Prologue: The Beginning of the End

Deep in a gloomy church’s catacombs, two soldiers crouched next to the decrepit cypress door of a funeral chamber, ankles submerged in green fog that smelled like poppy. Hector Priam, equipped with two magnums, one white and one black, pressed his hand against the frame. It was cold and prickly with static. The Reaper had been speaking with God.

“Now is a bad time,” he half-whispered.

“Will it ever be a good time, Lieutenant General?” the woman next to him said. She spoke slightly louder, but not at full volume.

General Leslie Margaret had accompanied him despite his adamant advice against it. She wanted to prove herself. Not ten hours ago she’d been a Colonel. General Dodger cited her being a mage to justify the unorthodox leap in rank. It was rare for a mage join Sector Seven.

She glared at him as if having read his mind. “Shall we?”

“I would advise against this,” he reiterated. He sensed from the stubborn sharpness in his superior’s eyes that he would again be rejected. Still, she was a comrade in arms. He felt obligated to offer another opportunity to turn back. “Zenith Pharaoh is more dangerous than you seem to think. You should leave him to me. I have a rapport with him you lack.”

“General Dodger has, “left him to you,” long enough,” she said. “Every time you attempt to summon him, he ignores you. The matter with the Saint Candidate grows urgent. Zenith is the only member of Sector Seven able to slay immortals. His assistance is critical.”

True. The Reaper was indeed needed, and Hector had been assigned to mobilize him. Twelve days straight he’d visited these dreary catacombs, waded through cobwebs, slipped on patches of moss, only to stand stiff and sweaty at the door. Not once had he attempted to enter.

“He is a Pharaoh assassin,” he said, watching eldritch green fog bubble up from under the doorframe. “His thought processes and instincts differ from ours. He will not respond to authoritative measures in the manner you expect.” He glanced nervously at his watch. 9:10 PM. Sunset had been at 8:11. “Moreover, it is nighttime. His vagary is active. Should you elicit hostility, not even my Spirit Contracts will be able to protect us.”

“Oh?” she said, raising a bushy eyebrow. “Is Humanity’s Strongest, afraid? If you would rather not accompany me, I will permit you to wait in the hall.”

He shook his head. His conscience wouldn’t allow him to send her in alone.

She tugged her hair back taut enough to play violin on and tied it into a bun, her mannish face seeming to expand under the strain. “Then pull yourself together. Sector Seven is a military. He understands how militaries function. He will fall to command.”

“I am not certain he remains committed to the organization,” Priam said, carefully, as if negotiating for a hostage. “He blames us for what happened to Ayui.”

“He is fifteen years old. Children are naturally inclined to follow authority.”

“His brain was enhanced in utero, drastically accelerating his mental maturation.”

“He will fall to command!” Margaret snapped. Her shout ricocheted between the catacomb’s narrow limestone walls.

Hector frowned. “Just be sure not to look into his eyes.”

He righted himself, knees popping, and knocked three times. Met with silence, he wrapped his fingers around the scuffed brass doorknob. It was freezing.

“This is Lieutenant General Priam,” he said, hoping for an invitation he knew wouldn’t come. He looked at Margaret. She gave a prompting nod. “I am coming in.”

He gently nudged the door. It cracked open, and a blade of light sliced into the corridor. Peering through the gap, the first thing he noticed was the frost. It was everywhere, mosaics of crusty patches painting the walls, ceiling and floor, glazing the cherry blossom petals sprinkled atop a small cypress coffin. White candles surrounded the coffin, ghostly flames bobbing in the fog. Pewter statues of winged young women overlooked from either side, and a heart-shaped mask was propped atop a pinewood stool behind it. Colorful tribal patterns branched from the mask’s massive eyes. He recognized it as the engagement mask formerly belonging to Ayui.

Not until the door was fully open did he notice the young man kneeling back-turned before the coffin. He was unnaturally still, like a corpse suspended on strings. Aside from his tattered gray blindfold and the ethereal scarlet drop-earring dangling from his left ear, his entire outfit, from his Moto jacket to the skin-tight glove on his right hand, was jet black.

“This is Lieutenant General Priam, I—” Static zapped his tongue, and Margaret broke into a coughing fit behind him. He’d forgotten Thanatos was nearby. Swallowing prickly saliva, he took a few cautious steps inside. Margaret sidled next to him as soon as there was room, clunky boots thunking. The young man didn’t react to their approach. Hector saw no signs of breathing, not so much as a muscle spasm. If he didn’t know better, he would assume the boy was dead. “How are you holding up?” he said.

He waited for a reply, but none came. The quiet was thick enough to taste, a slick, buttery gob lodged in the bottom of his throat. He nearly jumped when he heard the door squeak behind him. It had begun to close. Eyes unblinking, he craned his arm back and stopped it.

“Easy,” he said. “I need you to acknowledge my presence. Your little sister’s death destabilized you. I must confirm you are of sound mind.”

Still no response. The silence was so complete he could hear his heartbeat, clanging in his ears like funeral bells. “Talk to me,” he pleaded, inching his hand toward his white magnum. He flicked its holster’s latch with his thumb and wrapped his fingers around the gun’s grip. Its barrel hummed and heated, and white mist that smelled like acacia flowers drifted from its chamber.

The Reaper finally spoke. “Have you come to pay respects to Ayu? If you came to pay respects to Ayu, I’ll forgive the intrusion.”

Priam released his weapon and exhaled. “I was ordered by General Dodger to inform you that you are needed,” he said.

“So you did not come to Ayu’s memorial to pay your respects. You’re here to request a favor of me while I am grieving. Did I state that fairly?”

Things were taking a turn south.

“I have already paid my respects to your little sister,” Hector said.

The Reaper’s voice was calm and steady, even as a dagger. “The man at fault for her death believes a brief attendance is sufficient to express remorse.”

Priam felt like punching himself. He’d walked right into that. “I will visit again,” he said.

The silence returned. He tried to come up with something that would untangle the knot in their discourse. He didn’t have much time. Margaret wouldn’t stay quiet forever. He didn’t know what sort of face she was making, but the discontent radiating from her was piercing.

“That will be all, Hector,” the Reaper said. “I have no interest in Jack’s games. Now that Ayu is gone, you lack the leverage to make me play them.”

Margaret clenched her fists hard enough to make her gloves squeak. “Get over yourself,” she said. “We have all lost loved ones to terrorists. Until Sector Seven puts a stop to the Conflict, we will continue to lose them. You have been given ample time to grieve. More would be unfair. Your little sister held no greater value than anyone else’s.”

Priam glanced wide-eyed his superior, eyes breaking from Zenith for the first time.

“No greater value, you say?” The boy’s tone was just as calm as before. That the rebuke didn’t seem to agitate him made Hector all the more nervous. “I am the most important person in this cursed world. Ayu is the most important person to me. Her value is tremendous.”

Margaret snorted. “I was not aware Sector Seven’s Reaper possessed such arrogance.”

“Pharaohs are psychologically incapable of arrogance,” Zenith said. “My analysis is objective. I’m the most important person in the world, because I’m the only person who can save the world. Nobody else can save the world, because nobody else can see the Bead.”

“The Bead?” Hector said, grateful for a chance to redirect the conversation.

“It’s directly above you. It’s directly above everyone. Look up, and you’ll find it exactly one inch out of reach. Were you to extend your arm, it would rise, consistently remaining one inch from your fingertips, tantalizingly close, but impossible to grasp.”

Hector felt the overwhelming urge to look up, but that would mean letting Zenith out of his line of sight, and he wasn’t willing to take the risk a second time.

“Don’t be afraid,” the Reaper said, as if he’d read Priam’s mind. “This is an experiment. Now that I’ve informed you of the Bead, I’m hoping you’ll be able to see it.”

Against his better judgement, Hector looked up. In his peripheral, he saw Margaret doing the same. “There is nothing,” he said. He didn’t know whether to feel relieved or nervous. Seeing a bead would’ve come as a shock and opened the door to a thousand questions, most of which he wouldn’t be offered an answer to. But Zenith never lied. There was, without a doubt, something tremendously dangerous hovering above him.

“Ask your Spirit Contacts for assistance,” the assassin said. “Hades is a lesser god, and EA’s Holiness runs through Michael’s veins. They might be able to see it.”

Priam’s eyes glazed as he entreated his Contractors to augment his vision. The ceiling exploded into colorful texture. Grooves in the frosty wood appeared vividly exaggerated, as if they’d been carved with a broadsword. Shades of brown he didn’t recognize revealed blotches where too much varnish had been applied and bruises where it had been forgotten.

“I do not see it,” he said, promptly returning his focus to the young man.

“Disappointing.” The Reaper didn’t sound disappointed. He didn’t sound anything. “It’s been getting bigger. Darker, too. You’ll be able to see it soon enough. Everyone will.”

Margaret interjected. “We do not have time to listen to your drivel. Come with us now.”

“No time?” Zenith said. “You’re right about that.” Silence descended again. She tapped her foot and looked at her watch in a condescending manner as she waited for him to continue.

Receiving no elaboration, she declared, “That was not a request.”

“What a noisy woman you are,” Zenith said. “Is it not obvious I’m trying to concentrate? Just because my brain runs thousands of trains of thought simultaneously doesn’t mean I can’t be distracted. I have an important promise to keep, and fulfilling it demands more planning than you can fathom. Tell Jack I won’t humor his whims. There’s too much at stake.”

Hector saw Margaret’s shoulders tremble. She opened her mouth, likely to say something they would both regret, so he interjected before she could get a word out. “This is important,” he said. “General Dodger has located a Saint Candidate.”

“Deal with it yourself. I have no reason to kill a Saint Candidate.”

“It is not that simple,” Priam said. “Intel suggests the Candidate is being targeted by—”

“Enough!” Margaret spat. “General Dodger cannot be kept waiting. Accompany us to the briefing. This is an order.”

“It seems you misunderstand your position,” the assassin said. “Orders are administered by the strong to the weak. They are obeyed, because disobedience begets violence.” He paused as if he thought she needed a moment to process the information. “In daytime, I’m the strongest member of Sector Seven next to Hector. At night, as it is currently, I become stronger than him as well. Since no-one is capable of inflicting violence upon me, your orders are meaningless.”

The General couldn’t take any more. She stormed up to him and reached for his shoulder.

“Don’t!” Hector said.

He didn’t call out in time. His superior grabbed the Reaper, his jacket squeaking as she squeezed. Priam took a slow step back. He was at the doorway, the hall just behind him. *Can I make it?* A question not worth asking. It wasn’t a matter of trying. It was a matter of doing. He needed to escape. All hell was about to break loose.

“General Dodger has summoned you,” Margaret said. She didn’t sound as confident as before. She sounded afraid. It was too late to be afraid. “I think you should hear him out,” she added, requesting rather than commanding. A futile courtesy. “Your sister is dead, but her death need not be in vain. If you help—”

“Silence,” the Reaper said. Margaret’s jaw snapped shut as if she’d taken an uppercut to the chin. The collision of her teeth echoed through the catacombs like a gunshot. Priam smelled blood collecting at her gums. “Don’t presume to voice your worthless thoughts. You forget your place. Both of you do.” Still facing the coffin, he pointed at the floor. “Lower your heads and crouch down. Prostrate yourselves before me.”

Something slammed Hector’s shoulders. His legs buckled like saplings. Green fog whooshed aside as his knees hammered the icy cobble. A shove to the back of his head carried it forward, and the ground seemed to rocket toward his face. Spinning stars filled his vision as his brow blasted the floor. His mouth popped open, and he gasped crosseyed.

He heard his magnums rattle and felt heat at his hips. Dark haze that smelled like wood rose gushed from his black gun’s chamber. The haze pooled into the poppy-scented green fog, and the catacombs smelled like a forest. He gathered his scattered thoughts with haste. *Hades. I entreat thine restraint. Do not offer him an excuse to draw Thanatos’s scythe.*

“You didn’t keep your word, Hector,” the boy said. His words hurt Priam’s ears. Sound was a knife on raw nerves. “You promised to protect Ayu, yet let the Artist gun her down.”

“Lieutenant General Priam was thousands of miles away at the time,” said Margaret. She sounded just as groggy as Hector felt. “Surely you did not expect him to stay by her side every second of every day. He is General Dodger’s bodyguard.”

Hector heard a bang. Hot, lumpy liquid struck his cheeks, eyes, and lips, flooding into his mouth, down his throat, up his nose, and into his sinuses. Squinting through the scarlet, metallic-tasting goo, he saw that Margaret’s left arm had been shredded to bone. Pure, dull ivory. Stripped of skin, muscle, nerves, and blood, like the limb of a corpse decades passed.

“I told you not to speak,” the Reaper said calmly.

“My arm,” Margaret said, staring wide-eyed at her arm. “What did you. How.” She shook her shoulder, and the skeletal appendage clacked limply. “Your vagary?”

“I’m certain you heard me,” the Reaper said. “My command couldn’t have been clearer. It wasn’t complicated. I merely asked for quiet.” He sighed. It sounded mechanical, like gas seeping from a valve. “This is why I dislike talking to people. Nobody listens. Nobody learns.”

“B-bastard,” Margaret said.

He released his telekinetic hold on her. She clambered to her feet, stumbled a few woozy steps forward, and drew her pistol. Hector tried to tell her to run. He felt vibrations in his vocal muscles, sound climbing his throat, his tongue molding words, but nothing left his mouth.

He watched powerless as she took aim at the back of the assassin’s head. She was a meter away, point blank. She couldn’t miss. “Die,” she huffed, then wrenched the trigger. One shot wasn’t enough to satisfy her. Sparks and gunpowder smoke splashed as she fired again. Again and again. Again and again and again. She kept yanking the trigger long after her magazine clicked dry. By the time she let up, the gunshots’ echoes had dissipated.

“Impossible,” she panted, teary-eyed. The assassin was alive and well. His fist was clenched, reached behind his head. He gradually opened his hand. Bullets fell one by one, pinging and rolling along the cobble. “Monster,” she whispered and dropped to her knees.

“Exactly,” Zenith said. “I am a wicked monster, a terrible, evil villain.” Upon dropping the last bullet, he climbed to his feet. “I know no mercy and ruthlessly devour anyone who dares tread my territory. Men lack the power to deter my rampages. Heroes die trying to slay me. Their sons seek vengeance and too perish by my mocking hand. I feast on their virtuous corpses until I’ve had my fill, then trample the gory remnants, obliterating skull and bone.”

He turned for the first time. His face was impossibly beautiful, celestial, preternaturally gorgeous, how Hector imagined an angel’s face might look had he not met angels in the flesh. He lowered his gaze, focusing instead on Zenith’s chest. The young man was wearing his blindfold for now, but he knew how fast the boy was. A split-second of eye contact was all it would take.

“And yet I am doomed to fall,” the Reaper continued. “Fate dictates monsters must never win, regardless of their might, regardless of how vigorously they struggle. Those are the rules.” He reached for his right hand. Hector’s stomach knotted when he saw the boy pinch the lip of his black glove. “My ambition is enormous in scope. Pursuing it, I will exert more effort, experience more pain, than you can fathom. If fate operates as I believe it to, that pain and effort will be for naught.” He slowly peeled his glove off, fingers slipping free sequentially. “I will fail to keep my promise not due to ineptitude, but because the universe at its inception decided that I would fail. I was always going to try, and I was never going to succeed.”

The glove left his thumb, and his right hand was free. It was a shade paler than his left, dull as if cast under moonlight. The lines on his palm were inverted, sloped diagonally downward from his pinkie rather than his index finger.

“You attacked me with lethal force. I respond to every provocation in kind.” He cracked his knuckles one by one using his thumb. “The Gods decided that this is where your story ends. It’s your fate to die here.” He crouched half an arm’s length in front of her. “But I want to believe fighting fate isn’t an exercise in futility. Prove it can be conquered, and I’ll let you go.”

“How can I prove that?”

The Reaper reached toward Margaret’s head. “Endure my touch, my touch that should be impossible to endure.” She stared at his looming hand, lips shaky. It was a meteor, huge enough to snuff the sky and crush the sun, and it was headed straight for her. Unable to coax her legs into moving, she leaned back, farther and farther, so far her spine nearly snapped.

There was no escape. The Reaper pressed his palm against her brow. Her terror was so palpable Hector could hear her thoughts. The hand was colder than he imagined cold could be. Ice squeezed his heart with clammy tendrils. His thoughts froze. His body froze. The room froze. The headquarters froze. Cites froze. Oceans froze. The planet froze. The heavens froze.

“Go to Hell, human,” Margaret said through chattering teeth.

The Reaper’s voice was serene. “No, mage. Hell is coming to me.”

The General collapsed with a thud. Hector looked away. He didn’t need to see the body. He knew what Death Touch did to people.

Zenith’s footsteps made no sound as he headed for the door, stepping over Margaret’s corpse without sparing it a glance.

“Let’s get this over with. Whom does Jack want me to kill?”

Priam scolded himself for failing to monitor the flow of the conversation. Everything always came back to Ayui. When speaking with Zenith, she inevitably became a topic of discussion. It was imperative to predict how and when it would happen. Slighting her, intentionally or not, was a costly mistake.

*Fate?* Priam wondered. He had heard the question. He understood it. It was just so extraneous, so inappropriate, so asininely irrelevant, that he couldn’t believe it had been asked.

“My arm doesn’t hurt,” Margaret said, too distracted to address the question. “It got blown off. Shouldn’t it hurt?”

“Answer me,” Zenith said. “Do you believe in fate?”

“I don’t?” Margaret said, the inflection of her tone implied she didn’t plan to say more.

“How about you, Hector? I’d like you to elaborate.”

The question demanded a thorough answer. Nothing less than the utmost thoughtfulness would be accepted. Hector found thoughtfulness difficult. Fear had dulled his wit. Words and phrases scraped around his head like nails in a jar. An imaginary clock ticked all the while. Time wasn’t his friend. He couldn’t make the Reaper wait. Why didn’t he run when he had the chance?

“I think fate is what people make it,” he said.

The answer had been forced. He wasn’t even sure if he believed it.

“Narrow minded and arrogant,” said Zenith. “Created beings—no, a subclass of created beings—control destiny? Men are too pitiful to lift this meagre world’s curse. The idea they bear influence over the cosmos is laughable.”

Hector had given the wrong answer. “You misunderstand,” he said.

“I didn’t misunderstand a thing. I never misunderstand anything. My interpretations are always correct. Everything I say and do is correct. You have no license to claim otherwise.”

The assassin began to peel the black glove from his right hand. “Fate is an agglomeration of individual instances of cause and effect,” he said, glove shedding one finger at a time. “It’s an infinite assortment of stones, perpetually in motion, constantly colliding. With each collision, momentum, force, and energy rebalance. Directions, velocities, and accelerations change. Those rebalances and changes are not random. They adhere to the laws of physics. They are predictable and thus inevitable.”

The last finger left his glove. His right hand was a shade paler than his left, dull as if cast under moonlight. The lines on his palm were inverted, sloped diagonally downward from his pinkie as opposed to his index finger.

“What are you going to do?” Priam said.

The Reaper slowly reached into his jacket and retrieved a golden coin. “I’m going to give Margaret a choice. If she makes the wrong one, I will kill her.”

“Kill me?” the woman said. She had lost a lot of blood. She would die soon without aid.

“You have two options,” Zenith said, holding the coin up. “Flip this coin, and call heads or tails. I promise not to take action that might influence the outcome.” His hand twitched, and the coin vanished. “Or, you can trust in me to act in your best interest.” Still facing away, he extended his arms in opposite directions, fists clenched. “Select the hand you believe I am holding the coin in. I’ll tell you right now, I’m holding it in my left.”

“If I know you’re holding it in your left, how is this a game?” Margaret asked.

“I’m only telling you it’s in my left. I’m not offering proof. I could be lying. It could be that I want you to choose my left, when it’s really in my right, because I desire to kill you.” He paused, offering time for the General to process her options. “Which will it be? Will you place your faith in fate, or in me?”

“The coin is in your right hand,” Margaret said, faster than Hector assumed she would.

“Are you sure?” Zenith asked. “This is the biggest decision you will ever make.”

“It’s in your right hand,” Margaret repeated.

A lengthy silence. “How unfortunate,” the Reaper said. He opened both hands. The coin fell from his left. The green fog sucked it in, and it clanged against the cobble. “I told you it was in my left. You should’ve trusted me. Do I not have a reputation for my honesty? It’s partly because of unreliable imbeciles like you that I face such insurmountable odds.”

Margaret clambered to her feet and drew her pistol. Hector remained pinned. Zenith was allowing her to move. Priam tried to tell her to run, but found himself unable to speak. He felt sound bubbling up his throat, his tongue molding words, but nothing left his mouth.

“You are useless,” Zenith said. “Uselessness is a dire sin for beings lacking inherent value. You, along with everyone yet living in this cursed world, are my tools. Tools that function improperly are a hindrance. My work mustn’t be hindered. I have an important promise to keep.”

She woozily took aim at the back of his head. Point blank distance. She couldn’t miss. “You will not be keeping any promises.” She fired. Once wasn’t enough. Sparks flashed as she yanked the trigger again, again and again, again and again and again. She yanked even after the magazine clicked dry, pungent gunpowder smoke curling from the muzzle.

“I have an ambition substantial in scope,” Zenith continued, alive and well, still facing away. His fist was clenched, reached behind his head. He gradually opened his hand. Bullets fell one by one, pinging along creases in the cobble. “Pursuing it, I will exert more effort, experience more pain, than you can fathom. If fate operates as I believe it to, that pain and effort will be for naught. I will fail not because of my own ineptitude, but because the universe determined at its inception that I would fail. I was always going to try, and I was never going to succeed.”

“Monster,” she whispered, allowing her pistol to fall.

“Exactly,” he said. “I am a wicked monster. I’m a terrible, evil villain.” He dropped the last bullet and turned toward her for the first time. “I requested your perspective because I want to be wrong. I want to believe fighting fate isn’t an exercise in futility. Hector said fate is what men make it. Prove that to me. Conquer fate. Endure my touch, my touch that should be im possible to endure.”Rising to his feet, he reached for Margaret’s head. She stared at it, knees shaky. It was a meteor big enough to crush the sun, and it was headed straight for her. Unable to coax her legs into moving, she leaned back, farther and farther, so far her spine nearly snapped.

Through clenched teeth she said, “Go to Hell, human.”

The Reaper pressed his palm against her brow. Her terror was so palpable Hector could hear her thoughts. The hand was colder than he imagined cold could be. Ice entombed his heart and squeezed with clammy tendrils. His thoughts froze. His body froze. The room froze. The headquarters froze. Cites froze. Oceans froze. The planet froze. The heavens froze. Darkness descended, and he heard only the Reaper’s words. “No, mage. Hell is coming to me.”

The assassin began to peel the black glove from his right hand. “Fate is an agglomeration of individual instances of cause and effect,” he said, glove shedding one finger at a time. “It’s an infinite assortment of stones, perpetually in motion, constantly colliding. With each collision, momentum, force, and energy rebalance. Directions, velocities, and accelerations change. Those rebalances and changes are not random. They adhere to the laws of physics. They are predictable and thus inevitable.”

“What are you going to do to me?” Margaret said.

“I’m going to give you a chance to fight fate. I want to believe fighting fate isn’t an exercise in futility. Hector said fate is what men make it. Prove that to me. Conquer fate. Endure my touch, my touch that should be im possible to endure.”Rising to his feet, he reached for Margaret’s head. She stared at it, knees shaky. It was a meteor big enough to crush the sun, and it was headed straight for her. Unable to coax her legs into moving, she leaned back, farther and farther, so far her spine nearly snapped.

Margaret doubled down. Not that it mattered. She was as good as dead anyway.

The staticky air that accompanied it was so cold it burned.

He pushed the door shut. “It is at most -40º Fahrenheit in there,” he said. He looked at his superior through one eye, praying she would reconsider things, but she showed no sign of it. “I am going to open it fully so the temperature equalizes faster.” It would be like ripping off a bandaid. “Brace yourself.”

The door’s hinges yelped as he whipped it open. Sub-zero static crashed into the hall, stabbing his cheeks, pinching his arms and neck, clawing up his nostrils like tiny spiders. He hacked, and it scraped down his throat, sapped the moisture from his tongue. His stinging eyes snapped shut as if blasted by floodlights. He scrubbed them with his forearm, desperate to accelerate their acclimation to the bitter atmosphere. He was wide open.

Part 2 April First Chapter

April stopped outside the rooftop door to catch her breath. Fifteen flights of stairs had left her legs and chest feeling like icy metal. Her bare feet burned, carved to crimson ribbons by the orange juice glass she’d dropped during the Reaper’s telepathic declaration of war. She took the knob, but couldn’t convince her hand to twist it. Her instincts shrieked at her to turn back. Leave this place, they urged her. Go back to your comfy bed. Cuddle with Sora. Pretend you didn’t hear a thing. Pretend the world isn’t about to end.

But she couldn’t pretend. After his message to humanity terminated, Zenith had contacted her directly. *Come to me,* *April Augustine,* he’d said. *Come alone to the rooftop.*

She clutched a fistful of her silky purple nightgown and squeezed until her fingers turned white. Three years ago, back at her village, she’d succumbed to cowardice. She had sensed that monster, Anathema, approaching from the forest. Deep down, she’d known that if she didn’t run into those dark woods, meet the interloper head-on, the people most important to her would suffer. She had also known the threat was more than she could handle alone. She’d known that if she fought him, she would die. The thought was too terrifying. She had listened to her intuition, retreated with her husband, and watched the vampire obliterate her home.

She sniffled hard, fighting back cold tears. As a member of the anti-terrorist army, Sector Seven, she’d witnessed tragedy after tragedy. They were all the same, planned by a cell’s higher-ups, executed by useful idiots. They surgically destroyed targets, inadvertently sending ripples of misery and fear through the populace. It was easy to find and terminate useful idiots. The higher-ups, not so much. They slithered from bunker to bunker, using their followers’ corpses for cover.

The tragedy about to unfold would be of unprecedented scope, with ripples spanning the globe. The man on the other side of the door, the man responsible for orchestrating it, was alone, unguarded by useful idiots. Like at her village, she had a chance to pre-empt the catastrophe. She could save the people she loved. She could protect the world. She could redeem herself.

She released the knob and slapped her cheeks as if to shake away grogginess. She needed to pump herself up, get some adrenaline to chase the fear away. If she let this opportunity slip, she wouldn’t get another one. Nobody would. Zenith would disappear and watch his play unfold from the darkness. Since he was a Pharaoh, it would be impossible to find him.

She rolled her sleeves and tore her nightgown along its lower seam, expanding her legs’ range of motion. She needed to eliminate the Reaper before her husband arrived. He was too soft. He wouldn’t be able to kill his friend. He’d try to talk her out of it. Her comrades in Hellfire Squad could show up any time, too, and she had no idea how they would react. Even if they kept their cool, they wouldn’t be able to change his mind. He planned to bring about the apocalypse. Words wouldn’t shake his resolve. This would come to blows eventually.

She curled her stinging feet into the expanding puddle of warm blood. As a half-fairy, she didn’t need a sigil to use nature magic. She could attack the moment she saw him. Cast primus illium. No, oxyl minnitu. Turn him into a beautiful flower. She mouthed the incantation. “Oxyl minnitu. Oxyl minnitu. Oxyl minnitu. Oxyl minnitu. Oxyl minnitu.” She’d used the spell a million times. Never on a person, but the effect would be the same.

She took a deep breath and shoved. The door flew open, and needles of pressurized wind flooded in, jabbing her eyes and lips. Blinking through the pain, she scanned the rooftop for life. The sky was overcast, and it was hard to parse through the darkness. At first, she saw nobody. A second scan also revealed nothing. She wanted to be relieved. She wanted to believe she had the wrong place. It would’ve been a lie, though. She could sense him. He was out there. She took a step outside and winced as sharp gravel dug into her foot gashes, stamping the dusty stones red.

The Reaper appeared to her so abruptly she hiccuped in surprise. He stood back-turned, still as a corpse, on the rooftop’s edge. She opened her mouth, willed it to chant, but the words wouldn’t come. Terror seized her chest like a giant hand, squeezing the air from her lungs. Her throat was a vacuum sound couldn’t cross, corked by her dry puffy tongue. Before her stood the most dangerous man on the planet. She’d known him to be the moment they met. Dangerous men didn’t scare her, she’d thought. Working for Sector Seven, she was around them all the time.

She’d been wrong about Zenith Pharaoh. She’d made the mistake, the terrible mistake, of assuming he was a man at all. In the night, with his vagary active, the blindfolded assassin’s true self was revealed. He was a god, a ruthless deity who stood above mortals, judging them with cold impartiality. His decision that the world must end had been made through divine reasoning. Even if she’d had the power to oppose him, she had no right to.

The ethereal scarlet gem hanging from his left ear twinkled as he turned to face her. He slid his blindfold to his forehead, and her will to fight evaporated. Forget the world, she thought. The apocalypse might not be so bad. If she hid under her bed, it would pass like a storm.

He opened his eyes gradually, as if they were weighted shut. She knew she ought to look away. Her friend Kallen had warned her the Reaper had God’s Eyes. His scarlet irises could suck the mind from the body, trapping a victim’s consciousness inside a hell scape he controlled. *Look away*, she urged herself. *Look away, look away, look away.* She couldn’t look away. Those eyes were black holes, sucking all the life and warmth and goodness from whatever was nearby. They drew her in like a tractor beam. Their gazes connected, and the black patterns in his irises began to shift: expanding, contracting, twisting, turning, winding, rotating like leaves on water.

\*BUMPBUMP\*

She gasped as her heart skipped two beats. It felt like something was being wrenched out of her. She grabbed her chest with both hands and squeezed, letting out an exaggerated wheeze. Numbness spread to her limbs. Black spots dotted her vision. She was about to pass out.

“No!” she shouted, slapping her hands over her face hard enough to mark her cheeks red. She wouldn’t go down so easily. Her thoughts were jumbled, and her heart felt like it was on fire, but the spell was broken. She could still fight. Rolling her eyes down to break their alignment with Zenith’s, she screamed a warrior’s cry and charged, bloody feet stamping the dusty gravel.

The distance between them closed in an instant. She stopped on her heel and pivoted into a spin kick. Moving only his arm, he caught her foot and held it delicately, as if he were cradling a kitten. She withdrew in a flash, wrenched her hips sideways, and threw a second spin kick from the opposite direction. Her heel rocketed toward his temple, her leg scything the air, nightgown fluttering behind like a butterfly wing.

Blood splashed from her serrated soles as he blocked with the back of his hand, again moving only one arm. It felt like she’d kicked a slate of icy steel. The impact vibrated down her leg, up her spine, between her teeth like the reverberations of a clashing gong. It hurt, but the humiliation was worse. She knew what he was capable of. He was treating her like a toddler.

She clicked her tongue, lowered her leg, aligned herself for another strike, then froze. His fist hovered an inch from her face. She hadn’t seen his arm move. One moment it was at his side, the next it was close enough to kiss. She stared at it, crosseyed, breath lodged in her chest. A single bead of sweat, cold in the nighttime air, slid from her hairline, down her cheek to her chin.

He coiled his index finger against his thumb, slowly, as if knocking an arrow. There was a bang like a gunshot as it shot forward, its tip striking her between the eyes. Light exploded in her skull, and her head snapped back with enough force to knock her from her feet. She pinwheeled backward, knees and elbows scraping the gravel, and hit the wall with a shuddering thud.

The strength seemed to drain from her body. A shimmering strand of drool dipped from the corner of her lips as she lay slouched against the cement, groaning a steady drone, hands limp on her lap, one leg out, the other tucked under her bottom. Her chin dropped, her head too heavy to lift, and she tasted blood from a gash she’d bit into her tongue.

“That was too hard, huh?” Zenith said. She barely heard him through the ringing in her ears. His voice sounded vague and distant, as if she were listening from underwater. “When you’re as strong as I am, it can be difficult to fine-tune touch.” He raised his hand above his head and examined it as if it were a foreign object. “It’s like measuring inches with a meter stick.”

April might’ve called him cocky, but she knew Pharaohs were psychologically incapable of arrogance. He wasn’t talking himself up. He was objectively acknowdledging a fault.

Salty blood spilled from her tongue as she stretched it to the side of her mouth, severing the strand of saliva. The spinning stars were dissipating from her vision, and her focus gradually settled, going from quadruple, to double, to a blurry normal. She fluttered her eyelids, each blink stripping a layer of fog, until the world again appeared crisp and vivid.

As the haze cleared from her mind, the sense of humiliation returned. She’d never felt so inferior, not even to Anathema. For the past three years, she’d done nothing but train in the art of combat. Sector Seven Academy’s regimen was utterly grueling. It left her so sore some days she couldn’t get out of bed. She had been confident in her skills, thought she could compete with the best of them. Her former comrade wasn’t even taking her seriously.

She gritted her teeth, tears of anger bubbling in her eyes. He wouldn’t get away with making her feel like this. He would pay for underestimating her. Pay for it with his life.

The star-shaped birthmark on the side of her neck glowed. A warm tingling sensation in her heart overflowed, pouring along her arms and legs, into her fingers and toes. Power swelled inside her chest, a firm pressure that begged to be released. Her head felt hot, ears burning red.

Her voice oozed sticky distain as she said, “

These eyes of mine have already ensnared you.

He was toying with her. She was like a child, a toddler throwing a tantrum. He flicked her forehead and she shot backward. She wondered what sort of face he was making. Was it pitiful, mocking?

“I could use your help, fairy,” he said, snapping her from her trance.

“My help?” she said. A voice in her head told her not to engage him in conversation. She didn’t need to know the details of his plan. She just had to kill him, kill him and be done with it.

“I don’t plan to destroy the world,” he said. “In fourteen days, three hours, twenty-one minutes, and six seconds, the world will destroy itself.”

The pain in her feet dissipated. “Kallen told me you like to speak cryptically,” she said, glancing down. They were still bleeding. A sinking feeling welled as she realized her mind had been ensnared. “I’m not a fan of it.”

“I was being literal,” he said, still without emotion. “In roughly two weeks, a cataclysm will ravage the planet. Only a handful of humans will survive.”

“How could you possibly know that?” she said.

He cocked his head at her as if it were a stupid question. “Were you unaware of it? All the other fairies seemed to know. They’ve retreated into the earth, buried themselves very, very deep. Most of the other immortals I’ve been tracking have done the same.” He cupped his chin in thought. “Your human half must have stifled your intuition.”

“I’m not so sure,” she said. “I’ve felt tremendously uneasy for some time. I’d chalked it to my concern for Sora and our battle with Anathema.” She smirked despite knowing it was ill-advised to taunt the Reaper. “And now you’re acting up. There’s a lot of stress in my life.”

“It seems you’re unconvinced,” he said calmly. “I’ll show you what’s in store for us.”

He tapped his foot, and bright light ripped the night away. She blinked her stinging vision clear to find they were no longer on SSA's rooftop, instead hovering above an unfamiliar city. It was daytime, and everything was peaceful. Women with strollers walked side-by-side, gossiping about new neighbors. Workers in reflective vests and blue hardhats pummeled the street adjacent with jackhammers, their construction walled-off by plastic orange fencing. On the marble stairs of a congressional building, a reporter was interviewing a politician, his security detail keeping a small crowd of journalists with flashing cameras at bay.

“It will start with a clang,” Zenith said.

Before she could ask what he meant, a deafening ring like a triangle hit with a mallet tore through the sky. She clamped her ears, breathing heavy as its vibrations bounced inside her skull. The people around her were staggering, groaning, hands pressed against the sides of their heads.

“Next comes the wind,” the Reaper continued. Even though she couldn’t hear beyond the ringing in her ears, his words were crystal clear.

Wind arrived like an explosion. It struck the eastern end of the city first. Buildings caved sideways, glass shattering, hunks of stone and metal appearing to be dismantled midair, breaking into smaller and smaller pieces until they were little more than dusty gravel. The wind decimated skyscrapers and apartment complexes, flung cars, peeled trees apart. Pedestrians in its path were sheered to bleeding stumps, organs liquified, before disappearing altogether.

The tempest was over before she realized it, having passed through her in the manner of a hologram. Scanning the city’s remains, she counted four survivors. Through sheer luck, they had been positioned just right when the blast had struck. Most were frozen in shock, dusty from head to toe. One small boy was wandering deliriously, holding half a teddy bear by one arm.

April gulped. Her tongue felt dry as sandpaper. “So some people will survive,” she said, trying to inject hints of hope into her tenor.

“It’s just getting started,” Zenith said, still sounding calm and impartial.

He began to rise, and she followed. She couldn’t say how high they floated, but it was high enough to make the city limits clear. Everything appeared to have melted together. The once vibrant metropolis, home to hundreds of thousands, was now a lifeless, misshapen, gray smear among greenish-brown patches of what she assumed used to be farmland.

The light dimmed as a shadow washed over her, drawing her attention again to the east. What appeared at first to be a brown wall, moving uniformly forward, was approaching fast. As it drew nearer, she detected an undulating sort of fluidity to it, a wobbling unsteadiness that gave it an inward tilt. “Mud,” she said under her breath.

“Water and earth,” Zenith said. “The oceans relocating themselves, collecting dirt as they surge continentally in waves up to eight miles high.”

The wave whooshed past beneath them, consuming everything from horizon to horizon, its bottom charging like a vanguard of elephants, its leaning crest a guillotine blade. The liquid dirt in its wake wobbled, then settled, solid parts gradually sinking. Not a trace of the city nor the farmland remained. She looked around desperately for survivors, any struggling glimmer of hope for the future, but there were none. Anyone unfortunate to survive the wind had been crushed.

She felt tears gathering in her eyes. “There’s a chance someone, somewhere got lucky,” she said, though she didn’t believe it.

“It’s not done yet,” Zenith said.

“What more could possibly happen?” she asked angrily.

He pointed upward, drawing her attention away from the devastation. The sky was burnt-orange, glowing, the sun nowhere to be seen.

“Now the planet bakes,” he said.

She heard a loud hiss, like squid on an oiled skillet. Steam, so thick she couldn’t see her hand in front of her face, surged up like smoke from a train. She found herself coughing even though none of it entered her lungs. Zenith was blocking the sensation, she knew. If he hadn’t, the steam would’ve boiled her alive.

“It takes a few hours to clear,” he said, though she couldn’t say from where.

She heard him snap his fingers. The steam vanished, and she found they had returned to the ground, a plain of dusty red clay, warm and brittle beneath her feet, so dry it had cracked into small plates. Not a trace of life existed in any direction. The sky still glowed burnt orange, the sun nowhere to be seen. Tiny white clouds had materialized. They moved unnaturally fast, jetting between the horizons like shooting stars.

“There’s no way,” she said, shaking her head in denial. “This can’t happen.”

“You’re trapped in my world,” he said from behind her. “It’s impossible to escape the prison of God’s Eyes. Stronger beings than you have tried and failed. I can keep you here as long as I want. Since you have no cards to play, I have no reason to deceive you.”

She turned to face him. “How do you know about it?”

He shook his head. “Answering further questions will in no way benefit me,” he said. “I will share no further details unless you agree to help me.”

“It should go without saying I have a vested interest in preventing something like this from happening,” she said. “I’m sure with the right spells we can—”

“I have no interest in your magic,” he interrupted. “Your role is not that of a fairy, it is that of Sora’s wife. As I told him, I will tell you. He is the one I have chosen to oppose me. He is the good guy mankind will turn to for protection from my tyranny.” He looked up as if envisioning a grand event. “He will lead an army to face me in a battle for this world’s fate. In that battle he will fall, and humanity will have no choice but to embrace my rule.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, wondering the point of ruling a dying world was. “What is it you want from me?” she asked.

“Sora is a Saint, a creature born once every 3,000 years,” he said. “Due to their rarity, there is very little data on their abilities. From what I observed of him, I’d say it’s safe to assume their power is tremendous. He defeated Anathema using word of mouth alone. If I am to face him, I need to know what else he is capable of.” He pointed at her. “Convince him to transform, and make him reveal his cards. After that, stay out of my way. I’ll ask no more of you.”

“You want me to betray my husband on your behalf?” she said.

“I want you to betray your husband on humanity’s behalf.”

She felt like laughing. “You can’t possibly expect me to agree to that, can you?”

“I merely wanted to give you a chance to do this the easy way,” he said.

“The easy way?”

“Sora will show me his hand,” he said. “If you refuse to extract the information from him, I’ll have to do it myself.” The coldness in his tone sent a chill down April’s spine. “Trust me when I say that is not ideal. My methods will be unpleasant for everyone involved.”

>Something more pristine about Z than Anathema, like on a whole different level

>Z proposes a match, lets A use spells, tries to defeat him, only spell that would work is one that would destroy half the planet. He needs her to have that much resolve. Can’t extract Fairy Iizons, though he tried because stone is an artifact made by a True God, has to be used naturally.

>>>Z explains Kallen is crying from betrayal, and we had an especially upsetting chat, Mary and Aaron were damaged during their battle at actor, and Sora will be out cold for a long while, Rebecca didn’t take kindly to the telepathy and so is struggling with asmodeus, so April’s squad mates aren’t coming. Hector and Jack will arrive eventually.

>>>At very beginning, Evelyn watches people writhing from telepathic spell, and a groggy soldier explains what was said.

Hector and Kallen

“I want Zenith dead now!” Dodger screeched for the thousandth time, spittle spraying all over the war-room’s round table, peppering classified documents and touch screens like sleet.

The General had gone mad. Every officer at the table could tell. They sent shifty glances to one another as if playing tag with their eyes, daring their peers to interject. If one spoke up, the others would back him. Somebody had to go first, though, and as the conference dragged, on it became clear there would be no volunteers.

Such cowards they were, Hector thought. The saggy old men in decorated suits belonged in a retirement home, not anywhere near the battlefield. They couldn’t kill a cockroach, let alone the most dangerous man on the planet.

“Should we not regroup first?” said a Major General through his mop of a mustache. Priam eyed him in disgust. The man was just as skinny as the clown sitting next to him was fat. Those sorry twigs he had for arms probably couldn’t even lift a gun.

A Brigadier General across the table who had managed to find coffee somewhere nodded. “We have to reorganize our forces. Our victory over the demon king Azazel came at great cost.”

Hector’s upper lip curled. OUR victory? They had played no role in it. It was the work of a Saint, assisted by one of SSA’s student squads. Nobody in the upper echelon had been informed of their engagement until the fight was already over.

The tea-drinking dotard was right, though. The Saint was out cold now. It wouldn’t wake up for ten days. Priam could either wait those ten days, listening to feeble skeletons bicker like idiots while his lunatic of a boss rampaged about, or he could take matters into his own hands.

He stood up abruptly, chair shooting out behind him, and slammed his palms down on the table, making a teacup rattle on its saucer. “I will go,” he declared. The officers stared at him like spooked rabbits. “Zenith called me out. I will accept his invitation.”

He clenched his fists to steel himself through the grating silence that followed. Everyone at the table knew it was a terrible idea. Hearing it aloud made it seem all the more awful. As the quiet dragged on, punctuated only by the ticking of a mounted clock, he began to hope someone would try to talk him out of it.

“Can you do it?” General Dodger said with a coldness that made Hector’s stomach tense.

“I can,” he said. It was a lie. Everyone knew it was a lie. Their skepticism was palpable, polluting the air like city smog. He wrapped his hands around the grips of his magnums and drew them halfway from their holsters. The guns were hot, painful to the touch even through his black leather gloves. “Michael and Hades will assist me,” he said, well aware that the heat meant his spirit contracts disapproved of his decision. “At the end of the day, Zenith is only human. He can not hope to compete with a lesser god and archangel.” The statement seemed to convince a few of his peers, though it did nothing to assuage his own doubts.

“I say give it a try,” the mustached Major General said with a nod.

His fat companion offered a more vigorous nod. “I approve as well,” he said with such confidence it seemed he considered the idea to have been his own.

General Dodger was the third to nod. His approval was the only Hector remotely cared about. Jack had been his patron long enough to warrant the modicum of respect. With his permission granted, there was nothing more to say. Priam released his magnums, now unbearably hot, and left the officers to squawk amongst themselves.

He was halfway to the door when Kallen darted in front of it, lab coat whooshing as she spread her arms wide to block him. He’d completely forgotten she was in the room. Despite being a Major General, and despite being more qualified than any of them to speak of Zenith, she hadn’t said a word during the meeting, just leaned arms-crossed against the wall, skulking like a shadow. Probably, she’d assumed they wouldn’t listen to a student.

“I can’t let you go,” she said. “Not now, not when you’re so clearly walking into a trap. I’m putting a plan together that I think has a decent chance of success. If you go off and die—”

“Die?” he interrupted. “I do not intend to die.”

“You’ll die!” she barked loud enough to silence the clucking officers. “You’ll die unless Sis-com decides otherwise. I can think of no reason he’d spare a man as dangerous as you.”

Hector had no idea how to proceed. It would take more than a verbal order to make her stand down. She didn’t consider herself a soldier, nor did he consider her to be one. She was a strategist, a scientist. Her rank served as a clearance badge. He took her shoulders, planning to shove her aside, released them immediately. Her bones seemed so delicate, like twigs that would snap under the slightest pressure. She looked up at him, clearly trying make a resolved face, but it only made her seem pitiful. Her eyes were like a wounded animal’s.

“I hate you,” she half-whispered. “You’re a pathetic man.” He couldn’t help but recoil. He’d never been spoken to with such disrespectful vitriol, not even by Zenith. “I’d considered you a dog, a dog too dumb to recognize the vileness of its master, a dog incapable of thinking for itself. I couldn’t fathom anyone with free will doing what you did to me in that chapel.”

He felt a knot tighten in his throat. He knew what she was referring to. General Dodger’s monster of a son had been set to marry her. The boy had drugged her, dragged her in front of the altar, attempted to rape her, and nearly killed her. Not only had Hector done nothing to help her, he took her knife, leaving her unable to defend herself. If Zenith hadn’t come, she’d have died.

“Sis-com told me you betrayed him,” she continued. “He said it’s because of your avarice he was forced to join Sector Seven, and it’s due to your neglect Ayui died.” Her eyes were shaky with tears. “I thought he was just making excuses. Dog or not, you struck me as one of the good guys. He was right, though. You’re a greedy man who thinks nothing of obligation.”

“I am obligated to follow the orders of my General,” he said. It was a flimsy excuse, and he felt weak for hiding behind it.

“You’re obligated to save the world,” she said. “If you, Michael, and Hades have a Saint backing you, our odds improve immensely. Be a good dog and sit until Sora wakes back up.”

Hector shoved her aside harder than he’d intended to, and she slammed the wall with a thud. He knees looked weak, about the crumple, but she stayed on her feet and dashed back in front of him. “Did that feel good?” she spat. “Shoving a defenseless girl?”

He grabbed her arms, picked her up like a pillow, and set her down behind him. She tried to get in his way again, but he flung the door open before she could.

“This is not for debate,” he said, stepping into the hall. “My mind is made up.”

He power-walked toward the armory, and she jogged after him. “You know damn well it’s impossible to beat him at night,” she said, coattails flapping like ribbons. “Your inability to break out of his cage proved his vagary is too powerful for Michael and Hades to combat.”

“Impossible is it?” he said. “If Zenith were here, he would scoff at you.”

“With the exception of opposing the True Gods, nothing is impossible,” she quoted. “Isn’t this one of those exceptions? Have you forgotten Who had a hand in him acquiring that vagary?”

A chill ascended Hector’s spine. He’d forgotten about Thanatos. If the True God decided to intervene, he was as good as dead. His pace slowed. The air had taken on a thickness that made his legs feel heavy. “Zenith intends to execute his plan unassisted. Though they are friends, He will not ask Thanatos for help.”

Kallen seemed to pick up on his hesitation. “Thanatos has been summoning Ayui’s soul to comfort Sis-com against his will. If our intel is accurate, He even revived him from the dead.” She hooked her arm around his elbow and pulled him to a stop. “From Sis-com’s perspective, we’re at mid-game, halfway to his climatic battle against mankind’s collective forces. Thanatos probably sees things the same way. He won’t let His pal die unless it’s on that final stage.”

She let out a surprised yelp as he forcibly resumed walking, dragging her stumbling along with him. The time for talk was over. Even if he’d had a counterargument, he knew it would get him nowhere. Kallen Paris was as persistent as she was intelligent. She would bombard him with clandestine logic artfully tailored to manipulate his emotions until he relented.

“You are just like Zenith,” he said, not realizing how poisonous the words were until they had left his mouth. She stopped in her tracks, and a cramping sensation squeezed his chest as he listened to his footsteps echo in the silence. He bit his bottom lip, drawing salty blood.

“Is there nothing I can say to convince you to stay?” she said softly.

He stopped outside the armory. “No. The best you can do is advise me.”

“Advise?” she said. The anger in her voice was palpable. “Advice would be wasted you.”

“Are you saying that out of frustration, or do you truly believe it?” he asked.

“

He could tell she was crying. A cramping sensation squeezed his If he turned back to console her, his heart would waver. If his heart wavered,

Kallen asks Hector about what tombstone he wants

If Hector goes alone, Z won’t use his vagary.

Everything felt surreal, as if each hall led to an execution chamber.

Synagoge of satan: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0BzmzYUZFyTg4aWNTNjZYcGZyNE0/edit?resourcekey=0-xuYKAEUTVnomJB\_8tpBhxg

April asks why me

Z tells April to get Sora to transform again

“Do you know where the other fairies are?” he said. The terror she’d felt disappeared, as if his voice had unlocked a dungeon in her heart.

She studied his face. There wasn’t a hint of malice on it. The question was harmless. “No idea,” she said honestly. There was no point lying to the Reaper. It was impossible to deceive his eyes. “The only fairy I know is my mother. I haven’t seen her since I was two.”

“They’re deep underground,” he said. “They buried themselves.” She squinted at him. “They’re not the only ones. Immortals of every species have taken shelter underground. From what I can tell, only vampires and the lesser gods can still be found on the surface.”

“Is that why you’ve chosen now to make an enemy of the world?” she asked. “Because there’s limited opposition?”

“Immortals have never been a threat to me,” he said, extending his hand. Her forearm shot up to protect her eyers as the air flashed bright red, sizzling like a road flare. She lowered it to find he was holding a monstrous scythe. “I have Thanatos’ blade, the only weapon in existence capable of slaying them. They go out of their way to avoid me.”

“Then why are you asking me about fairies?” she said, blinking the glare from her eyes.

“I was curious if you’ve felt the same sense of foreboding that led them to flee,” he said.

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As Ayui had been forewarned, the awakening of her Mind’s Eye started as an itch on the back of her head. The itch couldn’t be scratched, she’d been told. It came from her brain, not her skin. Trillions of micro-neurons, created by a spell cast on her *in utero,* were activating in unison. Her Portent would begin soon.

Ayui lay beneath a granny smith apple tree, her head resting on her adopted big brother’s lap. As per their morning routine, she hummed a lullaby he liked, the same one as always, while he studied a grimoire, memorizing sigils and incantations. She couldn’t say whether his desire to learn death magic came from a sense of duty or something else. He always tried his best to live up to the Pharaoh family’s expectations, making every effort to master the tools of their trade. This was a sword too heavy for him to wield, though. He wasn’t a mage. He never would be. He couldn’t cast kill spells, nor could he defend himself from them.

A mild breeze lolled. She took a deep breath of salty island air, and nuzzled her head against his stomach. A circling trio of gulls cried out to them from the cloudless blue sky, and she decided the cause of Zenith’s diligence was irrelevant. This was a chance to cuddle the boy with whom she was in love. She never felt so relaxed. She’d rather drink vinegar than stress herself out overthinking pointless matters.

“Do you find my interest in this stuff morbid?” he said without looking up from his book.

She stopped humming. It seemed he had figured out what was on her mind.

“A bit,” she said honestly. She was always truthful with him. It didn’t matter how painful or awkward the subject. Honesty and loyalty were the two most important traits in a relationship. She would sooner die and spend an eternity burning in Hell than betray him.

“Then I’ll explain myself,” he said. Paper rustled as he turned a page with his thumb. “Put simply, I suspect a thorough understanding of death magic will be necessary someday.”

“A hunch?” she said.

“A hunch,” he confirmed.

She nodded against his thigh. The issue was settled. Hunches had to be followed. Thanks to *in utero* magical enhancements, Pharaoh brains possessed processing powers rivaling quantum computers. Even though he didn’t have a drop of Pharaoh blood in him, he’d undergone the same procedures. His intuition wouldn’t lead him astray.

“I gleaned it from my Portent,” he added. He’d had his Portent two weeks ago. A mental explosion created an infinite matrix of causal probabilities, offering him a glimpse of the future. A unique vision came to every Pharaoh sometime between their fourth and fifth birthdays. Some were symbolic and difficult to interpret, but all were 100% accurate.

Unsettled because repeat every word, but Zenith didn’t say. His had greatly disturbed him. It must have led him to believe he had to learn death magic

Not born of a blood Pharaoh, but still received enhancements

That’s too bad. Their fate is unfortunate.

the next, he was carrying her piggyback-style up a flight of stairs. There were no walls, only the staircase, infinitely rising in a void, seeming to go nowhere. Below them, a pool of liquid darkness, like crude oil on water, was steadily rising.

She couldn’t move a muscle, and she couldn’t feel a thing. It was clearly hot, though. The back of her beloved’s neck was slick with sweat, and heat vapors wriggled in the air. The darkness was everywhere.

She could tell Zenith was exhausted. He swayed like a pendulum, panting with every step.

It was midmorning on Pharaoh island, and Ayui couldn’t have been comfier. She lay on a frilly pink blanket beneath a granny smith apple tree, knees tucked to her stomach, head resting on her adopted big brother’s lap. Liquid sunshine spilled through the branches to kiss her cheek as he stroked her long, feathery brown hair. She hummed for him, a lullaby he liked, taking deep breaths of cool, salty air between verses. She loved him. She was in love with him. He had promised her a happy future, no matter how many people he needed to kill to create it.

He had set his textbook on fairy genetics down and was gazing up at the towering statue of Azazel, the demon king who had led her family through the Cataclysm six thousand years ago. Ayui traced his folded batlike wings up to their hooked tips with her eyes, seeing his triangular chin and pointed ears. She didn’t look at his face, though. The third eye on his forehead seemed to stare back, making her feel cold and vulnerable. She lowered her gaze back to his feet and the mantra, “The world will always need assassins,” carved into the pedestal.

“Do you think the world will always need assassins?” said Zenith.

It didn’t surprise her that he’d asked the question already on her mind.

Cassandra misinterprets

Slane Beginning

Slane had just finished his millionth fingertip-pushup when Ayui and Zenith arrived at the granny smith apple tree, unrolling a white blanket to sit on. His daughter and adopted son planted themselves under the tree every day at 10:00 AM. He sat, and she lay on her stomach beside him, feet kicked up behind her. The boy fished a grimoire from his jacket and flipped it open, weaving his free hand through his sister’s long, feathery brown hair to caress the bare spot on the back of her sun dress. He was wearing a golden crown studded with colorful, expensive jewels. It was too big for him and frequently drooped down over his eye, forcing him to adjust it. Ayui opened a ziplock snack baggie that had been nested in the blanket and meekly slipped a sugar-coated grape into his mouth. As he ate, she hummed a gentle song for him, the same one she always did.

Watching out the corner of one snakelike eye, Slane frowned. Their routine was pointless, and he hated pointless things. Darts of salty island air whipped into his nose as he accelerated, knifing up and down so fast he didn’t appear to move. Zenith had no business learning death magic. He wasn’t a mage. He could neither cast kill spells, nor defend himself from them. That crown belonged in the treasury. Like everything else, someone had died over it.

“Show some respect,” he growled under his breath. Sure, the kids were only four. They hadn’t undergone torture training and therefore had yet to sour to the world. A little carefreeness was understandable. It didn’t justify immaturity, though. Thanks to magic in utero modifications, they had the minds of adults with mental processing speeds rivaling those of quantum computers.

He heaved a forceful exhalation, pectorals bulging like barrels, and sucked air in like a jet engine. The sugary scent of Ayui’s grapes made his mouth water. What a pointless confection. It had next to zero nutritional value. And what was with that song? It was too soft. It was like a lullaby. Midmorning was hardly an appropriate time to be humming lullabies.

He knew their behavior shouldn’t upset him. That he even noticed came as a surprise. He usually ignored kid. Odds were they’d die before age ten. Only graduates deserved his attention.

Darkness washed over him, the colossal shadow of his family’s patron deity’s monument. He craned his neck to look at the stone statue of the man with pointed ears, a triangular jaw, and hooked bat wings. The vertically-oriented third eye centered on its forehead stared back at him, as it always did, seeming to match his gaze no matter how he moved his head.

He curled his fingers into the sandy earth and accelerated, air whistling in his ears, grass parting around him like leaves under a helicopter. Azazel’s statue was a waste of space. The Saint had sealed him, Corson, and Gaap in purgatory 3,000 years ago. With all three demon kings gone, the era of the Unholy Trinity was over. Oaths of fealty were void. Maintaining the statue was a pointless waste of time and resources.

He stopped doing his pushups and spit a wad of thick saliva aside. The workout had been pointless. His capacity for muscular development had already been reached. It was physically impossible to increase his strength. Why had he been coming here every day to watch them? He gained nothing. There were more productive things he could be doing. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, making his veiny forearms bulge. Not understanding himself was worst of all.

Before he knew it, he found his eyes had floated back to his daughter. Maybe she was the problem. Watching her made him feel unfamiliar emotions. They were confusing emotions. He felt, for some frustratingly inexplicable reason, a sense of shame from them. She was a child. There wasn’t a sensual thing about her.

That wouldn’t always be the case, though. Analyzing her musculoskeletal features, he could predict exactly what she would look like as an adult—or, at least how adult-looking a Pharaoh female could become, as, due to in utero magical enhancements, they stopped physically aging immediately upon the completion of puberty, the time at which they were most flexible.

“Put it out of your mind,” a voice said.

Slane flopped over like a pancake. His face was red with embarrassment, an emotion he hated more than most others. He’d been caught in an act that, though he couldn’t say why, was shameful. Worse than that, he’d been caught off guard. In the Pharaoh line of work, being caught off guard meant death. He had nobody to blame for the mistake but himself. His father, Averice, head of the Pharaoh household, would accept no excuses.

“I apologize,” he said, shuffling onto his knees and staring at the ground.

“Ayui is not for mating,” Averice said, clearly more concerned about his son’s wandering mind than lack of vigilance. “She’s a child and your daughter.”

It was lust, then, Slane realized. “I could not help but visualize her as an adult. She will not grow much taller, but her eyes will be big, her bosom exceptionally ample, her skin healthy, and her face youthful and symmetrical, all indicators of fertility.”

“She’s a Pharaoh,” said the family head. “Pharaoh women are barren.”

“That may be,” said his son, “but I am still instinctually drawn to those features.”

Averice ran his hand through his trim hair, thumb aligned with a silver streak. “This could be problematic,” he said, giving a moment’s thought.

Auction Beginning

The auctioneer prodded mage #14141, “Ashley Alder,” along the stage with his cane. She was sniffling, eyes red and puffy, nose dribbling clear snot, blonde locks pinched down under her armpits as she hugged herself. Evelyn shook his head, smiling faintly. Twelve or not, she should have known better than to lose her composure. Aristocrats held no pity in their hearts. Her sad display would only serve to arouse the sadists among them. His gaze flickered between the politicians he knew to be most perverse. Their faces were scarlet, eyes clear as glass. They licked their lips, dabbed sweat from their faces with silk handkerchiefs, fidgeted with their bid cards, plump bellies squished against their opera boxes.

What disgusting creatures humans were. Evelyn liked to think he’d been different, not an unsightly slave to carnal wants. Men were more civil twelve thousand years ago, back when he’d turned, back when he’d been cursed. He slid his tongue along his gums, pricked it with his fangs and savored the coppery sting. His blood tasted decent, but not half as good as a mage’s, it being spiced with magic-channeling iizons.

“No fairies tonight,” the man seated across him said, beaked nose buried in the auction’s merchandise catalogue. He looked, dressed, and spoke like a depressed insurance salesman. “No angels, either. Gods I could go for a goblet of angel blood.”

“There hasn’t been an angel on the market, on *any* market, in six thousand years,” Evelyn said, “and all the pureblood fairies have hidden themselves underground. The Origin could blow any day now, and they sense it.” His friend knew as much. They’d had this conversation a dozen times. Jeeves liked to bitch. Six millennia of acquaintance had left Evelyn so accustomed he no longer found it annoying. “Not like hiding will do them any good,” he muttered.

The auctioneer cleared his throat, having finished the blonde’s introduction. “We’ll start the bidding at $15,000.” Patrons shot to their feet, whipping bid cards.

“$20,000,” Friday City’s portly mayor cried.

“$30,000,” an attorney Evelyn recognized from a billboard said.

The second prince of Angland waved his card high, armpit stain spreading. “$50,000.”

The first wares sold for the most, regardless of quality. “Humans are such impatient creatures,” Jeeves mumbled. Ice clicked as he took a sip of scotch. “What’s the rush?"

“They’re probably worried about a raid,” said Evelyn.

“A raid? The governor is seated three tables behind us. There’s enough security to conquer a small country. One can hardly walk without bumping into an armed guard.”

“It’s not the police we have to worry about. It’s Sector Seven.”

“I doubt they’d mess with 200 strong over an auction.”

Jeeves flipped to a new page in his menu. The printed image of a dreamcatcher woven from stitched human fingers reflected off his spectacles. “It wouldn’t take General Pharaoh ten seconds to slaughter everyone here.”

Evelyn swigged his whisky, sour and strong, not as tasty as blood, but satisfying enough. “Don’t get my hopes up,” he said, wrapping his fingers around the embroidered hilt of the katana clipped to his belt. Flicking its golden silk tassel with his thumb, he drew the blade an inch from its pinewood sheath. “It’s been ages since I’ve had a good fight.”

Jeeves rolled his eyes. “Yes, the mighty Evelyn Redshield accepts all comers. Be careful what you wish for. Sector Seven’s Reaper can kill immortals.”

“A silly rumor,” Evelyn snorted.

“Pretty sure it’s not a rumor,” Jeeves said, propping his glasses with his middle finger.

“Oh? Something you know that I don’t?”

“A lot of things, actually,” his companion shrugged.

“You have five seconds to rephrase that.”

Jeeves sighed and set his menu down. “Why don’t we ask his boss?” He turned toward the two men sharing their table, a lanky man with long silver hair and a soldier equipped with two large magnums, one white and one black. “How about it, Othello?” he said to the silver-haired man, “Can your subordinate kill immortals?”

“He can,” said the silver-haired man. “And if you were wondering if Sector Seven would raid this place, you could’ve just asked. They wouldn’t do it without their General’s approval. I go by, “Jack Dodger,” now, by the way.”

“Asking would’ve ruined the suspense, Othello,” smirked Evelyn.

Jeeves nudged him with his foot, a signal that something was off. Redshield didn’t need to be told. Othello was frowning. Never once in the three millennia they’d been acquainted had he seen Othello frown. The vampire sported a big, goofy smile at all times. Evelyn avoided him because of that smile. The aloof facade concealed a manipulative psychopath. He knew, because they were one and the same. Everyone cursed by Thanatos was mad.

“Well if we’re being direct,” said Redshield, “I guess it would be appropriate to ask why you wanted to meet us here.” He motioned toward the blonde trembling on stage. Her price had increased to $110,000. “Don’t tell me you want to get into the human trafficking trade.”

“I asked to meet, not to meet *here*,” Dodger said. “This was your idea.”

“It was my way of telling you I dislike your company. I didn’t expect you to actually show up. Part of me hoped you’d raid the place. That would’ve made for an exciting night.”

The soldier spoke up for the first time. “Sector Seven is an anti-terrorist organization,” he said, observing the attendees. Disgust contorted his face, as if he were watching maggots feast on a corpse. “The Conflict has escalated. We do not have the manpower to address domestic issues.” He rested his hand on his black magnum’s grip, thumb pressed to its holster’s buckle. “Though I would be happy to dismantle this assembly if so ordered.”

“Scary scary,” said Evelyn. “We’ve earned the scorn of the mighty Hector Priam.” He nudged Jeeves with his elbow. “Think the Reaper’s here too, hiding in a shadow?”

“Most likely,” said Jeeves. “Othello doesn’t leave Sector Seven’s HQ unless escorted by his upper echelon. Strange, for an immortal to be so paranoid.”

“Zenith isn’t here,” Dodger said. “He betrayed me.”

Evelyn wasn’t surprised. Assassins weren’t known for their loyalty, and he’d heard through the grapevine that the young man’s little sister—and lover—had been killed whilst under Sector Seven’s explicit protection. Since he hadn’t retaliated, everyone assumed he’d let the matter slide. Pharaohs were level-headed, almost inhumanly so.

The soldier added. “We have come to request your assistance in neutralizing him.”

“Can’t you do it yourself?” Redshield said. “I assume your unofficial title, “Humanity’s Strongest,” isn’t just for show.” His eyes shifted between the man’s magnums. “At the very least, your Spirit Contracts are the real deal.”

Dodger folded his hands, white gloves squeaking as he massaged his knuckles. “I’m not certain my Lieutenant General is enough,” he said. “I need to be certain. Zenith must die. That monster killed my only son.” Evelyn fought back the urge to grin. Jack of all people had no right to call someone a monster, and rumor had it his kid Axe was quite the little monster himself. “He tore my poor boy to pieces during his wedding, then used his corpse like a puppet to taunt me.”

“How horrific,” Redshield said, trying his best to sound concerned.

“Will you help?”

Evelyn cupped his chin. “If he’s able to kill immortals. He’s a bad matchup for me.”

A familiar voice shouted, “One million dollars!”

Evelyn perked up. “Peters,” he said, scanning the auditorium. “I friggin’ hate Peters.” His eyes settled on a gaunt man with overgrown fingernails who was among the few with a name tag. Lord Percy Axton Peters the Third, Duke of the Rhine and Master of Royal Ceremonies. “Such a pretentious prick.” Nobody else had written more than their first name. “He’s going home empty-handed tonight,” Raising his auction card, Redshield called out. “$2,000,000.”

Peters snapped around, and Evelyn gave him an innocent wave.

“$2,500,000,” said the lord, drawing a few gasps.

“Five million,” Evelyn whistled. He grinned watching the man’s eye twitch. Percy never learned. Evelyn Redshield invented money.

“$5,100,000,” Peters said through his teeth.

Evelyn sang, “Ten million.”

Percy opened his mouth wide. Evelyn leaned toward him in anticipation. Was he going to announce another bid? Admit defeat? Hurl a profanity? The man’s face was reddening, beady black eyes bloodshot. *Please let him scream,* Redshield begged the Gods. He waited, but the man didn’t make a sound. Jaw slack, he stood straight as a plank.

“Oy, you okay?” Redshield said.

Percy didn’t respond. Evelyn realized the auditorium had gone silent. The air was heavy, utterly stagnant. Nobody was moving. Patrons were frozen in their seats, and the girl on stage had stopped trembling, as if she’d turned to wax. He glanced at Dodger, then Jeeves. They were looking around too, appearing equally confused.

“What’s happening?” Evelyn said after several seconds.

“I believe it’s telepathy magic,” Jeeves said. “Somebody’s speaking to them.”

“How can you tell?” Dodger asked.

“The pinkish film around their heads,” his friend said, pointing at woman with a fur coat.

Evelyn squinted. The film revealed itself. It was moving—grainy dots sparkling, a mass of crawling pink gnats swarming into her ears and up her nostrils. He’d never seen anything like it, and he’d seen a lot. But if Jeeves said it was telepathy magic, it was telepathy magic. The nerd had memorized the symptoms of every spell on record.

“I assume it’s *nihsnab nihsnednihsi*, given there are multiple targets,” the man said. He sounded disturbed. “It’s not affecting us, because it’s a seventh-tier spell, and we’re immune to magic up through the eighth tier. One of the few perks of Thanatos’ curse.”

“I think we should leave,” said Dodger.

“I concur,” Jeeves agreed. “Let’s take this elsewhere.”

Evelyn heard a thud. Swiveling toward the noise, he saw Hector had dropped to one knee. The Lieutenant General was holding his head with both hands, teeth gritted, facial veins bulging. His magnums whirred. Dark fog that smelled of wood rose drifted from the black gun’s chamber while pearly mist scented like acacia flowers seeped from the white.

“This could get ugly,” Dodger said, eyeing the dark fog.

Hector released a heavy breath, and the auditorium came to life, a symphony of agonized groans, squeaking chairs, and stumbling footsteps resounding. The Lieutenant General shakily returned to his feet, planting his hands on the table for support. “It is dangerous to stay here,” he panted, face slick with sweat.

“What did you hear?” Jeeves said. “Someone spoke to you, yes?”

“Zenith.” Priam’s eyes were glassy, fading in and out of focus. “He intends to initiate the apocalypse.” He gagged into his hand and spoke between his fingers. “To purge the world and rule over what remains.”

“Purge?” Dodger asked. “Purge what?”

“Undesirables.” Hector struggled to speak, as if each word required tremendous effort to summon. “Murderers. Rapists. Pedophiles. Adulterers. He’ll slaughter them all.”

“The people at this auction are in trouble, eh?” Evelyn grinned.

Darkness swept across the ceiling, a brief flicker, like a black wave crest.

“Did you see that?” he said, pointing up.

“Concentrated iizons,” Jeeves said. His voice was trembling. Evelyn couldn’t tell whether it was from fear or awe. “Somebody just cast a tenth-tier spell, world-altering magic.”

Hector looped his arm under General Dodger’s and pulled him to his feet. “Allow me to escort you to headquarters,” he groaned. “Our additional defenses—”

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.” An inhuman voice, how Evelyn imagined the corpse of a mange-ridden cat would sound if wind passed its rotting vocal cords.

“I assume everyone heard that?” he said, straining his ears. More quiet groaning, the sounds of patrons collecting themselves. He licked his lips, tasted blood and scotch, and took several deep breaths, carefully parsing scents—alcohol, perfumed sweat, mascara salted with tears, leather billfolds, dry-cleaned suits.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

“Gods, what is that?” Jeeves said.

A twitch in Evelyn’s peripherals drew his attention toward a large bureau. Its shadow was thick. Inky and black, like a velvet curtain, darker than it should’ve been given the lighting.

“Something’s weird about that shadow,” he said, pointing toward the darkness. An unease he recognized bubbled in his gut. Having lived thousands of years, he knew to listen to the feeling. He was in serious danger. He needed to flee, find somewhere safe to lay low. He looked at Jeeves, and Jeeves nodded, clearly thinking the same thing. Hector gave Dodger a tug, but the General didn’t budge. The conflicted expression on his face indicated he shared their concern, but he wasn’t going anywhere until their business was settled.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

Evelyn spun around. The voice was right next to him, in the shadow of a coat rack hardly a meter away. It was thick too, jet black. He squinted as if staring into deep water. It seemed vast world existed beyond, on the other side of the darkness, a place of things that didn’t belong in the light. Nudging his seat aside, he wrapped his hand around his katana’s hilt and took a step back.

Stillness again descended on the auditorium. It was serene as the eye of a tornado, silence punctuated only by the synchronized ticking of wristwatches. He’d felt the same stillness prior to many a battle, before he would draw his sword and jump into the fray, slashing, cutting, being slashed, being cut, laughing in the warm sunshine as he bathed in the blood of his enemies and the blood of his veins. Many would die here. He was certain of it.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

The shadow wobbled. He waited breath held, eyes stretched wide. He heard a snap, and the surface broke. Something sharp emerged. A claw, he realized, pinched together like a wedge. The hand it belonged to, oily and black as coal, followed. Next, the arm, long, lanky, with three elbow joints. Its fingers spread, knuckles crackling as they probed the air. The hand smacked down, pressing flat against the floor. Ligaments bulged. The arm bent, pulling weight forward.

He drew his katana. His spine tingled, the hair on the back of his neck stiff as needles. Feet squared, he held the blade in front of him with both hands.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

The voice came from his flank.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

One above. Two on either side. Shadows materialized one after another. On the walls, on the floor, on the ceiling, next to lamps. In the light, with nothing to cast them.

The arm he’d been watching heaved, and the creature attached to it rocketed from the darkness so fast he didn’t get a good look. It tackled the security guard next to him, wrapped its arms and legs around the man’s torso, pinning his elbows to his side. Warm blood, rich and metallic, splashed Evelyn’s cheek as the creature buried its face in the man’s throat. Its mouth was big. Huge. Stuffed with crooked, semi-transparent teeth.

“Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn. Orrrrrrriggggiiiinnnn.”

The shadows erupted, and beasts poured into the auditorium. They swarmed into opera boxes, hurling men into space. They burst through tables, flinging jagged planks and splinters. They dove from chandeliers and rafters, crushing women against the ground. Claws slashed lines of blood like streamers. Jaws snapped, splashing gore.

It took the guards a second to shoot. There were so many targets, they didn’t know where to aim. Everything was moving too fast. Presented with irreconcilable chaos, they fired at anything with a pulse. Bangs of pistols and tactical rifles merged with the pings of spent casings striking the floor, and the smells of sparks, smoke and gunpowder overpowered all other scents.

A bullet speared Evelyn’s left thigh. Wind sailed from his chest as a second punched through his right lung. Another speared his right hand, nearly blew his fingers from their knuckles. A fourth found his backside, shrapnelized the ilium of his pelvis. Two more plunged into his chest. One straight through; the other ricocheted off his third rib, plunged diagonally downward, and clipped his vertebrae.

It seemed the guards were using armor-piercing rounds. “How annoying,” he mumbled as he slashed the imbeciles who’d shot him. Standard bullets couldn’t breach his skin, let alone damage his bones. Any that got stuck in his body would be difficult to remove. His wounds healed instantly. Keeping them open long enough to extract bullets was nigh impossible.

\*BOOOM\*

A hole blasted open in the ceiling nearby, as if the building had been struck by a meteor. A dark figure shot down among the rain of wooden shrapnel so fast Evelyn didn’t register it until it had already landed.

“Good evening.”

A young man dressed in black crouched atop Evelyn’s table, knees bent as if he’d landed a high jump, gloved right hand planted for stability. The ethereal scarlet gem dangling from his left ear danced with halted momentum. A gray blindfold had been rolled to his forehead, its loose ends flapping. His glowing scarlet eyes were perfectly aligned with Hector’s.

“And goodnight.”

Priam collapsed stiff as metal.

Red light flashed at the young man’s side, hissing like a road flare. Evelyn noticed the black scythe that materialized and jumped back just in time to avoid a sweeping slash.

“Gah!” Jeeves stumbled, blood gushing from a deep horizontal gash in his chest.

“Zenith!” Dodger yelled like a hero to his nemesis. “You—” His head snapped back from a swift kick to the face, and he sprawled to the floor holding his nose.

Draping the colossal scythe over his shoulder with one hand, the young man slipped his blindfold back over his eyes. Evelyn raised his katana, a two-handed grip. The world around him was chaos—men and women running, flailing, screaming, chased by clawed nightmares; glass shattered, tables flipped; bullets zipped; plates of plaster fell from the ceiling, pluming powder as they detonated on the floor. An angel statue crumbled, the debris crushing a women in mink. He heard tires screeching outside, cars honking and crashing. The air smelled like smoke, guns, and blood, stinging his eyes, scalding his nostrils and lungs.

But none of that mattered. It was white noise, like elevator music or a television left on in another room. The Reaper demanded his full attention. He’d avoided the initial strike, but he felt no relief. The attack had been little more than a test, a gauge of his reflexes. If his opponent had been intent on killing him from the get go, he would’ve brought the scythe with him rather than summoned it after revealing himself. Pharaohs were assassins, ambush predators who attacked without warning. Hector had been the initial target, the man Zenith considered the greatest threat and so decided to neutralize first. The rest of them were afterthoughts.

“I do believe I’m being underestimated,” Evelyn muttered with a forced smirk.

He ventured a quick glance at the fallen Lieutenant General. Priam was alive. *Why?* The man had, without question, been caught off guard. He’d looked into the Reaper’s eyes. There’s no way he would’ve done so willingly. Even children knew better than to look into the eyes of Sector Seven’s infamous Reaper. His paralysis wasn’t an act. Evelyn recognized a faker when he saw one. The man was a sitting duck. That he remained alive meant he wasn’t marked for elimination. He was merely an obstacle. The Reaper’s real target was someone else.

As if having read his thoughts, Zenith said, “I’ve come for you, Evelyn Redshield.” His tone was calm, cold, and objective. “I’m creating a new world. Usury has no place in it.”

“You’re targeting me because I invented the concept of interest payments?” Redshield said. He might’ve laughed had he not known Pharaohs were humorless.

He felt a soft tug on his pant leg. Out his peripherals, he noticed Jeeves had crawled over to him. His face was pale, brow clammy with sweat. “It’s not healing,” he said, clutching his chest gash. Bright blood oozed between his fingers and spilled over the side of his hand. “It should’ve healed right away.” The man sounded delirious, like a widower in denial. “I even used a healing talisman. It was an eighth-tier talisman. Why am I not healing? Hey. It hurts.”

Redshield eyed the Reaper’s scythe, its dull gray blade slick with his friend’s blood. He’d seen it before somewhere. A long, long time ago.

Evelyn was about to inquire about it when suddenly it was in front of him, swooping down overhead. He raised his katana to block, catching it at the joint between its blade and staff, leaning sideways so it wouldn’t skewer his shoulder. His wrists and elbows vibrated from the impact. The scythe was heavy. Much too heavy. How much did it weigh? Two tons? Three? With a roar, he swept his katana sideways, redirecting the blow toward the floor.

They were face to face, Evelyn gritting his teeth, the Reaper expressionless, not a wrinkle or bulge on his beautiful face.

“Are you done warming up yet?”

>Mention the commotion still going on outside

“Evelyn Redshield, yes?”

“What does Sector Seven’s Reaper want with me?”

“I’m creating a new world, and men like you have no place in it.”

Evelyn smirked. “You’re not the first to have claimed so, and you won’t be the last.”

The ethereal scarlet gem dangling from his left ear twinkled as he turned to face her, the flaps of his blindfold shifting. S

“*Nihsnab nihsnednihsi* is ancient, last cast over three millennia ago. I’d believed it long lost to time. The mage we’re dealing with has access to grimoires pre-dating the Vascan empire. To use magic even the Vascans deemed taboo, he or she must be a psychopath. It’s never wise to underestimate intelligent monsters.” He lowered his voice. “On the off chance this mage is capable of casting ninth or tenth-tier spells, we could be in trouble. They might not be able to kill us, but we both know how excruciating death magic can be.”

Evelyn heard a loud crash outside, metal on brick. The building trembled. Drinks spilled. Oil paintings dropped off walls. Stained glass windows shattered. Plaster chips fell from the ceiling. A car honked from what sounded like the entrance hall. Not a single honk, but a steady drone, as if someone’s face was crushed up against the horn. Another crash followed, then another, the metallic clangs of colliding automobiles.

Redshield waited, watching the walls in case a vehicle decided to pounce. He listened for screeching tires, but didn’t hear any. Nobody was applying their breaks. No screams or frustrated shouts of profanity, either. He’d seen shit hit the fan many times in his day. On such occasions, humans screamed and swore. No screaming and cursing meant no humans.

“Did everyone die?”

“I hope not,” Jeeves said. “We’d have nothing to eat.”

Evelyn scanned the auditorium.

“Nobody applied their breaks,” Evelyn said mumbled, noting that none of the crashes were preceded by screeching rubber. “It’s like everybody passed out on the road. Could this spell be affecting people outside too?”

“If the mage is powerful enough,” Jeeves said.

The crashes stopped just as suddenly as they’d started.

Z mentions E’s nose. E says he hadn’t expected a Pharaoh to have a sense of humor. Z was really just trying to mess with his head, draw a response and probe it for weaknesses.

Every friday from 10:00 PM to 2:00 AM, Bidd, a ritzy venue with sleek, shiny furniture, statuesque ushers in tuxedoes, and open bars stocked with crystal flasks of ludicrously expensive scotch, held a human auction. Everyone in Soaring City knew of its shady dealings, but nobody lifted a finger to stop it. The politicians, billionaires, celebrities, and law enforcement personnel who attended made no attempt to conceal their patronage, arriving in limousines and smirking at flashing cameras as if to say, “Yeah, I’m about to purchase a person. Slavery is illegal, but what are you gonna do about it?”

In the 314 years since the infamous Evelyn Redshield established Bidd, Pierre Samuel had yet to miss a single event. He bought someone every time, a total of 14,891 little girls—aged two to fourteen—and 1,317 adult women—aged fifteen to twenty-five. He never laid a finger on his acquisitions. He offered them food and a place to rest, then let them go. Catch and release. He told himself that it was philanthropic, that he was a savior to the vulnerable, but in truth he just needed an excuse to attend the auction. Today, for the first time, he was regretting it.

“Next we have a cute little blonde from Armenio,” said the portly auctioneer. His knees were wobbly, knuckles white from gripping the podium. “She—”

“Shut up a second!” a groggy-sounding shouted.

Everyone was groggy, holding their heads as if hungover at a violin recital. The aftermath of the ninth-tier telepathic communication spell, *nihsnab nihsnednihsi* was excruciating. Based on the tire screeches and automobile crashes he’d heard from outside, it seemed the spell caster’s claim that their message had been delivered to everyone on the planet was true.

“Gods,” Evelyn said from across the table, stomping his feet like an agitated child. His face was pressed against his menu, his arms splayed out. He’d spilled $500 scotch all over his jeans and marijuana leaf t-shirt, but he didn’t care now, and he wouldn’t care later. The violent spaz dressed like a beach bum, and he was the richest man on the planet. “It’s like getting kicked in the balls if your balls were in your brain. If this was a prank, I’ll—ughhh.”

“It was quite the amusing message,” said Jeeves, who was struggling to hold onto a bulky calculator. “Ruling the world and slaying bad guys. He claimed to be a Pharaoh assassin.”

“A bluff to get people’s attention,” said Pierre Samuel. “Pharaohs aren’t mages. Nobody from their family can use magic.”

The chorus of groans gradually petered out. A handful of people collected their things and left, but most stayed behind.

“I’d like to resume the auction,” said the auctioneer. “We do have a schedule to keep.” He waited, permitting his audience an opportunity to protest. Receiving no complaints, he continued, though with less pep and much quieter, “This lovely young lady is Roxanne. She’s twelve, and a virgin. Her parents are nobles from Armenio. They came upon tough times and so sold her off to pay the bills. Being from the upper class, she can read and write, and is well-versed in etiquette.” He snapped his fingers at the girl on the runway. “Smile. Show them how pretty your teeth are.”

Roxanne forced a smile, and a teardrop fell from her chin, shimmering in the stage light. Whether she was crying due to the headache or the auction, Pierre Samuel couldn’t say. If she knew what was likely in store for her, it would be both.

“We’ll start the bidding at $20,000,” said the auctioneer.

A man with the face and body structure of a hog had just raised his number card when all hell broke loose. Pierre Samuel saw the ceiling above him buckle, a plume of dusty oak chips blossoming. A young man in black fell among the debris and landed on the table, melting into a crouch to absorb the impact. He held a colossal scythe. Pierre Samuel recognized it. The weapon of the True God Thanatos was the only he feared. No other held the power to slay immortals.

But one person was permitted to wield the scythe, Thanatos’ only friend. Pierre Samuel had never met Sector Seven’s Reaper before, but his assailant fit the description: black blindfold, glowing scarlet gem affixed to the left ear with fishing wire, black glove on the right hand, height 6’1”, age 20, weight 170 lbs, fair white skin, face fit for magazine covers. It was Zenith Pharaoh.

“Found youuu,” the Reaper said. His voice was muffled among the crashing rubble, but it was unmistakably the same that had addressed the world telepathically.

Pierre Samuel kicked the ground has hard as he could, propelling his chair backward. The maneuver wasn’t a conscious action. It was a reflex he’d developed through millennia of battles. He saw Evelyn and Jeeves do the same, albeit faster. Redshield avoided the slash entirely. Jeeves got away with a torn jacket. Pierre Samuel felt searing pain in his chest. Lithium-smelling steam gushed from a horizontal gash, crimson blood spilling.

Jeeves grabbed Evelyn’s arm. “Uodinaknuhs.” His pocket flashed blue, a dark hue characteristic of spatial magic, and the two men vanished.

Pierre Samuel clicked his tongue. The bastard had escaped using a teleportation talisman.

“I plan to deal with them later,” Zenith said, answering the unasked question as to why he allowed them to get away. He stood up straight and cleared his throat. Save the patter of crumbly chips falling from the ceiling, the auditorium was silent, all eyes on him. Scythe draped over his shoulder, he bowed. “My name is Zenith Pharaoh.” A smirk. “Good evening, and goodnight.”

“Mmmaaaagggiiicccaaalll.” Heads swiveled toward the backstage. A grotesque humanoid creature emerged from the curtains. It was hunched, arms so long the tips of its claws brushed the floor.

Swamp Beginning

The stink of the jungle filled Evelyn Redshield’s lungs as his combat boots hit the muck. He and 31 other Sigma Force troops, most of whose names he hadn’t bothered to remember, had been dropped on the outskirts of a swamp. Sultry rot lingered in the humid air like pollen, and he savored every breath of it. It smelled like blood, he thought as he ran his tongue along his gums, massaging the fangs sheathed inside. Nothing smelled better than blood.

A Poindexter-looking man with a black briefcase and gray suit sidled up to him like a kid with only one friend. He was frowning, as he had been since he lost their bet 3,100 years ago.

“This is a swamp, ya know, Jeeves,” Evelyn said with a big grin. “You’ll ruin that outfit.”

“I have seventy of them,” Jeeves said, propping his glasses up with his middle finger. “And I don’t want to hear fashion advice from a man with the hygiene of a beach bum.”

Evelyn ran his hand through his dirty-blonde hair, smearing gunpowder-scented lubricant against his brow. “Well everyone’s staring at you, ya pencil-shaped pecker,” he said. “You stick out like a sore thumb. They’re probably worried the mages will spot ya.”

Jeeves sighed. “We’ll be killing humans this time,” he said. “If you insist on larping as a soldier, at least pay attention during the C.O.’s briefings.”

Someone tries to tell him how serious it is. He laughs to himself thinking nothing matters.

He talks really loud when they’re walking through the swamp.

Plane Ride

Page 90 death

Zenith was scared. Only had himself to worry about.

He is baiting you. Do not give him an excuse to draw his scythe.

—Start in safe

—Money gets older the further back b/c Pharaohs had always been doing what they do

He was carrying her from rising flames. Could let go and be free but would sooner burn.

Drops her, and she sees panic on his face

Shadow stabs him in the back, killing him

—Ayu has premonition of Z dying, always apologizing

—Whenever she looks at him, the boy she loved and was in love with, sees only his death

—Doesn’t know how old they are, because of Pharaoh aging

—Mention Azazel’s statue

—Can’t worry Z about dream, b/c he will soon be tortured

—Z explains to April in world

—April can’t betray Sora

—Azazel finds that April’s consciousness is gone

—Pharaohs survive, as do evil people and randoms

—-Z can only keep five people trapped, Anathema escapes

—Z’s monsters drink blood

—Z didn’t know much about the world/eyes didn’t see Thanatos’ curse

—Axe was evil b/c of curse

—Jack didn’t see point of children b/c of cataclysm

—Worshippers don’t understand blood

Cassandra is good at reading people. Reason she joined the Pharaohs.

Z can smell feces, thought Cass was an animal

Z gives April date and time of world’s end

—Z was swaying, could only imagine how long he had been walking

—Z is a mess when she’s not around

—Watch the looming statue of Azazel approach as the sun shifted in the sky

—Rammott tells Z about cataclysm and survivors

The blast from the shotgun had been loud, but this was a million times worse. Only it wasn’t the same sort of loud. This felt like something was exploding right in the core of my brain, a noise so sharp that I could almost see it – a blinding white light that made me stagger and fall. I clamped my hands to my ears but it didn’t help, the shrill ring burrowing into my head like a wasp laying its eggs.   And those eggs hatched into visions that made everything else I’d seen look like something from a kids’ book, even the nightmares that sprouted from the warden’s eyes, even the dreams I’d had when they were pumping the nectar into me. It was as if the carvings on the desk were coming to life, each scene played out in terrifying detail. I watched each of those poor souls die again and again and again, those few short seconds dragged out into an infinity of pain and suffering.

  The ringing ended, but it was replaced by something even worse – a presence that seemed to engulf my mind in a fist of shadow. I stared into the holes of the earpiece, from which there appeared to emanate something rancid and rotten from the darkest part of the world.

  Furnace. Alfred Furnace.

  He stopped a short distance before us and I could swear the temperature dropped several degrees. I don’t know why but I started to think of him as a black hole, like he sucked all the life and warmth and goodness from whatever was nearby. The closer he got the more it felt as though something was being wrenched out of my body. I squirmed in discomfort, beads of sweat forming on my forehead.

  I clawed my way up, half running and half crawling towards the door, feeling invisible fingers in my head, probing my thoughts, leaving filth and decay wherever they went. Only when I’d wrenched it open and fallen into the corridor beyond did the sensation recede, literally purged from me as I unloaded my stomach over the red stone. Zee and Simon fell by my side, retching and crying, wiping the blood from their ears and the puke from their faces.

The fat man fell forward. His chest hit the edge of the counter. His knees folded. the edge caught his chin and knocked his head back as he fell

Stacy stood in the living room, her senses tuned to everything around her:  the creak of the house as it shifted on its foundation; the moan of the wind as it blew around the eaves; the patter of rain that drummed on the roof; the crackle of lighting that flashed on the horizon, followed by the slight boom of thunder in the distance; the ticking of the clock above the mantelpiece in the living room; the hum of the gas burner in the furnace when the thermostat kicked in, heating the house. Stacy stood rooted in the center of the room, watching, waiting, all senses peeled for any extra activity. Any presence, any outward signs that Mother was here and watching.

She whirled around at the sound, her heart jumping into her throat. Four blood-red creatures were scuttling up her walkway, their insane eyes wavering on their eyestalks. With the darkening sky moving in fast, she didn't noticed they were coming up the sidewalk toward her house. She turned and scrambled to the front door, the sole of her right foot slipping. Her arms reached out to break her fall, grasping the doork.n.o.b, her feet slipping as she fought to regain her footing. She panted, struggling to get up, her ears barely registering the click click sound of their claws as they scrambled up the walkway and steps that led to the porch. Her mind reeled with panic as she regained her footing, her hand turning the doork.n.o.b, the weight of her body pushing the door open, her fear propelling her inside the house...

She slammed the door behind her, threw the umbrella down on the floor and scrambled up the steps, taking them two at a time. She ran down the hall to Bobby's bedroom, adrenaline spurring her on.

RICK ROLL https://www.bitchute.com/video/20pwSTE6Lwxe/

P.360 exploring wreckage

Deepfake <https://deepsukebe.io/en>

Ayu wants to give him all the love he can handle. Her body was always weak, and he did thing for her.

April thinks tragedies are like ripples, and she had a chance to put a stop to it before it spread. It was her duty.

Z comes out of torture looking like a zombie. Doesn’t look at Ayui. Freaks out when she touches him, seeing her but not seeing her. Trapped in his mind. He shoves her away, later sees her bruises.

Ayu took up cooking and cleaning because she knew what was coming to him

Darkness a place where things did not move and voices did not sound,

Flashlight beams seem to fade after fifteen or twenty feet.  The pitch darkness pressed in closer. I swear I could almost feel its weight against my skin. It was a palpable thing and that definitely made no sense whatsoever. This was not the gloom of an ordinary night, even a moonless or starless night, this was the absolute absence of light of any kind, the abyssal blackness of an ocean trench or the darkness that fills the void between galaxies.  Usually, the dark of night is inconsistent, in that there are dark shadowy pockets blending into grays. It’s never perfectly dark. Such a thing probably does not even exist on this planet except in a deep mountain cave or ocean abyss. Even when electric lights go out and candles and lanterns are extinguished, there’s still moonlight and starlight. Even if it’s cloudy, light still gets through.

  But no light was getting through.

  It was like one of those shades they put over bird cages at night had been dropped over the world. It was perfectly black. It was like being in a tomb a mile underground and Boyd literally felt the walls closing in on him.  As if he was slowly being asphyxiated by this place. It was a numb sort of horror, making him feel utterly helpless like a swimmer going down for the last time.

 Fog that stank like a wind blown from the throat of a corpse.  A sucking gray mist that stank of rotting seaweed and dead things on beaches, moving and shifting and enclosing. A mildewed, moist shroud that was equal parts corpse gas, teleplasm, and suspended slime. It was thick and coveting, claustrophobic and suffocating.

 Styles’ first day in it he was amazed by its contours and density. The second day he hated its fullness, its completeness, the way tendrils of it drifted over the dinghy and sought him out. And the third day? The third day it simply scared him. Because he was hearing things in it. The sounds of pelagic nightmares that called it home. The things that were waiting for him to fall overboard, things with yellow eyes and tentacles and sawblade teeth, malignancies and monsters.

3:00 Tues 17th

Clouds the color of sour chocolate milk

Zenith liked certain sounds. She didn’t suppress it but didn’t enhance it either

Stab wounds like big sticks were jammed ,linto his side.

Creature landed on all fours, hissing in anger, black eyes narrow with hatred and hunger

V D3 5000 iu

NEET bux = Disability:$600/mo + SSI:$800/mo + Food stamps: $200/mo.

Health/Vision/Dental/Prescription insurance:Free

Rent = $560/mo

Net profit: $1040/mo

Wage slave: 40hrs/wk \*4 wks\*$15/hr = $2,560

- 30% taxes - $400 Health insurance - $560 rent

Net profit = $832/mo

<https://www.docdroid.net/Iv8omhj/turner-diaries-andrew-macdonald-pdf#page=21>

Never gonna give you up: https://www.bitchute.com/video/20pwSTE6Lwxe/

Ai pictures: <https://artflow.ai/>

Speech on great reset: https://odysee.com/@LongXXvids:c/Ernst-Wolf-speech---summary:3

Europa: <https://www.bitchute.com/video/s1nPYDj7KBEQ/> 1:14:57

[daftsex.com/watch/-174844737\_456240110](http://daftsex.com/watch/-174844737_456240110)

<https://www.empflix.com/bukkake-porn/3D-teen-Imoni-X-Rey-Deep-Fuck/video663078>

<https://hentaisea.com/episodes/kabegami-kanojo-episode-1/>

Maids: https://hentaisea.com/episodes/eromeido-noiru-le-c-episode-1/

Jez muse demon w/ voice of angel, would sneak into room and read scenes and wear funny hats, she wrote plays terrible terrible plays sobject matter happy and hope filled and that was enough for me was a fool times would last

Turning point: Ayu realizes she has to kill Rammott for Onii-chan’s sake. Runs toward a light but finds herself back at the fire

Z gets owned by the diving test. Realizes Ayu isn’t there to help with his despair. Nobody will come rescue him. He was dumb to think he could do everything on his own. In the face of fate, he was powerless. Is unable to use flesh alchemy to heal himself. As long as Ayu was there to help him, everything would be okay, he’d thought. Loses sense of direction. Here’s nuke ticking. Ayu gave him something ahead of time for comfort.

https://mdcom.convergentcare.com/mdcom/goToLogin.action?navStep=#Application/onReady

Boobs like perfect water balloons

Checking 8262493821

Routing 073000228

Wier 121000248

Forest fairies: @ left &?&

Tingle: - @ left &ws

Twins (past): @ left &yy

Mamou: !- up 5 spade

Plen: - spade Y w #

Library: 5~Tm\*

Elder: !- up = N

Troy: !- up 3 diamond

S- up @7 D heart spade5L HQ left 86