

B1C01 — The Pull and the Plea

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The march across Serephis was an exercise in unravelling. Not of the body, though the heat fused sand into glass under a sky of bruised violet and the air tasted of metal, but of the soul. Miguel, Supreme Commander of the Celestial Host, knew the clean pain of battle. He had felt the bite of demonic steel, the searing kiss of infernal fire. Those were honest wounds, wounds with edges. This was different. This was a hollow ache in the center of his being, a space where something had been taken, leaving behind not a scar but a relentless, demanding void. His hand, sheathed in a golden gauntlet, went to his chest by instinct, a gesture he had repeated a thousand times since the ache began. His stride was unnaturally rigid, a commander's discipline warring with a weariness that went deeper than bone. He was fundamentally incomplete, and the question that drove him across the blistering wastes was a constant, silent whisper: *What was taken from me?*

The ache was not just a pain; it was a summons. For days, it had been a dull, constant throb. Now, it pulsed with a clear, directional authority. It was a call that overrode his own military discipline, his ingrained sense of celestial navigation. He recalled the clarity of the Divine Word, the way it settled in the soul as unarguable truth. This new call was similar in its unyielding command, yet terrifyingly different in its origin. The light itself seemed to bend in the direction of the pull, the thin air shimmering. He stopped, the grit of sand crunching under his sabatons. He closed his eyes, a flicker of hope warring with a profound dread. He turned his head slowly, a compass needle finding its true north, letting the pulse guide him. Was he being led to salvation, or to a damnation far worse than any battlefield could offer?

The oppressive stillness of Serephis was broken by a sound of pure harmony, a chord that resonated in the very structure of his being. Gabriel had arrived. His presence was a physical relief, a sudden coolness on Miguel's sun-scorched essence, the scent of rain on stone that momentarily washed away the desert's metallic tang. A soft, resonant light bloomed around his brother, pushing back the gloom. Miguel felt a surge of love so sharp it was painful, followed by a wave of shame. He did not want Gabriel, the Herald of the Divine Voice, to see him like this—unraveled, chasing a phantom ache across a cursed wasteland. He straightened his posture, a futile attempt to reclaim the bearing of a commander, but he knew the weariness was etched into his spirit. Gabriel's expression was not one of judgment, but of a deep, aching worry that was somehow worse.

"The Council is concerned, Miguel." Gabriel's voice was the sound of that first harmony, but it had a sharp, pleading edge. "They fear this is a deception, a lure crafted by the enemy to draw you out. Your absence creates fear in the Host."

The words—'Council,' 'duty,' 'fear'—felt like echoes from another life, irrelevant to the gaping hole in his chest. Gabriel's light seemed to probe at the wound, making it ache with a fresh intensity. He took a half-step back, guarding his chest as if from a physical blow. Gabriel took a step closer, his hands open in a gesture of appeal, not command.

"They think me a fool," Miguel said, his voice rough from disuse. "Or a traitor."

"They think you are their commander, lost and in pain," Gabriel countered, his voice softening. "They think of their brother."

The shift from envoy to brother was a blow more potent than any command. The air between them became intimate, the cosmic stakes momentarily forgotten, replaced by the held-breath quiet of a shared past. Miguel was thrown back to a memory—the aftermath of the disastrous battle for the Onyx Gates, his wing shattered, his spirit nearly broken. Gabriel had been there, his presence a calm anchor in a storm of failure, tending his wounds not with the grand power of an archangel, but with the quiet, gentle care of a brother. Miguel's jaw, clenched for days, unclenched for a single, painful moment. Gabriel's gaze softened. He started to reach out, to place a hand on Miguel's shoulder, but stopped himself, letting his hand fall back to his side. The unspoken history hung between them, a testament to a love that now felt like a cage.

"Come home," Gabriel pleaded. "Whatever this wound is, we will face it together. As we always have."

For a moment, Miguel wavered. The thought of returning to the Celestial Bastion, to the familiar harmonies of home, was a siren's call. But it was followed by a moment of cold, unsparing clarity. To return would be a living death, an eternity with this void inside him, a constant reminder of his own incompleteness. The Council would offer comfort, not answers. They would try to heal a wound they could not comprehend. He had to go forward. He had to know.

"I cannot," Miguel said. He met his brother's eyes directly for the first time, his own gaze no longer weary but filled with a terrible, crystalline resolve. "This call... it is a command more fundamental than any the Council can give. It is a truth I must find, or I am nothing." He turned his body slightly, away from Gabriel and toward the direction of the pull. The choice was made. He was alone now.

Gabriel's light seemed to dim, the harmony of his presence faltering. He did not argue further. He had delivered his message, made his plea. The decision was Miguel's. A single tear of pure light traced a path down Gabriel's cheek. He gave a

slight, sorrowful nod. "May you find what you seek, brother," he whispered, his voice thick with a grief that felt ancient. Then, he was gone.

The oppressive heat and heavy hush of Serephis crashed back in, heavier than before. The memory of Gabriel's sad eyes would haunt him, a fresh wound to accompany the old. But the regret was quickly suppressed, burned away by the cold, clean feeling of a severed anchor. The choice was made. He turned and marched on.

He walked for an age, the landscape unchanging, until it did. The transition was sharp enough to be a physical blow. One step was on hot, grating sand; the next was on cool, soft moss. The oppressive air gave way to a still, clean coolness that carried a metallic tang. He had arrived at the Grove Without Shadow. Trees with leaves of a pallid, leaf-metal sheen rose around him, their foliage emitting a bright, even light that cast no shadows, creating a flat, depthless world. His tactical mind screamed 'ambush.' Nothing in creation was this perfect; it felt manufactured, a lure. His hand rested on the space where his sword hilt should have been, a residual habit that now served only as a reminder of his vulnerability. His posture shifted from a weary trek to a cautious, tactical advance. This beautiful lie held the answer he sought, and he would not be deceived by its perfection.

The quiet here was not an absence of sound, but a presence. It was a heavy, listening quality that made him feel scrutinized, an intruder in a sacred, but not holy, place. He smelled wet stone and something like the air after a lightning strike. The temperature was constant, with no breeze to stir the unmoving leaves. He tried to recite a verse of the Divine Song, a centering exercise he had used before a thousand battles, but the words felt dead in his mind, swallowed by the immense, watching stillness. He walked with his feet deliberately placed, trying not to make a sound, but every soft crunch of fallen leaves felt like a shout in a library. He was being watched. He was being measured.

Then he saw it. At the heart of the grove stood a great ash tree, its bark the color of ancient bone. And plunged into its heart was a sword. It was not made of metal, but of living, solidified light. The moment he saw it, the agonizing pull in his chest ceased, the void filled. But it was replaced by something else: the immense, silent presence of the blade pressing *in* on him, a weight on his very soul. The air around the tree was visibly distorted, shimmering with a power that made the shadowless grove seem mundane by comparison. His breath caught in his throat. His steps, once cautious, were now drawn, almost involuntary. It was not a thought of "that is a sword," but a moment of pure, terrifying recognition: *that is what I am missing*.

He stood before the great ash, his hand trembling as he raised it. The sword's presence felt like an older, more fundamental truth that threatened to overwrite

his own name, his own history. He thought his own name—"Miguel"—and for a second, it felt foreign, a title someone else gave him. The sword's "name," an unspoken, thrumming concept, felt more real, more his own. A low hum began to build, not in the air, but inside his skull, a vibration that resonated with the hollow space in his chest. He hesitated, his fingers inches from the hilt, caught between seduction and terror. If he touched this, would he still be himself? Or would he become merely an extension of the blade?

The moment his skin brushed the hilt, the grove vanished. He was cast out of his body, a disembodied observer in a place of cosmic, amoral chaos. He witnessed supernovas being quenched like hot steel in a bucket of darkness, their light siphoned off for some grand purpose. He felt gravity not as a law but as a physical hammer blow, a tool used to shape reality. He heard the sound of a star-sized hammer striking a black-hole anvil, the ring of it a chord that created and destroyed galaxies in the same instant. His mind struggled to apply concepts like 'good' or 'evil' to what he was seeing, and found them utterly, laughably inadequate. He was infinitesimally small, a mote of dust witnessing something no being was ever meant to see.

The dominant sensation of this primordial forge was not power or purpose, but laughter. It was a jubilant, irreverent, and terrifying sound that saturated everything. It echoed in the ring of the hammer, in the hiss of cooling starlight, in the very fabric of this creative space. This was the laughter of the unseen maker, and it was the most frightening thing Miguel had ever experienced. It was not evil, just utterly unconcerned with consequence, with morality, with the neat little boxes of sin and virtue he had built his entire existence upon. This blade, he understood with a soul-crushing certainty, was not forged for a cause. It was not a holy relic or a demonic weapon. It was forged for the sheer, anarchic fun of it. It was a cosmic joke, and he was about to become the punchline. The vision ended with a final, triumphant peal of laughter as the blade was given its final form. He was thrown back into his body, gasping for air, his heart hammering with a new kind of fear: not of damnation, but of meaninglessness.

He stood before the sword, the maker's laughter still echoing in his soul. The questions about its origin, its purpose, its creator—they all vanished. Not because they were answered, but because they no longer mattered. There was only the sword's truth now. He gripped the hilt, his hand no longer hesitant but firm, unyielding. He drew Solmire from the heart of the ash tree. As the sword came free, the ancient tree groaned, a sound of deep and terrible mourning. The light of the entire grove dimmed, as if in sympathy. The air became unnaturally still and cold. A power flooded him, not warm or holy, but clean, cold, and final. It sealed the wound in his chest, filling the void not with peace, but with a terrible, placid certainty. His weariness was gone, replaced by an unnerving, perfect straightness in his posture. He was complete, yet hollowed out.

The quiet returned, but it was different. No longer heavy and listening, but sterile and empty. A silent, powerful pulse began to gather around him, a bell being struck in the heart of reality. He felt the pulse not as an external force, but as an extension of his own new being. It was his new voice, and the world would now listen. He lowered the blade slowly, feeling its alien weight, its perfect, cold balance. His expression was a mask of calm, his eyes distant, seeing beyond the dying grove to the wars that were to come.

The pulse rippled through creation, a subtle pressure, a change in the quality of the stillness in all realms. In a quiet, opulent chamber in Hell, surrounded by shadows that smelled of old knowledge and cooled ambition, Lucifer set down a delicate, clockwork instrument he had been adjusting. He tilted his head, his expression one of pure, intellectual curiosity. He recognized the signal. Not as a threat, not as a challenge, but as an echo of a sound he had not heard in eons. He recognized the laughter woven into its very structure. A slow, genuine smile spread across his face. "So," he murmured to the empty room. "One of the old songs is being sung again. How interesting."

Back in the dying grove, the pulse subsided, leaving Miguel in a profound hush. The silence was final, but nothing was the same.