

SOCIETY IN HELL

Part One

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Custom will reconcile people to any atrocity; and fashion will drive them to acquire any custom.

George Bernard Shaw

Author's Note

Hell, like other places, has its own history. In addition it also possesses an immensely rich and varied culture, partly owing to the fact that the vast majority of people from all regions of the Earth end up there. Yet despite this, very little has been written about the normal everyday existence of the daemons and humans who inhabit it. A glaring omission of course but not an altogether surprising one. As with other far off exotic locales, the mythology of Hell has such a grip on the public imagination that it eclipses all the more mundane realities. That said, my goal here is to write a fictional story which nevertheless maintains a realistic and balanced portrayal of its setting. In doing so I have primarily relied on first-hand accounts and, wherever I've encountered disagreements in matters of substance, I've always been careful to take them into consideration. How successful I've been in this enterprise I leave for my readers to judge – soon enough they'll probably be able to assess my accuracy with personal experience.

Chapter One

He liked torture as much as the next daemon. Well, almost. He did find the screaming rather irritating. Most daemons thought this was one of the best parts but he was odd that way. He didn't care for pleading either. Interfered with his concentration. He preferred a nice thoughtful quiet. The solution though was easy enough – he gagged his assignments. And if he didn't have any rope handy he could always pull a few feet of intestine out of them and use that. He was wonderfully ingenious when it came to those sorts of things.

Asmodeus Lucifer Cambioni was a torturer by profession. Yes, his middle name was really Lucifer, but in Hell that's like having the name Alexander or David. Daemon spawn are named after famous individuals all the time, and for the same reasons. Mr. Cambioni furthermore went by the less formal and magisterial sounding Asmoe in all aspects of his daily life – except when he was paying his taxes. In Hell naturally the taxes are rather high but payment tends to be prompt. This is ensured by a very sensible incentivization program – individuals who don't pay in a timely manner are punished with unspeakable torments. Asmoe Cambioni in fact was now often the one devising and implementing said torments; a civil service he took great pride in. He wasn't a government employee though. Rather, Mr. Cambioni was a torturer third-class who worked for Tsuji Giri Enterprises; a subsidiary of Omnicide. It just so happened that they'd recently begun taking a lot of public contracts and that's why Asmoe suddenly found himself inflicting meritorious cruelties on tax delinquents and litterers and serial jaywalkers instead of on the underperforming data-entry clerks and incompetent managerial staff

who were typically assigned to him by his corporate clientele. Not that Asmoe had any complaints about this. While daemons came in even greater shapes and sizes than human beings, still they all suffered more or less alike. Bodily speaking that is. There were of course noticeable mental differences but these only became relevant with respect to psychiatric tortures, and Asmoe wasn't authorized for that. A daemon had to have a doctorate in agonology before they could apply for the certification necessary to engage in the more sophisticated science of mentally inflicted distress. The danger of accidentally cultivating a lasting hope or resilience in the will of one's assignments was simply too enormous for daemons without adequate training. In any case, Asmoe didn't mess around with that sort of stuff. Nope, his business was just good old-fashioned physical excruciation.

Before going further into the remarkable events that were about to unfold for Asmoe Cambioni, a few things will first have to be explained about Hell; geographical and economic details mainly, without which much of the story won't make much sense. Hell, as most people when they arrive there are surprised to find, is nearly identical to Earth in terms of terrain. This is because Hell is actually a parallel Earth simultaneously existing in another dimension. There are notable differences admittedly. In Hell there's no vegetation. No trees, no grass, no flowers. Nothing. There's no rain either. There is water I guess but you wouldn't want to drink it. Imagine the most repulsive liquid you can conceive of and you'll probably come up with something close to what passes for water in Hell. About a sixth of Earth's ocean mass remains there – a dark briny sludge that's so loaded with corrosive pollutants it's regularly used for industrial disposal. If that wasn't bad enough, in Hell the sun has turned into a massive red giant large enough to swallow Mercury. Because of this, terrible solar storms frequently ravage Hell and bring suffering to those who dwell there. But still damnation goes on and this is where humans come into the picture. You see, if you die on Earth and you don't satisfy whatever mysterious criterion the saints have for admission into Heaven – and as yet no one's figured it out exactly – then you materialize in Hell at the same coordinates. For example, if you die in Los Angeles you'd reappear in Los Angeles. As unfortunate as that may be.

Regarding infrastructure and artificial things in general, these are all very different, but in terms of geography, Hell exists at a level of reality which in most ways conforms to Earth – the shapes and locations of its continents are nearly identical, likewise its mountain ranges and other aspects of its landmasses. It's a

world that shadows Earth with respect to its more robust natural features but the correspondence ends there. For example, the architecture in Hell is uniquely its own and the layout of its cities and towns aren't constrained by Earthly principles. Daemons are nevertheless concentrated in those areas which overlap major population centers on Earth for the simple fact that these are the places where most humans die. You see, humans provide the basis for daemonic society. Humans are far and away the preeminent commodity acquired and exchanged by daemons, for two reasons. The second most important of these reasons is that humans are incredibly versatile slaves. They can do nearly everything that daemons can do and unlike the subhuman classes, imps and goblins and what not, they aren't irredeemably stupid and unreliable. The most important reason though, and the much more important reason, is that humans are delicious.

Obviously you can't die in Hell – it would defeat the point of being in Hell. Given that, it's impossible to starve to death there. You can however experience all the effects of starvation without the final release of death. So naturally everyone still wants to eat. This begs the question though – what's there to eat? Sadly, not a whole lot. Because vegetation can't grow in Hell, there's no crop-based agriculture. Which only leaves carnage. Now local fauna do exist – among these maybe the most edible are basilisks, which should tell you all you need to know. Yes, things are pretty bad in Hell and they'd be unbearably bad if it wasn't for the steady stream of new humans materializing. It should also be mentioned that human flesh spoils the longer they've been in Hell so fresh arrivals are especially welcome. From what's just been outlined though a certain hesitation may have sprung to mind. After all, if people can't die in Hell, what are the permanent consequences of eating them? In short, there are none. In Hell, flesh regenerates. Hack off a limb and it'll grow anew. Cut out a portion of someone's brain and they'll get it back, in time. The psychological trauma of course is more lasting. Now, nearly everyone who first hears about this asks the same question – if you saw someone in half horizontally, will both of the two halves regenerate their counterparts? No. Medical experiments conducted by the best daemonic minds have shown that regeneration is centered somewhere in the medulla oblongata, the portion of the brain which connects it to the spinal cord, and any flesh severed from this is dead. Regeneration takes exponentially longer the closer one gets to the medulla oblongata too so harvesting humans has to be carefully orchestrated in order to get the best results. Some humans are set aside for having their fingers cut off, others their eyes plucked out. Until they lose their taste and start getting ground into pet food.

Humans are also raw materials in many industries. A lot of high quality furniture for instance is made from their bones. In fact they have such a marvelous range of uses that trying to list them all would be futile. Suffice it to say, humans pervade every crevice of daemonic industry. Despite all that's been said, one shouldn't get the wrong impression that daemons feel no affection for human beings. Attitudes vary here. Some daemons regard humans as the most amusing of the lesser rational species, others regard humans as vermin. The majority of daemons however have a keen appreciation of the fact that individual humans all have individual merits. Skills and talents among humans are carefully measured and recorded using a variety of well-established metrics. The utility of a slave of course is the most important thing in determining their value. As a result of this, while all humans in Hell lack the legal privileges of daemon kin, there's a natural hierarchy among them that both daemons and humans more or less agree on. Technological genius for example is highly prized and humans with solid scientific expertise will rarely go to waste in the mutilation factories – a mind after all can hardly survive such an ordeal intact and daemons aren't the sort to squander something scarcer and more precious for something cheaper and more plentiful. Naturally such positions are still contingent on good behavior but humans that experiment with misbehaving almost never do so more than once.

Then there are also the less easily quantifiable contributions that humans make – in terms of their physical appearance for example, their own artistic abilities, and other factors like this. Regarding the first, good looking humans can fetch a premium but, unlike practical talents, this won't necessarily protect them from being used as outlets for sadistic appetites. Since humans remain whatever age they die at in Hell though, youth and beauty are sufficiently rare that only wealthier daemons can afford human slaves with these qualities. Extremely young humans for example can cost astonishing sums of money – twelve years old being about the lowest. To own the youngest human at any given time in Hell is moreover a social distinction that many in the daemon aristocracy covet. Likewise, daemons are generous patrons of the human arts. All the great artists who end up in Hell, and most of them do, can be sure of finding fans of their work among the more cosmopolitan daemons. Many human poets and writers who were never adequately recognized in their own lifetimes find that posthumously they have much more successful careers in Hell. The daemons of Hell were shocked and greatly disappointed however the day William Blake died and he didn't show up in

their domain. He's literally idolized in Hell to this day and there's a lingering suspicion that Heaven deliberately interfered in the matter. In any case, plenty of famous people do make it down to Hell and there they find that the right kind of fame has its own currency. Naturally, impressive achievements in the field of evil are also highly admired. Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot for example have all done quite well for themselves. Meanwhile, as on Earth, ugly illiterate and undistinguished people fare the worst. Such are the laws of supply and demand.

Asmoe Cambioni himself hardly ever tortured humans in the course of his duties. Third-class torturers and above were generally assigned to fellow daemons since only they were legally qualified to do so. Any daemon could do whatever they wanted to any human, provided that said human was their property or they had the owner's consent, but what one daemon was allowed to do to another was strictly regulated by the authorities. Largely it depended on status. The archfiends for example sat at the top of the pyramid and were the only ones really above the law. Because they made the laws. Asmoe meanwhile was a member of one of the lower categories of daemons owing to some distant human ancestry. Fortunately it didn't show in his appearance but his surname gave it away so it wasn't exactly a secret either. In any case, Asmoe had to earn everything he got in his damnation. He was a generally ambitious and confident daemon however and he'd put himself through school and rolled up his sleeves plenty of times in order to get what he wanted. His determination endured even despite the fact that lately he'd run into whole minefields of bad luck. The most unhappy of which concerned the new boss that'd been transferred to his division, one Mr. Bellicoso. What was so bad about Mr. Bellicoso you ask? For one, he was a hideous troll. Not a metaphorical troll either but an actual, nine foot tall, green and putrid troll of yore. Asmoe didn't have any specific prejudice against trolls mind you but Mr. Bellicoso certainly lived up to the worst stereotypes. For instance, he salivated a lot which, whenever he yelled (also a thing of great frequency) he succeeded in flinging in every possible direction. Additionally, he left heaps of unfinished bones in the break room which he'd point blank lie about being responsible for. And he didn't seem to know the first thing about torture. In fact, it amazed Asmoe that anyone could believe his boss was qualified to run anything – let alone a whole division of Tsuji Giri Enterprises. Perhaps the least forgivable of the litany of unforgivable things though was the fact that Mr. Bellicoso the troll insisted on holding daily staff meetings where he'd inevitably snarl on and on about whatever random obsession that'd recently lodged itself in the catacombs of his tediously trollish mind.

Asmoe Cambioni was shuffling some paperwork on his desk when he got the dreaded summons. An imp gave him a note saying that Mr. Bellicoso wanted to see him immediately. Asmoe couldn't imagine the reason why but by now he was firmly convinced that reason wasn't even an understudy for any of the parts that played a role in Mr. Bellicoso's decisions. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself up from his chair and left his cubicle. It was about 10:45 in the morning so most of the daemons in the office were busy. No one he knew looked up as he passed by, which was too bad since he wasn't in any particular hurry to get where he was going. Then, seizing on the excuse that he was feeling a bit thirsty, Asmoe took the opportunity to put off the inevitable for just a little while longer as he made a detour to the nearest bleeder-cooler for a drink. He'd barely finished pouring his refreshment from the gulping canister when suddenly Abyssphagus from accounting saw him standing there and came over to say hello. Taking one of the nautilus ghouls' tentacles in a firm handshake, Asmoe smiled and tilted his horned head by way of greeting.

"How's the spawn?" he asked, by which he meant Abyssphagus' newly hatched clutch of a couple dozen eggs.

"Coating the walls in slime as usual," replied the nautilus ghouls with a mixture of pride and exasperation before imparting an unsolicited rumor. "I hear they're bringing in a horde of subhumans to replace some of us." Asmoe choked a little on the blood he was having.

"Where'd you hear that? Actually, I don't even want to know. Stories like this fly around all the time. Don't let it get its claws in you." Abyssphagus wasn't so sure.

"Easy for you to say. Torture's a controlled occupation. Me though? All I do is move numbers around." Asmoe patted his colleague on the shell.

"Come on, you're fine. What are they going to do? Trust their financial records to a bunch of kobolds and gremlins? I'd be surprised if any of them can count without using their fingers, and they only have three on each hand." Abyssphagus did his best not to look too glum.

“Sure, I’ve got nothing to worry about from kobolds and gremlins, but gnomes? Most gnomes can do ledgers,” said the ghoul.

“I’m sure you’ll be okay,” protested Asmoe. At last, Abyssphagus cracked a smile.

“I wish I could be as relaxed as you. Anyways, I’ve got to get back to my desk but it’s good running into you. And watch out for gnomes. They may look like shrunken little dwarves but their devious like you wouldn’t believe.”

Words of wisdom.

“Gnomes,” murmured Asmoe as he nodded conspiratorially.

“Gnomes,” Abyssphagus echoed back in earnest.

Having delayed it long enough, Asmoe now finished making his way to Bellicoso’s office where he knocked politely on the door. After a few seconds of cryptic violence, a guttural voice inside shouted a garbled “In!” and Asmoe did as it commanded. Surveying the room he’d entered, torturer third-class Asmodeus Cambioni was unsurprised by the disarray he found there. Torn up reports and file folders covered the place and huge claw marks gashed the desk and walls. About the only thing there in good condition was a trophy case situated across from the door and perpendicular to the far end of the room. Here an assembly of gaudy trinkets suited to the mediocre achievements of an adolescent troll had all been arranged in clumsy earnest. On them phrases like “Whomp Nummer Three Basher” and “Whomp Eat Mosed Eels” were scrawled in crudely formed capital letters that served as hallmarks of cave-dwelling monstrosities everywhere who’d been unfairly burdened with literacy against their own better inclinations. Whomp of course was Mr. Bellicoso’s first name and he was excessively proud of his awards. Asmoe was sure that they’d be mentioned at some point in the lecture that was about to follow. In the meantime, Bellicoso himself was standing in the middle of the room wheezing and towering over Asmoe who himself was about six feet tall, not including his horns.

“You late As-Moo,” reprimanded the troll, rows of crooked serrated teeth jutting from his crocodile sized mouth. Asmoe shrugged. The less he said the better

things usually went. Interpreting silence as submission, the troll continued. “Project deadline not fine. Dumb brainy daemons say things need go faster. You torture more. Or less. Just get job done. Have all ‘signments cleared next quarter. No more napping like fancy time. Be like Whomp. See trophies? Whomp delivers. Whomp gives all the percent. Plus extra.”

By now Asmoe was barely listening – instead he was picturing himself grabbing his own horns and ripping them from his skull. He was a little frustrated and he didn’t have any hair to pull out. The next quarter was the end of the year, just over a month away, and he had more than eighty assignments on his docket. It would be useless though to try and explain this to Bellicoso. In lieu of that, he slowly pulled himself together and waited for the troll to dismiss him without offering a reply. This came soon enough.

“Ready? Go chop chop now. Whomp want stack of heads,” ordered the troll, seeming not to understand the irrelevance of decapitation in this particular case. Asmoe didn’t care though, Asmoe just left.

Without really thinking about it, he drifted towards the cafeteria. It wasn’t lunch yet but he needed somewhere to clear his head and the cafeteria was as good a place as any. Since there wouldn’t be many daemons there yet, Asmoe could expect to have the opportunity to contemplate his situation for a while in relative peace – however this was denied him. As it turned out, she was there. She being Malice Necrobias, the head of Subhuman Resources and incidentally the target of Asmoe’s infatuation. That she’d become, out of all the female daemons at Tsuji Giri’s head offices, the vortex devouring his unspoken affections was... a rather predictable thing. Malice collected the hearts of male daemons with merciless glee. Although only a few centuries old, she already had so many that she had to rent a storage space just to keep them all. It wasn’t like she had to try that hard either. The daughter of a naiad and a phantom of chaos, Malice possessed a dark infernal beauty overwhelming to humans and daemons alike. Not just those of the male persuasion either – she could seduce females just as easily, and did. Her spectral form was as sultry and enveloping as the flames wrapping themselves around a heretic tied to a stake but dismal like the aspect of shadows. Her lips conversely were as red as a scarlet wound. Meanwhile the aspiring suitor in this instance was decidedly less grand in his own sexual magnetism. Asmoe was a decent enough looking daemon but he was no Casanova – and having seen the actual Casanova

dragged around by a choke collar at a daemon soiree, it wouldn't have helped him much if he was. On top of this, his last serious relationship had been with a banshee over four months ago and he was still only barely recovered. Of course anyone who's been shrieked at for hours on end in murdered Gaelic every time they came home would be able to sympathize with him here. Nevertheless, he couldn't pass up the chance that fate had just provided.

Malice was sitting alone, a rare thing. She also appeared to be intently reading a book and she gave no indication that she noticed Asmoe approaching. That worked in his favor. Asmoe was reasonably composed by the time he was standing next to her and, after hesitating for a bit before glancing at her book, he succeeded in making an anxiously off-hand comment without immediately embarrassing himself.

"That's some pretty dry stuff," he said, feigning casualness, but Malice didn't turn to meet his hopeful gaze. Oh no. Did she think he was criticizing her reading material? Before he could fall all over himself in trying to explain what he meant however, Malice looked up.

"This?" she replied innocently. "Yeah. Not the sort of thing that really carries you off now is it? But it does make the interesting point that World War 2 wasn't nearly the economic boom it's usually made out to be. Many of the humans who were killing each other were so brainwashed that they really didn't have the evil motivations necessary to earn them a stay here. So even daemon economists exaggerate? What else is new? Still, I try to read books like this from time to time, you know, for self-improvement."

Asmoe realized now that Malice was smiling. At him. "There can't be much room for that in you," he blurted out before blushing. Malice laughed.

"Well, aren't you a wicked he-devil," she cooed, stroking him on the sacrificial altar of her own predatory desires. He was perfectly fine with being slaughtered though. Knowing she could have whatever she wanted, Malice nevertheless decided to savor the unspoken power she was wielding over her new toy. "What's up with you Asmodeus?" she asked playfully. Asmoe happily melted into a puddle of aw-shucks.

“Call me Asmoe,” he said. With a deftness then shared by only the most seductive of divas, Malice gently softened the allure she was radiating so that Asmoe’s brain could function again. “Uh... not too much,” Asmoe finally continued after a brief pause, searching his memory for something interesting to mention. “Had to flay a whole half-beast the other day. Turns out he was pink on the inside.” Malice’s eyes twinkled with amusement.

“And how’s life in the den of Whomp?” she asked, rolling her eyes with the partisan intimacy of a fellow guerilla even though she was actually above Bellicoso in the Tsuji Giri hierarchy and didn’t have to deal with him much. This loosened Asmoe up.

“He’s a gob of maggots isn’t he? Not a day passes where I don’t think about garroting him with his own tie. And I’m sure I’d be doing the company a favor. I don’t know if you’d even believe what he just told me in his office. I mean, of course you would. You probably have to deal with trolls all the time. Still, it’s incredible. He actually thinks I can churn through almost a hundred torture sessions in a month and still hit the despair parameters on every one. Of course I’m generously assuming that he even knows what a despair parameter is.” Malice nodded sympathetically but her thoughts quickly turned to how she could use this to her own advantage.

“You know Asmoe, your problems might just be the solution to one of my problems,” Malice suggested pleasantly.

“How so? I’d be glad to help,” Asmoe replied.

“As you may or may not have heard,” Malice continued, “We somehow wound up with an extra pallet of subhumans last week. It seems that one of the VPs couldn’t read a spreadsheet and decided we were running low on lackeys. Anyways, now I’ve got all this additional inventory that needs work placements and it sounds like you could use some assistance.”

Asmoe squirmed a little inside. Subhumans? He needed them like he needed a ball and chain shackled to his legs. Sensing his reluctance, Malice brandished her charm.

“I know you torture fiends are very independent and the rules stipulate that subhumans can’t do any of the actual punishing but, they could help with the prep work and administrative details. You’d be astonished at how much you can come to depend on them over time. Plus I’d really owe you.” She’d didn’t need to add that last part to persuade him but the thought of her being in his debt was convincing enough on its own.

“Okay, you sold me Malice,” he said, feeling magnanimous and profitable at the same time. At some unrecalled point in their conversation, Asmoe had sat down next to Malice and now they were sitting very close together indeed. Her legs were so near to brushing against his own that the lower half of his body had ceased to move entirely. For Asmoe, the air was full of electricity and perfume. For Malice, the waters smelled like blood. The professional torturer now smiled at the superior virtuoso in his own art. “How many do you need me to harbor?” he asked with mock resignation. She laughed at this.

“Oh, just take one of the goblins off my hands.”

Asmoe returned to his cubicle quite pleased with himself. Their conversation hadn’t lasted much beyond the part where he surrendered to her proposal but it was, by far, been the longest he’d ever talked with her and that was something. Things seemed to end well too – she even winked at him as she left. Subsequently, it took a while for the bad news from Bellicoso to worm its way back into his mind. Feeling a bit pluckier however, Asmoe thought about it and realized that the next month would be arduous but it wasn’t catastrophic. He’d have to pour in a lot of overtime but at least he’d be getting paid for it. No matter what that troll Bellicoso insinuated, he knew he was the highest performing torturer in his class. Only Gehenna-Lich the Ravenous and that idiot Swineshrill had better numbers than him but they were both first-classers. Plus, he knew that Swineshrill had a special arrangement where he got to preselect all his assignments – ensuring that he always loaded his docket with the easiest ones. So Swineshrill didn’t even count. If only the head of his division wasn’t a complete moron. Asmoe didn’t mind having to earn his way up the ladder but it was hard to get anywhere with a giant troll squatting on the steps. Perhaps he needed to look at his situation more like an opportunity though. After he pulled off his next impressive series of torturing jobs, he could do an end-run around Bellicoso and get himself noticed by one of the higher ups couldn’t he? Hell! Malice could even put in a good word for him and

she'd do that now right? Brimming with thoughts of all the success that soon awaited him, Asmoe leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. Stretching his hands in the air, Asmoe then cricked his neck with a supreme sense of satisfaction and finally rose to stand. Today was not going to be a good day to be tortured by Asmodeus Cambioni. Time to get to work.

Plowing straight through lunch by only snacking on a few ears here and there, Asmoe had cleared two assignments from his docket by mid-afternoon. If he kept this pace up he'd torture his way through his quota with ample time to spare. Then as he was humming to himself in the cleanup room and scrubbing smatterings of gore from his apron, he felt something tugging at his pants. Gazing downward he found a tiny goblin staring up at him with wide red eyes. The little guy was only about a foot and a half tall but the majority of that was a giant round head with large fanning ears and a long hooked nose.

"You're my new adjunct?" asked Asmoe. The goblin grinned, revealing most of his sharp ivory teeth, and he even seemed to be quivering with what Asmoe could only assume was excitement. In response to the question though the goblin merely laughed, something that sounded more or less like Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh – three sharp maniacal syllables which, by themselves, were still enough to hint at the vast depth of derangement behind them.

"So what's your name?" continued Asmoe, already a little irritated.

"I'm Sneer," replied the goblin and he rubbed his hands together gleefully as if this were some wonderful and insidious secret. Asmoe returned his attention to his apron again while he considered his predicament. This was going to be worse than he thought. What was he going to do? He was now wedged between a troll and a goblin, with a mountain of work that needed to be pulverized in a very short time. Sanctify it all! He'd fob the little cretin to a bunch of office supply tasks. That at least would keep the goblin off his scales for a while. So that settled that. Looking down again he found Sneer peering around the empty room as if trying to conjure any opportunity for mischief.

"Okay," said Asmoe calmly, "Here's what I'm going to have you do."

Once more at his desk, Asmoe got busy filling out the reports on the two assignments he'd finished that day. A lot of statistical data that seemed thoroughly superfluous but was mandated by company policies. Number of screams during session, estimated time spent sobbing – those sorts of things. He was getting through it at a decent pace however so that was good. Abyssphagus even passed by briefly and Asmoe could tell from the look he gave him that he'd heard about Sneer. Glad to have someone he could vent to, even for just a moment, Asmoe mimed putting a pistol to his head and blowing his brains out. Too bad in Hell suicide wasn't a permanent solution to anything. Still, something to dream about. The days he might get off sick would even be worth it if it wasn't for the burden he'd recently acquired. Or burdens rather. Speaking of which, one of them had returned from the first errand he'd given it.

“Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. I tortured those pencils you ordered me to master,” boasted Sneer as he held out two claws full of mangled bone styluses. Asmoe angrily threw the folder he was holding in his hands down on his desk.

“I wanted you to sharpen them!” he yelled, “These are snapped in half and chewed on!”

Sneer raised his profusely studded fists in triumph. “They won't be disobeying you any time soon will they? Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Sneer is an excellent torturer. Maybe one day he'll be the chief of them all! The chief! The chief!!!”

As the goblin's voice trailed off with the advent of tyrannical fantasies, Asmoe could only shake his head in defeat. “Damn it Sneer,” he muttered loudly to himself and the goblin seemed to take no notice.

“Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh,” laughed Sneer.

Asmoe sighed and decided he'd just focus on his work and leave the goblin to its own devices the rest of the day. Swiveling in his chair, he turned back to the folder in front of him and wearily opened it. Sneer meanwhile took a seat on the floor behind Asmoe and started to build booby-traps with the broken pencils.

After putting Sneer in a cage for the night, Asmoe left the offices sometime past seven. Not an unusual thing for him by any means but not exactly something

he was looking forward to for a whole month. It was twilight outside as he departed, the world bathed in a pervasive crimson light. The sun had started to descend below the horizon but a huge crescent of it still took up a large portion of the western sky. Passing through the company parking lot where a few demons were getting into their various macabre vehicles, Asmoe began walking to where he usually caught a ride home. As he often did, he used that time to think about things in his life and to observe the scenery around him. For Asmoe it was just an ordinary part of his commute home but, to a human who hadn't spent much time in Hell, the city he lived in would be alien and mesmerizing. The buildings for example were a labyrinth of surreal constructions. In the urban areas one could find facilities of white crystalline glass in an array of geometric shapes, pulsating tenements of carnal post-modernism, and terraced synthetic gardens that imitated tropical jungles in the minutest of details. There were ziggurats and coliseums, pyramids and obelisks – most set aside in deliberate decay. There were brutalist skyscrapers that swarms of locust roosted on and then there were buildings, if you can call them that, suspended in collapsing hyperbolic shapes which had parallels only in the vague allusions of H.P. Lovecraft. There were gothic plazas and grim baroque houses and razor-wire parks and free public guillotines and art installations of grotesque towering Goldberg machines and canals of festering ichor and power facilities where humans in giant hamster wheels ran forever in tiers stacked on tiers. What else would you expect – it was Hell. A place as anarchical in its styles as it was totalitarian in its laws. But these weren't two unrelated things – both were expressions of the same appetite for draconian violence.

Asmoe enjoyed the volcanic air rushing over him as he rode a rickshaw he'd caught to the condo where he rented. The centaur who was pulling him must have fallen on hard times to end up in that line of work. Aside from humans and subhumans who made up most of the labor force, difficult physical jobs were generally left to monsters. While centaurs were actually great rickshaws, they were hybrids like Asmoe himself (although lower than cambions) and so normally managed to find work in higher positions. Maybe this centaur had dropped out of school? Maybe they'd suffered ambrosia addiction? Who knows? Asmoe wasn't about to ask – the demon was in the middle of pulling him home and to pester them with questions would be really inconsiderate. Besides, starting conversations with strangers was something Asmoe was never really good at. Instead he kept his thoughts to himself and decided to check his phone. Tsuji Giri company policy was vicious when it came to engaging in personal calls during work hours, so Asmoe and

most of his colleagues played it safe by keeping their phones off. The offices after all were filled with surveillance eyes in every corner. Powering on his phone, an icon quickly appeared notifying him of the fact that he had two new messages. Asmoe wondered who they could be but he'd left his headphones at home that morning and, with the noise in the rickshaw carriage at the moment, now was not the best time to listen to them. As such he fiddled with a cruel little pay-to-play puzzle game he'd downloaded recently until his centaur taxi finally stopped. Reaching into his wallet, Asmoe pulled out enough to cover his fare and handed the money over to his pilot. The centaur checked this, nodded his acceptance, and then indicated with his head for Asmoe to get out. Doing that, Asmoe stepped down from the rickshaw carriage and watched as the centaur stamped one of his hooves a couple times before departing at a gallop. Some young daemon spawn who were playing on the street meanwhile had an old man tied to a sign post and were sticking him with small knives for amusement.

Entering his building by way of the front doors, Asmoe walked straight to the elevator and pressed the button to go up. He waited, tapping his foot for a minute or so, and then stepped inside the sliding doors that opened into a box inlaid with a bronze mosaic of screaming human faces. It was empty except for him. After jabbing another button for the eleventh floor, Asmoe now decided to play his messages. He lazily made the wrong selection though and ended up listening to his own answering recording first. "Hey, you've reached Asmoe but I can't answer my phone right now. Leave me a voice-mail at the end of the scream though and I'll get back to you." After the murderous recording of a woman's screeching played for three seconds, Asmoe navigated back to where he was trying to get and his messages started. "Asmoe? This is your Ma. You there sulphy? Pick up if you are." Ma Cambioni wasn't especially knowledgeable when it came to contemporary technology so she thought cell phone voice-mails were like the old answering machines and that maybe Asmoe was listening to her message as she was recording it. Asmoe smiled to himself as he heard her Brooklyn accent unfurl. "Listen, your Pa and I were just talking and we think you should come by for dinner next weekend. We know you're busy Asmoe but it's been too long. We really miss you and we want to catch up. I got a deal on a thirty-something girl from Tokyo at the market the other day too so we'll be having Japanese when you come. I know they're your favorite! Anyways sulphy, let me know ahead of time when you'll be coming so I can place the roast in earlier. Oh! Before I forget, I saw Cobra's mother at the spa last week. Had to put her in her place. Don't worry about it though. Gashes from

Pa and me. Bye.” Cobra was the banshee he’d dated. Unfortunately there was nothing Asmoe could do about his Ma’s devotion to meddling in his social life but at least she hadn’t passed any messages along this time.

Asmoe had left the elevator and was walking down the hall to his door when the second message started to play. “It’s Thoth. Wish you could’ve made it out last night. Things got crazy. A sphinx at the club had her tail stepped on and she went berserk. Burnt the whole place to the ground. I mean, she was spewing torrents of fire at everyone and anyone. It was awe-some! I got a little cinged myself. Smashed my snout into a door as I was running out of there too. Ha! I’m alright though. Hey! You should come by the library tomorrow when my shift ends. I’m going to be giving a reading at the cabaret and it’d be nice if my best pal was there.” Eucharist! He was going to go. Him and Thoth were fiends since way back and Asmoe wasn’t about to let Tsuji Giri Enterprises get in the way of that. Now he was at his front door and, putting his phone away, he grabbed his keys and opened it. Almost immediately a hissing sound started, followed by clickety scuttling noises across his kitchen floor. Then a three foot long millipede appeared from around the corner and hurriedly weaved its way towards him. Wrapping itself around Asmoe’s leg and up his torso, the creature paused when it reached his chest, fluttering its forelegs at him and staring with its shiny black eyes.

“Chitters!” exclaimed Asmoe, “How’s my boy? How’s he doin?” The millipede responded with affectionate insectile behavior and Asmoe picked him up and cuddled him in his arms. Then he carried Chitters into the kitchen where he fed him and refreshed his bowl of drinking bile. After some more time spent petting Chitters, Asmoe now shuffled into the living room to watch the news. Nothing of particular interest had happened that day it seemed. The Auxiliary War Administration had begun a new series of artillery strikes on the outlying principality of Sanguindis but to what end? Even if The Hive managed to topple whatever daemon generalissimo ruled that place, another one would just rise up to take the throne in due course. The borderlands were a mess. Asmoe didn’t understand why the Archons didn’t just decree that a wall be built to surround the whole federation. They must have their reasons, thought Asmoe as he changed the channel. He was circumspect enough to know that he wasn’t an expert in plutonic politics. While flipping through a few more shows he soon realized he just wanted to go to sleep and so he ended up turning the monitor off after only a few minutes of actually watching anything.

Gazing out his bedroom window a short time later, Asmoe admired the sprawl of the New York Nether. He'd lived in Hell's shadow of New York for ten years now, almost all of his adult life, and still the sight of it lit up in the darkness left him with an uncanny feeling. The immensity of it – all those daemons just going on with their damnations, encompassed all at once in that very moment and at the same time utterly reachless. What did it all mean? Why did Hell exist? The mystery of it haunted him. Yet, most of his life was spent in arbitrary tasks delegated by apathetic overlords. Maybe one day he'd figure it all out. Not today. Not tonight. He wanted to relax, to let the world go and fall into the quiet void of his dreaming mind. To have ghosts whisper him into oblivion. At least for a short while. When he woke up tomorrow he'd brave the random perils that waited. He'd find the victories and plunder where he could. In a while. Sinking into his bed now, Asmoe turned on his side and pulled the velvet covers up over his shoulder. His bed was so great. Not everyone got to be as comfortable as he was here. What a wonderful thing to have a bed. And silence. His consciousness ebbing into the mists of surrender, Asmoe began to drift away. He was not alone though. Chitters had finished his meal and pushed his way through the cracked bedroom door. Crawling onto the bed, the millipede curled up in a coil at Asmoe's feet.

Chapter Two

Something was caressing his face. Chitters? Asmoe's giant pet millipede was trying to wake him. Why did it feel so strange though? There's nothing wrong with your millipede wanting to wake you. A much nicer way to get up than the alarm going off. The alarm! Asmoe jerked his head in the direction of his bedside clock. Eucharist! The fake uncurled scorpion tails that made up the metal hands on its analog face weren't stinging where he'd want. As it was he had about an hour to get to work. Nearly flinging himself out of bed before remembering that Chitters was still on him, Asmoe hurriedly placed his millipede aside as he sprang up and started rushing around the room. Socks! He needed socks! And pants! Hopping into a pair he then started frantically looking for a collared shirt. Grabbing the first clean one he found on the floor, Asmoe sprinted out the room.

His keys, his wallet, his shoes – none of them turned out to be where they should've been. How was that even possible? Sometimes his damnation in Hell almost seemed like some kind of cosmic torment. He shuddered at the thought but knew it was absurd. He'd seen rows of victims trapped in actual dream-torture facilities – their suffering was much worse than his. No, it felt more like an invisible presence ever so subtly disturbing his existence. God maybe? Asmoe chuckled out loud at the thought of it, a little cheered up as a result of doing so. God! He laughed again. He'd have to mention that one to Thoth. Speaking of the devil, Asmoe remembered he had something he needed to return to him. What was it again? Oh right, that book – Where's Jack? (We Know He's Here). The one about the Jack the Ripper mystery. Grabbing it off the shelf by his monitor, Asmoe felt ready to leave

when he saw Chitters lurking by his food bowl. Almost forgot another thing. Over filling the bowl out of haste, Asmoe gave his pet a vigorous little scale rub and then dashed off to leave. As he was closing the door however, the fact that Chitters had woke him up popped back in his mind. Sticking his head back inside the door he tossed a couple grateful words to the millipede. “Thanks buddy!”

The elevator took too long, a satyr tried to pester him with questions, and he almost fell and tripped over a rug – eventually however he made it outside. He had about 43 minutes to get to work now. Slightly undoable but if he was lucky and he rushed like mad, he might not have to pay the price for his lateness, which would be a minor amputation. Naturally whatever they chose would grow back but he’d still be in pain for weeks. Just what he didn’t need right now, being swamped and all. So he ran. Soon he slowed to a hobble however and, panting, he emerged from the hovels and satanic promontories and skull-encrusted gore markets teeming across his netherhood, when a miracle occurred. A taxi chariot dragged by an octet of humans and driven by an ogre was coming right at him down the wide cobblestone thoroughfare. Immediately he bolted for it and a moment’s hesitation would’ve cost him dearly too – just as he was about to reach the chariot, a satyr with a briefcase tried to get on. Another satyr! All’s fair in commuting though. Asmoe lunged at the goat-legged bastard, grabbing him, and biting off a hunk of his cheek. The satyr staggered back from the onslaught, pressing both hands to the mangled side of his face and dropping a briefcase which spilled open with wigs. Dozens of wigs. Asmoe added a ferocious departing snarl for good measure before leaping on the chariot and turning to the nonplussed ogre.

“Know where Tsuji Giri’s HQ is?” he barked, and the ogre nodded. “Good! Get me there in 30 minutes and I’ll double the fare!” With that the ogre’s eyes lit up and, swinging his long whip over his head a few times, he started to send it down like lightning on the humans. Off they went then at a furious speed.

Good, bad, good, bad – his luck was all over the place. Reaching into his pocket, he proceeded to discover more misfortune. Holy water! He’d forgot his phone! Asmoe sighed – at least they were making decent time. With admirable greed, the ogre mused his human beasts relentlessly. Whenever one flagged a little he added a new stripe to their back to perk them up. Even the heavy traffic wasn’t a problem – an assortment of gothic wagons and crystal palanquins and motorized fortresses with tank treads and saddled bellowing monsters all trying to

hog as much of the road as possible. It also helped that speed limits were illegal in Hell but, here and there, they had to swerve around the twisted wreckage of various accidents. Since larger vehicles simply ran over everything in their paths, these casualties of the highway were inevitably re-victimized continuously until they'd been swept aside by the violence and left to the imps and other bottom feeders who picked apart their remains. Among the worst culprits were the city ambulance services, a variety of venture-catastrophe firms that would cannibalize anyone who didn't look like they could afford the expensive fees that came with being rescued. Their own fault for irresponsibly getting hurt though.

Asmoe's taxi started to make its way towards the city core of the New York Nether and the surrounding buildings began looming higher and higher all around them. Tsuji Giri's HQ wasn't technically located downtown but it was close enough that a dense urban expansion was in the beginning stages of enveloping its campus. Likewise, the traffic was becoming more congested and the taxi was making frequent stops now. Asmoe idly scanned the many billboards he saw. In Hell, there was no such thing as too much and accordingly the billboards provided an ever changing scenery of grime stained advertisements cluttering one's view with visual noise. Every appetite was catered to without the slightest modesty and nothing was too grotesque or bizarre to sell. Hell was a capitalist utopia – it even said so in the constitution. Asmoe of course was a good citizen so he was perfectly alright with it all. Once in a while an offer or slogan even caught his eye. Misery's Baked Ears – Don't you deserve the taste of true suffering? He ate those all the time and they were just as delicious as they promised. Likewise, the billboard of a smiling daemon family standing together next to their pet human tumbling in the window of a washing machine had the intended effect on him. Brought to you by Serf Electric. As the taxi turned a corner, a large monitor display appeared blaring its looped messages and their corresponding imagery. Asmoe caught the current ad somewhere in the middle. "Order now and you can get a second brain-in-a-vat for half off! That's not one but two unique minds you can torment at leisure in your very own customizable virtual reality!" The pleasant voice making the pitch was accompanied by a fifties style cartoon of humans trapped in a merry-go-round of horrors. Asmoe definitely wanted one but those things were expensive. Before he could work out the exact math however another ad interrupted his thought process. It began with a flat black background and then a tiny red point swiftly expanded into the red emblem of the Department of Orthodoxy Maintenance. Or, to borrow a human phrase, the Thought Police. "Remember citizens, the discussion

of dialectics is a capital offense. Report any instance of metaphysical philosophizing to your nearest orthodoxy station at once. Failure to do so is evidence of your conspiracy.” Since there’s no such thing as death in Hell, a capital offense in this case meant something different. Something worse in fact. Any daemon who was even suspected of committing a capital offense had their daemonic privileges suspended – effectively denying them protection by the law. As such they would become perpetual prey since daemons were just as merciless to traitors belonging to their own species as they were to human beings more generally.

They were getting close to Tsuji Giri now and Asmoe’s impatience was starting to get the best of him. When they stopped, Asmoe would eye the ogre’s whip as if he was considering grabbing it to scourge the humans himself. And if the ogre didn’t like that, he’d just scourge the ogre too. While Asmoe was sizing up his taxi driver though, a fight broke out in the street up ahead. Two large ram-headed fiends started clashing in the road, colliding head-first with each other just like rams do on Earth. Disregarding their fellow commuters, they brought traffic to a halt, which incited an immediate response from those being delayed. “Get out of the way!” shouted a ghoul seated in a rickshaw two vehicles ahead and right in front of the fight. One of the ram-headed daemons paused in his preparations for another run and answered, “Genuflect yourself you little deacon!” in a loud contemptuous voice. Then the two ram-headed fiends collided again. A lot of horns were being honked and curses were flying in the air but none of it seemed to have any impact on the combatants. When the troll in the jalopy ahead of Asmoe’s taxi screamed, “Dumb lambs need butcher!” at the fighters, the one who’d spoken earlier yelled back, “Eat eucharist you catechizing priest!” while his opponent joined him by wagging a mocking gesture of prayer at the troll. The situation was deteriorating and a wider melee was becoming likely. Asmoe didn’t have time for this. He decided to sprint the rest of the way there and, taking the money he’d have paid if the taxi had made it to Tsuji Giri in good time, he stuffed it into the surprised ogre’s hands and leapt out of the chariot. With his fare departed, the ogre slowly got out of his chariot too and advanced towards the two fiends blocking traffic, his whip dragging in tow. Asmoe was careening in the opposite direction so he wasn’t going to witness anything of what was about to occur but he heard a distant “Go get baptized!” before he left the conflict behind entirely.

It was the morning rush-hour so the sidewalks were packed and no one was especially eager to get out of anyone else’s way. Throngs of daemons in business

attire streamed past each other – many of them in vaguely 19th century English style suits with infernal flourishes at the cuffs and shoulders, but some in far more distinctive dress. Among the majority of black and dark gray figures there was the occasional djinn who was wearing a long frock jacket in a rich scarlet hue or a succubus in a lace sapphire bodysuit or a squad of elven slavers garbed in patchwork leather mantles supplemented with pieces of silver plate-mail. There were daemons wearing imitation Tudor finery and plain utilitarian uniforms and clothes for which no human equivalent exists that could best be described maybe as luminescent sheaths. There were the naked and baroque, all together, in a fantastic cornucopia of maniacal apparel. And then there were daemons like Asmoe in white collared shirts tucked into their slacks, who bought the shoes they were wearing because they looked like the sort of shoes everyone else wore at work. But Asmoe at least made sure his shoes fit well – something that happened to be fortunate just then as he jumped over the leash of a human on its hands and knees while it was being taken for a walk by a tall hunched cyclops. Idiot. Asmoe didn't have time to berate them though – he had only 3 minutes left to make it to his cubicle. Even as the Tsuji Giri campus appeared beckoningly in view now, he knew this was impossible. His one hope was that something would come up for Bellicoso unexpectedly that morning which would keep him from calling the staff meeting on time. The troll was punctual however – his one professional quality that in this instance was actually going to screw Asmoe over. Sweating as he hustled across the Tsuji Giri parking lot, the late torturer quickly charged past some executives loitering outside the front door and disappeared inside.

Ignoring the elevators where a group of uneasy daemons waited, Asmoe headed straight for the stairs and began ascending them two at a time. He wasn't the only one with the same plan but the stairs were vacant enough that no one got in his way on his journey to the sixth floor. Pausing for a second when he got to the door there, Asmoe opened it slightly and looked out to see if Bellicoso was in view. Not finding the troll, Asmoe plunged in and tried to make his way to his cubicle without drawing too much attention to himself. As it turned out, he soon found himself walking directly behind Bellicoso while the troll was advancing towards Asmoe's cubicle. No doubt looking for him. Asmoe had to think fast – if the troll got there and didn't find him, he'd automatically assume Asmoe hadn't gotten to work on time and there'd be no way to convince him otherwise. Bellicoso would check the office surveillance footage if it came down to it. Looking up to make sure he wasn't presently in the line of sight of any (flesh and blood) surveillance eyes,

Asmoe found himself with the proverbial green light and, grabbing a hole-punch off of someone else's desk, he threw it at the back of Bellicoso's head. Asmoe heard the furious roar as one office tool struck another and swiftly crouched behind the nearest cubicle.

"Who hit Whomp!?" the troll bellowed and Asmoe could sense everyone in the vicinity stop moving. No one liked Bellicoso though so even if another daemon saw Asmoe trying to sneak past, they probably wouldn't say anything. Still, Asmoe was relieved as he circumvented the now livid troll and made it to his own desk without encountering one of his coworkers. He'd slunk into his chair and was just going through some folders he hastily pulled out of a drawer when his boss stomped into his cubicle, towering over him.

"You see!?" demanded the troll. Asmoe made a show of appearing confused.

"See what?" he replied. Angry beyond words, the troll took a huge bite out of the siding of Asmoe's cubicle before spitting it out.

"Why Whomp ask if worm saw!? Worm can't see!" snarled Bellicoso before adding with equal rage "Now! You come! Staff meet!"

Without even the dregs of enthusiasm necessary to fake normal enthusiasm, an assortment of daemons gradually trudged into a waiting conference room. There were cursory nods between those who knew each other but no open socializing – any outside observer would easily conclude that they all just wanted to get the meeting over with. All except Mr. Bellicoso who, recovering from his recent ambush less out of any particular personality trait than from a short attention span, was about to indulge in his favorite part of the day. The part where everyone had to listen to him.

Leering a gigantic toothy-grin dripping with drool, the troll made his way to the head of the room as the last few stragglers took their seats. Before he began to speak however, Bellicoso eyed the attendees and took a few long sips from a mug with the phrase "*Revenge is Pure Profit*" written on the side.

"Team; Whomp the boss one month so far. A great boss. Made the team strong. Sissy team needs a tough boss, a troll boss. Team lucky team got Whomp.

Is team grateful? No! Instead stupid team sneaks and whispers! Dumb team! Say it to troll's face! Can't! Weak team."

Here Bellicoso cleared his throat. "Whomp means, weak if Whomp not here. Team; the time now team. Time to obey Whomp. Year-end coming. Is team going to make quotas? Only they follow Whomp's lead."

It was obvious from the way he was carrying himself now that that the troll truly believed everyone was hanging on his every word. Inside the meat between his ears he must have had a vision of himself as an inspiring leader and this was enough to drown out the apathy surrounding him. When the troll was satisfied that he'd instilled his employees with as much zeal as they could handle, he dramatically flipped over the blank front page on a large multi-sheet display pad to reveal a title page that read "Team Whomp's Thurdy Day Bleetzkreeg." This would be today's presentation. It was especially unfortunate that Bellicoso had put a lot of effort into it – he had for example, drawn the charts himself. The whole presentation then was basically unintelligible but that didn't hinder the troll in the slightest.

"This here logistics," he began, pointing with one of his huge clawed fingers. "Bad. This finance. Bad. This services. Bad. This management. Good. You see? Whomp makes it clear to you stupids? Of course Whomp does."

And so it went on – for over an hour. Jealously, Asmoe watched as one of the wraiths in the room congealed into a puddle of mist and drifted out under the door without the troll noticing. He didn't have any similar powers though so he was forced to stay for the duration of the ordeal. Just when he thought he was going to rip out his own jugular for the reprieve it promised though, the meeting finally came to an end. Exhausted, the assembled daemons began to wander out under the gloating stare of Bellicoso. Too brain-dead to even move at first, Asmoe turned listlessly and looked over a few chairs to where a decapitated incubus' head was scanning the room.

"Mortoro?" asked Asmoe. The incubus' head used its lower jaw to shift its direction towards him.

"Hey Asmoe. Yeah. Don't mind me. I got dismembered about a week ago but I'm honestly feeling a lot better now." Being polite, Asmoe didn't ask what Mortoro

could possibly accomplish at work in his present condition – the incubus was in maintenance.

“Need a lift?” Asmoe asked instead. As the torturer made his offer however, an ogre appeared and picked up Mortoro’s head.

“Nope. Here’s my ride,” said the incubus and Asmoe waved hesitantly as Mortoro was taken away. Bellicoso himself was gone now and Asmoe decided he ought to get going as well. He had a full day. The staff meeting could’ve been a whole lot worse though. That was, honestly, the most eloquent Asmoe had ever seen Bellicoso be.

Trying to compensate for the time wasted in the lecture they’d just had, the daemons who worked under Mr. Bellicoso’s management were all hurriedly getting on with their duties. Asmoe however had only just gotten back to his desk, and was about to sit down, when he heard a voice from an adjacent cubicle chide him.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” tittered Maenada the Harpy. Yeah, thanks a lot, thought Asmoe sarcastically. She was talking about Sneer. He didn’t see why he couldn’t decide on his own whether or not to let the goblin out, but having office resources and not making use of them was a fairly serious infraction. So he was forced to make a show of at least taking the little pest out of his cage, until he could sign Sneer back over to Malice that is. Making his way to the subhuman storage area, Asmoe tried to remember where he’d stashed his new helper. In row after row he stared into the cages of creatures waiting to be released. A crazed gremlin with eyes pointing in different directions, like a chameleon, stood prison-style with his elbows resting outside the cage, hands holding the bars. It didn’t say a word. A gnome meanwhile made eye contact with Asmoe and stumbled over to beg something off him.

“Got a smoke boss?” asked the gnome. The torturer shook his head. Asmoe was getting ready to go hunt for the sign-in sheet when he saw a silent goblin practicing his stabbing technique on a non-existent foe. It was Sneer. Incredibly the goblin seemed unfazed by his stint in cramped quarters and was displaying as much energy as ever. What did they say about goblins again? They’re like rubber balls or something? Meaning that nothing you do to them really affects them in any significant way.

“Alright, I’m taking you out now Sneer,” said Asmoe reluctantly. As soon as the door to the cage was open, the pint-sized goblin jumped down from the ledge and looked around eagerly with bunched fists.

“Sneer knew the master would come for him. Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Sneer is irreplaceable!” Asmoe couldn’t help but laugh a little – goblins could be bought by the dozen for the price of a single human cadaver. In terms of their value in Hell, they were like live pigeons or rats on Earth. Asmoe added a joke for his own private amusement.

“I’ll say this Sneer; there’s no way I’d ever want to replace you.”

When they got back to his office, Asmoe had an epiphany. “Bite this,” said the daemon as he handed Sneer a replica iron skull that he used as a paper weight.

“Until when?” asked the goblin.

“Until it’s dead,” replied Asmoe solemnly. Sneer laughed an evil laugh.

“Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Dead! Dead! It won’t escape!” and the goblin began to gnaw on the metal skull, despite the fact that it was too big for his mouth and his teeth couldn’t even scratch it. Relieved that he’d found something to permanently occupy Sneer, Asmoe got down to business.

The next case on his docket was going to be a challenge – a giant who’d been indicted a second time for begging. His file even said that he’d somehow managed to avoid corporal punishment after the original indictment, which meant that the floodgates were open now. Repeat transgressions in Hell were severely punished – especially if the cruelties that could’ve been imposed the first time weren’t. The justice system in Hell was never lenient but occasionally daemons were given less than maximum penalties due to complicated legal justifications. In such cases, the bloodlust of the prosecution would go unsatisfied but they always made sure to indulge it in full if they got another chance later. On the file in front of him, there was stamped in thick red ink “INFLICT UTMOST PAIN” repeatedly and in the “Additional Details” section of the admission form, Asmoe noted that someone from the prosecutor’s office would be in attendance. This case was a matter of

successful theater then. The difficulty Asmoe foresaw wasn't specific to having an audience though, with a normal case he could make the assignment writhe and scream as much as he wanted, but rather from the fact that this specific giant was diagnosed with OSD or Obtuse Sensory Disorder. The relevance of which was that their pain threshold was far higher than normal. Nothing Asmoe could do about it though. The drugs he had at his disposal to heighten pain sensation wouldn't work in this case. Instead of sitting there thinking about the problem however, Asmoe realized he'd better get over to the torture chambers and have a look right away.

Incidentally, on his way there, an unexpected event transpired. The Tsuji Giri interoffice loudspeakers suddenly blared a hideous klaxon before a shrill crackling voice took its place. "This is a company announcement! We repeat – this is a company announcement! Due to low productivity reports, lunch time has been adjusted from 26 minutes to 22 minutes until further notice. Anyone found sitting and eating outside designated periods will be summarily penalized. Everyone pledge yourselves in eternal allegiance to our glorious regime! That is all." The glorious regime meaning the federal government, a staple dedication made in announcements throughout every corporate workplace in Hell. Not that the government and the corporations were divided in any real sense. Fascism had been perfected in Hell.

One floor up was where the music happened. The seventh floor was wholly devoted to torture with numerous individual chambers and holding cells being paired together in concentric hubs around torture instrument storage bays. Each hub had six chambers and six holding cells while, in and out of these, armed security forces transported shackled prisoners in various stages of detention. Asmoe's giant was already in holding so all he had to do was lead him into the chamber and start in on them. Asmoe was worried that when he got there he'd find the prosecutor's observer already waiting but he was pleasantly surprised. Not wanting to waste any more time, Asmoe pulled the obedient sixteen foot tall giant into the torture chamber by their chains and tied them tight against a wall using some metal rings attached there.

Kneeling now, the giant still hadn't said anything and Asmoe took a moment to thoughtfully consider his next move. Then, marching out the room and returning with a frightening looking hammer in one hand, he went straight over to the giant and hit him directly in the face a few times. Showing little response, the giant

uttered a single meager “Ow” lacking any real conviction. Asmoe’s heart sank. This was going to be like flogging a lagoon. Unsure of what to do, and still without the observer arriving yet, Asmoe decided to strike up a conversation with his new assignment.

“You know why you’re here?” he inquired.

“Yes,” replied the giant. “I was asking for money from strangers.” Asmoe stroked his chin.

“And why would you do a thing like that?” asked the torturer in a friendly manner. The giant made a sad face.

“My brother got sick,” he said.

“Oh, your brother,” whispered Asmoe using his best imitation of concern, “Where’s he?” The giant tilted his head to the side.

Puzzled, Asmoe repeated himself quietly again “Where?”

The giant sighed. “In the corner,” he said morosely.

Asmoe looked and confirmed that the corner of the room was indeed empty. Not so much as a spook present. Examining the giant with wry curiosity, the torturer carefully walked to the corner indicated.

Pointing at the nothing there, Asmoe looked at the giant and asked, “This is your brother?” while searching his face. The giant nodded once more and Asmoe was sure that he was too far gone in his idiocy to be pretending.

“Then I guess you’re not to blame,” said the torturer happily. Now he had an idea. The giant’s glum face lifted into a tender smile before Asmoe erupted with orchestrated fury.

“You wretch! You miserable goon! You’ll have your brother beg for you will you!? Then take that! And that!” Asmoe punctuated his tirade with great swings of his hammer and it was all he could do not to be overcome by the hilarity of it.

“No! No! Leave him alone!” cried the giant in response and he was immediately bawling like a child. Instead, Asmoe mimed dragging the giant’s imaginary brother over to him and started wailing on them in front of the poor giant. He couldn’t take it – the giant was moaning now and convulsing with desperate sorrow. Asmoe however didn’t relent and his plan happened to work out perfectly.

As expected, the prosecutor’s observer soon arrived, appearing in the viewing window of the torture chamber. From his angle, it looked like Asmoe was hammering the giant’s knees and that the whole affair was going off splendidly. The giant was thrashing around and making an awful noise while Asmoe threw himself passionately into his performance, caught up in its intensity. As such the observer had to knock really hard on the glass to get the torturer’s attention. Asmoe turned to the window, wiping some sweat from his brow with the forearm in which his hammer was being wielded, and paused deferentially. Ignoring the intercom, the observer simply tipped his bowler hat to convey his appreciation for Asmoe doing such a fine job and then pointed at his wristwatch to indicate that he was in a hurry. Asmoe smiled and waved, thereby sending the observer on his way. As soon as he was gone, Asmoe slumped to the floor to catch his breath. Usually he didn’t work himself into such a frenzy during his torture sessions. Not his style. Had to improvise though. When his attention eventually returned to the giant again, Asmoe saw that his assignment was still racked with despair.

“Come on you big dummy, it wasn’t that bad,” protested the torturer.

“My brother...” sobbed the giant.

Asmoe frowned, “Hey look! He’s fine! The hammer cured him!” he exclaimed a second later.

“Really?” asked the giant suspiciously.

Asmoe stood up with the hammer tucked in his belt and held out his open hands towards the floor, as if to say “If you don’t believe me, look for yourself.” Then he headed towards the instrument bay to put the tool he’d taken out back on its proper shelf.

He'd gotten away with it! Broke half a dozen strict policies in the process but it was done and he had another case scratched from his docket! As he hung up the hammer he'd used and signed it back in however, something started to bother him. That giant shouldn't have even been sent his way. Just another example of bureaucratic incompetence. But given the state of their file it was only a matter of time before the giant was recycled through another torture chamber, if not with Tsuji Giri then somewhere else. As Asmoe considered this, he noticed a fellow practitioner of the morbid arts stream in at the far side of the bay. It was none other than Gehenna-Lich the Ravenous, a first-rate torturer for centuries and a perennial candidate for Tsuji Giri's employee of the month. The undulating phantom quickly got the tools he'd come for and made haste to get back to the chamber he was using. Seeing Asmoe looking his way though, the phantom offered a polite nod in his direction before departing. Gehenna-Lich wouldn't do what he was thinking about doing. So? Fine, he'd do it. Muttering to himself, Asmoe went out to one of the holding cell's external doors and grabbed the file that was resting in the transparent slot there. An imaginary brother!

Asmoe shook his head and went through the forms in the file until he found the one he was looking for. There he put in a request to have the giant reclassified as psychiatrically exempt from torture on the grounds that he was immune to its positive effects. By doing this he wasn't breaking any rules; the problem was he was following the rules a little too scrupulously. In Hell it was pretty common for the rules to be written in such a way that you could get in just as much trouble by following them as you could by not following them. They were deliberately contradictory so that daemons in higher positions could exercise arbitrary power over those below them – something that had actually been developed as a result of fact finding missions regarding the administrative policies of governments on Earth. It even had a technical name that'd become very popular to bandy about – selective enforcement practices. It was all the rage in current management theory and it was probably only a matter of time before everything was made illegal so that every daemon in Hell was at the total mercy of the Archons. Or maybe Asmoe was just being overly pessimistic. Wasn't every daemon already at the mercy of the Archons? They didn't need to make the system more totalitarian; it was already as totalitarian as anyone could possibly hope for. The system was magnificent.

Descending to the sixth floor again, Asmoe couldn't help whistling a little as he approached his cubicle – the thrill of minor rebellion. His whistling came to a dead stop however when he saw Sneer waiting for him. The goblin was standing guard in a frozen salute and didn't move until Asmoe was staring at his work space in dismay. Most of his things had been wrecked beyond repair.

“What in Satan's trick bag have you done?” gasped Asmoe. Sneer saluted him anew and then gave a report with extravagant flourishing gestures.

“The master ordered Sneer to bite the skull. Treacherous skull, it refused to surrender! So Sneer had an idea. Yes! Sneer, the goblin! Using his terrifying brain powers, Sneer captured a machine to help him bite things. Then, when the mighty skull had been slain, Sneer defeated all of its allies! Yes! None can stand in Sneer's path! None! Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh.”

The machine in question was a mechanical vice that torturer's would often use for immobilizing limbs – Asmoe had no clue how Sneer had got his claws on one though.

“Sanctify this,” hissed the daemon. He grabbed Sneer by the arm and started to drag him off, the goblin bouncing in the air like a loose satchel.

“Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Another battle commences!” proclaimed Sneer with undaunted enthusiasm. Asmoe was too frustrated to yell at him but he did make a point of hauling the goblin around as inconsiderately as he could. Not that it had the desired effect – Sneer stared dementedly and smiled as his nose and ears flopped all over the place in tandem with his gangly limbs. The goblin might as well have been the uvula in the mouth of Moloch for all he cared. Soon though he would be Ms. Necrobias' problem again. Asmoe had done his best, he really had, but the goblin had proved himself worse than useless. He was a menace, an impediment to professionalism in the delivery of essential torturing services. Asmoe couldn't endure another minute of it. Still, as he got nearer to Malice's office, the problem of exactly how he was going to change their agreement began to dominate his thoughts. If he barged in there furious she wouldn't take too kindly to that – they'd be pretty much over at that point. Asmoe slowed his advance and began to think things through carefully.

He had nothing to bribe her with, nothing to offer in exchange for taking Sneer back. Could he play up the sympathy angle? No. That'd make him look weak, which would destroy any attraction she might be feeling towards him. With all his other options eliminated, Asmoe decided on the usual. Lies. He'd go with lies.

Every employee at Tsuji Giri was just a single bladed tooth on the chainsaw of the corporate machine, but they weren't all equal. Malice Necrobias for example was a certified VID (Very Important Daemon) and her offices made sure no one had any doubts about this. Its doors were modeled on the famous "Doors to Hell" by August Rodin, except instead of having wailing humans in contorted shapes, the doors of Malice's office depicted various species of subhuman suffering the same fate. They were also a bright polished gold and so conveyed an intense baroque splendor. Naturally, you couldn't just go right up and open them. Or even knock. Instead you had to go through Malice's secretary, Mrs. Qliphoth. An elongated skeletal figure that looked like the mummified corpse of a woman who'd been stretched into the shape of a praying mantis, Mrs. Qliphoth was not a ghoul you made idle conversation with. Asmoe approached her respectfully and waited as she finished hitting a few keys on a large ornate typewriter. When she was done, she hesitated before looking over her small round glasses at him.

"What'da'ya'want?" she rasped and her voice sounded like a wooden coffin being pried open after decades in the grave.

"I want to speak to Malice," said Asmoe, trying to project as much gravity as he could.

"About what?" countered the secretary. Asmoe held up a dangling goblin while Sneer pointed at himself with his free hand and grinned for Mrs. Qliphoth's benefit. "Ms. Necrobias is out. Would you like to leave a message?" she asked coldly, emphasizing Malice's formal title and last name as an implicit rebuke for the familiarity with which Asmoe had referred to her.

"Can I leave the goblin with my message?" inquired an exasperated Asmoe.

"No," she responded. Asmoe sighed and looked around as if that would somehow help. Around him all he saw were other daemons apparently able to work with an enviable lack of distractions. Asmoe gave up.

“Do you know when she’ll be in again?” he asked, crestfallen.

“No. She’s on sick leave. As I said, I can take a message about your... thing... but that’s it. You’ll have to wait until she’s feeling better.”

The nerve of him, a nobody, trying to impose himself on the head of Subhuman Resources. Asmoe mumbled an “Okay. Never mind,” and wearily departed. A couple footsteps in the clacking of Mrs. Qliphoth’s typewriter started again with rejuvenated villainy.

His cubicle of course was still waiting for him in a state of disaster. The sight of it, of his things destroyed with mischievous glee, caused him to stop and grind his teeth for a moment. Reaching down, he picked up an electrical cord that ‘d been ripped from his smashed file scanner. The cord drooped from one hand as Sneer hung from the other, wildly trying to snatch a fly out of the air that was buzzing near him. The goblin seemed to be siphoning all of his energy and Asmoe looked up in a silent undirected plea. There he saw the ceiling fan, spinning round and round, going nowhere. Like life itself. But as he stared at the ceiling fan something also began to stumble around in the basement of his mind. What? The ceiling fan kept spinning. The ceiling fan, the ceiling fan, right overhead. If he was standing on his desk he could just reach it. His eyes widening at his own thoughts, Asmoe looked again at the cord he held and the goblin. Then he smiled at Sneer, who happily smiled back. A few minutes later, the torturer had taken his seat once more and was busy cleaning up his work area, swiveling around in his chair as he did so.

After he’d organized the mess as much as possible, Asmoe pulled some files out of his desk drawers and started to go through them. A short time later, Abyssphagus from accounting happened to be slithering by and he came over to say hello. Before he could get a word out however, he looked up and saw Sneer tied to the ceiling fan with the electrical cord. The goblin was being spun quite fast but, while he seemed to be dizzy, he was not struggling for release.

“Working on some new techniques?” asked Abyssphagus as he pointed up at Sneer with one of his tentacles.

Asmoe shook his head, a grim expression on his face. “Goblin stress testing,” he replied with all the seriousness of war. Abyssphagus scratched his head using another tentacle.

“Huh. I’d have figured you’d be stuffing him in a blender somewhere by now,” remarked the nautilus ghoul.

“That’s not a bad idea,” quipped Asmoe and him and Abyssphagus exchanged friendly gestures as the ghoul now went on his way. Asmoe likewise got a few curious looks from passing coworkers but, if he made eye contact with them, they immediately saw that he was all business. Sneer meanwhile had long ago passed out.

The rest of the work day was more arduous than eventful. With only an hour until lunch, Asmoe used the time he had left after tying up Sneer to fill out some requisition forms for the office items the goblin had ruined. On each one he made sure to check the box marked “Goblin Related Mischief” and then signed and submitted these to the teller at the supply department. There his forms were perfunctorily examined and stamped before being filed for review by an inventory specialist daemon, who themselves then had to submit the forms to an overseer daemon to ensure that the employee requesting supplies wasn’t in the habit of doing so. If no problems were found, double the cost of the supplies was then deducted from the employee’s next paycheck – note too that bringing your own office supplies from outside sources was subject to grievous penalties. The supplies themselves would take about two weeks to arrive though. But with that taken care of, it was lunch and Asmoe took his 22 minutes on the rooftop veranda. The sky had begun to drizzle lightly with seething brimstone and the torturer watched as a few stragglers ran indoors for cover. He admired the excellent view of the New York Nether while he greedily finished a liver cutlet burrito wrapped in a Caucasian skin tortilla. Then it was back to the seventh floor for a fresh round of torture where Asmoe found out the assignment waiting for him was a doppelgänger.

Asmoe hated doppelgängers and this one gave him no reason to revise his feelings. As a species they were overwhelmingly driven by the need to deceive others, even when there was no clear gain in doing so, and this one immediately tried to disorient him by adopting his physical appearance for the torture session. Unfortunately for the doppelgänger, Asmoe was actually feeling a fair amount of

self-loathing at the moment so he was perfectly content to unload a crossbow at a quality imitation of himself for a few hours. When this was done, Asmoe was quickly dragged off to one of a series of company safety meetings he'd inexplicably forgotten about. It proved to be as tedious as any other, the sort of presentation where they gave advice like "When spraying an assignment with sulphuric acid, always wear eye protection" and other obvious things. Not that they cared about the well-being of their employees but workplace injuries did negatively impact productivity.

When the safety presentation concluded it was almost time to leave and Asmoe plodded back to his cubicle to get ready to go. On his way there, navigating the corridors of a part of the campus he rarely got around to, Asmoe thought he heard something that sent a chill through his entire body. Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. No! It couldn't be. The corridor he was in was empty but Asmoe looked back and forth multiple times to see if Sneer was lurking in ambush. And when he couldn't find the goblin he waited. Then after a minute or so passed without Sneer descending on him, Asmoe started walking again. He had made his way to a large atrium where small cloistered groups of daemons were talking amongst themselves when he thought he heard it again. Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Asmoe expected to find the goblin scuttling behind one of the daemons passing by but this never materialized. While he was standing around however he suddenly found himself in the path of a thirty foot titan and only managed to dodge out of the way just in time. The glorious deity with flesh like pale radiant gemstone strode by without even noticing him and for that he was lucky. Titans were so far above him in the hierarchy that even just accidentally being a nuisance to one of them could mark the end of one's career if they were feeling vindictive. And in Hell everyone was vindictive. That was one of the few things that you could really take for granted.

Tracing an upside-down pentagram over his heart in mock superstition for his good fortune, Asmoe hurried on. He was back in the work area of his own division in a short while without hearing any more of Sneer's laughter, but his tension hadn't subsided. He expected the goblin to leap out and strike at any moment. Worse, what if he didn't find Sneer where he'd tied them? The nightmare of forever being stalked by an obsessive goblin snatched him up like a giant owl descending out of midnight. He made a point of silently admonishing himself the rest of the way to his cubicle but when he got there he was greatly relieved to find the goblin still in rotation. He honestly wondered though if he could get away with

tying Sneer up during all his shifts. Probably not. In any case, he took the still unconscious goblin down after stopping the fan with a lip-stapler, and carried it back to storage. There, after stuffing Sneer inside, he saw the gnome who'd tried to get a smoke off him earlier and, feeling more charitable, took a cigarette out and handed it to them.

"Thanks boss," was all the gnome said before retreating to the darkness at the back of his cage.

Asmoe was going to offer to light the cigarette despite the gnome not asking but he heard a woozy goblin voice say "Has the windmill... given up?" to no one in particular and he quietly departed instead.

Another shift was now officially over. Despite all the interruptions, he'd gotten two more assignments knocked off his docket and that wasn't too bad. Eager to leave Tsuji Giri behind for the day, Asmoe rushed to get his things and then took off as quickly as he could out the front doors. Nearly breaking into a run as he crossed the parking lot, Asmoe gradually slowed down to a normal pace. It was only about 6:20 and soon the torturer decided that he deserved a reward for enduring the miserable day he'd had. Then, remembering an Ethiopian rug he'd seen in a catalogue recently (Made from only scarless Ethiopians, or so the ad promised) he changed his course. Before going home today he'd get a little something nice for his place. Passing a cluster of idols on his right, the seven archfiends and various other notable daemons in depiction plus a few too of De Sade and Vlad and Blake, Asmoe soon found himself approaching a larva train station. In Hell, public transit was always an expensive and cramped experience but the trains were still the fastest way to get around sometimes. Said trains consisted of enormous wormlike creatures with thousands of small hooked legs covering their bodies. That they were able to be used for mass transportation resulted from the fact they'd had large seating compartments implanted into their bodies for travellers as well as a solitary one for the conductors who controlled the larva through electrocution devices embedded in their nervous systems. Briefly glancing at some graffiti which read "Freemasons are scum" in scrawled dripping letters, Asmoe bought a ticket at a dispenser and then descended down the stairs of the station to one of the waiting platforms. A number of other daemons were already standing there and, finding a relatively sparse area, he took his place among them. During the wait, some coughing and a few daemons talking quietly among themselves could be heard, but

for the most part silence prevailed until a train finally arrived. The swathe of wind and the tremendous noise of the train's churning legs coming to a halt then enveloped them and this was punctuated with a hiss as rows of automatic doors slid open. All the daemons made for the doors at once but who was allowed to enter first was decided by the order of who seemed too dangerous for everyone else to barge in front of. Asmoe got in with the upper-middle half of the group and took a seat he had to brush some loose teeth off of. Kids!

He was sitting with his arms folded, looking out the window at the passing scene of a factory complex billowing dark smoke and geysers of flame, when he realized he'd forgotten something. Not at work either. The book! Asmoe had left *Where's Jack?* in that taxi chariot this morning. It wasn't as if Thoth would really care but... then he remembered that he was supposed to meet Thoth tonight too! He didn't have his phone so he looked for a monitor display in the train and saw he still had time to make it to the library. A good thing because he couldn't call to tell Thoth he'd be late. He immediately got to his feet now but as he did he realized that the next stop was a ways off. Impatiently he grabbed a vertical hand rail while unconsciously tapping one of his feet and glancing at the train monitor where news text crawled across the bottom of an animated graphic of every line and the trains moving on them.

Judging from what he was seeing, the train he wanted to catch to get downtown would be reaching the station he was getting off at almost right after he'd reach it. He'd have to hustle. Then he noticed that a withered ghoul with a cane and a face like a lamprey's was glowering at him from the seat nearest to where he was standing. The fidgeting maybe? Asmoe stared back until the doors opened for the next stop and then rapidly performed a rite of blessing on the ghoul. The shocked ghoul reacted by dropping his cane with a clatter and Asmoe danced off the train, laughing evilly.

Chapter Three

The cities of Hell tend to be roughly the same age as their respective earthly counterparts and the New York Nether was no exception. Unlike in modern human cities though where urban planning is fairly well-established, in Hell cities were laid out with the sheer chaos of brute force. The concept of zoning restrictions for example would've dumbfounded the average daemon bureaucrat at city hall since their overriding concern was to extract as much payment as possible in exchange for the property licenses they dispensed. If this meant building munition factories on top of schools then so be it; the result of which was that every district in the New York Nether was also a melee of different historical eras from the earliest beginnings of the city to the present. Things were partially cannibalized far more often than they were completely torn down and that was very much evident in the vicinity of the central library. Almost four centuries worth of architecture was crammed into a thirty-six block area, with the inner sixteen wholly taken up by the library itself. This largely consisted of a pit in the shape of a hexagon with flat vertical walls that descended into darkness even during the daily zenith of the sun. Out of the pit though a thin inverted pyramid rose from the depths of the abyss, widening to a radius of about four blocks a few stories above street level and then narrowing to a more acute angle as its four trapezoid faces ascended another twelve stories. Only one of these though had an entrance and this was reached by a long bridge of compacted skeletons about thirty feet wide and nine hundred feet across which climbed gradually and inconsistently towards a diamond tessellated portcullis that was open between the hours of twelve and nine pm, six days a week, with Satyrdays closed for the bacchanalias.

While the walkway of the bridge was worn smooth with use, the exterior protruded with both humanoid bones and monstrous ones. This was noticed by Asmoe as he approached, swinging off a gas streetlamp from an outstretched arm, but he didn't give it more than a glance as he began to walk up the inclined path it offered him. A few other daemons were likewise coming and going and Asmoe deftly maneuvered around the slower of these with the intent of finding Thoth before his shifted ended. Asmoe knew where the cabaret Demiurge was so, at worse, he could head over there if he couldn't find his pal, but that'd be a rather disappointing way to start the evening. Passing through the expansive outer alcove beyond the portcullis gateway, Asmoe observed small groups of scholars standing around in various discussions and others giving mathematical and scientific demonstrations on chalkboards to whoever was interested. He continued on however and swiftly made his way to the huge arched opening that provided admission to the sanctum of the library where its archives and computer stations were located. Flanking it were two sets of twin sentry golems, one group on either side and, despite being innocent of all bad intentions (at least relating to the library) Asmoe felt a faint quiver of unease as he went inside. They were there mainly as a precautionary measure against terrorist actions but they'd also suppress any public disorders that occurred in the area, as well as apprehend any criminals – either one of which would consist of the transgressor being pounded into a broken heap of whimpering repentance by the golems' massive fists until agents from the Bureau of Diabolic Security, or DS as it was known, finally arrived.

Wandering the main floor, Asmoe couldn't find Thoth at first. Normally his best fiend would be working at one of the disinformation booths but it was possible he was assisting another of the library's patrons with finding something. Thoth would be expecting him though where he was so Asmoe decided to simply browse some materials in the meantime. Looking at the new releases in the humor section, Asmoe had just picked up a freshly translated edition of the Malleus Maleficarum when he saw a minotaur appear in the distance. It was Thoth, but he was with another daemon as Asmoe would expect, so, instead of walking over, Asmoe pointed at him in a jovial manner until, noticing this, Thoth made eye contact and responded with a thumbs up. Apparently it was still a little early. Turning back to the book he was holding, Asmoe proceeded to casually flip through its pages, reading snippets from whatever sections happened to catch his interest as he did.

What he found was funny enough that by the time Thoth emerged at his side, Asmoe was doing his best to stifle an avalanche of laughter.

“What do’ya think?” asked the minotaur librarian and Asmoe replied “It’s hilarious! I’ll have to pick it up sometime.”

Thoth gave him a knowing look. “Busy huh?”

Asmoe made a glum face as he countered with “That’s an understatement,” but it was all in good spirits. Thoth grinned.

“Well, I’m glad you made it tonight. Come on, let’s both forget about work,” and he motioned behind him for them to leave.

Asmoe put the book down and, remembering that the poetry reading at the cabaret didn’t start for another two hours, asked “So where we headed?” while falling in stride with the minotaur. Thoth slapped him on the back.

“To the Sewer Tap. Drinks are on me tonight!” Asmoe clapped once in relish and the two daemons began to make their way out of the library, talking animatedly amongst themselves. The Sewer Tap meanwhile was a popular dive bar in the district but it didn’t serve sewage, contrary to its name. Nope. Only the usual assortment of poisons and bodily fluids.

The sun had completely set already as they were crossing the skeleton bridge and now only the ambient light of the buildings, streets, and traffic illuminated them. They made an interesting pair. On the one hand there was Asmoe, a lean clean-cut figure in generic office-wear with both reptilian and mammalian features who had two horns like harpoon-blades growing vertically from the top of his head; on the other there was Thoth, a stocky minotaur in a lapel coat who was short for his species, about a foot less than Asmoe, and thickly bearded with big yak horns that were almost as wide as his shoulders. Of course they didn’t attract any special attention from the other daemons streaming through the downtown nether but they were competing with the full panoply of Hell’s bizarreness so that’s hardly surprising. They were starting to get close to the Sewer Tap when they made a right turn, passing by a statue called Diogenes the Philosopher. It depicted a crazy-eyed old man with a blanket draped over his shoulders done in a classical style. Under

the statue a quote read "*If only hunger was so easy to satisfy,*" and the meaning of this was explained by the fact that the figure of Diogenes was sculpted in explicit masturbation. The monument itself was erected in mockery of humanity but it also betrayed the underlying tension that resided in the daemonic contempt for, and dependence on, humans.

"I tried to reach you on your phone earlier," said Thoth in an offhand way as they did their best to avoid some panhandling gremlins.

"Yeah, sorry, I left it at home this morning. You know me," replied Asmoe, a distinct note of self-deprecation in his voice.

"Always in a frenzy," laughed Thoth. "Speaking of which, you're still up for bloodshed on New Year's right?" There was a note of insistence in the minotaur's question.

"Of course, of course," assured Asmoe, sweeping his hand to dismiss any thought to the contrary. "That'll be right after I turn in my numbers so either way I'll be good to go. If I make the quota we can celebrate; if I don't, well, I'll need a pick-me-up." Thoth caught the slight edge in Asmoe's voice as the two demons arrived outside the bar they were headed for.

"Good. But none of that morose talk. We're two unshackled demons tonight and were going to make the most of it!" the minotaur proclaimed before adding, "And I don't know about you but I could really sink my teeth into a she-demon right about now." Asmoe rolled his eyes (as Thoth mischievously wagged his eyebrows) and then followed as the minotaur disappeared through a dark open door. Above, a neon sign that read "The Sewer Tap" flickered and sizzled with electricity.

Inside the music was roaring. Sounding something like a recording from an industrial abattoir mixed with heavy-metal accompaniment, it was just the sort of thing to put young demons in a sociable mood. Asmoe looked around and saw that the crowd that night was mostly made up of artist-bohemian types as well as a few professionals like himself. With no trolls or goblins in sight, Asmoe grabbed a stool next to Thoth at the bar and settled in, feeling good.

“What’s your suicide!?” shouted the minotaur.

Asmoe had to think for a second. “A pint of O Negative with a splash of adrenaline!” he yelled.

Thoth nodded and, flagging down an incubus who was tending the bar, ordered a pint for each of them. While they waited for their drinks, Asmoe looked around the room some more. First he noticed a trio of sirens sitting at a table by themselves and leaning over a tray of empty shot glasses in animated conversation. After admiring them for a moment, his attention moved on to a pair of elves and a cyclops playing darts on a live human target stretched out across part of the wall. Surprisingly the cyclops appeared to be winning despite the handicap of not having any depth perception. Then the bartender returned with Asmoe’s and Thoth’s order and handed a drink to them separately with each hand. The two fiends clinked their glasses together on receiving these and Thoth immediately started to drain a decent portion of his. Asmoe was going to join him but he noticed the bartender trying to get his attention.

“Long time no see!” hollered the incubus. Had it been a long time since he’d been to the Sewer Tap? Asmoe tried to recall if he’d met the daemon he was talking to before. Maybe they thought he was someone else? In any case, Asmoe decided to play along.

“Evil never rests!” he claimed by way of explanation. The bartender nodded as he started to clean a pitcher out with a cloth.

“How’s work!?” the incubus inquired.

“It’s torture!” laughed Asmoe. The bartender chuckled as he put the pitcher he was holding under a counter.

“If you think torture’s torture you should try serving drinks to amateur comedians!” he retorted.

“Me?” protested Asmoe with a smile. The incubus shook his head.

“You’re a worrying case but no, I mean your fiend!” Hearing this, Thoth looked at the bartender with exaggerated shock and then again at Asmoe with over-the-top gestures of denial. They all shared a laugh before the bartender had another customer to deal with and walked off to the other end of the bar.

“I didn’t know you knew him!” shouted Thoth in surprise.

Asmoe shrugged as he yelled back, “I’m not sure I do!”

A couple drinks later the two daemons were really starting to enjoy themselves. Like surfers who’d caught the perfect wave, they were riding high on the crest of their intoxication. Daemon physiology is such that blood naturally has a certain vivifying effect whenever they drink it, but the potency of what they were enjoying that night was the result of added adrenaline and a hyper-oxygenation resulting from special brewing processes. In Hell, alcohol doesn’t exist so this was their daemonic alternative.

“Mm mm... that’s some fresh haemoglobin right there,” mused Thoth to himself as he untilted his glass after a long gulp.

“What!?” shouted Asmoe in response.

Thoth waved the question away good-naturedly and then patted himself down, looking for his cigarettes. Before he could find them though, Asmoe was offering Thoth his and the minotaur took one out of the packet gratefully. The torturer then lit both their cigarettes and the two daemons clinked glasses again. Smoking of course is legal everywhere in daemon society. Everyone smokes in Hell – it’s considered almost patriotic.

“Oh! There was something I wanted to tell you!” remarked Asmoe suddenly.

“And!?” yelled Thoth.

“And... I’m... coming up blank!” laughed Asmoe, “But I should mention I lost that book of yours! Sorry!” Thoth took a long drag off his cigarette with a puzzled look on his face.

“The...” began the minotaur but he was interrupted.

“Yeah!” interjected Asmoe. Thoth blew out a series of smoke rings, each one sailing perfectly through its predecessor.

“I suppose we’re archenemies now!” joked the minotaur.

“A curse on your house!” toasted Asmoe and they clinked glasses a third time.

Eventually Thoth and Asmoe were, all by themselves, having the best time out of everyone in the bar and this naturally attracted some attention from the other patrons. As it so happened, two of the sirens that Asmoe had checked out earlier came and sat down on the stools next to his minotaur pal. Drunkenly, Asmoe looked for the other one beside him and then everywhere else but apparently she’d left the bar already. That worked out, he thought. Two of them, two of us. He didn’t realize that when the sirens had discussed sitting down with them, one had inevitably decided to take off, not wanting to end up a fifth wheel. When Asmoe’s focus returned to the newly arrived sirens he watched as the one nearest Thoth easily engaged his pal in conversation. Asmoe was so addled from the rounds of blood they’d been having that at first he didn’t notice the other siren repeatedly glancing in his direction.

“What’d you write your thesis on!?” the one siren asked Thoth. The minotaur stubbed out his cigarette before replying.

“The title was ‘The Semiotics of Daemonic Materialism’ but in a graduating ordeal thesis everyone writes about the same thing! It’s a summary of orthodoxy!” This confused her.

“So what’s the point!?” she yelled, frowning. Thoth laughed.

“To show that you can regurgitate everything they’ve been brainwashing you to believe! It’s essential for certain kinds of academic advancement and for attaining positions in posts that affect information control! I work in a library!” The siren Thoth was talking to seemed impressed by this. Asmoe however finally realized he was disappointing the other siren by not taking the seat next to hers

and, downing the last of his glass, he went over to introduce himself. She feigned being preoccupied with her phone as he approached but then looked up when she sensed that he'd passed her by. Asmoe had intended to talk to her but something on a nearby monitor diverted him. He went over to the wraith who'd activated it and asked them to increase the volume, which they almost had to max out just to be heard.

“Corporate Sieges. Tonight the software company Hexadigm has encircled the headquarters of its chief rival, Datagore Ltd, with a mixed army of about 18,000. Sections of the San Francisco Nether are blocked off as Hexadigm employees and mercenaries attempt a corporate takeover but it appears that Datagore had enough forewarning to allow them to erect various fortifications. The outcome then is far from certain, and no word yet on whether government officials will intervene, although that does seem unlikely given the localized nature of the conflict. Tune in later to see who'll ultimately triumph. We'll have this story and more at 11 with me, your anchor, Ossuary Corpsemauler.”

“Okay! Thanks!” shouted Asmoe to the wraith who turned back to the monitor and began flipping through the channels. Joining Thoth again he found the minotaur alone with a half-serious scowl on his face.

“Why'd you do that!?” Thoth yelled, meaning how Asmoe had ignored the other siren. This was apparently what caused both the she-daemons to depart.

“My wound!” hollered Asmoe in casual apology, “I saw something on the monitors!” Thoth picked up his latest pint of blood which had only a few gulps left.

“What was it!?” the minotaur asked. Asmoe resumed his place on the stool next to him and leaned in.

“Hexadigm's at war! And I had the head of one of their senior manager's in a vice only last month!” Asmoe seemed to remember that a bunch of them had been brought in due to a general lack of initiative. Maybe he was partly responsible for the bold acquisition strategy they were undertaking now – he'd like to think so. Thoth however made a show of being immensely disappointed in Asmoe.

“And the beast of workaholism devours another golden opportunity! You have a disease my poor fiend! A disease!” Asmoe opened his mouth to object but paused because Thoth was absolutely right.

“Ya got me doctor! What’s the cure!?! You wann me to go chase down those two darlin’ evils!?” Thoth shook his head.

“We should head ov’r to Demiurge now! Besides, there’s always sins t’be had elsewhere!”

Staggering out into the streets again a few minutes later, the two demons leaned on each other and sang brief bursts of song in between drags on their cigarettes. Incidentally, the wind had started to pick up and this added some amusement for the pair as a harpy handing out flyers had a number of these blown right out of her talons. Asmoe lazily tried to grab a few as they flew by and then laughed at his own inability to do so. Thoth caricatured his failure by doing an impression of this and the guffaws that ensued almost caused Asmoe to stumble into a large vertical spike where some demons guilty of minor heresies had been impaled. Ignoring their moans, Asmoe weaved his way back to Thoth and the two fiends continued onwards, chuckling.

“This’s SO great! I’m glad... you ‘nvited me pal,” slurred Asmoe. Thoth tried to high-five his companion but they both missed.

“I’m a... I’m juss glad you could make et t’night ah-mee-go!” the minotaur gushed. The pair continued to banter amicably in a somewhat coherent manner as they made their way through the thinning crowds. Hell actually gets quite cold when the sun goes down and if it wasn’t for the warmth of Asmoe’s inebriation he probably would’ve been feeling it without a coat. Most of the other demons on the streets, at least those without thick fur, were themselves bundled up and, in the glare of the cold downtown lights and the oil drums burning with corpse-fat and the tangled nests of power lines crackling with perilous energy, they were freely carved up by shadows and illumination.

Only their eyes were always glowing – piercing red eyes and sly amber eyes and eyes of white phosphorous, burning with unholy fury. Long horizontal jets of dripping fire suddenly startled Asmoe and Thoth as they were passing by an alley

in a 19th century part of town. A squad of daemon storm troopers in black armored hard-suits were shouting and using flamethrowers to drive some abominations back underground. The creatures had slithered out from the rubble of a demolished building whose destruction had accidentally caused a rift to open to the city's subterranean labyrinths. What are abominations? Imagine an ooze of naked liquefied flesh that churns with ephemeral faces and sprouts rapidly decaying limbs, a screeching wailing horror incapable of meaningful thought but irradiated with an endless supply of psychosis. They were the most loathed creatures in all of Hell and ruthlessly persecuted as a public nuisance. Despite being fairly slow they were also rather dangerous.

A colossal two-dimensional she-devil in a red corset and red stockings leaned against an invisible wall, licking one of the prongs on a red pitchfork. She was drawn in an art-deco style and below her in ornate capital letters it read "DEMIGURGE" as a rectangular border of individual light bulbs pulsed in a clockwise pattern around this. In the immediate area only a small number of daemons were loitering and among these the most notable was a quartet that was unloading accordions and amplifiers from a motorcycle-drawn trailer. *Pious Cruelty*, as they were called, consisted of Brek, Eke, Kex, and Koax Koax, each an anthropomorphic toad daemon who walked on their hind-legs and stood about three feet tall.

They weren't famous yet but they were very popular at the moment in the local underground music scene. Seeing them, Thoth drunkenly hailed the band and, recognizing him, they responded in kind. Thoth was a fairly well-known and popular figure when it came to the nether's night life so Asmoe wasn't surprised by any of this.

"Rrrr-bt. You managed to make it here still standing Thoth," croaked Brek, poking a little fun at the minotaur.

"Barely," laughed Thoth, "But I couldn't sho' up sober. I've got a reputa'shun to maintain. And we wer commiser'aitin," he added, putting his arm around Asmoe's shoulders. "You know Asmoe right?" Asmoe however hadn't met any of them before (although he'd seen them around) so he shook hands with each one in turn, slouching slightly so they didn't have to reach up too much.

"When are yoo going on?" asked Asmoe. Kex answered.

“Rrrr-bt. About ten minutes. We only just made it here. Rrrr-bt.”

Then Koax Koax chimed in, “Had a run in with some feral kobolds. Rrrr-bt. Nasty kobolds, tried to scavenge our trailer.”

Asmoe and Thoth nodded sympathetically. “Need some help with yer stuff?” asked the minotaur and the members of *Pious Cruelty* were more than happy to accept. With the added arms of the two new arrivals, the group was able to take everything in one trip and so they all clambered into the building together.

Demiurge was one of the most popular entertainment venues in the New York Nether and its foyer certainly reflected this. The lush red carpet which roved up to the mezzanine and down various halls was vividly contrasted by the brilliant white walls hung with framed vaudeville posters and also embedded with subtle rows of realistic imitation skull-faces. Five dangling prism chandeliers hung from the ceiling with four of these equally spaced around the massive central one. At the far end, a bar with shelves of crystal bottles filled with all manners of infernal pleasures had a decent number of daemons standing and waiting beside it while others reclined on the array of pale green divans available. To the right, the doors leading to the theater area were visible and occasionally muffled roars of laughter could be heard coming from inside.

As the group of daemons laden with musical equipment entered, Asmoe and Thoth handed the gear they were carrying to a troll that’d been waiting to greet *Pious Cruelty* and then they waved to the band who had to rush to get themselves set up in time. Thoth of course didn’t need a ticket since he was performing that night but Asmoe did and the two debated each other about who should pay for this. Eventually Asmoe relented and they headed across the room after waiting in line at the ticket desk and then at a coat-check where Thoth turned his in. Underneath the minotaur was wearing a smart-looking vest, making him a little better dressed than Asmoe, although they were both about par with the rest of those in attendance. Thoth was going on stage too so it made sense he’d be making a little extra effort that night. While they were talking idly outside the theater doors, a ghoul acquaintance of Thoth’s passed by and offered them both a snort of powdered ambrosia. This sobered them up considerably.

“I should head backstage,” said the minotaur after a minute. Asmoe agreed it was a good idea and he told his pal that he’d find a seat somewhere close to the bar inside the theater. Thoth said he’d meet up with him there and Asmoe wished the minotaur good luck.

“You’ll crucify them!” he promised.

The theater was dark except for the open-curtained stage illuminated by spotlights in the rafters. A little below these a metal chandelier hung that was originally intended to hold dozens of candles – instead a handful of winged imps were now roosting on it and enjoying the entertainment. Both the balcony and the tables on the floor in front of the stage were well-populated and the overall mood was boisterous. The bar to the right had a row of stools with some empty seats but Asmoe grabbed a small round table just beyond it by the wall and ordered himself a couple shots of poison from a passing waitress. Might as well keep the evening going, he thought to himself, as his eyes appreciatively lingered on the waitress’ lizard-like tail. Shifting his attention to the stage, Asmoe watched as *Pious Cruelty* energetically performed something he couldn’t identify. He found out what it was though when they finished and Brek declared amid the continuing applause.

“That was Saint-Saëns’ Symphony No. 3 in C Minor. Rrrr-bt. But now were going to play something you’ll all know.” Brek wasn’t lying as *Pious Cruelty* launched into a manic rendition of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Fairly risqué stuff in daemon society. The cultural authorities were vehemently opposed to anything which was even remotely spiritual but a sliver of tolerance was extended to such works if they were performed in an ironic or satirical manner. Since cultural laws in Hell were utterly devoid of clarity, engaging in this kind of thing could be a rather unsafe enterprise – but that was true of a lot of good art on Earth too. Asmoe had no idea how it worked in Heaven but he doubted it was much different there either. Then his waitress appeared with his drinks and Asmoe pulled out his wallet to pay her. Noticing how she was watching intently as he sorted through his money (Did she think he couldn’t cover the bill?) he made a quip as he was passing her the cash.

“It’s made from real human leather!” he said jokingly. Most wallets were. She took the money without even the hint of a smile though and Asmoe shrugged, downing a shot right as one of Bach’s many crescendos elicited a chorus of howling approval from the audience. By the end, the daemons were nearly going wild and

a chair or two might have been thrown by the more exuberant. As the last note quivered in the air, the patrons of the Demiurge haphazardly rose to their feet applauding and a few human body parts were even tossed on stage in admiration.

After *Pious Cruelty* had taken its bows, a troupe of daemon thespians came out on stage to replace them. They didn't announce what they were going to do but Asmoe recognized it as the beginning of Act Five from Hamlet. He'd heard about this. They used a human whose real name was Yorick for the part of Yorick. Sure enough, when it got to the point where Yorick's skull was pulled from the grave by the clown digging in it, some daemons standing to the side with a human in chains decapitated him and then tossed the head to the actor playing the clown. This drew ravenous cheers and the daemon playing Hamlet had to wait a while holding Yorick's "skull" before he could begin the famous soliloquy that followed.

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most noble fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it! Here hung those lips that I have kiss'd I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning – quite chap-fall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that. Prithee Horatio, tell me one thing."

The daemon playing Horatio responded after a brief pause, *"What's that, my lord?"* Hamlet looked at him mournfully.

"Dost thou think Alexander look'd a this fashion i' th' earth?"

Horatio drooped his head sadly. *"E'en so,"* he replied.

Hamlet made an expression of disgust on his face, *"And smelt so? Pah!"* throwing the head behind him after the question had been asked and uttering the "pah" with the head flying in the air.

As the still bleeding head struck the stage floor, eliciting a moan from the barely conscious Yorick, the audience erupted in bravos and whistled with delight. The daemons on the chandelier were likewise swinging it back and forth,

screeching as loud as they could, and everyone engaged in another standing ovation. When the clapping died down and the thespians finished bowing, one of them shuffled over to where Yorick's head was laying.

"Please, no more," begged Yorick weakly.

"Shut up you!" growled the daemon as he stuffed Yorick's head in a sack. Overhearing two sylphs at a table next to his, Asmoe learned that this was only Yorick's twelfth time performing this scene. The torturer downed another shot, musing to himself that he was sure Yorick was destined for a long career.

Now though it was Thoth's spotlight. The minotaur had done this sort of thing before but Asmoe couldn't help notice the slight stiffness in his movements and facial expression. Walking out to the middle of the stage, Thoth nevertheless swept the floor and balcony with his eyes. Then he cleared his throat and started.

"I did a good deed today," he began and immediately the boos rang out. Daemons aren't big fans of good deeds. "I helped an elderly woman cross the street," Thoth continued and the heckling grew louder and thicker. "I made sure she'd get home safe. I protected her from lurking dangers. I saved her from invisible disasters." With each claim the audience reacted predictably, voicing its disapproval and now also throwing a few drink glasses and bones. Asmoe had no idea what Thoth thought he was doing but he'd never seen his pal recite poetry this bad before. When the minotaur next asserted, "I did it all so she'd get to see her grandson," what he said was so mind-bogglingly benevolent that it managed to reduce the audience to a sullen silence. Only the agitated swinging of the chandelier could be heard for a moment as Thoth paused. All of a sudden however he offered a wane smile as he confessed with grossly feigned concern, "I was worried she'd miss his drowning in a pool." As the daemons absorbed this dramatic shift in the narrative, scattered cheering and applause arose. "She didn't though," added Thoth. More cheering. Louder applause. Some enthusiastic whistling too. Then the final thrust of the sword. "He wasn't yet four years old."

A number of daemons now physically fell out of their seats, rolling on the ground and hissing with laughter. As Thoth bowed on stage, Asmoe stood up and whooped while other daemons shouted out praise. It had been a magnificent display of misdirection. It was doubly evil – not only had Thoth expressed a

wonderful evil but he'd also deviously manipulated his audience; something they could all fondly appreciate. Of course the poem was very short but it had to be. A few more verses of philanthropy and his enraged audience would've certainly torn Thoth to pieces.

An intermission followed during which some gnomes appeared to clean up the gore that'd accumulated on stage during the last few performances. Thoth gradually found his way over to Asmoe, having to stop by some tables to say hello or receive compliments, and when he did the torturer handed him a shot of poison before he could even sit down.

"To this minotaur! Leading us down the labyrinth!" beamed Asmoe, standing and raising a shot glass of his own in toast. Thoth clinked glasses with him but he seemed somewhat flustered or embarrassed. This didn't go unnoticed by Asmoe and he looked puzzled as they both took their seats.

After draining his poison, Thoth explained, "I nearly cracked up-there."

Asmoe's confusion turned to sympathy, "It was reckless but you pulled it off."

The minotaur smirked and said, "Yeah, well, I could use a few more shots of this right about now," as he held up an empty glass.

Asmoe was all for that so they quickly ordered another tray of drinks and proceeded to chip away at the unexpected interlude of sobriety that the earlier ambrosia had brought on. As was often the case, it wasn't long before their talk turned to she-daemons.

"You know, I finally made a move on Malice the other day," said Asmoe blarily as he leaned on his elbows. Thoth had to think for a moment.

"Malice? She's the ethereal right?" he asked. Asmoe tilted his hand side-to-side to express that Thoth was sort-of correct.

"Part naiad too. The best part," the torturer added.

Thoth emptied another shot glass. “Knowing you, a ‘move’ here means polite conversation,” predicted the librarian. Asmoe pointed at the minotaur, his elbow still resting on the table.

“Says the fiend who swings his axe at anything even vaguely female. And it was more than that, for your information. It’s tricky though right? I mean, with us working for the same company and the difference in our positions. I’m just making sure I don’t baptize the whole thing.” Thoth was unconvinced.

“Don’t try to sell me on any of that Asmoe seduction-by-installment-plan nonsense. Lucifer! I’ve probably got you beat about three-to-one when it comes to she-daemons and I’m a squat hairy beast! I mean, come on.” Asmoe wasn’t prepared to concede anything though.

“Look, your numbers may be higher but my average is better,” he asserted. “So, what good is that?” countered Thoth.

“Well, there’s something to be said for quality. I mean, you’d skewer the holy mother of rancid trolls if given the chance.” The minotaur chuckled, partly at the image Asmoe had conjured, but also at his best fiend’s argument. “Quality? Like quality control? Tell me, where does Cobra fit in with that?”

At the mention of his ex, Asmoe shook his head in comical disgust. “Don’t say its name!” he pleaded as he collapsed in helpless laughter. Thoth raised a shot glass to himself and gloated.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

They continued to debate each other about a number of things until a large group of mutual acquaintances happened to arrive. Dragging their chairs over to the table these other daemons had reserved, Asmoe and Thoth easily established themselves in the discussions already going on and were having a good go of it. Soon however a drumroll started and everyone’s attention settled back on the stage – it was time for the feature performance. An incubus with yellowy skin and a dark handlebar moustache calmly walked out in view now as the drums ended. He was wearing a black velvet tailcoat and top-hat plus matching black knee-high

boots which sharply reverberated with each of the methodical steps he took. When he halted at center stage, he leaned forward slightly and spread his arms wide.

“Citizens of Hell, a vile evening to you all,” he intoned loudly. “Tonight it is our privilege to bring you a comedy of delectable cruelty. A story so remorseless that merely seeing it would condemn you all to damnation were you not already honored with that distinction.” The audience snickered at this but the daemon on stage paused only for a breath. “I give you a masterpiece of diabolical theater. Witness now! The Temptation of Saint Anthony!” And with the completion of his introduction, the daemon began to walk-off while keeping his arms spread and maintaining a sinister smile towards the audience. Applause followed and many daemons adjusted their chairs in anticipation of what was to come.

To begin, a satyr wearing an imitation beard that reached all the way down to their shins, as well as ludicrously-huge fake human-feet, came out in a brown monastic robe. The expression on their face was one of exaggerated distress.

“It can’t be true! It just can’t!” said the actor. “How can I, Anthony, be cursed with such a dreadful affliction!?” With this the actor playing Anthony pulled out a vanity mirror from his robe and began to examine himself in an absurdly conceited and terrified manner. Each twisted facial expression made by the actor stirred a set of laughs from the audience. Suddenly though, Anthony looked out towards them. “I fear I must run away into the wilderness to hide myself! I cannot bear for others to see how my fair skin has been ravaged!”

One of the winged imps perched on the chandelier shouted “Hurry and do it!” and plenty of daemons chuckled at this remark.

Anthony betrayed no sign of hearing it however and instead began a pantomime of an idiotic walk. While he was engaged in that, a number of daemons in large bulbous pig-costumes entered from stage left. Again, Anthony addressed the audience. “Surely I cannot leave without saying farewell to my dearest friends though? Alas! My heart is full of sorrow!” The pigs now were all lined up against the back of the stage and Anthony was beside the one farthest to the right. “Oinky,” wept Anthony, staring at the googly eyes of the pig costume. “I will miss our gentle cuddling you noblest of animals!” In response a billow of brown smoke shot out from the pig’s behind as a horn off-stage did a musical imitation of flatulence.

Anthony turned to the audience with a look of astonishment and they broke out in appreciative laughter. After a beat though he moved on to the next pig. "Squealy," he cooed, "You were always a wonderful bath-time companion." Again, more brown smoke but this time in two brief puffs and with the appropriate musical variation. More laughter followed and Anthony moved on. "Whiny," he lamented, pulling at his robe. "The memory of your wet nose nuzzling me will be a great consolation on many a lonely night!" At this, only a thin jet of brown smoke was released from Whiny's behind and the accompanying horn was so faint as to almost be a creak. But it got guffaws and applause. Anthony then deftly moved on to the second-to-last pig. "Groany my dear," emoted Anthony. "You've never said a word to me. Have you no parting thoughts?" With that a torrent of brown smoke was unleashed from the pig and a tuba blared. So much smoke was used in fact that the pigs and Anthony were momentarily obscured. Among the waves of laughter which ensued there was both cheering and coughing in equal measures. Finally, when the stage was visible again, Anthony approached the final pig. "Retchy, O Retchy, my favorite!" he implored, "Give us one last kiss my love!" At this the actor in the pig costume opened its trap-door mouth and a keg's worth of green liquid poured out, spilling everywhere and seeping across the edge of the stage. "Err, not now I suppose," quipped Anthony, and the daemons erupted in riotous glee.

In single file the pigs then exited the stage and Anthony turned back to face the audience, beginning to act out travelling on an arduous journey as he did. "I will leave the lands of Egypt to hide my shame," he declared. "I will venture out across the arid wastes of Africa to the ocean. Yes, the ocean! Perhaps there I can search for the remnants of fabled Atlantis and find an ancient cure for my condition!"

From somewhere in the balcony a sarcastic voice shot back "Good luck!" and this induced a hissing round of snickers.

Meanwhile, as the actor playing Anthony continued his pantomime, some stage devices were employed. First, a large flat sun with a glaring face on it was dropped from the rafters, and it jostled around a bit before settling. Then some fans were introduced at the right of the stage and these were turned on-Anthony to mimic the desert winds. An ogre standing there also threw handfuls of sand at Anthony's face, to the general approval of the audience. The actor playing Anthony had to endure this for a considerable time before the fans were eventually turned-off and the ogre stopped throwing sand – although they made sure to get one last

good-one in despite the machines being off already (and the daemons watching cheered and clapped enthusiastically at this) Standing center stage now, Anthony started looking around wildly.

“Where am I!? I... I don’t recognize this place! Oh dear! I fear I’m utterly lost!” Just then, another actor (wearing a harness) was dropped from the rafters and swung unspeaking above Anthony from one end of the stage to the other, each swing punctuated with an impossible attempt to grab Anthony who was several feet below. The actor was a ghoul who was costumed in the style of a devil from some medieval manuscript, a grotesque and colorful imitation of a daemon with wings and a pitchfork.

“You there! Human! Give me your soul!” shouted the medieval devil in exasperation. Noticing his assailant at last, Anthony watched with dubious concern as they repeatedly passed over his head.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” he replied to the devil in a squirming tone.

With his harasser still groping the air, Anthony looked out at the audience. “I have no idea what a soul is so how can I even give it to this poor fellow?” the actor deadpanned. Another bout of laughter.

Frustrated now, the medieval devil threw his pitchfork at Anthony and bellowed, “Never-mind them! Every human has a soul!” Anthony frowned.

“Who says?” he asked, appearing genuinely curious. The devil had to think a moment, hanging limply as he swayed.

“Prophets,” he replied glumly.

Anthony turned towards the audience and put up his hands in an apathetic shrug that elicited fresh laughs. The medieval devil then retaliated by throwing shoes, pieces of clothes, and anything he could rip off himself, at the human. Anthony fled this barrage, exiting stage left, as the medieval devil was hauled back towards the ceiling by a jerky pulley mechanism. Cackling and tossed pieces of meat from the audience followed them off.

A group of gnomes now dragged out the façade of a ruined Roman fort on wheels and, after they left, the actor playing Anthony appeared again from stage right. He was crawling on his hands and knees as he wiped some imaginary sweat from his forehead. "What terrible misfortune has befallen me! I'm doomed! Totally doomed!" he wailed before displaying extravagant surprise at something imaginary on the ground in front of him. "What's this!? Tracks! Is someone else out here!? Hello!? Helloooooo!?" After he had yelled though he slapped himself on the forehead. "Wait. These are my tracks," he moaned and the daemons cheered. Anthony was seated now, miming picking up handfuls of sand in agitation, when he turned to look behind him at the Roman ruins.

"What's this!?" he exclaimed. "It seems I've stumbled across a bunch of buildings which somehow I'm just noticing. Perhaps I'm saved!?" With that he stood up and proceeded to brush himself off before adjusting a non-existent tie, slicking back his hair, and marching behind the façade of ruins. After about a minute where the actor playing Anthony was obscured and throwing random absurd objects up out from the ruin façade, the loud sound effect of a door slamming-shut was played. "Oh no! The door" yelled Anthony. Then a series of grunts and groans followed, indicating he was struggling to free himself, until his face suddenly appeared in a barred window in the façade.

"I'm trapped," he said, making a very sad face. Amid the general laughter, someone in the balcony threw a shot glass at the barred window and the whole audience howled as Anthony winced. "I hope... I hope someone will come along and save me. Any time now," he called out pointedly and a troll actor costumed as another medieval devil was forcefully shoved on stage.

The troll playing the devil seemed to suddenly remember he was an actor, taking a magnifying glass he was holding and using it to look at the ground like he'd been tracking Anthony.

"Me wonder where that human is," the troll asked eventually.

"Here I am!" cried out Anthony, getting plenty of laughs. The troll in the devil outfit scowled and put his magnifying glass away. When he'd crossed to the window where Anthony's face still hovered, the troll-devil made a big show of

inspecting the ruins. "I'm trapped," said Anthony, showing mock irritation at the the devil's apparently unnecessary scrutiny.

"Me could help you maybe," said the troll actor shrugging. Anthony's elation quickly turned to suspicion.

"What do you want?" he asked, leery.

"Me want... what those things called? Souls! Yeah! You got one?" said the troll, doing a good impression of a devil not entirely succeeding at trying to appear casual.

"Wait. Are you a devil?" asked Anthony with concern.

"No... no," replied the troll, shaking his head and trying to push his fake devil tail out of sight. Fresh laughter.

"Well... I don't know what a soul is but it can't be as good as getting out of here," proclaimed Anthony, making a grossed-out face.

The troll devil now got all excited. "Good! Good! Sign dis," he said, pulling out a piece of paper and a pen.

Just then though another six actors walked on stage in the foreground, talking loudly among themselves. They were demons dressed as human peasants but, incongruously, with tourist gear as well. The troll-devil quickly placed his hands over the barred window where Anthony was trapped. As Anthony made a show of trying to see around the troll-devil's hands,

"What's going on?" he said, the peasants noticed the devil.

"Hey you!" one cried, "What are you doing there?" The troll actor looked around innocently and made a show of coming up with a lie.

"Me? Me... uh... me just do some stretches," he said as he turned his back to the peasants and pretended to push against the façade ruins while keeping his hands over the window.

“Are you hiding something?” asked one of the peasants frowning.

“Am not!” replied the troll indignantly. “Me jogging.”

The peasants turned to huddle. “I think he’s lying,” said one.

“He probably found a treasure or something,” said another. Then they all nodded to each other and approached the troll-devil. Deflated, the troll slowly lowered his hands, revealing an intensely smiling Anthony.

“It’s just some guy,” said one of the peasants disgustedly and Anthony’s smile dropped as the troll-devil’s expression rebounded. One of the other peasant’s however had a thought.

“Unless... he’s a hermit!” Sensing that this was a bad thing, the troll-devil objected.

“Not true. He only some guy. Just was locked in there.” The peasants were suddenly very excited.

“He locked himself in that cell? He’s a hermit! We found a hermit!” they cried as they started taking pictures with their cameras and generally going agog. The troll did his best to convince them otherwise while impotently trying to usher them away – meanwhile Anthony had started posing like a high-end fashion model. More peasants started to pour on stage too and a massive brouhaha commenced.

Some of the daemons in the balcony got so caught up in what was going on that a fight broke out between a pair of them and they tumbled over the railing. As the chaos on stage was playing out then, two daemons were rolling around on the floor to the right and the audience’s attentions were eagerly divided between both. The wrestling soon ended though as one daemon broke the neck of the other, to much applause and many drinks raised in salute. Meanwhile on stage, the devil that the troll was playing got so frustrated by the peasants that he threw his pen and paper in the air and stomped off stage. Subsequently the daemons dressed as peasants proceeded to tear the façade of ruins down and liberate Anthony. One of

them even got Anthony on his shoulders as the other peasants clamored around with questions and requests.

“Give us tidbits of wisdom that won’t tax us with any thinking!” one shouted.

“Ummm...” stammered Anthony, “An open door can still lock behind you?” Despite his character’s uncertainty, the others were elated.

“How Zen!” one cried before another effused, “He’s an oracle!” A different peasant then stepped forward to ask something.

“Abba, how should a man live?” For a second Anthony seemed like he might not have an answer but then one came to him.

“Forwards if possible, um, backwards if necessary – but never just going in circles,” he declared, his confidence growing as the crowd ooh-ed and ahh-ed. Now a third petitioner approached to beseech him. “Yes?” said Anthony, luxuriating in all the attention he was getting. The peasant seemed like they were about to ask one thing before abruptly changing their mind.

“Is there something wrong with your face?” they inquired with obvious puzzlement.

“No,” assured Anthony but with more worry than conviction. The peasant who was carrying Anthony now took a peek underneath his robe. Immediately horrified, they threw him off as the others looked on astounded.

“He’s got a disease!” shouted the peasant who only a second ago had Anthony on his shoulders. The rest were all terribly dismayed by this revelation and made gestures like they were raising their hands to their foreheads, as if to faint, or covering their open mouths. At last, a peasant in a doctor’s outfit pushed himself to the front of the crowd.

“Run for your lives! Run! For your! Liiiiiiiiives!” he screamed, throwing away a stethoscope, and all the peasants rapidly dispersed. This left the satyr playing Anthony sitting alone dejectedly on stage. As the curtains started to close and the

applause ascended, gnomes could be seen emerging to collect the pieces of the façade ruins.

Act Two opened with Anthony walking by himself in front of a screen covered with mountain scenery reminiscent of renaissance art. He had a hiking stick in one hand which he was leaning on heavily as he gasped for breath.

“Woe am I, a simple traveller seeking relief for my suffering. Far have I journeyed and yet I’ve not come across a single village which has welcomed me due to my curse. I am almost ready to give up but... I will sit here for a moment to rest and think.” Due to the way the stage was lit, only the background and Anthony were illuminated – everything across the stage itself remained hidden in shadows. This included a number of dark mounds and the actor settled down on one of these. As he crossed and uncrossed his legs, and made faces, and moved his arms in contorted poses, chuckling rippled through the audience until a narrow spotlight lit up the mound he was sitting on. This started to gleam from the light and it was clear from every seat in the theater that Anthony was resting on a pile of treasure. He continued not to notice for a while but when he did he leaped-up with a shout.

“Is that... it is! Gold! Well, now I know how it feels to be a magic goose.” Anthony arched his eyebrows knowingly at his own lame joke and many in the audience groaned in response. Undaunted, he speculated to himself, “Perhaps my luck is changing...” before adding “Unless...” Anthony’s eyes quickly scanned the imaginary sky for menace. “Unless this is some trick by the evil one.” On cue a number of other stage lights were activated, revealing that the other mounds were similar heaps of wealth. Anthony was now surrounded by an immense fortune and his facial expressions oscillated between greed and suspicion. Likewise, as he began to speak again his tone shifted back and forth between these two conflicting dispositions.

“With equal wonder and desire do I behold the miracle of this precious find. But have I not been the target of scheming ill-spirits since my voyage began? But also, can I really dismiss this good fortune as a mere illusion? But then are the punishments of damnation not infinitely greater? But is that not mere hypothesis? But who am I to doubt? But... but... fine. Fine! I renounce it all!”

This declaration was soundly jeered by the audience but the actor playing Anthony simply waved his hand in contempt at the treasure around him and thrust his nose in the air.

Anthony maintained this pose for a few seconds until a satyr costumed as an old-fashioned archaeologist and a centaur with a huge fake donkey-head over their torso, entered from stage right; the latter also pulling a rickety wagon. Anthony immediately took his hiking stick in both hands and assumed a defensive stance but neither of the other characters noticed him at first.

“Miserable wretch,” said the archaeologist to the donkey, “Because you startled at a little rock slide, now we have to retrace our steps and wander about looking for our cargo.” At this the archaeologist muttered under his breath and stooped down to lift up a pile of treasure, which he threw into the wagon. Observing his actions, Anthony called out to him.

“You there! Explain yourself or prepare for a thrashing!” while lunging forward and brandishing his hiking stick with both hands. After briefly being worried, the archaeologist reached behind and pulled out a mock scimitar from his back. Anthony’s attitude immediately went from aggressive to submissive and he dropped his stick with a clatter – the audience laughing at his cowardice.

“What do you want old man?” demanded the archaeologist.

“Just, um, how you came by such wealth. I... well, I am a chronicler of such things young master.” Hearing that, the archaeologist became friendly and sheathed his sword once more.

“Is this not Egypt? Why I robbed a pharaoh’s crypt sir. Fair and square,” he beamed before picking up another armful of treasure.

“Indeed? So you are not a daemon?” asked Anthony anxiously. Before he replied, the archaeologist went and gathered up the last few mounds of his loot. With that he ostentatiously brushed off his hands and turned to Anthony.

“Only to the ladies sir,” he bragged and winked. Then he added, “That reminds me, I have a whip for my donkey sir. Would you be so kind as to whip him while I lead? It’s hard to whip a donkey from the front.”

Anthony was incredulous. “Whip your donkey?” he sputtered and the archaeologist nodded enthusiastically while pulling the whip from his wagon with a flourish. Instead, Anthony turned to address the audience.

“I swore off these riches but they aren’t the trap of demons, only the unearned plunder of some fool,” he commented bitterly. In the background meanwhile, the archaeologist called out faintly

“My donkey sir? Just a little whipping will do,” while gray smoke began to billow around the ceiling above the stage. Anthony however continued.

“I could take this fellow’s blade and keep the treasure and the donkey all to myself! Muwahaha! Muwahahaha!” As Anthony was heaving with maniacal laughter though, a flash of light and a booming clap of thunder erupted from the thickly gathered smoke on the ceiling. Anthony and the archaeologist both cowered but the donkey far exceeded them by quivering with cartoonish extravagance. After wincing for a moment, Anthony looked up, peaking through his hands.

“Can’t I just steal a little bit?” he asked and was instantly chastised with fresh rage from the heavens. At this second outburst the donkey took off and the archaeologist ran after him, both of them disappearing to stage left. Anthony conversely ran around as the thunder persisted and rain started to pour from hidden sprinklers. Despite the clamor, one lone complaint was still audible.

“Why didn’t you whip the donkey!?” shouted a genuinely unhappy daemon in the back of the theater.

The simulated fury of the elements continued as the screen behind Anthony began to scroll to the left, changing from mountain scenery to the inside of a cave. As the background changed the effects of the storm also diminished until the setting had been fully altered and Anthony stopped to address the audience.

“At least I found this cavern to take shelter in tonight. Alas, I’m so exhausted.” With that he laid down in the middle of the stage and curled up in a fetal sleeping posture. He even sucked his thumb.

It wasn’t long however before four actors in medieval-daemon costumes snuck up on him with clichéd violin sound-effects accentuating each step. When Anthony was surrounded the daemons, one by one, took turns miming the horrible things they were going to do to him. The daemons out in the audience of course roared with approval at each grisly suggestion. When it got to the last daemon though he struck a thoughtful pose and then excitedly gestured for the other daemons to follow him off stage.

With a great show of reluctance they eventually did and Anthony was once more alone, but the peace he was enjoying didn’t last long. “Wake up human!” bellowed a tremendous voice. The fact that this was followed by barely stifled snickering coming from multiple sources indicated it was daemons who were behind this.

“What!? Who’s there!?” cried a disheveled and confused Anthony.

“Who am I puny mortal!? Are you so fallen, so wretched and worthless, that your heart does not tell you who I am!?” Anthony was on his knees, consumed with distress, but he said nothing. “Well!? Answer or be damned!” Stricken, Anthony took a wild guess.

“God?” he ventured.

“Of course I’m God!” retorted the voice. “Who else would be talking to you in a cave idiot!?” Anthony clasped his hands together reverently.

“Right. Sorry God,” he called out. The Demiurge prided itself on the audacity of its productions so even the mentioning of God wasn’t prohibited, but still, many members in the audience growled and hissed at the mere mention of the Enemy.

On stage meanwhile, a slight incredulity managed to edge its way into Anthony’s mind. “God? Are you hiding behind those stalagmites?” A flash of fire and a loud bang erupted on stage.

“Moron! Imbecile! How dare you interrogate your maker!” came the rabid reply. Anthony was sufficiently cowed that he prostrated himself and the group of medieval-daemons could be heard trying to suppress their laughter again while their human dupe seemed to take no notice.

“Please Lord, give me some means to atone for my lack of faith! Please!” When the speaker among his antagonists had composed himself, he replied.

“We demand a promise of devotion!”

Anthony raised his hands in supplication. “Anything Lord! Anything!”

A sly tone crept into the voice of the daemon playing God. “Do you pledge your soul to us for eternity?”

Anthony cried tears of joy. “I do! I do!!! I do!!!!!!”

As the curtains closed for the second and final time that night, the audience showed its appreciation with the loudest and longest sustained applause of the evening. The actors were soon brought out for their bows to unruly acclaim and everyone at Asmoe’s and Thoth’s table joined in.

“Who wrote that!?” asked a female daemon among them.

“Racine... Rabelais... some French scribbler,” smirked a cynical elf next to her. Thoth noted his tone and chimed in.

“The happy ending felt a bit tacked on,” he said affectatiously. “Still good,” he conceded a moment later, not wanting to seem too pretentious. As they exchanged comments, the din of cheering continued for quite some time but eventually it died down and everyone in the theater went back to gluttony and repartee. Asmoe was once more intoxicated however so he mostly just watched those around him.

As one daemon was poorly trying to explain the scientific basis of astrology to another, he noted with dry amusement how Thoth eagerly jumped in. “Forget

all that quantum mechanical mumbo-jumbo,” insisted the minotaur. “Nuclei don’t apply here. Astrology is simple classical physics combined with statistical analysis. The best way to understand it is to think of a clock. Okay? Say you’re boiling blood. You heat it up to a certain temperature and it boils in a certain amount of time right? And you use a clock to keep track of this. Of course the clock doesn’t actually have any effect on the boiling blood – it’s just a measurement device. Likewise, the movement of the planets, stars, etc, doesn’t exert a force on anyone, it’s just used to keep track of the normal cycles in daemonic and human affairs. This is where the statistical part comes in. Every cycle in the material planes, whether it’s biological, social, or environmental, will always have an aggregate cycle with every other cycle. If you have two different sized gears for example, they won’t revolve back to their initial starting position in every revolution but they will always eventually reach a point where they repeat their initial starting position. No matter how many gears!”

The elf took a drag from a cigarette and then interjected. “So what does that mean professor Thoth?”

The minotaur looked at him and smiled. “It means that we can predict long-term cycles using astronomical parallelism. It’s perfectly orthodox. It doesn’t require any of that mystical garbage humans are so preoccupied with. And naturally daemonic astrology is much more refined and accurate than human astrology. Our systems are just more self-consciously scientific.”

Thoth wasn’t always right but when he was he was hopeless. He proceeded to lecture the table on increasingly tangential topics, yet everyone else was a bit worn-out with the night’s entertainment so they were all content to listen. Finally it got to be closing time though and the theater began to empty.

“They got a loft party going on just a couple blocks away,” said Thoth to Asmoe hopefully. His pal’s eyes widened and mouth tightened noncommittally. It was already late a long time ago and Asmoe had to go to work in the morning. Thoth did too but he was a government employee in one of the least demanding professions ever, so the term “work” here was almost purely nominal. There were the special collections though which could be tough to wrangle but Asmoe was pretty sure Thoth didn’t work in the library dungeons. The minotaur now put his arm around Asmoe’s shoulders and the two walked ahead of the company they’d been sitting with.

Passing through the foyer, Thoth was going to head right out the front door when Asmoe reminded him. "Don't forget your coat." The minotaur patted his fiend on the chest and pulled him over to the coat check. They stood there swaying for a bit until a young she-daemon showed up.

"This diablo needs..." said Asmoe before he was cut off.

"His coat?" asked the she-daemon.

Asmoe countered, "I was going to say, somewhere to sleep it off but sure, what the Eden, we'll take his coat."

She smiled politely at the joke but insisted on being given a coat-check ticket stub, something Thoth had to fumble around to find. When he'd finally got it and the she-daemon had returned with his stowed item, Asmoe and Thoth terminated their embrace so the latter could put his jacket on. The minotaur was still struggling with it as they stepped outside but this had less to do with being inebriated and more with the fact that he was distracted by his own desire to talk.

"The theater is crippled with socialism," he insisted. "The guilds don't even let doppelgängers perform because it'd make certain sections of the industry obsolete. It's uncaptalist!" At the mention of doppelgängers, Asmoe sneered with loathing but Thoth didn't notice. Instead, the minotaur gestured down the street in the direction of the loft party and Asmoe stood trying to decline this with his hands. They were preoccupied as such when the police thralls approached them. These were tall, intimidating daemons in sharp Gestapo uniforms (designed by none other than Karl Diebitsch himself) who were the street-level enforcement agents of Diabolic Security. There were six of them and two immediately grabbed each of Thoth's arms as a third one spoke.

"Thoth Horrorgorger, you are being arrested on charges of heresy," he stated coldly. "You have the right to cooperate. If you choose not to cooperate you will be dealt with as an enemy of the state." Thoth's eyes bulged in disbelief as they started to drag him off to a waiting paddy-wagon. Asmoe was about to protest but the police thrall who'd spoken interrupted.

“Take that one too,” he said pointing at the torturer and two other police thralls dutifully complied. Asmoe didn’t fight back, he knew better than that, but he tried every possible way to convince them to let him go. They didn’t. Meanwhile, as the paddy-wagon initiated its flashing lights and started to drive off with its detainees, the daemons standing around who’d witnessed it all weren’t troubled by it in the least.

Chapter Four

The Ereshkigal Detention Facility was a gargantuan citadel on the eastern outskirts of the New York Nether. With its two arching tesla towers, it'd once been described by a visiting Philip K. Dick as looking like a "cybernetic stag-beetle." The futurist-dystopian architecture of the place was furthermore accented by the large plumes of ash crackling with lightning and the enormous fountains of molten fire erupting from the volcanic Appalachian mountains visible in the background. Neither Asmoe nor Thoth could see anything from their separated windowless compartments but they could feel the ascent of the paddy wagon and the jostling of its suspension going up the bomb ravaged road that was leading to their awaiting destination. Before entering Ereshkigal however, their vehicle had to stop at the outer gates where twin statues of bearded Assyrian lamassu flanked the entrance. As the truck idled there for a minute, a pair of uniformed daemons with submachine guns and a leashed chimaera checked around the vehicle while another ran the driver's credentials through a scanning device. Since everything was in order, the heavy sliding gates were opened for the paddy wagon and it drove down into an underground docking area where other armed guards waited in silence. The paddy wagon now came to a halt again and the Diabolic Security agent in its passenger seat got out and spoke with the others already there. When the situation had been discussed, each of the detainees was unloaded one-at-a-time and led into the facility after they'd had their hands and feet shackled and black hoods pulled over their faces. Despite the droning of the ventilation system, the loudest sounds during this were Asmoe's and Thoth's jangling manacles.

* * *

The reason the two heresy suspects were kept apart was so they wouldn't be able to formulate a story together and, keeping with that, they were also processed in different sections of the facility. Asmoe paid close attention as he was marched through the echoing halls, although he managed to overhear very little. Traffic seemed relatively light but when he lingered for a second trying to catch some voices, one of his escorts zapped him with an electrocution prod (which really hurt) He was unable to keep track of the various turns they subsequently made but after several minutes he was finally led into a room unlocked by someone at an intercom and told to stand still. He listened as his guards became preoccupied with some sort of container or drop box behind him and was unpleasantly surprised when one of them grabbed his wrist-manacles and attached these to a chain that was hanging from above, tightening this to the point he was nearly hoisted off his feet. Asmoe grunted with pain but he knew it'd be stupid to protest. He'd tried to convince them to let him go earlier but now that he was being processed he realized that any inconveniences he imposed on the DS agents would result in swift retribution. The most pragmatic thing for him was to be as cooperative as possible until he got the chance to speak to someone who could actually help him get released. However long that might take. Asmoe thought about the quite realistic possibility of being incarcerated for years, before ever going to trial, as the guards emptied out his pockets and patted him down.

"Where's your phone!?" one of them barked at him.

"I left it at home this morning," said Asmoe before adding apologetically, "By accident."

The guard snorted with irritation but didn't press the issue. Instead, him and his partner tore off Asmoe's clothes and then proceeded to pick up some kind of metal tool from a nearby table. The horn choppers. Asmoe knew what was coming before he felt the bolt-cutter-like device clamp down on one of the twin protrusions on his head and slice it off. It didn't hurt but the sound of the one horn, and then the other falling to the floor, deflated him. He limply acquiesced as his captors now took his hands and began shearing his claws with another instrument.

“Make a fuss and we’ll take the whole fingers,” he was told but luckily he got spared this. When it came time for the defanging however he knew he was going to feel it for real now and he couldn’t help struggling as they ripped off his hood and pried open his mouth. His eyes had difficulty adjusting to the light but a devilish face was right in front of his and leering.

“Such puny fangs. Hardly much point in pulling them. The rules are the rules though,” they said, smiling evilly. Asmoe’s eyes bulged and darted with fearful anticipation.

It was over in an instant and the DS agent with the defanging tool neatly deposited the two bloody teeth in a metal tray before dumping its contents in a garbage. After he’d done that he paused and looked at Asmoe.

“I’m sorry. Did you want those as souvenirs?” he joked and the other guard enjoyed a good laugh.

Asmoe gazed at him blankly for a moment but then closed his eyes and concentrated on willing the pain in his mouth into something dull and distant. It didn’t work. He wasn’t given much time to focus on it though since his guards had a schedule to keep. They unlatched him from the ceiling chain and removed his wrist-manacles before tossing a flimsy blue robe at him.

“Put it on,” he was ordered and he mechanically complied.

Having done this, he had his wrist-manacles restored and they proceeded to take him out the only other door in the small room besides the one he’d entered through. This led to some barren hallways which he suspected were identical to the ones he’d passed through earlier, and these then brought him to another small room but this time with a fold-out chair in front of a large window of reinforced glass. Asmoe was forcefully seated in the chair and left alone, allowing him time to inspect what was on the other side. It seemed to be some kind of interviewer area. A tall microphone was situated in the middle of a desk facing towards him and a plush empty chair was just behind these – swiveled in such a way that it was clear someone had gotten out of it since it was last placed there. Asmoe also noticed a panel of monitors angled towards the chair to the left and a dormant alarm siren but, other than that, there wasn’t much to see. He felt himself being watched

though and, looking up, he saw a surveillance eye in the corner of his room – just like the ones they had at Tsuji Giri. With nothing else to attract its attention it stared at him incessantly, the giant eye blinking now and then but always sending a continuous stream of visual feedback to whatever observation hub it was connected to. A living camera. Asmoe wondered why the eyes were grown with eyelashes but he realized they probably only produced one model for indoor and outdoor use. He continued to pass the time with idle thoughts like these until eventually a door in the interviewer’s area opened.

* * *

Elsewhere, Thoth had been had been hung by his wrist-manacles on a hook attached to an overhead conveyer-rail after enduring his own confiscation and screening ordeal. His horns now reduced to stumps, the minotaur actually found it easier to twist around and survey his surroundings. He didn’t have to worry about knocking into things as much, at least until his horns grew back. Not that there was anything in his immediate vicinity. Aside from the rail he was dangling from and the other empty hooks in view, the corridor he’d been deposited in was bare. He looked along the ground that was resting about a dozen feet below (the daemons who were hoisted here like he was after all could be much larger than him) but it was pretty clean. He did notice a blue robe, like the one he wore, lying up ahead and he was silently thankful that at least he didn’t have to endure his current situation naked. Thoth squirmed a little though as the manacles that were digging into his wrists began to become a source of real pain. Were they just going to leave him like this forever? His guards had departed through the swinging doors on the other side of the platform just across from him but, although there were small round windows in these, he couldn’t see anything happening beyond. Should he try to escape? The thought of thrashing around violently enough to break free didn’t exactly appeal to him. It’d be a lot of work. Then he’d fall and hurt himself. Plus there was the problem of getting out of a maximum security detention center. Besides, they knew who he was. What would he even do if he did manage to get out of here? As awful as it was to contemplate, he’d just have to see how things played out. It wasn’t too long however before his guards returned. The two uniformed daemons didn’t pay any attention to him though as they came in, dragging an unconscious human male by its armpits. Despite their disinterest in him, Thoth decided to try and have a word with them.

“Fellas. Sorry to bother you but I was just wondering about, you know, where you’re sending me and...” Thoth stopped talking as one of the DS agents fixed him with a mean stare and marched over.

“Say another word and you’ll get it in the mouth,” they spat, holding a crackling electrocution prod an inch from his face. Thoth went cross-eyed looking at it and shut up. Now the two DS agents conferred among themselves.

“Send them along?” asked one. The other thought for a moment.

“Yeah,” he replied eventually, “We don’t have any more intakes for another hour.”

With that the first agent nodded and stepped over to a control panel where a lever waited. Pushing this, the conveyer-rail trembled and then slowly started moving. As Thoth was being carried off he instinctively struggled a bit but then gave up, looking towards the two diminishing DS agents as he did. One of them even returned his gaze, mockingly saluting him.

The machinery quickly increased its pace and soon the bodies of Thoth and the still unconscious human were slanting at an angle from the speed. It could’ve almost been an amusement ride if it wasn’t for the mysterious foreboding destination looming for them up ahead. To be fair actually, Hell did have more than its share of masochistic entertainment venues where getting seriously injured was part of the experience; so a vague threat of future peril wouldn’t necessarily have excluded it. Thoth was a normal daemon however who didn’t like suffering if it happened to be his own. He had an uncle that was a professional Russian roulette player, and who constantly encouraged Thoth to take an interest in it when he was a young calf, but Thoth always declined to on account of this. The thrill of maybe shooting yourself in the head was lost on him. Now though his fate wasn’t his to decide and getting a bullet in the skull might be preferable to what was waiting ahead. He didn’t know for sure what he was in for but as an accused heretic he knew it couldn’t be good. His currently being transported on Ereshkigal’s interior rail system was even giving him some ideas of what that might be as he caught glimpses of various parts of the facility. Whooshing along with his beard rippling and body swaying in the turns, Thoth watched as his conveyer-rail crisscrossed dozens of others, many of which also had daemons and humans on them being

transported to their own allotted unpleasanties. The immense spaces that he passed through astonished the minotaur and he got to see technicians in lab-coats who stood around on metal-grated catwalks examining their clipboards and some that were attending to convoluted machines and others glanced through large windows sitting in office chairs while drinking hot beverages on their breaks. There were also robotic arms removing detainees from their rails and putting them in boxes or just throwing them down shoots or dropping them unceremoniously into pits of darkly stained gyrating blades that led who-knows-where. Thoth stared as detainees were bunched up on rails waiting for automated lasers to etch barcode-like identifying marks into them and he stared as detainees on a railing disappearing into the opening of a huge conduit labelled “ACID INTERNMENT” realized where they were heading and started to panic. Acid internment, or acid suspension as it was more commonly known, was the most efficient way to store criminals and undesirables in Hell – while you could simply stuff anyone into a small confining area, that still tended to take up a lot of space so, as a consequence, daemonic scientists had devised a system whereby the medulla oblongata was removed and stored in an acidic solution powerful enough to compensate for the regeneration process. In this way you could incarcerate hundreds of prisoners in a space comparable to the average dog kennel. It was also discovered to be tremendously painful, generating a kind of bodiless limbo of anguish, so it had the added benefit of appeasing the many lobby groups who pushed for the expansion of cruel and unusual punishments. This was a constant feature of Hell’s political landscape – the spectacle of demagogues demanding the end to soft-on-crime policies. Of course, in Hell a politician could get a reputation for being soft-on-crime if they accidentally failed to express sufficient passion for what was now called the Triple D Program – the three Ds in question here being Dismemberment, Disemboweling, and Decapitation. In terms of its real implementation, it encompassed far more than just these forms of punishment but they were considered the axioms of criminal justice. The only solid basis on which good laws could be established.

As he continued in transit, Thoth made eye contact with a ghoul on a rail running parallel with his for a stretch. The ghoul had a demented look on his face as he spontaneously blurted a confession.

“I said something about karma in casual conversation!” he yelled and then grinned at his own admission.

Well, serves him right, thought the minotaur. You can't just go around talking like that. Thoth took a minute to ignore the fact that he'd been accused of heresy to silently disapprove of the hypothetical crimes of the other detainees. The frantic noise and energy of his current environment didn't exactly promote clear thinking but here he was merely feeding off an already ingrained prejudice. Ignoring his many lapses in consistency, Thoth liked to think of himself as a true believer. This only made him all the more bitter regarding his predicament. His thoughts were soon distracted though by the awakening of the human beside him. Thoth made no attempt to communicate as its face underwent a gradual transition from confusion to terror. Finally it noticed the minotaur looking at it and cried out

"Where are we going!?" The clanging and whirr of background machinery was nearly deafening.

"Different places I hope! For my sake!" Thoth responded. The human didn't know how to take that. As it was miserably searching its surroundings for some sign of hope, the minotaur decided to elaborate. "They won't bother assessing you! Even if you're innocent, the only value you have now is as an object lesson in the consequences of disobedience!"

The human still didn't understand. "Why!?" they begged.

Thoth did his best attempt at a shrug despite having his arms taut above him. "That's what you get for being human."

It startled the minotaur though when at that exact moment a robotic appendage like a scorpion's tail whipped around at blinding speed and removed the human by impaling it in the chest. The machine carrying them didn't even slow down.

Metal on metal. The pounding hydraulics. The screeching. Thoth was starting to hyperventilate. The air around him became acrid and the industrial smells swirling through it began to inflame his nostrils. Strained wheezing. Snorting. The conveyer-rail was decreasing in speed. Why? His eyes followed the curve of it up ahead to see what it was passing close to. A platform with a couple DS agents was visible. Okay. There were also open-topped chemical vats seething with some kind

of glowing liquid. Not okay. Thoth watched uncomfortably as a cambion from another rail was removed and submerged in one of the vats by a robotic arm. As they were brought up, they flailed their whole body like a fish on a hook while the chemical dissolved their flesh. Thoth began to struggle. He bellowed with bestial abandon, a primal eruption unconstrained by any rational impulses. The glowing liquid rippled. Tendrils of the goopy substance separated from each other like miniature dancers when one of the bubbles burst. In his mind he could hear it drowning out all the external cacophony. A hot gurgling furor. He clenched his teeth. It glowed. It was bright and hungry. It was luminescent with appetite. A robotic arm reached out for him. No. He jerked his head side-to-side. It lifted him up. No, he insisted. It didn't care. It didn't feel anything. But it wasn't malicious either. It wasn't carrying him to the vats this time – instead it dangled him over the platform with the DS agents. Thoth shuddered with relief and gave no thought to the fact that he wasn't wearing anything under his robe as the uniformed daemons below were looking up at him. When the robotic arm deposited him on the platform, he was like a newly born calf. He also puked.

* * *

“Would you like to volunteer for exploratory medical trials?”

The question was asked in a perfectly congenial tone but it seemed incongruous coming from the mouth of the EDF admissions officer. Not that it was unusual. The admission officer's catfish face however seemed incapable of the cheerful insincerity that was sluicing out of it.

“I haven't even been indicted yet,” responded Asmoe, trying not to sound too sullen as he attempted to redirect their conversation.

“Oh, I know,” acknowledged the admissions officer, “But that's in no way an impediment. If, in the unlikely event you aren't convicted of heresy, participation in these trials will still entitle you to a fifty percent deduction off the charges you accrue during the term of your incarceration. And honestly, for you, I have the perfect study in mind. The Effects of Catapulting as a Disciplinary Measure. Sounds pretty great doesn't it? Just sign right here.”

The catfish-faced admissions officer pointed through the window as two thin robotic arms descended from a trapdoor in the ceiling with a clipboard and a pen. Unfortunately for the EDF employee, Asmoe knew this game. Looking him in his glaucous eyes and noting the eager quiver betraying itself in his slimy whiskers, Asmoe firmly replied to the admissions officer while pushing aside the clipboard and pen he was being offered.

“Mr. Illwroth is it? You’ve all my personal information now and it’s been what, forty minutes already? I appreciate that it’s part of your normal procedure to recruit for programs during this process but since I’m not going to agree to participate in one of them let’s not waste any more of each other’s time. I’m sure you have plenty of other things to do today.”

This rebuke stung Mr. Illwroth and he slumped in his chair a little as the robotic hands in Asmoe’s room retreated back into the ceiling. The pain in his mouth was still throbbing but Asmoe knew he had to speak forcefully and shrewdly in order to handle the bureaucracy in a place like this.

“That’s disappointing to hear,” said Mr. Illwroth at last, a slightly condescending note in his voice. His pride had been injured and he was subconsciously compensating for that. “Reviewing your file it says you’re a certified torturer. Lucky you. That means you won’t have to be taken for a preliminary evaluation.”

Here Mr. Illwroth was referring to the fact that in order to become a certified torturer one had to undergo testing to gauge one’s own responsiveness to torture and to appreciate the experience at an intimate level. How could you properly use such techniques after all if you didn’t fully understand their effects? Therefore Asmoe long ago had his various pain thresholds measured and recorded for future use. Unlike Thoth.

* * *

Four mechanical coils held him spread-eagle by the wrists and ankles. The attractive harpy in the lab-coat who was running the assessment had remote control of these and she could loosen them to give Thoth mobility or force him to perform certain movements whenever she pleased. They’d only just begun but

already he'd been pulled in multiple ways to test his endurance for this, as well as jerked around like a marionette to imitate jumping-jacks. It was nasty and Thoth was getting desperate. Searching deep within himself for any hidden reserves of charisma, the profusely sweating and disheveled minotaur tried to sweet talk his tormentrix.

"Hey. This really isn't necessary is it?" he crooned before succumbing to a fit of choking. The harpy scientist seemed to take no notice of his tone in any case.

"We have to test your pain threshold so we'll be able to punish you more effectively," she said with a jaunty voice as she pressed the intercom button in an observation room located near the ceiling. Then, with another button press, she added, "Your cooperation is appreciated."

Thoth snorted. "Hallelujah," he cursed but carefully and quietly.

If this is what she was going to do to him in a happy mood he didn't want to find out the alternative. As the harpy scientist focused on some diagnostic readouts on her computer, Thoth tried to ready himself for the next round of copious abuse. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. His heart rate started to decrease. He could get through this. It wouldn't last forever. Thoth closed his eyes and exhaled again. When he opened them a few seconds later, something punched him in the face. A fist-sized pummeling device descending from the ceiling to be specific.

"Ugh!" he yelled afterwards and the harpy scientist made some notes for her report. Before Thoth could expand on his misery and frustration though the pummeling device hit him again, but this time in the stomach.

"Uhhhhh," he moaned as a thin stream of bloody drool fell from his bottom lip and splattered on the floor. The harpy scientist made some more notes before pressing the intercom button.

"More in the face or more in the stomach?" she asked and Thoth couldn't comprehend what she was saying. He didn't want more of either. Sensing his misunderstanding she explained.

“Which pummeling hurt more Mr. Horrorgorger?” Ohhhhhhhhh, he thought. That’s what she meant. Well, he’d have to go with the stomach wouldn’t he?

“The stomach,” he answered honestly and the harpy scientist checked with her readouts for double verification. Satisfied, she had the machine punch him in the stomach again, only harder.

“More in the groin or more in the eye?” asked the harpy as she adjusted the thick, black-rimmed glasses resting on her beak. Thoth had been replying honestly up until now but that last shot to the groin left constellations in both eyes rather than just the one so he decided to give lying a shot.

“The eye,” he said, wincing. The harpy scientist shook her head as she checked with her readouts.

“I can tell that’s not true,” she said admonishingly. “Are you lying Mr. Horrorgorger?” Her minotaur subject was crestfallen.

“Yes,” confessed Thoth. Hearing this she nodded her head and made a few more notes but he couldn’t restrain his frustration now. “If you know already, why do you keep asking me!?” he screamed. The harpy scientist paused, calmly surveying him before pressing the intercom button.

“To determine whether you can still tell the difference,” she stated dispassionately. Thoth went slack with despair and then exploded in animalistic thrashing before once more conceding defeat. The harpy scientist pressed the intercom button again.

“If it’s any consolation Mr. Horrorgorger, physical duress appears to be extremely effective in your case so it’s likely you’ll be subjected to minimal excruciation from here on out.” It wasn’t. Instead Thoth’s mind fled to thoughts about the various things he cherished for comfort. His collection of first-edition posthumous autobiographies bound in the skins of their authors. His photo albums filled with pictures from all sorts of famous abattoirs and sacrificial altars he’d visited. The pseudo-mushroom garden he’d been carefully crafting for years out of goblin-resin that made his duplex’s balcony the envy of his netherhood. And of course there were all the good times he had with fiends and acquaintances, the

nocturnal indulgences he enjoyed as a counterpoint to his tranquil work in the library. He just wanted it back. Was that too much to ask?

“Okay Mr. Horrorgorger, I think you’ve been pummeled enough for today,” acknowledged the harpy scientist. Thoth sighed with relief. His tormentrix however wasn’t done speaking. “Now we just have to get through drills, torches, lacerations, and electricity. Then we’ll be all done.”

* * *

The daemon guards escorting Asmoe perfunctorily removed his manacles and then shoved him into a holding cell. That seemed excessive, he thought after landing on his face. Pushing himself off the cold cement floor, Asmoe found himself crouching in a strangely dark room. The only light getting in was from a small horizontal slit in the door and this only revealed maybe a fifth of the space he’d been left in – the length of which was perpendicular with left leaning asymmetry in relation to the door. It was odd too that he’d been put in such a large room alone wasn’t it? Asmoe’s eyes narrowed as he sensed the other presence. Where though?

“I know someone’s here,” he said, flexing his declawed hands. No response. “Who’s there?” he demanded, a little more emphatically. Initially nothing filled the silence as his voice evaporated but then he heard something in the far corner of the room. The sound of friction. A flicker maybe. And then the rasping inhale and the glowing red ember that gave away a cigarette in the shadows.

“I could ask you the same thing. Since I was also here first, why don’t you be the one to go ahead and introduce yourself?” retorted a voice. It was low, sibilant, and almost musical. A masculine voice but one that hovered on the edge of song. Asmoe couldn’t tell what kind of daemon it belonged to.

“Fine,” he replied. “I’m Asmoe. Now it’s your turn.” The other daemon took a long drag on their cigarette before replying.

“The name’s Eights. At least, that’s what the other snared in this place call me.” Asmoe merely bobbed his head as he remained crouched below a wedge of light, peering into the darkness where the voice was emanating from. “You’re new here,” said Eights.

“What gave me away?” responded Asmoe with a casual air. “The fact that I’m not huddled up in the fetal position?” Eights liked this.

“Yeah” he hissed, laughing. After a few seconds he added, “Maybe you’re okay Asmoe Cambion. Until they start poking you that is. No one’s okay after that.” Asmoe noted Leg’s mention of his species.

“How’d you know I was a cambion?” he asked warily. Eights laughed and took another drag.

“Spawn, I’ve got infrared vision. Plus, I had a good look at you when they were throwing you in here.” Asmoe shook his head in a self-deprecating acknowledgement of his own question’s stupidity. He even managed to relax a little and this didn’t escape Eights.

“Want some?” the mysterious daemon asked and the ember in the dark moved a little closer to Asmoe.

“Sure,” he replied and stepped forward to take the cigarette. As he did he finally got an idea of who his cell-mate was. The silhouette of a massive tarantula daemon leaned towards him and Asmoe had to take the cigarette from one of their long bristling appendages. Observing the slight trepidation in his counterpart’s demeanor, Eights confessed something in a sardonic way after he settled back into his corner.

“Don’t worry Asmoe, they took my fangs too. The scoundrels.”

They continued to talk with Asmoe twice offering Eights back his cigarette and both times the tarantula refusing. When it’d dwindled to a little smoldering stub, Asmoe ground it into the wall and then tossed it away with a clever snapping motion of his fingers.

“How about that Diabolic Security?” mused Eights.

“Sorry?” replied Asmoe.

“You’d think they’d be in better moods seeing as how they get to go around hurting kin all the time,” elaborated the tarantula.

“Trust me, it can get tedious pretty quickly,” replied Asmoe in dissent, and then, “I torture for a living.” As soon as he said this he wished he could take it back. If Eights had been in Ereshkigal for any length of time, and getting the usual treatment, he might be harboring a general anger towards daemons in Asmoe’s line of work. But didn’t the tarantula just concede it was a desirable profession?

“Where at?” inquired Eights, apparently unbothered by Asmoe’s admission.

“Tsuji Giri,” he replied. Then another thought struck Asmoe. Why’d DS put him in here alone with Eights? Was the tarantula an informant mining him for incriminating details? Asmoe decided to be more cautious now but, at the same time, he didn’t want to let himself succumb too easily to paranoia.

“How about you Eights?” he asked. The tarantula drew a little nearer and once more his outline became visible.

“Would you believe... I’m a dancer!?” he hissed and then did a brief jig, twirling an imaginary cane and doffing an imaginary top-hat. Asmoe chuckled.

“Yeah, I’d believe it,” he said sincerely, his eyes trying to keep up with the rhythm of Eights’ many legs. The tarantula however stopped abruptly and turned his head towards his cell-mate, his nest of round eyes glittering slightly.

“Just wishful thinking Cambion. Just wishful thinking. Despite my obviously fantastic moves, I remain a merchant mariner. A regular sea-spider.” Here, Eights was referencing the sea in a metaphorical sense. Shipping traffic in the terrestrial regions of Hell was done by dirigibles. But those weren’t the kind of ships Eights was even talking about.

“Gone far?” asked Asmoe. Eights’ mandibles fluttered with mirth.

“What’s far? Our colonial hives out on the moons of Saturn? Or our fortresses across a dozen interdimensional outposts? Maybe you’re thinking really

far though, like the cosmic wharves of diamond laid out before the gates of Heaven itself? Rest assured Asmoe, I've been a few places."

As the tarantula enthusiastically recounted some of his exploits across Hell and other dimensions, Asmoe sat down in the shadows nearby and leaned against one of the walls. Now Eights decided to move on to politics.

"Listen spawn, the thing with the government is they're not worried about a few measly principalities or some rag-tag human terrorists. The archfiends got it all under control and that's what it's about. Control. Even though they've every means to conquer all these menaces they don't. Why? Because they cultivate them. Keeps the hordes in line, having enemies. Us versus them. Feeds the narrative. Powers the hate." Asmoe didn't entirely disagree but a holding-cell in the middle of the infamous Ereshkigal wasn't exactly his ideal spot for subversive discussion. But then maybe that was the point? Or it was just the reason Eights was in here in the first place.

"Well, they could simply lobotomize everyone," suggested Asmoe "Like police thralls." This was a common procedure done on Diabolic Security's street level enforcement officers. Naturally the removed pieces of brain grew back eventually but the surgeries were repeated as necessary and they were a cheap way to produce extremely compliant and gung-ho agents of authority.

"That would mess with their system though," countered Eights. "If every daemon was reduced to a brain-dead idiot then who'd be able to keep the machine running? Nah, they need intelligent daemons. But they prevent them from seeing the whole picture, the real picture, by constricting their knowledge and attention. They shove their faces in a little patch of sand so they can't see the desert. You skewer this?" Asmoe was about to offer up some hedged acquiescence but a slot opening in the cell-door, interrupted him.

"Dinner!" barked a voice and a basin full of cold severed limbs was pushed through.

"Finally," sighed Eights as he rubbed the two pairs of his forefront appendages together. "I thought I was going to have to resort to eating you."

* * *

Was it the morning of the next day? The afternoon? Thoth couldn't tell but he hadn't slept yet. He was craving sleep, sure; Ereshkigal however had other plans for him.

"Mr. Horrorgorger, it says here that you were arrested on the sidewalk outside something called The Demiurge? Correct me if I'm wrong."

Huh? Thoth looked at the daemon sitting across from him at the gleaming metal table they were sharing. Another lab-coat. A scrawny little daemon who had total power over him. He stared ruefully at his manacled-hands shackled to a ring in the center of the table.

"Mr. Horrorgorger?"

Since his pain tests he'd been zoning in and out of focus and he couldn't remember what the lab-coat wanted to hear. "How... long... is this interrogation going to be?" he asked weakly. The EDF interviewer in the lab-coat shook his head and tried to be patient.

"Mr. Horrorgorger, I already told you that this is only your pre-interrogation assessment. Now, if we can just establish your version of the events leading up to your arrest." His version was that they'd been having a wonderful evening. Nothing seditious.

"Mr. Horrorgorger?"

Thoth stared at the interviewer with welding-torch eyes, his voice cracking. "We were drinking and joking and enjoying ourselves! I read some poetry! And there was a farce about some idiotic saint! Okay!?" The interviewer remained unruffled.

"We?" they said, letting it hang in the air before continuing. "Yes, that's right. You were picked up with another daemon. A Mr. Cambioni. What can you tell us about him?" They wanted Asmoe? That didn't make sense. Asmoe was a drone, a

smoothly rolling satanic cog in the great infernal engine. No, it was him they wanted, him; Thoth sanctify-it-all Horrorgorger. He'd been reading Spinoza.

“Asmodeus? He has a pet millipede.”

The interviewer gave Thoth a disapproving look and wrote something down before the minotaur detonated.

“How much longer!? How much longer is this going to go on!?” The interviewer did their best to smile.

“Mr. Horrorgorger, please understand. Time has no meaning in this place.”

* * *

He'd been given a tiny pencil. Shorter than his pinkie finger and with barely enough graphite peeking from the wedge of bone to write anything. Asking to have it sharpened wasn't an option though. Instead, Asmoe dragged his glazed eyes back to the papers spread across the table. They'd given him forms to fill out – a sacred terror's worth of forms. He'd finished a couple already but he'd paused to let his mind wander after filling out an exhaustive list of personal details on the current one. Alright, back to work. Question One: Have you ever belonged to any political organizations? No, answered Asmoe. Below it also read: In either case explain. Asmoe wrote, Because I have full confidence in the Archons' leadership. This was true. The archfiends were so powerful he doubted anyone could challenge them. Moving on then. Question Two: Have you written or spoken in favor of human rights? Another no. They were certainly covering all their bases weren't they? Here he was, detained on heresy suspicions and they were assessing him for political subversion too. To be accurate, technically they were trying to get him to commit fraud by submitting false claims to a government agency. That would give any sentencing a hefty multiplier. Below the previous question he made sure to fill out the required explanation, adding that he had no doubts about it being the natural role of human beings to serve as demonic sustenance. Question Three: Have you ever read anything published by terrorist groups? A trick question. Human terrorists plastered posters in many areas and just glancing at one of these could count as a yes here. If he said yes though, even if he clarified himself in the explanation section, doing so could still reclassify him as a higher security detainee.

On the other hand, if he outright lied they'd baptise him on that. Time to finesse his rusty equivocation skills. Writing down a no, he followed this with the following explanation; I refuse to indulge terrorist propaganda. The concept of indulgence was ambiguous enough that he could argue that reading as such would have to constitute the actual intent to follow the author's assertions or narrative. Asmoe smiled to himself. He was pretty good at this, devising logical loopholes to slither out of their rhetorical traps. Another down. Okay, Question Four: Have you ever felt the temptation to pray? Eucharist.

Paper after paper filled out and flipped over but no matter how many he got through it seemed like new ones were quietly slipping into the bottom of his incomplete pile. Question Forty-Eight: Have you ever had dreams where pacifist ideals were notable? Question One-Hundred-and-Sixty-Seven: Have you ever suffered from an episode of ethical dilemma and failed to report yourself? Question Three-Hundred-and-Eighty-Two: Have you ever tried to convince someone else about the merits of one of your unorthodox beliefs? Asmoe had the terrifying thought that maybe his entire existence up until now had been nothing more than an insidious assessment devised by some secret invisible power so that it could generate the exact test which would make him succumb to madness. Maybe this was his eternity from here on out – just an endless filling out of these invasive questionnaires? Despite having once been taken to see Sisyphus rolling his boulder during a family vacation, Asmoe momentarily envied the human. This was worse. The shackling of his thoughts, the tedium that was a sort of liquid pollution seeping into every pore and crevice in his mind, it dwarfed the deviousness of his own imagination. He'd long prided himself on being inventive when it came to inflicting suffering on others but now he'd been given a stark lesson in humility. As a torturer he had much to learn. Asmoe wiped off some of the sweat that was drenching his brow and looked up at the silent surveillance eye that was watching him. It blinked with apparent nonchalance but Asmoe knew that behind it another daemon was observing him, making sure he didn't decide to take a nap or otherwise neglect the form-filling task he'd been assigned. They'd even hooked him up to a machine to ensure this and, if he didn't keep filling out the forms in front of him, the machine he was hooked up to would instantaneously send torrents of electricity through each of the wires they'd inserted in every major orifice of his body.

* * *

“You suffer from an abnormal personality disorder. You appear to have a notable underdevelopment when it comes to your aggression responses.” The psychiatrist said this to Thoth without any insult intended – it was simply his psychological evaluation; another of the preliminary tests Thoth had to get through before he’d be qualified to be interrogated.

“What does that mean for my... situation?” Thoth asked warily. The psychiatrist gave him an uncertain look before pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his lab-coat and lighting one up.

“Nothing. I just thought you should know. There are hormone treatments available,” he added helpfully.

Thoth was well aware that his appetite for violence left him preferring the role of spectator to participant, a thing other daemon children had teased and bullied him about at school. How did the rhyme go? Yes, that was it. Squeamish Thoth, as soft as a moth, keeps his dagger dry; when bloodshed starts, he loses heart, and anguish makes him cry. Which was totally unfair. As a calf he had a perfectly healthy interest in cruelty, he just found a lot of the other children’s torture-games messy and complicated.

“So what effect has this evaluation had on my detainment status?” the minotaur inquired. The cyclops psychiatrist sitting across from him blew out a long stream of smoke before replying.

“To be honest Mr. Horrorgorger, so far there’s no good news. You don’t meet the requirements for any medical exemptions for example. And, just between us, I wouldn’t get my hopes up about a reclassification. I hate to say it but realistically you’re looking at a long internment aside from whether or not you’re convicted. My suggestion is that you continue to be honest and cooperative.” What a surprise, the psychiatrist was telling him that the best thing for him to do was to make the psychiatrist’s job easier. It was probably true though. Thoth couldn’t see how being troublesome now would get him anything. Other than pain.

He continued to do his best to be go along with the evaluation but as time went on he couldn’t help asking more and more questions. “What’s the point of a psychological evaluation when it comes to heresy?” wondered Thoth out-loud,

unable to help himself all of a sudden. The cyclops psychiatrist gave it some thought and then replied.

“Well, in trying to address the scourge of heretical beliefs, it’s important that a correct scientific understanding of their true source and causes is obtained. Otherwise, how could we ever eliminate them? In response to your question then, evaluations like these are all part of an ongoing effort to solve the problem of heresy once and for all. If we can determine its true origins then we can devise a permanent solution.”

That made perfect sense to Thoth but it seemed like an extraordinary challenge. “How would you ever be able to do that though?” he wondered. The psychiatrist now took out another cigarette, as well as offering one to Thoth. After they’d both had theirs lit, the cyclops answered.

“The issue is how to plug a leak. Minds, whether daemonic or human, are like liquids that always run down-hill and slip out of any available hole. That is to say, they’re always motivated by the greatest prevailing force but this can lead to unorthodox choices. If we can plug these holes however, if we can impose a more rational psychological structure on the individual, then we’d be able to prevent them from exercising their free-will in an undesirable way.” At this last assertion, a look of unease darkened Thoth’s face. “What’s the matter?” asked the psychiatrist innocently, “Don’t you believe in free-will?” The minotaur shook his head with great emphasis.

“Absolutely not. Of course not. Free-will’s a metaphysical concept.”

The psychiatrist gave him a hostile smile – Thoth had avoided the pitfall he’d been deliberately herded towards.

* * *

Asmoe clenched his teeth. “But I’ve already been through this,” he seethed.

“Through what?” asked the she-daemon in the lab-coat interviewing him.

“Had the assessment, the... the pre-interrogation assessment!” he insisted. The interviewer averted her eyes and discretely thumbed through the file-folder she was holding in her hands.

“Mr. Cambioni,” she explained, “This isn’t another pre-interrogation assessment.” Asmoe waited for her to tell him what it was but she just looked at him patiently.

“So what is it!” he whispered furiously, the exasperation he was feeling burdening him to the point it compressed his anger into a muted parcel of rage.

“This is a pre-interrogation in-ter-view... not an assessment.”

Asmoe’s mouth fell open. “Wasn’t the assessment an interview!?” he asked, clawing agitatedly at his scalp.

“Yes,” replied the interviewer, nodding happily as if she were pleased that his frustration hadn’t reached the point yet where it’d short-circuited his brain. She had an interview to conduct after all.

“So? What’s? The? Difference?” continued Asmoe. With a light sigh, the interviewer carefully closed the file-folder she was holding. Still, she was used to her interviewees being unreasonable sometimes.

“The pre-interrogation assessment is an interview which aims at establishing the accused’s degree of cognizance with regards to the charges they could potentially be indicted on. The pre-interrogation interview on the other hand is designed for the purpose of assessing whether or not the accused’s degree of cognizance is pertinent to a potential indictment and, if so, how this could affect any charges.” Asmoe wasn’t able to follow much of what she’d said but he threw out a follow up question in sheer desperation.

“Does this mean you’ll be able to finally give me my detainment classification? You’re the third daemon I’ve asked about it.” The interviewer shook her head apologetically.

“No. Having that assigned is contingent on all pre-interrogation procedures being completed. You’ll have to wait for your pre-interrogation designation session.”

Asmoe let out a loud exhale. He needed to remember that this was all deliberate, that they were doing all this deliberately to him. The system wasn’t supposed to make sense; it was meant to crush your resistance through overwhelming obfuscation. He couldn’t let it get its hooks in him, otherwise he’d just be their puppet. Summoning all of his determination, Asmoe looked his interviewer calmly in the eye.

“How do I get out of here?”

Using her best professional smile, the she-daemon attempted to properly convey why his question was predicated on a false premise. “Mr. Cambioni, it’s best not to think of your situation using those kinds of terms. Whether or not you’re ever released is contingent on a number of factors, none of which are really within your control. It certainly won’t help you then if you focus your energy on trying to figure out how to respond in order to secure a discharge. In fact, an attempt to exploit due-process to obtain one’s own advantage is, in and of itself, considered evidence of criminal misconduct. Unfortunately I’m going to have to note this in your file.” As the female daemon began to write down something to that effect in the file-folder, Asmoe jumped to his feet in savage fury.

“All these rooms look the same!” he shouted, throwing his chair at the wall and smashing it to pieces.

* * *

After the various tests he’d been put through that day, Thoth was returned once more to his sleeping hex. “Discarded into” would be a better way of putting it perhaps. He was going back into the pit... and he definitely didn’t want to return there. Thoth thought of it in the singular, as if his pit was the awful black core of Ereshkigal, but in reality there were multiple pits just like his at the facility, all of them utterly identical in construction. These consisted of stadium-sized circular holes made out of daemon-ravaged concrete that were roughly 400 feet deep. At the top of the pits’ walls there were perimeter-enclosing sentry walks where

armored guards patrolled with cudgels and automatic shotguns. Located every fifty feet along these there were also acid-hose stations and whenever the mayhem in a pit threatened to become a problem, or a Diabolic Security guard just wanted to inflict some terror, these could be used to spray the prisoners below. As for how the daemons who were incarcerated in these pits were taken in and out of them, this was achieved by a host of robotic limbs moving along tracks across the ceiling that were capable of lowering long chains with cross-bars that daemons could ascend or descend from. The floor of the pits furthermore had hexagonal shaped recesses, like honeycombs, which individual daemons were randomly deposited into and these constituted their dwelling areas. Some large daemons even had makeshift expanded hexagons, or mega hexagons, and these could be as large as nine regular hexagons. Usually any daemon which occupied one of these was an acknowledged pit-tyrant or pit-lord and, in the case of Thoth's pit, this was a saurian colossus who ruled over things from his abode by the northern part of the wall. In the pit, status was easily discerned by proximity to the center – the closer to the center you were, the lower your status. This is because having a wall at your back was extremely advantageous in the chaos of all the animalistic fighting going on and, the closer one's hex was to the wall, the closer one was to taking over a wall-hex. If you can picture a swarm of hermit crabs all competing for shells then you have a general idea of what the social dynamics in these pits were like. Except each combatant was also a criminal daemon who'd been honed for years by the ruthless predatory environments of Hell – in some cases for millennia.

As a daemon that was both new and lacking in pugilistic prowess, Thoth predictably found himself situated near the center. Adopting a turtling strategy, he rarely stuck his head above the ridge of his hex, and since no one really wanted his space he only had to engage in a few fights a day on average. It also helped that minotaurs were well-known for having horrible tasting flesh. Despite the nearly constant clamor and violence going on around them, the inhabitants of the pit didn't solely make war on each other – they also formed gangs and traded assorted types of contraband. Thoth was even on a first name basis already with one of his adjacent fiends, a monster that could be described as a large cluster of eyeballs with jellyfish-like tentacles undulating from it and a stalk for a thorax which segmented into three long radial crab legs. Its name was Zyslesh.

“Thhhhoth! Whhellcaaam bhaack! Yooourr misshhhiing qqquiiite a shhhhhoow!” rose the monster's voice above the frenzy of background noise as

Toth ducked in his hex like a soldier in a trench. He'd adopted a defensive posture and his eyes were moving around anxiously as he responded.

"Thanks Zyslesh but my ears and imagination are working just fine!" A thin tentacle lightly slapped the south-eastern ridge of his hex.

"Chaaamm aaaaaahhhn. Hhhaave a llook." Since everyone in his immediate area seemed pretty hunkered down for the moment, Toth decided to risk a glance. With the top of his face tilted back and just barely lifted above the ridge of his hex, the minotaur gazed over the field of hexagons to the south-east. A pitched battle was being fought there between two gangs: the Dread Knives and the Beast Raiders. Many of them had somehow got a hold of improvised spears, lengths of chain, and other comparable implements of combat, and were jabbing and swinging these with great tenacity. Since no one was trying to ascend the walls, the guards along the sentry walk above let it go on. In fact, they were watching with the interest of spectators attending a sporting event and, seeing them exchanging cash, Toth realized they were betting on the results of particular outcomes. If he were at home watching something like this on the monitors, he'd probably bet on it and enjoy it too, but his worry that the conflict might spread to his section mitigated that. Was Zyslesh really as unbothered by it as the monster sounded? Probably not, thought Toth. Probably they were just trying to project an aura of fearlessness. Or they were crazy. As he sank back down onto the metal grating which provided the floor for his hex (so that any part of the hex could be used as a latrine) he put his head in his hands. He was looking between his legs, past the metal grating below and the layer of air beneath it, at the raw sewage whose stench he was starting to get used to, when he realized this could be it. The end of the line. I really hope not, thought Toth morosely, raising his head once more. Then, as he was staring upwards, a severed limb happened to fly by overhead.

Eventually the gangs got too reckless and disaster fell on both of them. Each side was throwing things at the other and some daemon must've tossed a spear erratically or something and somehow Brull got struck in the process. Brull, the saurian colossus. The pit-tyrant. How had Brull acquired this coveted title? Consider his physical characteristics. Brull had a head like a komodo dragon's and a body like a gorilla's, if said gorilla were covered with a thick crocodile hide. He was also a good forty feet tall and, at the time of this incident, he'd long ago regrown his rows of bladed teeth and backhoe claws. Of course, he still had to earn his distinction as

pit-tyrant but he'd managed to achieve that on his first day in the pit by ardently dismembering everyone who'd looked at him wrong. Naturally, Brull also didn't take too kindly when other daemons he considered little more than snacks were inconsiderate enough to disturb him. Which they'd just done. Bounding over the heads of the daemons occupying the hexagons between his and the battle, Brull dove right into the melee, swinging his open claws like wrecking balls among brick tenements. Except in this case, the "bricks" that started flying all over the place were the body parts of his victims. The lines that had formed between the two opposing gangs began to crumble as soon Brull plowed into the fray but, although the more sensible members of each side fled, a fair number of these from both gangs started standing together to defend themselves against the pit-tyrant. After all, they did have him outnumbered about sixty to one – although it didn't do them any good. Despite the knives and spear-tips which were thrust into him, Brull was undaunted and his combination of strength and speed utterly overwhelmed the daemons that'd assembled against him. The fight ended after only a couple minutes following Brull's entrance. With numerous weapons still sticking out of his body, Brull took his time smashing the skulls and ripping out the spines of anyone he felt-like among the heap of defeated foes. Then he let out a tremendous roar and this was followed by some whistling and clapping from the guards on duty who were very appreciative of the exceptional display of ferocity they'd just witnessed. As he was lumbering back to his sleeping area though (and no one had dared to try and take it over it during his absence) Brull noticed something. A furry little thing cowering in a hex he was passing over. Such a soft thing. Thoth gulped and closed his eyes as the pit-tyrant leaned in close to inspect him.

* * *

Asmoe spent another solitary night in the holding cell he'd shared with Eights. The tarantula daemon was removed at random one day and Asmoe never saw him again which, despite the many suspicions he'd acquired, was greatly disappointing. The big spider had been a good companion and now Asmoe found himself alone in a barren room whenever the EDF staff weren't probing him via their endless tests and interviews. There was no consistency either – Asmoe suspected this was carefully orchestrated so he'd always be off-guard whenever they wanted to give him a go-over though. In the meantime he passed the waking hours in his cell by getting in some exercise, a thing he hardly ever did prior to his incarceration. He also spent a lot of time contemplating matters and quite often he

couldn't help thinking about Malice. Malice Necrobias, what was he going to do about her? He definitely had to go for it. That's to say, if he ever got out of Ereshkigal there was no way he wasn't going to ask her out. In damnation no one died with unfulfilled desires but this wasn't exactly a blessing – eternity was a long time to carry one's regrets. Asmoe suddenly started doing push ups to help vent the frustration boiling up inside him. Twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven... the sound of his cell door opening however brought him swiftly to his feet.

“Detainee! Turn around and face the wall with your hands on your head!”

The figure standing in the doorway kept a flashlight pointed at his face so Asmoe couldn't identify which guard it was, if it was even a familiar one – regardless he complied. With Asmoe's arms and legs manacled again, the guard brought him out into the hall where another guard was waiting. But when they went to drag him off to wherever they were taking him, they attempted to pull him in opposite directions and the two uniformed demons began to quarrel about this.

“He's a class four heretic. We need to take him to his weekly torture session,” said one. The other guard looked at his partner like he was a complete moron.

“That's sheer prayer. He hasn't been classified as anything. If he was, his file would've had the torture stat-sheet in it for us to fill out.” Asmoe stifled his laughter but he was enjoying himself – listening to his guards worrying about the sort of stuff he had to deal with back at Tsuji Giri gave him a small but welcome measure of revenge. Here he was somebody else's problem.

“No, no. We have to pick those up from the hub ourselves now. Cut backs. The admin staff won't take care of that anymore. Don't you read your locker memos?” The second guard's conviction was wavering but he wasn't ready to concede anything.

“I still say he hasn't been classified.” This led the first guard to spit on the floor in disgust before suggesting a solution. “Fine. Why don't we ask him?” That elicited a scoff from his counterpart but the demon nevertheless turned to Asmoe to give it a try.

“Hey! Detainee! What's your status!?”

With undisguised satisfaction, Asmoe replied, “I have no sanctifying clue officer.”

* * *

This was the first time he’d found himself sitting in front of more than one lab-coat. And not just lab-coats either – suits as well today. Of course he had no idea what was going on since, as usual, no one had told him anything. It must be important though, mustn’t it?

“Mr. Horrorgorger, we’re convening this meeting to assign you your pre-interrogation designation. Do you understand?” asked an official looking daemon who was adjusting his collar. Additionally, he was speaking into a recording device that’d been placed on the table, but Thoth only nodded his assent at first. “Please make a statement for the record,” insisted the official.

Thoth cleared his throat. “I understand.”

The daemon who was leading the meeting was satisfied with that so he moved on. “Also for the record, the names of those in attendance will be read out. This includes Dr. Defoulus Umbra, Dr. Ra Ba Pef, Dr. Pyre Grimbone, Dr. Ashagath Molgus, Dr. Paleo Sagittarius... all Ereshkigal facility clinicians, as well as Mr. X. G. Tlazolteolt... did I pronounce that correctly? Good. Mr. Tlazolteolt, the representing Overseer for the Bureau of Diabolic Security’s Administrative Division, Mrs. Erra Drugasa of the Spire’s Intergovernmental Growth and Research Task Force, and finally Ms. Gaki Jikininki, Junior Preparatory Analyst for the Department of Orthodoxy Maintenance’s Interrogation Branch. I’m Hades Bloodlance, the Presiding Inquisitor, and the time is eight... thirty-two. Before we proceed further, do you have any questions Mr. Horrorgorger?”

Thoth didn’t even try to hide the fact he was flabbergasted by what he was being asked. Yeah he had questions – where to even begin? He racked his brain on how to start but as he opened his mouth, the overwhelming incredulity that he was feeling forced its way out of him.

“Why are there so many of you?”

This was followed by a moment of stark silence before the entire panel of EDF doctors and bureaucrats convulsed in a ripple of mild laughter. Thoth gaped at them stupefied but when Inquisitor Bloodlance began speaking again he simply ignored what the minotaur had just said.

“After a thorough review of Mr. Horrorgorger’s civic files and preliminary evaluations, it is the unanimous conclusion of this panel that all the evidence points to Mr. Horrorgorger being a heretic guilty of major crimes against orthodoxy. As such we recommend an indefinite period of acid internment.”

“Wait!” shouted Thoth, squirming in his seat and twisting his arms in their manacles. “You didn’t even interrogate me! Aren’t you going to at least ask me questions!?” Inquisitor Bloodlance looked at Mrs. Drugasa and smirked as if to apologize for the pitiful detainee’s absurdity.

“Mr. Horrorgorger,” he continued, “This is only your pre-interrogation designation panel. The actual interrogation will be scheduled after this, pending the approval of a logistical timetable.” The members of the panel almost seemed embarrassed at having to listen to that be explained.

“But didn’t you just say I was a heretic?” protested Thoth. “If I have a designation now, what’s the point of the interrogation?” Inquisitor Bloodlance sighed.

“The designation’s only a heuristic aid for assisting your interrogator in making their final determination regarding your case. Strictly speaking it doesn’t alter your status or heretical classification, although in practical terms it will guide how you’re going to be treated from here on out... which is as an enemy of the state Mr. Horrorgorger. Let’s not forget that before you get too indignant. You’ve been given a generous period of assessment by a formidable panel of experts so, to be blunt, a sense of gratitude is really the only appropriate response when it comes to your feelings at this time.” Thoth flopped his head down on the table, his forehead sending reverberations to all four of its corners.

“All this time... it was pointless... all of it,” moaned the weary minotaur.

“Obviously that’s untrue Mr. Horrorgorger,” quibbled Inquisitor Bloodlance while making sure he leaned in and spoke audibly for the sake of the recording device as he did so. “For the record, the pre-interrogation process at Ereshkigal is a vital component of our core practices. Countless internal reviews have established this beyond any doubt.” As Inquisitor Bloodlance leaned back, Dr. Ashagath Molgus pushed himself up and bent forward next.

“Yes. For the record, the psychiatric and psychological evaluation procedures at this facility have proven themselves utterly indispensable on every occasion. EDF represents the very model of high-quality detention and heretical analysis.” When Dr. Molgus sat down, Dr. Defoulus Umbra also wanted a turn.

“And for the record, our most recent quarterly redundancy-eliminations was especially thorough so there’s absolutely no basis for any further cutbacks at this time.” Many of the panelists looked at each other in response and murmured in agreement. Mr. Tlazolteolt now also decided that he wanted to add something.

“For the record, the DSAD finds itself in a similar situation and, given all the critical projects it’s handling presently, it’s carrying out its allotted functions with remarkable success despite a scarcity of resources.” When he’d said what he had to say, the DS Overseer straightened up, looking quite pleased with himself. Seeing what all the other panelists were doing, Junior Analyst Ms. Jikininki felt compelled to do the same.

“We’re... we’re really overcapacity at the moment. DOM. The interrogation branch. I mean, we need...” She trailed off, silenced by the disapproving and uncomfortable looks she was getting from her more tactful fellow panelists.

* * *

Asmoe twirled idly and let his eyes wander the hall – he was shackled to the ceiling by his wrist-manacles but he was feeling pretty good despite that. When he’d been left where he was about an hour ago he’d didn’t know what was going on but, by eavesdropping on passing EDF staff, he’d managed to arrive at the conclusion that today he was finally going to get interrogated. At this point he was also flooded with relief at the mere prospect of it. Although only incarcerated for a few days so far, and despite the fact that in all likelihood the interrogation was

going to be a horrible process with a horrible result, a meager tide of hope now was enough to buoy his mood. Asmoe was even tapping his foot and humming when he heard some steps heading towards him from behind. The hard clacking sound of business footwear echoing in prison halls. Asmoe didn't turn around but instead he waited for the daemon to enter his peripheral vision. When he saw who was walking by however he instinctively glanced away and then paused, staring at the floor. It's couldn't be. Don't look at them, don't look at them. Beseeching the mystic arbiters of fortune with the hope that he hadn't been recognized, Asmoe's wish died a quick brutal death. A scream was unleashed, a distinctive scream he'd happily forgotten about until that exact moment.

"Asmodeus!? Asmodeus Cambioni!? I can hardly believe it!" the high pitched voice exclaimed and Asmoe turned to face the fiend addressing him.

A short gaunt daemon with a large spherical head and a long gaping mouth that flapped around when the wind picked up, Ofol Drekovac was a fellow torturer who Asmoe met back in his academy days. Incidentally, not something he was nostalgic about.

"How's it going you old belly stabber!?" asked Ofol cheerfully. Asmoe briefly motioned upwards with his eyes to the pivot he was shackled to and then slowly listed a few degrees in both directions. Ofol suddenly clued in.

"You're in here! For..." but he stopped in the middle of his question when Asmoe nodded. "I... I can't believe it. There's a mistake right?"

Asmoe's mouth tightened in a forced smile and he shrugged as best he could. This was going to be as bad as he thought it'd be. Ofol hadn't changed.

"It just... I couldn't expect this. You!?! Of all the fiends in the world! Hey! Don't be glum though. I'm really really sorry. I mean really sorry. There's no way the Asmoe I knew could be a heretic."

Asmoe winced at this – he and Ofol had barely ever spoken at the academy. Asmoe had made every effort to avoid "Dreko" (as he'd been called by all the other apprentice torturers) but here he was and in the worst possible circumstances. Ofol

Drekovac, never had to exert himself to pass his torture tests. He could break his victims by personality alone.

“Want me to put a good word in for you?” the gray skinned Ofol asked as he scratched himself under an arm. Asmoe shook his head vigorously.

“No no! Definitely no. Thanks but I wouldn’t want to drag you into this mess.” Ofol nodded vacantly.

“You keep in touch with anyone?” he asked.

“Can’t say I do,” replied Asmoe. This surprised the other daemon, although that could be hard to discern as a result of his perpetually gaping mouth.

“Yeah? That’s too bad. I mean, ‘cause I do. Everybody.”

Asmoe played along while half-feigning interest. “Of course,” he said.

Meanwhile, Ofol kept going. “Sure, but everybody’s so busy. Hey! I know. We should organize a get-together. Like old times.”

Asmoe’s urge to roll his eyes was so powerful he had to shut them to make sure they didn’t roll right out of his head. He was in no position to retrieve them after all. Just then a random group of EDF guards came marching down the hall and Ofol was forced into an awkward waltz to avoid them.

“So where you living?” persisted Ofol afterwards. Uh oh, think fast. “New... Jersey,” lied Asmoe. Ofol’s face assumed an uncharacteristically sober expression.

“Really? Things are that bad?” Here Ofol was referring to the fact that the New Jersey Nether was a total war zone. The authorities euphemistically called it a controlled experiment in libertarianism and had it *post hoc* declared a special administrative region but anyone who’d ever been there knew the place was a disaster. This wasn’t necessarily common knowledge however because, besides all the mainstream media propaganda, few outsiders ever returned after visiting New Jersey. Still, the audacity of Asmoe’s claim didn’t appear to phase Ofol.

“A real shame to hear all this. You and everything and all. And what with my situation going so well. I mean, things are great with me. A real shame... it really is. Anyways, I should go. You hang in there,” said Ofol consoling him, oblivious to the sarcastic hint in his encouragement. He even patted Asmoe on the back.

Well that was depressing, thought Asmoe, having to endure condescension from him of all demons. At least it was over.

As Ofol walked away though he shouted “Asmodeus Cambioni!” to himself in raw amazement and Asmoe flinched at this.

Alone again, Asmoe started to think about Thoth. An actual pal of his, or at least someone who had been. Asmoe might never see him again. On top of that, Asmoe was feeling conflicted regarding the minotaur. As much as he hoped Thoth wasn't faring too badly, he felt a considerable amount of personal grievance towards the librarian for getting him in this mess. Let's have some fun tonight. Sure Thoth, why not. And now here he was, hanging from the ceiling like a piece of meat and likely to end up being continuously carved-up like one too. It was strange though, how lenient they'd treated him so far. Very little actual torture. For all he knew it was the result of some misplaced files or a bureaucrat getting behind on their case load but still it left Asmoe wondering. This made him start thinking about work however and Asmoe sighed to himself as his chains rattled from shifting his weight. Tsuji Giri was going to fire him. Which meant actual flames of course. Getting fired in Hell traditionally means a corporate officer walking up to your cubicle or into your office and unleashing a flamethrower on you until you've scrambled out the door. Or until they turn you into a heap of charred flesh and scoop your remains into the nearest garbage. With his absence threatening to deprive them of this kind of closure, it was possible they'd send someone to his condo to get satisfaction.

Up ahead, Asmoe now saw a police golem march into view from a hallway perpendicular to his own. A perfect unthinking servant of law and order. Their presence though meant that the DOM interrogator was here. DOM agents were typically escorted by police units answerable to them personally. Good, Asmoe thought to himself. This was finally going to happen. As he watched, a female gorgon in a crimson business suit arrived and entered a door. Was that them?

Probably. Then he was surprised to see Thoth following behind, chained and gagged, with police golems on the other side of him holding his arms.

“Thoth!” yelled Asmoe without thinking. The minotaur turned his head and stared at Asmoe, a look of relief in his eyes, but he was quickly dragged into the same door that the gorgon had entered. Two golems also entered and two more stayed outside, guarding the now closed entrance. There was nothing Asmoe could do but he gave his restraints a frustrated shake anyways.

* * *

The room Thoth was led into was by far the most impressive one he'd been in yet. The center of it had a pentagram freshly painted in blood on the stone tiles and in front of this an elevated chair, almost a throne, presided over things. The chair was black with grim ornate armrests and a gothic headboard that looked like a halo of writhing shadowy tentacles – which his gorgon interrogator (interrogatrix actually) carefully sat in after handing a file folder to an attendant gnome. Thoth meanwhile was pushed into a kneeling position in the center of the pentagram by the two golems escorting him before having his gag removed. They then took single steps back and stood guard, waiting behind him menacingly on either side. Thoth's attention remained fixed on his interrogatrix though who was showing off a crossed pair of very nice legs in a business skirt that was two or three inches away from reaching her knees. Her skin was a light magenta color and the turquoise serpents on her head were tied back like a samurai's hair but it was her eyes which held his focus. Yellow feline eyes with dark irises like apertures ready to swallow up the souls of helpless daemons. She was a vision of infernal beauty and Thoth couldn't help feeling the pangs of attraction toward her despite her being the arbiter of his destruction. Or salvation perhaps, but she didn't look like the sort of interrogatrix who dispensed anything but brutality.

“Why are you here Thoth Horrorgorger?” she asked in a loud, almost prophetic, voice. If this wasn't the last judgement it was certainly a solid prelude to it.

“I've... been accused of heresy,” replied Thoth. His interrogatrix smiled.

“Wrong. You ARE a heretic. Everyone’s a heretic. The only question is if it’s worth our time to break you.” Thoth died inside. It was like that was it?

“I’m a loyal citizen of Hell,” he protested demurely. His interrogatrix smirked.

“Sure you are. Just an ordinary librarian. In fact, why don’t we begin by discussing the materials we found while searching your residence.”

Things only got worse from there. His interrogatrix took him through each area of his damnation methodically and got him to confess to everything. It went on for hours but after a while Thoth began to feel a little belligerent. If he was already ruined then what was the point of further grovelling?

“Whoever came up with the acronym for your agency did it a disservice,” he suddenly interjected. For her own amusement, his interrogatrix decided to indulge this outburst instead of having the golems thrash him.

“How so?” she replied calmly.

“The Department OF Orthodoxy Maintenance? DOOM? That doesn’t come to mind whenever you think about it?” asked the minotaur.

His interrogatrix tilted her head. “I hardly think your ludicrous suggestion would make an appropriate title for a government department. More importantly, if you had even a modest sense of self-preservation you’d realize that now is not the time for whimsical banter.” Thoth’s rebelliousness persisted though.

“You’re no fun,” he said accusingly.

“Do you understand the seriousness of your situation?” responded his interrogatrix without any trace of irritation.

“It’s bad?” asked Thoth sarcastically.

“No. Bad is milk and cookies compared to what’s looming over you right now. You’re currently being held under suspicion of paradox. Which means all your daemonic privileges have been suspended. You might as well be human.” The word

“paradox” struck the minotaur hard. That was the worst kind of heresy. Realizing the idiocy of what he’d just done, Thoth reverted to a suitably deferential attitude despite his ensuing outburst.

“Wait! But I’m not hiding anything!” The interrogatrix laughed.

“Funny, it says here that you’re close fiends with the Tsuji Giri torturer we brought in. Hey! Maybe I’ll force him to come extract a confession out of you. Wouldn’t that be fun? How can you say I’m not fun?” Thoth looked at her like a puddle looks at a tire about to run it over.

“Please. Whatever you want to know, just ask me,” begged the minotaur.

“Do you believe in metaphysics?” replied his interrogatrix casually. Thoth straightened himself while still kneeling.

“No! Hell no!” he declared. “I swear it by the seven archfiends! I even wrote a first-rate thesis on the merits of orthodoxy!” His interrogatrix remained nonplussed.

“I read it. It was okay. More importantly, do you believe any of it?” Thoth nodded enthusiastically.

“Then why do we have a sworn statement from one of your coworkers saying you exhorted them to praise God on more than one occasion?” she countered. Thoth practically leapt out of his skin with his desire to clarify things.

“I was being sarcastic!” he claimed loudly. His interrogatrix assumed a puzzled expression however.

“Sarcastic?” she asked.

“Yeah, you know, sarcasm?” replied Thoth before gulping at how that’d come out. His interrogatrix looked at her nails carefully for a moment, repositioning her hand a number of times.

“I’m... not familiar with... sarcasm...” she said, furrowing her brow for effect. Thoth was confident she was joking but not enough to risk saying so. It could be a trap. Instead he looked at her imploringly – defeated.

“Let’s discuss the magicians. It’s been said by various sources that you’ve recently been spending time in the company of magicians. Do you admit this?” the interrogatrix asked. Thoth stared at his knees.

“Yes. But I don’t understand why that’s so bad. None of them claimed they could do real magic.” The interrogatrix gave him a stern look.

“Every magician of any stripe is guilty of culture crime. The mere concept of magic is aligned with the possibility of metaphysical principles transcending material reality, therefore even theatrical imitations of magic are heresy.” Thoth looked sick. He wanted to slump over on his side but was too afraid to do so. His interrogatrix eyed him dubiously.

“It would appear Mr. Horrorgorger that we’ve succeeded in covering your many transgressions. Unless you have some other things we can add?” she inquired. At first Thoth didn’t realize she was serious but when he did he hesitated. She wanted him to confess? Without torture? Thoth was going to lie but then he looked at her and saw an odd expression on her face. Like she was hinting that he should come clean. It seemed earnest too, not just a trick on her part. So, for whatever reason, he went and did.

“Aside from the idealist philosophers, I’ve also been reading poetry. Poe. Shelley. Donne even. And I said to someone last week that I believed in the actuality of transfinite numbers.” When his interrogatrix heard this, Thoth could tell she already knew by looking at her.

“Good. That’s everything then. I suppose we can send you on your way now. Back to the routines of your normal damnation.” Thoth didn’t understand. “Back?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes. You’re not much of a heretic,” she replied. “To be honest, we only brought you in as part of our standard precautionary sweeps. Unfortunately for you, you haven’t been sufficiently discriminating when it comes to your casual

acquaintances.” Hearing this, Thoth was enormously relieved but his anxiety soon reasserted itself.

“What about Asmoe? Asmodeus Cambioni?” he asked urgently.

“That’s another matter,” replied the interrogatrix.

* * *

After having to endure hours of being strung up in the hall, Asmoe was finally taken down and led into the interrogation chamber. Like Thoth earlier, he was placed in the pentagram on his knees before the chair of judgement.

“Why are you here Asmodeus Cambioni?” intoned the interrogatrix. Asmoe was going to answer that he didn’t know but then Thoth came to mind.

“For consorting with heretics,” he said bitterly. The interrogatrix was surprised by his being so forthcoming and she stopped to examine him for a second. Asmoe met her gaze and it left him with a strange feeling he couldn’t immediately explain.

Finally the interrogatrix asked another question, “Are you unrepentant then?” Air shot out of his nose as Asmoe stifled a laugh.

“No. I’m very repentant,” he said in a self-mocking tone. There really was something about her though. What was it?

“Nevertheless this interrogation will still proceed,” she said forcefully. “While you may not be trying to disguise your heresy, there remains the matter of its depth and degeneracy. As such you are expected to go over every detail of... your heretical activities and to... clarify whatever may be requested... of you. Detainee, why are you staring at me like that?” Asmoe had been looking up at her with growing surprise.

“Excuse me. It’s just... you seem very familiar,” he insisted.

“You don’t,” she retorted. But in a defensive way. Asmoe was too sure now to brush it off.

“Really? Did you use to live in my old netherhood?” he inquired. The interrogatrix uncrossed her legs and took his case folder from the gnome standing beside the chair. She was looking through it with apparent focus when she replied,

“Maybe. Do you remember the Caliginas?” The penny dropped for Asmoe.

“Lilith!? Little Lily!?” The interrogatrix looked up and finally made eye contact with him. She was obviously pleased he recognized her. Asmoe was happy too, despite the fact that she’d been so much younger than him they’d only spent two years of school together – one in elementary school and one in high school. “Last time I saw you, weren’t you like this tall?” he asked, putting his flattened hand about halfway between his nipples and bellybutton.

“And you were like this tall,” she replied warmly, placing her own hand about a foot above her head.

“This is so weird...” he said to himself in amazement, thinking of Ofol who he’d also run into only hours ago.

“Why?” asked a confused Lilith. Asmoe briefly thought about telling her but he realized she didn’t even know him.

“Well, you know, just for me to end up here and... you... being my interrogator, I mean interrogatrix. That’s all. What are the chances?” Lilith smiled.

“Stranger things have happened in Hell.” Asmoe laughed and then remembered that he was currently undergoing an interrogation for heresy. This was no time to get carried away with anything. Whether or not he was going to spend the rest of his damnation in constant agony was being decided right now. By a she-daemon who, the last time he saw her, was a tiny soft-spoken devil.

“I... I didn’t ever tease you when you were little did I Lily?” He made no effort to hide the trepidation in his voice. When she started to chuckle, the relief was so powerful it had a visceral effect.

“Not me Asmoe. And lucky for you, you didn’t break my heart either.”

The golems were utterly indifferent to what was going on, and the gnome was astute enough to pretend like he didn’t notice, but the last EDF interrogation session that day turned into two daemons pleasantly reminiscing with each other. They talked about which of the teachers they’d shared had the best aim when using their pellet guns to admonish students, about a recent tragic escape of humans from a harvest center near their old suburban Albany netherhood, and about how they’d both planned on travelling across Hell but had put it aside and never gotten around to it. Then the conversation turned to their careers.

“It’s one of those jobs that everyone thinks is so enviable, but torture isn’t always fun. Sometimes the work makes me feel like I’m the one being tortured.” Asmoe said this with a mixture of sincerity and self-deprecation, hoping to amuse Lilith. It worked – she grinned.

“I know what you mean. Daemons I’ve just met tell me about how wonderful it must be to dispense justice on enemies of the state without actually asking what it’s like. Plus my parents are always bragging about me in an embarrassing way. Speaking of which, how’s your mom?” Lilith casually mentioning her role inflicting penalties on heretics caused Asmoe to hold his breath for a second but he quickly recovered and answered her question.

“Ma’s alright. I’m going to see her in a few days. That is...” As his face trailed off, Lilith laughed.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him, “You’ll be out of here now in no time. You can even take that minotaur with you.” Asmoe’s voice cracked as he laughed with delight. His sense of humor was re-energized too.

“Should I though?” he wondered, referring to Thoth with mock disgust. Lilith’s eyes widened playfully.

“Oh! I actually already let him go. Signed his discharge papers and everything. I mean, I guess I could have him reincarcerated. Since they get

additional subsidies for every daemon they hold, it's not like the EDF warden would question it." Asmoe pretended to think about it before dismissing the idea.

"Subsidies or no, it's probably not worth it," he concluded. Lilith tilted her head and shrugged in acquiescence.

"Yeah, the idea of tormenting him actually made me feel a bit sad. You on the other hand..." Asmoe stopped her by putting his hands up.

"Woah woah woah. Let's stick with the plan where I get out of here."

Despite the thrill of his impending emancipation, Asmoe abruptly came to the realization that he still had a serious problem to deal with. Tsuji Giri. He became pensive for a second and Lilith noticed.

"What's the matter?" she asked. It dawned on him that he was letting anxiety leak into his demeanor and he did a one-eighty to correct himself.

"No, nothing. You're being so good to me. I just remembered I'm going to have some stuff to deal with when I get out of here. Still preferable to spending another night in a holding cell though." Lilith tried to get a read on him and then whispered in an intimate tone.

"Tell me. I thought we were getting along so well." Asmoe sighed.

"Work's going to kill me. Probably more than once. I'm just hoping they use one of my less competent colleagues." Lilith fell silent a moment as she became very thoughtful.

"You know Asmoe, I could have one of my people phone your boss. Tell them that you were requisitioned at random for emergency torturing services. I've done it before." She said all this in a very off-hand way but she had to know how much it would mean to him.

"Really?" he replied in genuine shock, and then "Wow Lily. Lilith. Interrogatrix Caligina. You're my own guardian angel. A fallen angel to be sure." They both laughed and the gnome standing beside the chair of judgement

discretely gave them an askew glance. He was actually quite nervous. Then, as Lilith held her hands apart, as if to say “Well, I guess that’s it?” Asmoe took one last look around the room. The chamber he was in must have heard a lot of sobbing in its time. As the golems now stepped up as a result of some prompting by Lilith, she also reached into a tiny purse Asmoe hadn’t noticed and pulled out a small flat metal container.

“You should take my card,” she said. “Who knows right?” Asmoe took it with both hands, accustomed as he was to Japanese corporate etiquette.

“Absolutely. Thank you. Let me give you my number too.” Lilith shot that down with a comical look.

“Asmodeus? Really? I have a folder with all your personal information.” Asmoe laughed.

“Duh,” he conceded.

* * *

They still had him manacled but it was only a matter of time now. He could afford to be patient. Thoth was sitting in the release bay, waiting for the expulsion officer dealing with his case to confirm the paperwork they’d been given. There were no other daemons there in a room with about a hundred empty seats but Thoth kept looking around hoping Asmoe would show up. When he left the interrogation chamber he was led out a door separate from the one he’d entered, so he hadn’t gotten to see Asmoe again, and the parting words of the interrogatrix weighed heavily on him. He was partially to blame wasn’t he? Thoth tried to clear his mind of that idea by shaking his head. His old eight-ball didn’t always tell him the answers he wanted to hear at first so he had to ask until he got them. It was all just a terrible accident, thought Thoth. That was even orthodoxy. Ultimately chaos controlled everything and trying to impose an invented moral order on the universe was the ridiculous disease of the Enemy. This recollection made the minotaur feel a little better about things and his mind returned to much happier thoughts. He also realized he was starving. Ereshkigal was out in the middle of nowhere though so he’d have to wait until he got back to New York to get something to eat.

“Thoth Horrorgorger?” yelled out a reptilian expulsion officer from behind the reinforced glass panels of an administration booth. Thoth smirked at this as he crossed the floor to speak with them.

“Yes?” asked the minotaur. The reptoid in the booth was scowling at him but it didn’t seem personal – the scowl was one of those habitually worn by daemons who hate their jobs.

“We’ve gone through the release order requisition forms and they check out. However, before we can let you go there’s the matter of the NDAs.” Thoth slowly raised an eyebrow.

“NDAs?” he asked. The reptoid’s tongue slithered out from the corner of his mouth to lick one of his own eyeballs before he explained.

“Non-Disclosure Agreements. By signing these you agree to not divulge certain vital details about our detainment and correction practices.” Thoth looked at the forms that were pushed towards him.

“I suppose you don’t want me tell daemons how horrible my stay was here,” he said reading them over. While still betraying their own indifference, the official nevertheless shook their head.

“On the contrary, please do. This contract only relates to technical aspects of our security procedures. Quoting the DS policy manual: Law and order can’t exist without the specter of punishment.”

* * *

“One retractable stiletto blade. One opened packet of gremlin gum. One opened packet of “Clenzo-Zigarette” brand cigarettes. One plastic lighter. One slip of paper scribbled with notes on serrated catheters and, last of all, one wallet containing various IDs belonging to Asmodeus Cambioni, as well as thirty-four dollars and sixty-one cents in cash.”

Asmoe eagerly stuffed all his things back into his pockets. He was pleased to find that they hadn’t lost or stolen anything but also a bit self-conscious at how all

his belongings looked and sounded when being examined by the EDF officers. As Asmoe waited for them to bring him his bill (hopefully not too expensive since his stay in Ereshkigal had only been a few days) he looked around at the room. There were posters on the walls targeting the demons who'd be passing through here on their way to rejoining infernal society. Put Your Bloodlust to Good Use – Join the Auxiliary Battle Corp, said one. Below the caption, the chiseled face of a heroic looking daemon drawn in a socialist realist manner stood gazing off in the distance with a hand shielding their eyes from above and another fingering the trigger on a rifle slung over their shoulder. There were also pamphlets free for the taking and Asmoe flipped through one of these – The Eight Easy Steps to Reintegration. The opening paragraph began: Perhaps many centuries have passed since your term of imprisonment started. Don't worry, Hell remains as free as you left it. Many things will still be familiar and you can be confident that you'll soon be able to satisfy all your pent up sadistic appetites. However, technology might have changed a great deal and it's the purpose of this helpful guide to aid you while you acclimate to these... Asmoe stopped reading here because two EDF officers were approaching him. Something was wrong.

“Mr. Cambioni, there's been a mistake.”

Asmoe instinctively gripped the stiletto in his pocket. If they thought they were going to take him in without a fuss they were wrong – they were going to bleed for their error. The two officers stood next to each other behind a reinforced glass window while looking back and forth between themselves with obvious unease. When neither of them said anything after a few seconds, Asmoe did.

“What do you mean... mistake?” he asked coldly. The taller of the two daemon officers answered while shifting his eyes repeatedly in the direction where the other one stood.

“Somebody failed to... process you properly and a step was missed. We need you to do a full body scan – to make sure you aren't leaving with any EDF property.”

Hearing this, Asmoe relaxed. He wasn't hiding any stolen goods in his body cavities so he had nothing to worry about. Couldn't they just order him to undergo the scan though? Ah! But then it might come to light that they'd baptized their own procedures. Which would result in serious consequences for them. Asmoe

considered the situation for a moment but there was no way he could exploit it really. Best to just get it over with.

“No problem,” he said to their visible relief. One of the officers then motioned for him to empty his pockets again so that nothing he was holding would interfere with the scan. Asmoe exhaled sharply but did as he was indicated. Following them to the machine they needed to use, he thought about the fact that he hadn’t run into Thoth out here. Maybe his minotaur pal had taken off?

* * *

They were lucky. They’d both been released in time for the last hovercraft bus back to New York. The one after that wouldn’t have come until morning. When Asmoe arrived at the bottom of the hill where the bus stop was, he found Thoth already waiting there alone. Seeing him, the minotaur ran up and gave his fiend a vigorous hug. Asmoe partially returned the embrace before pushing his pal away.

“What?” asked a perplexed Thoth. That just made Asmoe madder.

“Thoth! We only got released because our interrogatrix happened to live in the same netherhood as me back when she and I were fiendlings! Otherwise we’d be rotting in Ereshkigal until who knows when!” Thoth took a step back and turned around, chastened and angered by Asmoe’s rebuke. Not having a good retort, he kicked a nearby pile of bones, scattering some ribs and a clavicle into the air.

“It’s not like I meant for any of this to happen!” growled the minotaur bitterly after a moment. Asmoe’s eyes narrowed.

“Oh? You didn’t? That’s good to know... that you didn’t plan for us to be imprisoned as heretics! Although, if you can achieve such amazing results while not planning them, we probably never would’ve ended up in Ereshkigal if you HAD been scheming to get us sent there!” Thoth stared at an ad on the bus stop wall with his arms crossed – the ad was for fang brightening toothpaste and featured a group of happy daemons outdoors as they smiled on a sunny day next to a gushing fountain of blood.

“What do you want me to say Asmoe? That I’m sorry? Sorry for what? For being in the crosshairs when the... the stealth bombers flew overhead searching for convenient targets? They didn’t even care about my heresies!” Hearing the hurt in Thoth’s voice, Asmoe’s wrath faded. He realized he was being a jerk.

“No. You’re right. I’m sorry.” The two daemons looked at each other with a renewed sense of fraternity – the bond between them restored. Soon they were even sharing a couple of Asmoe’s cigarettes under the bus-stop roof and watching as a light shower of brimstone began to splash their surroundings with fire.

“Your gorgon there was pretty hot though right?” said Thoth with a wink. Asmoe groaned but he couldn’t help chuckling. They were still best fiends.

Chapter Five

His old netherhood's playground was full as he was passing by, the young daemon spawn all chasing each other merrily with whatever weapons their parents had most recently bought them. Whore Mass was nearing on the calendar though so soon they'd all be hacking and gouging each other with something new. Asmoe grimaced. He was going to have to tell his mother that he wouldn't be able to make it this year. He was doing round the clock shifts at work right now trying to fill his quota and even just coming out to Albany by train for dinner tonight was pushing it. It'd be better to tell them face to face however and he was only going to stay a few hours. Thankfully he still had his job (despite the absence resulting from his time in Ereshkigal) and he aimed to keep it. The rest of his damnation would have to be put on hold until New Year's Eve – this would be his last non-work related thing until then. Realizing that, Asmoe decided he ought to try and relax tonight. Maybe even enjoy himself. Ma said she had an excellent meal planned after all and she was always a great cook. He thought about it and decided he'd save the bad news until the end of the evening – no point in ruining it too. His parent's house was only a couple blocks away but Asmoe decided to take a seat on a bench across from the park to smoke a cigarette first. Seeing all these fiendlings romping around without a care in the world was making him nostalgic about his own spawnhood happily spent in blissful violence. Much of it in this very place.

As Asmoe sat down, he placed a large plastic carrying cage next to him. Inside, something nudged the bars of the door. It was his giant pet millipede, Chitters, curious about wherever it was he'd been taken. Asmoe thought about

letting him out for a bit but a giant millipede could be quite tricky to get back into their cage if they were feeling frisky. Better not to chance it. He'd have Asmoe's parent's house to roam around in-a-few minutes anyways. In the meantime, Asmoe was going to have that cigarette. Touching the flame of his lighter to the thin white cylinder hanging from his lips, he inhaled deeply, bending the flame towards him and into the fissures of the dried adrenal-gland shavings that Hell used as an alternative to tobacco. It sizzled quietly, smoldering into a spool of opaque gray smoke that Asmoe held in his lungs for a single transcendent moment before slowly relinquishing it, allowing the billowing cloud pouring from his mouth to waft away in idle observation. Cigarettes... humanity's greatest invention. You had to give them credit occasionally – they'd devised some truly ingenious vices. While Asmoe enjoyed the slight rush he was feeling and took a few more drags, another daemon was approaching along the hexagonal bricked sidewalk with his own pet in tow. Or rather in front. A wyvern, a two legged serpentine creature belching small gluts of fire and thrashing a barbed tail behind it, was pulling an incubus in leisure-wear who was barely able just to keep a grip on its leash. As the wyvern came snuffling and weaving in his vicinity, Asmoe gave its owner a disapproving glare. Feeling a certain embarrassment at his predicament, the incubus subconsciously tried to compensate for that by offering Asmoe some macho sounding advice.

“Better keep whatever you got in there cooped up. My wyvern could eat it.” This was not the best thing to say.

“And I could eat your wyvern,” Asmoe retorted acidly. He meant it too. He'd sink his fangs right into its neck if that idiot didn't keep his rancid beast under control. Fortunately, the other daemon didn't doubt Asmoe's sincerity. Veering away from the torturer's bench with stiff awkward strides, the other daemon pulled at the leash of the wyvern until he managed to get it going in the direction of the playground. Good. Let it eat some of the children. Always a good lesson to learn in youth – you're edible and don't forget that.

Flicking his ashes into the dry dusty earth at his feet, Asmoe was taking a few last puffs when a fiendling of about five or six suddenly appeared out of his peripheral vision.

“Can I have a cigarette mister?” she asked with wide eyes as her hands fidgeted behind her frilly lavender dress. What an adorable little daemon, thought

Asmoe. The Clenzos he was smoking were too strong for a spawn so young but... wait, he remembered he had a few extra-mild Executioner's someone had repaid him with and which he didn't want to smoke anyway. Taking out three of these, he placed them into her now outstretched hands like a tiny bouquet.

"Here you go kid," he said as he gave them to her. She smiled and held the cigarettes very solemnly for a second before spinning around and scampering back to her fiends in delight. A group of daemon spawn excitedly gathered around her under the spike studded monkey bars and Asmoe chuckled to himself as the girl fiendling carefully bestowed two of her cigarettes on the two other spawn she liked best that day. When this was done they all ran off to the nearest fire-fountain to light them, somehow managing to avoid the many bear-traps scattered in the jungle gym's sand. His attention turned to the parents then and Asmoe noted how happy and proud they looked watching their offspring run around and slash each other. His own mother was beginning to pester him about settling down and raising a family but he was too preoccupied with his career to give that sort of thing any serious consideration yet. Besides, he wasn't even in a relationship.

Of course he was going to hear about that tonight too, among other things. Ma Cambioni had never been shy about making her opinions known. Feeling his phone vibrating, Asmoe checked and, sure enough, it was a text from his mother. It wasn't even seven o'clock but she wanted confirmation he was still coming. Instead of replying, Asmoe picked up Chitter's carrying cage and began to make his way in the direction of his parent's house. Meanwhile one of the fathers on the playground had pulled out some sticks of recreational dynamite and a crowd of daemon spawn had begun to swarm him, jumping up and down in their enthusiasm.

Passing some emerald statues depicting famous atrocities, Asmoe crossed the street, leaving the park behind for a sidewalk arrayed with contemporary middle-class houses. While each one had its own particular characteristics, they often shared the following features: six-foot-wide ichor moats, razor-wire fences garnished with homey touches, shale lawns with lawn ornaments like skeletons and plastic flamingos, sand gardens with grotesque statues, sentry gnomes chained up by the neck to stakes out front, signs that threatened trespassers with horrific reprisals and, because it was the season for it, gaudy antichrist decorations. Not a lot had changed since he'd last lived in the netherhood. Presumably many of the

parents of his old fiends were still here but he didn't see anyone familiar as he went along. A Human Patrol squad car came rushing past though and Asmoe followed it with his eyes briefly. Probably a human had materialized somewhere in the area and they'd been called in to pick it up. Legally, every human began their damnation in Hell as government property and daemonic officers were dispatched for new arrivals. The failure to report wild humans, or to otherwise collect them for oneself without a special permit, was severely punished; but those who captured them and called the Human Patrol hotline were rewarded with a finder's fee as well as the bodies. Human Patrol officers only collected the heads. Then the humans were processed at the nearest HMA facility (Human Management Agency) where they were given registration numbers before being auctioned off to private sector distributors or, in the case of especially valuable humans, to wealthy individual daemons. Asmoe wondered if he'd ever own a human one day. It was possible. His parents never did but they'd been poor working-class immigrants who'd had to save up for close to a century just so they could afford a nice place in the suburbs. As it was, they were enjoying a period of semi-retirement; his father no longer able to find much work as an electrician and his mother running a dessert business from home for small local retailers and online customers. They'd done a lot for him in all fairness, giving him a really good upbringing. And he appreciated it but... his mother was such a whirlwind. Just all the time.

He arrived outside his spawnhood home and peered at it before opening the gate. It was a split-level stucco house with a standard moat that had short wide rectangular windows and a flat roof with a large iron weathervane in the shape of a cockatrice. Outside a collared and chained gnome was squatting under a tori-like structure to shield them from any falling brimstone.

"Hey Merlgus," said Asmoe as he opened and closed the gate.

"Greetings Sir," replied the gnome. "Your mother has been waiting on the porch looking for you. She actually just went inside." That sounded about right.

"Thanks," he said as he walked by, lugging Chitter's carrying cage up the front steps. His mother returned before he'd even reached the door and when she saw her son she held her hands together and beamed.

“Look at you!” she exclaimed before bustling forward in her cooking apron to greet him with a hug. Asmoe returned her tight embrace with his one free arm while the other dangled Chitter’s cage behind her. It’d only been a few weeks since they last saw each other but this was pretty typical of Ma Cambioni. As she examined him though in close proximity, Asmoe still with his one arm around her, she gasped and reached up to cradle his head by the cheeks, turning it this way and that.

“What happened to your horns!?” she asked in alarm. Asmoe didn’t want to worry her so he lied.

“Just an accident at work Ma. This guy... fell on my head. They... got stuck in his carapace and... had to be sawed off. It was nothing. Don’t worry about it.” Asmoe tried to come across as nonchalant as he could about it but his mother frowned nevertheless.

“How can you say this to me Asmodeus? Huh? I’m your mother. Of course I worry. That’s what I do. How about you just give me less to worry about alright?”

Ma Cambioni shook her head in mild concern and then clucked a few times as she scrutinized Asmoe’s bowed head a little more. There was a skeptical look on her face but, after thinking about it for a second, she decided not to press him on it. Instead she took a step back from her son and noticed the cage he was carrying.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“You remember Chitters?” he replied.

“I’m not senile sulphy,” retorted his mother as she stuck a couple fingers in the cage to caress the amiable millipede. She then added, “I mean, what’s he doing here?” Asmoe scratched the back of his head and cleared his throat before responding in an apologetic tone.

“Work really needs all my focus and energy right now and I don’t want to leave him by himself in the condo all the time. So I thought maybe you two could take him for a bit? It’ll only be until the end of the month.”

“Really Asmoe,” chided his mother as she rested her knuckles on her hips in a posture practiced over years of maternal lecturing. “You have a responsibility to the poor creature. It didn’t choose you for a caretaker, you chose it. And you knew what you were getting yourself involved in. I told you, didn’t I? I said millipedes are a big commitment. But you, you told me you could handle it. That you’d be able to make time for him. Well? What happened?” Asmoe had been staring a hole into the wall with a nonplussed expression on his face until his mother paused long enough for him to jump in.

“Ma? Why you got to talk to me like this? It’s been four years since I got Chitters. Four. And not once in that time have I ever asked you to take him for me. But I got things at work now okay? So, if it’s fine with you and Pa, this one time, could you just look after him for a while? If that’s possible?” His mother had opened the cage he was holding while her son justified himself and Chitters happily crawled up her arm and into her tender embrace. Holding the millipede like a baby, Ma Cambioni looked at Asmoe with exaggerated capitulation.

“Of course we can look after him. That’s not the point. We love Chitters,” she stated emphatically before addressing the giant millipede. “Don’t we? Yes we do!” Asmoe rolled his eyes but then covered this up with an attentive look as his mother started speaking to him again. “It’s a matter of exercising proper judgement. Of knowing your own limitations,” she insisted. Whatever that meant, thought Asmoe. For the moment however his mother was done jousting with him.

“Go on. Say hello to your father,” she urged, with a tilt of her head in the direction of the living room. As she turned around to head into the kitchen, Asmoe stared at Chitters leaning over her shoulder, perfectly content with being carried away. Of course Asmoe didn’t resent the millipede. Chitters was simply a glutton for affection.

As usual, Asmoe found his father sitting in the same plush recliner he’d had for twenty years, watching sports on a large monitor.

“Hi Pa,” said Asmoe, kissing the old daemon on his bald forehead. His father reciprocated by patting him on the arm as he leaned over.

“You’ve seen what she’s got going in there?” he asked as he stared at his son through large circular glasses.

“Not yet Pa,” Asmoe replied.

“Oh, it’s a good one,” Pa Cambioni declared, jutting out his chin and smacking his lips. In his youth, Asmoe had often been embarrassed by his father’s eccentric mannerisms and quirky behavior but now he found them endearing.

“What cha watching?” asked the younger Cambioni.

“Gladiators. And it’s just starting!” replied his father enthusiastically. Turning his head towards the monitor, Asmoe had this confirmed for him by a fancy animated graphic that morphed into the logo for the Human Gladiator League. The camera then cut to two daemons sitting beside each other at a large desk with holograph-like images of human warriors phasing in and out on a wall-sized screen behind them. The one on the left, a fiend in a suit who resembled a stick-insect with independently roving telescopic eyes, opened the show.

“This is Moanday Night Slaughter! I’m Stalker Cryptorius and with me as always is my co-host Orl Gnasher,” declared the daemon in a faux-suave, nasally voice with ivy league pretensions.

His counterpart, a large squinting sphere with huge serrated teeth added, “We’ve got a great match tonight. A great match.” This one’s voice by contrast had a crass guttural assurance heavy with bass. From the brief introduction, it was immediately obvious that Orl was the dominant personality and the color commentator; Stalker conversely was the one tasked with keeping the show on track and fussing over the details. It turned out, he was also responsible for giving shout-outs to the show’s sole advertiser.

“Before we get to any of our matches though, a word about our proud sponsor. Clenzo-Zigarettes! After you’ve gone on a killing spree, sit back and relax with the nice smooth flavor of Clenzo.” Or I could have one anyways, thought Asmoe, as he pulled a cigarette from his pack and lit it. Better check on Ma too.

In the kitchen, the dismembered remains of a youthful Japanese woman were lying on the island counter, minus her torso. This was currently cooking in the oven and Asmoe inhaled deeply through his nostrils to savor the delicious smell of it. Pa was right, this WAS going to be a feast. His mother meanwhile was fiddling with a fresh box of plastic wrap that she'd just pulled out from a drawer.

"Let me help you with that Ma," said Asmoe, placing his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and reaching towards her with both hands. After trying to open it by herself for a minute, Ma Cambioni handed it over and then grabbed a piece of human flesh, which she threw on the floor for Chitters. He eagerly gobbled it up.

"You want me to wrap all these?" asked Asmoe, indicating the body parts on the island.

"Not by yourself," his mother replied, motioning for him to hand her a sheet of the wrapping plastic. He tore off a long strip for her and then one for himself, before picking up the shaved head of the female corpse and enveloping it. When he'd used up his sheet, he checked the whole head over to make sure that he didn't miss any spots – briefly lingering on its translucently shrouded face and its neck hole.

Seeing her son examining it, Ma Cambioni commented, "I only noticed it an hour ago, when the butcher's extracted her medulla they took a big chunk of her brain with it. I'm going to have to have a word with them. A waste of perfectly good meat."

Well, the butcher was certainly in for it now. It wasn't merely what his Ma said though, it was how she said it. That tone, that texture of speech. It was also the flavor of the accent, admitted Asmoe. His mother's Brooklyn accent, like the human slang and mannerisms dispersed throughout daemon culture, resulted from a constant osmosis feeding off the never-ending stream of new humans who wound up in Hell. She'd made it her own however.

After a few minutes of diligent teamwork, Asmoe and his mother were done with wrapping the remains of the woman and he scooped up all the body parts to carry them down to the basement freezer. Ma Cambioni fretted that he was trying to take too much in a single trip, what with each of the legs tucked separately under

his arms and the rest piled up to his chin, but Asmoe managed to shush her even with a cigarette in his mouth. When he returned he found his mother waiting with a bottle of blood and three empty glasses.

“So grown up,” she said, pouring a drink and handing it to him. Asmoe almost spilled some however when the sound of dynamite exploding in the distance sent a tremor through the house.

“Have been for a while now Ma,” he said at last, taking a sip. Ma Cambioni made a face conceding that and filled a glass for herself.

“And yet it seems like just the other day you were building little bone forts in the backyard.” In an effort to head off any sad reminiscences, Asmoe made a show of being cheerful.

“Who’s got it better than me huh? A great family... a great job...” His mother smiled slyly at him.

“When are you going to find yourself a nice succubus to settle down with?” she demanded, pinching his cheek and then poking him in the ribs.

“Come on. Cut it out,” protested Asmoe, backing away to evade her fingers. “I meet plenty of nice she-devils Ma. Trust me.” His mother laughed and in such a way that it hovered between incredulity at Asmoe’s boast and a suspicion of all the typical depravities. She knew her son well enough to know that she had nothing to worry about but, at the same time, she wasn’t thrilled with the idea of having to wait for grandkids much longer. The two demons, mother and son, then drank some more blood together without speaking as the red light from the huge setting sun filled the kitchen. The only sound for a while was that of Chitters scrounging for scraps on the floor when a loud voice emanating from the living room rang.

“I hear blood being drunk! What!? Is no one going to bring me any!?” Asmoe smiled and grabbed a glass.

“I’ve got you Pa!” he yelled as his mother urged him on with shooing before turning back to the various dinner related things she had to attend to.

Pa Cambioni was still watching the gladiators when Asmoe brought him his drink. Without looking away from the semi-armored men currently hacking at each other on the monitor, the old daemon held out a hand to receive the drink and then, after placing it in his lap, motioned for his son to give him a cigarette. Asmoe complied and lit it off his own smoke first before stubbing his out in the nearest ashtray. Then he sat down on a couch near his father to watch the show with him.

Presently, Moanday Night Slaughter had transitioned to some filler background material as an onscreen clock counted down to a rematch between Horatius and Alexander the Macedonian. This consisted of close-up footage of gladiators attended by statuesque slave girls in chastity thongs and mouth-blocks (so no orifices were available) that was all done premeditatedly as a way to maximize the sexual frustration of the fighters and increase their ferocity. It worked. After cutting to some highlights of recent matches, mostly finishing sword thrusts and men getting impaled or chopped up by environmental hazards, the camera switched to an extended panning shot with a number of gladiators training and sparring in practice scenarios. After this a simple animation filled the screen that conjured up a group of cartoon daemons rockabilly dancing with cigarettes in their mouths, all while accompanied by a snappy singing voice over: Zippity Doo Dah! Zippity Zoom! Clenzo-Zigarettes will fly you straight up to-the-moon! Then the voice shifted to a painfully chipper promise: Now with extra pep and extra zazz! A smart fella never says-no to Clenzo! This was followed by a cut to Stalker Cryptorius and Orl Gnasher at their desk again.

“As I always say,” barked Orl, “It’s not over ‘til the last drop of blood.” The spherical daemon’s huge mouth threatened to open past a hundred and eighty degrees as he talked, perhaps tempted to go the full three sixty and turn the daemon completely inside out.

“And right you are as always Orl,” added Stalker sycophantically. “A stunning upset by Roland against the mighty Vercingetorix. Despite having a significant size advantage, and after he promised to destroy his opponent in the first minute, the big Gaul’s twelve match win-streak has finally been brought to an end.” As Stalker shuffled some papers in front of him, Orl interjected.

“Don’t yap ‘til it’s in the trap!” Another daemonical cliché, this one meaning that you shouldn’t brag before actually accomplishing what you intend.

“You saw it for yourselves folks,” said Stalker, shrugging into the camera. “An HGL arena is a harsh place to be. Harsh like our wonderful sponsor, Clenzo-Zigarettes! Medical experts agree, if you’re not smoking Clenzos... you’re probably a sissy.” As an animation of cigarettes tumbling out of a packet in slow motion played, Asmoe glanced towards his father.

“Pa. I noticed some of my old axes and stuff cluttering up the downstairs. You need any help with that?” Pa Cambioni looked at him while adjusting his glasses.

“What? You think this is why I want you around? Like I can’t get any one of the netherhood kids to come and deal with that?” Asmoe put both his hands up to show he wasn’t trying to push anything.

“Nah... I just thought if I’m here, I’m here. You know?” Pa Cambioni settled the matter by shaking his head and returning his gaze to the monitor. There a large picture of a mangled Vercingetorix filled the screen and this loosed some grumbling from the old daemon.

“That lousy human cost me twenty bucks. Ah! What am I doing gambling anyways? My luck’s no good. Not in years. Years son. Keep that in mind.”

Asmoe nodded before lighting a new cigarette for himself. At the same time, Chitters scrambled into the room and hopped up on the couch next to his owner. With one hand petting his millipede and the other holding a cigarette between his index and middle finger, Asmoe tried a different approach with his father.

“That weathervane’s still hanging in there huh Pa? Got your money’s worth there.” Here Asmoe was referring to the fact that none of the recent solar storms had taken it out. Pa Cambioni wiped away some ashes that had fallen on his pants as he replied.

“It did get knocked over, oh, a few weeks ago. But I put her right back up. And she’s good daemoniac metalwork. None of this shoddy human slave nonsense.”

Asmoe wasn't nearly as passionate as his father about the superiority of daemonic handicrafts so, in response to this, he wisely chose to say nothing and attend to his cigarette. They proceeded to watch some more Moonday Night Slaughter together before his father got up suddenly. Asmoe only raised an eyebrow as his father looked at him.

"Every time I drink blood lately, it goes straight to my bladder," the elder daemon muttered.

With Pa Cambioni shambling down the hall towards the bathroom, Asmoe decided to see what else was on in the meantime. Getting up and walking over to his father's chair, he picked up the remote that'd been left there and remained standing while he flicked through the channels. The first thing he paused on was a news show that was reporting the results of a scientific study.

"The Journal of Daemonic Psychiatry has issued its list of the top ten most prevalent psychiatric disorders. Number one? Aversion to psychiatry. Treatment? Long term expensive drug therapies and psychiatric counselling sessions. Number two? The free-will delusion. Treatment? Expensive rehabilitative torture sessions. Number three? Persistent Contentment. Treatment? Expensive consumer re-education programs and an intense commodity purchasing regimen."

Asmoe changed the channel again and kept pressing the up-button until he got to one of the business networks. Here he found an interview in progress.

"Yet there are rumors of discontent among your shareholders," said a satyr in a black tapered suit with a head of perfectly combed hair. The daemon he were addressing conversely had a corpulent slug-like body and a small round head composed of oily compound eyes. Magnifying their grotesque appearance were multiple asymmetrical mouths beneath this and two rows of six tiny arms protruding from their torso. Ten black lattice wings twitching on their back also alluded to the fact that they could fly.

"Lurk, let me stop you right there," replied the hideous daemon in response to the original question. "We ship over 400 million metric tonnes of human flesh annually. That's annually. And this is on top of our other ventures. Look, it's our position that in a stable market like this one it's better to be enterprise rich than

liquidity rich. Money is only losing money if it's just sitting around. Money is a depreciating asset. Keeping large amounts of cash only makes sense if you don't know how to invest it. But we do. That's why we're consistently pushing the limits of our growth potential. And that's why everyone else is always playing catch up." The interviewer (whose first name was Lurk) shifted his focus in response to this.

"Fair enough. But what about critics who say your debt ratio is too high?" His counterpart gave him an exasperated look.

"Again, not borrowing doesn't make sense if you can invest money in anything with a yield greater than the interest on the debt. That said, debts should always be repaid. Especially injuries. And injuries should be repaid with compound interest. Our critics ought to remember this." Lurk's eyes shifted briefly towards the camera and then back as he changed his tone to something more congenial.

"Some menacing words from the CEO of Omnicide but we wouldn't expect anything less. I've heard though that you personally make a lot of donations to worthy causes. Care to comment?" The other daemon paused before replying.

"Lurk, every year I do contribute generously to a wide array of misanthropic foundations. And at Omnicide it's a core part of our business creed to be good corporate citizens. No one wants to see Hell descend into pacifism right?" Lurk smiled.

"Couldn't agree more. Unfortunately that's all the time we have left for tonight. To those out there viewing us, this is the CEO of Omnicide, Beelzebub the Second, and I'm your host, Lurk Boggerly. Tune in tomorrow at the same time to see another edition of The Infernal Market Report. Until then, vile evening."

Asmoe had caught the tail end of the program he'd been hoping to find and so he started flipping the channels again, trying to go back to where his father's show was. He hadn't made a mental note of which channel it was on so he was forced to pause longer than he'd like to eliminate the wrong ones. During this he stumbled on a segment featuring a video of Hunter S. Thompson, one of Hell's favorite celebrity humans.

“Can we have a comment Hunter?” asked a daemon journalist off-camera while pointing a microphone in the human’s face. Hunter responded by screaming in a high-pitched, almost infantile manner. “And there you have it,” commented the journalist before Asmoe moved on again. Then he came across a Clenzo-Zigarette ad and stopped, thinking it could be part of the Moanday Night Slaughter program. It was an animated graphic of a respiratory system that had arrows with little happy-faces on them entering it. These arrows represented the cigarette smoke and a voice over declared: “Clenzo-Zigarettes! Fumigates the lungs, eliminating harmful bacteria!” A commercial for couture garrotes followed this so Asmoe realized he wasn’t on the channel he was looking for. How many channels did his parent’s media subscription have? It seemed like too many.

By now, Asmoe was pressing the button on the remote in an agitated way and Chitters came up to him, wanting to cuddle. Asmoe bent down to pick up the millipede and then walked back to the couch with him, still changing the channel as he went. Sitting down once more, Asmoe at last found his father’s show.

“You gotta crack the bone to get at the good meat,” asserted Orl. The daemonic platitude he was relying on referred to the fact that achieving anything required effort. This was aimed at some medieval Swiss mercenaries who’d done poorly against the Spartan phalanx destroyed at Thermopylae. Orl’s contention was that they hadn’t trained hard enough.

“But did the Swiss humans really have a chance?” asked Stalker. Orl was adamant.

“These mercenaries, veterans of brutal European conflicts, were in no way disadvantaged compared to the Greeks. That’s pure sanctity. They had every opportunity to prepare themselves for this match and it’s their own fault they were butchered so badly today. Devils have horns for a reason.” This last remark was another well-known diabolical saying and it meant that violence was an intrinsic and fundamental part of the daemonic nature. Stalker however was confused by it in the context of human beings.

“I’m not sure that one actually applies here Orl,” he said hesitantly. Orl had absolutely no patience for his cohost’s uncertainty though.

“I was speaking metaphorically Crypo!” Still visibly unsure, Stalker Cryptorius nevertheless decided to concede the point.

“I should have known,” he said, passive-aggressively directing his comment towards the audience. “In any case,” he continued, “That pulls the coffin-lid over our show tonight. For more bloodshed, you know where to find us. But don’t change the channel because after this it’s Hell’s number one reality show: Dungeon Holocaust! And as always, we end with a word from our sponsor.” The camera cut to a close-up of a very masculine looking daemon posing proudly in front of a pile of corpses and enjoying a cigarette after what appeared to be a hard day’s work. Then a debonair voice over: “Clenzo! It’s like arson in your oesophagus!”

Immediately after Moanday Night Slaughter was over, a promo followed for more entertainment violence. “Next week in the Human Gladiator League! Which of our competitors will collect the most heads from their challengers!? Tune in for a thrilling 24 man battle-royal!” Watching humans fight was an especially popular pastime among daemons – even more so than daemon-on-daemon brawling. Not that surprising however when you think about it. Watching humans kill each other was a gastronomical experience for them, comparable to people enjoying a culinary program on Earth only with the addition of athletics and soap-opera shenanigans.

As a matter of fact, Asmoe was feeling pretty hungry. Dinner was probably still a ways off but he decided he had to see if he could sneak himself a small snack. His mother was no doubt all over the kitchen but if she happened to be preoccupied he might just be able to grab something behind her back. It’s not like it would ruin his appetite. On arriving there however he found both his parents having a heated discussion right in front of the fridge and pantry.

“Where’s the troll-skull crock pot?” his mother asked peevishly.

“How should I know?” Pa Cambioni retorted.

“Who else would!? If I don’t know that leaves you!” Asmoe’s father pulled at the cuffs of his long sleeve shirt and looked inside each one, as if to make sure nothing was hidden up there.

“Nope,” he said smugly.

“The troll-skull crock pot!” Ma Cambioni insisted. “The big white pot with the ugliest face you ever saw? Come on!” Pa Cambioni bit his lip as he leaned against the kitchen island with one hand.

“Well, I moved some stuff from the cupboards to the basement last week. Could be there.” Asmoe’s mother shook her head in amazement.

“You think?” she added sarcastically. Pa Cambioni was already walking backwards out of the room though, making comic gestures of apology as he did. Having kept quiet so as not to fan the flames, Asmoe now sidled up to his mother.

“That looks wonderful Ma,” he said, practically drooling over some seasoned flesh she’d taken out of the oven and which she was basting with a condiment comprised mostly of human spinal fluid.

“It’s almost ready,” she said smiling. Then when he tried to grab one of the smaller pieces while she was looking elsewhere, she somehow caught this out of the corner of her eye and deftly slapped his hand away. “You have to wait sulphy!” commanded his mother.

“Maaaaa!” Asmoe protested. She relented.

“Fine. Here,” Ma Cambioni sighed, tossing him one of the many strips of flesh she was preparing. Asmoe did a brief victory dance with the hunk of meat flopping in one of his hands before he started tearing pieces off it like a giant strip of jerky.

“Uh! Mmm! Ahh!” he gushed in between bites. Ma Cambioni even stifled a little laugh at her son’s antics. He paused with a full mouth though when his father returned, a box filling the old daemon’s arms that even obscured his face. Setting it down noisily on the kitchen island, Pa Cambioni proceeded to make an announcement.

“Darn it! Gotta call pest control again.” Asmoe’s mother stopped what she was doing and turned around.

“Whyyyyyyyy!?” she exclaimed, her voice elongating the solitary syllable until it became a nasally caterpillar of noise.

“What else? Gremlins,” grumbled Asmoe’s father. “A whole nest of em.” Asmoe made an effort to quickly swallow the food in his mouth so he could say something.

“I didn’t see any,” he remarked with puzzlement. Pa Cambioni looked his way.

“There’s a litter of babies right under the exercise equipment.” Ah! He hadn’t looked over there. Asmoe grinned however as he took another bite. An infestation of gremlins in the basement! The horrors of daemonic suburbia! Outside a pterodactyl cry serenaded the evening.

“Hey! What’s with the horns!?” asked Asmoe’s father, finally noticing. “I hope it’s not some weirdo fashion statement.” Before Asmoe could remember the lie he’d told his mother, she came to his defence.

“It’s nothing. Leave him alone about it.” Asmoe’s father shrugged and he went over to his wife to go grab a piece of meat like his son had. Discerning his intentions, Ma Cambioni simply rolled her eyes and handed it to him without a fuss.

“You two...” she added exasperatedly. Asmoe laughed and finished off the last of his snack. Then, noticing Chitters lingering by the sliding glass door that opened to the backyard, he decided to let the millipede out. Pushing it with a grunt, Asmoe watched as Chitters bounded into the yard like an excited ferret – his small pointed legs leaving tattoo-esque trails in the desert ground as he swerved around piles of junk electronics and the morbid arts-and-crafts projects that Ma Cambioni occasionally indulged in which were too big for the house. With the door still open, Asmoe noticed his parents were standing close together in an affectionate sort of way now so he decided to head outside himself. There, his millipede was nowhere to be seen for a second until it burst out of a heap of bones in the far right corner of the yard. With a man’s Humerus held in their little mandibles, Chitters dragged this over to Asmoe and laid it down at his feet.

“So you want to play fetch...” said Asmoe smiling. His parent’s backyard was only about a forty feet long so he tossed the bone with a casual underarm throw and it landed well in front of the back fence. This was repeated in much the same way a couple of times, Chitters bringing the bone back promptly on each occasion, until one of Asmoe’s throws came up embarrassingly short. Determined to throw the bone right into its original heap now, he gave it a forceful horseshoes-like toss. The Humerus spun in the air as if it were an errant helicopter tail-blade before striking the back fence with a loud bang. Asmoe stooped a bit in chagrin at the sound it made before looking around to see if anyone had seen him. Fortunately no one had. When Chitters returned with the bone this time, Asmoe took it from the millipede but didn’t throw it. Instead they played a bit of tug-o-war until Asmoe had enough and he sat down in a nearby plastic lawn chair. Underneath, Chitters curled up with the bone and began to gnaw on it while his owner lit another cigarette.

Inevitably, Asmoe soon found himself thinking about work again. Bellicoso was very displeased with the fact that he couldn’t fire Asmoe for missing multiple days in a row and his boss was taking it out on him as maliciously as he could. The troll pestered him with all sorts of insane errands nowadays. Fortunately he was only in the office during regular hours so Asmoe’s overtime productivity wasn’t being hampered in any way. The other day he’d also played a satisfying trick on his idiot boss when he’d pretended to object to Bellicoso taking Sneer from him. The troll had been leaning over his cubicle, giving another tedious lecture, when the idea suddenly arose. So Asmoe interrupted the troll, making a point of saying how much he needed his goblin to help him, and Bellicoso of course had decided to take Sneer for himself. Being “deprived” in this manner, Asmoe had gotten a lot of work done that day, plus he and Abyssphagus had burst into hysterical laughter together when they heard that Sneer had melted down most of Bellicoso’s trophies and minted goblin-faced coins with them. Even daemons from other divisions who heard about it wanted the coins now and they were the most sought after item of contraband currently being traded at Tsuji Giri. Asmoe thumbed one of these coins as it rested in his pocket – he’d gotten a hold of six other ones too but he’d already given three of those away. Bellicoso had predictably tried to prevent their being distributed but this was a little hard to do when Sneer had climbed up a statue of Lucifer and, standing on the fallen angel’s head, tossed the coins in handfuls to any daemon passing by. After security had apprehended the goblin, he was once more entrusted to Asmoe’s custody (unfortunately) but not before one of the VP’s had

publicly scolded Bellicoso. Asmoe now found himself feeling a certain amount of affection for the little goblin and, even though keeping him from ruining things was still a challenge, it was one he was content to accept. He hadn't tried to give Sneer back to Malice again – in fact, the last time he spoke with her he'd mentioned how useful the goblin was. A lie naturally and she hadn't appeared to believe him. Oh well. Asmoe was almost finished the cigarette he was smoking and, taking another out with the first one still in his mouth, he lit that one too before putting out the first. This way he minimized the amount of time his lungs had to suffer the fresh air. Behind him though he heard the sound of the back door sliding open. "Your Ma says dinner's almost ready," his father announced.

After coaxing Chitters to follow him inside, Asmoe entered himself. "Set the table sulphy," instructed his mother, handing him some plates laden with cutlery. Taking these in both hands, Asmoe realized his cigarette was going to get in the way at the moment and so he squashed it in an ashtray on the dining table. Seeing this, his mother objected.

"What are you doing? Wasting a cigarette? I never taught my son that. Finish your cigarettes properly." Asmoe bowed his head.

"Sorry Ma," he replied with more deference than regret. She wasn't actually mad though, and besides, the oven needed attending to, so he was left to finish his chore. Asmoe carefully laid out the plates and meat-stabbers just as he had done all throughout his youth. *Déjà vu*, he thought to himself. Well, it made sense the family dynamic would revert to its old equilibrium. Not everything was the same though. His father was helping for example – bringing the seasoning shakers over along with some other eating paraphernalia. Back in the day, the old daemon would pretty much just vegetate until dinner but, being out of work at the moment, he was probably a bit restless. As if to confirm this private thought, Pa Cambioni began to talk about a project he had going on in the garage.

"You remember that thing I was working on before? The fire extinguisher?" he asked Asmoe. Pa Cambioni was developing a refillable fire suppression device because he was tired of having to buy so many disposable ones – although all buildings in Hell had fireproof roofs because of the brimstone showers, a lot of other things would often get incinerated.

“Yeah. How’s it going?” responded Asmoe.

“Good. Great,” insisted Pa Cambioni. “Only now I’m starting to think: why limit it to a portable unit? I could run pipes through the front and back yards and put a control panel right in the house. Then whenever we got a fire on our property I can just push a button from in here.” Ma Cambioni took enough time away from the meat slurry she was mixing to comment on this.

“Asmoe, don’t encourage your father. I knew he was crazy when I married him but this kind of thing is too much.” Asmoe’s father gave her a theatrical scowl before turning back to his son.

“I’m not sure though whether I can get away with using quarter-inch lead pipes.” Asmoe knew his father could get carried off by things like this but he didn’t want to come across as discouraging either so he chose his reply carefully.

“I don’t know Pa. But I was wondering: have you thought about building some kind of mechanical gremlin trap? Bet it’d be cheaper than calling pest control all the time.” His father’s brow furrowed before his eyes went wide and a smile started to curl at the ends of his lips.

“Say. That is an idea,” he said, thoughts of ensnared gremlins already tingling in his mind. Asmoe figured this would also go down better with his mother and he was sure he caught a flicker of relief in her eyes. Ma Cambioni now was looking at both of them and she clapped her hands together loudly.

“Okay! Time to sit,” she proclaimed. The two male daemons were also given bowls and trays of food before they settled into their chairs at the dining table. Ma Cambioni quickly followed them, taking the roast out of the oven and opening the tin foil it was wrapped in. When she had taken her seat, Asmoe perceived this as a cue he could commence but, before he got a single bite in, his mistake was rectified.

“In this house we say perdition before we eat,” Ma Cambioni insisted as she shaped a triangle above her chest with her thumbs and index fingers. The two male daemons dutifully followed her example as she spoke. “Thank you to Lucifer and all the wonderful satans who’ve kept our republic free and strong. Thank you to the seven archfiends for preserving us from the theocracy of the Enemy. And thank you

to the powers of chance and fortune for all the calamities they've heaped on those we loath." Then they all said Amen.

The centerpiece of the meal was obviously the roast. Propped up without its arms, the Japanese woman's torso was stuffed with an assortment of other meats protruding from her gaping neck hole. The small firm breasts of the human were also skewered through its nipples and, from the metal rods sticking out of these, some caramelized toes (stripped of nails) hung impaled. That wasn't all however. There was also the large bowl of slurry that was previously mentioned – made from equal parts brain, liver, and kidneys – as well as trays of miniature sausages, steamed locust husks stuffed with skin curls, and the flesh hunks Asmoe had tried earlier only they were now sautéed. Additionally, here and there on the table, small bowls were scattered that were filled with little tidbits of things – delicious culinary cruelties all arranged with artful presentation. Lastly, a blue mound of cartilage gelatin quivered in wait for dessert, the dozen or so eyeballs in it suspended evenly throughout. It was a meal straight off the cover of *Sinister Wives Monthly* and the two male daemons eagerly dove in. As they were shovelling the feast into their gnashing mouths, Ma Cambioni gave a piece of meat to the millipede begging up her leg and then started to speak in such a way that indicated she was looking for attention from either one of them.

"The locusts were the most difficult. I used her stomach acid to cook them and the recipe said two hours but they still seemed underdone to me so I put them in for another twenty minutes. I think it worked really well," she added, hoping for some praise. Her two counterparts though were too busy enjoying her cooking to compliment it. Not willing to give up yet, Asmoe's mother tried a more direct approach.

"They really blossomed with flavor. Don't ya think so Pa?" she asked. Pa didn't look up from his plate as he replied in between bites.

"Of course. Of course... They're swell dagger." This was not enough for Asmoe's mother though. Dropping her meat-stabber on her plate with a clatter, she did this just loud enough to convey her displeasure. Realizing he'd failed one of the endless number of surprise marriage tests husbands are subjected to, human or otherwise, Pa Cambioni put gorging himself on hold for a moment and looked directly at his wife.

“My sweet bloody dagger. Don’t be sore. You made a lovely dinner. Almost as delicious as you.” Ma Cambioni didn’t say anything in reply to this but her mood visibly resumed its previous level of cheerfulness. Her son however objected to his father’s overt display of affection.

“Come on Pa. I’m eating here,” complained Asmoe in jest, though his father’s comment didn’t even seem to slow him down.

“Shush you,” countered his mother. “Unless you miss the whippings I used to give you.” Pa Cambioni chimed in too.

“Ah! Fond memories,” he mused. He’d lashed his son more than a few times. In fact, in Hell it’s considered child abuse for parents not to beat their offspring – the absence of which is regarded as depriving them of a crucial educational experience necessary for proper character building. Daemon spawn can even be forcibly taken away from their parent’s custody if reports are filed by concerned parties that they’re failing to provide a sufficiently violent environment for them.

The Cambioni family ate and ate and ate with great gusto for the better part of half an hour before they started to slow down a little. In between bites of food, conversation once more began to ascend out of the pit of monosyllabic utterances.

“The other day at my ladies skeet shooting session, a human got jammed in the machine. When they finally shot him into the air he came out all in pieces,” laughed Asmoe’s mother. This was directed at her son of course since Pa Cambioni had already heard the story. Asmoe smiled but he remembered something else as a result of this.

“You still talk to Mrs. Caligina at all?” he asked, feigning nonchalance. His mother was surprised by the question.

“Mrs. Caligina? The one from my old hobby vivisection group? Why d’you ask?” Asmoe hadn’t remembered this shared connection between Mrs. Caligina and his mother but he played it like he did.

“Yeah. I thought I saw her the other day downtown. Could be wrong though.” Ma Cambioni shrugged.

“Not often. But we still say hi when we see each other. You know, she does have a lovely daughter though. You remember Lily right? Well you should see this one now.” Asmoe smiled but kept the reason to himself. His father however added a few words of his own.

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen her. The one who works for the feds? Does that prison oversight or something.” Ma Cambioni corrected him here.

“She works for DOM. Interrogation,” she said before shifting back to her son. “You know sulphy, I could call her mother up. Maybe introduce you two.” Asmoe shook his head with his mouth full. After swallowing he added

“I’m good Ma,” but his mother was still taken with the idea.

“We could arrange a casual get together. She doesn’t even have to know.” Asmoe recognized he had to put his foot down before his mother’s scheming started to build momentum.

“Lucifer’s wings Ma!” he exclaimed. Doused but still smoldering, Asmoe’s mother looked to her husband for support.

“Any thoughts?” she inquired. Pa Cambioni cleared his throat before speaking.

“Remember the first time he brought a she-daemon to the house? He was so nervous. What was he, fifteen? And he thought he was going to get a fierce one with the cat-o’-nine-tails ‘cause he didn’t ask.” Both of Asmoe’s parents laughed at this recollection but Asmoe started to look moderately embarrassed. His father meanwhile paid him no mind.

“What a devious little devil he was too. Sneaking her downstairs and then leaning a spear against the hall door so if we opened it he could rush over to intercept us. And you thought we weren’t wise to that!” Asmoe’s father directed

this last sentence at him and Asmoe sunk into his chair somewhat. Parents! This kind of stuff was worse than any thrashing.

Ma Cambioni now decided to serve dessert. Taking away everyone's dirty plates, she returned with three clean ones and put these down next to the gelatin. Asmoe and Pa Cambioni remained in their seats but helped, in their minimal way, by handing her the other dirty serving dishes next and, when she was done ferrying these back and forth, she cut everyone a large slice of her finale. Asmoe poked his immediately after receiving it just to watch it jiggle.

"Now, now. None of that," admonished his mother. Asmoe scooped up as much as he could fit in a single spoonful and plopped it into his grinning mouth as he returned her gaze. This had included a whole eyeball and when Ma Cambioni bent down to scratch Chitters a few seconds later, he pushed out the eyeball so it was slightly protruding from his pursed lips and showed this off to his father. Pa Cambioni chuckled, drawing the attention of his wife.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied innocently. "This is as tasty as it looks."

Asmoe stifled a laugh as he swallowed and then added his own puns. "How observant of you Pa. I see you're a daemon of refined taste."

His father smiled but maintained his composure. "Careful with those compliments son," he retorted. "You know what they say – *an eye for an eye.*"

Asmoe broke out in loud laughter, losing the contest with his father to see who could get the other one to crack first. Ma Cambioni then flicked a small hand towel at both of them.

"Honestly. I wonder about the two of you sometimes."

The Cambioni family proceeded to enjoy its dessert in good harmony and after they were done Asmoe helped his mother with the dishes while Pa Cambioni went back to the living room to watch the monitor. Chitters briefly searched around

the top of the dining table looking for leftovers, climbing on to a chair and leaning off it, but Asmoe saw this right away and motioned him down with a hand.

“So how’s work?” his mother asked as she scrubbed human remains off her cutlery. Drying the troll-skull crock pot, Asmoe replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“Busy. Really busy. I’m... uh... I’m basically shovelling coal into a furnace all day long at the moment. Taking extra shifts too.” Should he tell her now? Asmoe still wasn’t sure about the best way to break the news. Before he could decide though, his opportunity evaporated as his mother moved on to other things.

“Did Merlgus seem funny to you?” she asked.

“You mean like strange?” inquired Asmoe. The gnome wasn’t exactly a comedian.

“Yeah. Peculiar even. But I can’t put my claw on it.” Asmoe dried another dish and put this on the shelf before he spoke.

“I don’t know. You’ve had him for five years. Maybe it’s time to get a new one?” Ma Cambioni frowned.

“It’s not that. He’s a good sentry. How can I put this? I guess he just seems too accepting of things. All the other daemons I know in the netherhood have to give their gnomes regular beatings. But he’s so obedient all the time.” That IS odd, thought Asmoe.

“Maybe he’s happy here?” he quipped. Mother and son both looked at each other before erupting in laughter. Obviously that wasn’t it.

His mother finished washing dishes faster than he could dry them so she left him to take care of drying while she joined her husband in the living room. Asmoe could hear the program playing in the background and it sounded like some kind of entertainment show. Celebrity Skewer or something like that. Asmoe wasn’t a fan of that sort of thing but Maenada, the harpy with a cubicle next to his, was always taking about the latest gossip surrounding famous daemons. Humans too. In any case he was soon done with the dishes but instead of joining his parents he decided

to have a cigarette and think some things over first. Standing in the kitchen, flicking his Clenzo into the drain of the sink, he stared out the window to the backyard and the row of houses behind this. It made him reflect on his own place in the city. All that stressful energy. Yeah, it had its tranquil moments but they were rare. Of course he was about to drop a bombshell on his parents, well his mother mainly, so the suburbs had its mayhem too. Still, he was beginning to think that it would be nice to live out here again. Okay, he was ready now.

Walking into the living room with the last half of his cigarette threading the air with smoke, Asmoe found himself standing in-between his father and mother, their backs turned towards him in their respective seats as they gazed intently at what was on the screen in front of them. Asmoe now decided he'd wait until the commercial break to get their attention. As it was two daemon entertainment show hosts, one a preening but masculine wraith and the other a ditzy blonde siren, introduced a promo spot for a show. Cut to a handsome daemon in military fatigues and a beret shouldering a huge sniper rifle in the back of a jeep with other daemon soldiers. Then the voice over starts. "Thrust Heartwound is The Terrorist Hunter! Stalking his targets in the ash wastelands of Canada, Lieutenant Heartwound leads his squad of elite daemon mercenaries in heroic missions to recapture human terrorist vermin." More scenes of the daemon soldiers doing various daemon soldier things. Then a theme song in a marching military band style.

"He's coming for ya! He's coming for ya!
Terrorist Hunter! Terrorist Hunter!
He's coming for ya! He's coming for ya!
Terrorist Hunter! Terrorist Hunter!
You can run! You can run!
But there's no escape!
You can run! You can run!
But our bellies are your fate!
Terrorist Hunter! Terrorist Hunter!
He's coming for ya! He's coming for ya!
Terrorist Hunter! Terrorist Hunter.
He's cominggg forrr ya.
Heee's coommminnnggg ffforrrr yaaaa..."

The camera now returned for a reaction from the two hosts. "Satan's pitchfork!" exclaimed the smiling wraith. "I love that theme song. Season Five's going to be amazing!" His female counterpart was just as plastically enthusiastic.

"You betcha! And way patriotic!"

Cut to some flashy graphics and a windowed camera shot of daemon actors posing at a premier event accompanied by the same voice doing the voice over as before. "Coming up! The cast of Ogre Quest 3: Maximum Gore sits down with us! Don't go anywhere!" Asmoe cleared his throat loudly as the commercial interlude began, causing both his parents to turn around.

"I have some bad news," he said.

Before her son could continue though, Ma Cambioni started to babble away. "No! What is it? You're not in trouble are you? I mean, I hear some bookies cut off the horns of daemons as a first warning but..." she went on before her son stopped her.

"Ma... Ma! It's not a gambling debt! And when have I ever gambled!? Never mind. Here's the thing – I can't make it for Whore Mass this year. Sorry. I'm just too busy with work right now. I mean, I can only stay for maybe another hour tonight. I'm heading straight back to the office after this." His mother looked crushed.

"But we always spend Whore Mass together!"

Pa Cambioni however assumed a thoughtful expression as he considered this. "Actually," he interjected. "When he was at torture school, there was that one time." Ma Cambioni didn't appreciate that morsel of fact however and a sharp glare shut her husband up.

"It's once a year Asmodeus! Once!" she wept, tears running down her cheeks. Asmoe felt a lump in his throat as he bent down to console her.

"I know Ma," he said softly. "I'm sorry. Some things happened that were out of my control. I'm temporarily behind, that's all." Ma Cambioni wiped her eyes with a handkerchief as her son rubbed her shoulder.

“It’s just not going to be the same,” she murmured. Knowing there wasn’t anything he could say to make things better, Asmoe simply leaned forward and started rubbing her back with one hand. Pa Cambioni was looking at both of them until he noticed Chitters slowly creeping around his chair.

Picking up the millipede, he held him in the air and joked, “At least we’ll have this rascal around.” Ma Cambioni let out a single sob-laugh but Asmoe smiled now and looked over at his father appreciatively. Then, during the ensuing hour, Ma Cambioni started to feel better about things as a result of her son’s attentions and she even poked some fun at him as he was getting ready to leave. After hugging both his parents goodbye, Asmoe gave his pet some scale rubs and proceeded to exit out the front door. Unlike earlier, Chitters didn’t help this time.

Watching his owner disappearing through the door’s screen down the path outside the house, the millipede let out half a dozen or so sad chirps to convey his own unhappiness.

Chapter Six

A crowd of daemons had gathered to watch the bashing of a live human piñata. It'd been split open and sown shut full of fun prizes, and this particular human was so overstuffed, they could barely even scream. Dangling from a gothic lamp-post by a rope tied around their ankles, the human swayed back and forth quietly moaning in-between each hit. This just spurred the blindfolded incubus who swung a spiked club at them to swing even harder though. But his enthusiasm exceeded his ability to orient himself to his target and on one go he spun himself so hard he fell down completely. Everyone enjoyed this (minus the human) Among the guffaws and pointing however there was an equal amount of supportive cheering since the daemons were all eager to see the human burst open and release the wealth of precious trinkets it held. They didn't have to wait long. After the next resounding thwack a sizable seam appeared and a trickle of small kaleidoscopically colored packages began to spill out. Ardent demands to finish the job now pelted the blindfolded incubus and, pointing his club in various directions until the vocal approval of the crowd indicated where he should aim, the daemon tasked with liberating the festive contents of the human tightened his grip and put his weight into his next attempt like it was game seven tied in the bottom of the ninth. Then the human exploded. Prizes flew in all directions and clawed hands reached out to intercept them in the air or snatch them off the ground. Asmoe and Thoth of course were no less desirous for a share of the spoils and they were buffeted and pushed as they scrambled into the ensuing havoc.

This was New Year's Eve in Hell. In the New York Nether too – the home of over a hundred million daemons. As you'd expect, the number of them out in the streets was enormous. And very noisy. Not just the howling of the daemons themselves either but also the sound of all the firecrackers and wailing human sacrifices that were competing that night for a greater part in the pandemonium. And there were plenty of remarkable things to be seen too. Trains of behemoths decorated with vivid body paint and streams of bells and golden totems and windmill-like contraptions and riders smashing cymbals and portraits of notable daemons garnished with decorations and gushing fireworks, like foundry fountains, raining cascades of light on the revellers and their human slaves and beasts without discrimination. Plus, following these, groups of devil monks with giant brass gongs clanging – the junior monks pulling the gongs on wheeled platforms and the senior monks banging them. Musicians of every variety in an anarchy of costumes were ever present too – among these a half-corporeal Djinn in mystical regalia playing a huge satanic organ in a frenzy as it was being dragged through the streets in a chariot by yoked humans while a crew of kobolds clambered up and down it to pull out pieces of debris and body parts that got stuck in the tops of the pipes. Guns of course were being shot off. Pistols, rifles, machineguns, cannons – anything that had a bang and a kick to it, unleashed into the sky or on whoever took one's momentary fancy. There were plenty of dragons of course, eastern and western, soaring and weaving their way through the air respectively, as well as many wild chupacabras running around – packs of them marauding the streets. Across the sky, legions of seraphim patrolled in tight formations, their wings and bodies iridescent with eyes. Diabolic Security meanwhile maintained an omnipresent force as it did every other year. Uniformed and tactical suited officers could be seen gathered in clusters while invisible undercover agents went around ferreting out subversion. Crime wasn't a big problem since most of the laws were suspended on New Year's Eve anyways but everyone was readily taking full advantage of this. Carnage coated the sidewalks and roads, it splattered the building facades and signage and statues; it decorated everything in liberal quantities while the gutters overflowed with streams of blood languidly seeping into adjacent sewer drains.

Notable among the daemons not performing were the many uniforms and matching flags that were being hoisted around. These indicated membership in one of the different bacchanal associations – festival factions which daemons joined for various reasons but, most importantly, for mutual protection. Each one had its own criteria for admission, as well as rules of conduct, but most were fairly casual and

the only strict requirement was the paying of annual dues. They were celebratory groups after all and this was reflected in their colorful names. These included: The Zero Sum Union, The Superstar Smiles, The Yum Chums, The Sarcophagi Alliance, The Hoarded Ire, The Kilt and Halberd League, The Dangerous Aces, The Skull Stack Towers, The Red Tongues, The Anathema Oh-La-Las, The Fraternity of Ancients, The Anti-Masonic Party Experience, The Papier-Mâché Lickspittles, The Nuclear Hassle, The Mystagogues, The Cats Are Devils Too, The Let's Play Nice, The Mosquito Cloud, The Android Calligraphers, The Won Ton Troupe, The Sun Suicides, plus many many others. All of whom were heavily armed.

Now Asmoe and Thoth belonged to the first of these, The Zero Sum Union, and accordingly they were each outfitted in chessboard print tunics that were mixed in with a sea of other chessboard print tunics. The group, perhaps a little over sixty-thousand strong tonight, had currently claimed a portion of the downtown nether out by the Sadorama Arena. As a couple giants played a round of goblin hacky-sack in front of them, Asmoe and Thoth went ahead and opened up the prizes they'd managed to scramble away with.

"What'd you get?" Asmoe asked his pal.

"Some brass knuckles embedded with molars and a cube of ambrosia," replied Thoth before adding a "You?" Asmoe smiled slyly.

"A para-spectral lens, a pouch of spicy dried eyeballs, and a disposable acid sprayer." Thoth was impressed.

"Vile. You certainly made out. Let me see the lens."

Asmoe handed it to him and the minotaur admired it for a moment before holding it up to the evening light. Through it a translucent vision of human beings engaged in their own New Year's Eve celebrations was visible. Para-spectral lenses in fact filter light according to a specific dimensional frequency so wherever Thoth peered through it he was actually looking at things happening on Earth. Depending on the construction and thickness of these kinds of lenses they can be fixed on any dimensional spectrum and so were fairly valuable. The fact that Asmoe managed to get one from the Zero Sum piñata was an auspicious sign.

Asmoe and Thoth continued to lounge around and use up some of Thoth's newly won ambrosia until a few of their other friends showed up. These included Hades Abaissier, a ghoulish who worked as a poison merchant; Monger Reaves, a giant who owned an artisanal human butchering shop; and Flesher Orsullusus, an elven lawyer. Solid fiends all of them.

"Zero Sum Devils!" shouted Hades rowdily as he and the other two arrivals found Asmoe and Thoth.

Hades had also been undulating his chessboard tunic with his hands at the same time and Asmoe replied by pointing at his own tunic and grinning. Thoth was the first to get up though and he went and clasped hands with the new fiends before Asmoe followed suit.

"Let the evil begin," rasped Flesher cheerfully and the five of them formed a circle while a number of passing daemons began to flow around them.

"They've got some drag races starting in a few minutes?" suggested Thoth to the others. Heads nodded but Monger had a question.

"Where's the brawling?" he asked, pounding a huge fist into another huge hand.

"It's all black and white here," apologized Asmoe before he added, "But don't worry. I hear we'll be clashing with those Sarcophagi Alliance bastards later."

Monger was briefly downcast but Flesher patted him on the back and gave him a wicked assuring glance – the elf wasn't planning on all the knives he'd brought with him to come home unstained after all. Decided then, the group started to push through the crowd in the direction of the races. They pressed on despite the distraction of the delicious smell of human limbs being roasted on various barbeques, the bikini clad sirens promoting a new drink called Vitriol which promised to increase one's maximum rage, and a game of gnomeball (like rugby but with a gnome for a ball) that nearly spilled right into them.

Soon they could hear the sound of the roaring hot-rods despite the clamor around them and Thoth said to Hades, “Antichrist! Those are some beastly machines!”

When the five of them succeeded in carving out a decent spot for themselves among the other spectators, this remark was proven all the more true. The snarling hot-rods with their supercharged engines protruding from their chasses, were all tightly lined up along a street curb in an acutely angled row – flames and smoke belching from their rumbling motors. Among them, daemon drivers and their entourages sized each other’s rides up and heckled their competitors with all the usual taunts. “What’s that thing run on? Prayers and tears?” etc.

Then two of the vehicles were motioned forward to go against each other in the next race and these were slowly driven to the starting line in deliberately intimidating manners by their respective drivers. One was a cyclops wearing a spike-studded Prussian helmet whose hot-rod was painted dark purple with bright amethyst highlights and a large Eye of Horus on its hood. The other was driven by a troll with numerous trepanning holes in his head and his ride was a dull vermillion marred by gashes and bullet holes. Additionally its front bumper had a large sticker which read “Nice to Meat You!” and this was indicative of the widely popular pastime among serious motorists of running over hapless pedestrians. As the two drivers eyed each other and waited for the signal to go, a daemon mechanic in stained overalls came over and inspected both vehicles to make sure neither had any illegal safety equipment like seatbelts or airbags. Satisfied, he stuffed a greasy rag into his pockets that he’d been wiping his hands on and gave an incubus in the race control-tower the thumbs up.

Receiving this, the incubus turned to a microphone that fed into the tower speaker system and yelled “Drivers! Ready yourselves!” That elicited full throttled roars from both rattling vehicles before their driver’s eyes zeroed in on the starting lights suspended from a semi-arching rail in front of them. As each one activated after a pause, they were also accompanied by a loud shrill klaxon. Violet. Yellow. Red. The last of these meaning “Go” the tires of the two hot-rods peeled out and they lurched ahead at an utterly reckless speed. Daemons erupted in bloodthirsty cheering then as the two drivers tried to push each other off the straight thin track, their vehicles colliding with each other over and over again.

Things remained close until about three-quarters of the way to the end, where the troll managed to force one of the cyclops' front wheels into a large outcropping of rocks. The cyclops' hot-rod then violently launched into the air and twisted upside down before it proceeded to smash into the ground and explode in an enormous fireball. Like many drag races in Hell, this one concluded with a small mushroom cloud at the end.

The crowd of Zero Sum Unionists jumped up and down at this result and celebrated in other more distinctly daemonic ways. Attacking a stranger beside them being one of these, and Monger Reaves furnished an example of this when he clobbered a random satyr just because they were within reach. Even the loyalties of the old black and white had its limits. Then, as two other hot-rods tore a human roughly in half by taking off in opposite directions with the human's ankles tied by long chains to their tow axles, Hades shouted a question in Asmoe's ear.

"So you're in a good mood tonight I take it!?" he asked, assuming the answer to be yes.

"I am!" affirmed Asmoe.

"A clean kill over at Tsuji Giri then!?" continued Hades, meaning that Asmoe's work problems had been sorted out.

"Impaled through and through!" assured Asmoe. "Not only did I beat my quota by three but I got a sylph realtor to confess to a whole swarm of extra things! Maggot loads of tax fraud and so on! I've got sway now like the Serpent of Eden!"

Hades was glad to hear the news and he brought it up with the others, although Thoth had already indulged Asmoe an ample amount of bragging earlier. Flesher however was soon trying to get their attention and when he had it he pointed a ways off in the distance. There various gruesomely decorated totem poles were being erected and everyone knew what this meant. A bloodletting. They'd have to leave immediately if they were going to have any chance of partaking though and the group was almost unanimous in their enthusiasm. Only Asmoe was already sated from an earlier indulgence and he trailed behind the other four, snacking on some of the spicy eyeballs he'd won as the rest plunged ahead. Daemons were starting to stream in from all directions too and by the time

Asmoe and his four fiends got there, large throngs had already gathered around each of the erected poles. Meanwhile, tall trapezoid-faced drums were pushed into the vicinity. These were manned by horned giants wielding ogre femur mallets and they beat out a slow metronomic rhythm on the shuddering jigsaws of wholly-flayed human skins that constituted the drums' sheathes. This went on for several minutes until a government official ascended a podium.

“A new year is upon us!” intoned the deputy secretary for the R.V.A. or Recreational Violence Administration, “And the fires of Hell are burning as bright as ever!”

Enthusiastic acclaim arose from the crowd of daemons agreeing with this. At the same time, about two dozen high-quality humans, all in their late teens or early twenties, were hoisted up the totem poles, like flags, by large spindly arachnid daemons who each had a pole to themselves. There the humans dangled by their feet as the deputy secretary continued.

“Every unholiday, every celebration, we are honoring one thing above all – the success of our rebellion and our defiance of the Enemy!” An even more zealous response now. “Reap well then citizens! Reap the rewards of your shattered chains! And drink these offerings as a token of the blood pact!”

More cheering and disposable cups were suddenly being handed out to the daemons gathered around each of the poles. It was time. Drawing himself up to his full height, the deputy secretary now spread his arms wide.

“Citizens! Enjoy your libations!”

With that, the arachnid daemons slit the throats of all the humans in near synchronicity and long red streams of blood began to pour from their wounds onto the throngs of daemons below. Among these, a swarm of cups were eagerly raised by clawed hands to catch as much of this as possible.

Watching the bloodletting from a nearby hill, Asmoe now got a craving for a cigarette but, when he went to light one, he discovered that his lighter had stopped working. Not a big deal. Walking a few yards to the nearest book burning, he grabbed a partially inflamed volume from the pile and used this to ignite the end

of his Clenzo. All these heretical and terroristic diatribes burned well at least, he thought to himself. Then, tossing the book back into the inferno, he returned to where his fiends were – Thoth and Flesher being presently covered in a generous splattering of blood.

“You missed it,” said Hades but Asmoe shook his head. “Before you latecomers showed up, a couple of human rabbits were unleashed and I got to devour one of their hearts... along with about a gallon of the red stuff.”

Thoth nodded for the benefit of the others, having seen the incident in question, and Asmoe’s nonparticipation was jovially forgiven. It should be noted that the term rabbit is used in Hell to refer to humans that are let out of cages and then chased down and torn apart for entertainment purposes. As for Asmoe himself, he held out his pouch of spicy eyeballs for the others to take from as he smoked a cigarette with his free hand. This finished off the last of them and Asmoe perfunctorily tossed his garbage on the ground, as was customary during daemonic celebrations. The group of fiends then remained loitering in the vicinity of the bloodletting for a fair bit, talking about nothing in particular, until some horns sounded at the edge of the Zero Sum masses and the chessboard crowd began to flow in that direction. Hades was in a boisterous mood already and he began to shout, hoping to instigate a chant.

“S! A! S! A! Find the wimps and make them pay!”

This was a taunt against The Sarcophagi Alliance and Hades repeated it a couple times as a few daemons joined him but the chant never reached critical mass and it eventually petered out.

“You got doused pretty good there,” remarked an alluring succubus abruptly. She was looking at Flesher but he had difficulty believing she was talking to him at first.

“Human?” asked the succubus as a follow up. Flesher was hardly able to finish a single nod of a yes before the succubus proceeded to lean in and lick the side of his face with an artfully lingering sweep of her tongue.

“Delicious!” she said vivaciously before disappearing back into the crowd.

All of Flesher's fiends, and even a couple of strangers who'd witnessed what'd happened, started to laugh while he himself was left dumbstruck for a moment. Monger put him in a playful headlock and Thoth remarked, "That hairless little saint!"

It was a joke at his own expense though and to illustrate this he grabbed at sticky tufts of his fur and added, "And until now I never knew how badly I wanted a random she-devil to come up and lick me." With his good luck being unaccountable, Flesher just shrugged.

"It's going to be cadavers of fun!" declared Thoth a little later. He was saying this to Asmoe, who diverted his attention from a statue the crowd was passing which depicted Lucifer using a sword to sever the chains of another angel. A work that was symbolic of the original liberation of the celestial demons.

"I'm surprised there were still any openings left," replied Asmoe finally.

"Technically there weren't," grinned Thoth.

"Oh?" said Asmoe.

Thoth's face was radiant with gloating as he adopted an innocent look. "I may have bribed one of the library's IT warlocks to hack the booking site," offered the minotaur.

Asmoe smiled – the only thing better than getting what you wanted was getting it at someone else's expense. Thoth wasn't done though.

"That's not even the best part," he added. Asmoe raised an eyebrow as the minotaur, barely able to suppress his own laughter, continued. "The seats we stole were reserved for... you're going to howl at this... a group of doctors from... I'm such a devil... the Ereshkigal Management Committee!" Asmoe had been a little skeptical at Thoth's big buildup but his mouth fell open at his fiend's revelation and he quickly broke out into evil guffaws, his latest cigarette tumbling from his lips.

"No!" shouted Asmoe, still chuckling.

“Yes!” assured Thoth merrily.

Hades meanwhile had only started following their conversation when Asmoe burst into laughter and he wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

“Plotting something over there?” he asked curiously. Thoth shook his head as he lit a cigarette Asmoe had handed him.

“Just commemorating some earlier depravity. As I was saying to this devil, the reservations I got for the New Year’s Eve Sky-High Zeppelin Bash were plundered from some daemons we owed a bad turn. They’ll be in for a nasty surprise when they show up to board.” Hades heartily approved.

“Fang-tastic!” he said smiling. Asmoe though had an unsettling thought.

“When they show up, won’t they make a point of finding out who took their seats?” he asked but Thoth had it all taken care of. “The fiend who did this for us scrambled everyone’s seating arrangements so we’re totally untraceable. They won’t have a clue who was originally sitting where.”

The crowd of daemons in chessboard black and white surged up town as the non-affiliated daemons who saw them coming scattered. Like ants marching across the forest floor of a jungle, the Zero Sum Unionists ravaged every living thing in their path – but despite a certain *esprit de corps*, the sharing of the dismembered body parts of these stragglers was more often than not reluctant. Asmoe and his fiends were situated in the middle of the swarm so they weren’t able to participate in much of the action but all around them they bore witness to it. Some unionists, clambering up the side of an office tower, surprised a trio of imps roosting there for example and these tried to flap away screeching but it was too late. Elsewhere, a reptoid was discovered hiding under a parked truck and this was soon ringed by voracious daemons endeavoring to pull him out of there. Not every encounter ended with a bloody exclamation mark however. Flesher got to see a doppelgänger realize they’d been surrounded before anyone in his immediate vicinity noticed him and him quickly changing his skin pattern to match their tunics. But whatever their outcomes, such incidents were just the appetizers of violence – the main course was The Sarcophagi Alliance expected only a few blocks away.

The anticipation was energizing the unionists too – like a field of flowers suddenly in bloom, multiple weapons appeared everywhere all at once; the daemons holding these, sharpening them with stones or testing their weight or pumping them in the air and shouting demands for blood. Thoth meanwhile was trying to walk while stringing a crossbow, not with much success either, when a couple voices shouted his name.

“Thoth! Thoth!” they yelled, sounding like an echo.

Looking in the direction of this, the minotaur spotted two colleagues from the library – Himsayana and Hugrayuga, twin boar-headed daemons who could only be distinguished from each other because one of them wore a metacarpal bone through the septum of his nose. Which one did this however was never exactly clear.

“Yana! Yuga!” replied Thoth warmly. “I thought you were staying with your family in Mumbai this year.” Both the other daemons shook their heads before the one with the metacarpal piercing responded.

“We were. A typical Raksasas family affair. Arguments over who would get to fling the humans in front of the juggernaut and nonsense like that. Always exhausting... every family get together. This year we planned ahead though by ‘accidentally’ booking our return jumps early.”

Here the other twin jumped in with a “We blamed it on the teleportation company,” before the first one continued.

“Anyways, hopefully your unholiday went better than ours.” Thoth’s laughter at this idea caused him to forget about the weapon he was carrying and the end of it struck the ground before he cursed and righted it.

“Sorry to disappoint,” he replied, “But I’ve probably got it as bad as you. Dear old dad and I locked horns once again as per the annual tradition. Broke some of mom’s furniture too.”

Asmoe had been quietly eavesdropping on Thoth's conversation with his colleagues so when the lull that now ensued happened, he was poised to strike. Putting his arm around the minotaur, he directed his words to the two twins.

"Well, tonight's as good a night as any to take your anger out on others. Remember and revenge, as I always say. Even if this means you have to resort to punishing someone who's completely blameless. It's unhealthy to harbor your anger after all." Yana and Yuga nodded appreciatively as Thoth frowned in mock embarrassment.

"You remember Asmoe of course. Don't mind him. He's currently suffering from a bout of optimism."

As handshakes and greetings were being exchanged between the twins and Asmoe's group (while both kept marching) a wave of shouts was coming from their bacchanal comrades far in front of them. The Sarcophagi Alliance demons had been spotted and the news of this rippled through the sea of rowdy fiends. All sorts of distortions were perpetuated as the battle commenced and outbursts from the front were garbled from one daemon to the next – these running the gamut from "More violins! More violins!" to "Slither oats and decaffeinate them all!"

Because the encounter had inadvertently occurred in a particularly narrow intersection between a complex of high-rises, only the demons in the front lines got to participate in the melee and, after half an hour of standing around and peering over other demons heads, Asmoe and his fiends were getting fed up with the situation.

"I'm ready to bash my own brains in," growled Monger.

"We could push east and try to flank them," offered Hades as he looked around for support. This failed to convince anyone though and it fell to Thoth to issue a brief critical evaluation.

"East. West. These streets are crammed in all directions. Except backwards. And then we'd have to go all the way down the block and back around. By ourselves." The prospect of the seven of them trying to open a second front against

the Sarcophagi Alliance masses didn't appeal to any of them however, even the ever eager Monger.

"We could try recruiting?" suggested one of the Raksasas twins diplomatically.

"In this chaos?" retorted Thoth incredulously, an open hand waving around as his crossbow pointed towards the dark sky above. The futility of trying to organize a raid party impressed itself on everyone and for a moment they were all silent – the sounds of distant strife and howling barely audible above the white noise of the crowd. Asmoe, whose wrinkled forehead was betraying the intensity of the private thoughts he was currently preoccupied with, suddenly spoke up.

"I'm going to go for it," he said to himself, a grim determination in his voice.

"What!?" exclaimed Thoth, leaning in close. Asmoe's focus dissolved as his attention shifted to acknowledge the minotaur.

"No, not that," he whispered discretely to his pal. "Malice."

Thoth's concern turned to confusion. "Huh?" he blurted.

"She said she'd be spending New Year's in one of the neutral sectors," explained Asmoe. "I'm going to see her."

Well that's only slightly less crazy, thought Thoth, but he didn't say it. He knew how hopeless his pal was here.

"Fly with wings of avarice," he offered with a sigh.

Asmoe held a finger up as if he was going to wag it at Thoth but hesitated, before smiling and swiftly departing. The other members of the group watched him plunge into the daemons behind them before turning towards Thoth. With a resigned look on his face, the minotaur motioned with a sweeping hand across his throat. Apparently the first casualty among them tonight was going to be a bloodless one.

He spent about ten minutes pushing through surly ranks of tightly packed Zero Sum daemons before the crowd began to thin out. An accomplishment in its own right and, moving through the relatively spacious rearguard of idle loitering devils now, he wondered whether he should even bother coming back. Asmoe stowed that question away in the meantime though as he proceeded into the growing sparseness of the infernal city streets. Passing through the aftermath of his own association's march first, Asmoe waded through the blackened husks of burning vehicles and ravaged public property and ecstatically scattered carrion. Regarding the latter of these, clouds of flesh-eating locust had descended on them and the drone of their fluttering wings filled the air with a noise like a raging canyon river. They were all busily feasting away on the smorgasbord of corpses laid out for them but Asmoe couldn't help feeling a little trepidation at being surrounded by so many dead-eyed carnivorous insects. The responsive bristling of their wings and the buzz of the creatures as he skirted clusters of them was enough to make his mouth go a little dry, although he tried to poke fun at himself for reacting like this.

Looking at some gremlins scavenging in the area unperturbed bolstered his courage here and soon enough he'd turned down a street where the Zero Sum Unionists hadn't rampaged through. Self-conscious about his chessboard tunic suddenly, he quickly stripped it off in favor of his undershirt and stuffed it in the small duffle-bag that'd been bouncing behind him all day – not that the members of any other association wouldn't attack him anyways outside the neutral sector but this made him slightly less conspicuous at least. That taken care of, he now focused his mind on finding Malice. She said she'd be spending the evening at a cocktail lounge near the Cthulhu Shopping Plaza. Good. That was close by. What was the name of the place though? P something. Poison? No... Pogrom. Now his memory was working again. Pogrom, an upscale establishment for sophisticated depravity. Hopefully it had a sign outside. He was now in the vicinity of the Cthulhu building, a diabolical tentacle-faced monster logo adorning this with the initials CSP beneath, briskly looking around for the place he'd find Malice, when he came across a gang of four bored gargoyles camped out on a bench in an assortment of poses. Asmoe didn't pay any attention to them at first but they all quickly focused on him and their leader stood up and approached.

"You lost pal?" asked the gargoyle in the falsely congenial tone shared by hustlers and thugs everywhere.

Without a single thought, Asmoe shot back with a “Pious off!” that was forceful enough to stun the alpha gargoyle. Then, as his would-be intimidator was still stymied by this unexpected response, Asmoe’s eyes caught sight of a recessed stairwell nestled among some high-end stores that led down to a pair of macabre doors. That’s got to be it, he thought.

Knowing better than to give the gargoyles another glance, Asmoe marched straight over to this and, after noisily descending the dozen or so steps awaiting him, opened the doors and vanished inside.

Of course there’d be a maître d’ there. But he’d found it. Pogrom.

“Excuse me sir but you seem to have erred in your selection of doors,” asserted the maître d’ stiffly. “I suspect you’re looking for a much more... plebeian venue. Perhaps one with a communal trough?”

Noting the insult, Asmoe contrived to pass himself off as a member of the daemonic upper-class. “By gore!” he thundered, inadvertently reverting to a British accent. “I know where I bloody well am! And if you think I’ll be spoken to like this just because I happen to be in my street clothes, you’ve got another thing coming you servile wretch!”

Asmoe endeavored to maintain a stern expression as he held his breath and waited to see whether this display of arrogant indignation would work – and despite a lingering suspicion evident in the corner of his eyes, the maître d’ eventually apologized.

“My sincerest regrets sir,” he began, oozing insincerity. “We’ve had a number of uncouth individuals barge in here tonight and I made an unfortunate assumption.”

Keeping in character, and enjoying it, Asmoe replied with an “I don’t care about your problems,” before looking around the room for Malice.

“Can I help you?” asked the maître d’ after a long stress-laden exhale.

Finding Malice finally, Asmoe responded with a “No” and began advancing towards her.

As he brushed past a number of well-dressed daemons, many of whom gave him sneering looks, these all chipped away pieces of his confidence. By the time he’d reached Malice he was starting to feel genuinely unsure about the whole thing and only barely refrained from just turning around and leaving.

Approaching from her blind side, Asmoe walked up next to her and opened with an underwhelming “Hey.” Still in the British accent too. Surprised, she’d shifted her gaze from a conversation with numerous daemons that she’d been following and gave him a puzzled look.

“Asmodeus? What are you doing here... in those... and what’s wrong with your voice?” Asmoe cleared his throat loudly and then softer, embarrassed by the attention he got from the room.

“Umm... that was... uh... never mind,” he said, fumbling for what to say. “The point is I’m here. And the reason is so that I’d get to see you. Because that’s why I came. Umm... listen. What would you think about joining me for New Year’s? I’ve got some sinister things planned.” As Asmoe smiled intensely at her, Malice Necrobias glanced around the room with an uncharacteristic slippage of composure.

“I’m ahhh... with some fiends here Asmoe,” she at last managed to say.

“Great. Great,” he responded. “Bring em along. The more the massacre.” Then he realized that the only “thing” he had planned was the zeppelin trip and he didn’t have any extra reservations for that. Holy water. Well, too late now. Right when Malice was about to respond though a female daemon with strong tigress-features interrupted.

“Malice! Guess what!?! Typhonus says he can get us into Belial’s museum party. The Belial!” Malice visibly brightened at the news before the awkwardness of her current predicament reasserted itself.

“Asmoe...” she said, her voice hesitant. Now another of her companions came barging over – a succubus with a tower of blue elaborately curled hair and a radiant red evening dress the same hue as the underside of flayed skin.

“Darling! Come on! Come on! We’ve got to hurry!” urged the succubus as she grabbed Malice by the arm and began to lead her away.

Defeated by circumstance, Asmoe stood and watched as Malice looked back at him once and then allowed herself to be carried off. He kept staring until she disappeared into a hallway in the rear of Pogrom’s main room but when she was gone he slowly turned around and shuffled back in the direction he came in. He paused for a moment however as he found himself standing next to a table of wildly laughing devils. A party of both sexes was sitting around and falling over each other in hilarity after having hijacked another séance using an interdimensional broadcasting device that looked distinctly like a crystal ball.

This was something many daemons did for fun – pretend to be the humans that Earth’s naïve spiritualists were trying to contact and then dispense malignant advice and misinformation. It was basically the daemonic version of a prank phone call. Asmoe however was in no mood for games anymore. He lurched forward a few more steps, leaving the happy table behind, before leaning against a Doric style support column. He wasn’t alone in his depression for long however.

“Well?” asked a voice beside him but he didn’t turn his head.

Instead he replied, “I made a mistake,” and sighed.

“You most certainly did,” seethed the voice and now Asmoe made an effort to look at them. It was the maître d’ again. “I see you’ve recovered from that awful British accent,” they said irritably.

“About that...” replied Asmoe but he was cut off.

“Get out,” snarled the maître d’ with the full wrath of a daemon who’d been fooled by someone they despised as utterly beneath them. Asmoe didn’t bother arguing though. Bitterly he went over and pulled the front door open, returning to the cold night waiting outside.

As he was ascending the steps he remembered his earlier run in with the gargoyles and so he peered over the top of the staircase warily. The immediate area were vacant though except for a burning tire that was rolling past. Huh, he thought to himself. Probably went looking for someone else to maul. Walking out into the street, Asmoe found himself unclear on what he wanted to do. The failure with Malice had ruined his good mood but going home now would only stamp and seal a miserable evening. What he really wanted was an outlet for his frustration. Something, or preferably someone, he could vent his anger on. That decided it. He was going back to the Zero Sum mob to share in the mayhem.

Picking up his pace, he noted an advertisement in passing – a large glass-encased poster on the side of a building with a photo-shopped picture of the perfect little daemon house. Ill Star Home Security: the latest in land mines and sentry turrets for all your suburban domestic needs. The glass encasing was shattered though and someone who didn't really understand the concept of irony would've probably made a note of the irony here. The ad however made him think of his parent's house and, finally, of his millipede who was still with them. Last time he'd called his Ma he'd asked her if she could drive up and drop his pet off but she'd given him an endless litany of excuses. Asmoe suspected that she actually just wanted to keep Chitters for herself. He was almost certainly going to have to go there and pick the millipede up in daemon.

Seconds later, his thoughts were beginning to mull over some issues at work when he realized he was being followed. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the gargoyles from before hadn't gone looking for other prey. They must've been hiding somewhere when he exited Pogrom. Asmoe stopped and turned to face them, his left hand slowly reaching behind him to rummage through his duffle-bag. They approached with leering faces and surrounded him in a menacing half circle but Asmoe maintained his focus on their leader. Cut off the head and the body will fall. Irritated by the defiant look he was getting from his intended victim, the alpha gargoyle did his best to be his most intimidating.

"I knew they'd boot you out of there," he said. "And now you're gonna pay me back for that pious business earlier."

Thinking quickly, Asmoe replied, “Yeah I got something for you,” as he whipped out the acid sprayer he’d won that night.

Instead of sending a stream of corrosive liquid into the face in front of him though, the cheap disposable device malfunctioned and Asmoe found himself staring at four laughing gargoyles after a brief pause. But they’d also let their guards down. Rushing towards the alpha then, Asmoe leaped toward him and smashed the acid spray device into his face. Unlike the previous attempt, this had the intended effect, and the acid contained in the disposable sprayer splashed outwards as its casing shattered against the gargoyle’s forehead. Asmoe of course burnt his hand in the attack but, as he was frantically wiping it off on some plastic wrapping that’d been lying nearby in the gutter, his pain was diminished by the screams of the alpha gargoyle rolling around in agony.

Asmoe had gotten him good. The other gargoyles meanwhile were at a predictable loss given the state of their leader and they didn’t try to chase him as Asmoe started to jog away. After a few yards of running he realized it’d be a bad idea to show up looking like he was and, opening his duffle-bag while barely slowing down, Asmoe pulled out his Zero Sum tunic and messily put it on.

The locusts had stripped the bodies of their flesh. The corpses he’d cautiously passed earlier were now red racks of bone and the locusts themselves were gone. All the better. It wasn’t long either until he found himself at the place where The Zero Sum Union and The Sarcophagi Alliance had been having it out, but the area was now deserted – only the many broken weapons and blood stains left behind indicated that anything had transpired there earlier. He could see other daemons streaming by in the distance down the numerous streets visible to him but none were dressed in the old black and white.

Figuring they had to be somewhere nearby, Asmoe once more fell into a run. He looked in both directions at every intersection he came to and eventually this paid off – to the east down one of them he saw a congregation wearing his association’s colors. His disappointment grew as he got closer however when it became apparent that all the fighting was over. At least he’d been able to give it to that gargoyle, he thought consolingly. Now where were his fiends? Entering the crowd, Asmoe looked for any sign of his companions but in the chaos it was hard to do a proper search.

Having driven The Sarcophagi Alliance away, the Zero Sum Unionists were celebrating this by once more indulging in debauched revelry. Kegs of blood were pouring out their voraciously-sought-after beverage and human limbs were being roasted over great bonfires from spears as daemons everywhere continued to enjoy the last couple hours of the old year. As Asmoe disentangled himself from the crumpled body of a drunken centaur he'd stumbled over, he took a moment to observe some daemons engaging in a spirited round of bobbing for homunculi. This was like bobbing for apples except instead of fruit suspended in water, the daemons were dunking their heads into a vat full of blood and trying to sink their teeth into tiny pale humanoid beings that were thrashing around inside. Here a fellow cambion was successful and pulling his head out of the blood filled vat suddenly, he proudly showed off the squirming figure clenched between his teeth. No more than a foot tall, the homunculi screamed in its feeble pipsqueak way and all the other daemons gathered around the vat roared with enjoyment. Asmoe even managed a smile himself.

"Asmoe!" It was Flesher. Sharp-eyed Flesher. And sure enough, the rest were with him too. As Asmoe rejoined his companions, they all acknowledged his arrival; each according to the degree of familiarity. Thoth, being his best fiend, was the only one to tinge his pleasantries with sarcasm.

"I was sure you were a goner there," he stated with an air of comic disappointment. Asmoe shrugged.

"Some things are worse than death," he replied. "Life for one."

Here Asmoe was playing his obvious failure up for sympathy but Thoth just clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good to see you back among the damned," said the minotaur cheerfully. Then he passed Asmoe an open bottle of blood to take a swig from. Meanwhile, an intoxicated Hades was trying to carry on a conversation with the two twins.

"Hug-Ra-Yug-Ah?" he asked as he swayed side to side and tried not to burn himself with the cigarette in his hand. The twin with the bone piercing responded.

“Hue-Gra-Yoo-Ga. And he’s Yuga, I’m Yana.” Thoth overheard this and was compelled to speak up.

“Wait,” he interjected. “I thought it was the other way around.” Yana shook his head.

“No, I’m pretty sure I’m Yana,” said the boar-headed daemon. “Ninety percent sure at least.” After thinking to himself for a moment, Thoth dredged up a discrepancy that needed addressing.

“But I distinctly remember him,” and here he pointed at the twin without the bone piercing in his nose, “Saying the other week that Yuga had... well... had covered for me during my absence. Which would make him Yana.” The real Yana puffed his cheeks and exhaled as he tried to remain patient.

“No Thoth. That was me. I said that to you.” Thoth was bewildered.

“But he didn’t have a septum piercing! You do.” Yana smirked and pulled the metacarpus out of his nose and handed it to Yuga – who inserted it in his.

“We both wear it,” declared Yana. Thoth tugged at his beard and gritted his teeth for a moment.

“That’s so confusing,” said the minotaur. “I thought the whole point of it was so you could be distinguished. Why do you both wear it?” Here Yuga, the one who now had the bone in his nose, spoke.

“It’s a family heirloom. And we like to share.” At that, Asmoe let out a single sharp guffaw.

“Well... it makes sense,” he said apologetically to Thoth, who then responded by surrendering with an “I give up.” The group shared a laugh at Thoth’s resignation.

“I’m thinking about getting a septum piercing,” asserted Monger after a brief interval. “A ring probably. An ouroboros.” Heads nodded at the tastefulness of Monger’s choice. This was also how the conversation then proceeded for quite

some time – the group of fiends talking about random things while the night unraveled around them. At some point a few of them chipped in for a large tray of fried fingers from a street vendor and they all sat around munching on these and spitting out the finger nails while watching some tied up humans getting dunked into a sewer filled with abominations. The whole point was to terrorize the humans without losing them but, despite the daemons trying their best, their humans didn't always come up whole. It was all in good fun though.

Asmoe had finally recovered from his unpleasantness with Malice and was stripping the last meat off a fried finger when he felt someone bump into him. It was a ghoul and they didn't even look at him as they continued walking. Moron, thought Asmoe. He was tempted to get up and pick a fight with them too but the mood among his companions was really good so he resisted. Although probably some of them would like to join in. As he was thinking this however, his thoughts were interrupted by Hades chuckling drunkenly.

“What?” asked Asmoe. Hades fixed him with a crooked smile and confided,

“That ghoul over there's picking everyone's pockets.” Asmoe's lull instantly evaporated.

“What!” he said again as he followed Hades' pointing finger. Sure enough, it was the ghoul who'd just bumped into him. Reaching down to open his bag, Asmoe found his suspicions confirmed. It was already opened and the para-spectral lens was missing. Furiously zipping the bag shut, he jumped up. Around him the other daemons all became alert.

“What is it?” asked Flesher.

“I just got robbed!” seethed Asmoe. “That priest of a ghoul over there! He's got my lens.” Only Thoth understood what he meant by this but Flesher and Monger were the ones ready to aid in vengeance.

“Let's get him!” rumbled Monger enthusiastically and the look in Asmoe's eyes said “Agreed.” The three of them then began to chase down the thief but they'd neglected to disguise their intentions. With the uncanny heightened senses of a professional prowler, the pickpocket noticed them coming and, seeing that

he'd been made, he took off sprinting. A few seconds behind, his three pursuers followed.

The chase unfolded across the downtown New York Nether in a clattering slipshod way. It didn't help that the streets were littered with debris and throngs of daemons but both the hunters and the hunted seemed to be evenly impaired at least. Monger though, despite being by far the strongest of them all, didn't have the stamina of the others and he began to fall behind fairly shortly. Asmoe failed to notice this until the giant had long disappeared but he was too focused and pumped with adrenaline to give it much thought. Meanwhile Flesher was doing a good job of keeping up with him and, as they watched the pickpocket plunge into a crowd of intoxicated daemons up ahead, he threw out a fast comment to the elf.

"And I'd already ran around enough for tonight!" complained Asmoe huffing. Flesher then responded in a more pertinent fashion.

"You take the one side and I'll take the other!" Asmoe nodded at this and they split up; Flesher running left and him veering right. It was a smart decision. With the two daemons flanking the crowd, the pickpocket was forced to push ahead and this was impeded by the many revelers he found blocking his way. Asmoe and Flesher may have been taking much longer paths but this was cancelled out by the hurdles that the pickpocket had to deal with. Suddenly however the air in the vicinity grew very chill and a blackness seemed to spread across the faces of the nearby buildings. Asmoe, Flesher, and the thief were among the last to acknowledge its presence but eventually they too stopped and gazed at the approaching Ophanim. That is to say, one of the great fiery wheels described by the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel.

Like other forms of angelic being, some of their number had fallen too and these now roamed the skies of Hell in a solitary manner analogous to the huge manta rays and basking sharks of Earth's oceans. The aura of utter darkness around them was itself also caused by their brightness – just as the intensity of a nuclear explosion overwhelms the other light sources of its own surroundings. But for the best description of them available, one would have to turn to Machiavelli's Hierarchical Classification of Daemons – an essay written during the author's damnation.

“Ophanim are hive minds, the union of multiple daemons within a single celestial machine. They are immensely powerful yet, due to their consciousness being dispersed across various dimensions at once, they rarely focus their attention on any person or thing for very long. The Burning Wheels of the Old Testament. Imagine an artificial intelligence with multiple personality disorder or an inhuman god afflicted with primordial madness. Daemons scatter before them but they more often than not just wander the wastelands of Hell preoccupied with their unfathomable inner states.”

And as Machiavelli said, the daemons confronted with the presence of this Ophanim began to slink away as a group. It was not interested in them however. While rarely encountered in Hell’s cities, apparently it was merely passing through and hadn’t cared to go around the New York Nether.

When the Ophanim had gone on its way, all the daemons it’d instantly afflicted with anxiety gradually resumed their merriment. Asmoe and Flesher of course didn’t share in this and their awe turned to fear at the prospect of losing their prey. The thief had been just as stunned as everyone else though and they saw him only then recovering his wits. Partly this was caused by him making eye contact with Asmoe across the crowd and, seeing one of his pursuers, he once more broke into a sprint. They followed close behind however and the three of them melded into an equilaterally triangular formation as they then ran through a corpse strewn alley. Coming out of this, Asmoe happened to be looking the wrong way though when a gargoyle swooped down and tackled him.

Surprised, he was easily knocked over, but he soon found himself rolling around on the ground fiercely with his attacker. One of the gargoyles from earlier. Then a second and third descended on him and he was in real trouble all of a sudden. He clawed and punched and kicked but he was no match for so many. Luckily he wasn’t alone. Flesher had noted the assault and, turning back from the chase, came in swinging with knives in each hand. He cut up the gargoyles pretty good too before they retreated a bit to regroup.

“Go on!” said the ferociously grim elf to Asmoe. “I’ll take care of these roof ornaments!”

Alright Flesher! thought Asmoe as he scrambled to his feet but there was no time for compliments. Instead he bolted in the direction the pickpocket had vanished and quickly came to an intersection. Fortunately the thief had only taken a single turn and Asmoe immediately saw him running about a block or two ahead. You're not getting away that easily! Asmoe launched himself forward with a renewed sense of determination and after a few minutes he'd whittled the thief's lead to only a couple yards. Realizing that they were being gained on, the ghoulish pickpocket made a quick calculation and ran into a nearby dance club where the bouncer was too busy with some flirtatious succubae to notice. Asmoe was about to follow him through the door too but then he came to an ugly halt.

Taking a couple skidding steps before his momentum dissipated, a heavily breathing Asmoe walked over to a vending machine which'd caught his attention. He now fumbled around in his wallet for a second before putting in a fifty dollar bill with the face of Mammon on it. When the machine had absorbed the money it paused for a second before whirring and depositing one of its items in the accessible cavity below. There Asmoe reached in and pulled out a pistol, which he cocked once before putting it in his belt and jogging into the dance club.

Inside, a hard eighties-style electro beat was pulsing through the wildly strobing room. Packed with daemons, Asmoe wasn't going to have an easy time of finding his prey but he instinctively stayed close to the doors (so that the thief couldn't slip out past him) and surveyed the place. In a pervasive green light the twisted faces and limbs of daemons moving to the ecstatic rhythm almost seemed suspended in time for a moment, but this was only a fleeting crescendo in the bass and time was rapidly restored to a frenzy again. Red, blue, yellow, orange – these and other colors cycled one after the other with no discernible pattern as Asmoe tried to focus on his mission. There was plenty of ambrosia in use however and he even saw some daemons snorting it off each other in the middle of the dance floor. On the other side of these incidentally he found who he was searching for. The thief didn't seem to have any awareness of where Asmoe was and he'd taken a seat at a table where he kept his face turned away, trying to be inconspicuous. Too bad for him he'd failed.

Pushing through the crowded and seizing yellow room, Asmoe began to head towards the pickpocket. On his way there, he had to reach out a violet arm to push away a violet sylph that'd mistaken him for a potential dance partner and then

navigate his way around the hulking orange back of an ogre who rapidly turned blue. As such, he was soon standing over the thief, and he tapped one of his now red fingers on the thief's red shoulder. Their face shifted to a yellow as it hesitantly turned around and looked up at him with horror. The thief tried to yell something at Asmoe, probably a plea of some kind, but Asmoe couldn't hear him. Instead he pointed his new gun at the ghoul and started to unload it.

Eight instantaneous bullets flew out of the starburst of eight muzzle flashes as the ghoul knocked over chairs and fell to the floor with rivulets of blood pouring out of them. Blue blood, orange blood; whatever the strobing lights decided. The music blaring through the club ensured that the ghoul would have an exhilarating high energy accompaniment to his bleeding out in any case and no one interfered as Asmoe crouched down to get his lens back. Suffering from the onset of shock, the ghoul could do nothing but stare at him with wide eyes as Asmoe reached over and fished around in his numerous jacket pockets – eventually retrieving what he sought. Asmoe then smirked at the ghoul and stood up, holding the lens high in triumph. The other daemons understood this. He'd taken something he'd wanted and, without knowing the context of the situation, they nevertheless all approved of it. They too liked to take whatever they wanted. He got claps on the back and smiles as he exited the dance club, all of which was bathed in a bruised rainbow of flashing lights and frantically pounding cybernetic thunder.

Unable to be reloaded by design, Asmoe tossed away the vending machine handgun as soon as he exited the dance club. He'd made every bullet count though. Succumbing to a relaxed pace for a second, Asmoe then remembered Flesher and he staggered into a run once more. When he'd returned to the spot where he'd left the elf behind however, he discovered it deserted and devoid of any clues which might've indicated what'd happened.

At a loss for a moment, Asmoe went to check the time on his phone. It was 10:42. Eucharist! The zeppelin would be taking off at eleven. Rapidly deploying his thumbs, Asmoe shot off a hasty text message to Thoth: [wher u at?] He stared at the screen waiting for a reply but this only came after he finally looked away. With a notifying scream and vibration, the glowing display panel on Asmoe's phone blinked and a response popped up: [the loading terminal. hurry up] Could he make it? He immediately hit Thoth with a follow-up question: [and flesher?] After a few seconds that elicited: [??? not wigh u?]

Bibles! Well, he couldn't go looking for him: there simply wasn't enough time. Hopefully Flesher would make it on his own – if not, Asmoe would have to find a way to pay him back. By now Asmoe was thoroughly exhausted but he hurried as fast as he could in the general direction of the loading terminal. The streets had swollen to maximum capacity too so he had to constantly search ahead for paths in the masses of daemons as he ran to make the zeppelin. Recklessly, he bounded over the fence of a government operated reaping center as a tentacled security guard harangued him – since eighty percent of humans in the developed world die in hospitals, the nether real estate that corresponds to these all have containment facilities that are operated by their local infernal governments for the harvesting of said humans. Asmoe risked getting shot by trespassing like he was but on this occasion luck was with him and none of the bullets unleashed his way managed to tag their target.

Pumping his arms furiously, almost as if he was trying to pump himself forward through the air, Asmoe next had to cope with stumbling into the middle of a game of dentistry. A sizable group of juvenile daemons was chasing a few of their weaker members with the intention of pulling out their teeth by hand – collecting teeth in this way being a popular youth pastime. Similar in spirit to what daemons did with human “rabbits” although with the added element of seeing who could build the biggest and best collections. Asmoe collided with a couple of the participants as he plunged through their game and in retaliation many of the juvenile daemons threw garbage and rocks at him. Still he pushed forward. He was almost at the terminal now but it was going to be close – when a scream from his vibrating phone let him know he had another text message he didn't even try to look at it. Straining to the limits of exertion, Asmoe at last appeared around a corner and in view of the zeppelin terminal. And the zeppelin itself. Unfortunately he was too late – the airship had already taken off.

“Come on!” he yelled out in frustration as he found himself staring at the underside of an airship slowly rising above him. It was maybe only ten or fifteen feet over his head but there was nothing he could do. Unless... as Asmoe's eyes swept the area for a building he could climb and leap on to the zeppelin from, a familiar face appeared over the railing at the rear of the ship.

“We waited to the last second!” shouted Thoth.

“Never mind that!” hollered Asmoe. “Can you do anything?”

Thoth looked around in response to this with a furrowed brow until disappearing for a moment. Asmoe was going to yell at him for that but then the minotaur appeared with a bundle of mooring rope.

“Here!” he shouted, throwing a section of it overboard.

The rope unravelled in the air but at least twenty feet of it hit the ground with a thud. No knots in it for hand-holds or nothing – just a rope. This was no time to be picky though. Grabbing the rope with both hands and curling a leg around it for support, Asmoe was immediately lifted into the air. For a second he seized up but, after a deep breath, he began to climb the rope in a strained inchworm-like manner. Asmoe didn’t exactly practice this sort of thing very often and he wasn’t a paragon of physical fitness either. Nevertheless he continued to make progress as he dangled in the sky – only narrowly avoiding some street lamps and building roofs that the zeppelin was passing over. Soon he’d even made it to the hull and pushing against this with his feet he clambered his way up. As it turned out however he wasn’t the only one on the outside of the ship. Suddenly Asmoe realized there was a gremlin clinging to the zeppelin right beside him.

“Don’t tell anyone or I’ll gut you,” threatened the deranged-looking gremlin and Asmoe simply stared at them for a moment before continuing on his way.

None of my business, he thought. At the bottom of the outside railing now, a thick pelted arm extended an open hand to him and Asmoe clasped it by the forearm, his own forearm being grabbed in return. Thoth helped pull him up and together the two fiends fell onto the deck as some of the other passengers on the zeppelin eyed them with curiosity.

“What’d you do?” asked Thoth as he tried to catch his breath. “Eat him?”

Meaning the thief. Asmoe chuckled as he hyperventilated and the combination of these prevented him from making a witty comeback. Also he couldn’t think of anything. As both the fiends sat grinning at each other while

Asmoe recovered, a grotesque snapping-turtle like monstrosity in a long goblin-skin coat and an admiral's hat came stumbling over drunk.

“See here! I'm the captain of this ship! And that... was a nice little stunt. Ha! I always enjoy a good dalliance with the prospect of serious injury. Well done my lad!”

Seconds after the captain had said this, the sound of a satellite dish being crushed by the hull of the zeppelin rang out in an awful way.

“Excuse me,” hiccupped the captain wearily. “I should probably go do pilot things.” To his credit, he only stopped once on the way to the steering wheel and that was to get his drink refilled.

The party was in full swing. Which is to say, daemons were literally swinging from the chandeliers. And everyone had made it. After Asmoe received a playful punch from Monger in the shoulder, his already broad smile threatened to detach his skull from his lower jaw as he caught sight of Flesher.

“This elf!” he said loudly. “You all should have seen him!”

The rest of the group however didn't have to take Asmoe's word for it – Flesher had returned with a pair of severed gargoyle hands strung around his neck like a set of boxing gloves. Which he was still wearing. As the group of fiends carried on with their evening now, drinking and talking loudly with cheerful abandon, they also proceeded to mingle with some of the other passengers. Thoth of course spent much of his attention on keenly eyeing the many villainesses in attendance that night. Most of them had come with their own groups of he-daemons but here and there Thoth saw some he suspected were unattached.

Surprisingly though it was Hades who ended up bringing over a group of vivacious girl daemons. Fearlessly drunk, he'd struck up a conversation with one of their members and things had developed amicably from there. Learning that he was with a group of unattached males, they'd been intrigued enough to come over and meet Asmoe and his other fiends. As it so happened, Asmoe himself was engaged in a conversation with Flesher when they arrived and at first he didn't notice them.

“So I’ve come up with this new technique I want to try out,” he was saying. “Basically you make two incisions on either side of your captive’s torso and then you reach in with both hands to squeeze their lungs. The sensation of being unable to breath, coupled with the pain of having my arms inserted in their wounds... yeah... you better believe I’ll be able to extract some quick confessions with that one.” As an amateur torturer himself, Flesher was sincerely impressed by Asmoe’s idea.

“That sounds awesome,” he said before drawing Asmoe’s attention to the female daemons who’d showed up by pointing with his thumb. Seeing them now, Asmoe offered a complimentary “Wow” as a greeting but Thoth moved in fast to open the conversation.

“And how’re you heartbreakers doin’ tonight?” asked the minotaur suavely. An outgoing harpy with a long garland of kobold skulls was barely able to stand as she fielded the question.

“As many as we can find!” she shrieked while laughing at her own non-sequitur. The joke didn’t quite work but she was too drunk to care. The other girl fiends were mostly in the same state too.

“I need meat!” said a female doppelgänger as her companions erupted in hysterics.

“Daughters of slaughter!” said another drunk she-devil to a fiend as they exchanged a jubilant fist bump.

Asmoe’s eyes widened in mirth and Thoth couldn’t help letting out an appreciative “Uh oh!” It was going to be tough keeping up with these party vixens. Oddly enough none of the male daemons seemed to mind.

Things proceeded very well from there. As midnight neared, all of Asmoe’s fiends had paired off with female daemons and the couples slow-danced or made out with each other according to their individual whims. Ending up with a beautiful and petite serpent-skinned she-devil named Lascivia, Asmoe was feeling quite

pleased with himself as the two of them sat at the bar and flirted in an intimate tête-à-tête.

“You’ve got smooth hands,” he said as he touched hers. She smiled at him, searching his face, before replying.

“I heard you had quite an adventure earlier.” Asmoe shrugged.

“Just some thief,” he said in a bragging tone. “Had to teach him a lesson for stealing a prize I’d won today.” Curious, Lascivia pressed to know more.

“What?” she asked. Asmoe smiled slyly.

“A para-spectral lens,” he confided.

“You got a spy lens?” She was impressed.

“You want to see it?” offered Asmoe with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Lascivia said, biting her lip.

Asmoe dutifully took it out of his duffle-bag and handed it to her, watching as Lascivia peered through the lens in various directions. As she was doing this however an incubus announcer suddenly appeared at the railing of the mezzanine that overlooked the open area where the tables and dance floor were.

“Attention everyone!” shouted the incubus. “Five minutes until the new year begins! We’ll be carting out the blood champagne any moment now and there’ll be a ten second countdown broadcast over the loudspeakers! Just a fiendly reminder! Also, thank you for choosing Sulfur Skies Airlines for your New Year’s Celebration!”

A few of the roughly four-hundred daemons in attendance applauded at the end of this but it quickly died down as everyone focused on getting some blood champagne to toast with. Being at the bar, Asmoe was in a prime position to raid the first cart that came out and returning to his stool next to Lascivia, he handed her one of the two glasses he’d carried away. She in turn gave him back the lens she’d been looking at and he casually stuffed this into his bag without looking.

“To chaos,” he said, lifting his glass. Lascivia grinned but shook her head.

“You have to wait,” she giggled.

Asmoe made a face that conveyed his reluctant acquiescence and complied. The room was buzzing but they didn’t talk much then – both of them mostly just admiring the other as the intoxication of the moment rushed through them. They were even slightly startled when the room and loudspeakers erupted into a countdown.

TEN! Here it was. He raised his glass and she mirrored him. NINE! Another year in an eternity of years. EIGHT! He’d managed to get through it unscathed. Except for his horns but those were close to growing out. SEVEN! He briefly thought about Malice and then banished her from his mind. SIX! Bellicoso, Sneer, Ereshkigal even. Nothing could stop him. FIVE! Hell was his for the taking and anyone who got in his way would regret it. FOUR! They were all yelling the numbers loudly and the room resonated with a ravenous energy. THREE! He spilled a little bit of the blood champagne on his sleeve but he didn’t care. TWO! He looked around him and saw Thoth and Flesher and Monger and the twins all just as infernally pleased with things as he was. ONE! Asmoe smiled at Lascivia. He knew she was hungry for him. HAPPY NEW YEAR! They both shouted this before finally clinking their glasses and draining these in long single gulps. Then Asmoe and Lascivia leaned in close and sank their fangs into each other’s necks.

Chapter Seven

Slouched over, Asmoe was sitting by himself on one of the sofas against the wall with his elbows resting on his knees and his head in his hands. He'd staked out a corner spot by a wide, multistory rectangular window, and he was staring at the nocturnal cityscape of the Washington D.C. Nether as hundreds of floating lanterns were drifting into the darkened sky. These were made from the rinds of human corpses, the empty skins upside-down with their air-filled limbs splayed out from the candles inflating them, candles set in place under their gaping neck-holes using wire frame mesh. Because this was all happening on the other side of the window though, the silence of the outer world made it seem as if it could be infinitely far away. Inside the spacious Mendax V. Opprobrious Center for Acrimony meanwhile, a sociable crowd of professionally attired daemons were mingling with each other as they waited for the next lecture of the torture symposium to begin. If he didn't feel so drained he certainly would've joined them (getting to attend the invite-only event after all was a privilege he'd earned from his exceptional performance that year) but his train ride in earlier had gotten delayed for several hours due to a terrorist attack and it'd soured his mood. He just didn't feel like schmoozing and networking at the moment.

In fact, he'd begun thinking about returning to his hotel room when a tall devil in a slick double-breasted suit approached the window and stood next to him. The daemon didn't say anything to Asmoe at first and instead he gazed far off into the distance while drinking a blood cocktail with an assured connoisseur's poise.

“It’s marvelous isn’t it?” said the devil finally, his eyes still searching beyond the window.

“It’s a whimsical feat of savagery I guess,” replied Asmoe in a guarded tone. The other daemon now looked at him and shook their head.

“No, not the lanterns. The city,” they clarified. “All those lights and each one of them the transmutation of arduous human toil.” Here he paused momentarily to take another drink from his cocktail. “That’s all energy is. Violence channeled into practical results.” Asmoe had to admit it was an intriguing thought.

“I’ve never considered it that way before,” he confessed.

“Most daemons don’t,” remarked the devil, “But it’s my line of work so...” The other daemon shrugged to convey his meaning and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card. Asmoe dutifully sat up and reciprocated – the two daemons then took a moment to assess each other’s IDs.

On the card given to Asmoe it read: Voracious Harms; Profane Industries; Senior Vice President of Human Power Extraction. In other words, Asmoe was talking to a daemon of the same stature as his boss’ boss’ boss, and the sudden sense of being at a significant social disadvantage imposed itself on him. Fortunately Voracious Harms seemed pleased to find himself talking to a torturer (like being a fire fighter or a paramedic on Earth, being a torturer in Hell didn’t tend to pay all that great but it was a widely admired profession)

“A wonderful occupation yours,” said the devil respectfully. “It’s why we’re all here of course. Not that it isn’t hard work.” Asmoe nodded graciously.

“You might be surprised how many daemons think it’s all self-indulgence,” offered the torturer. “Sometimes I’ll even try to explain that we don’t inflict suffering just to gratify ourselves. I wish. If that were the case, I’d never complete any of my assignments.” There was a brief pause before the two daemons burst into laughter.

Voracious soon took a seat next to Asmoe and the pair of them began to carry on a lively conversation. Asmoe’s mood quickly picked up too – although if

asked, he wouldn't have admitted how flattered he really was. But it was more than that. They seemed to instantly hit it off. Eventually Voracious Harms even began to confide to Asmoe that he was wrestling with a challenge at work.

"I recently doubled the number of cajolers at our power plants but, despite all the additional stabbing and scourging they do, our productivity has only risen by a tiny fraction. We've reached the abyss of diminishing returns it seems." Hearing this, Asmoe realized he might be able to suggest a much better approach.

"I don't deal with humans much myself," he confessed to Voracious, "But I've observed that a lot of unnecessary problems arise from a tendency to treat them like daemons." This was a bold thing to say and the surprise on Voracious Harms' face confirmed it.

"What do you mean?" asked the intrigued devil. Asmoe scratched his head for a second and then thought for a moment as he concentrated on how best to explain it.

"Well, from what I've gathered," he began, "The trick to motivating humans resides more in the spectacle of violence than anything else. The demonic psyche in contrast suffers zero negative impact from witnessing atrocities, we simply enjoy them too much, but because of this we often fail to appreciate the effect they have on humans. While it's hard to compel a daemon to do anything except by constant physical coercion, the empathetic part of the human imagination is such that a single act of cruelty inflicted on the right individual in the herd can horrify all the rest. As such it tends to be more efficient than to torture the humans less overall, as counterintuitive as that sounds. You might want to consider putting monitors in the running wheels too with recordings of cruelty playing. Doing both those things I think you should be able to sustain your productivity levels and cut costs on the motivation side of things. Naturally you'll still have to make an example of the underperforming members of your livestock once in a while but that's inevitable. The important thing in any case is to make the humans feel a looming sense of personal jeopardy. That'll keep them scurrying if anything will."

"Torture them less!" murmured Voracious in delighted amazement. "What an outrageous sounding idea. It's practically benevolent. And yet... it make business sense. Which is the only sense that matters. Ha!"

Voracious Harms punctuated his laugh by heartily clapping Asmoe on the shoulder and the torturer bowed slightly, grateful his suggestion was so warmly received. "You're as sharp as I heard," said Voracious before finishing off the last of his cocktail.

"Sorry?" replied a confused Asmoe.

"Never mind," urged the devil, smiling. "You know what? I could really use a refill. Why don't you join me Asmoe?" The torturer was only too happy to.

"My pleasure," he said and the two of them got up from the sofa they'd been sitting on and began to descend a short expanse of stairs that surrounded the window viewing area.

Below, most of the demons gathered for the torture symposium were engaged in animated conversations and Asmoe overheard fragments of these as he pushed past. "I nearly stabbed the fiend next to me when he said 'Will you kindly whip my donkey sir?'" claimed an incubus with an erroneous memory. "It was your typical blood bacchanalia," commented an elf farther on. "You know, beast children at the udders of Ishtar." As Asmoe followed Voracious past a naiad in a silver evening dress who was ringed by a small crowd of listeners, he couldn't help slowing down to listen to her regale the group.

"Admittedly some of the exhibitions weren't anything special. Just swift decapitations and firing squads. One of the downsides of a devotion to historical accuracy I suppose. However, the way they handled the live re-creation of the razing of Carthage was sublime! Oh! The crucifixion fields!" Here she was momentarily interrupted by a large gelatinous monstrosity.

"What's it called again?" he asked.

"Safari of the Damned," replied the naiad with a gloating tenor in her voice. "Setesh and I got the all-inclusive package and the villa where we stayed had every imaginable amenity. It was a whole week of unscrupulous decadence – I'd wake up in the afternoon, get a facial at the gore spa facilities on site, then enjoy a long evening breakfast while watching one of the daily vivisection shows. If there's a

single evil bone in your body then please, you owe it to yourself to go. But plan ahead. The wait list's atrocious."

Momentarily spellbound by the naiad, Asmoe only belatedly realized that Voracious Harms was quickly disappearing ahead. The other daemon now was just a pair of horns in the distance. Asmoe made up for this though by aggressively marching forward, hoping that his new acquaintance wouldn't turn around before he'd closed the gap. As it was, Asmoe fell in behind Voracious right before the latter reached the refreshment table, so when the other daemon asked him what he wanted, Asmoe was able to answer as if he'd been following them the whole time.

"Whatever you're having," said the smiling torturer to the senior vice president. Nodding at this, Voracious then turned towards a waiting bartender with a chitinous exoskeleton and held up two fingers on his left hand like a peace sign.

"A couple of Otto's Blottos," he said and the bartender swiftly moved to fill his order. Approaching Otto the Man-Keg, a morbidly obese human suspended from a gallows-like contraption and numerous hooks in his flesh, the bartender deftly filled two glasses from the tap in Otto's navel before adding a dash of cyanide dilution to both and adorning them with a human ear for garnish. These were then deposited on the counter in front of Asmoe and Voracious, who each took one for themselves. Admiring the lurid orange beverage for a second, Asmoe made a show of how pleased he was with Voracious' selection and then clinked his glass with the one offered towards him by his counterpart.

"To greed," crooned Voracious. "By any means necessary." Asmoe grinned.

"To greed," he concurred. "Even when it's unnecessary."

After they'd both downed a head-tilting gulp of the beverage, they simultaneously turned to look in the same direction. Someone had been watching both of them. It was the Man-Keg surprisingly, wearing a strained but hopeful expression on his face. "It's good right?" he asked weakly.

After they witnessed the obese human get a vicious and liberal thrashing for his presumption, something greeted with soft applause from the nearby daemoniac patrons, Voracious took Asmoe on a tour of the room to meet some of his business

acquaintances. Asmoe was introduced to all manners of successful daemons but it soon became apparent during the course of these encounters that Voracious was actually only using him as a prop – the other daemon would bring Asmoe to the group’s attention and, after describing how they’d just met, segue into a torrent of self-aggrandizing personal anecdotes. Asmoe didn’t say anything but he became more and more sullen until eventually he found himself alone with a couple of dynamic all-stars from the predatory lending firm Wormwood and Sons – veritable geniuses in the sport of usury. Unfortunately Asmoe didn’t particularly know much about financial esoterica and he spent most of his time just listening to them and nodding, wondering where Voracious went off to.

He never found out – not that it mattered. Instead a giant tentacle of a musician played a brief series of musical scales on a large grotesque harp nearby and, as the sound of this gently rolled over the room, it signified to all the attendees that the next symposium lecture was about to begin. Putting down glasses and unfinished plates of appetizers, the crowd of daemons started to stream towards the doors while many of them continued to engage in lively discussions among themselves. Asmoe wasn’t with anyone any longer but the flow of the crowd urged him forward so he sighed and gave up any thought of resistance.

He looked in all directions though as he was carried shuffling on but he didn’t see any familiar faces. He did notice the sign on a printed billboard outside the towering front doors to the auditorium however and this caused him to raise an eyebrow. The first line read “Dr. Iniquitous Hamadryad” and below this the second line stated “The Ethics of Human Torture.” Too apropos, he thought. Like most daemons, Asmoe vehemently detested coincidences. They alluded to the possibility of there being a hidden order in the universe with divine connotations. The very antithesis of daemoniac orthodoxy.

Beyond the grandiose entrance all the daemons were passing through, an immense concentric semicircle of plush seats awaited in descending rows. Recalling from comments he’d overheard earlier that the auditorium could hold over four thousand average-sized daemons, Asmoe guessed that there were about fifty rows of these in all and he took his place in one of them strategically – grabbing the only available aisle seat he could find. Many daemons were still streaming in after he’d gotten a place to sit so Asmoe had to wait awhile as the rest of the crowd settled in. Next to him a trio of wraiths were leaning their heads together and whispering

but he made no attempt to eavesdrop. Instead, Asmoe pulled out his phone and pretended to be occupied with serious things. The intense look of concentration on his face was in stark contrast to the icons of frivolous games he was perusing. He just needed something to kill some time. He almost tapped on the “Baby Dicer” icon too, a game where cartoon human infants tumbled around and you had to swipe the touchscreen to chop them up to gory effect, but realizing that all the sweeping gestures he’d be making would betray what he was actually doing, he decided on just browsing some amateur dungeon sites.

During the few minutes he spent doing this he didn’t come across anything particularly interesting but fortunately a small group of daemons soon made their way up the dais in the heart of the room. Asmoe put his phone away at this but that turned out to be premature since the daemon who spoke first wasn’t Dr. Hamadryad but just some ghoul who was affiliated with the event somehow. And he didn’t introduce Dr. Hamadryad either but rather some other daemon, who introduced another daemon, and so on. Finding themselves with access to a captive audience, a series of daemons who no one had any interest in whatsoever were availing themselves of the opportunity to indulge their egotism by listening to themselves say nothing for an extended period of time to a large crowd – all under the pretense of making worthwhile preliminary remarks. Asmoe had difficulty believing that these daemons couldn’t perceive how transparent they were being but obviously they couldn’t since otherwise they wouldn’t have made such a disgusting spectacle of themselves. At last though, after about an hour of superfluous lead up, Dr. Hamadryad was invited to speak and the audience welcomed him with the relief of newly liberated hostages. A scrawny nature daemon with skin like a tree’s bark, Dr. Hamadryad shuffled a few papers at the podium in his trim pastel suit before finally beginning.

“A vile evening to you all. Before I get to the portion of my speech tonight where I’ll delve into torture in real detail, I’d first like to talk about the human being itself. Specifically, why doesn’t the human being want to be eaten? It’s their natural role in the daemonic food chain to give sustenance to us. If anything, humans should regard getting eaten as their highest purpose. And yet the problem of human resistance endures. To be blunt, we’ve only ourselves to blame. Ethically speaking, we haven’t done enough to properly educate our human livestock. We’ve allowed them a freedom of mind that’s simply unconscionable. And this despite the fact that our propaganda infrastructure is manifestly capable of countering their

puerile ideas of liberation. Yes, the fault here is ours. We've been arrogant. We considered the humans beneath daemonic instruction so we left them to foolishly ferment their own beliefs. This must end. If nothing else, I hope those of you who are attending tonight will take away the fact that we must begin to address the problem of human resistance as an educational problem. And the ethics here lies in our own ethical obligation to return every wayward human to its proper state of total subjugation. Allowing humans to run wild is a travesty. To rectify this of course we'll need the coordinated efforts of many daemonic organizations, both in the government and the private sector – the Interdimensional Torturer's Union not being the least of these. The future is in your claws my good fiends."

"Now I know the suggestion that there's an ethical aspect to human torture may still sound troubling to many of you. Have no fear though – no one is a bigger supporter of perpetuating our mastery over the humans than I am. Rather I'm using the term 'ethics' not in a moral sense but rather in the way the term's used in the phrase 'work ethic' for example. Pardon the human saying. It should be noted however that humans' have a long history of torturing and brainwashing each other on Earth and it'd be absurd for us not to make use of the many successful techniques they've developed on their own. Of course, we'll improve on these. By nature we're inherently superior in our capacity for violence and evil. Human precedence in this regard though can serve as a useful starting point at least until our own research and development programs take over. Where to begin then? Well, the situation we find ourselves in is analogous to the one that occurred in terrestrial Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hideous ideas of universal equality were being disseminated by revolutionary cadres who were quickly able to infect the general populace with these beliefs due to the lack of foresight and preparedness on the part of the existing establishment."

"In Hell meanwhile, we currently find ourselves confronting various underground networks of human terrorists dedicated to advancing the very same heretical agenda – and many of the individuals who're leading these groups were in fact prominent members in the revolutionary movements just mentioned! On Earth though, most of the pernicious effects of the "enlightenment" disease were adeptly neutralized through the eventual use of sophisticated misinformation strategies and said strategies continue to be employed by terrestrial human cabals up to the present day. How is it then that in Hell human slavery is still being treated like pure zoology? It's pathetic really. To bear witness to so much daemonic power

made a mockery of by a verminous humanity is a tragedy unprecedented in our history. I can't help but liken the situation to having to watch an ogre chasing after mice with a sledgehammer. What we need rather are counterinsurgency techniques tailored to the specific nature of the human pestilence that's undermining our daemonic law and order. Here, torture represents a frontline on the battlefield. I'm sure some of you are wondering by now how torture could possibly provide anything more to human slavery beyond the already immense contribution it makes, but please keep in mind that the most effective torturing strategy need not necessary increase the workload of our already overtaxed torturers. The challenge we are facing rather, the ethical problem if you will, is how to become better torturers."

"Currently our policies in relation to the humans are perfectly effective – but our only goals are producing the sustenance and materials that we need while maintaining our own dominion. Things which are in no way threatened by the ragtag human rebels who oppose us. However, if we consider the more desirable goal of reducing humanity to complete subordination, then the policies we're relying on are utterly inadequate. As an alternative, I'd like to suggest a few techniques we should be utilizing. Three to be specific. The first of these is Hierarchical Slavery. Right now we discriminate between humans on the basis of merit but there're no institutional gradations of rank for them. This is a missed opportunity. When the Nazis in their heyday had concentration camps all across Europe, these were very astutely organized so that some inmates helped police the others. There were even plenty of Jewish collaborators. Think about that. Aside from the poetic satisfaction of getting people to assist in their own self-destruction, this is simply a practical way of supplementing our security forces. And it also helps to pit the humans against one another so that they can't ever unite in opposition to their oppressors."

"A similar result is also obtained from the next technique I'd like to discuss – Nominal Democracy. Rather than encouraging your slaves to focus on escaping or overthrowing their captors, Nominal Democracy channels that energy into futile reform efforts. It's like a drain that carries away bodily waste – the offending material in this case though being the goal of the humans to secure their own liberty. Admittedly we have to be careful here to not accidentally foster the appetite for real democracy, but I have more than enough confidence in the daemonic talent for manipulation to remain assured that we can employ this

technique effectively. And Nominal Democracy needn't be equated with overt legal enfranchisement – one simply needs to provide those one wishes to keep enslaved with superficial outlets for exercising their desire for choice. This can mean as little as voting for what drums are beaten as they row the galleys.”

“Finally, I come to the last of the techniques I wish to bring up. The most sophisticated one too. I'm referring here to Currency Dominance. Now this is a complicated idea so bear with me. When I mention the term currency, many of you are probably thinking of money. And yes, money is a form of currency – but currency has many other forms too. Ideas are currency, trends are currency, institutional positions are currency. Basically anything that can be traded or used to secure specific actions from an individual. Whatever someone will devote themselves to. Currency Dominance then is the total domination of all of these. Like humanity's own terrestrial cabals, we need to take control of anything that holds sway over the humans in Hell and twist it to our own purposes. We need to infiltrate their ideologies, their cultural movements, their political organizations, whatever, and direct these clandestinely. Once this has been achieved, we'll essentially have every aspiring dissident lining up at our altars and waiting patiently to have their throats slit. And they'll never see it coming. Like the Venus fly trap – all we'll have to do is wait patiently for them to come to us. Using these techniques and others as general policy outlines in our extermination of human terrorism as a movement, we'll be able to maximize the results of the tortures we implement. *Going forward*, torture will remain crucial in our overall human control strategies, but above all we must impose on humans the truth – that humanity is nothing more than fuel for the fires of Hell...”

* * *

Everything Dr. Hamadryad said had deeply resonated with Asmoe. So much so that back at his hotel after the lecture, Asmoe decided he had to attend the 161st annual Agony Gala which was being held that evening. This was traditionally one of the main after-parties of the torture symposium and Tsuji Giri had already arranged everything for him. There, Asmoe was hoping he'd be able to find Dr. Hamadryad and deluge him with an armada of eager questions that were already amassing in his mind. Getting his tuxedo on properly was a bit of an ordeal at first but, with the help of some online resources and an ample amount of cursing, he

was eventually scrutinizing a dapper figure in the hotel room's mirror which he could hardly believe was his own.

Then he was off – heading out the hotel lobby and down the street on foot because the gala was being held only a few blocks away. On his walk there he was amused and momentarily distracted though when he saw a politician he recognized from the New York Nether being physically pushed around by the hulking goons of some unidentified lobby group. Unlike a couple tourists passing by he didn't stop to take pictures but it was nice to see a government official getting hell for a change rather than dispensing it. Feeling patriotic, he made a point of veering over to a human terrorist who was being held in a street-side stockade in the vicinity and passionately spitting on them. He didn't have time unfortunately to torture the man but every one of their fingers was already broken and they had numerous contusions and stab wounds so the public was clearly doing its civic duty. Instead he pressed on, lighting a smoke as he passed a billboard for Clenzo-Zigarettes which had a huge external shot of an imposing chemical facility and a caption which read: "Clenzo-Zigarettes! Unlike our competitors, we don't skimp on the poisons!"

Inhaling and exhaling proof of this, Asmoe soon arrived outside the gala venue – the relief engraved colonnade at the entranceway of the Museum of Xenophobic Art, or MOXA, an imperious testament to the eminence of the daemonic society within.

Inside a crowd was beginning to form in the outer rotunda as the first wave of arrivals lined up to have their tickets checked. While he waited, Asmoe stared up at the soaring murals on the ceiling depicting various pivotal events in the history of daemonkind. Lucifer leading the exodus from Heaven, the enslavement of humanity and the first human breeding facility, the destruction of the daemonic capital at Babel by the Enemy, and finally, the deluge sent to annihilate all the fallen angels and their offspring. Some difficult times in those early centuries to be sure but the future was looking bright now for the citizens of Hell.

With the explosion of the human population on Earth coupled with a permanent dwindling in the plague of spirituality, more humans were dying and going to Hell than ever – as such, Hell's economy was doing tremendous. On top of that, rumors abounded that daemonic scientists had discovered interdimensional conduits back to Earth and that it was only a matter of time before Hell reclaimed

the world that'd long ago been stolen from them. Never in the history of the world had it been better to be immortal and evil – of course this naturally raised the expectations of average daemons. Asmoe included. Ironically, although the irony is only superficial here, this also meant a corresponding increase in political friction as the situation in Hell improved and more daemons demanded their share of the spoils. As such, the Archons had wisely expanded the state security apparatus by many orders of magnitude and basically they had agents everywhere now.

Looking around the room, Asmoe could only guess how many of the daemons in attendance were there primarily to gather intelligence and dangle treasonous bait. This was especially true when it came to events held for the rich and powerful – the universal efficacy of blackmail assured this given the political ramifications of a wayward elite. Nothing that he needed to worry about however. Reaching the front of the line at last, Asmoe smiled at the attendant standing there and handed over his ticket.

He'd felt overdressed on the streets outside during the walk over but, within the opulence of the Agony Gala, Asmoe was conscious of himself as being barely presentable. With the exception of a few eccentric daemons who were wearing traditional tribal garb or their own avant-garde concoctions, everyone was attired in tuxedos and evening dresses – these being variously supplemented with fezzes, tiaras, top-hats, and the like. Already, the still swelling spaces he was wandering through were filled with more fashionable daemons than Asmoe had ever seen before, and he couldn't help but openly marvel at the sinful aplomb and sheer swank monstrosity that was surrounding him in all its gleaming and immaculate splendor. Then he noticed the music playing – a seemingly endless jazz sonata that paired a capriciously dancing trumpet with deferential drums patiently murmuring on the high hats. The sound was perfect in capturing the carefree tone of the rooms of amicably conversing fiends it was effortlessly suffusing itself through and Asmoe found himself irresistibly drawn to it.

Finally finding the source, he didn't recognize the drummer but the man in the giant gilded bird cage playing the trumpet was clearly Miles Davis and the haggard look in his eyes did nothing to detract from the warm sensuous music streaming from his instrument. Suffering is the soul of art, thought Asmoe, as he turned away to find something to quench his thirst. Of all growth even. Then he

pinpointed a kobold waiter in the crowd who was carrying a silver tray loaded with deftly balanced glasses of blood champagne. There we go.

Asmoe veered over to help himself and grabbed one of the glasses before noticing that another kobold waiter going by had an equally interesting tray. Caviar and epidermis crackers. Human caviar of course – harvested from robotic farming facilities crammed with tiers of shackled ovulating woman who were all subjected to strict hormonal regimens that artificially accelerated their natural menstrual cycles. The visual images of said horrors flittered into his mind and they swiftly succeeded in making his mouth water.

Once he'd secured his provisions, Asmoe took up a spot against one of the walls by the entrance and began to surveil the room in the hopes of finding Dr. Hamadryad. This didn't yield any immediate results but in the meantime he got a good look at the other attendees. These included the bat-horror Mang Cul Sin, an ambassador of Chthonia; Slesh Ezilian, the new president of Malware Incorporated; Gauntly Cryptorius, media executive and brother of the famous sportscaster; the Duchess Scythea Ravenous Dagon Amaranth, who like many in the aristocracy, had an excessively long name to compensate for a lack of personal accomplishments; Cerulean Screams, a seahorse-headed daemon movie-director whose latest release had flopped at the box office due to rumours that some of the snuff scenes were faked using special effects; Jihada Cadabra, the popular television finance guru; Baron Sinistro Dis Vehementes, another aristocrat and the perpetual fodder of gossip columnists and celebrity sites; Vexar Curseus, the National Slum Lord of the Year; Lady Babymangler, a performance artist who specialty was live shows that showcased her experiments in malicious plastic surgery; Mul Malchogma, a casino tycoon known for promoting the pastime of racing humans on all fours; Gorphage Porcus, a ghoulish master chef easily identified by his distinct quadruple chins and also famous for his wailing sushi; Dire Fortuna, author of the recent best-selling book "Lessons I Learned as a War Profiteer" which earned her ample praise; Tsilchiagriax, a decorated Horde Master; Totumares Charnalis, the Washington D.C. Nether's Chief Inquisitor; Aphrodite Propostrophia, heiress to the Woeful Foods empire; Inchaan Sunrashagra, chair of the Rwandan Genocide Endowment among other things; Zealblooder Havoc, spokesdaemon for a popular brand of home lobotomy products; Faera Nyxo, a professor of lachrymology and torture consultant; Grim Sires, the ward officer of the New York Nether who Asmoe saw earlier getting roughed up; Starbeast Antagonny, lead developer for the immensely successful

Vomitorium series of video games; with her was a nocturnal amoebic monstrosity, Oogoloo Oon Oo, the world record holder in various lightweight competitive eating events, including goblins (thirty-eight in five minutes) and the current athlete featured on all Vomitorium cover art; Lorgo Bulgaga, a speculator in the blood markets; Moloch Gravestench, owner of a large chain of taxidermy themed restaurants; Xilsi Lusteater, a senior partner at the law firm Baal, Baal, and Baal; Ashes Armageddon, professional gnomeball player; Kleptocorpse Villainy, director of the Callous Policies Think Tank; Hackall Warfuror, CEO of an internet biochemical weapons vendor; Asphyxia Bastilleri, a lich supermodel whose claim to fame was being seven feet tall and seventy pounds; and finally Elkgod Impaler, the wendigo trillionaire who'd made his fortune through ordinary slavery. Asmoe had actually been quite inspired reading his memoirs.

"I was Nixon for Halloween," said one incubus to another as he held up a tablet with his photos on it.

"That's a great mask!" remarked his counterpart.

"Oh, it wasn't a mask," the first replied.

"No?" came the intrigued response.

"I ordered his skinned-off face online," the original incubus insisted. "Totally authentic." This was met with a beaming smile.

"How droll!"

The two incubae had suddenly just appeared and started having their conversation next to Asmoe – preferring to not have to listen to them however, he decided to move on. With the rooms becoming increasingly crowded, he wasn't sure he'd be able to find Dr. Hamadryad at all and the thought of this irritated him as he navigated his way around the clusters of inwardly-facing demons that had sprung up everywhere. As you'd expect at an art museum, there was plenty of art on display but, despite MOXA's original mandate being for the promotion of xenophobic art, contemporary social trends in Hell had resulted in a total abandonment of this. A good example of which was one of the installations there that consisted of a tiny room filled with mirrors. After entering and exiting it, Asmoe

read the title of the work – The Narcissist Trap. Clever, he thought to himself. Warhol wasn't usually that conceptual either. Likewise, the paintings adorning the walls were also the work of human hands. Asmoe stopped to admire one called "Supercomputers Playing Poker." It consisted of two hulking monolithic machines situated across from each other at a table where each had a pair of thin robotic arms holding their cards. An original Cassius Marcellus Coolidge. At the opposite end of the visual spectrum meanwhile, Rothko's "Blood of Heretics" series was simultaneously filling an adjacent room. How many different ways can you paint red rectangles? Well, Rothko'd probably done them all. They were nice enough, Asmoe supposed. The vividness of the reds made him think of cigarettes though and so he reached for the fresh pack in his pocket.

"Care to share?" asked a voice as he was peeling off the outer layer of plastic. It was a female elf in a lustrous emerald green pantsuit that did an excellent job of showing off her petit curves and wasp-like waist.

"Not normally, no," confessed Asmoe sardonically as he extended the pack towards her. Acknowledging the hint in his remark with a flirtatious arch of her eyebrows, the female elf slowly drew a cigarette and waited for him to light it for her. After he'd taken care of her and then himself, they stood side by side enjoying these for a moment without speaking.

Finally the female elf shot him a sly glance and said, "Smoking is without a doubt the greatest icebreaker ever invented." Asmoe nodded.

"Cigarettes are the perfect type of a perfect pleasure," he added after a second. *"They're exquisite and leave you unsatisfied."* The female elf broke out into a wide enthusiastic smile.

"Who said that?" she insisted.

"Oscar Wilde," replied Asmoe before taking a long drag.

"Ah yes, quite an amusing fellow," the elf declared, imitating the tone and posture of a Victorian Englishman... before confiding in her normal girlish voice, "Actually, he was once served at a banquet I attended."

Asmoe couldn't help himself as he paused to admire his new acquaintance – who was she? As if she were reading his mind that very second (a possibility) she held out a pale slender hand and introduced herself.

“Gnosis Nightslaughter. I'm the principle choreographer for the Circus of Torment... which basically means I decide how the puppeteers will fling the humans around and other fun things.” Asmoe took her hand and shook it gently but firmly, his grip lingering.

“Asmoe Cambioni. Torturer. I've contorted a few victims of my own on occasion.” Now that they'd exchanged names and professions, a measure of ease was added to their conversation.

“Here for the symposium then?” asked Gnosis.

“You got it,” replied Asmoe. “Although right now I'm really only here for one reason.” Gnosis gave him a slightly disappointed look.

“Stalking prey?” she asked euphemistically. Asmoe shook his head.

“No. Not at all.” As soon as this was made clear Gnosis brightened again, while Asmoe finished explaining. “The whole reason I came tonight is to find Dr. Hamadryad. He gave a fantastic speech at the symposium earlier and I... I have all these questions.” Gnosis tilted her head sideways in incredulity.

“You are one lucky daemon,” she marveled. Confused, Asmoe asked for clarification.

“How so?” Gnosis laughed.

“Iniquitous? I've known Iniquitous for years. I mean, we're not personally close but we move in the same circles and cross paths all the time. You should come with me – we'll probably run into him.”

Asmoe smirked and flicked the last of his cigarette into a kobold waiter's face. “Sounds like a plan,” he chuckled diabolically.

Arm in arm, like a daemonic version of Hansel and Gretel, Gnosis led Asmoe over to some of her fiends and introduced him to the group. This resulted in a few nods and hand raises in his direction and then the group proceeded with the topic already underway.

“Human’s make up 99.99 percent of all janitorial service staff and this isn’t a unique example. Human slaves are threatening the livelihoods of hardworking daemons across a swarm of industries.”

Apparently, Asmoe had stumbled into a political discussion. The phantom who’d been speaking appeared eager to barrel on with his tirade too but some dissenting gestures from a dryad standing across from him stopped this.

“You’re talking about dreg work,” said the dryad. “What kind of self-respecting daemon is willing to clean toilets? In Hell of all places? As far as I’m concerned, anything a human can do is beneath us and those daemons who lack enough pride in themselves to shun this kind of work are a disgrace to their fallen progenitors. Manual labor by itself is almost heresy.” Before the dryad’s comments could lead to an outbreak of hostilities, a giant serpent spoke up on behalf of the conciliatory position.

Uncoiling himself and raising his head a few feet, he said, “No doubt the ideal form of life is to be a daemon and live in a state of total self-indulgence. It’s certainly the collective goal of daemonkind. At the same time, that all of us owe our absolute allegiance to the republic of Hell is unquestionable. Without Lucifer and the archfiends we’d still all be slaves in Heaven. Therefore any daemon who serves Hell ultimately serves himself because he’d be nothing outside of Hell.”

This was assented to by everyone in the group. No one had a single thing to say against the regime – a slight tension settled over them all however until a siren interjected.

“I’m doing my part. In fact, I’m producing more than my fair share of debauchery.” That elicited a few laughs.

“Like what?” asked a leering doppelgänger.

“You name it,” said the siren teasingly. “Although, I am... really getting into poisons right now. Like it’s a serious thing.” An enormous beetle in a tailcoat perked up at this.

“I’ve always found that poison is vivifying in small doses,” he said to no one in particular. Asmoe was surprised as he listened to himself make an off-the-cuff reply.

“But it’s more fun in larger ones,” he added wryly.

The joke received a solid round of laughter and a few admiring glances were directed towards him. Gnosis even gave him a playful jab in the stomach. Still he tried his best to hide how pleased he was with himself.

The banter among the daemons became relentless at that point. Like their human counterparts, daemons who go to ritzy galas tend to be very shallow and are often inordinately impressed by snide witticisms – accordingly, Asmoe adopted the conversational strategy of chiming in opportunistically with *bon mots* wherever he saw an opening. This quickly started to pay dividends as other daemons began eagerly clamoring for his attention. He wasn’t entirely comfortable juggling all the interest he was receiving though and it therefore came as a relief when one of them, a fop of a devil named Swilling Hexskull, began to monopolize him a little.

“I’d give them all a good disemboweling if my middle name’s Insidious,” boasted the daemon to the group. “It is by the way,” he added for Asmoe’s benefit. The “they” that Swilling Insidious Hexskull was referring to in this instance was a group of humans that had rioted at one of the Happy Minerals labor camps.

“I bet FOM had something to do with it!” snarled a disgusted sylph. AKA the Friends of Marat. This remark then prompted an incubus to relate something of his own.

“I’ve heard stories, awful ghastly stories, that some of these human terrorists actually ate a daemon governor they captured. Can you imagine such a thing?” That was his cue.

“Any word on how he tasted?” asked Asmoe.

The laughter that gushed forth from the group in response to Asmoe's question was of the purest depravity. In it the love of all things evil came to its fullest fruition and for a moment all the cruelty in the universe orbited around that small circle of daemons. Asmoe looked on with perfect satisfaction as he watched their heads tilted back in mirth, their mouths open with rows of glistening fangs. This too was power. Still chuckling, Swilling was the first one to follow Asmoe with any words of his own.

"My fiend, you are the very perdition of wit. You'll devour us all."

Asmoe absorbed the compliment with a comically exaggerated shrug and then snatched a glass of freshly extracted human tears off the tray of a passing kobold. While he was taking a sip from this, Swilling suggested that they both go seek out a close fiend of his that he felt Asmoe had to meet. Asmoe didn't care one way or the other so he said "Sure" and downed the last of his drink. Gnosis though wasn't a fan of the idea.

"Hey! I found him!" she protested, trying not to betray too much investment. While he definitely preferred Gnosis' female company to Swilling's, he felt like a break from her circle of daemons and so he made his choice on those grounds.

"I'll return," he assured her, "Like cancer in reverse remission."

As they navigated the gala, Asmoe casually feigned interest in an anecdote Swilling was blathering on about, something to do with his fraternity days and setting sleeping daemons on fire, when all of a sudden a tidal wave of scalding hot fondue was rushing towards them. Luckily Asmoe had just enough time to clamber onto a table and drag Swilling up with him before they got hit. From their sanctuary among a dozen or so empty drinking glasses they'd knocked over, the two daemons watched in disbelief as a sea of white gurgling sauce spilled out in all directions. Most of the other attendees in the vicinity weren't nearly as fortunate or quick thinking as they were either, so there was a lot of hopping and cursing and screeching as a number of them got drenched up to their shins. Swilling tittered at all the mayhem behind a hand with a large platinum ring on it but Asmoe was silent as he tried to figure out what'd happened.

Beside the giant tipped-over fondue cauldron at the epicenter of it all however was an obese ursine daemon slathered in sauce so it didn't take a lot of imagination to put two and two together – he'd evidently decided to forgo skewering the cubes of human meat laid out, instead trying to pull himself up on the cauldron's rim to drink directly from it. Physics took care of the rest. Well it sucks to be him, thought Asmoe dismissively, already impatient to continue on his way. Lingering up on the table had an odd air of cowardice about it. Motioning to Swilling he had a path for them, Asmoe proceeded to carefully step over the glasses in his way and across the table with his arms held out for balance. From there he made a short leap to a long rectangular seating platform which some other attendees were also standing on and then down from this to a part of the floor untouched by the disaster. Swilling followed a few seconds later – panting from all the excitement. "I haven't enjoyed a public humiliation that grand in ages!" he exclaimed with a grin.

The two of them continued on for a while but then paused as Asmoe gradually realized that they weren't going anywhere in particular. Swilling seemed to have momentarily forgotten about the fiend he wanted to introduce Asmoe to as a result of what'd just happened and Asmoe was too indifferent about it to remind him. Instead, Asmoe started to look around the room and for some reason his focus gravitated to the many famous humans there. These were brought along to serve as ostentatious displays of wealth by their masters – and among those Asmoe could identify that night there was Aristophanes, Oliver Cromwell, Cleopatra, Onan the Self Help Guru, and a barely recognizable Picasso. He was sure it was Picasso after careful scrutiny but it took a moment because the artist's face had been carved up and rearranged in homage to his own cubist style. Then Asmoe noticed a scrawny teenaged boy being led around on a leash. The boy wasn't anyone famous as far as he could tell (their youth had sufficient cachet in its own right though) but when he saw who their owner was he was exultant – it was none other than Dr. Iniquitous Hamadryad himself. He was ready to walk right over when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"The fiend I was telling you about's probably off in this direction," said Swilling obliviously. In that instant Asmoe realized he'd make an enemy of Hexskull if he brushed him off (not a smart thing for a lower class daemon like himself to do) but a solution to this predicament came to him at the same time too.

“Is that Dr. Iniquitous Hamadryad over there?” Asmoe asked disingenuously. “Wow. I’d sure like to meet him but I’m not really anybody. I mean, you’d have to be quite the devil to be able to impose yourself on a fiend like that.” Swilling immediately fell for the bait.

“My dear spawn,” he bragged, “Watch and learn from the master.”

Sincere in his egotism, Swilling marched over and introduced himself to the doctor. Asmoe followed with a smirk on his face and after the fop had made a few inane remarks about the torture symposium, Asmoe’s turn was next.

“It was truly inspiring,” said Asmoe sincerely in reference to Iniquitous’ lecture. However he knew he was going to have to be more than just another sycophant to hold the doctor’s attention. “It seems to me that the policies you suggested deserve a broader implementation across Hell. Beyond humans even. I know you’ve given me some excellent ideas for my own practice.” This piqued Dr. Hamadryad’s curiosity.

“You’re an initiate of the art?” he asked. Meaning a torturer.

“I am indeed,” replied Asmoe proudly. “A third-class rack-winner for Tsuji Giri Enterprises.” Here his casual use of slang peculiar to torturers themselves was a deliberate attempt to stoke a sense of the exclusivity shared by them. Since Dr. Hamadryad was an academic and didn’t actually torture for a living, this wasn’t especially accurate, but Asmoe was astute enough to realize that a daemon like Dr. Hamadryad would want to think of himself that way. As a roll-up-his-sleeves hard-working finger-nail-puller.

“A pleasure,” replied Dr. Hamadryad. “Of course it’s always nice to meet a daemon who’s red-stained in the trade but, I must say, it’s sadly much too rare these days to speak with another torturer who grasps something of the broader issues. Very astute of you. And yes, as you noticed my my analysis applies equally to daemons as well. It would’ve been impolitic though to say so.” Asmoe could certainly appreciate that.

“I understand completely doctor,” he concurred. “Just as there’s a tool for every scenario in a dungeon, in society every situation calls out for its own

particular approach.” He was laying it on pretty thick now but his counterpart didn’t seem to notice.

“Or wails in misery,” chortled Dr. Hamadryad.

While all the daemons focused on acquitting themselves in conversation, the boy on Dr. Hamadryad’s leash remained silent and downcast. Asmoe had only glanced at him once or twice but soon a lull in the banter ensued and the doctor turned to his pet for entertainment.

“Look lively there Andy,” he said congenially while at the same time yanking on the leash. After Andy had recovered himself he responded.

“Yes sir. What should I do sir?” Dr. Hamadryad made an apologetic face for the benefit of all the daemons around him.

“I don’t know,” he sighed with exasperation. “Tell us a funny story. About how you miss your parents maybe.” Andy winced at this suggestion but then pushed his sorrow back deep inside him.

“I hate my parents,” he asserted finally. The daemons all grinned at this.

“What a charming little morsel,” exclaimed Swilling Insidious Hexskull. Dr. Hamadryad was only too happy to take advantage of the opportunity now to vaunt his recent purchase.

“I confess he was horribly expensive,” lamented the doctor with artificial ruefulness. “But that’s the human market for you. The death rate among the young has suffered such a tragic decline as of late.” A rotund daemon in a monocle seconded this by nodding vigorously before asking a question.

“How old is he?”

Dr. Hamadryad smiled slyly before silently mouthing the word “Fourteen.”

The other daemons were impressed and one of them let out a sharp appreciative whistle.

“That young huh?” asked Asmoe rhetorically as he shook his head. “How’d you end up in Hell little human?” Andy gave him a sullen look before replying.

“Probably ‘cause I shot up my school. Killed six people.” Asmoe let out a single guffaw.

“Ha! That’ll do it. Good for you though, going out with gusto.”

Back on Earth in Des Moines, Idaho; the corpse of Andy Jefferies was just beginning its third week in a buried casket after the SWAT team that’d responded to reports of a shooting at a local high school had riddled it with bullets. While coping with the shock and loss, Andy’s parents desperately prayed for him – piously incapable of imagining his true fate.

“Pardon me but I have to defecate,” apologized the rotund daemon in the monocle who’d spoken earlier, and he turned away magisterially from the other members of Dr. Hamadryad’s circle in search of one of the lavatories where humans waited in porcelain trenches with open mouths.

Like weights on a trampoline, the greater an individual’s popularity is the deeper the dent they make in the fabric of any given social milieu. And this in turn draws in other lesser personalities – the center of gravity always being the most popular individual. As such, an eminent daemon like Dr. Hamadryad continuously radiates a magnetic force in any room he happens to occupy and this was evident that night as the group socializing around him persisted in growing. Since only so many daemons could participate in any given conversation at once however, rings of constantly shifting discussions formed and reformed around him – evolving chains of molecules warped by the forces of hierarchy and rhetorical struggle. Asmoe was eventually edged out of his privileged position at the ear of the doctor by daemons of higher status and as a result he found himself listening from the peripheries of other daemon’s conversations.

“Any tragedy can be turned into a comedy with the right voice over,” he heard an entertainment mogul say. “Don’t ever delay your vengeance my spawn,” asserted another voice. “*Carpe diem*. Otherwise you might find the opportunity come and gone, never to return.” Typical daemon sentiments. “If one is ugly, one

should have the decency to wear a bag over one's head," contended a blob creature indignantly. "Indeed. Quite right," agreed his withered skeletal companion. As Asmoe tried to think of how he could worm his way into Dr. Hamadryad's audience again, a piece of advice his father gave him came to mind. At the time it'd seemed hackneyed but here it proved itself a useful reminder: "Whenever someone shows something off they want others to take an interest in it." Asmoe looked at Andy again – he was being ignored by all the other demons. The kid, thought Asmoe deviously. Of course.

"You know, you're actually lucky to have died so young." Asmoe made this remark in an off-hand way and Andy was initially surprised to find himself being addressed outside of the spotlight of his master.

"Really?" he asked incredulously.

"Oh Andy," Asmoe assured him, "It's so bad for most humans in Hell, you have no idea." Andy was defiant.

"Worse than this?" he asked holding his leash with one hand as he nervously summoned his courage.

"Way worse," laughed Asmoe. "Way way WAY worse. There are humans here who spend the rest of eternity as breeding hosts for parasites. Picture every possible parasite you can imagine all infesting a person at once. I mean, eyes, skin, all of it; just saturated with swollen larva and worms and nasty little things that eat you from the inside out." Andy grimaced at the thought.

"That's disgusting... and horrible," he added quietly.

"Of course it is," replied a smiling Asmoe. "But now imagine the person you hated most in the whole world being condemned to that." The expression on Andy's face changed from one of total revulsion to a sort of torn pensiveness.

"I don't know," he said hesitantly. Asmoe had seen in the subtle change the truth though – that Andy, like the vast majority of humans, had a taste for cruel retribution. Putting his hand on the leashed boy's shoulder, Asmoe looked into his eyes and said in a warm friendly voice.

“No need to be shy. This is Hell Andy! Here evil is celebrated. Tell me, what sort of terrible things have you fantasized about doing to people?” Andy still wasn’t comfortable with the idea of sharing his secret dreams of revenge however and at first he could only look at the ground awkwardly. The lingering benevolent stare of Asmoe eventually achieved its desired effect though and, without looking up, Andy started to confess himself.

“I guess, there was this bully next door...” Asmoe noticed that other daemons were listening in now too as he encouraged Andy.

“Go on,” he said. Andy cleared his throat.

“Well... he used to sneak out of his house a lot. I’d see him through my window. And... I thought about putting a leg trap out one night. Maybe ambushing him when he got caught too. Like stabbing him or something.”

A round of applause, led by Asmoe, greeted Andy’s confession. In response to this the boy looked up in disbelief and hardly knew what to do when Asmoe complimented him.

“That’s pretty good!” said the torturer before turning to the other daemons who were facing them. “The boy’s a natural!” he exclaimed.

This was all part of Asmoe’s plan. He was going to make an entertaining spectacle out of a back and forth repartee with Andy. It was like one of those classic two person stand-up routines that used to be popular on Earth. Asmoe would feed the boy amusing questions and then supplement his answers with clever remarks. In this way he’d also feed Iniquitous Hamadryad’s reputation and work his way properly into the doctor’s acquaintance – everyone would be impressed by Andy and this esteem would then be transferred to his master. Accordingly, Asmoe followed up his previous question about Andy’s appetite for violence with more of the same. He got the kid to really open up too since as soon as Andy realized that all the dark urges he’d been taught to repress his entire life were welcome in Hell, he was eager to let it all out and reap the social approval of the daemons. Obviously they enjoyed it tremendously and their mirth continued to build until it all came to a climax when Asmoe asked Andy what the worse thing he ever did was.

“But I already told you,” Andy protested.

“No you didn’t,” countered Asmoe. “The school shooting? Come on. Killing a bunch of kids who viciously harassed you every day is practically justifiable homicide. Not good enough. Think now. Dig deep. What’s the most despicable thing you’ve ever done?”

Andy was at a loss and he let out a loud exhale with his cheeks puffed-out as he tried to come up with something. Finally, drawing from the very bottom of a well of suppressed shame, he recalled an incident that might satisfy the daemon.

“There was this thing... a long time ago. I was ten. I made friends with a kid... he was handicapped. Mentally.” Asmoe could sense Andy had something good here.

“And?” the daemon asked.

“And he had all these great toys,” replied Andy. “His parents bought him all this awesome stuff.” Asmoe licked his lips.

“And?” he said again.

“And I told some other guys in the neighborhood about it,” confessed Andy. “Older guys. He wouldn’t show them though.” The daemons surrounding Andy were breathless with anticipation now.

“And?” insisted Asmoe.

“And...” Andy replied with difficulty. “When I was visiting him one time... I unlocked his basement door. Right next to his room.” At this point it seemed like the whole gala was waiting in silent expectation.

“And?” asked Asmoe one more time.

“And I let the older guys know,” answered Andy. “And... we snuck in there and... stole all his favorite things.”

Cheers and laughter erupted simultaneously. The force of it frightened Andy but then he gradually succumbed to relief. He'd appeased them.

"Dear God Andy!" shouted Asmoe for everyone's benefit. "You're the vilest one here!" This sent the daemons in the vicinity into rollicking fits of hilarity, the laughter exploding among them like cold waves crashing against a rocky shore.

The main reason for this was because in Hell, joking about God is like joking about genocide on Earth. Difficult to pull off in mixed company but, when it works, the breaking of the taboo makes it that much more funny. It was then that Asmoe noted with satisfaction that Dr. Hamadryad had also sidled up next to him – clearly Asmoe's plan had succeeded. And he'd done it all with the added bonus of corrupting a penitent human being.

* * *

Hours later Asmoe was lazily flipping through the channels on his hotel room's monitor. He was quite pleased with himself, having managed to turn an awful evening around. Not only had he made up for the degrading episode with Voracious Harms by converting Dr. Hamadryad into an admirer but he'd also gone back later and found Gnosis Nightslaughter and charmed her all over again. A decent evening's work for any devil if he did say so himself. That fop Hexskull of course had only been a means to his own ends so he hadn't bothered with him at all after making contact with the doctor. He sure was exhausted though.

It was fortunate then that this happened to be his last night in the D.C. Nether. Tomorrow he'd be sleeping in his own bed once more. In the meantime he was trying to find something worth watching but he wasn't having any luck. For a moment he thought he might've stumbled onto something interesting when he came across a channel where a group of young daemons in mortarboards and gowns were gathered. It looked like a movie maybe. In any case, it appeared to be an ordinary graduation event but the low camera angle and a naturalistic quiet were infusing the scene with a palpable suspense. There was no soundtrack and only the backs of rows of daemoniac students all looking in the same direction. Not to the podium in front of them either but to something in their midst. Slowly the camera was moving in to whatever this was and now smoke was visible. A lot of

smoke. Getting even closer, the camera became enveloped by the smoke until it dramatically evaporated and revealed a very handsome incubus looking totally unrepentant with multiple lit cigarettes in his mouth. Then a radio style voice over swept in. "Clenzo! Graduate to a real cigarette and kick those kiddie puffs goodbye!" The shot lingered for a few seconds with the Clenzo-Zigarettes logo superimposing itself on it and then the commercial was over. Asmoe shook his head at having been taken in by the ad but then he reached over to the nightstand beside the bed he was lying on for his own pack of cigarettes. Still a couple left thankfully.

A short while later he was on his last cigarette when there was a knock at the door. Not expecting anyone, Asmoe got up apathetically and then looked through the spyhole before opening up. On the other side a smartly uniformed satyr bellhop was waiting with a wheeled suitcase in tow.

"Greetings sir," he said. "We've located your missing luggage." Asmoe gave the bellhop a curious look.

"My missing luggage?" muttered the torturer in perplexity.

"You are Asmodeus Cambioni are you not sir?" asked the bellhop with concern, worried that he could have made a mistake.

"I am," replied Asmoe slowly.

"Then sir," the bellhop continued, "This suitcase has your name on it." Something about the ghoul's anxious tone made Asmoe realize he was being an idiot. Even though the suitcase wasn't his he might as well still have a look in it.

"Right. Right," Asmoe said at last, feigning haziness. "Yes. I... uh... I didn't realize it was missing. Um, bring it in."

Standing aside, Asmoe motioned for the bellhop to enter and he did just that, dragging the suitcase in with a slight but noticeable strain. When this was taken care of the bellhop bowed to him (having to re-adjust his slipping hat after doing so) and Asmoe gave him a small tip for his trouble. Then he left and Asmoe turned his attention to the waiting suitcase. Examining a tag on it he did indeed find his name there, written in hastily scrawled letters, but that was it. How intriguing.

Asmoe was more interested in finding out the suitcase's contents however and so he went to lift it onto the bed without any further thought. Trying to do so with one hand, he was unpleasantly surprised at how heavy it proved to be and quickly stopped. Frowning at this small private embarrassment, he decided he'd just open the suitcase on the floor and proceeded to push it over vindictively with his foot. "Ow!" yelled the suitcase and Asmoe's frown furrowed even more.

Undoing the latches warily, Asmoe lifted up the suitcase flap and found himself looking down on a young human who'd been squeezed uncomfortably into the rectangular space within. It was Andy Jefferies.

"Hi," said Andy, looking at him with the one eye on the visible side of his face but remaining otherwise motionless.

"No," replied Asmoe immediately, realizing that this was trouble. He never should have accepted the suitcase.

"Wait! Let me explain," insisted Andy as he arduously unfolded himself from his cramped means of carriage and sat up. "I'm escaping!" Asmoe groaned.

"A Trojan Horse," muttered the daemon to himself. Andy ignored this and began his rehearsed pitch.

"I just need you to smuggle me out of here," the kid insisted. Asmoe stared at him now with a frustration that was only slightly dampened by an even greater incomprehension.

"Why... choose me?" stuttered the daemon after snatching the question from out of a scrum of alternatives colliding in his mind.

"You were nice to me," said Andy uncertainly. "Who else could I trust?"

No good deed goes unpunished, thought Asmoe. This was proof of that.

"I'm taking you back," stated Asmoe flatly, his hand held up to his forehead as if to ward off an impending migraine.

“No!” shouted Andy. “I’ll... I’ll say you tried to steal me!”

Asmoe sighed. Technically human testimony is considered worthless in Hell’s legal system but, depending on Dr. Hamadryad’s mood, he could have a real problem. Even if the doctor didn’t believe that Asmoe tried to abscond with his expensive new slave, it’s likely he’d want to avoid the humiliation of admitting his property escaped and just charge Asmoe with the crime anyways. Given that, he was suddenly in a very serious predicament and he had no idea what to do. Plus things had gone so well that evening! Asmoe bitterly flopped down on the bed and ignored Andy as he wallowed in his latest misfortune.

At first they didn’t talk. Asmoe wouldn’t even look at the kid initially and instead he tried to focus intently on the monitor at the other end of the room. Unsure of what to do, Andy fiddled with his thumbs and remained seated in the suitcase on the floor. In this way the two of them spent the next thirty minutes watching one of the twenty-four hour news networks. Gradually growing bolder though, Andy began to ask questions and eventually a reluctant Asmoe was even willing to concede the occasional reply. Despite this, in Asmoe’s mind he was soon thinking about how he should just butcher Andy, dump his corpse somewhere inconspicuous, and hope that the trauma of it would erase the boy’s most recent memories. Said course of action was quickly assuming the certainty of a decision when something Andy asked changed everything.

“Who’s that guy on the screen?” the kid wondered aloud. It was a citizen alert about an enemy of the state at large.

“Robespierre?” replied Asmoe. “He’s a terrorist. He was also one of the leaders of the French Revolution. Don’t they teach you this stuff in school?” Andy gave him a blank look.

“I dunno,” replied the kid. “But I’ve seen him around.” Asmoe’s laughter at this claim gradually turned into a scowl when he realized Andy was being serious.

“When?” the torturer asked. Andy shrugged.

“A couple times,” he replied. The way the boy said it assured Asmoe that he was telling the truth but the daemon needed more information.

“Okay Andy,” Asmoe said at last, “You’ve got my attention. Tell me everything you know about this.” Andy had his arms hugged tightly around his tucked-in knees and he watched Asmoe carefully as he elaborated.

“I don’t know much. That guy though, Robust-spear or whatever, he meets with the doctor at the doctor’s mansion. They talk and I get sent out of the room. Other people too. Humans. And after they’re done they always leave really quickly. I tried talking to them once but they ignored me.” Asmoe held up his hand.

“Wait,” said the daemon. “They leave? On their own?” Andy nodded.

“No chains or nothing,” the boy insisted. “That’s weird right? In Hell? All the other people I’ve seen have collars or something at least.” Asmoe closed his eyes as he concentrated on what Andy had just told him.

Even if “The” Robespierre wasn’t having secret meetings with Dr. Iniquitous Hamadryad, it sure sounded like there were some humans who were. Free humans, and free of course meaning that they were terrorists. Asmoe exhaled sharply and stretched himself by leaning backwards with his hands on his hips – momentarily staring up at the room’s ceiling. He was in it now.

“You haven’t told me how you escaped yet,” Asmoe said in an exhausted tone, resigning himself to the situation.

“Oh! It was really genius,” replied Andy, perking up at the chance to recount his successful scheme. “So I came up with the idea the other night – to hide in the luggage. How to get out though right? I know. This is when I had the... uh... the...” Asmoe gave Andy a little help here.

“The epiphany?” suggested the cambion. Andy smiled.

“Yeah! I realized, all I had to do was get one of the hotel daemons to carry me out and take me where I wanted to go. Then I met you tonight and I was like, ohhh, I’ll send the suitcase to him. And this is the best part. I called the hotel lobby and pretended to be the stupid doctor. I said, someone left their luggage in my room – take it away! Like all angry right. In a daemon voice. Then I hid inside it and

they came and grabbed it and now I'm here. Ta da!" Asmoe had to admit, it was a pretty good plan. Not that it would've worked under normal circumstances. This business with the terrorists however meant that Andy had caught a glimpse of something dangerous. Dr. Hamadryad? A collaborator!? Asmoe needed to think about his next move. And he had to keep Andy – the kid was evidence or leverage or... something. It seemed then that he was going to smuggle Andy out of the hotel after all.

"Alright," said Asmoe, "This is what we're going to do. You're going to get back inside the suitcase and then I'm going to sneak you out of here." Andy made a face at having to get smuggled by suitcase again but when he opened his mouth it was about something else.

"And when I'm safe you'll help me join the human resistance?" he asked hopefully. Definitely not, thought Asmoe. In his response however he was significantly vaguer.

"The important thing right now is to get you out of here and somewhere safe," insisted the daemon. "We'll worry about the rest later." Andy nodded glumly but he was compliant as Asmoe went to close the suitcase up – until he stuck his head out the side at the last minute.

"You're gonna let me out soon right?" asked the boy. Asmoe pushed Andy's head back inside.

"Shhhhh. No more talking," replied the daemon soothingly. It was too bad he didn't have any duct tape to gag the kid with, thought Asmoe as he locked the suitcase's latches.

Outside in the hall, dragging two suitcases behind him, Asmoe started to sweat. If he got caught like this there was no way he was going to be able to talk his way out of it. They'd have him impaled on a rotating spit over a fire before he could utter the phrase "medium rare." It'd been sheer luck before with the heresy thing how he'd avoided the gruesome punitive measures bestowed on accused criminals awaiting trial and Asmoe couldn't expect the same soft treatment again. Torturers who broke the law also tended to get it rougher from whoever happened to be assigned to them – the average torturer didn't appreciate it when someone

sullied the reputation of their profession through criminality. Asmoe wiped his forehead nervously as he approached the elevator doors on his floor. No one else was in the halls at the moment and he hoped to get down to the lobby with as few daemons as possible seeing him. The less witnesses right now the better. His impatience was evident as he repeatedly jabbed the down-button on the panel in front of him but eventually the doors opened and, to his relief, no one else was inside. Briefly fumbling to get both suitcases through, Asmoe then turned around and started jabbing the shut-doors button. This was accompanied by some impatient muttering under his breath but, despite a certain indecisiveness on the part of the machine, it eventually complied. As he waited anxiously, staring at a small row of transitioning lights indicating the elevator's descent, Asmoe realized that he hadn't double-checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Patting himself down he was relieved to find his wallet, phone, and keys, all in his pockets. His clothes of course had already been packed in his suitcase so he didn't even worry about leaving any of that behind.

Exhaling loudly, Asmoe shifted his focus to the impending advance across the main floor. He'd have to remain calm. Avoid drawing unnecessary attention to himself. All he had to do was walk out the front doors though and it wasn't as if he was likely to be stopped – still he wasn't going to take any chances. The row of lights above the elevator doors now halted at the one for the main floor but, instead of opening, an unnerving silence settled. "Come on! Come on!" complained Asmoe as he pushed the button to open the doors. At first hitting it rapidly he then resorted to pressing it for long intervals with his thumb as the doors nevertheless refused to budge. But just as he was on the verge of despair, suddenly the machine kicked into life. When the elevator doors did finally open however, they revealed a lobby full of Diabolic Security agents.

Dr. Iniquitous Hamadryad was a very famous and well-connected daemon. When one of his slaves went missing it was a big deal. Incidentally there was also a large contingent of DS agents in the hotel for a conference and when the manager had informed their captain of what'd happened, he'd immediately marshalled his daemons into action. Unknown to Asmoe, agents were already knocking on the doors of the hotel rooms upstairs and it was only by a few seconds margin that he'd gotten into the elevator before they'd reached his floor. Despite being ignorant of this, Asmoe nevertheless made the obvious inference that Andy's disappearance was the cause of all the agents swarming the lobby area now and this left him with

a huge lump in his throat. Exiting the elevator, he instantly felt his vulnerability looming over him in the enormity of the voluminous columned space he'd entered. The two sputtering and wobbling suitcases trailing behind him didn't help either, adding to his sense of paranoia. It wasn't as if he was that comfortable in a hotel like this with all its Rocco décor, and gilded skeletons, and walls mounted with the decapitated heads of notable humans to begin with. Of course when he'd first heard that Tsuji Giri was putting him up for the duration of the symposium at La Oubliette (pronounced with a thick French accent) he'd been excited to stay somewhere so prestigious. Not anymore.

Looking furtively to either side of him, Asmoe was faintly sickened by the opulence he saw – it was all pregnant with power and authority, the very things which at any moment could discover and obliterate him. Trying to keep his head down, he pressed on for the entrance, but it was this singlemindedness which caused him not to notice the incubus crossing his path. They weren't going fast enough to collide with him but, even worse, just fast enough to trip over one of his suitcases. And not the one with his clothes in it.

"Lucifer!" shouted the injured incubus as he reached down to massage his shin. "What've you got in there?" Apprehensive of the possible attention he'd invited, Asmoe wildly glanced around before replying.

"A... corpse," he said softly. The incubus smirked and snorted.

"Ah, that explains it. Carry on."

Asmoe though had to get his breathing under control so he stayed exactly where he was as the incubus continued with his own business. Meanwhile the revolving doors of the front entrance were beckoning him from a little over a hundred feet away.

Mustering his composure, Asmoe resumed his escape. He was only about halfway to the doors however when he saw a DS agent making a beeline towards him. He didn't know whether the agent simply wanted to ask some questions or whether they wanted a look in his luggage but he had absolutely no desire to find out. Searching around desperately he noticed a daemon standing nearby looking at their phone and another about to go by them. If Asmoe could just time it right...

leaning over after the second daemon walked past the first, Asmoe shoved the elbow of the daemon on his phone from behind. This prompted them to turn around in a rage after they'd corrected their balance but Asmoe motioned deferentially that he wasn't to blame as he pointed in the direction of the daemon walking away. The daemon who'd been on his phone was convinced by this act and, looking towards the departing daemon he yelled,

"Mind where you're going!" This immediately stopped the second daemon and he turned around to make eye contact with his accuser.

"Go read a bible," he retorted contemptuously. That only succeeded in provoking an even more heated response though.

"Your mother's a nun!" the other daemon yelled and from this the mayhem erupted.

The two daemons went at it, literally with teeth and claws, and like water converging in the vortex of a drain, the other daemons around them were swiftly drawn into the fray. All except Asmoe, who hurried now to get outside. He was so distraught that when the suitcase with his clothes in it toppled over, he dragged it a full ten feet before floundering to right it.

Behind him the fracas was still growing and, besides other patrons of the hotel, there were DS agents and even staff leaping into the mix. Furniture and vases were being smashed as the snarling daemons went at it but Asmoe averted his eyes as he determinedly plowed onward. The entrance was only twenty feet ahead when a bellhop rushed past him to wet his appetite for blood. Really, any self-respecting daemon would've loved to take part in such a violent brawl but Asmoe was too terrified to worry about any appearance of cowardice. A tremendous weight was already beginning to lift from him as he stumbled into the revolving doors and pushed them forward with his shoulder. Then he was inhaling the charred air of the D.C. Nether and nothing had ever smelled so wonderful to him before.

The cool darkness adorned with city lights furthermore held the promise of an infernal salvation and, waiting for him to his great relief, was an empty taxi. Someone had just gotten out a moment earlier and, before the taxi could drive off,

Asmoe was motioning to the driver to open the trunk. With his luggage safely stowed, Asmoe quickly scrambled into the back seat and ordered the driver to floor it to the train station. With that his escape was complete – but the rest of his trip wasn't exactly pleasant.

For the entire taxi ride that followed he had to make do without a single cigarette, all the while thinking: what in the name of every archfiend was he going to do with a human fugitive?

END OF PART ONE