

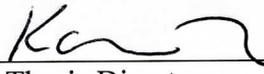
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Luce

Senior Paper

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His fist connects with my jaw and church bells start ringing in my ears. The sound hits a sweet frequency somewhere between Heaven and Miami-Dade county as my knees crack against the concrete. Blood blossoms in my mouth like spilled wine.

I heave in a breath, scraped palms and bruised lips pulsing with pain, and tip my head back. Someone is repeating my oldest name. I shut them out, letting the dirty moonlight spill over my throat. The constellations spin above my head, and as my vision threatens to give out, the stars look like music notes ripped from their measures and scattered through the sky.

“You know I won’t answer to that,” I rasp, spitting out blood. The name is repeated, softly this time, and the muscles in my neck tighten. I attempt to pull myself up off the ground, but I’ve underestimated how disoriented I am and only manage to stagger into a position of genuflection. I dig my fingernails into the asphalt, hissing in irritation.

“Do you really expect me to call you by some title you cherry-picked from the Bible?” The voice asks. “I would have thought we were beyond that.”

The sound of footfalls approach me, and I lift my chin up to face my assailant. He’s gotten more tattoos since being stationed in Gaza, some in Hebrew, some in Arabic, and there are new lines around his dark eyes, but he’s still Michael, broad-shouldered Michael with his rough hands and austere features. He’s practically thrumming with power, and as he looks down on me, he’s swathed in a light more vibrant than all of Florida’s neon signs put together.

I blink, and when I open my eyes the light has been smothered entirely.

“Please don’t resist,” Michael says. “I would prefer not to use force.”

If there's one thing I hate, it's going quietly. I try to kick out one of his knees but Michael sidesteps and hoists me up by the collar of my beer-splashed shirt. The asphalt disappearing out from under me is disorienting, and I stagger a bit as I am yanked to my feet.

"You get the fuck off me," I spit. "I didn't call for you. No one asked you to break down the door on my life!"

I've been laying low for the last week, raking in tips at a piano lounge by winking at lonely barflies and plucking out the chords to "Layla". Not my ideal situation, but it kept me out of the cosmic limelight. At least I thought it did. Apparently the universe and its agents are committed to making me as miserable as possible.

I thrash and Michael releases me.

"I didn't come all the way out here to fight you." He says.

I smear the blood from my mouth, defiantly drawing myself up to my full height. Michael stands an easy head taller than me, but I'm committed to conducting myself with as much dignity as possible. He doesn't need to know how much I want to run.

"Then why did you come?"

"You tell me. There's rumors swirling around about administrative change-ups in your department and the next thing I know you're working at some dive in Florida? I had to use every ounce of pull I have to pry your location out of the hands of people who were eager to bring back your head."

"Oh my God!" I groan, pressing the heels of my palms to my eyes. "Don't do me any fucking favors, Michael! If I have to sit through your lecturing and self-martyring one more time I swear I'm going to hurl myself into traffic!"

“You don’t seem to understand what a risk I’m taking here, how bad begging for this case made me look-”

“All you ever care about is how you look! How I look, how we look; it’s not fucking real! There are more important things!”

“Then be real with me! I’m not happy to see you either, but I’m doing my damndest to be civil. So do me the courtesy of answering my question.”

I seeth for a moment, then spit on the ground and say,

“I’m not breaking any cosmic law by slumming it in the States. I do it all the time.”

“I know that. But you’re usually just running down your company credit card on roulette and plane tickets. This is different.”

I cross my arms and kick at the edge of a dumpster with a patent leather shoe. Michael approached me slowly, his voice more soft and conspiratorial than either of us had heard for a long time.

“What happened, Lucifer?”

“There was a mutiny.”

“What?”

“There was a *mu-ti-ny*,” I announce.

“Drop the attitude. You’ve got one minute to explain yourself properly or else I’m deferring to protocol and calling in reinforcements. I don’t want-”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t want to have to do that,” I say, fishing a half-crushed pack of Virginia Slims out of my pocket and placing one between my teeth. A migraine is blooming between my eyes. “I’ve heard this fucking tune before. You haven’t changed at all.”

I rifle through my pockets, searching for my Zippo, and turn out the pockets of my jeans before realizing that it was probably thrown from my person when I got shoved out of the bar a few minutes ago.

Michael reaches into his pocket and produces a pack of matches, offering it to me like an olive branch. I glower at him for a moment, hips cocked at a dour angle, then acquiesce with a nod. Michael strikes a match on the wall and lights my cigarette. My eyes never leave his face. I've been vying for his blood for years, I've spent hours imagining how I would make him suffer if I ever saw him again, but I didn't really anticipate being in such a sorry state when that happened. It catches me off guard, and now sliding into a bit of our old familiarity, antagonistic as it is, presents itself as the easiest option. Maybe that's the way it always is with family.

Smoke as heady and spiced as frankincense floods my mouth.

"You look terrible, by the way," I mutter around my cigarette. "You've aged."

A smile touches the corner of Michael's lips, a for a moment it looks as though he's going to join in with the banter. Instead, he reaches for his cellphone.

"Who are you calling?" I ask.

"The only person with the jurisdiction to advise me on what to do with you."

I almost drop my cigarette. It's difficult to speak through the panic strumming at my nerves.

"You can't-"

"You don't get an opinion," Michael retorts. "I'm calling her in, and as soon as I'm off the phone you're going to explain yourself in excruciating detail with sources cited, and then you're going to do it again as soon as she shows up. You'd better start getting your story straight."

My shoulders slump and I nurse my cigarette in sullen silence. I could try to run, of course, but he would just find me, and I don't really have anywhere to go at present. Shitty as it is, I'm at the end of every rope I ever had.

"I'm not apologizing for a damn thing," I snap by way of an ultimatum.

I lean against the brick as the phone rings, once, twice, and then a terse female voice sounds on the other end. Michael cuts her off.

"Gabriel, I'm in Miami. Lucifer is with me."

Our actions have a way of coming back to kick us in the teeth, and in my experience the more time you spend running from something, the more likely it is to be sitting up waiting for you when you get home. In the past, I've reacted to such unpleasant encounters by setting the whole place on fire. Now, as I bite my thumbnail and eavesdrop on Michael's conversation, I'm really wishing I had a gallon of gasoline big enough for this mess.

I'm lighting matches and watching them burn out, and Michael is glaring at me like an irritated parent.

"Well what else am I supposed to do with him?" Michael continues, striding over to snatch back his near-empty matchbook "Show up to Heaven with the Devil in tow and no excuse between us?."

I massage my temples and groan. I forgot how awful all the bickering was. Michael covers the mouthpiece and turns to me long enough to hiss,

"Your testimony. Last chance to get it straight. *Think*, Lucifer."

A straight story. It's almost enough to make me laugh. Truth-twisting is my forte, and the rhetorical stunts I've pulled to get myself out of tight spots before are things of legend and renown. But in this situation, the straight truth might be the only option left open to me, and it's

certainly the most compelling. If nothing else, it can't implicate me in a thing that's happened in Heaven, Hell, or otherwise over the last week, and I'm really hoping to sidestep the inevitable blowback from Upstairs once they get wind of the whole thing.

So when Michael puts his phone away and looks at me with those vast, expectant eyes, I do what I haven't done in a long time. I start at the beginning. And I tell it straight.

The sound of an electric guitar ripped through the stereo, slicing through my haze of sleep and boring deep into my brain. I groaned out an obscenity, squeezing my eyes tight against the headache throbbing to life at the base of my skull.

“Get up, Lucifer.”

I dug my fingers into my pillow and threw it towards the voice, who, by the sound of things, caught it in midair. The heavy footfalls of steel-toed boots approached me.

“You’re running an hour late. Get your ass out of bed.”

I attempted to hoist myself into a sitting position despite the fact that my sheets were silk and didn’t appreciate being used as leverage. A dull ache shot through my spine, my body singing that same old morning after song. I cracked open an eye.

“You’re fired,” I said. My tongue felt like sandpaper that had been soaked overnight in tequila.

Azazel, archdemon of war, gave a derisive snort.

“You don’t sign my checks. Up. Now.”

I glared at him despite the fact that I could hardly see through the wall of sound assaulting my eardrums. His amber-colored eyes were impassive but he was worrying at the labret piercing in his lower lip with his tongue, a telltale sign that he was irritated.

“I’m hungover,” I said.

“That’s your own damn fault. After the stunt you pulled last night the least you can do is not inconvenience the rest of us about it.”

Azazel continued his rounds, ripping open every curtain in the room and letting the orange light of Hell spill onto my bed. He cleaned as he went, tossing discarded jeans into a corner, righting toppled furniture, and screwing corks into the various bottles scattered on tabletops. Realizing that he was serious about the whole regaining consciousness thing, I swung my legs over the bed and hoisted myself into a sitting position, cradling my head in my hands.

Seeing that I had managed to pull myself upright, Azazel took mercy on me by crossing to my sound system and turning the music down to a tolerable level. Then he tugged me to my feet by the elbow and began to beat the dirt from the dress pants I had passed out in the night before. I snagged a nearly-finished bottle of gin off the bedside table, but Azazel took it from my hands and replaced it with a glass of water.

“Finish that,” He ordered, retrieving a white button-down from the bannister of my bed and shaking the wrinkles out as best he could. I rolled my eyes but downed the glass, switching hands as I went to accommodate Azazel as he helped me into the shirt with rough hands. They were mercenary’s hands, adept at bloodshed and brutality, but after being in charge of my well-being for so many years, they had learned more domestic arts. I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to will the headache away. I was starting to remember my name and phone number, but last night was still floating out of reach.

“Didn’t I go to bed with other people?”

“I kicked them out twenty minutes ago. You slept through it.”

I blearily took in the scene around me as Azazel buttoned up my shirt. There were drink rings on the baby grand piano, banners hanging tattered and askew from the vaulted ceiling, and folders on my desk torn open and raided for trade secrets. I had never been good at keeping a tidy lair, but even I had to admit the place was a mess.

“What happened?”

“Nothing new,” Azazel muttered, rummaging through my devastated closet. “You showed up after one of your long vacations and threw a welcome-home party for yourself. You drank. You got sloppy. Same song, different verse. Abaddon is furious.”

Azazel succeeded in finding possibly the only one of my suit jackets that was presentable and threw it to me.

“She’s had it up to here with you,” he said. “You should watch your step.”

I snagged my favorite black silk tie off from the back of an armchair and began threading it through my collar as I walked over to my vanity.

“Has it ever occurred to Abaddon that I might be a little more cooperative if she stopped trying to sacrifice me on the altar of bureaucracy? I put her in charge of Hell so I wouldn’t have to deal with this shaking hands and going over budgets shit.”

Last night was starting to come back in flashes: doing a line of coke off the flat stomach of one of my secretaries, plucking out some old jazz standard on my piano, tonguing with a minor demon while glass shattered in the background. I worried at the signet ring on my finger, tracing the embossed serpent with my thumbnail.

“God, you’re a mess,” Azazel said, shaking his head. Once upon a time, I would have chastised him for speaking of our estranged Creator; there was an article against that in the original treatise I helped draw up in the early days of our banishment. *On the Governance and Purposes of the Republic of Sheol* or something like that. But angels around these parts have pretty much given up playing by the rules and putting on airs, at least in the privacy of our own bedrooms, so I just rolled my eyes and massaged my temples.

“Did I at least enjoy myself?”

“You didn’t kill anyone and you took requests when people asked you to sing, so I’d say so. And even though you don’t seem to care, I kept the press away. The rumor mill will be roaring for the next few weeks, but no one got any pictures. Your reputation is intact for the time being.”

I consulted my reflection, daubing at the eyeliner-smear bags under my eyes and raking my mussed bangs back into the rest of my hair. I was wearing it short then, platinum blond to compliment the fair skin. You may think angels are entirely celestial, genderless beings of light or towering many-winged superhumans, and we certainly can be, but in very much the same way Heaven is a geographical location as well as a metaphysical ideal, angels also occupy carnal bodies. In my purest form I’m an E above high C and the theory of relativity, but elevated forms really have no place outside the throne room of God. Hell likes to keep things simple: faces to remember, voices to recognize, bodies to sin with.

Azazel snatched up a makeup remover wipe from my vanity and started scrubbing at my face like a soccer mom at a little league game. I slapped his hand away.

“I can do it myself! I don’t need you to babysit me.”

“I’m not your babysitter, I’m your bodyguard, and if you ask me, I deserve a raise.”

I wiped the black out from under my eyes and started to knot my tie.

“I don’t sign your checks, remember?”

The hickeys were worse than I had expected; purpling bruises blossomed along my jawline and down my throat, set off starkly by the white lines of my Oxford shirt.

“Jesus,” I breathed, wincing a bit. I rummaged around my vanity for a concealer compact, knowing it would do little good at this point in time. “Walk me through this hole things one more

time. Because all I know is I got a call when I was sunning myself on a beach in Santa Monica to come back to Hell, *Santa Monica, Azazel-*”

“I heard you.”

“Am I giving a speech? Am I issuing a declaration of war? I don’t know. No one tells me anything anymore.”

“Probably because you never answer your goddamn cell phone and leave for months at a time without notice.”

I popped a piece of mint gum in my mouth to battle the nausea broiling in my gut.

“Spare me the lecture, alright? Not today.”

I rifled through the sticky shot glasses and half-spent tabs of ecstasy on my vanity until I located the mangled score of sheet music I had been working on whenever I was in Hell. It was a fugue, or perhaps a toccata; I kept changing my mind. After stacking the parts atop one another and running through a few measures in my head, I caught a sour note in the cello section. I snatched up a pen and scratched it out, hunching over my vanity in irritation. I used to be able to turn out pages upon pages of new compositions in my spare time, and I certainly never made such stupid mistakes. Now it took me a week to string together a chord I didn’t hate.

“Lucifer, there’s no time.”

I threw down my pen, glaring at him in the mirror. Azazel took a deep, steadying breath and squeezed my shoulders in a way that was probably supposed to be soothing but just hurt.

“It’s been too long since you were in Hell. Demons get antsy without a Devil to take their cues from, no matter how smoothly Abaddon keeps the place running. She needs to be seen with you every once in awhile or else no one will respect her authority.”

“Abaddon doesn’t need me,” I muttered, shrugging off his hands and standing to pull on my jacket. “I’m a figurehead and we all know it. She might as well lose my number.”

“She runs a mean business, but people don’t like her, Lucifer. All the fallen *love* you; you’re their god and their guiding light. As much as she hates to admit it, Abaddon needs you. And all you’ve got to do is show up, and do what you do best.” He straightened my lapel. “Perform.”

“I’m tired,” I said.

Azazel took my face in his hands, forcing me to look at him. Despite the intimacy of the gesture, there was no sympathy in his eyes.

“No, you’re not.”

There was a clamor outside my door, the scuffle of many shoes and buzz of agitated voices. I snatched up my darkest sunglasses from the vanity and stalked towards the door, tugging my cuffs into place. Azazel reached for the doorknob.

“Ready?” He asked.

I straightened my posture, adopting the icy composure demons expect from a proper dark lord.

“Let’s get this over with,” I replied, and he threw open the door.

A dozen demons hungry for my favor pressed forward, bearing gifts and bending to kiss my ring and jostling to get closer. Demoted lackeys looking to get out of my bad books elbowed social climbers trying to get into my bed. Hustlers shouted their pitches for the next big temptation, irritated pencil-pushers begged me to sign overdue patents of possession. The fear and adoration in their eyes thrilled me, hitting my bloodstream faster than heroin from a hypo. Worship. No drug like it under the sun.

“Everybody get back!” Azazel snapped.

The motley crew knew better than to try Azazel’s patience, and they all shrank back a few paces. The only one who didn’t seem to know better was one (obviously newly fallen) angel with large dark eyes and a willowy frame.

The room held its breath as I regarded him with cool grey eyes, waiting for him to realize his faux pas. He gasped and took a few steps back, but the demon behind him pushed him forward, probably hoping to appease me with a sacrifice. Even in this day and age, we still get the occasional angel who denies their Creator and runs away to join the Hellish circus, and they’re always eager to get a look at their enigmatic new leader as soon as they arrive..

“Yes?” I ask, dragging out the final letter of the word for a split second longer than necessary. I try to always make a terrifying yet enticing first impression, and Edenic allusions never go out of style.

“M-my lord,” The demon stammered, eyes blown wide with fear. His Heavenly accent sat sweet and heavy on the clipped consonants of Hell’s bastard language “Please forgive me—”

“Forgiveness isn’t something I’m apt to indulge in. I’m not the kind of god you’re used to. And you will not speak to me again unless spoken to, do you understand?”

Hisses of delight and whimpers of ecstatic fear sounded around us, and I reveled in the knowledge that I had them all eating out of the palm of my hand. A little more of this teasing and I would turn the boy loose or make an example of him, whichever his response merited.

The prospective demon’s eyes shined with tears, mingling with the grace glittering on his skin, and my resolve slackened. I could feel the fresh dying holiness radiating off him, and it pricked at the hairs on the back of my neck. He couldn’t have been more than a week out of God’s presence.

“Hell doesn’t accept just any angel with a rebellious streak,” I said, knowing it was a lie but relying on my performance to sell it. “And now you have the privilege of pleading your case to the highest authority. It had better be convincing. Why have you come?”

The angel dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the ground in prostration, and I could hardly stand it. Honest-to-God celestial court manners. How long had it been since I had seen those?

“I carry it as my greatest shame that I fought against you in the war on Heaven, and I’ve come to atone for what I did. I was a coward and I was wrong. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

It wasn’t the most memorable testimony I’ve ever received, but the sheer pathos of his response was overwhelming. Possible responses flooded the cavity of my chest; *it is already forgiven, your transgression is as far from you as East is from West, everything you are is known and delighted in*, once empty statements learned at the Father’s knee that suddenly seemed too full to bear. The soft minor chords resonating from the angel’s hastily thrown together body cut me to the bone, and I felt exposed. I blinked a few times, scrambling for something appropriate to say as the demons pressed closer in anticipation.

“I will spare you,” is what I finally managed. “Don’t make me regret it.”

“If I may...” The angel fumbled through his pockets before offering up cupped hands. “I brought you tribute. To prove my devotion.”

I expected some luxe bauble from the human realm-- Earthly contraband is in high, expensive demand in Hell, but your average entry-level demon can barely afford cheap vodka and macaroons, much less anything that would interest me in the slightest-- but when I peered down into his hands, the breath was stolen from my lungs.

“Where did you get these?” I demanded, my voice cracking in a not-very-threatening manner.

“Your rooms in Heaven. They have been left untouched since your banishment.”

I reached out and took the gold and silver jewelry from his trembling hands. Gold and silver is downplaying it, actually, those are the closest words I can find in this vernacular, but the reality is something closer to thin beaten, intricately carved, delicately linked fragments of light. Here were the earrings I always wore to worship, the collection of rings I would neurotically twist before I had learned to lie without tics, and the platinum chains tailored to drape across the wings I used to have.

“These....These are mine,” I said dumbly, my cultivated accent slipping into something more conversational. Azazel shot daggers at me from across the room and glanced conspicuously at his watch.

“I hope it pleases my lord,” The angel at my feet said quietly. I had no words. My rooms in heaven were filled to the brim with trinkets and no cleaner than my chamber in Hell; it was nothing short of a miracle that he had managed to choose my very favorites from among the hoard.

I slid the rings onto my fingers, delighted that they still fit perfectly. As I watched them glint, half-forgotten names started ringing in my ears.

Crown of glory, dawn's light...

My eyes snapped back to the angel to find that he had said nothing. His glassy eyes threw my reflection back at me, only there was too much silver in it, too much softness and light. Fear gripped my heart and I grasped his chin in my hand, holding his gaze steady. Azazel was saying something but I couldn't hear it. I was staring at my own face, or rather my face as it was, eons

ago. The light swelled, flashing through my vision with painful brilliance, and I hissed in pain and threw an arm over my eyes.

My consciousness came crashing back down to reality in the resulting silence, and I could feel the weight of eyes on me. *I should say something*, I thought. *I should make something up. I should...*

I gave up. I pulled a cigarette out of the breast pocket of my suit jacket, clawed through my pockets until I found my favorite Zippo with the little busty devil girl on it, and inhaled deeply. The angel stared up at me in confusion as tendrils of smoke curled between us, and I didn't offer him a single consolation.

Azazel stepped forward, shielding my inadequacy from the public.

“Leave your matters of business with Satan's secretary or come back during office hours. Anyone found lurking around outside his chambers again will be disciplined in whatever fashion I deem fit.”

Azazel flashed his filed teeth and the crowd scattered, even the fledgling demon. I watched him go, my cigarette burning down to ash between my fingers. Once he was completely out of sight, I pressed a cold palm to my eyes and shook my head. Impossible.

“What the hell was that?” Azazel snapped. “Do you have any idea how you looked staring down at him with stars in your eyes? For your own sake, don't fuck that one. I know you like the fresh ones, but word will get around. You look awful. Are you alright?”

“It’s nothing.”

You’re not sick again, are you?” I pushed past him and continued my trek down the hall, ignoring his words ringing behind me. “I can call Belial.”

“I said it’s nothing. Let’s go.”

Azazel scowled but fell into step behind me without protest. Azazel scowled but fell into step behind me without protest. I walked briskly through the halls of the labyrinthine, multi-tiered complex where all the fallen lived. The blueprints had been drafted amid the smoking ruins of our plans to overthrow Heaven’s monarchy, a monarchy under which everyone had equal access to the highest seat of power and equal protection under grace. My argument had been that this equality existed merely to distract weak-minded angels from God’s absolute power, and that such a system stole recognition and resources from creations more worthy of favor. I had appealed to the vanity of many a divine architect and cosmic mathematician when assembling my army, and they had been happy to display their merit by designing a grand palace of black stone and silver filigree. Despite being a pocket of the universe entirely bereft of the presence of God and lacking in any organic life, Hell was rich in iron and marble and everything else an architect could want.

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mathematician when assembling my army, and they had been happy to display their merit by designing a grand palace of black stone and silver filigree. Despite being a pocket of the universe entirely bereft of the presence of God and lacking in any organic life, Hell was rich in iron and marble and everything else an architect could want.

“Please be civil to everyone,” Azazel said, pausing in front of a door as we reached our destination at the center of the building. “All I’m asking is two hours of good behavior.”

“I’ll be civil to everyone as long as they don’t antagonize me,” I said mildly. Despite the concerning episode moments ago, the pleasant buzz of nicotine was setting to work on my headache and taking the edge off my mood. “You’ve got to trust me here. I know I can be--”

“Unprofessional and volatile and terrible at PR?”

“--a lot to handle at times, but give me some credit. I led you in all-out war against the Creator of the known universe. I can handle a council meeting.”

“We’ll see,” He muttered.

I pushed through the door and strode into the dimly lit board room where I (in theory if not in application) held weekly meetings with my council of archdemons. A few of them nodded respectfully when they saw me, others didn’t even pause in their conversations. There was no clamoring for my attention like the lesser demons outside my chamber door. This group knew me too well to abase themselves to such a display.

“Stop hovering, Azazel,” I said. “If I get assassinated in the next ten minutes I’ll take full responsibility.”

Azazel disappeared into the crowd, and I snagged a mimosa from the brunch spread on the center of the long mahogany table. Smoked partridges stuffed with figs were positioned fetchingly next to arugula salads with sugar-dusted baklava for desert. I was a bit disappointed;

I far preferred last meeting's lunch of suckling lamb broiled in its own blood and served with a tangy tahini sauce made from its mother's milk.

Ignoring the eye contact people were trying to make with me, I crossed over to the window that looked down into my throne room. Below me, servants were polishing the black marble floors to a mirrored shine and draping the statuary in purple to herald my return. All this pomp and circumstance was necessary, I supposed, but I was already itching for fresh air. I wanted to feel rain on my skin and gamble down to my last dime and dance in some dingy human dive where no one knew who I was or expected anything from me. Hell had been my oyster once, but that's the thing about setting yourself up as the charismatic god-king of a new and terrible empire. One day you wake up and realize the world you built looks just like the one you burnt down, and with nothing left to overthrow or desecrate, disillusionment isn't difficult.

"I'm glad you decided to join us, my lord," A smooth female voice said behind me. I downed my mimosa in one swallow and turned to smile cordially at the bane of my existence.

Abaddon was dressed in a wine pantsuit tailored so sharply you could cut yourself just by looking at it, and she wore her glossy waves of black hair loose down her back. Diamond studs winked on her watch face, earlobes, and nose, and her brown fingers were tipped with long cream-colored acrylic nails. She exuded the kind of easy authority and unspoken intimidation I could only fake, and for good reason. Of the twelve co-conspirators who had been appointed as archdemons of Hell after our fall from grace, Abaddon was the only one who wasn't an archangel in Heaven. The title denotes high responsibility in the celestial realm and privilege in Hell and isn't something easily earned.

She leaned in to give me the Judas kiss of greeting, and I could smell cinnamon and acetone as her lips brushed my cheek.

“Did you enjoy your pilgrimage abroad?” She asked, with a catty gleam in her eye that told me she had heard about the hotel fire in Ibiza and the coven in New Hampshire and every other bit of trouble I had gotten into over the last three months.

“It was both invigorating and enlightening. Full of new insights into the human psyche. I’ve got a host of new temptations to try next quarter.”

“Excellent.” Abaddon looked out over the room below us, her eyes resting for a moment on my throne. “I’m sure you don’t mind speaking on them during the meeting today.”

“Not at all,” I said coolly. Glossing over three months of unproductivity and partying for a crowd of adoring demons would be no problem; I had conjured more elaborate lies in my sleep. “I appreciate your attentive nurturing of Hell in my absence.”

“Always a pleasure, sire. Everything ran so smoothly you were hardly missed.”

Abaddon took a sip of her cucumber water, and I considered knocking the glass out of her hand just for spite. When had she become so hateful? I remembered her kneeling before me on the charred plains of Hell the night we had been thrown from the firmament of Heaven. Her eyes had shone out from a face swathed in grime and all that black hair had been even more beautiful for the blood matted into it. She had been nothing then, a lowly angel with nothing to offer me but the delight she took in dismantling the old regime and her willingness to break her body a thousand times over for my sake. As I had cupped her chin in my hand and proclaimed her archdemon of destruction, I had thought this must have been how my Father felt looking into the eyes of His Eve.

A movement over Abaddon’s shoulder caught my eye, dragging me out of my memories. A lesser demon was slipping in through the side door, anxiety written across his face, a clipboard in his hands.

“A t-thousand pardons, my lord,” He stammered, bowing deeply as he approached me. Sweat was breaking out on his forehead in beads; he knew very well that lesser demons were banned from council meetings. Effective division of labor and centralized authority have helped Hell flourish despite the anarchy that threatens to break out every hundred years or so. The key, I had found, was keeping the hierarchy rigid while allowing enough social mobility to encourage one-upping and favor currying. Competition was good for the economy, and I loved tribute from lesser demons looking to climb the ranks.

Unfortunately, this demon didn't seem to be offering my presents of any kind.

“I need Satan's signature for this transdimensional visa; it's urgent.”

I took the clipboard from him the same instant Abbadon plucked a fountain pen from her breast pocket. We made eye contact, and a prideful rage I hadn't felt in a long time swelled within me. Abbadon merely smiled.

“...My lady?” The demon asked gently.

I snatched the pen out of Abbadon's hands, signed the visa with unnecessary ferocity, and thrust the clipboard back into the demon's arms. Then I snapped my fingers, dismissing him, and turned back to Abaddon.

“What was that?”

“Do my actions displease you, my lord?” She asked. You've been gone so long someone had to take on the title of Satan, if only temporarily. I've been acting as interim Adversary during your last few leaves of absence. The council approved it.”

“I didn't.”

I spread my fingers and held up my hand, brandishing my signet ring.

“Do you know what this means, Abaddon? It means I’m the boss. I call the shots. Not you, and certainly not the fucking council. I’m disappointed in you.”

“Forgive me. I was only thinking of what was best for Hell.”

Her words were humble, but there was no fear behind her eyes, no earnest penitence or groveling shame. Just steel.

“I can see that,” I said.

Azazel, who can taste antagonism in the air the way sharks do blood in water, drifted over and cleared his throat.

“We’re ready to begin. Will you join us?”

I stalked over to my chair at the head of the table and sank into it, tapping out an irritated rhythm on the armrest. Abaddon arranged herself at my left hand, flicking through the unending stream of business emails scrolling across her phone. The delicate ticking of her nails on the screen was enough to make my skin crawl. I reached for another mimosa, but Azazel shook his head at me I sullenly withdrew my hand.

The other ten archdemons milled about, finding their seats, and Abaddon switched off her phone politely. She leaned forward across the table and cleared her throat.

“Thank you all for coming this morning-” Abaddon began.

Wait a minute, ten? I craned my neck and started counting heads out loud. Abaddon, number eleven, tried to pierce me with her eyes. I ignored her.

“Where’s Belial?” I asked. I kept a staff of twelve co-conspirators at all times. Some people like to criticize me for ‘ripping off God out of spite’ and ‘not doing anything original’, and while I usually take offense to this, I readily admit to stealing the number of Christ’s disciples when assembling my council. The irony was too poetic to pass up.

“She won’t be joining us today; she’s in the middle of a project that requires her constant supervision.”

“The cards probably told her to stay at home and stir her cauldron full of frog legs,” A watery-eyed demon with nearly translucent skin muttered.

I bristled at the jibe. I don’t really have friends in the conventional sense, but Belilal is one of the few archdemons in Hell I can tolerate for extended periods of time. Unlike everyone else I work with, she keeps to herself and doesn't stir up drama, so I don’t appreciate it when someone tries to turn her into a scapegoat.

“I didn't hear you complaining about her methods when you skulked up to her workshop for a charm to cure your impotence, Mamon,” I sneered.

The archdemon of avarice and material wealth turned red in the face and I smiled to myself, happy as a cat with a canary.

“All I was saying is that some of us don’t have the jurisdiction to skip meetings anytime we want, and I don’t think that’s fair,” Mammon continued in an undertone.

“Since when does a badly dressed loan shark get an opinion on what’s fair or not?”

Mammon clutched his gold necklace through the front of his silk shirt as though I had insulted his firstborn child.

“Lucifer,” Azazel said lowly.

“You,” I snapped at Mammon. “Can get over yourself. And you,” I continued, turning to Azazel. “Can back off.”

Abbadon arched a perfect black eyebrow. She always looked upon my outbursts with a mix of intrigue and disdain, which had a tendency to prompt me into further fits of pique.

“Shall we postpone the meeting so you can sort out your personal injuries, sire?” She asked.

I slouched in my chair and pulled out my phone, declining to respond. As Abbadon launched into the goal outcomes for the council meeting, I scrolled through the names in my contacts until I found Belial's number. While Abbadon droned on about expected returns for the third quarter, I shot off a quick text.

Dying of boredom. Where are you?

The response was almost immediate.

Home. Can't be coaxed away. Come see me after.

I glowered, slouching deeper. I managed to keep a civil tongue in my head while the demons reported on the progress of their various departments. Ashtoreth, archdemon of lust, was happy to report that the international porn industry was still roaring and that sexual assault rates and teen pregnancies were climbing steadily in six target countries. Resheph, minister of plagues and pestilences, had been nurturing a disregard for environmental concerns at the highest level of Earthly governments, and Berith, who chiefly concerned herself with blasphemy, was steadily chipping away at Christian theology with fashionable postmodern heresies. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the puffed chests and self-congratulation. At the end of the day, Hell has limited sway on Earth, as we merely encourage the less-than-holy inclinations of a species that does a fantastic job of brutalizing one another without much help. Eden is a story for another time, but I can tell you Eve had thought long and hard about that apple before I ever showed up.

I'm literally dying.

Two minutes, then a soft vibration under the table.

No, you are not.

I turned my phone face down on the table and sighed as Mammon whispered about me across the table. This was going to be a long meeting.

As expected, the board meeting was atrocious. I barely managed to excuse myself from the mixer afterwards with a few choice compliments and vaguely authoritative sounding duties to attend to. I skirted almost every demon on my way back to my rooms, managing to avoid the ones I had gotten a little too friendly with at last night's party with a couple of well-chosen detours. I threw back a bourbon on ice in my room, pulled on a pair of jeans, and deliberated for a moment in front of my mirror, turning the jewelry the fledgling demon had given me around in my hands. The delicate bands of luminescence weren't exactly intimidating; they have been gifts intended to bring out beauty of creation apparent in my God-glorifying form, and that was an image I had worked very hard to distance myself from. I had cut off nearly all my hair, taken to wearing black, and tried to suppress my magpie-like attraction to delicate adornments. Still, some habits were hard to break.

I slid one of the more subdued rings onto my thumb, then relegated the other gifts to a darkened drawer before I darting out of my room once again. I headed for the winding staircase that led above my chambers to the uppermost level of the complex, jogging up three and then four flights of stairs. There were private apartments here, and spaces for demons who preferred to tend to their individual machinations in solitude. I passed the bond offices, where Mammon lent out lump sums to demons too stupid to realize the impossible interest rates would sucker them into indentured servitude, and climbed up the sixth and smallest flight of stairs in the building.

The corridor was dark and narrow, leading to a single door strung with tiny bones and dried flowers on black cord. An elaborate sigil was drawn in chalk on the threshold. I stepped between the lines, careful not to disturb the design, and stood on my tiptoes to fish the key from

atop the doorframe. I didn't bother knocking before I slipped through the door and into the warm darkness of Belial's workshop.

The room was swathed in the dim light of shaded lamps and flickering candles. Velvet scarves obscured the edges of chaise lounges and end tables, and the bookshelves shelves lining the far wall displayed a myriad of diaries, grimoires, and books of occult knowledge. Jars of unlabeled plant material sat in an alcove near a small corner. Atop the stove, a steaming kettle bubbled conspiratorially, adding the sharpness of citrus to the heady luxury of sandalwood and frankincense in the air. The entangled scents filled my head with a drowsy euphoria, and I felt the tension in my shoulders abate, if only a little.

I didn't see Belial, but she wasn't the kind to keep candles burning when out of the house, so I snagged a deck of tarot cards left lying out on the kitchen table and began to shuffle them in my hands while I waited for her to return. Belial owned as many decks of divining cards as she had regular customers, but this one, an Italian antique from the fifth century, was my favorite. I passed the tattered cards from hand to hand, trying to remember the smooth way Belial had of jumbling them up, then plucked up the card that rose to the top and slapped it down on the table. The devil, inverted. I snorted.

"Have many times have I told you not to molest my decks?" A voice, light and husky as the rustling of pages in a book, asked from behind me. "You make them favor the pentacles."

I turned around to see Belial emerging from behind a velvet curtain that quartered off another section of the room. Her frizzy blonde hair had been teased and tied with a black ribbon, and her large eyes were lined in midnight blue. As she walked over to me, the silver anklets on her bare feet jangled.

"Hello, little hedgewitch."

Belial gave me a feather-light Judas kiss, took the deck from me with two hands, and retrieved the devil card from the table. Though her crescent smile never wavered, I saw a small furrow appear in her brown when she glanced at the grotesque illustration of a Satanic figure complete with goat legs and burning crown.

“What does it mean?” I asked.

Belial chuckled. “Divination is a service you have to pay for, my lord. Although...” She plucked up my palm and began to study the lines in my hand with feigned absorption.

“Descended from a line of royalty, I see...Very vain, but talented and of an agile mind. You’re demanding and jealous natured, but you have the uncanny ability to make everyone you meet fall in love with you, which makes them care considerably less.”

“You tease me. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“In time, perhaps.”

I arranged myself on a faded damask loveseat, perfectly at home. Belial’s studio was secluded, unknown to both Azazel and Abbadon, and self-aware of its own performativity. As a result, I liked it very much. I liked Belial too. She’s the archdemon of lies and false prophecy, which I find enchanting, and sometimes she even tells the truth. The fun of it all is trying to tell the two apart, of course.

“How’s business?” I asked, arranging myself on a faded damask loveseat.

“Booming,” She replied as she retrieved two china cups from her kitchen cupboard and poured us both tea from a whistling kettle. “You know how your subjects are. All looking for something to worship, grasping for some sort of guidance. For most of them, you’re enough. But there are few who will decline the comfort of a fortune read or a hex cast on their behalf.”

I took my cup from Belial and drank in the richness of Assam tea sweetened with Egyptian licorice.

“What will it be today, sire?” Belial lowered herself down next to me in a puddle of skirts and set her hand on my knee. “Shall I read the cards for you, or the stars, or the crystals? Do you desire a tonic or a charm? Or perhaps you’re interested in a little ritual sex magik?”

“Tempting. But I’ve got an appointment to keep. Today I’m interested in your specialty, my mistress of heresies. I’m so tired. I want for comforting. Tell me lies. The best you have.

She smiled at this, and considered for a moment, crossing one narrow ankle over the other. Finally, she pronounced.

“Christ never suffered, never died. He escaped the Romans and retired to live happily with a shepherdess on the sea of Malta.”

“Mmm. That one’s my favorites.”

“How was the board meeting?”

“Oh, I don’t want to talk about that...”

“I gave you something, now give me something in return. Come on, there’s got to be a bit of gossip worth passing on.”

“Mammon’s a dick.”

“Known facts don’t count as gossip, they carry no weight, have no magical power to them whatsoever. Come on, you must have noticed something.’

I considered this for a moment. Generally I bristle at the idea of people getting anything out of their dealings with me; I enjoy being the sole benefactor in any social transaction. But Belial was a good person to have in your corner, and keeping her happy paid.

“If I had to put money on anything, I’d bet that Ashtoreth and Berith have been sleeping together. That or they’re planning a coup. Either way, sounds like an excellent weak spot for exploitation should you need a little blackmail.”

Belial smirked, feline as ever. Witches deal in knowledge as much as potions, and the more she knew, the safer she was in the ever-shifting political waters of Hell.