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THE GREAT  
**DEVOURING  
DARKNESS**

THE SHIVERED SKY  
BOOK 3

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DARKNESS**

THE SHIVERED SKY  
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MATT DINNIMAN

# THE SHIVERED SKY TRILOGY

Every Grain of Sand  
In the City of Demons  
The Great Devouring Darkness

E-Edition

THE GREAT DEVOURING DARKNESS: THE SHIVERED SKY PART 3 © 2020 by Matt  
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This new, revised, three-part edition of THE SHIVERED SKY is a re-edit of the novel, The Shivered Sky, originally published in 2003. This new edit of the original novel is the author's preferred edition of this story. Plus, he actually gets paid for this one. Also, if you've made it this far, I not only love you, I want to have your babies, if that were physically possible.

Nobody ever reads this stuff, do they?

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DANDY HOUSE

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## Epilogue

Books by Matt Dinniman:

Glossary of Terms

## NOTE

At the end of this book is a glossary of terms and characters and creature types.





## TAMAEEL

THEY FOUND Ashia and the other angels at the end of the long hallway, digging with their hands to get through a collapsed section of the tunnel, only the light of their helmets guiding them. Having escaped the Pazuzu, they had been set upon by a series of motion-sensing guns, bloodying over half of them. Three had been killed before it was destroyed. The already injured Ashia had taken a shot to her chest and was barely clinging to life when Tamael met her for the first time.

Tamael had never seen an injured Virtue before. It was a terrible thing, like the image on the earlier anima bots, constantly coming in and out of focus. Each jolt of fresh pain sent Ashia's incorporeal figure into chaos. It was clear the others loved her dearly, and Tamael felt their pain.

The sight of the rock crushing down on Leefa kept replaying itself in Tamael's head. She had reached for the broad-shouldered, gruff angel as the world above began to crumble. She was going to be missed.

And Indigo. The cicatrix bearer had saved her. The human now worked just as hard as the others, along with her companion Dave, carefully grabbing rocks and shuffling them back to the growing pile. The human had pummeled into her so hard, she felt the impact despite her heavy armor, sending them both tumbling into the darkness.

So many implications of that. But Tamael didn't have time to dwell on any of them. They had to keep digging. One rock at a time. They were almost there, but with every heavy rock they moved, the whole hall threatened to come crashing down.

Tamael recognized this place. If the others did, they said nothing. The Hall of Feasts, where the very first humans were welcomed to Cibola with a rare banquet of foods from their worlds. She hadn't been here of course, but everyone knew the story. At one time a long table ran the length of this hallway. The angels had sat to His right, the humans to His left.

The humans had just arrived from the Propylaeum. Confused and bewildered, they were nothing more than animals. Afterward, when they were taken below to see their new home, they had complained about the size, the subterranean location, the fact that things were expected of them. Much later, when a small group had revolted, it was here in this hall that their deranged leader set out their absurd demands for equality.

This endeavor now was likely as ill-fated as that one.

"Tell me the way," Tamael asked of the injured Virtue. This sett was different from the others. It had no lower protective wall from the ice that was the core of their world. The cracks within were an unexplored world of their own. Ashia was the only one of them who knew the path. If she died, which was looking more and more likely as every moment passed, they would be condemned.

"There are many twists and turns. I can show you, but it involves burning the directions directly into your memory. I don't know if I could survive that, and even then the directions will be incomplete."

"Then I will pray for your continued health."

"I thank you, Power. Though I fear my wounds are slowly mortal." She took in a deep breath, and her entire body flickered. .

Tamael smiled sadly. "Until then, you are in command, Virtue."

Ashia shook her head. "Not in this state. Your Yehppael tells me how effective a leader you are. We'll all be well served under your leadership."

Yehppael put his hand on Tamael's shoulder as he passed to drop a stone in the pile, his wing brushing slightly against hers. How she had missed him.

Finally, a pathway was etched out, just large enough to allow them to pass. Tamael personally helped the Virtue through, holding one end of the litter.

Of course. The grand staircase. The greatest artisans of Cibola had cured and engraved and polished the mighty, curving staircase that led down into the darkness. It had been beautiful once, they said. The humans had rubbed it dull with their passage. It was the archway heralding it that had recently collapsed, blocking their passage. They hurried down the stairs, not daring to fly, wary of

further traps. But it appeared as if the last to pass through here were Ashia and her team on their mission to destroy the Spire.

"There was less damage when we were here before," a Principality muttered.

"Time is like that," Yehppael said as he picked his way around the ample boulder that had cracked and splintered the stairs. "Unforgiving."

The sett was similar to the others, but it was obviously deeper. It had been a long time since Tamael had been in one of these. The air was cool, and the distant walls weren't stone, but blue ice like the glacial tips that had reached into their subterranean base.

"There," Ashia said, pointing to a stout, shadowy building halfway swallowed by the wall of ice. It was the humans' duty to maintain the sett. A few more cycles, and it would be completely gone. They trudged the few blocks, the buildings looming over them like monsters.

The sign over the entrance read "The Registry" in simple, unassuming script. The building was short and fat, built to human standards, so some Powers had to hunch over as they went inside. The front door was gone, blasted away. Within was a waiting room of sorts, with a long wall of windows and small metal poles, most of them knocked over, for the purpose of corralling those waiting in line. No artwork adorned the gray walls. But the ground was stained red, as if the humans had set up a last stand here against the demons. But with no weapons, it must've been a massacre.

"What is this place?" Indigo asked.

"It's where you get your job," a Principality said. "We have one of these in every sett. But this was the first. And the headquarters for the data."

"The basement," Ashia said. The Virtue pointed to another small stairwell hidden within a corner. "It is hidden well. Even those who worked here didn't know of its existence."

Down they went, each one of their footsteps echoing. There were papers everywhere, mostly singed black, many stained red.

They came to a utility panel, and each of them went through one at a time. Ashia's litter had to be disassembled and slid through

piece by piece. Inside, one of the thin, temporary walls had already been removed, revealing a hollowed-out section of ice. Inside they went, sliding down a short way to a spacious cavern of blue, their light shimmering like crystals.

Several passageways branched away, each one carved in distinct diamond shapes. A few angels ran off down one in particular at Ashia's urging. This place was astonishing.

"I'm freezing my balls off," Dave said, rubbing his hands against his arms.

"Aren't you from Alaska?" Indigo said.

"You have armor on. All I got is this crap robe," he said.

A Principality offered him her own overcoat, which he gladly took. He still looked cold, but he stopped complaining.

"It's still here," an angel exclaimed, running back from the diamond-shaped passageway, being careful not to fall. "The others are bringing it back."

"What's still here?" Tamael asked.

"The sled," Ashia said, coughing. "That is worrisome."

Tamael didn't have to ask why. It had been over a cycle since they'd used the sled to come this way. If the angels had control of the ice core, then they'd surely have retrieved it.

"This system is so extensive," Yehppael said. "Why hasn't it been exploited further? Who maintains it?"

Ashia turned to him. "It maintains itself mostly. Within, there is no moisture or climate change, so the passageways retain the needed shape to allow the sled to pass. It's only near the edges where there are problems. It's not utilized much because the first Choir forbade us from mapping it, and only a few know it well enough to get through."

The "sled" was actually a very long, bladed vehicle that fit perfectly along the bottom half of the diamond-shape. Though there was room to seat one hundred angels, it could easily be pushed back and forward by just three, almost as if it was floating.

"Cool. It looks like a Viking longboat," Dave said. "It needs one of those dragons at the head."

"And water," said Indigo. "How does this thing go?"

“You'll see,” said an angel, leaping into the wooden boat. Tamael lifted Indigo herself, pulling her within. Wooden slats ran across the interior, covered with a thick frost. At both ends was a single seat and steering mechanism. From the side jutted oars, like on the floating pleasure boats in one of the various parks around Cibola. One sat within the boat and pulled on the wooden oar to propel the vehicle. Tamael had never done it herself. Here, the oar ends caught on the edge of the ice with small, metal tines.

After a quick lesson, each angel sat in a seat, an equal number on each side. They gently laid Ashia up front, and a Principality took the helm. After a quick push by a pair of angels, the boat easily slid off down the dark tunnel. The spring-loaded oars attached to the ice. The movement was fluid and easy. Even the humans worked with no sign of strain. Soon, the boat was silently speeding along.

Despite the speed, Tamael wished it would go faster. She kept expecting a sluagh of demons to come pouring at them from behind, regurgitating down the hole like black death.

“This far underground, engines are unreliable,” a Principality explained when Tamael asked why the boat wasn't powered. “But there is one for emergencies.”

When they came to a branch in the path, the pilot eased them over. The sides scraped against the wall, sending a blue shower of ice that shimmered in the light of their helmets. Another time, and it would be beautiful.

Ashia weakly, but confidently, told them which way to turn. Virtues had the skill to memorize any path. They traveled within the Sphere, and they needed the ability to properly find the correct worlds. If Ashia passed out, or expired, they would have no way of knowing which way to go. This system was incredibly complicated. Perhaps the Spire of Jhunayn had been designed and built as a homage to this place.

Trapped in their underground base, Tamael had spent much time at the ice wall that penetrated into the cavern where they held their cabinet meetings. She liked to put her hand against it, feel the power it emanated, the heartbeat of their world.

They said it started with this hunk of ice, on which all of Cibola stood. It is the source of all light, the very backbone to existence. He created it, but it created Him as well, the eternal duality. From the ice came the demon worlds that exist below it, and from the ice sprouted the seedling of the Tree of Eternity. As the plant grew, its roots taking hold, the whole world burgeoned around it. Each living thing can be traced back to the great tree, even His physical form, which didn't come until after the tree was many cycles old—in fact, she was taught—time itself didn't exist until the first sign of sprout erupted from the ice.

Even the first sparks of light within the Sphere were formed using seeds from the tree. He may have actually created the Sphere, but the tool with which the humans were created was the tree. The angels, too, were made with the bark.

The demon worlds were formed in the voids created by the ice. They came after the Tree of Eternity sprouted, but when they began to thrive was a mystery known not to Tamael. They had their own geography and life, but they existed despite the light created by the ice, not because of it. The how and why was far beyond Tamael's understanding, but it was the fatal difference between the two communities, the reason why they would never be able to live in harmony. The True Light, the power in which the angels lived and breathed, was fatal to the demons. And for the angels, the Absolute Darkness did the same.

“We have no choice but to hate each other,” Tamael whispered, watching the light dance through the icy hallways. They'd been traveling for a long while now, having made more than a hundred turns.

It was arrogant of them, Tamael thought. To use this place. Any other time, and she'd think it beyond disrespectful, like a spoiled child ruining her father's hard work just to get her way. But they had no other choice.

“Full brake!”

Tamael pushed the oars outward, like they had been taught. The boat lurched to a stop, the wood groaning. Cold ice showered

around them. The human Dave tumbled forward from his seat, quickly pulled up again by Indigo.

In front of them was nothing but a dark wall.

"What happened?" Tamael snapped.

"The tunnel is caved in," the pilot said. "Completely."

"So much for it maintaining itself," Dave muttered.

"Ashia," Tamael asked. "How do we get around?"

The barely opaque form struggled up. "There is no way around. This is the only path off the peninsula."

Yehppael came forward, his visor raised to reveal his intense eyes. "What do we do?"

Tamael thought for a moment. "Ashia, where can we go from here?"

The Virtue sighed. "There are hundreds of ports on this side, but I don't know the current status of any."

"The Tower," Yehppael said. "Can we get there?"

Tamael looked sharply at him. By all estimates, the Tower, located in the center of the peninsula was right in the heart of demon territory. Surely that would be the last place they'd want to go.

"Yes," said Ashia. "In fact, we're very close."

Tamael looked into Yehppael's eyes. "Why there?"

Yehppael shook his head. "The human boy, he said we needed to go there. I didn't think much of it at the moment, but here we are with no other options. He was the one who properly located those trapped within the Spire. He has an ability, one I don't understand."

Dave spoke up. "Gramm said we gotta go to this Tower place? Then that's where we gotta go! Haven't you been paying attention?"

Tamael thought about it for a long moment. Gramm *had* been right before. He knew of places he had no reason to know of. Very likely, he was dead, but maybe this had been his last task. To lead them to this place.

"Yes," Tamael said. "Take us there."





## GRAMM

GRAMM AWAKENED naked and in a cage, swinging slowly from the ceiling. His whole body cried with a thousand points of pain, like he had been rolled down a hill stuffed in a barrel of thumbtacks. The room smelled of a urinal at a football stadium, and it was cold. He was in darkness, and it took several moments to see.

He tried to turn, and with horror, he realized his foot was spiked to the base of the cage. His flesh, so eager to heal at a supernatural rate, had grown up the dirty black metal, like it was trying to swallow it. His foot didn't hurt—it was the only part of his body that didn't—but only because it was numb.

Gramm remembered most of what had happened, but he had no idea how he had gotten here. Most the angels had moved out of the way as the floating archway collapsed. All but Leefa. But Gramm didn't know for sure.

Dave made it into the hole, and Indigo was also safely within the sett, but Hitomi and the angry-looking angel holding her were trapped outside, along with four other Principalities and the large angel who had been controlling the drones. Two of the Principalities were injured, one of them badly.

The razer, the giant monster who had caused the platform to collapse in the first place, was now halfway down the block, its giant eye facing away.

The Power holding Hitomi dropped her next to Gramm.

"Are you okay?" Gramm asked her.

"I think so," she said. She clutched her perisceptor to her chest. She looked up. "Indigo? Dave?"

"They both made it."

She closed her eyes, exhaling slowly.

"Dear God," an angel said. She was one of the Principalities, her voice fearful. "What do we do now?"

Gramm wiped the dust from his robe and looked up nervously at the smoky red sky. Only part of the zoo had collapsed. The rest

looked like it was deciding on whether or not it would crumble. “We need to get out of here.”

After he said it, he realized that meant abandoning any hope of getting back to Indigo and Dave. It also meant going in the wrong direction. But his immediate concern was with keeping himself and Hitomi alive.

“I am in charge now,” the Power who had been holding Hitomi said.

“Under what authority?” the engineer angel asked, his voice incredulous.

“I am of the highest rank here. In both caste and grade,” the Power said, stepping forward so they were almost nose to nose. “I don't see what the problem is.”

The engineer laughed. “The problem is you disgust me,” he said, spitting the words. “You are nothing but a hypocrite and a murderer. I would sooner clip myself than follow you.”

“That's Polsh,” Hitomi whispered, indicating the engineer who looked like he was about to splatter the brains of the larger angel all over the street. “He's the friendliest one. The egomaniac is Verdan. He's a real jerk. They said he murdered the Hashmallim.”

“Gentlemen!” Gramm cried out. “We don't have time for this.” He pointed at the rock in the sky.

“Come then,” Verdan said. “We will withdraw.” He hesitated, then scooped up Hitomi.

“Deeper into the city,” a Principality suggested. “I know this area well. We can find temporary refuge in one of the empty buildings.”

“Suits me fine,” Verdan growled, giving one last acid glare at Polsh as they took off.

They flew low, hugging the buildings, careful to avoid the blocks with the beasts.

They were only flying for a few moments when the blast came. Wham. It wasn't a physical blast, not in the regular sense. There was no fire. The concussion was just loud, louder than anything Gramm had ever known, and the intense pressure began to build and build inside his head until he felt something *pop*, and his hearing washed away.

Gramm cried in silence, looking for the others, for Hitomi, but they were all gone.

*No, he thought, this isn't what was supposed to happen.*

He couldn't breathe, like a hand was reaching down his throat and tearing at anything it could find. He fell, lost from the grip of the angel. They were only a few feet off the ground, but the impact hurt all the same. Gramm ricocheted off the street, like a well-thrown rock skipping off a pond, and flew straight through the glass window of a building. And then he couldn't move at all.

He was in a shop of some sort. Whatever had been sold once was gone, the shelves ripped from the walls and plundered. His feet half stuck out of the window, and his face pressed hard against the rock floor, his arms splayed wildly. The cold ground smelled faintly of fish. Gramm tried flipping himself over, but he couldn't. His body wasn't his anymore.

His ears, plunged into absolute silence, ached. But after some time, the silence evolved to a ring that rose in volume until it buzzed like a dentist's drill. Sometimes this quick healing could be a curse, he thought. Whatever the demons had done, it had immobilized him and the others without leveling the city. Some sort of sonic artillery, probably aimed at the beasts.

He still couldn't move, not yet. He had to find Hitomi and the others once the pain went away. His leg tingled now, the wounds from the glass closing up.

But Gramm was tired, terribly so, and it just made sense to close his eyes.



## TAMAEEL

THEY REVERSED THE ICE SLED, eventually choosing another route. Soon, they came to a chamber not unlike the one they had started in, but much larger. Several weapons lockers lined the walls. The doors were open on many, showing them to be empty.

"It was a staging area," Ashia whispered to Tamael as they alighted.

Tamael nodded. After the human rebellion, extra steps had to be taken in order to ensure future riots, ones more organized, could be easily quelled. She glanced at Indigo and Dave. Neither seemed to notice the intention of this room. It would serve no purpose to tell them.

"We're directly below the Tower." Ashia indicated a wide panel bolted into the high ceiling. "It opens into the lowest utility level of the Tower, just one level below the human areas of the Athenaeum. From there, we can exit into a capacious sett or continue upwards."

Tamael looked straight up at the utility panel. It didn't appear as if it had been touched since the Fall. She chewed on her lip. "Do you know how the Tower is utilized by demons? Is it heavily patrolled?"

Ashia shook her head. "I don't know. The demon scientists are here, we know. They must use the library. And they study the Sphere, I'm sure."

No one truly knew how high the Tower reached. If one went too high, even while within the Tower, they would come to a point where they could go rise no further, almost like a mental wall whose height was dictated by caste. Only the Ophanim and Seraphim could reach the uppermost heights. Even a Cherub couldn't go past the living area of the Seraphim.

They prepared the door for the storming of the lower tier, the basement of the human tier. This bottom level was even lower than the bottom of the sett, encased in ice on the exterior. There were camera attachments that would allow one to spy within the room, but no one had the proper equipment to get it to function. If Polsh was here, he'd likely have it working, Tamael mused.

“Got your helmet?” Yehppael teased as they prepared themselves. Ashia, set back in case a firefight erupted, had laid out the room for them. It was a long, dusty room with a low ceiling, filled with several columns to support the endless tower above.

Tamael set the Powers on the perimeter, the Principalities in the center. All had their guns ready. Iopol had Dave, and a Power whose name she didn't know had Indigo. Each were to blast and sweep their lights upon entrance to the room.

“Why are we doing this again?” a Principality muttered just before she gave the order. She resisted the urge to smack him with the butt of her gun.

“Open,” Tamael said.

The two doors split apart. Books and dust showered down on them as the angels leaped into the air, flowing into the next room up. The room lit with perisceptor light as each of the humans desperately searched for a target. But there was nothing to greet them but swirling dust and piles of books. Indigo swept the light back and forth again. She was improving vastly. The room was clear.

Quickly they set about the room, searching for cameras or traps, but there were none. The books were quickly turned into building blocks for temporary bunkers and defensive positions. Only one exit drained the giant room, a staircase that curved upwards to a dark, black door. The room could be held a long time, if it came to that.

Frish and Iopol cautiously set out. The most tense moment was when they opened the wooden door. It groaned ominously, like it was calling for help. Tamael half expected to find a whole legion standing beyond. But it appeared this next level, the lowest of the human-dedicated tiers of the Tower, was empty. Even the demons had little interest in the reading material of the humans. They shut and bolted the door after Iopol and Frish went through.

“To have fear, here in the lowest level of the Athenaeum,” Ashia whispered, her voice wet with pain, “is a terrible thing. It was constructed to be a place of wonder, of joy. A place to gather knowledge.”

Tamael watched the two humans sift through the piles of books. They were books for children, she saw. But they had images of the

worlds from where the human writers originated. Yehppael walked past them, glancing down at the images, but just for a moment. The gravity of their situation was etched onto his face.

“What are we going to do? We are trapped, and we will be discovered before long. I'd rather die than flee underground again,” Yehppael said.

“Need I remind you that coming here was your suggestion?”

“No. But now I am beginning to regret the idea.”

“If we can find nothing here, we need to find a way to contact the other angels. If not for an escape, to receive orders. We may be in a position to benefit the others militarily in a way we can not see.”

Iopol and Frish returned a short time later. “This whole section is sealed off,” Frish said. “Fifteen

levels up, there's a single stairway that leads to the bottom surface level, and it is closed and locked. Plus, the exit into the sett has been welded shut.”

“They think they've completely isolated this section,” Yehppael said. “It means we have run of the place.”

“There was fighting here,” Iopol said. “Three levels up, the floor is destroyed. It's filled with human remains and charred books. Most everything burned.”

“Show us,” Tamael said. She selected two angels as sentries for the bottom entrance and the rest followed up the twisting stairs.

The first floor of the Athenaeum was a wondrous sight. Not as glorious as the angel levels above, but it was amazing in its own way. While the books and shelves of the angel levels were haphazardly placed in disorganized labyrinths, the humans had taken time to rearrange their own shelves in very neat rows, one after another. Seeing this, it almost made Tamael think the angel levels were designed for the purpose of keeping those who wanted a specific book away from it.

The humans wandered off, exploring the aisles. The others patrolled the shadows, seeking any hidden traps and cameras.

Tamael left the humans with Ashia and her attendants while they traversed up the cumbersome stairs. As reported, the third floor was

a burnt-out husk. Skeletons piled about the ash. She paused to utter a prayer for them.

Several more levels above, a single, thin staircase rose to a welded-shut door. Beside it, a small sign warned not to use this way as an exit from the sett. And if the humans wished to use the angel levels of the library, they must first obtain permission from their Principality representative.

"I've been meaning to catch up on my reading," Yehppael muttered.

Back down, they found a very excited Dave and the others crowded around a thick book with red binding. Books bound yellow were for the humans, black were for the angels, and blue for the Cherubim. She had never seen a red-bound book before, but it was the color of the Seraphim. Even Ashia had gotten up from her stretcher to look.

Dave read aloud. Upon listening for just a moment, Yehppael jumped forward, snatching up the book.

"What is this? Where did you find it?" he demanded.

"Hey!" Dave said, reaching for it. "Give it back. It's ours."

Yehppael turned away from the human. He ripped off his helmet, his black hair spilling out around his shoulders. Quivering, he quickly scanned the words. "The whole thing is here. The whole prophecy, with notes about what they might mean."

"Where did you find this?" Tamael demanded of the humans. She had an uneasy feeling. Such books were forbidden to the angels, much less the humans.

"There's a card catalog," Dave said, pointing to a massive row of shelves with tiny drawers. "I went to see if they had anything from my world, and it told us what row and shelf number to look under. The only books were *Treasure Island*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and this one."

Indigo sat facing away from the others. She was hunched over, deep in thought.

"It was purposely placed here," Ashia whispered. "For them to find. There was a note."



Dave handed it to Tamael. "It was stuck in the page I was reading when you came back."

Hand-scrawled on a single piece of parchment was the short note. Tamael read with Yehppael looking over her shoulder:

**Not all of you will be here to find this book, but I'll address it to all in case I am wrong. Faced with the impossible, one must be served with guidance in order to continue. I will intervene three times. This is the second for both of us. This book will help you.**

It was not signed.

"What is this? Do you know who this is from?"

"Yes," said Dave. "It's from that creepy guy we met in the woods. The Unraveler."

Confusion mounted as Tamael read it a third time. When the humans had originally told their story, no one took much stock in their account of this strange creature. In the areas neighboring the city, many creatures resided who were neither angel nor demon. Some were intelligent. They were of no consequence. They never approached the city or dealt in angel affairs.

Now, however, it seemed this thing had been inside the Athenaeum. And it anticipated their arrival by placing a book inside of a sealed chamber where it knew they would find it. She was forced to rethink her earlier assumption. After all, she reflected now, it was this creature who told them to seek out the Spire of Jhunayn.

"He can move backward and forward in time," Tamael said to Yehppael. "He can anticipate our actions, and even if he's not benign, he's clearly not an enemy. He must be a Seraph."

Yehppael looked up from the book he was still devouring. "I don't know," he said. "How did this book get placed here? Even the Seraphim can't enter sealed chambers."

"Then an Ophan. They are the wheels of His chariot. They must have some ability, including the manipulation of time."

"You mean that thing was an angel?" Dave asked. "I didn't know they could look like that."

"No one has seen the Ophanim before," Ashia said. "Their appearance is unknown. Your mysterious benefactor could easily be

one.”

“Wait a second,” Dave said suddenly. “Does that mean this shit is about us? About one of us killing the other?”

“Yes,” Yehppael said. His voice was distracted, almost distraught. “This is the full text of the prophecy. I’ve only seen part of it before. It is truly amazing. This is a book from above the Athenaeum, the private library of the Seraphim. It comes from beyond the reach of any of us.”

Dave sat down. “Holy crap. Is all that stuff gonna come true?”

Yehppael shrugged. “I don’t know. None of it has come to pass yet. And there were five of you, not four. So already the prophecy is flawed.”

“What does the bottom part say?” Dave asked. “It’s in a different language, and I can’t read it.”

“Let me see it,” Tamael asked. Yehppael handed it over. The first few paragraphs were archaic nonsense about the scribe and how the notes below were his doing, but not his thinking. It seemed this was more of a transcribed diary than an actual book:

**On the brink of ruin, four of His otherworld creations shall come to reunite the thirteen towers.**

**The fruition of their efforts is not set in time nor stone nor flesh. And they shall be burdened with 1,000 failures before the light will truly shine on not just His creations, but all of creation itself, forever quelling the darkness in us all.**

**For one, the end will be the beginning.**

**For another, two bitter reunions shall set those bound free.**

**The third will die by the hand of the fourth.**

**Healing all wounds but one.**

**Upon success, even the shadows will be lost to their heirs. As this world was once alone, it will find peace again. As once there was no otherworld, it will again come to pass. The thirteen towers will breathe as one, unleashing all of their power. Those who have come to destroy it will in turn be destroyed. But they must not have fear. For He will not deny even them. No one will be lost in the sky.**

Below this, a few notes were added. While the first part was handwritten with the practiced calligraphy of a scribe, these notes were hastily added in the flowing old speak. It had been a while, but Tamael understood the ancient angel language well enough:

**The last of this must not be made known to those of the lower castes. I can not help but think this isn't a prophecy, but a deep warning of an impending apocalypse. One that He desires. As Seraphim, it is our duty to make sure this comes to pass.**

**If the thirteen perisceptors are put together and used, it suggests the True Light will overwhelm this and the demon planes. Only then will He return to take us away.**

**But it also implies the slow and eventual destruction of the Sphere and all the worlds within. In turn, this will cause the Absolute Darkness to sweep across our world like a tide. If that is the case, this information must be kept from the demons at all costs. The Sphere is our protection, our barrier against the darkness. If the prophecy is properly fulfilled, we will be gone by the time our world is destroyed. But if the Sphere is shattered prematurely, we will forever be lost.**

**While this delicate balance is necessary, I must admit I am terribly uneasy with this. Still, the perisceptors must be kept apart.**

At the very bottom, written in a different ink and a shakier hand, but still in the old language:

**Cibola has been attacked. We will hold out as much as we can, but I fear it is time to bring the thirteen together. The prophecy has not been fulfilled, nor have the four appeared. I have dispatched Illian, Cabael, and Truet to seek and find the twelve perisceptors and bring them here. I will put all of them together and activate them myself. I pray we will be able to hold the Tower until they return. If they do not, I have a terrible plan.**

A small space.

**They have not returned, and much time has passed. The robes of those who sought out His chamber have fallen, and I presume them to be dead. The six of us who remain have no choice but to plant ourselves into the plinth.**

All the pages beyond were blank. It shook Tamael to her very foundation. She handed the diary back to Yehppael. She had to sit down somewhere and think about this. If the demons thought to demolish the Sphere—something many angels had petitioned to do a number of times—their world would be enveloped in the Absolute Darkness, and all living angels would instantly die.

*The demons would never do that. The existence of the Sphere allows them their crop of human slaves. If anything, they would protect it jealously.*

But not if they knew the truth.

It was confusing regarding the perisceptors. Sometimes it mentioned twelve, sometimes thirteen. One thing was certain. They had to get them all and put them together. He will return only then, it said. But they were scattered now, and the thirteenth still hadn't been found.

"There's more in here," Yehppael said. He flipped back, reading passages. "Amazing. This one book holds the answers to so many questions. Listen to this."

He read out loud. "They protest the Sphere. We've debated telling them the truth, but we have decided against it. The knowledge is too dangerous compared to the remote possibility it would be destroyed by an angel insurgency. Still, safeguards must be placed to protect it."

"So what does that mean?" Tamael asked.

Yehppael flipped back a few pages. "It seems the creation of the Sphere was for something different than we've been told. Here, listen." He read again.

"With the defection of so many, the balance has been thrown horribly askew. To combat this, He has created an alternate universe, one that will develop and grow on its own. It will absorb and hold the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us, and the pulses that menace the demon worlds will be controlled to a point. It is not a perfect solution, but it will work until a new existence, a new home can be created."

He turned a page. "It seems some time passes, and then there is this."

“A very peculiar thing has happened. Life is sprouting and growing within the Sphere. Soon, life of intelligence will be grown on many of the round worlds. Surely it must be an accident some say, but I am not so sure. His will is mysterious indeed. Much must be done, much must be built in order to deal with this. The energy of this new life is drawn from the overflows of darkness and light, but when this life expires, it leeches back into the ether. Some of this life must come to us in order to control the balance. It will be a great burden.

“New castes of angels will be created. This world must be made suitable for our guests. Though none will notice, the light of our world is now diluted. It will also help with the balance. It means a new era for us all. Twelve more towers must be built, and within, the overflow of light will be contained, and stored in the event it is needed. They are crucial, but terrible. I do not wish them to be built. This change opens a great vulnerability to our world, and I fear it will be exploited. But there is no other choice, and I am under His will. The bone of my finger will be used to make these towers.”

Yehppael shook his head, lowering the book. “All this time, we fought and railed against the humans. We blamed them for the terror when in reality they were created to protect us.”

“That's not what I hear at all, Sir,” Iopol said. “Our world was impenetrable before, but it was changed without our knowledge, making it possible for the demons to attack.”

Yehppael looked at the other angel, frowning. “He couldn't just create the humans, use them to protect us, and then allow them to be thrown away. What other choice could He have had?”

“I don't get it,” Dave said. All the others were subdued, deep in contemplation. Indigo was completely motionless, still hunched over in thought. “Who are these defectors? Who abandoned you guys? I thought you only fought over us humans?”

“Oh, no,” Yehppael said. “There was a war long before that. A war between angels who didn't want to live under His rule. They were cast into the ether. According to this diary, when they left, the balance of Cibola was thrown off. And your worlds were created to fix that. To soak in the darkness.”

“So we became a giant sponge? And we humans are what happens when it's squeezed out? Nice.”

“Yes, in a way,” Yehppael said. “But the author of this seems to believe you were no mistake.”

“Still,” Dave said. “I don't think many would be happy knowing this. People dedicate their whole lives to this meaning of life stuff. If they knew the truth, they'd slit their wrists.”

“We have five of the thirteen perisceptors here,” Tamael said, changing the subject. “It seems to me our only option is to do everything we can to find the other eight and put them together.”

“An all but impossible task,” Iopol said.

“I agree,” Ashia said. “But it is His will.”

“So what happens if they're all put together?” Dave asked.

“Apparently,” Yehppael said, “the light will sweep forth across all of Cibola and into the ether and across the demon worlds, killing all the demons everywhere.”

“But what about humans? What will happen to us?”

Ashia tried to sit up straighter, coughing. “You can survive the True Light. However, if such a thing were to happen, the excess light would build and build within our world, eventually cracking the Sphere. And all the light would burst out followed closely by a wave of the Darkness. And when that happens, all the angels within this city will choke and die.”

“But,” Yehppael added, “it says He will return before that happens. It seems to be our only path. We just need to find the missing eight perisceptors.”

“We have six,” Indigo said, speaking for the first time since they returned. “Not five.” She looked up from where she had been hunched over. She had been crying. All grew silent as they looked upon her.

“I carry three, Dave has two, and we are within the final one.”

The moment she said it, Tamael understood. Recognition sparkled in Yehppael's eyes as well.

“Of course,” he said, his voice full of admiration and wonder. “All the confusion makes sense now.”

The Tower was the thirteenth perisceptor. The first, really. Just waiting to be found. It seemed so obvious now.

Empowered with this revelation, Yehppael greedily read further accounts from the diary out loud. The beacons caused great tendrils of True Light to sweep through the ether, capturing the humans and bringing them forth once they died. These lights sometimes struck the demon worlds, but they were necessary for the balance.

*No wonder they attacked.*

"Has this balance been upset now?" Tamael asked. "The beacons have all been crushed or destroyed."

"Just turned off," Ashia responded. "A cluster have been kept tuned, and 'turned up,' attracting all the humans to the same area. The Dominion leadership must have some inkling on the workings of this equilibrium. It would explain the Camps, why so many angels are kept alive."

So the balance is kept, but tenuously.

"Ashia," Yehppael asked. "If the perisceptors have been captured by the demons, where would they be brought to be stored and or studied?"

"I don't know. But those in charge of the resistance might."

"There's no way to talk to them," Yehppael said. "But they must be told. This information can't be allowed to perish with us."

"What about the Sphere?" Tamael said to Ashia. "If we could somehow make it to that room, do you think you could absorb yourself inside and come back via a northern beacon?"

"I don't know," Ashia said. "I'm weak. While we absorb ourselves from the human realm back to the beacon, we become vulnerable to the Absolute Darkness. This form protects us for the short moments we are exposed. In my condition, I fear I would be too slow to survive. But I will try."

"You can mark someone," a Principality whispered.

Ashia nodded. "I suppose it is possible. But with the beacons detuned, the odds of it working are slim."

"What does that mean?" Tamael asked. "I've never heard this term before."

"I could find a human in the last moments of his life and mark him for salvation. It is a way to ensure he finds himself to Cibola upon death. I could direct him to any beacon I choose, but it doesn't always work, even with the beacons functioning properly."

Tamael shook her head. "This is too flawed to work."

Ashia held her head up proudly. For a moment, her hair shimmered brilliantly. "It is a good idea, one that must be tried."

"You just said you were too weak. You thought your wounds to be mortal."

"I will gather the strength from somewhere. I must."

"If we take them unexpected," Yehppael said, "and we can get past that sealed door, then we could probably fight our way to the Sphere."

Tamael sighed. "Then let us make it happen."

From there, much time was spent developing a way to breach the door in a manner that would be sudden enough to grant surprise. If they all concentrated a full blast upon the ceiling at the same place at the same time, it would surely buckle, leaving a hole for them to surge through. If they weren't buried under rubble. They worked long and hard. Drilling, etching out scenario after scenario of the assault. Praying. Tamael found it easier to talk to Him with Yehppael next to her, also silently conversing.

Tamael and Yehppael even found time for each other. Alone, they worked to gather the remains of the humans on the charred third floor, piling them together. The two angels held hands, allowed their wings to intermingle while they both recited a prayer for the loss of their souls.

Something had been eating at him, and Tamael had a deep suspicion at what it was. She could not bring herself to confront him about it. She felt him tensing, knew he was struggling with it.

Once, when she was a young angel, barely awakening to the wonders of their world, she had found a massive field of flowers in the low, northern plains. The yellow lilies had spread out like a quivering sea. The aroma was like nothing Tamael had ever experienced, and when she blew upon them, a rainbow of seeds



burst forth into the air. That discovery of life, that moment of pure peace was something she would never forget.

Then the dark, roiling clouds of rain rolled in from the east. The storms are common in that area, but she had never seen one before. The mountain of black, angry clouds descended on her, dwarfing her, redefining her concept of huge. The moment was the first time she had ever experienced the sensation of fear.

Tamael felt like that now, knowing she was about to lose the one thing she cared for above anything else.

"Ashia isn't strong enough for this," Yehppael whispered when the prayer was done.

"I know," she said.

"I spoke with Indigo, and she still does not fully recall the manner of her death. But Dave's circumstances are ideal."

"Will he agree to it?" She felt it coming, knew it was going to happen, what he was going to say. Before her, the pile of human skeletons was impossibly high.

"I think he will." He paused, wrapped his arm around her. It felt good to be so close, so alone. "She isn't strong enough," he repeated. "She can mark him, though. Before he returns."

Tamael took a deep breath. "The effort will kill her. She wouldn't be able to absorb herself into the Sphere." *Here it comes.*

"I can do it. I know the way."

"Someone else can do it," she said quickly. Saying the words were like falling and being unable to spread her wings. "You're too important to lose."

"No. I am the only one. The Principalities know nothing of the Sphere. I've studied it, read about it. It is His will, and we are His servants. I was created for this."

"If you absorb yourself into the Sphere, you won't be able to come home."

"I know," he said.



## GRAMM - DAVE - TAMAEL

GRAMM LOOKED AROUND, only able to twist his neck. Ringing still tormented his ears, but his hearing seemed to be almost fully recovered. When he tried to move his body, it protested. To his left and right more rounded, black-metal cages hung by thick chains, each with a shadowy form within. The cages all swayed in the darkness.

"Hitomi," Gramm called. His voice echoed, like the room was huge. Nothing.

"Hitomi!"

"Be quiet you fool," someone hissed from his left. It was a male, his exotic accent unlike anything he'd ever heard. Like Russian with a terrible lisp.

"Where are we?" Gramm demanded, his voice louder. He remembered the marketplace. There had been people in cages there, too.

"They will have your tongue cut out," another voice said, this time a little girl to his right. "Or they will just cut your head off and take away your brain."

"Just let him," a third said. This was a male voice, pitched in a high falsetto, like the way a clown might speak. "Keep talking, friend. Louder if you please. I'll get a prize. The wiggle will give me a prize."

"Who?" Gramm pleaded. "Where are we? Hitomi!"

"Gramm!" The voice came from his right, several cages down. It was hoarse and weak. She coughed. "I'm here." She began to sob. "I thought you were dead. They took it from me. My perisceptor. I tried to use it, but I couldn't move. I saw them find your body and your perisceptors, but you were limp, and I thought you were dead."

"Oh, Hitomi. I'm sorry. It's not your fault," Gramm said.

"Please," yet another voice cried. "Just be quiet. You'll bring them back."

The clown giggled, his voice ripe with insanity. "Yes, you'll bring them baaaack." He laughed again. "Wiggle! Come wiggle, come!" he shrieked.

“Shut the fuck up,” a loud, gruff male said. He was speaking to the clown voice. “If I ever get free, the first thing I’m going to do it cut you down and kill you myself.”

“You don’t have hands. Remember? Remember?” the clown said. “They gave them to me. I ate them. And your little girl. Her name was Peyton. You told me her name was Peyton. Wiggle! Come, Wiggle! They are talking!”

As Gramm’s eyes slowly adjusted, he realized these weren’t angels, but other humans. He tried to pull at the spike holding his left foot down. It wouldn’t move. All around the barb, his foot began to tingle, then itch terribly.

“How long have we been here?” he called to Hitomi.

“Not long. But we’re really far into the city. We were put on an airplane thing, and we flew forever. Longer than a day, maybe two, and we went unbelievably fast. This city is so big.”

He wondered about Indigo and Dave. If they had gotten out okay, if they’d discovered a way through the ice like Ashia had promised. They were so far away. He tried to turn on his navigational instinct, but it didn’t work that way. He had nothing.

Gramm didn’t want to ask, but he had to. “What happened to the others? The angels?”

“I... I don’t know. I heard shooting, but I couldn’t see.”

“Ha-ha,” the clown voice said. He was speaking to Hitomi. “Did they stick it in you? I will. I will when I tell Wiggle that you’re talking. They’ll reward me. I’ll stick it in you.”

“Shut the hell up,” Gramm said, anger rising.

The clown laughed. “I’ll stick it in you, too.”

“He means it,” the child in the cage next to him said. “They let him have Abita.”

“Please, just be quiet. All of you,” a voice said.

“Be quiet. Be quiet,” the clown voice said, mocking.

A loud creaking noise came from behind them, the sound of a giant door opening. Gramm’s head suddenly began to ache, like a finger had slipped into his skull and pushed just in the right spot.

Down the line of cages, they all began to whimper and snivel.

“Oh God,” someone moaned. “Look what you’ve done.”

“Come, friend,” the clown voice yelled, so loudly it cracked. “It was him. The new one. He talked first. Then more of them spoke. I know which ones. I do!”

*You will tell me. And you will be rewarded, pet.*

Gramm thought he imagined it at first. It was spoken inside his head. The voice, almost a whisper, was spoken in halting angel. He could feel the demon's presence, invading his head, poking around and looking for things. He felt terribly dirty suddenly, and ill.

He twisted the best he could to see. The demon had entered the dark room, and Gramm stared at the monster, horrified.

It didn't have arms or legs. The thing was just a head, floating there in the dark, hairy like a dog. He couldn't make out any of its features, but it was about the circumference of a wrecking ball, not perfectly sphere-shaped.

The clown laughed with glee. “Thank you, oh thank you,” he cried. “Can I have the new one, friend? The girl? The sweet young one with the black hair and funny eyes. I won't break her. Not all the way. I promise, I promise, I promise.”

*When we are done with her, she will be yours.*

The clown started giggling. His cage, just one or two spots from Hitomi's, started wildly swinging back and forth as he danced within like a crazed monkey.

The phantom voice spoke, this time much louder in Gramm's head, and he knew it was addressing him directly.

*You are afraid of me. That is good. It'll help when we do the extraction.*

Gramm had an incredible urge to scratch at his temples, get the voice out. His head pounded intensely. The pain was unbearable. To his left and right, the other prisoners suffered.

The clown laughed. “I can hear him talk to youuu.”

“What're you going to do to us?” Gramm demanded.

The clown snickered again. “Wiggle is going to make you squirm. And cry for your mommy. Cry, cry, cry.”

*You will be brought into an interrogation room once your injuries are healed, and I will touch you. Everything you know will become mine.*

"I don't understand," Gramm said, trying desperately not to let his voice quaver.

"You will. Oh God, you will," the clown said.

Gramm imagined himself smashing the face in of the clown person.

The crazy prisoner continued to taunt him. "Wuj don't lie. They can't. It's gonna hurt, too. Tell him how much it's going to hurt."

Gramm imagined his head was in a vice, and every second this demon remained in the room, it got tighter. He leaned against the side of the cage, yanking with his feet, causing the wound to start seeping blood again, but the pain did nothing to distract him from the agony in his skull.

*If you injure yourself further, we will be forced to attempt a physical withdrawal.*

"That's when they chop your head off," the clown said.

The disembodied head left the room, floating like a giant hairy beach ball, trailed by a small cloud of buzzing demons he hadn't noticed until just then.

"Don't forget me, friend! Don't forget my prize!"

Once the heavy door closed, the immediate pain began to slowly recede. Gramm panted, like he had just run a great distance. His right foot was really starting to throb.

"What are we going to do?" Hitomi asked.

"They'll come for you soon, funny eyes. I'll have you then. You're not hurt like your friend. You'll go first. You'll come back a zombie maybe, but I don't care. I don't care."

Gramm did his best to ignore the taunting voice. He understood it, now. Anyone living in the presence of that floating thing for long would surely go insane.

The clown had called it a Wuj, and it could force itself into his thoughts. Gramm shivered. He thought of Rico. Had this happened to him too?

His hands couldn't stop shaking.

His eyes finally finished adjusting to the strange darkness, and with some work, he could twist fully around without the pain being so unbearable. The semi-circle-shaped chamber was once a classroom

or meeting chamber. It had steps and chairs, all facing down to a single desk and podium. A metal-lined door stood gloomily beside the desk. The cages, about fifteen total, were strung along the curved part of the wall, dangling about twenty feet from the top row of seats.

To Gramm's left was a man who looked to be sleeping. Or dead. He was curled naked on the floor of the cage, his legs twisted oddly to accommodate the nails. The smell of rotten meat wafted from that side of the room.

To his immediate right, a naked young girl, absurdly thin and sheared of all her hair, stared back at him with eyes that almost glowed in the darkness. Gramm couldn't tell her age, but she was no older than seven or eight. She had one leg bolted to the floor of the cage, and the flesh was receded there, exposing her thin, red muscle. She clutched a doll made of hair and a few bones. It looked as if she had fashioned it herself. *From* herself.

"How long have you been here?" Gramm whispered.

"Forever," she replied.

Past the girl was a thin man with black skin and hair down to his waist. He rocked back and forth, his hands clutched to his ears. The tips of his fingers were all gone. He whimpered like a dog locked out in the cold.

After that was Hitomi. Gramm couldn't see her too well, but the sight of her foot bolted to the base of the cage made him cry out. She leaned against the wall of the small cage. He wanted to grab her and hug her and tell her it was all a dream.

And after her was the clown thing. His cage still waved back and forth. His features were muted in the poor light. His cage was wider than the others. The person within was overweight, grossly so. But he couldn't see him too well.

Most everyone else looked the same. Thin, hollow eyes with a long, long stare.

"What's your doll's name?" he asked the little girl.

"Little Niff."

"That's a nice name. Did you make it up?"

"No," the girl said. She held up a second doll and mocked the two dolls kissing. "This is her boyfriend, Adam. They had a baby that destroyed the world."

"Why are you here?" Gramm asked. "What do they do to you?"

"I am here because my master died fighting the terrible angels, and all his things were given back to the Dominion. I am a clean mind for the Wuj to hide in."

"Clean mind?" Gramm asked.

She danced her bone dolls along the rungs of her cage. "Yes. For the Wuj to clean themselves in, stupid."

"Do you always talk to your neighbors like that?"

"They're usually not alive long enough to talk to me."

Gramm shivered. "Why do you call the angels terrible?"

She put her dolls down, then. "They kill everybody. They came into our building where me and my master lived and they made us all go together and they killed all the masters, and then they killed all the slaves. Only me and Abita hid. My master was never mean to me. I'm glad they got their stupid city taken from them."

"Is the Wuj nice to you?"

"No. But I was bad. I let my master die. Only bad slaves come here. The Wuj can look at your brain. That's his job. He learns why you were bad."

"But maybe the angels are mean because the demons have taken their homes."

"The angels started it, my master said. They just wanted to be left alone, but the angels were building things that hurt them. They had to come to turn them off. They had to, or they'd all die."

Gramm didn't know what to say to that. He turned away from her, staring at the marble wall. Was it true? And if so, did it matter? He was so conflicted over the angels. At first he had nothing but adoration for them. After all, that's what you were supposed to have. Angels were good. Demons bad. Everyone knew that. Then he hated them. But Xac and the other Principalities, and even Colonel Yehppael eventually changed how he felt once again. Some angels were good, some were bad. Just like people.

The cage swung slowly, the chain creaking under its weight.



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"I've been dead a long time," Dave said. He helped remove books from the top human level into the one below. They were clearing the floor. Indigo sat nearby, her eyes wide with surprise at what Yehppael had just suggested. "I've been buried already, I'm sure."

"We can adjust the Sphere," Yehppael explained. "We can't go too far back, but we can easily move it back to a time before your death. It doesn't affect anything here. Not much, at least."

"Just like that, huh?" Dave tried to appear nonchalant. He removed the last set of books from the shelf, walking them to the staircase.

*Holy shit, he thought. I can go back. I can go back home.*

"What about all the people who've died between now and when you've gone back to? How can they exist here, but suddenly be alive again?" Indigo asked.

Yehppael sighed. "That's very astute of you. Some of our greatest scholars didn't think of that the first time the Sphere was reversed."

Behind him, Ashia laughed bitterly. "I remember that well."

Yehppael floated to the top of the shelf and picked up a set of thick, yellow books. It would've taken Dave four trips to get them all. "The answer is, they die," he said. "It's why this has only been done six or seven times. Those who are here, stay here. Their bodies on their human worlds simply drop dead right there, even if they weren't meant to die for some time. Your human body can't survive without you in it."

"Geez," Dave said. "I don't want to be responsible for any of that."

Yehppael shrugged. "This is your decision alone. No one will think any less of you if you decline."

"Wouldn't more people end up dying like this? We've been here months now, maybe longer. What if this guy was meant to die at home in three weeks, but because we do this, he ends up dying

while driving his truck and plows into a school bus full of kids? I couldn't bear that."

"Such a thing is possible, yes. But you will likely never know one way or another. It is unavoidable."

Dave's head spun. "How would I know where to go... afterward?"

"You needn't know anything," Yehppael said. "You will be marked before we even begin."

"Before, Ashia said it might not work."

Dave still wasn't fully clear on what happened to souls after they died, but he knew most ended up inside that endless ocean. The ether. The thought of floating there, all alone terrified him.

"I won't mislead you. There is a great risk. However, it is much, much less with someone who has already been here. That's why I'm asking this of you. You understand the situation much more than a human who has never been here. I am confident it will work. The real danger is once you return, alone."

"Alone? Wait a second, I thought you said Ashia was going to help me."

"She will. She will infuse you with enough information to know where to go once you return. She will mark you so your soul will find the correct beacon upon your death."

Already, this wasn't sounding good. "I might live to be an old man, though. What if I forget all this stuff? What if I'm too late?"

"No," Yehppael said. "You will need to come back immediately."

Whoa. "But... but..."

The angel put a hand on his shoulder. "It is a great sacrifice. A bigger one than any one of us has ever been faced with. This decision is yours."

"I'm not strong enough." Dave looked at Indigo, and he envied her. She'd do it.

"No," Indigo said. "Don't let that factor into your decision. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met."

It was absurd she would think that. The room was almost empty now. The shelves stood bare, skeletons. They were going to be removed, too. They had a dubious plan that involved blowing out half

the ceiling. The whole tower was going to come crashing down on their heads probably. Then none of this would matter.

“Okay,” Dave said. “Okay.”

Beside him, Indigo smiled sadly. His hands quivered. Still on his shoulder, Yehppael's hand shook as well.

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Tamael stood nearby. Unseen, but listening. She closed her eyes, breathing deep. She tried to find a prayer appropriate for this moment, but she couldn't. She just couldn't.



## JESSICA

ALASKA. A cold, beautiful day.

Jessica sat in Earl's cramped office. With the door shut, the hiss of the grill, the clink-clank of plates, and the late-afternoon chatter of patrons—mostly loggers done for the day—was almost drowned out. Earl's oak desk dominated the tiny room, giving her barely enough space to put her feet down. They'd had to cut a bigger door hole just to get it in. Pushed up against the back wall, her head rested against the coil of a meat distributor's calendar that should've been switched over two weeks ago. But April's girl was a blonde, and Jessica knew all-too-well of her boss's affinity for blondes.

"Waitresses don't get raises," Earl said. His paw reached around his overextended belly, scratching his used-to-be white shirt through the grime. His gold bracelets chinked, clashing obscenely with his unkempt clothes and tousled gray and black hair. She hated it when he did that. She never knew how his shirt got so filthy. All he did was sit on his fat ass all day and stare at his calendar. "Hell, you don't even get minimum wage, and you still make more than the freakin' cooks."

Sitting at home was a bill from Dr. Metcalf for almost \$1,000. Jessica had no idea how she was going to pay even half of it. They said Dave wasn't gonna be able to come back until it was paid off.

Jessica loved her son dearly. The Lord knew, she tried everything to make him happy. But the insurance only covered the visits to Dr. Metcalf so much. The rest had to come out of her own pocket.

That damn dog sure helped. She had thought it pretty inappropriate for the shrink to recommend her son have a dog, a wolf hybrid at that. Ridiculous. Or so she thought at first. Dave grew attached to the little critter from the first day anyway. His daddy was like that. Passionate about things.

Even though she didn't get it, Dr. Metcalf was on to something with this dog. He still had those awful dreams, but Carumba was

right there with him through it. It seemed to help him when he woke up.

“Look, Earl, I really like working here and all, but I got these bills.”

He shrugged. “If you want to try to find something else, be my guest. I'll keep you on until you do. Either that, or maybe you can take off one more of those buttons when you're serving. I bet your tips would go up exponentially for each one you undo.” He laughed, in a sickening donkey-like hee-haw.

She tried to stand, but her hair got caught in the calendar coil. “You're something else,” she said as she struggled to free herself. “A real asshole.”

He stared back at her impassively.

She opened her mouth to say something else but decided not to waste her breath. The phone rang. He snatched it up, waving at her dismissively. She scuffled with the greasy doorknob. She suddenly felt claustrophobic, and she had to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Oh my God,” he said on the phone. The way his eyes shot up to hers made her pause. “He's at Bartlett? Jesus fucking Christ.” He motioned for her to stop. “No, I'll take her there myself.” He hung up.

“Get your coat. I need to take you to the hospital right now. There's been an accident.”

It took Jessica a moment to realize he was talking to her. His voice had undergone a dramatic change. He even suddenly looked different.

Her heart fell. “What? What're you talking about?”

He swept up his keys. He put a hand on her arm. “I'm sorry, Jessica. It's your son.”

*No*, she thought. *This was how it started with John*. “What happened? Is he okay?”

“He broke through the ice of a pond. Someone was nearby and pulled him out, but he wasn't breathing. He was taken to Bartlett. That's all I know.”

The world spun, her whole body tingling. She didn't remember even getting her coat or being shoved into the passenger seat of

Earl's Hummer.

"There's no brain activity," the doctor said. Point blank, like a shotgun blast out of the quiet darkness. Jessica took a step back, physically staggered. The woman looked down at her clipboard through spectacles as if double-checking to make sure she had the right patient. "I'm terribly sorry, Ms. Jolson."

*No, no.* She didn't believe it. Tragedy like this only struck a family once in a lifetime. Not more. She looked up at Earl. Helplessness encompassed her. She thought about that morning when they came to tell her about John. He'd fallen off a tree, broken his neck. When they banged on the door she thought it was one of Dave's dreams.

"Can she see him?" Earl asked.

The doctor nodded. "Of course."

Earl wasn't allowed into the unit, but Jessica followed a quiet male nurse down a hallway and through double doors.

She'd made this walk before. Past the half rooms that were really nothing more than cubicles. Inside each one was a person more dead than alive, all of them elderly. They were hooked up to machines, breathing tubes, various other electrodes, each one looking worse off than the one before it.

"Take all the time you need," the nurse said, pulling open a curtain to reveal a boy who had been so full of life just this morning. "The doctor will come to speak with you when you're ready." He made a quick exit.

"Oh Dave," Jessica said, choking on her own words. She ran to him, taking his hand in hers. It was shockingly warm. In his mouth was a tube and a few various IVs dripped. His cheek was stitched up. A machine steadily blipped. Other than the rise and fall of his chest, he was utterly and completely still.

Braindead, the doctor said. She wasn't a smart woman, but she knew what that meant. He would never again wake up. What lay before her was nothing more than the shell of her beautiful son.

"What happened?" she asked no one, falling to her knees. The sobs came to her, then. Overwhelming. "What happened?"

But she didn't need to ask. She knew what happened. He went out onto the ice to get the stupid dog. He had fallen through. With all of her warnings about the ice, he had gone out there anyway. Her beautiful little boy.

The doctor was suddenly beside her, quietly awaiting her to stop crying.

"If he has no brain activity, can he still dream? He has nightmares."

"He is already gone. All that's left is for his body to die."

This isn't happening. Tragedy only hits a family once.

"What... what happened to his face and hands?"

The doctor sighed. "They're animal bites. From a dog. According to the man who pulled him from the pond, the dog attacked him."

"Carumba attacked him? I don't believe that for a second."

The doctor shrugged. "There's something more... pressing we need to discuss."

Shortly thereafter, Jessica Jolson made the most difficult decision of her life. He could live indefinitely with the machines they said, but she knew he wouldn't want that. They had never discussed such a thing—who would with their sixteen-year-old son?—but she knew he'd do the same if the situation were reversed. They were going to unhook him, and it would come almost immediately.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Jessica said when the time came, stroking his blond hair.

She cried silently as a small team of nurses and technicians swarmed over him for a few moments, unplugging and unhooking his lifeless body. They dispersed, once again leaving her alone with her son. They wouldn't go far, however. A team stood by, ready to harvest his organs once he was officially dead. He'd want that, Jessica knew.

Holding his hand in hers, she returned to her knees and buried her head in his bed. There, she prayed.

Even after John's death, Jessica was never much of a religious person. Her parents were Episcopalian, but not really. Just at Christmas, sometimes Easter. Though curiosity had led her to a variety of churches for some time in her twenties, none of them ever



really stuck. She rarely thought about religion, God, the whole what happens after you die.

But at this moment, Jessica prayed. She put every ounce of her energy and her soul in her words.

“Dear Lord, he is a good boy, such a good boy. I don't know why you're taking him now, but I'm praying to you, begging, that if there is a heaven, bring him there. His heart is good, solid, and I want you to take care of him. Bring him peace. Even if it means sacrificing my own place in your kingdom, give it to him. Please.”

The rise and fall of his chest ceased.

Then, a miracle. A terrible miracle.



## TAMAEEL - DAVE - YEHPPAEL

TAMAEEL SLIPPED the helmet over her head. Beside her, Yehppael bristled with anticipation. He was excited and scared, she could tell. Sad, too. Very much so.

She reached up and touched his face. So brave he was.

"Everything set," Iopol said over the radio.

"Very well," she said. "On my mark. As always, may He bless your swords."

"And may He bless yours," Yehppael whispered beside her. His wing wrapped around her for a moment.

"Go," she roared, unleashing a deafening fire on her pre-marked space. Around her, the others did the same, filling the room with smoke and dust. The ceiling of the human level immediately collapsed in on them, landing in a pile of rubble in the center of the room; followed quickly by the shelves and books, thundering like the anger of God.

Tamael's heart filled with the now-familiar battle rage. It tore at her chest, as if it wanted to break out and fight. Each of the angel levels all the way up to the main entrance had a center flyway and three more on the sides. Tamael and Yehppael took the center while the others rushed up the side tunnels. They shot upwards as fast as they could fly, strafing the rooms of books as they went.

The rooms were empty as expected. If there was to be resistance, it would be in the main entranceway and the Sphere room above. Indigo and Dave flew close behind, their perisceptors held at the ready.

They burst into the main room, filling it with fire. A single Dahhak stood frozen by the exit, astonished at the sudden appearance of forty angels behind him when he was supposed to be keeping trespassers from the outside coming in. Tamael cut him down before he could react.

The great mosaic of the Seraph was surprisingly kept intact. The occupied forces had systematically destroyed most of the artwork on the exterior of the city. The white dragon sparkled, its ruby eyes

polished to a piercing sheen. She could feel and smell the reverence from the other angels around her.

Tamael led the charge herself, bursting into the room of the Sphere. From behind, more fire rang out. The demons guarding the outside of the Tower were coming in. The shouting of the vociferous demon language rose, but it was quickly quelled.

Tamael rose into the room. It was all as she remembered. Four building-sized pillars rose, leaving a wide space in the center. The mighty Sphere dominated the chamber. It somehow seemed smaller than she remembered. The room appeared to be empty, which was strange. They surely had to know what this was, and just a few guards below was a pitiful defense for something so important.

The wall behind her exploded in chips of fire and marble. Her side burned, the blast cutting through her armor. She jumped and rolled, then took to the air, searching for the threat. Another blast came, this time from behind her, blowing apart something hidden up against the pillar.

Automatic defenses. Sentry guns. Yehppael had destroyed one of them.

Other guns were powering up, turning toward them. Tamael's hands were heavy as she began picking them off. About fifty of the guns littered the ceiling, a few more on tripods cemented to the floor. At first she thought perhaps there was something wrong with the guns, as they had reacted to her entrance too slowly. But they had been aimed at the entrance *above* the room, protecting against a threat from the higher levels of tower. Mercifully, the guns seemed to be calibrated so they wouldn't hit the Sphere.

Despite her speed and Yehppael's accuracy, there were too many of the heavy guns. She dove behind a pillar, screaming for the others not to come into the room yet. Yehppael was beside her, screaming the same. The angels didn't hear or didn't heed the warning. The angels came.

*Ching ching ching ching*, the guns rang, like two heavy swords clashing together impossibly fast, ripping through the angels. Tamael cried out as angel after angel was cut down like lengths of grass

before a scythe. Both the Powers Yehppael had brought with him burned to grain as she hopelessly watched.

But some managed to fight back. Tamael cringed every time the soft thunk of an angel blast ricocheted off the Sphere.

Soon, the guns were destroyed.

The silence that followed was overwhelming. Fifteen angels. Gone just like that. Smoke filled the room. It seemed attracted to the dark Sphere, swirling around it, forming a loose ring. The resulting image was oddly serene.

"Iopol, get up here."

The remaining angels came up, solemnly. They'd blasted shut the main entrance, and now they were going to seal off the chamber of the Sphere.

There was no time to mourn the passing of their companions. Bringing up some prefabricated supplies, they quickly fashioned a metal barrier over the single lower exit. While it was welded shut using a rifle, a pair of angels stood guard over the other exit, the one leading up. This one was already sealed, but they didn't know if the demons had created a secondary entrance.

"They'll be loath to blast their way in here now," Frish said.

"That doesn't mean they won't do it," Tamael said.

"Let's get on with it then," Yehppael said, removing his outer armor and helmet.

Tamael watched quietly. So many times now they'd been separated, and each time she had to deal with the terrible reality she may never see him again.

But this time... This time it was different.

Indigo was beside her. The cicatrix bearer appeared deep in contemplation.

"Is it as beautiful as he hopes?" Tamael asked.

"He will never run out of places to visit."

Tamael nodded. It was always his dream. Even before they had met. It wouldn't last forever, she knew. But it would be enough. Maybe even enough to make it all worth it.

Ashia was carried and placed on the ground before Dave. The human removed all his clothes, giving his two perisceptors to Indigo.

“First,” Ashia said. “The Sphere must be turned back.”

She had already explained how the procedure would work. Iopol, Frish, Yehppael, and a Principality each placed a hand on the lower part of the giant, swirling mass at equal intervals. There, they slowly began to move against the spin of the massive orb. They strained for but a moment, and then it began to turn.

The whole time Ashia stared into the eyes of Dave. After just barely a moment, she called out.

“That is fine.”

The Sphere looked exactly the same, but Tamael knew they had just changed billions of planets, turning back their flow of time. Trillions upon trillions of humans suddenly died on their worlds, perhaps altering the course of their histories. That it had been so simple was terrifying.

“Child,” Ashia said to Dave, her voice strained. “I mark you.” Her hand reached forward, and it passed through his body and into his chest. “I grant you a path, and the knowledge to complete that path.”

For a moment, both of them remained motionless while everyone watched. Dave took in a deep breath, shivering as the Virtue exhaled. He slowly opened his eyes, and the form of Ashia began to fade, fainter and fainter until she was gone.

Another terrible sacrifice.

“I killed her,” Dave said, horrified. He looked between Indigo and Tamael. “I killed her,” he repeated.

“No,” Tamael said. She had trouble finding her voice. “The demons killed her. You allowed her to have a purpose in her death, one of the greatest gifts you can give.”

Yehppael strode forward, taking Dave's hand.

“Goodbye,” Indigo said to her human friend. “I'll see you soon.”

“Bye,” Dave said. He attempted a smile.

Tamael removed her helmet. She and Yehppael held each other's gaze for a never-ending instant. In that moment, they said everything they needed to say, expressed everything they needed to express. He was going through a one-way door. She would never see him again. She had the perilously strong urge to go with him, leave this place of terror and war.

But she couldn't. She had a responsibility to the survivors. Silently, Yehppael and Dave rose. Her beloved knew exactly where to go.

Yehppael came to a spot on the Sphere. He and the human absorbed themselves within.

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“Code blue in ER. Code blue in ER. Code blue... Jesus. We have Code Blues in every ward. All nurses report to your stations!”

Dave opened his eyes. His head ached like he had been tackled without a helmet. He tried to shake the cobwebs away, but he couldn't move. His face stung, as did his hands and arms. The voice came again over the loudspeaker, this time shrill. A loud commotion raged around him, but distant. People were shouting, upset.

*I'm in a bed. In the hospital.*

He tried to remember what happened, how he got here, but everything was fuzzy. He'd had a dream, but it was different this time. Worse in a way, he knew, but longer. And it was confusing. His head ached, and his skin prickled.

The sensation at his leg was a person. A head rested on his leg.

“Mom?” he asked, his voice croaking the words.

Her head shot above his, her red-rimmed eyes widening.

“Holy shit!” she cried. “Dave!” She leaped on top of him. “Doctor!” Her arms were crushing. “They said you were brain dead. We had pulled your goddamn plug. Holy Jesus, you've come back to me. Oh thank God, thank the Lord. Doctor!”

“How did I get here?” His head swam. He had nothing in his recent memory.

“Oh, Dave,” she said, stroking his hair. “Where's the doctor?” she shrieked.

“I'm sorry, ma'am,” a woman's voice called, out of breath. “I'm just a CNA. Half the hospital just spontaneously coded. Some of them are doctors, and I can't find anyone.”

“My son just woke up, and he needs help.”

A pause. The nurse muttered something then ran off.

"What's happening?" Dave asked.

"I don't know, honey," his mom said. She started bawling, blurting the words. "The doctor said you were dead. But you weren't. I can't believe it. I just can't."

Dave wished he could remember. He struggled, trying to sit up. His whole body screamed in protest. His arms stung, and his throat was raw, like he had just swallowed sand.

He wasn't in the regular emergency room. This place looked eerily familiar, but he couldn't quite grasp that old memory, either. People kept passing by, paying no heed, always running.

"I know what's happening," a woman called from nearby. He couldn't see her, but her voice was piercing. "Read the Bible. It's there, I'm tellin' ya. It's all there. It's the Rapture. You hear me motherfuckers? The fucking end of the world."

"Shut up," someone else called. Another string of alerts were called out over the loudspeaker. His mother cried and stroked his hair.

"The angel of death is coming," the woman screeched. "If you're still here, he's coming for you."

*Angel. Death.* The words triggered something.

Carumba on the lake, savagely biting at him like in his dream. A girl named Indigo who was really an angel. Demons who looked like bats and scorpions. A woman spinning on a spit over a fire, still alive. How could he forget her face?

Like a wolf pouncing on him out of the bitter darkness, he remembered. Angels and death.

He remembered it all.

"Just a dream," he murmured. But that wasn't true. The chaos at the hospital made sense now. They had turned back the Sphere. Around the world, people died prematurely. Weeks, months, maybe years of death all pushed back to the same moment. All because of him.

He sensed another presence here now, too. Though Dave couldn't see him, he knew Yehppael was in the room, watching. The



angel had promised to stay with him until he was done. But what could he do? How?

"Mom," Dave whispered. "I can only stay a little while. I gotta go again soon."

She looked up. Her makeup was completely eroded away by the tears. Black rivulets of mascara remained upon her cheeks.

"What're you talking about? You're not going anywhere. Don't you understand what's happened? You almost died. Hell, you *did* die."

"I have to go back. They returned me so I can tell the others where they are."

"You're not making any sense, Dave. Who's they? You have to go back where?"

"Back to the place I just was. Before I woke up."

The deep red in his mother's face completely drained away. "It was just another dream."

"No," Dave said. "Mom, it wasn't a dream. They were never just dreams."

"You're scaring me."

"Oh, mom. I wish I could explain it all, but I don't have time."

Dave pivoted his legs off the bed, but his mother leaned forward, pushing him down. If she hadn't done it, he probably would've ended up a heap on the floor. His head spun.

"You hallucinated. You know how your dreams get."

"No, mom."

*Wait. This will help. I will show myself to her.*

Yehppael. Speaking in his head.

"Mom," Dave said, rubbing his forehead with his hand. She was going to freak. "I want you to meet someone. He's a friend. He's here right now with us. An angel."

"I'm going to get the doctor."

"There is no need," Yehppael said. He faded into existence at the edge of the cubicle for all to see, his magnificent wings completely spreading out to fill the hallway. A woman screamed. "Your son speaks the truth."

The angel's voice had the oddest accent, and it didn't sound like him. And he had that translucent look as before, but his whole body glowed with a light so brilliant, Dave felt tears well out of his own eyes.

His mom fell to her knees. "No," she cried. "Please no. Take me. Take me instead."

"Your mother loves you deeply," Yehppael said to Dave.

"You're speaking English."

Another scream, this time from a man. He dropped the tray he was running with and it went clattering. He, too, fell to his knees.

"Ashia imbued me with the knowledge of human speech," he said, grinning stupidly at Dave in a very unangelic manner. "Not just yours, but all of it. I must admit I find your talk fascinating. There are so many words I know how to say, but their meaning is a mystery."

An old man began snapping pictures with his phone, the whole time reciting the Our Father.

Yehppael reached forward and lifted Dave's mother's chin with a finger. A crowd was beginning to form now, more people taking pictures and filming.

"This is difficult to comprehend, I know. But your child is very important, and us bringing him back to you for a moment was the only way to accomplish what needs to be done. I know, it is terrible. But it is not without reason."

"Please," she begged. "Take me. Not him. Take me."

Oh God, this was hard.

"Mom," Dave said. "It's okay."

"No," she said vehemently. "It's not okay."

"He should not be alive," Yehppael said. "Without our intervention right now, he'd still be dead to you. Look around you, see all the confusion and pain. These people here and across the universe died early so he could come back and do this task. It is important, terribly so."

"I don't understand."

"You will," Yehppael said. He moved his gaze to the crowd. "You all will."

"What's going on here?" A loud voice boomed. A security guard, pushing his way through the crowd. "Holy crap," he squeaked at the sight of Yehppael. He was tall and thin with cracked lips and freckles. Probably about forty years old. "Uh... um... You gotta... Are you an angel?"

"Your weapon," Yehppael said, extending a hand to the guard. "Give it to me."

"Yes sir," the guard said, unsnapping his holster and pulling out the black revolver.

Yehppael, despite being transparent, could still hold the gun. He gingerly took it from the guard's shaking hands and dropped it into Dave's.

*Is this adequate?* the angel asked in his mind.

"Yes," Dave said.

*Don't miss, my friend.*

It was impossibly heavy. Dave gripped it in his hands. He and his father used to go shooting. His thumb found the safety, and he clicked it away. His father had died in this room, too.

"No," his mother said, panicked. "Give me the gun. Give it to me right now."

*I don't know if I can do this. I used to think about doing it all the time, but now that I have to, it just seems so... wrong. Dave thought the words.*

Yehppael heard him.

*You can.*

Dave thought of the marketplace and the humans used like cattle. Of the demons streaking out of the sky, killing everything in their path. Of the little girl in the slave market pleading for them to help. He thought of all the people he knew who had died. Were they slaves now? He could do it. He had to.

"Mom, I'm sorry. Yehppael will watch over you from now on. He'll protect you because I can't do it anymore."

"Please," she cried. "Please, no. Baby, no."

"Don't do it," a man called, followed by murmurs of agreement.

"The end of the world," the woman screamed from the bed next door. "It's the fucking end of the world."

"I love you," Dave said to his mother.

He placed the weapon into his mouth, aiming upwards. The metal tasted oily, and his teeth chattered against the barrel. The tastes and sensations of earth.

Just a squeeze of the finger. That's all it took.

---

Yehppael absorbed himself away from their vision as the chaos ensued.

The boy died instantly. His body fell backward as the people around him screamed. Dave's soul immediately shot free of the body, arcing outwards toward the edge of the universe, where his mark would lead him to the proper beacon. Yehppael prayed for him as the bright light of his soul took the long, mysterious journey for the second time.

Dave's mother cried, and Yehppael felt for her.

He touched her then, wrapping his wings around her. He didn't have the Virtue power of healing or redemption, but he had warmth, and he offered the human all he had.



## KO

IF THE ENTIRE history of the Geyrun was to be written in two sentences it would be: Defeated and enslaved by the Overseers. Gentle, peace-loving creatures.

Bloodthirst. Revenge. Hate. None of those thoughts were supposed to come as easily as they did right now.

"If I receive any sort of censure for this," the Footie captain growled to Ko, "I will come for you." The assembled team waited on a floating platform for the transport. Each of the Footie team was constantly fiddling with his weapon and suit. The newly-trained soldiers were nervous, and rightly so. This would be their first exercise. Most of them had arrived in Cibola from their respective worlds less than a full day earlier.

"These Molochites go out of their way to purchase slaves of your kind," Ko said. The captain was a head shorter than Ko, which was fairly big for a Daityas. The captain's long fingers twisted around the barrel of his gun. "No one knows what happens to them."

"If they're slaves, then it's no business of mine why they are taken. And that has nothing to do with this Charun. Prancing into their holy places does not constitute good relations if you ask me."

"I'm not asking you. I have an order for the arrest of the Charun. And now we know where she is. This order is under the direct seal of a sector commander. Your soldiers won't have to even remove their weapons. All I want is their presence, nothing more."

All Ko had ever wanted was peace. An existence where all creatures, regardless of how, when, or why they were created, could happily commingle in one great community. There would be no more slavery, not even for humans, and problems were solved using words and reason. Not fire and teeth.

What Ko was about to do was necessary. A cutting out of the cancer before it spread to the more vital organs of the Dominion.

Uzkiev was north meeting with the council to deal with the growing problem with the Overseers.

That, too, was a great concern for Ko. But the Overseers were constantly angry. He knew them and their politics well. They would take the recent slights and threaten to pull their forces. But they wouldn't. The council would sate them somehow.

Presumably, Uzkiev would discuss this new development with the Dahhak and their sudden concern with mass conversions also. But if the council even got to the issue, Ko feared they wouldn't do anything. Not until it was too late.

Ko found himself breathless after reading the report of the Dahhak's post-mortem interrogation. No, not breathless. Not angry, either. Enraged. This Dahhak had been sent out to specifically to assassinate Ko. Why was unknown, as the Dahhak himself didn't truly know, but it was very troubling. It was Ungeo G'sslom herself who had ordered it.

The Dahhak—and this rogue Charun—were taking everything the founders of the Dominion had worked so hard for, and they were rending it apart. The Dahhak temple services swelled with the anti-Dominion sentiment this single Dahhak had shown before he attacked Ko.

Ko had a child. Qulp, a strong name. His thoughts had been turning to him more and more often. Traditionally, Geyrun left all rearing responsibilities to the mother. If this boy was to live without knowing Ko, at least he could do his part to shape his future. He wanted him to grow up and never know war. To never know he was someone else's property. Ko had a responsibility to him. For peace.

The Dahhak were trying to take this away. They were trying to harm his child. How could he not feel such great anger?

Immediately after learning which specific temple the assassin worshipped at, Ko had asked Uzkiev if they should dispatch a platoon to fetch the Charun. Or better yet, tip off the Catechist on her location. But Uzkiev's response had been surprising.

"Ahh, no," he said. "This is a very dangerous situation. Disturbing, too. We must seek the council's opinion before we proceed, yesss."

But there wasn't time to take this to the council, Ko had said, *especially since there's a Dahhak sitting on it*. But Uzkiev insisted.

So Ko demurred, though as he finished his recovery and found himself back at work, learning how to balance the load with only one hand, he couldn't stop thinking about it. He began to fume. And then the results of the Flamen's process were delivered.

The 250-page computer-generated report extrapolated the Dahhak's last several hours in detail, including murky pictures of key images, actual dialogue, and thought processes. In addition to the Dahhak's constant mulling of the impending assassination of Ko, there was a very alarming prayer meeting where Ungeo G'sslom herself had stated: "Every moment that passes, we have new supporters. Every time the leadership of the Dominion fails us, Moloch becomes angrier. It is time to change focus upon our role in this war. Spread the word. Molochites will no longer exist in the shadows, quietly worshipping the one true god."

The assassin had felt great joy then, standing with his peers, crying into the sky. "Moloch is great! Moloch is great!"

The Charun had to be stopped. Now.

Finally, the transport arrived. It was a nondescript cargo boat, spacious enough to accommodate a Geyrun and several Daityas, but not so large as to attract the attention of the inhabitants of the temple rock when it arrived. They wanted to get in, make their demand, and leave.

"Answer me this," the Daityas captain said as the ship lumbered over the wall. "Why are you so sure they'll give this Charun up?"

"I'm not sure," Ko said. "In fact, I don't expect them to give her up at all. If they refuse, we'll leave peacefully. I want your presence. But no bloodshed. Absolutely none."

"Why, then? Why risk something that can cause friction between the nations? We already have the damn Overseers threatening to pull out over this flap with your boss."

"He's your boss too, and the political ramifications are not a concern of someone of your rank."

"There have been rumors lately," the captain said. "The Dahhak are angry with something. Their temples have taken a few recent beatings. They've vowed to defend them. The soldiers know this. They're nervous."



“They're your soldiers, Captain. I want no fighting.”

“We will defend ourselves if we're attacked.”

“We won't be.”

Maybe it was too late. Maybe the seeds of revolution had already grown roots. If that was the case, and by some bizarre chance they did give up the Charun, then arresting Ungeo could easily backfire. But Ko was prepared for that. The Wuj could interrogate the Charun, and all the major players in this insipid mutiny would be identified, and the council would be forced to react without the customary waiting periods and paperwork and national approval that could sometimes take a whole cycle.

Once Uzkiev learned of this, Ko would be executed. Of that there was no doubt. The Nidhogg did not accept disobedience. Ko was prepared for it. He had already filed the necessary paperwork. He had withdrawn all of his available wages and sent them back to his world. He left instructions with the great financial institution of the Overseers that dealt with probative issues.

Upon his death, his estate would be used to purchase the freedom of Booja and Qulp. Hopefully there would be a little money left over for Booja and Qulp to purchase their own tract of land. The thought of his son wearing the gold badge of freedom was enough to make all this worthwhile.

If the Molochites did what Ko suspected they would, which was refuse to surrender the Charun despite the arrest order signed first by the late Overseer, then again by Uzkiev, then the sector commander would be forced into reacting. Uzkiev was in a precarious position. If it became known that the Dahhak were flagrantly disobeying his orders, the Overseers protesting his command would pounce all over it.

Even after Ko was executed, the Dahhak insurrection would have to be severely and immediately dealt with because it would be all out in the open. Ko couldn't think of another possible reaction. And while he had learned he was very poor in the ways of deceit and espionage, he was very good at predicting the reactions of his superiors. It was why he was still alive. This was going to work.

"We're coming up," the pilot, a Shishi, reported over the loudspeaker. Ko watched out the window as they came to the docking area of the giant, turnip-shaped building. The temple was awe-inspiring in its simple beauty. While he detested what the Dahhak were trying to do, Ko couldn't help but feel the power of their faith while in the shadow of such a magnificent monument. They said these temples were minor compared to the ones on their homeworld.

Behind him, he listened to the uneasy whispers of the Footie soldiers.

"Their priests flay your skin for looking at them funny," a Marid said.

No, Ko thought sadly, if the Dahhak were planning on converting the whole Dominion, then they were terribly mistaken.

The ship landed smoothly just inside the bay, located on the underside of the massive bulb. Symbols lined the walls of the cavernous, open room. Several leathers were strung about. A few of them easily identifiable as Geyrun.

They were expected. A rector stood at the end of the docking bay dressed in full crimson regalia, flanked by several acolytes outfitted in their simple yellow robes. They were positioned before the archway that represented the entrance to their temple.

"Let me do the talking," Ko said to the captain. "Just stand behind me and look dangerous."

The captain said nothing, just motioned a few commands. Ko stepped down the ramp and walked casually to the rector, the soldiers marching behind. He had seen this done several times. He could do it.

Ko tried to sound as formal as possible, and he tried his best not to allow his voice to crack. "We have a signed order for the arrest of one Charun, Ungeo G'sslom, Mid-Commander in the Dominion military, for the crime of misrepresentation to a superior officer, gross misconduct of duty, and abandonment of her post." Attempted murder should've been on there as well, but he hadn't gotten the warrant updated. "Furthermore, we have compelling evidence that the Charun in question has taken up residence in this very temple."

The rector didn't speak for some time. An acolyte coughed, and a soldier directly behind him jerked in response. *Easy. Easy.*

"Hypothetically," the rector said, "if this Charun were here, then she would be our guest. Our tradition dictates that those deemed worthy and blessed with sanctuary are to be left unmolested by agents not of the church. These rules were accepted and ratified by the Dominion."

Ko was prepared for this. "Dominion law clearly states that grave security matters override national agreements at the sector commander's discretion. Those who wish to appeal must do so before the council."

The rector stood there calmly, not saying anything.

"Are you denying this Charun is present on these grounds?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny this."

"Which I'll accept as a confirmation."

"You can accept it however you please, infidel," the rector said. "Unless you plan on forcing your way into our holy place, you must leave."

Behind him, the soldiers shifted nervously. The acolytes looked defiant, but wary. None of them were armed. It was going exactly how Ko had planned.

"You're turning us away even though we have a direct order for the Charun's arrest?" Ko tried to sound as formal as possible.

"Our temple is always open to those who have interest in our faith. We turn no one away with genuine spiritual need. I invite any of you to return once you're given leave. In the end, it will be us standing over those who don't come to Moloch."

It wasn't a direct answer, but it would do. The air crackled with tension, but Ko felt strangely at ease. It was going to work. "We will leave then. But this is not the end."

Ko turned to leave.

Later, reflecting over what happened next, Ko would decide that choosing soldiers who knew nothing about Molochism was a dreadful mistake.

The rector reached into his robes and began to pull something out. Ko knew what the caduceus was. Just a hollowed wooden stick

that rectors waved around pompously whenever someone left their presence. He had seen them use it hundreds of times during meetings with the Overseer. The sticks were filled with ground rocks or bone or something, and when shaken, a cloud of dust arose around the rector.

But these soldiers were nervous. Terribly so, and the rector was pulling something from his robes.

Just a single burst from a Marid, but it was enough. The shot was a little off. It took off the rector's arm at the elbow and ripped through the wing folded on his back.

Ko stood there, looking at the Marid stupidly for a few seconds while no one moved. The rector dropped to his knees, blood spilling from his arm, the caduceus rolling away, trailing dust. The wing was bent badly, a savage hole in it.

The acolytes yelled for help with voices that echoed strangely, two of them dragging the rector away. The smell of burned flesh was heavy in the bay.

"Unless we're going to fight our way to the Charun, perhaps we should leave," the captain said. "Immediately."

Ko barely heard him. The blood trail led through the archway and into the temple. The rector's arm was still there. His caduceus was, too. Dahhak emerged from all around him, exits he hadn't noticed before. They were armed with long sticks, and their curious glares all turned to anger upon the sight of the blood.

No bloodshed. That's all he had wanted. Ko had pictured himself doing a great injury to the Charun, but that was just fantasy. He'd never really hurt anyone willingly. Geyrun were a peaceful race. This was terrible. He could hear it now. *Dominion comes to arrest the Molochites' new favorite orator and wings the rector when he refuses to comply.* Their ranks of dissidents were going to swell. And it was his fault.

*I should stay,* Ko thought. Let the Dahhak exact their punishment. He thought of Qulp, then. If he could see him now, he'd ask him for forgiveness.

*Even fathers make mistakes, he'd say.*

The Daityas grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him toward the ship. The others ran, all berating their fellow soldier who kept saying, "I thought he was pulling something." Over and over.

During the frantic ride back to the base, their anger toward their fellow quickly evolved to anger toward Ko.

"We should've been told what to expect," they groused.

Ko looked out the window. The city soared by. Cibola was beautiful to him once. Now all he saw was the destruction they caused. He understood why the angels wanted it all to themselves. Why they tried to kill the demons. It was to keep them away.

*By Jehu, he thought. What have I done?*



## ZEV - DAVE - LEVI

ZEV AWAKENED with the sound of the gunshot still echoing. He jumped to his feet, sniffing the air. He shuffled forward, his front paws scratching at the ground. Ahead, the small animal hiding loosed its bowels, identifying it as a chider, a creature with tough meat that filled the forest with its annoying, high-pitched squeal. They tasted terrible.

The wolf leaped forward, wanting to get a quick taste of the hunt. It had been so long. The threat of foul-tasting meat was not enough to quell the sudden burning need. The animal burst from the underbrush and tried to hop away, and he nipped it out of the air. A quick snap of the neck silenced it forever. The dead body thrashed as he swallowed it whole.

The blood dripping from his maw, Zev threw his head back and howled.

A new urge stirred within. Again, he sniffed the air carefully. Again he found what he sought. This time when he howled into the wind, it was answered several times over. Though not as many voices carried on the wind as he had expected. Nonetheless, one howl caught his attention. An old friend, a terrible enemy.

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Later, Dave awakened again, cold and naked on a rock. His head ached, and he was covered with blood.

He jumped to his feet, looking at his bloodied hands in amazement.

He had made it. He was back outside of Cibola. He was on the far side, in the never-ending forest that took up the north region of the angel metropolis. At least he hoped he was. There was no beacon in sight. The trees here were still huge, but more of a normal proportion. They were just as dense, and it smelled just as dark and

foreboding. Even the bugs seemed ominous in their loud, grating buzz.

The raw taste of chider still enveloped his mouth. His crotch ached from the recent mating. The nails on his hands throbbed.

But Dave had dreamt all that. Of finding the other wolf in the shadows. Of mounting her, howling.

*No, he had told his mother. They were never just dreams.*

Dave became aware of another presence sitting nearby. He turned and jumped, suddenly overwhelmed with the urge to run, but frozen at the same time.

Sitting before him was the living torment of his nights. The very reason he lived in terror his entire life, always afraid to sleep. Living, breathing darkness in the form of a giant wolf.

Vila. Her name was Vila.

"Your human form returns," she said. Each of her top fangs were as long as his arm. The wolf was huge, bigger even than in his dreams. She stood at least ten feet tall, maybe more.

"Am I dreaming again, or is this finally real?" he asked.

She cocked her head. "As does your human memory. Do you not recall what we just shared?"

Dave took a deep breath. He just wanted to bolt. But she would catch him. She always did.

"I remember... some of what just happened. But... no. I don't."

Vila snorted. "I will tell you, then." She strolled around him, her enormous nostrils sniffing. "Between the light and the darkness are the shadows that make our world. Together, we ruled the forest. But neither of us were satisfied with just this place. When the angels created the humans, we traveled to one of their worlds. There, we became gods. Humans worshipped us. Sacrificed for us. Fought wars in our names."

Her very presence was a terror like he had never known. Frozen, he listened.

"Others found the human planets and took up residence, establishing themselves as deities. Banished angels, demons, more of our kind. They bent nations to their will, used the people as their playthings. You reveled in it, as did I.



“Then He exerted His control over the worlds, one by one until almost all the false gods were gone. We returned here, to the hunting grounds of old. But you had changed.

“You wanted nothing more than to return to the human world. You somehow found a way of forever casting away your skin and mind, of being born innocent into the world of humans. So deep was your obsession, you did this freely, knowing the likely result would be an infinitely short life followed by an eternity of servitude.”

The wolf's voice took on an odd feeling of hurt. Somehow it made her as menacing as ever. “You left me alone. But I found what you could not. A way to wield power from here, influence. We still have servants on your precious planet. Through the crows, I entered your sleep. Through the wolves, especially your companion, I watched you by day.”

Dave found the strength to speak. “I... I don't remember any of this. How could it be true?”

“Of course you do not remember. You are not Zev. Just his shell. You're not of the same mind.”

“But, but... If I'm not the same, why do that to me?”

“In the end, you may not be him. But he is in you, and your pain is his.” She continued to pace, her feet crunching in the underbrush. The feeling of helplessness was compounded by his nakedness. “If I could, I'd forever keep you trapped in your human sleep. I'd consume your unending dream flesh, never ceasing your anguish.”

“Then why did you make my dog attack me?”

She stopped. “I did not administer your human passing. In truth, I lost control of the human world once again. I thought I had lost you forever, but soon afterward I found I could find your mind again while you slept. Because you were here.”

There was so much to contemplate, and he didn't even know where to begin. If she was telling the truth—and somehow he sensed that she was—why did Carumba attack him? Perhaps Vila lost control of Carumba while they were on the lake. Maybe his dog didn't know who Dave was anymore, and attacked the stranger on the ice. Maybe.

"Wait a second," Dave blurted. "Before I woke, how was I a wolf like you?"

Vila smiled, then. A wolf smile of gleaming fangs and death.

"Do you not remember? The dialogue we had before Zev fell to his sleep and lost control to your form?"

"No."

"He believes he knows a way back. To be Zev again forever. What you just experienced was but a temporary transference. Soon, though, he will be returned."

Dave felt sick.

Vila continued. "He was weak, but he forced the change upon you while you were incapacitated with your beacon travel. Through the hunt he gained enough strength for one last push, one chance to reclaim his soul."

Dave felt himself backing up, just like he did in his dreams. She kept pace with him. Her breath burned his skin.

"I thought you hated him now," Dave said, desperately.

"We are to be together again. I wish it."

"But what happens to me?"

"You die."

"I... I just don't understand." Dave backed into a tree.

"That is not a concern. Your, *his*, seed has taken hold in my belly. Already I can feel it. When the pups are born, the strongest will be chosen to take Zev within."

He wanted to run, but he couldn't. The thought of her claws digging into his back, of her flipping him over, devouring him, it was too much.

"Do not flee, boy. There is no need. For the moment, you live." Dave sank to the ground, but he felt no relief.

"Zev knows of your reason to be here," Vila continued. "And there is great urgency in your task. While we are no friends of angels, the demons hunt our kind and our game, killing indiscriminately. I will help you complete what you started."

"And... and after?"

"We remain together until it is time for me to bear my litter. I will allow the strongest pup to devour you, then all will be as it should."

---

Weaponless and without suitable armor, Levi crawled. He dared not stand or fly. Flight after flight of the demons continued to come and go directly above him. He was drained, and every inch of his body felt trampled upon.

Much time passed. Each moment was another grasp of dirt in front of him, every black shape in the sky possibly the one that would bring him his final sleep. It became his very existence, the only thing he knew. Each inch forward was penance for every wrong he had made. For each angel who had died under his leadership or at the helm of one of his machines.

He crawled. He crawled and crawled.

Much later, an ominous shape finally loomed in the distance, sprouting from the grass like a glacier grasping for the sky. A Foray. It was still in one piece, but the front end was dug into the dirt. The cockpit was black, like the insides had caught fire.

It looked like it had been swatted out of the sky.

"You and me both," Levi said to the machine. He ran his hand across the smooth metal once he finally reached it. He found the serial number. REV21:1. One of the earliest models. An officer's plane. A flight leader. He'd likely met the pilot, even trained him. He was dead now. Levi's fingers found the emergency release button on the side, and the cockpit slid open, the metal protesting. A breeze whipped past him, picking the sand and soot out of the melted seat and whisking it away.

The "fire-proof" flight suit was nothing but a strand of char that turned to dust when he touched it. The helmet was like paper. Levi tried to pick it up, but it fell apart in his hands. *Has it really been that long?*

He crawled in, sinking into the ruined seat. One side of the chair groaned and broke, causing him to fall lopsided. He wiped his hand across the panel.

A few lights still blinked, but the center display was cracked. Her back was broken. She would never fly again.

One light in particular caught Levi's attention, however. It glowed purple, blinking incessantly.

At first, Levi thought he was hallucinating. Or he had gone mad.

The blinking purple light told him two things, both of which caused him to jerk upright in the chair.

One, the radio was still receiving communications. Secondly, this was a Critical Action Message. They were important communications that went out to all military command vehicles, encrypted with a code that could only be broken by a verbal pass. Or an engineer who had designed the system himself.

A Critical Action Message in itself wasn't all that remarkable. Hundreds of them were issued on the day this plane was crashed. But all old messages blinked blue. Most were yellow when first received, and about an hour later, the light turned orange. After about twenty hours, the light became blue. Purple meant something entirely different.

Levi ripped open the under panel. The familiar feel of power-laden wires, like a second heartbeat, consumed him. There was only one place this message could be from. There was only one structure that contained the equipment to send it.

This message, less than twenty hours old, was sent from the Tower. In a room high above the Athenaeum, high above the Sphere. In this command center was a machine with a code no scientist or engineer could crack. If a Critical Action Message is sent from this machine, the resulting messages blink purple to let the commanders know the importance of it.

It was said only six angels knew the code to this machine.

Each one of them a Seraph.



## INDIGO - UNGEO

"NO. THIS WAY IS A DEAD-END," Indigo said. "Around the corner will be an exit. Probably sealed like the others."

An angel came back a moment later, confirming it.

Something very strange was happening to Indigo. From the moment they first came into the room that carried the giant Sphere, things began coming back to her like a flood finally ripping through a dam. The important stuff, like who she was, still wasn't there, but it was clear she had spent a great deal of time here in this tower. She worked here, for sure. Maybe even lived somewhere in these tall, opulent halls.

If anyone had expected Tamael to break down, they were mistaken. She was all seriousness now, feverishly detached, barking orders.

After the angel and Dave absorbed into the Sphere, they blew their way out of the room into the chamber above. Debris littered this room. They quickly traveled up, sealing every door they could. Level after level they climbed. They ran into no more resistance. All the external exits, which normally peppered the Tower all the way up to the flight ceiling, were all sealed from the outside, effectively blocking them in.

The déjà vu got increasingly more frenetic, coming and going with the strangest things, like an upholstered chair that faced the wrong way, or a bookshelf that appeared emptier than normal, or a room that just simply looked too empty. But when they left the official Athenaeum, through the massive steel doors, and into the Cherubim's internal city, Indigo knew this was real.

She knew because the sight of the Village broke her heart. The Village. That's what they called the next thousand levels of the Tower, designed for the purpose of Cherubim affairs. She had a clear image, then, of the vertical community rising within the belly of the infinite Tower. It was dead now. A mockery of what these angels once had.

The center waterfall, a thin stream falling from a distant height, still spilled into the azure pool, a pond that took up a good portion of the Village's floor. It was surrounded by a circling pattern of blue tiles. Various sub buildings, smooth, curved structures, rose along the walls like the great ribs of a serpent.

The Cherubim were the spiritual leaders of Cibola, giving advice and lectures on this issue or that. But they were also the keepers of all knowledge, and they were responsible for making sure the Athenaeum texts were accurate and up-to-date. As well as disseminating the messages and policies relayed to them via the Seraphim.

The Village was a living, breathing thing. While the Seraphim above were the brains of Cibola, the Cherubim were the heart. Indigo did not like seeing it like this.

"Nothing living here," Iopol muttered. "Just the ghosts of the past."

---

Ungeo slowly became aware of the changes within Ravi over a course of several feedings. The juvenile Dahhak was rapidly filling out, his features darkening, his muscles bulging. And it wasn't just him, but all the young males within the temple.

She spent much of her time in her chambers after the botched assassination attempt on the Geyrun. The prelate and rector were surprisingly forgiving of her grand failure. Though they certainly were worried about the inevitable interrogation of the assassin, it didn't faze them nearly as much as it should. They seemed to have abandoned their original plan of replacing the assistant.

Or, Ungeo surmised, perhaps the whole thing had been a decoy, a way to keep her out of their business, but at the same time test her allegiance.

Finally, she asked Ravi what was happening. He hesitated at first, but then shrugged and told her. Dahhak males grew to their juvenile size after a very short period of infancy. From there, they

could remain physically young indefinitely. They served in a temple for 101 Dahhak cycles before they were allowed to perform the ceremony that released the hormones into their blood. Ravi had only been serving Moloch temples for 60 Dahhak cycles, so he was supposed to have a long way to go. But recently all young Dahhak serving in temples were required to perform the adulthood ceremony. The ranks were being bolstered. A secret army was being built.

"What is the ceremony?" Ungeo asked. While she now spent hours upon hours between temple services and feedings poring over the *Decretal* and other ancient texts of Molochism, she still knew very little of the Dahhak race.

"To mate with a queen, of course," Ravi said. "Why else do you think they've smuggled the young queens in here?"

Ungeo remembered the queen from her meeting with the prelate. It made her uneasy. When she slept, sometimes she thought of the queen's eyes staring back at her. "Where are they doing this? Even the temples are too small for the children these queens must be breeding." It was hard to imagine that same creature was locked in a room somewhere, her body expanded to an obscene size.

"None have given birth yet of course. But they're to be spawned in the underground setts I believe. At least that's where the queen I mated with is now. I don't know where the other queens are, but there are quite a few. Young Dahhak are arriving by the thousands. They don't get listed as soldiers in the transport manifests. Only assistants, so it doesn't raise suspicions.

"Once they've arrived they're brought to a queen to mate, then hidden away. Other, older Dahhak are training us in weapons and flight formations."

"These baby Dahhak," Ungeo asked. "Once they are born, how long before they will grow up?"

Ravi shook his head. "Not fast enough. I heard the rector and prelate speaking of this earlier. Once the queens begin birthing, there will be too many to hide. Some will be kept and raised, I suppose. Others will be used for Moloch, or smuggled to the Sedim ovens, or given... other uses. Unless we are trained in time. Then we can act before this becomes an issue."



Ungeo looked down at the steaming plate of food Ravi had brought her. She suddenly felt ill.

It appalled her, strangely so. Ungeo wondered what these queens thought about this. They wouldn't think too highly of it, she was sure. Unlike the Sedim, Dahhak were fervent creatures. She was sure the women were the same. She tried to imagine how she'd react if they were her own chicks.

"How long before these queens birth?"

Ravi shrugged. "Half a cycle, maybe less."

This was a definite problem. Ravi didn't see it as he was still young, unskilled in the workings of the Dominion. While some races were allowed to breed within Cibola, the ones with more explosive populations were not. Like the Mites and Nidhoggs and Dahhak. This issue had caused a great deal of tension before the Dominion was officially formed. No one race was to be clearly dominant.

The Molochites would have to make their move before this was discovered. Half a cycle, maybe less. A lot could happen in that amount of time.

Soon thereafter came the news of the attack on the rector. Ungeo had terribly underestimated this one-handed Geyrun. He had overcome an assassination attempt by a highly-skilled Dahhak, whilst injured no less. And in an attempt to arrest her, he had the rector shot in the wing while the unarmed clergyman had a caduceus in hand.

It was a blasphemy beyond words. A defiling of the church. An unspeakable atrocity.

The rector, the same Dahhak who had reluctantly given Ungeo the chance to prove her worth, was of course obliterated. Along with all the acolytes in his presence at the time. But even that would not cease the blistering of the congregation.

Ungeo even saw the anger in Ravi's eyes. The boy, while always cocky, had never been foolhardy. His sudden ascension into adulthood was starting to alter his personality, and it worried her. She didn't want her young friend to become just another angry face in the crowd. A voice amongst a legion that had little worth compared to the rest.

"Don't you think it's best to wait until we're ready, until you're fully trained?" Ungeo asked the Dahhak. She cracked a talon. The missing toe no longer bothered her, but the sensation wasn't as satisfying as it once was.

"Moloch teaches that retribution must be swift and decisive," Ravi said, pacing back and forth in her small room. He had brought his dancing board, but they hadn't played in a long while. "They think they can spit upon our rites, our holy places. They must learn the power of our faith."

Ungeo leaned forward. "Moloch also says that reason is the tool on which you sharpen your blades. The most holy of fighters cannot pass unscathed through a wall."

Ravi shook his head. "No, my Charun friend. Even if I opposed it, we would still have our vengeance. With or without the blessings of the prelate and the elders."

Ungeo clicked her beak. "Moving too swiftly will cause us to fail."

"He was my father, you know," Ravi said. "The rector."

The statement was so unexpected, Ungeo thought she had misheard. "How do you know?"

"I just do. I could feel it. He knew it, too. That's why I was in his favor."

Somehow, Ungeo believed him. It also explained several things. Like why the prelate kept Ravi on as an aide even after the rector's demise. And why Ravi always seemed to know things before they happened. "Then I am sorry for your loss."

Ravi nodded but said nothing for a long time. Together they stared at the dancing board, neither making a move.

"There's a storm coming," Ravi finally said. "A real one, I mean. With rain and everything like at home."

Ungeo looked up, intrigued. It didn't rain much in the world from where Ungeo came, but when it did happen, it was usually in the form of short, violent bursts. She abhorred being wet.

"And it's big. Big enough to cover the whole city. They say the northern rain is common, but it comes to the city only once every ten thousand cycles. They are scrambling to protect the setts from flooding."

In ancient Charun folklore, the coming of great storms signaled the change of an era. If the great sand basin was filled with water beyond the first peak, the royal family was to be killed, a new one appointed. It had never come to pass in her lifetime. Or her mother's. But when it did, there was always war.

"There's talk," Ravi continued. "About how Dahhak can fly and fight perfectly in the rain while many others can not."

She waited for it.

"We're going to take the council. Every sector's Overseer will be removed, and the Dominion will be ours."

*Bloody hell.*



## KO

“YOU ARE REMOVED from your post, effective immediately, yesss,” Uzkiev said evenly. He and Ascot had come back early from their council business after news of the incident at the Temple. While the temple didn't technically float in Uzkiev's sector (being outside of the city, it wasn't in anyone's), he was given control of the situation. And he wasn't pleased. Not in the slightest.

They all stood in the landing bay outside of headquarters. Ko had already emptied his quarters of his personal belongings and verified that the proper correspondence had been sent back to the bankers guild on his own world. He wondered what they would tell Qulp. Would they tell him his father had died a traitor's death? Hung for disobeying orders? The thought made Ko sick.

The ramifications of the failed attempt to arrest the Charun were still resounding over the whole Dominion. The news had spread swiftly. Before Uzkiev could return, Ko spent a long time just walking the streets, listening to the conversations. He visited the new marketplace, and he didn't have to wait long to hear a score of arguments.

“These Dahhak are getting out of control,” he heard one Shishi trader say loudly to a Marid sifting through his wares. A group of Dahhak stood nearby, waiting in line at a food booth. The group and the merchant exchanged acid glares. “They think their religion is above the law. It's shit. The whole thing is shit.”

The Dahhak broke from the line then, but Ko didn't stay to see what happened. It wouldn't be long before either of them noticed the Geyrun standing nearby had only one arm. The crazed assistant of Uzkiev who caused it all. The scene was repeating itself all over. A terrible division was tearing through the Dominion, exactly what Ko

had wanted to prevent. The knowledge that this was his fault ripped at him savagely, ruthlessly.

Not just his fault, though. The Charun haunted his mind. His hate for her became a living thing.

It consumed his thoughts.

"I do understand your actions," Uzkiev said. "Ahh, but they surprise me. I've always thought you to be a more peaceful creature."

"My Lord, I apologize for whatever harm I've done. I hope my execution will bring some closure to the issue."

Ascot laughed. The small demon buzzed off Uzkiev's shoulder. "Execution? What makes you believe we'd let you off that easily?"

"I... I don't understand," Ko said, looking between the two of them.

"You silly buffoon," Ascot said, buzzing around his head. "Uzkiev here is rather fond of you, whether you're aware or not. He admires your perseverance and spirit. He thinks you should be executed to spare you. I was inclined to agree, but I have a better use for you."

"What? What are you talking about?"

Then Ko understood. He'd known for a while, really. But he just hadn't pieced it all together. All this time he had been addressing the wrong person. It made sense. Since everyone thought Uzkiev was the envoy—and now the sector commander—they acted freely in Ascot's presence. Plus, if there was ever an assassination attempt...

But the news that he wasn't to be executed overshadowed this sudden revelation. What worse could they do? Sell him back into slavery? Torture him?

"The Footie soldier who fired the shot that wounded the rector has been discharged, sent back to his world. This leaves a space open in the platoon."

Ko did not like where this was going.

"I have no military training. My presence would compromise them." He looked desperately at Uzkiev, who wore a sad smile.

"I've personally spoken with the captain of the unit," Ascot said. "He welcomes the idea. In fact, I'd say he relishes it. You made an impression on him."

Ko felt numb. Him? In a combat unit? The idea would be just as ridiculous if they named him to the council. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Just be thankful, you fool!" Uzkiev said. "You're still alive, yesss. And soon, you'll be given a second chance at your Charun. We can't allow his Lord's orders to be blatantly disregarded, can we?"

"Really?" Ko said. His head spun. "You're going to confront the Dahhak?"

Ascot held up his tiny hand. "Such things are not for conscripts such as yourself to know or discuss. You are to report to your platoon immediately, soldier."

"Yes, My Lord," Ko said, bowing and backing away, absorbing it all. He felt numb, almost like he was floating out of his own body, looking upon someone else. He didn't know what scared him more. That he was actually going to be a soldier, or that the idea excited him.





## INDIGO

THEY FLEW UPWARDS FOR AN ETERNITY. While so much was coming to Indigo, and this world was suddenly as familiar as anything, she couldn't recall the journey ever taking so long. Frish held her now. The female Power was ever silent.

They came to the very top levels of the Village without coming across any sign of angel occupation since the Fall.

A massive mosaic covered the ceiling at the top of the Village. It glittered blue and green and sparkled in the light. The image was of a great sea serpent with the torso and head of an angel and a long, white beard. All around the mosaic creature, the sea raged, and the sky was full of birds locked in combat with one another. A bloodied gash was open on the side of the beast, situated directly in the center of the image. The gash was an actual hole in the mosaic, and from this wound the water flowed, pouring to the pond miles upon miles below. The monster's mouth was also open, providing a wide entrance to the level above.

She remembered something very vividly, then. *Through the mouth of the Serpent, they will meet only death.* She couldn't remember who said it, but the voice was familiar and strong.

"Wait," Indigo called as they headed for the mouth. "That's not the correct way inside. We need to go through the wound at the side of the serpent."

"Are you sure?" Iopol said. "I can see the next level through the mouth. It's right there."

"Yes, I am sure."

"I don't believe you," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Is this some sort of trick?"

"What is through the mouth?" Tamael asked, coming to hover before her. The angel's eyes were wary and tired.

"I'm not sure," Indigo said. "It's a trap, I think. Maybe even what the demons are afraid of. But I do know the way through the wound leads to another pond. We'll have to swim through it."

"I don't know how to swim," Frish said. "None of us do."

"You're kidding," Indigo said. She couldn't recall actually swimming herself any time, but she had the feeling she could swim well. "It's probably not very far."

"I've heard of a few angels who tried to swim once," an angel said, her voice full of fear. "The water makes it so you can't breathe. They went in and never came out."

The others nodded. "I can't do it," someone said. "Ashia could, but not any Principalities. Not even the Hashmallim know the ways of water."

"I can't believe this," Indigo said, incredulous. "You've all come this far, and you're going to stop because of a little water? What a bunch of friggin' pansies."

"There's no need for anger, human," Tamael said. "Water presents to us the same obstacle the heights bring to those without wings. We're going to have to brave whatever trap there is for us through the main way."

"No," Indigo said. "Absolutely not." No matter how hard she searched her porous memory, she couldn't remember of nature of the danger through the mouth. Every instinct she had was screaming not to let them through. This wasn't automatic sentry guns, like in the room of the Sphere. This was certain, inevitable death.

"We have no choice," Tamael said.

"I'll go on alone," Indigo said. "Push me up through the water, and I'll try to find the danger from behind. Maybe I can disable it."

Tamael frowned and lolol laughed out loud.

"There are no steps to lead you from one place to the next," Tamael said. "And if you can't disable the trap, you will have no way of returning to us."

"I'll swim back down through the hole."

"You'll get sucked through and plunge to your death," Tamael said.

"I'll bring a communicator. You'll know when I'm coming and catch me."

The angel shook her head. "No. It's too dangerous."

"It's your only choice."

To Indigo's surprise, Tamael waved her hand. "Do not die on me. We have invested and lost too much for you to perish in folly." She gave Indigo a communicator to clip onto her belt.

The other angels watched silently as Frish gently glided Indigo up to the edge of the gaping wound of the sea serpent. A mist of water sprayed upon them. It was warm. Apprehension and doubt filled Indigo. She was going to be alone for the first time since coming here. She had always considered herself an independent person, and she felt as if she could make it alone if she had to. But now she began to doubt that assumption. She never realized how she had come to trust and rely upon the others, even these angels who still regarded her with suspicion.

Dave, Hitomi, Gramm, Rico. She wished all of them were with her right now.

"Be careful not to get sucked right back out," Frish said. "Swim to the side."

"I will," Indigo said.

With a push that was surprisingly strong, Frish braved the water for just a moment to send her up through the wound of the mosaic beast. Indigo was immediately pulled backward and toward the hole, the tug impossibly strong. But her hands desperately grasped and found a length of thin piping that spanned across the pond. She pulled herself over as quickly as she could, her lungs starting to burn. After the tug of the undertow lessened, she let go and swam for the surface.

Swimming up and up, she broke free into the ivory world of the Seraphim. Quickly, she swam for the edge of the pond, which was about half a basketball court away. Breathing heavily, she pulled herself out of the water and onto the ivory floor. Her chest burned.

There, staring up into the never-ending heights of the realm of the Seraphim, she knew. She'd suspected, but at that moment, she knew.

She was finally home.



## INDIGO

REBECCA MATTHEWSON.

Indigo couldn't get her name, her face out of her mind, even six months later. Their match had been touted for months. *Combat Sports MMA* magazine even had an issue with dual covers. Indigo on one side, and if you flipped it over, Rebecca was there, blonde hair and all. While the magazine usually focused on the professional circuit, they had caught wind of the story and decided to make a spectacle of it.

Their similarities made for a good tale. Both had Olympian fathers—one in boxing, the other TaeKwonDo. They were only three days apart in age.

Both practiced the same style. The first time they met in a match was at the junior nationals at eight years old. Rebecca had won. The next year Indigo won. Over the next seven years they would meet four more times, both winning twice.

It was the last time they were going to be able to compete as minors. Only one of them would take the championship, and their matchup was anticipated and talked about so much, the magazine decided to do a story.

"You will win this," Father said before the match as he helped Indigo with her gloves. They were alone in the locker room. "I did not raise a pansy as a daughter. You will bring honor to the school and to your family. That Barbie doll is your enemy."

"Yes, sir," Indigo said.

"I want you to hurt her. Not too bad, but bad enough to fuck up her chances at the trials next month."

The Olympic trials loomed, and Indigo's sights were on gold. This was going to be her only chance. Last time she was too young,

and if she couldn't make it now, there was no way she'd be able to do it in four years, past her prime.

"There's no honor in injuring an opponent in a friendly match, sir," she said.

"Just keep it in mind," he said after a moment. He started to leave. "I've worked very hard for this. Don't forget that."

A few minutes later, Indigo was alone in the hallway, sweat already pouring from her neck and temples. Rebecca emerged from her room. Side by side they stood, awaiting to be announced.

"Hi," her enemy said.

Outside, the audience roared as the announcer riled them up. For the first time ever, the boy's final had gone first.

"Hi," Indigo said, cracking a smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks. You too."

They stood side by side for an eternity.

"This is my last match," Rebecca blurted suddenly.

It took several seconds for it to sink in.

"What?" Indigo said, turning. "What about the Olympics?"

"I... don't know. My heart isn't in it anymore."

"Wow." Indigo couldn't imagine quitting. The possibility had never even entered her mind. "What did your father say? Mine would kill me."

Rebecca shrugged. "He was a little weird about it at first, but then he said it was my life. If I didn't want to do it anymore I didn't have to. I didn't even want to do this tournament, but that stupid magazine article..."

"Wow," Indigo said again. "I'm... I'm going to miss you, I guess." She laughed.

The announcer screamed out Rebecca's name, and she shot out of the hallway and into the arena.

As the announcer went on to tout her awards and accomplishments, as if this were a heavyweight boxing championship, Indigo began to stew. An anger burned within her, one she couldn't explain. Never once, ever, did she hold any ill feelings toward this girl. She always wanted to beat her, but always for the sake of winning. Never for the sake of making her lose. Her

father had forced the term “enemy” into her head so much that whenever Indigo saw the girl, she couldn't help but think that word. But it held no real meaning. Until now.

As Indigo's name was called and she marched out to face Rebecca in the round ring, she could think of nothing but making her lose. She was aware that this sudden, overwhelming emotion wasn't natural, not normal. She didn't even feel this way of the boys in school who called her “the walking stick” and filled her locker with mud.

Rebecca, she realized, was exactly like her. It went beyond just the similarities that made a good story for the news. They were the same person.

With one, blaring difference that filled the gap between them like a fire that could devour the world.

Rebecca was happy. If not now, she was going to be because she told her father she didn't want to do it anymore. It was her choice. Her life. And she was strong enough to do it.

Indigo hated her for it. Rebecca was in a place Indigo would never be. She hated her more than she had ever hated anyone or anything.

The whistle blew, and Indigo was on her.

Somewhere in there, the screaming began. A woman, Rebecca's mother, flung herself on top of her daughter. With each one of Indigo's blows, her anger at the girl lessened. All the way until it was completely gone. The referee stared right at Indigo, after she finally realized to stop, after she realized what she had done, the confusion and pain almost unbearable in his eyes.

“I told you to stop.”

A whisper. But words that would haunt her every night of her remaining life.

There would be a lawsuit that was still pending on that night several months later when Indigo died. A criminal case that was disposed of easily with a plea and probation. There would be no Olympic trials, no wall of fame in father's Dojo.

While Mother shied away from her, as if she were afraid, Father blamed everything on Rebecca and her father. “She shouldn't have



gotten in the circle with you if she wasn't ready," he said. "Her dad should've fucking seen it, too. And he knows it."

At school, she went from a tall, awkward girl that no one spoke with to a tall, awkward girl that everyone stared at. She never again found mud in her locker, but she began to wish she had. Lunches were in exile, and walking the hallways was a gauntlet of whispers and hate. They began calling her "Killer."

Graduation came.

"Good luck to you," Mr. Slocomb said to her afterward as Indigo met up with her parents in the parking lot. Everyone milled about. Laughing, having a good time, all still wearing their graduation gowns and caps. Mr. Slocomb was her art teacher, her favorite. He was the only one who had ever acted normal around Indigo, treated her like a normal person. Her father's hand was heavy on her shoulder. "So what're you doing after this? Going to college?"

"Yes," her father said. "She's to major in Business. Gonna run the family dojo."

"That's great," Mr. Slocomb said.

"I'm thinking about art," Indigo blurted. "Changing my major, I mean." *Did I just say that?* She thought her father's hand was going to shatter her shoulder blade.

Mr. Slocomb smiled. "That's great, too. You'd do well. You have a lot of talent. Well, whatever you decide, good luck." He turned away.

"What was that?" Father said a minute later. "What the hell, Indy?"

"I might want to major in something else."

"Art? You implied we're forcing you to do something you don't want to. You've embarrassed me."

Indigo sighed. May in Arizona. It was supposed to be warm, but it wasn't. The air made her arms shiver under her gown. "Dad, please. Just shut the hell up already. My life. Not yours. Mine."

He slapped her. Hard, right across the face, and it stung like nothing she had ever felt before.

She almost fell to her knees.

"You do not talk to me like that. I am your father. You may be a high school graduate, but you live under my roof." He was right in her face, his finger jabbed into her chest. She could smell the garlic and oregano on his breath.

"Don't you touch me," Indigo said. She was yelling, she realized. For the first time in her life, she was yelling. "Don't you touch me ever again."

He jabbed again, this time harder. "I will have your respect."

It was a simple maneuver. An upward swing of one hand, grabbing onto his wrist with the other. She had practiced it so many times it came as naturally as taking a breath.

The snap of his finger breaking was impossibly loud. Indigo practically ripped it clean off. It bent grotesquely, extended so far his nail met with the back of his hand. And, boy, did he scream. Mother did, too, and the crowd oo'd and ah'd and laughed like this was all a joke.

"Get him, Killer!" someone yelled.

He was on his knees, holding his wrist, looking at his finger as if it were a flower that had suddenly sprouted from his hand. Indigo pitied him, then.

She held out her hand to help him up.

"You fucking bitch. Don't you touch me."

"Come on, Dad. Father. I'm sorry. Let's get you to the hospital."

Savagely, growling with an incredible fury in his eyes, like a beast, he ripped up with his good hand, grabbed Indigo's gown, and pulled her to the gravel next to him. His python arm wrapped around her neck.

"Stop it!" her mother screamed. "The both of you! You're monsters, stop it!"

"Shut up," Father said as he strangled her. She started to fight, ripping at him, seeking his exposed pressure points. But before she landed a blow that was sure to force him to free her, she stopped her struggle.

For an instant, it was peaceful. *Maybe*, she thought after a moment, *maybe this is okay. Maybe this is right.* The notion didn't scare her. Not even a little.

She just lay there. She closed her eyes and waited for the black to descend.

"Jesus, Indigo," he whispered in her ear, his grip loosening slightly. But not enough. "Don't stop. Don't stop fighting. Haven't I taught you anything? You can get out of this. Do it. I know you can. Do it."

Suddenly, there was a loud *smack*, and his grip went away. Indigo flipped over, coughing. Her mother stood over the both of them wielding the aluminum baseball bat Father kept in the backseat of the car. It glimmered like a scythe in the night.

"Stop it!" Mother yelled again, even though neither of them moved now. The crowd was silent, too. Just the shutter snap of phones taking pictures and whispers, all around her. In the distance, a siren.

"You hurt your father," Mother said. "You shouldn't've done that."

"I hurt *him*?"

Indigo coughed again. Above, bugs twirled around the gathering crowd, dancing in the floodlight. She felt dizzy, and it was a strange, uneasy feeling. "We need to get him up and to a hospital." She reached over and grabbed his shirt.

"Don't touch him!" Her mom waved the bat.

"Have you gone crazy?"

"He's your father. The only one you'll ever have. You're hurting him."

"You're the one who just bashed his head in!"

Father groaned, turning over on his side. The sirens whined, suddenly very close, and the crowd parted as the gold and green sheriff's car pulled in. The young deputy stepped from his car as two more pulled up. He unsnapped his gun holster and pulled free his weapon.

"Ma'am, please drop the bat."

Father stood, stumbling. He was faced away from the sheriff, and he staggered. He lurched toward the open door of the car. The two other sheriffs got out of their vehicles, both women. Her mother stood there stupidly, the bat still above her head.

"You fucking bitch," Father mumbled. But Indigo wasn't sure if he was talking to her or Mother.

"Please. Drop the bat."

Father was in the passenger front seat of the car. *The gun. He's getting the gun.*

"No," Indigo said, but it came out only as a whisper. "Drop the bat."

"My husband is hurt. He needs help."

"Drop the goddamn bat!"

Indigo didn't have time to think. She rolled away, got up, and lunged for her father. Behind her, Mother screamed as she was pepper-sprayed from several directions at once. She began to wildly swing her bat.

"Don't do it," Indigo said, grabbing onto Father's legs, pulling him back out.

"Let go of me," he shouted, kicking at her.

She could no longer see what was going on behind her, but it sounded like her mother's bat connected with a deputy. More screams rose as the police tackled Mother. More cops pulled up by the second.

A shot rang out. Louder than a thousand screams.

Father swung around, something in his hand. She pulled herself up him, turning.

Father cried out, dropping the water bottle. Her mother was on the ground, clutching her shoulder. It looked like the bullet had barely grazed her. "She didn't do nothing! She didn't do nothing." He got up and starting pushing one of the cops, blood still seeping from his head.

"Get back right now!" a cop yelled, gun still drawn.

*I have to get out of here. I have to go right now.*

Indigo had a vision of wings sprouting forth from her sides, pulling her into the air, higher and higher and higher until she couldn't hear the screaming anymore.

But she didn't have wings, she couldn't fly, and it was at that moment she realized the bullet that had grazed her mother's shoulder had plowed right into her own back. The fire in her chest

was not anger or adrenaline. It was death, and as she fell, the sleep dragging her away like a wild animal into the night, she watched her father get thrown to the ground, handcuffs slapped on, and the horrified eyes of her entire class, watching. Always watching.



## DAVE

"ARE you sure this is the right way?" Dave asked. He had been riding upon Vila's back for some time now, and they had found nothing. The sights and smells and sounds of the northern forests were eerily familiar, but he still had no real recollection of this Zev. But sometimes he imagined he could feel him. A dark knot deep within his gut. A foreign body.

The creatures of the forest mostly bolted at the sight of the pair. The few that didn't flee either rolled over onto their backs or shoved their heads down, urinating all over themselves. Even the intimidating cats, ferocious-looking tigers bigger than the ones they'd seen in the other forest, avoided the mighty wolf.

Vila was silent. Wood exploded under each step of her paw. The air was getting progressively foggier. Soon, Dave couldn't see more than five feet ahead. They walked and walked, a silence that was ever more substantial as time went on. Dave was still naked. Her black fur was surprisingly soft against his skin.

Dave couldn't get the image of his mother from his mind, screaming for him to put the gun down.

As they traveled, he thought of that and his mission and of the wolf who had promised to kill him once her children were born.

They found a dark, twisting trail that forever led downwards. The fog became progressively thicker, the trees and plants more stunted. The buzz of bugs was almost morose, like a requiem.

"How much longer?" Dave finally asked. It couldn't have been this far. The trees were all gone, and the ground was mostly rock and dirt with occasional sprouts of dark green, underdeveloped weeds. His voice sounded hollow against the fog, giving him the feeling like they were on an endless plain.

“We are already there, human,” Vila said. And just a few moments later, the fog parted. They stood upon the precipice of a cliff that overlooked the edge of eternity.

“What the hell?” Dave said. There was nothing beyond the sharp cliff of stone. Whatever was below was so far down he could see nothing but a red haze, like he was looking down upon the top of the sky. “This is the wrong place. I thought the angels still held part of the city. I don't see it anywhere.”

“I haven't taken you to the city,” Vila said. “Look. They are coming.”

Apprehensively, Dave climbed off Vila and peered over the edge. Sure enough, several dark specks appeared, slowly spreading like oil until it became apparent these were groups of flying creatures, hundreds of them in each lump. And they were headed straight up for Dave and Vila.

“You tricked me,” Dave said fearfully.

“I have done no such thing,” she replied. “You seek angels. I have found them.”

Angels? What were they doing here in this bottomless pit surrounded by fog? How many of them were there? He remembered Yehppael telling him and the others about a group of angels who had rebelled. They had been banished. Was it here? Were these them? If so, why would they help?

Vila became noticeably tense once the groups came closer. It surprised Dave, but he said nothing. He was sweating himself, and he found his hand grasping her soft side, his fingers gripping fur for support. She didn't pull away.

The groups stopped 500 feet below the surface of the cliff. A single angel began to ascend, slowly. It was a big male, wearing a white and blue robe. The angel bore no armor or guns, but a long, curved blade—longer even than the angel himself. He pulled it free slowly as he came to the human and the wolf. The blade began to burn with a blue blaze that bled smoke into the sky, crackling like a campfire.

“A human and a wolf,” the angel said, sneering. He waved the sword, and smoke trailed. The robe he wore was tattered. Upon his



feet, his sandals trailed fibers, well-worn. "Is that all He sends? Are you here to mock us?"

"I... I'm not sure who you think sent us here, but I have a very important message."

More angels rose, though they stayed considerably back from the one he was speaking with. There were hundreds of them now. And tenfold still hovered down below, more and more coming the whole time.

"Speak then," the angel said. "I will hear your message."

But before Dave could start, another angel further from the edge cried out. "Look! The fog is gone! They have blazed a trail!"

Dave looked back over his shoulder, and to his surprise, a trail pierced the fog, like a great body of water that had a tunnel bored through it. Where they had walked, the fog had parted.

"I told you," another angel said. "I could feel them coming."

"Who are you?" Dave blurted. "How come you're not defending the city?"

The angel in the blue cocked his head to the side. "Defending the city from what?"



## INDIGO

"YOU'VE RETURNED, Your Honor. You are much more diminutive than when we last met."

The soft, male voice didn't come from any particular place. It was just all around, in the air. The voice was oddly familiar. It made Indigo think of comfort and safety, of a time before she had worries or conflicts.

"Where are you?" she said, rolling onto her side. Water dripped off her exposed skin, cold on her face and hands. The white crystal and ivory inner buildings shot into the sky all around her. "*Who* are you?"

"You're human now," the voice said. "I can see it's you, but you're human."

"Okay, tell me who / am then. Or who I was." To her right, white and beige tiles stretched in a checkerboard pattern. A depression led down to another room and beyond to where the others waited. To her left, the water spread all the way to the far side, taking up half the circumference of the Tower. An ivory statue of a three-headed lion dominated the far wall, tall as five angels. Water spewed from each mouth, and its upturned claws were made of sparkling red jewels.

The beauty here was overwhelming. She had an urge to close her eyes, as it was too stunning to stare at for long. She could become lost just looking at it. Such a shame it was only for the Seraphim.

"You are Derkea," the voice said. "At one time, you were called Seraph."

*Derkea.*

It was like a slap. She mouthed the word, familiar on her lips. Her memory welcomed it, for it was her name. Her original name,

and it stood long before she was called Indigo. The moment she heard it, she knew it was so.

"Yes," she said. "That's right. Who are you? Where are you? There are others below. Is it safe for them to come up?"

"I am the Ophanim. I am His chariot."

"The Ophanim? So you're the only one? Where are you?"

"We are all one. Though we have several eyes, and several wheels, we are one."

The voice definitely wasn't in her head, but no matter how hard she concentrated, she couldn't find the source, as if there were speakers all around her.

"Where are you?" she repeated.

"I am wherever you choose me to be."

She sighed. She was developing a headache. "What about the others? Can they come up safely?"

"You've ordered me to not allow anyone to return. And it is forbidden for any but the Seraphim to pass."

"You're not a Seraph. But you're here."

"Yes, I was here, once. But I am a sentry. And I am not here."

She was too exhausted for this sort of conversation. "Well, I take back my order not to let anyone up. Let the group below come, then resume your duties, I guess. Or you can come with us."

"Yes, Your Honor. Though I can not accompany you any more than I already am. I can not leave, but while you remain here at this place, I will be at your needs."

"Has anyone tried to pass lately?"

"There have been attempts. They did not pass."

"Demons?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

She asked about the Unraveler, who seemed to have been somewhere up here, but the Ophan did not know about him.

"This creature has not been here. Not yet. If it comes, shall I let it pass?"

Indigo paused. "Yes," she said finally.

"I shall not impede, then."

"Indigo, what's your status?" Tamael asked over the radio.

"I'm here," Indigo said into the mic. "Give me five minutes. I almost got it."

"Tell me more about myself," Indigo said to the voice. "About Derkea."

"What is it you wish to know? You left the Tower on a mission of great importance, and that was the last you have crossed my path."

She felt very cold suddenly. "When was this?"

"It was after the attack. More than a cycle afterward, but less than two."

"What was my duty as Seraph?"

"You are a liaison between the Seraphim and the Cherubim. You were gone when the attack came, and you eventually returned, only to find the others gone."

Where did they go?"

"A few decided to seek His chambers above. Almost a cycle later, their robes fell back from where they came. I suspect they rose and rose until they could no more, and they died before allowing themselves to admit defeat. A few others left to seek out the perisceptors, and they have not returned yet, either."

"And the rest?"

The voice didn't answer for a long moment, as if it was carefully thinking of what it would say. "There were six who remained. But when the demons broke through the lower levels, they became despondent. They had a desperate plan that involved sacrificing themselves to replace the missing perisceptors, to return the light of this world once again to the True Light. This plan did not work, and by the time you had returned, they had perished."

Indigo felt sick. "Why did I leave again? What was my mission?"

"The perisceptors had been hidden away. After you came and found your brothers and sisters dead, you left to gather them and bring the perisceptors here. But you never returned. Not until now."

"What about the rest of the Ophanim? Or the Cherubim? Where are they?"

"The Cherubim left to fight, or died defending their level of the Tower. I do not know. As for the Ophanim, I am the Ophanim. I am here, but I do not know where I went."

Indigo sighed. "I don't understand."

"The back of the train does not see the front of the train, yet it is still part of the train. I am the Ophanim, and I am here as you requested. The rest of the train has moved around the bend, and I do not know where."

The radio buzzed again. "Indigo?"

"Yeah. Come on up."

It only took a few moments for the others to emerge. She was still shaking as they came to her. Contrasted against the walls and columns, the twenty-six angels—Tamael; the Powers Iopol and Frish; and twenty-three shell-shocked and weary Principalities—looked ridiculously out of place. The black armor of the three Powers clashed obscenely with these clean halls, and the dirty white robes of the Principalities could never be white enough for this place.

"What was the danger?" Tamael asked, coming up. She looked distastefully at Indigo's wet hair.

"A sentry. Mr. Ophanim, say hello."

"Hello," the voice said.

A stunned silence followed. None of them had ever been in the presence of one of his caste.

"Oh thank His throne," Tamael finally said. "We feared the Tower was abandoned."

"When the demons came, scores of them, I opened my eyes, and they could not withstand my gaze. After Derkea left, I was alone in the Tower."

"Yeah, where were you when the damn city was attacked?" Iopol said, his voice dripping with venom. "Why didn't you *gaze* upon them as they were storming our walls? Trillions upon trillions of us lined up to die while you cowards hid in this tower, watching us die from afar."

Tamael looked as if she was about to shoot Iopol in the face. "You will show respect, soldier."

He spit. "I can't show something I don't have."

"It is not your place to question the Ophanim," said the voice. "My duty has always been to protect this entrance, and I have not failed. Your duty, as Power, was to protect the city's walls. Your failure is why you are here now."

"You show yourself right now!" Iopol screamed, waving his gun. "You have *no right* to call me a failure. No right! You weren't there. You don't know what I saw, what I've had to do! Where the hell are you? Show yourself!"

"I'm sorry," Tamael said to the Ophan. "He's angry at many things. He doesn't know what he says. We're here to follow your orders."

"You'll receive no orders from me," he said. "Derkea is the highest amongst you. You follow her."

"Who?" Tamael asked.

"The human. Her form may have changed, her memory not intact, but she is still one of His twelve. She speaks for Him."

"*What?*" Iopol said, raising his gun to point at Indigo. "The traitor?"

Tamael was silent, her eyes wide with surprise.

"No," Iopol continued. "She may have been one of His precious Seraphim once, but not anymore. She lost her chance. And if she was one of our leaders, I say what she did was even more wrong. I say I kill her right now."

"Your Honor, shall I execute him?"

Indigo sighed. "Not if he puts the gun down right now. We need every angel we can. Even the assholes."

Iopol growled, but he lowered the gun. "I'm not following her orders," he said. "I'm not. I'll follow Tamael, and I'll follow the Ophan, but not the human. No way."

Tamael looked at Indigo, her eyes slightly averted. Indigo remembered when they first met. She and the others had done terrible things to her. It seemed so long ago.

After a long moment, Tamael said, "What would you have us do, Your Honor?"

Iopol snorted.

"Is there some sort of radio around here?" Indigo asked the Ophan. If the demons had never made it to this place, then that sort of stuff would still be intact.

The Ophan gave instructions. There was a room, only a short distance away. They quickly found the office, surprisingly unimposing

and scant. It held a table with twelve chairs and a simple throne. Indigo was drawn to one chair. She had a flash of memory then, all of them sitting around the table, arguing, screaming at one another. They were discussing the humans.

A single bookshelf stood against one wall filled with red-bound books. A refrigerator-sized machine took up the opposite corner. It was metallic and blue with several knobs and a massive keyboard that held all 144 characters of the angel language.

Tamael ran a hand across the throne at the head of the table. "Do you think He ever used this one?" An uneasy silence followed.

"That's a big radio," a Principality said, examining the machine.

"Colonel, do you know what this is?" Frish said, her voice filled with awe.

"I do," Tamael said.

"You need a code to make it work," Iopol said. "Besides, the Seraphim trapped in here would have used it already."

"Not necessarily," Indigo said suddenly, surprising herself. She pulled her chair from the table and sat down. It was much too big for her now, but it soothed her anyway. Memories fell to her like raindrops. She suspected there would always be holes in her recollections, but random memories— many of them important— came to her now as she sat in that chair, where she'd spent most of her life.

"What do you mean?" Iopol said.

"None of us considered the machine very important. Only a few of us had bothered to learn the password at all. I didn't know it, and those who did either left the Tower to fight or went on their fateful climb to His chamber."

"So you don't know the password?" Tamael said.

"Actually, I do," Indigo said, looking at the machine, perplexed. There was a memory there that she was missing. "I'm not sure how I learned it, as I didn't know it when I left the Tower before, but I have it now."

"So, we *can* use it," Tamael said. She was deep in thought.

"Excuse me," a Principality said. "Won't the demons intercept the message? They had been taking all the messages we were



sending to each other before.”

“No,” Tamael said. “This is a different system. It's scrambled before it is sent out. They can intercept them, but they won't be able to decode them, I don't believe. Even if they learned how to read our secure messages before, this is different. It's a higher level of security. They have no reason to monitor this band, anyway.” She didn't sound too convinced of her own words.

Tamael seemed as if she was fighting back tears, but Indigo wasn't sure why.

Then, she understood.

The whole reason Dave and Yehppael had gone into the Sphere was so they could get a message out. This radio had been here the whole time. Had they known they could find this thing and make it work, they would never have had to send them away. The Sphere would never have had to be turned back, Ashia might still be alive, Dave would still be here, and Yehppael would not be gone.

“You can't dwell on it,” Indigo whispered to the angel. “It's done.”

“You can send secure and non-secure messages on this thing,” Iopol said. He played with the radio, fiddling with the controls. “If our human here knows the pass we can send whatever we want over whatever band we want.”

“But what do we say?” Frish asked.

Indigo had been thinking about that. She remembered something from her time before, something the Seraph Truet had said to her. *Our Selaphiel didn't trust us*. And something else. The content was still murky, but the ramifications of this knowledge would change everything. Another set of codes were emblazoned in her memory, learned the same time she had been told the code to the Critical Action Machine.

She had an idea.



## HITOMI

*YOU TERMINATED yourself in a very foolish way.*

Hitomi cried and squirmed, but she couldn't get the voices from her head. The Wuj had been interrogating her for hours. She tried to pull away, but she couldn't. It felt as if she had centipedes in her brain, moving about, stepping over every nerve.

"You've learned everything already," she cried.

*We don't understand everything. There are many questions.*

"Please, no. I can't take it anymore."

Each thought she had, they grasped onto it and kept it as their own. They commented on the darkest places of her memory, asked her questions about things she didn't even remember, only to decide on the answer themselves. They had learned everything about the angels and their secret base and the perisceptors, but still they probed.

*This Nigel did not love you. He only wanted to use you for pleasure.*

"No, that's not true. He did love me," she cried. They seemed intrigued more with her human life than with anything to do with the angels. Most of their comments revolved around Nigel and her father. They forced her to think of them, in ways she didn't want to.

*No, you know he did not. That's why you terminated yourself. You know he mated with your companion, Mari. You know he called her name out while he was on top of you.*

"No, that's not true. You're making me think that. Just leave me alone." It wasn't true. It wasn't.

*And your father. He did love you, but he was not very good at showing it. You only learned when you were dying.*

"Why are you doing this?"

Though she knew why. It had been whispered to her earlier from another cage, from the other side of the clown man. From a man that had no hands.

"The Wuj don't eat. They feed off us. Anger and distress are what they like best. That's why they toy with us. But they keep the children around, too. If a mind becomes too diseased or it suffers too much, it causes them pain, almost like choking. They can hide in the heads of innocence. It's like dipping a glowing iron into the snow. Without it they could even die."

"Please," Hitomi, said now. "No. Oh God, no." But they were leaving. She could feel them drifting away, finally leaving her alone again. The small demons were upon her immediately. They threw the rope net over her again, pulling her from the interrogation room.

She wouldn't let herself cry. Not anymore. They dragged her down the dark hallway, back into the chamber where they kept her and the others.

The clown's big cage was already lowered, the door open.

"Thank you, oh thank you, friend." He ran around in circles within the cage, squealing. He jumped up and down, his stomach roiling like a mad sea. His penis rose between his legs, thick and knotty like a tree branch, stiff as a cannon.

Gramm screamed at the top of his lungs. "Don't you hurt her. You hear me? I'll fucking kill you myself! Don't you bloody touch her!"

But his cries only seemed to heighten the clown's glee. "Oh, thanks to the great Wiggle! Praise him!"

They dumped Hitomi on the ground in front of the cage. She had a sudden urge to run, run away. But there was nowhere to go. She was pushed inside, the door slammed behind her. The cage began to rise.

She had never really gotten a good look at the fat man until now.

He was filthy. The room had a natural dank odor, like clothes that had been hung out and rained upon, and it was now clear he was the source. His skin was lily white, occasionally flecked with dark patches, especially under his eyes, making him look like a raccoon. His distended stomach was so large, the stretch marks on

his belly were like a relief map of rivers. He breathed in great heaves, like only one of his lungs worked properly.

But most of all she couldn't remove her gaze from his gigantic penis and his bright red balls that hung down like the wattle of a chicken. He stroked it now, and it jumped like a serpent in his hands.

"I'm gonna stick it in you," he said, his voice suddenly throaty. "And not just in the wet places." The cage returned to its usual height, but it was moved over, put in a place so everyone would have a better view. Behind her, she could hear the chitter of the tiny, flying demons. Someone had called them Mites. There were hundreds in the room now. She backed up against the cage, suddenly too aware of her nakedness.

Gramm screamed, as did many of the others, mostly the new ones who had been brought in just earlier. Those who had been there some time were silent. The demons, too, called for her blood. Hitomi thrust them out of her mind. It was just her and him. He stepped forward, babbling like a drunkard, his eyes in slits, a walking earthquake.

"Your dry places will get wet," he said. He said it again, then again, each time louder, swinging the cage.

Then, one of the Wuj entered the room. Its presence caused a collective groan across the cages, and all stopped screaming except Gramm.

She no longer had her perisceptor, but she did have her feet. She was small, but she was fast.

And when her foot, still aching from the spike that had been through it, connected with the fat man's crotch, she was sure she felt something rupture.

He fell so hard, she thought the cage would rip from the ceiling. He squealed like a baby dipped in water too hot.

"Get him, keep kicking him," Gramm yelled. "Before he gets up."

She hesitated. He rolled over, gasping and whimpering in pain. His penis had deflated like someone had popped a hole in it.

"HELP ME WIGGLE," he gasped. His raccoon eyes looked up into hers.

But the round, disgusting face of the clown was no longer that of a terrible stranger. Not anymore.

It was Nigel. Sweet, beautiful Nigel.

She took a step back. It had to be a mistake. Nigel never looked like that. But it was him. It was. The sight of his face in pain was a kick to the stomach. A dark cloud of confusion swept over her. What was happening?

"Nigel?" she said. "I'm sorry, Nigel. I didn't mean to..." She left the sentence unfinished.

Nigel grinned. His single tooth flashed in the dark room. "I see how you play."

"What're you doing?" Gramm screamed. "Kick him again."

Nigel didn't look anything like this monster. She tried to picture him in her mind, and all she got was this thing. She felt ill, then. This face and body was all she knew. She was aware that the face was different, wrong, but it was what she had in her memory. The Wuj had done it to her. For sport. They'd replaced all her memories of the boy with that of this fat, stinking man.

But worst of all, Nigel, her true Nigel, was gone from her memory. She pictured this fat beast on top of her, sweating and huffing and puffing away. His true face was gone. Completely and truly.

"What fun we're going to have. You and me."

*It's not Nigel*, she told herself. *Look at him*. She kicked him again. His neck snapped back, but he started to get to his feet. She punched at him, her hand glancing off his fat stomach. But he only laughed. He put a meaty hand around her throat, and no matter how hard she kicked and screamed at him, he wouldn't let go. Then another hand circled around her. His stinking, white stomach pressed against her face, his now-flaccid penis against her chest, already stiffening again.

Hitomi was blacking out. Dying.

The cage suddenly jolted, and the man released her. She fell over, coughing.

"I'm sorry, brother," a familiar voice said, from inside the cage.

"No," the clown said, his voice shrill. "Get away. She's mine."

"No one owns another," Rico said. A single smack, and the clown hit the floor beside her. He was out cold.

"Rico?" Hitomi cried, pulling herself up, throwing herself into his arms. How could this be? The naked boy sounded like him, even looked like him, but he was much, much bigger, his muscles practically bursting through his arms. "How did you..."

"Not now," he said. "We gotta hurry."

A jolt of pain returned Hitomi to her knees. She was no longer in control of her movements, and every nerve in her body suddenly screamed. The Wuj.

*You will not move. This Rico of yours is most interesting. He is not the same as you remembered him.*

Around her, everyone screamed with renewed pain.

"Your mind tricks will not work on me, demon," Rico said. "Hold on, Hitomi. I'll be right back." He disappeared from the cage. A blink and he was gone. More Wuj entered the room, each of them adding pressure. It quickly rose to beyond her level of tolerance. Past where they had her during her interrogation. She felt her mind start to break.

Then, it just stopped. Like her brain had popped free of the vice.

Behind her, the Wuj screamed. All of them, in a bizarre unison she would never forget. The sound they made, like a dying pig as the blade was presented to it, was equaled only by the screams of a falling angel. Whatever the cause, they were suddenly in intense, horrific pain.

But the small ones were regrouping. The Mites. They came forward hesitantly, as if they feared Rico.

"What did you do?" a voice screamed. It was Gramm, a yell laced with a horror she had never heard from him. "Jesus, Rico, what did you do?"

Hitomi turned then, and Rico was there a few cages over, in the one next to Gramm. At Rico's feet was the little girl, the bone doll still clutched in her tiny hand.

"I'm sorry," Rico said to the crumpled little girl. He looked up. "It was the only way. Hold on guys. This will hurt your heads a little."

The cage was gone. The advancing swarm of tiny demons was gone. The dark room a memory.

It took her a moment to gauge her surroundings. They were now in a windowless room. The walls were yellowed brick, the ground a dark marble. More light here than before, but still dim. Gramm was there, as was Rico.

He shoved a black robe in her hands. "Put this on." He already had on his.

"What is happening? What did you do?" Gramm asked, putting his robe on. "Rico, you killed that little girl."

Hitomi pulled the robe over her shoulders, wrapping it tightly around her waist. There were boots here, too. She put them on.

"I missed you, too," Rico said.

"No, man. I... I..." Gramm said. He put his hands to his head. "We thought you were dead. Shit, I don't know what just happened."

Rico sighed, sitting down. "It's a long story, my friend. I had to do it. But don't worry, she'll live. I didn't actually kill her. I blocked the Wujs' attempts at entering my mind so forcefully, they each were using their full power to get at me. Then I just let them in, and it was kind of like letting go of the rope while playing tug of war. Once they fell in, they immediately sought out their clean mind, the girl. I made her feel pain while they were exposed. It hurt 'em bad. If I hadn't done it, you'd both be dead."

Hitomi leaned up against the wall. All she could see was that first night with Nigel, but the memory was horrifying now. It was that disgusting, pasty beast inside of her. There was no pleasure in the memory. Just a ripping sting. *Had it really felt like that?* She didn't know.

"Christ, Rico," Gramm said, shaking his head. Rico wrapped a cloth around the hole in Gramm's foot. The blood seeped slowly out, already starting to heal. But it was still painful, Hitomi knew. "It's bloody good to know you're alive." They embraced, hard. "We thought you were dead."

"We're still in the Wuj sector," Rico said. "We're just a few buildings over from the one you were in. But they still might find us. It took a lot of energy jumping around like that and withstanding their



mind attacks. As soon as I can, I'm going to take us to someplace safe."

Rico pulled a perisceptor out of his robes. Hitomi's heart leaped. "I can use it pretty good now, but I know you're still better. If you want, you can..." She instinctively grasped at it, defying her own will. She snatched it from his hand and put it to her chest.

"Where's the other one you had?" she asked. Her heart thump-thumped. With the terrible weapon in her hand, she suddenly felt less hopeless, less weak. It filled a hole she hadn't even known was empty until now. *I'm never going to let go of you again.*

"It's safe," Rico said. "But not here."

"What the hell happened after you got taken?" Gramm asked.

Rico sighed. "There's a whole lot to tell."

Gramm nodded. "Aye. We have tales, too. In fact, Hitomi hasn't heard mine, and I haven't heard hers. Give us time to rest, let my foot heal, and let's catch up."

"All right," Rico said after a moment. "But not too long. As soon as I can do it, we're going."

He sat down on the marble floor, looking at each of them. "I want to tell you about a great man."

Something in his eyes suddenly made her uneasy.



## UNGEO

ONCE AGAIN UNGEO was summoned to stand before the prelate. As last time, apprehension filled her as she walked the long path to the meeting chamber. Ravi wasn't here now. A silent acolyte she'd never seen before led her down the lonely halls. With the juveniles mostly gone, the innards of the temple were eerily empty.

She had been expending most of her energy speaking out against these dangerous times, desperately trying to find an ear that would agree with her contention that revolting against the Dominion could only end with a great defeat for Moloch's minions. She had no doubt this was why she was being summoned.

"Come in," the prelate called as she entered the giant room, the acolyte closing the door and leaving himself outside. The prelate had recently returned from yet another trip back to the Dahhak world. It was just Ungeo and the prelate and another Dahhak. Trukkac, the Dahhak chancellor. One of the twelve appointed leaders of the Dominion. She was alone with the two most powerful Dahhak in Cibola.

Ungeo bowed. "Thank you for granting me your presence, your excellency."

The prelate waved his hand. "I've asked you here to request that you stop speaking out against Dahhak crusading. You have gained yourself inexplicable respect amongst the congregation, but you will lose what you have if you continue."

She clicked her beak. "I speak out because I think it's a damned effort."

Trukkac stepped forward. "You don't know everything," he said. "There's more to this than just Moloch's will. Things are happening at the council, plots and schemes that make this more important than

you realize. And your role in this has become significant, too. We need you to firmly speak out for us.”

Ungeo looked back and forth between the two. “I don't understand what you mean.”

The prelate and chancellor looked at each other. “We originally thought you to be a spy,” the chancellor said. “Despite your victory while dancing. The task we gave you to assassinate the Geyrun was a way to force you to reveal yourself. We wanted to see how far you'd go, but to the astonishment of all of us, you made a genuine attempt.”

“But I failed. The Geyrun still lives. He even murdered the rector.”

“Yes, unfortunate,” said the chancellor. “But I have read the report of the failed assassin's last hours. I know how well prepared he was. How if he hadn't been so inept, the Geyrun would be dead. That was his failure, not yours. We do indeed know you are truly in Moloch's grace, and that is a reason for great joy.”

Ungeo felt her anger rising as she listened, but she held it back. They doubted her faith? She was beginning to doubt theirs.

“We have a great number of followers scattered throughout the Flamen ranks. They have served us well, but now they are alarmed. They have revealed many things to us, information even your young informant has yet to learn.”

“You must forgive me, chancellor. Though I understand my... defection was a topic of interest, I don't understand how it can continue to hold significance with anyone other than perhaps the Geyrun himself. Especially with such bloodshed imminent.”

“Almost a cycle ago, we at the council were approached by an envoy who claimed to have proof the Overseers were in the early stages of a planned revolution. One that would usurp the council altogether and place themselves as our leaders.”

Ungeo snorted. “That doesn't surprise me at all.”

Trukkac nodded. “It didn't surprise anyone. This envoy had documents and witness accounts proving his contentions. We were gravely concerned, so after much debate, we decided to send a subtle message to the Overseers.”

Ungeo nodded. "You had the Overseer of the gate sector killed and replaced with the Nidhogg."

"Yes. The same envoy who had provided us with the intelligence." The chancellor stepped forward, his dark features emerging. The smell of importance rose from him, something only the highest-ranking officers and officials dared emanate in front of others. Still not as aged as the prelate, he looked old beyond his cycles. Too old for work such as his. "We now have reason to believe this envoy, this Nidhogg, his Mite companion, and his group are actually trying to do the opposite. They're trying to incite the Overseers into action."

"Why?" Ungeo said, thinking hard. She prided herself on knowing everything that was going on around her, but she was over her head in this. Completely. "And what does any of this have to do with me?"

The chancellor lowered his head and prayed for a moment, his second day prayer. Ungeo had done hers before she was summoned. The prelate didn't move. Once finished, the chancellor looked back up. "Ever since we became aware our world wasn't the only one, we've tried to destroy each other. It is our nature. Other demon nations are the same.

"This Nidhogg, however, is not seeking dominance of his people. Just his cause. We believe he is an agent of the Broken Fist. They seek to eradicate the humans. Removing the Overseers from the Dominion removes a powerful pro-slavery voice."

"So you think the Dahhak must act preemptively?"

Trukkac nodded. "The recent loss of the Overseers' property terribly strained the already tenuous relationship between them and the council. We were forced to kill dozens of the beasts when the insurgents attacked the sett and released them on the city. The Overseers are demanding immediate payment for each of the killed and escaped beasts. They want a ridiculous amount, almost ten million slaves per beast."

Ungeo laughed. Ten million?

"It turns out the creatures are quite endangered on their world. Some of them were the last of their kind. Anyway, it was the

suggestion of the Nidhogg envoy that the Sphere be destroyed in response. No more humans for anyone.”

Ungeo shook her head. No one would agree to that. “But... So many nations depend upon the humans for food, slaves. The Nemat require them just to survive.”

“Exactly,” Trukkac said. “Without the humans, many nations would wither and die. We quickly rejected the idea. Nonetheless, the vote was alarmingly close. Broken Fist has more influence on the council than we ever suspected, and we believe they are going to attempt to destroy the Sphere anyway.”

Ungeo tried to get a handle on this. “If they destroy the Sphere, the humans will stop coming. The Overseers will pull themselves from the Dominion.”

“They'll do more than that,” the prelate said, talking for the first time since his greeting to Ungeo. “They'll attack their two closest neighbors in hopes of conquering as many human slaves as possible.”

“The Dahhak and the Asag,” Ungeo said.

“Yes,” Trukkac said. “And while we have great numbers, they have great strength. We may be able to hold back an assault on our world, but it would weaken us.”

“But this is all speculation,” Ungeo said. “Even if they do destroy the Sphere, you don't know that's what will happen.”

“Our spies suggest otherwise,” Trukkac said. “The Overseers are already gearing up on their world. And this is without knowledge of the danger to their precious human supply.” He took a long breath.

*Here it comes.*

“We're requesting two things of you,” the prelate said. “Now that you know some of the urgency of this, we pray you'll work in Moloch's favor. First, we request you make a speech at the next services speaking out for the upcoming revolution. Secondly, we are going to ask that you leave the temple.”

“Leave?” Ungeo said, snapping a talon. It surprised her. She didn't want to leave. She enjoyed being here in the place of Moloch, where the others respected her.

“We can't force you,” the prelate said, “as we've given you sanctuary. However, this is a task worthy of Moloch. Your departure will be widely broadcast, but your mission will not. It will be up to you to survive long enough to complete your task. And perhaps if you succeed, we will still be able to salvage the Dominion.”

Ungeo looked back and forth between the two. They both watched her intently, and neither appeared sure of themselves. And with the prelate, there was something else. Desperation.

“Tell me your request,” Ungeo said, knowing full well she was going to accept whatever it was they suggested. Knowing it would likely lead to her own death, to her final journey to obtain her *Pri*.





## KO - LEVI

KO WAS GIVEN NO TRAINING, no special instructions on the protocols of military life. While he already knew the proper addresses for the officers above him, he knew nothing about marching, falling into position, or folding down his sleeping rack.

He expected the others to meet him with scorn. After all, he had been the reason their Marid companion had been taken away. But they greeted the large demon warmly into their ranks. They patted him on the side and offered him drinks of berry extract. They called him “brother.” He was a Footie now. It was an honor. He hadn't been punished. He'd been commended.

Their captain, the same Daityas who Ko had ordered to assist in the arrest attempt, was not as jovial as the others. Still, he wasn't as abrasive as Ko remembered. He even made a comment about how it was good to have someone bigger than him on the team. Even if it was a demon with only one arm.

After several drinks of extract, Ko admitted he had never once fired a weapon before. They laughed at that. And after even more of the drink, they all set out from their barracks, Ko toting his newly-issued Geyrun-sized weapon. Later, he was to meet with a surgeon and have a weapon surgically attached to his stump. He didn't like the idea at all, but he certainly preferred that to awkwardly holding the gun with his one hand.

They found an empty section of the city, and Ko—more drunk than he'd ever been in his entire life—began to practice with the weapon, blowing out window after window. With each direct hit, his companions whooped and shouted encouragement.

Through the fog of the drink, he began to think about his journey. This was exactly what he had wanted all along. Here he was with Marid, Daityas, a Gorgon, a pair of Shishi, and others, and they

were all working together, living together. While they still had many problems and arguments, they had become a very tightly knit group. That had been his dream, and here was proof it could work.

But that damn Charun. Ko's hatred toward the evil whore was as potent as ever.

Later, after his head cleared, he inquired of the captain if they were being given orders to help pick up the traitorous Charun again.

"Your obsession is a weakness," he said. "I have no such orders at this time, but if we are given the order to move against the Dahhak, I'm of the mind to keep you back."

"You can't do that to me," Ko said. "You don't understand."

"I do understand," the captain said. His long fingers were fixing two grenades together. They said the captain always played with explosives. He almost never had an accident. "It has become a personal matter. That makes you weak. I do not accept weakness."

"Give me the chance, and I'll prove you wrong," Ko said, his voice a growl.

The Daityas looked at him for a long moment, an odd expression upon his meaty face. "You are not like any Geyrun I have ever met."

"All I want is a life for my son. I wish to fight so he won't have to."

The captain placed the now-fused grenades down. He almost looked sad. "That's what we all like to think, Geyrun. But peace never comes because of war. Only despite it."

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Levi's fingers bled. He had no tools, and he was forced to remove the sleeve of the wires with his teeth and nails. He couldn't disconnect the generator, so a biting current coursed through him as he worked. He discovered that angel blood was an excellent conductor.

It wasn't a matter of defeating the internal security system that protected the messages. That would be impossible. However, he

could work around it. It required removing the receiver for the battle display, replacing the imaging chip with a speaker for the missile warning system, and then attaching it after the descrambler but before the radio security on the stack—all without allowing a power flux more than .32 crands above or below the loaded standard. And since he didn't have a scope to measure it, he was doing all the electrical measurements in his head.

Levi was almost finished. He didn't dare guess what the message might say, but he worked feverishly. Before, as he crawled through the fields, he had nothing. Not even hope. But now—now he had a glimmer. A spark of expectation that he converted to energy.

A twist of wire, a press of a makeshift button, and he was done.

A burst of static. For a panicked moment, Levi thought it hadn't worked. But then the message sprang forth, almost too quiet, but he jumped forward, pressing his ear against the speaker. He was prepared for anything, but the sound of his commander's voice, Colonel Tamael, was almost overwhelming.

“This is an urgent Critical Action Message originating from the Seraph chambers in the Tower. I am here with a small number of Principalities, two other Powers, and a human who at one time was a Seraph. Also present is an Ophan who protects the entrance to this section. I am Colonel Tamael, and I was originally stationed in the 701st Battalion of the Subterranean Defense Militia.” She listed a long string of her commanding officers and various other protocols, designed to assure any who listened that this wasn't a trick of some sort.

“To any and all who might receive this message: We need your help. We have discovered a method to defeat this menace upon our world. However, the tools required for this are not with us. You must listen to the following instructions.”

As Levi listened to the long list of things that must be done, he realized how desperate this scheme was. The odds of it working were small. With a pang of guilt, he understood a portion of this was a result of his failure. If they had all the perisceptors, none of this would be necessary.

And if you had been more diligent in your original duties, the demons might not be here at all.

There was something in the message, critical to the success of their plan, that could only be completed by someone on this side of the city. He didn't know where the others were, but Tamael clearly stated they weren't with her. What if they were all gone? What if he was the only one?

The fact that Tamael was away from their underground base was telling. Something must have transpired. Maybe the whole thing destroyed. The thought made Levi shiver. Was that something else that came as a result of their failed assault?

This message, while revealing many terrible things, had indeed given Levi the hope he yearned for. He stood from the cockpit of the Foray. He could no longer crawl because there was no more time. He didn't have a gun, and he had no sort of alternate protection. But he flew for the first time since being ripped out of the sky.

This was important, terribly so.

He would not fail. Not this time.



## DAVE- UNGEO

IT WAS MORE angels than Dave had ever seen. As the host of them poured up from the foggy valley where they'd lived for almost an eternity, he began to fully comprehend the beach on the other side of the city. Each grain of sand was a dead angel. When he was younger, he'd learned the names of numbers after a trillion. Quadrillion. Quintillion. Sextillion. He now knew what such numbers looked like.

They had given him a set of tattered robes and sandals, which he now wore. Underneath him, Vila trembled. The mighty wolf did not like being near so many. And they followed her now as she tread back the way they had come.

Beside him floated the angel who had originally greeted him. His name was Zydkiel, and he was stout and bald. The first angel he'd seen with no hair. His body was football-player wide with arms thick like solid pipes of iron. He had a long scar down his face just right of his nose. Long and straight like it had been caused by a quick chop to the face by an ax.

"Why couldn't you find your way out?" Dave asked as they traveled. "It's not like it's that hard, even with the fog. We walked right there."

The angel sighed. At first he had been downright hostile, but after Dave had told him and a few others his story, he had softened a little. Still, many of the others refused to even acknowledge Dave. The mass behind him was like the lion in the zoo, pacing back and forth. The lion that wanted nothing more than to eat him. And once he and Vila led them free of the fog, the cage would be gone.

From what Dave gathered, they had been placed there as punishment for revolting against Cibola when the humans first came. This was the second time there had been war in heaven. It seemed

that some regretted their decision to take up arms against their leader. But most were bitter and angry still. They all had weapons, but they were swords and knives and bows with full quivers. Not a gun amongst any of them.

"We were more than just lost in the fog," Zydkiel said. "For us it was only a short time ago that we were banished. And an eternity all mixed together. You're more than just physically lost. Your mind is, too. Like it's mired in the syrup from a tree's wound. It was only when you approached that we began to have more lucid thoughts."

"I think I understand," Dave said. It had been like that in the forest.

"Do we mean to help defend the city?" an angel asked Zydkiel, another with the blue-fringed robe. "I doubt many will be willing."

"Then tell them to go back," Zydkiel said, spitting. "Have they not learned? We were fools. Even if they choose not to fight, they will not be free to roam. The city has been overrun."

"Because of the humans," the other angel said.

"There's more to it than that, you pungent old cow," Vila said. She spoke for the first time in the presence of the angels, and the ones around her became suddenly silent. As if they hadn't realized she *could* talk. "The humans were created out of necessity. Your petty insurrection did nothing but exacerbate the situation on our world. Without the humans, the balance would've been upended. And you spoiled fools couldn't see it."

No angels around them spoke for a long while, but to whisper down what the wolf had said.

"How long before we find our brothers and sisters?" Zydkiel said after a long period. Already, the fog began to clear.

"Soon," Vila said. "Once you are free of your prison, we will leave you."

"No," Dave said. "I stay with the angels. I promised I would take a message to the ones outside the city, and that's what I'm going to do."

"I will not approach the city," Vila said. "And I will not allow you away from me."

"I am never away from you," Dave said. "I never have been."

The angels said nothing. Dave put his hand on Vila's neck.

*I'm about to say something really, really stupid.*

"I promise I will return when it's over."

"You would do that?" she said.

"I don't want to, but I will."

She didn't reply for hours. Only the crunch of her massive claws and the gossamer flap of trillions of wings filled the air.

"I will find you if you lie."

"I know."

The fog parted to reveal the edge of the massive forest. Nearby stood a beacon, a pyramid that rose high into the cloudy red sky like a behemoth emerging from the waves. The ground was wet and muddy, like it had recently rained. Beyond the hulking pyramid was the ether, but on this side there was no sand.

"We can find our way from here," Zydkiel said to Dave.

"Shall we take you along?"

Dave met Vila's eyes. Her teeth hung like stalactites, gleaming. She still terrified him. Vicious, brutal, and oddly innocent all at the same time. She reminded him of Carumba at that moment, though he wasn't sure why.

He could ask the angels to kill the wolf, and they probably would. He would be safe and free. He opened his mouth to say so, backing up at the same time. But he simply said, "Yes."

"I will wait," Vila replied.

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Ungeo found an empty building in which to rest and watch. She was tired and hungry, but she didn't dare go for food. And she couldn't sleep. Not now. She questioned herself again. Was this the right thing? For Moloch? For the Charun?

It was pointless to second guess herself now. Her part in this was already done.

She didn't know how her people were going to react, but she suspected they would side with the Dominion. If they did, and the



Molochite revolution was a success, she may be the only voice her people would listen to. Only through her—through her leading them to Moloch—could they hope to survive.

And if the Dahhak were struck down like she feared, it wouldn't matter who the Charun affiliated themselves with. The wars that would ensue would likely lead to all of their deaths. Ungeo did not like this precarious position the Dominion was in. She clicked her beak as she stared out the window at a marketplace. Most of these fools had no idea. How many of them would be fighting each other in the coming hours?

It was too soon. The angels weren't completely defeated. But now she at least understood the urgency in all of it. If what the prelate and the chancellor said was true, this mysterious group, Broken Fist, would have the Dominion ripped apart anyway. At least now it was on Moloch's terms.

Ungeo had made her speech to the congregation before leaving the temple. She told them that Moloch wanted this more than anything. They'd cheered her for that. Afterward, she had been smuggled into the chancellor's transport as he returned to the council. After he landed, she quickly escaped outside, no one taking notice of a fast-moving Charun carrying no weapon and several papers.

Before she first came to the temple, she had killed several Dahhak in order to cover her own failure. A strange feeling overcame her now when she thought of it. Guilt? She prayed to Moloch now that what she was doing wasn't worse.

Ungeo watched solemnly as the dark raindrops began to pound against the stone streets of Cibola. The clouds moved fast, and a swift wind threatened to overturn the booths of the market. Several of the keepers began to hurriedly close up their wares as customers scattered. A pair of Shishi tried to fly away, but their wings couldn't take air in the rain.

Then, she saw them. An enormous litter was carried through a side street. In it was one of the corpulent Overseers. This particular one was the council sector commander, and envoy to the council for the rest of the Overseers. Only Dahhak carried his litter. They

stopped before a building, the one adjacent to Ungeo's. One of the Dahhak looked back and forth, looking to see if they were alone. The doors to the building opened, and the Dahhak quickly hurried the rain-battered litter inside.

Ungeo knew at this moment this scene was being replayed all over Cibola.

Soon afterward, Dahhak began to emerge from the same building by the thousands. Armored and armed, they were ready for combat. The council chambers were not far from here, and a large contingent was converging on it from several directions. One of the soldiers carried a blood-red flag that flapped in the wind and rain.

As the Dahhak continued to erupt from the building, a huge number of them that flew easily and steadily in the ever-increasing torrent, the remains of the Overseer's litter were pushed back out into the street. It was covered with blood, and the pieces began to wash down the street toward the marketplace for all to see.

Ungeo wondered where Ravi was. She hadn't time to say goodbye to her young friend. He could very well be somewhere in the sluagh before her now, rushing toward the council chamber. While Dahhak prayed for death in glorious battle, she hoped for his safety. He was still a boy, not yet given the chance to truly live.

A concussion she couldn't see resounded, shaking the walls. The council building being rent open. They had a small, fierce security force that guarded the building and each of the council members, but there were many Dahhak and Asag in those ranks, too. The rest were mostly Pazuzu, and they would soon be overwhelmed if they weren't dead already.

It was too late to turn back now, she thought sadly.



## GRAMM - HITOMI

RICO HAD GONE INSANE. Completely, utterly insane. As Gramm sat in the cold, marble room waiting for his aching foot to fully heal, listening to the boy's amazing story, he began to realize that Rico's incredible journey since being swept out of the forest had more than just changed his body. His mind was different, too.

It was as if Rico had joined a cult. His hatred for the angels was fanatical. When he spoke of being confronted by the two angels in the temple, he practically spit the words.

But even if Rico was going crazy, these strange powers were not imagination. He could disappear and reappear in a different place in a blink, and he claimed he could slow down or speed up time under certain circumstances. He promised Gramm would be able to do it, too.

"Angels aren't as bad as you think they are," Hitomi said quietly when Rico was done with his story. "I can think of some who are bad, but the rest don't hate us."

"They only tolerate you because they need you," Rico said. "They view you like you are nothing. I have seen where they made us live. It's horrible."

"I know," Gramm said. "I've been there, too."

Gramm slowly told his story from when they were first separated from Rico. Hitomi listened quietly, and she closed her eyes as he got to the point where Dave and Gramm had been divided from Indigo and Hitomi. He described the marketplace of the demons as well as he could. And the maze and their frantic escape, and of the behemoths they had unleashed upon the city.

Rico asked no questions, but Gramm saw he carefully soaked all of it in. When he told Rico what Indigo really was, he pursed his lips but said nothing. Hitomi told some of what happened to them,

too. Of their return to the beacon. How they returned to find the others dead.

Telling their stories made Gramm think about Dave and Indigo. He prayed for them. Their plan had been to seek out the angels on the other side of the front lines, but Rico seemed to believe they were in the mighty Tower based on some recent news.

"You're lucky the angels have found you useful," Rico said when they were finished. He produced a small knife from the depths of his robe, spun it on his fingertip, and hurled it across the room. It sank into the marble wall like he had thrown it into butter. "Next time best let me take care of 'em for you."

Gramm wanted to change the subject. As much as he missed and cared for Rico, he had become a very scary person. "How do you feel now?"

"I think I'm ready," Rico said. "Okay guys, hold on."

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A blink later they were in a white, opulent room. This place was so different from the abandoned room they'd just left, Hitomi staggered. She dropped her perisceptor into a lavish rug. She quickly snatched it back up and brought it to her chest.

"We all alive?" Rico asked.

"You have to teach me how to do that teleport thing," Gramm said.

Hitomi looked up. They weren't alone in the room. Sitting on another couch were eight completely naked women with white hair and pale skin. At first she thought they were mannequins. The women stared back at Hitomi with dead, lifeless eyes.

A fat, older man appeared from the single door in the room. He wore an open red robe, and underneath he was naked. His gray beard hung down past his waist, only partially obscuring a penis so large it was like a caricature. A steaming drink was held in his hand. He had a bemused expression on his face. For a moment his eyes met Hitomi's. His pupils were impossibly small. Moloch.

"You had success?" Moloch asked, taking a long draw from his drink.

"Yes," Rico said. "They were captured by the Wuj."

Moloch stepped forward, patting Rico on the shoulder. "You did well."

Rico beamed. He introduced Gramm and Hitomi.

"It's a very crucial time, and I must make many appearances. You and your friends stay here for now. I will return soon."

"I don't want to stay here," Rico said. "What about their perisceptors? We can get them."

"There's no need," Moloch said. "We have two. With you and this girl you will be your own army."

"What about Dave and Indigo? You wanted me to gather them too."

"Let us wait. The demons are fighting amongst themselves, and when the smoke clears, we may be able to find what has become of the friends you lost. And the lost perisceptors. I know many who may be able to use them."

"They belong to me," Hitomi said, finally standing up. Her entire body ached. "To us. They were left for us to find by the angels, and they are our property. If you find them I would like you to bring them to us."

Moloch laughed. It was a deep, hearty laugh, but laced with malice. "She would be a spirited fuck, wouldn't she, Rico?"

"Hey," Gramm said. "Don't you fucking talk to her like that."

Rico said nothing.

Anger flashed in the eyes of the older man, but then they softened. "I apologize," he said. "That was rude. I've been so long out of the company of a real woman, I sometimes forget my tongue." He turned and left the room, leaving them in a complete silence that was almost overwhelming.

Still sitting on the couches were the eight women. None of them moved. It seemed they were completely oblivious to what was happening. Hitomi wondered how long they'd been here. She had the urge to sit next to them, rest her head on one of their shoulders to cry and sleep.

Looking at these women, Hitomi was inexplicably overwhelmed with a sense of loss that she didn't quite understand. The feeling crashed upon her like a wave. She wished she had never met Nigel or fallen so deeply in love with him or taken it upon herself to end her life so soon.





## KO

"SOLDIERS, WAKE!"

Ko groaned. Captain rushed through the barracks, smacking each of the beds and nests with the butt of his rifle, causing some to ring like a bell. Ko's head ached. While he was gaining a tolerance for the berry extract, he could still be brought to the edge of oblivion by trying to match a Shishi drink for drink.

"We gear up for battle. This is not a drill," Captain said, his voice straining.

Ko jolted fully awake. He took several deep breaths. He'd been drilling, preparing himself mentally for this. He slid his stump down into the waiting gun. It clicked as the metal bracelet slid into the groove. When the nodes attached, the lights on the weapon switched on. It was one of the most up-to-date weapons a soldier in the Dominion army could wield. Daityas had been rumored to cut off their own hands just so they could get one implanted.

"Where we headed?" Tix asked. She was a Shishi, the platoon's Arms Officer. Ko was very fond of her.

Captain was already in his full combat gear, and it made the Daityas look indestructible. His wide blast gun was slung over his shoulder, longer than Ko, and his deadly whip hung coiled like a snake in his belt.

"This is going to be more than just a skirmish with the angels," the captain said, his voice a low growl. "With the storm came an attack on several fronts. It appears the Dahhak have decided to rebel, and they've slaughtered every Overseer they could find. A Molochite contingent have taken over the council chambers and are declaring themselves the new leaders of the Dominion. The Asag have declared fealty, and great numbers of Dominion citizens of all

racers are raising the banner of their Moloch deity over their shops, barracks, and homes.”

“By Jehu,” Ko said. “They killed the Overseers?” Oh no. His thoughts immediately turned to Qulp. In the face of such betrayal, the Overseers would do something drastic. Ko knew them well. This would degrade to full out war, and that meant his family was in danger. His son would be forced to carry a weapon. He would be forced to fight. He could very well be killed.

*This is your fault. You had the rector killed. It was the spark that started the fire.*

No, he told himself. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't. Even if the death of the rector caused this, it still wasn't him.

Her name was Ungeo G'sslom, and he swore to himself at that moment, he swore on the name of his son, that he was going to find her, and that she was going die by his hand.

Captain nodded. “All forces loyal to the Dominion are gathering in staging areas across the city to fight back.” He paused. “If anyone plans upon professing loyalty to Dahhak rule, I will hear it now. On my word I grant you free passage from here.”

Cytusa stepped forward. She was a Gorgon; quiet and unassuming and slight, but deadly with a pair of hand artillery. The worms in her hair thrashed about.

“My true god is Moloch,” she announced. “I do not wish to fight against my brothers and sisters here, but I must find a temple now.”

“Cytusa,” Captain said, surprise evident. “I had no idea.”

“There are many of us. More than you know.”

Captain unslung his weapon and fired directly into her chest. The roar shook the walls of the barracks. Cytusa flew backward, flipping feet over head onto her rack.

Ko stared, astonished at the sudden violence.

“Loyalty to the Dominion is above even our own personal word. Remember that if you find yourself face to face with a friend in battle. A transport is waiting. Gear up.”

They raised their fists and cheered, all of them. Ko stood with Shishi, Marid, and others. The remains of their Gorgon companion stewed on the bed, threatening to catch on fire. He tried not to look

at her. She was his friend. But still he cheered, for she was also his enemy.

“Stupid Molochites,” Tix muttered as they quickly pulled on their armor and checked their weapons. “You were right, Ko. I wish we had killed them all when we had the chance.”

“Me too,” Ko said, and he meant it.

Before rushing out to the transport, Ko paused to look one last time at Cytusa, still smoldering on the cot. She had died because she believed in a false god. The thought made him angry. This religion was like a disease, preying on the weak-minded. This Gorgon was more victim than enemy.

Once loaded in the transport, Ko sat up front with the captain and the other Daityas. The landscape of Cibola spread out before him. The usual chatter was gone. Just the hum of the engines and the rain. In the distance, a detonation.



## INDIGO

DERKEA. Seraphim. Indigo rolled the words and images in her mind. As they waited to hear if anyone found their message, she began to dwell on it. Piece by piece, moment by moment slowly began to gather in her memory. She focused on Derkea's death, and gradually, like the tides, it came to her. Slowly and steadily.

It was still more of a disembodied memory, like watching a movie you know you've seen before, but didn't actually experience. She was more Indigo than Derkea, and she would remain that way. Some of the knowledge and attitudes of the Seraph were gone forever, replaced with the humanity of Indigo.

Her last moments as an angel were desperate. She had returned to the Tower, fighting through the hordes of demons, only to find her home abandoned except for the lone Ophan gatekeeper. She found Selaphiel's journal and learned Illian, Cabael, and Truet had each left to find the perisceptors, but none had returned. The weapons were hidden throughout the city, and Derkea knew they could only guess where some of them were. Each of the Seraphim knew where only one was hidden, but over time most discerned where many of them were. Each Seraph was very close to the others, and they knew each other terribly well.

Her perisceptor was hidden in the wall in a utility room of the Propylaeum, the first beacon. She had told no one where it was.

Derkea had wanted to use the communications machine, but in all of her idiocy, she never learned the code. So she left. She gave strict instructions to the lone Ophan guarding the Tower and set out using the high entrance, high above the ceiling and view of the wretched demons.

Only it *wasn't* out of view of the demons as she thought, and they fired upon her using great shells of metal that exploded and

filled the air with ripping fragments of death. With all the speed she had, she rose and fled, but they continued to fire upon her until her body and robes were a bleeding mass. Finally free, she came to land in the southern forest, alive only by the thinnest of threads.

There she rested for a long time, occasionally fighting off predators by simply showing them her true form. But that took its own toll, and her body didn't heal.

She gathered her strength and forced herself to take short flights, ever inching closer to the Propylaeum. Eventually, long after she had set out, the tree line disappeared and revealed the flatlands that presented the edge of the world.

Only they were no longer flatlands. She hadn't been prepared for what she saw there. She lost all hope at that moment, presented with a sandy graveyard beyond even her own comprehension. Their entire civilization burned away.

She found the top entrance to the pyramid, and she wearily climbed down.

She cursed on His throne. She'd been so preoccupied with the graveyard, she'd forgotten what she'd find here. The main chamber. The murals of the original war.

It shook her even more. All this death and pain was because of that war. If it had never occurred, the Sphere would never have had to have been created. The second angel war would never have occurred, and the balance would never have been so upended, causing the True Light to lash out at the demon worlds.

The mural depicted the fallen angels as turning to demons, though this wasn't a literal interpretation. Those who perished remained dead. The survivors of the rebels were cast into the ether, and since their hearts were so dark with their evil, the lack of the True Light didn't kill them outright. Most believed they'd eventually die. But several cycles later, with the discovery of demon worlds existing below, the theories began to rise. Were these demons actually the fallen angels transformed? Or had they always been there? Only He knew for certain.

What Derkea discovered in the small room was another surprise, one that would change everything. Truet and Cabel were

there, both more injured than her. They were peppered with festering wounds, and disease was spreading throughout both of them. Derkea gasped at the sight of them. Both were on the edge of death. Naked and bloodied.

"My brothers," she cried, rushing to them. She had known and loved both of them longer than the existence of Cibola.

"I told you she'd come," Truet said to Cabael, smiling weakly. Both were in angel form, the easiest to maintain. They appeared as dark, middle-aged angels with graying hair that hung in tatters around them. Their words came in wet gasps. "We came here to find your perisceptor... and were ambushed on the way. But we made it. Didn't we, brother?"

Cabael groaned, blood seeping from his mouth.

"You know me too well," Derkea said, smiling weakly.

Truet lifted a standard tracking device. "We had help. Our Selaphiel didn't trust us."

Derkea blinked at that. If each of the perisceptors had tracking devices built into them, it was a terrible risk.

"How long have you been here?" Derkea said, struggling to wipe the blood from her brother's chin. Struggling to maintain the tears. His skin was alarmingly cold.

"The energy of the beacon keeps us alive. Barely. We're slipping. I fear if we're removed, we will be lost."

"I'll get help," Derkea said.

"We have them. All twelve," Cabael said, speaking for the first time. He whispered the words. "Between the three of us... we found them all."

Illian. The third Seraph to leave the Tower. "Where is our sister?"

"She died protecting us," Truet said. The words were like punctures to her chest. *Illian is dead. My sister is dead.* "She turned to the dragon as they came. She devoured scores of them even as she plunged to her death."

"The prophecy will come true," Cabael said, speaking into the air. "I know it will. He has promised it." He coughed. "We will wait here for them. When they come, we'll guide them. This is where they'll appear. It has to be. And the perisceptors will be here. I've

brought other supplies for them, too. Like those wretched armored suits the young ones insist..." He trailed off, his eyes glazing. There were several supplies littering the room, though she knew little of such things.

A moment later, Cabael turned to Derkea. "Have we failed? Have we brought darkness to everything He made?"

"No," Derkea said forcefully. "I'm here now. I'll take the perisceptors back. I'll place them in the plinth myself."

Truet rolled onto his side. The skin of his back was mottled and marked with death. "You old fool," he said. "You and Selaphiel always think things to be so complicated."

"What do you mean?" Where Selaphiel had intelligence, Truet had wisdom, a way of figuring out even the most difficult of puzzles.

But Selaphiel was dead. The three here were the only ones left alive. The last of the Seraphim.

"Putting them together and placing them in the plinth will only destroy all of us. There's another way to assure His return. It will still result in the destruction of the Sphere and the demon worlds, but much more slowly. It will give them time to prepare."

Derkea stroked Truet's forehead, and she kissed him. "Even now you worry about the humans."

Cabael laughed weakly. "I told you they'd be the death of all."

Cabael had. He had raged against the creation of the Sphere, even though he knew it was necessary. Derkea reached down and kissed him, too.

Truet spoke. "If the mouth of the Tower is opened, and if the light of all twelve is simply directed upon the Tower at the same time, the True Light will return to the world. They only need to be less than ten sections away. It will hasten the melting of the ice and the cracking of the Sphere, but not nearly as swiftly as it would if you burst the light onto the demons with the plinth."

The mouth was a light at the very top of the Tower. It couldn't be seen by any angel, but they all knew it was there. It turned off and on at random, a pattern only known to Him. There was only one way to manually open it.



“And the demons on this world would perish anyway,” Derkea whispered. Of course.

Even though it had seemed so complicated at first, it was in fact surprisingly simple. All twelve perisceptors needed to be turned on at once, all aimed at the Tower at the right time, and the True Light would overwhelm Cibola, killing the demons.

She reached down and began to gather the perisceptors scattered about. “Well I’ll do it right now, then,” she said. But even as she collected them she knew it wouldn’t work. Only those with souls burnt by darkness could get them to release their light.

“We will remain and guard them, keep ourselves alive until these humans come,” Truet said. “You haven’t the ability to use them, my sister. You can remain with us. It will give both of us great comfort.”

So she did. The three strongest living angels huddled like lost children in the small room of the Propylaeum. She transferred strength to them by connecting their wings, but even that stopped working after some time. They slept and talked. Derkea finally learned the password to the Critical Action Machine, and she told her brothers of the secrets she knew. They told her all about their tracking of the twelve perisceptors, and their harrowing adventures getting to some of them. They became closer than ever. Laughing, crying, hoping, praying. They did them all.

“What would you change?” Truet asked once. “Other than the invasion.”

“The first and second rebellions,” Cabael said immediately.

“I’d wish He would show Himself,” Derkea said. “I’d wish He made Himself more known to us and the angels. More involved. They love Him, but they don’t know Him. Things would be different.”

Truet nodded slowly, but then said, “It’s not for us to question His ways.”

“I know,” Derkea said sadly. “Of course I know.”

Cabael was the first to die. He had been steadily worsening, the skin-wasting disease devouring him. Finally he raised his hand into the air, eyes already closed.

“Father,” he said as he burned away.

Soon thereafter, Truet smiled sadly at Derkea. "It's my time now."

"No," Derkea said. "No. Do not leave me here alone in the darkness. I can't be the last. I can't."

"My sister," Truet said, looking up at her. "My dear friend. You are our hope."

But Derkea didn't listen. She thought wildly. The meat of an acorn from a gray oak. It was said to have healing abilities. It certainly wouldn't cure him, but it could prolong his life perhaps. Just maybe. *Why didn't I think of this before?*

Derkea jumped up. "Don't die on me, Truet. I will return shortly. I will get medicine to help you."

"No," he said. "What are you doing? Don't make me die alone."

"I won't," she said. "I promise."

"Wait," he called as she rushed out. She wasn't thinking clearly, overcome with panic. "Derkea! Derkea!"

She had little strength herself, but she left the pyramid, careful to return the trap door. As she left, she noticed the stumps of the four columns—already smashed by either the demon army or one of those bothersome crabs—crackled with invisible energy. The death of Cabael within had charged them.

Derkea flew and flew. But she couldn't find a gray oak. She searched for an impossibly long time. Truet's words echoed in her head. *Don't make me die alone.*

She swooped in at a cluster of mammoth trees, and there she saw it. A gray oak. A direct offspring of the Tree of Eternity. It was beautiful. She let the current take her down.

That's when the arrow pierced her. A perfect hit, right in the underarm and all the way through. The head was barbed and poisoned, and she dropped like a stone. She tried to change form as she fell, but she couldn't. She didn't have the strength.

She hit the ground, and they were on her. Shoals. The small demons that accompanied their larger brethren like rats on a ship. Hundreds of them.

They clawed and bit, holding her down on her stomach. She wasn't strong enough to move, and she screamed. She struggled

and struggled, but to no avail.

*Don't make me die alone. She had promised.*

A blade entered her side, and the pain was incredible. Hundreds of thoughts and images flashed in her mind. Truet couldn't survive much longer. And if she died now, the humans would have no guidance. They wouldn't know what the perisceptors were, how to use them, where to go. The demons would finally win, and it would be her fault.

The small demons laughed and shrieked. Greasy, disfigured hands grasped her hair, yanking her neck back. A knife was presented to her throat, and it began to slide into her flesh.

No. She couldn't allow it.

She was a powerful angel, and even though she had no strength left, she found a reserve somewhere, and she threw them off her. It gave her a moment. And that was all she needed.

She reached and scrabbled until her hands found the dropped blade. A sword to the demons, but almost too small for her. Her weak, trembling fingers grasped at it. Already they raged back at her.

The world of the closest active beacon was where she would go. She prayed Cabael's death had been enough to properly charge the beacon. It was the only way. She would become human, and she would bear the cicatrix when—if—she returned.

"I mark myself," she cried. "I give myself the strength to retain all my memory. To know when to properly return." It wasn't a Seraphim power, but it might work. It had to. Her human form would know when to perish. She prayed and prayed.

She took the blade, rolled over, and plunged it into her own chest.

"Truet, Father, forgive me," she cried as the light fled from her sight, from her mind.

The memory was terrible. Indigo's cheeks were wet with tears when she thought of Truet. He must have lived a long time afterward, the length of Indigo's entire human life. And when he finally did pass, it was his energy that caused the beacon to flash on for just a moment. To allow all five of them to return.

She had promised he would not die alone, but he had. Even now, though he was only a vague memory, it burned.

Indigo remained in the small Seraph chamber, waiting for an answer or some sign Tamael's plea had found enough ears. Most of the regular radio signals were still jammed or not working, so it would be difficult for them to know if they'd been heard.

Some of the angels went out to explore, but she remained here with her thoughts. She had a pang of great guilt for not retaining her memory. If she had known...

Gramm, Dave, Hitomi, and Rico. They were the four. She was the fifth. The one not mentioned in the prophecy. By some miracle she died at the correct moment, and even though she hadn't retained her angel memory into human life, perhaps she had marked herself correctly. Perhaps something she had done had caused herself to return. She just didn't know. Maybe she would if she truly was still a Seraph, but a majority of the vast knowledge she had was gone.

"Your Honor," the Ophan said, startling her. He hadn't spoken since he told them where to find this room. Here, his voice sounded as close as it did by the lake.

"Yes," Indigo said.

"There is a matter of concern occurring below that I can sense. It's out of my range of vision, but a great battle is currently underway in the Athenaeum. I can feel the loss of life and damage to the Tower. Demons fighting demons."

"Really?" Indigo said, surprised. She looked at Tamael, who shrugged.

"It appears one group is intent upon destroying the Sphere. A smaller crowd is zealously defending it. I feel one of the four pillars is already cracked. If two of them fall, the Sphere will be thrown askew, inciting chaos within. If three pillars fall, it will crash and shatter."

"Holy crap!" Indigo cried, jumping up. If the Sphere was destroyed, she knew the Absolute Darkness would wash over Cibola like a crashing wave. Every angel would die. Did the demons somehow learn this? Was that their intention? And if so, who was defending it?

"We must do something," Indigo said. "We have to do it now."

"We can't get down there fast enough," Tamael said. "No way."

The Ophan spoke. "The Tower's aorta can swiftly carry you to the bottom of the Cherub level from its top. And back again."

"The Tower's what?" Tamael asked.

"I remember," Indigo said. She wanted to slap herself on the forehead. It was like an elevator, but it didn't actually move, it transferred you from one point to the next. The same technology was used to make that Jhunayn's Spire and the Sphere itself. If they had used it to get up here, it would have taken mere moments, not the days of flying. As Derkea, she had used the aorta often. "We can be there in a flash."

"How many of the demons are there?" Tamael asked.

"I do not know."

Tamael sighed. "Ophan, there's nothing you can do?"

"No. Not unless they come for this gate."

"We have no choice," Indigo said. "We have to go down there. If we lose the Sphere, we lose everything."

"I know," Tamael said. "I know."



## KO

THE TRANSPORT RODE in a convoy with the entire squadron. Over 100 ships, with many more—about two whole regiments—coming from other directions. About halfway through the flight, a transport three rows over inexplicably exploded, rocking their own ship in the turbulence. Then another. Ko shivered at the sight of flaming metal plummeting to the city below. The convoy scattered after that, and they rode high and fast, the inside cabin bucking and rearing like a wild beast in the storm.

Already, much of the Dominion was locked in fighting with one another. The loss of the Dahhak was a major blow to the Dominion military, and the Asag constituted the strongest of the mechanized ground force. But Daityas mechanics mostly controlled the tanks and ground skiffs the Asag required, and fierce battles were being reported in the transportation depots. Plumes of smoke rose from just about everywhere.

Behind him, Tix listened intently to the radio. She announced report after report, each one more surprising than the last. All the Overseers confirmed slain. The entire council dead. Uzkiev was acting Dominion leader. *Uzkiev*. Ko couldn't believe it. "They've ordered all humans to report to the camps," Tix said. "They've ordered the Sphere destroyed."

"I don't understand," Captain muttered. "It simply makes no sense."

That's when it hit Ko. Uzkiev and Ascot. Broken Fist. It would explain so much. They certainly wouldn't have wanted this, but it would be an incredible opportunity for their cause. They hated the humans. The main philosophy of Broken Fist was that the demon worlds were corrupted by the presence, the very existence of

humans. Under the pretext of war, they could finally achieve their victory.

*Damn them, Ko thought. Damn them all.*

Uzkiev and Ascot, they were no better than Ungeo. But still, Ko couldn't bring himself to hate them like he did the Charun. In the end, this was still *her* doing. It was *her* responsibility for this war they fought right now. It was *she* who presented this opening for Broken Fist to finally make their move.

"We land behind the enemy force," Captain announced. He now wore a head communicator underneath his battle helmet. Ko didn't envy him. "In a transport bay for the dock. We will flank them. For Asag, aim at their legs. For Dahhak, kill them like you would angels." The ship began to bank, the landing thrusters whined. Captain pulled out his rifle and flipped a dial. "Weapons on."

As the ship turned, Ko got a full view of the raging battle. For the first time in a long while, he suppressed a giggle. The last large-scale battle he had seen was the assault on the subterranean angel base. And then, that had been through cameras while he was far, far away, completely safe.

This made that battle look like two children squabbling over a toy. The divisional grande-commander who had ordered only two regiments to this particular clash was either terribly misinformed or deliberately sabotaging the effort. The Asag spread like bubbling lava, steaming as it was pelted with the rain. There had to be at least 100,000 of the giant, three-legged demons in the area. That was just on this side, and surely just as many were flanking the massive transport depot. Intermixed in their ranks was at least a half-regiment strength fleet of armored skiffs and ground artillery.

This was the edge of the city, and spread beyond through the jagged hole in the thick wall—blasted and drilled after the occupation to make way for the port—was the blue ether. Normally calm, it thrashed about like an angry sea. Though Ko wasn't sure why. The clouds shied away from the ether, revealing only the red sky.

The transportation depot spread for a great distance on top of a plateau, perhaps once a herbarium, but it was hardly worth the effort for so many demons. The Daityas, Shishi, and Sedim workers



desperately held off the siege. A buffeting inferno rocked back and forth between the two camps. A constant roar consumed the air, heard even over the whine of the transport and the rain, and a stream of colored light screamed back and forth as the two forces clashed.

*And we're going to fight them.* The realization didn't really affect Ko until that moment. They were bigger, better trained, and there were a lot of them. A whole lot.

Would they tell Qulp his father had died a soldier's death? Would that make him proud? Ko pulled away the clear safety coverlet and disengaged the trigger lock. The colossal gun attached to his stump lurched with power. The auto-aiming system came online in his helmet, already reprogrammed to seek Asag and Dahhak targets.

The transport crunched as it hit the ground. The back of the Asag mass was close, but out of blast range. Surely they'd seen them come in. Ko expected the artillery to come raining down on them at any moment. The transport's door yawned, revealing a world of fire and rain. And the stench of the Sedim ovens, but magnified tenfold.

"Go!" Captain yelled. The platoon hurried out, rushing for the wall of the port customs building. Tix fell in beside him, miserable in the downpour. He knew it must be torture for her to remain on the ground. But while Shishi were the fastest flyers, staying off the ground in the torrent was impossible for more than just a moment.

"Plans changed," Captain called suddenly, speaking into his radio. "To the port!"

Ko felt an odd disappointment and simultaneous relief as they turned back and went through the archway of the quarantine wall, leaving the enormous city fortification between them and the fighting. Artillery salvos sailed over their heads and into the cerulean ether, sometimes exploding overhead with deafening concussions and multi-colored stars in the storm-covered sky.

"Port detects a large number of incoming transportation vessels," Captain said. "They should crest at any moment. We don't

know their origin, so don't fire until we see who it is. A whole division is coming to help with this and the Asag behind."

Other platoons were set up on the narrow strip of land between the wall and the ether. Sedim gunners hastily erected their six-barreled anti-angel racks at semi-regular intervals. They covered them with tarp to protect them from the storm. Ko's heart raced with anticipation. What if it was Dahhak? Their transports would open at the top, and the demons would burst into the sky, free to rain fire on them from above. The wall would trap the Footies. He placed himself on a rocky slope, just enough to conceal most of his bulk. He aimed his gun at the ether and waited, soaked to the core and shivering.

The bubbling ether began to mist, a sign a transport was coming. But the vapor rose from as far as he could see. Big ones. His hand trembled.

"Steady," Captain called. "No one fire until I give the order."

Ko adjusted his weapon, giving it full power. It quivered on his stump, the vibrations shaking his teeth. *By Jehu*, he prayed. *Let them be friends.*

The silver tops of the ships emerged like behemoths from the deep. They belched black fumes and the deep, dark sound of burdened machinery. Beasts of hell gasping for air. Each one the size of a large air transport. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them.

"Steady," Captain cried.

The monster transports pulled forward to the edge of land. They were wider and taller than normal port ships by almost tenfold. An artillery shell exploded on the top of one to no effect. Ko slowly began to realize he knew where these ships were from. He had ridden in one himself on his journey here. Not quite relieved, he lowered his weapon.

"Overseers," Ko called to the captain over the rain. Next to him, Tix let out a stream of breath.

A moment later, the colossal doors of one crashed down, confirming what Ko had said. Overseers dressed in their ridiculous ornamental combat armor filled the transports, many already astride steeds. The steeds were Vangs, gray armored beasts with six legs and two horns atop their beaked snouts. The Overseers of old rode

them in battle, but Ko doubted any of these fat fools had ever even trotted on one. The helmets of the Overseers were decorated with rainbow-colored brushes, and some wore feathered headdresses that cascaded to the ground. Even some of the Vangs were colorfully outfitted like dolls.

“What are they doing here?” Tix asked, suppressing her feline laugh. She shook her head, though it did no good as the water continued to fall on her. “They look like over plumped game turkeys.”

“They're here to defend their precious honor,” Ko said. “They sure got here fast. They never liked the Dahhak, and now they probably mean to 'help' us defeat them.”

“Well there are a lot of them, that's for sure.”

The mid-commander, a Charun, strode forward to speak with one of the Overseers. Ko manually tracked her with his weapon, pretending she was Ungeo. She nodded and turned away. She began to relay orders on her microphone.

“We are to cover them while they disembark,” Captain said after a moment. “They've come to help us.”

“The last time the Overseers fought for themselves was when they conquered my world,” Ko said. “That was long before any of us were born.”

Captain shrugged. “They were slaughtered mercilessly, and they've come to help us. Besides, they say Asag are frightened by bright colors.”

Behind them on the other side of the wall, the battle continued to rage. Though Ko couldn't see what was happening, he could tell it had taken up a fevered pitch. Both sides likely had received reinforcements by now.

The Overseers had mechanical winches that pulled themselves onto their beasts. It was slow going, and the obese clowns sometimes fell off, usually to the jeers of the Footies covering them. When the first line of ships were finally empty, they closed up and sank, allowing the second line behind them to come forward.

“This is going to take forever,” Tix groaned.



## RICO

RICO WATCHED Hitomi pace back and forth, back and forth. She was antsy as hell. He wanted to get out of here too, but Moloch said stay put. He hated waiting. None of them could sleep, and Hitomi, timid Hitomi, wanted nothing more than to get back out there and start kicking ass.

He respected it for sure. She was worried about Indigo and Dave, and she wanted to find and help them. He probably could transport them to the Tower. It was far, and the effort would most likely knock him out, but he could do it. However, Hitomi said there were angels there, and he didn't think he'd be able to control himself. These guys didn't understand what the angels had done to their people. Maybe in time, but not yet.

Gramm was curious about teleporting, so to pass the time Rico tried to show him how to do it. Surprisingly, Gramm began to pick it up almost right away. It had taken Rico the equivalent of a month of constant work just to get himself to move a meter. Already, Gramm was popping around the room. After a few tries, he could start bringing objects with him, which was another hurdle. Then he started moving other things around by themselves, something Rico didn't even know was possible.

"Man, this is so easy," Gramm said, voice filled with wonder. "If everyone knew how to do this, we... we wouldn't be slaves anymore."

"It's not that. You're a natural," Rico said. "It's hard for most people."

"Look at this!" Hitomi called. Her head peeked out of Moloch's private chamber. "Look at what I found."

"Hitomi," Rico cried. "You aren't allowed in there!" Distracted, he didn't notice she had wandered away. When he had first come to this

place, Moloch had told him that his room was strictly off limits. At first Rico had been tempted to sneak in, but the repeated warnings about being filleted and baked in butter had dissuaded him. He'd never once set foot past this room.

"He has hundreds of TV monitors in here. He can see anything that's going on everywhere," she said. "There's fighting all over the place."

"Really?" Gramm said.

"No," Rico said, blocking the way. "We aren't allowed in there!"

"Come on," Gramm said. He disappeared and reappeared right behind Rico. "If he catches us, we'll just say we forced you."

"No," Rico said again, getting alarmed. "He won't like it."

"The old Rico would've been the first one in here," Hitomi said. She ducked back into the room.

There was an irony in that, but he wasn't going to point it out now. He went to the door. If they weren't going to listen, he was gonna make them.

Moloch's room was much bigger than Rico originally thought, and the moment he stuck his head in, he felt that time resumed back to normal, not slowed down like in the other room. Moloch had another bar in here, filled with bottles of different colored liquids, and a large, flat bed. Blood stained the sheets.

The monitors dominated the wall. There were about 150 small, round screens, all surrounding a rectangular main monitor that was huge, about two meters wide. At the head of Moloch's bed was a touch-screen panel that glowed and blinked with hundreds of lights.

"Listen," Rico said. But he stopped when his eye caught the main screen, depicting a heated battle between Dahhak and Kostchtchie inside of some building. The demons fought hand-to-hand.

"Look," Hitomi said, "almost all of the monitors are on people. Like the cameras are inside their eyes or they're wearing spy glasses."

Rico tried to take in scene after scene. A majority of the screens depicted people on various transports, tightly packed and huddled together. One monitor constantly switched from a Dahhak temple

floor to another and another, cycling through all of them in succession. These weren't on a human, but affixed to a wall. Most of these were just empty rooms, but every once in a while there would only be white noise or a scene of fire.

"What's that?" Gramm asked, pointing to a camera on the edge of the cluster.

Hitomi examined the touch screen panel. She put down her finger and dragged it across. The image on the main monitor switched over.

"The camps," Rico whispered.

Rico had heard plenty about them, but he never had the opportunity to see them. The view was from a human standing in a long line with others. In the distance, transports landed several at a time. Humans poured out of them, being prodded into long lines by Shishi and Pazuzu. There was no sound, but all the demons wore strange headgear. Many of the humans held their hands to their head, many on their knees in obvious pain. Blood and liquid freely flowed from the ears of the others.

"What's wrong with them? What's going on?" Gramm asked.

The camera holder turned his or her head, revealing a scene of complete terror. Even though Rico despised the angels, the panorama before him now turned his stomach.

"No," Gramm said, covering his mouth.

"Moloch told me they can't kill all the angels because it will upset the balance, so they keep them here," Rico whispered. He couldn't stop looking at the screen. He knew it stretched for over a hundred square kilometers.

Each angel was spread out on a rectangular metal rack with a metal cover locking over their torsos. A spike pierced each hand and foot, and the wisps of their wings were stuck, wrapped around their bodies. A final restraint was welded around their necks, permanently affixing them to the rack. They couldn't move at all. Then the whole mechanism was slid feet first into a slot of a great vice that could hold several hundred angels vertically, like a gigantic CD rack. The closer to the center of the camp one got, the higher the stacks of angels rose.

Several secondary machines snaked in and around the closely-packed stockades. One drone administered random electrical shocks to avert thinking processes, and another sprinkled medicinal dust about them to heal them of the festering wounds about their bodies. Though it did little more than keep them from falling off the edge.

"The humans are holding their ears because of the angels," Gramm said. "The sound of one angel in pain is unbearable. I can't imagine how this many sound."

Hitomi had tears on her cheeks.

Something else gave Rico pause. What were all the humans doing there? "They're being sent into that building," Rico said out loud. "Why? What is it?"

They watched as the person with the camera walked, then crawled through the mud and rain along the line until he got to the round, metal building. Several of the people around him tried to flee, but the guarding Pazuzu shoved them back, or lashed out with their claws, touching the humans on their faces. Their deaths were sickening.

Inside the building were more demons. The door behind them closed, and the cameraman looked around wildly. Then he began to fall, the floor gone. He grasped onto the leg of a Kostchtchie and looked down at the fire that consumed all those who had been around him in line. The demon, using its own wings to hover, hit the human in the head with its gun, and he let go. A moment later, nothing but white noise.

"Holy shit," Rico said. He looked around the monitors again. Scene after scene humans were on transports, some already landed, being put in line. "They're killing them all."

Moloch wouldn't allow this. He had to be told, but Rico had no way of contacting him if he wasn't here. Rico ran from the room, found the shelf that contained the other perisceptor and grabbed it. He also picked up a Pazuzu gun from the weapons wall, rushing back into Moloch's room. He shoved the big gun into Gramm's hands.



"We can't let this continue," Rico said. Moloch would thank him. Hitomi already had out her periscope. Gramm nodded fearfully after a moment.

"You take us there, I'll bring us back," Rico said.

"We gotta do this right," Gramm said. "We need ear protection. And we gotta come in at the right place."

"Okay," Rico said, scrambling around, looking for something to use for their ears. "We gotta hurry."

They had several of the angel helmets in the chest where he kept the supplies for his training. "Here," Rico said. They were battered, but they would work. And they could use them to talk to one another.

"These are too big," Gramm said, pulling one over his head.

"They adjust automatically." Rico slid his over his head, and the interior padding quickly molded to his features. All the exterior sounds were immediately cut off, a moment later resuming, but filtered through the helmet. The angels, at their best, were superior to the demons when it came to this sort of thing. But as Moloch once pointed out, almost all angel technology was gleaned from human scientists and engineers.

"We ready?" Gramm asked, studying a monitor intently. His words sounded odd through the filter. Even though they didn't know the exact location of the camp, he could bring them there if he had a good picture of it in his head.

"Let's go," Hitomi said. She had her helmet on. It looked as if it was devouring her head. "Ready."



## KO

MUCH TIME PASSED as the Overseers alighted. The ones who had already landed began marching off into the wall and toward the battle. Slowly but surely. Neither beast nor Overseer seemed pleased to be out in the rain. Those with the feathered headdresses had to abandon them quickly as they weighed them down.

The third line of transports were finishing up. There was only one more line behind it. Each row stretched down far, probably about 400 ships per line. And each massive multi-leveled transport could normally carry about 1,200 Overseers, but probably had less than half that with the inclusion of the Vangs. The lines and lines of mounted demons continued to slosh past Ko and through the wall. Ko noted with disgust some of the Overseers had bulging pouches at the front of their armor. They were packs to carry humans with easy access to their pleasure nodes. Already, the heavy stench of the Vangs filled the air, and the ground was muddied with their excrement.

It began to dawn on Ko that this just couldn't be, even though he was witnessing it himself.

When he had to leave the Overseer world—which was one of three staging worlds for the initial assault on the angel realm—the Overseers had required the reading of several poems before the ships could depart. It had taken hours. And the actual loading of the ships took longer than the unpacking.

They got here too fast.

Either they were planning on an assault of their own already, which Ko doubted, or they somehow knew this was going to happen. But if that was the case, why didn't they warn their own? It simply didn't make sense. Unless...

“Captain,” Ko cried. “Captain, we need to speak immediately.”

Captain was standing nearby conversing with a Nidhogg commander. Both had their weapons slung over their shoulders. He turned slowly to the Geyrun. He looked irritated.

“What is it?”

Behind him, the fourth row of ships finally finished pulling up, their massive jaws all opening simultaneously.

From the belly of this final row of ships came the Dahhak. Black death filling the dark sky like bats.

“Ambush,” Ko screamed, firing his weapon over the captain's shoulder and at the maw of a transport. Dahhak and metal exploded. Ko looked back, and the line of Overseers headed for the entrance to the city suddenly turned, facing the Footies trapped between them and the ether. The Asag artillery suddenly became very accurate. Up and down the thin strip of land, the Sedim guns began to explode.

The Overseers charged, firing their weapons, cutting them to pieces. Above, the Dahhak rained blasts down on them while maintaining wide gaps in their spaces for the Asag artillery. The winged Sedim and many of the Shishi burst up to meet them, but they were terribly outnumbered, and the Dahhak weren't hindered at all by the rain.

“Focus on the Overseers and get out of here,” Captain screamed.

Ko didn't have time to think about how or why this was happening. His helmet didn't automatically target Overseers, so he uttered the command to switch it to manual.

An Overseer with three human pouches barreled down on Ko and Tix. Ko aimed his gun and fired. It was like smashing rotten fruit with a hammer. He aimed at another Overseer, then another, screaming the whole time as fire and water rained.

“Come on, Ko!” Captain yelled as he and the others scrambled up the muddy rock. A thick line of Overseers blocked the entrance to the city, but they were not battle disciplined, and they fell back. Overhead, the Dahhak had already dispatched the onslaught of winged Footies and were swooping down, strafing the retreating soldiers.

Captain's chest exploded in a red mass, falling over only feet from Ko.

"Noooooo," Ko roared, flipping over and firing wildly into the air. The Dahhak scattered, some flying right into the blast radius of an Asag artillery shell.

Of his platoon, he could only find Tix now. All around him, soldiers grappled with swooping Dahhak or were fighting for their lives against Vang charges. The mud ran red, and he had trouble keeping his footing.

The Dahhak were mostly ignoring Ko. Perhaps they thought he was with the Overseers. He didn't know. He used it to his advantage, firing death into the air whenever a group of Dahhak got too close to one another.

"If we break past the Overseers, we can make it to our side," Tix yelled.

Ko aimed his gun at the jagged archway above the exit. The uneven rocks that had been carved out by the Dominion shattered and fell on the Overseers below as Tix sent several blasts at them. The Vangs panicked, bucking off the Overseers, sending a chain reaction.

"Go!" Tix called. She launched herself into the air, corkscrewing, strafing fire at the bewildered Overseers. She cut through several. Their cries of pain rose like miniature explosions. Ko sent a blast through to finish them off.

Ko couldn't move fast, but he went as quickly as he could. A small group of wet Daityas, Nidhogg, and Kostchtchie huddled together as they squeezed through. Ko became disoriented as they emerged back out to the landing area. The transports they had used to get here were all bombed out and burning. Ko spun around, trying to figure out where to go. The red flag of Moloch flapped over the transportation depot, but it looked like the mechanics and workers had burned most of the inventory before they were overrun. All around, Overseers struggled with their steeds.

Above and to the north, a full Pazuzu division filled the sky. In battle formation, they were like a net spread across the heavens. But

even at this distance, Ko could see they were unsure of themselves in the rain.

“That way!” Ko called to Tix, but his Shishi friend was nowhere. He turned, and looked away in horror at the sight of her body being rent apart by two riderless Vangs.

“Where to?” a Daityas asked. The tall demon was speaking to him. “This way!” Ko called. “Under the approaching Pazuzu.”

They found cover behind a stout building as the battle moved to the sky. It had a wide awning, and it offered meager protection from the rain. There were only fifty of them, most carrying wounds. All the officers were gone.

The whole thing had been an ambush. The Asag to lure them in, the Overseers to trap them, and finally the Dahhak to kill them. They had been absolutely devastated. Two whole regiments, maybe more, reduced to fifty soldiers.

The Overseers had betrayed them.

“I no longer have a home,” Ko suddenly said. Next to him, a Kostchtchie put a webbed hand on his shoulder.

“You fought well,” he said. “You carved our path to freedom.”

Ko had just raised a weapon in anger against the masters of his own world. The Overseer nation would have expected him to immediately turn on the Dominion and take up arms alongside the giant demons. If it became known he had slain several, his bank accounts would be seized, his family executed.

He put his face into his hand.



## RICO

AN INSTANT later they were there, the landing not nearly as rough as when Rico did it. Gramm had placed them in a small space where three storage towers of angel prisoners met. It was the metallic backside of the mechanisms, and the angel stacks were on the other side. The rain still found even this narrow place, and the water collected here, up to Rico's ankles.

Even through the helmet Rico could hear the angels, though the agonized wail was distant. It shook his entire body. The noise made the very ground rumble, and when he touched the metal tower, it was vibrating with a tortured energy. And the smell. The helmet did nothing to block that. It smelled like the dumpster behind the tocineria.

"There aren't that many of them," Gramm said. "They're just spread out."

"Maybe we can free some angels. They can help us," Hitomi said.

"No," Rico said.

Rico jumped from the space. They wouldn't be able to blend in here, not with the helmets. All around him were angels, clamped in the restraining devices. Eyes rolled back into their heads or clenched shut against the rain. Their mouths were open, emanating their painful shrieks. They were packed here like animals. He felt sorry for them. No one deserved this, not even treacherous angels.

Hitomi fell in beside him. A line of jailers stood only a hundred meters away, but their backs were turned. Beyond, more transports landed by the moment, but the pilots weren't sticking around. After they spilled their belly of the humans, they took off again, leaving the humans on the ground writhing in pain until they were gathered up.



"Wait until this last transport lands," Rico said. "Then Hitomi gets them all. I watch our back, cleaning up anything sneaking in. Gramm, you strafe the sides, careful not to hit the people," Rico said.

"Be careful," Hitomi said.

"Wait a second," Gramm whispered frantically. "We haven't thought this out enough. What're we gonna do after? Most of them are deaf by now. How are we going to communicate? Where are we going to go? We can't take all of them back with us."

"I don't know," Rico said. He hadn't thought that far in advance.

"I have an idea," Hitomi said.

They didn't have time to discuss it further. A Shishi looked back over its shoulder and looked right at them. Before it had the chance to scream, Rico and Hitomi simultaneously lit them up. Up and down the line of humans, the demons around them died. Rico flashed his light at the cockpit of the transports on the ground.

They rushed forward. The *ching ching ching* of Gramm's gun constantly rang.

"Above," Gramm called. Rico swept the light over his head. A shadow of something tumbled away, spraying blood.

Rico ran forward to the metal building and ripped open the door, shining his light inside. Behind him, Hitomi was shouting something at the people. He turned, and they were still trying to push their way past him and into the door.

"No," Rico cried. "No, stop! It's only death in there. Don't go in."

"They want to go," said Gramm over the radio.

Rico pulled the door shut, searching for a way to lock it, but the mass just pushed it open. He grabbed the closest man by the robes, pulling him to his chest.

"Stop, you idiot," Rico yelled.

But the man cried, blood on his shoulders.

The people piled into the room, but thankfully whatever mechanism opened up the bottom trap was out of reach. They searched the walls like madmen, scratching.

Hitomi mopped up the demons with her light. Not a single shot had been fired their way.

Gramm tried to shoo the people away, coax them into running. A few did, especially those who had just gotten there. Most were still on their knees, hands clenched to their heads.

With horror, Rico saw what Hitomi was doing. She had pulled an angel free. She had gotten the torso lock off but was struggling with a spike in the hand. Six of the deafened slaves jumped forward. She let them take over while she covered them.

"No," Rico yelled. He shot his light at a group of Shishi rounding the corner of a containment tower just two hundred meters away. His stomach burned. "Don't free the angels. We don't have time."

"We can't leave them like this," Hitomi called. They had the hands and feet free, but the angel's neck was welded down, permanently attaching to the stacking plate. A balding man picked up a gun from one of the fallen demons. He expertly switched it on, lowering it to a welding arc. The metal restraint was off in moments. The angel sprang forth. Hitomi flashed it with her light, and it seemed to invigorate it. Its wings began to glow a little more.

Instead of flying off like Rico would have expected, it began to help the humans free a second angel. Then a third and a fourth. The more that joined the effort, the faster it went.

A new group of transports landed, and Rico flashed light into the cockpits. Only thirty of the demon weapons were available for removing the welds on the angel restraints, and they were all in use. They set up a quick disassembly line. Every angel who could move helped. The others rested on the ground as Hitomi washed them with the light.

Many of the people helped now. The other half just stood there stupidly or lay on the ground. None were clutching their ears anymore. The distant cry had ceased. Word spread quickly amongst the angels, even restrained like this. Surely the other guards in different areas would take immediate notice and come.

"We have to get out of here," Rico said again.

Another voice roared. It wasn't through the loudspeaker, but the radio on his belt, the receiver still in his ear.

"Rico, I don't know where you are, but return here immediately." It was Moloch. He sounded mad.

Rico ran to Gramm and handed him the periscope. "I'll be right back. If you come under fire, take Hitomi and come back to Moloch's." Before Gramm could protest, Rico teleported himself away.



## UNGEO

UNGEO CURSED herself for not bringing a radio. She had no idea what was happening, and she couldn't bear to wait any longer. All around raged the sounds and smells of war, and she hid in this empty building like a coward. She had been instructed by the prelate to stay unseen during the fighting. They wanted her alive. It was through her they hoped to bring the Charun in, she surmised.

She had also found herself thrown into the position of Molochite ambassador to the Overseer world.

She had been the one to approach the Overseer envoy with the seal of peace and substantial tithe offering. He had brought Ungeo to a meeting of several Overseers in a northern sector, and they discussed what she and the Molochites had offered. When she mentioned offhandedly her suspicions that the council planned on destroying the Sphere, the giant demons joined up immediately.

They only had two provisions, both of which had been predicted by the prelate. Ungeo allowed them both. First, the entire Tower sector, the one just north of the gate sector, was to be given to them afterward. Secondly, one of the slave farms had to be handed over as well.

The last would make some angry, especially the Shishi Slavers Guild, but under Moloch rule that would only be one of many new worries. The slave ranches were deeply-built pits behind the few remaining beacons that were still active. With an adjustment, humans from many worlds flocked to these, causing the platform to be constantly overwhelmed, and they were herded into the pits for processing. Ungeo had visited one once, and it was very poorly run. When the workers fell behind, which was often, the humans began to literally pile up, causing many of them to be wasted. The males were evaluated and separated based on abilities. The women were used

mostly for food or thrown into the pool of domestic slaves. The children were set aside for the huge Overseer trade, sent to the tanners, or sold for veal.

Thinking of the markets made Ungeo think of male Charun. Some left her world to work as freelance ether navigators or transport pilots. But an even greater number received a stipend and safe place to live from the Slavers Guild. The male vulture demons combed the lowest levels of the ether, just above the great devouring darkness, finding the remnants of humans who didn't make the beacon or land on a demon world, and pulling them back up to one of the random light wisps.

Would she ever mate? Joining the military, Ungeo never believed such a path was for her. But now she wasn't so sure. She would be an excellent mother. She could fly into the ether herself and find the strongest male, seduce him, and once he was filled with the mating frenzy, force him to return to their world. She would save his flesh for her chicks, all of whom would grow with Charun pride and Moloch, and they would lead the next generation to an existence of peace and prosperity for all.

But those things would come in time, and only if she survived. Ungeo had no such illusions about her future, even if she hid away like a coward.

A pair of thunderous detonations drove her back to the rain-soaked window. Too close. At first she saw nothing, then a group of about 100 Dahhak hurried through, returning fire at the force behind them.

They were in retreat. She clicked her beak in anger. There was no retreat here. Fire streaked by from the direction of their unseen assailants, incinerating the abandoned store booths despite the rain. The windows on the lower floors of the building shattered. The glass showered to the street below. The fleeing Dahhak likely cremated.

She peered low out the window. She didn't have to wait long.

Angels!

Several wings of them! She wouldn't have been more surprised if it was the serpent Gollop slithering along the street. She sunk below sight. Angels? What were they doing here so deep in the city?

For a group to get here would require a great push. Had they taken out the Dahhak at the council? How many more were there?

What was she going to do? This could be disastrous. If the angels had somehow been concealing efforts to regroup, and they used this internal warfare of the Dominion as an opportunity, they could very possibly regain a grip here. With the Dominion so decisively split, the angels could even regain the city! And then they would resume their mass use of the beacons, and once again their worlds would come under a constant assault of the light.

*Calm yourself.* Even if they regrouped, they couldn't be that strong. Ungeo peered back out the window. They stretched far into the sky and haze, everywhere she could see. *Bloody Hell!* It looked like an entire angel company. Three million angels. It would take two Divisions just to face them equally. She had to find a radio. She had to tell someone at once.

She burst out of the room. She peeked over the balcony. As she suspected, angels were already searching the building. Braving the central passage, she burst up four floors. Not waiting to see if she was seen, she found the back perch. She opened the door and burst out, praying there were no angels on this side.

There were. Immediately, she started taking fire, but she dove down and around several buildings. Flying was exceptionally difficult in the rain. But it tired her more than faltered her. Luckily they only gave a half-hearted chase, and she was away.

Ungeo didn't know where to go. There were battles all around, but she had to find a grande- commander. It didn't matter what side.

In the distance, a heavily fortified transport convoy rode low along the skyline. It rode parallel with the angels, and the ships would cross Ungeo's path. She didn't know its affiliation, so she stripped the red band of Moloch from her shoulder and shoved it in a pouch.

She waved frantically at the lead ship of the convoy, a fighter. It slowed, bringing itself to hover. The storm rocked the ship. A Sedim piloted it, which meant they were loyalists. The troop transport behind opened its side and several Pazuzu and Shishi soldiers came out to surround her.

“What is your business and affiliation,” a Pazuzu called. His uniform identified him as a Stinger. An elite soldier.

“My affiliation is the survival of the demon worlds,” she said, finding it difficult to speak in the rain. “I need to speak to your commander immediately! A whole angel company has somehow broken through and they now hold the council area.”

A Shishi laughed. “Is that a joke?”

“Get her in here!” growled a Pazuzu captain from the open door of the transport.

“I speak the truth,” Ungeo said as she was ushered inside. The transport was filled with armored Stingers and Shishi Lobbers, the equivalent special forces of their race. She repeated her story to the captain as the convoy continued, a grizzled old Pazuzu with a crooked tail who looked more like an Arms Officer. Like an efficient soldier, he immediately got on his radio and began speaking with someone.

It was a shame these soldiers were on the other side of the conflict. When the Dominion was together, it was indestructible. A terrible shame.

The whole transport column began to turn.

“This wayward Charun speaks truthfully,” the captain said. “They came from the ground and decimated the Molochite scum we were on our way to fight. We’re regrouping with the sluagh so we can meet them.” He turned to look at Ungeo. “You saved our lives.”

“I did no such thing,” she snapped, suddenly uncomfortable. She told them she was a spice-bulb and perfume dealer who had hidden after the assault. She tried to find out more of what was happening, but they wouldn’t talk. The convoy moved slowly, picking up every errant soldier they could find.





## RICO - UNGEO - KO

THE APARTMENT WAS TORN to shreds. At first Rico thought he was at the wrong place, but he turned at the sound of the couch being thrown over. Moloch was in a rage.

"Where is it?" Moloch demanded.

"What?"

"The perisceptor you fool!"

"Gramm has it. We just did the greatest thing. They're taking the slaves..."

"Where is he now!"

"At the camps. We were freeing the slaves."

"I want you to return there immediately, cut your friend's throat, and return the perisceptor at once!"

What was happening? What was he talking about?

"I don't understand," Rico said, backing away.

"One has to remain here always! If not, all can be lost!"

"You promised Hitomi they were hers."

Moloch suddenly had a knife in his hand. He threw it straight at Rico's head. Rico caught it by the handle, just as he'd been trained.

Moloch beat his fists into the wall, raging. Then he took a deep breath.

"Very well," Moloch said, suddenly very quiet. "I will go get it myself."

"What has gotten into you?" Rico asked. "These are my friends. They are humans, like us. We are doing what you trained me for. We are freeing the slaves, saving them from being thrown into the fire."

"Fuck them," Moloch said. "Fuck them and fuck you."

Rico was incredulous. He had no idea what was happening. "I... Why are you so mad?"

Moloch still raged. "I am going to find your little friends, and I am going to rip them to shreds. When I return, I am going to kill you, too."

Rico shook his head. All this time, he'd never once seen Moloch this bent out of shape before.

"I'm your heir," Rico said. "Remember? Please, just tell me why you're so mad. I don't understand what's happening here."

"You sad little fuck," Moloch said. "Do you really believe I would have you as my heir?" He laughed. "You're nothing."

Rico's head spun. "But... But... You killed me. You brought me here."

Moloch laughed again. It was a big hearty laugh, filled with malice. Rico hated it. He hated the sound of people laughing at him. "I planted that memory in your head. You died because you were hit by a car. And the person left you there to die like a dog in the street. Because that's what you were. That's what you'll always be. A crippled dog."

No. Rico didn't believe it. He couldn't believe it. "This is a test. Another one of your tests."

"I can see what happens in every temple. I saw you kill the Nemat. That's how I first learned of you. Before, I didn't even think the perisceptors were real." Moloch shook his head and laughed.

"Don't laugh at me. Don't you laugh."

"Maybe I will let you live when I'm done with your friends. Though I will have to dress you up in a colorful costume and keep a leash on you. When I have visitors, I will make you dance for them. Would you like that, Rico? Would you like to dance for me and my friends?"

Moloch reminded Rico of his father right then, bent over and laughing at him. Laughing, always laughing.

"Maybe we'll travel to your human world. I can do that, you know. I'll have my way with your mother, maybe bring her here."

"Stop it!" Rico said. "Just stop it. What about the revolution? The army?"

"Neither of which is your concern."

“Of course it is! Our people... *Your* people are being lined up and killed.”

Moloch laughed again. The familiar form of Moloch began to twist and fade away, his features darkening and melting. His crimson robe fell from his shoulders to a heap on the floor. The figure that remained was black and shadowy. A floating wisp with no legs.

A Marid! “A shapeshifter?” Rico shook his head. No. It couldn't be possible. Moloch was not a demon. He had the urge to throw up. All this time, fooled. He thought he had been a part of something important. He wanted to cry and scream all at once.

“Why?”

“Sad little Rico. Always the last to figure things out. My people were once absolute. Until sloth invaded our lives and we lost our footing. Gone were the ways of our past until I uncovered the secrets and learned them again. Even your precious Creator understood our superiority and gave you humans a small portion of our powers. And the fools that you are don't even know you have them.”

“No,” Rico found himself saying, backing up against the wall. “No, no, no.”

“I was called upon by my people to assert power over the Dahhak, so I imitated their fool religious leader. Even after I ordered them to give us free trade, they still didn't suspect. Later I came here to incite a human rebellion, and you couldn't even get that right. But many remember me and my cause, and I have a huge network of slaves who would slit their own wrists at my command. Then you came along, right into my lap with a periscope. One of the four of their so-called great prophecy.” He laughed.

Moloch's voice was completely different now. A low raspy growl. “Know this before you die, human. The Marid were once the greatest of demons, feared by the others. After the Dominion crumbles only my nation will remain intact. Every person you've ever known or loved will be a slave under our control.”

Rico tried to jump away, back to the camps with Hitomi and Gramm. But he couldn't move. Moloch had done something to him.

“You mean to kill me?” Rico said.

“Yes. Yes I do.” Something was in Moloch's hand, raised. Then a terrible burning surrounded him.

Then, nothing.

---

“The interim Dominion commander wishes to speak with you,” the Pazuzu captain said as they finally landed and disembarked onto a high platform. Below, loyalist soldiers swelled like an ocean. It was the largest group of soldiers Ungeo had ever seen in one place since the initial assault on Cibola.

“*Who?*” Ungeo asked.

“The new commander of the Dominion. The entire council was slain, and he is in charge for now.” The captain suddenly bowed. “My Lord.”

“Ahh, I believe we've decided the proper term to be 'Your Grace,' please remember, yesss. Now check-in with your commander.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the captain said. He immediately began barking orders.

Ungeo turned to face the Nidhogg. Though she had never been in his presence, she immediately recognized Uzkiev and his ever-present assistant, Ascot.

“That's what I like about the Pazuzu, ahh. They adapt quickly.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Ungeo said.

*I'll tell them who I really am. Suggest they let me go, and I could convince the prelate and Trukkac to agree to a temporary peace until this new threat is overcome.*

But Ungeo couldn't do that. If she told them, they would likely kill her outright. Uzkiev hovered closer. “Tell us about the angels.”

“I saw many. Maybe a whole company of Powers, but I can't be sure. They have personnel-based heavy weapons, but I didn't see any armor. They fly easily in the rain.”

Uzkiev raised a hairless eyebrow. “I thought you were a shopkeeper.”

*Damn your beak.* “I am. I was military until I hurt my claw.”

“Voluntary discharge,” Uzkiev snorted. “That's something that's going to change.” The Mite on his shoulder began whispering in his ear. He nodded slightly. “Very well. All citizens loyal to the Dominion have been drafted. You are to report...”

*You have to do it. To save the Dominion. For your Pri. Even if it means your own execution, you have to at least attempt.*

“Actually Your Grace, I have been untruthful. I'm not really a shopkeeper.” She swallowed hard.

“Oh?” Uzkiev said.

“No. I am a daughter of Moloch. My name is Mid-Commander Ungeo G'sslom, and I have been hiding in exile at a Moloch temple until recently. It is my belief that if you dispatch me with a transport and an escort platoon, I can convince the Molochites to temporarily cease hostilities, so we can meet this in unison.” The rain fell in sheets.

“Commander,” Uzkiev said immediately. “Place this Charun under arrest and place her in the stockade. The charge is treason.”

“*Wait,*” Ungeo said as the Sedim platform guards came forward. They placed the metal binders around her wrists and both pairs of wing stems with silent efficiency. “Even if you don't send me, you must make an attempt. You must.”

The Mite, ever whispering in the ear of the Dominion Commander, turned its tiny head at one of the guards. “Belay that last order. We will keep her here.”

A soldier rushed up and said something to Uzkiev she didn't hear.

“No. Leave all such decisions to the grande-commanders. I don't want this fight lost because I didn't react quickly enough.

“We have already requested a temporary ceasefire, and our request was denied,” Uzkiev said. “Apparently your precious god himself killed the messenger. Only his head was returned to us, wrapped in a red flag.”

*God himself?* Had Moloch made an appearance to the prelate? She'd heard rumors such a thing happened from time to time, but she hadn't believed it. “Did you tell them of the angels?”

"They know, yesss. It's more than a simple company we face. Right now we estimate three full angel brigades mass just north of here, spread out along the center of the city."

"Three brigades!" *That many?* "From where did they come? What of the demons stationed there?"

"Ahh, we don't know," Uzkiev said. "Our best soldiers had already left the front to deal with the treachery in the rear. The others have retreated or are killed. We haven't heard from the Wuj since this started, and we fear they've been completely overrun. They were never good in mass combat."

Ungeo shifted uncomfortably in her bindings. Three Brigades? Bloody Hell. Neither the loyalists nor the Molochites alone could face this easily. In order to defeat this new threat and remain a viable power afterward, both sides would have to come together.

The Mite buzzed off Uzkiev's shoulder and hovered right before her. The Mite sank a few inches every time he was pelted directly in the head with a raindrop. Perhaps it was the look in the Mite's eyes, but at that moment Ungeo suddenly understood the dynamic between the Nidhogg and Mite. She looked directly at the small demon as he spoke to her.

"Our intelligence has quite the profile on you. I don't trust you, but I believe in your brilliance," the Mite said. "I will keep you here for your counsel. If we emerge victorious, your death sentence may be reassessed."

She considered the Mite for a moment. "Yes, Your Grace."

He smiled at that. "Have you counsel?"

"Yes," she said immediately. "Find me a method of communicating with the Dahhak prelate."

"It must be done quickly," Uzkiev said suddenly, lowering a communicator. "The angels advance." He paused, looking at Ungeo warily, then said, "The team dispatched to the Tower has met heavy resistance, but they report the Sphere will be shattered soon."

Ungeo's heart stopped at that. She looked between the two. If the Sphere was shattered, then all this was for nothing.

Ascot nodded. Below, the great mass of demons lurched forward. On the ground and in the air. A great number of transports,

fighters, and floating missile cruisers rumbled into the sky. A whole legion of the circular net traps buzzed ahead of the group. There were none of the massive beast transports. They had been sabotaged and attacked as a part of the Dahhak revolution efforts.

The platform on which they stood was a floating command center. It was outfitted with several automatic and manual defenses. Ungeo still felt terribly exposed. It moved behind the mass, barely squeezing between the buildings. On both sides above floated the enormous artillery guns that could fire shells a quarter of Cibola's width. None of them were ready yet, and each crawled with workers frantically cleaning and welding, removing and replacing panels on the side. They should be placed further back, much further back, but Ungeo knew they couldn't allow them to be placed in the unprotected rear.

There would be no quick end to this battle, even if the angels had all the perisceptors. The moment the light was fired, ten square blocks around it would be destroyed by the artillery.

Her wrists were unbound and a large radio was shoved into her hands. It was on a known Dahhak frequency, and it should work the Kostchtchie communications officer explained, but no one was currently answering.

"This is Ungeo G'sslom," she called into the radio. She spoke in Dahhak.

Far to her left, one of the massive artillery tanks suddenly roared to life. The barrel belched fire that laced into the air like the tongue of a dragon. "Please," she called again into the radio. "Answer."

---

Far below and forward, Ko rode on a black transport skiff racing toward the new angel menace. He was tired and bruised from the endless fighting. He was in a constant state of near-drowning from the rain. No strength was left for this conflict, but he would find the energy somehow. He'd assembled a loose squadron of orphaned Footies, none of whom with a surviving officer.



A Marid from the adjacent skiff leaned over the rail waving at him. Ko eyed him warily. All Marid looked the same, so there was no way to know if it was one he knew.

It jumped from the skiff and zoomed over to Ko's. Ko had to reach out and pull the shadowy demon in.

"It's Tua," he said.

"Tua?" Ko cried, clasping the Marid on the shoulder. He was of his original Footie platoon. "How are you alive? I thought I was the only one!"

"My gun was blasted out of my hands, and I was surrounded. So I played dead. I regrouped with a Marid unit of career soldiers. I'm one of them now."

Ko told him his tale of fleeing with Tix and the captain and of both of their deaths. And of the constant, wild skirmishes that had followed. Even coming to meet up with this group to deal with the angels, he had to fight off Dahhak, Asag, and Overseer attacks.

"I gotta tell you something," Tua said. "It's about that Charun of yours. She's been captured. And she's here."



## TAMAEEL - UNGEO - KO

THEY FLOATED above the sealed doorway to the room of the Sphere. The trip via the aorta was instantaneous, but they still had to come down from the aorta complex in the Cherubim sector to the room above the Sphere. It had taken several hours, and every passing second was absolute torture to Tamael. She expected the darkness to sweep up at her at any moment.

Tamael looked at Indigo, waiting for orders. It had taken some time to mentally allow herself to think of the cicatrix bearer as her superior, but the Principalities immediately submitted to her. And even Frish acted differently around her now. Iopol remained outright hostile.

"We blast our way through like before," Indigo said. "I wash the room in light, and we rush forward and do the same to those below."

From underneath came a massive crashing. Beneath their feet, the floor buckled. *Oh no*, Tamael thought, waiting for the black to sweep over her. *Yehppael*.

"One of the columns has fallen," Indigo said after a moment. "Let's do this."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Iopol muttered as he aimed his weapon at the door. They couldn't blast their ways through the floor like they did at the human levels—they were much thicker here—so they focused on the sealed door. They blasted the door. The entire door flew away, falling below.

Tamael rushed in first, firing along the side of the Sphere, careful not to hit it. The surprised Dahhak, who had been defending the Sphere, turned to face the angels but were cut down immediately by the sweeping light of Indigo, who was in the arms of Frish.

"*Forward*," Tamael yelled.

The room was in terrible shape. All three remaining pillars were damaged. The fourth had fallen inward against the black orb. Marble and dust littered the floor along with dozens of dead Dahhak. The orb itself had a single crack about twice the length of an angel running along the side. Maybe more as they were hard to see against the black.

Where the lower door had once been was now a gaping wound. A Pazuzu burst up through the entrance, and Tamael fired at it, knocking it back down, but not before it hit one of the three columns.

Indigo and Frish dove down toward the hole while the others directed their fire at the entrance.

It was over only a moment later. Frish placed Indigo gently on the ground. Both were covered with black soot.

"The room below was filled with 'em, but they weren't expecting us," Indigo said, wiping soot from her cheek and forehead. She was out of breath. "They'll be back. I can't keep this light on forever like Hitomi can."

Two of the pillars looked as if they could snap and tumble at any moment. Tamael shook her head. "They may not need to return if we don't do something about this."

Indigo surveyed the damage. Her eyes widened as if she was finally noticing how perilous their situation was. A large section of one of three remaining pillars cracked off, crashing to the floor below. "Holy crap," she said.

"I'm not sure what that means, but yes, holy crap indeed," Tamael said.

---

"Who is this?" crackled the radio.

Ungeo jumped at the sound. "Hello," she called, speaking Dahhak. "This is Ungeo G'sslom. With whom am I speaking?"

"Ungeo, this is Trukkac. We feared your death."

"I need to speak to the prelate immediately." She told Trukkac her situation, leaving nothing out. She told him what she wanted to

ask.

On the other end, Trukkac sighed. "Lothe was just in there trying to convince him the same. I agree, but the prelate insists Moloch himself wants this. Nonetheless, I will attempt to patch you through."

A moment later, "Moloch be praised! Ungeo is alive."

"Your Excellency!" She began to tell the Dahhak prelate of their perilous situation, and of how all may be lost if they didn't aid the loyalists.

Afterward, there was a terrible silence that lasted so long Ungeo feared she had been disconnected.

"Perhaps it is a test," the prelate said finally. "The *Decretal* speaks of several instances where Moloch has deliberately misled followers to test them. Perhaps this is one." He sighed heavily. "Allow me to speak with the Nidhogg."

Ungeo's heart leaped. There was still hope. "Of course. Just a moment."

---

Somewhere along the past few hours, Ko had picked up a Geyrun-sized waist holster and personal hand weapon to supplement his hand cannon. He found it extremely useful when he had to deal with an enemy up close.

Ungeo was in mid-turn when he shot her. She had a radio in her large claw, and it hit the ground and shattered. Along with the remnants of her hand and forearm.

He'd lost his identity as a Geyrun. It was her fault. All her fault. Ko thought of Qulp and Booja, and he knew neither would recognize him now. Because of her. A great fury boiled within, magnifying his already glowing hate.

He thought of Tix and the captain and all those friends he'd made in the short time he'd been a Footie. Gone. Of the great peace that had almost been. Of the dreams of so many, lost at the designs of this Charun.

Ko tried to imagine his greatest dream, coming home and picking Qulp up and placing the boy on his knee. Of telling him of the great war and how he had fought bravely. Of how his boy could now grow old because he was safe and free.

The hours of endless fighting had made him realize this was never going to happen. There would never be peace. Only war, pain, and death.

Ungeo G'ssлом was a living, breathing manifestation of everything that was wrong with the Dominion. But not for much longer.

Ko stepped off the personal transport he had commandeered and onto the command platform.

He walked toward the wretched Charun, who was on her knees, clutching the stump of her arm as the blood freely pumped.

"Stand down," roared a Pazuzu commander. A dozen guns trained on him. He reluctantly lowered his weapon, sticking it in the holster. He desperately looked about, seeking a way to kill her.

"No," cried the cowardly Charun, staring with disbelief at the charred pieces of her hand. "Moloch help me, what did you do?"

"What's going on here?" It was Uzkiev, coming from behind a gunner battery. The Nidhogg paused when he saw Ko and Ungeo. "You have a difficult time following orders, Geyrun. Why aren't you with your platoon?"

"They're all dead."

"No," Ungeo repeated. "He was asking to speak to you."

"This Charun is a prisoner under my care. To attack her is a direct assault on me."

"Please step aside."

"I understand your feud with this Molochite, yesss, but this time apologies will no longer do."

"Let me kill her."

"No," Uzkiev said. Ascot buzzed forward, landing on the snake's shoulder.

"Please," the filthy Charun cried, "We must find another radio. They will come. They will."

All around them, the artillery suddenly roared to life, filling the air with fire. The platform pitched, skewing everyone. Behind, a transport's forward landing gear buckled, causing the whole thing to crash down and ignite.

Ko had never met his father. He thought of him now. He wished he'd known him. He'd been killed by his master Overseer doing his job, a personal assistant. Ko had lived as one, but now he was about to die as a soldier. He prayed for Qulp, too, that if he ever had to live as a soldier, he would die knowing peace.

Ko was many things. Blundering, awkward with words, prone to terrible mistakes. But surviving as the Overseer's personal assistant—the same Overseer who cracked walls regularly with his fist and caved in floors with a stomped foot—he learned one thing: to remain sure-footed at all times.

All around him the others stumbled. Even Uzkiev who constantly floated rather than stood reeled at the sudden sway of the platform. Ko raised his half arm, aiming the giant weapon directly at the wide-eyed Charun. Smoke and fire erupted as he fired point blank.

The Pazuzu guards, also sure-footed, fired at Ko from multiple directions at once, filling his body with a consuming fire that seemed almost welcome to him.

And then there was a peace like he had never known. Finally, a great peace.





## HITOMI - DAVE

"I'M WORRIED ABOUT RICO," Hitomi said to Gramm as she helped slide an angel out of a locking mechanism. The angels were surprisingly light.

"Thank you," the angel whispered. But before she could get the hand spike out, the angel gasped and burned away to sand. That was the third time that had happened in the last few minutes. She moved to the next one.

A group of several hundred demons had attacked about ten minutes before, but they were overwhelmed and ripped to shreds by the weaponless angels before Hitomi could finish them off with the light. The number of free angels grew by the moment. With the discovery of a guards' shack filled with weapons and hand-held welders like the one Dave once had, the number of freed angels went up exponentially.

"I am too," Gramm answered. "Maybe I should go back to find him."

"No. Not yet."

The moans of pain were replaced with cheers, a roar not unlike the rain, and Hitomi had removed the cumbersome helmet long ago. Many of the humans were permanently deafened, especially those who had been here for some time. But for some, their hearing had already returned. Many sulked away back into the city, but an equal number remained to help.

A thousand free turned to ten thousand. Then a hundred thousand, and then to great numbers beyond.

"Hitomi!" called a familiar voice. She turned to see Polsh rushing her. She suppressed a sob as she rushed up and hugged the engineer angel. She had last seen him just before they were captured.

"I thought you were dead!" she cried.

"When they described our savior, I knew it was you," the large angel said, rain cascading off his head and face. He wept openly. "I knew it was you."

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Except Verdan. He plunged a knife into his own chest rather than allow himself to be captured." He spit.

She wanted to simultaneously laugh and cry at that.

Floating behind Polsh was another angel, a female covered with bruises and wearing ripped remnants of robes. Her hands were quivering. "This is Vuriel," Polsh said. "She has something to tell both of you."

The angel swept forward. Her voice quavered when she spoke. "I was part of a team searching for your friend Dave in the northern wilderness when we were set upon."

"Dave?" Gramm said. "I thought he was with Indigo. Rico said they had made it to the Tower."

"Yes, your Indigo is in the Tower. There is something we need to do with the perisceptors you carry."

"We only have two," Gramm said.

"We knew you didn't carry all of them. We weren't even certain you two were still alive. Each perisceptor has a tracer within it. We were given the frequencies of each, and we were given the task to collect them. I don't know their progress in finding them. We are to be given a sign, and then you must shine the perisceptors upon the Tower. All of them at once. It will kill the demons."

"The Tower?" Hitomi said. "From here?"

"This isn't close enough," she said. "They say you have to be within ten sections. We're about eleven and a half away."

"Close," Gramm whispered.

"But we don't know if someone has the other ones," Hitomi said.

"I suspect we will learn one way or another," Polsh answered.

"When do we do it?" Gramm asked.

"I don't know," Vuriel said. "Soon. There's to be a sign. It can come at any moment."

"I can move us in, but I need a picture in my head. I don't yet know how to do it otherwise. The only places I can think of are too far away," Gramm said.

"We'll take a transport," Polish said. We'll fill it with the most able-bodied angels and bring you within range. We'll find a place to hide until the time comes."

"Okay," Hitomi said. "But first..." She trailed off. Rico suddenly appeared about twenty feet away, but he was bent over, gasping for breath. "Rico!" she cried, rushing forward. "Rico's hurt!"

They ran up to him. Hitomi grabbed his arm, pulling him from the mud. He was barely recognizable. His skin and clothes were covered with char, like he had been burned. A wild look ran rampant in his eyes.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Gramm asked.

"Give me the perisceptor," Rico said to Gramm.

"We can't," Hitomi said. "We need them."

"Give it to me right now," he cried.

Gramm backed away. "What's wrong with you? What happened?"

Rico jumped forward, wrestling with Gramm. "Stop!" Hitomi cried. Then they both disappeared, just like that. Around them, the people gasped.

---

The rain washed across Dave's face. The water was hot, almost burning, and each drop pounded against him like it was hail, threatening to pummel him to the ground. He stood upon a tall building, staring off into the distance. Into the horde.

An angel standing near him mentioned this was once a neighborhood filled mainly with Hashmallim. Most of the buildings were colorless and slender, clutched tightly together, no two the same height. Only a few had flat roofs like the one he was upon now. The rest were pointed, curved, jagged. The landscape of a nightmare.

It was here where the main battle would take place. All around him the angels formed, an impossible number. They spread for miles upon miles to his left and to his right and high, high above. Everywhere, a giant living thing. A living wall. They were the fists of heaven. Battered, bruised, and weakened. But this time not taken by surprise, not naïve. And they were clenched, ready to pound.

The banished angels who chose to fight alongside their brothers and sisters were offered guns, but many preferred to use their swords and spears. They had left this world before human technology could inspire the creation of the engineering guilds. And like many of the older angels, they shunned what they didn't understand.

They were going to change their minds fast, Dave thought sadly.

"Look," someone said. "The Cherubim change form."

A large group of angels near the front grew, their robes ripping from their body. Dave stared as the angels grew two additional heads, transforming into lions the size of whales. Their manes were blue fire and their wings were the width of airliners. Zydkiel, the scarred angel who he'd met at the cliff was one of them.

In each hand Dave carried a perisceptor. Actually he had five of them, but two were attached to each other in one hand and three in the other. Tamael said that wouldn't matter, even suggested trying to do that over her long message.

It didn't take him long to realize that these five periscopes had been Hitomi and Gramm's. The thought tortured him, but he didn't have the luxury of mourning just yet.

He looked around, trying to grasp the number of angels around him. They had been scattered and hiding, mostly in groups of 500 or less, rarely fighting and more concerned with survival. The idea of once again rising up and regaining the city had been lost long ago.

But the radio message had energized them. Most had radios, and they had begun to find each other. As Dave and the banished angels pressed through the woods and toward the city, their numbers swelled. Any anger or resentment the angels had for their banished brothers was swallowed. One assembly, hidden deep in the forest had been meticulously planning one last final assault, but

everything had been pushed up because of this. They swept forward once the rain began, tracking and retrieving five of the perisceptors. They had been hidden away in a Wuj-controlled facility, locked and guarded.

Word came that the demons were dealing with a revolution of their own, and it was decided they could wait and organize no longer.

They only had to push about ten miles forward, then they'd be within ten sections of the Tower. So close. They would have to fight for every inch now, and hold their position however long it took.

These angels were out of practice, poorly armed, and without central leadership, but they were determined and angry, and they were fighting for their own land.

There were still two unaccounted for perisceptors, likely the ones Rico had held when he'd been taken. A wing of angels had sneaked behind the demon lines and was attempting to get to them. It appeared they were deep in a building outside of where the demons were known to occupy. Dave prayed Rico was alive by some miracle, and that he had learned how to use them. If not, the angels who recovered the two perisceptors would desperately seek out humans, trying to find someone like Hitomi.

The artillery began to pound a few miles to Dave's left. Buildings evaporated. All around him, the angels roared. They charged, thundering away into the storm.

He was to stay here under the tent, the secondary command area, only using the light as an absolute last resort. If he brought attention to himself, he'd have that artillery raining down on him in seconds.

*Dear God*, he thought as the angels and demons met in the sky.  
*Dear God.*

The two armies clashed, and the resulting thunderclap almost knocked him over. Fire, steel, teeth. He watched through a pair of air binoculars that could see sharply for miles. It rained bodies and blood, and even at this distance, the sound blended in with the rain. Cries of pain, belching cannons, flesh being ripped apart. The skyline was a panorama of death.

The ground crawled with demons too, ripping through the streets on broad, floating boats equipped with flame-throwers and guns. A line of buildings exploded, showering rocks on the boats, sending them and their occupants into chaos. The three-headed Cherubim swept down on them, claws raking up four or five at a time.

In certain areas Dave saw the demons were easily dominating the sword-wielding angels. They had round, floating guns that spun flower-shaped patterns of fire into the angels, cutting through them like paper. One of the weapons jammed, and the angels were on it, cutting at it with their swords. But they were picked off by the winged women demons with tails, and the gun was quickly repaired and put back into use.

"This is unbearable," the Power next to him said, also wielding a pair of air binoculars. He commanded this area. The artillery shelling continued. A building only five blocks away rocked with an explosion, shattering the windows all around. "The demons have completely broke through in some areas down the line."

Dave had to look away, beginning to wish he had accepted their offer for a helmet. Below, the streets were an ocean of blood, demon bodies, and dying angels.

The angels began to be pushed back. All around, their gains evaporated as the demons' heavy guns and fighting machines asserted their dominance. The demons were clearly uncomfortable in the rain, but their forward ranks were littered with floating skiffs and platforms upon which they could rest.

"I have to do it," Dave said. "Pick me up and I will strafe them with the light. We'll do it as long as it takes."

He didn't have to request it twice. The Power swept Dave into his arms.

They flew parallel with the advancing demon line. Dave aimed directly at the center, arcing the light. Almost immediately the artillery started raining down near them. They moved fast, zigzagging. The angels began to focus on the platforms where the demons had to rest, blowing several out of the sky. The banished angels picked up dropped weapons, quickly learning how to use them.

But the demons would not push back. It became a stalemate, both sides breaking themselves on each other, even with Dave cutting through them. He could only do it sparingly. It sapped his energy and they had to move after each burst. It became a battle of attrition, one the demons would easily win.

"We have to push forward," Dave said. He thought of Gramm, Hitomi, and Rico. If they were dead, he couldn't allow their deaths to be for nothing. He couldn't.

All around him, angels and demons died.





## GRAMM - DAVE - LEVI

GRAMM HIT THE GROUND HARD. He desperately tried to maintain his clutch onto the perisceptor. He rolled away, hitting a wall. The weapon flew from his hand and landed in a deep red carpet out of reach. They were back in Moloch's apartment. The place looked like it had been torn apart by a squall.

Rico was on the ground a few meters away, breathing and coughing heavily.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Gramm demanded.

Rico began to pick himself up. He lurched for the perisceptor.

"No," cried another voice from the other room. Rico's voice. Weakened, but clearly Rico. Confusion mounted. "It's not me. He's a shapeshifter. Don't let him get away with the perisceptor. Don't."

Gramm didn't have time to think. The wall was covered with knives and swords, and he yanked off a long, black blade and hurled it at the wobbling form of Rico.

Gramm had never thrown a knife before in his life, but it embedded right into the neck of the other form. The Rico thing sank to the floor and fell over, blood spraying. Gramm jumped over, snatched up the perisceptor, and pointed it. He flashed the light at the shapeshifter.

Nothing.

From the other room came a laugh. A horrifying laugh.

"No," Gramm said, the realization of what he'd done hitting him like a train.

Rico rolled over, hand over the wound in his neck. He had already pulled out the knife. The wound tried to heal itself, but the blood still flowed, like water out of a dam.

"Don't let him laugh at me," Rico said, the words gurgled. "I don't want to hear it when I die."

A numbness crept over Gramm. *How stupid can I be?* He rushed into the room, kicked in the door. There it was. The demon. He had a long gash along its black, legless body. The strange women, all of them dead, surrounded him.

"You can't do anything to me," the black demon said. "I am a god. Immortal, and I will be worshipped long after your kind has been forgotten." He began to laugh.

Gramm raised the periscope and removed the demon from life. He rushed back to Rico, falling to his knees, sobs wracking his very soul.

"What did I do?" Gramm said. "What did I do?"

Rico wasn't dead. Not yet. There was an impossible amount of blood.

Rico spoke, the words distant. "I thought I was dead, but the girls saved me. They attacked him, but he killed them. Then he laughed at me, so I stuck a spear in his side. 'That didn't kill your god,' he said. 'It won't kill me.'"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Gramm said. He put his hand against the horrific wound on Rico's neck. The blood kept coming.

"It's not your fault, brother. No sweat." He coughed up blood. A terrible numbness overwhelmed Gramm. He couldn't feel his arms or legs. He wished for his own death.

"Gramm," Rico asked. "Was I wrong? About the angels?"

"They're just like us," Gramm said. "Some are good. Some aren't."

"Do you remember what that guy in the woods said to me? They guy with the guitar thing. He said I had an important role. That makes me feel good. Do you think I did something important?"

"Yes I do, Rico."

"I... I hope so."

"You have to stay with me."

"It was a good throw. It took me a long time to be able to do that."

"Stay with me."

"I can't." He closed his eyes, and he died. For the second time in Rico's existence, he died.

Part of Gramm died, too. He placed a hand on Rico's warm cheek, tears streaming down his face. How could anyone live after making such a terrible mistake? He picked up the knife. He clutched it in his hand.

---

"What is that noise?" Dave asked, looking over his shoulder.

A massive cry rose from the east. Shadowed against the clouds a stain spread across the sky. The sight terrified him. He pulled the periscopes to his chest, his breaths coming in gasps.

"We're being flanked!" cried the Power. "I need immediate relief to the east!"

"Shit," Dave said.

They had been pushing back and forth for what seemed like hours, neither side gaining ground without losing it again almost immediately. The first several stories of the buildings below were buried in blood-soaked demon bodies. The fighting grew in intensity, both sides overwhelmed with the constant shifts.

"They're angels!" came the cry.

"Angels? From where? There are so many!" the Power said into his radio. He listened intently. He looked at Dave.

"They say three of your friends assaulted the angel prison camps and freed them all. Two males and a female, armed with periscopes."

It was the best thing Dave had ever heard.

Above, the angels swept down on the demons, carving them away like a scythe on grass. Like a wave on a campfire. Like light on darkness.

---

The building was a raised turret just inside the main gate. There were two of them, and he could assault either. He chose the

easternmost tower because it held the least amount of damage. Plus, the demons were congregated closer to the other one.

Levi hid within a crashed Human Jumper just a short flight away. He worriedly watched the rain wash down on another wrecked jumper nearby. If the explosives got too wet... No. He wouldn't let himself think like that. He'd covered them properly.

The human skeletons stared at him. He welcomed their scorn.

The main gate was once beautiful, and it dismayed Levi to see it like it was now. The great arch once spread high into the red sky, covered with flowers and vines, and an immense garden grew in front of it. Towering statues of Cibola's architects stood looking over the entrance, both pointing to another sculpture within, an empty throne. A pond filled with thousands of multi-colored fish surrounding it.

All that was gone now. The plants were dead, the pool drained. The statues and throne smashed and burned. The white of the arch blackened with war.

When Levi had scouted the gate earlier, there were only three guards, all Pazuzu. Now there were twenty, all Dahhak except for one. A hulking, three-legged Asag, a living hill with a gun the size of a Foray cannon.

It was time.

Levi had invented and designed over a thousand devices in his lifetime, and every single one of them was a failure. None accomplished their main goal: to serve and defend the citizens of Cibola. To better their lives. He thought of that now as he held the remote and flipped the switch, praying he'd get it right at least this once.

To his left, the wreckage exploded in a great fireball. Heat washed across his face. Then another explosion followed from another wreck further down.

The demons immediately burst into the air, brandishing their weapons. All rushed forward except the Asag, who raised its massive weapon, searching the sky for the unseen threat.

The Dahhak descended upon the burning wreckage. When they were close enough, Levi flipped the third switch to trigger the big

one, the one to finish them off.

*Click.* Nothing.

"Son of a demon," he growled, grabbing his makeshift rocket launcher. He jumped up out of a jagged hole in the jumper, aiming at the red-painted rock. He fired and leaped back down, covering his head.

The detonation was more powerful than he anticipated. His hiding place rocked and crumpled, throwing him over onto his side. His arm crunched painfully against the toothed metal wall. He burst into the sky just before the jumper exploded from the Asag's cannon. He flew at his top speed toward the turret, crisscrossing as the Asag filled the air with flak. Almost directly above the gate and Asag, he pulled the strap on his backpack, releasing the 120 bomblets on the giant beast below.

The monster unleashed one last blast as death rained upon him.

The shot knocked Levi from the sky. He nose-dived, hitting the hard-packed ground hard. His consciousness threatened to flee, but he fought the darkness with everything he had. He looked down with horror to see his legs mangled and bloodied. The pain came then, and he could do nothing but scream.

The door was right there, and he pulled himself toward it. All around came the shouts of demons, coming to investigate the explosions. He had to get himself inside. He tried to raise himself, but his wings just didn't work. Then he was at the wooden door, pulling it open. From behind came a distant shout, and a rifle blast ricocheted off the wall to his left.

Inside, he slammed the door. Taking a deep breath, he tried his wings again. He floated slowly up, the pain excruciating. Up and up he went, all the way to the top.

They began firing on the turret, explosions threatening to topple the entire building. Blood freely flowed from his legs.

These were mortal wounds. Levi knew it.

He went through the narrow hole at the top, coming into the room of the shofar. The massive horn twisted around the chamber, made of a strange ivory-like material that was unknown to him, and it was carved with the image of the forest. The bell of the horn rose

vertically into the air cresting like a flower, wide as the turret itself. The body snaked and snaked until the single mouthpiece at the very center of the room.

Tamael's message had been clear: the shofar had to be sounded. It was the only way to manually open the mouth of the Tower. It would be the sign to allow the others to know when to shine their light.

Levi prayed for strength, and it was given.

With one hand he grasped onto the receiver, pursing his lips. With everything he had left, as the building and his own life crumbled all around him, he leaned forward.

Redemption, too, came at that moment for Levi. For he died with the sound of the shofar ringing in his ears.

---

While the horn itself was almost deafening to the demons advancing upon the crumbling tower, it was the frequency, not the volume, that caused the sound to resonate deep into the ground, to cause the very ice to hum and amplify the call, to make the sound rise high and above everything, filling every corner of the angel world with the full, rich call.

---

High above Cibola, at the very top of the mighty Tower, the mouth yawned.



INDIGO - HITOMI - GRAMM - UNGEO - DAVE -  
TAMAEEL - THE END

FAR, far below, Indigo desperately tried to find a way to save the Sphere. They wound the columns with the fabric from the massive curtains from the room. They didn't help. Tamael was underneath the Sphere, her hand holding it. It was light as a bubble she said, but she didn't know if it would stay when the pillar fell. And even if it did, Indigo knew the angel wouldn't be able to hold it forever.

The blare of the shofar resounded throughout the Tower. Everyone stopped and looked at Indigo. She had the five perisceptors put together in a long staff. She clutched the long weapon, her heart thrashing. She pointed at the exterior wall and fired. Immediately, she felt a strange sensation in her stomach, and the light locked itself on, unable to turn off.

*My friends, she prayed. Please be ready.*

---

Hitomi and Polsh stood atop a massive dome. Once, the building had been used for athletic competitions. Hitomi's heart was heavy with worry for Dave, Gramm, and Rico. She didn't know where they were and if they had the perisceptors. After all the angels had been freed from the camps, she and Polsh had decided they could wait no longer and stole a demon transport. They rode unhindered until they found this place.

The horn echoed.

"There," Polsh said, pointing southeast. "That should be about right."



With the single perisceptor she had, she fired. Her arm stiffened, and the light became a solid thing, like she was suddenly pulling on a rope.

"I think I have it," she said.

---

"Are we close enough?" Dave asked. The battle continued to rage, and the demons were falling back fast. Some in full retreat. The shofar blast sent the angels into a frenzy, pressing twice as hard.

"Yes," came the answer.

He raised both weapons and fired.

---

Gramm was on his knees, staring at the knife when he heard the shofar. He ignored it. He was thinking of his own death. Of dying alone. He didn't want that to happen to him again.

"Rico," he whispered again. "Forgive me."

The horn blast ceased, echoing. Finally, he wondered about it. Then he remembered, jumping up, grabbing the perisceptor. Was he close enough? He didn't know, and there were no windows here.

He rushed into Moloch's room. The dead demon was completely gone, but the women remained. Rico said they had saved him, and they died because of it. "I'm sorry," he said to them, too.

Gramm searched the wall of screens for the right image. He looked and looked, desperation rising. Most of the screens—cameras somehow installed within the eyes of human slaves—were gone. White noise. Time was running out. Then he saw it. Someone wasn't too far from the Tower, looking at it. Beams of light came at it from two different directions, and the whole thing glowed. Gramm put the image in his head and went there.

He landed on a balcony of a building a few blocks from the Tower, knocking over a woman who shrieked and ran off. It smelled

of incense here. Demons floated all around, Dahhak, but all of them had their attention on the Tower.

He raised the perisceptor, first at them, then the Tower.

---

The blast from the idiot Geyrun's weapon knocked Ungeo down, scorched her body to the edge of oblivion, but it didn't kill her. Someone was wrapping up her hand wound. He was too close, Ungeo thought miserably as they picked her up. Everyone knew those hand cannons decreased their firepower the closer the target was to the barrel. He should've used the other weapon he had. The gun he had used to blow off her hand.

"Poor Ko," Uzkiev said sadly as a Pazuzu rolled his fat, dead body off the platform and to the city street below.

"Poor Ko?" Ungeo raged. "The prelate was asking to speak with you! And look at my hand!"

The Nidhogg and Mite ignored her. The Mite ordered the artillery guns moved back while the Nidhogg continued to peer over the edge.

"Ahh, even in the end, he had the best intentions."

"He just ruined any chance we have."

Uzkiev looked up at that. "He gave his own life because he considers our current situation your fault, yesss. He thought he was fixing it. Making peace."

"Peace? He had a poor way of showing it."

"The angels rush," a mid-commander said.

Ungeo watched in silence as the battle ensued. Her hand burned with phantom pains. The angels fought like never before. Their numbers were staggering. She didn't know why they hadn't done this earlier if they had so many. Perhaps they just needed the opportunity. An opportunity presented to them by the Molochite revolution.

Ko was right. Her fault. *But no*, she thought as she looked upon the Nidhogg and Mite watching the defeat unfold with grim faces.

"Tell me something," Ungeo said to the pair when the new angels came, finally causing their lines to buckle like bones. "Was this worth it? To rid your worlds of the humans?"

The Mite looked at her. He opened his mouth, as if to object, but then he smiled sadly. "No," he said. "We sought distraction and openings in the council, and destruction of the Sphere, but never this. When I took over leadership of Broken Fist I promised the elimination of the human cancer from our worlds and our lives, but this price is too high."

"Your Ko," Ungeo said to them. "He was so close to you both. He could have killed you at any time, and he never knew. He could have killed you both and prevented this. He would have had his peace then."

Uzkiev nodded. "Poor Ko."

The Mite snapped his fingers, ordering the guards to undo her wing bindings. "Go," he said. "Leave this world. Go to your people, and make peace."

"But..." she said.

"Go," the Mite said. "Go before I change my mind."

Ungeo fled the terrible battle, taking the personal air transport Ko had left moored to the side of the command platform.

She really had no intention upon returning to her world. Without an ether gully, the trip by wing would take a long, long time. As a Charun, she could navigate the ether and survive, but she wasn't fully sure of the way, and she still had much to do here. Much to contribute.

But then the light came.

It wasn't like a flash of a perisceptor. More like being placed in a pot of water just as the fire was lit. All around the air and the light changed. Instantly the clouds began to disperse. From high above came the shining of a light. A burning light that would soon become unbearable.

"We have lost," she said to the sky. She didn't know how, but the light of heaven had returned, and it was reclaiming what it had lost.

By the time she reached the ether, her skin was burned. Any possible transports were already gone. All around, demons—

Molochite and others alike—dove headlong into the murk. A great exodus. All of them would die. All except for her. She jumped into the thirsty black, swimming past the demons as they drowned.

As Ungeo fell into the darkness, she thought of Ravi and the Dahhak queens. No matter where they were, they wouldn't be safe. And Ravi. So eager to grow up and be a full-grown Dahhak. Burned away. She would never know, she realized. Such things were the terrible price of their path. The mothers and the children nothing but fodder for the still-starving beast.

Later, *much* later, as she finally approached the great, rocky plateaus of her own world, a place she never thought she would again see, she came across a male Charun aimlessly wandering the immense nothing. She spread her wings out before him, allowing the brilliant colors hidden within to shine.

He turned his back, and Ungeo G'sslom knew he was afraid. That excited her in a way like she had never known, and she rushed him, raking her talons down his back, freeing his blood. She hunched forward, licking it up.

His wings bristled, and she knew she had him. The mating frenzy overtook him quickly, and it was he who grabbed her good hand and led her home. Finally home.

---

The demons who attempted to stay and brave the light burned. They screamed together, a single voice rising high above the city like music. Dave finally let go of the perisceptors, and they stayed right there, floating.

As the voice of the last demon faded, the angels began to sing. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. But sad. A requiem for their brothers and sisters, so many gone.

“All are coming to the Tower,” an angel said to him. A Cherub. Zydkiel, still in the form of the massive three-headed lion with a scar upon its center face. “It would honor me greatly if it was I who could bear you.”

The song rose high.

"No," Dave said. "I would like you to take me north. To just beyond the edge of the city, right where the forest begins."

---

Angels scattered as the second pillar fell, shattering against the ground into thousands of smaller pieces and dust. Tamael closed her eyes and prayed. The Sphere became heavier in her hand, but it didn't skew. Though she sensed if she moved, it would go reeling.

To her horror, the fall of the second column weakened both the third and fourth great edifices, and just moments later they both fell as well, crashing around her like the very sky was falling.

Tamael stood frozen. She couldn't stop thinking of Yehppael, literally in her hands. If she moved now, if this giant orb, hundreds of times bigger than her, somehow slipped and shattered, he would die. And the darkness would still sweep out over everything, forever killing the angels who had fought so hard and so long for the victory they now savored.

Indigo was here, as was Gramm who came rushing in not long afterward. They embraced, but Gramm soon fell to his knees, weeping as Indigo consoled him. They re-established radio contact with all corners of the city, and she heard Hitomi was also alive and was being brought in. Polish lived, too.

"What do I do?" Tamael cried now.

"I thank you," said a voice, suddenly beside her, up against her, hand also holding up the Sphere. "I have been holding this Sphere for a terribly long time, and I welcome the respite." The words were strange and forced. They were spoken slowly like the speaker had a great difficulty getting it out.

"Yes, you may let go now. And Indigo is about to explain who I am."

"Who are you?"

"It's okay," Indigo said to Tamael. "Let go."

Gently, Tamael lowered her hand, turning to look at the strange creature standing before her, holding up the massive orb. His ratted gray hair crawled about a pair of horns that dominated his aged, emaciated face.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"It's the Unraveler," Indigo said.

"I will let go not," he said. "Patience."

"But... who... what are you? Are you an angel?"

The Unraveler looked at Gramm. A teardrop jumped from the floor, crawled up the creature's leathered face, and went into its eye.

To Gramm, he said, "The pain you feel right now will never go away. The great expanse of time that stretches before you now will dull some of it, but it will never heal. You must learn to use it as a tool. Like a torch to light your way. Never forget your friend. Honor his memory in the long road ahead."

He said that more easily, as if he had practiced it for a long time. The Unraveler nodded. "I know."

"I know who you are," Gramm said.

"Soon only you, Gramm, will remain. Even after this Orb I hold shatters, destroying all the human worlds, you will live. And even when this place is gone, still you will survive. When the last acorn falls from the Tree of Eternity, when it withers and dies, you alone will exist. For you are the Navigator, and you will ensure the forward passage of time. When the great collapse comes, you will shoot back, unraveling time's threads as you go. You will be in this room when the Sphere unshatters, and you will hold it until this angel here comes and takes it from you. From there you will help the success of the prophecy, and finally then, and only then, will you rest."

"I can't do it."

"I think you just did," Indigo said. "My god, Gramm." She pulled him into a hug.

Tamael looked back and forth between Gramm and the Unraveler, and she saw it. They were the same. She didn't know why, or how, but it made sense... in an odd way. Angels often openly wondered about the end of time. Gramm, it appeared, would experience it. When time ended, he wouldn't die. He would slingshot

backward through time, coexisting with his forward-moving self until he was given the opportunity to help himself and his friends complete their quest.

It was a gift. And a curse. One only He could bestow.

“For now you will remain unsure,” the Unraveler said to Gramm. “Perhaps it was Him. A dog on a lake, a random bullet, a candle too close to the wall, an accident in the dark. A disease that withers the body away. Perhaps coincidence. But I don't think so. I will know soon.”

Gramm didn't ask the question he was about to, leaving Tamael to wonder what it was.

“Now you will all leave me here. I just savored the last moments of a very peaceful thirty-six earth years, and I don't want it undone.”

They left, leaving the Unraveler alone with the Sphere.

“How long is that? Thirty-six earth years?” Tamael asked Indigo as she carried the human out of the Athenaeum and into the bright, beautiful light of Cibola. She brought her to the ground.

Indigo answered, but it was drowned out in the song of the angels.

Later, Hitomi arrived. She and Indigo embraced, crying in each other's arms.

“Goodbye, Tamael,” Indigo said suddenly, placing a warm hand on the angel's face. She had to shout the words.

“Where are you going?” Tamael asked.

“We'll meet again, but not today.”

The light of Cibola suddenly became brighter, and a strange joy burned in Tamael's chest. Her hands and fingers felt light, and even though she didn't flap her wings, she began to rise into the air. Giddy and scared all at once, she tried to move back down, but she couldn't. All around her, the same happened to the other angels. All of them lost form, turning to great wisps of light, rising into the shivering sky. That darkness within her, that great, devouring darkness was finally gone. Ecstasy wrapped her body, encompassed it. She knew love. She became it.

“You will be reunited,” Indigo called to her as she rose. “With both your father and your love. And you will never again be apart.”

Tamael heard the words, and she knew them to be true. She raised her arms, welcoming the love, welcoming the joy, praying it would never again go away.

---

Gramm stroked the neck of the grand dulcimer. A beautiful angel with raven hair like his mother had given it to him as thanks before she rose off into the sky. She said it had been her only companion as she hid from the demons. Alone for so long it had given her great comfort, and it made the most beautiful music. He thanked her, wondering how long it was until the end of time.

---

She was waiting for him at the edge of the forest.

“The demons are gone,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And it was because of you that they left.”

“No, not just me. I helped I think, but I didn't do it all.”

“We were gods once, you and me.”

“No, not me. You and Zev. We are not the same.”

Vila was silent a long while. “You will stay with me until my pups are born. Then you will return with them to the city. When He returns to take you home, you will bring them with you. They will know you as their father.”

Dave stroked her long, black fur. Even the creatures of the shadows, he realized, sometimes dream.

Vila raised her head and howled, long and hard into the ever-brightening sky.

---



Indigo looked much different from the last time Hitomi had seen her. She looked as strong as ever, but the fear was gone. Peace, Hitomi realized. Whatever the angels were feeling now, Indigo was feeling it, too.

There was something else. It was Indigo's eyes. They blazed with frightening power. Hitomi didn't know much of what had happened between the time they had separated and met here, but Indigo had changed. She'd changed in a way Hitomi knew she could never comprehend. Whatever had been hidden deep within Indigo had found its way to the surface. A tangible aura.

The angels were gone, now stars in the bright, red sky, and people began to emerge and wander the streets. Most looked shell-shocked and afraid. And lost. So lost.

"What now?" Hitomi asked.

"The light of this world will melt the ice. Below, the demon worlds will perish. For us it'll be the equivalent of thirty-six years, but it'll be longer for them. Generations. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it is to give them time. Then the Sphere will crack, and all the worlds will die. Then we, too, will be brought to our new home. We and the demons alike."

"So many have died," Hitomi said. She thought of a beach. A beach that never ended. Every grain of sand, a soul that was lost.

Indigo looked at her sadly. Her very presence was electric. "I have to leave you now, too."

"What? Where are you going?"

Indigo leaned forward and kissed Hitomi's cheek. "They will look to you three to be their leaders. But for now, Gramm needs time to deal with what's before him and the hurt he carries, and Dave won't return for almost a year. Until then, it will be up to you."

"You're leaving *now*?"

"Yes."

Hitomi didn't know what to say. So much had happened. It was like a part of her was being ripped away. Rico's death had been particularly hard, but this was almost worse. Still, as she looked over the people, she felt a great hope for the future, something she'd never had before. A filling of the empty space inside of her.

It felt good. By God, it felt good.

## EPILOGUE

YOUNG QULP LOOKED up into the sky, and there was a great light. Not the thin whips that used to indiscriminately kill, but a glowing of the world above.

“Qulp! Qulp!” his mother cried, rushing out from the cave. She giggled desperately. “Come inside! Come inside right now!”

“Do you see that, mother? The sky is broken.”

“Come inside,” she cried, her voice more frantic. “It can't hurt you if you're inside.”

“It already has,” he said. He thought of his father. His brave father.

“No, not yet,” she said. “Hurry. Please.”

She looked up at the sky then, and she wrung her hands. A tear ran down her face. Qulp had never seen his mother cry.

“Don't cry, mother,” he said, taking her hand. “I'll go inside. I'll be good.”

So into the cave they went, but before they sealed the rock door shut, completely blocking out the light, Qulp looked into the sky one last time, unable to escape the feeling that it was calling to him.

---

Ivan pushed past the strange lady in the lobby and found the nurse. “Please,” he said. “My friend is in labor. She is bleeding in my car.”

The nurses rushed out with him. Marija was in the back, screaming. Blood pooled around her legs and feet. A large nurse bodily pulled her out of the car and onto the chair. They rushed her inside. He quickly followed.

“Marija! Marija!” he called, following her down the sterile hallway. They rushed her into a small room, putting her up on the table.

“You. Out,” the doctor said.

“Please. I must know how she is.”

“Are you the father?” a nurse asked.

"No," Marija called, crying the words. "There is no father."

"You will wait in the lobby," the nurse said to Ivan.

Frustrated, he went out. He lit a cigarette, and the fat nurse behind the desk snapped at him to put it out. That same strange lady was also there, staring at him. She looked like an American. Familiar, too, like he'd seen her once on television. But that couldn't be. No one famous ever came to Samobor, and even if they did, they wouldn't waste time in hospital waiting rooms.

"You are Ivan," the woman said, speaking broken Croatian. "My name is Jessica, and I've been waiting for you."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Who are you? Why do you know my name?"

"You are to raise Marija's daughter like your own. You are to keep her safe, because there will be many who want to harm her."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I'm just her friend. Marija is going to take care of her. Who are you?"

The lady was starting to freak him out. How did she know so much? He'd known Marija since she was a little girl. She was like his sister. Two years ago, when she was only fourteen, her parents had died. Ivan's mother had taken her in. Now that mama was gone, all they had was each other. She refused to tell him who the father was, insisting she was still a virgin. He would kill the guy once he found out who it was. He had been toying with the idea of asking her to marry him. His girlfriend Gojslava wouldn't like it much, but he was sick of her anyway.

"Marija won't be able to take care of her."

"What the hell, lady? What are you talking about?"

Ivan realized he *did* know who this woman was. He'd seen her on television in the weeks after that horrible day a year before. The day when all those people died. She was from the video of the angel in that hospital. It was played over and over again on the news and the internet. People said it was fake, but there were dozens of videos of the angel incident, all from different people and angles. Jessica. That's right. That was her name. She was the mother of that boy from Alaska. The one who had killed himself. She had become a prophet, they said. She had a church with thousands of followers.

That's when the angel appeared. It had to be some sort of trick. It was an overwhelming glowing form with wings like the wind. Ivan's head spun. A trick. It had to be. The desk nurse shrieked and ran away. A strange feeling entered his chest, like all the pain he didn't even know he had was suddenly gone.

The angel spoke, the words like fire. "The end is in thirty-five years, and the girl being born right now is to lead this world to their salvation. There will be many false gods and prophets, and in about twenty-eight years, when the demon worlds evaporate, some will find their way here. All will seek to hurt her."

"I will help you," Jessica said. "And Yehppael here is going to leave me now and stay with you. He will help, too."

Ivan fell to his knees. What was this? He didn't understand. "What about Marija? Where will she be?"

The doctor came out then, shaking his head. Ivan saw the sadness, and he knew. All his life, everyone he'd ever known and loved had died. Why him? Why? In the doctor's hands, he held a small bundle, and he handed it to Ivan.

"She's okay, right doctor? Marija is okay?"

The baby was wiggly and purple, and a trident-shaped birthmark blazed on her cheek. But she was beautiful. The most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

The doctor smiled sadly, putting a heavy hand on his shoulder. Behind him, the angel named Yehppael was gone, but Ivan could feel his invisible presence. The angel offered warmth, and he spoke soothing words in Ivan's head.

*With death comes life.*

THE END

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Absolute Darkness** – The complete, utter absence of light. Only exists within the demon planes; deadly to angels.

**Acolyte** – A student of Moloch, usually a worker in the temple; almost exclusively Dahhak.

**Alli** – Dahhak. Well known for his skill at the Dance of Libation.

**Angel** – 1. Any inhabitant of the nine hierarchical tiers of Heaven's original population. 2. A specific caste, the bottom tier of the nine hierarchical levels (see appendix b.). The largest group by tenfold. The common angel has the appearance of a tall human with phantom-like wings. A common angel can only raise status by becoming a Power.

**Anima Bot** – A holographic computer simulation of an officer in the angel army. They are downloaded with the officer's intelligence and skill and are designed to be used by soldiers in the field for guidance when the real officer cannot be contacted. They are not trusted and used sparingly.

**Archangel** – An angel caste. The second to bottom tier of the nine hierarchical levels (see appendix b.). By sight, there is little difference between a common angel and an archangel. They tend to be more intelligent and very slightly larger. An Archangel can raise status by becoming a Power.

**Arch-Demon** – Any of the various races of intelligent and unusually large demons, the most common of which are the Overseers. The majority of arch-demons do not have wings.

**Arch-Rector** – The leader of the Moloch faith. Lives in the Dahhak realm.

**Arms Officer** – Usually the second highest ranking officer in a Dominion platoon.

**Asag** – An arch-demon race. One of twelve council seats. Large, round, three-legged, three-armed creature with no neck and several eyes covering their entire bulk. Has dark, hardened skin that feels like rock when touched. Almost indestructible. Often work as security, handlers, jailers, foot soldiers, or construction. Anything that requires great strength.

**Ascot** – A Mite. Personal assistant to Uzkiev.

**Ashia** – A Virtue.

**Athenaeum** – Great Library in the city of Cibola. Occupies the lower floors of the Tower. The Sphere is located within.

**Baka** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. They appear to be small, skittish crane-like birds. Fiercely intelligent. Said to be the first to suggest the formation of the Dominion.

**Beacon** – One of millions of pyramids located near the ether pool, designed to summon the souls of humans as they die within the Sphere.

**Blood Anger** – State of disfavor upon a Dahhak clan by the god, Moloch. Usually caused by some form of sacrilege. Individual members are punished until the proper rites are performed.

**Booja** – A female Geyrun who lives on an Overseer-controlled world. A slave. Mother of Qulp.

**Book of Ancestors** – A book located in a Dahhak family's clan temple. Every member of the clan has a page dedicated to him, unless he shames the clan somehow. Then it is burned. A clan's greatness is measured by the thickness of the book.

**Broken Fist** – An elusive terrorist organization comprised of members of various demon races. Believe dependence upon humans is the downfall of their societies, and actively work against slavery and importing humans. Are known to randomly attack humans, and their ultimate goal is the destruction of the Sphere.

**Burrower** – A hairy, armored, gigantic creature with six legs. Approximately 500 feet tall. From the Overseer world, used to dig large holes quickly. Very difficult to control and handle.

**Cabael** – Angel. Seraph.

**Caduceus** – A hollow wooden wand carried by all rectors and other officials of the Moloch church. Filled with the ground bone of

serpents.

**Camp, the** – A large outdoors prison.

**Carumba** – Dave's pet Siberian Husky

**Catechist, the** – A secretive department of the Dominion military; an elite branch of Flamen. They investigate treasonous acts within the military infrastructure. Consists of an unknown number, but is always referred to as a single entity.

**Charun** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Primarily females, who devour the males upon mating. They resemble large vultures, but have two pairs of rounded wings and powerful, clawed arms. Unmated male Charun are much more intelligent, and often given the task of ferrying souls to and from the Charun underworld.

**Chancellor** – Official title of one who sits upon the Council of Twelve.

**Cherubim** – An angel caste. Second in the first Choir of angel hierarchy, behind only the Seraphim. They are collectors of knowledge. They are the spiritual leaders of Heaven, speaking for the Creator. Said to take two forms, one is that of a common angel, the other a mystery.

**Chider** – A small animal that lives within the forest.

**Children of Moloch** – Creatures, often humans, believed to be brought into existence with the purpose of punishing Dahhak and other Molochites who have evoked Moloch's Blood Anger. The rite of Temple Oblation on one of the Children satisfies the God's anger. Believed to be nothing more than superstition by all those other than Molochites.

**Choir** – One of three sections of the angel hierarchy. The first Choir is headed by the Seraphim, the second Choir is headed by the Hashmallim, and the third Choir is headed by the Principalities.

**Cibola** – The capital metropolis of Heaven.

**Cicatrix** – A scar that appears on the backs of some humans after they have arrived in Heaven. It signifies they had once been angels who had committed suicide in order to live within the Sphere. Bearers of the cicatrix are unwelcome and considered outcasts by most angels.

**Clan** – A Dahhak family. Some of the larger ones number in the millions.

**Council of Twelve** – The leading organization of the Dominion. It consists of one leader from each of the thirteen nations of demons, minus the Overseers. They are seen by no one other than the Overseers and their battalion of envoys.

**Critical Action Message** – An important message sent via radio to angel officers by the higher ranks.

**Cytusa** – Gorgon. Member of Footie platoon.

**Dahhak** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. They look very much like winged humans, but taller and thinner. They have dark, angular features and their wings consist of a thin membrane stretched between long bones. The most common demon in the Cibola area.

**Daityas** – An arch-demon race. One of twelve council seats. Giants with long, adroit fingers. Can breathe underwater and are impervious to any temperature change. Very skilled in the way of mechanics and machinery.

**Dance of Libation** – A rite of Molochism. A game that is performed between two to six players in which the winner is declared to be in Moloch's favor. The losers are sacrificed.

**Dave** – Human. One of the five, from Alaska.

**Decretal, the** – The bible of Molochism.

**Denude** – A process in which a slave, often a human, is drained of all personality and free will. Permanent.

**Derkea** – Angel. Seraph.

**Dominion** – The Demon army. A conglomeration of thirteen nations of demons, allied to make war on Heaven.

**Dreg** – A Shishi. Arms Officer of a Footie platoon in the Dominion military.

**Drone** – A remotely controlled machine that usually flies and has a military purpose. Some are armed, others are used for surveillance. Usually very small.

**Ether Pool** – An ocean of nothing that surrounds all worlds outside of the Sphere. To the naked eye, it appears like a blue gas. It

ebbs and flows like water. The flow of time becomes erratic the closer one gets to the pool.

**Eyre** – A Sedim.

**Fall, the** – The day of attack on Heaven by the Dominion.

**Fheda of the twelfth age** – A celebrated Dahhak from long ago. Had over 5,000 wins in the Dance of Libation.

**Flamen** – A rank of the Dominion, consisting of members of various races. Flamen act as the “police” of the Dominion, and are in charge of interrogating both angel prisoners and those of the Dominion who have broken certain laws. One branch of the Flamen is the scientific branch, in charge of disseminating angel technology. Another is the Catechist.

**Footie** – A member of a conscript platoon.

**Foray** – A flying machine of war. Designed and used by the angels.

**Frish** – An Angel. A female Power.

**Gadfly** – A beast of the Overseer world. Largest living creature that can take flight.

**Gaeb** – A Cherub. Worked in the very bottom floor of the Athenaeum.

**Geyrun** – An arch-demon race. Similar to the Overseers, but not as large and without the pleasure nodes. Once an important power, but their world was defeated long ago by the Overseers and they were enslaved. Often work as handlers or assistants. A few have become military commanders.

**Gollop** – A mighty serpent of Dahhak lore who tried to eat eternity. Was stopped by Moloch.

**Gorgon** – A demon race of flightless, hairless humanoid creatures, usually around five and a half feet tall. Their most distinguishing characteristic are the long strands of parasitic worms that take residence in their brain and erupt from the top of their skull like hair.

**Gramm** – Human. One of the five, from Australia.

**Handlers** – Demons in charge of wrangling the large animal creatures of the Overseer world. Can be of any demon species.

**Hashmallim** – An angel caste. Usually appear to be older winged humans. Leaders of the second Choir. They are single souls split into two forms with independent will. Harming one of the halves injures both. If one dies, they both do.

**Hekka** – A Dahhak soldier, member of the Tempest Dahhak squadron.

**Hitomi** – Human. One of the five, from Japan.

**Humberto** - a human from Rico's hometown.

**Indigo** – Human. One of the five. Arrives with complete amnesia.

**Insurgents** – Remaining hidden pockets of the angel army that still do battle with the occupying forces of the Dominion.

**Iopol** – Angel. A male power.

**Ivan** – Human male from Croatia.

**Jessica** – Dave's mother.

**Jhunayn, Spire of** – A shrine of worship for the angels. Located within Cibola.

**Jullishia** - Angel. An engineer promoted to Power after the Fall.

**Ko** – Geyrun. Personal Assistant to the Overseer in command of the Main Gate sector.

**Kostchtchie** – Demon race. One of twelve council seats. Short, hideous, frog-like demons with wings. Have the ability to crawl upon walls and ceilings with their thin, long fingers. Extremely intelligent. Often find work as surgeons or Flamen.

**Leefa** – Angel. A female Power.

**Levi** – Angel. An engineer promoted to Power after the Fall.

**Libation** – A rite of Molochism that determines how vehement one's faith is.

**Lothe** – Dahhak. Grande-commander in the Dominion military.

**Manuel** - A human from Rico's hometown.

**Mari** – A human from Japan. Hitomi's friend.

**Marid** – A race of demons. One of twelve council seats. Shapeshifters. Their natural form is an all black humanoid with no legs but can fly. No wings. Were once the most powerful of all demons.

**Marija** – Female human from Croatia.

**Maternity Camps** – Large tracts of land, sometimes under a tent, set up so Sedim females may receive medical attention in the birthing process.

**Mayra** - A human from Rico's hometown. Twin sister of Paco.

**Mites** – A demon race. Small, like winged rats, but intelligent. Very common. They attack in deadly swarms.

**Moloch** – The spiritual leader and god of Molochism.

**Molochism** – A demon religion steeped in ceremony and sacrifice. Many followers, mostly Dahhak.

**Mouth of the Tower** – The light at the very top of the Tower. Opens and closes with no apparent purpose.

**Nemat** – An arch-demon race. Rare. Immense, worm-like creatures that need constant nourishment from the blood and fluids of other species in order to survive. Often become Rectors in the temples of Moloch.

**Nidhogg** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Long, winged snakes with powerful forward arms.

**Nigel** – Hitomi's long-distance boyfriend from London.

**Oblation** – see “temple oblation.”

**Ophanim** – An angel caste. Third in the total hierarchy, bottom of the first Choir. Said to have a strange appearance, a giant wheel covered with eyes. Personal attendants of the Creator's will. Rarely seen by even other angels.

**Overseer** – An arch-demon race. Huge, red horned beings that tend to be morbidly obese. They stand at about thirty feet tall. Their nation opted out of a seat on the council in exchange for being in charge of the military, which would allow all Overseers to remain equal with each other. They are all male except for the Queen, who remains on their homeworld.

**Paco** – A human from Rico's hometown. Twin brother of Mayra.

**Padre Montamos** - A human from Rico's hometown. A Catholic priest.

**Pazuzu** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Have long, curved tails like that of a scorpion or manta ray. Winged. They have black skin and are pestilence incarnate.

**Pendant** – One half of a Hashmallim pair.

**Perisceptor** – One of twelve or thirteen fabled weapons that produce True Light. They are devastating to demons, but only some, usually humans, can wield the weapons longer than a moment.

**Plehka** – Dahhak. Well known for his superior skill at the Dance of Libation with seventy-six wins.

**Pneumatic Crab** – A gargantuan lobster-like creature made from energy. Non-intelligent. It lives within the ether and often rests upon the shores of random worlds. They are attracted to beacon antennas.

**Polsh** – An Angel. A male engineer.

**Pooljab** – Dahhak. Grande Commander in the Dominion forces.

**Powers** – An angel caste. The angel military. Sixth in hierarchical order, bottom of the second Choir. Consists of members of the lower angel and archangel castes who have joined the angel military. Both common angels and archangels may become officers, but only archangels may become some of the higher ranks.

**Prelate** – The second highest rank in the church of Molochism. Second only to the Arch-Rector.

**Pri** – The great journey of personal betterment that all Molochites follow. An unattainable goal that is represented by only Moloch himself.

**Principalities** – An angel caste. Head of the third Choir. Principalities deal directly with human issues within Heaven. They report directly to the Virtues.

**Propylaeum** – The first beacon.

**Qulp** – A young Geyrun boy. A slave. Child of Ko and Booja.

**Ravi** – A young Dahhak.

**Razer** – One of the largest and most powerful creatures of war used by the Overseers. Resembles a black, single-eyed porcupine.

**Rector** – Priests within the Temple of Moloch. Can be of any demon race, but are usually Dahhak or Nemat.

**Reeka** – Dahhak soldier. Brother of Hekka. Lesser Commander in the Dominion army.

**Rico** – Human. One of the five, from Mexico.

**Scanner** – A soldier in the Dominion army equipped with a mechanism that can track and locate life-forms from a great



distance.

**Scourge** – A piece in the Dance of Libation that is controlled by the rector.

**Sedim** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Blue skinned and human sized with long, dexterous tails and membrane wings. The males are extremely rare (only one in 1,000,000 pure births are male) and live almost fifty times the length of the females. Females are known for their voracious sexual appetites and have the ability to cross-breed with many other races, though their litters of mongrel children rarely survive. They have an extremely quick gestation period.

**Selaphiel** – Angel. Seraph.

**Seraphim** – An angel caste. The highest ranking angel, and the first angels ever created. They are the leaders of the angel race, and they are the defenders of the Creator. By far the most powerful angels. It is said their true appearance is so bright, they can not be beheld by even the Cherubim. Their numbers are unknown. Some say as few as four while others say they number in the millions.

**Sett** – See Undercity

**Shishi** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Lithe creatures about four feet high. Have wings and the ability to fly long distances very quickly. They have a human form, but have cat-like features including spots or stripes. Often find work as slavers.

**Shoal** – A sub-demon race. Small, weasel-like creatures with a low, primitive intelligence. They prefer to live in the wilderness, away from other demons. The blood of the males is caustic.

**Shofar** – One of two mighty horns that stand in towers in front of the main gate of Cibola.

**Sphere, the** – A large glass dome located within the Athenaeum. Contained inside are the universes of the human worlds.

**Spigger** – A beast of the Overseer world. A round, fleshy, kraken-like creature with long tentacles.

**Stiletto** – A rifle-like weapon used by the angels.

**Sub-Demon** – Any of the various races of demons who usually hold only minor intelligence.

**Tamael** – A Power. Military commander of a group of insurgents hiding in a cave system.

**Teast** – A giant praying-mantis-like monster. From the Overseer world.

**Tempest Dahhak** – Elite Dahhak soldiers with special skills and training.

**Temple Oblation** – Sacrament that must be completed within the confines of a Temple of Moloch. Consists of strapping a victim to a device and draining them of all their fluids.

**Tix** – Shishi. Member of a Footie platoon.

**Tree of Eternity** – Largest living entity in existence. All life can be traced to the tree. First life ever born with True Light.

**Truet** – Angel. Seraph.

**Trukkac** – A Dahhak. The Dahhak representative on the council of twelve.

**True Light** – Matter that is used to create life. The source of it is unknown, but it is deadly to demons who can not exist in the same space as True Light.

**Ulnar** – A Geyrun. A Surgeon's assistant.

**Undercity, Understreets, the** – The home of the humans underneath the city of Cibola.

**Ungeo G'sslom** – Charun. Mid-Commander in the Dominion military.

**Unraveler, the** – A mysterious being that is neither human, angel, nor demon. It lives and travels in a time stream different than everything else, and those who cross paths with him will perceive him to be walking and talking backward at a high speed.

**Uli** - Angel. An engineer promoted to Power after the Fall.

**Uzkiev** – A Nidhogg. Envoy to the Council.

**Verdan** – An angel. A male Power.

**Vila** – A wolf.

**Virtues** – A mysterious angel caste, fifth in the total hierarchy. They are charged with maintaining the heavenly aspects of the Sphere, and they are given the special power of being able to travel within the Sphere's worlds. Look much like other angels, but their whole bodies seem blurred, almost transparent. They can also

appear as young, winged children. They were created the same time as the Sphere.

**Vuriel** – An angel.

**Wuj** – A demon race. One of twelve council seats. Basically a large floating dragon head. Have the ability to see into minds and control lesser creatures through suggestion. Very ineffective in battle against a large number of opponents, but almost imperishable one-on-one. Often find work under the Catechist or as jailers. Other demons are extremely afraid of them.

**Xac** – A Principality.

**Yehppael** – A Power. Second in charge of the group led by Tamael.

**Yvrex G'ssod** – Charun. Grande Commander in the Dominion military.

**Zane** - Angel. An engineer promoted to Power after the Fall.

**Zev** – The King of Wolves.

**Zydkiel** – Angel. Cherub.

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