

REVENGE



GABRIELLE FAUST

SOLOMON SCHNEIDER

NIGHTSHADE PUBLICATIONS

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A FEW WORDS OF THANKS

FROM GABRIELLE FAUST...

Out of possibly one of the darkest years of my life, two beautiful cosmic anomalies occurred: I met the brilliant Mr. Solomon Schneider and together, in a mad, music and wine-fueled flurry, we crafted the novel you now hold in your hands.

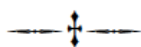
At our very cores, my co-author and I are storytellers. Whether it is music, art, or literature, after the experience of writing *Revenge*, I am convinced that the delivery and propagation of epic tales of fancy is at least one of the main purposes of our existence here on Earth. When I read back through the pages, I am humbled and awestruck at what we have been able to accomplish under some of the most dire and extreme circumstances. It is a testament to the resilience of the human will, the formidable force of creative fire, and—most of all—the healing power of friendship.

I must first and foremost thank my co-author for embarking on this journey with me and soldiering through the ups and downs of the publishing process, as well as the trials of life itself. I am blessed beyond all knowing to have Solomon Schneider as a friend, and I'm truly honored to have created this novel with him. I lift my glass and smile.

The road to the release of this novel has been wrought with peril since the beginning and had it not been for two extraordinary angels I do not know if I would be typing these words. In the darkest moments before the dawn, Shana Norton and Sean Kelly rallied to the cause and embraced me and Solomon as if we were blood kin. To this day it brings tears to my eyes at the recollection of their generosity. Shana and Sean, *thank you*, from the very depths of my soul. I love you both. I must also give thanks to my mother, Marilyn Faust, for her support during the last months of 2010. There are times when family must overcome whatever personal obstacles they have to reach out to one another and this was one of those times. Thank you for believing in our project and in me.

The support for this novel has been overwhelming. From my Endless Night vampire kin in New Orleans, New York, Chicago and Paris, to the members of the international Horror Writers Association, my friends and peers have cheered on this project with an inspiring fervor that has given me renewed hope. Thank you to Doug Powell for his support and to Jonathan Maberry for his constant encouragement and guidance over the years. Your wisdom and warmth is pure strength to me.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express a tearful, heartfelt moment of gratitude to my readers around the world. Every year I am awestruck by the love and loyalty of my readers. Without you, the characters within these pages would never have seen the light of day. I have said this once and will continue to say it again and again—you are all angels!



FROM SOLOMON SCHNEIDER...

I dedicate my share of this book to “the Portal Walkers”—those who move through the real world in much the same way the characters in this book move through the metaphysical jungle-gyms that fill it. Those I have in mind understand and know who they are. First among them is Aim Bennet, who was with me under the faraway willow tree where I began exploring portal-space.

The moment of my first fantasy publication would be tragically incomplete without mention of Nate Nauta, who was my best friend during the heady days when we taught each other to craft fantasy. My brother Tom deserves the same kind of thanks; the two of us improvised and forgot more epic than I’ll ever publish.

I probably wouldn’t be on the path of storytelling at all had my mom not put the Illiad and a book of Norse myths in my hands when I was too young to understand either one. The hours I spent in semi-comprehension of those great mythic archetypes were formative. Some blame for the way I write also falls on my dad who, while teaching me the old ways of hunting and fishing, also taught me—perhaps inadvertently—to trespass without fear.

Much of my work on this book was conducted under extreme “gypsy” circumstances, so I thank Seth Walker for being my brother on the road, and for stepping up to make ends meet when I had to hole up and write. Even now, he’s driving as I write this in the back of his legendary big blue truck.

Had it not been for Gabrielle Faust, though, none of my charmingly disturbing “brain-children” would have been likely to ever find homes in a real novel. She is more than a co-author of this book. She is the force that willed it into being. I pity the fool who stands between her and her dreams.





CHAPTER 1

Marcus sat curled with his pale bony knees against his chest. For hours he had remained motionless in the same spot, in the worn leather armchair, the one he had scavenged from a neighbor's garage sale earlier that summer, parked in the corner near the glass door to his balcony.

Brenda hated the chair. She always complained that it reeked of stale beer and old cigars, but her protests never lasted long enough to truly rustle Marcus's irritation. He had developed a strange attachment to the chair over the past few months, physically craving its lumpy, leathery embrace late in the day. As the hands of the clock ticked past five p.m., Marcus would leap from his desk and race down the two flights of stairs (it was always faster than waiting for the ancient elevator) and out into the parking garage to his car. Only when he was at his front door and the familiar sound of the lock clicking open reached his ears did he truly exhale a long sigh of relief. After dropping his keys in the bowl on the table by the door, he went straight to the kitchen to pour himself a stiff, straight bourbon and then into the living room to his chair. His *beloved* chair.

He had tried to tell himself that it was merely the stress of his job which was making him so reliant on the creature comforts of their home, but the anxiety had turned into full-fledged panic attacks that often left him in tears if stuck on the freeway in traffic. He rarely ventured out at night anymore, leaving Brenda to attend the social functions of their small circle of friends. Marcus was absent from company events, even the ones firmly suggested by the higher-ups to those who interested in surviving the next inevitable layoff.

In his chair the world stood still, his mind could focus in a clarity he hadn't experienced in years, and the incessant drone of the world that threatened him constantly, from all sides, seven days a week, dissolved amongst the creases and tears in the fabric.

Brenda had begged him to seek counseling. Growing up with a bipolar mother had made her astutely tuned into the signs of mental distress. She knew the darkness that could bubble up like crude oil if a disorder were left untreated, the manic highs and lows, the brooding, the silence; all of

the very signs and symptoms that Marcus had begun to display. Because of this, she worried constantly about Marcus, and the wear on her nerves showed in the dark circles beneath her eyes and in the fine lines that had crept in between her brows. Marcus refused to go. It would have meant deviating from his routine, the one that returned him home each day at approximately five-thirty p.m. and into the arms of his new lover. Besides, no one would understand. Not about the chair. Not about the panic. Not about the dreams...

Marcus's eyes roamed over the heavy shadows of the living room. The sun had retired hours ago, yet he had not moved to turn on a light. He realized then that he had grown used to Brenda doing such things *for* him. He had been lost in his own thoughts, and he suddenly wondered where she was. In the darkness, curled tightly within his chair, the imprint of his dreams seemed more vivid upon the backs of his retinas. The horrifically disturbing images blazed with a twisted life force independent of his will. Growing up, Marcus had never remembered his dreams upon waking. Whatever his subconscious had worked out the night before had always remained behind, leaving not even an impression upon him the day after.

Then one morning, he had awoken with a gasp, the image of himself and others traipsing over an island made of skeletons burned permanently upon his mind's eye. He had staggered to the bathroom as the dream had replayed itself over and over again in his mind; the sound of bones crunching beneath his feet, the smell of fog thick with sea salt in his nose, the arguing with the others that they were not supposed to be there...

"Here! This is it!" A male figure stooped before Marcus to the island of skeletons and ripped a jawbone from a protruding skull. "This is what we came for!"

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Marcus said quietly as the man, whose face was obscured in the fog, features seeming smudged and flowing as it rolled silently past, handed him the bone. Marcus looked down at the bleached curve of jaw and teeth. He wanted to hurl it out into the sea, to be rid of it forever. He could feel a low, cold resonance within the bone; a darkness that seeped through the marrow like oil, clinging to his skin, but for some reason Marcus could not let go.

The man said nothing and they turned as a group and began to head back to wherever they had come from. The chill invaded

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Marcus's clothing, molesting his skin with clammy, cold fingers. A sharp pain seared through his teeth and he reached up to cover his mouth with his free hand. Wetness. Marcus pulled his hand away and through the whiteness of the enveloping ground cloud he could see his hand was covered in red. He ran his tongue over his teeth and tasted blood; his gums were bleeding profusely.

"Damn it!" he yelled through his fingers as he dropped the jawbone and covered his mouth with both hands. "I told you this wasn't a good idea! I told you we weren't supposed to be there!"

It was then that he had awoken in a cold sweat. Since that night three months before, Marcus's dreams had grown progressively more perverse; filled with bizarre and demented scenes of bones and blood and gore he dared not try to decipher. The night before he had been forced to witness a cannibal slaughter a human being as if they were a sacrificial cow, skin the corpse, clean it like a fish and then roast it on a spit over an open fire. The smell of singed hair and bubbling fat was still heavy in his nose as the images flashed across his mind. Marcus did not know if he could face another night of dreams, especially knowing that Brenda was not there to comfort him when he woke up screaming.

His eyes drifted to the coffee table where he had tossed his keys and cell phone. The three feet separating him from the table seemed like the Grand Canyon. He took a deep breath and slowly uncurled himself, feeling the blood return to the cramped muscles of his legs in an explosion of tiny dancing needles. Gingerly, he picked up the phone, reaching out to flick on the overhead light switch near the door as he moved. He flipped the phone open. A text from Brenda lit the tiny screen.

Staying with Carol tonight. Need some girl-time. Be back tomorrow. XOXO

Marcus stared at the words for a long silent moment before deleting the text and flipping the phone closed. He knew what "girl-time" meant. It meant she needed to vent to Carol about him. He wanted to be angry with her, but damn, how could he be? If he could vent about himself, he would.

A strange sensation prickled the base of his skull, a heaviness settling in his chest as if he were being watched. He slowly turned around and stared at his chair. In the stark overhead light from the ceiling fan's four

angled bulbs, the chair appeared even more dilapidated; each frayed patch of fabric, each mottled dark stain accentuated with a nauseatingly harsh clarity. Marcus let his eyes explore the chair for a long while, like an addict seeing the ugliness of their addiction for the first time. Beneath the lumpy seat cushion Marcus noticed the edge of what appeared to be a large dark stain that seeped just over the front and down into the crevice of the arm. He had never noticed the stain before, perhaps because they rarely used the overhead lights and the ambient glow of the floor and table lamps cast too many forgiving shadows.

He approached the chair with cautious, slow steps as if it had suddenly become animate. He squatted down and lifted the cushion up. Beneath it, the reddish brown stain was nearly as large as the seat itself, set deep and permanent into the faded tan fabric lining below. Marcus frowned, his face contorting in a grimace of disgust. To think he had been sitting on whatever it was for months was vaguely nauseating. Curious, he briefly sniffed the area, trying to figure out what it had been that had created the stain. There was no aroma, except the smell of aged, dusty fabric. He sat back on his heels.

He thought to himself. *Could be paint? Or coffee?*

But he knew instinctively that the substance was nothing so innocuous. Marcus removed the cushion from the chair and placed it on the carpet. The stain had spread over most of the bottom of the cushion, dark and mottled. He stood and stared at the chair for a long moment. The bourbon he had drunk earlier had made the world warm and fuzzy, his reactions a bit dulled, so he hesitated to make any instantaneous assumptions. His first instinct was to haul the chair down to the dumpsters, but the idea of parting with it caused his stomach to sink and his skin to grow cold and clammy, and his throat tightened with panic. For a moment he felt as if he had stopped breathing, the world standing still in a claustrophobic fog of anxiety and fear and... rage. Inhaling sharply and holding the breath in his lungs, he rubbed his eyes. The last wave of emotion left him shaken, crashing down over him with a tidal force. Just as quickly as it had arrived, it rolled away from him with the echo of deep thunder, cold and timed as the call of the sea. He squeezed his eyes shut, terrified of his own capability for such emotion.

What was he so angry about? The chair? The idea of it being damaged? The prospect of having to dispose of it? Ridiculous! It was a piece of furniture...

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Marcus nervously stretched his arms over his head to crack his neck. As the crystals in his shoulder muscles crackled and dissipated, he rested his hands, fingers interlaced, on top of his head. The world settled back into place with a heavy, hard rationality that was indisputable. He knew he could salvage the chair. He had to. There was no other option.

He went to the kitchen and retrieved a can of foaming upholstery cleaner and a sponge from beneath the sink. Returning to the living room, he popped the lid off the can and sprayed a thick layer of cleaner on the seat lining and arm of the chair, as well as the cushion itself. He placed the plastic lid back on the can and set it on the coffee table behind him. Picking up his half-empty glass of bourbon from the end table beside the chair, he stood with the dry sponge in his other hand and stared down at the chair, contemplating his cleaning strategy. It might take a few passes before such an old stain could be removed. He would have to have patience.

After several bourbons and a can-and-a-half of cleaner, the sponge had begun to dissolve and his hands to crack from the chemical cleaner. Even after several hours of scrubbing, he was still been convinced that he could salvage his beloved friend, but exhaustion and drunkenness had finally won. Marcus had finally given up on removing the stain from his beloved chair and staggered to bed.

Marcus awoke at 6:00 A.M. the next morning. Like a semi crashing through his bedroom wall, the alarm sounded from Marcus's bedside table. After only three hours of sleep, which, again, had been invaded by twisted nightmarish landscapes, the idea of waking so soon nearly caused him to scream. His heart thundering in his chest, his face still buried in the pillow, he slung his left arm out of the covers, striking out at his arch nemesis. After several fumbling attempts, he managed to slam his palm onto the snooze button and silence the sound of the Eagles's *Hotel California*. With an exhausted groan he let his arm slip off the night stand to the floor beside the bed and lapsed instantly back into unconsciousness. He felt his body slide into the quicksand of sleep. He sighed, praying that the next nine minutes would be peaceful.



Silence washed over him and the world of alarm clocks and day jobs dissolved into an empty city street. For a moment he stood there, on the sidewalk, studying the landscape around him, vaguely aware that he still

wore only his T-shirt and boxer shorts. From the soft blue light and chill breeze he judged the time to be somewhere around dawn, though he could not be certain from the overcast sky. He shivered, staring up at the rows of empty black eyes lining the sides of the towering skyscrapers around him.

Why can't I ever just end up on a beach somewhere? He thought. *Or in a threesome with two Playmates, like normal guys?*

The wind picked up, pushing him from behind. He staggered forward a pace, regaining his balance, and turned to look over his shoulder down the avenue.

Maaarrreccuuussssssss...

He whirled around. The voice had seeped from the open doorway of an office building to his left. His stomach soured with dread. He sighed heavily and shivered knowing all too well that his dream-self would follow the sound of his voice being whispered. With slow, careful steps he walked towards the black rectangle in the building face, his bare feet aching from the city street debris beneath them. For a moment he lingered in the doorway, hoping that his mind had played tricks on him. He poked his head into the building and scanned the room. It appeared to have once been an old tavern of sorts, a neighborhood dive with oiled wood walls covered in cheaply framed black and white headshots. In the back of the room, Marcus could barely make out the outline of a pool table beneath a low-hanging stained glass lamp. The place appeared to be empty, so Marcus took a few tentative steps inside.

Walking over to the bar, he realized that the place could not have been deserted all that long ago as half-empty mugs of beer still sat on their coasters upon the bar's copper top. Behind the counter, dishes sat in a sink filled with water and the greenish digital numbers on the cash register still glowed brightly against the gloom. Suddenly, footsteps echoed from the back of the room, near where the pool table stood. Marcus's head snapped up, his heart thundering in his chest.

"Hello?" he said quietly, not really desiring an answer. Behind him, outside, it had begun to rain heavily. Marcus wondered if perhaps the sound of the water striking the asphalt street had made him misinterpret another sound. He took a step forward. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Moments ticked by to the sound of water pouring from the awning over the front door to the sidewalk.

"You're the boy who found my chair," a deep, gravely male voice

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slithered through the darkness.

“Excuse me?” Marcus was caught off guard. “*Your* chair?” His curiosity overcame his fear and he walked towards pool table.

At first he saw nothing as he scanned the pitch-black shadows surrounding the table. He reached up and scratched the side of his head, confused and suddenly wanting his alarm clock to rescue him with another bad song. He sighed and turned to go, but the sound of a match striking the side of a matchbox snared his attention. He spun back around.

In the far corner, off to his left, a strange misshapen thing sat huddled in what appeared to be his treasured armchair. Marcus could not suppress a grimace of shock and disgust. Perhaps once this thing had been a man, but now its limbs had taken on the gnarled texture and grayish pigment of a dying tree. What served as skin was mottled gray and black, slick as if from rain or sweat and cracking open in places in long jagged lines of red, like lava breaking through a landscape of soot and obsidian glass. The thing hunched forward, its stomach so sunken that Marcus could see its backbone through its belly, the deformed lines of its ribs straining obscenely against the layer of broken skin containing them. It raised its head, which looked like a gourd that had begun to collapse from mold and rot, and watched Marcus with eyes of scarlet made milky by thick cataracts. Its right hand extended to light a red candle suspended in midair beside the chair and then returned to its lap, the match mysteriously having vanished.

Marcus’s mind was blank with panic. He stared, mute, both horrified and fascinated by the creature. The thing tilted its head inquisitively, blinking several times as if to try to clear the fog from its sight, though somehow Marcus knew it could see far better than even he.

Finally, Marcus found his voice. “Wha... who are you?”

The creature tried to smile, but the act was grotesque as what was left of its lips curled back over the rotten stumps of its front teeth. In place of incisors jutted large white fangs, the only two teeth not touched by rot.

“I am known by your people as *Desiderium*.” It sat back a little in the chair, its skin creaking with the movement as new fissures split, red and hateful.

Marcus shook his head slowly and said, “I’m sorry. I’ve never heard of you.”

“Hmm...” *Desiderium* murmured. “Humanity is so very peculiar to me. You take the time to label what you cannot truly comprehend and then,

a mere few centuries later, you have completely forgotten your own lore. I find it rather amusing, don't you?" Its voice was harsh, like the hissing of two pieces of sandpaper drawn slowly together, forever.

"Are you a demon?" Marcus was unsure why he asked the question, but in his dream it seemed logical.

Desiderium laughed a little under his breath, then said, "Another label. Hmm... yes, I am a *demon*, though that word irritates me as most mortal words irritate me. They are so... limiting. I am the Demon of Hatred, to be exact."

Marcus frowned as he thought. The creature before him, to Marcus, appeared more wretched and pitiful than the ferocity that would come with such a title. Hatred brought to mind bloodlust and violence, fire and brutality. *If the creature truly is a demon, he could be lying*, Marcus reassured his dream-self.

"I never lie," Desiderium spat. "I have no need to lie, especially to something like you."

Marcus was stunned. He took a step backwards.

The creature leaned forward, folding its long, twisted fingers over its bent knee. "Where are you going?"

"I... I have to go... to work," Marcus sputtered. Distantly, down through the darkness of the bar, he could hear the faint melody of a song whistling in from the vacant street outside.

The creature smiled, its fangs glistening in the candlelight. "You *hate* work, don't you? You hate your life."

Marcus was backing up faster now, past the pool table. He bumped into a chair, knocking it over and nearly falling. "No... not exactly. It's fine..."

In his dream he felt the need to pick the chair up. He stooped over, fumbling to right the overturned piece of furniture, and in doing so began to turn his back on the creature in the corner. The world slowed. Marcus watched his hands reaching for the chair while his mind screamed at him of the foolishness of his actions. He felt heat on his back, the roaring of flames in his ears.

"You will..." Desiderium's sandpaper voice hissed through his mind, sharp as a razorblade against his consciousness.

Marcus turned and screamed as a ball of flame engulfed him.

DESIDERIUM



CHAPTER 2

Marcus's hands were shaking as he refilled his "Life is Good!" coffee mug with weak, stale Folgers® coffee from the office break room. More caffeine was probably the last thing he needed at the moment, but it was an excuse to get away from the gray misery of his windowless cubicle. He dumped a lethal quantity of powdered creamer substitute and granulated white sugar into the mug and watched as the mound sank below the dark brown liquid, leaving tiny rings of multicolored toxicity on the surface. Marcus had never resented coming to work before. He had always been rather content to perform the same tasks day in and day out, but today he felt as if the walls were closing in on him. The prospect of holding a conversation with his mundane coworkers caused bile to rise in the back of his throat. The room was too cold, the sound of fingers clicking on keyboards like a rain of gunfire, the air filled with the scent of toner and dust and correction fluid.

Marcus looked up at the round clock affixed to the wall above the doorway. It read nine a.m. The second hand ticked in a circle with an agonizing slowness that made him want to cry; seven more hours to go. Marcus rubbed his face with the hand not holding the coffee mug and sat down in one of the cold plastic chairs. Brenda had not called him that morning as she usually did on her way to work, nor had there been a cute little e-mail waiting for him when he arrived. He tried not to let it bother him, knowing how badly she needed some distance from him and his peculiar attachments, but in a way, he resented her for her ability to simply leave him. A part of him wanted her to suffer with him, to stay at his side and coddle him like a four-year-old until he was strong enough to fight whatever internal demons were suffocating him. She was supposed to *understand*, to help him through the bad times, to indulge his temporary insanity with the hope that it would pass one day; an idea which even Marcus had a hard time believing. After all, it wasn't as if he had done something truly heinous such as cheat on her or lie to her. He simply needed to sit in a chair. *His* chair. Where was the harm in that?

"Hey, Marcus!" Ralph boomed cheerily as he wandered into the break room.

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Marcus's head snapped up from his intense contemplation of his coffee. He nodded to Ralph, but said nothing.

"Man, look at you!" Ralph, a pudgy man in his forties with a slightly receding hairline, laughed, holding an empty coffee mug with the words "#1 DAD" printed next to a golf ball on the side. "Tie one on last night?"

"What?" Marcus asked quietly, frowning. The florescent lighting was making his eyes ache and he squinted at Ralph.

Ralph turned away and poured himself a cup of coffee. "You look like hell! Must have been a good night." He poured enough sugar in his mug to trigger a diabetic coma and turned back around, winking with a grin that made Marcus's skin crawl.

Marcus shook his head. "No, just trouble sleeping."

"Man, that sucks. You should see a doctor about that. My brother said his physician hooked him up with some sort of sleeping aid that knocks him out cold." Ralph took a sip of coffee and shrugged. "Lucky for me, I've never had that problem. Sleep like a baby the minute my head hits the pillow," Ralph said, chuckling to himself.

"Well, good for you," Marcus muttered, staring into his coffee.

"Excuse me?" Ralph asked.

"I said," Marcus looked up again, his eyes narrowing with anger, "good for *you*! I'm glad *your* life is so fucking easy, Ralph! I bet you have some pretty nice little boring dreams at night, don't you? You don't fucking know what you're even talking about, so why don't you take your fat ass, march it back to your pathetic little cubicle and leave me the fuck alone?!" Marcus was shaking, the hand holding his mug gripping the ceramic so tightly that it could have shattered.

"Jesus." Ralph stared at Marcus for a long moment, shocked beyond words, and then turned to walk out of the room. "Asshole," he whispered under his breath as he left.

"Crap!" Marcus leaned his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

He stood and dumped the remainder of his coffee down the drain before placing the mug absently in the aluminum sink. He'd heard of guys getting fired for less offensive blowups than the one he'd just spewed. Ralph was one of the boss's weekend golfing buddies, so it was only a matter of seconds before he went prattling to Gene about Marcus's behavior. With a

heavy sigh, Marcus returned to his cubicle to grab his jacket. The last thing he needed was a confrontation with his boss. He wanted to be at home, safe with the doors locked, sitting comfortably in his chair, a glass of bourbon in his hand.

“Marcus?”

He had barely had time to slip one arm into his jacket before Gene appeared in the entrance to his cube.

Slowly he turned around, pulling his coat on the rest of the way. “Yes?”

Gene’s jaw was set in a hard line, his brow deeply furrowed with irritation, his arms folded across his barrel chest and starched white shirt. “I need to see you in my office.”

“I was just heading home,” Marcus said with a sigh. “I’m really not feeling well—.”

“Too bad. You can go home after we speak. Now.” Gene turned and headed towards his office.

“Fuck!” Marcus exhaled to himself, shaking his head as he placed his hands on his hips.

Gene paused halfway down the hall and turned back to face Marcus. “What did you say?”

Marcus’s head snapped up. “Nothing.” He swallowed hard, suppressing another urge to scream. “Nothing... I’m coming.” Gene nodded and disappeared into his office.

Marcus thought for a long moment about simply leaving, about collecting his few personal items from his desk, shoving them into the pockets of his coat and never looking back. He couldn’t explain the sudden desire to run and the swelling nausea of discontent that was rising up and through his chest and into his throat. He had never cared one way or another about work; a job was a job was a job. But suddenly, it all seemed pointless and his entire life an empty, vapid hole of nonsensical routine, devoid of reason or meaning.

He stared over the wall of his cubicle, down the narrow florescent-lit gray and beige hall.. For some reason, though his soul pleaded with him to flee, he remained rooted to the worn commercial-grade carpet where he thought of Brenda and of her disappointment in him. If she arrived home and found him there ahead of her, he would have to explain, and the mere idea of her merciless judgment of his actions forced him to follow

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Gene. Marcus felt his feet begin moving. He counted the steps to the open doorway and turned, but did not enter the office.

Behind a large desk of particleboard and black aluminum, Gene sat, his face set into a stern frown, his hands steepled so he could rest his chin upon his fingertips.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” Gene gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

Marcus stood in the doorway for a long, silent moment staring at the chair. “I prefer to stand.”

Gene sighed through his nose, obviously annoyed about dealing with such a disgruntled employee so early in the morning. “Okay, then stand, but please come in and close the door.”

Close the door... the death-knell words from any boss. Marcus shuffled inside and closed the door. Gene’s office was barely more than a walk-in closet which had been converted with a Ficus plant and a few shelves lined with the standard pictures of a wife and children, images that looked as if they could have come with the frames at the point of purchase. Marcus hovered near the door, ready to turn and bolt as soon as possible.

“Now, we’re going to make this short because I have a meeting in ten minutes. What’s this I hear about you swearing at Ralph?” Gene asked as his irritation barely concealed below the forced diplomacy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Marcus mumbled under his breath.

“Marcus, I’m not playing here. Ralph just came to me, very upset, and said that you went off on him in the break room like a lunatic.”

Marcus stood, staring at a balding patch in the carpet between his shoes as Gene drilled him about the necessity for diplomacy in the office and how his personal issues needed to stay neatly tucked away in a drawer at home. As he listened, his nerves began to vibrate, his skin growing hot and prickly beneath his clothes, each word uttered feeling like a nail being hammered into his skull one at a time. He rolled his head to the side, cracking his neck and then reaching up to rub it.

Gene paused in his lecture, drumming his fingers on the desk in front of him. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself? Are you going to defend yourself or just stand there?”

Drum... drum... drum...

Marcus turned towards the door and closed his eyes, trying to block out Gene's arrogant, irritated tone. There it was, the sound of dry wood splintering in Marcus's mind. His throat became dry and tight. He coughed into his fist and then rubbed his eyes with both hands to try to clear the fog that was gathering around the perimeter of his sight. The muscles in his neck tightened, his pulse elevating until he felt dizzy.

"Damn it, Marcus. Are you even listening to me?" Gene stood, leaning over the desk to peer closer at him. "I'm giving you three seconds to start speaking, or this is going to have to be reported to H.R., and I'd really rather not have to deal with that right now because..."

Before Marcus's mind could comprehend what his body was doing, he whirled around and, stepping forward, slammed his clenched fist into the side of Gene's face. The raw crunch of Gene's cheekbone brought Marcus back to reality, but only barely.

He leapt over the desk, tackling Gene and bringing him to the ground in a clatter of office supplies. Through a haze of quavering red mist, Marcus became aware of his fists striking Gene over and over again, Gene's weak pleading becoming more and more faint with each painful blow.

Suddenly, Marcus stood and staggered backwards, shaking uncontrollably. He stared down at his bloodied and bruised fists. The only other time he had struck another human being had been in the fifth grade when he had stood up for himself on the playground and fought back against a horde of school bullies. Since that moment had he even had the remotest desire to fight, let alone viciously attack and beat someone to the ground. He glanced up at Gene's inert form, which lay on the floor between the desk and office chair. Marcus couldn't tell if Gene was breathing, but by the looks of his demolished face, he knew Gene would be in intensive care for a good, long time, *if* he survived.

"What have I done?" Marcus whispered, feeling his stomach begin to convulse at the sight of the gore.

He glanced around the office. Luckily, the door to the office had no windows, but surely someone had heard the commotion and would be checking in on them soon. Marcus backed up and slowly opened the door. He poked his head out slightly and glanced quickly up and down the hallway. It was empty. Slipping out into the hall, he closed the door quietly behind him and, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his coat, ran for the

Revenge

stairs next to the elevators. Very few people ever took the stairs, so he was fairly certain the stairwell would be empty of any inquisitive eyes.

“What have I done? What have I done? *What have I done?!?*”

Down the stairs, each footfall echoing excruciatingly making Marcus want to scream, he reached the parking garage level and burst through the metal door. Tears streamed down his face as he ran to his car and then fumbled to fit the key in the lock. His fingerprints were all over Gene’s office and Ralph would most definitely be there to offer up the story of Marcus’s explosion in the break room. It would only be a matter of hours before the police arrived at Marcus’s apartment to haul him away. What would he do? Run from the law? Flee to Mexico? What did people do in situations like these? What kind of people even found themselves having making such decisions?

As he peeled out of the garage, he glanced up into the rearview mirror. He didn’t recognize the man he saw staring back at him.



Marcus burst into his apartment, locking two deadbolts, the doorknob lock and then sliding the chain for extra security. He ran to the kitchen sink and turned on the tap. With a maniacal fury, he scrubbed the blood from his split knuckles, his adrenaline level so high that he barely felt the pain of the soap on his open wounds. He turned the water off and watched the blood swirl down the drain as he dried his hands on a towel lying on the counter. Blood, *his* blood, stained the light blue material with a deep reddish-brown. He stared at the stains, his mind blank. He was frozen with fear and anxiety, unable to force his body to move with the urgency he knew he needed at that moment. Instead, he absently turned to the cabinet over the stove and withdrew the half-empty bottle of bourbon from the shelf. Retrieving a glass from the dish rack, he poured three fingers and then walked in a daze back to the living room, leaving the open bottle and bloody towel on the counter.

Without thinking, he walked to the armchair and sat down. He stared at the carpet and took a long pull of bourbon from the glass in his right hand. He swallowed hard, welcoming the warm fire that numbed his throat on its way down. He glanced at his watch; it would be hours before Brenda returned home. By then the apartment would be crawling with cops and

he would most likely be in jail, *if* he wasn't already on the run somewhere. That was, of course, if she came home at all. In many ways, she had already begun to leave him. She was the one thing in his life, he suddenly realized, that made everything else bearable. If there had been any chance of reconciliation, it would be gone now. Marcus knew her well enough to know that his actions would be completely unforgivable in her eyes.

Marcus took another sip of bourbon. The shades were drawn over all of the windows, leaving the room in a dull gray-blue darkness. Suddenly, the sound of a match head igniting hissed across the room from the far corner of the couch. Strange golden light blossomed there and Marcus lifted his eyes to see the twisted, demented creature from his dreams raising his hand to light a single red candle, which drifted beside him in the air.

Desiderium... The name whispered across his mind, carried by tendrils of his fading dream.

"You remembered," the creature spoke, nodding contentedly as it watched Marcus with his milky scarlet eyes.

Marcus was beginning to tremble. *This isn't real. This isn't real.* He repeated the words like a chant inside his mind, but the creature from his dreams continued to sit and watch him expectantly.

"I have a confession to make to you, Marcus," *Desiderium* said, his tone mockingly conversational.

Marcus said nothing.

Desiderium stood from the couch, moving like an old man at first, and then straightening himself to stand with a regal power that spoke of eons of cultivated rage and imprisonment. Slowly, he walked towards Marcus. A black gun materialized in the creature's left hand as he moved. The demon stood over Marcus and gazed down upon him, his expression a gruesome mixture of pity and hunger.

"I lied to you," *Desiderium* said matter-of-factly.

"You're not a demon?" Marcus croaked out the words, silently praying he would wake from the nightmare.

"Oh, no. That part is true, but I am not the Demon of Hatred, as I told you."

"Then... what... who are you?"

Revenge

Desiderium tilted his head slightly to the side, savoring the fear he felt radiating from the mortal before him. His mouth twitched in the facsimile of a smile. “I am the Demon of *Regret*.”

Marcus felt his throat closing up. He struggled to pull air into his lungs. “Regret?” He could barely speak. “Why would you lie about that?”

“It is my nature.” Desiderium knelt down on one knee before Marcus. “Besides, you had no true regrets until now. Your regret was born of your hatred, a hatred you didn’t even realize you could nurture and embrace.” He placed the gun on Marcus’s lap. “You have nothing now.”

“I... I can fix this,” Marcus choked, feeling tears welling up in his eyes, spilling over and down his cheeks. “I can make this right. Brenda loves me. She’ll forgive me... She has to...” He knew he was now lying to himself, the words hollow; vacant of both strength and resolve.

Desiderium shook his head slowly and said, “No, you can’t. It is too late now. If you remain here, on Earth, you will go to jail. You will lose Brenda and everything else you have ever worked for or loved.” Desiderium reached out with his right hand and took Marcus’s left, moving it until it lay over the cold black gun in his lap. “You have nothing left. It is over.”

Marcus looked down at his hand covering the gun and felt his soul go cold and numb. The hopelessness was overwhelming, as if his very will to live had bled out of his body. He could see no future and his past was but a blur of meaningless regret and misery. His life felt empty, icy, and the very thought of the cruel hardship yet to come as he repented on for his sins made the tears fall even harder than before.

Marcus looked up. The room was empty. The glow of the otherworldly candle had vanished, the space where Desiderium had been kneeling filled with hollow blue-black shadows. Marcus swallowed the last of the bourbon and set the emptied glass on the small table beside his beloved armchair. He took the gun into his hands and lifted it to his head, pressing the muzzle firmly beneath his jaw at the base of his throat. He pulled the trigger.

The world before him exploded and instantly went black. Distantly, Marcus’s quickly fading awareness briefly recognized the pain where the top of his skull and left eye socket had been. The sensation of blood pouring down over his ears and then seeping into the back of the armchair seemed surreal as he drifted into the blackness of death, forever a part of his chair, of *Desiderium’s* chair. There, in the darkness, the demon waited to escort Marcus’s soul to Hell.

CHAPTER 3

*B*eep... beep... beep... hissssss... whoosh... beep... beep... beep. Marcus opened his eyes. He was back in the pool hall where he had first encountered Desiderium, sitting in the chair where the demon once sat. The demon was surveying Marcus with a disturbing covetous interest. A strange electronic rhythm played softly from somewhere beyond sight as if it were the very pulse of the building itself, real, yet insubstantial and haunting.

Beep... beep... beep... hissssss... whoosh... For a moment he could not remember exactly why he was there, though he remembered every single decaying, decrepit detail of the bar. Memories of his life before these newly birthed minutes were hazy and lethargic, requiring far too much energy and care to dredge up from the murk of his mind. When he tried to focus on the past, to uncover his identity even a little, his stomach soured and his palms grew moist with anxious perspiration. He curled his fingers about the ends of the arms of the chair and drew a deep breath, unable to shake the feeling that something was very wrong.

"I died?" The realization struck Marcus suddenly, swift and fast, knocking the drawn breath from his lungs. Paralyzed, he sat still, his nails digging into the wood beneath them, listening to the strange beeping that now seemed to come from within his own ears rather than from the building around him.

"Not quite."

Marcus's heart briefly stopped beating. The sound of Desiderium's smug rasping purr of a reply attached itself to the caverns of Marcus's ears like a viscous oil he could not remove, burning and itching maddeningly until he wanted to claw his ears from the sides of his skull. However, he made not a move, fear holding him silent and still in the shadows just beyond the light over the pool table a few feet away.

"Unfortunately for me, you are not skilled in the art of suicide." Desiderium materialized slowly from the air just to the right of the table, his grotesquely warped frame that appeared both frail and furiously powerful at the same time moving fluidly despite its malnourished contorted construction.

Revenge

Marcus stared straight ahead, unable to meet the milky cataracts of the demon's eyes or study the open rivers of bloody cracks running through his diseased ashen flesh. Swallowing hard, he tried to speak.

"I'm not dead. That's good." He could barely form words let alone coherent thoughts. It wasn't good, not if he was here with the demon. That couldn't possibly be good at all.

Desiderium laughed, a sound that trickled from his throat as a wheeze, curdling quickly into a raspy chortle no earthly creature could be capable of. Approaching the chair to Marcus's right, he lowered himself into the seat like an old man, the sinew of his joints creaking and popping like dry twigs.

"No. Not good for you. Not good for me," he shook his head. "You missed, but not by much. Your body is in what I believe humans call 'intensive care.' Those foolish young doctors still think they can save you, even though there is not much left to save."

Out of the corner of his vision Marcus could see Desiderium's mouth twitch slightly in a sad smirk as if the demon did truly pity humanity's attempt to scrape together the bits and pieces of a life even when it would never make a whole existence again.

"Even if they do somehow bring your body back to life, most of your face is missing and I doubt your mind will ever be the same," the demon sighed contentedly. "But assuredly your soul will still belong to me no matter what they strive to do. So, I suppose I will just wait. Wait and watch." He folded the long, bony fingers over the protruding bones of his hips above his sexless, smooth, gray groin.

Marcus felt ill. He remembered suddenly his last moments in his apartment as the demon had handed a gun to him, preying upon his weakness. The sensation of the heavy cold metal in his hand, the iciness of the hollow circular barrel as he pressed it beneath his chin, the finality of his index finger curling across the trigger as his last thread of hope vanished. However, he could not remember what had driven him to that point or why he had renounced his life so willingly. The deafening explosion of the gun firing, followed by the scent of smoke and a star burst of white and red that consumed his entire field of vision the taste of burnt flesh and blood thick in what remained of his mouth. Strangely, he could not remember pain, but only a surge of numbness as adrenaline rushed through his bloodstream as his body attempted to save him with a final cocoon of shock. Reaching up

with one trembling hand, Marcus ran his fingers over his face. It was intact, whole as if the fatal injury had been nothing but a dream. A flutter of relief skipped through his chest, his lips twitching as if in search of a smile that could no longer be formed.

Desiderium stared at Marcus with a strange mixture of pity and fascination. “You feel what you want to feel here. Though I cannot claim your soul until you have expired. I’ve sequestered your consciousness to the realm of Limbo for the time being. You will stay here until your body dies. Which it will, I promise you.”

“Why don’t you simply kill me?” Marcus sighed heavily as his fingers dropped away from his face, falling to his lap.

“My work is done. You gave me your soul when you accepted the gun I created for you.” Desiderium shrugged slightly, an eerie twitch of his skeletal gray shoulders. “I need not exert any more energy upon it.”

“What will happen to me when I die?” Marcus asked the question before his reason could apprehend the inquiry with fear.

“Your soul will be fed to the Beast as a tribute to his Darkness. The Beast will then excrete you as a new form, one bidden to do the permanent work of Hell, a lesser demon whose purpose is to fill the void until the time comes when you are chosen from the billions to claw your way into a higher demonic form. Perhaps in an eon or two you will be given the opportunity to stake claim to a position such as mine, though I think perhaps you would not be suited to such a title. But you will be all but unrecognizable when that day comes and I will be as I have always been and will be ever more.” Desiderium lifted his chin slightly, his jaw muscles flexing ever so slightly as he voiced a truth even he had trouble admitting after so many thousands of years.

There was a sadness in the demon’s voice, a resignation that plucked at Marcus’s numbed sense of empathy like needling kitten claws. This was a job, pure and simple, for the gnarled creature beside him. There was no sinister glee, no righteous triumph for the victorious demon as he sat beside the soul he had rightfully won. Marcus wondered how many times Desiderium had performed the task of tricking a sad, wayward human into relinquishing his chance at eternal freedom, how many ways he had watched those pitiful entities take their lives in gruesome, haunting moments of impetuous, irreversible destitution. Had the demon’s skin not been so sickeningly slick and mottled with petulant sores, had the bones of

his hellish frame not protruded so sharply like barely concealed swords, perhaps Marcus might have, in a moment of profound sympathy, reached out to his captor. However, Desiderium twitched beside him, a flicker of energy that caused his aura to flare like a sunspot for a nearly invisible second, shaking off the perceived weakness and incinerating it beneath the beat of Hell's merciless wings.

"Do not," the demon snarled at Marcus, who quickly looked away, staring straight ahead at the pool table before him that he gripped suddenly in a fear he thought could not exist in a realm lacking of extremes. He had to consciously remind himself of his precarious situation, a situation which he himself still did not completely understand, though he knew for certain that he was not the one in control. Not in the very least.

"I take great pride in my profession," Desiderium sneered. "I am a necessary part of our Dark Father's perfectly constructed world. Without me, humanity would be oblivious to their mistakes."

"Yes, but is it necessary to make a regret a sin?" Marcus was not meaning to challenge the creature, but was truly curious. "Haven't we all made mistakes that have cost us dearly? I thought that the reason for our mistakes was to make us grow as human beings. Not damn us to Hell."

The demon shook his head slowly. Marcus could sense Desiderium's irritation at what he believed to be a trivial question, one that he had perhaps answered countless times since its creation.

"It is not the regret that relinquished your soul to me, but the hopelessness that it was undoable. In that moment, when I handed you the gun with which to end your misery, you admitted to yourself that the challenge I had presented you with was insurmountable. Instead of combating the darkness of the depression I had riddled your soul with, you submitted to it, you embraced it and you found a sickening power within it you never thought yourself capable of. You turned depression into violence, which I must admit even surprised me! Your psyche was not ready to accept the consequences of such permanent actions. That is the damnation of your regret. We all regret, but some of us have more to regret than others." Desiderium drew a deep, creaking breath and exhaled harshly with a grunt.

Marcus stood slowly, his soul feeling heavy and aching even in the dream world where they lingered now. He could feel the demon's cloudy eyes scrutinizing his every movement, though there was the distinct immediate judgment that there was nothing this new human soul could surprise the

old creature with, nothing that he had not seen already throughout the eons. He walked to the pool table and placed his hands, palm down, upon the worn green felt of its surface. Distantly, Marcus could hear haunting wails winding in on whispers of unfelt wind from the landscape beyond the bar. He reached out and wrapped his fingers about the eight-ball, drawing it across the pool table towards him. The sound of the heavy slick ball sliding across the ancient felt, the icy weight of it beneath his palm drawing what little perceived heat remained in his hand away from him, allowed him to focus.

“What do you regret?” Marcus felt the question leave his lips before he realized he was speaking aloud.

The temperature in the room began to drop, slowly at first and then plummeting until the heavy resin ball beneath his fingers began to feel as if it were fusing with his skin. As if winter had breathed a heavy breath through the room, frost began to form on the edges of the table and along the rim of the lamp above. The walls surrounding them paled to an icy blue-white from their original mildewed brown, as if splashed with freezing water. He refused to move, however, leaning against the table beneath the subtle golden illumination from the low-hanging hooded light. Marcus exhaled slowly, his breath crystallizing in the air before him, trying not to outwardly animate the fear that gripped him as he recognized the danger inherent in his question.

“I do not regret,” Desiderium replied in a murderous quiet. “I am the master of regret, but I have never bowed to it.”

Though Marcus could not remember the miniscule mundane details of his mortal life, with the exception of those last fleeting moments before his death, he suddenly felt as if he possessed a strength he otherwise was incapable of in his physical form. A tension tightened at his center, fending off the excruciating cold that threatened to frostbite his flesh.

“I don’t believe you,” he said quietly, picking up the pool ball and straightening away from the table. Turning the ball over in his hand he stared at the slick black and white surface, studying his own reflection, dull across the sphere. He didn’t recognize his own image. “Everything...” he corrected himself, “... everyone has regrets.”

Desiderium stood abruptly. The sound of his joints creaking, his bones popping unnaturally against each other startled Marcus. Never had he heard, despite the creature’s warped appearance, such mortal weakness.

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Marcus remained motionless as the demon lifted himself to his full height like a weathered, thorned vine resuming its former poisonous glory. Without a second glance in Marcus's direction Desiderium walked past the far edge of the pool table and out of the room into the bar beyond. For a second Marcus hesitated, uncertain as to whether he should follow the creature who had laid claim to his soul or remain behind in the relative safety of the abandoned bar. Something he had said had moved the demon to leave, whether out of irritation or anger or both. It was not merely the annoyance of dealing with a lower life form that had driven the demon to leave, Marcus knew instinctively, but a trigger on a far deeper level from a confrontation, something the ancient being was unused to. Marcus could not explain why he no longer cringed with fear at the sight of the demon's horrific face, but he only felt that such horror could only conceal pain, and pain was something he could identify with. Though he knew it might end in a brutal way he dared not dwell upon, his curiosity drove him to pursue Desiderium and the question he had posed.

Beep... beep... beep... hissssss... whoosh...

Beep... beep... beep... hissssss... whoosh...

As the demon faded from sight, the temperature of the room began to creep back into a more tolerable chill. Marcus drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, carefully stepping around the table to follow the path of the demon out of the bar. It was just as he vaguely remembered, the old neighborhood haunt in lingering disrepair as if its owners and inhabitants had only just recently fled in a moment of utter panic. The emptiness was chilling, even more so than Desiderium's frostbitten disapproval of his question, making him want to scurry through the shadows of the room towards the dissonant gray light peeking in through the shattered door frame. He was fearful of what might lurch forth from his peripheral vision but he did not want to lose track of the demon, to whom his spiritual fate was now apparently eternally tethered.

As he reached the open front door a chill breeze hissed through the entrance, threading itself beneath Marcus's clothes causing him to shiver spastically for a fleeting moment. It was then he realized how little clothing he wore: a flimsy open-backed hospital gown and boxer shorts. His feet were bare. Marcus grimaced with annoyance.

Well, at least I'm not naked, he thought. *If I really am just my soul here, it's good that I am at least somewhat covered, I guess.*

It was an odd thought, but at the same time, for some equally strange reason it felt perfectly justified. Part of Marcus's consciousness still struggled with the idea that his physical form lay mangled and clinging to existence via the support of machines and drugs. For all he knew, this experience could be yet another of his surreal dreams, though he could not remember now what those had been or whether or not he had experienced them at all. His ability to differentiate between real and illusory was rapidly fading. Though he was incapable of stopping any of it from transpiring, he also lacked the will to impede it. Even if the power lay within his grasp, because he could not rationalize why. Perhaps if he had awoken within the demented tortured depths of Hell itself he would have felt differently. If Desiderium made good on his promise, Marcus would be faced with that unfortunate fate all too soon.

He stepped out onto the chilly gray concrete of the sidewalk, casting a nervous glance up and down a deserted street lined with abandoned high-rises. Wind whistled through the alleys, moaning around the towering structures of concrete, steel and glass like lost souls searching for redemption. A couple of blocks away he spied the demon slowly walking down the center of the boulevard, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent forward between hunched skeletal shoulders as if lost in thought. Mustering his courage, Marcus began to follow, tentatively at first, uncertain that pursuing the captor of his soul was a wise decision, but then with a firm resolve to find the answer to the question he had posed to the creature. After all, if he were handing his soul over to Desiderium for the crime of having succumbed to his own regret, he felt entitled to know what had brought the demon himself to that place of power. A flicker and snap of a dark, twisted certainty steeled his psyche to confront the ancient being, suddenly certain that at one time, millennia before, Desiderium had walked the Earth or some other dimension as something other than the wretched grifter hell-spawn he was today.

As he neared the demon, he slowed his pace, remaining a few feet behind and to the creature's left out of a strange sort of respect. Marcus recognized the volatile, dangerous nature of what he had disturbed within Desiderium with his question. He had only an inkling of what the demon's powers were and what he was capable of inflicting upon Marcus's incorporeal self.

"Why are you following me?" Desiderium growled as if he could hear Marcus's thoughts, without looking back or altering his course.

"It's better than being alone and waiting for death," Marcus replied.

Revenge

Desiderium stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around. Marcus nearly stumbled over the steps he was about to take when he saw the demon's face, etched and set with a barely concealed rage. His heart raced in his chest, adrenaline flooding his veins as he wondered if perhaps his sense of entitlement might be the last he ever experienced. He raised his hands defensively in front of him, palms towards Desiderium, and took several carefully placed steps back. His heel collided with the sidewalk curb and he faltered, reaching out with one hand to steady himself against a parking meter. His eyes still on Desiderium, he placed the meter between himself and the demon, holding it with both hands as if it might possibly protect him from Hell's wrath.

"You are out of your element here, boy," Desiderium hissed. "Leave me alone if you know what is best for your soul."

"I'm damned anyway. You have already stripped me of whatever hope I might have been able to cling to with your description of what will happen to my soul. Or was that merely another of your lies?" Marcus was astounded by his own audacity. *Just shut up and back away!* His mind screamed, but from his lips poured forth one challenge after another.

"No lies. Not this time, my boy," the demon snarled.

"Then answer me!" Marcus shouted. "I want to know what you regret! Why is that so much to ask? If I am to one day end up like you, tricking sad human souls into bargains to feed some Beast, don't you think I deserve to know what began it all?"

Desiderium shook his head. "You act as if Heaven and Hell began your human Big Bang theory, as if a single explosion of gases that can be timed and defined by science positioned creatures such as myself into their designated roles. It is not so simple." He snarled again, growling low in his throat, "I do not know why I even entertain you now. I should just end your life for you."

"Then why don't you?" Marcus instantly regretted the question. Inside he cringed, waiting for the demon to strike out at him and field dress him like a freshly killed deer. There was something causing the demon to hesitate, a strange elixir of apprehension and need that bound him to the moment in which they were both trapped like flies in a spider's web.

"Whatever it must be was so long ago that it couldn't possibly affect you now?" Marcus asked, truly curious of what could possibly be so grave

to still cause such pain to a spirit so calloused by evil. “Why do you hold onto it? Can’t you let go? Can’t you be free of it?”

Desiderium’s eyes appeared to refocus for a fleeting moment beneath the layers of milky cataracts. “Some things are permanent. They scar so deep that they follow you from one existence into another for eternity.”

The demon shook his misshapen skull and looked up at the sky. It had begun to shift, the clouds darkening to a deep blood hue, roiling in and out and over one another like clusters of jellyfish within an ocean of lava. The wind that had earlier chilled Marcus’s scantily clad body now warmed, hot like a diseased breath smelling of rotting fish and sulfur. Marcus instinctively raised his arm to his face, burying his nose in the crook of his elbow in an attempt to ward off the stench, to no avail. The skyscrapers around them began to erode like pyramids in an Egyptian sandstorm, the salt of their cold lifeless facades dissolving to be whisked away on the scorching wind.

The foundations of the buildings sank into a murky brackish mud that rose to either side of the street, which had suddenly transformed into a misshapen pier of decaying brown lumber. At intervals along either side of the platform, tall stakes displayed the decomposed corpses of impaled victims, some of them human, others demon or possibly angel, though their skeletons were now so damaged it was hard to tell who had been who. The pier stretched out seemingly forever into the horizon of a bubbling lake of tar beneath which something massive writhed and snaked, its slow, methodical ballet evoking sinister waves that rolled in towards the shore of mud.

Marcus’s heart raced in his chest as his mind fought to comprehend the new illusion around him. Desiderium turned away and began to walk down the pier out into the black ocean. Marcus watched him for a long moment, trying to decide whether or not to follow. However, when he looked back over his shoulder, the city behind him had been reduced to an apocalyptic nightmare of rusted iron rebar spines, broken concrete and deserted dead sand dunes. The street, the bar, the pool table were all now a ghost; there was nothing for him to return to. It was all part of Desiderium’s punishment for asking such a forbidden question of him. Despite the heat, Marcus began to shiver as the wind chilled the fine layer of perspiration broken across his skin like a fever delirium. He began to walk along the rickety wooden planks and was careful to not raise his eyes towards the decomposed corpses flanking him on either side.

CHAPTER 4

*O*h dear God, why is this happening to me? Marcus's muttered to himself silently.

"God can't hear you anymore. Not where we are now." Desiderium's voice was carried by the wind back to where Marcus hurried to catch up with the demon.

"I don't think he was ever really listening," Marcus said aloud, more to himself than to his hellish keeper.

Desiderium stopped and turned back to watch Marcus as he approached. He nodded approvingly. "You are beginning to understand the truth."

Marcus did not answer until he had closed the distance between himself and the demon. He halted just out of arm's reach. "Truth? Stating the obvious is not necessarily to be labeled 'truth'. I think most of humanity thinks that, if there is a God, he's busy with bigger things than our trivial little lives."

"He stopped listening a long time ago, if He ever was listening to begin with," Desiderium shook his head. "I tried to make Him listen to me once..." His voice trailed off as if he had caught himself revealing too much. As he began to turn away again he cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes, cutting them towards Marcus as if he was beginning to suspect something amiss with the strange human who pursued him.

"I think we all have at one time or another," Marcus replied.

A hollowness at the center of his being began to tighten and warm, the sensation of empathy forming within his soul for the trickster who had trapped him. Or was his empathy suspect now in the observation of his captor's moment of weakness? Marcus did not trust Desiderium, nor, he realized suddenly, did he trust himself. Something dark and devious had begun to unravel within him. Memories of his last day on Earth and the violence he had surrendered to crashed into him, incinerating the surreal notion of ineffectiveness that had numbed him when he first regained consciousness in the bar. That seed of violence, of which he never believed himself capable, had been fertilized by Desiderium's puppeteer manipulation until it sprouted and grew, hungry and edged with poison-

tipped thorns. He knew now the last of his human existence was being shed like the useless material items he had coveted when his soul had been housed in skin. He realized that this place Desiderium had created for him to dwell in while his body expired was warping him in a way that perhaps even the demon was unaware of.

The sound of bubbles slowly expanding and sharply popping upon the surface of the tar ocean punctuated the low constant moan of the wind and quiet, mournful clatter of bones shifting against wooden stakes. Marcus blinked, reaching up to rub his eyes as his vision seemed to blur for a moment, the image of Desiderium appearing to contract and shrink for a moment with an eerie fragility, as if he were fading.

“When He cast Lucifer out of Heaven, I fought to convince Him otherwise. I, like so many of the lesser angels, loved Lucifer blindly. We were loyal to him. Perhaps more so than God. I railed against what I saw as a grave injustice, thinking that perhaps my love would be proof enough that Lucifer deserved a chance to redeem himself in our Maker’s eyes. When I was cast out along with all of the other rebellious ones, Lucifer promised me that we would be avenged and that I would have a beautiful glory beyond what I had ever dreamt of as an angel of Heaven. He promised me that my loyalty would not go unrewarded.” Desiderium’s voice shook as he spoke as if the words burned like acid in his throat.

Marcus had never heard of Desiderium’s story, but of the legions that had followed their leader into Hell only a few had earned a permanent place amongst the texts of humanity. He remained quiet, allowing the demon before him the confessional he had never been allowed in Hell.

“He lied. Instead, this is what I became.” Desiderium stared out at the black ocean, his gnarled hands clenching into fists at his sides until dark blue blood dripped from the places where his claw-like nails had punctured his palms. “We were not elevated by our passions, but consumed by them. My regret poisoned me, twisted me. It became all that I knew, all that I could and would ever be good at. I regretted everything: my blind love for Lucifer, my stand against God, my own doubt that perhaps I had chosen the wrong side. If I had not joined the rebellion my heart would have been shattered for losing him, but I also regretted all that I left behind. I would never, will never be free of it and I see that in others, in humanity. You are too weak to fight it. It makes it so easy for me to inspire it in you.”

As Desiderium spoke, strength began to flow into Marcus as if he were being fed a drug slowly, drip by drip, directly into his heart. He wondered

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if perhaps, somewhere back in the world of the living, the doctors were manipulating his body, feeding it medication to revive it. However, this was different, for there was no pull for him to retreat away from the world in which he now stood. There was a permanence to the sensation, anchoring and fierce. He felt the fear of the contorted, demented landscape around him and his own impending doom.

“You became your weakness. You became your sin,” Marcus said, his voice strangely calm and dark, unrecognizable to his own ears. “You let it consume you.”

“Yes.” Desiderium nodded sadly, his posture caving, shoulders hunched until he appeared as if he might cave in upon himself and disappear.

“You are tired of this burden?” Marcus approached the demon, feeling more empowered with each carefully placed step.

Desiderium nodded again, but said nothing. A cold, dead weight began to form in the center of Marcus’s right palm, molding to the contours of his fingers until the solidity resonated with the sinister nature of a metal weapon. He glanced down at his palm, but he already knew what he held as his thumb reached up to release the safety. It was a handgun, the very same Desiderium had manifested for Marcus’s own demise. He stared at the gun for a long moment in silence, knowing all too well what this meant, but not quite yet willing to accept his new fate.

Desiderium turned to face him and Marcus tore his gaze away from the legacy of his death to meet the demon’s eyes. Resignation resided there in the milky, red-rimmed, sunken stare, a resignation that Marcus himself had experienced all too acutely. In admitting his secret, in submerging himself in those emotions once again, Desiderium had submitted to their power and lost himself to his own regret, once again. He was no longer worthy of his stature in Hell. It was time for a new demon to rise and take his place collecting souls for the Beast.

Marcus handed the gun to Desiderium, who took it without protest and raised it to his temple. The sound of the bullet leaving its chamber was like a clap of rolling thunder. An explosion of blue blood-slicked brain and bone and mottled gray flesh rained down over the pier like ash from a volcanic storm. As the strange, dull light faded from Desiderium’s eyes, the ocean to their left began to boil, the water thrashing and gurgling with angry venom as something hungry and determined swam to the surface. From the glistening black depths emerged a massive creature of slick white

sharkskin flesh, finless with the exception of a ridge of razor scales down its back. Blind, its lamprey mouth ringed with rows upon concentric rows of white translucent fangs that convulsed lewdly as if tasting the air before descending down upon the remains of the demon. The Beast had come to reclaim Desiderium so that his soul might be digested and regurgitated into the hordes of Hell. Perhaps in another millennia he would claw his way forth out of the fray to stake claim to another position, though a dismal voice within Marcus doubted a second chance would be likely for such a sad creature.

The Beast was oblivious to Marcus's presence, sinking back into the depths of the tar once his meal had been consumed. The gun lay stark and cold where Desiderium had dropped it, a fine wisp of smoke still trailing from its muzzle. Marcus stooped and picked up the weapon, studying it as if it held the secrets to the universe, or perhaps, at least, a map for this new world he traversed. Within the gleaming metal he caught a glimpse of his own reflection and what he saw both terrified and saddened him, but only momentarily. For he had understood the moment the gun had formed within his hand that he had been chosen to take his captor's place in Hell.

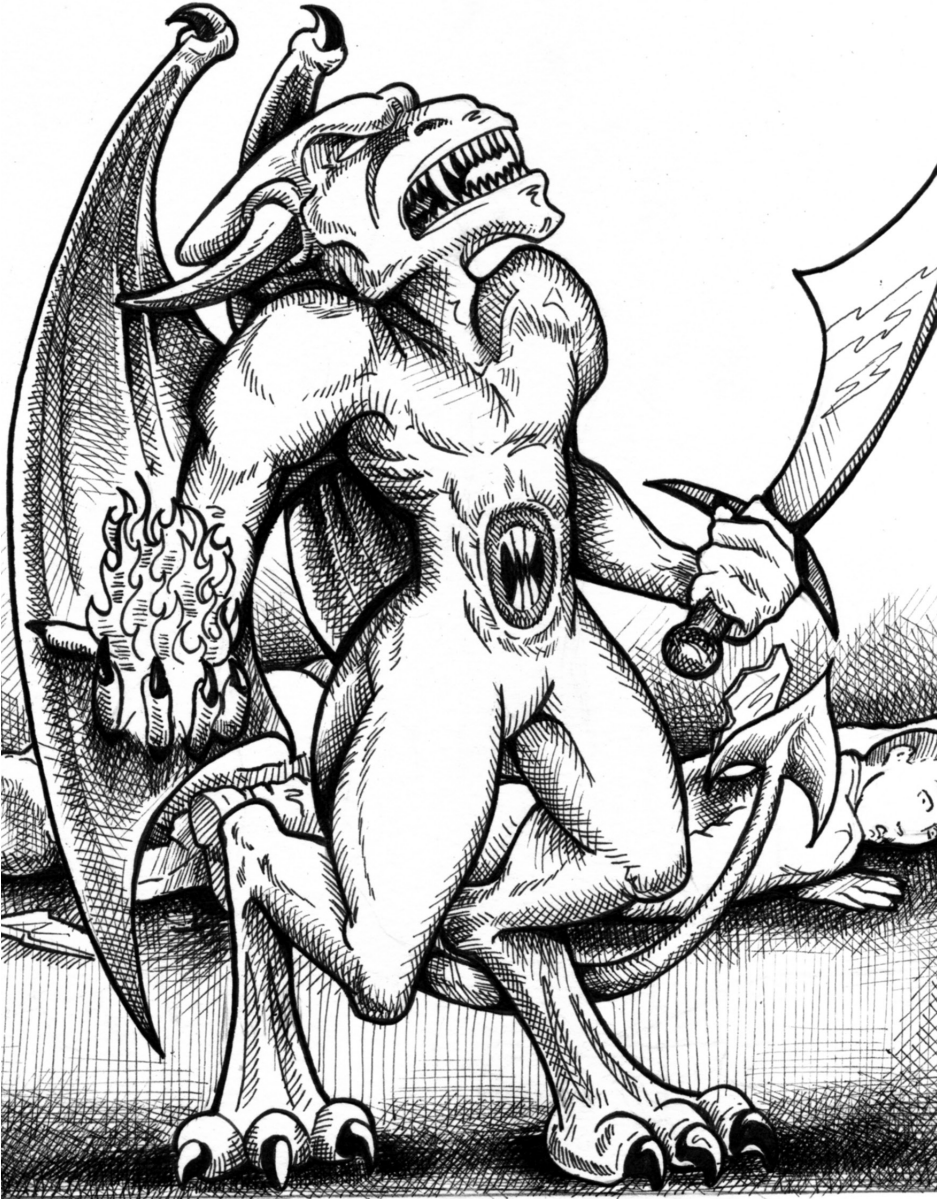
In the distance the soft beep and hiss of the life-support system powering his body flat-lined for a long sorrowful moment before disappearing entirely.

Drawing a deep breath, Marcus turned and began to walk back towards the sand dunes and urban relics. He had no guide for his new job, but something told him he knew all he needed to about regret and its power.

Marcus wondered if Brenda regretted not being there for him on his last day.

He also wondered just what she had done with his chair.

SONNELLION



CHAPTER 5

The autumn wind was crisp with the clean scent of ice and subtle perfume of decaying cottonwood leaves. It ebbed and flowed through the branches of the trees, humming a gentle lullaby to the spirits nestled in the rough-hewn cradle crooks that spoke of slumber and dreams and the promise of an eventual spring. The wind carried a residual loneliness, poignant at times as a harsh reprimand, soft and consoling at others like a mother's sympathetic caress. To Marcus it was the sweetest ballad of love and loss he had ever heard as he sat alone with eyes closed upon an old, weathered bench within the deserted park, near the river.

This was the part of the human physical world he adored, the simple, emptiness of solitude he realized now had been so incredibly absent when he was alive, because at that time it had terrified him. The images of his human past were scattered through his memory like broken bits of microfiche discarded in the basement of a city library. But from them he could now and again delicately retrieve periphery sensations that resonated with the essence of his being, such as the one he now lingered within. A single perfect moment looping infinitely without disruption where the past and future had been suspended from interaction with the present, hovering on the outside of the microcosm in which he sat, still as a Buddhist monk. He knew this comforting silence and its grounding power well. Perhaps if he had sought more of it in his human life things might not have turned out as they had.

Then again, everything happens for a reason. The wind through the trees, the changing of the season, the course of the current in the dark waters of the river, all had their place within the many layers of existence. Now Marcus had his, or at least a new appointment, which he now knew he must prove himself worthy of or face a far worse fate, one he dared not even dwell upon. With the knowledge of his soul's peculiar assignment in the Divine Order he had wandered away from the boiling tar pits where the blind Beast had consumed Desiderium in search of a way back into the physical plane. While part of him wanted to explore the terrifyingly fantastic realm that moodily morphed like a Dali landscape, enigmatic and haunting, he was ill-equipped to navigate the terrain. The natural

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uncertainty of his young soul placed him in immediate danger. Amidst a realm where time could not define the true age the creatures that thrived there, he was a newborn entity and one that was not at all welcome. He knew nothing of the world he had awoken to and, while he was not quite fearful of it despite its constant fluxing face of hostility, he could sense its predatory nature as it sniffed the air around him in search of his tasty tender spots. His one possible instructor had been reclaimed by Hell and no others waited in the wings to counsel him on his new path. In this dimension it was every soul for itself. Marcus wondered if it was the same in Heaven, despite what priests and preachers may have promised during his youth?

Drawing a deep breath of cold autumn air into his lungs, he slowly opened his eyes. The park around him was deserted in the early morning hours. Dim gray light filtered ambiguously through an overcast sky as the sun began its predictable, dutiful ascent from the east. The bench upon which he sat was tucked into a far corner, backed up to a wall of cottonwood and cedar trees, steps away from the banks of the lazy running river where turtles dove deep and copperheads coiled in wait. Facing him, a dozen yards away, was a small fenced swimming pool that sat drained of water for the coming winter. Its pale blue walls, absent the shallows of shimmering chlorinated water and the blissfully ignorant squeals of the pool's young patrons, seemed icy and flat, as inhospitable as an iceberg.

The sloping floor was speckled with fallen brown cottonwood and hackberry leaves, tiny broken gray twigs and other debris that would not be tended to by the teenage seasonal employees until late next spring. He recognized the park as the one that had been down the street from the apartment he had shared with Brenda. Marcus could hear the ghosts of the laughter the pool had inspired during its forty years of existence like wind chimes tinkling in the distance. It was a place of relaxation and peace, where families had gathered on the surrounding sloping hills to forget their worries and bask in the warmth of summer's simplicity. One would not think that it would be the place for a newborn demon to take his first steps. Then again, the light had not yet been completely extinguished from Marcus's soul. He knew it was only a matter of time though before the last tendrils of his humanity evaporated, digested by the darkness that had seduced him until he became as grotesquely gnarled as Desiderium had been. He tried not to dwell on that thought.

Marcus rose from the bench and began to walk across the park down the reddish sandy hiking trail that ran between the pool and the riverbank. Unlike Desiderium who had chosen to hide within the dreams of his victims, revealing himself to the physical world only at the time of his prey's impending death, Marcus had decided to walk amongst the world of the living, wrapping his evolving demonic nature in the guise of his former human self until the time arose when he felt the pull of a soul's pain. He did not yet understand the process by which Desiderium had managed to make the connection with his prey permanent, but something instinctively told Marcus it was linked with the chair he had coveted in the months before his death.

He remembered something he had once heard about physical objects being "haunted" or linked to the spirits that had once utilized them in life. Objects could absorb the energies of people and events, usually tragic and violent ones, the item permanently imprinted like a record to be played continually until it was completely, utterly destroyed. The image of the stains he had desperately attempted to scrub from the chair flashed across his mind's eye, bloodstains so deeply embedded within the grain of the chair that they would never fully be erased. Something horrific had taken place, an event so tragic and sorrowful and filled with resignation and regret that it had given the chair a power unto itself. For Desiderium it had become a tool, an anchor to the physical world to facilitate his work and he had utilized it to its fullest potential.

The revelation was strangely exciting to Marcus, as if he had discovered the key to an all-but-forgotten secret library. While he knew there were other items within the world, which he would eventually be able to tap into and manipulate as lures for future unwitting souls once he learned the intricacies of his new position, for now he knew his best bet for success was to find Desiderium's chair. Marcus could not yet tell how much time had passed since his death, though he vaguely remembered it being spring or perhaps early summer when he had last seen the sun shining. However, whether it had been months or years was impossible for him to judge. Time held very little meaning in the dream realm where he had wandered between Hell's gates and mortal life, and the park in which he had just awoken seemed itself frozen in time without its human occupants to propel it forward into the future. Marcus reached up and closed the long wool overcoat he wore, buttoning it and tucking in the gray scarf knotted about his neck. It was an instinctual motion that did nothing to fend off the chill.

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The cold seemed to permeate his entire being in a way that went far and beyond the physical and had nothing to do with the autumn wind. As he walked he tugged on the gloves he noticed upon his hands, adjusting the fine black leather at the wrists beneath the cuffs of his coat, another residual human gesture as he noted how much more well-dressed he was in this life than his last. Perhaps evil did have at least a few perks, even if they were only superficial and impermanent.

The trail wound through a wooded patch where the trees clustered close together conspiratorially, blocking out what little gray light attempted to filter down from above, and past a small ramshackle boathouse where the local rowing team still assembled each weekend. Or, at least, they used to. Marcus cast a sidelong glance at the empty pier to his right and then back at the dark, padlocked door of the building to his left, set back into the shadows of overgrown foliage, before moving on down the trail. The soft crunching of his finely cobbled black leather shoes upon the ground limestone and granite path was meditative and soothing, reminding him of the hiss of the sand he had walked over as he left Desiderium to be consumed by the Beast. It was a sound he now subconsciously associated with survival and victory.

He followed the path away from the park and up a steep hill of wooden beam steps to the city sidewalk. There he paused and allowed a moment to reacquaint himself with the eerie familiarity of his surroundings. Here in the mortal world the sky did not heave and sigh as if it might turn itself inside out and rain blood upon the creatures beneath it. Buildings and highway overpasses remained static and immovable, gray and brown landmarks which Marcus would not suddenly vanish and be replaced by forests of rib cages, fog-obscured marshes of mythical beasts or rippling seas of black tar and writhing tortured souls. In this plane, a plane where he had once felt so incredibly helpless and lost, he now felt like a king. Hell had been wise to choose Marcus for Desiderium's replacement for if the power of regret still clung to his soul, its effect was not in the least bit evident.

Marcus turned and walked the two blocks to his old apartment building. Unlike many of the sprawling hives of cement and particleboard that had sprung up around the perimeter of the city like brightly colored fungus after a rain, the home Marcus had shared with Brenda had been in a smaller community of only twenty units. The mid-century architecture that had once been cutting edge design had faded over the years to forgotten retro

glory as one young management team after another, each possessing less pride in the past than the previous one, had allowed the stucco exterior to fade from sea foam green to white and the small kidney-shaped swimming pool to become all but unusable by the tenants. Marcus paused outside of the wrought iron gate and stared up at the building.

In the distance he could hear the traffic beginning to build on the freeway a mile away as people began their sluggish, grouchy commutes. He wondered if Brenda still lived there, in their little apartment, or if the pain of lingering within a cold crime scene had finally pushed her away. Though she had not verbally told him their relationship was over, emotionally she had begun the process of detaching herself from him, one less loving gesture at a time, in the months after his discovery of Desiderium's chair. If they had not been engaged, she very well might have moved out long before his actual suicide. Marcus found himself wondering if she had enough love remaining in her heart for her to mourn his passing, to regret not reaching out to him as he had become withdrawn, rather than arming herself in self-preservation.

The sound of a door opening and closing on the first floor snared Marcus's attention. A middle-aged man with an eccentrically receding hairline in wrinkled khakis and an oversized brown bomber jacket shuffled out of his unit and down the cement walkway to the small courtyard. His attention was focused on the mass of keys and the scuffed IBM® travel coffee mug in his hand and he almost did not notice Marcus, who had stepped aside to avoid being hit by the metal gate.

Muttering to himself about his cheap broken alarm clock, Beasley stopped in mid-stride before he reached his battered white Honda Civic. Slowly he turned his head and glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing through his thick, wire-rimmed glasses. His brows furrowed and for a minute he looked as if he might turn away again, shrugging off the moment of recognition he knew could not be possible. However, something compelled him to face Marcus for a better look.

"It can't be?" Beasley muttered aloud to himself. "Marcus? Is that you?" He said a little louder.

Marcus responded with a small nod and a twitch of one side of his mouth. Smiling still felt awkward and unnecessary.

"Holy crap!" Beasley said quietly, a freakishly fascinated grin spreading ear to ear like a Cheshire cat in heat. "I thought you blew your head off?"

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Slowly he walked towards Marcus, his keys and coffee mug still held tightly in either hand. “Brenda said you were dead...” His voice trailed off as if he had caught himself saying something slightly inappropriate.

Marcus laughed a little under his breath and glanced at the ground. “Part of it is true, I suppose.”

The comment struck Beasley as out of character. He halted a few feet away from Marcus and looked him up and down. Marcus could tell instantly that Beasley had picked up on the immense change in him. He could smell Beasley’s fear beneath the stale potato chip oil saltiness of his usual odor and knew that the fine hairs on the backs of his arms and legs were prickling with instinctual caution. Marcus had been neighbors with the thirty-six year-old software engineer for nearly six years.

For all of his outwardly stereotypical geek appearance, Beasley had proven himself a down-to-earth jovial fellow with a wicked sense of humor and a strangely checkered past of sordid youthful adventures. However, though the rest of the world now perceived Beasley as settling quietly into middle age, alone with his cat and his job and a steady supply of pizza and DVD’s, Marcus had always suspected there was something dark lurking beneath the surface – something that escaped from time to time in a staccato laugh or off-handed reference to the far different life he once led and which he always refused to elaborate on.

The darkness that had blossomed like a black ink spill in the center of Marcus’s soul with the transition of power from Desiderium twitched in the presence of Beasley. It expanded slightly, tendrils of tar bleeding out through his veins, fluxing and tensing as if longing to break through the fleshy shell and wrap about Beasley, prying forth from his soul the secrets he sheltered. It was not regret that Marcus sensed in Beasley but something far more malicious: anger, frustration and resentment. Emotions that were out of Marcus’s jurisdiction, but still intrigued him nonetheless. He stared at Beasley unblinking, unconsciously tilting his head to one side as he listened to the frenetic chattering beneath the surface of his neighbor’s aura.

Unnerved, Beasley took a step back, “Okay, well, it’s good to see you’re up and about?” he said uncertainly, moving towards his car. “I have to get to work, but if you’re around you’ll have to fill me in on...everything.”

“Does Brenda still live here?” Marcus asked Beasley.

Beasley unlocked the driver's side door of his Honda. "No, she moved pretty soon after your..." He began to say "death," Marcus knew. Quickly, Beasley continued, to rid the air of the sourness the unspoken word caused. "Think she moved uptown, but she didn't really say. You know she and I never really spoke too much. I don't blame her though." He placed his coffee mug in the cup holder and stood with the open door between himself and Marcus, holding the edges like a shield.

Marcus nodded. "Who lives in the unit now?"

Beasley shook his head. "I don't think it's been rented yet. She just moved about a month ago and, well, the place does kind of have a spooky feeling. I went in there last week just to check it out. You know, morbid curiosity of mine." The staccato laugh broke free of his throat for a second. He ran his hand through his wild ash-blond hair.

Marcus looked up at the cement balcony that ran along the outside of the second floor. His old apartment had been in the corner on the northeast side of the building. The lights were off, the white plastic mini-blinds lowered and closed.

"I have to get to the office," Beasley said, placing one leg inside the car anxiously.

Marcus nodded again. "Good to see you Beasley," he said without tearing his gaze away from the inspection of the building. "One more thing." Out of the corner of his eye, Marcus caught a glimpse of Beasley grimacing.

"Yeah?" Beasley responded.

"Do you know what happened to my armchair?" Marcus asked casually.

The question made Beasley pause. He stared at Marcus as if the man, recently back from the dead, had actually lost his mind. "Are you serious? You mean the one you... you know...in?"

"Yes, that's the one." Marcus dropped his gaze back to Beasley.

"Man, you don't want that thing, trust me. I saw them take it out of the house after the police were done with it. It was like a prop out of *Saw*." Beasley shook his head looking as if the memory alone might make him gag.

"It has sentimental value," Marcus replied quietly, inclining his head slightly as he studied Beasley, his voice dark and serious.

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Beasley frowned. “Right... Um, I’m pretty sure they threw it in the back dumpster. But I doubt it’s still there. Got to go, man. Later.” He plopped into the driver’s seat. Before the door clicked shut Marcus heard Beasley mutter “Freak!” under his breath.

Marcus smiled and this time it felt genuine.



For several long moments after Beasley’s car had disappeared from sight a few blocks away, Marcus stood on the sidewalk outside his old apartment building listening to the murmur of the city around him. Beneath the steady whistle of the wind around the historical two-story homes that still dotted the street between loft spaces of stark, trendy modern architecture, Marcus could hear the symphony of heartbeats of the humans that lived within each room. The melody the distinct rhythms wove was mesmerizing; like the many echoing notes of a raging river where it met a waterfall, smaller more gentle streams feeding into it from either side down long and winding mountain ravines.

Despite the artificial construction of their struggles for survival, the blood that continually rushed through their bodies connected them permanently to nature, to the cosmos and to the afterlife. Marcus felt part of something larger now, whereas before he had allowed himself to slip into the lethal numbness of ambiguity and unimportance. Fleeting seconds of hesitation still tugged at the edges of his mind though, he realized, for he did not truly know what was in store for him or if he would have the muster to carry out the infinite number of deceitful manipulations of those weak-willed souls he chose to claim. He had stood upon the pier and watched Desiderium take his own life with a gun Marcus’s subconscious had manifested, and he had felt very little except pity. However, that had been the demon who had condemned him, not another pathetic mortal who had lost both their moral way and spiritual will.

Two more of his old neighbors scurried out of their apartments, exiting the courtyard gate to find their cars or mode of public transit. Neither cast even a momentary glance in Marcus’s direction, too consumed by thoughts of their day ahead to consider the implications of his appearance. Later in the day, as they were making copies for their boss or grabbing a latte they might pause and question with a shiver if what they had seen in their peripheral vision had been real, but by that time Marcus would be long

gone. While he walked within it, he was not part of their world any longer. At least, that is what they should have been praying for.

Marcus casually walked around the building towards to rear alley. He could feel the pull of the chair's dark, brooding energy even more poignantly now than when he had coveted the diseased object in his mortal life. Behind the building two large battered green dumpsters sat along the faded brown fence that separated the property from the adjacent house on the right. Standing on his tiptoes he peeked inside each one, but they had both been recently emptied.

However, he knew it had to be close by. Like a bloodhound Marcus sniffed the air, tasting it on the back of his tongue for the sour-sweet oiliness of its aura, which seemed strongest down the alley to his left. Without hesitation he followed the narrow dirty strip of broken asphalt the rest of the way to the street. For several blocks he wandered between houses and apartment buildings following the pull of the chair like a fish on a lure. He knew instinctively the article of furniture had found a new home, a notion that feverishly intrigued Marcus as the initial wave of relief that the piece had avoided an untimely demise in the city landfill passed over him.

A mile or so away the resonance of the chair's aura reached a deafeningly mute crescendo whining like a white noise deep within his ears. He halted before a tiny ramshackle house of peeling dark blue wood and a wildly overgrown yard. A chain-link fence ran along the perimeter of the yard, disappearing behind lines of chinaberry trees to either side. Patches of the weathered tar paper roof had fallen away, exposing the blackened wood beneath. The shades were drawn on all of the windows. Marcus sensed two individuals inside, a man and a woman. A tension burned between them, sharp and acidic, fueled by the wayward passion of youth tormented by addiction. As his senses absorbed the delicate precarious notes of their misery, Marcus felt the illusion of his mortal image shift momentarily, an involuntary bodily spasm that made his skin feel as if it were alive with the scurrying legs of a million tiny spiders. Opening the gate, he walked into the yard.

Rounding the side of the house in a blur of short tan fur, fangs and vicious snarls, a large pit bull charged Marcus. So fixated had he been upon the mortals within the house that he had neglected to inspect the property for other threats. For a moment Marcus froze in mid-stride, a lingering shadow of his old human fears immobilizing him. However, as the dog closed in it slowed its pace until it stopped a couple of feet away

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as if it were suddenly unsure about its chances of winning its attack. The pit's stubby ears twitched and laid back, his lips curling in a snarl, teeth clenched together as a low growl rumbled up out of its throat. Carefully, the dog began to back up, lowering its head in wavering submission, until it finally turned and fled.

Marcus stared after the dog, wondering if it had been able to see past his human disguise. With a smirk he continued down the barely visible broken sidewalk to the dilapidated wooden front porch. However, before he had lifted a foot to the first step, the door was flung aggressively open. A wiry Hispanic man in his early twenties burst through with an angry determination, flinging the rickety outer screen door aside so that it crashed into the side of the house with an echoing bang. His hair was close-cropped, Marcus could see a rough black tattoo on the right side of his scalp, his muscular, if painfully thin arms riddled with similar crudely drawn art denoting a rough life on the streets and possible prison time. He was dressed in a ragged white wife-beater tee and baggy blue jeans slung low over his narrow hips, and he loomed over Marcus, his face contorted in a vicious snarl.

"Who the fuck are you? And what did you do to my dog?" He shouted down at Marcus.

Marcus watched him calmly. A reasonable mortal man would have been instantly intimidated by the aggressive youth who most likely had a gun tucked into the back of his jeans. However, the horrors he had witnessed during his time away from the physical realm had severely muted his ability to fear anything that was not delivered straight from the belly of Hell itself. In fact, the malformed rage and warped sense of righteous indignation that emanated from the young man only further served to intrigue him -- like catching a whiff of a fine home-cooked meal being prepared and feeling one's stomach growl in response.

"Your dog is fine," Marcus said quietly. "He simply knows a losing battle when he sees it."

"What did you say?" The man stomped down the stairs, his heavy black boots causing the rotten wood to creak under his weight.

Marcus took a step back to allow the man room to confront him appropriately. He tilted his head contemplatively to one side as he watched the youth posturing before him, squaring his shoulders as if he meant to strike Marcus despite his response.

“I’d leave if I were you.” The man locked eyes with Marcus, who stood a full foot shorter than him. He flicked the lapel of Marcus’s coat. “You don’t belong here. You have no business here, so get the fuck out of my yard!”

The man’s soul was splayed wide open. It was completely unprotected and brutally eviscerated for creatures such as Marcus to observe and dissect, despite the bulletproof shield he had built around himself to protect him from the other mortal jackals that constantly prowled the perimeter of his territory. Slowly, but surely, Marcus was beginning to understand the intricacies of how Desiderium had manipulated his own soul in his moment of weakness by plucking from him the knowledge of the fissures that had opened in the dam all humans use to contain their primal animalistic instincts.

Though we are taught from an early age to deny them, once we give into the temptation of submitting to lust, greed, envy or another lesser impulse, regret is almost instantaneous. However, some souls possess the unwitting predisposition to be utterly demolished by those desires due to their lack of will to rebuild the dam and make amends, not with any higher power, but with their own consciousness. A flash of philosophic insight struck Marcus like a blow to the chest: regret, like many other emotions, was not linked to the intentions of such astral creatures as angels and demons, unless they are allowed to consume the identity of the possessing mortal. When the regret became more powerful than the soul itself, it was time for the demon to collect his bounty.

Marcus subtly sniffed the air about the man like a wolf, his eyes narrowing as he searched for the reason he had been drawn to this particular human being, besides the link to Desiderium’s old touchstone, the chair. What had attracted the man to the discarded, blood-soaked piece of trash and compelled him to drag it back to his dismal home? Beneath the rock-hard exterior screamed a tragically raw voice so wracked by the guilt of an event so radically beyond the young man’s control that it defied all logic. He held himself accountable, clinging to his guilt with every ounce of his resolve as if it were the very blood that raced through his veins. Marcus plucked at the young man’s soul, peeling back the translucent layers carefully, one at a time, as he attempted to reveal the nature of his enslaving burden.

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Instinctively sensing something dangerously amiss, the man struck out at Marcus, shoving him backwards with both hands. “What the fuck is your problem? I said, get lost!” he snarled.

The icy wind began to pick up as if it sensed impending violence, moaning through the branches of the trees, between the houses, as gray clouds raced across the sky. Goosebumps prickled along the man’s bare arms as he fought the urge to shiver. There was something else attached to the man’s soul, a darkness that was not his alone, an influence that warped his aura like a fun house mirror. Marcus frowned, strangely disconcerted for it was not a human energy he sensed, but an entity far older and wiser than his mortal shell. Inside the house Marcus had sensed another presence hiding timidly in the shadows.

This one was female and also quite young, her spirit whimpering not from fear, but from sadness anchored in prolonged, permanent physical pain. She had moved beyond fear into the irredeemable wasteland of hopelessness. Marcus suddenly felt as if he had won the lottery. His first outing away from Hell only to track not one but two suffering souls worth collection was a prize in itself. The two humans were linked by a tangled web of violence and sadness that would have made a human man cringe, but made Marcus want to sing. He would prove himself a worthy replacement for Desiderium soon enough.

However, he could not shake the feeling still that something wasn’t quite right about the situation, as if there was a higher level frequency he could not yet tune into.

“She is in pain,” Marcus said quietly. “I can help you. I can help her.” He held the man’s gaze steadily.

“Who the hell are you? Who sent you?” The man began to reach around to where the gun Marcus had suspected he wore was barely concealed beneath his shirt.

“That will really only worsen the situation,” Marcus said quietly as he turned away and walked up the porch stairs. “Haven’t you already caused enough damage?”

Standing mute with shock on the sidewalk the man watched as Marcus walked through the open front door, disappearing inside the house. The moment Marcus stepped over the threshold he knew the domain he had entered was already tainted and not simply by the base sins of humanity. Whatever had taken place within the desolate, dirty walls of the house had

summoned up a powerful entity whose very essence left a bitter bile taste in the back of Marcus's throat.

Had another demon already laid claim to the man outside, or was it the girl who lingered within? Marcus could not tell. Carefully he walked through the living room, past a soiled black leather couch with several cracked cushions exposing the dirty white stuffing within, and a battered metal and glass coffee table littered with a suspect assortment of beer cans and paraphernalia. Behind him the young man outside bounded up the front steps and raced into the house screaming as he pointed his gun at the back of Marcus's head, ready to commit murder. Preoccupied with his own curiosity of what lay inside the small bedroom off to the right, Marcus paid little attention to the man.

His gaze still focused forward, he waved one hand at the man as if to silence him with a gesture. The gun vanished from the mortal's hand, manifesting itself in Marcus's palm. He closed his fingers around the grip and the metal dissolved, turning to a fine silvery powder that filtered over his fist to the floor below. Marcus heard the young man muttering to himself, praying to a god that he had not truly communed with in years.

"He's not yours to claim."

The low, constant hum of an electric space heater defined an otherwise oppressive silence within the darkness of the bedroom, slicing through the icy quiet like a swarm of angry yellow jackets. Cold white walls painted a dark gray with the winter shadows were barren with the exception of two holes, one on top of the other near the wall light switch, clearly made by an angry fist. The space was small, with only enough footage for a double mattress set pushed into the far corner and small wooden dresser upon which sat a red ceramic lamp and alarm clock that constantly flashed 12:00 as if it had never been reset after a power outage.

Adjacent to the bed, in a corner near the window, wedged between the foot of the bed and the wall, was Desiderium's chair, angled out so that a clear view of the doorway could be seen from its seat. Curled there with her knees tucked up to her chin, a once lovely Hispanic woman cradled herself with her arms like a small child. She was dressed in a pair of faded gray sweatpants and olive green hooded sweatshirt, her long black hair, like a waterfall of shiny obsidian, hung down over her arms and shielded her face. She did not move as Marcus entered the room warily.

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“Did you say something to me?” Marcus asked quietly, his tone low and cautious.

The girl turned her head slightly, peering out through the mass of straight hair. Her eyes were ringed with dark blue shadows and her long black lashes were still damp from weeping. She stared unblinking at him, her eyes glistening like polished black diamonds from rim to lid. “He is not yours to claim,” she said again matter-of-factly without emotion. “Go home young demon. You are out of your element here.”

“I tracked him here. That is my chair you’re sitting in that he scavenged. I stake my claim to him by proxy.” Marcus was uncertain where his courage stemmed, but he clung to it steadfastly, refusing to have his first attempts at fulfilling his new destiny thwarted by some other minion of the underworld.

“No.” The girl began to uncurl from the chair slowly like a cobra rising into a striking position.

As her hair parted, revealing a heart-shaped face sculpted by hunger, Marcus could see dark bruises lining her jaw and left eye socket. Fingerprints also still remained on her neck from a recent strangling attempt.

“This is not your chair. It was Desiderium’s. That poor wretched excuse for a demon. I am the one who told the girl to bring it home, but it is not her I am after. It is he.” She pointed at the young man who stood paralyzed with fear behind Marcus. “I have already done too much delicate work here to give him up to you.”

Marcus could hear the man’s heart thundering in his chest, adrenaline racing through his veins causing his sweat to sour on his skin and turn to a sticky, icy chill across his body. He could hear his thoughts babbling profanities interlaced with promises of a life lived on the straight and narrow if only he could awake from the nightmare he was witnessing unfold before him. However, as much as he regretted stepping foot into the house after Marcus, another emotion ruled his soul which obliterated even his own desire to make amends with the universe and free himself from the immediate situation: hatred. His outrage at his territory having been invaded and his false sense of power annihilated cast a red haze over any other emotion. It became clear to Marcus that the demon before him had possessed the woman in order to provoke the man and draw forth from him the primal emotion he needed to capture him. Despite this knowledge, Marcus was not leaving without a soul.

“What is your name?” Marcus asked, uncertain if he really wanted to know the answer as the words left his lips.

“Why do you care?” The woman tilted her head to the side and rose from the chair. As she did so she rolled her shoulder back, popping the bone back into the socket from where it had been dislocated with a sickening crack of ligament and marrow.

“As you said, I’m new here. It would be nice to have a name if we ever cross paths again,” Marcus replied, standing his ground.

The energy in the room bristled, fizzing and popping with a low rolling crackle like sparking power from a downed electrical line. The woman narrowed her black eyes. Suddenly her image shimmered, wavering as if the physical body in which the demon resided had stepped behind a rushing waterfall of red and yellow flame. Behind the curtain of energy the woman separated into two bodies. The battered human woman, still dressed in her dingy sweats, swayed back and forth, her eyes rolling back in her skull before she crumpled to the floor unconscious. Through the wall of intangible Hellfire stepped a new creature, both fiercely terrifying and exotically beautiful in a way that captivated Marcus for a moment, before he was able to regain his focus and take a step back. A full head taller than Marcus’s corporeal form, the demon’s red skin glistened as if coated with fresh blood, his hard, wiry muscles wrapping about his arms, limbs and torso like muscle without flesh to cover them.

Unlike Desiderium’s sickly gray body riddled with broken sores and eyes near blinded by cataracts, this creature radiated a hostility that stole the breath from Marcus’s lungs. Its skull was long and tapered with high pointed ears pinned back against the sides like openings to a red conch shell, and the demon’s mouth stretched nearly from earlobe to elfin earlobe. In the center of his chest was what appeared to be a second mouth, black and glistening and oval, ringed with tiny black fangs like a lamprey fish. The creature stared down at Marcus with feline eyes the color of bile, sneering in irritation to reveal rows of jagged triangular shark’s teeth.

Marcus knew he should be gripped with a terror that surpassed any conceivable fight or flight impulse; that he should buckle before the ancient primal power and grovel in a position of submission as befitting the stature of his newfound demonic position. Yet, instead he merely marveled in awe at the strangeness of the beast before him as if the demon were nothing more than a gruesome Max Ernst creation. When he had awoken in the holding space with Desiderium between worlds the strange, numb desensitization

was already noticeable, as if the nerve endings to his soul had been severed from the trauma of his fleshly wounds.

Empty and silent, his being felt as if it needed to be filled and what remained of his old self repurposed, to be utilized in ways he had not previously known he was capable. As he stared up into a face only H.R. Geiger could love, Marcus simply found himself wondering why a creature of such power would continue to toil within the physical realm. Then again, a soldier of Hell had no choice but to continue their work until Lucifer decided otherwise. At least this much Marcus had already learned.

"Name? You want my *name*?" The demon sniffed at Marcus as if he might eat him in his annoyance. "My name is Sonnellion. I am the Demon of Hatred."

A sudden flash of memory skipped across Marcus's mind. "Ah! When Desiderium was tricking me into relinquishing my own human soul to him, he first lied to me in a dream and told me he was you."

The sneer on Sonnellion's eggplant-colored lips twitched, drawing back into a cruel grin. "That is rich!" He hissed. "And you believed him?"

Marcus shook his head. "What difference did I know then? The trick worked in provoking my rage which in turn made me surrender to my regret."

"Well, I suppose I underestimated Desiderium." Sonnellion seemed almost pleased. He clicked his viper's tongue against the back of his teeth. "A pity he was still too weak to survive. He was never one to be able to work through confrontation. Perhaps in another millennia he will be reborn with a stronger conviction."

Behind Marcus came the hollow echo of bone hitting the wood floors as the man dropped to his knees, unable to flee the house, yet too weak to remain standing any longer. Sonnellion glanced over Marcus's shoulder at the man, narrowing his eyes as if he was reconsidering his claim on the soul.

"As you can probably guess, the last thing I want on my first outing is trouble, from you or any other demon. Take the man. You've obviously invested time in him and I will be the first to admit that I could not win a battle with you even if I was brave enough. Leave me the woman." Marcus chose his words carefully knowing full well he risked a painful evisceration by Sonnellion's long ruby talons if he moved or spoke inappropriately. He glanced at the unconscious human on the floor at Sonnellion's scaled,

prehistoric feet. “Something tells me she was broken long before you came along.”

“She was a weak soul, you are correct. Easy to infiltrate, the perfect bait for the pent-up violence I sensed in her lover.” Sonnellion sniffed the air in front of Marcus’s face again, testing his aura for malevolent notes of deceit. “But, I don’t trust you. This is too simple a trade for even a demon as inexperienced as you to propose. Show me your true face.”

Marcus was taken aback by this demand. In truth, he did not yet know what his true face was or would become. There had been no mirrors in the strange middle world where he had wandered previously. He felt comfortable in his old mortal costume because beneath he knew his newly damned soul was still molten, molding beneath the discordant siren song of sin. If stripped of the face that was “Marcus” he was not sure if he would even have features or whether he would stand as an anthropomorphic outline of gray shadow.

“You will come to see it soon enough,” Marcus replied, trying to steer the conversation away from the uncomfortable weakness. “Do we have a deal?”

Sonnellion hissed through clenched fangs and stepped towards Marcus menacingly. “Deal? Why would I make a deal with you? I plan to take both of these souls. They are rightfully mine.” He reached out and gripped Marcus’s shoulder, the razor sharp talons tipping each finger piercing through his finely tailored clothing to the skin and muscle beneath.

Marcus grimaced, realizing that he was not beyond physical pain, though his fear of it might be muted. “Call it a favor.” The words slipped out of his mouth before he could truly contemplate the extent of their meaning. He had spoken compulsorily as if Sonnellion’s tightening grip on his shoulder compelled him to make yet another foolish pact so soon after the first one that had cost him his mortal life.

“I’ll repay you at another time.” He could have walked away. He could have simply admitted defeat. It was not as if the world wasn’t brimming with hopeless remorseful fools, any number of which would have been easy prey for even a novice demon like Marcus. It could not be undone though, and as Sonnellion smiled down at Marcus, he knew the favor would definitely be called in one day when he least expected it, and least wanted it. Dread chilled him from his core outwards, radiating like a river quickly freezing even as it rushed away from the encroaching storm.

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Sonnellion released him, chuckling. “You’re going to regret that vow.”

“Touché,” Marcus reached up and rubbed his face with one hand. “That was too easy...” he muttered to himself.

“Oh, no, not at all. Your services will be put to good use, I assure you.” Sonnellion stepped aside. “The girl is yours. I hope it was worth it.” He hissed.

No sooner had the agreement been struck then the sound of voices pierced the oppressive cold quiet of the house.

“Emilio, I know you’re in there!” A gruff, deep man’s voice bellowed from the front lawn.

Sonnellion stepped back and squatted down over the woman on the floor. “You’ll get her after I’m done here,” Sonnellion said quietly. “It’s time for me to finish what I started.”

The shimmering wall of orange and yellow flame erupted from the floor in front of him, obscuring the two figures for a moment before disappearing once again as if sucked upwards into the ceiling by a vacuum. Sonnellion had vanished, but the woman still remained, possessed once again by the demon. She moaned quietly. She lifted her head slightly, attempting to push herself up off the ground, and turned to look at Marcus with a knowing little smile and vacuous black eyes.

Marcus knew instantly that this was part of the theatrical plot Sonnellion had been weaving, that the woman appear as beaten and broken as possible to the outside world. He was not leaving without the woman’s soul, but he knew best to allow whatever was about to happen to transpire without interference. Quietly he stepped back, fading into the shadows of the far corner so that, to the man still kneeling on the ground stricken with fear, he appeared to vanish entirely. Marcus watched as the man shook his head as if awaking from a nightmare and scrambled to his feet. He took one step into the bedroom and glanced around in search of the terrifying creature he had just witnessed.

Running one hand over his buzzed hair he mumbled, “What the hell was in that stuff Jason sold me? I’m going to kill that bastard.”

“Emilio!!”

The sound of heavy footsteps stomping up the rotten porch stairs accompanied the booming angry voice. Emilio whirled around and charged into the living room to confront the man.

“What the fuck are you doing here, man? I told you to stay out of our business!” Emilio shouted.

From where Marcus stood within the bedroom he could not directly see the confrontation. Listening carefully, he instead watched the woman Sonnellion possessed as the demon orchestrated the demise of the man he had decided to claim. Reaching around, the woman used the leg of the armchair to pull herself up into a sitting position. Leaning against the front of the chair she rested her head against the seat cushion and called out with a raspy, weak voice.

“Donny, I’m in here,” she gasped, closing her eyes and hanging her head. With a deep breath she struggled to draw herself up from the ground, using the chair to anchor herself. “Help me...”

“What the hell?” The new male voice accompanied the sound of a punch landed solidly to bone. “You fucking bastard! I’ll kill you! What have you done to my sister?”

A crashing sound of body weight striking the wood floor in the living room echoed through the tiny building. Marcus, careful to remain hidden from the mortal eye, moved so that he could watch the progression of the fight. Sonnellion dragged the woman’s body across the floor, crawling on her hands and knees until she reached the door frame where she could haul herself up onto her feet.

“Donny, no!” she croaked weakly.

However, her appearance only served to drive both men into a further fit of rage at one another, Donny bent on seeking revenge for his sister’s injuries, Emilio blinded by his hatred of Donny and own unspoken self-loathing for the damage he had done to his girlfriend. Donny, a slightly overweight, yet still heavily muscled man at least ten years Emilio’s senior, threw another punch, which Emilio easily dodged. With a guttural howl, Emilio launched himself at Donny like a leaping wolf, tackling him to the ground.

The thin plaster and wood walls trembled as the men crashed to the ground, tipping over the glass coffee table, framed pictures slipping from their nails to shatter on the floor. The thin sheet of clear glass from the coffee table cracked as it fell over, separating into three long, jagged shards. Emilio gained the upper hand, his fists wrapping around Donny’s neck as he straddled him, even as Donny’s fists slammed repeatedly into his ribs, surely breaking them with each blow. Marcus found himself fascinated by

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the scene, watching with a respectful awe at the violence Sonnellion had managed to cultivate and ignite in not only Emilio, but also Donny. Though Emilio had been the focus of Sonnellion's harvesting, the possibility of gaining two possible souls, for his labors was enticing. Sonnellion watched on through the woman's blackened eyes, feigning weakness as she clung to the cracked white molding around the door, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

The two men continued to struggle for several long minutes on the living room floor, both completely surrendering to their rage and blinded by the sudden desire for blood to be spilled in their enemy. Donny was losing though, becoming weaker as Emilio strangled him, the muscles and tendons in his arms shaking from exertion. Donny's left hand swung out over the floor, searching desperately for anything to assist him. His fingers collided with the sharp edge of a shard of the broken coffee tabletop.

Without hesitation, he grabbed the shard, uncaring as the razor-sharp edges sliced into his fingers and palms, and swung it hard at Emilio. The glass dagger plunged into Emilio's side, sliding between his ribs just below his shoulder blade with a sickening slick wetness. Emilio was undeterred, the adrenaline and drugs racing through his system had hardwired him like a war machine. Donny withdrew the blade and stabbed him again, repeating the movement over and over again until Emilio finally became too weak to sit upright any longer. As his fingers uncoiled from around Donny's neck, Donny gasped with a rasping, desperate wheeze.

Emilio collapsed, lying on his side, his breathing so shallow that he appeared to have already expired. For a moment, the house was eerily silent. The chill autumn wind whistled through the trees outside, rustling the dead and dying leaves with a low constant howl. The screen door banged quietly into the front side of the house as the wind investigated it with a childlike curiosity. The woman sank to her knees, false tears slipping down her cheeks as a dreadful inhuman wail wove up from her throat that reminded Marcus of the wayward damned seeking solace from Hell. In the living room, Donny rolled over onto his side, coughing and sputtering as he attempted to sit up. Marcus's attention, however, was focused on Emilio's dying body. Something whispered silently to Marcus that the scene had not ended yet.

Emilio's fingers twitched. His arm slid back, his fingers searching for something under his shirt. Donny was no longer paying attention to the man, whom he thought had died from the gruesome battle wounds.

Emilio, his eyes open and unblinking, blood dribbling from his mouth and pooling beneath his head, found what he was looking for tucked into the waistband of his pants: his gun. With one last heartbeat of energy he pulled the gun out, placed it at the base of Donny's skull and pulled the trigger. The explosion was deafening, echoing throughout the house like a scream through a shadow-drenched sewer drain, accompanied by a spray of blood, bone and brains that coated the front of the couch in a fine red mist. As Donny fell forward into the remaining glass of the coffee table, Emilio's hand slipped to the floor with a dull, heavy thud. Both men were dead.

Marcus was in awe. He wanted to start clapping, to step out of the shadows and scream "Bravo!" at the top of his lungs as for a profoundly inspiring theatrical last act. Not only had Sonnellion managed to successfully secure one soul, but two, even though Donny's had not been the intended prize. However, Marcus remained respectfully silent, standing still amidst the shadows of the bedroom as Sonnellion separated himself once again from the woman's body, who crumpled to the floor. He watched as Sonnellion walked calmly into the living room to inspect his work.

The front door slammed shut as the demon entered the room to prevent intrusion as he plucked the souls from the body one by one with a surgical precision. Standing between the two bodies, he held his hands out and closed his eyes. Marcus watched, breathless, as the demon summoned forth the lingering souls of Donny and Emilio, pulling them upwards like puppets limp on their strings. The translucent spirits, expressions of confusion and fear imprinted on their faces, wavered for a moment over their lifeless bodies like wisps of steam from a city grate before drifting towards the black mouth in the center of Sonnellion's chest. The mouth yawned wide, the obsidian slivers of teeth standing on end, flexing hungrily outwards as the souls writhed, desperate to flee the fierce vacuum pull that filled them with terror in the first moments since their death. Sliver by sliver, the two men's spirits were sucked into the gaping maw at Sonnellion's center.

Marcus could hear their silent screams, a high-pitched whine of fear like off-key violin notes pulled hard and fast by an angry musician. The sound caused the fine hairs on Marcus's corporeal disguise to bristle as excitement brewed frantically within him and his desire to claim his own first trophy surged menacingly. He wanted the glory, the base satisfaction of his initial kill and the pleasure of delivering that very first soul to the hungry belly of the Beast in his quest to prove himself worthy of the title Hell had seemingly bestowed upon him as a pure whim. Marcus watched

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as the last traces of the spirits were consumed, their faces drawn long and painful like the figure in “The Scream” painting by Edvard Munch, until with a final snap into silence they vanished entirely.

The glistening black mouth flexed in Sonnellion’s chest, pursing, the black teeth bending inwards as it swallowed the souls, leaving Marcus with the eerie sensation that, if it could have smiled it would have, as its hunger was satiated. Sonnellion opened his bile-yellow feline eyes, his gaze locking on Marcus as he lowered his hands, an expression of pure demonic smug entitlement smoothing his features into sinful bliss. Marcus was uncomfortable for the first time since his arrival back in the physical plane.

“Impressive, I must admit,” Marcus said, inclining his head in a curt nod of approval that was perhaps a bit too arrogant for a lowly demon of his newborn stature.

Sonnellion tilted his head to one side. He appeared slightly intoxicated by the consumption of the two souls, elation at his decadently infernal indulgence making him as truly happy as the Demon of Hatred can be.

“I’ll leave you to your woman and your chair. Until we meet again.” The hallucinatory wall of flame erupted from the ground once again and in an instant Sonnellion had vanished.

Marcus stared at the cooling corpses in the middle of the living room and the deep red pool of congealing blood beneath them. It was a grisly sight to behold, even for a numb soul such as his. After a moment of consideration of what he had witnessed, he drew a deep breath and dropped his gaze to the battered form of the woman at his feet. He wondered if she would remember anything once she awoke or if the possession created a black void within her memory. Something told Marcus that, despite whether or not the events since Sonnellion’s arrival remained imprinted clearly within her mind she was a soul that suffered the sharp pangs of regret intensely, with or without demonic intervention.

He was grateful to the demon he had just bargained with for the preliminary work he had done to the girl, which no doubt would allow Marcus an easy first job. However, it would still take a bit of manipulation to harvest her soul. He glanced over at the chair, narrowing his eyes as he considered his next move.

“I think we’ll leave you here,” Marcus said to the chair. “You shouldn’t be too hard to find for the next one.” He squatted down beside the woman.

Gabrielle Faust & Solomon Schnieder

“As for you, you’d best come with me. We still have a bit of work to do before I can officially call you mine.”

Marcus reached out and laid his hand on the back of the woman’s head, closing his eyes. The next time he opened them they were in the bizarre in-between land Marcus was becoming all too familiar with.

CRESIL



CHAPTER 6

Out upon the muddy field of broken turf and tombstones a herd of sheep ran for their lives from some unseen evil. Their mournful bleating reverberated through their empty chest cavities and rib cages exposed through bodies of decomposing flesh and matted dirty wool. Their hooves struck the ground, throwing up clods of earth that descended in their wake in a shower of blood droplets that glistened in the moonlight with a semi-precious quality worth coveting. Between the skeletal black formations of barren trees forming a crescent circle horizon a hundred yards away, Marcus thought he could see the wavering outlines of warrior spirits marching continuously onward, the dim twilight light piercing their mist forms from time to time as they acted upon orders delivered to them by generals centuries ago without even a glimmer of awareness of the present.

The untended grisly, yet strangely beautiful herd of sheep finally passed, their fear dying into the distance like rolling thunder. The mist that followed them reared up, contorting into vicious, snarling wolverines that raced forward with fangs bared before dissipating once again as the tendrils settled back into the low-lying bank of fog crawling across the tundra. Marcus watched as the beasts melted away, their ghastly, ghostly bloodlust spreading out into the dreamscape to be forgotten. Even he could not repress a shiver at the sight. It was so perfect and surreal and yet he knew now that these strange visions he witnessed were perhaps more real than the world he had once felt burdened by, enslaved to. Here everything was possible and the slightest flux of emotion manifested itself complete with a voracious appetite of its own blessing.

Whimpering at his feet snared Marcus's attention away from the landscape around him. With a calculating calm he looked down at the woman Sonnellion had gifted him, wrapped about his ankles and cowering in a childlike manner, and wondered if perhaps he had made a wrong decision in bargaining so early on in his demonic career. Though initially he had been driven by the certainty that she was to be his and the determination to gain a foothold on the new path he trod, her aura no longer appeared as appealing, stripped of the seduction of possession

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and the surrounding fever of violence. As Sonnellion had vanished, the air had tasted of burnt cinnamon, ash and blood, a mixture that was strangely intoxicating, the smell of a sacred space thick with years of incense burned upon altars. Marcus had gathered the woman close and pulled her into the in-between space connecting Earth and Hell, uncertain what his next move was to be. He had no previous interaction with this woman and no possible idea of what her soul might reveal to him in its intentions or its desires.

In the brief moments in which Sonnellion had exited her body, she had collapsed unconscious, her aura dull and lifeless, beaten down into a crevice of her body to cower before the nightmare that invaded her. She could have once been a strength, a power, a goddess in her own right, but now it would be hard even for Marcus to separate what the truth was from the heartbreaking nest of vipers her recent experiences had made of her. Perhaps it would be possible to convince her, now that she had awoken in a place where nothing of her previous life even remotely applied, from memories to simple applications of physics, that what she had witnessed in Sonnellion had merely been a dream?

The woman clutched at Marcus's pant leg as if it were her lifeline back to the physical plane, her head bowed, her face obscured by a curtain of long black hair. Marcus squatted down beside her and waited patiently for her to pull herself out of her catatonia. Slowly, she lifted her head and gazed up at Marcus with bloodshot eyes of a deep earthy brown hue. Despite the swollen splotches of prismatic bruises that mottled her face and neck, she was still a lovely woman. He realized suddenly that, despite the premature lines beneath her eyes and around her mouth, the woman was still in her very early twenties and, possibly not even beyond nineteen. It was plain that her life had been a harsh one with hardships no soul should have to endure yet she had and somehow managed to survive. However, despite her tenacity, it had still led her into his arms. Call it fate or simply call it unfortunate, her future was now carved upon a shale path only demons dared to tread on.

Marcus found himself pitying not the individual herself, but humanity's need to destroy beautiful things. Despite their attempts to save themselves through muttered prayer, they would forever be far more akin to the very creatures they most feared. They almost made the work of demons such as Marcus a bit too easy, as no matter how complex or intelligent one might appear, humans are always only steps away from their primal instincts. They can meditate, pray, worship, donate their time to charitable

causes, read self-help books until their eyes bleed, attend empowerment conferences and erect steel walls around their souls so thick that they themselves truly believe themselves untouchable. However, in the end, everyone is breakable.

“Wh... who are you?” The woman stuttered in a whisper.

“I’m whoever you want me to be,” Marcus said quietly. “Do you know why you’re here?”

The woman’s gaze timidly darted around the landscape, focusing on the shadowy figures of the ghost warriors still trudging through the foggy bank of trees across the clearing. She shook her head, unable to form words. Marcus could feel her trembling through her grip upon his leg. He held out his hand to her.

“Come,” he ordered softly. “Let’s take a walk.”

Her gaze shot back to meet his. She had sensed the darkness in his tone, no matter his attempts at appearing nonchalant. Her brows furrowed and she pulled away slightly, her eyes drifting down to his upturned palm, starkly white in contrast to the dull gray fog and dark brown mud below. The perfume of churned earth and sheep’s dung hung heavy in the air around them; pierced by the sharp scent of blood and bronze as if a battle had only recently concluded. The woman, so far from anything even remotely resembling home, tentatively placed her hand in his and allowed him to pull her to her feet. Marcus could hear her heart fluttering like a hummingbird in her chest, the adrenaline that fueled her fear tainting her sweat with an acrid pungency. Looping her arm through the crook of his elbow, he placed his hand on top of hers with enough pressure to suggest that she stick close to him if she was wise. The woman said nothing as they began to walk through the glen.

“What is the last thing you remember?” Marcus asked quietly, staring ahead as if they were taking a leisurely stroll on a fine spring morning in the English countryside. All that was missing was his top hat and cane.

The scent of mud and fog began to wane as the wind shifted subtly, bringing with it the pungent stench of rotting, burning flesh. The woman gasped, lifting her free hand up to cover her nose and mouth in horror. “What is that smell?” she asked fearfully.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Marcus said quietly, unconcerned.

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"I... I can't really remember anything," the woman replied to his question hesitantly, looking as if she were repressing the urge to scream and run away instead of calmly walking with the strange man at her side.

"Well, there must have been something," Marcus said casually. "After all, 'good girls' don't end up in places like this, do they?"

Out of the corner of his eye Marcus saw tears begin to stream down the woman's face. Her pain radiated out of her like blue solar flares, licking his flesh through his fine fantasized garments, sending shivers across his flesh like a lover's tongue. A sliver of his former soul still clung to the notion that it was wrong to revel in the exquisiteness of another's pain, but Marcus simply could not help but be enamored by it; the demon essence claiming his soul was simply too strong, too irresistible. She began to shudder, her nails digging into his coat sleeve as she fought not to collapse back to her knees where her grief could consume her.

"I... am.... a good girl!" she whispered between sobs.

Marcus halted their stroll. The landscape around them began to morph, the fog peeling away in sheets as if blown by an invisible giant's steady exhale. A few feet away a pyre had been cobbled from tree branches bound together with bits of twine and what appeared to be horsehair, though it easily could have been human. At least the length of human man, it sat high upon a mountain of lifeless sheep corpses, as if they had plowed headlong into one another in a silent mass suicide. Slow plumes of white smoke seeped out from between the bodies from a fire lit somewhere deep within the mound. In the distance the dank tundra gave way to black volcanic mountains backlit by a fiery sunset illuminated by twin suns that sank in opposite directions.

"Oh, come on. You and I both know that you wouldn't be here if you were so incredibly pious," Marcus chided her quietly as he stared at the mound of mutilated farm animals. Flames were beginning to weep from in between the bones and maggot-ridden flesh, bursting forth like viper tongues to taste the air. "My mother and father didn't raise me that way," she wailed, burying her face in his coat sleeve to block out the horrific mirage before her. "I came from a good home. I don't deserve this. Why are you torturing me?"

"What you witness here is not of my making," Marcus answered, still entranced by the upward dance of the bonfire flames as they gained the courage to rise forth and dance erotically with one another. "The world

here adapts to your subconscious. It may not make sense to you, but what you see is your own creation. Manifestations of all of the emotions you refuse to acknowledge or confront.”

“What the hell?” The woman jerked back as if possessed, her sorrow and fear transforming to rage as she reacted impetuously. “Are you saying it’s my fault he did this?” She pointed at her face. “Fuck you! I didn’t deserve this. I didn’t deserve his lying, cheating, punk ass! Do you hear me?” she screamed.

Patience was not a virtue Marcus had possessed in vast quantities during his mortal life. Thus, he found himself marveling at his newfound ability to navigate calmly about the storms he now encountered, which in another time would have sent him into a tailspin of panic. He turned and gazed down at the woman beside him.

“This has nothing to do with Emilio.” He gestured at the burning sheep corpses before sweeping his hand back to point at her heart. “There is something in there binding you, something you can’t let go of that has turned your soul a bitter black. You’ve held onto it for so long you aren’t even aware of it anymore, are you?”

He stepped closer until they were mere inches apart. Staring into her eyes he prodded the periphery of the armor around her soul searching for weak spots, like a crow pecking at an injured turtle. “Your expression tells me it’s not just one thing though. Something old. Something new. Something black. Something blue... Wouldn’t it be nice to be free? I am your confessor. Scream your pain here and here it will remain, forever.” He spread his arms wide to the nightmarish world around them.

It was as if she had been hypnotized by the soft tone of his voice. The rage that had boiled over the surface only seconds before evaporated, leaving her lower jaw trembling, her eyes wide and confused. Tears glittered in the corners of her eyes, welling up before breaking free to roll down her cheeks like heavy, slow raindrops.

“No...” Her whisper was barely audible as she shook her head, fearful that voice would give life to that which she had convinced herself was dead and gone. “This isn’t fair.”

Marcus clicked his tongue and sighed. With the fingers of his right hand he brushed the strands of disheveled hair obscuring her features. She no longer appeared a beaten woman worn beyond her years, but a confused teenager terrified of the consequences of her delinquent behavior.

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“No. It’s not fair. Nothing in life is fair, my dear,” Marcus said quietly while holding her gaze perfectly steady.

“He wasn’t supposed to have lived,” she mumbled.

“Who?” Marcus asked, pulling her truth from her, one sentence at a time.

“My son,” she choked. “I have a son. He’s three now.”

“Emilio’s?” Marcus replied, sensing the fissure had finally opened in the dam. Soon, the floods would be unstoppable.

She shook her head. “No. Though I told him it was ‘cause I thought that he’d be happy. But he wasn’t. He told me to ‘get rid of it’, but I couldn’t afford to, and my parents wouldn’t pay for it because they said I’d go to Hell. No one would help me. So I tried to O.D. I just wanted to die, but I didn’t. Just got messed up and even more addicted to that shit. I didn’t have any money to go to the doctor either so I shot up through the whole pregnancy. Emilio hates me. My parents turned their backs on me. My friends are all gone except for the ones I get high with... Oh, god! I didn’t want it to turn out like that!”

“What happened?” Marcus cooed, coaxing her to continue her confession.

“My baby...” She hung her head, covering her face with her hands. “He was born with Down’s syndrome. Really bad too. It was the drugs, they said. My parents showed up, took him away and gave him to a foster home of some sort. Then they stuck me in juvie and forgot about me for a month.” Her cries nearly made it impossible for her to speak. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Her head snapped up. She stared at Marcus, wild-eyed. “You’re an angel right? You brought me here to scare me so I’d confess. You said you’re my confessor. If I confess I can make amends, right? I am sorry. I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

Marcus halted her desperate rambling. “I am no angel. Nor can I give you the forgiveness you’re seeking. I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

She began to shake. Marcus could hear her heart thundering above the flames that now roared from the pyre, reaching for the sky with scorching yellow python tongues. At her feet the ground began to move as tendrils of thorny black vines broke free and crawled towards her, wrapping about her ankles. As they tightened, the thorns piercing the flimsy cotton fiber of her sweatpants until they drew blood, she gasped with pain and stared down at

the vines in horror. Reaching out, she grabbed hold of Marcus's forearms, fear having stripped her words from her throat.

Marcus glanced down at the vines and then back to the black outlines of sheep skeletons shadowy within the belly of the bonfire. The landscape shifted as he spoke, melting like a Dali landscape into shades of black and gray until they stood once again in the cold dismal bedroom where Marcus had made his deal with Sonnellion. The woman shuddered, unable to rationalize what she had just witnessed. From where they stood, the living room was partially visible through the open doorway. The grisly murder scene had yet to be disturbed, the two mangled men lying amidst the shards of shattered glass and dark, sticky pools of blood and gore.

As the woman's eyes shifted to the massacre her lips parted, a new flood of tears breaking free to coat her face. She began to buckle to her knees, but Marcus caught her, gently directing her back to the foul armchair in the corner of the bedroom. There, the gruesome image of her slain boyfriend and brother out of sight, she stared into the empty shadows beyond Marcus, rocking back and forth slightly in her seat.

"They were part of something else. Something that did not involve you," Marcus lied. There was no need to involve the tale of Sonnellion's manipulation when the woman's soul was already prime for harvesting.

"No, it was me. That's my brother. My brother...he's dead. Emilio's dead. It's all because of me. I know that's what they were fighting about. That's all they ever fought about." The hopelessness in her voice was heartbreaking, even for a numb being like Marcus.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed for the first time the open plastic pouch where she kept her needles. Two appeared to have been used recently, lying uncapped, the silver tips glinting slightly in the dim gray light that seeped obliquely into the room. Reaching over, Marcus gingerly picked up one of the syringes and lifted it before his face. Studying it, he blew upon the empty plastic receptacle and watched as a bright green fluid materialized and completely filled the syringe.

He turned back to the woman, whose gaze was now focused on the needle with a strange look of saddened awe. "You want it to end don't you?" he asked. "All of the regret that has caused you so much pain. You'd like to forget it, wouldn't you? There's nothing you can do now to make any of it better here on Earth." When mortal, such a lie would have turned

his stomach sour with disgust, but now it flowed from his lips as easy as commenting on the color of the sky.

“There’s nothing left for me here,” she whispered.

Marcus lowered the needle and held it out for her to take. She stared at it in silence for a long terrible moment. Outside the wind picked at the sides of the house, icy and curious in its pursuit of crawl spaces and broken window frames. Delicately she took the syringe from Marcus. He watched as she went through the motions of her daily inspection of her hands and feet until she found a vein still strong enough to handle the injection. She slipped the needle in and pressed the plunger until it was empty. Instantly she slouched back into the chair, her eyelids heavy as she began to lose consciousness.

“Time to go home,” she whispered as she left the living world.

“Not the home you’re expecting, I’m afraid,” Marcus said quietly. “But I’ve found it to my liking.”

This was the first time Marcus had claimed a soul for Hell. Up until this point, his actions had come naturally, as if he had been born and bred for the sole purpose of assuming Desiderium’s place in the underworld. However, now a flicker of uncertainty scurried across his mind, its tiny claws like screeching nails raking down a chalkboard. Trust in his instincts was all he had to rely upon. Reaching out he placed the heel of his palm upon the woman’s forehead. The contact with her skin, already cool and clammy with death and drugs, caused the air around the chair to flux, expanding and then contracting while the wall behind the chair appearing to shift quickly one pace to the right only to return a second later to its original position. As the scene returned to its original state the woman appeared standing beside the chair. Still dressed in the same dismal sweats, the soul stared down at her corporeal self with a mixture of sadness and pity. Unlike some souls who have yet to understand and accept their death, the woman appeared completely aware of her situation and her departure from the physical realm.

Marcus allowed her a moment of silent reflection. Though Desiderium had told him vaguely of what his own fate was supposed to have been, Marcus still did not know for sure exactly what would become of this woman once he delivered her to her new home. A spark of pity flared up briefly within the remnants of Marcus’s heart; though her life had been one composed of tragic decisions and unfortunate consequences, it was still a

sad turn of events that she should allow those instances to rule her to the point of damnation. What was done was done, however. There was now no turning back.

Slowly he stood so as not to startle the newly detached soul.

“Are we going back to that horrible place again?” the woman asked quietly, startling Marcus slightly with her directness.

“No. Someplace else. Someplace we both have never been,” he replied.

“If you’re not an angel, then you have to be a demon. Demons are from Hell.” She turned and gazed up at him. “How have you never been to Hell if you are one of its servants?”

Marcus had never thought of himself yet as a “servant.” The word pricked at him strangely, souring him in a way he thought impossible beneath the numbness that sedated every other aspect of his being. “Let’s just say that Hell would take an eternity to explore.”

The woman looked away from Marcus’s piercing gaze, staring down at the floor as she considered the expansiveness of a realm of darkness she only dimly understood from the terrifying tales told by her parents and priests. The bruises that had marred her face and neck had vanished, her golden tan complexion smooth and flawless once again. It was a cruel joke to restore a soul to its completeness before destroying it, Marcus contemplated, but was there even one aspect of his job he could reason or justify? He began to wonder.

The woman took a step towards him, reaching out to slip her hand into his like a small child. Her soul’s fingers, though semi-translucent, still held a strange warmth to them like a stone cooling at sunset after a day of basking in the summer heat. Her energy pulsed softly, her aura completely different from the frantic, fearful junkie she had been in the mortal world. The sadness of her regret still clung to her though, tinting her aspect with a deep blue hue that wrapped around her like a cocoon of rough wool.

The emotion was now permanently a part of her, forever integrated into her being. Marcus could not remember being this way when he had awoken sitting beside Desiderium in the pool hall. His regret had been something he had made peace with, he realized, before his death and when his soul had finally exited his body he had managed to leave it behind in the physical realm. Though his deal with Desiderium had been irreversible,

he had entered into the underworld a settled soul free of the binding poison of his past life's human emotions.

That's why Hell chose me, Marcus realized suddenly. *I was no longer ruled by the weapon Desiderium had used to kill me.* The epiphany was thrilling and unsettling at the same time. He turned and began to lead his prize first soul out of the bedroom. As he crossed the threshold into what should have been the living room, the house around them dissolved. The plaster walls and cheap bloody furniture, cold corpses and broken glass disintegrated within a matter of seconds as a gust from some strange silent storm assaulted the structure until all that remained was the rough, rickety wooden frame protruding up from a silken landscape of black volcanic sand. The wasteland of glittering crushed obsidian and flint stretched on endlessly in all directions save one. A mile or so away, dividing the roiling lava-red sky from the earth below, the black tar ocean boiled.

To Marcus it was a strangely comforting sight, one that reminded him of his conviction to his newly anointed path. Within those toxic waters swam the leviathan that was Beast, its sightless slight opalescent body writhing through the fathomless depths excreting the souls it devoured from this portal of the underworld into the lowest bowel of Hell. There they would be shredded and tormented by the legions, ripped asunder by their captors and each other until the strongest emerged victorious from the throngs, clawing their way through the undulating mountains of wailing broken wretches for a chance to be reborn in a new demonic state. Marcus wondered if there would ever be a day when he himself would lay eyes upon that realm. It was a morbid curiosity he knew he would be wise to keep in check.

The woman's fingers tightened around his and then released again. She began to struggle to free herself from his grasp, slowly at first and then building as her fear mounted. "I don't want to be here! Please don't make me go wherever it is you're taking me... please!"

The serene sadness that had enveloped her soul upon first leaving her physical body was shattered as the fear of the unknown horrors that awaited her seized hold of her core, throttling it mercilessly. Marcus did not acknowledge her cries; there was no use in trying to soothe her now, lulling her into a narcotic denial of the inevitable. The extent of the falsehoods he could muster conviction enough to tell were reserved now for the harvesting of the souls, not for their sentencing. Instead he began to walk, dragging the woman's soul behind him until she could resist no longer and stumbled forward with a pitiful wail.

Even as she tumbled after him, one shuffled footstep at a time, she clawed at his fist that held her as if his fingers had melded permanently with hers. Marcus's mind was blank as they trudged over the flat black expanse of volcanic sand towards the ocean. Distantly he thought he could hear the screech of the Beast as it sensed his approach. It anticipated the gift he brought as it thrashed up out of the depths towards the surface, it's terrible blank mind of pure guttural hunger and rage consumed with nothing but what the new soul would taste like.

As they neared the shore of the tar ocean the woman's struggling slowly faded away as her fear began to paralyze her. The glistening tar rolled up upon the black beach in slow, methodical waves that broke a deep garnet red as they retreated, leaving behind a strange pinkish foam that sizzled like acid as it evaporated. Marcus paused a foot from surf's reach and stared out at the limitless horizon where twin massive burning suns sank eternally into the pitch. The woman was silent and still at this side, unable to comprehend the bizarre world around her that resonated with a constant intense sinister vibration too low and dissonant for the mortal ear to hear.

"It will be over soon and you will not remember this, from what I have heard. If you are strong enough, one day you will reemerge a new being," Marcus said quietly as if he were channeling the thoughts of another creature.

"I won't remember my human life?" the woman replied. "It wasn't all bad. I do have some good memories." Her voice trailed off as she contemplated everything she was losing, everything she had lost, and allowed herself to sink even further into regret's dank cave.

"Where you are going it will have no meaning. You will be better off without it," Marcus said as the surface of the ocean a hundred yards out began to boil, black tar bubbling and breaking as the water below churned viciously. "It's coming now."

The woman gasped, sharp and short, as the ocean's surface erupted in an explosion of black water and blood red froth as the blind white worm that was the Beast emerged. Marcus let go of the woman's hand and stepped away from her. In her terror she did not even notice as his fingers slipped out of hers, her hand remaining frozen in midair, her eyes locked on the monstrosity looming above her. The Beast's lamprey mouth flexed, the millions of shark's teeth twitching hungrily as it honed in on the scent of her soul.

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“It will be over soon,” Marcus said to the woman, watching her reaction curiously as a zoologist might observe a newly discovered and caged species.

Before the woman could respond the Beast descended, consuming her soul whole in one swift motion that caused the shore to quake as if it might shatter into the black sea. Marcus stumbled back before finding his footing once again as he watched the Beast slowly withdrew into the tar ocean, its hunger sated for a moment more. A small painful spasm of awakening twitched at his center and he wondered if the delivery of every soul would resonate with such a haunting echo. He had not felt even a flicker of pity or sadness when the Beast had consumed Desiderium, for it had been the demon that had brought him to that very point to begin with. The exact definition of the emotion that tugged upon the periphery of his senses evaded Marcus, skirting through the shadows of his mind like a ghost through a faraway bank of mist, but he was now aware of its presence. Perhaps the Beast’s devouring of the next soul would not be quite as startling and a millennia from that moment, it would become as mundane as the many menial tasks he had performed day in and day out at his mortal profession.

As the tar ocean settled, the last of the bubbles bursting slow upon the surface as the Beast returned to the farthest depths, Marcus turned and began to cross the wasteland of volcanic sand. The sand shifted beneath each of his carefully placed steps, hissing hypnotically. With each hiss microscopic slivers of memories he had sworn to be forgotten were released from the vaults of his soul, seeds popping from a broken brown pod discarded on the forest floor. The images were fleeting and small, most of which made no sense to him as they flashed by unsynchronized; as if a box of photos had been dumped in front of him from a passing train’s window. Marcus shivered, but not from a chill, pulling the lapels of his finely tailored coat tighter across his chest. The walk back to the physical world seemed to be taking an eternity.



For the vast range of his new powers, Marcus had yet to figure out how to teleport objects in the physical plane from one place to another. Manifesting objects out of thin air using only his imagination seemed to come as naturally to him as breathing once had, but the manipulation of

the physical within the physical realm was a sensation like moving through slowly drying cement. He felt detached from the earth and the objects, both living and inanimate, as if, in a way, he was an objective observer of a play knowing he would never actually step foot upon the stage or be allowed to rearrange the set. He could, however, provide critical commentary of the production. Yet, his influence here in the earthly plane was as real, if not more so, as the friends, family and foes of the souls he cultivated and eventually claimed. The paradox was frustrating, but Marcus sated himself with the desire to achieve the ability to affect the physical plane completely and entirely.

He realized, as he once again, retraced his steps to his old apartment complex, with Desiderium's filthy chair hoisted over his head, that his goals as a demon were quickly evolving. Marcus knew he did not want to be the "Demon of Regret" forever. What he had witnessed, what he had *felt* with his first soul's demise within the fanged maw of the Beast had made him realize that, while he knew he must do his time at this initial level of Hell and fulfill his role to the utmost of his ability, lest he meet a similar fate, he desired to move on from the station and upwards through the ranks of his new world. Just as he had once felt uncomfortable and caged in his mid-level role at the company he had worked for as a mortal, that same restlessness quickened in him again as the numbness encasing his soul thawed.

A short while later Marcus arrived at his apartment building. It was late in the day; the sun was beginning to set, turning the slick thick sheath of silver clouds above a darker shade of gray. The temperature was beginning to dip, the wisps of wind scurrying through the openings at his collar and cuffs as if they themselves sought refuge from their own cold. Noting that Beasley's white Honda was parked in its usual spot on the front curb, as it had been every evening for the past six years, Marcus quietly opened the front gate and stepped inside the tiny courtyard. As the metal gate clicked shut behind him, the atmosphere seemed to change, deepening subtly like the strange heavy silence that precedes a clap of thunder. Pausing, he sniffed the air like a wolf scenting for danger.

He was not alone. Amongst the mellow, earthen auras of the few tenants returned home from their long days at the office, an acrid, sour venom coiled, wafting up like incense smoke from one corner of the building. Marcus had not anticipated another demonic encounter so soon after his return from his first delivery. However, the realization that the human world

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was truly riddled with his twisted new brethren dawned like a napalm sunrise. He would never be alone, never left to simply roam, a nomad of either world. The thought was slightly unsettling simply for the fact that to each new creature he would have to prove himself or, as in the case of Sonnellion, make a deal. Marcus still cringed inside at the fact that he had rushed into a deal with the “Demon of Hatred” so impetuously, but what was done was irreversibly done. A deal was a deal, especially to a demon.

His upper lip twitching in a silent snarl, Marcus turned and made his way up the concrete and metal staircase to the second floor walkway. It seemed like an eternity had passed since he last visited the apartment where he had met his unfortunate end. Placing one hand upon the scuffed gold-painted doorknob, while the other held the armchair steady balanced upturned on his head; Marcus focused his energy as he turned the knob slowly until a dull crunch signaled he had broken the lock. While teleportation of objects might still be out of his reach, his demonic nature did appear to come with an increased strength, a revelation that pleased Marcus intensely. As the lock within the doorknob itself cracked, he released the knob and placed his palm against the door over the deadbolt’s keyhole. Leaning against the door, he felt the second lock creak slowly and then give way, the metal bolt slicing in two rendering the lock useless.

Slowly the door swung open with a dull, low whine into a stale nest of blue-black shadows. The sharp pungency of pine-scented cleaning supplies folded in and out of the residual stale aroma of dried blood and dust. The empty apartment had obviously been vacant for some time, the central AC unit silent leaving the air stagnant and repressive. Carefully, Marcus stepped over the threshold into the living room and closed the door behind him. The indentations of where Desiderium’s chair had once sat while in Marcus’s possession were still visible in the carpet in the corner; though it was obvious the cleaning crew had scrubbed the area thoroughly in a frantic attempt to conceal the gruesome history of the unit. As if returning the Holy Grail back to its altar, he repositioned the chair over the divots and stepped back to survey his work.

The ghost of blood and gore still hung in thick in the area where he had blown half of his face over the wall behind. Though no longer visible, it had seeped down into the padding below the carpet where it festered and curdled with the residual negative energy of his suicide. The apartment would never reclaim the peaceful aura it had once when Marcus and Brenda had originally moved in, so in love and starry-eyed with dreams of their

future together. Again, he could not help but to wonder what had become of her and if she *regretted* turning her back on him in those last days. Before he had time to ponder a second longer, two solid knocks echoed from the closed front door. More curious than irritated, Marcus turned to open the door. He cared not who had seen him enter the apartment and he welcomed anyone who would challenge his return to his old domain. He would happily influence any soul that wandered into his sight now and any so foolish to come knocking was all the more invited.

On the other side of the door Beasley stood uncertainly on the cement walkway, his body turned at an angle as if he was fully prepared to break into a run as the slightest glimpse of danger. He stared at Marcus through the thick, scratched lenses of his glasses with one eyebrow cocked slightly.

“What are you doing in here?” Beasley asked, glancing over Marcus’s shoulder at the chair sitting ominously vacant in the corner. “You’re not seriously thinking of moving back in here, are you?”

Marcus did not answer at first, mulling over the idea for a time before answering calmly, his voice flat and emotionless. “Perhaps. I am not decided yet.”

While he had not planned on taking up permanent residency in the space, but only squatting there until he formed his next move, the idea of setting up shop in the very place where his fate had been sealed had a certain darkness to it that he found highly entertaining.

“You’re nuts, you know that?” Beasley’s nervousness bristled around him like porcupine quills. Marcus could hear the maddening race of his thoughts like the high-pitched whine of an AM transmitter. Beasley’s eyes darted to the splintered deadbolt in the doorframe. “What the hell? You break in here? Jesus, man! What is wrong with you?”

Marcus said nothing but merely tilted his head to one side as he wondered what Beasley might regret in his past. Surely, with all of the strange and sordid tales Marcus had heard from the man about his time in New Orleans and other cities, there had to be at least one interesting moment where Beasley had made that crucial wrong decision that haunted him.

“Okay... ” Beasley said slowly, drawing out the word like a slow exhale of cigarette smoke. Taking a step back, he started to walk quickly down the walkway. “Well, if you need anything you know where I am, unfortunately.” The last word he muttered under his breath.

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“A hammer,” Marcus said, stepping out onto the walkway and shutting the door behind him. It barely remained closed now that both locks had been severely damaged.

Beasley halted in mid-stride and slowly glanced over his shoulder as if he expected to see Marcus wielding an axe and rushing towards him. “Hammer?” He stared, unblinking. “You don’t have anything in there to hang...do you?”

“To fix the door,” Marcus replied quickly, diluting the ominous intentions he had originally instilled in the request.

Beasley’s eyebrows raised in unison as his mouth silently formed the word, *Oh*. He nodded, “Yeah, you might need something other than that, but...I’ll be right back.”

Marcus followed after him, keeping a respectful distance from his neighbor.

“Or, you can come with me, I guess,” Beasley muttered under his breath.

Beasley led Marcus back down the stairs to the dark alcove on the first floor where the tiny one-bedroom unit he called home resided. “You might want to stay out here. It’s a bit messy in there. Not much space left for guests.” There was a hint of sadness and embarrassment in his voice.

Marcus ignored Beasley’s request for him to remain standing on the dirty, worn welcome-mat, his hand flat against the door to stop it from closing as Beasley tried to swing it shut behind him. Desiring to avoid any level of conflict with Marcus, Beasley quickly relented and turned away, scurrying over the piles of refuse through a makeshift pathway between the living room and the galley kitchen. Marcus had only been inside Beasley’s apartment a couple of times before for brief visits, but never had it been in this wretched a condition.

The stench alone was enough to surprise even a damned soul like Marcus’s. The sour smell of putrid rotten food and spoiled milk layered with cat feces, musty paper and, strangely enough, cleaning products hit Marcus like a fierce slap to the face. He paused for a moment before entering the room, allowing his gaze to drift over the mounds of hoarded old magazines, scavenged furniture, piles of DVD cases and white plastic garbage bags filled with decomposing trash from months past. Marcus knew realistically it had not been that terribly long since he had last seen the apartment, no

more than a few months, but the tragic filth that threatened to overwhelm Beasley and his cats appeared to be years in the making.

As Beasley rummaged noisily through the piles in the kitchen Marcus cautiously stepped over the threshold into the living room. The crackling sound of his shoes crunching bits of stale cereal and discarded newspaper caused something to twitch in the far corner of the room where a large plasma TV blared Japanese cartoons with staccato English dubs. The motion instantly snared his attention, causing him to freeze in his tracks like a cat spying a mouse in a field. A deep muttering grumble rumbled from the corner, nearly entirely obscured by a mountain of trash. Near the floor, one large, once-white Converse sneaker protruded. It twitched again, accompanied by a loud snort that sent the large black and brown cat perched atop the nearest pile of magazines scurrying through the rubble into the bedroom to hide like a shell-shocked war vet. Marcus quietly closed the front door and took another cautious step as far into the room as the limited exposed floor space would allow. Leaning forward he attempted to peer around the piles. Unsuccessful, he stared at the portion of the sliding glass door still visible from where he stood, attempting to make out who or what slumbered in the corner. Within the dusty, smudged sliver of glass that peeked out between the partially drawn plastic blinds, the image of an older man in a dirty white V-neck T-shirt, red boxer shorts and a long gray terrycloth bathrobe slouched in an oversized maroon leather La-Z-Boy® recliner.

“Here it is!” Beasley’s muffled voice was inundated with relief somewhere within the kitchen near the back. He clambered back through the rubbish, stopping a few feet away from where Marcus stood, still studying the image of the strange man. Holding a hammer and a screwdriver in one fist, he stared at Marcus uncertainly, as if he were having reservations about giving the tools to Marcus for fear that they might be used on him instead of the door.

“When did you get a roommate?” Marcus asked suspiciously.

Beasley pried his gaze away from the side of Marcus’s face, his eyes flickering to the corner of the room before returning to watch Marcus again. “Oh, Vince?” Beasley asked as if he himself had nearly forgotten the other’s presence. “He’s just crashing here for a few weeks. His place was condemned so I said he could stay with me until he gets back on his feet.”

“Condemned?” Marcus replied, his unblinking gaze swiveling to pin Beasley in the place where he stood.

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“Um, yeah...” Beasley lowered his voice. “I’m not sure why. Something about him being a hoarder and the city got involved, but I can’t really get a clear answer out of him.” He shrugged, obviously uncomfortable with the discussion, but seemingly oblivious to the irony that he himself was on the verge of meeting a similar fate.

“Interesting...” Marcus whispered, more to himself than to Beasley.

“You know I don’t like it when you talk about me like I’m not here.” A grumbling, groggy man’s voice rumbled from the chair in the corner, but Vince did not make a move to stand or introduce himself.

Beasley pulled a face as if he had just been caught gossiping. “Oh, sorry Vince! This is Marcus, the guy I told you about that used to live upstairs. Looks like he’ll be rejoining the neighborhood.”

Silence rang harsh and heavy in the room for a long tense moment beneath the stilted dialogue blaring from the television. Finally, the unease was broken by the creaking of torn leather and rusting springs as Vince pulled himself forward, leaning enough to peer around an obscuring mound of trash to his left. He was haggard and heavily lined, his jaw covered in thick salt-and-pepper gray stubble growing over a sallow, mottled complexion. His nose and cheeks were riddled with tiny, red, broken capillaries.. From within the shadow of wildly untrimmed brows and dark purple-blue circles, Vince’s beady black eyes glared at Marcus, bloodshot and yellowing around the edges.

“Thought you were supposed to have blown your brains out or something?” Vince grunted, cold and uncompassionate.

Beasley giggled suddenly with an uncomfortable nervousness that reminded Marcus of a hyena’s wild cry. “No, no. He’s fine, apparently. Looks like Brenda just over-exaggerated a little?” He cast a side-long glance at Marcus, seeking confirmation that was all his miraculous reappearance added up to be.

Vince continued to stare at Marcus with a strange, territorial knowingness that made the fine hairs on the back of Marcus’s arms and neck bristle. There was no doubt in Marcus’s mind that he had, unfortunately, wandered into a domain staked by yet another demon, though this one’s trademark temptation was not as obvious to Marcus as Sonnellion’s unmistakable stamp had been. Hatred and rage were easy to identify, but the color of this creature’s poison was not as visible. In fact, the hue of the aura that hummed around the human façade was as dull and lifeless as

rain-soaked cardboard. Marcus did not feel threatened or humbled as he had in the presence of Sonnellion, but his instincts warned that perhaps, like the shell of flesh the demon before him wore, the deceptive lack of intention he sensed could easily be the invisible web this particular spider used to trap its prey.

“B., do we have anymore pizza rolls?” Vince sank back into his chair with a sigh, exhausted from his exchange with Marcus.

Beasley stared at the television screen, his mouth slightly open as he thought about his roommate’s request. “Um... not sure. But, dude, I’m tired. I’m going to go crash for a while.”

“Come on!” Vince shouted with annoyance. “You know I don’t have a driver’s license, man! Just go get the damned pizza rolls and then you can crash.”

Beasley rolled his eyes and trudged back through the rubbish towards the front door as if he were obeying his father. Marcus watched his neighbor closely as he passed, noting the desolate sense of failure and resignation that dripped from Beasley’s aura like motor oil. Marcus had always theorized that, beneath the unassuming geeky exterior, Beasley was a strong, old soul tempered by his life experiences. However, now Marcus began to question his previous image. It seemed a waste, though, to allow a creature such as Vince to claim a perfectly good soul such as Beasley’s. There were so many other far more heinous manipulations a demon could pursue than whatever this entity was orchestrating.

“And get some beer. We’re out of beer,” Vince shouted just before Beasley had closed the door completely.

Beasley said nothing, though Marcus felt him bristle with irritation. The small burst of energy snared Marcus’s attention and he wondered if perhaps Beasley’s soul might be salvageable after all if enough of his resistance to his current demonic influence remained.

“Now, who the hell are you, really?” Vince’s voice changed slightly, strengthening a fraction.

Marcus tore his gaze away from the door behind him and his contemplation of Beasley’s soul. Vince leaned forward, pushing himself up and out of the chair where he appeared to have been stationed for days. He was a slovenly creature whose very appearance bespoke of a foul stench though through the jungle of overwhelming odors that permeated the room, it was difficult to tell how much actually emanated from Vince himself.

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“I should ask you the same,” Marcus replied, tilting his head to one side and narrowing his eyes as he tried to peer past the human face that was “Vince.”

“My name is Cresil. This is my territory. I don’t know where you came from or why you’re here pretending to be that poor sap’s neighbor, back from the dead, but I suggest you move on.” Cresil’s voice was rough and thick as if the sound itself trudged through the rotting peat of an old Louisiana swamp.

Marcus shook his head and smirked. “I love how all of you demons think you can order me about just because I’m new here. I’ve barely begun to step into my new title and already I have proven myself able to collect the souls required of me. Trust me, I will leave, but you shouldn’t be so entitled, especially if your power only consists of this.” He gestured flippantly about the room. Though obviously the younger of the two dark entities, Marcus simply could not find it in himself to be intimidated by a man who resembled a haggard, filthy version of “The Dude” from *The Big Lebowski*.

“All of you demons?” Cresil’s wild eyebrows knitted together angrily as he stared, unblinking, at Marcus. “Cocky won’t get you very far in our world, you do realize that, young one? I have millennia on your whelp’s ass. That’s millions of souls. You should tread a bit more carefully when introducing yourself to your co-workers.”

Marcus studied the mountains of trash suffocating the room around him. “My last encounter was with Sonnellion. I’m sorry, but after that, you just don’t impress me.” Perhaps it was less than wise to continue to insult the demon in front of him, but Marcus felt as if his time was being unfairly wasted. However, the idea that Beasley should have been a soul claimed by him, not Cresil, held him wavering at the threshold to the apartment.

Cresil hissed under his breath, drawing forth a crumpled package of Pall Mall unfiltered from the ripped pocket of his robe. “Sonnellion! Please. He is all show. Humanity simply doesn’t have that much rage, if you ask me. Slovenliness, filth, impurity, laziness... now that’s something every mortal battles you know, unless they’re one of those weird O.C.D. freaks, and then that’s a whole different demon’s territory.” He shivered as if disgusted. “I wouldn’t want to touch that disorder with a ten foot pole, if you ask me. Obsession is just too much freakin’ work.”

“And what exactly would you call this?” Marcus asked of the seemingly compulsively hoarded items around him. “This isn’t an obsession?”

He truly was intrigued. Only recently severed from his mortal life, glimpses of his memories of individuals he had known that were plagued by such compulsions seemed ruled by their filth. The idea that a demon could explain what legions of therapists and pharmaceutical companies couldn’t was tempting bait. Even if he could not find it in himself to respect Cresil, there was still something to be learned about humanity and their connection to the temptations of the underworld.

Cresil drew a long drag on his cheap cigarette and exhaled slowly like a tired old dragon. “I suppose it has its own way of becoming an obsession. But it is so much easier to simply let it consume you. The other obsessions take effort; you must cultivate them, tend to them, nurture them. My sin, you simply allow to happen to you, one piece of garbage at a time. Before they know it, the souls I focus on are so consumed by the mess around them that they simply give up and dissolve into the shadows. All I have to do is sit back and enjoy the show, so to speak.”

Marcus shook his head. “I don’t see how that’s a sin. It’s just trash.”

“The trash itself isn’t. The resignation into absolute animalistic filth is, or at least that’s what He says.” Cresil pointed to the ceiling with a shrug of his shoulders as if to say he really couldn’t care less about the matter at this point. “Have you ever heard the phrase ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’?”

Marcus nodded, intrigued by the direction of the theological debate.

“Humanity is supposed to be above their guttural instincts. They are supposed to live a simple, clean existence in order to better serve the Almighty, or something like that.” Cresil looked around and spied a black ceramic ashtray atop the portion of the fireplace mantel still visible. “Though humanity seems to have, in large part, forgotten that little rule, He hasn’t.” Cresil gestured at the ceiling again with a calloused thumb complete with an overgrown, yellowed nail. Something on the television beside him snared his attention and he turned to watch it. “Maybe it’s because deep down inside they know they’re not living a ‘godly’ life so they end up just giving up and surrendering to the mess they’ve created. Eventually society just turns their back on them and they disappear.”

“But Beasley wasn’t always like this. I remember his apartment was dirty, but it was never...like this.” Marcus splayed his hands as if to embrace the catastrophic clutter.

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Still staring at the cartoons, Cresil picked something out of his teeth with one hand while fishing another cigarette out of his pocket with the other. "I guess it was probably about the time you disappeared from the scene that ol' Beasley's parents died. They were in a drunk driving accident." He slammed his palms together for emphasis. "Killed instantly. Beasley's siblings didn't want to deal with their estate so "B" ended up moving most of the stuff in here. He tried sorting through it, but eventually just gave up. That's when I showed up," Cresil looked back at Marcus and grinned his crooked, stained grin, "to make things worse."

It was apparent to Marcus suddenly that, like Sonnellion had possessed the young woman, Vince had been a reliable fixture in Beasley's life prior to Cresil's arrival. As private and suspicious as Beasley was about his life and the world around him, there were few he would allow to invade his personal space, let alone take up permanent residence. Marcus wondered if there would come a time when he would find it necessary to possess another body in order to fulfill the duties of his position. The idea of stepping inside the flesh of a stranger was unsettling to him, but he knew it was a concept he would have to make peace with. Desiderium had schemed within the dream realm where his grotesque appearance was almost expected in a nightmare, but Marcus's abilities to manipulate the human psyche were still developing. He had proven with his first kill that he could transport the living back and forth to the bizarre in-between realm located just beyond the lip of Hell. However, that had been a manipulation of the entire physical person, soul, psyche and body, not an invasion into the deep sleeping subconscious. Until those abilities developed, his easiest targets would be the individuals he had been closest to in life, those who trusted him intensely and would welcome his return from the dead as a miracle. The list of those people was not a lengthy one.

"So what's your bag?" Cresil turned back to face Marcus, his newly lit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Regret," Marcus said quietly. The word felt heavy in his mouth, the taste bitter as its resonance died down to silence as it departed from him.

Cresil laughed. "And you're giving me the second degree for my specialization? I thought Desiderium had that gig?" He eyed Marcus suspiciously.

"He was replaced," Marcus said matter-of-factly.

“Wow...” Cresil muttered. “That doesn’t happen very often. Sign of the times I suppose.” He marveled, frowning, but failed to elaborate further. “Well, welcome to Hell, I suppose I should say!” Cresil snorted. “At least you got assigned a pretty easy sin yourself. Everyone has something they regret.” He winked at Marcus knowingly.

The gesture made Marcus’s skin crawl. Behind him the door clicked, the old metal hinges whining pathetically as Beasley returned from the grocery store.

“Hey, you’re out of your chair,” Beasley remarked snarkily at Vince as he clambered past Marcus through the avalanche of discarded and broken memories, shoulders hunched, expression pained and exhausted.

“Not for long!” Cresil grinned devilishly at Marcus and plopped back down in his chair.

Something uncomfortable and sour like concern held Marcus from leaving. Or perhaps it was just the idea of another demon staking a claim to a soul he strangely felt entitled to. As Beasley finished dumping the pizza rolls onto a cookie sheet and tossing them into the oven, he staggered back out to the living room. Marcus was now acutely aware of how much Beasley appeared to have aged.

“I’ll return these later,” Marcus said of the hammer and screwdriver still clutched in his fist.

Beasley waved dismissively at him as he sank down onto the corner of a weight bench mostly buried under piles of clothing and three brown cardboard boxes with various words in black magic marker scrawled on the side. “Nah. Keep ‘em.” He sighed heavily. “Doubt I’ll need them anytime soon.” He drew another deep breath and exhaled slowly, running his hand over the top of his head. “Damn, I feel old today.”

“B, where’s the beer?” Vince shouted from the corner of the room.

Beasley didn’t respond, but continued to stare at the pile of stained, torn magazines at his feet.

Marcus turned and opened the door to leave. “Good luck, Beasley. It was nice knowing you.”

He felt, but didn’t wait around to see the look of pure horror on Beasley’s face as he watched his neighbor abandon him.



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Sleep was no longer necessary for Marcus, a trait he found both mildly annoying and strangely satisfying.. Lying on the dusty carpet of his empty, dark living room, his hands folded over his stomach like a corpse, he stared up at the popcorn-mottled white ceiling as the hours of night meandered slowly towards dawn. A part of him missed the ability to let go and slip into unconsciousness. However, with as surreal as his actual existence was now, he was not sure if he wanted to know what the dreams of a demon would consist of. Perhaps they were mundane and eventless, a return to the blasé, unexciting life of the average human. But the alternative that it could plunge him further into the depths of Hell he had yet to encounter kept him from craving the ability to sleep entirely.

Listening to the settling sounds of the world around him, from the distant blaring of a racing ambulance's siren to the sleepy shuffling of the elderly residents next door, Marcus contemplated the events of his first full day returned to the physical plane. To say it had been an eventful one was a great understatement. While he was intrigued at Beasley's pitiful developments and fascinated by his brutal introduction to Sonnellion, it was the story the woman had told him of the child she had birthed that fascinated him the most.

Her regret had been exquisitely poignant and all-consuming, a perfect first soul for Marcus to whet his appetite for his new profession. He could not stop thinking about the child, his curiosity of what had become of the unfortunate innocent making him restless. Brenda was still his primary focus, the question of whether or not she regretted turning her back on him becoming nearly an obsession, and his desire to claim her soul verging on the bitter, dangerous edge of revenge. Something caused him to hesitate, though, whispering to him conspiratorially to proceed with caution in her direction. A brief detour to find the child would give him the time to mull over how best to approach Brenda when the time came to draw forth the oily residue of regret from her soul.

As the first rays of sun slithered through the thin gaps in the plastic blinds Marcus rose to the second day of his new calling.

VETIS



CHAPTER 7

Morning had barely begun to call to the slowly waking city when Marcus closed the rusting iron gate behind him and began to walk with brisk, determined steps down the dirty gray sidewalk. Restlessness filled him, making his skin itch as if he was growing too large for it and soon would shed it in hideous translucent sheets like a python. Head bowed, his hand stuffed deep into the pockets of his coat, Marcus longed for the numb calmness that had enveloped him upon first returning to the physical realm. He wondered whether he should simply retreat for a time back to the dreamlike Hellscape where he could recharge and meditate on his new discoveries. It was not too much to admit that he had been inundated with a barrage of revelations about the inner workings of the universe and the spiritual world, which was a bit overwhelming no matter how overtly confident he assumed himself. Left alone to interpret the meanings of these insights and find his way through the treacherous new demonic hierarchy, a sensation slightly akin to uncertainty began to infiltrate the periphery of his psyche.

There was something about the physical world that drained him like a psychic vampire; distantly he remembered being plagued by this throughout his mortal life, a residual impression of depression drifting across his mind like a wisp of distant campfire smoke. His awareness of the weakness was acute and he erected steel walls around his identity to keep the sensation at bay, but he could still hear it sniffing and scratching on the other side searching for that one tiny fissure to break through. As soon as he found Brenda, as soon as he had collected just one more soul, he would feel comfortable in returning to the outskirts of Hell to recharge. Just one more soul would allow him to feel as if his first outing in the physical realm was a successful one—one that would be certain to prove himself worthy and reassure Lucifer that He had not made the wrong decision with Marcus.

Even so, Marcus's curiosity about the unfortunate child held his fascination like a trance. Something instinctual compelled him to seek out the innocent as if it were the key to his own personal mission. Eyes blindly locked on only the next step of concrete before him as he traveled into the heart of the city's downtown sector, Marcus opened his senses to the city

around him, allowing his newly heightened intuition to guide him. The whispering hiss of his black leather dress shoes passing over the pavement was a steady rhythm beneath the rising tide of waking life around him. From the soft murmurs of people groggily emerging from their homes to stumble off to their professions to the rumbling mechanical purr of city buses on beginning their daily routes, gradually the chorus of mortal life emerged like a cicada pulling itself from the rich, black Mississippi mud.

As the traffic began to build in the streets and the sidewalks to fill with determined denizens dressed in corporate attire, lattes and smart-phones in hand, the weight of their sins heavy in their stomachs, Marcus deviated from the avenues, switching his path to the back alleys and less populated side streets to avoid drawing unwanted attention to himself. He did not want to be deterred in any way from his current course or distracted from his first task. Ideally, he wanted to find Brenda by sunset that evening, and time in the mortal realm passed far more fleetingly than did the suspended syrupy moments of existence within the underworld.

On the east side of downtown, Marcus paused in the center of one particularly quiet stretch of alley. Raising his head from his intense focus upon the map of cracks within the oil-stained mosaic of asphalt, he looked past the towering walls of brick, glass and steel to either side of him and up at the thin sliver of blue sky. There, streaks of white stratus clouds crawled west on the currents of wind several miles above. Away from the grating moan of morning traffic, he could sift through the individual energies, both living and dead, to isolate the one particular vibration he was in search of.

Though he had never met, or even seen a picture of the child that snared his curiosity so intensely, he had gathered an impression of the child's aura from his mother. Her sorrow, her regret had caused her to think on the child every day until her last, creating within the center of her soul a manifestation of energy that had taken on the semblance of a shrine complete with flesh and blood offerings and the acrid incense of her own shattered dreams. The drugs had poisoned her body and psyche and had contorted her human emotions, her memories, into something that took on a grotesque life of its own. She could not let go of it and its talons were far too deep into her flesh to ever release her. Marcus could almost convince himself it was a blessing he had arrived when he did. While her fate in Hell might be far worse than anything she had experienced on Earth, once she emerged, eons from now, regurgitated in a dark new form, she would not

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remember her old sorrows. Not unlike life, where they remained with you until the very end.

Amidst the deeper, darker rumblings of humanity's inner turmoil, a thin note of purity lifted above the fray like the sound of a lone flute over the obscuring smoke of a battlefield. Marcus followed the vibration down the remainder of the alley and across the street. On the far corner, tucked between two monolithic black and silver high-rise office buildings was a modest church of weathered, yellow limestone. He paused at the base of the steep, narrow stone stairs that led up from the sidewalk and stared up at the church. It seemed encapsulated, like a white tumor just beneath the flesh of city, removed from the frantic pace of progress; delicate spires, red tiled roof and slender panes of prismatic stained glass depicting the trials and tribulations of apostles and angels. Marcus had never noticed the church before in all his days living in the city.

Like so many modern Americans, while he considered himself in his own way spiritual, he had never been a religious man. Brenda's family had been devout practicing Catholics and as a consequence, Marcus had found himself dragged to church functions and Sunday mass for nearly the entire first year they had been dating. He had tried to find a place for himself in the traditions they followed because he knew it was important to her, but try as he might, he could never truly feel the call of the need to worship something or someone he could not see with his own two eyes. After several months of his complaining and nagging, Brenda finally relented and dismissed her expectations of his participation in her religion. Her family had been none too pleased with him. Nor was Brenda open to the occasional philosophical debate about religion versus spirituality, which Marcus attempted from time to time as his way of searching for a place in that particular section of her life. However, he soon realized that the divides were simply not closeable and he sank into silence on the matter, knowing that his desire to be part of her world, regardless of whether or not it went against his instincts, was actually driving them further apart.

It had been over two years since he had last set foot in a church. He vaguely remembered the experience now, distantly as if it were a clip of a faded movie reel he had seen in a museum in childhood. The church itself had been fascinating to him, smelling of old yellowed paper, dust and candle wax. There had been a poetic stillness that caused his inner fretting to settle as he exhaled into a captured reverence generated by decades of silently chanted prayers and whispered guilty confessions. He had found

the rituals beautiful and charming, the rows of candles enchanting and the old wooden pews comforting.

But it had been the people who disturbed him; their eyes filled with regret and remorse for the long week of sin they had accumulated which they believed would be forgiven if they walked through the paces on Sunday morning and ducked into the dark, claustrophobic confessional at the end for a moment to receive their assigned repentance. Even then, he had never been filled with the oily, suffocating sense of dread that now enveloped him as he watched the stoic façade of the church before him. It was not exactly fear that stayed him from approaching the consecrated grounds, but a dire suspicion about the consequences he might endure should he place a hand upon the front door. Marcus desired the guidance of another demon in such matters. The reality of his isolation was daunting, discovering his new world through trial by fire and in this particular case, quite possibly, literally.

Drawing a deep breath, he cast an uneasy glance at the blue sky above the church's tallest spire, as if fully expecting to see the heavens open up and God's very own hand to reach out to hurl a lightning bolt straight towards him. The clouds drifted on oblivious to his presence, the sun glinting off of the silvered black glass of the office buildings to either side. Cautiously Marcus climbed the steep stairs, carefully listening with all of his senses to the mortal world around him for even the slightest disturbance that would signal impending trouble. As he reached the top stair he stepped onto the front walkway leading to the entrance of the church and paused. Now upon the same level as the structure itself, Marcus noticed an anomaly in its supposedly pristine sacred aura. He stared down the narrow path of large white stones between two small patches of neatly manicured green lawn at the twin carved oak doors. His apprehension slowly began to dissolve as he realized the seal around the church, which might have otherwise violently repelled him even from at such a distance, had been tainted. Like a discarded peach slowly being consumed from the inside out by a large green worm, a darkness far more potent than any mere mortal grievance had punctured the hull of this place of worship, soiling it enough to weaken its power until creatures such as Marcus could easily walk into its midst. Marcus could barely suppress the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth.

But why had he been drawn here, of all places, in his search for the child? Walking towards the church with slow casual strides, he followed

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the path around the side of the church and through a low black cast-iron gate between two perfectly trimmed holly hedges. Behind the church was a small courtyard complete with a beautiful fountain depicting a young shepherd standing amidst his flock. The musical sound of the water slowly dribbling over the pale gray concrete slithered through the cool blue shadows cast by the surrounding trees and hedges that encompassed three sides of the enclosure. The space felt completely removed from the city outside. Indeed, it appeared that the church was all but vacant, seemingly forgotten by its parishioners during the week. Marcus walked to the center of the courtyard and scanned the clearing in search of the source of the call that drew him there. In the middle of the rear wall of hedges, which grew a good six feet tall, he spied a dark red wooden door that led into the rear of a one-story stone building that appeared to run the rest of the length of the city block between the two office buildings. As if lured like a rat by a piper's lute, Marcus drifted across the courtyard to the door. Without hesitation he opened it and peered inside.

He found within a small sitting room, Spartanly furnished with an antique carved wood and burgundy upholstery couch, simple wooden coffee table and a small writing desk upon which stood a delicate white statue of the Virgin Mary in prayer. The walls were bare with the exception of a plain wooden cross hanging over the center of the desk and a framed painting of Christ's crucifixion carefully placed on the adjacent wall. The air smelt of inexpensive potpourri and aging paper, the silence heavy and baited. Marcus paused in the open doorway, suddenly unsure about his decision to seek out the child. Whatever had moved into this sacred space was undeniably powerful, its strength mighty enough to puncture the protective shell formed by years of focused prayer and repentance. However, he simply could not shake the intense draw to sate his curiosity. Instinctively he reached up and pulled his coat closed, buttoning it and dusting off his sleeves as if he were preparing to meet royalty, before stepping over the threshold.

He closed the door quietly behind him and wandered through the small house, following the bizarre hum of energies from the residents of the house to a room at the end of a long hall of polished wood floors. Careful to conceal his presence as much as possible from whoever or whatever lurked behind the partially closed white wood door, Marcus listened carefully to the sound of the soft voices drifting from within. He sensed three adult auras in the room directly ahead of him, two female and one male. Around

the corner and further down the hall, the gentle almost cheerful hum of the child's aura, content and oblivious to the actions of his guardians, resonated like distant wind chimes against the backdrop of an approaching storm.

Marcus had no desire to taint this creature, though deep down inside he knew there would come a day when the last tendrils of his past humanity finally withered and the temptation to destroy such innocence would be unbearable. He merely wanted to see with his own eyes the infant that had caused his first soul to regret so exquisitely deeply. However, now his attention drifted away from his initial preoccupation, honing in on the dichotomy of warring energies he sensed in the room ahead of him. Again, as he had with Sonnellion, as well as Cresil, Marcus was becoming increasingly aware of when he had tread upon another demon's territory. This would make his fourth encounter, if he included Desiderium. He wondered if there possibly existed a demon for every human soul, or whether his luck was simply that unfortunate that he should cross paths with so many, so early in his rebirth?

As he took another step towards the door in order to listen more closely, the voices suddenly died down.

"Is someone here?" a woman whispered.

"I wasn't expecting anyone. I have no appointments this morning," the man replied.

"Don't look at me. I was here to see you."

The third voice caused Marcus's blood to turn to ice in his veins. Soft and sweet, he recognized it instantly as Brenda's. His pulse raced as he repressed a feral growl that gurgled up from his throat at the thought of another demon having already laid claim to a soul he saw as being rightfully his. There was no guarantee that this was indeed the case, but even her close proximity to the dark entity he sensed among them made him uneasy, the fine hairs on the back of his arms and neck bristling with tension. The legs of a chair scraped softly against the wood floor as someone rose from it and crossed to the door. Marcus took a step back, steeling himself for the confrontation.

The door opened just enough for an elderly woman dressed in simple gray slacks and a white button-down blouse to peer out. From behind tortoiseshell framed bifocal glasses she frowned slightly with concern, her hazel eyes bright and clear and kind as if they belonged to a woman decades younger.

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“May I help you dear?” she asked, her tone kind, but tense from the unexpected intrusion.

Marcus stared at her, analyzing her aura for signs of demonic possession. Her body had not yet been invaded by one of Hell’s minions. However, there was an abstract cloudiness to her aspect that made her appear surrounded by a dense gray-green fog. The fog had a suffocating weight to it as it clung to her soul, its purchase deep and inescapable now. Marcus’s eyes dropped briefly to the silver rosary that dangled from a string of dark purple beads around her neck before returning to her steady gaze. He wondered just what she could have traded that had made her faith all but obsolete.

“Are you okay, son?” the woman asked, unnerved slightly by Marcus’s silent hesitation. “If you’d like to talk to Father Julian we can make an appointment for you. He’s a little busy at the moment.”

Marcus felt trapped, paralyzed by his defensive possessiveness over Brenda coupled with his curiosity about the nature of the demon that sat just beyond his view. He began to turn away, needing to flee for a while in order to strategize his next move, but the sound of the door being pulled further open stopped him.

“Marcus? Is that you?” Brenda breathed with shocked disbelief.

She stood behind the nun’s left shoulder, her delicate cupid’s bow mouth slightly agape, her dark brown eyes, uncomprehending. The blood had drained from her smooth olive complexion, giving her a ghostly appearance. Far more gaunt than when he had last remembered seeing her, his death had obviously affected her on a deep physical, as well as a cruel emotional level. He said nothing, but simply stared at her. Remotely, a part of his psyche that still remained slightly tethered to the preconceived notions of humanity suggested he should feel something other than the base possessiveness he experienced as if she were merely a chest of gold or piece of land. However, he could not muster an ounce of another emotion. In the end, the way he remembered it, she had abandoned him to fall prey to Desiderium’s manipulations. Whatever love he had once felt for her had been crushed to dust then and there. Marcus did not exactly lust for revenge, but his desire to become her escort to Hell verged on maddening.

Brenda took a staggered step back, her hand lifting to her mouth as if she might sob or scream. “No...” she whispered. “You died. I watched you die. I went to your funeral... You can’t be alive.” Her voice trailed off,

tears slipping from the corners of her eyes to snake down her cheeks in clear rivulets.

“It’s a miracle then,” the nun said quietly, staring at Marcus in awe, unaware of the truth of the situation she stood witness to.

“A miracle,” Marcus repeated. “I don’t know if I would call it exactly that.”

There was a film over the air of the house where the residing priest lived, a slickness that caused an image of red oil drifting along the top of a jar of water to waver in Marcus’s mind. As he took a seat in the small office where Brenda and the church officials had been previously meeting, a distressing unease caused him to begin to question his current path of pursuit. He contemplated abruptly excusing himself from the claustrophobically humble design of the room to seek refuge elsewhere in the city until he could approach Brenda at a less publicly scrutinized time. However, he could not move, and perched stoically silent and still upon the edge of the simple oak chair in the corner, a granule of pollen caught haphazardly between the oil and water.

Behind a large, precisely organized desk of rosewood sat the priest himself, dressed in the traditional plain, black, long-sleeved shirt and white collar. He appeared a kind man with short silver hair and deep-set blue eyes. Around his neck hung a gold cross on a simple gold chain. He leaned forward slightly, clasped his hands together on the oversized daily calendar in front of him, and smiled at Marcus. Indeed, the man projected an air of innocent, spirituality devoid of malicious intent or previous indiscretion, but there was simply something too perfect about the image. The man’s aura was too pristine, too clean and shimmering of golden warmth and solace, as if it had been prefabricated in a lab by otherworldly technicians who had painstakingly distilled it of every last ounce of darkness.

Humans, no matter how pious, how virtuous, were still human. They retained imprints of their former grievances, their sins, no matter how small or insignificant, tarnishing the unblemished cocoon they are born with as life progresses. Their flaws are what made them individuals and, at least to Marcus, more interesting and acceptable than their lofty heavenly parole officers. As he closely observed the priest he could see that the man had at one time been human, for beneath the alluring mirage of purity resided the husk of his former mortal self. However, whatever soul had once resided within the flesh had been crushed to dust and swept away into the maw of Hell. The entity that animated the costume was far more

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powerful than anything Marcus had yet to encounter, for even Sonnellion's rage had seemed somehow slightly too reckless and intense for him to outright fear. Perhaps it was simply that Marcus was beginning to settle more fully into himself again so that the numbness that had tempered his ability to react to the world, whether the physical or the metaphysical, was beginning to dissipate? Regardless, the force before him was so perfectly tuned, so acutely managed and controlled, that Marcus's body trembled slightly beneath his clothes.

The priest tilted his head to one side, his smile widening as he watched Marcus, curious. He knew what Marcus was, just as Marcus had identified one of his own as soon as he stepped within the room. Marcus knew he must proceed with caution, exercising the utmost diplomacy he was capable of. If this demon had already laid claim to Brenda, as well as whatever else it had staked here in the mortal world, he doubted he would have the courage to stand up to it as he had done Desiderium or Sonnellion.

"Did I hear correctly? You're 'back from the dead'?" The priest chuckled. "That is quite a feat! You should join my congregation and tell my parishioners all about it." He inclined his head, pinning Marcus to his chair with his piercing blue gaze.

Marcus did not return the smile. "It would be a story I'm sure they wouldn't forget."

The priest's smile faded a bit. He glanced up at the nun who stood patiently behind his right shoulder, a sweet look of blissful beatification on her face; she watched Marcus as if he were her favorite grandson. "You really should join us on Sunday. Everyone needs to hear about a good miracle every now and then to keep their faith alive."

Brenda squirmed uncomfortably in the chair next to Marcus. From the corner of his eye he could see her face pinched in a look of utter dismay and horror beneath her desperate struggle to remain calm and professional. He could feel her emotions radiating away from her like solar flares, her desire to flee the room screaming across his psyche like a harpy's cry.

"Thank you, but I don't think that would be a good idea. I'm not good in front of crowds and my story is not exactly uplifting. I am not what you would call 'religious'," Marcus said quietly, trying not to send Brenda over the edge completely. He had managed to find her much earlier than he had anticipated. He would not let her slip through his fingers. Not yet.

“Well, our door is always open if you ever change your mind,” the priest replied, a hint of sarcasm dripping from the back of his voice in a register only Marcus was certain he could hear. “So, what brings you here this morning if not to join our community?”

Marcus paused, uncertain suddenly as to whether or not he should reveal his curiosity about the child in the other room. As far as he could tell, the demon before him had no interest in the toddler, but it was hard for Marcus to gauge the truth behind the cleverly sculpted guise. Drawing a small breath he decided to chance it anyway, his curiosity still nibbling at the edges of his being like a drug craving.

“The child you currently have in your custody; his mother recently passed away, a most unfortunate tragedy. I am a friend of the family. While they really have no interest in adopting him themselves, they asked me to consider it. I am open to the idea and would like to meet him,” Marcus lied.

Brenda’s gaze anchored on the side of his face, her brows knit together in a look of utter confusion. Behind the desk the priest and nun exchanged glances.

“How dare you!” Brenda whispered.

Marcus turned towards her, gazing at her passively, his face emotionless and calm despite his heightened unease. She was just as beautiful as he had remembered her and perhaps even more so now that he coveted her as his next prize so intensely. “What do you mean?” he asked as innocently as he could muster.

“You’re stalking me aren’t you?” she hissed, losing her composure before the church officials. “You know I took that job I was fighting for as a social worker don’t you? You followed me here. You’re not a friend of that child’s family! You don’t even know what his name is, do you?”

Marcus glanced at the nun whose expression had transformed to one of concerned shock and gave her a little smile and shrug before turning back to Brenda. “Baby, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t even know about the social worker job. That must have been after...” He let his voice trail off as if in sadness.

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me!” Brenda hissed again.

“Perhaps Mr...” The priest extended his hand towards Marcus as he waited for a name.

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“Glenfield. Marcus Glenfield,” Marcus said, still staring at Brenda who sat trembling in her chair, clutching the thick manila file folder and notepad in her lap as if she might rip it in two.

“Yes. Perhaps Mr. Glenfield and I should take a little walk while you and Sister Martha finish up with the inspection?” The priest rose from his seat and walked around the edge of the desk towards the door. Patiently he waited in the hall just beyond for Marcus to join him.

“I’ll explain everything,” Marcus said to Brenda quietly, attempting to lull her into trusting him once again with the gentleness of his voice. “I have missed you so much.”

Before the tears brimming in Brenda’s eyes could break free, Marcus stood and left.

The priest led the way out of the house and back into the courtyard behind the church. He paused beside the fountain, his hands clasped behind his back as he gazed thoughtfully into the shallow pool at the base.

“How?” Marcus asked. “How did you get in here?”

The priest did not move for a long moment as if he had not heard Marcus’s breathed inquiry. Above them wisps of feathery white clouds drifted slowly through the sky, oblivious to the monstrous dealings incubating miles below. Somewhere, hidden amongst the boughs of the trees a small metal wind chime sang as a crisp breeze wound through the yard, the chimes eerily beautiful beyond the heavy darkness surrounding the two demons.

“You are a young one,” the priest said quietly. He turned slowly to face Marcus. His eyes had changed from soft blue to a viral glowing green, the pupil narrow and tall as a cat’s. He studied Marcus carefully, attempting to peer past the shell of human flesh he donned now. “I can see that your new face is not even fully formed beneath this mask you wear. Such a shame, that humanity has not given you a name?”

Marcus felt as if he were a young wolf trying to gain entrance into a fierce new pack, the temptation to prostrate himself subserviently and allow the elders to decide his fate overwhelming. However, his instincts told him to stand his ground and gain the older legions’ respect in his courage. He refused to believe that Hell would haphazardly choose him by mere chance. There had to be a reason; they had to have seen some sort of promise and strength within him, even if it evaded him personally.

“A name?” He had to admit that Marcus was not exactly a fierce sounding name for a demon.

The priest chuckled, his voice taking on a strange deep resonance that emitted a vibration that traveled down to the marrow of Marcus’s bones. “Yes. Eventually, once you have left your mark on their psyche, they will bestow a name upon you that is permanent and mighty. Tales will be woven about you; their belief in your existence will be their testament, as time will stand witness. Their fear will amplify your impact on their world and into Hell their souls you will hurl.”

“What is the name they gave you?” Marcus asked, carefully holding the priest’s gaze without seeming confrontational. The shift in the demon’s speech, the playful rhyming, made the fine hairs on the back of Marcus’s arms bristle with unease. As the priest continued to relax the guise around his inner self, the intensity of his power made Marcus want to step away from him.

“My true name was given to me by Lucifer himself, though you yourself may not have heard. I am old, far older than many of our legions. Humanity has given me many names over the eons. Gorigon, Dilith, Grijided, Girdinth or Drjin. It is a sin to pick just one; they are all so cleverly spun. But I am rather fond of Vetis. ‘Tempter of the Holy’, that is.” He smiled, his mouth widening to reveal a grin of startling long fangs.

The atmosphere around them began to change, the image of the courtyard wavering as if trapped behind the heat of a desert mirage. Marcus focused on Vetis as they shifted into a plane of the superior demon’s choosing. A fierce freezing wind slammed into Marcus’s back, nearly knocking him to his knees. He staggered a step forward before scuttling to the side beneath a large over-cropping of jagged black stone. As the world around them crystallized, they stood now upon the ledge of a mountain, thousands of feet above the earth below. A blizzard of snow howled through the ravine, shrieking a banshee cry of unrest and hopelessness.

In the center of the ledge a massive pile of tree limbs formed a nest large enough for a mythic griffin to nestle within. Instead, the leafless, reddish wood, dusted with a fine powder of white snow that constantly shifted shape with the wind, cradled three glistening black eggs. Vetis’s true form was fully visible now beyond the mortal realm. Though he still stood upright upon two legs, his torso had morphed, separating into two bulbous sections like a spider. His flesh had taken on the same coarse ruddy hue as the tree limbs of the nest as if his body were encased in a flexible sheath of

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rough bark. From his sides had sprouted two additional sets of long, sinewy arms, each equipped with a claw-like hand of spindly red fingers. Most disturbing of all, the demon's head remained fairly humanoid, though his jaw line had elongated to allow for the fangs within to fully extend.

Vetis leaned forward and inched towards Marcus on all six legs until he was beneath the overhang where the younger demon cowered from the elements.

"You are there for the nun then?" Marcus yelled over the howling wind, not wanting to waste any precious ounce of time for fear that Brenda might slip from his grasp while he danced with this new devil between worlds.

Vetis pulled back, settling down upon four of his legs and lacing the fingers of his two free hands together in front of him as he regarded Marcus patiently. "I am there for many souls, though who I shall claim and who I will let go, none of them will ever know."

Marcus squinted at the demon, suddenly envious that he himself did not possess such an intimidating demonic form yet. He knew it would come in time, but how much time was anyone's guess. Time did not hold the same relevancy in Hell as it had in the physical plane.

Vetis splayed his hands wide as if gesturing to the universe beyond the mountainside. "Every devout heart is my sweet sport, but only those who believe themselves truly pious will I continue to court. I will lure them in, one by one, with promises of salvation purchased and riches won through an investment scheme no mortal could devise. It is all about the human need for compromise. Millions of souls I have harvested for Hell since the first death knell. If I stitched them together they could encase the sun, a mortal tapestry I have spun."

Marcus struggled to understand the rambling riddle the ancient demon before him spewed. And, in truth, he cared little for the souls of the church parishioners as his sole focus remained fixed upon the acquisition of Brenda for his next trophy.

"I just want the woman, the social worker named Brenda. That is all I have truly come for. It is the last soul I want during this first time back." Marcus cut straight to the point. Though he would have loved to have the luxury to listen to Vetis's yarns for hours and hear the stories of a true Hellish veteran, he could do nothing but think of Brenda gathering her things and leaving the church house.

Vetis tilted his head slowly to one side as if listening to a faraway sound. “You can’t have her,” he said simply.

“What do you mean?” Marcus replied, frowning as an emotion as akin to panic as he could remember began to burn in the center of his chest. “I thought you said you only wanted the churchgoers? Brenda doesn’t belong to that church.” He did not like the fact that he now was beginning to feel again. The absence of the initial numbness of resurrection left him unstable and vulnerable.

“It is not I who has claimed the icon of your obsession, but another of our brethren.” Vetis turned around and scuttled back toward the nest. Carefully he inspected the eggs, turning them lovingly and stroking them with gentle nurturing hands in a manner all too unbecoming of a demon of his elevated stature. “Belial has already staked claim to your dame. He is the Chief of us all, the Prince of Trickery and the Master of Guilt. If you cross his path, more than blood will be spilt. I would suggest a new conquest, lest chance a dance with the best of the best.”

“Belial...” The name seemed familiar to Marcus, but he could not remember where he had heard it before. A flash of memory left over from his mortal life blazed across his mind’s eye; images of a church of obsidian crawling with horrific black vampiric creatures caused him to shudder. Instinctively he knew somehow that the dream had not been Desiderium’s work, but that of Belial. Could Belial have found Brenda through Desiderium? Could they have been partners to bring down the two souls in unison? Desiderium had been such a haggard and pitifully resigned demon that Marcus had difficulty picturing him in league with the Chief of Demonkind.

“But why would he be after Brenda?” The moment the words left his lips he realized what Brenda harbored in her soul, more so than even regret, was a stifling guilt. Could it be that she had taken his death upon her shoulders to bear for all eternity?

Vetis froze, his hands lingering around the surface of the center of the egg as if he were sensing movement within. “Shh!” he hissed. “He’s listening.”

“Who’s listening?” Marcus whispered, his gaze darting through the blizzard across the mountain pass expecting to see something monstrous emerge from the white drifts and black crags.

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“He knows you’re here. He knows what you want.” Vetis turned slowly back to face Marcus. “He believes you are taunting him by being so nonchalant so soon on your new path.”

Marcus swallowed hard, pressing back against the icy rock shelf behind him. The distinct feeling that Vetis was contemplating whether or not to slaughter him curdled his stomach. Behind the glassine green cat’s stare, the wheels of Vetis’s insane mind spun with a cyclone force.

“We have to go.” Suddenly Vetis scurried towards Marcus and in a flash grabbed him with four of his long arms. The demon’s sharp, hard fingers dug into Marcus’s back as he pulled him towards him and began to wrap him in a cocoon of black silk pulled from Vetis’s own body.

Marcus shrieked as true terror gripped him, shredding the last of the numbness that had encased his being. Over and over he was turned with a blinding speed until he lost all sense of direction, nausea rising in his throat as the world vanished behind a thick curtain of black silk. He felt Vetis begin to run again, scampering out into the blinding freezing elements before leaping up into the air. The sensation of falling towards the earth far below the ledge caused another hysterical scream to rip from Marcus’s throat as images of hurtling into the ravine onto the sharp black rocks below filled his already terrified mind. These would be his last moments. Vetis had decided to kill him just as he had killed Desiderium, a thinning of the weak from the demonic herd. Marcus braced himself for impact.

“Open your eyes.” Vetis’s voice, returning to the human register of the priest he inhabited, sliced through Marcus’s fatalistic dread.

Gradually Marcus pried one eye open at a time, slowly dropping his hands away from his ears where he had apparently been attempting to block out the sound of their descent. Once again they stood beside the fountain in the midst of the quaint, peaceful church courtyard. Vetis quietly regarded him, his eyes gradually changing from the glowing cat’s-eye green back to the soft blue of his host body. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly with a knowing smile for a flicker before fading again.

“You will leave here if you know what’s best for you.” The deranged predilection for rhyming words had also mysteriously vanished as the demon reformed his human guise. “You are simply out of your league.”

“But she belongs to me!” Marcus stammered like a child being refused an expensive toy.

Vetis tilted his head slightly to the side and frowned with pity. “I generally wouldn’t waste my breath on such a young creature as yourself, but I have to admit it would be a pity to see you destroyed on your first day out of Hell. Don’t you agree?” He stepped away from the fountain and began to retrace his steps slowly back to the house. “But do as you see fit. You, and Belial, are none of my concern. I have learned to stay out of his way and if you are keen on surviving, you will do so as well.”

Marcus stared after Vetis for a moment before uprooting himself to slowly follow the demon back inside the house. If he could not directly pursue Brenda, perhaps his presence would be enough to cause her to stray, her guilt naturally transforming into regret.

The two emotions went so delicately hand in hand.

CHAPTER 8

Marcus and Vetis returned to find the office empty. Down the hallway soft feminine voices could be heard accompanied by a childish giggle from time to time. Vetis walked behind the priest's tidy desk and sat down, folding his hands properly upon the surface as he regarded Marcus, still standing in the doorway, his attention focused down the hall.

"Say your good-byes and move on to another soul," Vetis said quietly with a measure of what sounded like actual sincerity.

Marcus hesitated, listening to the sound of Brenda's sweet voice as she went over a few last remaining details regarding the state support of the child while in the temporary custody of the church. Though she had managed to pull together her professionalism for the sake of the meeting, beneath her well-recited social worker lingo was a piercing anguish that was impossible to completely conceal. He slowly turned back to face Vetis one last time.

"This is non-negotiable, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

"If you are allowed to remain in your current position, you will come to understand the natural hierarchy of our world. Think of it as a pride of lions, if you will. The eldest is not to be challenged and those who do are usually killed in the process. It is nothing personal, unless you make it so. There are plenty of souls for you to practice on. Leave this be," Vetis warned.

Marcus snorted softly, "A pride of lions." He repeated under his breath.

He was suddenly not looking forward to his new journey. This was far harder than any corporate ladder he had attempted to climb in his human life. Here, if he displeased his boss he was not simply fired, but he faced the fate of being eaten by the Beast, his soul torn to unrecognizable shreds by the swarming throngs in the belly of Hell. However, his obsession with finding out the truth of Brenda's soul was maddening, obliterating his reason behind a screaming curtain of white noise.

He nodded to Vetis. "Thank you, I suppose," he said. "Hopefully we will not cross paths again anytime soon."

"I highly doubt it," Vetis said, the smile fading from his mouth as if he sensed that the intensity of Marcus's fixation was spiraling out of control.

Without another word Marcus turned and walked down the hallway toward the sound of the voices. *Don't go in there*, he thought. *Just turn and leave. If you see her once more you'll have to have her. This is foolish!* His inner sensibility shouted angrily at him, but he refused to listen, batting away the voice as if it were an annoying gnat. There was no harm in speaking with her, he consoled himself, and if Belial had truly staked claim to her soul, then there was nothing a lowly newborn demon like Marcus could do to sway her. The idea was laughable, really.

As he neared the open door, Brenda and the nun stepped out into the hallway. Brenda gasped as she saw Marcus, clutching her pile of folders against his chest like a shield. Her eyes were wide and unblinking as she stared at Marcus.

"Oh dear boy! You startled us!" The nun laughed nervously. "You shouldn't creep up on people like that."

Marcus did not respond but stood perfectly still as he held Brenda's gaze. "I'd like to talk to you."

The nun glanced nervously between Marcus and Brenda sensing the brewing storm of repressed emotions bristling around them. "Okay. Well, this has been lovely." She turned to Brenda. "If you have any other questions either myself or Father Brently are always here to help. It's been such a pleasure being able to assist with the care of little Jonathan. Hopefully we'll be able to find him a permanent home soon."

Brenda pulled her gaze away from Marcus, her voice trembling slightly between the professional pleasantries. "Yes. Yes, thank you so much Sister Martha. We are just full to capacity right now at the state facilities and he requires around-the-clock care. I will be in touch very soon." She smiled at the older nun beside her.

The nun stepped around Marcus, casting an uneasy sidelong glance as she moved past him. He waited until the nun had disappeared into Vetis's office before speaking again, but before he could utter a word Brenda sharply cut him off.

"No!" Anger pinched her features, tears brimming on the reddening edges of her eyes. "I don't want to do this here."

She turned and stormed out of the house through a rear exit. Marcus chased after her and down a steep set of narrow stone steps to the city

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sidewalk below where Brenda's car was parked. He grabbed her arm as she reached for her keys in her purse. The action caused her to drop the pile of folders she was clutching. The papers scattered on the pavement.

"Shit!" Brenda shouted. "Don't touch me!" She screamed and yanked her arm out of his grip. Running her hands through her hair she knelt down and frantically began scooping up the files before the wind could carry away any of the important documents.

Marcus squatted down in front of her, watching her silently as she blindly tried to reorganize her work, tears streaming down her face, inelegantly smearing her mascara and eyeliner. Distantly, as if reviewing an old movie scene, he knew he should be feeling something other than curiosity for her. He should have wanted to comfort her; her pain should have been as harrowing and tragic as if it were his own.

However, all he could think about was the perfection of its intensity and how he desired to be the one to cultivate it to its end, to proudly carry her back to Hell. There was no doubt that Belial had been kneading her soul since the day of his death, if not long before that, precisely manipulating her every thought and impulse until she was so fragile a single strong gust of wind might destroy her. He could see now, up close, the dark circles beneath her eyes, the deep lines around her mouth and between her brows from long hours of crying. Even her hair had lost its youthful sheen, strands of premature gray peeking out beneath the heavier locks of dark brown. A Mona Lisa of destruction, her pain was the work of a true master.

She refused to look at him as she dug in her purse for her car keys. "I don't have anything to say to you. You're not here. You're not alive. I buried you. Your family was there. I watched your coffin..." Her voice died in a choked sob.

She scrambled clumsily to her feet, scampering around to the driver's side before jamming the key in the door. Marcus stood and followed her, placing his hand on the open car door as she threw her work and purse into the backseat.

"I want to explain to you. I need to talk to you," he said, filling his voice with as much of a facsimile of regret as he could muster.

"I can't do this! I can't do this!" She grabbed hold of the roof of the car to keep herself from collapsing as her crying reached an incapacitating degree.

Marcus let go of the door and turned her around, prying her away from the car to pull her into his arms. At first she resisted, her confusion and fear swelling like a storm cloud, but at last she relented, collapsing against him like a rag-doll.

“Yes you can,” he said softly. “Is there somewhere we can go? I’ll explain everything.”

After what felt like an eternity, Brenda finally drew a long shuddering breath, her hysterical crying subsiding like a passing torrential storm. She nodded into the lapels of his coat.

“My apartment.” She turned away and, without looking at him sat down in the driver’s seat. Staring straight ahead she asked, “Are you going to follow me?”

“If you don’t mind, I’ll ride with you? I don’t have a car yet,” he replied, watching her carefully as if she might slam the door and speed away as she changed her mind.

Her jaw clenched, the muscles working along the side of her face as she struggled to regain her composure. “Get in.”

Marcus had the distinct feeling as he opened the passenger door that he should have followed Vetis’s advice.



They drove in silence away from the downtown church along the highway, north to Brenda’s apartment complex. As they pulled into the sprawling luxury community of beige stucco and white molding, Marcus remarked silently to himself that she had indeed upgraded from their old lives since his death. Brenda’s family was well off; she had never needed to work, but had chosen to follow her humanitarian desires through volunteer positions at various agencies and organizations. The very fact that she had accepted a paid position as a social worker was odd, Marcus suddenly realized. When they had been engaged, she had moved into his apartment, claiming it to be, at least in the beginning, “Bohemian.” However, the appeal of living modestly had worn thin and Brenda had spent more and more time with her family and wealthy friends. Marcus had wanted to be a good provider for Brenda and had put in excruciating hours at his job in a desperate attempt to get promoted to a position that would supply the kind of income he needed to purchase a house. The plan had only worsened

the situation and was, no doubt, the beginning of the end and the opening Desiderium had needed to pry his way into Marcus's world.

Brenda's new residence felt hollow and frigid despite the neatly manicured hedges and sparkling blue community pool. The complex seemed to be holding its breath, perhaps in anticipation of its inhabitants returning home from their places of employment. However, as Marcus stepped out of the car before a building prominently marked "C 260-280" he shivered, again questioning his irrational obsession with his ex-fiancé's soul. In the space beside her shiny new coupe, an old black and red Firebird that had definitely seen better days was parked, its engine leaking a nasty black oil stain on the white asphalt below. The vehicle was sorely out of place in such a picturesque setting like a biker at a country club.

"You coming?" Brenda had paused midway up the flight of concrete stairs.

Marcus tore his gaze away from the old car and silently followed her to her second floor apartment. With each step, the air felt heavier, stifling, as if the oxygen were being slowly removed and replaced with carbon monoxide. Brenda seemed oblivious to the transformation even as she opened the door and entered her apartment. Marcus paused at the entrance, his eyes darting around the beautifully decorated living room as if he expected to see the devil himself awaiting his arrival. After a minute, he crossed over the threshold and quietly shut the door behind him while Brenda tossed her work folders on the granite breakfast bar separating the living room from the kitchen. Pulling a wine glass from the cabinet to her right, she poured herself a strong serving from an open bottle of pinot noir on the counter. Marcus could see her hands shaking as she lifted the glass to her lips, the color drained from her face from emotional exhaustion and stress.

Placing the glass back on the counter, half empty, she ran her left hand through her hair and stared at Marcus. "So, you wanted to talk?"

Marcus opened his mouth to speak, but before his words had the chance to leave his tongue another voice sliced through the space between them.

"Hey babe!" A sleepy male voice accompanied a groggy groan and crack of a back. "I didn't know you'd be home so soon."

In the doorway leading to the hall where the bedrooms were located stood a tall, lanky man, no older than twenty-five. Dressed in faded black jeans, his naked chest and arms were illustrated with a variety of intricate tattoos. His shoulder-length brown hair was mussed from sleeping, his dark

brown eyes, shadowed as if from a long night of heavy partying. The scent of stale cigarettes lingered about him, mixed with aftershave and whiskey. He wandered over to stand behind Brenda where she leaned against the counter, lacing his sinewy arms around her waist.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed at him. “I thought Jimmy was supposed to pick you up this morning?”

“Man, where’s the love?” he asked, kissing the side of her face. “Yeah, well, you know how Jimmy is. Probably passed out somewhere with a groupie. We’re going to practice tonight at the rehearsal space.” He nuzzled her hair. “You smell good.”

“Don’t!” she wormed out of his embrace. Grabbing her glass of wine she pulled out one of the dining room chairs and sat down, resting her forehead against her palm.

The man cut his eyes up at Marcus, a strangely knowing half-smile tugging at the right corner of his mouth. “Who’s this?”

“Steve, can you please just give us a minute. Alone,” Brenda asked, her eyes closed.

Steve’s gaze narrowed. He crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back slightly as if evaluating Marcus. “Wait a second. You look really familiar.” He wagged a finger at Marcus. “Don’t I know you from somewhere?”

“Steve... please...” Brenda’s voice was barely more than a whisper as if she simply could not muster the energy to stop him.

Steve’s expression changed suddenly from sly knowing to an almost mocking shock. “Holy shit! No way!” He leaned forward slightly. “Dude! You’re dead!”

“Stop it! Now! Yes, it’s him. It’s Marcus! He’s alive, apparently! We can all see that!” She shouted.

Steve raised his hands. “Sorry! Just...I’ve seen a lot of weird shit, but I’ve never seen a guy come back from the grave, that’s all.” He turned and walked towards Marcus slowly as if he were approaching a ghost. “You look just like your pictures. Man! You must have had one hell of a plastic surgeon. Half of your face was freaking gone!”

Marcus peered at Steve suspiciously as Steve walked in a wide circle around Marcus to get a better a look at him. “How did you know about that?”

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A frustrated agitation was beginning to build within Marcus. Not only was the presence of this man interrupting his interaction with Brenda, it now appeared that whatever relationship she had with Steve had been going on for a while. Though he knew it shouldn't, for he was supposed to have been beyond such emotions by now, the very thought irked Marcus.

Steve halted and backed up a pace, sensing Marcus's growing unease. "Wait a second, man. Did you come back here to get even or something?" Steve's eyes widened. "Man, she left you a long time ago! Brenda, back me up here!"

"What is he talking about Brenda?" Marcus asked quietly, tempering the surge of old violent human emotions.

Brenda didn't respond for a long moment, her forehead still resting against her palm. Finally she lifted her head and, taking another long drink, turned to face Marcus. "I'm so sorry," she said, tears slipping down her cheeks.

Standing, she walked to the edge of the breakfast bar and stared up at Marcus. "You were such a good guy. You did everything right, or tried to at least. I know you loved me. And I did love you. I don't know why...I just...I needed more excitement, adventure...I guess."

"With him?" Marcus could not disguise his shock. Steve was her complete and utter opposite not only in looks, but in lifestyle and personality as well. "I don't understand." He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answers to his questions, though.

Suddenly an image of Brenda sitting in her car, typing out the last text message he had received from her, flashed through his mind. As she put down her Blackberry the scene expanded. In the passenger seat sat Steve slyly smiling before leaning over to kiss her. Brenda hadn't been staying with friends that night as she had said, but had instead been with Steve. The scene in his mind's eye changed again, bleeding into the image of a hospital room. Brenda sat beside the bed where Marcus lay, his head wrapped in bandages to the point where only one closed eye was visible. Tubes snaked from his arms to the IV stand as the life support system wheezed mechanically at timed intervals pumping air into his lungs. After a long moment of silence, Brenda sighed heavily as if saying her final good-byes and left the room. In the hallway outside, Steve sat in one of the uncomfortable pastel green hospital waiting chairs. As he spied her he rose to receive her as she rushed into his arms, her face contorted in grief.

The hospital waiting room melted away to reveal an overcast morning at the local cemetery. A small group of people dressed in formal black sat in plastic folding chairs beside an open grave. In the front row Brenda slouched in her seat, painfully thin and pale, her eyes covered in large black sunglasses. Beside her, Steve sat uncomfortably in a black mod suit, his eyes downcast at the open grave as he placed his right arm around Brenda and pulled her closer to him. As the priest spoke his final words the gathering rose to throw flowers into the grave. Brenda and Steve remained seated until all of the other mourners had departed to watch the gravedigger begin to shovel the newly turned earth back into the ground.

“Months,” Marcus whispered, a strange deadly calm creeping into his voice as his possessiveness over the acquisition of her soul soured into a seething scorn. “You were leaving me,” he hissed.

The tone of his voice shook Brenda to the core. Her eyes widened momentarily, her hand rising halfway as if to cover her mouth before she found the resolve to speak again. “I’m so sorry,” Brenda sobbed. “I didn’t think you would take it as hard as you did. I wanted to sit down with you and talk. Maybe even work things out?” She spoke as if she no longer cared if Steve were standing a few feet away. “But you didn’t give me the chance. I should never have done that to you. I never should have betrayed you like that. You were so good to me...”

Marcus shook his head, unable to speak as red tinged his sight. Brenda raced from the room, shoving past Steve into the hallway bathroom. Slamming the door shut, the sound of the lock clicking was followed by her tragic howls and her fist colliding with the wall.

“Nice work,” Steve said, his posture relaxing from the feigned alarm. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe, chuckling.

Marcus turned towards him. “What did you just say?”

Steve gestured towards the bathroom door with his thumb over his shoulder. “Nice work! I was planning on letting her have at least another day or two to linger in her own guilt here on Earth, but you’ve done the last bit of my job for me it seems. A little push over the edge.” He made a pushing motion with both hands and grinned.

Marcus glared at Steve. “Belial,” he said quietly, unable to disguise his disgust. At his sides, his fingers curled into fists, his nails carving neat, bloody half-moons into his palms.

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“Good guess monsignor!” His jest faded into mock disappointment. Belial stuck out his bottom lip. “You don’t seem pleased to see me at all. What a little brat Hell has put in Desi’s place. Such a shame. Desi really did do a great job as the Demon of Regret. He just needed a little break I think, a vacation.” Belial strolled to the dining room table and finished off the rest of the wine in Brenda’s glass. “Too bad in Hell there is no such thing as a vacation.” He shrugged and poured the rest of the wine from the bottle.

Marcus ignored the ancient demon’s statements. Casting an icy glare sideways at Belial, he walked to the bathroom door to bang on it with a force that shook the frame around it. Marcus was stunned at his own strength, but still the door held fast to its hinges. Blind in his anger, both towards Brenda for her deceit and Belial for his arrogance, Marcus was suddenly determined to be the winning demon in the battle for Brenda’s soul, regardless of whether or not it cost him his own. He was the Demon of Regret, by God, and regret Belial would when he was done with him.

“Brenda! Brenda, open up!” He drew a breath and tried to lower his voice into a facsimile of forgiving concern. “Brenda, come on. It’s all in the past. Just open the door and we’ll move on.”

“Move on? Nice touch! Interesting choice of words as well. You’re getting good at this manipulation thing, but I’m afraid you’re still not quite mastering it yet.” Belial appeared beside him, leaning against the wall on the far side of the bathroom. “You know, if you really wanted to, you could ask me for help. You certainly wouldn’t be the first demon I’ve taken under my wing, so to speak. Why look at Desi! He’s been around nearly as long as I have and he’s doing quite well, I’d say!”

“Well? You call that well? He blew his brains out on the banks of the tar ocean.” Marcus growled as he banged on the bathroom door again. “I wouldn’t call that a successful mentoring.”

“What would you know? May I remind you that you are only days old in this new skin of yours. Desiderium is millennia in the making. But that is not relevant here.” Belial dismissed the issue as if it were merely the weather.

Marcus could feel the heat of the ancient demon’s gaze on the side of his face. His instincts screamed within him to back down and humble himself before the primal Prince of Guilt and Wickedness, but Marcus simply could not wrest his better judgment from the talons of his desire

for revenge. Grabbing hold of the doorknob he yanked hard upon it until it severed from the door itself. With a howl he threw it to the ground.

“Marcus, do you really think this is the best decision you’ve made so far during your time back? I mean, you’ve managed to collect one soul, but you certainly haven’t made any real case to Lucifer as to why your position should be permanent. You saw how easily Desiderium was replaced. What makes you think you won’t be just as quickly?” There was a weary irritation in Belial’s voice signifying a dangerous level of boredom.

Marcus ignored Belial’s taunts. He focused his voice, summoning up the memory of his old former self and the gentleness with which he had once approached his lost love. “Brenda, baby, please. Just open up the door.”

The sobbing was beginning to die down on the other side.

“Hmm, I wonder if I left that perfectly full bottle of Xanax® on the edge of the sink with the cap conveniently off?” Belial tapped his chin with one long finger as he sipped his wine. “Yes, yes I did. Do you think she’s, oh I don’t know, taken some?”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Marcus hissed, refusing to look at Belial.

“What makes you so certain?” The humor vanished from Belial’s voice, its register deepening to a deadly calm. “You’re correct that she is a strong soul. That is why I chose her in the first place. But even strong souls can crack if enough pressure is applied. You are another perfect example, may I remind you.”

“Open the fucking door,” he growled at Belial, turning to stare at the demon with murderous intent. “Just open the fucking door and let me have her. Is she really worth it to you? Aren’t there other souls for you to claim if you’re so mighty and powerful as everyone vows you to be?”

A sliding noise snared their attention followed by a dull thump. The apartment fell into an even deeper silence until Marcus’s ears rang painfully with it.

Belial could barely contain his glee. “Oh dear. That’s not a good sign, is it?” Belial smiled at Marcus as if he had just won a profitable bet as he found amusement once again in the immediate situation.

The last of Marcus’s newfound reserve crumbled as rage engulfed his being like a scorching back draft. With a howl he stepped back and began to kick in the bathroom door, but before the heel of his shoe could collide with the wood the world around him froze. As if suspended in a block of crystal Marcus was unable to move, perfectly preserved in his

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moment of recklessness, as the apartment began to disintegrate into shards of reality. Like pieces of a broken mirror they spiraled away before falling down into a feathery black nothingness as the physical world morphed into a new plane of existence. Brenda's collapsed body was revealed as the bathroom walls blew away. Motionless, as if separated from Marcus and Belial in a cocoon of ice, she lay perfectly still exactly where she had fallen, unconscious, to the floor that was no longer there. The silence of the mysterious void separating Hell and Earth was deafening, the pressure of the insubstantial and intangible suffocating as it sought to squeeze every aspect of life from the beings trapped within it. Beside Marcus's right ear Belial snapped his fingers. Like a cyclone traumatically vacuuming the air back into the center between Belial, Brenda and Marcus, the world around them suddenly congealed again, coming into focus with a nauseatingly surreal speed in the span of a single heartbeat.

Marcus gasped, staggering back as gravity seized his body once again. Around him the walls of the horrific obsidian church of his mortal dreams loomed, the glistening black stone even more sinister than he remembered. Through the towering thin cathedral windows poured a strange directionless light made a bloody red by the jagged panes of stained glass. Each window depicted an even more terrifying image than the last of the various tortures awaiting the unfortunate souls in Hell. The bodies of condemned mortals, their faces contorted in unimaginable terror, were ripped asunder by the talons and fangs of the starving deranged swarms below that roiled like a black and green sea, while legions of commanding demons looked on in gleeful approval. Marcus instinctively knew he should fear the images looming above him. However, as he settled into the new setting, the last dizzying tendrils of Belial's magic dissolving from his consciousness like the sands of sleep, he found the blinding anger towards the Prince of Guilt obliterated any desire he might have had for self-preservation.

Tearing his gaze away his eyes drifted to the center of the room. Where the crucifix and altar should have been rose a leviathan statue of Lucifer in his half-goat, half-man form, black wings outstretched to either side until they nearly grazed the vaulted ceiling above. The statue gazed down upon Marcus, Brenda and Belial with massive ruby eyes and an obscure expression of smug judgment, as if it lived and breathed, though its glistening black stone surface was still as a starless night sky. Marcus could not help but feel as if the likeness of his new master silently mocked him while simultaneously demanding an unquestioning worship from the

newfound demon standing at its feet. He found his footing as he backed into one of the long carved black pews and was incensed and confused by the oppressive sensation of being forced to kneel by an unseen hand. He ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. An angry, denied scream pent in his lungs echoed off of the vaulted ceilings far above, darting from one end of the church to the other like angry hawks.

“Feel better?” Belial asked Marcus as he stared at Brenda where she lay at the foot of the Lucifer statue. Walking around her he took a seat between the legs of the monolith on the edge of the platform.

Marcus looked up at Belial. While still primarily in the human form of “Steve,” two reddish-orange horns had emerged from either temple, curling like a ram’s backwards over his long tapered ears. His lips had widened, two small ivory tusks protruding from the top row of teeth causing him to appear as if he was slightly smiling even when he wasn’t. He watched Marcus curiously as if mulling over the fate of the new demon before him.

Marcus asked, his eyes nervously darting about the room in search of the horrific skeletal vampires that he remembered slithering down the walls to devour him in his dream. “You’re going to make me fight you, aren’t you, Belial? I’m going to have to fight to win the right to claim her soul?” Inside his shell of human flesh, Marcus felt as if the final layers of numbing ice that had sheathed the creature reborn were dissolving beneath a scorching heat. The humanity he had maintained in an effort to navigate the earthly realm was fracturing as his rage. Belial looked on in mild fascination as Marcus struggled to control his mutating psyche. Leaning forward to rest his cheek on his fist he chose his words carefully as if speaking to a child. “You should realize by now that it’s not about winning. It is simply a job and one with a strict hierarchy of power we must adhere to. I answer to Lucifer and a demon such as yourself will answer to me. We are no different than, say, a pride of lions. If I want the gazelle, I will have the gazelle and you will wait your turn within the pack. If you feel the need to challenge me, so be it, but I would highly advise against it.”

Belial narrowed his eyes at Marcus. “I chose Brenda’s soul to take as my own because I need a wife, a creature I can mold into a powerful entity to bring forth yet a new type of reign in the plane where I wield my power. It is my right to take a consort when and where I choose. What can I say, but that she snared my attention from the moment I sensed her. Some mortals spend their entire life denying the darkness within them. I thought

it would be a true waste to allow her to squander her own. No demon, except you, would dare to question that.”

Marcus swallowed hard, glaring, unblinking, at the demon sitting smugly before him. The air within the room, once frigid to the point of frosting one’s breath, began to grow damp and heavy, suffocating like the final moments before a heavy rain. “She...is...mine.” He stammered through clenched teeth, tunnel vision making it impossible to focus on anything else within the cathedral. Consideration of the consequences of his reckless challenge was utterly absent from his mind.

“You are a true idiot, Marcus.” He shook his head sadly. “Unfortunately, there is no place in Hell for insurgents. Disloyalty among the ranks cannot be tolerated. Your time as Desiderium’s replacement was a test to see if you might be able to fit into the upper echelon. Desi really needed a break, but I see now that we misjudged. You are simply too green. Perhaps we can reassign you elsewhere for a bit until you settle more into your new skin. I’m not exactly sure what Lucifer has planned for you, but it must be something big. He usually doesn’t take such chances on mortal souls such as yours, not unless they’ve been kings or warriors in life, at least.”

“Break?” Marcus stammered. “What do you mean he needed a break? He’s gone. I watched him commit suicide. I watched the Beast eat him!” His voice rose to a hysterical shriek.

“Yes, you did.” A familiar, creaking old voice quipped from the front left pew.

Marcus nearly jumped out of his skin -- he instantly recognized the voice. He whirled around with a gasp. There, perfectly putrid as he had ever been, Desiderium sat like a slowly decaying elderly man. The demon gazed at Marcus through his thick milky cataracts.

“My dear boy, did you really think it would be that easy to replace me?” Desiderium said with a measure of true pity. He shook his head slowly. “You started off pretty good there. I thought for sure I’d have more than a rotation of the Earth’s axis off before you did something foolish.” He exchanged a look of bemused defeat with Belial. “Well, I suppose it is not the first time I have been wrong about something.”

“No!” Marcus shouted. “No! I refuse to accept this.” He looked frantically back and forth between Belial and Desiderium.

The frenzied delirium suddenly began to transform; at his center, Marcus felt a chill of psychotic calm bubble up, spreading out through his

limbs as the last of the perpetual humanity that had muddled his perception dissipated into the darkness. Around him the panes of the stained glass windows seemed to come alive, twisting and turning as each scene of death and torture animated to allow the demons depicted there to enjoy their victorious feasts of mortal flesh and fear. Serpentine hissing snaked down from darkness nesting at the peaks of the vaulted ceiling as the shadows there began to come alive. Marcus refused to tear his gaze away from Belial's as the creatures of his nightmare began to slowly descend, inching down the intricately carved obsidian walls on their bellies like massive black geckos. Their scaly skin rippled over the protruding muscles and bones beneath, their red, soulless eyes locking hungrily upon Marcus as they tasted his aura with bloody forked tongues that flickered from their parted lips. Amidst the engulfing design of red and black, the starkness of their long flawless white fangs was all the more a horrifying sight to behold.

As the creatures reached the ground, Marcus began to walk forward, down the center aisle between the glistening black pews towards Belial. Clicking of talons upon the slate floor ticked around the perimeter of the room, a strange rolling purring reverberating from deep within their throats as they anticipated the coming kill. However, they did not descend upon Marcus as they had been called to; something they sensed within him stayed their murderous, reptilian intentions. Marcus felt their hesitation as if the creatures were holding their breaths, a foreboding, ominous tension like the dense, dark moments before a storm. In unison the creatures released a vicious hiss that filled the air like a vast swarm of hornets. At the sound Marcus broke into a run, leaping through the air with a banshee howl towards Belial.

Even in midair Marcus could feel himself transforming beneath the cotton and wool construction of his clothing, his skin hardening as scales bristled along his forearms, his skull aching as it morphed to portray the demon he had become, angular and sinister in the wake of the emotional tumult that consumed his reason. However, despite his empowering surge of bloodlust, Belial was still the quicker of the two, his tried and tested millennia of experience allowing him the strength to easily counter Marcus's attack. In a flash of movement so quick to even escape Marcus's keen sight, Belial caught the young demon by the throat, his talon nails digging deep into Marcus's flesh to puncture the arteries beneath. With a snarl that shook the stained glass horror stories above them in their frames,

Belial hurled Marcus across the cathedral hall. Marcus collided with the wall just beside the entrance with a sickening crack of his bones, knocking over the well that should have contained holy water, but instead spewed forth blood as it shattered.

“How dare you!” Belial roared, incensed at the outlandish display from what he considered now a pathetic upstart of a demon. Drawing a deep breath, he regained his composure, running his hands vainly through his hair to smooth the out of place strands. Stepping down from his seat between the cloven feet of Lucifer, Belial slowly walked down the slate aisle towards Marcus, murderous intent boiling beneath his gaze.

With a gasp of pain, Marcus clawed his way to his feet, his eyes rolling back in his head as his bones snapped themselves back into place one excruciating segment at a time. Marcus pushed away from the wall and staggered a few short feet towards Belial. “How dare me?” He straightened his back with a dull pop. “If Lucifer saw fit to allow me to step into Desiderium’s station, even if for a ‘break’ as you put it, perhaps it is you who should contemplate what lines you are willing to cross. Brenda was mine long before I ever even believed in Hell, let alone you.”

Belial stopped a few feet from Marcus. As he had crossed the cathedral he had grown in size until he towered over Marcus, the human shell of “Steve” vanished to reveal a terrifying monstrosity of twisted red flesh. With eyes that glowed like dying suns he stared down at Marcus, ready to squash the lowly demon before him like a carpenter ant. However, something stayed his wrath, the massive leathery red wings that had emerged from his back flexing as if they might summon forth a gale wind. For a moment Marcus believed his new demonic life might end as Belial glowered down at him, the ancient demon’s skeletal hands flexing over him as if he longed to crush him to dust in a single swift motion. However, just as with the vampiric creatures that still prowled the perimeter of the cathedral, Belial appeared to be listening to something powerful and undeniable, yet unheard by Marcus himself. Marcus’s eyes darted around the room in search of something he could use as a weapon, but nothing except slick, black chunks of the shattered fountain lay at his feet.

Cautiously he began to slowly inch closer to the doorway; if he could not win the battle, he could surely escape. However, the motion did not go unnoticed by Belial. With a feral snarl the ancient demon’s right hand shot out, pinning Marcus to the wall like a fly. Marcus gasped beneath the crushing weight of Belial’s palm, now nearly the size of Marcus’s entire

body, his hands flailing as he fought in vain to pry himself free. Belial's fingers closed around Marcus, forming a prison of leathery flesh about his limbs, and lifted him from the ground until Marcus was face-to-face with the ancient, furious demon. Belial's tusks had grown to the size of an elephant's, curling out to either side of his face as he growled at the annoying pest in his fist.

"I should crush you," Belial said. "Crush you and feed you to my pets."

"Belial, you know better," Desiderium's exhausted voice echoed from the back of the cathedral. With a grunt and a groan of arthritic joints, the Demon of Regret hoisted himself out of the pew where he had been leisurely observing the show and slowly walked down the aisle.

At Belial's feet he stared up at his fellow demons towering above him. "It's not worth upsetting His Dark Majesty. I heard him too just now. We can't kill this little peon. As always, Lucifer knows something we don't." Desiderium sighed with weary annoyance. "However, I would say this child needs a bit of time to think about his actions towards his elders, wouldn't you? We can't have such a hot-tempered rogue wandering about without an assignment. He needs time to mature and to contemplate the respect he seems to be lacking," he stated.

Marcus's blood went cold. He ceased his exhaustive, useless efforts to free himself and stared at Belial, suddenly wishing he had simply walked away from Brenda at the church, as Vetis had sagely suggested. He would not grovel, he would not buckle and apologize; the respect that Desiderium spoke of was nonexistent in Marcus's heart for either of these demons, let alone Lucifer himself, whom Marcus had yet to meet.

"Fine," Belial snorted, sniffing at Marcus with distaste. "I know the perfect place."

Far beneath the belly of the cathedral, deep within the dark, putrid bowels of the top layers of Hell, a winding well of obsidian and slate stairs, slick with waste and blood, wound to a series of oubliette prison cells. Through the roughly constructed openings in the walls of a long, narrow corridor lit by strange balls of red flame that hovered independently of any source, the sound of tormented souls wound up in a horrifying wailing opera. Marcus remained silent, refusing to allow Belial or Desiderium the smug satisfaction of sensing even the smallest grain of remorse or fear within him. Though he dared not even imagine what terrifying tortures awaited him within the darkness at the bottom of one of the cells, he tried

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to take comfort in the idea that Lucifer had deemed him worthy of sparing a fate of complete obliteration. A greater destiny awaited him, even if it meant lingering in this prison until called upon for a new assignment.

The question remained, however, exactly when he would be called upon? Marcus had already sensed that time was not nearly as fast and fleeting as the construct of it that had dictated his mortal life. Perhaps being fed to the blind Beast might be better? At least then he would not remember what he once had been whenever the day came that he clawed his way free of the hordes to be reborn. There was no use in dwelling upon that image for he knew it was not an option for him now.

Belial stopped before one of the cell openings. Unlike the others, from which the screams and wails seemed to never cease, winding up like a freight train's horn from deep within a mountain pass, this particular oubliette was silent save for a subtle reptilian hissing somewhere far below. The hissing paused for a moment as the creatures from which the sound originated stilled in anticipation, sensing the delivery of a new plaything for them to torment with a mindless eagerness. Belial extended his arm through the cell entrance and over the pitch-black opening in the floor. Marcus remained still, holding steady Belial's gaze in one final challenge.

Belial shook his head with pity as he stared at Marcus. "Stupid child," he said, clicking his tongue against his teeth. "I would say it is too soon for you to have earned enemies, but by the time Lucifer comes to fetch your worthless hide, I will have long forgotten you. I promise."

"That is a pity," Marcus replied with a deadly calm. "I certainly will not forget you."

Belial opened his fist and Marcus plummeted into the icy shadows. As the first of Marcus's screams clawed their way up out of the cell to reach the elder demon's ears, Belial turned to Desiderium with a contented smile, his form slowly returning to that of his mortal persona "Steve," in which he felt most comfortable. Above in the cathedral Brenda still slumbered upon the altar, unconscious and oblivious to the anarchy about her. The creatures that lurked in the shadows of the satanic church would not harm her for she was now truly Belial's property.

"Feel better?" Desiderium arched a hairless eyebrow over his milky, cataract-obscured eye.

Belial did not reply, a deep growl rumbling in the back of his throat as he stared down into the shadows, listening to Marcus's terror as if he still longed to be the one inflicting the agonizing wounds.

Desiderium turned and began to walk away from the older demon, sensing that he had perhaps overstepped his boundaries a bit with the Prince of Guilt. Over his shoulder he quietly muttered, "You really shouldn't let a little creature like that get to you so much."

"I realize that!" Belial snapped hastily. "The mortal world in general has just been irritating me lately. I spent too much time tending to more important matters that dallying in the physical plane has been a drain on my psyche. Makes me wonder if I really need a consort after all?" He tore his gaze away from the cell, running his fingers through his hair and straightening the fresh set of mortal clothes over his sinewy frame as he reclaimed his composure. With a grunt he turned and followed the sound of Desiderium's shuffling steps out of the cellblock and up the miles of black stairs to the narrow iron door that opened back into the church.

As they returned to the cathedral hall Desiderium took a long look around as if trying to decide if he were truly ready to return to work. Behind him Belial wandered to the altar where Brenda still lay, deep within her tortured unnatural sleep. He leaned over her, sniffing her face and hair as with a bizarre mixture of hunger and barely contained rage as if he could not decide whether to consume her or take her as a wife.

Desiderium cast an uneasy sideways glance at Belial and muttered, "Another day, another soul... I suppose?" His eyes flashed to Brenda and back to Belial curiously before turning away to shuffle quickly to the front entrance of the church as if he had suddenly realized that perhaps his own job was not so heavy a burden after all.

"It's good to have you back." Belial's face snapped up at the sound of Desiderium opening the door. His voice was strangely cold and dissonant as if it contained a malicious warning obscured by the false pretense of camaraderie.

"That's what you always say," Desiderium shouted over his shoulder as the church door slammed behind him.



CHAPTER 9

At the bottom of the oubliette the concept of time had vanished. If it were not for the razor shards of obsidian that punctured his body where he lay and the jagged, black, stone walls he had clawed so deeply his nails had been ripped away, the definition of his existence might have been lost entirely. For what seemed like eons the horrific creatures he was blind to in the lightless prison had prowled about the cell, descending upon him repeatedly with precision in merciless vicious attacks fueled by a harsh reptilian rage. The sound of their talons clicking over the glass shards, down the walls of the oubliette towards him on their way to sink their saber fangs into him soon drowned out any other memory from either his demonic life or the mortal one that preceded it. The haunting symphony of their combined shrieks, triumphant, yet furious, ricocheted about the fathomless cavern where Belial had tossed him to reflect on his insubordination.

Had the Prince of Wickedness now forgotten him? Marcus could barely remember why he had been imprisoned, let alone what his purpose had been, though some part of him distinctly remembered an ambiguous pardon from Lucifer himself. It took all of his strength now simply to listen for the beasts' approach.

Marcus's will dwindled beyond the point of retaliation and the creatures of the oubliette wearied of their attacks as the novelty of their new plaything wore thin. Occasionally one would return to sniff him over, taking him in its massive maw to toss against the wall hoping for a reaction, but rarely did it progress beyond that point. As the most visceral of Marcus's wounds healed, wounds no one but a demon beneath the direct protection of Lucifer could possibly survive, the clarity of his perception slowly coagulated, primordially congealing to smother the white noise of shock.

Cognitive thought inched into the periphery of his intellect, shimmering like a mirage in the desert. By the time his fingers dipped into the water of recollection it was brackish and stagnant, wholly unpalatable. He wanted to wonder at the length of time he had been in the darkness, but that would require him to remember what time was. The concept of an hour, a day or year was pointlessly, infuriatingly abstract as his own purpose in Hell

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or any other plane of existence. Like a man with amnesia struggling to remember his own name, Marcus knew it was important even though he could not quite grasp why or how. It was compelling enough for him to continue to wade through the murk as he lay, curled into a fetal ball on the floor of the oubliette, his arms folded over his head in a final weak defense. In the distance, the snarls and shrieks of the beasts echoed as they moved on to torment freshly deposited entities.

The screams of the imprisoned reverberated through what must have been a labyrinth of interconnected oubliettes, though Marcus could not yet summon the energy to venture out and explore a possible escape route. Though he was fairly certain miles above him an opening still existed to the cell, one that led up to Belial's satanic church of flint, obsidian and grotesque stained glass, not a single dust-moat-tainted shaft of light reached him now. He might have been hopeless if he could remember what hope was. His inability now to articulate his desires would have been his one saving grace, but grace was reserved for those chosen by God to take their place in Heaven and certainly not for a creature such as himself. Of that, at least, he was quite certain.

Marcus...

At first he did not respond to the voice, sweet with a metallic chime of feminine youth, yet tinged with a conflicting harsh resolve. The sound seemed to come both from within the caverns of his ears as well as slithering through the darkness from several points about the oubliette. His own name processed like a foreign language, uncomfortably unfamiliar as it fell across his mind.

Marcus, get up.

Why? He finally mustered the energy to formulate the single syllable question. *Why should I?*

Because if you don't, they win.

Marcus was silent for a time, wondering if he had finally crossed the threshold back into the madness that had plagued him in the last days of his human mortality. An entity's scream swam towards him out of the cavernous darkness, before dying away in a whimpering wail. Marcus drew a slow breath, noticing with a renewed awareness the damp scent of the stone around him, sharp and sweet as peat moss. Underneath a current of something more metallic and rank decayed slowly. He shivered. The shards buried themselves deeper into his skin.

They? Lucifer and Belial? They can't win because there's nothing here to be won. The obscurity of the girl's plea was beginning to annoy him. However, it was the only voice he had heard in ages and in a way it felt good simply to form sounds that were not evoked of pure blinding pain, even if they were, at the moment, only in his mind.

Not just Lucifer and Belial. All of them. They all will win and we can't let that happen.

Her plea carried a defiantly ominous weight to it, though its simplistic stature obscured her true intent. *If you're asking me to take on Hell in its entirety I think you're barking up the wrong tree. As you can see I'm not really in a position to challenge anything at the moment.*

Not just Hell. Heaven and the mortal realm, as well. You don't have to do it alone. We'll help you.

He let the sad sea echo of her voice die away against the crags of his mind before summoning a reply. Despite the pure intention he sensed in her voice, her promises caused bile to rise in the back of his throat. *We? There is no "we". There is only "I" and "you", whoever you are. I've been human. I've been a demon. I don't have allegiance to either side at the moment.*

But...you know of his plan —? She halted suddenly as if someone or something might be listening.

Marcus felt himself prickly with tension as his sense of "being" returned. He had wanted only to lie in peace for a while, settle back into himself as his physical shell mended itself. Steeling himself for a new wave of pain, he drew a deep breath and attempted to hoist himself into a sitting position. With a strangled grunt he pushed his mangled body upright, the obsidian shards slicing his palms open and piercing his hips, legs and ass as his weight shifted. He could feel the remnants of his pants becoming damp again as blood seeped out through the fresh wounds. Through gritted teeth he breathed heavily, slamming his head back against the wall to take his mind off of the pain in his lower extremities until the first wave numbed slightly.

All I know is that Lucifer is reserving me for something—something that neither Belial or Desiderium know about. What it is, I frankly don't give a shit, but if you have any insight, I'd love to hear it. He struggled to not sound angrily sarcastic, but the venom was sour as it dripped down the back of his throat, making it hard to focus. Seconds stretched into stifling

minutes as Marcus waited for the girl to reply. A sensation that something or someone was restraining her was distinct, but he could not tell if it were simply a product of his own apprehension or a reality.

I knew it was all in my head. He thought with a fraction of disappointment as the silence rang on infinitely. He was fairly certain his eyes were open and he tried to adjust them in the dark, hoping his returning mental clarity might assist him in finding an escape route. For an instant he thought he could make out the far wall of the oubliette, but then the image faded back into the suffocating blackness.

It's not safe for us to talk here. The girl's voice sparked across his mind again, startling him. *You have to trust me though, you have to make your way out and join us.*

"Fuck!" He spat with frustration and reached up to rub his face as he instantly regretted the noise, fearing the beasts would return. *If it's not safe then don't talk to me about it. If you're not just a sign that I've completely lost my mind, I'll need a better reason to trust you than simply telling me I need to. Why don't you start with showing me a way out?*

I don't know the way out. She replied simply. *But you do. Follow the path the creatures that torment you take. We'll meet you at the end.* She paused. When she spoke again it was with a concerned haste. *I have to go. They're coming.*

Ahhhhrrrrgh! Damn it! Marcus screamed silently, hitting the back of his skull against the rock behind him again as he looked in the direction he believed to still be "up". One at a time he carefully placed his options on the scale of judgment, as bleak as they all appeared to be. He could sit and wait—wait for what could very well be an eternity of attacks from the oubliette guardians until Lucifer finally decided to call upon him, if he did summon him at all. Or, he could take his chances and try to find a way out of his prison, which would most likely be infuriatingly futile and equally painful as the beasts made sure their prisoner remained incapacitated. The darkness above him appeared to flux as his eyes struggled to find a definition of space within the pitch, rolling in upon its self like pregnant storm clouds. The memory of Belial's manipulative acquisition of Brenda for his consort speared through this center, painfully angry. Belial's arrogant last threat to forget Marcus's very existence echoed through his mind. Whatever promises the girl's disembodied voice might have carried; it was not nearly as motivating a force to fuel Marcus's desire to escape than that of standing face to face with Belial one more time.

With a fierce snarl nearly as guttural as his scaled keepers, Marcus struggled to stand. “No, Belial, I certainly haven’t forgotten you. Not in the least.”



The stone was devastatingly uniform in its inconsistencies, each nook and cranny, each crack and fissure feeling discouragingly like the last as Marcus felt his way about the perimeter of his prison. As he staggered about the circular cell, the razor sharp points of the floor punctured the thin soles of his shoes as his hands molested the cold stone inches away from this face. He tried in vain to remember the sensations he experienced, aside from the crushing dread, when he heard the reptilian guardians approaching. Like a delusional burn victim he shakily stripped away the calloused protective membrane that had unconsciously formed about his psyche during his imprisonment.

The energy that served as a soul still remaining beneath the shell was raw and blistered, scorched from the harbored acid of resentment for those that had put him here. He refused to allow the bitterness to mutate into hatred, refused to allow himself to give into any extreme emotion lest he become the bastardized pawn of yet another of Hell’s minions. His struggle to separate himself from the temptation felt like the center of his being was slowly being shredded, sinewy strands of matter being precisely drawn apart to expose each and every nerve to the wrathful judgment of the universe. Marcus’ knees buckled beneath him and he longed to howl a release and hear it spiral upwards in search of Belial’s ears like a flock crows bridging the divide between worlds. Memories of the peaceful purpose he had felt in his first few moments as a newborn demon reemerging into the physical plane had all but been obliterated, reduced to intangible impressions as foreign to him now as his own reflection. Trembling, his breath a staccato Morse code reminder of survival, cold and damp across his cracked lips, Marcus fought to focus on the task at hand, reaching deep within himself to find the smallest kernel of strength to push onward. Around and around he staggered, eventually dragging his right shoulder along the wall, as he found nothing but cold rough stone beneath his interrogating palms with each pass.

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The repetition of his feet placing one step in front of the other, the sound of his shoulder scraping over the rock, brought about a strange lucidity to his mind, allowing him to focus in a way he had not found possible in ages. Another dying wail rippled out of the darkness, emerging somewhere far above him, followed by a distinctly different disemboweling screech reverberating from what felt like a section of space directly in front of him. He paused his delirious shuffling in mid-stride, steadying himself with a single palm slammed into the stone before his face. Sensory memories snapped and popped painfully across his mind's eye of the attacks he had endured, each bringing about an intense wave of nausea at the recollection of not only the agony, but sense of isolation and helpless abandonment. As the wails of his fellow prisoners snaked around one another in an distorted discordant passion play, a singular consistency emerged, a key element that was unanimously completely tangible and yet completely obscure.

During each attack, the beasts had not entered the cell from the same angle or even the same height, the scurrying clatter of their talons amplifying as they grew near as if down long, low tunnels of stone to suddenly emerge, each with a distinctly different defiant screech. At times the creatures would manifest almost miles above him, descending down the walls with a furious speed while other times they burst from the wall directly beside him, clambering over him as they jousting for the right to take the first bite. Never was there a specific replicable pattern to their movements, just as there was no predictability to their routines or even the sound of their cries. The only consistency was that they existed at all. It was the one variable that remained constant. Everything else revolved around that fact.

Or so it seemed.

Was their mere apparent manifestation concrete evidence of their substantial existence?

Was there actually more repetition in their behaviors than he had originally noted?

Was their existence at all a fact simply because it was based on his expectancy, or rather his dependency on their presence to give him a definition of his own reality?

If their existence was an irrevocable truth, regardless of whether they were a manifestation of his own psyche or a concrete external entity, was their seemingly unpredictable demeanor truly lacking in repetition?

Everything has a pattern, even chaos, though it may be so expansive as to be invisible to the archaic sense of physical perception. He had, in his short time as a demon, already mastered the ability to manipulate that said human perception, easily dancing from the periphery of Hell, to the mortal realm and back again, with as little as a secondary thought to the process. It had come to him instinctively, as if he had been born and bred for such a purpose and raised on a diet of metaphysical distortion. If he could instinctively slip in and out of the various constructs of salvation and damnation, what was preventing him from slipping out of this one just as easily, aside from his own fear?

The atmosphere shifted; Marcus sniffed the air noting a distinct metallic acidity that had not been there a moment before. The beasts had sensed his reanimation. Marcus bowed his head and pressed his back up against the wall behind him, using that single point of sensation to anchor himself. He heard a chorus of vengeful, guttural hissing they lifted their bloody muzzles from their prey and turned towards Marcus, sensing something was distinctly different about this particular prisoner. Their forked tongues tasted the awareness returning to his mind, the strength accumulating within his spirit, inspiring a maddening bloodlust unlike anything they had experienced before. Marcus focused intently on their primal responses, taking a deranged glee in the disoriented frenzy his presence evoked. He realized that he was the first entity to reclaim enough of their sanity to seek an exit when most simply faded into nothingness. He was the center, the commanding force, their sole purpose for being. He heard them charging through the darkness towards him, and he felt his heart rate rising, his breathing deepening. His eyes rolled back in his skull as he transformed himself from victim into tormentor. He was not their prisoner any longer but the primal force summoning them to his bidding. Still they raced, oblivious to the subtle shift in power from predator to prey, leathery, scaled hides whipping through the ether in a blur of unsubstantial air, long, barbed tails thrashing against the tunnels they believed that they dominated.

With a banshee wowl the first beast broke through, the air around it shredding like black tissue paper as a fissure in the dimension violently ruptured. Something caused the creature to hesitate; Marcus, though he was still blind, sensed the beast clinging to the far wall in front of him. Above, three more guardians arrived, racing downward, seemingly oblivious to whatever it was that caused the first beast to pause. The creature in front of him roared suddenly, hissing a warning to the others to halt their approach.

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The clicking of talons against stone dissipated, replaced by an ominous cloud of angry thrashing about the room like a nest of vipers a few feet above Marcus's head. A maliciously low growl reverberated in the back of the closest beast's throat. Marcus could feel it crouching, repositioning itself, its muscles tensing as it readied itself to attack. Bowing his head, he lowered his breathing, focusing his entire being on the rank scent of the guardian and the context of the energy that it required to hold a physical place in his mind.

The beast roared again like a dragon and sprung from the wall, its massive fanged jaws spread wide and ready to rip Marcus limb from limb. Without a second of hesitation, Marcus punched forward towards the creature's open mouth. Dead center on his target, he felt his arm slide down the monster's wet cold throat towards its heart. The time that had not existed in what could have been eons flickered and stopped momentarily as the guardian's jaws plunged over his head and shoulder with a cataclysmic clap of thunder. A strangely intoxicating tingling sensation rippled through his body as if his exterior shell were being blown away like ash in the wind, until only the core of his essence and his consciousness remained.

As he became insubstantial, he distantly he heard the sound of the beast's fangs passing through him and colliding with the stone where he had been leaning. He poured himself down the gullet of the creature with a supersonic speed, his hands curling into claws to find purchase in the guardian's physical manifestation.

With a soundless, defiant cry he ripped the fabric of space he sensed to be the creature's core viciously apart, spreading the curtains of his preconceived imprisonment wide. The howls of the distraught guardian evaporated, dreamlike, as he crossed the threshold. His physical shell reconfigured itself like molten wax poured into a mold as he collapsed into a bank of tall wildly whipping grass. The tear in reality snapped shut as if vacuumed from within.

Shivering uncontrollably, Marcus lay within the protective embrace of the grass, his face pressed into the damp dark earth between the reeds until the painful spasms subsided. The contrast of the cloyingly sweet perfume of the untainted natural landscape to the dank, lightless decay of the oubliette was shockingly nauseating. The cool breeze that rippled over his body was like a gentle hand attempting to console the abused, yet strangely repulsive. His heart thrashed in his chest like a frightened hummingbird as adrenaline coursed through his veins. Digging his fingers into the dirt to

either side of his head, he drew a deep breath in a futile attempt to stop the sensation of the world spinning around him. Gradually, eyelids fluttering spastically, he forced himself to open his eyes.

The light was blinding even amidst the shadows at the bottom of the sea of grass. Painful tears slipped down his cheeks as he fought to adjust after years of nothing but complete and utter darkness, the vibrant greens and browns of the bowing forest before his face nearly psychedelic. This was certainly not Hell, nor was it the warped wasteland where he had wandered after Desiderium's death. It felt too much like Earth, yet different somehow, as if it were new, devoid of the centuries of horrors cannibalized by humanity. He shut his eyes again as the stinging became too intense. Off to his right a rustling sound emerged, faint at first growing louder with each passing second as two sets of slow methodically-placed steps crushed the grass in a path towards him, one heavy and one light. Daring not to assume the intention of what approached, quiet as a mouse beneath the scrutiny of a soaring hawk, he lay in wait.

The two entities paused a few paces away.

"Are you sure about this one? He is a demon, after all," questioned a deep voice that strangely conjured to Marcus's mind the image of Redwood trees. "You remember what happened with the last one..."

"I know! I know," whispered a young exasperated female voice, the same voice that had reached out to him in the oubliette. "You saw what he just did, right? He's got it! He understands!"

"Perhaps, but can we trust him?" The older male voice boomed.

"We have to start somewhere." The girl said quietly, her voice full of forceful resolve tinged with the sadness of a youth obliterated by responsibility far beyond her years.

The man grunted his response, signifying both his ire and acceptance of the present situation.

"Marcus?" The girl reached out to him quietly, her voice nearly vanishing amongst the thrashing of grass around his head. "Marcus, can you hear me?"

He made a small gesture with his hand, flicking his fingers as if batting away a fly to signify his awareness. He hated to admit that, for the first time since his mortal death, he was afraid. Demons, Hell, sin...all of these creatures and concepts were predictable, bound by a set of preconceived guidelines dictated before the beginning of "time", but this instance was

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different. He could feel it in his bones, the vibrations of what served as “earth” and “air” and “water” around him were deviating slightly from the imprinted memories, yet strangely more powerful, more substantial than they should have been, as if he might psychically converse with the blades of grass licking his cheek or the granules of dirt beneath. He wanted to find the strength to transport himself to any realm more familiar than the one he lay within now, but something dangerously akin to curiosity held him still. The crunching of feet through the grass amplified as the entities neared. Marcus made not a move, frozen by his inability to process his circumstance.

The girl stepped close to his inert form. Cautiously she lowered herself beside him, squatting as if to inspect an injured animal. He tensed, trying desperately to shrink back into some sort of protective cocoon of reality where she could not physically touch him, but he failed. The girl’s fingers came to rest upon his shoulder, light as a dragonfly’s gait.

“Marcus? It’s okay, Marcus. You can open your eyes now,” the girl said, leaving her fingers resting upon his shoulder. For all of the youthful mockingbird pitch to her voice, her words were delivered with a nurturing stillness that bespoke of wisdom far beyond her years.

Marcus attempted to open his eyes again. The light, as muted and indirect as it was filtering through the sea of green, was excruciatingly painful. The world was a soft-focus blur of shapes and color as his brain fought to process and remember the impressions of what a sky should look like, what grass and dirt and human features should resemble. Holding his breath as if he swam deep beneath the ocean, he lifted his face from the dirt and turned to squint at the girl beside him.

“Welcome to Missouri.” The girl beamed mischievously down at him.

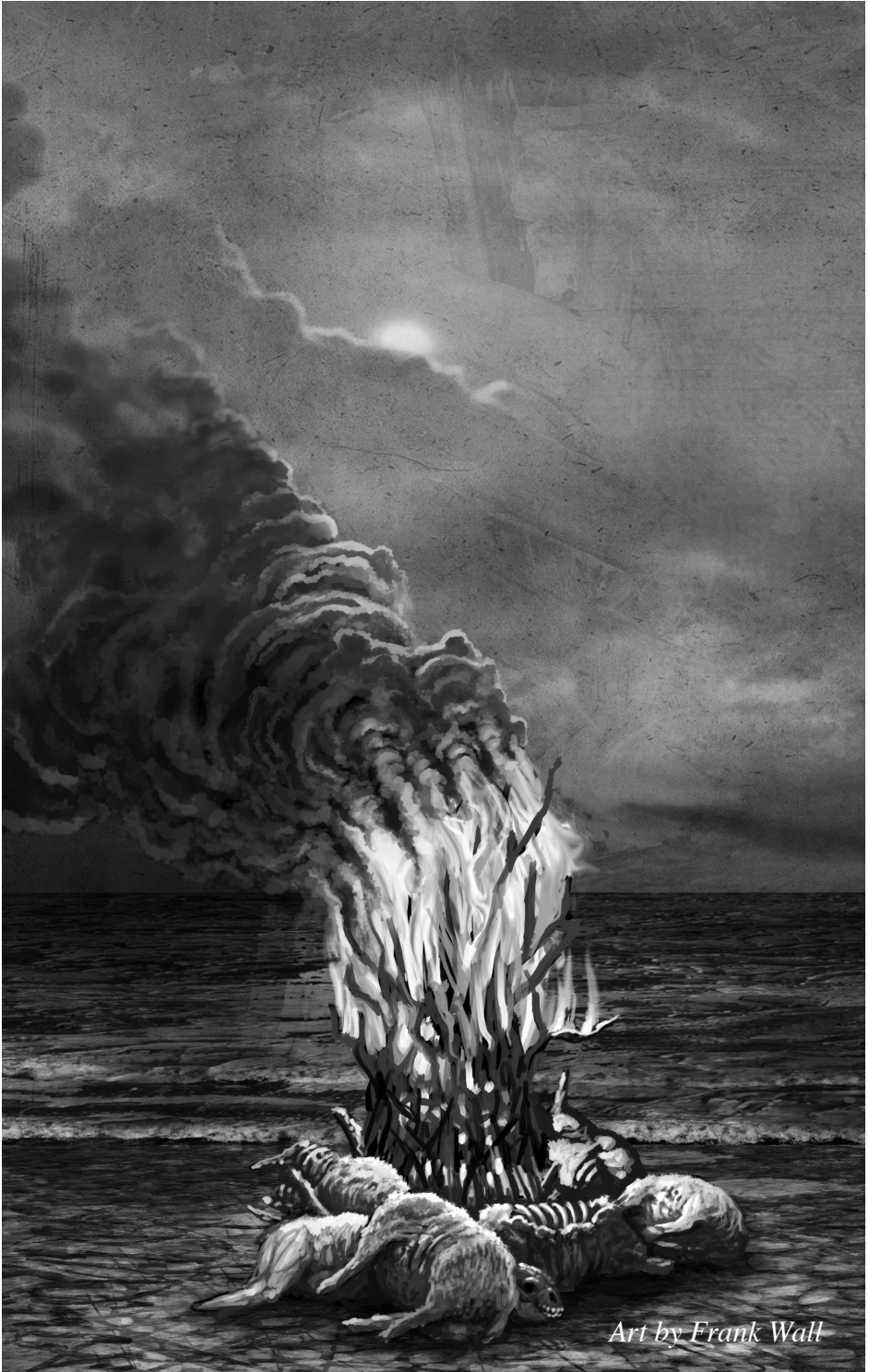
Marcus still could not make out her features, framed by a curtain of long blond hair that glowed like a halo with the backlit blue sky far above them. Dressed in a black T-shirt, pink and green athletic shorts and matching hot pink high-top Converse sneakers, she could not have been more than nine years old. Marcus fought to comprehend the situation, instantly wondering if perhaps he was still imprisoned and dreaming, though he could not remember having dreamed in quite some time.

“Mi... Missouri?” he croaked, completely bewildered. “What...?”

The girl said nothing but continued to stare at him, her mouth fixed in an unsettling grin. Behind her a large looming shape of a man -- resembling a grizzly bear in Marcus's distorted sight -- replied, "It's an inside joke."

Marcus felt lightheaded, his lips tingling as if he might pass out at any moment. "Missouri," he repeated the word, failing to find the humor in it. It was as good enough a place to be as any he supposed, lowering his face to the dirt again. At least it wasn't swarming with oubliette guardians, or so he hoped.

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Art by Frank Wall



Art by Frank Wall

CHAPTER 10

The air was crisp and clean and heavy with pure oxygen, sweet and ripe with the pregnant promise of growth as it must have been at the beginning of time. A steady slow breeze wandered aimlessly over the rolling landscape of undulating wild grasses coaxing them to emit the softest hiss of contentment as their brilliant green blades bent to kiss one another in an endless foreign whispered conversation. Above stretched a dome of soft azure that seemed always to be on the verge of twilight or dawn. In the distance, from time to time, an alien orange and pink luminescence occasionally grew, dancing for a moment like the Northern Lights, snaking in and out of itself with pulses of mesmerizing intensity before slowly fading back into the cusp of the horizon again. Marcus stood, the grasses and cattails whipping against his legs, staring out across the landscape, savoring the moment of quiet peace, knowing all too well that moments such as these, especially for creatures such as he, would not and could not last.

Though he allowed the serenity of the new environment to restore him, drawing upon the raw fluctuating power he could feel vibrating just beneath the surface, he could not dismiss the eerie sensation that this realm was unfinished somehow. Indeed, though his direct line of sight told him the prairie stretched on infinitely into the distance, the periphery of his vision suggested otherwise, bending the illusion of reality into a bizarre bowl as if he were viewing the world through a peephole. The impression was disorienting when he tried too hard to follow it, the line of distortion shifting each time he tried to catch it in full sight. Rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms, he drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He wanted so badly to feel a modicum of freedom, but his heart told him he would never be free, at least not entirely.

Angelee lightly touched his right elbow. He jumped slightly and stared down at her. He was still uncertain as to what to make of the child so seemingly human on the exterior and yet every fiber of his being resonated fiercely with caution each time he looked at her. She defied definition, her cosmic molecular structure filling space somehow both within the present and past tense of her physical manifestation. Marcus, however, could not

dismiss the notion that she was oblivious to her continuum of existence. She simply “was”. There was also a strangely familiar quality to her features, her innocent wide brown gaze and pixie, upturned nose decorated with the faintest smattering of delicate brown freckles. If it were not for the cold, heavy weariness that stole the glimmer of youth from her eyes she might have made a convincing nine-year-old. But Marcus’s demon nature hissed silently, threatened by her mere existence. There was darkness within her, darkness that she was not fully aware of, nor did she comprehend the nature of, a darkness that something or someone had neglected to warn her about. “Neglect” was perhaps not the most appropriate term, for such a power was not easily overlooked or dismissed. No, Marcus decided, the withholding of such knowledge was markedly, detrimentally purposeful.

Marcus’s gaze drifted to the large plush toy giraffe Angelee now clutched to her chest with her left arm. Had she always had that with her? He couldn’t remember.

“Where are we?” he asked again.

Behind Angelee the mountainous bear of a man named John answered, “The King and Queen will explain. It’s better that way.”

He reached up with his remaining human hand to scratch the chin buried somewhere beneath the glorious waterfall of his golden beard. Marcus stared at the massive emerald claw of gleaming alligator leather extending from John’s forearm. It resembled something plucked from the heart of a sailor’s nightmare, though John was not of a demonic nature, of this Marcus was quite certain. However, the mutation was certainly sinister in nature, an evolutionary weapon that was simultaneously prehistoric and futuristic. If John had not been originally born with the claw, Marcus considered, it would have taken a trauma of horrendous proportion to force its development. He continued to stare, utterly fascinated, at the directionless sunlight glinting off of the surreal liquid finish as weathered tan flesh flowed into green leather.

“Are you sure they can’t find me here?” Marcus asked without looking up. “Lucifer and Belial. They’ll be searching for me soon, if they aren’t already. I know it. I can feel them.” He shivered as a chill of dread slithered up his spine, his stomach souring with anxiety as the fleeting thought that perhaps he should have simply stayed put in the oubliette scurried across his mind. *Nothing good can come of this.*

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“Good is relative,” Angelee remarked, tilting her head to the side slightly as she continued to stare up at him. “You wanted freedom. You have it now.”

Marcus attempted to reinforce the walls around his psyche with riveted steel, but exhaustion made of his effort a shoddy shanty. “Do I?” His eyes dropped to her hot pink high-tops. “Child, I don’t think you know what I’ve been through.”

“And you don’t know our stories either.” John stared at Marcus with hard eyes the color of dry pine needles beneath the wild brows that matched his beard. “If you really prefer, we can toss you out there again if you want to take your chances,” he gestured to the horizon with his massive green claw. “Makes no difference to me.” He emitted a short, deep grumble within his throat. He, like Angelee, possessed the presence of one who had witnessed many battles and bore the hardened scar tissue of those experiences like leather armor across his soul.

Marcus’s eyes followed the direction in which John’s claw had been pointing as if half expecting to see a doorway magically appear. Rolling waves of green like Thai rice fields bowed dreamily beneath a static blue sky that now appeared to be growing grayer as if tainted with hazy smoke from a distant fire. The word *recruit* echoed morbidly in his ears making him wonder what sort of cosmic draft system he had been randomly selected from. Where were the other draftees if he was not the first? The plane around them was completely devoid of other inhabitants, at least, as far as Marcus in his current state of dampened sensory perception could detect. His skin itched tightly as his contemplation of what new unknown forces were dictating his life caused a newfound claustrophobia to settle into his chest, dense and cold as ocean fog. For a brief time during the first few hours of his rebirth he had felt truly in control of his fate and he reinvented himself with the help of his new demonic purpose. Though there were forces beyond comprehension he was to answer to, his success or failure had felt firmly planted within the center of his palm. Now, he was nothing more than an aimless entity at the mercy of yet another realm’s obscure agenda. He wanted to find power in a concentrated emotion such as hate for his captors, but his irksome inclination now was toward a festering apathy, a sentiment equally dangerous, but alas only to himself.

Suddenly Angelee’s hand dropped away from Marcus’s elbow as she turned to stare at the horizon behind them. Following her gaze with his

own, Marcus became aware of a faint rumble of pink and green light in the ashen sky.

“John,” she said, her voice barely a whisper, “John... the dogs are coming.”

“Alright,” the big man replied, firmly hugging the girl’s shoulder with his one lion’s paw of a human hand. “Let’s go.”

“What?” Marcus tried to wind himself up into a question, but the big man cut him off.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “She always senses them coming in time. When we get separated, make for the lights. Don’t waste time and don’t look back.” He delivered the last instruction with his own back to Marcus, already striding ahead across the lurid grass.

Marcus glanced about. He could see no immediate threat, nor could he feel the presence of anything truly ominous. What was he missing? He did not want to follow John and Angelee, but the expanse of prairie around him yielded no other viable options for escape. Marcus could have sworn he only took a minute to scan the horizon surrounding him, but when he turned back he realized he had quickly fallen far behind the duo. While John and Angelee appeared to be tramping through the grassland like any other motley party of outlaws, their movements gave the impression of prerecorded paces translating away across the plane.

They moved with the fluidity of ideas in pure geometric space in an inexplicable way that redefined his perception of physical movement. The further away they moved, the more they appeared like two entities on a silver screen, looping infinitely. Marcus found himself blinking intensely trying to focus on them to catch any deviation from the expected mimicry of escape.

His study of John and Angelee was interrupted suddenly as a new set of auras approaching from the opposite direction. Behind him, a sinister energy bubbled up over the horizon like magma just beginning to crest before a volcanic eruption. Contained within an invisible cloak that roared silent, yet deafening, deep within the canals of his ears, as if he were standing directly beneath a waterfall, the energy quickly became palpable within the plane, congealing into a solid reality where only seconds before it had existed as merely an impression upon his senses.

Hostility glowed like embers through the veil between the realms, still obscuring the full intensity of the emerging entities from Marcus’s

viewpoint. Blurred as it was, its unspoken malicious intent was familiar to him.

Up ahead of him, across what now felt like miles of obliviously undulating grassland, John and Angelee paused to cast a mortified glance back at the emerging towers of darkness. The infernal remains of Marcus's animal instincts told him that his situation was desperate, that time was of the essence. Lest the distance between himself, Angelee and John become too great to close, he knew he had to master their ability to transverse the plane with an unrealistic speed, as they did now. He reached deep and did his best to mimic their strange purgatorial "stride". Much to his delight and surprise, even in his panicked state, he found it far easier to grasp than he believed it could be.

For a moment, the cockiness that had marked his first days as a newborn demon returned to Marcus as he quickly overtook the fleeing party. A sudden thought stopped him in his tracks; perhaps their need to run from whatever was behind was actually rising from deep beneath them. He felt the cardinal directions shift, up becoming down, left to right, front to back thrown on their sides and tilted like an unattended amusement park ride. The concept of "perception" grew disorienting, blurring in an indistinct miasma where concepts of physics ceased to apply. He staggered a pace, but steadied himself quickly, suddenly fearful that if he fell he might simply sink into the construct of "ground" beneath his feet. Behind him Angelee and John caught up with him as he stood in the sea of grass, staring at his feet as if he could see the very entities that pursued them, even though he knew full and well they encroached quickly now from behind. Ghostly howls caused the marrow in his bones to freeze. His head snapped up as he whirled around to see a slavering, snarling pack of hellhounds charging across the field towards them. Marcus wanted to scream, but could not find air enough in his lungs to supply the sound.

"Shit," John moaned like a frightened bull. "Something powerful must be with them this time, something masking their presence. They are way closer than should be possible." Marcus felt John's aura shifting to match that of a snarling bear. "Run!" John bellowed with a primal authority, command that resonated with the sweat-streaked panic around them like the moan of a Viking battle horn.

Though their haste was such that they seemed to overtake time itself their pursuers continued to close the distance to their prey. Marcus's awareness reached back across the dwindling separation. His consciousness

collided with the hot, slathering aura of the hellhounds, swift and savage, mindlessly focused solely on their own bloodlust. Behind them two pillars of energy loomed like apocalyptic storm clouds, commanding the pack of grotesque beasts with an iron-vise will. One pillar of energy consisted entirely of a pitch-black darkness so fathomless that it seemed to draw the light from the plane around it, consuming it hungrily and extinguishing it permanently. It so devastatingly deep that it caused him to physically ache to look upon it for long. Extending from the monstrous, swirling pillar were tendrils of its own essence, snaking, spidering cyclones of putrid energy that briefly obscured all the other auras around it as the vines passed over them and around them, controlling the dogs it led.

Marcus could not identify the true identity of the creature behind the first pillar. This was an upper echelon entity he had luckily not had the pleasure of encountering, thus far. The signature of the other demonic pillar, however, was unmistakable. A roaring crimson that oscillated ferociously between blood and fire, it gleamed with the beauty of rubies crushing against themselves until only dust remained in a blind, passionate rage. There was no mistaking the fingerprint of the Demon of Hatred, Sonnellion, though Marcus had never witnessed the creature in this primal, deconstructed state. Marcus's heart thundered in his chest as he remembered his initial encounter with the demon during his first day of collecting souls on earth. While he had not feared the creature then, he had distinctly instinctively known that this was one demon whose full wrath he would not want to experience. Now, with Sonnellion and another equally dominant demon bearing down on his heels, Marcus quickly remembered the sensation of the sin that had landed him in Hell the first time around: Regret. If he had heeded Vetis's warning to walk away from his obsession with collecting Brenda's soul, if he had not challenged Belial and insulted the Prince with such arrogance, if he had just simply served his sentence instead of clawing his way out of the oubliette... there was no time for him to linger on the realization or contemplate why the hellhounds were in pursuit. If he was to survive at all he had to focus on the running.

The gently rolling planes escalated, morphing into steep, uneven and unending hillsides until they had trouble seeing the ground far ahead of their feet. Marcus was falling behind again, his grip on the structure of the new plane slipping slightly as his fear of the demons behind them roared in his mind to a deafening maelstrom. He pushed onward though, his muscles burning like battery acid as he tested the limitations of his own body. John

and Angelee appeared to be making for the bizarre vortex of pink and orange light, which was now growing and centered above their steep climb, spiraling down toward some distant point on the ground. Absurd as it was, as they crested the hill, Marcus couldn't shake the feeling that someone up in the clouds was ironically installing a plastic twisty-slide.

John and Angelee came to a screeching halt in front of Marcus and he nearly collided with them. Gasping frantically, Marcus could not tear his eyes off of the encroaching storm descending upon them from behind. He desperately wanted to scream at them to keep running, but his voice seemed to have been lost somewhere along the way. Watching, stunned and shaking like an island villager watching a tsunami wave, he noticed an eerie gradual slowing of the progress of the two pillars and their rabid pack of dogs. It was as if the space between where Marcus stood and the demons had elongated suddenly, stretching out to place miles between them where only a few hundred feet had existed before. He took a step back and bumped up against John. Cautiously stepping around to John's right, he ripped his gaze away from their hellish pursuers.

Their vantage point looked down on a wide, arid bowl of grassland, much like the expanse of rolling plains they had crossed, but carved deep and wide as if from an ancient asteroid impact. At the bottom of the crater clustered a village of canvas tents, their various brightly colored peaked roofs and awnings breathing and billowing in the gentle breeze. So peaceful the scene appeared, so removed and oblivious to the approaching chaos that Marcus wondered if it were tangible. He no longer trusted his senses, especially his vision, to distinguish certainty from duplicity. Did this mean there were others—others besides John, Angelee and the strange “King” and “Queen” they had flippantly mentioned? Or was the encampment below merely a representation of something else, an illusion? Regardless, real or not, John and Angelee seemed to be intent on reaching the gypsy nest.

Their guiding neon light had vanished from the sky. Now it licked out like beckoning tentacles from behind the flaps of a massive central tent of red and white striped walls and pitched roof, euphorically painted with concentric ripples radiating outwards from the center of a cosmic pond. The images of swirling forming galaxies painted on the peak of the tent's roof shifted from time to time, crawling about the circumference of the structure as if it were a holographic movie playing in real time. Without a word, John and Angelee broke into a run again, racing down the side of the

crater through the waist-high grass like two deer fleeing the pursuit of a mountain lion. Marcus scurried after them, half slipping and sliding down the steep incline towards the encampment, terrified to be lost behind in the spatial distortion of the plane. In the back of his mind a terrified inner voice screamed that a cluster of canvas tents was the last place they should attempt to hide, but still he followed them blindly, if for no other reason than there was no other option before him. Through the maze of tents they raced towards the sanctuary of the central hub.

The encampment seemed all but deserted, though as they grew near the entrance to the largest tent the joyful cries of what sounded like a marvelously oblivious festival wound its way out of the billowing canvas flaps, dancing in between the tendrils of light with the effervescence of wind chimes. The air felt thicker here as if the solidity of the area over which the camp was anchored was more tangible, taking on a gravitational permanence the rest of the realm had yet to acquire in its infancy. Marcus felt it pull on his limbs, nesting in the center of his chest and wrapping about his bones like rubbery vital Amazonian vines. With each step the bizarre sensation that reality was disintegrating behind him, deconstructing itself into a swarm of spinning neon electrons and protons, intensified until he finally paused just as John and Angelee disappeared through the entrance to the main tent. Swallowing hard, unable to breathe, Marcus hesitantly cast a glance over his shoulder fully expecting to see nothing but the vacuum of space.

Reality was still excruciatingly intact. There on the cusp of the crater loomed the towering pillars of hellish wrath stretching upwards towards the dome of the sky, cyclones of pure vengeance. Within the center of each vortex Marcus could distinctly make out the physical manifestation of the demons, the silhouettes of their nightmarishly warped forms each gripping the leashes of pure red energy their hellhounds strained against with all of their might. The demons had halted their pursuit at the top of the ridge, staring down at the encampment with what Marcus sensed was an emotion almost akin to caution. Slowly Marcus turned around, his eyes darting nervously over the gently billowing oiled canvas alleys searching for the source of their hesitation, something as equally terrifying as their own hellish countenances looming in opposition to Sonnellion and his cohort. Only brightly dyed canvas and crushed stalks of flattened yellowing grass filled his sight. Marcus felt his fear beginning to drain away and he drew a deep breath as the moment of blinding panic subsided. He stared up at the

distant pack of rabid black hounds. Frothy bile-yellow mucus dripped from their foul jowls as they shrieked and howled, revealing rows upon rows of menacing saber fangs, their reptilian eyes glowing like scorching coals. Marcus squared his shoulders as he discovered a faulty sense of security in his pursuers' vacillation. He resisted the urge to raise a defiant middle finger in a base mortal gesture.

However, before he could begin to lift his hand thick, angry fingers dug through the remains of his long gray coat between his shoulder blades, yanking him violently into the tent behind. Losing his footing as the hand let go of him, Marcus fell backwards with an inelegant thud, nearly knocking the wind from his lungs as he collided with the packed earth. John loomed over him, furious as a grizzly bear about to eviscerate an antagonizing hunter.

"What the hell are you doing?" he bellowed, pointing at the tent's entrance with his massive green claw.

"They've stopped." Marcus crawled to his feet. "They're scared of something. I can feel it."

"Scared? They better damn well be scared!" John growled.

"They're not scared," Angelee said quietly clutching her giraffe to her chest as she stared at the shadows clustered high above against the canvas tent top.

"Maybe they're not scared, but something is keeping them from coming down here..." Marcus replied, his voice trailing off as his attention was drawn towards the tent's interior.

Against a haunting lullaby of minor harpsichord and violin an assortment of exquisitely costumed acrobatic performers twisted and turned in the lofty space high above, flying effortlessly through the air and contorting their sinewy limbs into impossible positions as they practiced their acts to a room of empty wooden bleachers. Though no direct sources of lighting could be seen anywhere in the tent, the center ring was perfectly illuminated with a soft golden glow. The thousands of tiny multicolored crystals that adorned the aerialists' leotards sparkled with a mesmerizing fluidity as they soared towards one another to interlace arms and legs in a perfectly timed dance. A tiny woman wearing little more than sequins and a top hat strolled across a high-wire as if on her way to Sunday brunch. The performers appeared completely oblivious, not only to the encroaching doom outside, but also the newly arrived trio at the door. Marcus's gaze

dropped from the aerialists to a young man on the edge of the center ring balancing himself on one hand on the back of a wooden chair. Perfectly poised without the slightest of trembles, his toes pointed gracefully towards the ceiling, his free arm outstretched like a bird's wing, his expression bespoke of a simple bliss found only in the deepest of meditations. A twinge of envy and resentment plucked Marcus's heart momentarily as he flippantly decided to dismiss the entire scene as nothing more than elaborate illusion lest he become too attached.

"We have to go," Angelee said, severing the instance of surreal peace. Her high-pitched voice sliced through the music and it sounded like it suddenly skipped off-key.

Bolting like a startled fawn, Angelee made for the center ring of the circus, darting in and out of the performers who paid her as little mind. Marcus and John followed without hesitation. As they chased her, the structure of the room began to change, fragmenting and reforming as if it were ore being boiled down in a refinery pit. Marcus was fascinated by Angelee's movements; he could sense immense power radiating from the child in a way that made him want to dance for joy and tear his own eyes out in glittering agony at the same time. She had mastered her power instinctively, without instruction, making her a volatile element in her own right. He realized that she was in fact playing hide and seek with their pursuers now by moving the foundations of being instead of moving herself. They were not running as his subjective conscience expected, but reality was moving around them. Angelee was playing space like the nine-year-old Mozart must have played the piano. However, just beyond the space they occupied, she had a formidable opponent and all too often, as they went, she found herself deceived about the pursuers' next moves.

Marcus felt her childish, yet virtuosic tactics change modes. The maze of chutes and ladders ended, and they found themselves in single broad, steep tunnel. It was lined with a slick, damp substance that felt like moss beneath their feet; it was difficult to find purchase as the tunnel twisted swiftly upward. The hounds were now gaining on them, coming hard and fast behind, the impact of their colossal paws quaking the fibrous web of existence with each starving advance. Marcus could smell the festering decay of their breath scorching his back. He was certain this was the end; he would be devoured, wholly and completely on a physical and spiritual level and this time there would be no oubliette for him to wait out his sentence, but only an eternity of mindless archaic torment in the belly of

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the Beast. The hounds closed the gap between them as Marcus's doubt caused him to trip humanly over his own feet. He gasped, crying out a shriek of terror that echoed off of the slick rock around him. With a final lunge they snapped for him, frenzied to feel his bones break between their teeth, but as the jaws of the lead pack dog began to close, John reached back and grabbed Marcus by the shirt collar, hoisting him up to toss him like a rag doll forward, out of harm's way.

The corridor behind them burst into a blaze of ginger light as if a star had reached its supernova. It was so strangely and wistfully compelling, contained within and yet still entirely dominating the darkness around them, that Marcus turned to stare directly into the heart of it like Galileo. Outlined within the glow, which shot through a hole in the wall in a hurricane of laughing, toothy length and speed, were the flinty, feral outlines of the hounds.

Then blind viperous jaws at the end of a brilliant orange neck of light bore down on the lead wolf, slicing it clean through, from snout to tail, while it was still poised in mid-leap. The sickeningly wet sound of bones separating from tissue slithered out from the hound's body as the halves divided, a thick phosphorescent green liquid trickling down to the floor as its malformed organs were exposed. The lead hound collapsed onto the floor of the corridor, its body disintegrating into dully glowing, smoking ash as the single massive whip of light segmented into multiple tongues, each seeking out another of the hellhounds to deliver a similar brutal fate.

Feeling his modicum of garnered sanity beginning to slip, Marcus nearly laughed out loud, but his delight was severed when Sonnellion, now complete in his wicked, scaled physical form, rounded the corner. Even before Sonnellion's torso was in full view, Marcus saw the length of the serrated bronze broadsword he wielded come crashing down on one of the orange vipers, sending its head rolling down the tunnel. As it came to a stop, colliding with the wall, its brilliance faded into cool nothingness, dimming like a crushed firefly. Marcus watched in terror as Sonnellion's other talon-tipped crimson hand gripped yet another of the whipping orange heads by its snout as it came to investigate its fallen comrade. With a crack and a piteous moan from the viper's muzzle, Sonnellion decapitated it as well, sending it to join its friend in a lightless death.

Beside Marcus Angelee shrieked at the sight of the massacre, her face contorting in a fury that rivaled that of Sonnellion's own rage. A hurricane force wind exploded through the tunnel from behind them, knocking

Marcus forward onto his stomach. Throwing his hands over his head, he cringed, shaking uncontrollably. A secondary explosion of light rocked the corridor, filling it entirely like an atom bomb. Blinding yellow and white star bursts, accompanied by a high-pitched wail, progressed far and beyond supersonic until Marcus could feel trickles of blood beginning to seep down his cheeks from his ears. In an instant it was over, the light winking out of existence as quickly as it had originated, leaving them in near complete darkness. Sonnellion and the hellhounds were gone, as were the vipers they battled. All was still and silent as if it had been a dream.

Slowly Marcus began to uncurl from the fetal position he had instinctively tucked himself into. The sound of Angelee's sobbing was that of a distraught young girl now, the god-like wrath completely absent from her being.

"Shit," John sputtered, visibly shaken. "Easy Angie," he cooed, picking her up and cradling protectively against his chest. From the pocket of his oiled leather coat he pulled a small amber pocket-lantern to fend off the darkness.

Angelee wrapped her arms around his neck and stared down the tunnel in the direction the battle had occurred. Her cheeks, streaked with tears, were splotchy red from grief, her eyes hard and furious with a determined resentment Marcus knew all too well. Upon first meeting the two, Marcus had momentarily entertained a fleeting sense of superiority, falsely deeming them mere humans, despite John's mutation, but now he knew without a doubt that he indeed had much to learn if he was to survive in this new realm. Angelee blinked several times and lowered her gaze to where Marcus still sat staring up at her. Something about her expression made his blood run cold; it was a plea for help she was far too confused to even understand herself. This was not the life she had chosen nor were these battles of her own making. She, like Marcus, wanted to run away, but could not think of a single place she could go for this was her world, the only world she had ever known.

"Just remember to survive, Angie," John whispered into her hair. Angelee did not respond, but only continued to stare at Marcus, unblinking.

Marcus was beginning to wonder, himself, if survival was all any of them had left to live for.

CHAPTER 11

Neon orange embers of electricity sparked above his fingers as he touched them to one another, thumb to index, thumb to forefinger, thumb to pinky, distractedly precise as if he were practicing scales on an invisible violin. His polished black riding boots propped against the stone windowsill, Lucifer tilted the baroque throne of beautifully depicted gilt tortured souls on its back two legs as he considered the state of his own boredom. Rivulets of acidic rain trickled down the arched lead pane window before him like squid ink, incapable of nurturing and further distorting the molten ocean of writhing souls just beyond the banks of his personal island. He no longer saw the sea of churning rendered flesh for what it was, the desperate clawing of one soul over the other having lost its significance eons ago, the sound of their screams no more impressive than the call of gulls over a harbor. It was exactly as it had been since the creation of Hell. It was expected and its predictability, its ease of ascertainment buzzed like a persistent gnat just outside of his ear. Where was the challenge?

Though the mortals Hell collected like leaves being raked off the surface of an abandoned pool still wanted desperately to believe that there remained a roaring epic war between the realms of their salvation and damnation, the truth of the matter was that God and the Devil had grown weary of their disagreement, each settling into their designated roles like two old surly ranchers with a dispute over the placement of a barbed wire fence. Occasionally they would rally at one another, bellowing over the great divide of the other's idiocy of having let too many of their "cattle" wander across the perimeter, but for the most part they simply had learned to coexist.

In the physical plane the seasons rotated like painted horses on a carousel while the mortals that rode them haphazardly continued to reproduce successfully committing the same series of actions that neatly opened the door for either Lucifer or God's soldiers to meet their monthly quota. The demons employed by Lucifer had, for the most part, become so incredibly good at their jobs that he rarely even found it necessary for him to intervene, except on occasion when a particularly nasty being caught his attention and he decided to personally pay them a visit. He had

come to a sickening realization that he had begun to live only for those moments, those coveted breaks in the monotony. It was not wrath or greed or pride that drove him now as it might have in the beginning, when he was still determined to show God his might, his right to reign over Hell, to inflict such agony on those evil mortal entities, but more a hate of the consistency, the permanence of his own existence. If only for a distraction, a new challenge, a campaign he could mobilize with a renewed vigor to reaffirm in his own mind that he was still capable of achieving more than this profession he could perform unconscious.

It had been Belial who had first approached him with the idea of invading Purgatory and claiming it in the name of Hell. Why it had not occurred to Lucifer before was a mystery to him, though he remained stubbornly allied to the idea that he would have eventually thought of it himself, given time. If Lucifer could feel gratitude he would have been grateful to Belial, a demon he had cultivated himself since his damnation and come to rely upon heavily as an advisor and leading commander amongst the Legions. Since its inception Purgatory had always been vaguely under God's command. Why exactly, even Lucifer could not remember. It simply was one of the many aspects of existence that they had all settled into complacently. Now, however, Lucifer saw a ripe golden opportunity to tip the scales in favor of Hell. If there was a way for him to establish dominance in the domain he could then set in place a selection of the more skilled demons to give them one last chance to tempt into damnation the billions of unsuspecting souls aimlessly wandering through the realm. Occasionally a few would be rescued by God's grace, but for the most part Lucifer was sure his talented officers could successfully claim a decent bounty in the name of the underworld. If he could remember what glee felt like he might have been downright giddy.

Purgatory was largely an unguarded wilderness, as much an afterthought now by God himself as by Lucifer, though Lucifer knew full well the legion of angels God would unleash as soon as he sensed the realm fully invaded. Lucifer welcomed the idea of another epic war, the very idea making his pulse race with anticipatory bloodlust. However, he had yet to get that far with his plans. As with all things that appear too easy, there was, they soon discovered, a massive obstruction to their plans for an invasion.

Since the beginning of humanity Purgatory had been filled only with the sad, tortured souls whose sins committed in life had not been grave enough to sentence them to the belly of the Blind Beast, the ones still

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thought redeemable by God once they had been thoroughly tested and tried in gruesome ways even Lucifer at times tipped his hat to. If only these imprisoned souls had existed within the realm the demons under Belial's command would have had absolutely no problem invading the domain. However, it would seem that Lucifer and God's carelessly unobservant attitude had allowed a rebellious division to grow within the shadowy backwoods of the realm. These souls were not bound by the fate dealt to them by God, existing beyond the jurisdiction of the laws binding the dimension, yet somehow continuing to survive upon the periphery, conducting independent lives that appeared dedicated to the sole purpose of viciously guarding Purgatory from all outside invaders.

However, as Belial and his soldiers reported back to Lucifer of their encounters with these fearless creatures, some of them mortal while others verged on demonic and even angelic, it became increasingly obvious to Lucifer that it was not Purgatory itself they were guarding, but something far more precious. Like a clear glass globe suspended within a pool of water, a new dimension had begun to form. All but invisible and inaccessible to anything not directly seeking its discovery, it was difficult to tell when exactly the realm had quickened into existence for its presence had been entirely obscured, unbound to the rules of the realms around it. Only now, as the solidity of its push towards manifestation swelled to the point of dominating Purgatory itself, lending rise to an ever-increasing need for its defense, had God and the Devil sensed its relevancy.

For Lucifer, the realm itself intrigued him little, so consumed he was with the grandeur of Hell to be concerned with what he considered a minor plane of existence. However, it was now becoming irritatingly obvious that the realm, minor or not, was directly impacting his ability to invade Purgatory, for its outlaw defenders had proven themselves formidable fighters in their own right. As if drawing on some unseen power source, these vagabond entities impressively stood their ground in bloody battles with the most ferocious demons and wrathful angels. Belial and his army had gained little footing in Purgatory and achieved even less success in accessing the new plane itself. This was completely uncharted territory for Lucifer and his minions. The obstacle both fascinated and infuriated him simultaneously.

Belial cleared his throat quietly, shifting his weight as he stood beside the horrifically sculpted gold and black leather throne awaiting Lucifer's reply. Lucifer only continued to stare into his own reflection, hollow and

ghostly in the distorted, rippled panes of ancient glass, his jade green eyes glowing like swamp fires between the rivulets of black water.

“My lord, I hate to insist, but we do need to decide what to do about Marcus,” Belial prodded gently, careful not to cross the line of propriety, despite his rank.

Lucifer drew a deep breath and stopped tapping his fingers. His elbow still planted on the arm of the chair, fingers pointed at the ceiling, he turned his face to look Belial up and down with a vague expression of disapproval. “What is this?” He gestured at Belial with a flippant wave of his hand before returning to his finger tapping, the sparks of light above the tips reflecting off of the glassine surface of his eyes.

Belial raised one eyebrow and cocked his head slightly to the side. “What do you mean? What is what?”

“This. This ‘look’ you’re sporting these days?” Lucifer pursed his lips with distaste. “I don’t care for it much. It’s rather passé. It’s sloppy.”

Belial had found himself settling rather comfortably into the role of “Steve.” It was an easy façade, one consisting of a stereotypical rocker complete with long hair and a sleeve of brightly colored ink depicting everything from an ace of spades to a portrait of Lucifer himself. It was one of the least complicated costumes he had ever needed to seduce a mortal and at times now he almost forgot he still wrapped himself in it like an old worn T-shirt. Perhaps the image was a bit “sloppy” as Lucifer deemed, but he felt no need at this time for anything more intricate. His image, after all, did not dictate his inherent power.

Belial shoved his hands into the pockets of his faded black jeans. “It has its purpose.”

“No,” Lucifer contradicted. “It served its purpose. That mortal you fancied has borne your child, though the location of said spawn is in question at the moment. Her soul has been secured, her place cemented at your side. There is no need for such shows any longer. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Belial replied through clenched teeth, “I suppose it could be time for a change.”

He grimaced, struggling to maintain his composure at the mention of his lost child. It had been nearly a decade since the abduction of his infant from beneath the very noses of the two demons assigned to guard her. There had not even been time enough to decipher what her true potential

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was before she disappeared. Her aura had been dazzlingly strong upon birth, so much so that Belial had found himself almost leery of the baby, eyeing it suspiciously as Brenda cradled it against her bare breasts. Though he had eviscerated the guards and unleashed his wrath in unmentionable ways upon the physical plane in the hours after Angelee's abduction, the mere mention of her caused every muscle in his body to tense to the point of shaking. The idea of a child of such intense power simply vanishing was inconceivable and while he knew it was a personal priority of Lucifer's to find the child, eventually, at times Belial wondered if his preoccupation with the invasion of Purgatory had overridden his promise to his second in command.

"Change..." Lucifer sighed again and turned to stare back out at the ocean of damned. "Change is good."

His voice drifted off as he listened to the calming white noise drone of the universe, sifting through the infinite layers of perception for the distinct vibration that belonged to Marcus alone. It had been several long excruciating "days" since his escape. Lucifer knew exactly *who* Marcus was with. However, his precise location was another matter. Now they had absconded with Marcus, the demon he had been reserving to cultivate as Belial's second in command once Purgatory was placed under Belial's jurisdiction. What could they possibly want with him?

He pushed himself out and away from the throne with a feigned motion of effort, a habitual instinctual pleasantry he had assumed from the observation of humanity. As he moved his essence trailed behind him, tracers of energy imprinted on the space he had momentarily occupied. The energy rippled through the quantity of relativity between himself and the conjured surface he departed from like phantasmagorical smoke from a distant oil fire. The physical plane subconsciously felt the sensation of his movements, tiny earthquakes of unease in the pits of human stomachs that folded onto one another until cataclysmic upheaval occurred in the form of war; or perhaps a man cannibalizing the postman in a blacked-out basement next door to Saturday garage sales and Sunday bake sales.

He became still again, standing inches from the window, confronted with only his own painfully exquisite reflection in the thick glass, a façade of the past he continued to cling to with the full knowledge of the hideousness his true face had mutated into just beneath the surface. The gold threads woven in intricate patterns of thorny vines along the lapels of his dark gray sharkskin waistcoat glinted in opulent comparison to the black leather

chest plate tooled with Luca Signorelli's fresco "The Damned", a particular piece of human artistic suffering Lucifer had grown quite fond of. Below the tower of his estate the ocean of souls roiled and boiled, monotonous in its predestined course of torment, yet so intricately and perfectly timed to mimic the pulse of a human heart. A city crumbled as he lifted on hand to press his fingertips against the cool surface of the glass, orange embers sparking as surreal flesh met unsubstantiated polymer. He wondered for how long Purgatory would hold his interest once it was conquered? Was perhaps the answer to his boredom something far more revolutionary and transformational? Did Hell need to be redrawn? Behind him Belial watched him steadily in the window's reflection, his brows slightly drawn as he wondered what his lord might be contemplating now.

As Lucifer continued to wander the labyrinth of possibilities, mulling over the state and structure of his domain, Belial hesitantly broke the heavy silence, "The issue of Marcus? How would you like for me to handle it?"

"You won't," Lucifer replied quietly. Turning away from the window, he faced Belial. "I gave you the simple task of imprisoning him, someplace he would surely not escape."

"No one and nothing has ever escaped the oubliettes! Never! This is not of my doing!" Belial brashly protested. "How was I supposed to continually keep watch over him while I was heading up the invasion of Purgatory?"

"Another mission you have had little to no success in, I might point out." Lucifer said, tilting his head slightly to one side, narrowing his eyes as he regarded his second-in-command. "I must admit, you are unfortunately causing me to question your abilities."

"My abilities?" Belial was aghast. "My lord, I have never disappointed you in all of my long years of service to you and the Legions of Hell."

"Yes." Lucifer raised his eyebrows, "But twice now? Perhaps you need to be replaced?"

Fear began to creep into Belial's eyes as the realization of the treacherous terrain he was standing in. "I am not expendable. I have purpose still. I am necessary."

"Everything is expendable and nothing is absolutely necessary. Nothing, except me." Lucifer said with a deadly calm. He allowed his words to settle into Belial's mind like a cluster of daddy longlegs before speaking again. "But don't worry, my friend, your time is not up yet. I feel that I need to intervene personally, though. It is not just you in particular whom has

failed, but apparently there is not one demon among the Legions that has the power to be victorious in this campaign.” He reached up and flicked a tiny flake of ash from his left sleeve, sparks flickering like lightening bugs as the pointed tips of his black curved nails made contact with the shark’s skin. “My patience is spent. I want Purgatory and I want it now. I also want those wretched upstarts eradicated before they cause any further disruption to the balance. We have let them linger there, left to their own devices for too long. They are no longer a minor nuisance, but are a true threat to our very existence. They are recruiting.”

Belial swallowed hard, straightening his back, his hands at his sides as if standing at attention. “Recruiting? From where?”

“Don’t make me question your position any further, Belial.” Lucifer shook his head in disgust and then waved his hand through the air dismissively, “Not that there’s really any way for you to know these things. New hirelings, mostly. Lower level demons, really. Not many right now, but a few that have caught my attention here and there, simply vanishing. At first I thought nothing of it, since really I think we have quite enough to tide us over into eternity. However, I began hearing rumblings from my sources,” he pointed skyward, “that similar instances were occurring in the opposition’s camp, as well as within the physical realm.”

“They’ve vanished, though. For all intent and purpose they could very well simply be eliminated from existence. What if the uprising is simply extinguishing their essences?” Belial countered carefully.

“I would know if they were eliminated, as would—” He made another dismissive gesture skyward. “They’re definitely keeping them in existence. I can feel them, somewhere just beyond the surface of Purgatory.”

“But mortals? Whatever for? Demons, angels, that I can see a use for, but mortals? In a war?” Belial was genuinely perplexed.

“The fact that neither we, nor our self-righteous competitors, have managed to break the seal around this new world leaves me with only one possibility. They’re amassing their own army.” Lucifer tilted his head slightly, listening to the sound of the screeches and howls that deviated slightly from the uniform chorus of damned thrashing just beyond the shores. Though he knew his own personal domain was the most impenetrable point in Hell, discussion of such topics aloud heightened his awareness even further.

Belial could not repress a dry desperate cough of a laugh from erupting from his throat, “An army! To wage war on Hell?”

“Or Heaven. Or Earth.” Lucifer met Belial’s gaze once again, still subtly pleased after all of this time to see how one look could cause the upper level demon to squirm like a naughty child. “I’m not in the least saying that they would be victorious, but it would not be the first time someone or something thought they possessed the courage or the right to such a challenge.”

Belial dropped his gaze to the slate tiles of the floor as he reached up and rubbed his jaw with one hand, the furrow between his brows growing ever deeper with concern. If Lucifer himself felt the need to intervene there was far more to this story than he was telling his chief officer. “This cannot be good.” He muttered to himself.

Lucifer shrugged his shoulders. He lifted his hands and tapped the tips of his splayed fingers together, igniting a shower of sparks as he spoke. “It will all be over soon enough. I am not so much worried as annoyed and you know how I detest annoyances. I have a plan.”

Belial looked up again, intrigued, but remained respectfully silent.

“Since force does not appear to be the answer, I will join them willingly,” Lucifer said with a hint of smug satisfaction, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly in a smile that was incapable of fully forming.

“Join them, but how? These aren’t merely naive mortals who are easily tricked.” Belial protested, completely perplexed.

Lucifer regarded Belial as he might a small child, trying hard not to slap him across the face for his ignorance. “No, they are not mortals and that is why a more extreme version of disguise will be necessary. They are seeking recruits, obviously from the lower levels of our newborn initiates. If that is what they want, that is what they shall see. One that is ready and willing to change sides at a moment’s notice. This manifestation I will create requires your participation, which I assume you do not object to.”

“Of course not.” Belial’s voice was barely more than a whisper as he stared at Lucifer, transfixed.

“In order for me to manifest the form necessary to fool the uprising, I will need a vessel in which to store a portion of my power until I return to claim it again. You will become that vessel. Make no mistake, I will still have full control over this aspect of myself so do not become arrogant of its existence within you while I am away. You will be an extension of myself,

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the one all others will answer to in my absence from Hell. Trust me, I do not plan to be away for long.” Lucifer narrowed his eyes, looking Belial up and down for a second before closing the space between them. He placed both hands upon Belial’s shoulders. Belial winced slightly at the painful arcs of electricity beneath Lucifer’s touch. “Do not become distracted, Belial. If you disappointment me this time, there will be no opportunity to redeem yourself. Do I make myself clear?”

Belial was petrified and barely able to speak except one word. “Perfectly.”



Out!

A single syllable congealed clinging to the front of its consciousness like sub-arctic frost. The sound, of which it could not remember the significance or definition, brought with it a sudden shocking awareness of painful placement deep within a scorching black sea of mindless souls metastasizing into grotesque mutations of their former corporeal selves. Clusters of relentlessly stinging jellyfish swarmed in and around one another in a blind and mindless desperation to escape only to find themselves plunged deeper beneath the surface as they lost the remaining perception of direction, each rendered limb from limb by their tormentors. There, in the boiling tar murk the remains of their spirits sank, to be shredded like lifeless chunks of bloody tuna in the jaws of a Great White as more primeval creatures than even raided the surface emerged from their caves to devour the damned. For those unlucky souls whose struggles only served to force them to the bottom of the sea, with each cycle of torment, consumption and excretion their identity was distilled until absolutely nothing of its former humanity remained. It had not reached that depth. It knew without knowing that it must rise to obtain the essence of the sound it chanted now in its newly reforming mind. *Out! Out! Out!*

Upwards it clawed blindly, using the heaving moaning walls of broken limbs and flayed flesh to pull itself towards the shore. With each movement its focus solidified giving it purpose and with purpose came the intent to exist independent of the ocean. Its skeletal pale green fingers broke through the face of the sea, tar clinging to its flesh as the sensation of a hot howling wind blasting across its palm fueled the urgency of its quest for freedom.

Determination lending unto it ferocity necessary to fend off the attacks of the terrors that assailed him from every side, with time it found itself in the shallows where those with similar ambitions of extrication from the collective fought more viciously with each other than their demonic assailants as they jostled for dominance and the right to be the first among the damned to set foot on the glittering black sands a few feet away. The repugnant stench of sulfur and ash was stifling as its lungs kick-started with a strangled wheezing gasp, its eyes rolling back in its head as the mucus membrane sheathing them split to form functioning eyelids.

I am... A new set of words resonated through its consciousness at the sight of the distant shoreline and the glistening monolithic black crags that soared upwards out of the center of the island. As it waded forward, compelled as if by an unseen hand against its bony shoulder blades, it clung solely to the desperate, gnawing sensation that it somehow knew this place though the concept of a “memory” continued to be too illusive to grasp. Around it souls thrashed in the searing thigh-deep oil like piranhas shredding sacred cows, the obsidian surface churning until a thick froth slicked with a thin wine-red facsimile of blood while the occasional distracted soul looked on in mute horror unable to comprehend or act upon what it witnessed with any amount of conviction.

I am... It thought again, longing for the completion of the identifier as if it were a key to its salvation from the madness around it. Despite the chaos surrounding it, would not be deterred from its goal. It recognized the fault in its fellow souls’ combat that kept them entangled for eons until, at times they were pulled back to sea by their own malicious intent. As it pushed forward, climbing through the remains of butchered corpses, its feet sinking through mounds of freshly eviscerated entrails, a mangled bloodied corpse suddenly tackled it from the right with a furious screech, just as it reached the edge of the shore. Launching up out of the boiling black abyss to sink the remainders of its teeth through the thick cocoon membrane of gray-green flesh, down to the sinew and bone below, the assailant knocked its victim forward into the black sand. The attacking soul seemed oblivious to the fact that it too had made it out of the ocean, so intent it was on destroying its fellow entity’s chance at freedom. Like two starving junkyard dogs they ripped at one another snarling and howling as fresh wounds soaked the sand beneath them in blood, now a deep midnight blue in the absence of the black water. The attacker pinned it to the ground, clambering on top as it unhinged its broken jaw straining

to bite into the other's face. The soul below pushed its feet beneath the assailant's deformed, concave chest cavity, trying desperately to find the strength for one last blow.

"*I...am...*" The sounds in its mind became solid reality as they hissed past its lips. With a final howl it kicked forward sending the soul above flying backwards into the torrid ocean, "*Lucifer!*"

It was now a he and he had found his name again. The expulsion of the affirmation from his lips left him shaking uncontrollably. Rolling over onto his side, Lucifer pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, violently retching with an excruciating repetition, forcing the remainder of oil from his stomach and lungs until he thought he might physically turn inside out from the agony. A hundred feet away his attacker was pulled back down beneath the blistering black surface by the hordes of hungry, angry souls that still thrashed in the shallows. Lucifer sank back on his haunches, heavy ragged breaths wracking his thin reconstituted physical form. His rebirth had been completed, his manifestation as a newborn demon realized. Memories flooded his mind as his identity roared through him, a sensation that was both comforting in its familiarity and, yet, strangely devastating as the impact of his remembered station anchored him with the weight of eons of responsibility.

Reaching up with shaking fingers he dug his thick bruise-blackened fingernails into the caul encasing his new body, slowly ripping the thick sheath of membrane away to reveal slick, grayish flesh below. Each strip of casing removed was accompanied by the sensation of blazing hot metal branding him, a pain so excruciating that he could not even scream, but only shudder and shake, his eyes rolling back into his skull as he fought ensuing unconsciousness. He took intense pleasure in the pain. It had been a millennia since he had felt such exquisite agony, truly since he had felt anything at all other than boredom.

He wanted to savor it, to revel in his transformation, yet he knew he could not linger for long, nor dwell on the relevancy of his transition for he could not chance the truth of his identity being discovered by even one of the rebels. Nor could his manifestation become knowledge to his enemies in Heaven. While the entirety of his power was most certainly at his disposal, safely housed in Belial's corporeal shell, there still existed a poignant weakness in the division of power. His former physical form lay within a guarded chamber within his castle, his crystalline antimatter casket protected by a multitude of powerful seals only he himself knew how

to unlock, knowledge he would take with him if he were destroyed on this mission. It was true that he could have simply recreated his original physical manifestation, but something somewhat akin to nostalgic sentiment caused him to covet the original. It was, to him, an artistic masterpiece which no clever reproduction would ever truly do justice. A copy of *Hylas and the Nymphs* was still a copy of *Hylas and the Nymphs*.

Tossing the oozing strips of membrane aside to land like dead squid on the dully shimmering black sand, Lucifer leaned forward, placing his hands upon his bent knees as he stared out at the ocean of damned from which he had emerged. The moans and shrieks of the souls he had left behind swarmed upwards out of the depths of the sea, rising and falling in timber and range with the distressed call of slaughtered gulls, a chorus of grief rolling in and out with the tide that was as soothing to his blackened heart as it was exhilarating. It had been eons since he had walked the shores of this deep his will had given birth to, using nothing but his own determination and the soiled psyches of humanity itself. For thousands of years he had watched it mutate and grow from a stagnant pond, a discarded secondhand thought, into an ocean so vast he could no longer see the far shore, nor fathom its depths. It was an entity unto itself, a living, breathing organism subsisting on a diet of self-cannibalizing darkness. To him, this oil painting metamorphosis of suffering was a true triumph, a testament to the permanence of his might. If he could remember what love was he would have cherished it obsessively. There was no stopping this ocean. It would continue to grow, with or without his guidance. Kneeling in the black sand, he cracked his joints, aligning his spine, hips and shoulders, his thin colorless lips curling with the knowledge that the ocean now possessed a will of its own. Even God could not destroy such an entity.

He could feel his new skin, raw without the protective caul, beginning to heal, tightening and smoothing as he focused his energy on the fulfillment of his new identity. A lingering sense of vanity made him want to elevate his new appearance to that of a divinely tempting creature of the flesh, one which no mortal or immortal could resist, as he was when he resided in his original shell. However, he knew he must forego such physical extravagance to ensure the success of his mission. A crude and gangly entity, thin, unseemly and unassuming enough to lure the trust of those he now sought to form a false alliance with, yet strong enough to allow their evaluation of his potential addition to their ranks to be substantial. Slowly, he stood, closing his eyes as he finalized the details of his appearance:

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short black hair slicked back from his forehead in a Brill cream widow's peak past the slightly tapered ears and angular, hard-lined features and darkly rimmed eyes the color of agate. Across the grayish green length of his sinewy starved frame he draped a worn white T-shirt, frayed army fatigue pants, sculpting a pair of polished paratrooper boots to adorn his gnarled feet. A name was all that remained.

Addai. Simple, perfect and encompassing everything they wanted him to be: uncertain.

Addai turned away from the damned and stared up at the tower of vexing cliffs supporting the intricate spires of his old home with a hint of jealousy. He simply could not resist a small moment of self-indulgence knowing that Belial walked his halls and slept in his bed reveling in the sensation of the power he had coveted his entire demonic life residing within him now. Let him linger there. It would all be over before it began, Addai reassured himself. Once Lucifer returned to assimilate himself Belial would have no recollection of what had transpired. As he watched the castle far above the dual red suns glinting off of the wet leathery walls and glassine slate sculptures adorning the structure's prominent corners, the surface of the ocean behind him began to ignite. A small blue flame sparked from the path of sodden footsteps where he had trudged up from the depth, leading back down to the shore where a subtle flicker like a pilot light being lit with a match spread with wildfire randomness across the surface of the ocean. Those damned near the surface caught fire quickly, the cauls in which their mangled spirits were encased melting with a horrific waxen distortion until they sank beneath the surface to be rendered and devoured by their demonic captors.

Addai followed his own shadow as he left the shore, led forth only by the backlight of flame from the ocean of damned.



Art by Dusan Kostic

CHAPTER 12

The image of Angelee's angry eyes still haunted him. Such paralyzing torment as no child should ever bear the burden of crystallized within the chambers of his heart making each pulse painful as if a barbed vine had taken purchase in the sin and soot-stained arteries. If he had stumbled upon her in the physical plane he might have been so fascinated as to covet the acquisition of her soul as a magnificent challenge, but here, where all aspects of reality deviated drastically from what even a creature as he considered the norm, he could only stand in awe as if witnessing a historic murder from afar. She was an anomaly, a metaphysical mutation whose purpose would be determined not by her own hand but by her keepers. The darkness in her aura screeched with such a finite frequency that Marcus was unwilling to believe that she had not in some way been either heavily influenced by an aspect of Hell or was of Hell itself. However, she had obviously been removed of that realm and still she suffered.

Perhaps she suffers more because of that alienation? He wondered. If she had been left to be reared by those who birthed her she would not be so conflicted. Her path would have been defined by her nature, not by her present circumstance.

Even as the words formed into completed thoughts, his conviction to them waned. If an entity was not a product simultaneously of identity, circumstance and environmental influence, what exactly could it be a product of? Was it not true that all of pressures exist continuously, except in the case of extreme isolation? Though the waves of grief and anxiety that emanated from the child begged for explanation, who was Marcus to judge her situation or expect a different return on her present circumstance? Despite John and Angelee's promise of "freedom" Marcus knew no such concept truly existed and Angelee herself was living proof.

Poor child, he thought, she was doomed from birth, wasn't she? Maybe that's why John protects her so? He knows...?

Marcus drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, staring up at the glittering nightscape of stars dancing within the dome of startling clear pitch sky above. Never in his life had he witnessed such a vision of a

galaxy. A memory from his mortal childhood flickered across his mind as his eyes darted from star to blazing white star against the velvety backdrop of midnight blue. Though he could barely remember her face now, the woman who gave physical birth to him laughed and tossed her curtain of black hair back over her shoulder as she recounted the first time she had witnessed the night sky in the absence of urban illumination. So bright the stars had been, so close they had seemed to the proximity of earth, that she had found herself completely terrified by the magnitude and raced back inside the shelter of her friends' tiny house. It had been in that instance, during her first excursion away from the bright bustling frequency of city life that she had truly come to understand her insignificance in the universe, her microscopic existence in an otherworldly wilderness of unfathomable proportions.

Marcus had experienced enough of that sensation as a human throughout his life to understand that what he witnessed now was not an affirmation of his insignificance, but a profound declaration of his placement in the whole of existence. Yes, the weight of his contribution to reality might be minute, but he still existed and with his existence came the promise of an ability to effect the structure and nature of things both within and without his perception.

Or so he wanted desperately to believe, though he would never willingly apply the adjective "desperate" to his desires or his actions. John and Angelee had seen something in him that made them risk the wrath of Hell itself in order to show him the escape from his prison. *He's got it. He understands.* Angelee's emphatically whispered words echoed in his mind. But what was "it"? What did he understand? Every time he thought he was an inch closer to grasping hold of his potential he seemed to fall back several paces to find himself even more overwhelmed by the fathomless quantity of what he did *not* understand.

After the battle in what Marcus could only describe as a time-space distortion tunnel, Angelee and John had fallen into a recalcitrant silence, refusing to answer any of his questions. John's only concern was Angelee's apparent onset of fragility in the wake of the passing danger while Angelee herself had become nearly catatonic. As the distortion had evaporated, opening up around them like giant clam to diffuse into tendrils of brown smoke as it evaporated into the ether, they had found themselves trudging, once again, through the waist-high green grasslands. If it had not been for the solemn silhouette of John clutching tiny Angelee to his chest a

few paces ahead of him Marcus might have been led to believe the entire episode to have been naught more than a terrifying dream. For a long while they had walked in absolute silence with only the sound of the cool breeze eternally rustling the stalks of grass around them. A bone-deep weariness invaded his entire being. He felt as if the cells of his body were warring with one another for the right to survive and regenerate. He found himself falling back again, unable to keep up with their natural extraordinary pace, until he simply stopped walking altogether. There seemed to be no sense in continuing on through the plains as each mile was exactly like the last in his perception. With a sigh he watched them fade into the horizon with the sensation that they would find him again when needed.

“Do you like our new stars? I made them with my own hands.” The voice sounded as if it had been perfectly equalized by a genius of sound engineering. All offensive frequencies had been removed while tenor and bass harmonics danced playfully and gravely in a rich balance. “The burning, as you can imagine, was ferocious,” it continued, “but I survived and I healed. And it was worth it, all in all, I think.”

Turning to face the source of the voice Marcus saw two humanoid figures gliding formally across the bright grass to greet him. They appeared to be pale, liquid marble made “male” and “female” by some brilliant sculptor’s hands, eyes, hair and skin of the same supple, smooth element that flexed and bowed in a divine simulation of humanity. The clothing they wore was in no way designed to cover anything. It appeared to serve only to enhance the impact of the lines of limbs and to intensify enjoyment of the luminescent night breeze. Faced with their grace Marcus was suddenly aware of the horrible question mark surrounding his own outer shell. He was ashamed. He suddenly remembered that a timeless expanse of laceration lay between the present moment and his last look in a mirror. He recalled his revulsion when he first looked on Desiderium’s oozing, broken flesh and moved to brush what filth he could off of his tattered rags, but he found, somehow, that his own fingers could tell him nothing about what he was or what he wore.

“God, Child, you look like the sea,” the woman spoke. “The sea at blackest, heaving night,” she went on as if chanting ancient verses “when there’s no hope for sailors.”

The gentleness contained in the woman’s voice felt distant to Marcus, like that of a goddess addressing her favorite mortal, though he was in no way, shape or form due such graces. She tilted her head slightly to one

side, a motion as fluid as water running through a mountain stream, and regarded him with a perfectly poised expression of concern executed so flawlessly that it transposed itself over him like a requiem.

“You are faded,” she remarked. “Faded and drawn to quarters of what you must have once been so that I can near see through to the stars beyond you.”

Marcus wanted to laugh at her statement, but found he no longer held the capacity. “What I must have once been...” he muttered beneath his breath. “I was no one. Then, I suppose, I was led to believe I might become ‘something’ only it was simply another lie. I am nothing but a pawn of some other fate, some other god or devil’s will. It would be best if I simply faded into nothing I think.”

“The universe has been unkind to you. Tested and tried you so that you are barely clinging to existence. Yet, you exist. That in and of itself is a triumph, is it not?” the man asked quietly. His voice resonated with the deep hollow echo of heavy wind chimes hung from an old oak tree.

Though the graceful elevated entities before him strove to emanate the aura of ancient, Marcus could not help but feel far older than the both of them combined. “I suppose it depends on what trials you had to endure to get to the point of ‘existing’,” he replied, attempting to avoid bitterness, but finding only ambivalence.

“I would not despair if I were you,” the woman consoled. “In order to achieve access to this higher plane you needed to be capable of annihilating your ego, your identity, which you have been clinging to since your days as a mortal. You have been desiring the ability to recreate yourself, even as in your brief moments as a demon, to redesign yourself in a falsely representative light, but what you have needed is, in fact, a manifestation of a completely new entity that is the true self.”

Marcus stared at her, uncomprehending. He wanted to interpret her words instantaneously, but the weariness that evaporated him, body and spirit, made it difficult to digest her wisdom.

Her smile was an eerie, ghostly beauty of curling colorless lips. Approaching him she reached forward to cup his face in her cold, smooth palms. “Let your body rise above its own filth. Let the rift be in your blood. Let your nerves burst and blossom. Here the world is raw enough for it...” she whispered into his skin as she placed her lips against his forehead. Stepping back she gazed down at him. “You are ready to be

reborn, to step out of the shadow of the makers you were once beholden to, whether consciously or unconsciously, and create a truthful representation of yourself, one that answers to you and only you as both its father and mother. Do not fear this moment when all is called into question, when nothing seems substantial and all is at stake. It is only in these times can one truly be free.”

Marcus stared up at the statuesque beings that loomed a good head and half taller than he. “Who...what are you?” he whispered, feeling vacuous and transparent as ancient, frayed muslin before the sight of such pristine replicas of life.

“We, Marcus, are living signs, letters beyond those that could ever form any words or names. We are living signs informing God of the error of his ways,” replied the man.

“The error of his ways?” asked Marcus.

“The Good Lord,” the man-creature uttered the title with grandiose sarcasm, “took himself a name and placed himself beyond form. And, thus, his decent into an existence of empty, arbitrary decrees began. We on the other hand, took to ourselves only form, and placed ourselves beyond all names. And we will soon pass into an existence all our own.”

Marcus thought on this statement for a moment, eyeing the creatures suspiciously. While he could sense they strove for an appearance of neutrality, their proclamations were lofty and their expectations of an independent existence somewhat conceited, at least in his eyes. “So, you are not an invention of God?”

“No,” answered the woman. “We are the collective product of a singular desire for an alternative. A desire that stems from all aspects of our known realities, be them Heaven, Hell, Earth or otherwise. The restless dissatisfaction with the spiritual *quid pro quo*, if you will, fed into itself for centuries until the core of that energy gave birth to a vessel into which the desire for liberation could be funneled. Even now that same energy is what we feed upon, what is channeled into us constantly.”

“You said ‘a vessel’, but there are two of you?” Marcus replied.

“The ‘I’ became a ‘we’ when the influx of energy became so great, over time, that we are able to achieve mitosis into separate forms in order to continue our evolution. It was only through this next step could we continue to create the world you see around you without danger of being destroyed by the very desire we were born from.” The woman instructed

calmly, her voice washing over Marcus like a strong lavender-perfumed wind.

“Why the male and female aspects, if you don’t mind me asking? Why not something wholly unique if you were striving for something independent of the current structure?” he inquired, still suspicious of their statuesque appearances. If these beings were not gods, nor attempting to portray themselves as such, why did they take on the likeness of the Greek sculptures of Aphrodite and Ares so closely?

“What would you have us appear to you as?” The man regarded Marcus with intense interest, his colorless eyes unblinking as they measured him both externally and internally. “Male and female, Yin and Yang, there is always a balance of energies to the universe. It is the rhythm of nature. We are the product of the disillusioned men and women, be they mortal, demonic or angelic. We need no other representation to fulfill our purpose.”

“Darkness and light,” muttered Marcus.

“No,” retorted the man. “It is much more intricate than such a blatant division. Within every mortal man and mortal woman exists Yin and Yang, the male and female energies. Within every angel and demon there is the same, as there is even within God and the Devil. One cannot exist without the other.”

“You said you were not a product of God, but what about the Devil?” asked Marcus. For the present, at least, he was much more concerned with the affairs of Hell than those of Heaven.

“You mean Lucifer?” the male figure asked in return.

“Of course,” answered Marcus, not much in the mood to have his word choice corrected.

“Take care not to conflate the two,” the moving statue went on, either unaware or in no mood to indulge Marcus’s mood. “You may not always find them to be the same.”

“What about *Lucifer* then?” Marcus asked a bit sharply. His native impatience with the lofty tone of “wisdom” was beginning to expunge his shame, like a stubborn old creeping-plant, edging out new flowers in a garden. The man smiled, perhaps about Lucifer, or perhaps, it seemed to Marcus, at the change in Marcus’s own bearing.

“Lucifer,” he said slowly, “is an entirely different matter. The light-bringer,” he went on, choosing his words with care, “is...similar to us, if you will. He is concerned with our concerns. He is, therefore, much

more dangerous.” He looked Marcus over carefully as if evaluating his fitness for more information, noting Marcus’s desire to question what those “concerns” were.

His gaze returned to his companion as he spoke to Marcus. “But we will speak no more of such things for the present.” He returned his lightless gaze to Marcus, reaching out to place one solid cool palm upon his shoulder. “Rest and explore. Explore this place and yourself. And remember that the meaning of existence is in living form, not in any commandments you may have broken in the past. Cast off the weight that makes you crooked. Discard the wounds that bleed you. Shed them like dry scabs and be new.”



New... The word spun in his head like a child’s wooden top. In spite of the strange creature’s admonition to “be new” Marcus found himself, as he walked within the strange lurid grass, unable to think on anything but the past. He renewed the struggle to pierce the black veil that his timeless torment in the oubliette had thrown across his past. He wanted to see the truth of his situation for what it was, not what anything or anyone else would like to construe it as having the potential of being or becoming. What did it mean to become “new”? Was this realm in which he walked truly “new” or was it simply just another abjectly reconstructed aspect of the same old reality he had grown weary of in the mortal realm?

He thought of Earth, how crowded and soiled it had felt, how mired in desperation and grief it had been. His eyes wandered over the rolling plains of grass as it rippled hypnotically against the static horizon, oblivious and serene in a way only something mindlessly mechanized could be. Even on Earth, when he had experienced moments of natural peace, sitting within the woods outside of the city proper or upon a mountainside overlooking the ocean, he had still felt as if he were witnessing something that lived and breathed without him; he had taken comfort in the subconscious concept that the entity that was “Earth” would long outlive him. However, here, he worried that each and every action he took could possibly effect the outcome of the world around him in a way he was not ready to take responsibility for. Yet, there was so little of this world in existence that he was strangely fascinated by the idea of playing “god” to it and wondered just how far he could push the extent of his influence, if allowed.

Marcus closed his eyes. The gentle rustle of wind through cottonwood leaves rippled around him as he pictured himself sitting on his favorite park bench, silent and undisturbed, meditating on the prospect of becoming and being “new”. Behind his mind’s eye tufting white pellets snowed down from the lofty gray branches above as winter brought a stalemate to summer’s reckless antics. He breathed deeply, drawing into his lungs the sweet, feathery decay of the wide brown leaves lining the ground beneath the bench. Bending forward, he reached down to lift a leaf from the ground. He pressed the fading foliage pressed between his thumb and forefinger as he leaned back against the rotten peeling wood and rusting metal rivets. He contemplated the leaf more closely, inspecting the tiny empty veins running through each section, interrupted only by small parasitic gray knobs where beetles had lain their larva. There were no leaves in the new world and no soaring, lamenting trees to release them. Only miles and miles of grass and stars and a strange humming flow of pink and gold and orange that alternated incessantly between crying out for formation and subtly nuzzling gentle approaches of “hello!” and “what?” to the onlooker like an amorphous liquid jungle cat.

“Oak,” Marcus answered almost absently as his mind drifted through the image of the swirling autumn leaves. He felt the dance begin.

First it was on the outer hairs of his nerves, nearly invisible, a brisk elegant diatribe of sensation that left him breathless. Swirling and shifting instantaneously through the various aspects of space and time it appeared in front of him as a rolling sentient fog of faint amethyst and amber. A sudden rush of ecstasy that was almost pain funneled through his center as a brilliant daffodil yellow point condensed on the ground before him. It burned like molten gold and sank into the soft dirt like a spear, disappearing out of visible sight as quickly as it had manifested. Tapping the energy of the strange astral loam into which it had sunk the droplet of ore rocketed back upward out of the “ground”. The motion was too fierce for Marcus’s thoughts to grasp it or contain the erupting forms of trunks or branches or leaves. The comet of energy detonated like a massive firework, catapulting huge, deep sparks violently, yet almost silently, skyward. For several seconds, Marcus stood there, stunned and silent and shaking. The sound of a deep laugh called him back to himself.

Slowly, feeling somewhat traumatized in a wholly euphoric way, he turned to see John standing high above him on the rim of the green bowl. His brown canvas pants were rolled up to his thighs. He appeared to be

standing calf-deep in a small stream that vanished mysteriously somewhere on the slope between his vantage point and Marcus.

“Try up here,” John called, beckoning to Marcus.

With John’s deep, soothing chuckling rumbling over him like thunder Marcus started up the slope. His mind was a blur of sensory projections that numbed him from head to toe so that all that existed was the sound of John’s laugh and the placement of one foot in front of the other.

“Try up here,” John repeated, as Marcus got close enough to use his ordinary soft speaking voice. “Along the edge of the stream,” he explained, “It’s easier up here on the edge where things are less solid. Not that they’re terribly solid down there, mind you. Up here, though, they’re, well...” He gestured outward over the rim of the grass with his claw. Marcus followed the gesture and beheld the dizzying oddity that was the landscape around him.

They now stood close enough to the rim of the newly forming plane to see clear over its edge, a starkly terrifying delineation of space softened only by the gently bowing stalks of grass. Beyond the “edge” stretched an expanse of pure, unadulterated nothingness. This space was not the deep velvety black of an ordinary night as viewed from earth. It was more nearly the black of a black-box theatre space, seemingly fathomless, though containing the sensation of mounting anticipation and expectation of a concealed performance. Within the infinite darkness lay only two distinct markers shattering the monotony, two strange sets of island shapes that floated and yet appeared to be anchors for the entirety of what existed beyond them. The first were great globules of bright, softly multicolored starlight, set at various vast distances from the rim of the plane where John and Marcus stood.

Directly overhead the plane, however, the cluster of islands seemed more bulbous, forming a nearly unbroken canopy which had not been visible from any other position deeper down in the bowl of grasslands. His eyes widened as he took in the new sight above him. For the first time Marcus was able to directly perceive the source of the lurid light around him. Thick braided tendrils of lush vibrant luminescence hung down from the distant central canopy of opaque bubbles, extending out to all edges of the realm as if to hold their bowl of newly forming earth suspended like a hanging planter basket. In places these tendrils formed nets that reminded Marcus of the riggings of a great ship, intricately and meticulously crafted to endure the

most malicious of storms. He wondered if they could be climbed and, if he could, where would they lead?

His eyes drifted again to the lingering island, adrift light years away within the darkness. This other formation was no less marvelous to behold in a sort of microcosmic way, its gravitational pull somehow interconnected to, yet wholly independent of the current of the stream John stood within. As Marcus had strained his neck to take in the architecture of his surroundings, John had waded out beyond the rim of the bowl and gone back to work. The visual effect was like a man working on a diamond high-rise built on the bottom of some vast abyss. Marcus was in awe. He had felt more anchored to a tangible reality when standing on the shores of the boiling tar ocean watching the blind worm Beast devour the soul he had collected than he did here. That realm had been solid, the product of millennia of watchful manicuring. Not, literally, “unfinished.”

“Actually,” John shouted over his shoulder to Marcus, in a tone one might hear on a small construction site, “you might want to wait a minute. It’s not really quite ready for trees, but it’s getting there.”

“Oh, right,” Marcus mumbled under his breath.

His voice trailed off, his lips and tongue feeling still a bit too numb to navigate full sentences. Instead he returned to his visual analysis of the world around him. The stream was more remarkably three-dimensional than any environment Marcus had ever seen before. Even on Earth, swimming within the depths of a river, Marcus had never experienced the sensation of being able to visualize and experience the body of water on multiple levels beyond the sensory. The stream seemed to swell out of a dozen hidden springs from the void beyond the rim of the plane in winding branches that gradually found each other as they wandered to the edge of the grass. However, Marcus could not tell if the flow was inward, outward or existing simultaneously.

The work John performed appeared to be a matter of moving these spring-points further out from the edge and, as he did so, of increasing their flow as if he were maintaining a giant dam. Marcus watched as the big man pulled a jackknife out of the pocket of his worn brush-pants and thrust it outwards punching a hole in the darkness. As he removed the knife from the astral puncture wound a new trickle began to flow. A cascading waterfall fell into a slow, wide segment of the streams like an amusement park waterslide course. After inspecting the new fissure for a while John

emitted a satisfied grunt and turned to walk back into the more solid areas of dirt.

In its upper reaches, the stream looked as if it flowed through perfectly transparent piping, a pure column of bright water glittering in the colored light that came from a nearby cosmic rope. Where John had walked, however, its bottom was almost the golden brown of ordinary river gravel. The palette of shimmering colors was somewhat altered from the expected Earthly norm by the indirect abstract light that existed here, but it appeared to in fact *be* ordinary river gravel. The stream's course continued through the grass in this way until it disappeared with a rush into a heap of river-smoothed dark gray boulders. Marcus was taken aback by John's strength as he watched him hoist up two of these stones and return to wading up the stream with one under each arm. He puffed and wiped sweat from his brow as he cast them down to complete his waterfall pool with two enormous, gleeful splashes.

Suddenly something drew him bolt upright and still. John sprang up onto the larger of the two boulders and perched there like an enormous bear cub staring out into the black space. He gestured urgently for Marcus to take the boulder beside him. Hesitantly Marcus reviewed the situation, still uncertain of his ability to navigate this new unstable terrain. Leery of gliding out over that terrifically deep darkness, Marcus cautiously waded up to the spot, taking time to allow his feet to establish contact with the "gravel" at the bottom of the stream and have the sensation register as indeed "real" within his consciousness before proceeding further. The water was almost warm in the chill night air, the steady slow current calming in its obliviousness to his interference in its progress. Marcus sat down on the rock and John gestured towards a far-off point in the void with his human hand.

Marcus looked up and was instantly, utterly gripped by a far distant power beyond anything he had ever beheld. A line of pure emptiness seemed to swell with the pregnancy of a wave. It grew into a roil everything his senses had ever taught him until that moment declared was impossible. Even in his turbulent demonic youth, even in his unheard of passage through the mouth of a hellhound to a back-country expanse cultivated by outlaws, this type of spatial distortion was simply *impossible*. It was an agitation of nothing upon nothing, that by virtue of some insatiable, unrestrained power of the fluid tension therein *was*. There was no explanation for it needed none to exist, all encompassing, omnipresent and eternal. Its source

did not reveal itself, oblivious to Marcus and John's marveling as they perched upon the boulders, but the passing of the wave left Marcus with a premonition of infinite muscle cleaving deep sea. The silence that followed was long.

John's mutter, almost a chant, only barely broke the quiet. "Can you make a pet of him like a bird or put him on a leash for your girls?" He said, his deep voice far away and dreaming.

"What?" Whispered Marcus.

"Oh? Just an old quote from somewhere," John's embarrassed tone cut off further questions. "I love to see him out there," he said, as if now bent on filling the silence properly. "You know, the Great Blind Worm of Hell is only a copy of *him*. No one made *him*."

The silence that followed was long. Marcus wasn't ready to ask who *he* was yet.

"So you've met the 'King and Queen', then?" John asked. His leathery green claw made the quote-marks gesture rather comically imposing when coupled with his human hand. Marcus didn't have to ask whom he meant. John stretched his back as if, perhaps, getting ready to go back to work.

"Mmmhmm," hummed Marcus, rising to his feet in the shallow, bright water.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" John didn't get up. This time, his tone almost demanded an answer. Marcus slowly sat back down without taking his eyes from John's large brown ones for a second.

"But... ?" Marcus replied, sensing the lingering desire in John to continue the idea.

John hesitated for several seconds, as if unsure whether or not to speak. His soulful, strong eyes sought safety in the little laughing pool he'd made around them. "They weren't always." He murmured.

Marcus raised an eyebrow, but John didn't look up. John did seem to recover something of his typical bold humor, however. "I liked them better back then, if you want to know the truth," he said. "We wore our cruelty on our sleeves back then. Oh, when we broke out we took such revenge!" The last words tumbled like the water in the fall he stared at. "I wanted to squeeze Jesus Christ's own balls in my fist back then, once I'd recovered enough humanity to make thoughts out of my wants at all. I was such a slathering monster then. But at least I was *me*. And I'm still *me* now..."

if you follow? I had been in Purgatory a long time when the plasma rain came down and King and Queen showed up to cut me loose.”

Marcus tried to follow John’s poetic diction, though he felt as if he might be lost between the grains of sand of John’s memory if he was not careful. There was far more to this hulking man. Marcus could sense that intensely, like a solar flare building beneath the boiling surface of the sun. Soon it would erupt and lash out into the galaxy.

“What was your sin?” Marcus asked, unable to resist steering the conversation to territory in which he felt some control.

“Idolatry,” John said, “I shot a cop with a 12-gauge, too, right at the end. But I was drunk and he didn’t die, so that was more of a legal thing than a sin thing. My sin was loving something more than God.”

Marcus was intrigued. “What did you love enough to condemn yourself?” Marcus pressed, almost beginning to feel the familiar joy of taunting a sinner rise up in his guts again.

“My daughter.”

Something about John’s answer made Marcus ironic sense of control slip. “What?”

“As I said,” explained John, “I loved my daughter more than God.” He sighed, staring into the frothing water at the base of the waterfall as if he could see his daughter swimming there beneath the surface. When he spoke again, his voice was far away and tinged with sadness.

“She loved to ride her bike. Total tomboy! She’d fall off a lot and come in all scraped up. I worried. But one day, she fell off and as she fell the handlebars turned into the ground and hit her in the abdomen. She lay there, in the dust of the two tracks, all by herself, and bled to death on the inside. To the horror of everyone who still loved me, I cursed God at her funeral. They forgave me for that, of course, but I didn’t just speak the curse. I spent the rest of my short life *living* it. What I did in those years none of them could, in the end, forgive. I was a spiteful, resentful man. When I finally met my end, I was pissing on a church carpet with my dick in one hand and a shotgun in another. Cops came in. The shotgun went off. The police all fired. It was over and I was dead.” John’s last words were heavy and cold, yet spoken so matter-of-factly that they, to Marcus, seemed almost too convincingly resolved of emotion.

John continued, “Soon after my death, I met an angel in a cold, hard place between two rocks, just like my parents always told me I would. He

was all fairly robed in shining white and everything. He spoke to me by name: ‘Deep down, John, you’re a good man,’ he said. ‘But...’”

John’s lips began to curl and his teary eyes began to harden. He stared into the heart of his waterfall as if he meant to kindle a fire there. He was struggling now as he pulled the memories forth like cactus spines from his skin, “The angel told me of my sin. ‘You’re not ready for Heaven,’ he said, ‘Not yet. You must first go through a series of changes. The thoughtless animal in you must live fully if it is to ever fully die. And only once it dies will your passions resonate with the heavenly order.’ Then I saw the dogs. An angel, with those things at heel...it was...” Here John’s vocabulary failed.

He skipped the account of his emotions and went on narrating the event. “After that, the angel didn’t speak any more. He brandished a hammer and great golden stakes and chains. He bound me to the earth in that place and left me to the dogs for nearly fifty years. Countless times I was wounded and my wounds healed. And as my flesh was torn apart and grew again, I changed, inside and out. At the time it ended *this* had grown from me.” He held up his great, green claw almost triumphantly.

“At that point I was able to kill about half the dogs that came at me, even in my chains.” John’s triumph was short lived as he continued. “But there were always more where they came from and far worse things that could slice my new hide in ways they couldn’t. Then, one day, a great storm began to howl all around Purgatory. Globes of plasma rained down like neon tears from the ashen sky of that place for days and for days the beasts left me alone. Then it was them who found me. You know, the two without the names.” He gestured over his shoulder with his human thumb at bowl of grasslands below them. “They found me and cut me loose.”



“Shi—!” hissed Marcus suddenly, nearly leaping off the stone into the void.

A woman’s gentle laugh yanked John and Marcus out of their grim reverie. The unexpected sweet sound was as shocking to Marcus as a sudden kick to the back of the head, seemingly erupting from nowhere in the absence the usual auric prelude that always preceded speech in his heightened perceptual state. However, when he saw the source of

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the sound, he cut his hiss short. Recognition took a moment. It was the strange, nameless Lady of this land again, certainly, but the change in her entire appearance was so dramatic as to almost be a metamorphosis. The shadowy veils of her hair were drawn back into a long ponytail and she had traded her Venetian ornamental slip-dress for an ensemble that might have perfectly suited a mortal navy seal or even a comic book character. The new outfit consisted of high black boots of some light, supple, synthetic material and a long, black coat of superb slender cut made of a similar fabric.

John whispered in Marcus's ear, sensing his shock and irritation, "She does that, brother. Don't let it bother you. Stealth and silence are great gifts of hers and she sometimes forgets to turn them off."

"John!" The woman exclaimed warmly splashing into the stream with a ballerina grace, "You're really outdoing yourself here. This little thing is lovely! And you!" she said as she turned to Marcus, "You'll have it lined with the most beautiful trees in no time, I'm sure!"

Marcus frowned. The compliment practically twinkled in the black air, but it splashed a sour wash of adrenaline over Marcus's gut. She'd been watching him try to make the tree and he hadn't sensed her at all. How much might she have heard of John and Marcus's conversation and how much might she have read into it? Her tone was gay as an oriel and gentle as a dove, her face displaying no signs of concern with anything but streams and trees. A flowing, playful beauty of agility seemed to have replaced the reserved, statuesque beauty she had displayed a few hours ago. She had "a gift for silence", though. That was something to be wary of.

What might she be hiding, even as she splashes around like a teenage gymnast? She's certainly no teenager. Marcus cursed himself for finding his way into a position of such dangerous ignorance. He had to learn more about these creatures. Even if he could find a way out of this new dimension, leaving simply wasn't an option until he had a firm understanding of their nature. If there was one key piece of crucial knowledge he had gleaned from his brief time as a demon it was there are some enemies that mere distance is no protection from. Trying to keep his dark, tactical concerns from showing on his face, Marcus reached down from his perch to take the white, slender hand she offered him.

"Would you like to see more of our land?" she asked.

“Certainly,” he answered, attempting to keep his tone casual as he forced his intentions to pry far deeper into her world than the surface tour behind a screen of common expected courtesy. He nodded farewell to John, who saluted casually with his claw in return, and followed the woman down the hill. With a desperately amused smirk he noticed that something about the way she walked in those boots made his tactician’s emotional distance from the situation all but impossible to maintain for long.

“Shit,” he breathed, finishing the word this time carefully, quietly and emphatically. He shook his head and jogged a little to catch up with his guide. Walking, more or less, at her side he could follow her lead without having her in view all the time. He suspected that the sight of her had a dangerous narcotic effect that would only increase with exposure.

CHAPTER 13

Angelee was hanging from her knees. Her long golden hair dangled down from her head into the apparently infinite abyss below, each strand glowing like a fiber optic wire because of the luminescent grid structure spread out above her. She had climbed down into the lowest supporting rods of the platform she referred to as “her fort” in order to get a better view of a newborn thunderstorm sweeping across the great purgatorial marshes far below.

“No...not *far below!*” She applied heavy sure breaks to her train of thought.

Catching herself in a perceptual error, she steadied herself and rehearsed what she had been previously taught by the King and Queen. It was hard not to think of the swamps as ‘far below’, but she repeated the lines her teachers had given her to remember: *He who gazes at the stars as if they were above him, still gazes as one who lacks knowledge.*

She squinted from the effort of trying to set her own perceptions in the proper order much as a disoriented traveler might fight to convince himself that he was truly, as his compass suggested, heading straight west.

Would this be easier if I were right-side up? She wondered, suddenly distracted by a particularly brilliant green bolt of lightning in the distance.

This storm would be a fierce one and a sore trial for the souls below it. Angelee could have stopped the storm if only the thought had occurred to her. But she was no more interested in *stopping* the storm than the average nine-year-old hanging from a jungle-gym would be interested in *crushing* a butterfly that crossed before her eyes. The green roils and plasma arcs of the storm felt warm and homelike to her. As the storm sailed across the swamp sky she longed to bridge the space separating her from it and cuddle up in them to be comforted as if she were in a nest.

Far below that sky, however, the people of the swampland scattered and rallied in busy waves like agitated colonies of ants. Down there, the high rushes clattered against the heavy posts of the skeletal catwalks winding through the marshes. Amphibious war and burden beasts of myriad shape and size fretted in their stolid damp enclosures. The creatures were on

edge, their senses frantically heightened by the tumbling army-green skies. Men and women strangely resembling their reptilian aquatic livestock raced back and forth on catwalks among the low, bone-white domes of their dwellings. These dwellings had been *grown* in this land where building materials were all but nonexistent by the life-craft of their two Leaders, a direct product of their vision, their intent.

Each of the buildings, to enable and ensure survival within this unstable inhospitable landscape, had been fitted with an impermeable hatch to keep the swamp storms out. The goal of the commotion that now surged through the settlement was herding the animals into their waterproof barns to protect them from storms. The ripples in the clouds spoke of heavy winds away to the west. Soon the swell would descend, the entirety of the swamp drowned beneath ten fathoms or more of violent water. This was not the first time the settlers here had experienced such a flood; storms like the one now rapidly encroaching had occurred time and time again throughout their existence. Now it was integrated into the fabric that constituted their way of life. Once preparations were complete they would ride out the flood, safely tucked away in the comfort of their fabricated chambers and tunnels. It could be said that such times of epic storms had become a kind of relief from the constant vigilance that was required in their eternal state of war. In the days that would follow the squall feasts would be prepared from their carefully cultivated hoards of provisions and many songs would be sung about the brave whom had weathered the downpour.

A crack of dry lightning panicked a massive, fanged, six-legged beast with great leopard jaws as an old man struggled to hold him with a long leather and iron leash. The creature was bound and bent upon freedom, sensing the approaching storm to be other than the normal typhoon. With an archaic primal screech of angry terror it sprang clean over the fences and vanished into the gnarled wilderness of warped cypress trees and algae-coated bogs, dragging its hapless handler with it. His scream died like a foghorn into the phosphorescence-illuminated mists. The others within the pen strove to ignore his screams as they struggled to subdue a teenage boy attempting to climb the fence himself to give chase to his father. His screams were nearly as devastatingly tormented as that of his departed father as he thrashed in the pen beneath the restraint of surrounding villagers. Nearby an anti-tank rifle cracked twice as the lost beast's mate was put down to prevent further casualties.

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With a sudden pang of guilt Angelee checked to make sure John was okay. He was. Despite his threats he hadn't, she now *saw*, gone down to the swamps after all. He was still on this side of the veil between the two plains. She couldn't quite *see* him yet, but she could sense his presence not too far away. Angelee found a small comfort knowing he was probably tinkering with his stream and waiting for her to come down to the plains so they could cross back over together. With the storm rolling in that wouldn't happen for a while, though. The storm would need to run its course and she needed to observe it in order to learn from it. Each storm was distinctly different from the last, despite their rudimentary recognizable structure. She felt her hold on altered perception slip suddenly like a soap-slick glass bubble popping free of her fingers. In that instant Angelee lost her concentration on both John and the storm. She let out a cry of glee in the momentary liberating sense of floating reckless freedom. Out on the horizon in the opposite direction of the looming storm clouds a faint, yet eerily heavy, mind-bending surface wake glimmered in the void of nothingness.

Regaining her control she swung herself up onto the gelid, glowing bar she had been hanging from and climbed back into her fort. It was reminiscent of the basket of a hot air balloon, equipped with a pink pup tent and a sleeping bag decorated in a bizarre camouflage of stars and rainbows. Her stuffed giraffe was, of course, snugly secured there. Leaning against one of the sides of the enormous floating basket, as if it were a simple BB gun, was a flaming AK-47. Next to it, on the floor of the basket, was scattered a half-empty box of ammunition that she had been loading into clips before she climbed down to watch the storm.

This weapon, stashed there one Earth-Christmas, was, in fact, one of the most sought-after assault rifles in all the nexus of plains. Invented by the angels themselves as the evolution of the flaming sword, it had changed hands many times, and the flame-craft on its barrel was of a particularly mighty quality. Rounds fired from the lesser flaming firearms would merely burn a little when entering demonic flesh. This one, however, like a handful of its strongest brother and sister weapons, sowed fiery explosions when fired that would shatter stone and send permanent engraved ripples through the hardest tempered steel. As was becoming her trademark, Angelee had painted it pink and green. John now gave her boxes of ammunition for it the way a normal uncle might give his niece boxes of gummy bears. Each time, without fail, she would squeal with delight and run off giggling to

her fort. Some things, no matter how complicated on the exterior, were still perfectly, blissfully simple at the core.

Now she shouldered the neon paint-splattered firearm and propped the barrel, on the rim of her fort. She fired a few bursts out into space like signal flares.

“Hey! Hello you!” she called in her biggest voice, still high-pitched in girlish youth, “Come here!”

She let a few more signal bursts sear into the silence that followed. He’d heard her. A gaunt, draconian head breached out of the nothing. Had it rested its chin on land, that head alone would have filled the bulk of an eighty-acre field. However its aura gave it the presence of an entity far larger than even its visual appearance. When one looked upon it directly its mass appeared great enough to be far outreaching the area in which the onlooker actually existed as if one were *inside* it, reviewing a photocopy of itself preserved inside the institution of its own head. The head rose into view slowly, gently, always carefully keeping its face turned away from where Angelee perched. It focused out toward the celestial horizon as if the slightest careless glance might cause a tragedy. Behind the head came the armored rings that could have been the silhouette of a body or merely a neck. It was impossible to define where one began and the other ended.

The top and sides of the mammoth cosmic creature were scaled with deep, dark, translucent shades that transcended the full spectrum of natural light from red to violet. In stark contrast its underside was the fertile obsidian of deepest night, distinguishable from its surroundings only by a silken, sweet shimmer as if it moved through a vast body of volcanic ocean water. The dragon turned its midnight belly up toward Angelee like a colossal dog and she laughed. She knew this game well and opened full-automatic fire, raking piercing explosions up and down the monster’s hide as if the storied AK-47 were an apocalyptic massage-wand. The stabbing blasts left, of course, no mark and the beast emitted a low satisfied rumble.

Suddenly, though, it fell silent. The unintentional subconscious psychic static of its change in mood caused Angelee to shriek and drop to the floor of her fort, her arms wrapped around her head in panicked alarm. The utterly forgotten rifle clattered down beside her. As the beast sped away into the darkness she sobbed, terrified trickles of blood began to drip from her nostrils, ears, and the corners of her eyes. Through the interference of Leviathan’s wake and of her own trembling she could sense the vibration of John racing up the plasma nets and ladders toward her. From the edges

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of the nexus plains he had come in the signal of her distress, just as he had always come since her earliest memories of existence. She exhaled slowly and gathered herself. She knew she had to struggle to her feet and go to him before he did something stupid. Someone like him would likely be obliterated in the attempt to mount the upper reaches of that climb and he would not, of course, stop until he saw her safe. She shook her head, rolled over, and stuffed her giraffe into her military backpack as she sat up, slinging it over her shoulder as her blood pounded through her skull.

This would be a tough climb down.

CHAPTER 14

As she directed Marcus in among the tents, the mysterious lady John called “Queen” was a long, dark silhouette against the lurid, green glimmer that flickered up and down hollows underneath the grass. Marcus, still uncomfortable in her presence, was struggling to follow her and ignore her body at the same time. He soundlessly muttered gratitude for her long coat as he seized the opportunity to take in his new surroundings. There were no outdoor lights in the camp. The central pavilion was shrouded in darkness. The surrounding tents were almost half as large in diameter as the central structure. From the outer cluster a soft spider web pattern of light leaked causing the illusion that the tents were in fact vast, geodesic, bioluminescent membranes. Beneath one’s touch, however, it was revealed that they were actually constructed of a relatively ordinary fabric. It was lighter and of a tighter weave than canvas, but it was comfortingly similar enough.

She pulled back the flap of a small portal in one of the central tents and ushered Marcus inside. The carpet of grass continued inside the tent much as it had outside. If anything, it was far more lush and green. The air beneath the canopy was warm and humid as a greenhouse. The roughly dome-shaped space was almost entirely filled by three wooden cube buildings of various sizes. At first glance they reminded Marcus of log cabins, but he could see no chinks between logs. He inspected the nearest wall more closely and could not even find the thinnest of spaces between boards. The buildings looked as if they had been grown out of the grass right where they stood at which point they had been carved and planed into shape from a single piece of wood. Their polished surfaces glinted with sharp points of light reflected from densely spiraled strings of yellow lanterns hanging from the roof of the tent.

“It is hard,” she said, catching Marcus’s quizzical look, “even for creatures such as we to be always out under the primordial nothing. It is beautiful, certainly, but something about it has a way of... of eroding the mind over time.” She looked at Marcus and smiled wanly under the weight of her own words.

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“Here,” she continued, “there is a modicum of simple comfort and a chance to recharge. We even have running water. Hot running water.” She flashed her eyes in the direction of an intricate assemblage of copper piping crowned with a water tower that gleamed and hovered just below the crown of the tent. “The heat source is condensed cosmic plasma we gather, but the hot water itself feels ‘natural’ enough.” She glanced around the interior of the tent proudly. “John made all this, you know? He has really proved a master of blending the new arts we’ve taught him with his old builder’s craft.”

Marcus halted for a moment to feel the warmth and the coppery glimmer radiating out from the octopus structure. It filled the close air underneath the tent canopy with a slightly steamy, burnt tinge, which Marcus found welcoming. He suddenly noticed that the night outside had begun to chill as he had walked down the slope from the edge of this world. A new low, warm, amber light fluttered out of the nearest cabin as the woman opened the door and walked in. The close-fitting lines of her combative clothes made for an odd contrast with the rustic room. Inside the tent, she seemed to have unconsciously, Marcus intuited, become slightly less “silent”. However, the aura around her was still fuzzy and faint as if he beheld it from a great distance.

The interior walls were the same polished, golden wood as the exterior. Soft-looking globules set into nooks in the walls were filled it with a mixture of dim green, yellow and orange light that reminded Marcus of the lights he had seen dancing over the encampment the day before. The room, not more than twelve feet on a side, was furnished only with cushions, a plush plum rug, and a low wooden table, which also appeared to have been expertly crafted from a single enormous piece of wood. The ceiling soared at a surprising height above the comparatively small floor. It was mostly obscured by a loft that grew out of three of the walls like a wooden version of a ledge on a stone cliff, which could be reached by a ladder of deep steps carved into the wall to Marcus’s right.

Despite the intriguing details of his new surroundings Marcus’s gaze was primarily preoccupied with the strange comic book goddess who wandered about tidying up like room service. The realization of his fascination with her thoroughly annoyed him. Her untouchable supermodel beauty combined with the motherly warmth of her movements in a way that made Marcus’s skeptical senses feel as if they were under attack. He

recovered a little bit of control as he put his finger on what it was about her that was bothering him.

Once the energy patterns around her came into view, watching this woman was like looking at a hologram. For all her grace and aesthetic perfection, she seemed, somehow, to be constantly assembling herself hastily from all angles, by means of faint arcs connecting her to the shadows the low, colored light cast. She lacked the focus of identity that Marcus, in his recent brief demonic stint on the physical plain, had seen in even the simplest mortal women. This “woman” was not what she appeared to be. Some monstrous air of a fairytale shape-shifter was at work.

He tried to focus on these thoughts as he watched her pull out folded clothes made of black material similar to that of her own, and arrange them next to a pile of towels. He felt suddenly ashamed as if this creature were simply too beautiful for such petty, rough dissection. Yet, he could not shake the unsettling wariness silently screaming that something was simply not right about her.

He shook his head in an effort to clear the fog from it and looking at the towels, felt suddenly filthier and wearier than he had ever felt, in this life or in any other. When he heard the squeak of a heavy faucet and the slosh of water falling into a bathtub he decided to make for the sanctuary of that bathtub, whatever the cost. In fact, in a sudden wave of haze that made him sway a little where he stood, he all but gave up thinking and decided not to care about anything else until he’d washed and changed. So when the mysteriously monstrous beauty pranced back to the front room, clapped her hands once in front of her and said, “There! Meet us in the cabin across the alley in an hour!” He accepted her cheerfulness at face value and shuffled obediently to the tub, turning only briefly to see her close the front door on the way out.

Alone he sighed and drank in the brief moment of solitude. Globes of orange light lushly illuminated the large polished copper tub, making the metal to appear to float above the black flagstone floor. With its plumbing exposed outside the walls, it reminded Marcus of some strange Victorian machine that he had perhaps dreamed of long ago. So much of this world was built with its internal plumbing exposed still, so to speak. Marcus wondered if that were intentional or if, one day, walls would be constructed to conceal the mechanical workings of the world. Mortals were highly adept at the fabrication of such deceptive veils, as were the entities residing in Hell. He had yet to meet an angel or set foot in Heaven, but he had the

sneaking suspicion that they were perhaps the most adept of all. Despite the constant needling unease he experienced here, he did appreciate the raw, unfinished aspect the plane proudly boasted. A world of strange contradictions in which even trees had yet to be realized, but copper piping and hot water were readily available was one he oddly sympathized with. However, he knew in his blackened soul, if the Queen was not what she appeared to be, the danger of lingering here too long was one he was wise enough not to embrace.

A freestanding dressing mirror stood nearby framed in the same golden wood the walls were made of, its face already steamed over. He dipped a hand into the glassine surface of the water. Marcus decided it was possibly hot enough to scour away the layer of grime that had come to feel like part of his skin. He stripped away the shredded rags, the remains of the same clothes he had worn for years in the oubliettes, and slid through the glimmering surface tension of the water. It was a physical luxury he had come to believe he would never experience again. Seized fast by the penetrating heat, he lay with his eyes closed, submerged with the water up to his chin. It was a long time before he could muster the resolve to push himself slightly up and look down at his own naked body. When he did, it brought his sensory reverie to an end.

He saw that his body, which had always been in his mortal life pale and slightly soft and bony, was now also a moonscape of long, deep scars. Even his demonic ability to survive the wounds inflicted by the oubliette guardians could not erase the evidence of his pain. He shuddered, throwing his head back and closing his eyes as a flash-memory of his warped quasi-eternity in the oubliettes shot through his nerves. Keeping his eyes closed, he rallied his panicking conscious mind and tried to force the flashback to dissolve. Finally, with the agonizing slowness of a leg cramp relaxing, the horrific images vanished. A semblance of control began to return to him and his shuddering muscles began to loosen. He was unknowably far from those obsidian bowels of agony.

He was safe, or so he could make himself think, in a warm bath in a place where substantial reality itself displayed an inclination to yield and bend to his will. As a demon he had shaped whole worlds in the blink of an eye in the marches of Hell, but somehow what he could do here felt so different. It felt like it mattered. And he wondered at this feeling, for in his early demonic days he had all but convinced himself that reality was perception and perception was reality. He still heard the ring of truth in

this saying, but he knew now that it could not be true in the simple way he had once imagined. If it were indeed the truth, then his understanding of “perception” was still too juvenile for him to even begin the comprehension of that truth.

Comprehension may come and it may not, the words floated from himself to himself across his steamy mind, Fortunately action does not always require comprehension.

As a young demon he had learned to create scenes and illusions. Now he was learning to *create*. The nuzzling, spiraling presence he had felt out on the grass earlier in the night had found its way into the bathroom. It wanted to play. Allowing his thoughts to funnel to the back of his skull and begin a journey down his spinal column, he focused on his traumatized flesh, trying to dominate his memories of the oubliettes and reverse them, trying to use them as tools for erasing their physical inscriptions on his body. The memories fluttered like leaves before his will. He drove them mercilessly from his subconscious into the light of his mind’s eye. He burned through them, taking care only to save a handful of images, a collection of information that he could control but that would not control him. His whole body began to tingle, as if his capillaries had begun pumping the very radiant gel that lit this place. He felt a tremendous decompression and hydration in the tissue of his body as the unseen claws of stiffness that had gripped his nerves for so long began to melt away.

When he came to the water in the tub was getting tepid. He opened his eyes and stared down at his body. To his amazement, most of the deep scars that had crisscrossed his chest like canals seen from space had vanished. He blinked and did a double take at his legs; they seemed to be slightly longer and more powerful than they had been. In fact, the muscles throughout his core seemed to have hardened. He marveled at the transformation with the knowledge that his own conscious power had manifested these evolutions to his physical form. While he could not dismiss or deny that his “true face” was most likely as gnarled and twisted as Desiderium’s from his years of pain, he was content to embrace this new form and its power.

Weird, he thought, but not all bad.

There was something troubling, though, about the new alterations that brought his moment of self-congratulations to an abrupt end. As he studied his new body he noticed that, from certain angles when the play of light on the water was just right, he could swear he glimpsed the copper bottom of the tub right through his own limbs.

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I'd better be really careful if I'm going to do any more messing with myself, especially subconsciously, he noted.

He sighed knowing full well that his warning to himself was impossible to heed. How, after all, did one keep an “eye” on one’s invisible subconscious self-manipulations? He was pretty sure his subconscious would find a way to destroy him.. Shaking his head to clear it, he inspected his arms and found more of the same subtle changes toward an eerie, translucent length and strength. Finally his gaze came to rest on his hands, the hands that had, back when he was human, pounded a man to death in an insane fit. There he saw that he did not yet have power over all scars. The remains of the cuts the man’s glasses and teeth had left on his knuckles were still as pale and bright as ever. His fingernails, however, once stripped away in Hell’s oubliettes, had grown back. But they had grown back hard, sharp and white. Not the watery translucent white of mortal nails, but the deadly porcelain white of feral teeth. He was suddenly certain that whatever rebirth his induction into this community may have signified for him, his demonic days were not behind him. Studying his new claws the thought skipped across his mind, like a stone across a pond, that perhaps he did not entirely want them to be, either.

In spite of the steamy warmth that still lingered around him reflected in the illuminated metal, he shivered. He leaned forward to grab the heavy, rustic faucet and started extra hot water running into the tub. Then he finished washing and, slipping and sliding a little too humanly on the steep curves of the unfamiliar tub, found his way to his feet on the cool floor. As he toweled off, he inspected the clothes laid out for him. They were all jet black and appeared to be designed for submersion in water. As he dressed, he found that every piece of them, except for the long overcoat, was indeed as close-fitting as a superbly tailored wet suit. Wearing them seemed to make him feel more agile than he’d ever felt before. He was just about to step out to find the others when he paused and turned back towards the mirror.

He picked up his discarded towel and wiped the steam off of its cool, smooth surface. He was greeted by a slight grin that he hadn’t been aware that he was wearing. It was a cold grin, one that curled his mouth in a way that suggested a mouthful of fangs may lay below. His hair had grown out slightly. It hung like a wet veil in front of his eyes until he brushed it aside. The face that was revealed was only half-familiar to him now. It had been years since he had seen his own reflection, but the memory he had of

himself from his day as a demon upon Earth had been sharp and cold and calculating, a demon on a mission to fulfill his new position to the utmost of his abilities and assigned responsibilities. There was a certain greenish glimmer now mixed into his irises that looked more than a touch playful and inquisitive. The glow was youthful and eager and slightly intoxicated. Around his eyes, however, remained deeply etched lines.

“Where the hell am I going with myself?” he muttered and turned away from the mirror to step toward the night.

The air outside the cabin was still warm and close below the tent canopy, but after most of an hour spent in a steaming bathroom, it was jarringly crisp. He pushed his wet hair back behind his ears and reoriented himself. From the doorway he faced the blank side of another wooden building that, along with the front of his, formed a short grassy lane. Down to his left was the dark canvas entrance to the overarching tent. The right led to a central green lawn shared by the three buildings. The spider web of lanterns hanging from the tent canopy sowed glimmering reflections on the polished wood of the wall in front of him. A deep glow seeped out over the lacquer that seemed to come from a light source in the central lawn. Though he could not see or hear them, the heavy sensation of other beings residing just beyond his physical senses pressed down upon his psyche with a precocious needling. The fine hairs on the back of his neck bristled like a hyena’s hackles as he repressed the urge to call out to them and demand they reveal themselves.

Marcus clicked the door shut behind him. The water tower’s support posts stood in a ring around the open lawn turning it into a glade of copper trees. Held aloft in their bows, above the center of the lawn were two tanks, presumably holding water, but looking a little like alien clouds of metallic ooze. The lower, smaller of the two was attached to a glowing heating element beneath. It was from this that the brightest light in the place emanated, nearly lurid in its ginger intensity. Networks of copper pipes stretched out from each tank and vanished into one another and the walls of each building. The organic, meandering way in which they were routed reminded Marcus of the vines of a massive Amazonian plant. Indeed, it appeared as though the lawn was under the scrutiny of a giant jellyfish.

Marcus might have smiled at this observation, but at that moment his senses, which seemed to be operating at a higher level of resolution than ever, detected a surge of anger and deep concern creeping into the tent sanctuary like snakes winding through deep lush grass. His hosts must have

felt it too, for there was a tremendous urgency in their movements as they stepped in unison out of their own two-story cabin toward the lawn. The King, his physical features now more closely resembling a living breathing human being, though still in a state of true perfection, was dressed in the same chic military style as his Queen. He stopped and stood still near the center of the lawn, looking expectantly toward the tent entrance behind Marcus, his sleek, fine blond hair wavering softly in the breeze.

But there is no breeze! Marcus hissed to himself, noting again that he had been unaware entirely of the King's presence within the tent. A vision flashed suddenly before his mind's eye. The elegant, svelte male figure before him was a mask on the visible face of a much larger entity, one that dwelled deeply behind the scenes. Sinister tentacles spiraled out from the creature's shoulder blades, prehensile arcs of gray-green shadow molesting the light around them in a sickening manner. The man turned his eyes from the tent flap for a moment and met Marcus's gaze as if he had sensed Marcus's perception of his true identity. Fighting to keep the strangling tidal wave of fear, nausea and animosity concealed, Marcus steeled himself, reinforcing the guard around his psyche as he met the King's piercing stare unflinchingly.

Inside, however, Marcus quaked with fear in a way he had not experienced in ages. *No*, he decided as he attempted to process what he had just witnessed. *It wasn't a creature behind him, exactly. The tendrils weren't exactly monstrous.* Or were they? The King was somehow at the center of time-space itself, lines of a past journey that wove such intense violence into the fabric of the present that they glimmered darkly before Marcus's demon sight in the form of the snaking tentacles he had seen. He was both confused and terrified as the realization of the cataclysmic trauma that would have been necessary to create such a manifestation. What was this thing that walked and talked, presenting itself to the universe in the guise of a "man"? It was certainly not of Heaven, Hell or anything in between. The King had said as much of himself, but now Marcus understood. The man tilted his head inquisitively at Marcus for a moment. He narrowed his eyes slightly as he considered the demon suspiciously, before turning his gaze back to the tent entrance. With a shuddering sigh of relief Marcus felt as if a spell had been broken as he now stared at the very living statue of a godlike soldier watching out for danger. Suddenly ashamed, he wondered if the unnerving sight hadn't merely been another case of what he'd come to call "interference-visions". These hallucinations, spawned by the troubled

interplay of his faculties, his memory, imagination and the dim-but-penetrating preoccupation system called instinct, had accelerated as the raw firepower of his total perceptive and imaginative apparatus increased.

Besides, he looked around and cursed himself sarcastically for his carelessness, just look at the shadows these spooky fucking pipes are causing. It's no wonder I start seeing the whole world around me as haunted by monstrous tentacles. Perfect! He admonished himself, but the sarcasm quickly faded, *Especially, because I might have just seen truth...* The moment of peace in the bathtub had done him good, he thought, but there could be no further relaxation of vigilance from here on out.

John's great green claw erupted through the tent's entrance tearing great slashes in the canvas flap as he rushed inside. His human arm he used to cradle Angelee tightly against him, who clung to him with her face buried in the crevice between his enormous biceps and his chest. Trickle of vivid crimson blood painted thin lines against her pale skin as the serpents of John's wrath against the pale backdrop of her hair.

In spite of the rage boiling out of him, John's voice trembled weakly as he said simply, "I don't know what to do."

The Queen swept down from her perch on the cabin doorstep and flowed to John's side. She said nothing. With a motherliness that could possibly shelter the world filling her eyes, she lifted Angelee from the crook of his arm and swept her inside the cabin from which she had emerged. As soon as Angelee was in someone else's care and out of sight John's voice changed completely.

As he crossed the grassy gap between himself and his King slowly. Steadily working up to a run like a bull he growled a single word, "Motherfucker!"

He punctuated the word with a ferocious uppercut at the center of the taller man's face. Reacting sluggishly, like a man coming out of a deep journey through some distant memory, the King received the full intent of the punch. His head snapped back. Firing the same hand again, like a second round from a semiautomatic rifle, John struck the King's stomach. Blood burst from the slighter man's nose and mouth as he exhaled with the blow and reeled backwards. John left his feet, seemingly intent on driving him into the earth with his boulder chest. However, the King was no longer the fool and was beginning to move like lightning, his laughter rising like a whooping crane. John wasn't joining the laugh. He was now fully airborne

and almost horizontal, with one shoulder about to drive into his opponent's chest. The King pirouetted back and to one side, spinning John back into a vertical position with a blindingly sharp blow to the jaw.

Marcus was astounded to see John catch his balance as he landed on his feet, though he was wobbling. His lithe opponent spun whimsically as if the fight were merely a jovial game and slapped John across the side of the head. The force of the blow was such that even Marcus felt it like a percussive wave in the damp air. John staggered and collapsed, first to a single knee before sinking back on his haunches. For a long silent moment he wavered drunkenly there, glaring down at the ground, as if violently daring it to invite him to fall further. His eyes seemed to threaten to break the very bones of this strange plane if they didn't release him from their gravity and let him up. Slowly, he straightened, but it became clear that the fight had left him. There was a soft but sickening crunch as the King idly reset his own broken nose. He then took to a knee and blew blood from his nostrils onto the grass. When he rose his face showed no further sign of disfigurement or discomfort, his former pristine beauty reconfigured. He turned to John and laid a brotherly, steadying hand on one bearish, swaying shoulder.

"She's been up here too long," John said, looking dizzily at the ground, "and you know it."

"John... John," the perfect harmonic voice replied, "I do know it. How could I not? But where would you have me move her to? The Lands Far Below? True, they were a home to us for a long time and I miss the labyrinth of the swamps and sandstone cliffs dearly, more dearly than you could ever know. But now already they are becoming wrapped in storm the likes of which they've never seen, and soon they'll be wrapped in war. Would you have Angelee learn to weather such storms so young? Down on the plains of Upper Purgatory, then, perhaps? True, her mind would be more sheltered from the depths of chaos there, but you know how closely that land is watched now. Would you have her take her chances there? Do you really want her father to find her?"

There was a sharp reminder lurking in the word "father". John winced at it, as if he'd considered this reminder many times before. For a tense moment, Marcus thought John might try to throw another punch, though he doubted that the bear of a man would even be able to punch the air in his current state without falling down. John only muttered a reply in the listless tone of one going through the motions of a debate long turned stale.

“The physical plane,” John said, “It’s not so...translucent...as everywhere else. There are still places to hide there. I know some of them, in a way that you don’t. You’ve never lived there or even been there. I have. Trust me. Just about this one thing, trust me...but you won’t, will you? I suppose I already know that.”

As he trailed off, it became clear that John’s care had got the better of his anger. He was looking right past the King as if he were an insignificant stranger who’d asked him if he was someone he wasn’t. He focused now on the soft light in the doorway that Angelee had vanished through.

“John,” sighed the King, placing his hand on John’s head and running his fingers through his mane of shaggy hair.

John continued to stare past his face toward the doorway.

“John, you really don’t believe me when I warn you about what a trip to the physical plane might do to her, do you?” He straightened up and began to pace, like a military commander cursing himself for wasting too much time indulging sentimentality, “It’s almost dawn, the easiest time for making the crossing down to Purgatory proper. Be somewhat comforted, John. You and Angelee needn’t go with us this time. It is time for others to test their potential.”

He stepped back over to John and put a hand on one of his cheeks, “Lay aside your other projects and focus on tending to her. Keep her down here away from her fort as best you can and use the creativity in that big head of yours to build her something that will help her heal.”

At that moment, the Queen emerged through the door of the cabin. Her long hair was down out of the ponytail, softly disheveled. Her eyes were dovelike, revealing startling human dark shadows of deep weariness around them. With both hands she was, almost comically in a certain melancholy way, carrying Angelee’s stuffed giraffe. The giraffe gazed dejectedly, but resolutely ahead.

“She’s fine, John,” she said, “The waves of chaos are high tonight for some reason, but I’ve whispered in among them and set strong levies. She’ll sleep cleanly for a few hours. After that, you’ll have work to do. We,” she gestured at Marcus and the King, “still need to travel with the dawn. Something out there in the waves tells me that we can’t afford to waste another daybreak.”

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All present could see John's shoulders unfold with relief as he nodded. He rose sluggishly and stepped toward the cabin. As he passed the woman he reached out his hand idly to collect the errant giraffe.

"Actually, John," she held tightly to the giraffe. Her eyes glittered back to life a bit even through her obviously great weariness, "The main reason I came out to speak was that Angelee charged me with a solemn errand and refused to rest until I'd carried it out. Marcus!" She called, turning to face him across the lawn, "Angelee insists that you take her giraffe with you on this morning's journey."

Marcus walked dumbly across the grass to honor the madcap request. He wouldn't have known what to make of it in the best of times. He was still processing the fight he had just witnessed and the conversation that had followed.

John stepped towards Marcus, grasping hold of Marcus's forearm before it touched the plush toy and whispered, "Be careful with that thing. It's not at all what it seems." Without another word, John walked away, wearily lumbering into the cabin where Angelee rested.

Marcus frowned, his hand frozen in mid-air, the ghost weight of John's heavy large hand still warm on his forearm. Was anything here what it seemed? Still, Marcus noted silently to himself, it was good to be reminded from time to time. The King's tone had been condescending in a way that deeply irritated Marcus, and made it painfully hard for him to turn his attention to anything else. Something about apparently unassailable power had always irritated him, however noble or benevolent that power might be. He had noticed one thing that comforted the anarchist in him, John had struck only with his human hand. His monstrous claw had been tucked carefully behind his lower back throughout the confrontation. Was this "King", with all his laughing and comforting, perhaps too trapped in arrogance to mark what this meant?

Or was he simply too formidable a fighter to have any reason to spend conciliatory lip service reinforcing that sort of restraint? Marcus, at any rate, was aware that John's loyal self-control hadn't really snapped yet, not by a long shot. The demonic instinct that told him when a soul was ripe for collection, however, told him that John's point of no return had been close at hand this night. Something almost like a static shock derailed Marcus's covert train of thought, causing him to flinch as he took hold of the giraffe. Reflexively, he jerked the plush animal away from the woman in a way that caused two of her nails to lightly graze one of his hands. They cut like

razorblades, causing tiny drops of blood to ooze from a pair of faint white parallel lines.

The energy around the stuffed toy itself suddenly seemed more troubling than comforting. *Are we all monsters here?* Marcus wondered, but most of his mind was still preoccupied with something the King had said to John: It's time for others to test their potential. Impending trial and doom was a sensation he was unfortunately becoming all too acquainted with -- like a demented lover he couldn't quit. He held the giraffe up facing him and gazed into its beady, plastic brown eyes. He tried and failed to suppress a mad grin. At least this time he wouldn't be facing the test alone.

CHAPTER 15

So serene, so tranquil, his apparent state of sleep was ironically iconic as if it had been lifted directly from the still of a long forgotten fairytale silent film. Conscious and animated, Lucifer's physical manifestation possessed a terrifying elegance to it, so perfectly constructed from his worshipers' memories of his former angelic beauty and distilled over the eons of every possible physical flaw that it brought one to their knees. It was an unnatural beauty, living and breathing independently of his own essence, a replica of his intention he stepped into for pure self-gratifying pleasure. His interpretation of life was a malignant radiation, hostile and venomous as a Venusian cloud and devoid of even the slightest residual trace of humility, empathy or sympathy. What was once perhaps a sad attempt at artistic license the recreation of his physical glory had made of his beauty a mercilessly precise weapon he now basely took for granted.

Brenda had quaked, her fear resonating through her bones like a volcanic tremor when Steve had presented her to his Master for inspection, unable even to glance briefly upon Lucifer's haunting visage. If it had not been for Steve's hand supporting her by the upper arm, forcing her to remain standing, she would have collapsed, throwing herself prostrate upon the cold black shale beneath her as the final threads of her sanity dissolved into quicksand. From where she had summoned the courage to cling to her resolve of survival she could not fathom, but despite her rapidly slipping memory of her own mortal past there remained within her an ember of something slightly resembling strength.

The introduction had been disturbingly silent as the Devil had looked her over with a vaguely lecherous interest, his gaze stripping away her every defense to reveal the soft underbelly of her essence. She found herself profoundly grateful that her recollection of the religious literature she had consumed in life was naught more than water vapor when she went in search of it, the horrific passages of Hell and damnation a vague screech of dismay echoing from the chambers of her memory. There was no denying the entity that stood before her now for every ounce of her being recognized him on a primal, primordial level. However, what was to become of her within the labyrinth of this strange realm she had awoken to

was a complete mystery to her. Ignorance might have possibly been bliss, but it was not a bliss without the realization that, in this case, what she did not know could most definitely kill her in unmentionable ways.

“She will do,” Lucifer remarked quietly.

With one forefinger he forced Brenda to lift her head. She winced as the spark of electricity transferred through her chin as his flesh connected with her. Her trembling intensified until she thought she might lose control of her limbs in an epileptic fit. She squeezed her eyes shut until star bursts of purple and blue exploded behind them, her forehead and tear-streaked cheeks aching from the effort.

“If this is the one you have chosen to bear your child, I will allow it,” he said approvingly.

His hand dropped from her chin as he took a step closer to her. Brenda felt her throat beginning to close as she stifled a scream of terror. She wanted to turn towards Steve and bury her face in his neck, but her instincts refused, knowing he was not the human man she had fallen in love with. The solid, heavy sensation of Lucifer’s hand pressing against her belly caused bile to force its way up through her strangling throat, the shock of the sparks of energy igniting from the tips of his long fingers like a blazing branding iron, ripping into the flesh beneath her blouse. She slumped slightly in Steve’s grip as her eyes rolled back in her head from shock, a shuddering sob escaping through her clenched teeth.

“She is strong enough to endure the creation.” Lucifer released her stomach and stepped away. “She may even survive long enough to be of use to you after. You’ve chosen wisely, Belial.”

Belial... She still could not bring herself now to call him by his true name and, thus, she continued with the masquerade of “Steve”. Brenda stared down into the semi-opaque crystalline sarcophagi of antimatter that housed Lucifer’s treasured shell, repressing the urge to spit. Sleep was an illusion, she knew all too well; her every thought, her every move, her every urge or instinct he could hear and would not hesitate to strike her down for her insubordination. It was still tempting though, for the pleasure she would take in that one small gesture of spite for the violence she had endured at the hands of Steve. She no longer feared the physical pain or even the spiritual torment. All he had done had not broken her as he might have desired, but instead had tempered her into a numb shell of steel. He had created of her a feral, hardened creature whose desire for death trumped

her desire for any modicum of resolution or truce that would allow her a vague sense of “normalcy”, for she knew no such concept would or could ever exist here in Hell.

There was a hollow understanding between them, though, an unspoken realization that, while Lucifer might tire of her and send her down into the pit of the boiling tar ocean of souls, Steve would never take it to that point. She had heard his titles, heard demons beneath him addressed him with a terror-stricken humility laced with resentment. He had reigned for eons, since nearly the beginning of humanity itself, an expansive span of time that caused him to deny ever being human himself at one point. However, when she sat beside him, his indentured bruised consort, in the times when the din of their threats towards one another subsided and a moment of stillness allowed breath to be drawn slowly, he deferred to her with a warped representation of respect. He had obviously chosen her for some reason other than merely the bearing of a child, for any mortal could complete such a mechanical biological process. He was not about to destroy her. Steve would never admit that, though. He would never allow her the luxury of comfort in knowing her importance. She tucked the knowledge away in her soul, spinning a silken cocoon around it for future use when she was strong enough.

For a brief moment in time in the wake of the birth of their child, a distant sense of hope had returned to her like the sight of land to a lost sailor. Angelee had been a beautiful creature, possessing an inner radiance that caused Brenda to question how she could possibly be the product of a demonic union, consecrated with a violent bloody rape and blessed by the Devil himself. Like a single shaft of sunlight breaking through a wall of black hurricane clouds, Angelee’s existence had shown Brenda that there was still a life beyond Hell, that the power that reigned in the underworld was not all-encompassing or omnipotent. Steve had prowled about the perimeter of the room in the hours after Angelee’s birth with a panther’s predatory suspicion -- as if he might eat the child alive. Brenda had clutched the tiny infant to her bare breasts, watching the demon and trying to remember how to pray as the faceless specter midwife hissed a blessing, floating around the altar cleaning the blood from Brenda’s thighs and preserving the afterbirth for future rituals.

“Gloria Satanas, et Belial et Spiritui maloso. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.” *Glory be to Satan and Belial and to the Evil Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and*

ever shall be, world without end. Amen. The midwife reached forward, extending one long bony red finger towards Brenda's forehead. Brenda did not even blink, so focused upon Belial that she dared not divert her attention for a mere second.

The midwife's curved yellow nail dug into the flesh of Brenda's forehead. Slowly she scratched an inverted pentagram into the sweat-salty skin. "*Satanas vobiscum.*" *Satan be with you.*

The pain from the marking was excruciating, radiating inwards through her skull from her third eye until she threw her head back and howled aloud like a wolf caught in a steel trap.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo.*" *And with thy spirit.* The midwife retrieved the steel box containing the placenta and rippled into nothingness as if slipping through the surface of a river.

In her arms Angelee had howled along with her mother, obviously disconcerted by the powerful darkness that gathered around them. Through the pain a clarity had ignited. An echoing finality locked into place as if a series of iron doors were being violently slammed shut one at a time down a spiraling corridor from the marking on her forehead, through her center to the shredded hollow tomb of her womb. The birth of this child had cemented Brenda's place in the hierarchy of Hell.

Steve had desired progeny; a creature to carry within it the legacy of his own power, something that he could cultivate and manipulate to become his ultimate predecessor. As with all things born of chaos, the true nature of this child could not be anticipated—by him or the council of Satanic seers he consulted. Perhaps if he had not been so utterly preoccupied with his fixation on the occupation of Purgatory, Lucifer himself might have noticed the deviant spirit gathering within Brenda. And so, for whatever divine reason—whether quickened from the darkness or the light—they had all ignored the many signs that now appeared so very obvious after the fact. Regardless, Steve continued to believe that no matter what adverse reaction he had to her initial birth, his young were destined to reign amongst the upper echelons of Hell. He believed she would ascend to greatness no other demon except perhaps himself and Mammon had ever achieved.

Brenda would have died to protect Angelee, but Steve had convinced her that her instinctual mother's guard was not enough to ensure the survival of their young. Angelee required a detail of demons at all times, especially during a period of epic planar wars. It was difficult to argue with

such logic, which at the time seemed so incredibly reasonable for Brenda was still young within the world of the damned. The scope of the wars that waged outside of Hell was of such a scale she could barely comprehend. The vast complexity of their nature or the ultimate implications of the success or failure of the campaign Lucifer insisted on waging was based in concepts of reality even her own solid religious upbringing failed to grasp. Steve had at one time attempted to explain the intricacies to her but she felt like a toddler attempting to understand calculus. All she had known, from her brief and limited observation, was that Lucifer and the Legions did not appear even close to victory, which meant that the opposition was of a nature beyond the control of Hell's greatest powers. It was a concept she shuddered to consider. When news of Angelee's abduction had reached them, she could have ripped Steve limb from limb. Even now, nine long years later, she found herself wanting to eviscerate him slowly, cruelly.

The air within the room was icy, her breath forming small puffs of white condensation in the eerie illumination of the twin torches of blue phosphorescence suspended without physical restraint a few feet above and to either side of Lucifer's crystal coffin. Brenda crossed her left arm over her stomach as one of her most recent physical scars began to ache in the cold, her bare feet nearly freezing to the stone beneath them within the tiny antechamber just off the side of Lucifer's private chambers. The only reason the guards had allowed her entrance to the room at all was out of their respect for their superior, Belial, as he was now the direct channel for their Dark Master. To disobey Belial or treat his consort insolently was to directly disrespect Lucifer himself in their eyes.

Saliva pooled in her mouth as her teeth ground together. Tiny blue flames ignited around the base of Lucifer's tomb suddenly, sparking and spreading like a gas line as a warning to her. She tilted her head back, preparing herself for the consequences of her next action. The flames rose higher, scorching the hem of her long black silken gown delicately embroidered with the mark of the Beast along the sleeves and bodice line. She cared not if she burned and stood her ground even as the stench of sizzling fabric reached her flared nostrils, her toes feeling the effects of frostbite from the arctic ice of the subzero flames.

However, before the spittle could leave her throat, a hand grabbed her hair at the base of her skull and yanked her back. The force of the movement lifted her from her feet, flinging her across the room into the barren gray wall behind with a sickening crack. For a second the flames raged, bursting

up from the floor to lick the stone ceiling high above before vanishing with the faintest wisp of hissing white steam. Blood filled Brenda's mouth as Steve's slow methodical steps closed the distance between them. He squatted down in front of her and watched her for a moment in silence.

"Are you really that stupid a creature?" Steve said with a hint of disgust. "I don't really know why I still keep you around."

Brenda tossed her head back and spat her mouthful of blood into his smirking conceit. She smiled, watching the blood drip down his cheeks. "If I can't spit upon him, you are the next best thing. I'll tell you exactly why you *keep me around*." Leaning back against the wall behind her as she waited for his next attack. "Because I'm the mother of your fucking child, that's why. Because for some fucking reason, out of all of the women on Earth, you chose me and if you killed me now, you'd be admitting you were wrong." She drew a deep, low breath as she felt her wounds beginning to heal. The longer she stayed within the realm of Hell, she felt herself mutating as if slowly evolving into a demonic creature of her own creation. "We couldn't possibly have that be the case, could we?"

Steve licked the blood from his lips and narrowed his eyes, the smirk widening into a homicidal smile. Since the exchange of power he no longer attempted to completely disguise his true nature behind the human guise he had seduced her with, the two prominent saber tusks curving out from beneath his upper lip as ram's horns spiraled from his temples through the mane of shaggy brown hair left over from his image of "Steve". The disfigurements were not as terrifying to Brenda as the change that had happened to his eyes, the pupils now a deep ruby red surrounded by irises of brilliant flame gold, the whites now black and bloodshot. When she stared into them she felt like she was falling into the mouth of an angry volcano. Try as she might, she could not remember the sensually wicked bedroom brown eyes that had held the power to lure her away from her every responsibility with the slightest playful glance.

"I like your arrogance," he said quietly. In a flash he reached out and grabbed her by both shoulders, pulling her towards him until their noses touched. Staring into her fierce, frightened gaze he growled, "It's quite... erotic."

She squeezed her eyes shut as she braced herself for one of the legendary assaults she had grown accustomed to. Gone was the passionate lovemaking she had come to crave with a narcotic addiction in her mortal life. Back then her skin itched when she went without his touch for too

long. Since Angelee's abduction he took what he wanted, when he wanted it and often in the most brutal, violent ways he could imagine, as if he were punishing her for the loss of their child. He savored the knowledge that she was well aware of how powerless she was to stop him. It was completely inconceivable to her why he would torment her so in the face of the horrific pain she was already condemned to as she mourned, but after a time she had begun to wonder if in fact she might somehow have been responsible.

Had she lured something to them, somehow alerted Lucifer's enemies to the whereabouts of the child, even though Angelee's presence should have been well concealed within his Dark Majesty's domain? It was possible, she had finally decided. After all, she had possessed a quality that had caught the attention of the Prince of Wickedness himself. Perhaps there were entities outside of Hell, or even within it, that were stronger than even Lucifer himself. She shuddered to dare even imagine such a creature and the concept of her child in its hands was all too much to bear.

"Do what you will," she whispered into Steve's face. "You always do. Don't you, Steve?"

Steve's grip on her shoulders intensified until she thought he might shatter the sockets to bone dust. "My name is *Belial*!"

With a snarl he tossed her back away from him and stood. "You're such a victim," he growled as he stared down at her. Turning on his heel he stormed from the chamber. "You disgust me."

Scrambling to her feet Brenda chased after him. She ducked past the towering black, insectoid demons stationed to either side of the doorway, each clutching long spears of tempered titanium between the armored fingers of their six hands. Her heart thundered in her ears as she followed him back to Lucifer's observational office where Belial now spent the majority of his time. The walls of the empty hallway were constructed of a malicious glistening blood-red substance that appeared to breathe and bleed when illuminated by the hovering globes of phosphorescent light intermittently existing at intervals down the corridor. As the light faded between, the surface of the walls seemed to solidify, glossing over like hardened magma, proving the living energy of the structure itself, feeding constantly upon the torment of the souls beyond its perimeter. Up ahead of her Belial strode with a slow methodical impatience over the polished black marble, each step echoing deafeningly off of the arched ceiling, though his feet never quite made contact with the stone below. Still several

feet behind, Brenda diminished her pace to match his, following silently as he passed over the threshold to the observation chamber.

"I am no victim," she replied, hovering in the doorway as she watched Belial standing before Lucifer's elaborate throne. Claspings his hands behind his back, he stood perfectly motionless, as he did for hours on end since the exchange of power, facing the wall of leaden windows overlooking the roiling ocean of damned, listening to the chorus of torture hundreds of feet below.

"Did you hear me?" Brenda demanded.

"I wonder if he'll find her?" Belial said absently, the words hissing across the sea to some strange distant shore.

Brenda's pulse stopped for a brief moment, her throat tightening painfully as if a cold iron rod slid down her windpipe. Her gaze dropped to the floor as a small fissure in the shell around her soul cracked open. Squeezing her eyes shut, she curled her fingers into fists until her nails sliced deep, bloody half-moons in her palms.

"He's not looking for her?" Brenda replied in barely more than a whisper.

"Not directly, no, but there is a great likelihood that whoever, whatever, is holding us at bay might also have Angelee," he replied, his tone darkening as severe arcs of vertical orange lightning crackled from the dark green-gray clouds obscuring the red sky above.

"What? Why haven't you said anything to me?" With careful, cautious steps she entered the room, tip-toeing around the perimeter to catch a glimpse at his profile, trying to gauge his expression.

"It is just a theory of mine. An instinct. I have no proof, but something tells me she is still alive. The last campaign I led across the outskirts of the new dimension, I caught a glimpse of a child in the far distance..." His voice trailed off in thought.

"A girl child? What...what did she look like?" Brenda was paralyzed as a tidal wave of confusion threatened to drown her.

"Strangely...normal," he replied. "If it were not for the circumstance or the adult male with one mutated green claw for a hand, whom I can only assume was her guardian, I might have mistaken her for a human child." Belial shook his head slowly from side to side, his hideously handsome reflection eerily distorted in the ancient warped glass panes. "She was anything but human though. That same unsettling power radiated from

her, even with unsubstantiated miles separating us, that I sensed from our child upon its birth.”

Silent tears slipped from Brenda’s eyes, pouring down her cheeks in a heavy warm stream to drip from her chin. She pushed the heels of her hands into her closed eyes as she tried to steady herself. Shakily, she drew a deep breath and lowered her hands to her sides again, straightening her back and squaring her shoulders in a facsimile of strength.

“He will bring her back to us then. There would be no point in leaving a child of Hell in the keeping of his enemies.” She attempted to convince Belial as much as she attempted to convince herself that, even if for nothing more than selfish Machiavellian reasons, Lucifer would deliver Angelee back into the folds of the underworld. “He will return and when he does she will be with him.” For a brief moment her hope surged, returning with a fluttering spasm of frenetic energy that made her tremble.

“I would not count on that. It is more likely he will simply kill her.” Belial turned casually and stared at Lucifer’s throne with a contemplative desire.

“How can you say such a thing?” Brenda was aghast.

“She is a threat now. She has been in the company of the uprising since infancy. It is all she has ever known. She is corrupted and useless to me.” He muttered as if his thoughts were far from focused on Angelee’s fate.

Brenda’s hands flew to her open mouth. “Dear God, no!” She whispered.

Belial’s eyes shot up to her with an arc of rage. “Dare not use that name here, my Lady.” Tilting his head to the side he walked forward towards her, his fingers lazily drifting over the gilt carvings of the chair’s arms as he passed by. Reaching up slowly with one hand he cupped her chin, pulling her closer to him. “We will create more children, have no fear of that.”

Brenda’s blood turned to ice in her veins. Belial’s touch was like battery acid burning into the delicate skin of her cheeks. “No. Please. No more...”

“You will bear as many as I request, as is your place here. If I desire my own Legion, you will create them. Do you understand me?” Belial did not wait for her answer, satisfied with the expression of utter torment reflected in her eyes. “If his Dark Majesty brings Angelee back with him, she will be a great sacrifice and her blood will bring about an even more powerful creature from our combined essence. That is, if he comes back at all.”

Brenda dared not even consider his insinuation, but a brutal hand of dread told her that the maniacal gleam dancing across the molten surface of his eyes was a portent to war.



Addai stared up at the flaking, grungy white stucco memory of mid-century architecture that had once been Marcus's mortal home. A king's palisade or a junkie's gutter was one thing, but this strangely nondescript, vaguely ugly reminder of humanity's ability to neglect recent history felt unbefitting of the demon he had believed could rise to such nobility amongst the Legions. The winter wind howled down the empty street, tossing a rusting cola can and pages of a urine-yellow, week-old newspaper down the dirty broken concrete. The barren branches of the sparse few trees and bushes that clustered near the edge of the courtyard on the far side of the iron gate before Addai appeared to lean away from the building like gray and brown dogs straining nervously on their leashes.

They too could sense the sour energy that enveloped the structure, an unacknowledged malevolence tainting the aura of any and all whom still resided within. Marcus had not been the only demon to set foot upon the property, this Addai knew instantly. Each creature had left its distinct imprint upon the fabric of reality, melancholy oiliness spiked with vicious bile bitterness that made the corners of Addai's thin, cruel lips twitch with pleasurable pride. Even before Desiderium had trespassed within Marcus's world and left his gunpowder residue permanently embedded in the walls of his apartment, there had been countless other demons that had found this particular section of land desirable far before the ugly apartment complex had been constructed. Addai tilted his head and listened to the rhythm of the darkness droning incessantly through the physical earth beneath the building. Soaked in sin, this plot of physical plane would never be clean, forever an oasis for hopeless and hapless mortal souls.

Without bothering to open the squealing barrier Addai stepped *through* the gate, his body dematerializing ever so slightly to flow around the rusted metal bars before congealing once again on the far side. As he had stepped over the threshold of the underworld into the physical plane, Addai had finessed his disguise to blend in slightly more with the mortals he might encounter there. A few minor adjustments such as the hue of his skin from greenish gray to sickly pallor, his eyes from lifeless agate to umber, would

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not only allow him an unobstructed journey, but also further temper any residual impression of his former supreme identity from those whose attention he now required. While he had no fear of Marcus sensing his true nature, he would take no chances with the creators of the realm he now intended on infiltrating. It was not that he feared these new beings, for fear was not a word contained in the limited libraries of his emotions, but he did respect their power. With a childlike eagerness he anticipated the coming invasion, the manipulation of their trust and the eventual destruction of their realm, of which he was most certain he would achieve. If he could not, he would be forced to admit that the supposed permanency of the rule of his infallibility was no longer a constant of existence. It was a concept he refused to even remotely entertain at this time, but the possibility, however miniscule, existed still, with or without his acknowledgement.

The uprising had abducted Marcus from the oubliettes. It was difficult to gauge exactly how much “time” had passed since his escape for time in each plane progressed differently. A day, a week, a month...Addai did not exist within these parameters of reality and, thus, those quantitative mortal definitions were meaningless. He knew only that each pulse of his black heart meant an aspect in which Marcus’s perception could be influenced and altered by these new forces. He had not given up yet on his initial instinct that Marcus was a soul that could be molded for a greater purpose. He had not only been malleable in all the right ways a broken empty shell of a being could be in the beginning, but now also possessed a newly rediscovered strength of character that gave him the ability to cleave to a properly presented purpose. He was ripe and ready for influence, a creature seeking a leader, a soul craving a cause behind which he could pour his power with a conviction he had lacked in his past life, a life he had squandered so carelessly.

Perhaps Addai had left Marcus too long alone in the oubliette? He had been preoccupied with such vaster divine matters than this singular personal project that he had not realized, until Marcus had snared the attention of the uprising, just how incredibly special his little experiment was. The unknowable was the ultimate Achilles’ heel where gods and devils were concerned; Marcus may yet be salvageable or he may have been forever corrupted, a lost cause to Hell and Lucifer. The new realm Addai and his soldiers fought now to conquer was beyond his complete perception, cloaked by formidable forces unlike anything previously recorded. This both intrigued and infuriated Addai. From all of the accounts delivered to

him by his trusted commanders of the Legions assigned to the invasion, whatever or whoever was master of this new domain, its energy was that of a very young and arrogant government, though it continually hid behind its armies of recruits. Or so it seemed.

Even Belial himself had yet to penetrate far enough beyond the realm's fluxing forming perimeter to catch a glimpse of the core of the force responsible for the realm's creation. However, the singular consistency among the reports returned by the defeated demonic troupes was that their impression was not of a sole entity, but a pair of twin energies, male and female, which existed both unanimously and independently now of one another like a cell only recently first divided. To Addai this connection, this dependence of one entity upon another screamed of fragility for it was far too *human* to ever gain true permanence as an equal of God or the Devil. While they existed together they were invincible. Apart, though...

Addai needed to gain entrance into the realm first. During the initial stages of his rebirth Addai had purposefully flown far beneath the uprising's radar knowing his new state of being was perhaps still too young to be credibly jaded yet to the divine caste system. It was time now for him to begin cultivating the aura of discontent and establish a connection with a familiar entity within the new realm, one he could tether himself to with the right degree of manipulation. That entity was Marcus. He would prey upon Marcus's wavering loyalties and his still malleable theories on the universe, making of the demon a seemingly convincing ally. Though trust was not Marcus's strong suit, Addai would earn the lost demon's trust as Addai allowed himself to be recruited by the rebellion.

If his instincts served him right, and they always did, Marcus was no more ready to commit to his captors' new dogma as he had been to that of Heaven or Hell's. During his first day back within the Earthly plane to collect souls under the assumption that he had stepped into the daunting role as the Demon of Regret, Marcus had embraced his new path with an honorable conviction, willing to perform the duties of his responsibility to the best of his abilities. Addai, as Lucifer, had covertly observed and noted Marcus's willingness to learn from the demons he encountered and without hypocritical interpretations of the hereafter. If Addai could reach him before the leaders of the uprising completely brainwashed their new recruit, it was possible that Addai could sway Marcus back to Hell's side. A ripple effect of dissent could be exactly what he needed to open a rift in the boundaries containing the new realm within that of Purgatory.

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A connection needed to be made between Addai and Marcus, one that would subconsciously suggest to Marcus that he needed Addai by his side as an ally. Marcus had left nothing behind within the oubliette, not even the smallest fragment of his personal physical identity that could be utilized to establish such a connection through ritual, nor had Addai spent any time personally in the company of the creature he planned to cultivate. In his weakened state with a large portion of his former power residing within the host vessel of Belial, he lacked the ability to forego such manual physical means as bindings and spells in order to reach and take what he desired. Therefore, he needed a token, a belonging which was unmistakably imprinted with the residual psychic, emotional and spiritual energy of the soul named “Marcus”. There existed such an item here within the boundaries of the apartment complex, of that Addai was most certain.

Addai walked down the cracked dull gray concrete sidewalk around the empty, destitute, kidney-shaped swimming pool. All was eerily quiet, with the exception of the sound of the wind whistling through the barren trees, as if the neighborhood held its breath in anticipation. Somewhere nearby a cat cried out once, a mournful baying howl that echoed down the alley behind the apartment building as the animal fell into silence once again. Off to Addai’s right a feathery rustling of paper snapping in the breeze snared his attention. Another entity still resided here, comfortably integrated into the very fabric of the building itself now. Like a beetle burrowed deep within the bark of a tree, it thrived here, complacent and unmotivated to move on having found the sustenance it needed. That was, until this particular soul expired from the depravity of hopelessness in which it was now irreversibly mired.

Only then would the resident demon feel the motivation to move onward to seek out another weakling mortal’s existence to commandeer, hauling his supernatural bulk from the obstruction of Earthly refuse like an Amazonian tree sloth, one talon at a time. Though he knew it was this demon’s “nature” to behave thusly, and it was, in large part, the upper echelon of the Legions’ fault he had been ignored as long as he had been, Addai found himself irritated by the slovenly lack of ambition the aura of this particular demon radiated. Where his brothers and sisters moved about the Earthly plane successfully claiming their quotas of souls for Hell, this demon had not achieved, from what Addai could sense in his limited psychic state, the collection of one soul in nearly nine long Earth-years. This demon had sunk into his own contentedness like quicksand,

knowingly falling far beneath Hell's radar in an effort to indulge the vices he was ruler and commander of.

Addai walked towards the peeling painted door where the paper fluttered, adhered just beneath the peephole with a thick piece of clear packing tape across the top. Reaching up he placed the heel of his fist against the door and listened to the souls inside as he read through the callous black-and-white jargon of the eviction notice. *Cresil...* The name of the resident demon slithered across his mind like an oil slick.

Of course, thought Addai. *Who else would it be?*

Beyond the two inches of heavily painted, grimy wood the entities, both mortal and demonic, stirred, sensed something amiss in the once comfortably static universe around them. Addai savored the tension he felt, drawing strength from the restless paranoia building within the maniacally cluttered rooms just beyond his physical reach. The sound of piles of hoarded material possessions shifting haphazardly in panic as hushed voices consulted one another on the possibilities of just who might be lurking outside was strangely comforting to Addai.

He leaned closer until his cheek was mere inches from the corroded surface as he waited for the finely orchestrated moment for his fist to raise and descend with ominous force in a single knock. Heartbeats of adrenaline-steeped seconds ticked by as the mortal within the room cried and fretted with an unexplainable and unaccustomed terror he could not identify with on any level. He only knew there was darkness near, an evil he had yet to encounter. Cresil did little to calm his captive prey's nerves as he cautiously rose from his place of uncouth rest to approach the door. Addai waited until he felt Cresil's laboriously hulking physical manifestation raise his hand to the doorknob, his face leaning in close to peer outside, before he let his own fist collide with a thundering crack beside the scarred gold plated peephole.

"Jesus! Fuck!" Exclaimed the mortal inside.

All movement ceased, except for the frantic racing pulse of the human's heart. Cresil froze, continuing to stare out the peephole at Addai, who stared him down with a cool sinister purpose.

"Who is it?" Cresil asked suspiciously through the closed door, his hand still resting lightly on the battered old doorknob. "Do I know you?"

Addai's mouth twitched in a replica of smile. "No, but I'm pretty sure I know you."

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Cresil hesitated, recognizing the distinct aura of his own kind through the threshold, though the being who brazenly addressed him appeared to be nothing more than some young upstart of a demon. Addai could feel Cresil's mounting irritation seething just below the surface of his mortal illusion, making it hard for the ancient demon to control his appearance. A low growl rumbled in the back of Cresil's throat.

"Dude. Who is that guy?" the mortal asked timidly, followed by the crash of a random pile of clutter collapsing as he attempted to maneuver around it on his way to join Cresil by the door. "Just ignore him and maybe he'll go away. He's probably with the leasing company."

"I'm not working for the landlord," he paused for dramatic effect. "Am I... Cresil?" His arrogance found the upper hand and he gave in to the temptation of poking the demon with a bit of a sharp stick.

The door flew open. Cresil stood just over the threshold of the dismally tiny apartment. Nearly six feet in height and verging on at least three hundred pounds, the old demon had crafted the perfect embodiment of hopeless laziness. His pudgy, ruddy jaw line was dark with several days' growth of beard, his balding, graying, dishwater-blond hair shiny with grease and pulled back in a tiny ponytail at the nape of his neck. He was dressed in a faded RUSH T-shirt speckled with leftover pizza and beer stains and riddled with cigarette burns, and his gray terrycloth bathrobe had probably been a fluffy white, once upon a time. His right hand remained firmly wrapped about the doorknob as if he fully intended on slamming it closed at any second. Between the fingers of his left hand he clutched a slowly burning cigarette and half-empty bottle of Miller Highlife. His beady eyes glared down at Addai.

"You have a lot of gall, my friend. Who sent you and what do you want? You have about thirty seconds before I get severely pissed and, trust me, you don't want to push me to that point," growled Cresil.

Addai raised his eyebrows in mock surprise, feigning a modicum of fearful respect for his supposed elder. He raised his hands, palms open, and faced Cresil as he spoke. "Sorry to disturb you." He lowered his hands slowly, looking sheepishly out of the corner of his eyes at Cresil as he bowed his head in submission. He lowered his voice slightly so that the human inside would not hear his next words—though he was certain Cresil could dismiss whatever he said as the product of insanity, as Addai had the distinct appearance of a mid-life heroin junkie. "I'm on an errand for his Dark Majesty."

Cresil cast an uneasy glance over his right shoulder at the human hovering uncertainly between the arm of the couch and the small portion of the kitchen counter still visible. Without a word he stepped outside onto the sidewalk, closing the door behind him. Addai stepped to the side down the shadowy exterior walkway, never taking his eyes off of Cresil.

Folding his hairy tree trunk forearms over the flaking RUSH logo on his chest he glared at Addai. “How does this involve me?”

“Well, it really doesn’t, but you might be able to help me locate a certain item I am in need of.” He folded his fingers in front of him, placing the tips together lightly to form a steeple as he locked gazes with Cresil.

“This had better be quick. I have my own to tend to,” Cresil growled.

Addai smirked. “Ah, yes. I see you are quite busy and rightfully so. Trust me, it will not take long.” His voice darkened imperceptibly as he made a mental note to relay a status report to Belial with express commands to take care of the situation at once. Ancient or not, demons who did not pull their weight within the Legions were simply a burden. Too many others would kill to take Cresil’s place. Literally.

“There was a demon by the name of Marcus. He was filling in for Desiderium for a short time. I heard this was once his place of dwelling during his time as a mortal and he might have passed through here again recently?” Addai asked.

“Yeah, I think I remember him. That was years ago, though. What about it?” Cresil narrowed his eyes at Addai, untrusting, but uncertain as to exactly what it was about the wiry, rockabilly-pale creature before him that unnerved him so.

“If you could just point me in the direction of his old lair?” Addai cast a curious glance about the apartment complex. “I have to admit, I’m still a little shaky having just been reborn and my senses feel like I’m being electrocuted at all times.” He coughed a weak laugh beneath his breath and made a dramatic twitch. Lowering his voice to a whisper he leaned a little closer to Cresil. “But I don’t want to disappoint ‘you know who’ being that this is my first mission and all. That boiling ocean’s a bitch to crawl out of, if you know what I mean.” He winked at Cresil and pointed down towards Hell as if Lucifer could hear him.

Cresil’s expression plainly stated “you’re an idiot”, though he responded only with silence for a long, painfully uncomfortable moment. Uncrossing

his left arm he pointed across the courtyard past the empty kidney pool to a set of concrete and metal railing stairs leading to the second floor.

“Upstairs, all the way at the end. You’ll recognize it by the yellow hazard tape across the door.” Cresil replied. He turned away and headed back for his apartment.

“No one lives there?” Addai was, in part, not surprised after the epic way in which Desiderium had manipulated Marcus’s death, but he was still impressed that even after all of this physical plane time another tenant had not claimed the space.

Cresil paused in the half-open doorway with one dingy Monty Python killer bunny slipper inside. “One tried and didn’t last twenty-four hours. That was about eight years ago or so. Since then they can’t seem to rent the damned place.” Cresil finally cracked a smile. “Impressive. Hat’s off to Desi for a job well done. Might help them if they got rid of that chair up there, but no one will touch it.” He shrugged and stepped inside. “Landlords finally gave up and just boarded the place up permanently.”

Addai watched Cresil disappear inside without another word. “And soon they’ll do the same to your place, I’m sure,” Addai snarled under his breath and spit on Cresil’s weathered jute doormat. The sound of burning twine crackled quietly as the acidic saliva corroded its way viciously through the fibers to the concrete below.

Turning away he skirted the perimeter of the courtyard and bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. With the exception of Cresil and his tragic little mortal, the denizens of the complex were largely at work; it was still quite early in the day. Strolling past two darkened units, Addai wondered if any of the residual energy from Marcus’s old apartment had slithered through the walls to warp the lives of the nearest tenants, leaking under doorways and through the air vents like nerve gas to poison their dreams. Then this complex might indeed be ripe for harvesting additional souls in the months to come. Addai would be careful in whom he selected to revisit this place, once he retrieved his power from Belial and returned to the throne. A loyal and dependable seasoned pro with a proven track record such as Desiderium might just be the perfect candidate.

Addai could taste the foul, bitter malignancy that permeated the air around Marcus’s doorway. Beneath a large X of thick yellow hazard tape, the door beneath had been sealed with a thin layer of plywood, which had been nailed to the molding as if the unit were a condemned building

awaiting demolition. Addai ran his hand over the wood, drinking in the power of the darkness beyond, again finding himself impressed by the permanence of vibrations howling like a cyclone of horrific dismay through the very fiber of existence.

With two long bony fingers he traced the black and red spray painted symbols to ward off evil left by a superstitious mortal. Unfortunately the being had lacked the depth of conviction behind their beliefs to pour any true power into the markings. As a result they were now nothing more than crude artwork faded by the sun and rain.

Pressing his palm against the center of the door, Addai leaned forward slightly until he heard the wood begin to strain, creaking woefully like rotten planks on a sea-weary ship. With a short exhale he pressed harder and the sheet of cheap plywood splintered neatly in half before exploding inwards as if sucked backwards by a black hole. Before the sound could ripple through the atmosphere and snare Cresil's attention, who no doubt was keeping psychic tabs on Addai in his suspicion, Addai waved a hand over the gaping hole where the door had once been. In an instant the beginning of a deafening thunder ceased, the shards of wood freezing in midair as they sailed into the living room of the tiny apartment.

Pulling aside the last strip of hazard tape stubbornly clinging to the doorframe outside, Addai stepped over the threshold into the dark room. The stale air was like a dense humid swamp fog, musty from years without ventilation. The malicious warped energy Addai had sensed on the outside of the threshold was magnified countless times over. Left to its own devices the residual mayhem had stagnated, inbreeding with itself until it had nearly taken on a sentient consciousness of its own. It was no wonder the management of the property had been unable to rent out the unit; anyone stepping foot inside would have instantly felt as if they were in grave danger of being possessed. Addai was almost disappointed that he had disturbed whatever was growing here for by breaching the barrier of its microcosm it would soon slink out into the physical plane instead of remaining contained where it could continue to evolve.

The dull carpet was coated in a fine layer of undisturbed dust that blossomed in barely visible dandelion puffs with Addai's slow footsteps in the horizontal slivers of gray-blue light seeping through the closed mini-blinds. Walking about the perimeter of the space, he trailed his hand along the matte-white walls as he let the film reel of the past flicker violently through his mind. As the final scene of a despairing human Marcus pressing

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Desiderium's manifested gun beneath his chin exploded into a fragmented haze of blood and bone, Addai turned on his heel to face the one haunting physical reminder of Marcus's tragedy. There in the corner, a mildewed, gore-stained relic befitting Hell's historical museum, hunkered the chair Desiderium had used to tap into Marcus's psyche and unravel his sanity, one frayed thread at a time. Addai was fascinated by the significance of this strange talisman. As his eyes wandered over the shredded seams of the arms and seat cushion where pieces of cracking yellow foam seeped out like sea urchin innards, he felt assured that this would be exactly the item he would need to establish a connection with Marcus through the boundaries separating the planes.

Approaching the chair as if it were a wild beast crouched in the corner, he turned and lowered himself into its seat, placing his hands upon the arms as if it were his coveted throne of gold tortured souls. The entity that had begun to form within the apartment shivered, the slightest ripple of electric static bristling through the musty air as a courageously oblivious breeze blustered through the doorway. Though its consciousness was yet to be fully formed, it instinctively recognized the presence of its lord and master, even in the disguise of a lower-level demon. Like a beaten hound it crawled on its belly towards Addai, wrapping itself submissively about his ankles. Addai slowly raised his hands and brought them together with a single resounding clap. The atmosphere twitched and flickered as reality reset itself, the door solid and closed again as if it had never been dismantled.

"Don't worry, my friend," he spoke aloud to the invisible entity curled and purring at his feet. "You'll have your lair back momentarily. The chair, however, is mine."



Art by Grandfailure

CHAPTER 16

Vaporous crystalline wisps of breath hung in the air before Addai's pale thin lips like puffs of *espíritu* before fading into nothingness. Outside the abandoned machine shop at the edge of the city the wind bayed mournfully like a pack of lonely hunting hounds as it thrashed against the sheet metal roof, its laments of deathly slumber slipping through the missing shards of glass throughout the towering wall of north-facing windows. Snow would fall soon as night descended, casting the discarded, elderly relic of past progress into a twisted landscape of sharp, hostile bruises. Shafts of dull gray light broke through the decades of grime curtaining the remaining glass panes, slicing downwards to illuminate the antiquated networks of rusting iron gears and pipes connecting the maze of fabrication machines. Nested between the rusted bolts and silent cogs slept a strange isolated beauty tragically awaiting the return of the men who once swore and bled into them for generations. They slept now, hibernating like black bears in hollowed dead redwoods while the few actual ghosts attached to the mill trudged onwards with their daily routines, unaware the world of the living had passed them by. Addai liked it here, appreciating the silence that was absent from the underworld. Silence did not exist in Hell.

Addai could not help but find it odd how humans often simply walked away from their creations as if denying their existence would somehow make them vanish. Space was extremely valuable in Hell, a realm that had reached nearly maximum capacity eons ago. Everything was repurposed there, stripped down to its core essence so that its energy could be dispersed for another use. The maddening recycling process to make room for the newly claimed souls and born demonic entities was yet another reason he knew Hell must claim Purgatory and soon. It was true that Hell could survive indefinitely in its current churning, bloated state, but expansion of true power dictated the ability to grow. Addai longed to see his domain overflow, a malignant cancer rippling through Purgatory and perhaps even this new realm the uprising brazenly sought to build, ceasing the stale monotony of metaphysical cannibalism that had begun to dilute the potency of Hell's influence in the physical plane. Evil in its essential form was no longer pure, millennia of inbreeding polluting its true potential until only Addai himself, as Lucifer, and the upper echelon of the Legions

remained the center and source of true sin. He dreamed of a place to begin anew, taking from within himself seeds of the undiluted quintessence of evil to quicken a new breed of demon the likes of which even Belial and Mammon would bow before. These desires he had kept secret even from his most trusted advisors to avoid dissension within the upper ranks. All would be revealed in good time, once the uprising was crushed and Purgatory conquered once and for all.

Addai stared at the chair he had relocated from Marcus's old apartment. Though it was obviously out-of-place amidst this industrial playground, its decrepit ominous presence had a deranged artistic merit to it, as if it were a prop in a theatrical production. Tilting his head back he drew a deep breath of icy air, holding it in the back of his throat to taste the complexity of the auric imprints it carried, as if he were analyzing a fine wine. Wherever Marcus was currently, he was too far away for Addai to detect. Looking down again at the chair he knew a ritual would need to be conducted to open enough of a rift to allow Addai to project his carefully constructed façade of spiritual discontent through Purgatory and across the boundary of the new realm. Through the usage of the chair as a physical connection between himself and Marcus he could form a bond to the demon who, if all went according to plan, would influence those amongst the uprising in charge of luring recruits to their cause to consider offering Addai the option of defecting from Hell.

As the sun sank behind the horizon Addai remained still and standing, the only telling tangible sign of his physical solidity the breath before his lips, produced only for his own fascination. Addai waited until the witching hour, when the veils between the worlds were at their thinnest, to call upon Marcus. During those hours would be a brief window of opportunity for him to access a sliver more of his complete power, channeling it forth to him from where it was cradled within Belial. In the final minutes before the strike of twelve Addai's lips began to move, forming the name of the demon he now called upon, whispered at first and growing in volume with each spoken word until the resonance of Addai's booming voice echoed off of the iron girders above as midnight ticked into place. Deep within the bowels of Hell Belial fell to the floor before Lucifer's throne and twitched in a semi-consciously, his eyes rolling back into his skull as his body convulsed spastically upon the invisible puppeteer wires binding him to Addai. Addai exhaled slowly as he allowed the faintest of tendrils of consciousness to wind their way through Belial with a maniacally meticulous cruelty to

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find the chamber where he had securely deposited the aspect of himself he needed to cast the spell. Inhaling the icy winter air molesting his physical manifestation, Addai pulled long and hard on the feed of power, savoring the searing sensation of electric fire that accompanied the siphoned essence.

Turning to the west he chanted as a low thunderous rumble rolled about the perimeter of the building outside, "Obey these words of power!"

To the east he addressed the guardians of the realms, "Watchers of the threshold, watchers at the gate!"

Aggressively challenging the north he demanded, "Unbar the guarded door!"

Finally, to the south, his voice rising until it threatened to shatter the remains of the broken glass windowpanes, "Obey this command of this servant of power!"

Repeating the incantation twice more, Addai's body trembled as he envisioned thrusting a sword of pure energy into the heart of the physical realm, rending it asunder with a defiant howl. The final words of the spell echoed off of the hollow sentinel carcasses of rusted metal machines surrounding him.

Addai lifted his arms upwards, bowing his head as the banshee howling wind outside the abandoned building flowed through the walls to spiral like a cyclone. Bits of debris and loose pieces from the machines themselves were tossed into the storm like dead leaves. "I call to you Marcus Glenfield, servant of the Legions of Hell. Hear my voice and come to me. Those that have led you astray are not what they appear to be. Hell calls to you. Return. Marcus Glenfield, servant of Lucifer. Heed my call and find me."

He severed the channel with Belial, and instantly felt the uncomfortable fragility of the shell he had created for this mission. The wind ceased, the accumulated trash descending from the air to crash into the cold dirty concrete floor. The sweet torturous taste of the small addition of his full strength caused him momentarily to long to return to Hell and force the leaders of the Legions to fulfill their duties in the war or face extermination. Wrath was an emotion that wasted valuable energy while in his current state, but Addai vowed that those who had failed him in this war would face fates more divinely heinous than anything they had ever inflicted on their own mortal prey. There were means of suffering so twisted that only the Devil himself could dream of them.

Addai staggered to the chair, sank down and tucked himself into a tight cat-like fetal ball within the seat. The tiniest of rifts had been ruptured in the fabric between worlds, one that would be nearly imperceptible to most entities, but would remain open long enough for Addai's "disillusionment" to leak out into the other realms, baiting the uprising with the promise of a possible new recruit. There was nothing left to do now. It was time to wait.



Translucent brown veils rocketed up in the blistering light as the broad runners of his sledge slammed across the mucky tussocks of the swamp. He held the reins with one iron-cruel hand as his wafting, tendril nerves drank in the sputtering joy of his dogs. Their bright, scaly, green backs parted the shallow brackish water like dolphins as their broad alligator claws dug deep into the muck. Their powerful legs drew the sledge on with the speed of a chariot drawn by Egyptian stallions on open ground. Whenever one of the eight creatures hit a deep spot in the bog, it would sputter momentarily like a rooting boar, snorting brown water out through its alligator jaws. At times they would swim for a moment, using violent sweeps of their broad prehistoric tails to keep pace with the pack. The ferocious far-traveled charioteer had waged many a great battle and learned their secrets, all without ever thinking to seek knowledge of his own name, blindly existing from moment to moment knowing it was not at all in vain. Now, he felt a sensation he had never experienced before: nostalgia. His neural tentacles wafted in the wind generated by the speed of his race through the swamp and his astral, radar perception ranged across the host of motley reptilian cavalry that spread out around him. He recalled the mighty storm winds and the racing, bulbous, green clouds of the day he had forged this deadly course alone.

He had been born out of this swamp. Whether or not the creators of the original plane had foreseen the genesis of the swamps of Lower Purgatory none down within the bogs knew. The force sustaining its existence was the psychological detritus of Purgatory proper: the last substantial thoughts of the souls who were mercilessly tormented, without first being consumed and digested as if they were in Hell itself.

This energy sank into the black mists of chaos and the seeds of the rank plants that blossomed from the filth began to take root, expanding until a simulation of solidity had become semi-self-sustainable. The

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creature crashing through them now as the lord of an uncanny host was its first true conscious native, a being born of the filth and nurtured in the vital burgeoning desperation for life that thrived amongst the moss. However, to say he was the second would have been just as accurate, or just as inaccurate, for there was one other that was his mirror. His twin. He had never seen her, but he *knew*. Not a twin by blood, though blood coursed through them both, yet she was his twin in terms of a bond far stronger than any mere physical tie. Their bond burned within him with all the fire of the collected idealized longing of countless lonely, tormented souls.

He would find her. They would fall together. The thought was like a hunting flame coursing through the whole of his body. Not yet, though. Longing was not the only mood being generated by the tormented masses coursing around his bones. That emotion must wait for first he would realize his revenge. Though his very lungs were of the fabric of longing itself, every breath filling him with its exquisite ache, revenge was his primary driving force. It was his dark and beating heart armored with ribs of pride and rage.

He was one of the two centerpieces of the great collective psychological artwork of all of Purgatory's tormented. He was the male half of the expression of the cry of all they wanted. The incubation of all the thoughts that made him took place in these wild fertile regions of Purgatory proper. It was terrible to behold.

He was an anomaly of epic proportions with bones of meteoric iron gathered and smelted by the heat of cosmic rage that supported flesh of pure twisted muscle. The muscle was braided like the tubers of psychotic stone-cracking plants and encased innards consisting of the pure gel of primal, undiluted life force itself. His face was a featureless scarecrow's visage with tendrils of nerve serving up a mighty array of perceptions whipping wildly about a haunting void of half-formed connotations. Before he even fully felt what it was to be a conscious "self", he had begun to move, driven by the deafening chaos of the thoughts and memories that made him.

In the "beginning" he had moved in the way a salmon, grown in the deep sea, begins to make its way to the mouth of a river. Unbeknownst to him it had been, literally, to the mouth of a true river that he found himself moving.

He made his way out of the boggy labyrinth of rivulets into a wide, deep channel of open water. Upstream the river began to form into two firm

banks held in place by the roots of several colossal weeping willow trees. The ancient, elegantly gnarled entities soared into the skies above, their mammoth bases matronly heavy as if they might birth worlds within the shadows of their roots, their mournfully ashen branches bending outwards over the river to interlace like lovers being slowly torn apart in war. Though he could not know its name, this was The Willow Gate. As the eons had passed, the massive intersecting branches over the water had melded into one another until they were inseparable, one tree growing into another, symbiotic and permanent. To either side of the grove of trees on both banks of the river, the marsh continued endlessly into a sun-scorched horizon. However, between them, the river seemed to wind and rise up without reason into a wooded country of firm mossy earth, defying conventional wisdom and mortal perception.

He plowed his way through the river, passing beneath the haunting gate of weeping willows. On the far side he came across an angel standing sentry. He quickly realized that this was also to be his first true enemy. The angel's great pavilion tent was pitched up on the shoulder of one of the gnarled, mossy banks beneath the trees. There he lazily lounged near the water with his sheathed flaming sword cast carelessly on the green beside him as if he lacked a single care in all the world. As his gaze landed upon the horrific humanoid monstrosity standing chest-deep in the heart of the river the angel leapt to his feet, reaching for his sword. In a brilliant flash of scorching, leaping orange flame, he unsheathed the weapon, swinging it wide to challenge the entity.

However, his years of lackadaisical inattention had made his immortal warrior's movements sluggish in comparison to his revenge-driven enemy. Only one who has seen a butterfly caught by a frog's tongue could fully comprehend the magnificence of what happened next. Bracing his body against the fierce current of the murky river, the deadly elastic sinews extending from the creature's head whipped out like pale green dripping bolts of lightning towards the angel, wrapping about his heroic winged body with boa constrictor viciousness. Yanking backwards, the creature lifted the angel far from the bank of the river and hurled him down into the sediment of the shallows with a sickening crack of parting water that sent waves rolling across the expanse of the river's surface to crash up onto the far shore. With a snap, the creature's sinews contracted, releasing the crushed corpse from where it was half-buried in the silt, snapping back to their original snarling chest length. He watched as the water began to

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settle, the surface becoming still once more as if the brief battle had never occurred. On the shore, the angel's flaming weapon went cold, the fire fizzling to a cold smoking remain of metal.

The creature began to stride once again against the current through the river's center. Something in his tangled ugly nest of desire and memory told him to turn to his right. There was a strange hazy sort of peace that lingered in the air amidst the wisps of ghostly white mist that hovered over the land. As he pulled himself up the mossy bank, emerging from the river like a terrifying primordial beast on its first steps towards evolution, he looked back downstream. Beyond the Willow Gate, the landscape changed from moss-heavy cypress trees and placid algae- green murk to a rich prehistoric forest. On either side of the trees the deep wooded canyon seemed to continue without end. Eddies of a storm wind vibrant with swamp-reek rolled and between the steep lush ravine walls, so vibrantly and mysteriously different from the hissing bog of the swamp from which he had been born. He could see arrowhead plants and rushes whipping under bulbous green skies as far as his senses could reach. The ethereal sense of peace accosted him and it was so utterly alien to his embittered soul that he simply could not trust it to be as pure at its core as it appeared upon the surface. His instincts screamed in a painful high-pitched shriek of white noise that a key aspect of his quest for revenge lay not far from the banks where he stood.



The Willow Gate was now in essence all of what Purgatory had become since its inception eons ago. Straddling a river that was the fluid spinal cord of that dim plain, the river was long ago called the Mulmor. However, now it was commonly referred to among the angels in Purgatory as simply "Mona's Ditch". Once upon a time, the river had flowed downwards from a source of black springs high above in the grasslands, beyond the swamps and evergreen forests, into a maze of deep shimmering pools in a lush wooded valley. The threshold of its grave was a great salt marsh on the edge of the vast and bleak Purgatorial sea. Or so it had been before the Willow Gate was planted.

The Willow Gate was designed to channel the energy of the river in a way that bound the upstart swamp generated by the energy of the tormented souls within Purgatory to the original, divinely created plane itself. The

specially cultivated trees drank this energy back up into the fabric of Purgatory proper with the intent of ensuring that the transfiguration of the souls being “processed” there was indeed a transfiguration of their own natures—their own identities, hopes, dreams and passions — rather than an obliteration of their individuality for the sake of a neat and clean cookie-cutter absence of sin. As the river spilled through the gate it gave rise to a metaphysical double of itself, a Mulmor of Purgatory Below, rather than merely a continuation of the river in its entirety in one constant stream.

That doppelganger river wound most of its length as an unobstructed channel coursing through an endless labyrinth of slack swampland. The only way to cross from one image of the river and its banks to the other was through the Willow Gate. If one attempted to navigate around the Willow Gate, from one side or the other, one would find only more of the same landscape from which they came instead of the alternate aspect of the realm with the direction back to the gate shimmering in peripheral vision.

The Willow Gate was a portal and since its creation, it had functioned flawlessly. That was, until the unrest began.

The tall graceful woman named Mona who had planted the gate years ago had done so shortly after her appointment as the Governess of Purgatory. Her creation of the gate was based upon her innate understanding and personal interpretation of what the “cleansing” and “glorification” of sinners ought to be. Mona was a woman of vast wisdom and unquestionable power, her conviction to the cultivation of the willow trees she planted unmovable, but even she had shuddered the moment one of the two first-born of Purgatory Below passed through it. She had been leafing through the Ledger of Purgatory, a twenty-six-page pamphlet of the names of those souls destined for the purification process. The Ledger of Purgatory was a crude document, hastily bound with twine woven through the pages in the place of a spine and lacking any true cover. Mona paused in her absent perusal of the list to shake off the chill, and cast a sidelong glance at the river out the window of her quaint little cabin. Seeing no sign of trouble or distress, she had quickly dismissed the sensation as nothing more than a ripple of residual energy.

A new Ledger, along with a fresh supply of tobacco and parchment rolling papers, now sat on her desk, as was delivered to her river valley cabin precisely and predictably every twenty-six days. The number of pages in the pamphlet was determined not by any divine significance in the number itself, but merely by roughly dividing the number by the modest

number of cigarettes she typically smoked in an Earth day cycle. This accommodation was the only token of appreciation she ever received from above. She scanned the content of the Ledger carefully. Each page detailed her appointment for the day along with the location and circumstance of a soul which had completed its Purgatorial sentence. She was to draw each one out of the cycle of its torment, introduce it to its newborn self and send it merrily on its journey to Heaven. Whatever weaknesses there may have been in the divine plan, none of them involved record keeping or routine logistics. Some intelligence had ordered the sequence and durations of the sentences so that there was exactly one soul to be drawn out each day, in a slow, punch-drunk parade that stretched out across the eons.

Like a human child on Christmas morning, the first thing she did was to flip ahead to the last page of each newly received Ledger. She would stalwartly deny that she was expecting anything, but there was a certain name she was searching for: her own. One day she would be allowed to cross over. One day she would be allowed the same grace the countless souls she had helped escort through the gates of Heaven had known. She knew nothing of when it would come, that fateful date when she would be released from her dutiful and honorable time as the Mistress of the Willow Gate, but she knew that the last name of all would be her own. Mona still possessed mortal essence in her, and was, she readily admitted, not without mortal sin. In the end, when all her work was done, she would descend willingly into torment, to be drawn into new life by The Hand of the Almighty Himself. But her name was not in this issue. It was a relief and a disappointment all at once. She rolled the first cigarette of the day and flipped back to the beginning of this month's Ledger. She smiled as she scanned the page, breathing a bit easier, and unexpectedly forewent one part of her daily ration of cigarettes. That day's appointment was to be up in the Downs of Solitude.

The Downs of Solitude was the most rarified, abstract place of torment in all the planes. A range of sharp gray-green hills, it was constructed of stone and wind-lashed grass that formed a labyrinth preventing any wanderer there from ever crossing the path of another. Never would they discover their ways out of the Downs without divine mandate. For many souls, eons of this solitary stark existence, without the infliction of a single laceration or bruise to their "physical" self, was all that was required to break them entirely, forcing them to face their failings. The Mistress of Purgatory, however, liked it up on the Downs. Within the region's stoically

stark and winding pathways a peace existed that seemed entirely removed somehow from the petty squabbling of angels and demons. In no other place in all of existence was a true sense of perpetual infinite timelessness so incredibly tangible, draping over one like a mantle of fine mist to dampen every slight whisper of progression, be it future or past. At the times when her appointments placed her within the rolling gray tundra territory she often found that they were simply less “messy” than some of the others she had to tend to.

Those who had been tormented with pure solitude were grateful for the mere sight of her deep, understanding blue eyes, her gaze at times all that it took to lure them from the unending, gray pathway they had wandered since their deaths. Within her existed a little of the eternal youth of the angels, though it was tempered by the mortal tendency to become bent by long years of care and attention to detail. Hence the reason she was forever the Mistress of the Willow Gate and never an angel herself.

Donning her favorite dress, she hummed a light meandering melody as she strolled out into the river valley afternoon. She glanced back on her lovely little cabin with a smile. It would have been easy enough to build a palace instead of a more meager abode for she had been given no restrictions except her own imagination. However, the image of the estates constructed by angels while drunk on their juvenile glorying in the chaos of early Purgatory caused bile to rise in her throat. She wanted no part of such base decadence.

Mona was, in a way, a nurse to the souls she freed. Thus, she possessed the characteristic healer’s contempt for the art of inflicting wounds on the battlefield. The angels of Purgatory were exclusively skilled at this and only this art, that of causing agony in war. Mona clung fast to her vision of what her Father’s land would and should look like one day. She also possessed her own distinct vision of Purgatory’s promise. She knew she had work to do to combine and realize both of those images. That was enough for now. With a dutiful sigh she returned to her desk to tend to a few other matters before her first appointment.

“Mona,” a deep clear voice outside her open door said.

“Mona,” the visitor knocked firmly, but politely, as he repeated her name.

“Come in Mike,” she answered. “I’m decent.”

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His bright shadow passed across the pale cedar light. “Mona,” he repeated with a curt nod before getting down to business like a soldier addressing a captain. “We need to tear down the Willow Gate.”

The figure towering now within the room was much more accustomed to being called “Michael” or simply “Sir”, rather than the flippant, casual title of “Mike”, which Mona insisted upon. He was tall and clean-limbed with deeply bronzed skin, a great mane of curly black hair and a full beard of the same dark shade. His eyes were a pale, amber brown that appeared to glow when the indistinct slant of the Purgatorial sun caught them at the right angle. Dressed in a tunic of scarlet linen, Michael proudly presented himself in an armored breastplate of highly polished gold. As a sign of respect, he had deposited the arms he consistently carried upon his person outside the entrance to Mona’s cabin. Even the daggers he wore concealed within his boots had been laid aside. Michael had been a warrior since the great beginning of existence itself.

Many strange stories had, since that time, been woven around this collected pile of weapons that was now topped with the angel’s latest acquisition, a gold-plated Winchester rifle. The fine piece of handcrafted firearm was scrimshawed with the painting “St. Michael Defeats the Devil” by Eugene Delacroix, though vain Michael cared little for the likeness. His adoration of the masterful workmanship of the weapon itself caused him to forgive the ill-conceived engraving, though. The mechanism itself was a marvel.

Inventiveness being, perhaps, the one area in which angels were, by and large, inferior to humans, and the warlike fraction of their kind had long followed the mortal arms race with interest. Contrary to human legend, the first flaming sword was not, in fact, forged until after the first earthly bronze blade. In the oldest of days flaming fists had proved enough for settling angelic disputes. No extension of their own physical enterprise was necessary in combat amongst their own ranks. The entire war with Lucifer and his angels had been fought with bare hands. This form of combat was still the only one considered honorable in the arena of celestial duels. When the first firearm was invented by humanity the celestial smiths had taken note and adopted the construct to their own needs, applying to the gun the same angelic flourish they had applied to the sword. Michael’s Winchester rifle had been a personal gift from the chief of the celestial armory. It was the first weapon of its kind: a repeating flaming rifle.

“We can’t,” Mona answered, bent over her Ledger, smoking a fresh cigarette. She was instantly bored with the encounter, repeating lines from an old and fruitless debate she had shared with Michael for years. “I planted those trees to support the growth of this plane. We can’t complete The Work without the energy gathered down in those swamps coming up through those tree roots. We set out to bring souls back to themselves, glorified. Not to whitewashed. Remember?”

“You would do well to *remember*, Mona,” Michael drew himself to his full height, which would have been intimidating to anyone except the Mistress, “that what The Creator meant by ‘glorified’ is a matter of interpretation. Your interpretation is only one among many.”

“And yet, am I not Mistress of all matters of roots and depths here?” She drew herself up in return, “Your station in the great Order may be far above mine, Michael, but you cannot serve Him truly without respecting knowledge and the wisdom born of knowledge. Of Purgatory my knowledge is far deeper than yours. You may be the master of deeds of war on its surface, but take care not to meddle with the depths of its roots as you achieve those deeds. Recall yourself and defer in this.”

For a long moment, their wills locked like antlers. Michael was strong and proud, but he was not so stubborn as to be immune to the barbs of truth. He diminished.

“As you wish, milady.” He bowed and with a slight knowing smirk and left the cabin.

Mona had heard many rumors of battles fought on the surface of her world. The heavy, hypnotic routine of her duties, however, had rendered these reports hazy and distant. Perhaps she should not have dismissed the Archangel Michael like an errant schoolboy without hearing more? It might well be that he knew something that, for all the depths of her knowledge, she had not allowed herself to see. However, he was gone now and with him, whatever strategic information he possessed.

“Let it be,” she sighed. Hopefully, Michael would deal with the battles as he always had so that there would be nothing for her to worry about in the long run. Hopefully.



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Years had passed since the firstborn male of Purgatory Below had passed through the Willow Gate. In those long indefinable years countless unprecedented battles had been fought in Upper Purgatory. At first he was a mere lone terror that stalked the plane, venting his directionless, insatiable rage upon the angels and hapless souls who were unlucky enough to cross his path. Among the camps of the guards in the arid badlands and within the caves of the Downs the bloodiest of his torments were waged. Soon, though, it was noticed that with every crumpled sanguine death a handful of liberations also happened. It was no longer simply revenge for revenge's sake, but one that incited revolution, gained purpose and caused a ripple of unrest that he recognized and embraced if only at a base, unconscious level. Soon enough parties of warped guerilla soldiers rose up and, hunkered down to plot and scheme for their own freedom within the shadows of the harrowing badlands.

The angels would have none of such shows of blatant disobedience. The insurgents were forced to retreat or face extermination. No judgment, no progression, whether to Heaven or Hell, but simply obliteration as they were seen as an unwanted anomaly in the greater course of Divinity. Purgatory had never been intended to foster the creation and evolution of a new species -- especially a species that appeared to be outside of the jurisdiction of the creators of the plane itself. The rebel forces retreated under fierce duress through the Willow Gate and back into the swamps of Lower Purgatory. The angels followed to ensure they would not return to the higher planes. Within the feral hostile landscape of the swamps, however, it was the angels who found themselves ill-equipped for the battle. This was not the fertile, supple landscape they were accustomed to, but one filled with reptilian nightmares and quicksand bogs against which they struggled nearly as hard as they did their guerilla foes. The might of the angels was strong, but they were loath to lose even one of their number, unlike the rebels who sacrificed themselves with a blind berserker rage. In the end a unanimous decision was made to concede the useless swamp to the uprising. Instead of furthering the battle and losing more of their precious ranks, the effort was instead funneled into fortifying the guard stationed at the Gate itself to ensure that no rebel would find their way past it ever again.

For years the guard at the Willow Gate held fast. Lower Purgatory was all but ignored, abandoned by the denizens of the upper domain as

their efforts were so focused upon keeping the new creatures out that they neglected to send out scouts to survey exactly what became of the swamps.

In the absence of divine supervision the rebels responded, breeding beasts of burden and of war. A true united people emerged, brave and strong, tempered by the harsh terrain from which they had evolved and the fiery conviction to their independence that burned brightly in their hearts. Now, out the belly of the uprising from where he had spent his time cultivating his people's desire for freedom, the firstborn man of the swamp advanced on the Willow Gate again. This time he did not come alone in the winds of a green storm, but rather he bellowed forth as the bold new lord followed at close range by the finest of his stealthy warriors. Archangel Michael, however, would not be taken by surprise. He had long caught the wind of Swamp Lord's impending attack and had since returned to the Willow Gate to wait for him. Michael had brought with him specimens of the results of the latest Earthly import to the celestial armories, the flaming variation on the recent invention of the estimable mortal Richard Gatling. The Swamp Lord was well aware of the angel's new arsenal for a great gambit, long in preparation, was now being tested.

The firstborn man of Lower Purgatory advanced upon the behemoth archway of woven gray limbs and weeping green curtains, leading his pack warriors riding upon the backs of colossal crocodiles of war. Behind them the blood-red sun sank below the hallowed, moaning, moss-burdened cypress trees, setting them aglow as if propelled forward by the fires that raged within. Michael did not hesitate as his gaze met the Swamp Lord's, drawing forth his rifle to unleash a merciless stream of fiery rounds at his enemy. The swamp was ablaze, the crackling roar of the rounds illuminating dank, murky marsh water and skeletal weeping trees with the brilliance of an atom bomb.

The Swamp Lord's men were no match for the wrath of Michael's divine artillery. Soon the air above the river was thick with the acrid stench of singed flesh and splintered bone, their unearthly howls of agony echoing outwards to be devoured by the encroaching eerie darkness of twilight. One by one the soldiers of Lower Purgatory, along with their slain reptilian mounts, sank below the algae-laced brown water to return to the murk from which they had evolved.

Only the Swamp Lord and a handful of the original hundred warriors survived, charging down Michael in a berserk rage to avenge their fallen comrades. In his blind bloodlust, Michael had spent the ammunition. With

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a growl he tossed it aside into the river shallows beneath the Willow Gate, which now strangely appeared to cringe at the site of such horrific violence as it had never born witness to. Michael lamented ever having left his spear of old behind in favor of the repeating rifle, now empty, blunt and useless. With a maniacal grin he drew his sword just as the Swamp Lord crested the bank, racing up out of the water as he launched himself from the back of his hissing fanged mount. The black blade of the lord's sword crashed down upon Michael's shattering the weapon gripped in the angel's fists as if it were made of unfired clay. The Archangel staggered backwards, slipping off of the banks into the river itself as the mammoth weight of the Swamp Lord slammed into him, driving him down into the dark brown mud below the water. Michael's mind raced to formulate his final prayers, suffocating as water rushed into his lungs.

However, just as he accepted that this might be indeed his last battle, the Swamp Lord released him and began to charge onwards through the Willow Gate. Gasping for air Michael exploded back up out of the water, spinning around as he tried to orient himself as he coughed the sediment-poisoned water from throat. Around him the remaining soldiers of Lower Purgatory circled, their terrifying human snake-eyes ablaze with hate. Michael pushed his drenched hair back out of his eyes, a wide grin spreading across his face as he sized up his foes. These were lesser creatures by far than that of the Swamp Lord himself, though their determination would make them formidable opponents for the brief time Michael had the pleasure of engaging them in combat. The angel's spirit soared as he clenched his fists and prepared himself to fight barehanded. This was one plight he knew well and cherished. The joy of battle flowed through him driving all other concerns from his mind. He would find the Swamp Lord later, of this he had no doubt, and he would toss the heads of his men at his feet in challenge.



Michael might have been wise to follow in pursuit, for the Swamp Lord's intentions to fulfill his quest for revenge on the rulers of Purgatory were of the darkest mold. Having tossed the valiant Archangel into the river like a rag doll where he stepped upon the glistening gold breastplate as he completed his assault was enough to sate the Swamp Lord's preoccupation with Michael. The angel had proven himself, in the Swamp Lord's eyes,

less than worthy of his historic epic reputation. Yes, he had slain nearly eighty of his soldiers, but it had been, in his opinion, a cowardly attack as the angel had hid behind Heaven's latest long-range weapon. It had been ignoble, but effective.

However, now Michael was stripped of all but his bare hands and, while he might still fight his way out of the viper's nest of remaining rebels, it would be a long and taxing battle. Michael was not the focus of the Swamp Lord's quest, but merely an annoying obstacle. It was the Mistress of Purgatory who would soon experience his full wrath.

With a surgical precision he sifted through the wayward tortured memories of those souls that roamed in wait of their purification for the form that stood there watching all of the suffering. There was such strength of understanding and pity in those fathomless blue eyes, her feminine grace undeniable even to his callous primal instincts, but it was not enough to dissuade his wrath. She stood watching, understanding and doing nothing to stop the torment of the souls she governed. This was what kindled the rage that drove him now. He tore the black sheet of the water as he charged on up the shallows of the river, leaving the noise of battle behind as he passed up the ravine of lush evergreen cliffs.

Soon, the almost impossible sequence of bending brush piles and deep pools forced even he, with his massive semi-reptilian legs, to abandon the river channel and take to the path that ran just beyond the banks. Had his blood not been beating so hard through his body, he might have sensed again the warm peaceful air that turned him aside long ago, noting the pleasant peace of the path upon which he walked. A soft autumnal light filtered through the thick green needles of the pines that towered alongside. The beauty enveloping him was lost, however, beneath the unadulterated hatred that propelled him onward. After a few miles, the path began to turn away from the river, winding in severe switchbacks up the steep bluffs that bordered the river valley to a green and shaded shoulder. Though he knew he was not entirely alone here in the upper plane, he could not shake the feeling of isolation as he made his way up the mountain. In the swamps of his homeland the concept of silence was absent, the constant trilling churning of aggressive life fighting and surviving brewing like a cauldron around him always since the moment of his birth.

As he rounded the final bend a quaint cabin emerged from the forest shadows. He knew it instantly. A visceral subconscious recognition caused his breathing to deepen even though he had never personally laid eyes on

the house before. This, he was certain, was the domain of the Mistress of Purgatory. He quickened his pace, racing down the quaint narrow stone path, lined with tulips and hydrangeas, like a bull tearing through the streets of Milan. With a snarl, his leathery fist collided with the wooden front door, felling it inwards and clean off of its metal hinges with a single blow. With thundering steps that caused the walls of the tiny cabin to tremble he strode inside, the remaining river water that clung to him dripping down to the smoothly hewn cedar plank floor. The light that filtered into the room through the window to his left was the pale, slanting glow of a northern Earth twilight.

Purposefully cultivated dust motes drifted lazily in the light creating a peaceful nostalgia that grated against his nerves like a steel brush. This perfectly orchestrated compilation of human memories was the creation of the Mistress to allow herself a modicum of small pleasantries while she doled out the judgments of the divine upper class to the hapless she governed. To the Swamp Lord it was the essence of arrogance and the epitome of oblivious denial. It sickened him.

Mona stood before him, paralyzed with terror. She had been tough and wry as nails in the dilapidated beauty of her ways, but the deep and heavy rhythm of those very methods had blinded her to the things moving beyond her jurisdiction. This monstrous green creature before her was utterly outside anything she had dared to consider might be developing on the fringes of her world. She had seen similar forms before, in the early days when she still felt obligated to observe the middle periods of Purgatorial torments. But she had never seen one with its strength set free for always they had been bound until the time of their purification was completed.

None she had ever seen in chains could compare to the concentrated deadly power of this near-human form, which was the ideal sum of them all. She felt neither awe nor respect, though she trembled in fear of the invader. Nor could she feel her usual pity she did for the condemned and tortured for she knew that now she was the one who needed divine rescue.

She said nothing, but only stood with one foot slightly, boldly, in front of the other, and brushed her brown hair from out of her huge, blue geode eyes. He leveled his black sword at her and she broke her stance, backing slowly into the corner behind her. Mona's eyes darted about the room briefly, searching for escape, fully expecting Michael or another of the angels stationed in Purgatory to race in through the gaping destroyed doorway. No such rescue came as the seconds ticked agonizingly by. The

Swamp Lord stepped forward, his leathery, webbed hand reaching for her throat, pinning her to the wall behind her. Mona gasped with terror, unable to fight her way free of her monstrous captor. Swinging the sword downward away from her, he pointed the blade at the floor behind him. The cedar planks began to warp and darken, a pit opening like a black hole, swirling and sucking the substance of the floor inwards into oblivion.

“No! You can’t do this!” she stammered as she stared at the void in horror, “You don’t understand what the consequences are!” She pointed at the pit trying desperately to worm her way out of his vise grip. She gasped, trying to find air enough to protest beneath his crushing grip. “You’re tearing up the fabric of *everything*. I would have gone down willingly in my time, under the eyes of the One Guidance. I am not permanent! I am just doing a job I was appointed to. But this... this is monstrous. Please!”

A blast of heat blew through the room, blowing papers and bits of tobacco from her desk as the eternal looping shaft of the construct he willed into existence continued to open. The Swamp Lord said nothing, but only continued to stare at her with his icy, spiteful, reptilian gaze. Nothing she could say, no amount of pleading or reasoning could deter him. To him, Mona was the source of all of his misery, an abject voiceless pawn of the Divine. Her murder would be a warning to all who reigned, not only above, but below as well. Lifting Mona from her flailing bare feet, he tossed the Mistress into the gaping maw behind him with an angry growl. He watched her fall long past the limits of ordinary sight, her scream echoing upwards out of the pitch like the wail of a passing freight train until it faded from perception.

With an exquisitely wretched slowness she began to burn. He smiled, expecting to witness her tortured for eternity in the metaphysical rift of his revenge. He had created the void with the intention of it being limitless, forever looping back on itself. However, suddenly her descent came to an abruptly violent stop as she struck a viscous surface that was both beyond and a part of the same darkness in which she fell. The moment resonated within him, plucking memories buried within some unknown part of his being. Mona’s figure froze in his mind. The image was connected to a rare, isolated, uniquely intense inherited memory of a sunburned country girl, jumping off a railroad bridge into a deep pool, but unlike in the memory, the water didn’t splash. The woman did. Or, at least, most of her did.

In the moment of impact, Mona’s flesh stripped off over her head like a sundress, her bones scattering into the darkness like broken tinkertoys. A

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thin mist of red suspended itself above the black layer of nothing that had flooded the hole. Yet, he knew instinctively, she was not dead, but continued to exist in her shattered state. Only a deep blue jellyfish substance continued the fluttering fall beyond her broken body. The nothingness around it seemed, to the one who once, only a moment ago, would have proclaimed himself the masterful and vengeful architect of this scene, to heave against everything he intended. It shrugged up like the sea protesting the advances of an incompetent surfer and initiating a deadly game all its own.

He tore his eyes away from the grisly tragic scene, stricken. Bewildered, the emotion of terror flooded through him, igniting his nerves with a painfully frantic surge of adrenaline as he realized he could not comprehend what he had just witnessed. She was supposed to have fallen into his revenge, slowly roasting forever. But this punishment was utterly more significant. There would be no transgression or evolution for her soul. It was suspended, yet unable to process the agony it endured for it was beyond comprehension of her sentencing. Next to this “murder” his desire for revenge seemed small and incredibly mean. He stood long in thought and let his sword fall carelessly to the cedar planks of the floor at his side. He was shaken and altogether bereft from the cruelty of his own strength. Unarmed, he vanished into the woods like a furtive beast.



Art by Iaroslava Daragan

CHAPTER 17

There existed a tower of diamond gathered from the darkest mines of astral space and carried to the highest heights. It was the only house on the dark crystal threshold of Heaven's Gate. One without fear of heights might have been able climb above its highest balcony, up the terraced roof to the pinnacle and then onwards to the arcs connecting to its diamond spires that soared into the glittering cosmos like needles. From one of those dizzying masts one might just barely attain the angle needed to see over a distant line of malachite bluffs into a green wonderland of garden far below. Somewhere in that tangle of green was the gateway into Heaven itself, but no mere angel would ever find it, not until, perhaps, the very end of days, if there was such a thing. Technically, the angels' dominion ended at the towering, shining bluffs and the great gates set into the one and only cleft within them. They were its guards and like so many foot soldiers were never allowed to step within its walls. This tower was the only structure between those bluffs and the shore of the primitive *nothing*. The woman who built it had been welcome to build anywhere she liked within the paradise realms of at least four of the seven Archangels, but she preferred it here.

The land between the bluffs and the sea was a mighty chessboard of crystal and obsidian glass, a perfectly level plain stretching for uncounted miles around the gates of Heaven's outer court. From this vantage point there was almost no interference from other forms of consciousness in the dreams she sought each night. She was free here in her prophetess's sleep to merge with the memories of entities from a variety of realms, dead and living, as she chose, to live what they had lived and to learn what they were living towards. Her great, white bed had been the site of much spilled blood and sweat as she tossed and turned alone in battles with forgotten horrors, bonding with the wicked juice of time.

This evening, however, she had to leave her seer's bed of visions and venture out of the tower. She passed down her thousand diamond spiral steps as like an illuminated specter. Waves of refracted light washed around her as she stumbled, leaning always to the left with the great spiral, and staggering haphazardly on the irregular landings she'd built long ago

with her own mind in days of greater strength and whimsy. At one time she would soar about the cavernous vaults and tunnels of the stairwell like a sparrow for merely the pure enjoyment of her own private, beautiful sanctuary. Now, though, uncasing her wings required a destructive and possibly deadly degree of effort. She glanced at her reflection as she descended. Her pale hair trickled like a waterfall over her shoulders to the waist of the pocket-lined tunic dress she had made for herself. Her shoulders and most of her legs were bare.

She stopped and looked down at the insides of her elbows. *Ooh...* She thought. *Last night must have been a bad one?*

Her thin arms were nearly transparent, as were her legs from the thigh to the foot. Standing still, she looked like a glass mannequin. This was not the first time she'd seen her limbs this way, so she was not overtly shaken. She was, however, out of breath and leaning slightly on a diamond wall. In another pocket she fumbled and produced a small white candle. She could, of course, have lit the candle with a thought, but real fire produced from nothing required fierce bursts of energy and she felt so terribly fragile. With shaky hands she struck a spark and kindled the wick. Then she stood still on the stairs a while longer, waiting for the pearlescent sacred oils of her own blend to melt and pool. As the flame drank them through the hundred tiny, braided straws of the wick, it took on a deep, intense vitality. Its light thickened. Aurianna breathed it in. As it entered her lungs, she looked momentarily like a long, thin human firefly. As her angelic lungs processed the light red filaments began to uncoil through her, following the invisible tunnels of her celestial veins.

She took another breath and the red began to disappear as it wrapped itself in thick, dull gold, which cooled and whitened as it rose toward the surface of her skin. She blew out the candle and inspected her hands and arms as she waited for the wax to cool and harden.

I look almost like a human girl, she thought, *out of one of those sad stories set in London*. Suddenly she raised her eyes, as if in pain. "Mona, I'm trying," she whispered out loud to the flickering vaults of the stairwell, "but I really don't know if I'll be able to complete this journey or not." She pocketed the warm, soft candle again. Then she walked on, still meandering side to side, but more easily than before.

It's been a hundred years. Really, quite a bit more than that now, she thought, making use of the prevailing Earth calendar like she usually did.

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It was a subtle habit, but one born of deep conviction. Her angelic colleagues, being possessed of perception beyond mortal measure, all saw the conviction behind it clearly. Most begrudged her it, and some scorned her outright, but Aurianna carried on. The Physical Plane, she was quite sure, was The Creator's masterwork. The very way its time and space operated, the very thickness of it set it apart from every other plane in the cosmos. Compared to the Physical Plane, all the others looked like toy worlds. They had advantages such as a wild, raw simplicity in their fabric, but as finished works of art, they were nothing.

"Consider the evidence," she'd insist to the Archangels, "Nearly everything we do and wear and use is influenced, all but determined by, developments on one tiny world called Earth. And our little network of planes, even though, it's 'endless' in its way, is nothing compared to the time-space caverns of the P.P."

The reference to Earth culture and its determining influence on angelic culture was actually a mere surface tremor of something that bothered Aurianna deeply. She, in her heart of hearts, had begun to suspect that the very selection of non-physical planes she and all her angelic and demonic colleagues had access to had to do with their intimate connection with this one world within the great physical symphony.

Her fragile but far-seeing psyche surmised the existence of many other points of power in the physical universe orbited astrally by the thresholds of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. The question as to why the circle of Archangels so resisted entertaining or investigating this suggestion vexed her.

Of the seven Archangels, only two shared her views: Raphael, and Remiel. Indeed, Remiel, who had been Aurianna's teacher in these matters, seemed lately to be more interested in wandering the Physical Plane for its own sake and studying weather patterns, than his official work of supervising the resurrection of the redeemed dead. Four of the seven, however, viewed this as a sign of his degeneration. These four seemed to resist the very idea that the Earth they were given watch over was not the only plane with a developed spiritual life. They appeared content to think that their network of planes, since it was all that their powers of travel gave them access to, was the only such network in existence. The seventh Archangel, Sariel, cared more for the primordial waters of chaos than any plane, Physical or otherwise, that might have been created out of them. Thus, centuries rolled by and the exploration Aurianna longed to

undertake never commenced. Constantly, she proposed the idea of entering the Physical Plane and working out a way to travel across its vast swells of time-space in search of other centers of spiritual power where new nexuses with other planes could be reached. Just as predictably, the idea was rejected out of hand as either childish fantasy or heretical hubris.

The century since her sister, Mona, fell into ruin, however, had left the other angels blissfully free of such needling, wild-eyed suggestions. This century, exploration of the dream-seeing had all but consumed her. Aurianna was the appointed seer of the Archangel Council. Her palatial tower was riddled with secret passages to mysterious, hidden rooms where scenes from places far away played out continuously in the fabric of the diamond walls. In one room, New York City bustled ever since its streets had been laid. Another room looked endlessly out on a spiritually significant Nordic Fiord. In one tinted chamber, far out on a lonely spike, Hell's black ocean oozed and lapped against its brooding shore, while tucked away in a far corner was yet another scene, which Aurianna had never understood the point of, showing only a bedraggled easy-chair with an awful stain on its seat.

The dream-seeing, however, was a gift innate to Aurianna alone. She couldn't have taught its secrets to anyone else if she had tried. Her perception of traces of the distant past and haunting present strands of time and space was razor keen, as it was in all angels selected for seer training. But for her, the qualities of the visions were altogether different. Her wild mind would, as she slept, breathe life back into the ghostly shadow play of the lives she watched and worlds she experienced. She would *become* people long dead or lost selves of people who still lived, in the setting of a world she was never quite sure was her own creation or not.

This gift was not as obviously useful as it might initially seem. For one thing, it was perilous. With every transformation a small portion of her own self vanished, leaving her weakened. Each time she woke with alien memories that accumulated alongside her own, threatening to fragment her psyche.

This two-fold attrition had begun to diminish her ability to detach from the possessed identity at the end of a dream. In addition to the danger, it was frustratingly difficult to direct the gift toward any specific end. When she dreamed, she would simply meet and become whoever or whatever happened to cross her path. It was only as she matured in her studies of the dreaming disciplines that she discovered and developed the ability to

construct relatively fixed, recurrent “dream-paths”. Through repetition and association she could select distinct individuals to see through. However, she used this form of vision-questing only when all other windows were shut for the drain on her fragile system was overly taxing, even in comparison to her regular seer’s dreams.

Her sister’s murder was one such shut door. A few angels had seen the Swamp Lord -- Mona’s murderer -- and Michael himself had crossed swords with him. None of them, however, could recall exactly what the creature had looked like. When required to summon memories to impart to Aurianna to aid her in her visions, they claimed his image was now an amorphous shadow within their minds. This was an intolerable puzzle. Any creature capable of breaking Michael’s sword and casting him to the ground should be a legend. Yet, he had become an enigma of broken accounts. After the murder, the beast had simply vanished. For more than a century Aurianna had worked on the dream-path that would unravel the mystery and clear the ominous fog from the minds of those that had first encountered the beast.

The process was harrowingly difficult for Aurianna. The dreams would start with a few simple minutes of her sister’s daily routine. The sensation of her warm, half-angel, half-mortal life was beautifully bittersweet for always the dream would dissolve inexorably into the brutal nightmare of Mona’s destruction. Aurianna would wake sweating profusely, coughing blood onto her dress and white sheets. It had become such a regular occurrence that she had begun to keep an ivory bowl on her bedside table to wretch into upon waking. She continued on with the painful process, though, for she knew it was only from such a place of darkness that she could discover the trails of energy that led her to the original cause. Aurianna refused to believe her efforts were in vain for a new development had allowed her to finally fleetingly brush the Swamp Lord’s energy directly. She was certain that she had discovered the fingerprints of the murdering monster. Thick and icy with a prehistoric viciousness, the energy was a memory engraved in the sandstone face of eternity from the very beginning of its existence over three-hundred years ago.

The swamps of Lower Purgatory that had birthed the beast were an organic manifestation of the psychological detritus of the mortal souls tormented for the sake of their own transformation on the bleak hills above. Vast and hostile, they were nearly completely unexplored and were now the home of a resistance this evening’s council of Archangels would discuss.

Aurianna shivered as an image of the Swamp Lord flashed through her mind, his focused rage and heartless dedication to self-preservation chilling her to her very core. Whatever the creature was, it was most definitely not mortal, angelic or even demonic, but an entity entirely of its own unique composition. It was massive with an aura that threatened to break her and consume her brittle self's last shards. She knew, however, that she had to face it.

At last, she wobbled her way through the final dizzying switchback of her tower almost cursing the playful, impractical intricacy of the way she'd articulated architecture when she was younger and more whole. The perfect brilliant air of the plains around the Gate of Heaven brought her back to the present. Before her stretched the great chessboard. To mortal sight, it would have looked endless, but her seer's eyes could just make out the shadow of the malachite bluff where the Gates themselves stood. She could see the spindle of the soaring stairs that rose like a mighty tree. Its main trunk leaned up to the Gates with its largest branches leading to the seven realms of the Archangels. Somewhere far ahead of her, too low and flat to be visible at such a distance, swept the long curve of the road that redeemed mortal souls followed to the stairs. The road was paved with gold-veined rose quartz and emerald.

The tiles below her feet, however, were of alternating obsidian and crystal. Through the crystal squares one could see the vast gallery of the cosmos brimming with the spiraling sonic dust of nebulae and galaxies. She breathed deeply in the austere beauty of the black and white plain, feeling a little more alive beyond the tumultuous walls of her tower. She began to glide in great figure skater movements toward the gathering place of the Archangels.

Those angels who would decide to attend the council meeting would be appalled to consider such pedestrian means of travel. However, Aurianna still felt too weary for the burst of glory that would uncase her wings and lift her to flight. Besides, the quiet moments in the simple, ordered vastness of the plain, with the billions of stars dancing beneath her, made her happy, peaceful. The structure of the meeting spot was a smooth concave impression in the chessboard, ten yards across and ten feet deep like an illustration of a bend in time-space in a science textbook. At its center, a blue-white fire, built of driftwood from the seas of Sariel's realm, burned.

Sariel himself, the lone wolf of the council of seven, a grim sailor of the nothing and an angel of death who took occasional comfort in such warm

simple labors, would show up early before each council and build this fire. Deep black cushions were strewn about the bowl, and as one lounged on them, the nebulae below seemed close enough to reach through the mineral and touch, a dizzyingly intimate setting perfected for contemplation and collaboration. Gliding to a stop at its rim, Aurianna saw four Archangels had already arrived. She, the seer and not herself an Archangel, was only invited to one late stage of the council, so these four were likely all that would remain. It was not unusual for Archangels to miss meetings. That said, though, Aurianna suspected that the three absentees had failed to show specifically because they no longer cared to hear what she had to say about the present crisis. Michael was in attendance, though. However vehemently he disagreed with her, he never disrespected her. Despite his aggressive arrogance at times, no one could question Michael's honor.

Remiel's back was to her as he leaned into the fire. The outline of his broad shoulders flickered in its light. He was wearing his favorite jacket, a western-cut monstrosity of white suede with a storm-and-wolf scene screen-printed on the back in aqua and gray, the exaggerated, comic book lightning bolt a lurid yellow. Remiel was the most inscrutable of the seven Archangels and he was the one Aurianna trusted most. Known as an angel of hope, he had an incredibly odd sort of foresight of his own. The task of training young seers always fell to him. Thus, Aurianna had come to know him well. She alone, perhaps, understood the notoriously odd habit he had acquired in the past fifty years or so of going M.I.A. among the tourist trap hotels and diners of the American Badlands on the physical plane. He was the only Archangel who fully shared her fascination with the mysterious intricacy and vastness of Earthly time and space. At the moment, he seemed intently focused on something in the palm of his hand. From across the fire, Michael watched her approach, eyeing her with deep concern.

Suspicion, actually, might be nearer the mark, Aurianna thought. The glow of his pale, amber eyes in the firelight was kind, in a distant, fatherly way, but his brows were knitted hard and dark beneath his great mane of curly black hair. He ran a hand over his beard and rose in greeting, smoothing his tunic of scarlet linen as he did so. He had a towering frame, deeply bronzed skin and Herculean limbs.

"Lady," Michael said, nodded, and sank back to the cushions.

Remiel rose and turned, smiling his big, thundery grin that moved his whole yellow beard. Golden light was seeping out between the fingers of his clenched left hand.

“Hi Remi,” Aurianna said, smiling back.

Sariel, sitting to Michael’s right, didn’t rise with the others, but acknowledged her arrival with a simple nod. His long, thin, blue-black hair swaying slightly as he did. He was the only one who had brought a weapon to the council, but everyone present knew why he’d done so. It wasn’t readiness of any kind, nor was it posturing or pride. It was simply baby-sitting of the weapon itself. A scythe-like sword in a massive curved sheath of black iron rested across his knees. Black flames licked out from it, teasing the tips of Sariel’s hair. The weapon had a mind of its own and a tendency to take on very unpleasant little metaphysical landscaping projects if left to its own devices. It had been a great gift of relief to Sariel, however. The blade, locked in its sheath with seven clasps, had been forged as a mere vessel so that Sariel no longer had to carry the dark flame in himself. That flame, Aurianna knew, was too much destructive power for any one creature to be cursed with. She vividly remembered the sight of Sariel during the chief battle of the great war, cornered alone in the malachite bluffs, fighting off nearly fifty of the fallen. She remembered what he had been like after the battle had ended, howling and tearing his clothes, running along the ridges. It was Raphael who had finally managed to approach him and bring him down from the cliffs.

Raphael, who was stretched out across the fire from Sariel, was a healer. He eyed Aurianna with as much concern as Michael, but the concern was of an altogether different sort. He was looking right through the temporary blush of solidity she had worked with her little candle spell and, with his piercing green eyes, checked her health like a physician. Raphael was the only Archangel to have been inside her tower and felt the sickly aura of her bedroom. He had come to her there on more than one occasion when he had sensed her being in imminent danger of fading into nothing. The memory of his gentle, bronze hands and the healing energy that flowed from them warmed her where she stood.

“Welcome, Aurianna,” Raphael said, “You’ve come at just the right time. I was beginning to update Sariel and Remi on the current status of the situation in Purgatory, for, as you know, it has been long centuries since they emerged from their own lands and journeys.”

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Stretched out in his blue jeans, work boots, and golden-brown tunic, he was all calm, relaxed business. The medallion of deep gold that hung about his neck was the only sign that he had given any thought to “dressing” for this gathering of Archangels at all.

“As Michael and Aurianna know well,” he went on, his deep voice soft, but clear, “It’s been nearly three-hundred years —”

“Years?” Michael quietly cut him off, raising a heavy, black eyebrow and grinning a little.

“Yes, Michael, *years*. I will not quibble over the celestial purity of my diction now.” Raphael rebuked, still softly, but firmly. Remiel continued fidgeting with whatever it was in his left hand as he listened silently.

“It’s been nearly three-hundred years since the first Purgatorial revolt, a strange, monstrosly brutal attack that came on us unawares out of the deepest heart of a plain of our dominion. We still, unless Aurianna has learned something new from her oracles, know almost nothing of the origins of that attack. Or even of the number and identities of those who carried it out.” Raphael paused and looked at Aurianna, offering her a chance to speak if she wished.

“Yes...Yes, I suppose...I have...walked...lately, in my dreams. I have experienced the swamp as it was in its infancy. It was endless and mighty, supremely unstable, its thin slip of sandy mud alone being all that veiled the young plant life within it from the nothing itself. It is my assessment that the swamp is indeed the heart of Purgatory.” Here Aurianna paused a second. She suddenly realized that she was still standing, like a schoolgirl reciting lessons. Forcing herself to relax, she took a seat beside Remiel.

With renewed confidence, she continued, “Think about it,” she said, “None of you, I trust, will lay claim to having crafted or even planned these swamps when the Archangels executed the building of Purgatory?”

There was silence. Sariel was now leaning forward and listening closely, the idea of a whole world of vegetation growing spontaneously on the shores of the primal formless void interested him a great deal more than any schemes about the fate of Heaven or Hell ever could. Aurianna hesitated, staring into the fire. Her voice was little more than a whisper as she continued.

“It is my belief,” she said, “that these swamps are of mortal creation.”

Remiel nervously cracked his neck next to her. Sariel was unreadable. Even Raphael looked at the ground next to him as if unsure what to say.

“I’ve been there.” Against the wall of Archangelic disbelief, her voice began to grow thin and nervous, “The whole place is permeated by a desperate power that longs in a way that only mortals can. Every drop of water in that awful place longs for release from torment.”

“What she says is true.” It was Michael’s voice. Aurianna was shocked. “Your sister, Mona,” he studied Aurianna’s eyes as he replied, “knew it to be true. She spoke to me at times of her concern and I believed her. Though I questioned her tactics, I never questioned her knowledge of Purgatory. That is why I yielded to her judgment in the end. Mona told me that the swamp was a product of the droppings of a place like Purgatory, where souls, without being essentially destroyed, as they are in Hell, are tormented.. She described it as the primal germinating pool of the mortal animal desires distilled out of the tormented souls. This is why she wouldn’t let me amputate it from Purgatory. The energies contained in it, she claimed, were essential to the identities of the souls serving their sentences in Purgatory proper. Those souls, she said, could not be transformed and yet remain themselves without that energy being reincorporated into them. This last claim, I was skeptical of for reasons of my own. But I do not doubt that you are essentially right about the origin of the swamps below Purgatory. What of the Hell-spawn who entered Purgatory proper through the Willow Gate, though? Have you located him yet, or discovered his true identity? We must find him.”

“No, Michael,” Aurianna said. She was almost blushing, grateful for the unexpected support, but knew that she was now at a dangerous juncture. “I wanted to believe the creature you fought was born of Hell, but I have found no evidence to support such a claim. I have looked elsewhere, in all the books, in all my mirrors. During the past hundred years, I have been through the annals of the great demons up and down, including even those that were destroyed eons ago. I still support the concept that Lucifer has resumed the old craft he practiced, back in the days when he created the great blind worm of Hell. Somehow, secretly, I think, he has made a new monster.”

Two weeks ago, this report would have been complete and honest truth. Now, she suspected that the desperate human power in the swamp and the monster were one and the same. Lucifer had nothing whatsoever to do with the uprisings in Purgatory. She did not, however, want Michael to know this for it would dampen his zeal for the cause. Michael watched her

intently, analyzing her every small move until she began to feel incredibly uncomfortable and transparent.

“Brilliant songs of angelic life that should have gone on sounding forever were silenced in those dark days,” Michael spoke with a soft reverence into the fire. “I counseled the Governess of Purgatory, may her spirit find its way to the light,” here he nodded slightly but solemnly to Aurianna, “to tear down the gateway between the plains of Purgatory proper and the seething, mutating swamps. I urged her to face the fact that an evil force was at work there, a force that threatened her, as the Governess of Purgatory, more than anyone else. I urged her to cast the swamps adrift into The Nothing and return Purgatory to its original simplicity. She would not listen, and it was not my place to use force. Then, when the need for action came upon us in the fullness of its own time, I did not have enough strength in me to use. I am sorry.”

“Michael,” Raphael cut in with the urgency of one who seeks to check a psychological landslide before it gathers momentum, “no one doubts that you did the right thing when you granted Mona free range of her will in Purgatory. And no one doubts that you fought as fiercely as anyone could have when the time for fighting came.”

A sudden gust of strange wind caused the fire to flicker and dim for moment turning the flames a deeper shade of blue, the veins of the coals momentarily glowing with a renewed ferocity. The black flames around Sariel’s sword danced aggressively as if with a prehensile life of their own.

“Be still, damn you,” muttered Sariel at the sword, like a man embarrassed at the behavior of his dog.

Here, Michael rose to his feet and began to pace the circumference of the upper slope of the bowl. He shook his head and unfolded his primary wings in a rippling whoosh of radiance with feathers like a golden eagle, their span nearly encircling the entire counsel. He strutted and fretted in silence for a long moment as if trying to drive the darkness from his mind.

“After the rebellion had been driven into the swamps below,” he began, “some of the Seraphim and I attempted a few aerial forays through the Willow Gate and down the river, hoping to wipe them out once and for all. That proved...foolish, useless. The wild landscape there aided our enemy until we eventually retreated. Two of my dearest friends withered into the mud of that place, for my sake.

“A time of silence then ensued,” he continued. “We fortified, setting up an expansive encampment in the bleak, steep valley above the Willow Gate. Morale was low for the devilish awe of those trees was ever over us. But we were undaunted. We set up forges and we crafted cunning gates of adamantium carefully designed far from the roots of the willow trees. Great, arching arms of intricate celestial geometry suspended the boundaries, and they were perforated to allow the river to run in its own free way, even in times of flood. We respected Mona’s wishes. To the fortifications we added cannons of mortal-angelic design and a few of the very first Gatling Guns ever crafted by our armories. We were a formidable defense, even by my own high standards.”

Michael folded his wings behind him as if he were about to roost, his lion pacing ebbing as the ferocity left him. “The gates were watched ceaselessly,” he said, “much to the weariness of my warriors. For as you all know, our kind does not take naturally to dull labor. Morale fell still lower, and some began to grow crass in a way that I had never seen in angels before. I was troubled. I began to doubt the wisdom of forcing our nomadic warriors to assemble permanently in organized camps. At any rate, factions within the soldiery had nicknamed the river Mulmor ‘Mona’s Ditch’. They began to speak with hate of both her wisdom and the trees that were always above us.”

A wild warrior’s fire burned in his amber eyes as he gestured emphatically with his hands. “One night a cruel fog rolled up through the gates, heavy with a stench of decay and salt as if it had drifted in from some distant sea. It stuck to our skin and feathers, burning our minds and nerves like hatred itself. The guard, grumbling, left their posts, relocating up to the bluffs above the river. Say what you will of them, it was well that they did so for the gates and all their ramparts began to creak and moan. The sounds continued throughout the night, paralyzing the hearts of the warriors present with fear. I was summoned to the Willow Gates and arrived just as a fierce dawn broke upon them like fire, dissolving the fog. What we saw struck us dumb with despair. All our mighty, golden metalwork lay crumpled along the riverbanks, gripped still by black, ominous roots that had crept up out of the foul earth of that place. It looked as if the trees themselves had laid our fortress low. Whether they had acted of their own accord, or answered some other call, we did not know. But we heard howling. Deep, trumpeting howling, away beyond the edge of sight in the swamps.”

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Michael rose once more and turned his back to the gathering. He stepped a few paces toward the rim of the bowl and spread his wings slightly. Raphael watched him with a hand on his chin, concern brimming in his deep green eyes. Sariel's dark gaze sparkled with mischievous animation, his fingers dancing in time with the black flames enveloping the hilt of his sword. Remiel passed the flame he had gathered from the fire like a fist full of fireflies back and forth from hand to hand in arcs of lightning.

Aurianna was reminded that all Archangels were deeply tempted by the joy they took in battle. When Michael spoke again, it was loud and formal, as if chanting to the night sky above.

"The channels of the lower Mulmor are deep, but just above the gates there is a great sandbar. It was there, with translucent brown eddies around my ankles that I waited, and watched, as the brutal light of that day began to prick my skin. I stood there long before that strange panorama of dark, high earthen banks, shores riddled with stinking caves of torment that simply vanish when one looks through the portal of those willow trees. I stood there waiting, until, at the edge of my sight I saw a green wave begin to roll. It looked as if its surface was studded with emeralds, breaking the light in a million irregular ways. Then I saw it for what it was: it was a front of living creatures, tumbling over themselves and one another in their frenzied stampede. I gave orders to salvage what artillery remained and position them around the base of the trees before the gate. By the time this was done, they were close enough for us to hear them, their calls trumpets, whistles, drones and howls of mingled rage and joy. It as if the swamp itself was singing a battle song against us."

Aurianna pushed off of an opaque crystal square with her right foot, lifting her leg like an ice skater to slip shakily a few more feet across the magnificent chessboard on her way back to her tower. Though the heated discussions had continued on for several more long hours until the last of Aurianna's wavering energy dissipated the council meeting had left her filled with a thrilling rush of adrenaline.



Exhaustion caused her vision to quaver, her limbs feeling no heavier than strips of rice paper, yet her heart beat fast and furious in her fragile chest as she recanted Michael's story again silently to herself. His words had reignited Raphael, Sariel and Remiel's thirst for battle. While their

interest in her personal quest might not have been furthered directly, the war itself in Purgatory had once again seized their attention. When she had delicately, quietly inserted mention of Mona, this time she had not been entirely dismissed, a sign she took that it would not be long before a firm request for their assistance could be presented again.

Flinging her arms wide, she pirouetted in the center of a clear tile above the fiery magenta and aqua spirals of a dazzling new galaxy and the pitch of infinity as she celebrated her minor victory amongst the Archangels. She felt nearly strong enough to uncase her wings and fly back to her home, but she was wise enough to resist the urge knowing all too well that this moment of adrenaline-renewed conviction would soon deplete her already frayed core. Onward she skated, slipping from one perfectly polished tile to another upon her bare feet, her shapeless pocket-lined dress giving her the appearance of a madwoman dancing on the lawns of an institution. The Archangels would most likely believe she had lost what was left of her sanity if they saw her now, except for perhaps Remi who seemed to intuit such states of being without question or concern. So much of her life was bound by the torments of her dreams and the sorrow of her lost sister that this brief moment of jubilant, childlike celebration she felt entirely entitled to.

Upon the horizon she spied her home of towering crystal spires. The exquisite, seamlessly carved mineral was alight with chaotic fluttering pulses, electrified with the impulses of her own trilling jubilation. It was the first time in ages Aurianna had witnessed the stone alive with such a miraculously beautiful positivity for most often it echoed a far more brutal and dark energy of her dream world wanderings. As she neared her home her smile began to fade. Her muscles began to twitch slightly beneath her skin as exhaustion tormented them. She knew her dreams would bring about an end to the glorious lightshow she witnessed now. The thought rolled through her like distant, dangerous thunder and she suddenly wanted to apologize to her home even though she knew it was the purpose of the structure to be her conduit.

It was useless to remind herself that the tower was a tool and nothing more for she had become so traumatically intertwined with its inner workings that it could have very well housed a soul of its own within the gleaming crystal. She knew its destruction would mean her death.

Up the steep, spiraling maze of narrow stairs she pulled herself, resting her shoulder against the wall as she moved as she slowly reached the

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uppermost floors where her bedchamber resided. As she staggered to her bed she found herself so weary that even drawing a breath had become a monumentally complex feat. Aurianna needed to return to the dreamworld to continue her examination of Mona's parting moments. It was all the more crucial that she continue with her crusade now that the Archangels contemplated a return to their original war with full force. Asleep already where she stood, Aurianna collapsed into the bed and felt her mind sink down deep into the quicksand of Purgatory's history.



Muddy water sprayed upwards as the sound of the battle thrashed through the girth of the Mulmor river, churning violently into frothing madness tinged gold by the spilt angelic blood and green of their fallen swampland foes.

It was just as Michael had described it in all of its violent glory. Twisted arcing remains of the original golden gate protruded out of the ground beneath the gnarled roots of the two colossal willow trees arching overhead, the long green tendrils of foliage draping down to nearly touch the heads of the maniacally fighting entities below. Swords plunged into the leathery, scaled hides of the Lower Purgatorians caught by the guards. The Swamp Lord waded through the center of the fray, cutting through the angels that dared to try and block his path, ripping their wings from their backs and crushing them down into the silt and stone at the river's bottom. He seemed unconcerned with the demise of his fellow reptilian soldiers as he charged towards the Willow Gate, determined to make his way through no matter the cost.

Aurianna felt the icy swift-moving water threaten to drag her under as the commotion enveloped her, dampening her ability to focus on the details as her senses were overwhelmed until the fighting began to subside, the dead sinking below the surface to be carried downstream and back into the depths of the swamp.

Somewhere between the last flailing, bloodied bodies she caught a glimpse of the Swamp Lord as he engaged Michael. A blur of fiery artillery blasts illuminated the river through the shafts of broken sunlight before a blur of movement and bone-crunching sound was absorbed by a torrential splash as the Swamp Lord hurled Michael down into the sandy riverbed. For a moment the Swamp Lord stared down at the image of Michael

embedded in the silt, his repugnant, humanoid-lizard features displaying little emotion except for the blind rage that caused his golden eyes to blaze horrifically. He lifted his head and glanced back through the gate and for a brief instance Aurianna was certain he could see her, his stare seemingly fixed upon her with a deadly suspicion...

The scene shifted, blurring as if caught in a centrifuge for a disorienting second and Aurianna found herself once again forced to witness Mona's death, though this time was somehow different. The details of the events unfolded in a malaise of mottled sensation rather than terrifyingly crisp detail. Aurianna felt her psyche drawn towards the Swamp Lord's presence, the power of his aura threatening to consume her, wrenching her permanently from the corporeal shell slumbering in her bed and toss her down into the abyss along with her sister's broken shell. Struggling against the invading kudzu vines of his will, she wrested herself free with a silent scream but not before a wave of strange sexual ambiguity washed over her, nauseatingly intoxicating.

He was dividing within himself, his potent animalistic desire for procreation fueling his quest for war until he would soon outgrow the hide he had first been born into. An incestuous amoebic lust boiled within the Swamp Lord, which he was yet to be entirely cognizant of.

Aurianna thrashed against the pull of his will until she managed to find an anchor to tether her psyche within the hazy memory of Mona's cottage, the ledger of souls upon her desk, newly open to that day's assignments.

Aurianna focused upon the immaterial material object that contained within it so much of her sister's own residual energy from her devotion to her position, imagining placing her hands down to either side of the pages upon the time-worn wood that smelled of Mona's soft perfume and eons of tobacco smoke. Drawing a "breath" Aurianna glanced up just in time to see Mona hurled into the open vortex and the dream shifted yet again. Now she tumbled down the abyss as her sister, staring upwards at the Swamp Lord as he watched her fall with cold calculating eyes. Aurianna could feel every ounce of Mona's terror as she plummeted downwards, her legs and arms flailing about her in desperation to find some hold to stop her descent. When the impact came Aurianna was unprepared for the scorching agony as her bones shattered, and her flesh stripped away from her body like a bloody sheaf of silk. Time stopped, her mind blank as a screeching white noise of pain obliterated every thought or memory, her vision one blinding star burst of red.



Aurianna gasped as she awoke and nearly choked on the bloody vomit filling her throat. Unable to stop the spasms in her limbs as she quaked in the aftermath she turned her head to the side and wretched onto the bed, soaking the white sheets and staining her dress a deep red. She screamed aloud as the memory of the agony ripped through her again, the convulsions intensifying until her eyes rolled back in her head showing nothing but white. She gasped again as another wave of blood welled up in her throat causing her to gag and wrench until she thought she might turn inside out.

Her fingers intertwined within the bedding until she began to hear the fabric rip, Aurianna fought for control over her body for hours, until her limbs were slick with sweat. Panting and trembling like a beaten wolf she lay curled in a fetal position near the edge of the bed upon the soiled sheets, her long hair matted to her face as she stared blankly into space, unable even to form a single coherent thought. She had been close to a true death this time and her ability to return to the waking world had been nearly impossible. It was a realization that terrified her to her core. However, she knew now that Mona was indeed “alive”, trapped in a state of horrific torture, but “alive”. *Mona was alive.*



Art by Daniel Eskridge

CHAPTER 18

The Queen looked at Marcus as if she could see every one of his dark thoughts. “I need a nap,” she said to him. “We’ll come get you just before dawn.” She didn’t turn away immediately, but spared a long slow glance at the glinting, crystalline nail of her right third finger, the one that had grazed Marcus’s hand, before looking back at his face. Her features still looked taken from a slender 19th century representation of Aphrodite, her skin flushed like living rose-marble with hair fluid and dark as a waterfall of ink. Her eyes were impossibly inviting, perilous midnight-blue whirlpools.

However, the instance of perfection had vanished, her hair disheveled and features darkened by an all-too mortal weariness. Her skin, whatever sort of molten sculptor’s miracle it may have been, had all too much in common with mortal skin now that fine lines and dark circles revealed a tiredness that caused her to sway slightly where she stood. Marcus was dimly aware of the King’s tall shadow passing in through the lighted doorway of the cabin and out of view as she bent in close to his right ear. Wisps of her hair touched his face like feathery, investigating tentacles. With the others gone, Marcus saw that a blue-veined, black vortex had overwhelmed the other auras lingering around the lawn. His proximity to its center seemed incredibly unsafe.

“You see things clearly,” she said, “but you still waste too much of yourself playing the silly, deceptive, riddling games of Earth and Hell.”

Marcus felt a warm heroin-heavy tingle shoot through the right side of his neck. The Queen took a step back and then another. Marcus counted them hazily like a man in a trance. With a third, however, the spell broke. She held up the third finger of her right hand, and it was slick with his blood. With a disturbingly feral sexuality she placed the tip of her finger in her mouth and licked the blood, letting her tongue explore the razor tip of her nail for a seductive moment before lowering her hand once again.

Her voice was barely audible in the thick, pure silence. “Here, in this world, we must be closer than blood. All other ways of being are poison.” She relaxed visibly as the final, careless stage of her exhaustion came over her. “Leave them behind while you have the chance. Believe me, it’s not

a chance you'll find anywhere else. I've looked through many, many pairs of eyes."

Marcus raised his hand to his neck as she turned and walked away into her cabin. There was quite a bit of blood there, but whatever wound it had emerged from had already healed. Marcus wandered dizzily away and found himself back in his own cabin. The tub was still filled with tepid water. He dipped a corner of a towel in it and rubbed the remaining drying blood from his neck. Pulling the drain plug, he watched the queasy gold eddies as the water swirled its way through the copper light and down into darkness. No matter how solid the feel of the metal beneath his forearms or the trickling of the evacuating water, he could not shake the sensation that there was nothing *real* about this place. His senses buzzing with adrenaline, he knew he would never be able to find sleep now.

The stuffed companion Angelee had loaned him, however, appeared to have his back. Behind him, on the low table among the cushions where he'd left it, the bright orange giraffe was a warm center of comforting energy. It seemed to hum a kind of interference pattern that cut the amplitudinal legs out from under the disturbing waves in his psyche. Suddenly, it felt as if the giraffe could make things simpler. Stepping back into the front room, he scooped it up and smiled a little stupidly at it. He was sure he made an odd spectacle in his close fitting military garb. With the giraffe tucked under one arm he climbed up the ladder cut deep into the wall of the loft.

The loft loomed over him like a gigantic outcrop of golden, wood-grained stone as he climbed up nearly twenty feet. However, as he swung over the top of the ledge he found the platform broad and comfortable, hollowed out slightly like a nest lined with an array of soft brown and yellow blankets. In the shadows cast by the globes of light far below he sheltered the stuffed giraffe like a living child. Marcus curled up on his side and allowed the numbness of over-stimulation to draw his mind away from his body. As a light, crouching sleep began to creep stealthily over him, the bright puddles of color seemed to dim of their own accord. The sensation of black hounds circling below beyond the perimeter of the encampment infiltrated the periphery of his senses, but he knew, somehow, he was safe. The feeling lasted only a moment. Floating back to the surface tension of wakefulness, Marcus rolled onto his back and stretched out, folding his hands behind his head. The ceiling above was a steepled, dark abyss of seamless polished wood. He cast a suspicious glance at the giraffe, which

he had perched on his chest, sure he had heard the toy whisper to him. He began to sink again.

He was on porous, warm, wet stone. Orange sandstone that, more than anything else, meant “home” to him, high up, lying on his back on the flat top of a tower. A fat, warm rain was romping down. His amphibious skin reveled in it, as did that of his friends. It nourished them lovingly. There were six of them, wildly dissimilar and yet, identical as siblings. The rain-pierced air between them brimmed with the type of familiarity born of long, dangerous journeys together. Three of them were gathered around a strange fire that blazed on within the splashing downpour. It seemed rooted to a point on the ground like a campfire, moving with a swaying flicker akin to flame, only more languid, its light far too pale than the natural golden glow to be of an earthly realm. It not only burned in spite of the rain, it seemed to burn brighter because of it. Nearest to the liquid flame squatted Jordan, her skin slick lime green and spotted like a leopard frog. She’d stripped off her Kevlar® to be naked in the rain, glistening in the firelight, shadows of her seaweed-lank hair casting dancing shadows on her small breasts and long torso.

Nin sat cross-legged across the fire from her. While Nin’s spine and vitals were protected by beautiful, small, round emerald scales, the rest of her exposed skin appeared human. She wore a garish tropical bikini top and heavily frayed slate-gray wet suit shorts and retained a fraction more modesty than Jordan.. Her brilliant orange hair was shaved at the sides, but from the wide Mohawk stripe on top, it fell low enough to gather on her thighs where she sat.

Jack, whose salamander skin was as orange as Nin’s hair, was whispering something scandalous in her ear, causing a faint blush to rise to her cheeks and her eyes to glitter with arousal.

Amos and his brother Argyle were on guard at the rim of the plateau with their prized rocket launcher. They would most likely randomly fire it at something for no good reason before the night was over. He, himself, whoever “he” was -- stretched out nearby the fire enjoying the warm hydration of the storm as it passed over his body. A long, sleek, high-powered sniper rifle of lay propped against his hip. Its name was Fang and in moods like this he felt compelled to throw Fang over the side of the cliff. When such storms occurred it always dissolved their last shreds of patience for even the slightest of military discipline. He could feel the collective energy of that mood coming over the whole group, a reckless

primal abandon steeped in renegade youth and rebellion. The disposition would pass, some part of him knew, and they would all become deadily distant again, crossing endless miles together. But, for now, the vital flow of the furious rain was all that mattered...

As the scene spiraled away beneath Marcus, back into the darkness of the dream world, he began to miss the dank anarchic sense of camaraderie. The sensation left him disoriented and puzzled by the sentimental reverie for entities as alien to him as angels. How had those names come to him with such a swift, automatic ease? He was fairly certain the names were not even ones he had heard in his mortal life, let alone his demonic one, though he consciously understood that dreams were strange fickle creatures steeped in pure unadulterated imagination. However, he could not stop thinking about the orange sandstone and how he had never once touched such a strange surface that felt so natural. The distinct sensation that the dream had been more of a vision plucked from some other sentient consciousness lingered in his tired mind, causing him to wonder just why had he stepped into that world at such a time as this. Through whose eyes had he watched the new world?

As a demon, he did not need to sleep. Even in the oubliettes he had rarely been able to find peace in the dream world, yet here, in this strange alternate plane, he felt drawn to sleep more than even since his days as a human. He doubted the effect would last long, but, as it often went with particularly vivid dreams, Marcus felt changed by it. He felt certain there was some sort of historical significance to it, but how, he did not even know where to begin searching for answers.

He felt like he'd acquired a new personal significance in twenty minutes of light sleep. He stared at the giraffe with a bleary suspicion. The fuzzy orange toy gazed blankly at something just to the left of his pillow. Marcus couldn't help but smile. Smiling was something that seemed to come naturally to him in this place, strangely enough, a physical and emotional response that he had all but forgotten. He could not remember if it was simply that he had nothing to smile for, or if he had lost the ability—as though an aspect of his *self* had been incinerated by the pain he had experienced in his mortal life. Regardless, he welcomed its return and wondered if perhaps there might be hope for him after all.

“Marcus,” the King’s unmistakable voice came from below, perhaps for the second time, “it’s time to go.”

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Marcus listened to his purposefully placed footsteps as he left the cabin, closing the door quietly behind him. He slung the long jacket on and, with his hands in his pockets and the giraffe under one arm, climbed down from the loft. The King the Queen were leaning nonchalantly against the front wall of the building. Without a word they vanished through the entrance to the tent. Marcus followed. The sky outside had not changed since the time they had sought refuge. The King noticed Marcus's puzzled glance.

"Oh, the sun won't rise here," he said. "The setup just isn't that expansive or elaborate yet. Night will become day, but not in the physical process ingrained in your perception of planar spatial relation. But 'down', if you will, in Purgatory itself it's just about to be first pale light. We're going to wade out into its margins and cross over. After coming up Angelee's way, I fear, you might find our way down anti-climactic, but it is safer, provided of course that one doesn't have all the hounds of Hell on one's heels."

The Queen had her hair up in a ponytail again and, by her walk, Marcus guessed that she had recovered at least some of the matter-of-fact jubilation she had displayed earlier. It was back to the edge of the plane, though they were making for a point far from John's stream, which Marcus soon located as a twisty glimmer a quarter-mile above, on their right. Climbing through the lush, knee-deep grass, its arches grabbing languidly at their ankles each time they lifted their feet, they hiked once again towards the lip of nothingness above.

The tall swaying grass blurred the edge of the bowl of plane so Marcus was careful not to step too close to it. The Queen, however, pushing herself up an earthen ledge hidden in the tangled grass, brought herself to the very brink without so much as slowing down. The King hung back a little, watching her as she studied the stars for a moment. She extended her right arm, pointing with three fingers, ever so slightly splayed. The Queen sighted over them with her right eye as if she were aiming a triple-barreled rifle at some coordinate high out in the blackness. As she held the pose for more than a minute, Marcus found himself standing as still as she did, frozen by expectation. Only the King looked even remotely relaxed as three colossally long pipelines of light began to unroll slowly out of the sky.

It soon became apparent that their sloth speed was an illusion, their uncoiling blazing from a tremendous distance away towards the lip of the plane. Watching them, Marcus suddenly noticed something about the King and Queen's newly created stars. When they had been the only light in pure black space he hadn't picked up on it, but now that these uncannily

long, straight, yellow lines acted as a sort of yardstick for Marcus to orient his perception by. These “stars”, as heavily and beautifully as they loomed above, were not oriented, in Earthly stellar terms, at the truly great distances they appeared to reside. True, they were far out of reach from such a creature as Marcus, but did not match the billions of light years true stars existed at when viewed in the physical plane. It was the yellow lines of light that brought the spatial relevance into clarity as they clearly came from somewhere beyond the glowing pinpoints of white light, both laterally and vertically.

Marcus barely had time to flinch as the end of one of the lights unrolled its last turn and splashed against his forehead. In spite of the terrifying speed he barely felt the impact, as if the beam had not transferred any of its kinetic energy. The energy was instead converted to the warm, organic luminosity that pulsed gently as it lay absurdly draped over his head and shoulders like a translucent membrane. Looking around in sheepish shock, Marcus saw that the King and Queen had both caught their beams neatly and were now nobly, doing their best not to laugh at him.

“You can’t tie it to yourself,” the Queen said, “because you’re going to have to let go of it in a hurry when the time comes. But make sure you’ve got a damn good grip on it. I wrap it around my forearms like this. Let’s hope the ground is under us when the sun comes up. It usually is.”

This was all the verbal explanation she seemed to consider necessary. She began to demonstrate the wrapping she described. Marcus held up the stuffed giraffe that occupied one of his hands, and hastily searched himself for a place to stow it. He undid his belt, slid it out of a couple loops, and refastened it across the giraffe’s body so its forelegs were on one side of the belt and its hind legs on the other. The poor thing looked squeezed as it gazed up at him with its inscrutable plastic eyes. The Queen patiently started her demonstration over again, like a gothic cowgirl performing a rope trick. Her arms looked like they were bound in a pair of alchemical manacles. She showed how, by pointing her elbows up and releasing her grip at the same time, she could let the cord slide away from her easily. Marcus attempted to follow the pattern of loops. The glowing strand was as flexible as cooked spaghetti, easy to grip, almost tacky, and slightly pliable. He wanted to lean back and put weight on it to test his grip, but was more than a little afraid that it might snap back and catapult him over the edge.

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“It’s time,” the King said. Marcus was relieved to see that he was taking a less technical approach to holding onto the cord than his female counterpart.

The King stepped up to the edge and leaned back, a little, to pull the strand tight. “It’s important that we all go at exactly the same time. Our speed will be great, as will be the distance we cover. Small errors in timing will magnify into wide separations between us.”

The Queen was leaning back, tightening her strand, as well.

Shit, thought Marcus. *We really are going to use these to swing out there?* Gingerly, he stepped up through the tangled grass to the earthen ledge. Before him, just beyond the tip of his toes, was the dizzying expanse of the void. Testing his boots’ hold in the dirt to make sure he wouldn’t slip, he mimicked the King and Queen’s movements and leaned back a little. From his forearms, the strand of light stretched up at about a sixty-degree angle to some point wildly beyond the outer limit of his sight. He tried not to raise any metaphysical questions about what it might be anchored to.

I’ll ask later, he thought. At the moment he really didn’t want to know. His whole consciousness was consumed by his grip on the glowing tube in his hands. He wrapped a second loop around his left forearm for good measure. Fortunately, the thing seemed too thick and soft to dig into the flesh much. He didn’t dare bring any extra power to bear on the affair. He wasn’t sure how the bright substance would react to his innate dark abilities. In fact, he was surprised it allowed him to make contact with it at all, once again causing him to wonder just what the origin and purpose was of these strange energy paths. Marcus drew a deep breath and prepared himself for what came next.

“On three,” the King said. “Do as we do. Just lean back, kick your feet out, and let the rope take you where it will. One, two, three.”

As one, they sailed smoothly out into the blackness, descending in a broad, shallow arc. But shallow as their trajectory was, they still gathered speed rapidly. To Marcus’s horror, he found himself rotating slowly to the left as they descended. All he could do was hang onto the yellow beam for dear life. As he wound around to the point where he was swinging backwards what he saw behind him looked like an immense glass sculpture modeled on psychedelic mushroom iconography. Emerging from the void below, rose a braided trunk of the pink and orange plasma that seemed ubiquitous in this place. It appeared as if a shovel full of silt and

roots had been dug up from mineral rich soil, veined and glittering with a copper luminescence. Additional braids of plasma rose above opening into the canopy of congealed starlight where Angelee kept her fort. The bowl seemed to be held in place by a kind of dual suspension structure from above and below.

Swinging further out, forty-five degrees past facing straight backward, Marcus suddenly saw the frontier of the stars. Rotating the rest of the way to the side, he saw his feet and the Queen rush toward that frontier. The moment they crossed it, everything but them and their respective harnessing lines went black, blinking out as if it were a string of Christmas lights that had been suddenly unplugged. Marcus became acutely aware that there was now absolutely no air resistance. As he revolved full circle to face the direction he had initially been traveling, he noticed that the cord in his hands was nearly vertical, the three of them were gliding straight ahead together. The circular motion in the void was beginning to become nauseating as his bearings on cardinal directions slipped away in the vacuum of interspatial continuity. He was about to start another lap when the King, who had somehow veered in closer to him actually took a hand off his own cord and tapped him on the shoulder to set him straight.

“Look! The dawn!” the King called suddenly, as if crying from the deck of one ship to another.

With that he raised his hands over his head, so that his legs swung down into a vertical position. He began to execute a striding motion in space, as was the Queen. An orb of faint gray appeared in the distance amidst the dense oil paint blackness of the void.

Do as we do... Marcus remembered and raised his hands to swing his feet down. The dark gray light was growing, lightening at the center like an oncoming train. As he lowered his legs, Marcus’s feet struck a spongy approximation of substance, though nothing appeared to exist beneath. The sensation created just enough resistance flowing around his feet to force him to steady himself. As the light grew ahead of them, the invisible substance stiffened. Soon, Marcus felt like he was making great bounding strides across a sheet of gelatin. Dawn broke in earnest, a pale line blooming across a dreary horizon; from the three aerialists’ perspective, it was as if the horizon was giving birth to a landscape rather than rising over it.

“Let go! Now!” shouted the Queen. Her voice sounded foreign and distant despite her close proximity.

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Marcus obeyed. The three golden ropes of light vanished in unison. Marcus, found himself lurching wildly forward as if he'd just parachuted into a bog and was fighting not to face-plant. Suddenly the spongy gray matter solidified, taking on an earthy definition, casting him into a complete somersault, followed by another tumbling, graceless fall. As the world around him ceased its spinning he realized he was laying on a carpet of thick, dry, ordinary grass that was slate gray in the early light. There was no sign of any marshmallow bog back the way he'd come as he had expected. His boots were dry.

Jesus! he thought, his heart thundering in his chest. *This is what these people call "safer" and "anti-climactic?" Fuck...*

"Everyone still here? Good! Marcus, you do indeed have a gift or two!" The Queen's voice was like a babbling brook.

"Welcome to Purgatory," the King said.

It somehow comforted Marcus to see that both his fellow acrobats were lying on their backs in much the same way he was. They spent some time getting up, dusting themselves off and waiting for the wan sunlight to get bright enough to really see by.

"You've been here before, of course," the King said, "but there wasn't time, as I heard the story, for much of a formal greeting."

Confused, Marcus looked around and found that they were laying on the relatively flat top-section of a large, irregularly shaped hill. Beyond the vales around it rose as a jagged, grayish tundra upon a steep, knifing hill. There were a few nearly vertical spaces of exposed clay here and there, but mostly the coarse grass carpeted the landscape. The sky loomed overhead as an immense sheet of slate, the sun hanging as a cold pale disc shining faintly through the dull sorrowful haze. The greatest center of warmth in the entire realm, it seemed, was the giraffe, which was still plastered awkwardly to Marcus side anchored by his belt. It seemed, somehow, to be radiating softly a peaceful grounding energy. His conscious mind, which had forgotten all about the stuffed toy, was tremendously relieved to see it had not been lost in their travels. Feeling oddly a little guilty about the tormenting contortion he'd put it through, he undid his belt and held it in his hands, fluffing it back into shape.

"We'd better get moving," the King said. "Many eyes are looking for us."

It turned out to be a long and tiring walk, even for a creature such as Marcus. The bleak silence of the hills was deeply disorienting, seeming to echo from within itself like a ghost of a chant executed eons before. It grabbed hold of Marcus's psyche, teasing it, its familiar scent of slow decay suffocating the trance-like ability to experience the forgotten emotion of happiness that had begun to creep back into his being in the new plane. He shivered, trying to cling to the residual warmth that seemed to be evaporating from his soul with every step. His fingers tightened unconsciously around the neck of the giraffe as he studied his surroundings.

There was no consistent path through the hills, the three of them forced to scramble repeatedly over crests and valleys, each absolutely identical to the other. Though the King and Queen assured him he had been here before, he could not for the life of him recall a memory of such a place. The images of his past were always far more twisted and tormented, brimming with horrific, fantastical creatures and shifting scenery that could have been plucked from a psychotic schizophrenic's nightmare. Left alone in this new place, Marcus was sure he would have been reduced to wandering in circles for time eternal. The King, however, was focused, appearing to know exactly where they were going. As what felt like hours drifted by to the rise and fall of the gray tundra, a question began to needle at Marcus.

"If this is Purgatory," he asked, "where is everybody? I mean I'd always pictured the place crawling with tormented souls." His tone was a little caustic. Again, he was completely convinced he had not actually been to Purgatory itself for he had simply stepped into Desiderium's role as the Demon of Regret shortly after he had committed suicide.

In the brief silence that followed his question, Marcus suddenly realized how amazing it was that his unbeliever's sarcasm had survived all his experiences. The actual physical and spiritual experiences of the "afterworlds" he'd wandered into were so utterly unlike anything he'd heard about in Sunday school as a child that he didn't really see their existence as a mark against the lazy, half-hearted atheism of his adult mortal past.

"Oh they're here," the King replied, "but these ones you can't see. I could show you stinking, shrieking caves of mud that would fulfill your most superstitious expectations. By noon, if we keep to our current pace, you will see the river Mulmor, the great river of Purgatory. The towering banks of its lowest, winding reaches are a place of foul moss and springs. The springs flow out of caves that are true places of inconceivable torture. For the moment, however, count yourself lucky to be in a very strange

region of Purgatory, one that is very dear to me, to us.” The King, who had been leading the way, checked his pace and allowed his Queen to come up alongside him. He put his arm around her and surveyed the hills with a wistful gleam in his eye.

“These,” the King gestured to the rolling gray tundra around them, “are the Downs of Solitude, one of the most unique and unstable works of metaphysical artifice in all the plains. You could wander in them forever and you’d never cross the path of another soul. Nor would you ever find your way out. Unless, of course, you had a guide who had studied them long and deep in order to unravel their secrets. In fact, I’ve reworked some of my favorite regions of the Downs myself, in a much more pleasing color palate. There, the skies shine blue and the grass is lush and green. A few birds, the masterpieces of my early creative work, when I was still more than half animal myself, even sing there. She made some of the most beautiful, glossy, midnight-blue crows.” He squeezed his companion’s hand affectionately before letting go of it.

She likes crows. Marcus though smugly.

The King turned and resumed his marching pace. Marcus’s curiosity, however, was far from satisfied. There was simply something too cloyingly sweet, too over-zealously orchestrated about the way the King spoke about this realm and even the way he gazed lovingly at his Queen.

“Okay,” he said. “So this is Purgatory. And I’ve been to Hell. And I was born and died on Earth. But where the hell was it that we just swung in from?”

“That...that is something new,” the King spoke slowly. “It is a place that, like us, has no name. Why, after all, should we deign to differentiate it with a name, as if it were only one place among the others. It is the only place amidst all of the plains that is truly *free*. Therefore, it is the only one that matters. But perhaps I get ahead of myself? It will be all those things once we finish it, a task I very much hope you will help us with, for your talents seem to be considerable.

For the moment, however, it is dependent on the energy of the Downs of Solitude, to which it is anchored. You might say that I ‘hot-wired’ the Downs in order to give that place’s roots their first sip of life. Think of it, if you like, as a ship being built in dry dock. Very, very soon, however, it will sail.”

When the silver-dollar sun was roughly overhead they crested the final ridge and Marcus received his first glimpse of the River Mulmor. The body of water was enormous, scattered out across an abundance of delta channels so that its racing currents were light and shallow. Its bed was a vast, braided arena of rivulets and gravel shoals, an even slate gray that matched the sky so perfectly it was hard to differentiate it from the horizon as it faded off into the distance. Marcus found his breath trapped in his chest at the haunting sight, the sound of the water whispering downstream cold and nostalgic as it bore the burden of such tribulations as Marcus could not begin to even fathom.

It felt alive and yet numb and lonely as if it wanted to quest to remember where it was going and why, but had become enslaved to its own flow and no longer remembered how to question. The river was an entity unto itself. Tendrils of its power reached out seductively towards Marcus, threading into his chest to wrap about his once-warm heart. He understood this body of water far more intimately than he felt was conceivable.

The movement of his traveling companions startled him out of his reverie. Marcus looked over to see the King and Queen descending down onto the wide, flat shore and begin to follow the river downstream. He quickly followed suit, fearing being left behind to waste away in the Downs if he lost sight of them. A few feet away from the shore itself, the rushing pulse of the gray water was mesmerizing, the power of the river thick and tangible as the silt and mud it coursed above. Marcus eyed it suspiciously from time to time as if a tentacle of it might separate from its face to reach out and drag him down into its current to be swept away. Where did this river originate and where did it end? Were such things as “beginnings” and “endings” applicable to such a source of power? As they traveled, the land steepened, the labyrinthine pattern of the river beginning to incorporate waterfalls, usually only a foot or two, but sometimes towering as much as twenty feet. As one fall flowed over its edge to blend into another in a stark white froth, luminescent against the aluminum sheen of the water, the rivulets of the river blended together seamlessly, sweetly symphonic.

After two hours of foot travel they finally reached a region where the smaller waterfalls and delta streams disappeared and the river cut a single swift, wide channel. Somewhere in the distance the constant droning echo of a massive unseen fall rumbled ominously. As mist rose above the lip of the waterfall, the King chose a path that led them away from the river, winding down the side of a steep ridge to a clearing, surrounded by a sentinel of

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tall evergreen trees. Breaking through the trees, Marcus beheld a towering, echoing grotto, which they'd circumnavigated and now approached from the downstream side. The sun, emerging, for a moment, from the steely canopy of cloud cover, seemed to magnify the roaring of the water. The sound of the water careening over the great sheer cliff and drumming into the deep pit of its own making accessed more than mere visual and audible senses, becoming an essence one could physically breathe deep into one's very soul. The abstractly-shaped pool beneath the fall was edged with shallow bays and hollows of clay lined with small thickets.

The King steered them towards one of the larger hollows, moving through a variety of warped, thorny hedges firmly rooted within the stone. The King uprooted them easily with a mere brush of his hand as if they were nothing more than tumbleweeds loose upon the desert sand. There, cleverly concealed in a cove, was a large airboat. It was impressive in scale with a rear propeller nearly as tall as the King himself, with more than enough deck space for the three of them to travel upon. Liberating it from the brush, the King waded into the knee-deep water and dragged the boat out to the bank. The Queen sprang into the front end like a springbok. Marcus followed her with slightly less grace, positioning himself in middle. Wading in deep behind the boat, the King pushed it out into the current and in a series of unbelievably smooth motions, half climbed, half vaulted over the rusted metal propeller cage onto the deck.

"No firing the engines until we're close to home," he said, "The currents of Mulmor will serve us well enough for now."

Though the river was deep, smooth and silent, its main channel was swift. They made quick, quiet time downstream, the sounds of the liquid highway accompanied by the soft murmur of the forest to either side. The further they went, however, the darker the King's mood grew. Often he glanced furtively at the left bank as if haunted by something that lurked in its shadowy tree-lined slopes.

"We are now drifting towards the Willow Gate, the vertical axis of Purgatory. Traveling on the river we will pass through it and cross over to Purgatory's flip side, the land of our people," he murmured.

Something about the phrase "our people" resonated with Marcus in a way it probably shouldn't have. He was suddenly conscious again of the energy of the giraffe in his lap as his brief dream from earlier that "morning" springing vividly back into his memory. He found himself doubting even

his predisposition toward doubt. Was there no end to the downward spiral of uncertainty? It seemed to fold in upon itself and deepen exponentially.

“The Willow Gate, however,” the King went on, “is a frontier of war. It will be guarded. We will pass in silence.” He turned on Marcus and looked him hard in the eyes. “Silence. Do you understand? Silence even of aura. Even of the way you reflect this pale sun’s light.” With another alarmingly feral glance at the left hand bank he turned his eyes back into the distance downstream.

Even as Marcus’s internal struggle waltzed with itself, the King’s warrior’s poise seemed to return to him. Marcus wondered if the time of mandatory silence had begun? He dared to presume that it hadn’t yet.

“Who’s guarding the gate?” he whispered.

“Angels,” answered the King softly. “They’re close now. Shield yourself.”

While he had mastered certain degrees, he intuitively recognized that this time would require a far more radical manipulation of his aura in order to become invisible to the watchful eye of the celestial guard. Marcus focused on mimicking the energy movements his new acquaintances were executing around him. This, he found, was a far more complex task than anything he’d attempted before. Their technique appeared to be a matter of taking every auric ray that radiated outwards from the physical self and rerouting it in a loop to be absorbed back into the energy field around the body so that it would be imperceptible to outside sensory receptors. As Marcus began to integrate the technique he realized quickly that the effect of the re-ingestion of one’s energy, at least to him, was intolerably nauseating.

The inherent inexorable corruption of his soul that caused him to feel as if leaden, icy morphine was coursing through his veins, pooling in the pit of his stomach. It quickly became apparent that the King’s direction to Marcus to follow in their lead had been a matter of pedagogical formality for the King himself was conspicuously not partaking in the process, but only in the most subtle of ways. The Queen seemed to have all three of them covered, redirecting the combined energy fields of their auras back into the space they occupied before they even crested the edge of the boat.

Even the aura of the Mulmor itself she controlled, training it to pass through them as if they weren’t there at all. Marcus felt vomit rise in his throat as he clutched Angelee’s stuffed giraffe tightly to his chest.

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Mercifully soon they came upon a long, straight stretch of river that broadened to reveal sculpted white sandbars undulating beneath shallow, pale green water. Here, through the hazy mirage of their concealment, Marcus first glimpsed the Willow Gate, the towering arch of living wood spanning the girth of the broad river. Constructed solely of two magnificent mammoth trees, the structure filled even skeptical Marcus with primal awe. As they approached on the gently rushing currents of the Mulmor he felt a heavy blast of salty air pierce the shield the Queen had created about the boat. Marcus could just make out waving swamp grass along the high banks of the river that appeared to extend beyond the gate. The sky beyond was alien, a bulbous stormy green that lay in expectant wait as if for their arrival. Glancing about he realized he did not see the angelic guard the King had spoken of.

Mere feet separated them from the entrance of the towering archway of interwoven willow wood. Marcus caught sight of what appeared to be the ruins of towers and ramparts of golden metal. They were crumpled now, twisted and tarnished into defiled shattered ghosts of their former glory. Through the dripping gray strands of swamp moss that had begun to slowly consume them, the exposed gold still gleamed defiantly while colossal glistening black tree roots held them in an inescapable grip. It was as if some deep sea monster had risen up amidst the ancient past, reaching its tentacles about a regal royal ship to pull it down to a watery death, yet somehow had been petrified before that final plunge. The sight was horrifying and yet terribly beautiful to behold, the wrestling of the defiant and immortal spirits of nature and the epitome of craftsmanship intertwined in an exquisitely painful last death dance. Marcus shivered.

Even as they floated through the ruins themselves Marcus could not spy the angels. He scanned both shores, searching high above them into the tree lines to find any trace of the legendary creatures. His skin tingled with the electricity of the approaching storm he sensed in the green sky on the far side of the gate causing him to begin to question if he had trusted wisely in the King and Queen. What would have happened if he had refused this journey? What was a demon doing in Purgatory after all? This was not his place, not his place at all. There was no turning back, though. Even if he managed to swim ashore and find his way back to the tundra wasteland of the Downs he would be lost there forever, he knew. There was nothing he could do but continue on with the journey and hope he made it out in some semblance of the word “alive”.

Oppressive pungent swamp air billowed about him, settling in like the heavy wings of a massive owl coming home to roost in its dead hollow home. Though he knew the Queen had full control of their concealment something whispered to Marcus, *Don't breathe...*

As if in slow motion, the airboat slid through the Willow Gate to the other side of Purgatory. It was then Marcus saw the angelic guards. Two scaffold towers of the same gleaming gold as the mangled ruins rose up in garish glory out of the swamp a small ways downstream. The towers bristled with a withering array of artillery. There were long howitzers that looked distinctly like they belonged on battleships and heavy caliber machine guns ranging in age and manufacture. Indeed, each tower stood as a singular museum of firearms dating back as far as humanity had first imagined the weapon. However, these instruments were altered slightly, each bearing a certain otherworldly artisan's fingerprint that gave it an awe-inspiring luster and bravado it might otherwise have lacked in the mortal world. Hard against a backdrop of suddenly clear yellow evening light, made lurid by the bank of ominous storm clouds before the sun, the towers looked like primeval pipe organs of destruction. The array of weapons adorning each tower was tended to by tall, muscular men and women. The polished perfect sheen of their intricately tooled armor and richly colored garments of myriad cuts and styles contrasted sharply with the modernity of the guns. The guards appeared to be oblivious to their passing.

These are angels, then? Marcus wondered.

The distorting work the Queen was performing to keep them hidden seemed to disable Marcus's ability to perceive auras outside of the airboat. He dared not reach out through the veil to try to decipher more of these strange, beautiful creatures, however strong his curiosity might pull. The airboat drifted slowly by the towers. All the while the angels high above carried on with their surveillance routines with expressions of mild boredom. The river channel was now nothing more than a winding space of open water cutting through a fine colonnade of vivid green plants of a fibrous waxen structure and cypress trees whose boughs bent heavy with weeping, gray moss. It reminded Marcus of the swamps surrounding the lower Mississippi in Louisiana where solid land was a precious and legendary commodity. The air was different here in the lower Mulmor, humid and heavy, rich with a strange perfume of decay that somehow also signified a brilliant reemergence of new life. It seeped up from the silt below the river's surface, which had turned a murky greenish brown. The water

moved through the tangles of gargantuan prehistoric water lilies and over the arched knees of protruding gnarled tree roots to release in a collective soft moan that slipped away into the swamps like a whippoorwill's cry. The King was standing in the rear of the boat, his eyes shining wickedly bright. His tall, majestic frame loomed up over the propeller cage, his left hand on the ignition of the boat's engine. Heavy thunder rolled up from the dark green clouds on the horizon.

"Dear, don't," the Queen said.

"But Love," the King replied quietly and distantly, "it's too perfect."

She shook her head and smiled as if she knew argument was pointless. The King fired up the motor. As it roared to life the angels on the towers stirred with alarm as they searched for the obscured origin of the sound. They began calling to one another in trumpeting voices, the barrels of the great guns swinging downstream in the direction of the concealed boat, ready to take aim at whatever revealed itself. However the King didn't yet open up the throttle. In fact, he didn't even cast so much as a glance in the direction of the guns. Leaving the motor idling restlessly, he raised his hands toward the thunderclouds, praying to them like a shaman. The Queen sighed and raised her hands likewise, intertwining the fingers of her left with those of his right. Marcus could swear he felt the massive clouds inhale like a living thing. With a sudden aggressive animation, the King and Queen broke their summoning pose and spun to face the left bank tower like they were both throwing knives. The whole air snapped with tension.

The sentries on the tower screamed to one another and leapt away from their battle stations. Some uncased their wings and flew while others simply dove into the river. The concealing shield dropped as the Queen finally released her grasp of their auric energies. Marcus's senses suddenly were open to a strange current of wholly alien auras carried on the swamp breeze, powerful and metallurgical, each resonating, in their own distinct undeniable way, like the vibration of a gong from a high mountain peak.

Awestruck terror caused his heart to falter for a moment as he gasped, feeling altogether outnumbered in a primal way without the power of Hell or his demonic brethren to aid him, despite the fact that the angels were the ones who appeared to be fleeing for their lives. Marcus hissed between clenched teeth like a cornered alley cat. The atmosphere over the river ripped asunder before the distant boiling green thundercloud. In the channel of the rift, a supernatural bolt of lightning arced. In a flash it crossed the

miles between the cloud and the tower. It struck with a prolonged crack that echoed into repeated waves of sizzling simmering as the metal melted into ruin. Slowly, the mighty structure collapsed into the river, creaking and groaning as the barrels of the guns peeled away, plunging down to stab uselessly into the mud.

The King roared a single, jubilant exclamation and opened the throttle on the airboat. The noise of the propeller mixed ferociously with the echoing thunder that still resonated through the ravine. However, they were far from out of harm's way. The adjacent, unharmed tower opened fire. In the microsecond between the ping of the priming caps in the howitzer shells and his possible obliteration, Marcus became fully aware that he was no longer a mere observer in this strange world. Swinging his right hand in the direction of the attack like a fencer blocking a lunge, entirely forgetting that he was holding a stuffed giraffe in it, he brandished the plush toy like a buckler. For a fleeting moment, he saw the energy disruptions the trajectory of the flaming shells made in the air. At the same time an orange arc leapt from his arm towards the rippling disruptions of the path, bending not the shells themselves, but their direction, steering them away from the airboat. The whole volley exploded on a point fifty yards off their stern, sending gouts of muddy water, roots, and green algae tumbling overhead to coat the deck of the boat as it sped away.

"Ha!" the King cried, looking at Marcus with a beaming grin while picking a long, wet strand of swamp grass out from behind his ear.

Marcus slumped to his side on the deck as another wave of nausea washed over him. The instinctual action had accessed a deeper level of his innate power than he had known he was capable of. If asked to reproduce the skill, he wasn't sure if he could, nor did he know if he ever wanted to again for it felt as if his insides had been liquefied from the exertion. The Queen laughed as he curled up with the giraffe for a pillow in an attempt to make the world stop spinning around him. The boat sped on. After a few miles, covered at a water-skipping speed, the King swung the boat out of the main channel and into the labyrinth of still, shallow, swamp rivulets. The grass on either side was tall and slender like a forest of elegant deadly rapier blades. The lanes of open water were still and winding, forking and branching almost every quarter mile.

The land beneath the river's eerily still face was dangerously uneven with gradients of fathomless depths and sandy shallows barely covered by more than a few inches of water. The King never slowed their pace however,

seeming to give little mind when the bottom of the airboat occasionally scraped a mossy embankment with a jarring crack. From his fetal position, curled on the bottom of the boat, Marcus watched the marshland whiz by in a blur of greens, grays and browns through half-lowered lids. Emerging from some of the larger shallows were haunting, lonely-looking trees. Their trunks were mostly bone white, displaying old watermarks as if floods had passed through this region. Living green still glowed triumphantly and defiantly in their top-most branches, a testament to their will to survive.

“We keep a great green fortress in the midst of these thickets,” the King said, “it is a strong place in times of need. With the storm swell coming in, many are probably sheltered there now, no doubt. Its dikes keep out the greatest floods. The ‘Tilan’ is what we call it.”

Marcus remained silent. The relatively uniform sea of rapier-grass and muddy islands gave way to an alien waterscape of tubers and succulents. Serpentine, amphibious thickets sprouted up with a hostile presence through the water interspersed with an occasional towering plant vaguely resembling a cottonwood tree, but made up of a fibrous kelp that gave the appearance of bark.

The labyrinth of channels opened up into a wide vast everglade of new foliage, the hull of their boat thumping and plunking through the fat, wet plants. The sound of the airboat plowing through the water was soon drowned out by the first blast of the pre-storm wind. Rich and heavy with sea salt, it billowed and howled over the flat terrain unchecked. The surface of the water, which was clear now, far away from the swamps, showed up the deep green and violet hues of the stalks and roots beneath it. As the wind passed over it, the water serrated with ripples under the storm’s harsh, inconstant breath. The boat rocked and wavered precariously, but the King’s expert steering kept them upright and on course.

Marcus stared over the side of the boat, down into the deeps, the icy splashes of water showering his face and bringing him back to from his state of nausea. He blinked suddenly, his eyes growing wide with wonder. Leaning a bit further over the edge, making sure to hold on for fear of being tossed overboard by the rough transit of the airboat, he squinted to see through the rippling surface. Here and there on the floor of the river, clusters of low, bone-colored domes crouched. As they passed near one, Marcus could’ve sworn he heard agitated, human yelling on the wind, mixed with the bellowing of beasts.

The King saw the sudden interest on his face, and indulged it with an explanation. "These are the pastures of my people. When fair weather returns, you will see the most wondrous array of life forms here. But the shepherds have brought them all in. This wind, passing over the sea, will stir up a flood, a big one."

Here he steered them off their course and began a wide, slow starboard arc. Vivid, green lighting was now flashing visibly on their port side, but the thunder, which was still a low, dull, undifferentiated rumble, bespoke that the storm was still far away.

They had emerged into a wide basin of water. The King opened the throttle wide until the boat threatened to take flight. Time and again, it would appear as if they were approaching the edge of the open basin only to have the distant shoreline recede before them, windswept green vanishing into troubled gray-brown. In the midst of this shadow play, a ruddy line appeared on the horizon ahead of them, and swiftly rose in a sheer, deep-orange glory of stone.

"Behold the Rarak," the King orated as he steered. "The iron-boned badlands of Purgatory below. Among all works of mortal art, they are, perhaps my most enduring favorite, for they were made subconsciously, collectively, over ages, by strongly suffering men. At their heart is the deepest stronghold of my people. There we have our mines and foundries, factories, weaponries. Some of the greatest engineers and inventors of all time are among those I and my soldiers have liberated from torment and returned to freedom. The problem of resources, we solved through brute creation. John's raw strength was invaluable to us at this point. He willed us groves of cedar and veins of rich metals." Pride burned brightly in his eyes.

"But I don't understand," Marcus responded. He was sitting close to the King, in the back of the boat, so as to talk through the wind without shouting. "If you love it so much, why don't you live here and rule? Why build a new world? With this storm coming and all, surely your people need your leadership?" It surprised Marcus a little to hear himself speaking so earnestly. It also surprised him that the King didn't seem to resent the questioning at all.

Rather, the King's face became thoughtful as if it related to some idea that had tormented him for some time. "Perhaps," he said. The orange wall of bluffs was getting close enough now to reveal the intricacies of its

structure, a huge, galaxy-shaped cluster of rock throwing long spiral arms out into the everglades.

“Perhaps,” the King repeated, “I love it all best from a distance. The father does not always understand the sons and the sons do not always understand the father. And sometimes what the father wants most is to see the sons go their own way and stop leaning on him. This place, down here, Marcus, is not ultimately a place for creatures like us. We need the new world. The one I’m making now. Do you care to guess, Marcus,” he went on, “at the number of people in the city we are now approaching who could make the crossings back and forth between worlds that you have already made?”

Marcus was silent.

“Zero,” the King said. “Not one of them would have even been able to perceive the structures you climbed and swung on, let alone grip them. They are a noble people. And they have the tools they need to take this land and shape it, to hold it for their own, to live and love and sing songs in their feasting halls. But if we stay here, they’ll turn us into the very things we swore never to be: Gods.”

The sun, by this time, was gliding down into twilight, and the heaving green clouds swallowed it. Still far off in the distance, the storm strafed the everglades with atomic lime-green lightning. Marcus counted the seconds between the specific claps of thunder and their lightning counterparts to estimate the miles, but the fiercest effect of the storm was already upon them. Foot by foot, the everglades were disappearing rapidly into open sea. Far away, a mighty wind was hammering the water, driving a storm swell. As the shoreline advanced, rolling breaks began to form sporadically as far as the eye could see. The nearest of these was little more than a half-mile out, generating surf in excess of ten feet. It struck Marcus that he had no idea how big a wave could get in this place without the constraints of the physical plane’s natural laws of physics.

The King’s face suddenly lit up as he appeared to be inspired by an idea. Quickly he steered the boat hard to port, straight into the teeth of the rising swell. “Look at that storm, Marcus. Look deep into it.”

It was, Marcus had to admit, one hell of a storm.

“Do you not recognize the flashing of your own nerves in that lighting? These storms are, in a way, dearer to the people of this land than anything else. But in the end, when it actually strikes, the fascination ends and they

crawl into hiding. The kinship with the storm is, for them, a fantasy. For the three of us, in this boat, however, it is different. In fact, we three have more in common with this storm than we have with any soul on this plain.”

Rhetoric aside, Marcus really wasn’t quite sure how much he had in common with the crashing surf the King seemed to be about to plow their light boat into. Just at the point where the foam of the failing waves began to wash the bows the King shut off the motor and stood up from his seat, leaving the steering to the wind and currents. In a single movement, he leapt up to the very tip of the bouncing prow and balanced there, steady, swaying fluidly with the boat’s movements.

“Can you believe it Marcus?” he yelled, without turning his head, “The people here have actually called upon me to still storms like this so that they might be saved. When I told them I wouldn’t, they begged. When I told them I couldn’t, they prayed. They prayed, damn them! I had told them the truth, though. I couldn’t stop a titan like this no matter how hard I tried. But why, *why*, would I want to? I tell you, Marcus, it is the fearful and oppressive who try to still the storms. For creatures like us, there is another path.”

With that he crouched down to his haunches and blasted up, springing for the dying crest of one of the bone-chewing waves. His left foot struck the foamy boil first and he vaulted off of it. He landed on his feet in the late stages of the break of the wave behind it. As Marcus watched in awe, he crossed the second wave’s unstable surface with a lightning-quick gait that reminded Marcus of a cross between ballet and Irish step-dance, blended a little with the odd gyrations of a shaman. There was a certain irresistible charisma in these madcap movements. An urge to join him out there gripped Marcus like a bad joke that he just couldn’t help laughing at.

The Queen was already on her feet and letting her hair down as she walked toward the back of the boat. Far away, the King slid down the back of another wave, like a skateboarder dropping down a half-pike. For a split-second, he was lost to view. The Queen followed suit, dashing along the length of the boat like a long-jumper before exploding off the prow, extended laterally like a panther. As the King popped up the other side, she hit him like a linebacker. Down they went, but as they hit the wave’s surface, they both stabilized and began to body surf back toward the boat in tandem.

Marcus couldn’t resist any longer. The aura of the scene was intoxicating. He ventured a step off the side of the boat, trying to mimic the flows of

energy the King had been weaving. His feet went out from under him instantly, but part of what he'd done had worked. When he hit the water, he didn't splash all the way through it. Though he never perfected his balance enough to earn the right to say that he'd "walked on water" that evening, he did earn the right to say that he'd crawled on it.

For the first time in years, Marcus felt absolutely ridiculous. It was a good feeling. In fact, it was the best feeling he could remember. Even in his mortal life he could not remember, since his early childhood, such a sensation of liberation from guilt, fear, oppression, repression or expectation as those brief moments of wild abandon wrestling with the surface tension of the thrashing waves. He could have stayed there forever, struggling to master the ability to treat water as earth, but the break was rising higher and moving further inland around him, a twenty-foot, slate-gray wave with a rough, angry face ready crash over him. Tapping deep into the rhythm of the ocean itself, he drew a deep breath, pulling the energy generated by the tides through his body. No wave, no matter how mighty would bring him down today. Raising himself to his knees, he punched upwards at the wave, releasing hellion scream that broke into maniacal laughter. The focused burst of energy funneled towards the wave drilling a large hole clean through the falling sheet of water so that it crashed around him without ever touching him.

Nearby, oblivious to Marcus's experimentations with his newfound powers, the King and Queen were going through the motions of some sort of a lover's wrestling match. Marcus paid little mind, completely consumed with his own game. The energy of the storm was definitely within him for he distinctly felt now as if he was wielding it. Or was he within it? Was it wielding him? All was one and the same.

Suddenly, he felt a strong grip on his collar. The King was lifting him back into the boat where the Queen was already sprawled out on the deck. It wasn't until Marcus himself was back within the protective cradle of the airboat that he realized how dangerously exhausted he was. The King shot him an elated grin. No one said anything as the King fired up the motor again.

Heavy waves were beginning to pound the deck, soaking them, forcing them to hang on fiercely to whatever handholds they could reach. As the propeller at last began to rotate with a mighty roar they made haste toward the shelter of the nearest arm of the orange sandstone bluffs. The wind redoubled, and the rain began to lash down in a nearly horizontal pour.

Marcus let out a tremendous sigh of relief as they finally made it to the lee-side of the rock wall. The airboat cruised up the narrow, deep green fiord until they came to a pool underneath an outcrop in the windward cliff. There they bobbed peacefully, waiting for the storm to pass. The Queen, lounging on the boat's deck, flung her soaking wet hair out of her face.

"Join us," she said to Marcus, "That is, if you haven't already." Her smile seemed so much less dangerous than it had the night before.

Marcus felt ashamed forever mistrusting her. He felt grateful to be right where he was, right that moment, between the soaring orange cliffs, on deep green water, beneath a howling sky that seemed to hold no terror meant for him.

CHAPTER 19

The dual suns over the boiling tar ocean never set. Hovering within the hazy, swirling sky like smudges of brutally glowing red paint made in an artist's opium-mad rage, the stars migrated slowly from one horizon to the other, threatening to bring the night only to rise once more. The arc had become a taunting silent laugh mocking Brenda with the reminder of her eternal enslavement. For hours she had stood within the bed chamber she shared with Belial, staring out the narrow lead panes of the archer's windows that lined three of the four walls of the tower room at the dual suns as they made their slow progression across the dome over the ocean. If it were not for the occasional blink, one might have sworn she had turned to stone.

The news Belial had delivered of Angelee's possible survival consumed her like a single purifying flame in the heart of a blackened, frayed wick. The heartless cruelty with which Belial had dismissed their child's existence, as if she were grain of sand he flicked from his sleeve, had not surprised her, though the venomous chill of his threats still crawled within her veins like mercury. No matter how thick the scar tissue she cultivated about her heart grew, some things would always be able to pierce it to remind her just how alone she truly was. However, this time his words had not born the crushing weight they might have years before.

He had gripped her hair and bent her over the gilt arm of screaming souls upon Lucifer's throne to force himself viciously inside her to remind her of her place as his consort. He had continued to rail of the legions of spawn she would bear him and the glory they would rise to within Hell. She was no longer listening though for the part of her that had once wished for a true death, a complete obliteration of existence, had fallen silent with the realization that an untainted aspect of her "self" still thrived, powerful and resilient in a place even Lucifer's army could not infiltrate.

She would endure whatever humiliating torture Belial inflicted with a secret smile of pride, knowing that the child Belial himself had created was now perhaps growing to be one of his most formidable foes. Brenda might not ever witness Belial's death, but her revenge had already begun

to form and she would do whatever was necessary to ensure it continued to prosper.

She would harvest the hate that had grown wild and untended in her heart and distill it for fuel to feed her newfound determination. From within the walls of Lucifer's castle she was powerless to defend her child. Only by Angelee's side could she lend her own strength, whatever it was worth. She knew she needed to escape, but once outside of those walls, how would she find her way out of Hell itself? The castle's interior was her only knowledge of the realm, having awoken within it after her suicide and never allowed to venture outside of its massive lacquered iron doors. The plane beyond consisted only of what she could view from the windows: the vast, seemingly unending expanse of churning souls cannibalizing each other and themselves in one direction; a flat, barren desert of glittering black volcanic sand stretched into the other direction for miles before disappearing into a line of what appeared to be a crimson mountain range that rose and fell as new peaks burst forth like shards of crystal. She dared not trust her eyes though, having learned, even as a confined prisoner, that nothing could be trusted to be what it appeared until experienced with one's own senses. Even then, existence in Hell was more often than not a terrible illusion designed only to torment one's remaining human psyche to the breaking point.

Brenda stared at her deranged reflection in the lead glass, rippled and translucently smeared over the image of the dual suns suspended at their apex directly over the ocean. Rays of their light, diffused to a seedy burnt orange by the sulfuric clouds, sliced through the haze, intermittently painting the surface of the roiling tar where the waves broke against each other. Her clothes were disheveled, the seams of her gown ripped at the shoulder and waist from Belial's last assault, her hair chaotically tangled and hanging over her eyes. She wanted to reach through the glass and rip the suns from the sky, squeezing them to a bloody pulp in her fists. Suddenly, with a banshee howl, Brenda broke her statue stillness and picked up the black bone and leather bench at the foot of the massive four poster bed, hurling it at the windows framing the symbols of her enslavement. The bench collided into the wall of gleaming gray stone and glass with a thunderous crash before falling to the floor, two of its petrified black femur legs splintered and detached. The windows, however, remained intact, each pane vibrating ever so slightly as the ripples of her scream washed over them like rain. Brenda stared at the glass, breathing heavily as her heart

thundered in her chest like a stampede of wild bison. Though she knew the windows were unbreakable, as she had tried countless times before, a small part of her had hoped to at least see one small crack. Just one.

With a growl she turned away from the windows unable to face the red suns' judgmental gaze any longer. Her eyes traveled around the Spartanly furnished room as her mind scampered frantically to formulate her plan of escape. The bed consumed the majority of tower chamber, its mammoth weight immovably planted upon the slate tiles of the floor as if it had somehow grown directly from the stone itself. Each of the four posts were made of the petrified leg bones of some towering prehistoric beast, charred black and etched with a harrowing design of suffering and mutilation. Above an opulent pile of red and black furs and black silken sheets, a canopy of heavy crimson tapestry hung, draping down on two sides to form curtains that had been drawn back by large cords of braided silk. To either side of the garish bed the skins of exotic beasts were laid. Light from two hovering globes of reddish-orange energy to either side of the bed, against the wall, cast low falsetto warmth over the dark decadence further lending to its already disturbingly lurid presence. Belial adored this bed, his personal den of wickedness where he could abuse his "wife" and other various chosen demonic partners. Brenda charged towards the bed, ripping at the canopy and bedding in a snarling rage. Snatching one of the ceremonial swords of tempered black iron from the wall to her right she jumped up onto the bed and plunged the blade deep into the center of the mattress repeatedly. A muted, mewling wail wound up from the wound in the bed, filling the room like an approaching storm. Blood began to seep up through the fabric, pooling out to stain the sheets a shade darker than black. Gasping, her eyes wide with horror, she released the hilt of the sword as if it had suddenly seared her palms and leapt from the bed. Staggering backwards until she collided with the wall, she watched as the bed slowly became drenched in blood until it dripped down onto the floor, pooling on the dark gray stone to congeal as it cooled.

Brenda bolted from the chamber, flinging the door open with such force that it slammed into the wall behind it. The thunderous bang echoed down the long narrow hallway that led to the six flights of stairs winding down to the ground floor. Fear was an emotion she had not truly experienced in several years since her arrival at the castle; after a time there was simply no horror she felt she had not witnessed. Disgust, resentment, rage, sadness, these were all still accessible to her, but true fear was a sensation she

thought she might never experience again. The sight of the blood, coupled with the pitifully trapped moans had reawakened that emotion again and, just as in her first few hours in Hell, she now was blinded by it, consumed with a maddening panic and singular desire to be free.

Belial had been called to chair a meeting in the great hall of the castle to discuss the next plan of attack against Purgatory once Lucifer infiltrated the new realm. The twisted labyrinth of dark corridors and stairwells was thus mercifully empty with the exception of the silent insectoid sentinel guards positioned before the chambers accessed only high ranking demons and Lucifer himself.. Never had Brenda witnessed these creatures move in the long years she had lived amongst them so that now she regarded them as little more than grotesque works of art, no more threatening than an ancient suite of decorative armor. As she reached the ground floor she raced past a row of guards, her bare feet slapping unceremoniously against the cold stone, her torn clothes and chaotic hair flying wildly about her like a banshee as she made for the unforgiving front doors.

A few feet from the towering slabs of iron she came to a screeching halt as if she had run headlong into an invisible wall. Steadying herself with arms outstretched, panting from the delirious race through the castle, she swallowed hard as she stared up at the twenty-foot-high double door, the entrance to her prison. Set flush into the center of each door was a wheel nearly fifteen feet in diameter. Strange hieroglyphic occult symbols alternating with astronomical and astrological markings radiated out in spokes from a black opalescent stone that swirled hypnotically as if each contained an infinite number of galaxies to an outer ring of inverted numbers and geometric shapes. Brenda had witnessed the doors open only once before: she had stolen a glance when the Council of the Upper Echelon had found it necessary to physically walk down to the black sand beaches during one of their heated debates on the cannibalistic state of the ocean.

In silence the demons had addressed the doors; and then the wheels had begun to turn, at first clockwise and then counterclockwise, before spinning into one another like cogs of some great machine. The stones had begun to glow, their color shifting from black to red to golden flame as if they had been plunged into a blacksmith's cauldron. Never once was a word uttered or a motion made by any of the demons in attendance, leaving Brenda absent of clues.

Timidly she now approached the doors, feeling incredibly small and human. Casting a nervous glance over her shoulder to make sure she had

not been followed, she reached up with a trembling hand and placed her palm against the icy metal. The surface felt unlike anything she had ever touched before, silken and malleable as sharkskin, yet when pressed upon it instantly flexed to titanium rigidity. The energy that coursed through the ancient substance chanted through her a vibration of primal cosmic knowing. It was, perhaps, from a time and place far older than even Hell itself, forged from the very fabric of existence beyond the limitations of this one plane.

Brenda had never allowed herself as a mortal to consider such abstract concepts, content in her devout religious beliefs to stay comfortably within their parameters. She placed her other palm on the door and pressed her ear against it as if she might be able to better decipher the rumbling whisper of its truth. However, for all of her eager curiosity it was a language she was unable to understand.

“Damn it!” She hissed under her breath, frustrated tears welling up in her eyes. “There has to be a way to open you!”

The sounds of the doors to the great hall creaking open caused her to whirl around, snatching her hands away as if the metal had scalded her. Belial and Bael’s low voices rumbled towards her, the sound of their footsteps approaching echoing hollowly off of the stone walls. Brenda’s heart pounded in her chest until her entire body shook with its power. If Belial caught her anywhere near the front gates her punishment would be unimaginable. Her eyes darted about the receiving hall in search of a hiding place. At equal intervals about the chamber were ten tall, shallow alcoves into which large bronze statues of various high-ranking demons in their full terrible forms were displayed. Without a second thought she bolted across the hall to the alcoves furthest from the doors and wedged herself behind the lowered locust wings and curling scorpion tail of Abbadon’s statue. The cold bronze leached what little warmth remained in her skin as it pressed up against her where she squatted down, her back against the black stone behind her. She dared not even breathe.

Gradually the two sets of footsteps became one. Bael emerged alone into the receiving hall, his head hung low and obscured behind a long curtain of forest green hair that seemed to glow from within as if subtly phosphorescent. His war-worn black leather breastplate, pants and forearm guards caused his already ashen skin to appear even more sallow, blending into silver of his hinged steel shoulder plates and chain mail undershirt. Lean and sinewy with a feline grace, the demon was at least eight feet in

height at his present state, though Brenda knew this was a politely limited scale of his full self. Across his back was strapped an enormous broadsword of cobalt blue steel, the hilt, pommel and blade seemingly carved of the same piece of indestructible metal.

The air about Bael was dangerously thick with tension, his aura tucked tight within him as he brooded silently. Brenda held her breath as she watched the Commander of the Infernal Armies as he turned towards the direction in which she was hiding. Raising his head he stared with eyes of a solid milky blue-white in an expression of utter contempt. His attention was not on her, but rather on the statue of Belial two alcoves away. Reaching up with his right hand, he grasped the hilt of his sword and slowly released it from its titanium scabbard. The sound of metal hissing across metal as the blade slid forth caused the fine hairs on Brenda's arms to bristle. Bael crossed the distance to the statue with three slow, predatory strides. Without so much as a growl, Bael swept the sword up over his head in a powerful arc, bringing it down with a deafening clang upon the statue's shoulder, slicing clean through the rich, polished bronze. The severed limb clattered to the floor in a thunderous explosion that ricocheted off the stone walls like a trapped raven, spiraling upwards into the vaulted shadows of the haunting gothic arches.

Stunned by the sound, Brenda could not repress a small squeaking gasp. Realizing her blunder, she slammed both of her hands over her mouth as she attempted to press herself even further into the darkness behind Abbadon's bronze wings. Bael's head swiveled towards her hiding place as he sniffed at the air. Cautiously he approached and bent down to peer behind the statue. As his cloudy gaze spied her he frowned.

"What are you doing down here?" His voice was deep and hoarse as if he had breathed the smoke of one too many war fires. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

Shakily, Brenda extricated herself from her hiding place, nervously stepping around the curve of the scorpion tail as her eyes darted towards the entrance of the receiving hall. She fully expected the noise from Belial's defiled statue to bring a vicious hoard of unwanted attention, but all was quiet, for the moment. She spoke in a rushed whisper.

"Bael, you have to help me. I need to get out of here, out of the castle." She stared up at him as she pleaded.

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He watched at her for a moment before replying. "Why would I help you? So that Belial would have one more thing to hang over my head?" He straightened to his full height and began to turn away. "I have my own problems at the moment."

"I know! I know about the war for Purgatory. I know of your unjust displacement as Lucifer's main assistant, as well. You do not deserve to be treated so unfairly for your eons of service to him. Belial has not earned the right to stand at Lucifer's side." Brenda darted in front of him bravely. She held up her hands asking him to give her one more minute to make her case. Her mind was a frantic spider desperately weaving a web before the storm winds carried her away.

A strange shudder of darkness flickered over Bael's subtly feline features. "Why do you care so much about my fate, consort of Belial?" He bent so that he could peer directly into her eyes. "Would you betray your master so?"

"He is not my master!" Brenda snapped viciously with a low, hushed venom. "I hate him."

Bael raised one eyebrow and smirked. "Well, that makes two of us. It is still not enough to convince me to aid you. To me, you are still just Belial's whore."

Bael's words struck her to her core, but instead of leaving her shaken only served to harden her resolve. "I deserve that. I do. But I think I know of a way to help you regain the power you have lost." Brenda replied. Bael scoffed at her declaration with a snort, but she continued undeterred. "I know the vicious lies Belial has been feeding Lucifer about you and your armies." She swallowed hard on the lie she was quickly inventing.

Her statement snared Bael's attention. The air about the demon seemed to contract slightly, becoming heavy and colder than the rest of the atmosphere in the room. He said nothing, but waited for her to continue.

"He has blamed you for everything, accepting none of the responsibility for the last few failed attacks." She took a brave step closer to Bael, staring up into his overcast gaze as she lowered her voice further. "He said your armies are unfit for combat and even suggested you be removed from your post...permanently. Would you stand by and allow that to happen? After everything you have already been through?"

"What do you know of me and my trials?" The demon narrowed his eyes at her as he seemed to contemplate crushing her where she stood.

"I remember reading of you when I was a mortal. You were once a god in your own right, worshiped and revered by human culture as a god of fertility, or rain. You were mighty, powerful, respected, but when humanity wandered away from your alters you were forced to choose a new side or else fade into memory. Lucifer promised you glory, he brought you under his wings and you trusted in him. Though you were not a god any longer, you were a commander of sixty-six Legions and Lucifer's confidant in all things eternal. Now they seek to strip away your power once more. After everything you have sacrificed and the loyalty you have shown to the underworld." She paused, seeing the profound impact of her words on the towering entity before her as the realization of her knowledge of his history sank into him, bitter and burning. "Don't let them destroy you again."

"Why should I trust your words?" Bael growled.

"Why should you not? We may not be allies, but, as you said, we do share a common hatred. Is that not enough? I have no ill will towards you. I have no reason to do you any injustice," Brenda replied.

Bael cast an uneasy glance around the chamber, listening to the rhythms of the castle for inklings of Belial's awareness of their treasonous conversation. "While I appreciate your concern for my circumstance, I do not see what a creature such as yourself could do to help me, especially if I am implicated in your escape."

"I have heard that the child that Belial and I created still lives and she may well be the force that is keeping you from infiltrating the new realm. The plane that is slowing your conquering of Purgatory." Brenda watched Bael carefully, secretly praying the news would be confirmed.

"Slowing? She's downright obstructing it entirely," Bael growled. "Yes, the child lives and she is a force unlike anything I have encountered in ages, but, from my observations, I do not even think she is fully aware of powers or why she uses them. Regardless, she must be destroyed." He stared down at Brenda.

It took every ounce of her restraint to keep from flying into a blind rage at Bael's words. She knew she trembled slightly from the oppression of her fear and anger, but hoped Bael would not notice. "What if there was another way?"

"Is this where your escape comes into play?" Bael said sarcastically.

"Just hear me out, please," she begged for one more minute of the powerful demon's time. "I am her mother. She was stolen from me. Who

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knows what creatures have kept her captive for all of these years, forcing her to use her powers against her own kind. If I can reach her, I can distract her, lure her away, allowing you the weakness in their defenses needed to penetrate the perimeter of the plane.”

“There is no need. Lucifer will destroy the plane and all that resides within it once he is inside. Your interference at this point is a waste of time,” Bael retorted bluntly and stepped around Brenda.

“But this is your chance to show Lucifer that you are meant to be his true second in command!” Brenda chased after him, taking three steps for every one of his determined strides. “Yes, he will have already gained entrance to the plane, but you will show him that your armies are not invincible as they breach the plane! You will be there fighting at his side! You can show him your worth and restore your former glory!” She drew a deep breath, shocked at her own forthrightness and took a step back from Bael. Casting her eyes to the ground submissively her next words were delivered softly, humbly. “I will also be in your debt if you give *me* this chance, as well. I realize it has been eons since your days as a god, but let me pray to you now for the life of my child.”

Her words paralyzed Bael. He stared down at the small, slight once-mortal woman before him in the grips of a distant, powerful memory. Brenda sank to her knees.

“Please...I will serve you willingly. Whatever you may ask,” she whispered, the tears she had been repressing finally breaking free to slide down her cheeks, heavy saline droplets clinging to her chin before plunging to the slate beneath her. She knew her prayers would bind her to Bael eternally, but the words had been spoken and now she would honor them, whatever his demands might be. The consequences would be unimaginable in the fallout of Belial’s discovery of her new allegiance, whether or not he was demoted from his position of power after all was said and done. There was no use in dwelling on the future, though. What was done was done.

“Rise!” Bael hissed.

Brenda quickly obeyed, her gaze snapping up to watch Bael’s face. He was listening again, his expression concerned and calculating.

“He has sensed something amiss.” His milky gaze pinned Brenda to the patch of stone where she stood below him. “You are not where you were supposed to have been.” Turning he walked briskly to the entrance to the castle. “Quickly! We have only a few moments before we are discovered.”

“Can you not simply transport me elsewhere?” Brenda whispered with panic.

“Unfortunately you are bound to this place. The only way you may exit is through these doors. Do not worry. You are under my protection now.” His words should have been comforting to Brenda, but there was no way they could be.

Bael faced the doors, standing perfectly still a few feet from the expansive wheels. Slowly they began to turn, spinning just as Brenda had remembered before coming to rest in unison upon a particular set of coordinates of ancient symbolism. With a heavy metallic groan the doors slowly swung inwards, coming to rest as if manned by unseen hands. A blast of hot sulfuric wind howled through the gapping entrance, carrying with it the scent of scorched tar and granules of obsidian sand that bit into Brenda’s skin. Cowering behind the looming figure of Bael, she fleetingly questioned her decision to escape. If the horrors she had endured while within the castle had been obscene, she dared not even imagine what lurked on the other side of the doorway, waiting for an inexperienced soul such as hers. Refusing to allow herself to dissuade her mindset further, she scurried after Bael as he charged out onto the wide stone balcony. As she cleared the threshold the doors slammed shut behind her again with a titan force.

The sound echoed off of the ominous cliffs of black and gray stone around them from which the castle itself seemed to have been seamlessly chiseled. At these great heights the wind brutally molested her, threatening to toss her down the thousands of feet of glistening, dizzyingly, zigzagging Escher-maze of stone stairs that led to the beach. Bael, however, was unmoved by the gale as if it were nothing more than a slight breeze. Through the whipping mane of her long dark hair she lifted her gaze to stare out at the boiling black surface of the ocean she had only witnessed behind leaden glass before now. Mangled limbs of the condemned and tortured occasionally broke through the tar like bits of driftwood turned bloody by the twin suns above releasing their horrific animalistic screams as the water parted for a brief second. The cumulative effect was that of a horribly out of tune pipe organ, rusted from long years of disuse, as the sudden bursts of voices rose and fell, escaping only to be consumed again and drug down into the unfathomable deeps. Their exquisite suffering was tangible as the stone beneath Brenda’s feet, a fine acidic mist collecting on

her skin she felt would never evaporate or rub clean. The ocean stretched onwards endlessly into the horizon.

Angelee, she said the name to herself like a prayer. *Remember, this is for Angelee.*

Turning towards her Bael reached down with a sinewy, calloused, ashen hand and picked her up by her starved waist. “Now, we may leave.”

Instead of descending the stairs, Bael turned to his right and ran, leaping from the edge of the wide balcony into the air before the cliffs themselves. Brenda’s terrified scream echoed off of the steep rock walls like an eagle’s screech. Her heart thundering in her ears she squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her face into Bael’s leather breastplate as she awaited her destruction upon the beach below. Wind howled in her ears as they fell for what felt like an eternity to Brenda until gradually their speed diminished, the air about them dying down to a faint breeze as their path seemed to take on a forward progression rather than downwards.

The pungent odor of the sulfuric wind mixed with blood and boiling tar faded and was replaced with a strange metallic scent like oxidized copper. Though the rest of her senses suggested that they were, for the moment, out of harm’s way, her fear made it impossible for her to pry open her eyes for even a peek. Without warning, Bael released his grip on her waist. With a short surprised shriek, Brenda tumbled to the ground unceremoniously. Shaking, she lay prone on the ground, unable even to draw breath. At the sound of Bael’s heavy footsteps crunching the brittle earth she forced herself to sit up and open her eyes. She scrambled to her feet and turned in a full circle, taking in her new surroundings.

The vast ocean, soaring black cliffs and glittering obsidian beach had vanished. In three directions stretched a wasteland of barren desert of roan riddled with deep drought fissures that appeared to be wide enough for a person to fall through. Off to her left, breaking forth from the flatlands like saber teeth, the rib cage of some long-extinct gargantuan beast towered twenty feet into the swirling, cloudless amethyst sky, each bone scoured a perfect pristine white by an unregistered infinity of sandstorms and endless days. Far beyond the skeletal remains, the eroded spires and columns of a once obviously grand cluster of buildings remained, half buried beneath the shattered desert floor and pressed against the horizon like an archaeologist’s rough pencil sketch. There was a sense of abandonment here, as if it was merely a room far below a museum discarded by earlier generations for a more interesting and intricately constructed wing.

As she continued her circular survey, Brenda's eyes traced the expanse of desert to the mountain range behind her. Though she could not be certain, it appeared to be the same range she had viewed from the castle.

A jagged series of deep peaks and valleys carved from a crimson crystal that slowly rose and fell as it manifested and cannibalized new aspects of itself. Rising thousands of feet into the air, the highest peaks reflected the swirling purple of the sky as if they were absorbing them, pulling the energy deep into their core down into the lower ridges, which mirrored the desert before them. If they had not been so volatile and sharp, the mountains would have quite possibly been one of the most beautiful sights Brenda had ever seen. She shook herself out of her reverie and chased after Bael as he headed straight for the mountains.

Panting, she finally caught up to the demon. "What is this place? Where are we going?"

"The Demon Despair's domain, Piel. Very few beside Piel ever come here anymore. He likes to be alone. Unfortunately, if we are unable to command Purgatory, Piel may find his home annexed again. Every sliver of our realm is valuable now." Bael replied, his deep hoarse voice blending with the low scratchy hiss of the wind.

"Can Piel help me? Is that why you've brought me here?" Brenda asked, keeping a careful eye trained on the ground and her dust-covered bare feet to keep from falling into one of the larger fissures.

"It is not Piel we seek, but Geryon. He is a gatekeeper and guardian of Hell. Geryon will be able to open a portal for you to slip into Limbo."

Brenda's mind raced, trying to remember the details she had learned in her mortal life of the placement and purpose of Limbo. "Why there? How can I even exist in a realm like that when I have been in Hell for so long?"

"Contrary to popular belief, there are no domains that are unreachable by any creature if their desire and skill are great enough. Heaven is merely off limits to us because it is so well guarded, as is Hell to the likes of angels.

Limbo is the last place Belial will think to look for you, for none of us ever have reason to venture there." Bael replied. "Once you are inside, however, you will be on your own to find your way out. That is as much assistance as I am willing to lend you."

Brenda dared not even think to ask for more. In silence they traversed the remaining few hundred yards to the base of the mountain range. They

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wound their way through a maze of smaller crystals that jutted from the ground at wickedly sharp angles like the center of a geode, and Bael led them deep into the heart of a newly formed cluster.

“Careful where you walk. Watch the crystals if you don’t want to be impaled. They are living, growing with each passing moment,” Bael warned.

The red shards arched up and over them, new slivers having erupted to connect with one another, forming a crystalline bridge. Passing beneath the ledge, the world was briefly cast into an entrancing sea of lurid red light before they emerged on the other side in front of the mouth of a gaping black cave. There stood a centaur of epic proportions. Stationed directly before the cave’s entrance, the massive creature was three times the height of Bael with the hardened muscled torso of a Spartan warrior and powerful jet black lower half of a stallion. His equine black eyes watched Bael and Brenda approach with a mysterious judgment, his wide cruel mouth a perfect cold line beneath a closely trimmed beard of raven’s wing darkness. In one hand he gripped an exquisitely carved longbow, a full quiver of red feather shafts peeking out between the locks of his long black hair above his right shoulder, all held in place by a wide leather strap slung across his chiseled chest.

Bael stopped a few yards from the centaur and bowed, low and deep with respect. “Geryon.”

“Bael.” The centaur’s voice boomed down upon them like a clap of thunder before rumbling away into the mountains. “It has been ages since I saw the likes of you.”

“Indeed,” Bael replied as he straightened again, looking up at Geryon towering above him. “I have a request. I need for you to allow this woman to pass through to Limbo. I cannot divulge all details, but suffice to say it is in the best interest of Hell’s acquisition of Purgatory.”

Geryon’s expression was nearly impossible to read “I have heard the rumors of Lucifer’s quest, but as you know well, I do not involve myself in such matters. It is not my place, nor do I want it to be.”

“Yes, but such matters are for the greater expansion of Hell. If it fails, this place of solitude where you dwell with few others except for Piel may very well brim with souls. Allow this woman to pass so that she may lend her strength to the war.” Bael attempted to appeal to the centaur in the most humble way he could.

“Who is this woman?” The centaur’s gaze shifted to Brenda. She shrank back behind Bael, overwhelmed by the centaur’s colossal mass.

“Belial’s consort. Her child was abducted several years ago by the founding entities behind a rebellious new plane at the heart of Purgatory. The new realm has created a disturbance at the heart of Purgatory. The child is being used by the uprising to prevent our invasion. This woman has volunteered to try to lure the child away from her captors,” Bael replied concisely. He paused, watching the centaur consider the new information. “Belial must not know, however. No one must know.”

“Bael, you ask me to keep secrets from the Prince of Wickedness?” The centaur cocked his head to one side, narrowing his eyes.

“Only until she returns. Then you may tell whoever whatever you like.” Bael said.

The centaur’s large liquid gaze swiveled back to Brenda with a look of suspicious curiosity. No doubt her wild, disheveled appearance did little to convince the creature of her strength or ability to fulfill such a dangerous mission as the one she was about to embark upon. Drawing a deep breath, she smoothed out her gown, drawing herself up to her full height, shoulders squared, head held high as she returned the centaur’s gaze.

“I see your doubt. I see your suspicion. But I swear what Bael says is truth and I will return to Hell with my daughter in hand or I will die trying. My lord, my husband,” she nearly choked on these titles, though she knew she must voice them to the centaur, “does not believe in my mission as I do. He does not believe it possible or necessary. He will try to obstruct my way, which does nothing to assist Lucifer’s war. Please, allow me to pass so that I may serve Hell with my modest abilities.”

The centaur bent slightly at the waist so that he might get an even closer look at the woman who stood so bravely before him. Brenda could see her reflection in the surface of his eyes, a tiny pale creature whose eyes burned with a furious inner fire that, despite her frayed outward appearance, made her proud. She was not broken; she felt more determined than ever before.

“Limbo?” Geryon asked. “My lady, you are in for one very strange trip.” He said with a sarcastic snort and stamp of one obsidian hoof that quaked the desert beneath them.

I seriously doubt it could be any stranger than the one I have already been on for the past nine years, she thought. The moment the words skipped across her mind, she regretted them.

CHAPTER 20

Once the fury of the storm had exhausted itself, dwindling down to a chill weeping mist, Marcus followed the King and Queen out of the protective cove where they had stored the airboat. Carefully, they made their way up a narrow series of rain-smoothed stairs carved into the face of the orange sandstone cliffs, spiraling around the natural curve of the rock. As they cleared the last step their arrival was met with a deafening celebratory roar as hundreds of amphibious humanoid beings raced towards them. Glistening with the evidence of the torrential rains, their skins were a mesmerizing rainbow of aquatic colors and textures. Some resembled Amazonian tree frogs while others appeared evolved from other more fierce swamp dwelling reptiles with leathery crocodile armor plating. Strong and proud in their gaits, their collective energy radiated a deep courage and pride that bespoke of long years of battles fought and won.

Out of the throng Marcus could see a handful of individuals that possessed far more human traits than the rest as if their evolutionary process from amphibian to human had been somehow accelerated beyond the rest, the tale-tell signs of their heritage confined to patches of hard gemstone scales, gills or small colorful fins that sprouted from the tan flesh of their wrists and necks like tribal ornamentation. Whereas one might expect to have seen the distinct garb of an indigenous people, wholly unique to this realm as the creatures themselves, the garments they wore appeared to have somehow been lifted from various mortal centuries from the physical plane. A few wore doublets and tunics plucked from the Renaissance, others in leather armor far older and well-used, while the rest were an assortment of motley-matched decades; battered cargo pants, combat boots and painted leather jackets indicative of the twentieth century. Indeed, they appeared in their entirety to have been cobbled together from someone or something's faded recollections of the human race's cultural history, a patchwork quilt of physical existence struggling to cling together by the common thread of their roots within Purgatory.

The moment his eyes passed over the crowd, his breath caught in his throat as the memory of the strange dream that had visited him in the King and Queen's tree house flashed through his mind. He shivered as

the sensation of the rock beneath his body, the rain falling against his amphibious skin returned to him for a fraction of a second. For all of their emphatic celebration of the King and Queen's return, Marcus could not help but be disturbed on a deep primal level. There was simply something unsettling about the entire scene; as if he had happened upon a camp of gutter punks who, despite their glittering piercings and brilliant smiles, carried a diseased darkness they themselves were unaware of and could never scrub clean of their skins, let alone their souls. The King and Queen appeared oblivious to the skewed energy, drinking in the adoration of their people like ambrosia, their faces alight with laughter as they, standing a full head taller than the lot of the throng, allowed themselves to be embraced and fawned upon like the gods they claimed they did not want to be.

Marcus hung back as they were drawn away from him, unsure of how he might be received. A stranger in a strange land did not even begin to describe his station in the universe now. Those on the edge of the crowd at first eyed him with suspicion, their gleaming fanged grins fading briefly as they assessed the unknown entity in their midst. However, as soon as the association that Marcus had arrived with their revered leaders congealed in their minds, their smiles returned and Marcus was pulled into the swirling yelping storm of trilling cries and swaying leaping limbs as if he himself were a god. A stunningly beautiful female threw her arms around Marcus's neck. Her flesh graduated from deep cerulean blue on her back to the palest of violets on her face, palms and chest, and she was speckled with black freckles as if she had been caught beneath Jackson Pollock's paint brush.

"You've brought them back to us!" she beamed, her disturbingly large teal eyes flashing in the eerie greenish light of the post-storm sky. Her wide purple lips spread revealing rows of pristine white shark teeth. "We thought they had turned their backs on us, but no! They have returned!" She buried her face in Marcus's neck, clutching him tight as if he were a long-lost lover. "Thank you!"

With that, she released him and whirled away into the crowd in a blur of gauzy gray garments resembling Spanish moss dripping from her willowy limbs. Marcus could not even bring himself to protest, his senses overwhelmed by the dizzying array of alien portraits flashing about him. He was in the middle of an expressionistic painting thrown into the Villa d'Este Gardens, as the beings touched him, embraced him, and shouted expressions of gratitude.

Revenge

He drew a deep breath and halted his pace, fighting against the current of slick humanoid-amphibious flesh to remain still for a moment as he struggled to avoid being swept away in the moment. He wanted to be a part of this merriment, to allow himself the luxury of immersing himself in a tide pool of instant zealous gratification, but he simply could not.

A strange energy pulled at the base of his skull, trickling down into his stomach like soured adrenaline. He felt wickedly nauseous and predatorily defensive. He wanted to scream at the people around him to stop touching him, that they had no idea what or who he was, but then again, he realized; he was starting to forget those self-identifiers as well. The memories of Hell and his human life before that time were beginning to gradually blur into a brutal oppressive fog that curdled his senses like the residual intensity of a nightmare. He began to reach up to rub the heels of his palms into his eyes in hopes of erasing the present when he realized he still clutched in his left hand the toy giraffe, now smudged with grime from the floor of the airboat, its synthetic fur soaked through by the storm. Why had Angelee given this to him? What was he supposed to do with it? He thought momentarily of tossing it over the edge of the sandstone cliffs into the ocean below, but instantly crushed the thought to dust as it invoked a flutter of panic.

As the last of the throng swirled away towards the warm glow of fires burning within massive stone chimneys, eerily resembling the wide trunks of the swampland cypress trees, Marcus found himself alone. He shivered as a gust of cold wind howled up and out of the cove from the waters far below, penetrating the synthetic second-skin fibers of his clothing as if it held a secret it was determined to deliver, with or without his permission. In the absence of the din of cumulative energies masking him a sudden infiltration of awareness caused him to whirl around, his eyes darting upwards to a ridge a mile away where the cliffs continued to rise above the plateau upon which he stood. There he spied a cluster of silhouettes watching him intently, their features blurred by the marmalade shadows of the encroaching dusk.

Marcus took a step back as the group realized they had been noticed: one of the figures rose and took a step forward. While he could not make out any details, he intuited that these individuals did not share the same sentiment as the rest of the creatures who fawned upon the King and Queen. His internal psychic defenses shivered, prickling with alarm at the sensation of being scrutinized. He dared not take any chances though and quickly focused to fortify the wall about himself to keep out intruding

minds. Silently he continued to watch the figures above him as they rose to their feet, one by one, turning to disappear from view until only the lone male figure remained, lifting the silhouette of a high-powered firearm to sling its strap across his chest.

Perhaps my welcome to this new world is not as warm as the King and Queen would have me believe? Marcus thought as the last figure vanished from sight.

The celebration had moved inland towards a small village of artistically constructed dwellings built from twisted sheet metal and intricately carved wood perched upon tall pale pillars of river-smoothed wood, each as wide as an ancient Redwood tree. The damp sandstone never seemed to warm, even beneath the fitful watch of the three massive bonfires built within the center of the village, below the overlapping maze of wooden suspension bridges interconnecting the dwellings. The flames leapt upwards, crackling and popping fiercely, lapping at the dank salt air with serpentine tongues fed by a steady supply of cypress and other wood drawn from the watertight shed that protected it from the storms.

For hours the King and Queen had tended to their people, alternating between joyous bouts of celebration and quiet intense conversation with what appeared to be the elders of the tribe. It was obvious to Marcus, by their dark expressions, that, while they believed their leaders' return to be a momentous occasion, there were still grave matters to be discussed. Marcus did his best to remain separated from the hypnotic pull of the night in order to observe objectively. Despite their alien beauty he simply could not dismiss the rank ghost of decay that taunted his senses whenever they moved too close to him, as if the complex enigma of their existence was perilously perched upon a bog that might be swept away in the next approaching storm.

He sat cross-legged upon the damp orange sandstone within the swaying shadows of one of the suspension bridges, and waited for the King and Queen to find him. He knew they would eventually note his absence once they grew weary of being adored. The toy giraffe sat on his lap, staring blankly forward into the heart of the closest bonfire, the flames reflected in its smudged plastic black eyes.

"What do you make of all of this, my friend?" Marcus asked the toy aloud as if it might respond in kind. "I might be tempted to say that madness is a pale description, wouldn't you?"

Revenge

“Unfortunately there is nothing so random or excusable as that happening here.” A soft, liquid male voice spoke in a slightly weary, yet conversational tone behind Marcus.

Marcus leapt to his feet, backing up with the agility of a startled cat, retreating until he collided with one of the massive structural support beams. Out of the shadows melted a cluster of colorful natives, two females and four males, their movements fluid and precise as if choreographed specifically for stealth.

He repressed a hiss as he realized he had been completely unaware of the group’s approach. Instantaneous recognition crashed into him as a blizzard of images from the tree-house dream flitted across his mind like a broken film reel. *Nin... Jordan... Jack... Amos... Argyle...* Their names were as familiar to him as lovers as his eyes traveled over their vibrant hair and distinctively colorful skin patterns.

Jordan was now clothed in her Kevlar® vest and Black Ops military cargo pants, her deep green hair, beginning to dry after the storm, smoothed back from her forehead to fall below her shoulders. Close by Nin hovered beside Jack, his arm draped cavalierly over her shoulders, her neon orange Mohawk braided tight against her scalp and bound with several lengths of gray-green alligator leather. In her right hand she loosely held what appeared to have once been a 20th century machine gun, now altered with a bizarre assortment of alien brass devices. Her index finger pointed outwards from the trigger, twitching slightly. The twins Amos and Argyle didn’t have the rocket launcher they had played with like a child’s slingshot in the dream, though something told Marcus they had stashed it not far away. They stood to either side of the group, a half a head taller than the rest, their muscular arms crossed firmly over their matching flak jackets as they regarded Marcus with an outright psychotic hostility. Marcus quickly noted the wild assortment of handcrafted patches and painted symbols, making each coat look like prehistoric biker jackets.

The central male leader nodded to Marcus. “I am Haldane. I would say ‘welcome’, but that would be a lie.”

Haldane’s voice was tempered with a subtle lilt of sadness beneath the carefully crafted coolness. It seemed as if his heart was far from this moment, the ache of its absence suffocating. Though he found the stranger’s directness a bit unsettling, Marcus also thoroughly appreciated his honesty for it was the first moment since his release from Hell’s oubliettes that he felt as if it were completely, abruptly genuine. What was more disturbing,

though, was the distinct sensation that he had not only dreamed of Haldane, but in that dream he had *been* Haldane. He had felt himself within those long sinewy limbs shelled in a pale aqua tiger-striped flesh as they had lain in the rain upon the sandstone, drinking in the water as if it were life itself. He had watched his motley band of friends through those same wide pale green eyes that assessed him now from a few feet away, framed by a wild mane of elegantly woven rows of aqua-green dreads that matched the hue of his eyes. In those dream moments he had known a brutal yet liquid complexity of a life that had never known a moment of true peace, but loved more brilliantly and hated more intensely than Marcus had ever dared imagine.

Born of water and war, two elements unequivocally and irreversibly moving against one another like colliding tectonic plates far beneath the ocean's surface, Haldane had learned to swim between the fissures like an eel until he no longer even heard the deafening crash of continents. He was growing numb to the fight, retreating to the primal aspects of himself, the instinctual indulgences. He wanted the simple moments of bliss such as the one Marcus had experienced through this Lower Purgatorian's skin; lying on the sandstone in the pouring rain and wanting nothing more than to throw his weapon away.

With a deep, shaky breath, Marcus shook himself out of the memory of Haldane's inner self. He straightened and began to introduce himself, as a formality, but was cut short by Haldane.

"I know who you are. Just as you, I can see, know who we are. It would appear you and I shared a similar dream," he said as if such occurrences were commonplace. His eyes briefly dropped to the toy in Marcus's hand, before returning to meet his gaze once again. "The question is -- do you know why you are here?" .

Marcus's lips parted slightly as he realized that he still did not understand why the King and Queen had decided he needed to see their homelands. Perhaps it was to inform him of the true extent of their power and the foundations from which the idea had been born to create a new realm, but even still, he knew in his heart that this was only a shadow of the full truth. A distant loneliness washed over him for a fleeting moment as he forced the memory of the dream from his mind in order to deal with the individuals before him in the present. However, he could not shake the remote sense of immediate rejection, as unwarranted as it was. Though it had only been for a few minutes, he had experienced tangentially the

nobility of their deep-seeded bond that allowed them now to communicate often without words, the merest gesture speaking volumes between those whom had weathered the worst battles together and lived to tell the tale.

Marcus had simultaneously felt their restlessness and their discontent, their willingness to fight for the survival of their people and the conflict with their outrage against the ruling word of those supposed leaders who still dictated their lives from afar. In the rapid succession of a few fluttering amphibious heartbeats, Marcus had ingested the essence of not only what they were as an indigenous people, but who they were as young warriors.

He did not know them but he respected them and realized he craved the kind of union they had, the loyalty and commitment to a common cause. In turn, he realized with a sinking dread, if he had managed such a profound connection with them during the dream, they, or in the very least Haldane, had most likely experienced the conflicted core essence of Marcus. The thought caused him to retreat into himself as he envisioned the tangled snarling pit of confusion and twisted demonic darkness they must have encountered at his core. While he had begun to allow himself the luxury of curiosity and awe of the new plane resulting in a facsimile of momentary flashes of something akin to “hope”, he knew well and good that he was and would forever be a demon. There was no turning back from that path. His soul was too far gone now after so many years enduring the tortures of Hell’s oubliettes to ever truly walk another path again, no matter how deluded he may allow himself to become. It was no wonder Haldane and the others watched him now with a barely veiled threat of violence.

The distant greenish-yellow light of the bonfires cutting through the forest of support beams glinted off the sharp white points of Marcus’s newly formed talons, his remaining outward physical demonic distinction. “I sadly admit I do not.” He met Haldane’s gaze again. “I have to say, I have not received too many clear answers about anything since I escaped.”

A nervous exchange of sideways glances ricocheted through the group. They seemed ready to flee, but managed to hold their ground. Nin’s finger twitched beside the trigger of her gun as Jack shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his arm dropping away from her shoulder to fidget with something concealed at his waist along his back. Amos and Argyle each leapt to the side like salamanders, attaching themselves to the nearest support beam to scamper up the poles a few feet, scanning the surrounding area for suspicious onlookers. Jordan crouched down on her haunches, placing her hands to either side of her head as she stared at the ground

angrily for a moment, before jerking up again to a standing position, pacing back and forth between the posts where the twins held vigil.

Haldane appeared unaware of his friends' reactions. "Escape?" he asked. "Where from?"

Marcus felt the corner of his mouth twitch in a shadow of a smirk. "Hell. Let's just say, you don't want to piss off the Prince of Wickedness or you might end up ripped limb from limb for an eternity."

"Is he looking for you? Can he find you here?" Haldane was obviously concerned now, his tone darkening as his words became clipped, yet the muscles of his body still managed to remain relaxed. He stared past Marcus at the King and Queen with a look of overcast outrage as if they had condemned them all by bringing Marcus into their midst.

"Oh, I'm sure there are many who are looking for me. Lucifer among them, for whatever reason he may have," Marcus shrugged. "It seems that everyone has a plan for me, except me." Tilting his head to the side slightly, he considered Haldane's nervous energy and took a careful step towards him. "I do know this, though: While I would like to trust your leaders' vision, something is making me incredibly uneasy. The only other two I have met in their new world have been all too human of character to be relied upon to tell me the truth. I can sense their uncertainty and fear. Something tells me you have the capability of being a bit more...objective."

Haldane stood his ground as he took in the demon's words. "I do not relish the idea of Hell having one more reason to attack us."

Marcus frowned, raising one eyebrow with confusion. "One *more* reason? Since when did Hell have an interest in Purgatory?"

Haldane could not disguise his surprise, his lips parting slightly as he weighed whether or not to believe Marcus's ignorance to be genuine. "You have no idea, do you? None at all?"

"None whatsoever. I'm afraid regular updates were not provided to me in my prison and, as I mentioned, the information about the state of the universe I've been given since that time has been, shall we say, selective," Marcus responded sardonically.

He could tell by the prickling aura of nervous energy bristling about the group that there was a deluge of crucial intelligence being held at bay from him. The very idea caused a fierce broiling anger to begin to bubble up from the depths of the sedate complacency he had allotted himself during his first couple of days within the new realm. His instincts had been

correct, that all was most definitely not as blissfully utopian as the King and Queen would have liked them to appear. From the instance in which they were chased across the fields by the unfettered faces of the Legions leaders to the brutal violence and pure raw power he had witnessed Angelee wield towards their pursuers, reducing her to a quavering terror as if she were more a slave to her abilities than a commander of them, such moments had been merely brushed aside. *Look at those stars John's making! Aren't they beautiful!* It was all a distraction.

Of course, Hell and Heaven alike would have reason to stop the King and Queen from creating their own isolated realm where God and the Devil held no sway. But the realm was far from substantial and held nothing, that Marcus could see, which would cause Lucifer to send forth his armies when certainly other more pressing matters of salvation and damnation were at hand elsewhere else.. However, if the King and Queen were derived of Purgatory and Purgatory itself were embroiled in some sort of other political strife, then perhaps that could possibly explain some of what Marcus had witnessed. His head swam with possibilities.

"Listen. I would happily leave if I knew how the hell to get out of this place, but between the swamps, the towers of angels and that dizzying wasteland of the Downs that they showed me, I'm pretty much here until they decide we're leaving. However, I think it would be in both of our best interests if you took the liberty to fill me in on what exactly is going on." Marcus stopped himself, realizing his tone was quickly becoming far too demanding to be beneficial at this juncture. He drew a breath. "I would be greatly appreciative. I have been, literally and metaphorically, in the dark far too long."

Slowly, Haldane nodded his agreement. He turned and silently met the intensely territorial gazes of the others, one by one. Gradually they began to nod their approval of his decision. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he whispered to Marcus, "Follow us."

For a second Marcus watched the colorful group of individuals as they quickly strode off into the darkness before briskly catching up with them. Despite the King and Queen's current preoccupation, he instinctively knew it would not be long before his absence was noted, especially if he strayed too far away from the village. They had taken him on the treacherous journey to Purgatory for some yet-to-be revealed reason, a reason other than merely a whimsical field trip, and he was certain they would not allow him to simply disappear into the wilderness.

He also had no desire to be stranded in this strange place between Heaven and Hell that appeared to be the source of a conflict even greater than the ongoing territorial disputes over the physical plane.

Away from the eerie glow of the bonfires and undulating waves of voices rising and falling in peculiar lilting, tremulous tribal song, the expanse of the sandstone cliffs transformed into a glittering porous moonscape of layered sediment. At sparse intervals small pockets of native foliage burst forth from the stone like mirages, the gnarled, mossy trees and tangled forbidding shrubs thrusting their roots through cracks in the stone to find their way down the hundreds of feet to the waters below. Each microcosmic cluster of plant life appeared dense enough to contain a world within its heart, the shadows sweetly womb-like in their nurturing, yet strangely inhospitable in their darkness. From within those damp, rich shadows echoed the eerie clear calls of the distant alien cousins of the creatures that twirled about the bonfires now glowing like match flames in the distance.

After a time they crested a small rise to find themselves walking through a steep pass where the dramatically sloping walls bent to and fro with the echoing memory of a time when the waters here rose to cover the cliffs in their entirety. Haldane halted, taking a seat on the edge of waist-high shelf jutting from one side of the ravine. Jordan and Nin stooped down to retrieve their firearms, which they had stashed within the secretive shadows beneath the shelf. Amos and Argyle lifted the rocket launcher from an alcove a few feet further down the pass, inspecting it to ensure it had not been tampered with. Jack leaned against the wall opposite of Haldane, crossing his orange arms over his thin chest as he watched Marcus in silent distrust.

Suddenly Amos rabbit punched Argyle in the upper arm, causing him to let go of the rocket launcher. Amos giggled like a psychotic schoolboy as Argyle cursed under his breath before turning towards Amos with a reptilian hiss of displeasure. The sharp crack of metal striking sandstone only briefly preceded a sinisterly playful snarl as Argyle leapt forwards across the narrow pass towards his twin, slamming him into the curvature of the wall. Jordan raced towards them, pulling the twins apart with a surprising strength for her slender stature. Tossing Argyle aside, she pinned Amos against the wall with one forearm against his throat until he stopped struggling. Amos and Argyle smiled at one another in a way that revealed

the fight was ongoing and would erupt again at the next opportune moment. From the opposite end of the ravine, Nin observed with a look of disdain.

Haldane rubbed his forehead with one hand for a second before leaping off of the ledge in a fluid graceful flash and charging towards Amos and Argyle. The entire ravine plunged into silence. Amos and Argyle scrambled towards the rocket launcher and reassumed their outlook position, as if the disturbance had never occurred. Jordan shrugged at Haldane as she readjusted the AK-47 she had slung across her back on a wide green canvas strap. Haldane observed for a moment until he was sure there might be a minute or two of true undisturbed silence before returning to his conversation with Marcus. As he passed by a dark alcove a few feet away he paused to retrieve his own firearm from the shadows. It was Marcus's turn to cast a nervous glance up and down the ravine.

"What you observed back there," Haldane gestured with a dismissive wave in the general direction of the village, "is a dwindling sentiment."

"Uh huh," Marcus muttered distractedly as he surveyed the upper reaches of the cliffs above wondering just how far the sound of the twin's playful scuffle had reached. "I'm sure it is."

"There's a reason the King and Queen came back here and not to some of the other villages within the swamps. Their reception would not have been as warm." Haldane watched Marcus's nervous observation as he reclaimed his place at the edge of the nearest sandstone shelf, pulling his legs up to cross them as he sat. He watched Marcus with a subtle feline superiority as he awaited the demon's response.

"They seem so proud of their homeland though, this place they claim to have created?" Marcus replied, finding his focus again, comfortable that they were still undiscovered. The wind whistled through the pass momentarily carrying with it the heavy perfume of salt water, stone and rotting wet foliage.

"Proud perhaps in the way a farmer is proud of the beast he's raised that he knows he'll fetch a good price for one day. They love to boast of their noble beginnings, but that was a very, *very* long time ago. Their allegiance to this land and to this people is not only questionable now, but nearly altogether absent. Since our creation the angels have aimed to eradicate us. However, we have, so far, proven to be a formidable fighting force so they have lately left us alone, for the most part, so long as we stay clear of the Willow Gate. For as long as I can remember, though, Hell

has had its sights set on claiming Purgatory for its own. At first the fight was between the angels and the demons. They simply ignored us when our people were in our infancy, leaving us to our own devices while they battled one another. However, we matured and our so-called ‘unnatural’ existence within this realm was noticed. This place was supposed to have been solely devoted to the souls of mortal men and women, and the war began to involve our people to a greater and greater extent until now we are completely caught in the crossfire.

Our valiant leaders should have stayed here to defend us, to protect us from the angels who detest us and the demons that want to enslave us. Instead, though they chose to abandon us.”

He shook his head sadly as he chose his next words. “Within the fabric of Purgatory itself they began to form a new realm, a plane of existence they initially claimed would be a refuge for us. Once it was completed we would all be taken there to begin a life free of the restraints of the predetermined laws set forth by the rulings of God and the Devil. No sooner had they begun to build this realm, than their intentions changed. Suddenly it was a ‘utopia’, which could only be reached by those with the special gifts that allowed them to cross over into the realm. Excuses upon layers of excuses were heaped when we asked about the day when we might see this new realm. In response to our questions they created barriers, which were so incredibly incomprehensible to the vast majority of entities, be them of Purgatory, Heaven, Hell or Earth, that the realm became completely isolated. Their promises had been lies. Our creators had betrayed us...”

Haldane struggled to retain his composure. It was obvious it had been quite some time since he had last, if ever, voiced this story aloud. Those he kept close to him already knew it well enough to never need a verbal reiteration.

“That, however, is just the beginning of our troubles. Not only have we been all but abandoned to defend ourselves, but the realm has created some sort of disturbance which has made it even more difficult for Hell’s armies to infiltrate and conquer Purgatory. There are rumors that they are harboring a creature possessing a nearly invincible power, something plucked straight out of Hell itself. So now, Lucifer’s main focus is no longer merely the conquering of this realm,” Haldane threw his arms wide, “but the obliteration of the King and Queen’s new one as well.”

Revenge

“That would explain the fury with which Sonnellion attacked us the first day I was there,” Marcus muttered under his breath as he rubbed his chin in thought.

“It’s only going to get worse. If I were you, I would leave while you have the chance,” Haldane warned. His gaze turned towards the weapon in his hands. He stared at it with mixture of love and disdain as if he might be silently conversing with the metal that bore the divots and scrapes years of indentured servitude. He tilted the gun upwards, placing the butt on the ledge between his feet, pointing the long slender barrel at the sky, and leaned his cheek against the metal. He grasped the chamber between his hands to steady the weapon.

“That is easier said than done, I’m afraid,” Marcus replied, shaking his head. “I’m still attempting to figure out how I managed to get there in the first place, let alone how to escape. Hell, Earth, those are realms I’m familiar with. I can manipulate those planes, tap into them and use my powers to alter them as needed for me to move about freely, but the new one is... different in a way I can’t quite explain. Its innate instability seems to be one and the same with the power that protects it. I can’t help but feel that there is something far more primordial than even Heaven or Hell lurking just beyond its perimeter.”

“That would not surprise me. The legend of just one creature maintaining the defenses of the new realm with enough strength to keep Lucifer out just doesn’t make sense to me and I have seen so very many unexplainable things during my time.” Haldane agreed with a slow nod, still pressing his cheek to the dark gray metal of the gun’s barrel as he stared at Marcus with luminous aqua eyes. “Even with my limited knowledge of the universe beyond Lower Purgatory.”

“As have I...” Marcus’s voice trailed off. His mind was preoccupied with means of escape from the new realm. However, he could not return to Hell, not while he was still a fugitive. He might be able to hide out in the Physical plane for a while, but he knew it would only be a matter of time before they would find him there. If what Haldane said was truth, the new realm was the last place in all the folds and creases of the universe for any entity to remain, unless they had a dire desire for extinction. But where else could he go?

Seconds of silence ticked by as the last vibration of Marcus’s words died away. The wind moaned again through the ravine. This time it carried with it the distant sound of a large wave breaking against the nearest sea-

bound cliffs. At this distance the cries of the King and Queen's celebration could no longer be heard. To Marcus, though, their presence felt all too close for comfort.

Haldane uncurled, his limbs unfurling from around the slender rigid frame of his gun like a morning glory vine awaking to the sun, "Stay here with us and fight. We are building a rebellion. We need the help of creatures such as yourself." He leapt down from the ledge, leaving his gun behind, and approached Marcus.

Marcus snapped out of his internal dialogue and lifted his gaze from the ground to meet Haldane's. "Why? I have no allegiance to this realm and, I hate to be the voice of negative reason, but Lucifer will succeed and once he does he will unleash his wrath upon Purgatory. He will not just commandeer your world, but he will make an example of it to all of the other realms. I know this is your home, but if I were you, I would be planning to find a way out of it while you still can."

Haldane shook his head. "No. We won't leave. We can't, even if we possessed the power to. We have fought too hard to ensure its survival. This is our homeland. It's all we've ever known. Besides..." he paused, "We have been approached with a deal."

Icy, clammy dread pooled in the center of Marcus's stomach at the very sound of the word. "From whom?" His voice was barely a whisper.

Haldane did not answer immediately, pacing back and forth from one sandstone wall to the other, restless suddenly and brimming with energy as if he were channeling lightning from an approaching storm, before returning to stand before Marcus. "While we were on patrol near the perimeter of the furthest reaches of Lower Purgatory we were contacted by a demon by the name of Vetis. He delivered a message from Lucifer himself that if we were to join forces with Hell's Legions and cease our battles against them, we would receive immunity and protection from the angels. He promised us that we would continue to live in our homeland once the war ended."

Marcus could not repress a low and dry scoffing laugh as he shook his head with disbelief. "I would have hoped that you all would be wiser than that. You never make 'deals' with demons, or angels for that matter. Trust me, I know all too well the consequences. They will never be truthful with you. Any promises they make they will break for their only allegiance is to their own self-preservation. And Vetis! Of all of the demons you could

ally yourself with, he is probably the most distrustful of them all. His riddles must have been so profound this time for you to treat them with such reverence!”

“You should know, shouldn’t you, demon? But, no, there were no riddles. Only a simple, matter-of-fact deal.” Haldane folded his arms across his chest and glared at Marcus as if he were contemplating the worthlessness of bothering to inform Marcus of the true status of the war. “What would you have us do, Marcus? Once the King and Queen leave, and they will again soon if not on this very night, and you leave with them, we will be alone again. Our people will be alone to fight a war we have long been ill-equipped to fight. Hell’s armies will attack us and the angels will, no doubt, accuse us of being in league with them, regardless of whether or not we go through with this deal, because they would love yet another reason to kill us. We are exhausted. We want some sort of semblance of peace.”

“And you think peace is what you’ll find under Hell’s rule?” Marcus spat. “If you think your lives now are hard, you have no idea the torment you’ll suffer for eternity once the underworld commands you. That is, if they do not simply exterminate you in order to make an example to other creatures who dare defy them.”

“But we will not be defying them then!” Haldane protested. He suddenly appeared far younger in spirit than Marcus had originally suspected. While he could not judge how time passed in this realm, Haldane could not have been more than twenty-five Earth years in age.

“It doesn’t matter,” Marcus shook his head, running one hand through his hair. “It is true, you have been unjustly caught in the crossfire, but it doesn’t matter what oaths you take or what allegiances you swear. If they do not kill you, they will enslave you and use you for their own purposes—purposes that you are far too innocent to comprehend.”

“We are not innocent!” Jordan suddenly spoke up, leaping down from the ledge where she had been perched and charging towards Marcus brandishing a large silver bowie knife in one hand. “I should gut you where you stand! Why are you even telling him these things?” She shouted at Haldane. “If what he says is true, he’s not to be trusted! He could take this information back to the King and Queen and everything we’ve been working towards will be crushed!”

“Because I’ve seen through his eyes, through his soul.” Haldane looked past Jordan as if she were invisible, to hold Marcus’s gaze as if defying the

demon to prove him wrong. “He holds no allegiance to them. He holds no allegiance to anyone or anything, for that matter.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow as he considered this statement. He had not contemplated his own loyalties in a very long time, but now it would seem that there was quite a bit of truth to Haldane’s observations. He had long forsaken humanity, even when he was a human. The concept of Heaven had always held too many contradictions for him to embrace its credo wholeheartedly. While he had struggled and toiled, mentally, physically and spiritually on Earth, never once had an entity from that realm reached forth to provide him with any real evidence of their existence or their care for his “eternal salvation”, no matter how he prayed. For a brief moment in time he had embraced his new path as a demon and convinced himself that his true purpose was to serve the powers of Hell, but even that new family had betrayed him immediately and unapologetically, condemning him to years of brutal unspeakable torment. He had not turned his back entirely on Hell for he was and would forever be a creature reborn from its darkness, but to say he was “loyal” to the realm was quite another thing entirely. Now he had found himself an unwitting guest, if not an outright prisoner, in a realm he instinctively, no matter how fascinated he might be with it, resisted. It was true. He was a creature without allegiances or alliances, neither trusted by or trusting of anyone or anything. The realization was both unsettling and strangely liberating at the same time.

“All the more reason not to trust him!” Jordan snarled. “He’s incapable of being loyal. He’s a born traitor.” She took a step towards Marcus with malicious intent. Haldane grabbed her by the forearm and pulled her back.

“Actually, I have never betrayed anyone. The one soul I did claim in the name of Hell during my time as the Demon of Regret, had condemned herself through her own actions. I only held her hand, so to speak, as she made the final leap towards damnation.” Marcus responded calmly, watching Jordan as she ripped her arm away from Haldane’s hold. “I will make no promises to you. Thus, I cannot betray you.”

“Convenient!” Jordan hissed. “Kill him!” She shouted at Haldane.

Jack, who had remained a silent observer, stepped away from the wall where he had nearly begun to blend into the orange stone. “Now, now, Jordan! Give the demon a chance.” He slid his long arms around her neck in an almost perverse way pulling her back against him as he stared at Marcus. The motion seemed to have a mildly sedative effect to Jordan for a moment, even though she continued to glare at Marcus as if she could

rip the skin from his face. “We have to consider our options here if we’re already dallying in darkness,” Jack added.

The commotion had snared Amos and Argyle’s attention. Cautiously they crept towards the group, their eyes still darting upwards towards the cliffs and down either side of the pass. Removed from the immediate debate, they seemed attuned to a different frequency than the rest of the group, their senses unfettered by the high emotions being hurled like throwing knives.

Marcus tried to bite back the sarcasm in his tone, unsuccessfully. “Why would you have me stay here? I am not exactly on good terms with the Legions, nor would I, I’m sure, be of any assistance negotiating with angels. Not that I’ve met one personally, but from that brief encounter back there in the swamp I’d say they’d probably kill me just on the principal that I was spied with your leaders.”

Nin crept up slowly, her footsteps feather soft on the damp sandstone. “You obviously have a very rare power, one that few others in the universe possess. The King and Queen have recognized it and believe in it. Otherwise they would not have allowed you entrance into their new realm. They will do everything in their power to keep you there and use you to fortify their defenses. They believe themselves the true immortal deities, above God and the Devil. They will do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival.”

Haldane’s gaze dropped to the ground. Jordan wriggled out of Jack’s embrace with a disgusted grunt and turned to stormed off down the ravine to where Amos and Argyle had been standing watch.

“They told me the reason they left Purgatory was because they didn’t want to be regarded as gods?” Marcus replied, knowing all too well the answer to his question.

“Have any of their actions supported that statement?” Nin asked quietly, tilting her head to one side. In the shadows of the cavern her neon orange hair seemed to glow from within, even pulled tight away from her face. There was a radiance to her that was beyond merely the brilliant coloring of her hair, skin and retro human clothing. There was no doubt she possessed just as much of the survivalist warrior within her as any of the others, but the energy that coursed through her, much like Haldane’s, was grounded and solid, a rich ore of carefully protected wisdom and strength she had long ago learned how to forge without pretension or exposition.

Like a shotgun cutting through the night, Argyle shouted an unintelligible explicative and jumped onto the nearest ledge. “I think we’ve been noticed!” he barked to the others. “Lay low!”

Amos slung the portable rocket launcher across his back, tightening the wide harness across his chest. As awkward and heavy as the weapon appeared, Amos scurried to the wall to his left and began to scale the warped face like a gecko, his long fingers finding purchase in the smallest of crevices with an amazing ease. Argyle was already several feet above him and quickly reached the top of the cavern wall, Amos arriving seconds later. The two hoisted themselves over the rim and crouched down to set up the rocket launcher. From his position far below, all Marcus could see of the twin brothers was the black silhouettes of their bent backs from the waist up as they hunched over the weapon. His heart pounded in his chest as he wondered what their cryptic warning had meant. Demons, angels or the King and Queen: who or what had discovered their secret meeting? His question was answered by the sound of the rocket launcher being fired.

CHAPTER 21

The crystalline giggling of small metal wind chimes rambled aimlessly through the currents of soft lavender breeze. Dappled sunlight warmed her skin as it filtered down through the wide unblemished green leaves of the massive oak that cradled her in its gnarled roots with a perfect silent acceptance. Brenda curled tighter into soft bed of leaves and grass between the two massive roots, savoring the sense of security and serenity that sedated her psyche, moving through her like a gentle childhood memory. In this place, wherever it was, she was whole and perfect, her physical wounds healed, the tattered rifts in her soul stitched neatly closed. She could not even remember a dream from her mortal life that was this pure and sweet, her entire being having been submerged in such brutality for years that the echo of contentedness had become impossible to conjure.

A syrupy amber wavelength of bliss emanated upwards from the ground beneath her, deep solid vibrations that rumbled in unstructured perfection like a lion's purr. She thought that such concepts of harmony and peace had faded into oblivion, crushed to dust that blew across her soul with a wrathful wrought iron wickedness, scraping away her identity one small sliver at a time. Peace, as unobtainable and elusive as the color blue to the blind, no tactile or conceptual comparison could ever truly reveal or express the nature of the sensation.

For a moment she wondered if perhaps her time in Hell had simply been a nightmare from which she felt she might never wake. However, through the aromatic perfume of flora and fauna cocooning about her, stroking her tangled hair in an innocently familial manner, she could still smell the subtle residual scent of sulfur, sand and ash when the wind tugged at her mangled dress. The evidence of her identity was embedded beneath her fingernails, etched into the lines of her palms, folded now beneath her cheek as if in prayer. The reprieve of mortal hallucination was not for her. The smell caused her to shiver and grimace, flickers of Hell skipping through her mind like an arrowhead across the surface of a muddy pond. A soft quavering moan escaped her lips as she struggled to keep the serenity from slipping through her fingers like water.

“What do you think she is?” A lyrically sweet woman’s voice blended with the tinkling dance of the wind chimes, full of caution and concern. “She is most definitely not of this place.”

“I don’t know.” Another woman’s voice answered, lower and softer than the first, like the slow passing of a deep river. “It might be dangerous to wake her. There is something rotten about the way she smells. Look at her arms. She’s covered in bruises! It has been a very long time since I last laid eyes upon one, but I cannot help but think she might be demonic in nature.”

“True. But do demons bruise?” the first woman asked innocently. When the second woman did not reply, she continued. “By the looks of her, she’s been through something awful, but I don’t think she’s an *actual* demon. Besides, what would a demon want with our little corner of the universe?”

“Those are the types of questions that are better left unanswered. Isabella, I worry sometimes about your naivety. I really wish they had appointed you elsewhere for a time to become a bit wiser to the ways of the universe before sending you here. You are a marvelous nurturer, but as a protector, not so much,” the second woman said with a patient dismay.

“Marian, the last thing this place needs is cynicism and paranoia. Our purpose is to ensure our charges’ eternal happiness,” Isabella replied as if reciting a well memorized lesson. “I am well aware of the horrors in realms beyond, but it does me no good to dwell on them.”

“Except in times like these,” Marian pointed out.

Isabella was silent for a long moment. “I’m going to wake her.”

Before Marian could protest, Isabella reached out and gently placed her hand on Brenda’s shoulder, shaking her softly like a mother waking a child. Terror gripped Brenda, tight and cold around her heart, freezing her breath in her lungs. Behind her eyelids Geryon’s colossal black gaze bored into her, judging her, taunting her as he led her to the gateway to Limbo.

Before she had stepped forth into the tangible web of darkness of the cave she had cast one last glance at Bael, but he had already turned away, leaving her to the harrowing task of completing her self-designed mission alone. The extent of his involvement in their agreement had been fulfilled. Until that time came when he called upon her to serve him, as she had willingly submitted to, she was as good as dead to the Legion commander. She had watched him as he disappeared back through the cavern of growing red crystals, the rose-orange light that filtered through the minerals tinting his ashen limbs and neon green hair, the cobalt blue metal of his sword

deepening to a heavy purple that was almost black. Turning back was not even the smallest fraction of an option. Yet, the unknown and unknowable was suddenly more terrifying than any torture she had endured at Belial's hands.

"She's shaking," Isabella observed with overwhelming compassion. "The poor thing."

"I think we should go get assistance. After all, we're only meters from the wastelands. Sure, we haven't had an incident in ages, but that doesn't mean something wicked couldn't have made its way over the perimeter. Call to your Archangel, Isabella," Marian urged.

"Marian, that is ridiculous! If you're so concerned, call to yours. I'm not going to upset Remi with such an annoying, petty request. He has much more important matters to tend to." Isabella reached out and touched Brenda on the shoulder again. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Brenda jumped with a gasp at the sensation of several hands touching her at once and snapped out of her memory of watching Bael abandon her upon the Plains of Despair. Her eyes flew open; what had only moments before been nurturing halos of honeyed light through softly rustling leaves of jubilant energy now felt like prison yard flood lights as they struck her, distorting her blurry vision. Her peace, her serenity had been shattered. Scrambling backwards, she pressed herself as hard as possible against the trunk of the tree, pulling her knees up to her chest as she held out her hands defensively ready to strike at whoever or whatever approached next. Grunting and snarling like a feral animal, Brenda's reason was consumed by panic and she could not even form words to warn off her perceived attackers.

"It's okay. We're not going to hurt you. We would never hurt you," Isabella cooed, trying to pierce the blazing wall of fear surrounding Brenda.

"Unless you try to hurt us, of course," Marian chimed in beneath her breath.

Brenda's eyes tried desperately to focus and darted over the blurry female forms a few feet away. She held one hand still extended outwards to hold the strangers at bay, and ground the heel of the other into her eyes with a strangled whimper. She stumbled over the root to her left, falling backwards into the leaves at its base. There she cowered, pressing her forehead into the bark that was strangely smooth as if polished by a river's current. The tree's energy called to her, pulling her down and grounding

her as it seemed to absorb her fear like a poultice of herbs and honey. The strangers remained silent as she composed herself. As her panic began to subside with the realization that these two women were not about to attack her, at least not now, Brenda's anxiety melted into shame, the embarrassment of her shell-shocked condition inexcusably mortifying.

Slowly, clarity restored itself to her sight. Several feet away the two women stood staring down at her with a mixture of fascination and alarm. In large part, the women resembled rather average, unassuming humans, their features pretty, but plain and unadorned, their long brown hair pulled back into neat buns. Their slender, but soft figures were concealed beneath turn-of-the-century nurse uniforms of a deep marigold hue. However, from their sides extended two additional sets of arms, which expressed their various emotions by either being crossed tightly over their stomachs or defiantly cocked with fists planted firmly on their hips. On the left breast pocket of each of their uniforms a gold tag gleamed, their names, flanked by images of extended wings, etched into the polished metal.

"Can you speak?" Marian asked, folding her uppermost arms over her large matronly breasts neatly confined by the thick polyester material of her uniform. "Who are you? Where did you come from?" she demanded.

Brenda stared at Marian, her mouth slightly agape as she struggled to piece together words. At last she managed to simply say her name. The two nurses exchanged pensive glances. Isabella raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Her lower hands fidgeted nervously with a marbled blue plastic child's ball. Brenda stared at the toy, trying to piece together what these creatures were that stood before her. From the two hip pockets on Isabella's uniform several items protruded including a baby's bottle, a red plastic water gun and an old Nintendo® Gameboy from the 90s.

"Where am I?" Brenda croaked, her body shivering uncontrollably as if from a deep arctic chill.

Beyond the many-armed women the landscape glistened with a soft-focus, luxurious beauty, an ethereal romantic rendition of nature. The sweet golden sunlight rippled through layers of lush foliage representative of every shade of green perceivable, the shafts of illumination always indirect and passive to coax a permanent sense of timeless serenity from every nook and fold of stone, wood or fauna. At the base of the enormously wide oak trees the shockingly vivid petals of mesmerizing flowers curled and unfurled with a silken waxen glory that seemed substantial enough to support the weight of a human being, pollen pregnant stamens sparkling

invitingly as they proudly presented themselves for inspection from the passing colossal honey bees.

A mile away, however, the landscape began to morph, appearing to melt like a watercolor painting left out in the rain. The forest gradually dwindled, the impressionistic pallet bleeding down and out into a stretch of eggplant purple sand, barren of life save for the way the light caused the granules of glassine mineral to sparkle and dance as if they might spontaneously combust. There was an eerie familiarity to the expanse of nothingness that caused Brenda to shrink further behind the trunk of the tree she clung to, but it was what rose in the distance beyond the sands that caused her heart to thunder like a suicidal steed. The jagged red outline of the mountain range through which she had passed from Hell into Limbo severed the ignorant pastel blue of the horizon, slicing wisps of stratus clouds asunder with the silent recognition that all realms had boundaries perched upon darkness.

No matter how far one might wander, Hell was always permanently branded into the periphery of one's senses. There was no escaping its presence.

Marian noticed Brenda's preoccupation with the horizon and turned to stare at the mountain range for a moment. Slowly, her gaze returned to regard Brenda with an even more defensive caution. "Why are you here?"

Brenda snapped out of her trance, jerking back away from the tree as if it had scorched her hands. Stumbling backwards, she tripped over one of the titanic exposed roots jutting up out of the earth like the ridged back of a dinosaur. "I have to go. I can't stay here. The new realm. I have to get to the new realm." She babbled like a madwoman.

Unwilling to let Brenda out of their sight, Isabella and Marian began to approach, climbing over the roots slowly, never once diverting their gaze. The movement of their muscular matronly arms as they navigated their way over the gnarled brown roots caused them to appear like golden spiders gracefully inching their way towards their prey.

The sound of children playing suddenly reached Brenda's ears, a cheerful shimmering bubble of innocence that echoed as if carried by the wind of pure memory. Tears came to her eyes as the image of her infant Angelee fluttered through her mind. Her panic blinded her from the possibility that the women approaching her might possibly aid her journey; all Brenda could think of was finding a way out of Limbo as quickly as

possible. Every second that ticked by was another instance in which Lucifer might destroy the one thing in all of existence Brenda still lived for.

The wind changed direction with a heavy sigh and the sound of the children playing diminished, swept away by the sudden emergence of the eager, yet disciplined shouting of young adults over the clashing of swords as if in the midst of a training exercise. Brenda looked about her, wildly searching for the source of the sounds but the lush, dense forest enveloped her, concealing the world that extended in the opposite direction of the wastelands.

“Bael, please help me if you can hear me,” Brenda whispered aloud. Though she knew he would not reply, he was the only entity she felt she could pray to now, for better or worse.

The two women halted their approach, their eyes widening.

“The mark on her forehead! She is one of Lucifer’s own! Did I not warn you? She prays to Hell’s commanding officer!” Marian hissed at Isabella. Standing upright, she extended all of her arms and lifted her face to the sky as if offering up a prayer of her own. “SARIEL!” Her voice echoed through the forest, shaking the very fibers of the realm, sending birds squawking towards the clouds and small forest mammals scurrying for their burrows.

With a gasp Brenda found herself fleeing through the forest before cognitive thought could comprehend her direction. Her bare feet flew over beds of fallen leaves that still felt fresh and green as if they continued to live upon the branches that laced above in an intricate latticework of organic innuendo. The sound of Marian’s cry followed in close pursuit, warping from a near angelic hail to a furious scream of alarm. To her left, in her peripheral vision the ghostly outlines of children darted in and out of the tree trunks only to solidify as they reached open glens where the soft constant morning light fell without interruption, running alongside her in the distance like a pack of wolves. To her right she could feel the pull of the wastelands, a deep tide of inhospitable desolation that signified the delineation between realms where probability of the all existed, yet none dared to dwell for fear of wandering the line of infinite possibility past the point of madness.

The vaporous blue auras of toddlers were now accompanied by the elfin silhouettes of older children, sprinting like deer, their hollow white blazing gazes trained upon her with a honed suspicion the younger souls were all but unawares of as they tumbled and played like lemurs beneath the feet of

the others. Brenda could not tell if she even breathed any longer as she ran, her lungs burning, her sides aching as panic-fueled adrenaline pushed her on a wave of mute instinct. She longed to stop, just for a moment, to regain control and regroup in this strange new land, but she could not shake the sensation that the souls that followed her were in pursuit of her, their tiny hands gripped about the shafts of spears and bows waiting for her first stumble to take her down for her rude intrusion on their peaceful world.

Isabella and Marian pursued Brenda through the woods with vengeful howls alerting all who lingered of the whereabouts of the intruder they chased. As Brenda had fled, leathery wings of deep, dark gold sprouted from their shoulder blades, bursting forth, ripping the nostalgic replica uniforms as the primal force of their protective natures consumed them. The heavy downward pulse of their beating wings whipped the air into a cyclonic draft that pulled at Brenda's body, threatening to suck her backwards into their extended arms.

Are there no safe places in the universe anymore? Brenda craved the anonymous insignificance of the physical realm suddenly more so than any other time in her double lives. For all she had been taught in her mortal life of the structure and purpose of Limbo she did not feel the exponential bliss so described by her religious leaders.

However, she was not one of those sinless souls who by happenstance found themselves expiring before they were ripe enough for the opportunity to dip their toes into the dark waters of the irreversible err of mortal coil. Here her soul was wound and bound by the vile vine of her past mortal indiscretion, unlike those of the human condition might encounter. Her infidelity had not been one of the millions unnoticed by God or the Devil, dismissed as merely "human nature" left over from evolution's maddening mindless desire for procreation. As her heart had strayed from Marcus's embrace in a time when he himself seemed hell-bent upon self-destruction she never dreamed her soul would become the bait to lure the darkest of predators from the deeps.

The souls here in Limbo did not care for her excuses. Even if given the chance to tell her tale it would not change the signature of her own soul. Regardless of whether she was a willing participant or a slave, nine years as Belial's consort in Hell had soiled what was left of her identity, saturating it with the putrid rotting stench of corruption.

One of the winged women behind Brenda screeched again like a pterodactyl as she tore through forest, weaving over and under the expansive

maze of branches. Brenda cast a terrified glance over her right shoulder as she continued to run and tried to gauge how far away the creatures were. No more than twenty feet separated her from the women, whose hands now curled like claws tipped with golden curved talons. Their eyes blazed with rage, irises seeming to glow with a brilliant yellow light as if the sun had been plucked from the sky and placed within them. Brenda screamed as her bare foot caught beneath a small piece of root, hurtling her forwards as she lost her balance. So focused she had been on her escape she had not noticed how her path had gradually inched her closer and closer to the perimeter of the wasteland where the physical structure of Limbo was less substantial.

She tumbled and rolled swiftly toward the edge of a cavern opening in the ground. She was unable to grasp hold of anything to keep her from plunging down into the darkness. Her mind reeled as images of Hell consumed her with a fear that the pitch would return her to the very place she sought to escape. Above her the sight of the cornflower blue sky and lush green leaves quickly shrank to a pinpoint of light, a gathering of young souls crowding around the edge of the cave accompanied by Isabella and Marian to watch her descent, until eventually it blinked out of existence like a dead star. She flailed, to no avail, her legs kicking, her hands grasping out into the nothingness. Her scream died away as the force of the fall paralyzed her vocal cords, her lungs barely able to draw breath in her state of shock.

Out of the darkness a form sped past her in a blur of iridescent purple scales and black leather, its electric shriek piercing her ears painfully as the wind from its passing spun her like a gyroscope.

Her fall was halted brutally as the creature returned, plunging its claws into her shoulders down to the bone as it captured her. Brenda found her voice in the void and screamed. Reaching up she grasped the creature's legs, throwing her head back to try to see what it was that held her now like a hunting hawk. The lower torso of a giant bird of prey, its hide covered in a mixture of small purple feathers and razor-sharp scales, seamlessly bled into the alabaster flesh of woman. From her back furiously beat expansive wings of midnight blue and black, so dark that only their movement distinguished them from the hollow infinity beyond. The creature stared down at Brenda, its face a horrific contortion of black eyes and fangs set into a skeletally thin face of blind hatred. Though Brenda could feel no wind, the creature's hair floated about its shoulders like writhing serpents

as it bent forward, twisting its head in a painful angle on its long, sinewy neck until its face was mere inches from hers. She wanted to shrink back, to struggle to free herself, but the slightest movement caused the harpy's talons to dig deeper. The creature opened its wide mouth and hissed, a long black serpent's tongue whipping forward to taste the air before Brenda's eyes with a vile exhale of stagnant breath.

Brenda felt herself beginning to lose consciousness. With another vicious cry that echoed out into the vacuous emptiness, the creature threw its wings outwards to their full reach and began to fly with its prey securely clutched beneath it. Brenda fought against the ensuing darkness that threatened to consume her vision. It was not long before two more creatures emerged from the darkness, swooping in to investigate the first's catch in a defensive predatory dance like tattered purple ribbons arcing over one another in a dizzying figure-eight. The creature clutching Brenda howled and hissed, snarling whenever her fellow harpies drew daringly near, jerking Brenda like a broken doll from one side to the other as it dodged the aggressive conquest of the others, flapping its massive wings harder and harder as it fought to place distance between them.

What happens if they rip me apart? The thought blew through Brenda's mind, cold and hollow. *How do the dead die?*

A whoosh of something slender speeding through the void towards them was punctuated by the sound of leather flesh pierced. The harpy carrying Brenda screamed in pain as it reached up to grab hold of the long black arrow shaft, edged with dark blue feathers, protruding from its left shoulder, dangerously close to where its heart might have been. The harpy wavered as blood drained from the wound, dripping down its body in slow, glistening, black rivulets. A second arrow sang through the void, piercing the harpy's side. This time the creature's cry had diminished to a frustrated wail of pain like a red fox in a steel trap. Preoccupied with its own pain, the harpy's talons loosened from Brenda's shoulders, letting her slip free. Backwards Brenda sank into the darkness, the tattered remains of her gown fluttering about her splayed limbs as her eyes began to close. However, just as she began to feel herself slip over the edge of consciousness excruciating piercing pain ripped through her calf, brutally snapping her back.

Shaking as ice filled her veins, she felt tears begin to slip from the corners of her eyes, trickling back into her hair as she waited for the final strike to end her agony. *Let it be over. End me. Please...*

Something tugged at the arrow shaft embedded through her leg for a second, its barbed tip straining against the muscle it had ripped through to anchor about the front of her shin. Brenda gasped at the excruciating pain as star bursts exploded before her eyes. Suddenly the inquisitive tugging became a pull, sharp and swift, dragging Brenda through the void, swinging in a massive disorienting arc “upwards”. A last terrified howl escaped her lips as she flew into the nothingness without even a single star to anchor her sight until, as if congealing from the very darkness itself, the outline of what appeared to be a ship, black as the blackest of nights, began to manifest. A combination of a vast Viking buza and Argosy, it sported flawless steep gunwales constructed of a gleaming black wood that seemed to emit its own source of light within the void.

It was impossible to tell if the ship moved forward or simply hovered, though long black oars extended outwards from each side, steadily churning in time with one another. From ornately carved poles of the same jet wood, set at equal intervals along each side, were hung metal lanterns, each containing a dancing blue flame. The light from the lamps clung to the ship like frost in moonlight.

The arc of her swing diminished as she was pulled towards the ship until at last she dangled directly beneath its mammoth hull. Staring up, her eyes traced the nearly invisible line attached to the shaft of the black metal arrow the hundreds of feet upwards to where it disappeared at the end of a colossal contraption resembling a deep-sea fishing reel. She was suspended upside down, and what little blood remained in her body drained to her head, causing her leg to go mercifully numb. A wave of nausea flooded her as she felt herself hoisted upwards to the deck. Brenda closed her eyes, too weak to even pray for death any longer, until eventually the soft creaking of the large metal fishing reel turning signaled to her that she was close to the boat. Two pairs of large strong hands reached out and grabbed hold of her, pulling her over the railing to lay her on the cold smooth deck. Without warning the arrow was pulled through the wound in her leg, the feathered shaft gliding through the clean puncture with one swift yank.

Like a lightning bolt the renewed surge of agony brought Brenda immediately back as she screamed, sitting up to clutch her leg weakly before collapsing back again against the railing. She breathed heavily as her eyes darted over the massive ship that writhed like a hive with dozens of bare-chested men in dark blue leather breaches and high black doeskin boots. All of various ethnic origins, the men bore the chiseled physiques

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of disciplined warriors, bodies of etched muscles designed and perfected for the art of combat. Across their skin, woven in and out of the scars they retained from various battles, a myriad of vivid images were tattooed. Each mural, upon first glance, seemed somehow tailored to that particular individual with scenes and symbols that appeared tied to the man's origins in a time and place far before they came to be upon this ship. Concealing their eyes were ornate goggles of intricately etched copper molded about lenses of a brilliant amethyst crystal. Tirelessly, in silence, they toiled to ensure the ship's optimum progression through the void. Along either side of the ship benches supported the weight of three men each, propelling the oars in perfect unison by hand, their gazes fixed dead ahead with a dark sea of collective meditation. In the center of the deck at the beam of the boat a single gargantuan mast soared upwards into the nothingness. From the mast a sail of iridescent black fabric nearly thirty feet in height pulled taught against its battens as if filled with the winds from a mighty hurricane. At first Brenda thought it was merely a trick of the blue lantern light and her wavering vision, for the fabric of the sail seemed to writhe, thorny pointed tendrils detaching from the pregnant face to lick the air, curling outwards into the void beyond the bow to find an invisible purchase to pull upon. As they retreated the tendrils curled into themselves, vanishing into the fabric where they would swim like eels while a new batch of prongs reached out into the darkness. Brenda slumped against the cold wood railing and stared up at the sail's fluid dance, completely mesmerized. Faintly she was aware of the wood planks beside her creaking softly as someone approached, but she could not tear her gaze away from the tendrils curling high above her.

"My sincerest apologies for wounding you so." A cool deep man's voice rained down upon Brenda. "Once the harpy released you, there were only moments before I lost track of you altogether in the void."

As if awakening from poppy dream she blinked heavily, shaking her head slightly, and turned her face toward the man standing near her outstretched legs. Tall and rigidly thin as a bamboo reed, the man possessed a distant cold reserve that reminded Brenda of an icicle. His long aquiline features, masked in colorless skin, were framed by long wispy hair the color of a raven's wing that matched his deep-set, soulful eyes.

There was an aspect to him that seemed impermanent as if he might dissolve into a plume of smoke, but the dual resonance of a quiet harnessed fury gave him a grave permanence tested by the eons and impassable by his enemies. He was dressed in a long black robe of raw silk, cinched at

his painfully narrow waist with by a wide belt of black leather, adorned with a silver buckle in the shape of the infinity figure-eight. He loosely held a large longbow of black wood and polished steel in one hand. Near the grip, beneath the sight, the large deep-sea fishing reel had been cleverly integrated into the bow so that the struck prey could be reeled back through the void to the ship. Along the curve of the upper and lower limbs of the bow, barely perceivable wisps of black flame danced, licking at the man's sleeve and fingers, causing the air about the bow to shimmer.

"I am Sariel. Welcome aboard my ship, the *Dragonette*." He gestured to the two men hovering nearby awaiting further instructions. As they stooped to lift Brenda from the ground Sariel continued, "As you may imagine, I have quite a few questions for you -- beginning with why exactly you're here. However, such questioning will wait until you have recovered."

Brenda watched in awe as the longbow suddenly morphed into a scythe-like sword in a massive curved sheath of black iron. Absently, in a motion obviously made countless times before, Sariel affixed the sheath to his belt to hang from his side. The black flames continued to escape, leaking upwards in an inquisitive, eager fashion as if seeking his touch again.

Sariel nodded to the men. His voice remained reserved and cold as he stared out into the darkness beyond the blue light of the lanterns, watching and waiting for something, "Take her to the infirmary and tend to her wounds. Alert me when she is capable of conversation."

As the realization of her removal from immediate danger sank in, Brenda exhaled and relaxed into the strong arms of the strange sailors, allowing herself finally to slip into merciful, quiet unconsciousness.

P

Sunlight filtered in through the mini blinds above the bruised particleboard headboard of the bed, dull yellow mid-afternoon light slicing dusty horizontal ribbons of reality through the dingy grays of the tiny apartment bedroom. Brenda turned her face into the pillow and sighed into sheets ripe with a week's worth of cigarette smoke, incense and sex.

If it had been anyone else she would have been revolted, but there was something strangely seductive about the filth, the unwashed odor oddly comforting just as she found the ripped black leather second-hand sofa and piles of discarded beer bottles amidst the stacks of musical equipment

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an escape. An escape from exactly what, she refused to allow herself to contemplate.

She only knew that when she returned to her “normal” life she found herself reaching for the prescription bottle of Klonopin just a few too many times than she thought was normal. This world, Steve’s world, was a chaos she needn’t attempt to control, organize or justify. It simply was. Between keeping up with her demanding Master’s degree studies, holding down a part-time job, maintaining “normal” appearances for her conservative family and tending to Marcus’s increasingly frequent nervous breakdowns she found herself needing the deliberate unfettered lack of structure, craving it even.

This was her exhale, her self-indulgent release of expectation that, for several months, had been her drug of choice every -- once in a while. As time passed, however, she found it harder and harder to separate the two worlds as her lust turned to genuine affection for the wild tattooed guitarist. Those around her grew wary of the changes in her once reliable, easygoing persona as she showed up late for work, missed deadlines on assignments and became increasingly more moody and distant in her dealings with her fiancé. The time when she would have to make a choice between Steve and Marcus loomed eminent on the horizon, but that was a decision she would put off for another day. Just one more day...

Steve’s back was to her, the sheet draped over his narrow hips. She turned her face out of the pillow, reached out and ran the tips of her fingers down the indentation of his spine and back up again to trace the black and white depiction of the spiral Milky Way galaxy tattooed on his right shoulder blade in such intense detail that she swore she could see it churn. Running her hand up the back of his neck she threaded her fingers through his long brown hair. Steve did not stir, his deep state of sleep punctuated by his soft rumbling snore. Brenda rolled over and fished her Blackberry out of the pile of clothes where it had fallen beside the bed the previous evening. Her pulse faltered as she read the first in a long string of hysterical text messages listed in between emails and voicemails yet to be heard. The initial message was from Beasley, Marcus’s neighbor and friend.

Brenda, we really need to find you!

Marcus is in critical condition at St. Mary’s Regional Hospital.

Hurry! He may not be here much longer...

She could not even form a coherent thought as she jumped out of the bed, scrambling to find her clothes, purse and car keys. Pulling on her jeans, she heard Steve slowly waking on the bed behind her.

“What’s going on? Where you going?” Steve groaned and reached for the clock on the bedside table. “Jesus! It’s 6:00 a.m.!”

Brenda found her blouse and pulled it on, not bothering to find her bra, which was no doubt tossed in some far-flung corner of the apartment, “Marcus is in the hospital. Critical condition. I have to go.” She choked on her last words as fear- infused tears spilled over her cheeks.

“What? What happened?” Steve asked, sounding suddenly slightly more awake.. “Never mind.” He said, getting out of bed and pulling on his jeans. “I’ll drive you.”

“No, no. You don’t have to. It wouldn’t be a good idea.” Brenda pulled on her sneakers and began rummaging frantically through her purse for her car keys, which she was already clutching in the hand that held her purse open. “Fuck! Where are my keys?” She screamed, suddenly hating the mess around her.

Steve grabbed her wrist, “I said I’d drive you”

“And I said no—” Brenda looked up at Steve’s touch and screamed.

In place of Steve’s sensuously handsome features Marcus’s destroyed face grinned down at her, half of his jaw and left cheekbone ripped away from the suicidal gunshot. The eye within the left socket was as red as blood, the pupil barely visible from the massive internal bleeding the wound had caused. A ragged exit wound hole in the side top of his skull revealed pulverized gray brain within, slick with red gore and flecked with tiny fragments of pale white bone and stray strands of dark brown hair that had sifted back into the wound. The chiseled tattooed physique was gone, replaced by Marcus’s walking corpse draped in a bloodstained pale blue hospital gown. Brenda tried desperately to pry herself free of Marcus’s iron grip, using her keys to dig into the back of his hand, but he did not even flinch as the metal raked through his skin down to the tendons and bone beneath.

“No? You don’t want to go to the hospital?” Marcus’s voice wheezed out of the exposed trachea, his swollen tongue moving against his teeth out of time with the words he somehow emitted.

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“No... no... no! Please, dear God, no!” Brenda cried, shaking uncontrollably with fear and revulsion as Marcus moved closer to her, pinning her against the wall. “I’m so sorry, so very sorry.”

“Sorry?” His rank breath smelled of puss and congealed blood mixed with the stale odor of cigarettes from the overflowing ashtray on the bedside table. Brenda gagged, choking on bile burning the back of her throat. He leaned in close to her face as if to kiss her, his tongue moving across his top lip like an octopus tentacle. “Your apology is NOT accepted,” he hissed.



Brenda awoke screaming, her body drenched in a fine, sour sweat that instantly chilled as waking reality congealed around her in the form of a small ship’s cabin of black wood and ambient blue lantern light from just outside the lead-paned window. There was no way to judge the progression of “time” in the void, but her fevered dreams had consumed her for what felt like an eternity while she had healed.

In and out of a hazy state of delirium she lingered while the strange men in crystal goggles came and went, wrapping her wounds in fresh gauze packed with pungent poultices and glowing fragments of what appeared to be the same crystal used in their protective lenses while others washed her body of the perspiration with a removed clinical tenderness. Though these men were obviously physically trained for a greater tactical purpose, it was apparent their skills in the healing arts were also greatly honed, leaving Brenda to wonder further just who they were and what purpose they served.

Tonight, however, the room was empty. Through the velveteen blue-black shadows the sound of footsteps traversing the length of the boat overlapped the creaking of twenty oars ceaselessly rowing through the nothingness below the ship. From within the room Brenda could imagine the boat commanding itself for not one solitary voice broke the solid routine of physical movement.

Brenda pulled the quilt aside and was shocked to realize she was naked beneath it. Where had her tattered gown gone? After nearly a decade in Hell such little details rarely stunned her, but she still found the fact that she had no recollection of its removal slightly unnerving. Leaning forward

she turned her leg out to investigate the arrow wound through her calf. With the exception of a small concave pink scar, the hole had closed.

Excellent work, she silently praised the ship's healers, *But, that begs the question, just how long have I been here?*

Reaching up she felt her shoulders where the harpy had pierced them with its claws. Again, the same smooth new scars were present where the puncture wounds had once existed.

Why would anyone want to heal me? She wondered suspiciously. She could not help but consider only the worst possibilities.

Across the tiny room, hanging from a hook on the wall beside a small simple table and narrow dressing mirror, Brenda spied a long gown of deep purple silk. She eyed it warily, unsure as to whether or not it was meant for her, but it would seem they had left her little choice but to don the garment for it was the only option, lest she emerge naked from her quarters. Shakily she crossed the room, using the bed as support until her weak legs found their bearing again with gravity, and lifted the dress from its hook, slipping it over her head. The silk was supple and ice cold against her still slightly feverish skin, the dress slightly too large at the waist and hips even when she cinched the medieval-style laced drawstrings that ran down each side.

As she pulled the coarse horsehair bristles of a wide polished silver brush through her damp, tangled hair she noticed, as if for the first time, though she had stared at it for hours on end, the scar of the inverted pentagram visible between her eyebrows. Slowly she set the brush back down on the table, lifting the same hand to timidly touch the thin lines of raised flesh the demonic midwife had left with her claw. The spot still ached when she pressed upon it as if she had frowned deeply in her sleep for too long. No matter what her intentions might ever be or how she worked to escape her unfortunate damnation, she had been branded as property of Belial and Hell.

Without a knock of formality, the click of the doorknob turning was followed by the sound of the narrow door opening with a soft hiss of wood over wood. One of the silent sailors stood aside to allow Sariel to enter the room, ducking down beneath the low doorway as he stepped forth from the blue lantern glow outside. Brenda had not noticed just how regally tall the strange commander of the ship was until now, the top of his head mere inches from the ceiling. His expression unreadable and reserved he nodded

to her. The black sword hung still at his hip, the ethereal wisps of black flame licking at his robe inquisitively.

“I see you are making a sure recovery,” Sariel observed, his voice dark and soft as the rolling of distant thunder.

“Slowly.” Brenda replied. “I am still quite weak.” She paused, suddenly excruciatingly conscious of the mark on her forehead and bowed her head so that curtains of her hair concealed her face in shadow. “I cannot express my gratitude enough for saving me. It was more generosity than I deserve.”

Sariel did not acknowledge her show of humility. “I see you have found the dress left for you.”

Brenda nodded, refusing to look up at Sariel. “Yes, thank you so much! It’s lovely. I did not see any other women aboard? Whom does this belong to?”

“No one in particular. A ship’s captain must always be prepared to make a lady comfortable,” Sariel replied.

Brenda looked up at him, meeting his overcast eyes in a moment of intense curiosity before looking away again. Her hand reflexively covered the mark on her forehead, rubbing it slightly as if feigning a headache. “Well, I am honored to be the first to wear it,” she mumbled in an attempt to simply keep the conversation going.

Sariel’s presence terrified her in a way she couldn’t quite define. It was not the visceral fear Belial inspired in her with thoughts of physical torment, but a far more disorienting deep disturbance as if there were secrets he knew about her that even she was unaware of. Somehow he held these in the palm of his hand, ready to crush them to dust without the slightest inclination of remorse. For all of the perfect stillness of his presence that mimicked the steady complete darkness of the void itself through which they traveled, the aura he emanated was possessed of an orchestral gale of carefully cultivated madness. It was the kind of psychosis that had flung out and over the edge of redemption only to circle back upon itself like a serpent consuming its own tail. It brought a razor edge clarity to perception more lethal than any outwardly wielded weapon of war.

“There is no use in concealing the mark. I saw it before I had even released my arrow towards you.” Sariel watched her carefully with a steady unblinking gaze for a moment before turning away towards the door again. “Follow me. I would suggest you wear the goggles provided for you, as well.”

Brenda watched as Sariel ducked beneath the doorway again, stepping out into the soft blue haze of the lanterns. She looked up at the hook where the gown had been hanging and noticed a pair of the same protective crystal eyewear worn by the sailors. Terrified to disobey any of Sariel's orders she quickly retrieved the accessory and slipped them over her eyes. Through the amethyst lenses the world was not stained a rosy lilac haze as Brenda had thought it might, but held a crystalline clarity that seemed to magnify the intensity of each and every detail around her exponentially. She blinked, adjusting her eyes to the new level of vision as she glanced about the room until she caught a glimpse of herself in the dressing mirror. The combination of the deep midnight purple medieval dress and elaborately crafted goggles created a bizarre illusion of royalty, as if she were somehow a queen upon his cosmic ship. However, she knew good and well that it was indeed an illusion and one she had best not be seduced by if she were to find her way onwards to rescue Angelee. Drawing a deep breath she slipped past the sailor standing attentively just outside the chamber and closed the door after her.

Nearly running to keep up with Sariel's long strides, Brenda caught up with the ship's commander. He glanced down at her briefly with another cold, unreadable expression before turning his attention back towards surveying the ship and the void beyond. Making their way to the prow of the ship, Sariel led them up a steep set of stairs to an outlook deck where a powerful sailor with short-clipped black hair and pale olive skin manned a colossal steering wheel. The sailor paid no mind to their approach, staring directly ahead with intense concentration. Brenda followed his line of view and gasped as she realized suddenly that, through the goggles, the definition of the void was now revealed to her where it had only contained infinite fathomless darkness before. Around her clusters of spinning glittering galaxies were born and died in a matter of minutes, each swirling and churning in a stunningly beautiful chaos of sparkling octopi arms. Nebulae exploded in psychedelic neon gas clouds while stars went super nova and collapsed inwards on themselves in vicious black holes like bubbles bursting on the surface of a boiling pot of water.

As she gazed out further, beyond the immediate microcosm of interstellar activity, Brenda realized that this was only one "container" of "space" abstractly and almost haphazardly, if it were not for the precariously precise means in which they coexisted, that was simultaneously stacked and overlaid upon an infinite number of other projections of universes.

Just when she began to sort through the layers like sheets of translucent vellum they would shift, blurring for a moment to reconstruct themselves in a different configuration. She staggered forward and grasped the railing in front of the ship's steering wheel, unable to breathe in her pure awe and vertigo.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sariel remarked as he approached to stand beside her, one hand resting loosely over the hilt of his scythe-like sword.

"Why...why couldn't I see this before? It was just darkness..." her voice trailed off.

Sariel tilted his head slightly to one side as if listening to something far off in the distance, the long, feathery strands of his midnight blue hair moving gently in an unfelt cosmic breeze. "Reality is simply too complex for most creatures to perceive. It is safer for them to exist in one plane or another, one world or another, instead of out here in the void where all is one and one is all."

"But those creatures that attacked me," Brenda asked, unable to tear her eyes away from the void. "Do they see this? Do they exist *here*?"

Sariel nodded. "In their own way they see a portion of this. Their job is to devour anything or anyone who falls into the void. Scavengers," he said with a mild disgust, the first emotion that had registered in his tone, thus far. "There are far worse creatures that lurk out here, creatures even a being such as yourself could not imagine."

Brenda turned to face Sariel, "Creature such as myself? Do you know what I am -- for I certainly do not. I know where I've been. I know where I am trying to go, but I most definitely do not understand -- what -- that makes me."

Sariel stared down at her, intrigued by her blunt honesty. "An unwilling participant, perhaps, but you have been a participant in the play."

"Play? Is that what you call it?" Brenda began to take offense, even though she knew she was more than likely treading within very treacherous territory.

"We are all participants in one play or another. You are part of that which is known as Hell. It may not have been the place you had desired to ultimately be, but it is where your path led and so it is has been your destiny, as represents the mark upon your forehead." Sariel stared out at the void beyond the ship, his eyes darting from one universe to another, scanning each galaxy for signs of distress.

Brenda instinctively reached up and covered the mark with her fingertips, turning her face away for a moment as she stared at Sariel out of the corner of her eyes nervously.

“Do not worry, my lady. You are not ‘evil’. I would not have bothered with you if I had believed that. However, I sense you are sadly beyond the point of redemption, but it is of your own resignation.” Sariel stated as if reading coordinates from an oceanic map.

Brenda was aghast, her heart faltering in its natural rhythm as she processed his words. Who was this man who dared to condemn her so? Her instinctual fear of him kept her from retorting again as she had so brazenly seconds before, for something told her that what Sariel spoke was an irrefutable truth she must eventually simply accept.

“What does that mean for me, then? I would do anything to escape Belial’s prison. I thought maybe... Maybe if I saved Angelee from Lucifer I might be given a second chance somewhere else?” She spoke out into the void itself, her questions indirectly directed at the universe itself and not Sariel in particular. Sadness weighed heavily upon her soul suddenly, a crushing weight of the improbability of her delusional quest to rescue her child and somehow escape Hell’s grasp.

Sariel should have simply left me to the harpies, she thought, reaching up to wipe away a tear before he could see her weakness.

“Belial? Lucifer?” Sariel’s tone changed suddenly, darkening with a bristling intensity that caused Brenda to take a step backwards. He turned to face her fully, his inspection of the void placed on hold to funnel his focus entirely upon the woman beside him. “Who is this Angelee you speak of?” His fingers instinctively twitched over the hilt of his sword, the flames arcing slightly higher, wrapping about his wrist as if they too were intrigued by the names Brenda mentioned.

Brenda swallowed hard, trying to formulate words beneath Sariel’s intense gaze. He stepped towards her, staring down into her eyes and the distinct sensation of the onion layers of her defenses, the ones she had cunningly subconsciously crafted over the past decade in Hell being peeled slowly away caused her body to begin shivering uncontrollably.

“She is my daughter,” Brenda managed through chattering teeth. “Belial is her father. She was abducted when she was an infant, years ago, by the creators of the new realm at the heart of Purgatory. Lucifer believes

she is the power that is sabotaging his attempts to invade Purgatory. If he finds her he will kill her. I can't let that happen. I have to save her."

Sariel straightened as he considered her words, his expression overcast as his fingers tapped the hilt of his sword as if telling it to be patient. "Interesting," he whispered to himself. One eyebrow rose suddenly and he looked down again at Brenda, narrowing his eyes. "Lucifer. He has left Hell in search of this child of yours?" He said with a strange warrior's bloodlust burning behind his eyes.

Brenda felt a spark of twisted hope ignite in her heart. "Yes. He left Belial in charge." Adrenaline began to race through her veins as she spoke the truth aloud to this dangerous dark ship's captain. She lowered her voice slightly, glancing over at the sailor steering the ship to see if he was listening, but the sailor appeared to pay them no mind. "He's taken the form of a lesser demon in order to infiltrate the new realm in the guise of one of their rebel recruits. Belial is his vessel of power now that he commands at a distance."

"Lucifer, where is he now?" Sariel asked.

Brenda shook her head, "I don't know. I'm not exactly sure how much time has passed. The suns never set in Hell."

Her voice trailed off as a hint of strangled premature sense of defeat entered her mind at the thought. There was no way for her to gauge how much time she had to try to save Angelee. She turned towards the railing of the ship, placing her hands on the cold black wood as she stared out into the spiraling vortex of overlapping interstellar dimensions. It all seemed simply too vast now for her to even attempt. Where, amongst all of these galaxies and planes would she even begin to search for Purgatory, let alone the new realm being born within it?

"Do not dismay, my lady. The suns never set in Heaven either." Sariel said -- a bizarre quip of surprisingly twisted joy.

Brenda looked up, whirling back to face Sariel with a mixture of awe and renewed fear. Heaven? This could not be an angel?

"Archangel, actually," Sariel said distractedly in response to her expression. "Yes...yes! Do not fear. I believe I would have heard by now if Lucifer had succeeded with his little plan. We have had our own issues with that annoying new realm." His voice trailed off again. "I haven't had the pleasure of a good sparing match of such a caliber in quite some time."

He mused. “Yes, yes.” He hissed at the sword. “I know. Me too, but be quiet for now.”

Brenda could see the massive wheels of his mind turning as he plotted and schemed. Her eyes darted to the sword before returning to his face again as she wondered just how mad this angel might be. She wanted to fall to her knees and plead with him, but instead she held fast and strong, standing before him with her fists clenched at her sides to keep from trembling as she awaited his next words.

“Do you truly believe you are up for this fight? A fight with the Devil himself?” Sariel grinned.

“If you can take me there, I believe that what I have experienced has prepared me well,” Brenda said, squaring her shoulders and trying to appear more substantial than she was.

“That is what they all say,” Sariel replied ominously. “But who am I to turn down a good war? Sometimes a personal vendetta is the most powerful weapon of all.” Turning towards the sailor behind them he boomed. “Let us escort the lady to the new realm.” Facing the void again his voice lowered to its former cool reserve, though a small, satisfied smirk tugged at one corner of his mouth, “Hold on.”

Brenda was wise enough to follow Sariel’s instructions.

CHAPTER 22

Marcus pulled himself into a tighter ball within a small cave he had found worn into the side of the sandstone bluff, focusing every ounce of his energy into concealing his presence from the universe. This was not his war, nor did he have any interest in sacrificing himself for any one side's cause. Far above, the sky exploded as fireballs of brilliant searing orange flame rained downed like meteors with deafening detonations as they collided with the porous stone. Beneath the ceaseless song of the fiery assault, the cheerfully psychotic yet antagonistic war cries of Haldane's small band made a parody of the mysterious attackers' attempts. Rapid secession gunfire overlaid the occasional rumbling bang of portable rocket launcher being detonated which was quickly followed by the high pitched delusional giggle of the twins celebrating as the missile struck its intended target. In the distance, Marcus could hear the unearthly screeches of a variety of massive horrific creatures, though he dared not reveal himself simply for the sake of garnering a peek.

Sandstone fragments rained down over Marcus as the earth around him quaked, coating his black poly fiber garments, hair and hands in a fine orange dust. He shut his eyes tight and retreated within himself, imagining the world around him buffered by a thick opaque protective barrier. If he had found a way out of the oubliettes into the King and Queen's realm, there had to be a way for him to reach through the fabric of Purgatory and escape. He pictured the safest, most innocuous realm he could think of, the physical plane. Though he knew that the Earthly realm was just as infested with demons as Hell itself, each on their personal mission to collect their quota of souls, he felt sure he could buy himself a little time there until he figured out his next move.

He had a sinking suspicion that the King and Queen would not take his sudden unannounced departure lightly, especially after they had been so "generous" as to show him their native homeland. Their wrath, though, was the least of Marcus's concern. Saving his own skin seemed like a far better use of his energy than any further investment in the aspirations of any other creature.

Through the shadows of his inner eye an image suddenly surfaced. Ancient rusting machines hunkered ominously against a towering metal wall of rectangular panes of broken glass. Frost clung to the oxidized iron, small icicles forming along the edges of pipes, clinging to bolts and gears that had ceased their work decades ago. Marcus was aware of his body as it shivered once in response to the perceived memory of the cold. Something dwelled there within the maze of petrified equipment, he was certain, a creature not so unlike him. Marcus twitched as his mind tasted the spoiled aura of the demon, his mind's eye traveling through the warped metal labyrinth in search of the creature in question. There had to be a reason he saw this place, out of the myriad locations he could have envisioned for a possible escape route into the physical plane. Why was he was instinctively drawn to a building he had no memory of that was currently inhabited by a hell spawn?

Projecting himself further into the vision, Marcus felt the concrete solidify beneath his feet just enough for him to stand and survey the scene from ground level. He knew he had not yet found a way to physically pierce the realm and draw himself through as he had done in the oubliettes for that had required a desperation he did not quite possess at the moment, despite the fact that a terrible battle waged on around him. The structure of the warehouse was semi-translucent like a holograph, one machine slightly visible through the carcass of another. He turned, surveying the building, peering through the layers of frostbitten metal until he spied the creature he had sensed. Marcus's blood ran cold as a strange strangled envy rose suddenly within him with an oily black desperation.

There, not ten yards from where he stood, his beloved chair hunkered like a broken troll, its rotten, ragged cushions even more dilapidated and disgusting than ever before. His greatest addiction in his mortal life, the possessed talisman of the Demon of Regret. Desiderium no longer sought use from the discarded remnant; it had served its purpose through the acquisition of Marcus. Its aura was still a potent dark vortex of self-indulgent sadomasochism; its fibers had been soaked in the blood and wretched inner dialogues of those who had fallen into its thrall over the years.

Marcus had not been the first, nor would he be the last, to take his life in that chair, but, for some reason, he felt a particular possessiveness, as if he were entitled to wield it next, following in Desiderium's footsteps. His

anger began to boil as he noticed the creature curled upon the seat, its eyes closed as if in sleep, though Marcus knew full well it was only waiting.

A passing human might have mistaken this creature for another wayward mortal soul. A wasted scrap of sickly pallor and secondhand rags, a symbol of a rebel movement long past that had been left behind, clinging weakly to the present. He was young yet in the dark rebirth, prey still to his own coil that had once wrapped tightly about his neck, dragging him down one ill-fated decision at a time. He had not yet been assigned a task or station, left to find his way and scabble from the other newly emerged demons from the boiling ocean like rabid junkyard dogs over a soup bone.

This had not been Marcus's own path for he had been chosen by Desiderium to be his replacement during his first hours returned to the mortal plane while the elder demon was on "vacation". Marcus had been one of the lucky ones, blessed with the ability to sidestep the horrific distillation process of being consumed by the Blind Worm and ripped asunder by the inconceivable terrors that lurked within the boiling tar, waiting for the day when he would be strong enough to claw his way forth to the shores. Though he, no doubt, found his own breaking point within the oubliette, he wondered at times what sort of demon he might have been if he had been subjected to the process nearly all the condemned faced. Would it have made him stronger or would he be as destitute as the demon he witnessed now?

He could not imagine the creature he observed making such a blackly valiant journey for it seemed too broken and weak to even lift its head. Indeed, this creature before Marcus seemed to have lost its ability to fight at all.

One bone-thin arm draped over his sunken cheekbone, the demon stirred slightly, twitching like a cat in the midst of an epic dream. Marcus knew it was aware of him. Marcus took a step forward and the demon twitched again, a spasm that shook his body into two facets, a solid body and a slightly juxtaposed translucent mimicry of his physical self. A tremor rippled through both images, a vibration of energy like glass transferring a wavelength of high-pitched sound to the point of shattering, until they froze again. The demon's physical self exhaled, a white plume of condensation freezing in the air before his pale thin lips, just visible beneath his overcast arm. The translucent semblance uncurled in midair, two feet above the floor, unfurling its long anorexic limbs to stand upright. Raising his head,

the demon met Marcus's gaze directly with eyes hollow and dark as a lost miner's grave.

"You came!" the demon said. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't."

Marcus narrowed his eyes, wondering what the demon was referring to. "Who are you? Why have you called me here?" He wanted to add, *What the hell are you doing with my chair?* But he refrained. It was obvious to him that this demon was savvy to his past obsession with the article of furniture. Someone or something had led the demon to the chair; for why else would it have relocated this particular piece to a warehouse where it then proceeded to reach out through the planes to Marcus.

"My name is Addai. I am a simple demon without status, yet. Certainly nothing as legendary as your own." Addai made a small, curt bow of respect, though the oily energy that rippled through his aura naturally added an element of mockery to his gesture.

"Whom do you work for?" Marcus asked, knowing all too well that any demon who did not hold an official title must certainly answer to one entity or another amongst the Legions.

"No one in particular," Addai shrugged, his boney shoulders moving beneath the frayed papery white cotton of his Seven Seconds T-shirt. "I suppose you could call me an 'errand boy' for the time being. On call to do the dirty work others don't. Yee-haw." He spat, unable to conceal his bitterness. He straightened suddenly as if realizing whom he now addressed, a certain degree of panic and fear darting across his dark eyes. He lifted his hands in defense, waving them slightly, "Not that I wouldn't do whatever *you* asked of me! You're a fucking rock star, man!"

Marcus held up his hand to quiet the fawning demon from embarrassing himself further. "That is not necessary." Distantly he was aware of the fighting surrounding his hiding place in Lower Purgatory reaching a deafening crescendo. He knew he had only moments before it would become too dangerous to linger between realms. "Just tell me what it is that you want. I cannot stay here much longer."

"Right, right." Addai composed himself and took advantage of the invite to be direct. "There are rumors that you have joined the uprising and found an escape from Hell. I want to pledge myself to the cause and hope you will consider me as a new recruit."

Marcus could not conceal his confusion. "I'm sorry, you must have heard incorrectly. I have 'joined' no uprising, nor am I in charge of the

recruitment for this realm. I still am not sure exactly how I ended up here to begin with..." His voice trailed off, preoccupied with monitoring the battle around him.

"But they have said that you hold the leaders of the uprising's ear in crucial matters. Certainly you could request they judge me for themselves? I want no part of Hell, Heaven or any other existing realm for that matter. Their reign is archaic, their ways of ruling our souls antiquated!" Addai pleaded emphatically. "I proved myself strong enough to pull myself out of the ocean and be reborn only to have them treat me like a grunt paper-pusher in some human army. I'm capable of more. I am stronger than that." Addai squared his shoulders, raising himself up to his full lanky height as his anger lent him renewed vigor. "I suffered enough in my human life to be a slave to someone else's regime all over again."

There was something altogether poignant about the passion with which Addai spoke. It reminded Marcus of the young activists he knew back in high school, so determined to change the world and convinced that their voice would be heard if they only shouted loud enough and sacrificed heavily enough. Back then, they were willing to lay down their lives for their beliefs in order to save the world and their fellow humankind, unaware that they would one day grow just as jaded as the rest of the adults around them.

Marcus took a step towards Addai, looking him up and down for a moment, scrutinizing his body language for any microscopic hint of deceit. A thought flickered through his mind that, even if the King and Queen held no use for this young demon, perhaps he himself might find a purpose for him as his own personal assistant. A sidekick, a minion of his own, so to speak. While Marcus himself had not yet found a realm that inspired such a passionate conviction to protect and serve, such emphatic determination in another might be what he needed to rally himself to some cause or another. Marcus was not unaware that regardless of whether or not he stayed within the new realm or figured out a way to seek refuge in another, he would need allies. He would need his own rebellion.

Marcus spoke slowly, making certain to not promise anything he was not ready and willing to deliver, even though this young upstart demon most likely held no true power to pursue him if he negated those commitments. While he wanted to accept Addai's pledge, he still could not be sure about the true intent behind the bluster or if it were all of Addai's doing. If he were an errand boy for the upper tier of Earth-wandering entities this

might possibly be only a task he had been assigned to by either Belial or even Lucifer himself.

“I understand your outrage and your discontent,” Marcus said. “As I have said, I do not possess the ability to bring you forth into the new realm, at least not that I am aware of. I will speak to the King and Queen on your behalf, if that is truly what you want and if they deem you worthy, they will most likely challenge you to find your own way into their realm. It is my understanding that this is their method of selection in building their army.” Marcus felt the earth quake near his physical body within Lower Purgatory and all went silent, signifying a possible end to the skirmish. “I have to go. Remain here as long as you can so that I know where to find you.”

Addai bowed again, more deeply this time. “Thank you!” When he rose again he added, “I promise you will not be disappointed in my service to you and your new world.”

“It is not *my* world. Keep that in mind. Nor will it ever be,” Marcus said and vanished as his consciousness retreated back into his physical self.

As if the blood flow through his body had ceased during his trance, nerve endings beneath his skin sparked and crawled with a painful electric current as his consciousness reconfigured itself within his solid shell. He uncurled his arms from about his shins where he squatted in the small, low cave, and raised his forehead from where he had been resting it on his knees. The first inhale of breath carried with it a fine sandstone dust that coated his throat. Coughing and wheezing, Marcus extricated himself unceremoniously, brushing the layer of gritty orange sediment from his hair, skin and black clothing, which now looked as if he had spent a year trekking through the Sahara desert. Wild crane hooting erupted from both sides of the ravine as the last rumbling wave of the final air strike dissipated like thunder, a maniacally joyous celebration of victory punctuated by a trilling war cry that sent shivers down Marcus’s spine.

He traced the sound up the steep warped sides of the pass and spied Argyle and Amos jumping up and down like crazed children, Amos holding the rocket launcher above his head while Argyle raced back and forth along the edge of the cliff pumping his fists in the air as he screamed. To the left Nin, Jack and Jordan embraced each other fervently, lifting one another off of the ground as they celebrated. Jack pulled Nin away and swept her into a deep, almost lurid kiss, bending her backwards over the edge of the cliff in a dangerously beautiful acrobatic motion.

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“Take that you fuckers!” Haldane screamed, racing past Nin and Jack, hurling his assault rifle forward through the air, its final clip empty as it crashed into the sandstone a few yards away, out of sight. “That’ll teach you angels to get this close to our home!” He turned, backing up a few yards out of Marcus’s range of sight before launching into a breakneck run towards the edge of the cliff where he leapt through the air, long, lithe limbs outstretched like a flying squirrel, towards the other side where he collided with Amos and Argyle, knocking them to the ground with a hyena giggle. “Nice shot, my brothers!”

Marcus marveled at the childlike psychosis of their celebration, so very different in manner than the cautious, hostile air he had sensed before. Here the warriors were in their element, high on the adrenaline of their apparent and momentary victory; embracing their lives and love for one another with an intoxicating abandon. They seemed to have forgotten about Marcus entirely. In the distance, back the way they had come from the village, Marcus could hear equal cries of angry victory over the softer sobs of the fearful and wounded. He turned and walked a few paces down the winding orange path to try to gain a better view of the village. He climbed up a series of steep ledges and he spied the maze of interconnected raised buildings.

For the most part the village still stood intact. However, two of the structures were ablaze, blown apart as if from a long-range missile impact. Tiny figures raced through the eerily illuminated maze of swinging wooden bridges like swarming ants, carrying buckets of water and other substances with which to extinguish the flames. A surreal, removed sense of urgency and sadness underscored the triumphant celebration of Haldane and his crew upon the cliffs behind Marcus. The night broke into painful shards of reality all too removed from one another, yet hopelessly intertwined. He could not help but wonder if the hope of this people’s ultimate survival was perhaps in part futile and delusional. No matter how great a lion’s heart their desire to exist, the forces at work against them were simply too great to hold at bay forever, though they had somehow done so for time immemorial.

Perhaps Haldane’s talk of an alliance with Hell was not the worst possible decision, if only they had a cosmic lawyer to review that contract before they signed their souls away. It was also obvious the angels would not be extending the same invite proposed by Vetis, as was evident in this most recent brutal attack. The cold hard reality was that their leaders had

forsaken them and thrown them to the wolves and without their protection, the people of Lower Purgatory would eventually become simply a mass casualty of the war between Heaven and Hell.

“Do you see now?” Haldane’s voice startled Marcus out of his contemplation as he appeared at Marcus’s side suddenly. He pointed at the village burning in the distance, though he seemed in no hurry to race to its aid. “This is what our lives have been like since the very beginning. Day and night groups of soldiers like mine patrol, constantly on watch, never truly resting except during the times of the great storms.” He looked up at the vast dome of night sky above where glittering stars so similar to those seen from Earth twinkled between thin racing streams of clouds.

He outstretched his arms as if offering up a prayer, “It is only during the storms that we have a little peace. We pray sometimes that a powerful storm will come and last until the end of time so that we could lie within the rain and smile again.” He lowered his arms as his jubilation seemed to ebb slightly, a grave weariness returning to his exotic features as the thought of the storms painfully pulled at the core of his being.

Marcus turned to Haldane, studying the side of his face as Haldane stared blankly at the efforts of his fellow Purgatorians to save their home. “Did they come to your aid during the fight just now?” Marcus felt a bit odd asking the question for he himself had not risen to the occasion as he should have.

Haldane did not meet Marcus’s gaze, continuing his reflection of the fires. His expression darkened in the shadows of night causing him to appear far older than his youth. “What do you think?”

The rhetorical question felt like a death knell resonating between them. The victorious commotion from the others behind them subsided, replaced with exhausted sighs as the five colorful warriors climbed down from the cliffs to join Marcus and Haldane. The collective restless energy Marcus had sensed in the group earlier that evening had dissipated. They leaned against one another as they too watched as finally one of the two large fires died down in a haze of dark gray smoke against the blue-black shadows of night. Upon the horizon dawn began to silently emerge, slyly seeping a cold glow of rose upwards into the majestic canopy of stars.

“They come now.” Haldane pointed at two tall, beautiful figures striding forth across the sandstone bluffs towards them. With a disgusted scowl he turned back towards his friends, “Time to make our exit.”

“Where are you going?” Marcus said with surprise.

Haldane paused and looked back at Marcus. “Whatever they have to say is only going to make us feel more alone in this war. We certainly don’t need their smug false praise to remind us of our success here today. This was only one of the thousands of victories we’ve had, but it is also one of the thousands of battles we’ve fought and will, no doubt, fight in the future.” He turned and began to follow the others into the sculptural organic shadows of the ravine. “Beware, Marcus, who you ally yourself with,” he shouted over his shoulder.

Marcus watched as the troupe faded into the lingering predawn darkness. A gnawing uncertainty pinned him like a butterfly with silver stakes of circumstance. He closed his eyes and drew a deep ragged breath as he tried to sort through the tangle of barbed information that had been dropped into his lap. Slamming his head against the sandstone wall beside him seemed like a less painful option. He rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes and squatted down.

“Marcus!” The Queen’s voice was all too cheerful as she bounded towards him like a gazelle. “Was that not brilliant?” She beamed as leapt up to the ledge where he was perched like gargoyle in black latex. “What a magnificent battle! How our people threw themselves into it -- so incredibly brave!”

Marcus looked up at her through the bars of his splayed fingers over his face, but said nothing, suddenly ashamed to even be associated with such an oblivious creature.

The Queen turned towards her King as he arrived at a much more leisurely pace, his face etched with a bold smile of pride. “We have given birth to some beautiful noble warriors, haven’t we, my love?” she chirped.

“Indeed!” replied the King as he stood beneath the ledge staring up at his bride with his fists firmly positioned on his hips. He nodded his agreement, “We have done well. They are survivors through and through. I feel more confident than ever that we made the right decision to make them to stand on their own. They are a formidable force to be reckoned with.” He laughed aloud. “Truly stunning the way those two with the rocket launcher took down that chariot of angels!”

“Did you see it?” the Queen turned back to Marcus. “Tell me you saw it!”

“No, I didn’t.” Marcus grumbled, his face still buried in his hands.

“What do you mean? How could you not? You were here, with those brave warriors!” She looked down the ravine in both directions, “Where are they? We must congratulate them on their success! They deserve boundless laurels of recognition!”

“They...are not interested.” The words felt strangled in Marcus’s throat as he suffered to select the appropriate ones.

“Not interested?” the King scoffed, but then settled into a new tone, “Hmm. Well, they are humble as well as noble, then. Even more admirable a quality.” He nodded again his approval.

“Why won’t you let them join you, then?” Marcus could not repress his directness any longer.

The jovial air of self-congratulations between the King and Queen dissipated instantly as if a cold wind had blown through the ravine. Against the backdrop of the rosy glow of the approaching dawn, their expressions darkened with suspicious irritation.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked the Queen.

Marcus lowered his hands and stared up at her. “If they are such beautiful and noble warriors, why won’t you bring them into the new realm? Why leave them here to fight this insufferable war for another eon? What do they have to do to prove that they are worthy?”

The King and Queen exchanged pensive glances. “It is not about whether or not they are worthy. They haven’t tried, nor have they asked.”

Marcus rose to his feet. “They shouldn’t have to ask. I think you know full and well that their days are numbered if you leave them here. It is only a matter of time before the war between Hell and Heaven over Purgatory’s real estate becomes too great for them to stave off. Yes, they’re amazing warriors, but between God and the Devil they are ants and you know it.”

The King leapt up onto the ledge and walked towards Marcus, stopping only a couple of feet away, “Who, exactly, have you been speaking with? This does not sound at all like you.”

“It doesn’t? Well, I suppose that is because, up until now, I really haven’t said much at all, have I?” Marcus retorted. “Answer my question. Instead of recruiting from the other planes, why haven’t you looked within your own people to build the new realm?”

“It is a slow process,” the King said, watching Marcus’s every slight expression intensely. “The new realm is not stable enough to bear the

weight of so many yet. We need those that possess extraordinary abilities to perceive beyond the immediate, entities that have the innate ability to tap into the power of the universe itself and manipulate it, draw upon it in order to help us finish the construction of the plane. Creatures such as yourself. You possessed the ability to bend time and space between the deepest reaches of Hell itself in order to escape into our world. For all of their valiant survival skills our people have not yet evolved to that point. Perhaps there are a few among them on the verge, but until that time we cannot risk transporting any of them with us. They must find their own way to the new world, just as they have found their own way through this world.”

Marcus could not help but feel that the King’s words were a warning. They might treat him as if they were grooming him for a position of great power, but apparently it was only if he were willing to submit to every aspect of their vision. They were not looking for a creature to challenge them and force them to contemplate the effects of their actions on others. They wanted a yes-man, a sycophant to praise them and fulfill their faulty sense of superiority in their self-made exclusivity. A sense of being completely outnumbered and isolated crept in like poisonous vines.

Had his escape to the new world been entirely of his own doing? Had he truly manifested the portal from oubliettes to the new plane or was it ultimately the King and Queen’s doing? The idea that he alone possessed such a power did little to console him at a time when he was beginning to feel more and more like a prisoner in the presence of these new world rulers.

An image of Addai flashed through his mind suddenly. The young demon had managed to reach out beyond the Earthly plane and find Marcus deep within Lower Purgatory, an ability that bespoke of far greater powers to ascend to if guided properly. While he did not like the idea of turning over another possible recruit to the King and Queen, Addai was more akin to Marcus himself than any of the other creatures he had encountered, thus far, and, as a fellow demon, might possibly make for an excellent ally during his time within the new realm. It would give Marcus the sensation of not being entirely alone amidst this vortex of clashing titans and, in the end, if he needed to sacrifice another demon in order to find a way to escape, he certainly had no qualms about that.

Marcus dropped his gaze to the ground as he wrestled with the decision to mention Addai to the King and Queen. After several tense moments of

silence he spoke, "I think I know of one who might soon possess such an ability. Another demon who claims he wants to join forces with you."

The King's demeanor changed, relaxing slightly as Marcus diverted the subject slightly. Arching one perfectly sculpted eyebrow skeptically, he folded his arms over his chest. "Abilities as you have? How did you come across him?"

"Possibly," Marcus replied. "His name is Addai. He seems very young, but he managed to open a psychic link between the physical plane and here, while the battle was in full swing. His passion seemed genuine, from what I could tell in the brief encounter. If shown the beginning of the path, I have a sneaking suspicion he could break through the rest of the way by himself."

"It is Angelee and John's responsibility to acquire new recruits. If this Addai possesses the power you believe he does and the desire to join us, they will sense him in their own time. You needn't concern yourself with such matters. There are far more important tasks for you to focus on," the King replied.

"Now, now. He's only trying to help," the Queen rebutted the King's admonishment. "We should be thankful such an astute individual has joined us." She approached, placing a hand on her lover's shoulder as she met Marcus's gaze, "What are you asking of us?"

It was time to take a step back into the façade of submission the King and Queen desired in their recruits. Sharp-tongued accusations would get him nowhere. "Permission to open an invitation for him to join us."

The King and Queen exchanged concerned glances.

"I would need Angelee and John's assistance, of course, to guide him to the right portal, as they did with me, so it would not be completely unsupervised, if that is your concern." Marcus watched their expressions as they silently weighed his request.

The Queen reached out and took Marcus by the shoulders, staring down into his eyes as if he were a knight about to embark upon a lonely quest. "Very well. If you truly believe he will be an asset to our new world, so be it. Remember, though, he must make the journey himself."

Marcus nodded though inside he was less convinced of his own decision and wondered if Angelee and John would even consent to assisting him. Something told him that they were just as lonely as Marcus. The idea of an

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addition to the cast of the new plane might be wholly welcome. He could only pray it was an addition that he didn't soon regret.

CHAPTER 23

Frost had formed upon his pale lips before the image of Marcus's psychic self had vanished from the warehouse. Addai smiled as he closed his eyes and listened to the whistling breeze of his departure, a mere ripple of energy that teased Addai's senses like a single strand of silken spider web drifting across them. Marcus had taken great care to cover his tracks, to disguise his auric footprints across time and space, but it had not been enough to thwart the keen senses of a seasoned hunter like Addai. Though he may have distanced himself from the black diamond mine of his powers, there were some skills no trauma could permanently eradicate from one's soul. He opened his mind allowing a barely perceptible sliver of his consciousness to grab hold of the trailing end of Marcus's aura. Threading his subconscious fingers about the strand he felt the vibrations opening up like a roaring hot rod on a lost stretch of American highway. Up and out of the physical plane, though the shifting gallery of hand-planed doors gnarled and warped from the shimmering sharp-edged vortex of time spinning infinitely upon itself.

The doors blurred and snapped back and forth, at once spreading out into the cosmos like lost soldiers' tombstones, each one shade darker than night, and overlapping to form strangely dissimilar planes that were one and the same. This was the dividing facet of the in-between, neither reality, nor unreality, a place of indistinguishable indeterminate impermanence and reckoning where one could find the key to the universe or lose their souls forever to the void. Few besides Lucifer, God and the certain of the ancient gods were privy to the physical manifestation of the portal between realms.

As substantial as it may appear at first glance, the portal was merely a guise, like a film shown upon a sheaf of silk. It billowed and at times was translucent enough to reveal what lay beyond when glimpsed in the right light, on the far side of the void where the true constructs of realities existed. Addai knew that even Marcus, with all of his legendary abilities, some tapped and others yet to be explored, had not seen this vision of doorways during his visitation, nor had Marcus thought that a simple snail's trail of essence could linger between worlds.

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Addai's smug grin stretched further. The demon Marcus thought Addai to be could never guess such a thing, but Addai could see perfectly the path Marcus's aura had slithered down as the diaphanous thread of his lifeline trailed through one of the doors far to the right, then to the center before snapping violently off to the left again. Addai recognized the energy imprint of the gateway instantly as Purgatory.

Interesting... Addai thought to himself as he wondered just what particular piece of business Marcus might have within the realm. He was tempted to follow Marcus into Purgatory to see just who or what might be accompanying his journey. However, he decided it was better suited to his ultimate mission to not waste valuable energy and time chasing him. Addai knew that Marcus would eventually return to the new plane of the uprising. There had been a strange resignation in Marcus's voice, a tension that bespoke of forced cooperation. Even through his instinctual guard of suspicion towards Addai himself, he had radiated an anxious discontent like a hostage managing to whisper a message to the outside world while his captors were preoccupied. Purgatory would be the ultimate reward for Hell to reap, but only if the new plane were infiltrated and destroyed. Addai could wait.

Reaching deep within himself he clawed free a small part of his essence like separating pumpkin pulp from its meat. It twitched and jerked like a wooden puppet as he forced it upwards from his core, molding it like cumulus clay between the palms of his mind until it emerged from his throat to slither across his tongue, cold and sour and wet.

For a moment he savored the bitter taste of the cluster of *espíritu*, bidding it farewell and strangely mourning its separation from his being, before exhaling the vaporous matter. It lingered before his face, fluxing and twitching as if it had absorbed the spasms that had momentarily wracked Addai's body during the separation. Drawing a deep breath, Addai propelled the *espíritu* forward toward the doorway to Purgatory with a single strong breath heavy with icy condensation.

Like an inchworm, the matter crawled forth, wrapping itself about the glistening trail left behind by Marcus's lifeline until it disappeared through the doorway, compelled open by Addai's will. Once it had vanished beyond sight, Addai released his hold. The portal slammed shut with a reverberating explosion of vibrations that were felt but not heard as the void beyond absorbed whatever sound might have been generated by the force. Addai shivered, reaching up to idly scratch his stomach where it itched

deep within in the place where the aspect of himself had been excavated. It would follow the trail with a bloodhound precision back to Marcus where it would attach itself to his aura as a psychic tracking device, allowing Addai to perceive exactly where Marcus was at all times. To Addai it seemed such an easy task. The Legions should have been able to conceive of it years ago.

He shook his head, *This is why I'm king, I suppose? I should just slaughter all of them and start over. Worthless demons.* Suddenly realizing just how careless he was being with his thoughts, he quickly relined the layers of his defenses with lead to keep out stray streams of consciousness. *Careful, Addai. Careful...*

Slowly he turned on his heel, surveying the interior of the warehouse as he listened to the rumbling of eighteen-wheelers tearing down the dingy pockmarked interstate off to the east. Something was watching him. His eyes darted over the exposed metal support beams and air ducts that zigzagged from one end of the vast industrial tomb to the other a few feet below the roof. He was certain he would see a creature of prey lurking amongst the shadows. The room was empty, though, save for the nest of bats roosting within the eaves and litters of rats and mice darting between the dormant machines, their tiny nails whispering over the filthy concrete.

Addai's senses bristled with alarm, though he felt no malicious intent, but only intense curiosity in the entity's observation. He wanted to reach out to Belial to draw upon the reserve of his full power, but he did not dare risk this mysterious creature glimpsing his true identity. Already the possibility that it had gleaned too much from his last unmasked thought and expiration of *espíritu* existed.

Crossing the room, he stepped up into the seat of the chair and squatted down, perching upon the edge of the cushion like a vulture on a street lamp. He closed his eyes and listened to the pulse of the universe, sifting through the various layers of existence from conscious physical to the far reaches of the abstract untapped psyche. The sensation was coarse against his senses, its rudimentary crudeness felt like a sheet of fine sandpaper were being slowly drug across his skin harder and harder with each pass. For all of its brutality, Hell was far more evolved than this Neanderthal world of simple souls and he found himself resenting even more the fact that he had been forced to take such extreme measures.

Blood will flow when I return and demons will be thrown into the Abyss for Abbadon to break. Addai swore silently to himself.

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From the encapsulated microcosm of the city itself Addai progressed through the entirety of the plane, scanning through auras until he was satisfied that the consciousness that watched him now was not within this plane. However, the nature of the plane in which it resided was obscured; when Addai attempted to pinpoint the location it appeared behind his mind's eye like a bank of dense, low fog concealing every inherent characteristic about the realm as if it did not exist at all. It infuriated him, for no corner of existence had ever dared to thwart his inspection so brazenly.

"Won't you show yourself?" Addai whispered aloud with a facsimile of innocently suspicious curiosity. "You're part of the uprising, aren't you?"

He was answered by silence, though he knew the creature was listening for he sensed a slight flux in the vibration of its energy pattern, a hesitation as it realized its observation had been acknowledged.

"You're listening. I know you are. Then you perhaps heard my plea to Marcus?" He bowed his head as if in prayer, opening his eyes to stare blindly at the scarred oily concrete beneath the chair. "Show me the way to your world. I am ready to join you."

Your powers are remarkable. When the voice finally came, it was in the form of a girl child, shimmering with crisp brook clarity through space and time. Even more so, maybe, than Marcus himself. You were able to trace him to Purgatory which is a feat in itself. He was right though. It is not his place to let you in nor does he know how. I do though.

Addai's head snapped up at this bait of opportunity. A long moment of silence resonated after the girl's final words. Was this creature playing a game with him, tempting him so?

"What must I do then to earn your favor?" Addai whispered up into the rafters, his breath white against the rust and battered blackened steel.

The awareness of your presence is my favor. You already know the way between worlds. Now it is up to you to figure out what door leads to ours. The girl responded with a hint of childish arrogance mixed with a weary jadedness unbefitting the youth of her voice.

So, there is a door after all? Addai replied, attempting to pull the tiniest bit more information from the girl before she vanished. The impression of a wandering restlessness permeated her contact with him now, as if a prominent distraction somewhere within her own realm drew her now, causing her consciousness to do the equivalent of fidgeting with her fork at the dinner table.

There is always a door. A door that is a door that is not a door. In one. Behind another. Follow your intuition as Marcus did. I must go before we are discovered.

The silence was deafening as the child severed her communication and withdrew, slamming shut her defenses and the gate to the new plane. Addai winced as the vibrations ripped through his mind, sharp and sarcastically cold like a hard slap across his face.

Well, doesn't someone think they're clever? he snapped to himself. *A riddle? Really? Little does she know I invented those damned things.* He scoffed, punctuated with a snort. *Pretentious little...*

He stopped himself, shaking off the initial burst of annoyance as he reminded himself of his supposed disguise of humility before these creatures and their world. Until his feet were firmly planted within the fabric of their plane and his presence was irrevocably established he could not afford to jeopardize his new alliance through any slight diplomatic mishap. There was also the constant threat that an unsavory angelic entity might catch wind of his presence while he lingered in the physical plane. In the taking of this weaker form he had placed himself within a precariously vulnerable position. The sooner he departed the physical plane the better and that time, he realized, was upon him. Adrenaline raced through him; he knew he was only moments away from accessing the plane his armies of demons had repeatedly failed to breach countless times before. Perhaps it was this new form he wielded, but the simpler emotions he had thought permanently expunged from his being were accessible once again with a maddening ease, readily available suddenly at the merest inclination towards their own peculiar weaknesses. The excitement that now coursed through Addai was intoxicating, stemming from a bloodthirsty passion for conquest he had long forgotten, last experienced in his great war against Heaven. Addai looked down at his hands, watching them trembling.

This is not good, he thought. *I cannot succumb to such weakness. Not when I am so close...* His voice trailed off, echoing within his own mind over the pounding of his pulse in his ears, another disturbing physical quality he had not experienced in eons. Curling his fingers into fists he squeezed them until his rough blackened nails drew dark blue blood from his palms.

Steady now. Steady. He cooed, grounding himself in the small, sharp, self-inflicted pain. *Do not let flesh, even demonic flesh, be your downfall now.* Closing his eyes he summoned forth the veil. As the infinite array of

doors raced forward out of the pitch in their dizzying inarticulate equation of possible configurations, Addai listened for a moment for the piece of himself now attached to Marcus's aura. He still remained, for the time being, in Purgatory.

Perfect, thought Addai. Wouldn't it be amusing if I'm waiting there in the new plane for him when he returns? Ah, the look upon his face will be priceless.

Before him the blinding chaotic movement of the doorways were barely perceptible against the supple velvety darkness that rippled save for their individual imperfections that emanated a soft green phosphorescence. Through the torrential maze Addai could hear the song of each portal resonating like a forest coming alive in the early morning light. He tilted his head to the side and listened intently as the portals flashed past him in a dizzying dance of light-years. Peeling back the layers of the discordant symphony, one intricately structured and strangely tuned melody at a time, Addai easily recognized the prominent planes of Heaven and Hell. Their songs were nearly deafening as they were discovered, roaring past his senses like a freight train of pure power.

The lesser of the established and acknowledged planes carried with them their own emphatic forces, each poignantly prepared with the sap of their individual histories and the plight of those souls confined to each. A trace residue like raw bee pollen and molasses clung to Addai's psyche as these planes' portals passed, manifesting and then vanishing in the blink of an eye, simultaneously bitter and sweet.

Perhaps once Purgatory was secured he would move on to that frivolous waste of space Limbo. He had never understood Limbo's purpose, but it would be a fine addition to Hell. The physical plane he would leave to use for his own idle amusement. Aside from being the perfect training ground for newly emerged demons, mortal beings possessed a certain haphazard charm that stemmed from the unfortunate commingling of intelligence and idiocy. Their most carefully planned movements had an awkward irrelevancy Addai found soothing. Though there was little in the physical world he could not predict or foresee, every once in a long while, humans could manage to surprise even *him*. He took special note of those entities and reserved a place amongst his kingdom for them like a treasured addition to an exotic collection of ephemerata. One such soul had been Marcus Glenfield.

Addai watched the doors shuffling themselves like an illusionist's marked deck, waiting for a particular clever alignment to occur. Each slight nuance of movement birthed a quantum equation juxtaposing time, space and matter while answering its own question posed of similarity and dissimilarity, interdependence and independence.

It was an the abstract definition of reality applied to that particular corner of one universe or another parallel, perpendicular or in opposition to both. In his full state as Lucifer he could have slowed the process, frozen snapshots of their transitory equilibrium to carefully pinpoint the portal the "clever" girl had alluded to. However, as Addai he could only draw upon his ancient reserve of time-honed patience to wait.

Time passed within the mortal plane, evening crawling with broken disheveled insolence towards the witching hour, while Addai stood before the chair in the center of the warehouse transfixed and frozen as if carved of stone. For hours he had watched the veil filled with the certainty that the portal was within close proximity, just barely beyond perception. He could have stood there until the end of time, watching the universe calculate and recalculate portals, but it would seem it was indeed Addai's lucky day for suddenly he caught sight of exactly what he had been searching for. It was such an obvious –but rare -- alignment, the physical plane, Purgatory and Limbo briefly overlapping one another. Through the stacked translucent gnarled black doors Addai glimpsed a fourth door unlike any of the infinite others he had witnessed.

Though as obscenely dark as the others, it shimmered with a bruised purple opalescence that gave it a strangely hallucinogenic quality. Instinctively Addai knew this was the portal to the new plane. Without hesitation he broke from his trance and hurtled his identity towards the portal, breaking apart his physical shell atom by atom to become a pure insubstantial liquid essence that could move between the boundary of the physical plane and the veil without a complete annihilation. As he threw himself blindly through the transformation scalding agony passed over him, through him, as if his body had been suddenly submerged in a vat of hydrochloric acid.

A howl escaped Addai's lips, a wail that was instantly absorbed by the vacuum of the void where it caused the veil to ripple with a renewed intensity for a moment as if rustled by a night breeze. Within his mind he held tight to the image of the door, refusing to allow it to disappear from sight even as it zigzagged away, causing him to chase it like a swallow

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following a beetle, until at last he found himself close enough to reach out and grasp hold of its edges. With a furious, soundless cry of determination Addai wrapped the “fingers” of his perception about two sides of the portal and ripped it backwards as if to remove it from whatever cosmic hinges it was attached to. The door creaked and groaned momentarily before exploding in a blinding, all-encompassing flash of white-gold light, knocking Addai backwards through the fabric of time and space before an obliterating darkness crashed down upon him.

Addai refused to consider he had failed, but the silence that followed was simply too devastatingly complete to signify anything else. Stunned and seemingly paralyzed Addai waited. Gradually a distant ringing emerged from the nothingness, growing in intensity until he realized it was originating not from within the darkness, but in the caverns of his own ears. The rich deep scent of earth and sharp sweet perfume of new grass found its way through his senses, anchoring him and drawing his mind back into his physical form until feeling began to return to his extremities, one finger and toe at a time. His body ached as if it had been beaten with a metal pipe. It was a stifling pain the likes of which he had not experienced in eons and he wondered if perhaps the demonic form he had created had not entirely survived the journey from the physical plane to...wherever it was he lay, facedown. Shakily he rolled over onto his back with a grunt and slowly forced himself to open his eyes. With a gasp he flung his arm over his eyes as the light from the cloudless pale blue sky overwhelmed him. He could sense two auras hovering nearby.

“I’m not sure what to make of that entrance, do you?” A deep rumbling man’s voice asked in an attempted whisper.

“I don’t know,” a young girl replied to the man. It was the same voice that had reached out to him in the warehouse. “It was definitely different from Marcus’s entrance. Much... more... violent.” There was a tremor of subtle fear buried beneath her observation.

“You should have asked me before you invited him to try to join us,” the man gently admonished the child. “These kinds of recruitment decisions need to be made by the both of us or at least run by the King and Queen, Angelee. They need to know who you’re letting into the plane.”

“You were busy building the stream!” the girl snapped with irritation. “You didn’t hear his conversation with Marcus or his request to join us. Besides, if he couldn’t access the plane he wouldn’t have been able to.”

“No, I didn’t. That’s the issue,” the man said, his sigh becoming a deep rumbling growl in the back of his throat. “But he’s here now. Just because he can access it doesn’t mean he should have been shown the way.” The man’s irritation was beginning to evolve into true fatherly anger.

Addai cleared his throat. “I hate to interrupt, but where is ‘here’?” He asked of the strangers from beneath the shadow cast by his thin, pale arm, mustering the energy to move his other limbs.

“Welcome to Missouri,” the girl welcomed him, if a bit uncertainly.

Addai could not repress a chuckle. “Behold, here I am, send me. I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thy honor,” he replied as he sat up in the grass.

His reciting of his own supposed words from the mortal *Book of Moses* was met with a stunned silence. He looked up to meet the gazes of a small, thin girl with long blond hair, dressed in a black T-shirt, pink and green athletic shorts and matching hot pink high-top Converse high-tops standing beside a great bear of a bearded man with one massive emerald green claw. They stood silent and still within an endless rolling field of wheatgrass that gently waved about their waists. It was apparent that no one had ever responded to her welcome statement in such a way.

“I always found it interesting that the Mormons put the Garden of Eden in Missouri,” Addai chuckled again under his breath as he winked at the girl. “Don’t you? They were not even close by a mile.”



Marcus knew something was amiss the moment they tumbled into the new plane. Well, at least he tumbled, falling head over heel into the grass to roll down the steep curving shelf of grasslands from the tip of oblivion. As he slid to a stop on his back nearly a hundred feet from where he had entered the plane, digging his heels into the supple rich earth that now seemed too pliable to retain life after his brief time in a far more ancient realm, he wondered if he would ever get used to being flung like a penny on a rubber band through the cosmos. Faintly he was aware of the King and Queen standing far above him on the ridge of the bowl, holding a personal discussion in muted tones.

Splayed out unceremoniously like a truck stop Jesus amongst the weeds he stared up into the sky, suddenly resenting its perfect harmony of pale-blue-to-wispy-cloud ratio. The fingers of his left hand instinctively squeezed tight to ensure Angelee's giraffe had made the journey intact. The feel of the synthetic fur, now matted and dulled by the torrential Purgatorial rains and swamp mud, transmitted a strange ebb of reassurance like a softly chanted mantra.

With a heaving huff he pulled himself out of his prone position and threw his arms on his knees as he stared out at the expansive bowl of the new plane. His body felt as if he had gone three rounds in a dingy Brooklyn boxing ring. His intellect and perception were distorted with a low-grade white noise as his nerve endings fizzed and popped with exhaustion. He missed suddenly the first day he had returned to Earth, a newborn demon with a purpose and a mission. In those first twenty-four hours he had felt invincible and perfect, doused with a calm he had never known in his short two and half decades in the mortal world. He recounted with crystal clarity the moment he had opened his eyes in the deserted park, the sensation of the rotten wood bench beneath his legs, the soft sweet rustling of cottonwood leaves as they rustled high above, the chilly autumn wind slowly tugging them one by one from their limbs to drift to the ground. That world had been *real*. Riddled with imperfections like wormholes in petrified driftwood, it was worn and weathered, but honest. Though the sad, short-lived souls that dominated the plane might whittle away their lives with dismissive gestures, dishonest acts and deviant wishes, they were ultimately, unapologetically themselves.

No matter how uneventful, their lives were still meaningful in the greater scope of existence, moving their history and their species along, whether to a destiny of doom or greatness, it did not matter in the end. Each life had left its impression in the soil and cement, each breath, each heartbeat, each scream of joy or anguish uttered giving the realm credibility.

Marcus stared out at the bowed uniform field of undulating wheatgrass before him. The air was sweet and damp, rich with an equally uniform sensory input of what a blade of grass *should* smell like, what a patch of earth *should* feel like. Though he knew a group of creatures of seemingly substantial flesh and blood created this plane, he could not help but compare their work to a computer simulation. No matter how imperfect it was designed to appear, at some point there was always repetition in the pattern, if you looked close enough at the detail.

Marcus reached down and plucked a long strand of grass from the earth near his boot and placed it between his teeth. Idly he pursed his lips against the blade as he ground it between his teeth to release its taste. Nothing. The blade of “grass” felt real enough between his lips, crunching with a substantial organic complexity between his molars. However, when its fibers were destroyed, Marcus was met with only the coppery fleshy taste of his own mouth and not the pungent, bittersweet perfume of fresh plant life.

Facsimile. The word spun across Marcus’s mind like a dislodged dandelion seed. He shivered as he listened to the sound of two pairs of carefully orchestrated footsteps approach. The King and Queen paused to either side of Marcus, a few paces behind him like sentinels scanning the horizon. Marcus shrank within himself, repressing the urge to bolt headlong across the field towards the pitifully tiny pockmarks of billowing tents deep down within the pit of the bowl even though he knew it was only a fragile, false symbol of safety. He dropped the giraffe suddenly into the grass between his knees as he reached up to grasp handfuls of hair just above each ear, tugging on them until it became painful before sliding his fingers down to pull on his earlobes until he thought they might rip from the adjoining cartilage. It was a motion he had made many times during his mortal youth when his parents had screamed at one another on the far side of the thin plaster walls of their apartment, one that brought him a strange focus amidst a swirling painful chaos.

“They’ve let someone in,” the Queen’s tone was dangerously dark, genuinely displeased.

“We did place Angelee and John in charge of such recruitments. They’re only doing their job and, so far, they’ve done their job quite well.” While the King consoled his lover there was still a tension to his voice that did not escape Marcus’s heightened awareness. The Queen did not answer.

Marcus remained tucked into a tight ball between the two entities. He kept tugging on his earlobes as he tried to block out the raging torrent of their auras that threatened to drown out his ability to perceive beyond the immediate. The muscles between his shoulder blades tensed and twitched at the realization of the stagnation of his own sensory and psychic abilities since he had arrived in the new plane. He had been so enamored by the limitless possibility of the world being created from pure will and desire that he had turned a blind eye towards its impermanence and as a consequence began to ignore perhaps his strongest characteristic, his gut instinct. Now,

however, it returned to him like the roar of an angrily breaking surf. He knew without even reaching out to scan the plane for signs of the new aura just who had taken up residence there. Despite his apparent humble plea to Marcus, Addai had impatiently and persistently found another way. Marcus was at once impressed and deeply disturbed. Just who or what was this creature whose powers had been significant enough to lure Angelee and John into trusting him so quickly?

Marcus stood, scooping up Angelee's giraffe, and began to run down the hillside. The King and Queen did not call after him, but quickly followed suit in silence, their long powerful strides rapidly overtaking Marcus's determined race across the plains of undulating grass. The trio of figures skirted the edge of the tent encampment. The steady low breeze rippled over the colorful canvas walls and peaked roofs causing them to appear to breathe from time to time as their awnings snapped and chattered with one another conspiratorially. While he had been led amidst those structures for sanctuary, he now regarded them suspiciously as the sensation that they were empty of any true life force chilled him.

The images of the acrobatic performers he had glimpsed suddenly resonated of pure holographic, hallucinogenic dream dust, a shared illusion no more substantial than a poster reproduction of a master's painting. There was no doubt in his mind that the King and Queen planned to one day fill those tents with the most notable entities of established reality, but until that time they glossed the pages of their travel brochure with stunning images plucked from another exotic destination. It also begged the question of where the other recruits were. What happened to them? Had they ever been there at all?

Marcus spied the trio of figures on the rise where John was building the stream. Addai stood upon one of the large boulders, his fists planted on his hips as he gazed out over the plane like a conquistador, his scarred black combat boots pieced together with dull frayed duct tape. Angelee and John sat on the edge of another large rock a few feet away staring at Addai with a pensive wariness. A hundred feet ahead, the King and Queen slowed their pace as they approached the base of the hill.

"It's him," Marcus said as he caught up to them, whispering even though Addai was still several hundred yards away. "The one that contacted me."

Addai spotted them and waved, his thin pale lips spreading in a feral accomplished grin to reveal startlingly white fangs. He leapt down off of the boulder into the waist-high grass and began to make his way towards

them. John and Angelee quickly scurried to follow him as if they were unwilling to allow the new recruit out of their sight for even a moment.

When Addai was within earshot he yelled above the hissing rush of the plane, "I beat you here! Ha! What do you think, Marcus? Impressed?" The demon seemed genuinely smug.

"That's not exactly the word I would use," Marcus muttered.

"Who are you and how did you get here?" the Queen demanded. Marcus could see by her tense posture and stony gaze that she did not appreciate in the least bit Addai's flippant arrogance in her presence.

"My sincerest apologies," Addai stopped a few feet away and made a deeply exaggerated bow before the King and Queen. "My name is Addai. Marcus must have mentioned me?" His wildly cunning gaze slid from the Queen to Marcus briefly. "It would appear that my appeal to him was overheard by that beautiful young girl," He made a sweeping open-palmed gesture in Angelee's direction, "and she was gracious enough to extend a rather challenging invitation. I do so love a good challenge. Don't you?" He smiled again, though this time it was darkly through tightly closed lips. The demon extended one long, bony, pale hand to the King. "Who do I have the pleasure of meeting now?"

"We are the creators of this world," the King replied simply, crossing his arms over his chest, denying Addai's greeting.

Addai's eyes widened, his lips parting slightly in shocked awe, though there was something ever so slightly mocking in the expression. "But of *course* you are! Again, my sincerest apologies!" He dropped to one knee, bowing his head like a servant in fear of being whipped for his insolence. "It is beyond an honor to make your acquaintance," he said, his gaze trained on the ground beneath him. "I am humbly at your command."

The Queen could not resist the fawning display, the show, no matter how obviously ingenuous. Marcus rolled his eyes, exhaling heavily through his nose with distaste of how easily such a powerful creature as the Queen could be manipulated with the most simplistic plays. She stepped forward, her body language relaxing as she laid a hand upon Addai's shoulder.

"There is no need to prostrate yourself so," she said and began to pull her hand away again.

Addai's head snapped up as he reached out to grab her wrist before she retracted entirely. Pulling her hand back towards him in a lightning quick movement that startled her, he gently kissed the back of her hand like

courting lover, “Ah, but there is! Such beautiful gods as yourselves deserve such adoration.”

The Queen pulled her hand out of his grasp, her razor glassine nails drawing blue-black blood from Addai’s palm as they grazed his pallid flesh, and took an instinctual step back.

“We are not gods,” the King watched Addai through narrowed eyes, obviously not as tempted by Addai’s theatrics as the Queen. “We do not believe in such titles.”

Addai’s gaze drifted from his intense study of the Queen’s exquisite features to meet the King’s steady, cold gaze. Slowly he rose from his knee, squaring his shoulders to bring himself up to his full, anorexic height. He nodded as he contemplated this denial of universal station. “How should I address you, then?”

“King,” the King responded simply, as if it were supposedly common knowledge.

“And I am the Queen,” the Queen added, still holding the hand that Addai had kissed close to her chest as if she feared he might attempt another bold act.

Addai raised his eyebrows as he tried desperately to suppress a quizzical smile. “King and Queen? Yes, I agree, far less pretentious. So it will be.”

Marcus frowned at Addai, attempting to figure out exactly what suicidal game this demon was playing. Who would be so arrogant to toss their weight around so flippantly before the creators of an entire world?

A soft tugging on his sleeve tore his attention away from the newcomer. Marcus turned to see Angelee looking up at him. Dark bruising smudged inelegantly beneath her eyes as if she had not slept in ages, her long golden hair slightly disheveled. One of her neon pink high-top sneakers was haphazardly untied. Marcus stared down into Angelee’s weary, ancient gaze, so cruelly unbecoming such a beautiful child’s face. Her lips parted slightly, as if she wanted to ask him a delicate question, but was unsure of how to verbalize it. Slowly she reached out and took the giraffe. For a moment she gazed into the toy’s scuffed black plastic eyes, frowning as she held the dingy orange body in both hands. She looked displeased with the state of her cherished possession, struggling internally with her ability to make peace with its sad, irreparable state. With a sigh she looked up at Marcus again.

“Did it help you?” she asked.

Marcus was confused. “Help me with what?” An unsettling tension had begun to form at the base of his skull. The desire to take the toy back from her made his skin feel as if it was pulled too tightly against his bones.

“It always helps to have it with me when I’m asked to do hard things,” Angelee said in a simplistically foreboding manner. “It makes me feel warm and safe,” she said, stroking the matted short brown mane. “I don’t feel good when it’s not around.”

“Then why did you give it to me?” Marcus asked, squatting down in front of Angelee in order to meet her gaze. He reached out and mimicked her movement of petting the toy. The action instantly made him feel less anxious. *Odd*, he thought, *very odd*.

Angelee pulled the toy away from him, clutching it tightly to her chest. “It told me to. It said you needed a friend because you don’t have any.”

Marcus straightened, sitting back on his heels, slightly taken aback by the directness of her words.

“I thought that you and John were his friends?” Addai interjected, squatting down beside Marcus.

Angelee took a step back, her expression shifting from a concerned sort of pity for Marcus to a barely concealed dread. “You’re not his friend either,” she accused Addai. “I don’t like you.” She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to appear fierce despite her fear.

Addai smiled, his thin pale lips pulling back to reveal his gleaming white, fanged teeth. “Well, aren’t you a precious little brat. I’ll let you in on a little secret Angelee,” he leaned forward slightly as he hissed her name, “I don’t particularly care for you either.”

Marcus could feel Angelee’s terror beginning to transform as she channeled the confused energy into a protective wall around her. The air fizzed and popped as it electrified, the crisp scent of ozone burning sharpening like the atmosphere just before a thunderstorm. Marcus reached out and grabbed Addai’s sleeve, pulling him to his feet as he stood.

“Okay, that’s enough, I think,” Marcus announced. “It’s been a long journey and we’re all exhausted.”

Angelee stood her ground with her toy clutched in her arms, her unblinking gaze locked with Addai’s in a challenge. “I should *never* have let you come here. You don’t *belong* here.”

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Addai tilted his head slightly to the side, his grin seemingly permanently etched into his gaunt face like a jester doll. “Neither do you, my dear.” His gaze dropped briefly to the giraffe and back again to her face. “Cling to that totem all you want. I know more about you than you could *ever* imagine.”

Marcus grabbed Addai by the sleeve again and dragged him backwards. “Enough!” He hissed at his fellow demon. He waited to speak again until he was sure they were out of earshot from Angelee—or anyone else for that matter. “What the hell are you trying to do? Why did you beg to come here? To pick on a child?”

“She is no mere child. I think you already know that,” Addai replied. “Her aura may appear innocent enough because she has been raised in this place,” he gestured at the curved bowl of gently billowing pristine grassland around him, “but her origins are closer to ours than you can imagine. I had to see the child with my own eyes to confirm the rumors, but it is true. Her soul is dark.”

“What are you getting at?” Marcus cast an uneasy glance back in Angelee’s direction. There in the distance, a small dot upon the horizon, standing in the waist-high grass, the child continued to watch them as if she could hear their conversation.

Addai took a step closer to Marcus, lowering his voice. “She was born in Hell.”

“What?” Marcus scoffed. “Impossible!”

Addai nodded, enjoying the reaction he was receiving as the information settled into Marcus’s consciousness. “Yes, it’s true. A product of Belial and his once-mortal consort. I believe you remember her by the name of... Brenda.”

Marcus’s blood turned to ice in his veins. He stared at Addai in silence, repressing the tsunami of cataclysmic emotion tearing at him like starving carrion birds.

“Hmm, it would appear that you had repressed that memory after all. I have heard the tale of your confrontation with the Prince. Not many would be brave enough to take him on *mano-y-mano*, but he did rob you of her soul, which, at least in my meager opinion, was rightfully yours. But who am I to speak of such things?” Addai shrugged absently as if he were imparting gossip from one neighbor to another, though his eyes carefully registered every subtle change in Marcus’s body language.

“Yes, who are you to?” Marcus replied.

Addai smirked. “The entities that created this place are far more vicious and self-serving than you might be led to believe.”

Marcus shook his head, “Oh, no. Believe me, I’m well aware of their ability to turn their back on their homeland.”

“No, that’s not at all what I meant, though that definitely does not help to add a gleam to their tarnished reputation,” Addai said. “The ‘King’, as he is referred to, abducted Angelee when she was barely a month old. Right out of Lucifer’s very own castle. She is not a willing recruit of this new realm, but a prisoner whose powers are being manipulated to defeat her very own people. Here, without the guidance of her demonic mentors, she is a volatile element. A veritable untended nuclear reactor. It is impossible to say what she is truly capable of.

There is a fear though that once the Legions do break through to this realm and engage her fully in combat, she may well self-destruct taking with her, not only the new plane, but all others as well. It would be in Hell’s best interest if she were returned.”

“This is the true reason you came here,” Marcus narrowed his eyes at Addai, unsure as to whether or not to believe him. “Quite the skilled liar, you are.” He slowly sarcastically clapped three times. “I am impressed.” He lowered his hands back to his sides. “Did Belial send you on this mission because he was too lazy to do it himself?”

“Actually,” Addai replied, “he was unable to fulfill his mission.” A shadow flickered across Addai’s eyes. “It makes me question why Lucifer gave him Bael’s position? Well, I suppose even the Devil can make a mistake now and then.”

Marcus took a step back, his senses prickling with alarm as he realized how dangerous it was for Addai to have knowledge of his whereabouts, especially if his fellow demon was in direct contact with Lucifer himself. “Why should I care if Belial’s child is ever returned to him?”

“Now, now, Marcus,” Addai wagged a long boney finger at Marcus, reprimanding. “Remember what I just said. This isn’t about your personal vendetta against the Prince, but about ensuring Hell’s survival.”

“And it’s expansion. Let’s not forget about that. After all, if Angelee is returned to Hell, then this realm will be ripe for the picking and after its destruction Purgatory will be primed for plucking. I’m right, am I not?” Marcus retorted accusingly.

“Well, let’s not split hairs over the matter. Of course the added bonus of her absence is the acquisition of new territory.” Addai tilted his head to one side as he considered Marcus carefully. “Why do you fear returning to Hell?”

“Who said anything about fear?” Marcus spat.

“I can smell it on you. I can see it in your eyes,” Addai replied, undeterred.

“I gather you’ve never spent time in the oubliettes? Try a few years of imprisonment getting ripped open in the pitch like a mastiff’s chew toy and then dare to talk to me about fear.” Marcus was beginning to lose his tenuous control over his anger. “Who is to say that Belial won’t simply throw me back to the beasts down in those pits the moment I set foot in that realm?”

“No one. You’re fully correct that Belial might attempt such an arrogant act simply to save face after your escape. However, you might want to also consider the fact that, it is rumored, Lucifer himself has noted your new powers and it has added to his desire to appoint you to a place of recognition within the Legions.” Addai raised his eyebrows as if insinuating he knew far more than he was even speaking aloud.

Marcus said nothing, though he remembered the exchange between Desiderium and Belial shortly before his imprisonment. *Lucifer knows something we don’t...*

Addai smiled cruelly, holding Marcus’s gaze long and steady. “Help me return Angelee to her rightful place in Hell and your own position in the underworld will be secured. No one, be them; demon, angel, mortal or otherwise, will be able to touch you again.”

Immunity. It was a word that seemed too simple, too sweet to be possible. The concept of becoming an untouchable entity within an unfathomable realm of ancient and immensely powerful creatures caused his heart to race in his chest, his vision narrowing as adrenaline coursed through him.

Though every fiber of his being screamed that Addai’s promises were naught but a trickster’s ruse, he wanted to believe. Purgatory be damned to its own devices, this was a chance to have the permanent place and purpose he realized he craved. He cast a glance back towards where Angelee had been standing, off in the distance, watching them, but the tiny girl had vanished. For what seemed like miles in every direction stretched the vast sloping expanse of the bowl, its unfinished edges abruptly met by the

surreal marmalade sky in a haze of ink and glittering stars that peeked through from time to time like missing patches in a quilt.

Jordan's accusations of betrayal loomed within his heart, heavy and cold as wintered lead. Angelee and John had begun to place their trust in him. True it was a guarded, strangled adaptation of trust, born from two isolated brutalized souls, but it was a form of trust nonetheless. Angelee was all that John had to keep him going. He loved and protected her with his very life, cherishing her like the child he had lost so many years before in his mortal existence. To rip her from his arms and leave him alone in this place of such abstract, undefined and ever-expanding loneliness was quite possibly the most heartless and cruel things Marcus could do to the hulking bear of a man.

However, if such an action meant a permanent reprieve from the persecution haunting Marcus, it was an action he knew he had to consider. No matter how the King and Queen might elaborately posture to produce evidence of his necessity to this new realm they strove to create, he knew he could not stay there. Not only did he not belong, he knew he did not have the conviction of its preservation in his heart to stand and defend it against the invading Legions. There was no other place for him except Hell and, thus, to that realm one day he would ultimately have to return. He suddenly craved the sedative grounding effect of Angelee's giraffe more than ever.

Shoving his shaking hands into the pockets of his black polysynthetic trench coat to hide them from Addai he turned back to face the demon. "I'm listening. Tell me your plan."

CHAPTER 24

Brenda shivered and pushed the goggles back from her eyes onto her forehead. Instantly the elegant untimely undulation of the universe ceased like a television set turned off, the infinite galaxies and parallel dimensions blinking out of existence with an inaudible snap. She gasped and staggered back a pace, dropping her gaze to the black wood planks of the Dragonette's deck as she instinctively reached out to grab hold of the nearest figure beside her for support.

She realized her unwise reaction and froze in mid-movement, her body trembling with the sudden sensory deprivation. Her fingers poised mere centimeters from Sariel's, and he still gripped the hilt of his black sword. She could not bring herself to look, but Brenda could feel the iciness of the ghostly black flames that flickered about the hilt of the black sword as they investigated her like a wary feral dog sniffing at her palm. There would be consequences if her fingers even grazed the surface of the sword they told her, grave and painful consequences, though it was not the sword she had been reaching for. Brenda carefully curled her fingers away from Sariel's hand into a tight fist and slowly dropped it back to her side.

The Archangel seemed not to have registered her momentary shock, continuing to glare out into the cosmos beneath a frozen veil of mischievous bloodlust. Brenda released the breath that had become lodged painfully in her chest. As the air shuddered from her lungs out into the void her body suddenly felt completely insubstantial as if her skeleton had been removed and all that remained was the paper-thin shell of flesh. She steadied herself against the railing of the ship, anchoring herself in the freezing cold solidity of the gleaming black wood. A short while before, the realization that time was becoming meaningless to her here in the center of *everything* had begun to seep into her consciousness like a low-lying fog of white noise. In fact, everything about everything was slowly losing its meaning to her. Pinned like a butterfly to the awareness of the epic battle lurking somewhere out there in the spaces between exploding stars, Brenda pushed herself with a silent, maddening conviction to grasp hold of the entirety of the cosmos in all of its spastic, fluxing glory.

She needed to absorb its complexity, to distill its secrets down into a simple undeniable and wholly essential truth so incredibly obvious that she had simply overlooked it or, was never inclined to search for it in the first place. Her eyes darted from galaxy to galaxy, tracking abstract trapezoidal planes of relevance until she felt she might be sucked deep into the heart of one of them, lost forever. However, the complexity of the organismic architecture that wove the irrefutable constant of life, death and rebirth became more and more elusive the longer she gazed into it.

Each star that erupted and exploded appeared less substantial than the last one she witnessed; their existences magnificently short in the greater concept of existence. They were random, unpredictable and wholly unique to themselves despite her determination to find some sort of relevance, a concrete method of prediction. She knew now that the “scientific theory” humanity slaved to derive and balance their precarious sense of nobility upon was incredibly limited by their own microscopic human perception. There was no way for even the most exceptional mortal mind to recognize, let alone *understand* the secrets that Brenda was now privy to. While she was an intelligent woman, she was no mathematical genius or quantum physics mastermind and after a time her determination began to fade into a disillusioned hopelessness. How did she expect to battle what she considered the most fearsome entity in existence when she could not even understand what that existence truly consisted of?

Sariel broke out of his trance, as he had done from time to time throughout their journey, and began to pace the width of the helm with long, determined strides. His shoulders slightly hunched, his head bowed and hidden beneath the thin blue-black curtain of hair, he whispered frenetically in harsh hissing tones to the sword as if it were equally his closet advisor and mortal enemy. Brenda had begun to wonder if they were in fact heading towards the new plane or if the captain of the ship was too absorbed within his own madness. However, she remembered the direct order Sariel had originally given the helmsman and strove to derive some small comfort from the silent meditative discipline the Dragonette crew exuded.

She watched Sariel pace; sure he would one day wear deep grooves into the planks below him. The eagerness of his conspiratorial gait made her nervous, though none else aboard the ship appeared to take even the slightest notice of his increasing agitation. She watched him, carefully

attempting to not make even the slightest move that might startle the Archangel.

Suddenly, as if smelling the acrid perfume of her fear, the tall gaunt creature froze in his tracks, whirling around in a blur of midnight blue-black robes to face her. Brenda was sure her heart stopped beating. Behind Sariel the velveteen canvas of the void, devoid of even a single star, pressed down upon the ship like cold, damp cave moss in the pitch. The halo of blue light cast by the ghostly lanterns suspended about the deck accented the powerful, yet waifish lines of Sariel's form, the hollows of his cheekbones dark as the whites of his eyes blazed in stark contrast to the event horizons at their centers. His right hand curled about the hilt of his sword, engulfed in feathery black flames that danced almost gleefully as they fed upon his own excitement, as he raised his left to point at her. Brenda felt pinned to the railing behind her by the long bony finger he extended as if he had driven it through her sternum and deep into the black wood. She tried to swallow, but found her throat dry as sun-scorched leaves.

"You've never been to war," Sariel's deeply hissed delivery turned his question into a declaration.

Brenda wanted to find her voice, but it felt lost out in the void in one of the infinite realities she could no longer see but sensed acutely. She twitched slightly in an effort to shake her head, though distantly she wondered if she had managed even that much movement. Sariel continued to point in her direction as excruciatingly long seconds ticked by to the sound of the massive oars creaking as they propelled the ship forward through space, absent of the sound of the ocean to anchor them. His gaze at once bore directly into the heart of her soul and to a point somewhere far beyond. Sariel cocked his head slightly to one side, listening as his unblinking stare dropped to the planks between them.

What have I done? She asked herself silently. *What fury have I unleashed?*

Sariel's burning gaze snapped up to lock upon her wide-eyed apprehension again. "This is not the time for questions of such a nature, my lady. You must be committed to this battle or you will fail. No warrior who walks into a war with doubt will reemerge intact."

"I'm not a warrior," Brenda found her voice. "I don't understand all of this." She gestured at the blank black canvas of the void around her. "I just want to save my child. I just wanted to rescue Angelee..." Her voice trailed

off as if swept away by a solar wind. She regained control of her limbs and turned towards the railing. Reaching up, she removed the goggles from where they had rested upon her forehead. She resisted the urge to toss them overboard in her moment of painful frustration.

Sariel approached her slowly. With the tips of his fingers beneath her chin he forced her to look at him again. "Your kind always perplexed me so." His hand dropped away as he stared down at her with a strangely desolate mixture of pity and mild disgust.

"My kind?" Brenda asked. "Demons, you mean?"

Sariel shook his head, the wisps of his hair trailing back and forth like the flames that danced about his waist. "Mortals. Half of you live your lives discrediting yourselves of the strength you always had while the other half believes they possess abilities they will actually never obtain. Either way, you doom yourselves before even beginning. Another little kink in your composition we never did get quite ironed out. It's really a marvel, at least to me, that you've survived this long at all."

"For an angel you're not very good at pep talks." Brenda began to shiver, though not from physical cold.

Sariel ignored her quip. "You needn't understand the fundamental logistics of the *all* to be part of it. Your acceptance that it *is* will be enough. Every creature in every plane, in each reality is privy to a piece of the fabric that monumentally binds us all together, mortals, demons, angels and everything else in between.

I showed you the void to give you an idea of the magnitude and scope of existence, not because I want you to master it. Even I cannot make that claim and I have prowled these dark waters for eons." He stared directly upwards as if watching a falling star passing overhead. Brenda could swear she could feel his disappointment, though he showed no outward signs. "Just focus on your child. Leave the rest of this battle to creatures more suited to fight it."

Brenda's lips parted as a flare of resentment erupted to the surface of her being, but she quickly stifled the desire to defend herself. She knew the validity of his points, no matter how poignantly patronizing they might be.

Mortal? Why did he call me "mortal"? She wondered what the Archangel knew about her state of being. She stared down at the goggles still clutched between her hands. *I may have been mortal once, but I'm not anymore. If I am, I would have died from Belial's torture years ago.*

Revenge

She nodded to herself, steeled by the possibility that Sariel's assessment of humanity might not completely apply to her. Bracing herself for the explosion of the void around her, she slipped the amethyst and brass goggles over her eyes once again. *I'll show him. I'll prove my worth in this war.*

"I certainly hope so," Sariel replied to her internal dialogue. He stepped up to the railing beside her, his free hand not braced on his sword reaching eagerly for the railing. "I do believe I perceive the plane we seek just beyond the horizon."

Brenda followed Sariel's line of sight deep into the dizzying ballet of existence, through veils of cosmos and the dipping, twisting, shifting of simultaneous realities to a tiny blossom of gaseous light. At first no larger than any of the trillions of stars singing drunken dirges within the void, the nebulous plume quickly expanded as they approached, engulfing the darkness around it with a sphere of opaque swirling neon mist like a finely blown glass marble. Brenda blinked several times as her eyes fought to anchor on the sphere as it appeared to shift and tremble slightly, slipping in and out of sight, its vibrations sending small shock waves of dark ripples over its surface and blurring the texture of the void just beyond its perimeter. It was unlike anything Brenda had witnessed, thus far, in the cosmos and, while Sariel had touted the expansive unknowable that was the void with creatures and aspects she would never and could never encounter or perceive, she instinctively sensed there was something awry with this place in time and space.

The overwhelming sense of inhospitable instability radiating from the exterior of the plane caused her to want to shrink away from it and take cover below deck within the guest cabin.

"Angelee? Are you out there?" she whispered, summoning her courage to stand and face her fears. She wanted to believe she could sense her child within the sphere, but in truth, if Angelee was alive her aura was muted too greatly to be perceived.

"Why have you called me here, brother?" a deep voice sliced through the staggering silence.

Brenda gasped and whirled around to face the stranger, a towering presence of Herculean bronze limbs and curling black hair dressed in a deep scarlet tunic and brown leather pants. From the wide thick leather belt at his waist hung a holster containing a gold replica of a modern mortal semi-automatic handgun while in his right hand a Gatling gun of a similar glowing gold pointed its muzzle down towards the black deck. The man's

intense pale amber eyes darted between Sariel and Brenda with a mild annoyance as if he had been called away from an important matter. Sariel turned to greet the stranger, a cold feral smile spreading across his thin, pale lips.

“Michael. How long have you craved revenge on the parasites of Purgatory?” Sariel spoke in barely more than a whisper, his fingers stroking the sword as its vaporous black flames flickered and licked at him like an eager puppy.

Michael took a long heavy step towards Sariel that, if it had not been for the sudden mischievous spark of bloodlust in his eyes, might have been taken as a challenge. “Pray tell? You’ve found a way in?”

Sariel’s smile became a toothy grin as he raised one arched black eyebrow. “Indeed. Time to call to the others and load that beloved gun of yours. Ready yourself for battle. The time for blood is nigh.”

Revenge



CHAPTER 25

Before Addai had the chance to reveal the details of his plan to Marcus, the King and Queen had insisted on taking their new recruit on one of the lengthy self-congratulatory expositions of their land. They expounded on the glorious uniqueness of their new world and their commitment to “breaking the mold” of previous states of existence beneath the antiquated oppressive religious law upheld by what they considered lesser planes. They seemed to have forgotten their initial suspicions of Addai as they trotted him around like a possible financial investor.

Beneath his clothing Marcus’s flesh remained cold and clammy; his stomach tight and soured from the knowledge of Addai’s true intentions. From the corner of his eye he watched the demon unrelentingly. He was unsure of exactly what it was he was searching for, but he knew there was something crucial missing from the dynamic of this creature. Marcus most definitely did not consider himself special in his ability to have reached the new plane on his own, but the idea that another young demon would find his way, so soon after Marcus’s own arrival was simply an improbability.

At last the tour came to an end as the constant soft blue sky with its Stratus clouds of pale pink and green faded into a facsimile of twilight. The King and Queen brought Marcus and Addai back to the seamless, gleaming wood quarters where Marcus had dreamed of the Purgatorial warriors. There they bid them good night and departed to take care of mysteriously undefined “pressing matters”.

Throughout their walk waves of nauseating vertigo swept over Marcus as if he were going through a terrible drug withdrawal. At times he had to pause, leaning forward to brace himself against his knees to keep the world from spinning. The sensation had begun the moment he had returned the toy giraffe to Angelee, increasing in intensity and duration as they walked until it was almost unbearable. Marcus staggered to the glowing copper tub in the far corner of the first floor and threw himself against it, clinging to the smooth, cool, metal side as he retched into the drain.

“Someone should have warned you about that,” Addai said quietly as he strolled about the exotic building, running his hands over the living

walls of polished wood. His expression was an inscrutable complexity of impressed intrigue.

“About what?” Marcus retched again, though his stomach contained nothing to expel.

“Those creatures are very sly to create such an innocuous totem to bind that poor child so. Sedation of that intensity is really the only way they could keep her here willingly.” Addai paused and shifted his attention to the network of copper pipes that supplied the wash facilities. “Curious and curiouser,” he muttered. “I would imagine, if we left her here, she would eventually outgrow it. They would have to create more powerful amulets to bind her.”

Marcus drew a deep breath as the wave of nausea subsided. He slid to the ground beside the tub as if he had been shot, one arm still crooked over the edge.

Addai turned to look Marcus up and down, “You’ll live.”

Marcus glared up at Addai. “Helpful. Really,” he muttered, wiping spittle from his bottom lip on the back of his sleeve. Pulling his other arm down from the tub, he leaned his head back against the cold metal and focused on his breathing. “So, if we get rid of that damned giraffe, she’ll break out on her own? Is that what you’re saying? Well, hell! Burn the thing and be done with it.”

Addai chuckled, shaking his head as he took a seat on a small wooden stool nearby. “I’m afraid it’s not quite that easy. Were you ever addicted to drugs when you were human?”

“Some might have called me an alcoholic, but not drugs. Bourbon was enough for me. Reality was weird enough.” Marcus ran his fingers through his sweat damp hair.

“Well, with severe long-term addicts you can’t just make them go cold-turkey. Their systems would fail nearly instantly. In Angelee’s case, I’d say it’s more likely that she’d self-destruct and if that little blond fission bomb goes off it could very well take out several planes of existence.” He steepled his fingers before his face, tapping his bottom lip with the peak of his index fingers as he watched Marcus. “She needs to trust you, believe in you.”

“I think she already does.” Marcus pushed himself forward, leaning his arms across the tops of his knees. “Otherwise, why would she have given me her giraffe?”

“She’s concerned for you. That’s not the same thing as trust. She also doesn’t understand what her toy actually is. You saw how disheveled she looked. It was killing her to be away from it for even a day,” Addai replied. “No, we need her to really *trust* you, the way she trusts John.”

Addai reached into one of the pockets of his faded olive green cargo pants and retrieved a small lock of long blond hair. He held it up for Marcus to see, “She was so tired she never even noticed when I plucked it out.” In a flash he reached out and ripped a small patch from the side of Marcus’s head.

“Fuck!” Marcus shouted, his voice echoing off of the high wooden ceiling as he reached up to rub the side of his head.

Addai giggled like a mischievous child as he contentedly wove the two strands, tying the ends together. Laying the circlet of hair within his palm he cupped his other hand over it and closed his eyes. A crackling like static electricity ignited between his palms, blue-white lightning arcing between his flesh as the pungent odor of melting metal wafted out from between his fingers. As the electrical storm grew silent and dark, Addai opened his eyes, withdrawing the hand concealing the circlet of hair. In its place now lay a deceptively delicate gold chain from which a tiny gold giraffe charm hung. Addai pinched the chain between his fingers and held it before his face, smugly inspecting his work for flaws.

“She’ll love it,” he said, more to himself than Marcus. Looking past the dangling necklace he met Marcus’s suspicious stare. He smirked. “Tell her it’s for her birthday.”

Marcus hesitated for a moment, watching the warm ambient light from the hovering globes shimmer in the perfectly molded charm. There was a sad, wistful expression in the giraffe’s face as if it knew of its purpose and longed to be set free. The queasiness that churned in his bowels was no longer withdrawal, but apprehension.

Angelee had endured a lifetime of manipulation and servitude, but this was her home. It was the only home she knew. The horrors she would endure once she was returned to Hell were unimaginable, but if Addai’s promises were true, she was the key to Marcus’s diplomatic immunity and ultimately Lucifer’s favor. Before he could change his mind, he snatched the necklace from Addai’s fingers with such force that nearly snapped the chain in half.

“Once that is secured around her neck, you’ll be able to remove the King and Queen’s amulet from her without harm,” Addai cooed. “Her attachment will then be transferred to you. After I kill the King and Queen—”

“Excuse me?” Marcus interrupted, staring at Addai as if he himself had just turned into a giraffe, and laughed. “Just *who* are you?”

Addai squatted down in front of Marcus and leaned forward until his face was mere inches from his fellow demon’s. There was a deranged sort of glee twinkling in his dark eyes. His words were delivered with a rancid exhale of breath, “I’ll let you in on a little secret.” He lifted his index finger to his lips mockingly and whispered, “My real name is Lucifer.”

Marcus burst out laughing before he could stifle himself. “Now I know you really are mad!”

Addai was not amused by Marcus’s rejection of the idea. His expression darkened, the knowing grin sinking to a tight hard line as he stood and backed up a few paces. Marcus’s own laughter died away as he noted the demon’s overcast demeanor. Mad or not, Addai was obviously a creature of great power and not one to be trifled with. Marcus carefully rose to his feet and braced himself. The energy in the cabin warped, the air condensing and contracting like the back draft in a firestorm. The lights in the glowing glass globes about the room flickered and dimmed before rising again to an excruciatingly bright gold luminescence. Marcus shielded his eyes until the light faded again slightly, changing color from gold to a deep crimson, painting the amber wood surfaces of the building in a thick coat of glistening blood. His eyes blazing a solid white, his mouth slightly agape Addai stood with his arms outstretched, head tilted back as if offering himself up to the Devil himself.

“Belial, I command thee to release my essence. Belial, I command thee!” The voice seemed not to emanate from Addai’s throat but from every corner of the cabin itself.

Several harrowing seconds ticked by until suddenly the room was plunged into darkness. Marcus remained frozen and waiting, unable even to breathe for fear of what now stood before him. Slowly the light within the glass globes quickened again, blossoming at a low, dull glow allowing just enough illumination to make out the hard lines of the few pieces of furniture and Addai’s painfully thin frame. Bewilderment pulled Addai’s

gaunt features as he drew deep steady breaths. Even from across the room Marcus could see the demon trembling slightly.

“No... no... *no!*” Addai was whispering under his breath. “Why can’t I reach him? This can’t be...this can’t be!” He stared blankly at the floor between himself and Marcus, his eyes, now returned to their previous bloodshot burnt umber, wide and wild with panic.

Marcus cast an uneasy glance towards the door to the cabin fully expecting the King and Queen to blow it off of its brass hinges at any moment. “Look, whatever you’re trying to do, don’t. If you want to believe you’re Lucifer, go right ahead, I won’t question you, but displays like *that* are not going to help us abduct Angelee!” Marcus hissed. It was obvious Addai truly believed himself the embodiment of the Devil, a dangerously unstable delusion that could cost them both their lives if they were not extremely careful.

Addai was deaf to Marcus’s pleas. Clutching the sides of his head, he paced the length of the cabin, his combat boots striking hollowly on the dense seamless living wood floor. “It’s this plane. It has to be the plane itself. Belial would not betray me this way. He could not! It’s the plane and that fucking bitch child! I’m going to kill her. I’ll kill those arrogant bastard creatures that call themselves King and Queen and then I’ll rend that little imp limb from limb and toss her remains to the harpies in the void!”

Marcus’s mind spun as his own panic began to surge to a deafening drone. Absently he stuffed the chain into his pocket as he tried to think of the best possible hiding place. He knew, though, the King and Queen would be able to sniff him out no matter where he sequestered himself. The cabin quaked again, a deep rumbling shudder that caused the copper pipes to rattle slightly in their fixtures.

He whirled around to face Addai, “Stop doing that!”

Addai froze in mid-stride, breaking out of his litany of damnations and threats to meet Marcus’s gaze, “That wasn’t me.”

Another quake rippled through the building, this time with enough strength to cause both Addai and Marcus to stagger to find their footing. Marcus bolted for the door, throwing it open and racing outside without a second thought to the King and Queen’s wrath. As they burst through the canvas entrance of the tent Marcus felt razor nails sink into his neck as he was grabbed from behind and forced to his knees. Beneath the Queen’s

wild waterfall of black hair her face was contorted into a mask of pure blind rage.

Snarling, she held Marcus kneeling in the grass at her feet as her nails dug deep into his flesh. Blood poured hot and fast from the wounds, dripping down beneath his shirt as white star bursts of pain exploded before his eyes. A banshee howl preceded a mighty crack and out of the periphery of Marcus's sight Addai flew backwards through the air. He landed a few feet away, sprawled on his back like a broken marionette. Scrambling to his feet, he crouched on all fours, his body shaking from the surprise attack as the King charged forward.

"You! *You* did this! You brought them here!" the King's voice boomed with a crushing decibel that caused blood to seep from Marcus's ear canals.

"Who?" Addai hissed. "I brought no one!"

"Don't play games with me, you little parasite! The Archangels have never known the location of this plane. Not until you arrived! I knew I should have killed you the moment I saw you," the King bellowed.

The dome of sky above them pulsed and fluxed like a cloud of smoke in a vacuum. The time construct had become unstable, what had previously been night flashing back to midday sunlight before sinking into darkness again behind the maddening vortex of churning clouds.

"Why would I be in league with angels? Don't you think if I were going to bring anyone here it would be the Devil?" Addai pulled himself up to his full height, but he was still dwarfed by the King's looming rage.

Marcus could see Addai struggling to once again summon the power he had attempted to tap into before, but this attempt was even more unsuccessful than before. The King reached out and grabbed the front of Addai's shirt in both hands, lifting him from the ground.

"We can defeat the Devil. We have kept his armies at bay for years. The Archangels are our true enemies. Our only protection from them was their inability to find us, but now, thanks to you, they're right at our door!" the King snarled.

"I didn't bring them here!" Addai screamed into the King's face. His hands, wrapped about the King's wrists were beginning to glow a molten reddish orange, steam rising from them as he channeled his rage into a searing heat.

The King refused to release the demon, though his arms had begun to shake with the inflicted pain. The plane quaked again as if struck by

a meteor, sending the four of them stumbling. The Queen released her grasp on Marcus's neck as she staggered backwards, her nails raking deep gouges through his flesh. Quickly he scrambled forward, jumping to his feet and spinning around to face the King and Queen, his heart thundering painfully in his chest. The King hurled Addai into the ground with a sickening crack. A high-pitched shriek echoed through the atmosphere like lightning, terrified yet defiant with a child's fury, followed by a hailstorm of dissonant automatic gunfire.

The rage suddenly evaporated momentarily from the Queen's face as she looked up towards the sky, "Angelee!"

Marcus frowned with confusion as he turned a full circle in search of the sound's origin. On the horizon he spied a wavering line of what appeared to be a rope ladder descending down from the spiraling storm of electrified clouds.

"There!" Marcus shouted over the rumble of another quake.

"No!" The King's attention was torn from his intent to destroy Addai, "I told John to keep her from going up there!"

Without thinking Marcus bolted into the grasslands towards the ladder. It was not so much out of pure concern for Angelee's safety, but more so the idea that if she were killed in this battle, his one shot at gaining Lucifer's true protection would become null and void. Let the Archangels destroy this place for all he cared! He'd even assist them if need be, but the child would be his! As he closed the mile between himself and the ladder a new thunder of gunfire exploded from the clouds above, igniting the atmosphere with bursts of white light like jellyfish through the Great Barrier Reef. Leaping out of the grass Marcus grabbed hold of the bottom rung of the thick plasma rope and began to climb like a sailor up the rigging of a ship. A few feet below he felt the ladder jerk to and fro. He paused and glanced down to find the King and Queen deftly scaling after him. Addai was strangely nowhere to be seen. He scanned the plane from his new vantage point upon the swaying ladder, but the demon appeared to have vanished or perhaps was simply still lying in the grass where the King had planted him with a bone-crushing force.

Marcus looked back up at the clouds that were growing ever nearer with each rung. Whether or not Addai had been lying about Angelee, there was no turning back now. Lightning crackled horizontally through the atmosphere at a dangerously close proximity, igniting the air with painful

static electricity that rippled across his skin like billions of silver needles. Marcus could feel the hair upon his head, legs and arms bristling in response to the sudden charge, his heart pounding in his chest with alarm as wicked heavy thunder followed the blast, causing the ladder to sway and shake unnervingly. Adrenaline fueled his climb, forcing him higher at an unnatural speed until he emerged through the top of the clouds into the upper atmosphere of the plane. Above him, floating against a bejeweled twilight canvas of infinity like a prehistoric jellyfish, was a gargantuan hot air balloon of a quilted diaphanous substance that pulsed from within with an organic free-floating fire. Suspended from colossal ropes wide enough to tether a ship to a dock was a massive brown wicker basket. Its shadow pressed down on Marcus with an ominous weight of its own, threatening to hurl him back down to the grasslands hundreds of feet below. Clinging to the violently swaying ladder for dear life, he cringed as Angelee let out another psychotic, defiant scream followed by the sound of the rapid fire of an automatic weapon. Below him, the King and Queen tried to pass him on the ladder as he hesitated for a moment too long.

“Move, fool!” the King bellowed as he swung around to the opposite side of the ladder with a trapeze artist’s grace and continued to climb up and past Marcus.

The movement caught Marcus off guard as his hand was caught between the King’s foot and the rung just in front of his face. With a gasp he jerked his hand free, losing his footing as the ladder swung again in the gale winds and the Queen’s similar gymnastic maneuver. Hanging by one arm, Marcus fought desperately to regain his hold on the ladder. As his feet found purchase on one of the rungs he growled, fury replacing his fear as he raced up the remaining few feet to the basket. If there had been any doubt in his mind as to his desire for allegiance to the King and Queen, it had been permanently obliterated as he found himself silently praying that Addai was indeed Lucifer.

Now would be a great time to make good on that threat Addai, wherever you are. I will certainly help you kill these bastards, if I can. Marcus hoisted himself over the edge of the basket, tumbling unceremoniously into the interior with a thud. On the far side Angelee perched like an owl on the edge of the basket, one arm wrapped about one of the massive rope riggings for support. Her back to him, she seemed oblivious to the new arrivals as she screamed out at a patch of sky that boiled aggressively. Lightning sparked from one cloud to another below them, arcing up and

over the balloon briefly showering the craft with another violent surge of electrical illumination. Another reality-quaking impact caused the entire plane to convulse as if it might disintegrate. Her long blond hair whipping violently around her head, Angelee lifted the golden AK-47 she clutched in her free arm, and aimed it at the ominous emerging vortex, unleashing a brilliant spray of drops of liquid fire out into the sky.

“We’re not equipped for this kind of battle!” John bellowed as he turned on the King and Queen, charging towards them across the basket from Angelee’s side. “We need to take cover. There’s no way we can hold off whatever that is that’s trying to come through.” He pointed at the sky as he shouted over the wind and Angelee’s screaming.

“We have no choice but to stand and fight,” the Queen said, staring John down like a mountain lion. “Besides, we have her. The only weapon we need.”

There was a brief moment of silence as John stared at the Queen as if she had gone completely mad. Marcus inched his way around the perimeter of the basket so as not to draw attention to himself. He halted a few feet behind John. The delicate romantic beauty of the Queen’s features had vanished in a sea of Machiavellian vengeance. Beneath the dark blue surface of her eyes a swirling darkness swelled, primal and fierce as the forces of creation itself. There would be no arguing with the entity; she would protect the plane utilizing whatever and whomever she deemed necessary to further her cause.

John took a step back, his human hand curling into a massive fist as his emerald green claw opened and closed agitatedly, preparing for violence. Behind the Queen, the King’s form had begun to mutate. Having stripped away his black coat and shirt to reveal his flawless idealized human flesh, he stood just behind Angelee, his head thrown back, his eyes closed. The air about his body vibrated like a desert mirage as he lifted his hands, palms upwards, fingers splayed as if conducting an orchestra. His long pale digits began to extend, tapering and darkening to a deep green. They resembled vines inching ever closer towards Angelee until they began to wrap about her waist and neck. Angelee was oblivious as the tendrils began to tighten. With a gasp she dropped the golden AK-47 into the basket behind her, nearly tumbling forward over the thick wicker edge as she reached up to her neck in horrified surprise.

“What are you doing?” John bellowed, raising his green claw as he began to charge forward.

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The Queen raised one hand and John flew backwards, nearly colliding with Marcus as he crashed into the side of the basket. When she spoke her voice grated against the air between them with a reptilian hiss, “Do not question us, John. We will do what we have to in order to save our world. Angelee has the power within her, but we must help her to unleash it. Stay back.”

John could not have moved even if he had wanted to as his grizzly bear body was pinned to the side of the basket by the unseen force of the Queen’s will. The color had drained from Angelee’s face, her arms dangling slack at her sides as if she had fallen into a trance. Around them reality quaked again as an attack was laid against the outward defenses of the realm, sending cataclysmic waves of energy through the tangible structures around them. Marcus could feel his own body’s cellular composition vibrating violently, each molecule humming with the unearthly frequency until he thought he might boil from within.. He clung to the side of the basket and gritted his teeth at the pain that coursed through him as if his nerve endings were being electrocuted.

He stared up at the vortex and again found himself praying that Addai was indeed Lucifer, that Lucifer would come to put an end to the selfish madness of these young entities. The prayer felt oddly “good”, a surge of energy welling up from the core of his being, righteous and empowering connecting him back with the source of his identity.

With a grunt he pried one hand away from the wicker wall. Bits of the flesh from his palm stuck to the woven surface, scalded and flayed like bloodied bits of pale parchment. He stared at his hand and watched as the wounds began to close slowly, fighting to repair themselves as the echo of the quake dissipated into the distance. Reaching down, he grabbed John’s shoulder where he sat, grimacing with rage as he watched Angelee contorted in the grips of the King’s venomous embrace.

“Get up!” Marcus growled. “They’re going to kill her unless you get up and fight, for fucking sake!”

The mirage of energy that had surrounded the King began to bleed over to Angelee’s form until she appeared disguised behind a fine waterfall mist. The mist began to congeal suddenly until it encased the fragile-looking young girl in a crystalline gelatin that pulsed from within with a deep yellow light. In a deafening explosion the pulsing viscosity shot outwards, spiraling around itself like a tornado towards the heart of the boiling vortex above. The sky ignited, roaring and rumbling as lightning

arced its way through the maze of recently constructed stars, blowing apart the amorphous, roiling storm clouds below to reveal the bowl of grasslands edged by the simple streams that had once been John's pride and joy. Marcus instinctively knew John would care little if they were obliterated now. Like a prisoner whose time had been whiled away by idle mechanical labor, it didn't matter how much loving attention to detail he might have invested if his one reason for living was taken away from him.

"Get up!" Marcus screamed over the storm, grabbing hold of John's shirt collar as if he could pry him loose.

"John, you are nothing more than a rock farmer. You've been a good guardian for Angelee, but you were never intended to be more than that." The Queen cocked her head to one side gazing down on John with a maniacal glint of a fabricated emotion akin to sadness. "We are still your liberators and your keepers. Do not listen to the words of a demon."

"If I'm only that to you, why did you lure me here?" Marcus pushed himself away from the wall. "Why the dangerous trip to Purgatory, the grandiose display of your powers? Do you really worship yourselves that much?"

The Queen threw her head back and howled a coyote laugh up to the remaining façade of stars. Her wailing cackle was answered by an eerily angry baying that pierced the storm with a colossal vindictive might. The Queen staggered back, thrown off guard by the sound, her gaze darting through the constructed cosmos in search of the origin of the sound.

Behind her, the King appeared oblivious to the horrific howl, bound to Angelee and veiled behind the fluxing cocoon of gelatin casing as he coaxed the energy from her tiny form and harnessed it for their next counterattack. The moment of distraction had relaxed the Queen's invisible hold on John. With a grunt he clawed his way up from the floor of the basket. Clamping his green claw over the side to anchor him into a standing position, he continued to fight against the remaining tendrils of her will pressing down upon his body.

Marcus could not tell if the animalistic sound had come from within the new plane or beyond its periphery. "What the hell was that?" he asked aloud as he glanced over at John.

A homicidal grin gleamed beneath the thick curtain of his golden beard. "Leviathan. And he's not happy."

CHAPTER 26

Aurianna forced herself awake before the Swamp Lord could enter her dreams once again. It had taken her days beneath Raphael's attentive care to recover from the last encounter. While he commiserated with her devotion to her sister he earnestly admonished her for taking such perilous risks. Remiel too had come this time to aid in her healing, lending what strength he could to mend the physical wounds.

"You are too frail to be undertaking these visions right now. The toll has already been too great on your body and mind. I fear the next dream might be your last," Raphael had said as he sat on the edge of her bed, her thin pale hand resting lightly between his strong, tan healer's palms.

Sighing, she turned her face into the pillow for a moment before raising her eyes to meet his. "I know the risks I am taking are enormous, but I have to take them."

Raphael shook his head sadly, but it was Remiel who replied, "So do we. You are my greatest student. We cannot stop you from dreaming, but we hope you will choose your own life over hers."

By "we" Aurianna knew he meant "I". She smiled weakly. She dared not reveal her plans to absorb Mona's identity into herself to him or any of the other Archangels, for that matter. Though they all might, in their own ways, speak of their passion for various aspects of existence, she could not help but feel that not one among the illustrious lot had truly loved anyone as she loved her sister. Perhaps, once upon a time, such a blinding commitment had resided within each of them, but now it seemed merely an echo of their own isolated egos.

Remiel was different, for he seemed to intuit the universe on a very existential level, and his commitment to her seer's education had been awe-inspiring and enthusiastic in the beginning—before the draw of another long quest through the human back roads had drawn him away for years. Aurianna stared up at Remiel, noting how furrowed his brows were. Not even the faintest glimpse of his notorious mischief was visible in his downturned mouth, hiding beneath his golden beard.

“Remi, you know as well as I do that I will wither away and die if I *don’t* finish this,” she said sadly.

Remiel held her gaze for a moment before nodding slowly. He turned away and walked a few paces from her bed. Aurianna studied the image of a wolf and lightning airbrushed on the back of his jacket and wondered what strange corner of the human world he had acquired the garment from.

“My dear, when will you simply accept that death is inevitable at times? It all happens for a reason. We may not fully understand the reason for Mona’s death yet, but we will, in time. Make peace with it and move on. We will need your visions in the battles to come,” Raphael pleaded softly as if she were a child.

“That would be, if she were dead,” she replied, her gaze still resting on Remiel’s back . “I felt her perpetual state of agony, suspended for eternity in that final moment of shock. It was the most horrendous torture any creature should have to endure. She is alive and deserves to be rescued...”

Neither of the Archangels had spoken aloud after that, the room falling into a cocoon of dutiful resignation until both had left her to tend to the calling of other celestial matters. Aurianna knew what she needed to do, though finding the courage and strength to take the final steps would be the greatest of feats. Many years before she had been taught about an ancient battle tactic employed by angels in which an angel mortally wounded in battle would surrender its identity to the void and allow a less severely wounded angel to absorb the remains of its energy.

This selfless maneuver allowed the surviving angel the ability to regenerate itself and live to continue on in battle. However, the surrender of the dying angel’s identity wholly to the void was absolutely essential. Only by this means could the absorbing angel’s identity remain whole, their sanity saved from irreparably splintering. An unwounded, healthy angel was always equipped to absorb the shards of a destroyed angel unilaterally. Yet, if such a procedure was undertaken without the surrender of their former personal identity, the absorbed identity would linger within the angel, creating a monstrous and dangerous dual personality. At least, this is what Aurianna had been taught.

Lying awake, staring at the ceiling, savoring the fact that she had not woken in the fits of violence she had grown so accustomed to, she wondered if the rules applied to angels in battle would hold fast and true for sisters, whose bond was far greater than mere celestial soldiers? Surely

she and Mona could reside equally within the same physical shell? The crystal around her was quiet, breathing gently a deep contented hum as it too relished the absence of such intense tumult. Rising slowly to ensure the steadiness of her limbs, Aurianna stood and walked to one of the walls. Reaching out she placed a palm flat against the cool pale mineral.

“It is time for me to leave you,” she whispered aloud. “My era as your seer is over. Take good care of whoever takes my place and honor them as you have me. I pray they will not torment you so as my dreams have.”

In the darkness she reached into one of the many pockets of her dress and withdrew the small white candle she carried with her at all times, lighting it with the matches from another pocket. Soft golden light blossomed from the wick, chasing away the clustering velveteen shadows as she turned to rest a final gaze upon the bed where she had spent so many years living the lives of other entities. A shiver of sorrow blew through her soul, vanishing as quickly as it had quickened, leaving her feeling simply... sad. There was no other road for her, this she knew, yet the finality of it, suddenly overwhelmed her. She wished it were not a path she had to walk alone, but as with so many great quests, there were no other souls who could travel these last miles with her. As the Archangels prepared themselves for another full-scale siege on Purgatory, so she too would set out for the realm.

The idea of seeing the realm in person rather than simply through the twisted dream-lens of her horrific visions thrilled her, and brushed away the cobwebs of sorrow that threatened to bind her. While she had walked through countless planes of existence, through millennia of time, she had never actually set foot in any of them. Never had she felt the salt water of Earth’s Atlantic Ocean wash around her ankles, smelled the fantastical gardens of Limbo or witnessed the bloodied torments of the Abyss with her own senses, but always through the interpretations of another. Soon she would walk the very paths Mona herself had often taken, smell the scent of evergreen needles and hear the low constant harmony of the Mulmor. Soon she would place her hands upon the ancient bark of the Willow Gate and converse with the angels who still stood guard there.

Aurianna turned and strode from her bedroom without a second glance back and began to make her way up the winding crystal stairs to the roof. Through a narrow doorway, barely wider than an archer’s window, she slipped out onto the balcony that wound around the perimeter of the uppermost spires that reached up for the cosmos in stalagmites of frosted,

etched crystal. The opaque white mineral glowed subtly from within as it amplified her excitement, reflecting the ambient starlight like virgin snow. One would think at such a height the wind and chill would blow such a fragile creature as Aurianna off of her feet, but the air here was still as death, neither warm nor cold, but expectant, as if it waited for her next move. She stared out over the chessboard surrounding the tower far below with a wistful sadness knowing that she might never lay eyes upon it again, at least not as she witnessed it now. If and when she returned she would view her world through new eyes. That was, if enough of her own self remained within her shell to remember once she had absorbed Mona's spirit.

With a deep breath she unfurled her wings to their full glorious white width. The effort left her shaken, the chessboard landscape blurring slightly into the cosmos above and below as a heavy purple-stained darkness crept into the edges of her visions for a split second.

Steady now, she cooed to herself as she held out her hands to either side, bracing herself in a wide stance like a surfer remembering the feel of the ocean after too many landlocked years. Her body pulsed with a strangled tormented energy, but she remained determined. There was no going back; she would not accept defeat when she felt she was on the very brink of fulfilling her quest. Drawing another deep breath of still sweet air she flexed her wings, beating them once and stretching them upwards over her to trigger her memory senses of flight. The motion felt good, solid and real, the force generated by the movement of the massive feathers stirring a brief rush of wind that lifted her long hair around her face. Aurianna smiled as she launched herself out into the darkness.



Scorching agony ripped through Aurianna's left wing as if a bullet had torn through the muscles expanding out from her shoulder. Tiny blood vessels were beginning to rupture in the tissue between the tendons and bone with a nearly paralyzing rapid-fire succession, causing her to falter in flight as she descended through the veils separating Purgatory from the rest of the void. Gasping and flailing she tried desperately to regain control of her damaged wing, but found she could only manipulate it in staccato bursts of sporadic haphazard directions. A warped manipulative energy tainted the ether with layers of spiteful, vicious wards to keep intruders

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at bay. Or perhaps, she hesitated to question, it was only her whom these shoddily constructed, yet effectively painful wards were in place to repel, for Michael and the other Archangels had never mentioned such resistance. She had come too far to turn back. Even if she retreated, Aurianna did not think she had the strength to return home to her tower, especially not in her injured state.

She drew upon the reserve of what little energy remained within her to force herself past the barriers. With a scream she tore through the remaining ward, the seal giving way like shattering glass as she tumbled into the upper atmosphere of the plane over the river Mulmor. Blood vessels in her right wing exploded, sending a raging torrent of fire through it down to her chest, the finer bones beneath the feathers shattering from the pressure as tendrils of the energy from the wards clung to her, attempting to rip her backwards and out into the void. Tears streamed down Aurianna's pale gaunt cheeks as she hurtled towards the wide, dark river, unable to stop herself or even slow her descent. She wanted to pray for help or call out to whatever angels might be nearby, if any, but her voice was trapped in her chest, the agony simply too much to endure for her to form words and still remain conscious. Try as she might to aim for the water itself she found herself just short of the river's edge. With a bone jarring impact softened only by a dense thicket, Aurianna made landfall.

Shaking with shock, Aurianna stared up through the woody mesh of brambles and sharp, dark green leaves at the patches of azure sky miles above. This was not at all how she had imagined her entry into Purgatory. The agony of her broken wings had dissipated into a throbbing numbness. She knew at least one was beyond her ability to heal for it lay beneath her in at a horrifically awkward angle. Her legs and arms were covered in deep gashes from where the claws of rough thicket undergrowth had raked through her flesh. Carefully she stretched her fingers and toes to see if her extremities still functioned. Soured relief washed over her as she found herself able to still move her arms and legs. Slowly, wincing and gasping at the pain that continued to quake through her body, Aurianna extricated herself from the clutching embrace of the bushes, crawling on her hands and knees towards the river.

As she reached the water, she forced herself to her knees in the shallows, savoring the cleansing coolness that lapped about her, softly, quietly investigating her body and soaking her torn dress. Leaning forward she plunged her hands into the water, resting her weight on her palms and

finding a grounding comfort in the soft, supple sensation of the sandy river bottom beneath. Digging her fingers into the sand she sighed, attempting to channel some of the river's immense power upwards into her body to assist with at least a portion of the healing she needed to continue on. The river roared downstream, tirelessly oblivious to her presence and her small tap into its strength, giving willingly of itself as if she were nothing more than a leaf traveling along its current. Slowly she felt the more superficial wounds begin to close, the smaller broken vessels within her wings reforming to cease the internal bleeding that threatened to drag her down into death. There was little she could do in her fragile state to mend the broken bones, but she knew she was now stable enough to at least stagger forth and find Mona. Sitting back on her heels, she lifted her dripping hands from the river and placed them on her knees as she carefully, delicately attempted to collapse her wings. Crying out as she forced her broken bones to constrict at her command she retracted them as much as possible, tucking them closely against her back.

Fighting back tears of frustration, Aurianna wavered as another bout of vertigo set in. The humming noise of memories from past dreams of Purgatory called out to her suddenly: hazy images of Mona conversing with Michael the morning before her death and Mona tending dutifully to the Willow Gate, working amongst its roots like a contented gardener. Aurianna allowed herself to be wrapped within the warm cocoon of the image of her sister so lovingly nurturing the massive trees of her creation. Her eyes were her sister's eyes, staring down at the sun-dappled dirt and moss beneath her slender hands. The dirt deepened, darkening until the rich black soil smoothed into a velvety nothingness, the massive gnarled roots to either side of her, twisting and turning like the tentacles of a long extinct deep sea leviathan as they spread out from the colossal base and plunged into the banks of the Mulmor, fading away as if consumed by the darkness. A rushing whirlpool of cyclonic sound filled her ears as the darkness began to spin counter-clockwise, opening to reveal the prison where the remains of Mona's essence was imprisoned. With a gasp, Aurianna's eyes fluttered open, her heart deafening in her own ears. There was no doubt in her mind she knew now exactly where the portal was located, somewhere beneath one of the Willow trees. Staggering to her feet, she stumbled with painful swaying steps downstream the remaining mile to the Gate.

Wrapping her arms about her body in a feeble attempt to stop the shock-induced shivering she listened to the eerie silence that riddled the

landscape. In the mist-softened distance the great arc branches of the willow trees bent over the expanse of swift, dark currents like two giants leaning against one another, their arms interlaced, the long bright green tendrils of their leaves dipping down towards the water like hair. On the far side of the gate Aurianna could see a lookout tower where several angels stood watch, their golden arsenal of firearms held loosely in their hands as they absently monitored the river for approaching invaders from the lowlands. They seemed oblivious to her, their backs to her as she reached the gate, their concentration focused on the swamps beyond. It seemed, to Aurianna, a lonely and tiresome position to be assigned to as she crawled over the towering mounds of dark gnarled roots, winding her way deeper and deeper to the base of the tree itself in search of the spot in which she had seen Mona in her vision.

As two of the roots began to merge, she discovered a small cave-like nook where the moss seemed especially vibrant and plush, coating the rich soil and parts of the roots themselves with a thick carpet of soft neon green. Kneeling down into the moss she pressed her right palm to the ground. Somewhere, far beneath her, the faintest echo of Mona's energy vibrated like the ghost of a flute song. Aurianna's pulse raced as she withdrew her hand, staring down at the moss beneath her in a moment of shock; she was so close to her sister after all of these years.

Without a conscious thought she fumbled through her pockets and found the small pocketknife, decorated with a swirling black, panther tattoo image, Remi had given to her as a souvenir from one of his many excursions to the physical plane. Opening the knife, her gaze anchored on the patch of moss before her, she pressed the sharp silver blade against her palm, drawing it quickly across her flesh to open a thin wound. She barely noticed the pain over the agony still pulsing through her broken wings as she curled her hand into a fist and squeezed several drops of blood onto the ground. Nothing happened. She stared at her bloodied palm for a moment before drawing the knife across it again, deeper this time with a grimace so that blood flowed more freely. Leaning forward she pressed her bleeding hand flat against the moss allowing the lichen to lap up the blood and pull it down into the earth below. Suddenly the moss began to dissolve beneath her, or so it seemed, breaking apart beneath where she sat like patches of algae on the surface of a pond. She felt herself slipping slightly, sinking as the soil became insubstantial and transparent revealing the mesmerizing labyrinth of the root system that seemed to descend without end. Aurianna

scrambled with a gasp to find her footing as she slipped down, catching hold of one of the roots to keep from plunging into the darkness. In awe she marveled for a moment at the expansive intricacies of the system around her that branched out like pale white capillaries drawing forth the nutrients they needed from the very universe itself. Carefully she inched her way from one root to another, combing her way through the living breathing mesh of life force until a fluttering phosphorescence caught her eye like a bit of torn cloth trapped on the edge of a brush-choked river. Her breath caught in her throat, her chest tightening with dread. Panic fueled a new surge of adrenaline through her fragile system, propelling her to leap dangerously from root to root as she frantically worked her way to Mona's distorted remnant form.

As she neared the tattered remains of her sister, she released a shuddering sob. It was far worse that even her dream visions had allowed her to imagine. Boneless and malformed, the essence suspended within the clutches of a cluster of snaking white roots was no longer what could be called a "body", but only the memory of Mona's physical self as it half-consciously attempted to reassemble itself only to be torn apart again and devoured by hungry tree, the newly formed flesh constantly, inquisitively tugged and plucked at by the drinking tendrils of rootlets around it. To Aurianna's horror, a semblance of Mona's face still remained. Eyeless and hollow like a discarded plastic mask left out in the summer sun to melt, it rested in the cradle of a cluster of roots, some of which protruded up through the empty eye sockets like distorted pale eyelashes. Aurianna braced herself against the nearest root, steeling herself before closing the gap between herself and her sister's remains. There she gingerly found a few interconnected rootlets where she could sit beside Mona's essence and begin the horrific task of attempting to disentangle the flesh from the roots.

Her hands trembling like leaves in a storm, she pulled the nearest roots out of the flesh, separating them from the amorphous, pulpy form before her. The smaller, less resistant ones emerged with ghastly wet sucking pops, but the larger ones had woven themselves so deeply and extensively through Mona's flesh that they threatened to rip what remained of her "body" apart as Aurianna pulled in vain on them. With a howl she began beating on the roots as she realized they were winning the struggle, each more aggressively reaching for the shredded entity they had suckled from for centuries. Exhausted from her frustration, Aurianna slumped against one of the roots and stared at the tangled web of half-formed muscle

and nerves. The blueprint of Mona's self remained intact enough for it to continue to attempt to rebuild itself for an eternity, but it was too weakly connected to the remaining DNA to fight the power of the willow tree itself. Mona was becoming part of her own creation. Aurianna's efforts to wrench her sister free were only expediting the process, much to her mortification. But one way remained for her to save Mona.

Wiping away the tears with the back of her sleeve, Aurianna moved around the web of roots cradling her sister. Leaning forward as she balanced carefully on a net of thin overlapping rootlets, she cupped the strange hollow replica of Mona's face in both hands. Blood from the still-open knife wound seeped out through the spongy tissue like dye soaked up into the leaves of a rose. Closing her eyes, Aurianna pressed her lips to Mona's gaping toothless mouth and inhaled deeply, pulling her sister's essence deep inside of her own being. Aurianna nearly toppled from the roots where she stood as the horrific, foul flow of sensory impression flooded through her, nauseating surface expressions of an excruciating death impaling her like iron spikes until she shook violently, fighting back the blood and bile that threatened to drown her. Clutching Mona's face between her hands with a feverish determination, distantly she felt her fingers plunge into the soft, pliable tissue as she forced herself to inhale again. The initial tidal wave of darkness and pain began to subside, replaced by the original healing light that had permeated Mona's essence in life. The celestial syrup simultaneously healed Aurianna's body while drowning her internally as the fluid snaked through her aura, filling her like a clay pitcher with Mona's memories, her expressions and feelings, her very identity until a small spark of fully formed consciousness kindled deep within her as the dual identity found purchase and began to grow. Aurianna pulled away from the remains of what had been Mona, slicking back her lank, sweat-drenched hair as she shook off the trauma of a death that had not been her own, allowing the spark within her to fan itself into a flame. She could feel herself sinking back into her *self*, Mona's identity stepping into the foreground as it found its place of power and continued to spread out through Aurianna's physical form. For the first time in ages Aurianna felt as if some of the burden of responsibility she had shouldered had been lifted. She was content to allow Mona to drive for a while as she rested. Her work was done. At least for the moment.

CHAPTER 27

The echo of John's bellowing roar rung heavy and hollow in Marcus's ears as the giant, witnessing his window of opportunity, launched himself towards the Queen, his mighty emerald green claw raised, ready to slice her in half. Leviathan's war cry had distracted the Queen momentarily as it had quaked through the realm, overshadowing even the rumbling distortion of the angelic invasion. Marcus stood, transfixed by the sight of the bearish man's limber catapult, descending down towards the object of his rage. As his shadow eclipsed the Queen, her concentration on the primordial beast snapped and, in a flash too quick for even Marcus's perception to register, retreated behind the King, out of harm's way. In the same dizzying moment one of the malicious tentacles that bound Angelee separated from the young girl's body, punching upwards towards John. Before his screamed warning could even leave his throat, Marcus watched, helpless, as the tentacle pierced John's chest, erupting through his shoulder blades with a sickening fine red mist of blood and bone fragments. For a horrifyingly silent moment the giant was suspended far above their heads, his limbs twitching with agony as shock took hold, blood pouring from his lips down over the glistening green flesh of the tentacle.

Marcus staggered back a pace, his mind filled with paralyzing white noise as he watched John flailing like a flounder on the end of a pike. He pried his stricken gaze away from dying man above him and sought out the Queen's eyes. She stood just behind the King, peering through the semi-translucent pulsing caul with a deadly mirth. As Marcus's eyes met hers he felt his already cold pulse turn to ice. Any shred of manicured "humanity" had evaporated from her expression revealing the truth of the manipulative intent of self-preservation that compelled the entity that inhabited her lovely shell. A dying grunt escaped John's lips as the King ripped the tentacle free of the wound. The giant fell from the air, colliding with the floor of the basket with a thunderous force that rocked the entire structure. The wicker basket swayed precariously, throwing Marcus backwards, near the side where the ladder attached. Leviathan roared again, its bestial rage far more intense than its first bellow. The Queen hissed like king cobra, her romantic features warping into a grotesquely feral snarl as she stared out into the roiling storm around them. Stepping around the King, she slowly

claimed several paces towards Marcus. She halted beside John's upturned death mask.

"You! *You* did this!" she hissed at Marcus. "You brought this upon us! And how I trusted you with our world. You held such promise of becoming our champion, someone we could teach our ways to, an entity capable of ascending beyond the restraints of the preconceived realms to flourish in ours. But you betrayed us!" A piercing note of genuine heartbreak wove through the barbed branches of her spite.

"I have done nothing of the sort! I have not betrayed you!" Marcus knew in his heart, even as he shouted the words, that though he had not brought the wrath of the angels and Leviathan to their perimeter, he had conspired to abduct Angelee. However, as he witnessed the child's abuse, he could not find even a drop of remorse within himself. Now, he only prayed he might somehow find an escape from this madness. This was not *his* war; he wanted no part of it. He never had. "I don't know these angels or how they found this realm. Or why Leviathan is angry."

"So, you know of Leviathan! How did you know it was he who roars now?"

"I don't know what or who Leviathan is." Marcus shook his head frantically, as he felt his innate powers start to bristle from their sedated dormancy in the face of the Queen's threatening presence. "John mentioned his... its name before he attacked you. That is all." Marcus felt the fear leave him in a strange instant; a deadly, grounding calm replaced it with a solid darkness.

"You lie!" the Queen screamed. Raising her boot, she brought it down upon John's upturned face, driving the heel through the bridge of his nose, reducing his rugged, noble features to a cavern of gore above his great golden beard. "Just as John lied." She ripped her bloody boot free of the wound. "He would have murdered me now if I had allowed it. After all I have done for him. Traitor!" She spat upon John's corpse with renewed venom.

Marcus was at a loss. *She's mad. Completely mad*, he thought to himself. *I am not, though. Of that I am certain. I may be damned, but I am not mad.*

The solidity of the wicker wall behind him suddenly brought with it a new level of awareness about the stability of perception and its place in this new plane. A realization sparked that it was not the wall that was "real",

pressing against his back with a grainy impermanence, but he himself that was the point of origin around which all the other components of this “reality” fought to define its self. John had also been such a point of definition, a singular entity, which the instable organic evolution of creation could cling to, enveloping like vines reaching for the sun from the floor of a jungle. Entities such as Marcus and John were the ancient trees around which such vines instinctively climbed. However, left untended and wild, he knew now that those vines would eventually one day suffocate their host leaving only a hollow, sun-starved shell to support their burgeoning weight. It was not he whom had betrayed them as much as the King and Queen had seduced him with ill will. He might have been better off to have kept to his sentence in the oubliettes of Hell. There at least he knew his fate and his favor with the Devil.

“You!” the Queen hissed, but her gaze scorched a point just beyond Marcus’s left shoulder. “You are worst of them all!”

Marcus cautiously swiveled his attention so that he could still keep the Queen in his peripheral vision. Perched upon the wide, woven railing like a gargoyle, Addai silently watched the Queen with scalding, murderous intent.

“Oh, my lady of the realm, you are so right in that,” Addai replied, his lips curling in a vengeful grin. Bits of grass and clods of dirt still clung to his hair and clothes from the King’s attack, though he showed no other outward signs of injury. He leaned forward, his fingers curling around the wicker like skeletal, ashen claws. “But I never pledged my allegiance to you. I am beholden only to myself and myself alone. You are the fool here to ever have accepted the word of a demon.”

Marcus eyed Addai warily. “What are you doing?” he hissed under his breath.

Trust me. I may not have access to my full powers, but I am still nothing to be trifled with. Addai replied silently, leaping down off of the edge of the basket, landing like a cat to rise slowly as if he were reinforcing each limb with strength drawn from another realm.

Addai, if what you spoke was truth and you are indeed my Dark Lord, remember your limitations in your new form. This is not a time for arrogance! Marcus urged. Though he had no proof that Addai’s claims were true, his own instincts prodded him to believe. It provoked an unexplainable but strong protectiveness, drawing on the center of his

being with the force of honor. Addai did not reply except to acknowledge Marcus's suggestion with a small nod.

The Queen stood her ground, her fingers flexing at her sides as her nails began to elongate into talons. Behind her, the funnel of light continued to pour from Angelee, still wrapped within the King's tentacles like a tiny fish in an octopus' deadly embrace. The light illuminated her figure, a halo bleeding out on all sides until her form was shrouded in darkness save for the whites of her eyes, glowing like newborn stars. The intensity of the angelic siege escalated, the roaring, rolling waves of vibrations quaking their very bones as the perimeter of the plane was attacked repeatedly and ceaselessly. The fierceness of the light pouring from Angelee and the King increased until it became blinding.

Marcus raised an arm, squinting to keep hold of the image of the Queen's silhouette. At first he believed his eyes were playing tricks on him, but he quickly realized what he saw was real: the Queen's form was mutating. Her hair began to snake outwards from her skull, the long dark tresses weaving together to become rope-like tentacles that whipped with a virulent violence all their own. The hands that had once curled with a hungry vehemence into claws elongated, webbing separating prehistoric talons of gleaming obsidian wrath. The eyes that had once shown with a perfectly orchestrated, brilliant blue mirth transformed as she blinked once into cold, hard amber with vertical diamond pupils of pitch.

"Foolish, petty demons. You will rue this day if there remains enough of your souls to remember it when I am done with you," she hissed with an eerie, reptilian cadence that caused a slick silver shiver to slither down Marcus's spine.

"Stand with me," Addai called to Marcus. Crackling red energy had begun to ignite along his forearms and legs, arcs of a temporal lightning feverishly dancing up and down his extremities. "I admit I cannot do this alone. Stand with me now or forever stand against me." Addai's tone had deepened, carrying with it a resonance that pierced even the deafening roar of the energy beam conducted by the King, though he seemed to barely whisper the words. Marcus did not hesitate to heed Addai's instruction. Stepping up beside his fellow demon he drew a deep breath, dropping his guard slightly to reach out to Addai's aura, opening a feed between the two of them to combine their powers. As the connection established itself the arcs of red lightning leapt from Addai's frame to Marcus, eagerly seeking out the additional source of fuel. The crackling electricity danced

up Marcus's arm, spreading out over his chest and down the rest of his body until it appeared he stood amidst a live Mobius coil.

Addai began to chant, a harsh, visceral spitting of verses in a language far older than the most ancient of Latin words. He allowed himself to be drawn into the recital, the power of each syllable echoing like a gong through his being until the very molecules that bound his soul to his flesh began to vibrate with a nuclear intensity. A blissful incineration escalated from the core of his being until he was sure nothing remained of his physical self, that all he was and might ever become had been dismantled into a pure fiery energy to be consumed by Addai.

Addai raised his right hand, palm flat and facing the Queen; Marcus felt himself mimic the movement instinctively as if he were merely a reflection in a mirror, tethered entirely to the movements of its master. Marcus could barely see the Queen now through the red fire of the electrical storm enveloping him, except for the harsh outline of her black silhouette and brilliant glowing whites of her eyes. The language of Addai's sentences altered, slipping from one language to another from verse to verse calling upon dark forces more ancient than any form of conscious summoning could muster until finally he reached Latin once again.

The Queen began to squirm; her feral growls become sharp shrieks as she twitched sporadically like a marionette on tangled metal strings. With a howl she lunged awkwardly forward towards Addai as trying to break free of invisible manacles, her mouth open to reveal rows of razor-sharp shark's fangs where human teeth had been. Her attack was halted in mid-leap as Addai's voice rose. Throwing her head back she unleashed another blood-curdling howl of painful frustration, the snaking tendrils of her hair lashing about her face like squid tentacles. Marcus could feel Addai pulling on his energy with a renewed zeal until Marcus thought he might actually find himself sucked directly into Addai's core. The Queen's body began to shake, twitching and vibrating as if caught in a centrifuge, her screams skipping and scratching, as if echoing down long cement corridors of reason from different angles.

Marcus fought to remain conscious, peering through the arcs of red lightning at the Queen as she viscosly fought against Addai's attack. Suddenly the vibrations ceased, her arms shooting out to each side, her head thrown back as if impaled upon a spike. A dull, wet shredding sound creaked and groaned beneath a horrific wail that wound up from her throat and seeped out into the roiling atmosphere beyond. Marcus watched as

the Queen's limbs began to separate, the very flesh binding her physical manifestation stretching until it tore in long strands that seemed somehow interlaced with the poly fibers of the black garments she wore. Blood poured from her body, soaking the wicker beneath, entrails seeping from the rifts opening in her torso. The hollow sound of bones cracking as her chest plate separated, each rib shattering, one by one, seemed to echo on for an eternity, though distantly Marcus knew what he witnessed was happening in only a few small moments of time.

"Satanas vobiscum." *Satan be with you.* As Addai spoke his final, insulting verse, the Queen's physical form shattered completely, obliterated beyond recognition until even the blood itself vaporized to ash, blown away in the cyclone wind whipping about the perimeter of the balloon.

While his Queen had been caught in Addai's rage, the King had appeared oblivious, completely immersed within the cocoon he had created about himself and Angelee to harness her power. At the moment of the Queen's death, the energy stream pouring from Angelee faltered, flickering and dying in an instant. The King's tentacles ripped free of the young girl as he shrieked with rage, the gelatinous caul that had enveloped them shredded. Angelee, unconscious, fell to the floor of the basket in a broken heap, her limbs bruised a dark purple from the King's vise-like grip, her flesh ghostly. The King threw his head back and howled a rage so exquisitely painful that it pierced Marcus's dark heart through the electrical storm obscuring his senses.

Addai took an aggressive step forward; as his leg lifted and fell with a defiant hostility, so did Marcus mimic the movement involuntarily, though with a drunken purpose that left him nearly on the verge of giddy insanity. The King's features no longer even remotely resembled the perfection of masculinity he had originally flaunted. Standing a head above Addai and Marcus the monstrous entity glowered down at them behind eyes of brilliant reptilian gold, his face a grotesque blend of amphibious and humanoid as if a crocodile had successfully mated with a mortal to birth a species tempered by torment and bred specifically for war. Subconsciously Marcus felt his instinct to flee rise in earnest until it screamed in his ears, but to no avail. His submission had left him irrevocably tethered to Addai.

"*Run!*" he screamed to Addai through the storm even as he felt Addai raise their arms towards the sky as if summoning the roiling clouds around them to descend upon the beast before them.

Oh, not now, my boy. We're only getting started! Addai replied smugly.

In the absence of the blinding stream of yellow-white light the churning clouds around them seemed impossibly dark, cold and forbidding despite the incessant chaos of arcing lightning illuminating them from within as the wind toyed mercilessly with the balloon. The King charged forward ready to destroy the two demons before him in a blind quest for revenge, but before he had closed the gap, the sky ripped asunder in a piercing clap of thunder that shook the very core of the realm itself, threatening to destroy the fabric that bound it to existence. With a gasp Addai faltered, staggering back to catch his balance as the basket tilted drastically to one side like a ship about to capsize.

Angelee's slack form skidded across the wicker, colliding with the far wall like battered rag doll. The feed between Addai and Marcus severed with painful static snap that tossed Marcus backwards against the wall behind him. With a gasp he clung to the edge, frantically grasping hold of the top of the rope ladder tethered there to keep from skidding across the floor. An acrid burning scent filled his nostrils as he fought to orient himself, his eyes darting over the boiling atmosphere and back to the interior of the balloon that now swung nauseatingly to the other side as another brutal gust caught hold of the structure. He could barely keep himself from shaking, his teeth on edge as if he had bit hard into a sheet of aluminum, every nerve ending throughout his body painfully electrocuted.

You have to get it together, Marcus! he chided himself. Ten feet away, the King managed to stand his ground, bracing himself with a surfer's stance. His attention was no longer on Addai and Marcus but directed at the sky in the direction he had projected the beam of light. Marcus followed his line of sight and felt his blood run cold. A rift had formed within the bank of clouds as if a scythe had cleaved a deep valley through them revealing a foreboding darkness beyond. Absent of even the faintest glimmer of stars, it was pure and infinite in its heaviness, a solidity that seemed to have its own gravitational pull like the center of a black hole.

A whisper of intuition convinced Marcus that this absence of everything was a precursor to everything, a totality that drew upon his soul as much as he longed to absorb its secrets. Mesmerized he watched as the hull of massive ship of gleaming black wood emerged from the pitch, its oars creaking in a determined time above the thunder and lightning that continued to roar about them. A halo of icy blue light from a series of black iron lanterns illuminated the cloud banks to either side. Marcus

shrank back as the utterly consuming urge to flee began to screech across his mind.

“Marcus!” Addai’s cry pierced the white noise of his own panic. With a startled gasp, he ripped his attention away from the encroaching ship, casting a glance over his shoulder towards the far side of the basket. There only one hand was visible, ashen skeletal fingers barely clinging to the woven edge like the bones of a dead sailor. Addai had been thrown overboard in the wake of the last gust of wind and now dangled precariously hundreds of feet above the sea of grasslands. If it had been any other demon Marcus might have simply let him slip to his death in light of his own survival. However, in the moment in which Marcus and Addai’s auras had interconnected, he realized the undeniable truth in Addai’s claim to be Lucifer. Though the details of how such a state of being for the Devil had come to pass, he felt the raw potential of the power that resided within the corporeal form of “Addai” and the frustrated rage spawned of the malicious denial of his full abilities.

Casting another frantic glance about the basket, he caught sight of the King a few feet away. The creature’s back was to Marcus now, standing guard over the unrecognizable remains of his former love as he defiantly faced the oncoming ship. His shoulders heaved as he hissed and snarled like a Komodo dragon. In his arms he clutched Angelee’s unconscious body like a shield, wrapped in his dark tentacles. Marcus cringed at the sight of the frail child in the grip of such a monster. If it were any other beast Marcus might have considered launching an attack, but it had taken the combined powers of both Addai and he to destroy the Queen. In his weakened state he knew, without a doubt, that it would be pure suicide to confront the King without Addai’s help.

The King roared again, tightening the tentacles about Angelee’s body as he aimed her like a cannon towards the hull of the hovering ship inching its way through the sky towards them. Marcus could feel the atmosphere beginning to electrify again as the King tapped into Angelee’s powers like sunlight focused through a magnifying glass. A brilliant glow began to emerge from Angelee’s chest as her head lolled back, draping over the King’s arm. Weakly she opened her eyes and met Marcus’s. Soundlessly her lips formed the words “help me” before her eyes rolled back in her skull until they showed only the whites.

I would if I could, child, Marcus thought, *but there will be no hero here today, I fear.* He hung his head in disgust.

Suddenly, a metallic hiss sliced through the storm. Marcus's head snapped up again just in time to witness a massive silver harpoon erupt through the King's chest, just below his collarbone, beneath his left shoulder. The gore-streaked tip anchored itself, tugging upon the King with such force that the creature released his hold on Angelee, tentacles unfurling and retreating into his body. He staggered forward a pace, stepping over Angelee's crumpled form, barely missing her head with his massive, reptilian foot, before bracing himself again. Blood seeping down his chest and back, the King wrapped his hands about the line attached to the harpoon as if he meant to pull the ship towards him.

Marcus took his window of opportunity and released his hold on the top of the rope ladder, sprinting to the far wall where Addai dangled. Grabbing hold of Addai's forearm, he bent over the edge of the basket, "Take my hand," he extended his right hand as far as he could without tumbling over the side himself.

Addai looked up at Marcus, a psychotic gleam in his eyes and released a howl of laughter, "I haven't felt this alive in eons!" he grinned up at Marcus.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?" Marcus shouted over the storm. "Take my hand!"

Addai's grin faded slightly. With a grunt he swung his free arm upwards against the currents of wind. "You should live more precariously, Marcus," he said as he hoisted himself over the edge of the basket with Marcus's assistance.

"Precariously?" Marcus spat. "Precariously!"

Addai waved him to silence as he stood, watching the King struggle against the barbs of the harpoon. "He's far stronger than I ever thought possible. It's a pity he has to die, but he'll never submit. He'll never be controllable enough to fit into the cosmos without threatening our very existence."

Another singing silver harpoon sliced through the air, arcing down from the deck of the ship to plunge through the King's abdomen. This time the King faltered, staggering forward a pace before dropping to one knee with a harrowing wail like a wolf caught in a poacher's trap.

"Shouldn't we get out of here? If there are indeed angels aboard that ship?" Marcus whispered nervously, his eyes darting from the King to

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Addai and back again, tracing the silver fishing lines back to where they disappeared over the bow of the ship.

"I want the girl more than ever," Addai said, "I understand now why they have been coveting her. We need her, in Hell. She will be a powerful tool," his voice dropped until Marcus could barely hear him over the storm and the King's bellowing, "She may be what I need to subdue Belial from within this plane. We can't leave without her."

Marcus glanced over at Angelee where she lay silent and pale, her exposed flesh covered in bruises, beneath the King. He was not sure if Addai was suggesting that Marcus retrieve her, or whether they would attempt the feat together. Either way, if they were successful in escaping to the ground below with Angelee in tow, where would they go? Certainly the angels would be able to hunt them down? He shrugged. What did he have to lose?

He pushed away from the edge of the basket and took a cautious step towards the child, his eyes unwaveringly, trained on the back of the King's head. He was sure there was no way the King could reach him, bound as he was by the two harpoons which seemed to have weakened him little, Marcus bolted towards Angelee. As he bent to scoop her featherweight form into his arms, he realized his poor judgment as the sound of one of the metal lines snapping caused him to stagger backwards, losing his footing in a moment of pure terror. In a flash the King, still tethered by the harpoon through his shoulder, whirled around to reach one massive talon-tipped hand out towards Marcus, grabbing him by the shirt collar and yanking him forward so that he nearly dropped Angelee. He could not tell if he had screamed for the world around him blurred into blind, racing instinct as the King lifted him from the ground, swinging him around like a kite before pulling him in close before his fearsome reptilian face.

Marcus tried to focus, to draw upon his powers to project himself elsewhere or combat the monster before him, but found he could not slow his racing mind. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the King raise his free hand, forming a sinister claw as if he meant to disembowel Marcus with his next move. Marcus opened his mouth to call to Addai, but as his lips parted another metallic hiss pierced the chaos followed by the sickening sound of leathery flesh being punctured as a newly launched harpoon found its target. With a howl the King dropped Marcus, doubling over in agony. This time, it appeared, his wounds were beginning to overtake him. Gasping,

Marcus scrambled backwards towards where Addai stood, Angelee still clutched against his chest with one arm.

“Where the hell were you?” Marcus screamed at Addai who watched the hull of the black ship, transfixed as its shadow began to overtake the balloon. Addai did not respond, his expression grave. Marcus followed Addai’s line of sight up to the railing of the ship, which was now more clearly visible. Three figures stood upon the bow, staring down at them with an undisguised hate in their eyes. “What is it?”

“I believe this is where we make our exit,” Addai replied. “That is, if we want to live.”

“Wait.” Marcus grabbed Addai’s boot as if to halt him. With a grunt he hauled himself to his feet, repositioning Angelee in his arms. He simply could not believe his eyes. “I know her,” he whispered in disbelief as the recognition of Brenda settled in with a cold, dizzying dread. A flood of emotions he had not allowed himself to experience since Belial’s acquisition of her soul threatened to drown him. “What is *she* doing here? With them?”

“That is a very good question,” Addai snarled. “That whore! She’s betrayed all of us. She’s betrayed *me*! There are no tortures in Hell painful enough to punish such treason!”

Addai’s words were lost on Marcus as he stared up into Brenda’s face, waiting for the moment when she recognized him as well. Had he changed so greatly that he no longer even remotely resembled the man he had once been? Her eyes met his, a flicker of trembling confusion skittering across their dark surfaces, her brows knitting as she tried to recall a memory that had faded to near nothingness. The urge to call to her welled up within him unexpectedly with such force that he fought to stifle himself. Instead, he took a step back behind Addai, sheltering Angelee between the two demonic entities as if it might somehow protect her.

To Brenda’s right, a ghostly, thin man with long raven’s wing hair, dressed in long black robes, towered over her. In his hands he clutched what appeared to be a massive black metal longbow customized with a deep-sea fishing reel. He grinned as he stared down at his captured prey, the King, winding the reel slowly to cause the King increasing degrees of pain. To Brenda’s right, a Herculean man dressed in gleaming gold armor, with dark curling hair, watched the chaos below with a bloodthirsty glee. He flexed his broad shoulders, unleashing an expanse of powerful wings in a rush that could be heard even above the howling winds.

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“Michael!” Addai snarled, his hands curling into shaking fists at his side.

Without a word Marcus grabbed hold of Addai’s arm and yanked him towards the ladder; every aspect of his being screamed that this was their last chance to flee. “You cannot do battle with them. Not in this form!” he shouted.

Addai ripped his arm from Marcus’s hold, grabbing him by the shirt collar to slam him against the wicker wall with enough force to knock the wind momentarily from Marcus’s lungs. “You forget who I am!”

“No!” Marcus gasped. “I urge you to flee because I *know* who you are, my lord.” The sound of wings beating against the storm currents was deafening, blending with the thunder of Marcus’s pulse in his ears until he thought his eardrums might explode. “I cannot let you die this day.”

“He will not die.” A deep resounding man’s voice preceded a heavy whoosh of wings descending and folding as sandaled feet found their stance on the far side of the basket. “As much as I would love to be the one to deliver such a sentence.” Michael drew himself to his full height. In his hands he gripped a gold Gatling gun of the finest craftsmanship Marcus had ever seen, its surface intricately engraved and polished until it glowed like the sun. Michael’s attention was not focused upon Addai and Marcus but was wholly captivated by the King, who had sunk to his knees, buckling over from blood loss.

“You!” Michael hissed. “How I’ve dreamed of this day, of seeing you restrained and beaten like the beast you are!” He stepped forward towards the King, his face contorted in a snarl of rage and disgust. “Too many angels died an ignoble death at your hands!” Michael raised the gun high over his head, swinging it down to slam the butte with a brutal force across the King’s cheekbone. A dull crack of bone shattering beneath the blow sent the King down upon his hands, hunched over and shaking as he tried weakly to wrench himself free of the harpoons, but to no avail. Every small movement only further rendered his flesh, opening the wounds to stain the wicker around him black as if his very shadow were bleeding.

Michael bent down, lowering his voice as he spat his vengeance upon the King, “You destroyed our Governess of Purgatory. You took Mona from us—from me! My hate for you is unspeakable. I hate you as no angel should ever come to hate anything in existence, and now you shall pay for your crimes. May whatever soul you have rot in the deepest, darkest

depths of Hell!” Stepping back a pace, he lifted his gun and opened fire, unleashing a deafening rain of flame into the King.

The King’s arms flailed about him and his body spasmed violently as the merciless bullets of fire ripped through him, shredding his flesh until he was nearly unrecognizable amidst the halo of blinding gold light. With a growl, Michael ceased the execution, lowering his gun back to his side to survey his kill. His shoulders rose and fell as his chest heaved with heavy breaths. The Archangel’s eyes wandered over the charred mass of leathery gore and broken exposed bones at his feet, the acrid stench of burnt flesh filling the air. The color had drained from Michael’s strong tan face, a strange bewildered travesty filling his eyes that Marcus found more deeply disturbing than any monstrosity he had witnessed in a long time.

He turned and hoisted Angelee over one shoulder. Leaning over the edge of the basket he surveyed the rope ladder. Vertigo caught hold of him as his eyes wandered down its twisting spiraling length to where it disappeared into the lightning illuminated clouds. There was no way he could make the climb down with Angelee in his arms. If he could not summon the power to project himself elsewhere, he was stranded and at the mercy of the angel before him.

He turned towards Addai, who stood like a statue watching the discomposed Archangel with a haunting mixture of spite and respect. “What do you suggest we do now?” he whispered.

“You will give the child to us,” the cold ink of another man’s voice slithered through the sound of singed flesh still sizzling as it slowly cooled. Thunder rolled across the sky, some miles away, as the storm began to recede.

Marcus turned to face the new entity, the black-robed angel he had seen aboard the ship. At his side Brenda stood, clothed in a long dark gown, her brown hair pushed back from her beautiful face by an elaborate pair of bronze and amethyst crystal goggles. She stared at Marcus, her mouth slightly agape, her lower lip trembling.

“Is that...Angelee?” Brenda asked in a stunned amazement. When Marcus did not respond except to hold her gaze steadily she appeared to come to her own conclusions. “Marcus, please. Give me my child.” She pleaded softly, as if terrified to make any sudden moves towards him.

“We intend to do no such thing, Brenda,” Addai addressed her sharply.

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Brenda's eyes sliced hard and cold towards Addai, her mouth closing into a hard angry line. "And just who are you to say such things to me? You will give me my child, demon!"

Addai rolled his eyes, shaking his head as if he pitied her. Looking up at the towering dark figure beside Brenda, he folded his arms over his chest as he spoke, "Sariel. It has been a long time."

"Indeed." Sariel watched Addai with curiosity, as if he were gauging the limitations of his foe's new form. His hand rested loosely over the pommel of his sword, which was affixed to his belt at his side. Ghostly black flames eagerly danced about his hand as if begging him to unsheathe the weapon. "I have to admit, I'm a bit disappointed."

"You and I both," Addai replied, though his tone delivered the words as a warning more than a mere agreement. "As much as it would delight me to no end to battle you now, I believe it would be in all the realms' best interest if we simply walk away. The rulers of this realm have been eliminated and soon this plane will be dismantled and repurposed. There are far more immediate and grave matters I must attend to," he said cryptically.

Michael broke out of his trance with a staccato burst of laughter, "You expect us to just let you go free?"

Addai stared at Michael, "You cannot kill me. It would undo the balance of existence and He would not be pleased, I assure you." A slow, cruel smile crept across Addai's mouth.

Michael and Sariel exchanged glances. Sariel stepped forward towards Addai, "Oh, we won't kill you."

Addai made a choking noise as if gripped by a sudden pain. Gritting his teeth he snarled, shaking as he battled some unseen force with all of his might until his knees buckled beneath him. "What are you doing?" he demanded in a gasping, rasping hiss. "Sariel, release me!"

"I cannot tell if I am overjoyed or saddened to see you so weak. What a foolish idea to think Belial would not betray you," Sariel said as he stared down at Addai. "Divvying up your powers was a very unwise decision. And all over Purgatory," he clicked his tongue softly.

"Marcus! Help me!" Addai commanded. "You must...help me!"

Marcus felt paralyzed, his eyes darting back and forth between Sariel, Brenda and Addai. Even if he somehow escaped with Angelee, if he did not help Addai now he might face the same fate he had dreaded all along—or worse. However, his instincts told him that interfering with Sariel

and Michael would result in complete and utter oblivion, beyond mere damnation.

“Give me my child,” Brenda’s voice broke through the torrent of his thoughts. Tears had begun to well up in her eyes. “Please...”

Before he could answer a cataclysmic roar rolled across the plane; a sonic boom shaking the basket with an epic earthquake force. All aboard staggered haphazardly. Brenda stumbled forward nearly colliding with Marcus. Catching her, he pulled her against his side where Angelee was still draped over his shoulder, limp and lifeless as a corpse, though he could still feel her heartbeat faintly against his back. For a moment he could do nothing but stare into Brenda’s eyes in wonderment. Reaching up he touched the inverted pentagram scar between her brows. As his fingers made contact with her skin she closed her eyes and bowed her head.

“Marcus, I’m so very sorry,” she whispered.

“Apologies are worthless at this point. We all have something to be sorry for.” Marcus replied and lifted his gaze once again to the sky.

Sariel whirled around to meet the source of the sound, staring out into the veil of pitch beyond the clouds where his ship had parted them in a deep ravine. Addai continued to struggle against Sariel’s will, trying desperately to pull himself to his feet, to no avail. Buffering himself against the wind, Michael made his way to Sariel’s side, his face dark and uncertain. He began to speak, but Sariel cut him short.

His lips curling into a feral madman’s grin, Sariel answered Michael’s unvoiced question, “Yes, it’s him. Something has angered him greatly.” Before another word could be spoken, the darkness beyond the ship flexed and bowed as if a massive eel moved just beneath its surface. Midnight blue and purple slithered with a serpentine gravity of its own pulling towards it the light of the new plane as if it meant to drink in its warmth while slowly destroying its life. Sariel reached for his sword, slowly unsheathing it in a sinister shriek of metal and howling banshee black flames.

“Stars,” Marcus whispered as if gripped by a fever dream.

“What?” Brenda said, her voice shaking with fear as she watched Sariel and Michael face the approaching Leviathan. “What stars? There *are* no stars.”

“Yes. Where are they? I need to see them.” Marcus searched the void beyond the cloud, trying desperately not to allow his fear of the encroaching battle consume his reason. Memories of the Queen as she stood upon the

edge of the plane, drawing down the light of the “stars” she had created to launch them into another plane of existence flashed before his mind’s eye, as crisp and solid as if he stood there amongst the bowing fields of grass once again. They had once claimed Marcus possessed abilities beyond any other entity they had encountered, that he alone had been able to command the line of energy and navigate through time and space to Purgatory. If he had done it once, he could do it again, but first he had to find a star and draw it to himself, somehow, some way.

The darkness flexed and moaned. From its pulsing depths emerged a shape, clawing and swimming its way out of the murk with powerful strokes of aggression. Even as they watched, a massive head emerged like a dragon rising from the depths of the sea, jaws opening to reveal obsidian fangs as long and wide as the tallest of redwood trees.

“Sariel, we need to leave. Now!” Michael shouted at his fellow Archangel. “This is more than I was prepared for. We cannot take on Leviathan by ourselves!”

“Perhaps you can’t,” Sariel continued to stare directly at the approaching beast, his sword drawn and at the ready. “But I will and happily.”

“You’re just as mad as ever, aren’t you, my brother?” Michael stared at Sariel in disbelief. When Sariel did not respond, Michael uncased his wings in a violent burst that caused Sariel’s robes to flutter about him as the flames around his sword roared to a renewed height at the influx of hostile energy. “Very well. You force me to call upon the others. Raphael will not be pleased.” Michael spat as he launched himself upwards with a lightning speed, disappearing from sight in the blink of an eye.

“He never is,” Sariel whispered aloud.

“It’s coming for us, isn’t it?” Brenda’s voice shook with pure terror, though she allowed herself to remain in Marcus’s embrace.

“I think it was coming for the King and Queen, but now, anything in its way will pay for their crimes.” Marcus replied, still determinedly searching the void for any sign of a star. “Damn it! Where are the stars?”

As if awakening from a dream Brenda pulled sharply away from Marcus, reaching up to yank the goggles from atop her head. “Here, put these on.”

“What are they?” Marcus eyed them suspiciously, still untrusting of Brenda and her newfound alliances.

“You want stars? Trust me, you’ll see them and more with these.” She shoved the goggles towards him. Marcus slipped the goggles over his eyes. With a gasp he staggered back a pace as the universe exploded before him in a myriad array of quantum reality facets living, dying and expanding within the darkness of the void beyond the clouds. The cloud banks themselves appeared to churn with a greater fierceness as the minute molecules that bound them, agitated and destructive, collided with one another in a dizzying atomic dance, appearing both one-dimensional and four-dimensional at the same time.

His heart froze cold in his chest as Leviathan’s true face emerged from the deep, no longer merely an abstract aspect of time and space itself, but a true and separate identity that was the all of the void and yet somehow completely independent. Somehow, its master and fate still bound eternally to it on the most microscopic elemental level. More majestic and terrifying than any sea dragon plucked from the tales of old, Leviathan possessed not only an aquatic fierceness but also a jaguar quality as if each stroke propelling him forward through the void left deep, primal footprints in a realm independent of anything man, angel or demon could ascend or descend to. Leviathan broke through the cloud banks, reaching out with a mighty paw to swipe a deep gouge in the side of Sariel’s ship. Screams erupted from the ship’s deck as men plunged to their deaths, tiny shadowy forms of flailing limbs tumbling over one another between broken shards of the black hull like ash raining down from a wild fire.

“Noooooooo!” Sariel screamed. Turning back to Addai he stormed towards the Devil and thrust both hands out before him as if shoving an assailant away from him. “If you love Purgatory so much, why don’t you spend a little more time there?” Sariel roared, sending a wave of energy towards Addai.

In an instant Addai was sucked backwards as if pulled into the heart of a cyclone, his scream dying in an echoing wail as he vanished from sight with a snap of white light. Turning back towards the fray, Sariel rushed towards the mayhem, black wings exploding from his shoulder blades as he leapt into the air.

“Find the star. Find the star. Find the star,” Marcus chanted to himself between gasped breaths as he tried frantically to calm himself enough to focus.

Revenge

Brenda screamed at the sight of the Leviathan's attack, whirling around to grab hold of Marcus's jacket with both hands, "What are you gibbering about? What star? Please, Marcus! We're going to die!"

"We can't die," he whispered as he found his center beyond the numbness of panic. He forced his attention past the gargantuan beast laying siege upon Sariel's ship and the harrowing sight and sound of men in their last braying brave struggle for survival. "We're already dead."

Death was not permanent, he realized, just as life was not permanent. Permanency held no place in the universe. Yet everything had a will to *live*. In the moment of his epiphany he spied what he had been searching for, a cluster of brilliant white pinpoints so easily mistaken for stars that they themselves perhaps burned more brightly than even a galaxy could cultivate. Mimicking the maneuvers of the Queen as he remembered them he raised his hand and pointed his fingers towards the constellation as if aiming through the sight of a gun. Drawing a deep breath he commanded every aspect of himself to will the coming of two of those points.

Distantly he was aware of Brenda at his side, frantically speaking to him as the battle raged on above between Leviathan and Sariel's ship. In his concentration, the noise faded to a dull roar, his heart slowing as he found a strange communion with the stars he beckoned. The lights twitched, expanding slightly before beginning to intensify as they drew nearer. Marcus struggled to remain focused amidst the chaos, anchoring himself upon the beacons. Painful seconds ticked by as the familiar lengths of connective quantum energy spiraled towards them, unfolding and twisting like lengths of illuminated silk past Leviathan and the ship he sought to destroy. These were different from the ones the Queen had summoned, coarser and, yet far more beautiful in their hard-edged construction than the gelatinous and pliable ones that had given them passage to Purgatory. Where they were anchored to, Marcus could only imagine, but his instinct told him that anywhere would be better than the plane they were in at the moment.

"Look there!" he commanded Brenda, waiting until she ceased her fretting to turn towards the lights. "They are bands of energy connected to alternate worlds. As soon as they are within grasp, take hold, wrap them about your wrist. We will not have time for formal instruction. Follow my lead and, for all else's sake, don't let go!"

Brenda's face was awash in confusion, but she willingly followed Marcus's lead, reaching out her hands to welcome the streams as they

bore down upon them with a lightning speed. Beyond and beneath the energy streams Sariel and Leviathan's sparing match waged on. They were seemingly unconcerned with Marcus and Brenda, at least for the moment. Brenda watched Marcus, mimicking his every movement as he wrapped the strands about his wrist and readied himself for flight. Her eyes momentarily darted from Angelee's inert form to his gaze as he emoted motherly concern punctured the immediacy of their escape.

"I can feel her heart beat still," Marcus reassured her. "She's strong. Stronger, perhaps, than any of us. Now," he turned his attention back to the planar extension wrapped about his forearm. "It's time for us to leave this battlefield."



-THE END-

ABOUT AUTHOR & ARTIST GABRIELLE FAUST



Gabrielle Faust's diverse talents have allowed her to pursue an eclectic career as an illustrator, speculative fiction author, and leading industry entertainment critic. Her first published collection of poetry, *Before Icarus*, *After Achilles*, was released in 2005.

In 2008, Faust released *From Deep Within the Earth*, the first book from her post-apocalyptic vampire trilogy, *Eternal Vigilance*. In October of 2008, Gabrielle was the Guest of Honor at the "Queen of the Damned" Vampire Ball in New Orleans, an annual event produced by the Anne Rice Vampire Lestat Fan Club. The second book in the trilogy, *The Death of Illusions*, was released in 2009, and Ms. Faust appeared as a Special Guest at the Endless Night Festival alongside author Charlaine Harris, where she was dubbed "New Orleans Vampire Royalty" at the "Tru Blood & Gold" Vampire Ball. Gabrielle's second collection of poetry, *Crossroads*, was also released in 2009.

In 2010, the third novel in the trilogy, *Bound in Blood*, was released and Ms. Faust appeared as a Special Author Guest at the "Memnoch: The Resurrection" Vampire Ball, as well as the New Orleans UnDeadCon. Future signings and appearances can be found at Gabrielle's website, www.gabriellefaust.com.



ABOUT AUTHOR SOLOMON SCHNEIDER



Solomon Schneider is a neo-folk singer/songwriter and co-author of the novel *Revenge* with Gabrielle Faust. Born in Santa Barbara, California and raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Schneider is obsessed with the concept of adventure and the odd manifestations of time and space it gives rise to. He is a philosopher with Ph.D. level training who left academia during the dissertation process, believing that his area of research had to be explored artistically rather than theoretically.

At the end of 2010, he released his first album of adventure songs, *Visceraline*, and moved into his Buick Roadmaster station wagon to pursue a life of full-time touring. He joined forces with nationally acclaimed road-warrior poet Seth Walker, and, as a multi-instrumentalist, became a noteworthy presence on the spoken word scene. Playing cello, banjo and guitar, Solomon has been booked as a featured performer at Da Poetry Lounge in Los Angeles, The Green Mill in Chicago, the Nuyorican in New York City and Yale University.

Schneider also works as a composer, arranger and producer. Albums he has worked on include the 2010 Austin, Texas Poetry Slam Team album, Lauren Begent's *Shadows over Bones*, and Gabrielle Faust's forthcoming album, *The Killing Tree*. He intends to roam the country in his Roadmaster indefinitely, injecting metaphysical madness into art wherever he may go. Find out more at his website, www.dearlioness.com.



ABOUT COVER ARTIST IGOR CHUNIN



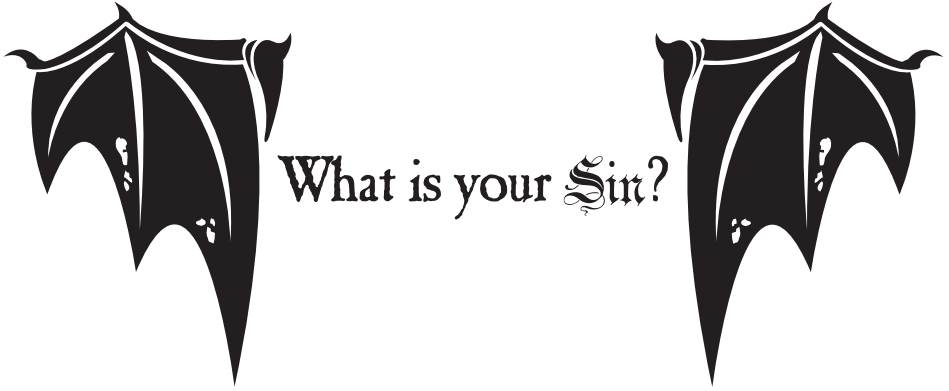
Born in 1990 in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, Igor Chunin, a.k.a. “Procrust”, currently lives and studies in Dublin, Ireland, where he is currently earning his PhD degree in Physics. Apart from running experiments, mentoring undergraduates, and worrying about research publications, he lives a parallel life as a self-taught, digital artist.

Procrust has been drawing and painting ever since he got his first crayons as a child and maintains that, outside of his academic career, art will always be an important and essential part of his life.

Procrust’s distinctive personal style employs dark symbolism, and spiritual and religious themes to reflect a challenging and chaotic modern life, as well as the problems and decay of human nature. His works emanate an otherworldly magic within a disturbing atmosphere. Apocalyptic landscapes, angels and demons are some of his most common themes.

More examples of Igor Chunin’s work can be found at www.deviantart.com/procrust.





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