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| Character:      | Cuphead (Cuphead), Mugman (Cuphead), King Dice (Cuphead), Elder Kettle, The Devil (Cuphead), Appleman (cuphead), Various Characters, Porkrind (Cuphead), Baroness von Bon Bon, Mr. Wheezy (Cuphead), Mangosteen (Cuphead), Chips Bettigan, Original Characters, Mr. Chimes (Cuphead), Beppi the Clown, Djimmi the Great |
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**Bad beat**

by innodle

**Summary**

One month has passed since Cuphead and Mugman fought for their souls when a deal with the Devil went awry. After the comotion surrounding their tremendous feat died down, the boy’s lives have settled back into a usual carefree swing. Cuphead knows he should be thankful, but has grown bored and secretly yearns for some thrill in his life again.

Meanwhile, a certain lackey is still coming to terms about losing everything. With King Dice’s life changed and his relationship with the Devil in tatters, what will happen when their paths cross once more?
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

The song King Dice is singing is 'They Can't Take That Away From Me' (The Louis Armstrong vers, as his voice is a lot like King Dice's)

also this is a very angsty opening to what probably won't be an overly angsty story, haha

(Edit: I made a tumblr! Come say hello! http://innodle.tumblr.com/)

“Don’t go out too far, boys!” Elder Kettle lectured, as he began to pack some of the cakes and biscuits back into a wicker basket.

“We won’t!” Cuphead replied absentmindedly, not bothering to turn his body away from the lush forest in front of him. The boy had been nagged to sit for what felt like hours at the picnic table, trying to listen to some boring show on the portable radio. He hadn’t absorbed any of it.

“Don’t worry!” A slightly more solicitous Mugman turned to state, giving the old man a reassuring smile. “We’ll be back real soon! Just gotta stretch our legs, ya know?” He joked, as he tied a small bandana full of bread and apple juice around his shoulders to form a makeshift satchel.

Cuphead rolled his eyes at Mugman’s excess rations. It would be a short galavant through the woods, not a two day trek.

“Alright, but stay safe, you hear?” Elder Kettle said, his grey brow furrowed in concern. The boys shared a look. Why was their mentor being so fretful? They took walks through the forest all the time.

“What’s the sour look about? We beat the devil! everything else is a walk in the park.” Cuphead laughed. “Are we done now? C’mon, Mug! Lets go!”

Mugman simply rolled his eyes at his brothers eagerness and ran to his side.

With that the two young cups raced into the dense foliage and were soon out of sight.

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Wet leaves raked against Cuphead’s body and chest. The dirt path long ago became eaten up by plantlife and the forest became denser. No sun could shine through such thick foledge, and as such the depths had a dewey chill to them. He looked over to his brother who was having none of it, weaving and dodging the trees to find the dryest path.

“Say Cuphead, maybe we should go back to the dirt road?” Mugman suggested with a sigh. “It’s so wet and cold through here!”

“Nonsense, bro-” Cuphead began, but got sidetracked when he saw something. “Oh! Look how swell it is over there!”
The eldest cup gestured to an area that they could just see peeking through the leaves a few yards away. It was a large sun filled clearing speckled with bright flowers. In the middle was a large rock formation that Cuphead yearned to clamber and play on.

The boy’s shared a glance and soon the two had shot off in its direction.

“First to climb that rock is the ruler of Inkwell Isle!” Cuphead laughed, pushing his brother playfully.

“Hey, no fair!” Mugman shrieked, stumbling slightly.

The young mug let out a huff at the lead the other boy had now, before running to catch up. A new determination filled his veins. As he closed the distance he shoved his brother out of the way, soon overtaking him.

“ Wo-ah!” Cuphead yelped, more surprised that his usually docile brother would do something so brash than the act itself. Stunned, he jogged into the clearing just in time to see Mugman climb to the tallest bolder. He had a grin that took up most of his face as he bowed repeatedly, as if to show gratitude to his imaginary legion of people.

“ Thankyou, thankyou.” Mugman giggled, sitting down on the warm rock and swaying his legs. He untied his bandana, setting up a makeshift picnic on a ledge of rock. He took a sip of the ice cold apple juice.

“Hrm. As your new ruler, my first law will be… I get to eat your slice of cake when we get back, Cup!”

“Not a chance!” Cuphead shrilled in protest, a serious expression gracing his face as he tried to climb up the rock. “ Elder Kettle’s teacake is the best! Can I have a quarter still?…No, I need at least half-”

Mugman’s laughter cut him off. His poor older brother was in a panic at the mere thought of not having any cake. If only he took other matters so seriously.

“Pfft, very well. I’m a kind ruler… So I’ll allow you to keep it.” Mugman snickered, offering a hand to help his older brother up onto the rock. Mugman had filled up on bread on the way here anyway, so no loss. Cuphead laughed and accepted the outreached hand as he settled down next to his brother.

The area smelt sweet from so much pollen drifting around. There was also a hint of smoke in the air; Elder Kettle had said it was from nearby chimneys. The two sat in silence, happily eating and drinking for a minute, appreciating the secret spot they had found.

That’s when they heard it.

“- The way you sing off key… The way you haunt my dreams. No, no they can't take that away from me- “

Just through the bushes a mere stone’s throw away, someone was singing. It was a deep and soulful voice that sounded like slowly churning gravel, or perhaps ice cubes knocking around an empty whiskey glass.

The boys knew that voice.

“ You hear that, Mug?” Cuphead whispered.
“Do I ever.” The other replied in an equally stifled tone. “Is that, ya know. Him?”

Normally the boys wouldn’t be so reserved, but if that was who they thought it was…

Mugman quietly folded the condiments back into his fabric sling as Cuphead clambered off the rock. Their sunny spot totally forgotten, the two snuck towards the sound. As they got closer, the voice became even clearer.

“-We may never never meet again, on that bumpy road to love. Still I’ll always, always keep the memory of: The way you hold your knife. The way we danced till three. The way you changed my life… No, no they can't take that away from me-”

Peeking through some trees, Cuphead finally saw a glimpse of the man, who had stopped his singing and now was coughing into a cupped hand.

“Mr. King Dice.” Mugman said in hushed awe, once he had stealthily joined his brothers side. “It's really him. He... Looks terrible.”

Cuphead couldn’t dispute that.

The crumpled man was sitting on a rock, his usual crisp suit incomplete and haggard. His bright violet tailcoat was nowhere to be seen, as was his vest or gloves. All the man had on was a disheveled white dress shirt and purple slacks with a untied bow hanging dejected around his neck. To finish it everything was smothered in a black soot, from his head to his toe. The whole scene told a tale of a man who had been through the rough.

“What do ya’ think happened?” Cuphead drawled, feeling sorrow for the man quietly clawing at him. Underserved empathy, he tried to mentally correct himself. The king pin deserved such a fate for helping the devil.

“I don’t know.” Was all Mugman could provide.

Not satisfied with such an answer, Cuphead stepped out of the clearing and walked towards the man.

“Cup, no!” Mugman squeaked in worry, which probably wasn’t the best idea. If Cuphead hadn’t gotten his attention, King Dice was definitely now aware of their presence.

The bedraggled man rose to his full height, and hit the perpetrators with a cold stare. His eyebrows shot up in shock when he saw who was actually there, looking up at him with large inquisitive eyes. Mugman and Cuphead in turn at this point saw the large crack that ran down the right side of King Dice’s face. It was deep and splintered off in many directions. It looked painful, and poised to crumble at any moment.

“You two-” He growled, his voice hoarse and tired. “-leave. Now . I am not in the mood for two brats giving me a lecture. Anyone with eyes can see it. I got my comeuppance. I lost. Now at least give me the right to wallow in my own self pity.”

The boys gave each other a confused glance.

“What happened to you ?” Cuphead asked.

King dice scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief.

“You don’t know what happened? Does that old coot Elder Kettle really keep your little heads that
far in the sand? Ha, what am I saying? *Of course he does.*”

King Dice grabbed the boys and pulled them in under his arms, like one would if they were about to tell a grand tale. They struggled to get out of his grip, but his hug that was slightly too tight to be friendly told them it wasn’t happening.

“Say, can you smell smoke in the air today? Well that’s the smell of *my* casino, *burning.*” He hissed, his angry facade giving way to a tone of grief.

Cuphead kept his mouth shut in a tight line. Mugman, who usually spoke in behalf of them in tactful situations like this was also silent. Apparently that was the right thing to do, as the man soon chuckled darkly and spoke again.

“Look at you two. You have no clue what you started. When you burnt all those contracts and set the people of Inkwell Isle free; you made the Devil lose all of his power. His web of contacts, favours, the lot. *All gone.* So he got… *Mad.* *Real mad.* Now I’ve been loyal to that son of a bitch for years and I’ve never seen him that unhinged. Red, burning and feral he was. Speaking tongues and throthing at the chops. But the casino was still going well, so I told him to wait. Be patient, people will forget and slip into the same mistakes soon enough—”

King Dice let out a ragged hack which soon turned into a coughing fit, his voice not up to the task of talking so much.

Mugman slipped away from his grasp and set to work pulling out the small bottle of apple juice he had left. Cautiously he handed to the man, who snatched it and gulped from it greedily. Eventually Mr. Dice composed himself enough to speak again.

“He was too angry to listen. He… He said he was sick of waiting. The Devil is not a man but a monster, boys. Never forget it. Because I did and now look at me.”

Cuphead frowned, taking in the information he just received.

“The Devil… Did he do that?” Mugman asked, pointing to the large crack on the man’s face tentatively.

King Dice looked at him dumbly for a moment. It took him a brief pause to realise the boy wasn’t making a terribly distasteful joke about his features but rather the damage to his die.

“Ha ha! No kid. He didn’t lay a hand on me. He ain’t that stupid. I got this from a pillar falling on me as I tried to flee my burning casino. The Devil sees this place as a sinkhole. He burnt all ties and split.”

Another awkward silence filled the air, as the two cups didn’t have a clue what to say. Was King Dice a victim in this? Was the Devil really gone? Neither knew what to feel or what to believe.

It seems they didn’t have to decide, as the shrill voice of Elder Kettle broke the air.

“Get away from my boys, *now.*” The Kettle growled. The wheezes for air and unfit physique took away any intimidation the threat possessed, however.

Cuphead and Mugman obeyed nonetheless, putting some space between them and King Dice.

Mr. Dice only looked on with a bored disinterest, not caring even the slightest about the Kettle’s presence.
“Oh shut it, old timer. Does it look like I’m up to anything right now? No.” He drawled, taking another sip of the juice. It was a precaution; he didn’t want to start hacking a lung up again.

“He’s right. He ain’t hurting anyone.” Cupman elaborated when Elder Kettle’s furious stare didn’t waver.

There were a few more beats of tense staring, until Mugman stepped forward.

“Why didn’t you tell us that the smoke was coming from the casino?” Mugman blurted. “Why did you lie about that? We deserve to know.”

“I need to protect you boys-” The Kettle started, but was cut off by King Dice.

“I believe the correct term is ‘keep in the dark’, which isn’t a smart thing to do when your sons are the ones that started this whole mess.”

“- And who are you to speak? Why don’t you crawl back to the Devil’s side, you fiend-” Elder Kettle started, but stopped immediately when he saw King Dice stand up and clench his fists.

Mr. Dice wasn’t reckless, he wasn’t going to fight in this shape. But he had to admit, hearing people still referring to his ties with the Devil made him feel like a fool and he didn’t enjoy it one bit. He had no clue what he was to that thing anymore.

“I would if I knew where the hell he was.” The King seethed. “But I don’t. And so now I’m left here, with only the clothes off my back and a crack in my face the size of a canyon. A swell trade off, don’t you thin-”

King Dice erupted into another fit of coughing, this time more violent than the first. The tremors through his body caused a large corner of his die to crumble off. Cuphead raced to catch it in his hands. Mugman stood at his side but was unsure of what to do, so wringed at his straw anxiously.

Elder Kettle looked the man up and down, slowly realising how injured he was. The fog of his fear and rage had stopped him from seeing it before.

“You’re hurt.” He quietly stated.

“And the sky is blue.” King Dice bit back, wheezing.

Elder Kettle cleared his throat.

“Look here; I don’t trust you as far as I could throw a penny but you need to get to a doctor as fast as possible. I know a discrete path we can take, away from the townspeople. Then we part ways and you leave Cuphead and Mugman alone, deal?”

All King Dice could do was nod and follow the Elder Kettle as he walked back into the foliage, Cuphead and Mugman trailing behind him.


Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'd like to first say thank you for all the really nice comments on chapter 1! I wasn't expecting it at all haha. It's seriously a great motivator. Secondly I plan for this to get pretty long, but only because i have so many ideas for this fic. Hopefully they're good ones that keep you guys interested~

enjoy!

When they sauntered into the small Doctors practice, the room fell silent. Elder Kettle went to approach one of the staff, but King Dice held him back with a outstretched hand.

“I think I can make my own appointments, old man.”

The receptionist sat stiff in her seat as the tall villain walked over to the front desk, leaning on it far too casually for a man covered in ash and only partially physically intact.

“Is the doctor in? I’d like to see him as soon as possible. A slightly pressing matter, as you can no doubt see.”

The few other patients in the waiting room gawked on in fascination and alarm. Most would have fled, if not for King Dice’s treacherous appearance combined with the two now famous cup headed boys watching over his every move, like two tiny cherub bodyguards.

“Y-yes Sir, he’s in his office, second down the hall.”

King Dice nodded and went to head off.

That’s when he spotted the small plaque on the wall that read in thick gold letters DR. R REGINALD. He stopped in his tracks.

He knew that name.

Oh, he was a fresh one. They had only collected his soul mere days before Cuphead and Mugman tore them all up, so he would believe the memory of the King’s snide laughter and biting tone as the poor doctor begged for mercy would be… A tad fresh.

No matter, Mr. Dice would improvise. He loosened the cuffs of his sleeves, taking a few more steps. Then he intentionally collapsed, a dramatic thud filling the air of the silent doctors office.

“King Dice!” He could hear one of the boy’s shout and soon two little sets of hands where on him, helping him back up.

He chuckled quietly to himself; they were so predictable.

He cracked open a eye lazily as he sat upright once more. Both boys were looking up at him with worried stares. He then looked down at Mugman’s hands, which were open and cradling something.
Another chunk of his die sat in them. Oh. That probably wasn’t the best idea. He had to admit though, he knew why that dusty old kettle was so protective of them now. When all of their bubbly and caring energy was directed at you, it felt rather nice. King Dice felt strangely pampered, even.

Also powerful, knowing first hand what these two were capable of. And now he had them around his little finger...

“I say boys; could you walk me there?” He sighed, placing a hand across his forehead as if he was still faint. It honestly wasn’t too far from the truth; he felt like death. But it wasn’t anything he hadn’t dealt with before.

They nodded eagerly and soon King Dice entered the doctor’s office, now with a rather cushy entourage if the Doctor decided to go against his hippocratic oath and instead rip his framed degree off the wall and beat him within an inch of his life with it.

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The Doctor didn’t kill him on sight.

That didn’t mean he was happy, however.

“Why the hell should I treat you? Damn well got what you deserved, ya’ sadist.” He scoffed, a cold glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes.

“Please, he’s really hurt.” Mugman started, but was cut off by a curt snap of laughter from Dr. Reginald.

“I know that son, I have eyes and a medical degree.” He barked. “Doesn’t mean nothin’ to me.”

“He might die!” Cuphead dramatically offered, not entirely knowing if such a brash statement was true. It probably wasn’t knowing King Dice.

“Then get busy dyin’ somewhere else. Leave me the hell alone.” The Doctor snapped.

King Dice stood tight lipped in the doorway. He was dizzy and his lungs and throat still felt like fire ants where having a party in his respiratory system. He couldn’t believe he had been reduced to this.

“Sir, if I could offer you-” Mr Dice started.

“Not a chance in hell, you box headed frea-”

King dice growled and snapped his fingers, causing a particularly sharp playing card to go whizzing by the Doctors head. Cuphead and Mugman tensed in alert, poised to interfere if things went too far.

“Listen damn it! You don’t have a choice; you will make a deal with me!”

King Dice’s body and pride were both in tatters, but damned if he was going to let some weasely little man talk like that to him.

Dr. Reginald shut his mouth, as his eyes widened in fear.

Much better.

“I have your wife’s wedding ring in a safe back at my casino. Actually, I got a lotta things of yours.” He started again casually.
“You were quite the regular now that I remember, weren’t you? The safe is made out of three inch thick titanium, so even now as the building is in ashes, it wouldn’t have a scratch. Want them? They’re yours if you patch me up for free.”

Dr. Reginald stood silent now, obviously enticed.

“ I-I ain’t making no more deals with the Devil.” He said quietly.

“Well that’s good, because it isn’t the Devil asking. He’s not around these parts no more. *But I am*. No contracts, all this soul nonsense means nothing to me anymore, Doc.”

The Doctor sighed. His wife never did forgive him for gambling away that ring.

“Fine, get on the table. And remove your shirt and shoes, no doubt you have burns I need to attend to.”

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Cuphead and Mugman sat on some wooden stools to the left of the room as the doctor treated King Dice’s wounds, which turned out were many once the soot was washed away. It made the older brother squirm, thinking about how the man acquired them. He never did like fires, they frightened him. The time he had spent fighting the Devil more than solidified that. To be trapped in a blaze sounded horrifying.

Currently King Dice had his tattered dress shirt removed and was sitting cross legged on the examination table, his alabaster chest bandaged up. It was marred with bright pink marks and gashes. The thing was only a fraction of them looked new, with most being raised and fully healed scars. Cuphead guessed it made sense; the man’s line of work was pretty dangerous.

He himself had gotten a few scars and knicks from the short time he had been in the heat of battle, too. The boy thought they looked kinda cool; he could remember how he got every one. His brother didn’t think they were quite as novel, however.

“Drink this.” The Doctor said, pushing a glass of red liquid into his patient’s hands.

King Dice swirled it around scrupulously like one would a fine whiskey, before taking a sip. His face showed the brew wasn’t pleasant.

“If your trying to poison me, just say it.” He scoffed, before taking another sip of the bitter drink.

The Doctor just shook his head in reply, his hands and attention now occupied to gluing his die back together. It missed a few pieces, but he seemed re-assured it would re-form soon enough with what was there.

When King Dice sat the empty glass down with a subdued clink, the Doctor had done all he could. He pulled a small packet out of his desk and handed it to the man.

King Dice hummed at the packet of medicinal cigarettes and accepted them.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Whatever. I’ve done my part of the deal; now get the hell outta my office. Your face around here is bad for business. I do however order you to rest up for a few days. But that’s just the physician in me not wanting you to re-injure yourself and undo my hard work. Don’t give a damn about your wellbeing, trust me.”
“Verywell. Goodbye, Dr. Reginald.”

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The slow croaking of the hammock as he swayed to and fro was rather calming to King Dice. Shame it was eclipsed by the shouting that was going on inside the house. When they had relayed the information from the Doctor, Elder Kettle was not too pleased. They had gone inside to discuss matters, leaving King Dice to idle on their porch. It had soon escalated to a yelling match, so he didn’t even need to stretch his legs to hear the conversation. Convenient.

“*He has nowhere to go!*”

“He’s not staying here! And thats final.”

“But-”

“Absolutely not! He’s **dangerous**. Come on, boys. I know you want to help but don’t be so naive!”

“We’re not naive! If he gets out of line, we can deal with it.”

King Dice rose an eyebrow at what was no doubt Cuphead’s hard tone. That boy had a fire in him that he didn’t know to be scared of or stoke a little to see what happened. Either way he was right, at least for now.

“Cup’s right. He’s not gonna hurt a fly in this state.”

The lanky man crinkled his nose at Mugman’s statement; he wasn’t *that* weak.

“-just for a few days, ok? To keep an eye on everything.”

There was a silence, as either they had stopped talking or gone back to a more sensible speaking voice. King Dice strained to pick up any words, but his luck had gone dry. If he wanted to eavesdrop now he would have to do it the old fashioned way, which didn’t seem worth it. Closing his eyes he focused once more on the gentle swing of the hammock.

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He was awoken by small gloved hands nudging his stomach.

“Wa… huh?” King Dice slurred, looking around.

“- One night. We have a spare room and you’re out in the morning. Thats it, ok?” Cuphead said in a neutral tone.

“Of course, I was expecting little else.” The King finally said. He felt slightly bereft at Cuphead’s now colder tone. Elder Kettle must have finally talked some sense into him. What a shame.

Getting up he then saw the two weren’t alone. Mugman and the old coot were gawking from the front door, quickly ducking their heads back in when they were seen. Huh, so maybe Cuphead’s flakiness was because he was being pushed.

Walking into the small home of Elder Kettle as a welcome guest was a strange experience, and not one he expected to ever experience in his lifetime. The rooms were small but cozy, as well as full as the trinkets and others things he would expect. He made it his personal mission to pinch one or two of them as a souvenir, for pettiness sake.
“You’ll stay down there.” Mugman gestured, pointing to a door at the end of the hall. “If you need anything just ask.”

King Dice hummed in acknowledgement and approached the room, opening the door to a gust of stale air. He coughed as the dust agitated his already finicky lungs. Obviously this room didn’t get used much. What a shocker, Elder Kettle didn’t have company over all that often.

He closed the door behind him, blocking of the curious faces peering from down the corridor.

The guest room, like everything else, was compact and modest. The man sighed as he sat on the single bed, running a hand over the thick wool duvet that sat atop of it. What a miserable little place of humbleness this was. He felt like he would burst into flames if he touched anything.

No he wouldn’t, he corrected himself. He wasn’t him. He wasn’t even close to that bastard.

Although he would be treating himself a fool if he didn’t admit to wanting to be at his side again, even after everything. How utterly pathetic.

He laid down on the stiff mattress and cringed. He ached to be back in his King suite at the casino again, which was spacious and soft and draped in all things lavish. Heck, He missed everything about that place. The noise, the drunk fools with pockets full of coin. The bright lights and even gaudier three piece wearing gents. His minions, which he could only assume all met their demise in the blaze.

Shutting his eyes tighter he tried to emulate the sleep that came so easily to him on the porch earlier, but found little success. Even so, he tried.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So here it is, the next chapter! As always thank you for the lovely comments :) I’d reply to more of them but I can never think of what to say haha. Also it’s a tad on the shorter side as i’m very busy right now, but I have some free time coming up soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

King Dice was running for his life.

His breath hitched in sloppy gasps as the bolted down the hall. Between strides he tried to wipe away the white hot embers were settling on his clothes, threatening to set them ablaze. The smoke billowing in curtains around him was intolerable, filling his lungs and making him feel like he was being cooked from the inside out. The heat made his movements laborious as he met dead end after dead end, the foundations of the very building crumbling around him and creating a cruel maze.

The flames licked and hissed as far as his stinging eyes could see, giving him a beautiful show that surely only the bravest of firefighters or dead men were lucky enough ever to see.

Not wanting to join the later he jumped over one of the smoldering pillars, feeling nothing as the fire burnt at his feet and legs.

He brushed it off and ran on; even the most awful of wounds would heal. His life however was a one chance offer. Right now his body was just screaming at him to live through this. To run, to get out.

Survive.

He squinted through the ash and swore he saw a glimmer of metal. It could have been anything, the shine of the bar stools, the trimming of one of the slot machines.

Or the gilded front door to the casino.

It could be that.

His legs ached as he raced towards the source. King Dice let out sob of joy when he felt a cold gust of fresh air. It was the exit, he was saved! The dull glow of the nights sky could even be seen in the distance through the veil of smoke that camouflaged the door. Just a few more steps and-

Pressure shot through his numb body as he felt his feet lose their solid grip of the ground. A loud crack could be heard, and King Dice prayed he didn’t have any part in that noise.

He blearily looked up and was greeted with the feeling of an unbearable weight on top of him. Instinctively he went to push the object away with his hands but found they too were trapped by his side. He was cemented under something, and its weight threatened to start crushing him like a split pea under a pestle if he didn’t move.

No... He was so close.
“H-help..” He tried, his voice hoarse. But no matter how hard he tried, his voice still seemed so small.

Meanwhile the object seemed to get heavier and it was more laborious with every breath he took. The thing swelled and shifted. Grew and pressed on him. He swore he could hear something. Laughter?

Then his scenery had changed.

He was no longer in a burning inferno, but laying in a comfortable bed. His bed, to be exact. Glancing to his side he ran a hand over the purple satin sheets, glittery and soft in the casino lights. The muffled music from the poker machines downstairs chimed softly from here. He smiled thinking about how many suckers had no clue they were rigged and were throwing their money happily away.

He watched as a black taloned hand clapped over his. Their fingers intertwined. He relaxed. In that moment he felt utterly content. What had been happening before? He couldn’t seem to remember anything apart from the fact he had been lounging in his suite all day with the Devil, of course.

King Dice scoffed; for a man who seemed chastily tied to his work, the minute he so much as hinted at the chance of sex suddenly the Devil’s busy schedule was miraculously freed up. Funny that.

“Look at me.” A deep voice growled seductively above him.

King Dice happily turned to gaze at his lover, who held a mischievous expression.

“Hrm? What do you want?” Mr. Dice crooned, running his hands over the others back lazily and tangling his hands in the fur there.

“I think you know.” The beast purred back, leaning over to stare deeply into the others eyes.

King Dice went in to kiss the man, but froze mid way. Something was wrong. That gaze. It was… empty.

Vengeful .

King Dice tried to look away, only to find he couldn’t move again.

“B-boss, please.” He begged as the man continued to stare with those vorpal eyes. “Help…!”

But the man did no such thing, only laughing as he grew heavier and the walls set on fire once more, a familiar heat and smoke filling his room. The Devil burst into rapturous flames, and melted and warped in front of him. King Dice thrashed as he felt himself set ablaze.

No.

No . He needed to get out, now!

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King Dice shot up in bed, his eyes wide and chest thumping so loudly it sounded like his heart had relocated to between his ears. He gripped the thick wool sheets with shaking hands, the fear and panic from his nightmare still leaving his system.

That’s when he felt something. Looking down he could see in the grainy darkness that his right hand was wet.
Squinting around the spare room of the tiny cottage, he noticed quite a few things in rapid succession.

The first was that he wasn’t alone. The dark silhouettes of Cuphead and Mugman sat afraid and sheepish at his bedside. The second was the jug of hot water, upturned no doubt when he had awoken from his dream.

He sat, furious. Also incredibly bemused.

Had they really tried the old hand in warm water trick on him? So the unbearable heat in his nightmare… Just hot water. No doubt the crushing sensation was those damn brats clambering around on his bed. He felt slightly embarrassed when he recollected the lude turn that the dream had taken, paired with their presence.

Coming out of his stupor, he noticed the pair trying to sneak out of the room.

“Oh you don’t, you little shits-” He started, clambering out of bed to block their only exit route.

“We’re sorry!” Cuphead plead as he tried to dash quickly underneath the lanky man’s legs for a quick escape down the hall.

King Dice preempted this however and grabbed the boy roughly by the collar, balling his fist in his pyjama top and lifting him up off the ground. The whole scene was reminiscent of a cat grabbing her boisterous kittens by the scruff.

As the elder brother thrashed and tried to twist out of the others grasp, Mugman stood by in panicked hesitance.

“I-it was just a silly prank; we didn’t mean to give you night terrors; we promise! We tried to wake you up but you started thrashing a whole lot and-”

“That’s because less than twenty four hours ago I was trapped alive in a burning building! It does things to a gentleman! You honestly thought putting my hand in scalding hot water was a good idea?” King Dice hissed, his rage and lingering panic seemingly fighting for dominance in his mind.

“No sir! I’m sorry!” Mugman cried.

King Dice let out a frustrated sigh, trying to calm himself. He wanted to throttle them, but that would wake Elder Kettle and he really didn’t feel like being booted out and rendered homeless this instant. He was gracefully allowed one night here and damn if he wasn’t gonna milk it for all it was worth. He was sure in the coming days he would be missing this crummy little spare room. No hotel or tenant in the area would have him, he knew that much.

Deflated, he dropped the still thrashing Cuphead. The boy made a squeak of indignance as he was plonked down.

Speaking of getting his money's worth...

Walking down the hall he turned to the small nook he remembered the kitchen being in and immediately started looking through the cupboards. The boys followed him in a curious confusion.

“Not looking for the knives are you? We already said we’re sorry.” Cuphead joked sheepishly.

“No,” King Dice replied shortly, peering into what seemed to be a pantry. “Also an apology only works if the person accepts it. You just can’t go around saying sorry and expect it to diffuse any
situation. I’m saying this as a professional sleaze ball, kid. Just thought you should know.”

“Thanks for the advice.” Cup bit back, rolling his eyes.

“Then what are you looking for?” Asked Mugman, seemingly not as relaxed at the idea of King Dice poking around their kitchen in the early morning, especially after their little prank.

“Food.” Was the simple reply that left Mr. Dice’s lips.

“Oh. Well I mean it’s about three o’clock… That’s technically morning, right?” Mugman trailed off, shrugging.

The dice headed man scrunched his face in confusion, finally stopping his casual ransacking to turn back and look at them.

“The hell has that got to do with anything?” He asked.

Cuphead laughed, looking at his brother with a knowing look.

“Up for some breakfast in the dark, Dice?”

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Elder Kettle slowly plodded down the hall, leaning on his cane with each step. The first light of early morning filtered through the windows giving the place a friendly glow. The man let out a content sigh as he walked. Last night had been cold and as such had left him with a stiff ache in his legs. As his old bones limbered up from the sun, he turned into the kitchen.

He then froze in place.

“Oh, you’re up.” King Dice murmured around a mouthful of eggs.

“I… Uhh.”

The old kettle looked dumbly at the scene in front of him. His boys were happily shuffling around the kitchen, cooking… Something. It looked dubious and only slightly edible. A content Mr. Dice sat at their small kitchen table eating a much more standard breakfast of eggs, bacon and buttered toast.

Ok then. This was fine. Apparently the fiend had made himself at home while he slept. He took a deep breath; he would approach this situation with grace and tact. First things first, though.

“Boys? What are you making?” Elder Kettle asked. It was supposed to come out as a causal question, but the way he rushed to their side and yanked away the mixer Cuphead had poised in his hands showed the panic.

“Pancakes!” Mugman said with excitement. “It looks a little weird though… I think it was the lemon.”

“Lemon?” Elder Kettle exclaimed, perplexed.

“Yeah, King Dice said he knew a guy who would put sugar and lemon in his pancakes.” Cuphead elaborated.

“I said on the pancakes and once they were cooked, don’t drag me into this.” The villain scoffed, pushing some more bacon onto a fork with the knife in his other hand.
“Oh, boys! If you wanted some pancakes you should have just waited for me to get up. If you put lemon and milk together they curdle.” He sighed, looking at the thing that only vaguely resembled batter in the bowl. Maybe he could save it. A bit more cream and he could turn it into a filling for lemon tart.

Maybe.

He sighed for what felt like the tenth time in mere minutes.

Anyway, briskly on to task two.

“And may I ask why *you* thought you could help yourself to *my* kitchen?” He asked King Dice, who only gave him that same damnable expression he had in the forest. Boredom, mixed with petty inconvenience.

“Because I was hungry and your boys offered? I would have made more but Cuphead simply insisted on making pancakes once I was done. Kid has drive, I’ll give him that.”

“How long have you been up?” Kettle croaked, indignant.

“Not sure, old man. You ask a lot of questions, you know that? Why not deflect some of that energy onto your kids?” He sighed, finishing off his plate.

King Dice then stood up and side stepped over to the small sink, filling the basin with water. With his back deliberately tuned to the situation, he began to wash up the mountain of pots and pans the boys had somehow mown through, plus the frying pan and two bowls he had used in his own preparation. When Elder Kettle tried to talk to him again he simply began to sing as he scrubbed, his surprisingly sonorous voice killing any chance of conversation.

“*Stars fading; but I linger on dear-*”

All Elder Kettle could do was let out a frustrated huff at the man’s obvious avoidance of the question and looked back towards the boys for answers.

“Uhh, we might have woken him up.” Mugman offered. Immediately a red flag went off in the elders mind. *What had they done?* 

“And *how* did you wake him?” Elder Kettle scowled.

Cuphead let out a nervous chuckle.

“Well…”

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King Dice sat on the porch, legs swinging idly over the edge. It was a gorgeous day, with only the faintest warm breeze and bright blue skies. He finished the last of his juice and placed the glass gently next to him.

While the boys were being chewed out by a furious Elder Kettle inside, he had used the distraction to finish up the dishes and discreetly grab the tied up tea towel full of canned goods he had prepared earlier. A free breakfast was always good, but he knew he’d need more than that. There was at least a week’s worth of stolen food in this sack.

He pulled a medicinal cigarette out of his breast pocket and brought it to his lips, lighting it with a
snap of his finger. He took a slow drag. It definitely wasn’t tobacco, but rather some bitter herbal concoction. Shame, he itched for nicotine about now.

He looked around.

King Dice was here, out the front, just idling. He didn’t know why he was still sticking around. Waiting for a goodbye, perhaps? For them to let him stay another night? Both he knew were unrealistic.

Peeking over the horizon, he looked to island over where his casino once would have stood. It wasn’t visible from here, but the mountain it was located in was. The smoke that had filled the sky yesterday had ceased, meaning that they had finally put the blaze out.

He supposed he should go over there. Not to assess damage of course; he knew that his beloved building was obliterated. But the safe would still be there. He thought nervously for a moment that perhaps one of the firefighters might have taken it off the premises, but pushed that thought away. The safe was heavier than any man or ten could pick up.

Sliding off the porch he picked up his sack of goods and began to walk away, giving the house one last look as he did so. He doubted this would be the final time he’d see Elder Kettle and his two boys. He almost hoped it wasn’t.

Back in his casino he had always joked that the phrase ‘domestic bliss’ sounded like an oxymoron to him. However after watching your own livelihood burn to the ground there was something to be found in a cozy house, warm food and honest company.

He scoffed as he picked up his pace, catching his own thoughts.

“Son of a bitch. I have to get out of here before I go soft.” He muttered to himself, shaking his head ruefully.

Chapter End Notes

The song King Dice starts singing is ‘Dream a little dream of me’. Also the devil will finally come into play in the next chapter! I promise! For now you just get this bizarre dream sequence that took me like three attempts to write haha
Chapter Notes

Hoo boy, this chapter took a while. Sorry guys!
Anyway as always thank you for the support and I hope you enjoy this chapter :)

Elder Kettle settled down into his armchair and sighed in contentment.

King Dice had left on his own accord, thank the heavens. He wouldn’t have known what to do otherwise. It wasn’t like he - a man in his late sixties with no social or economic status - had the means to threaten him into leaving.

Cuphead and Mugman were standing in the doorway, peering out onto the porch where the man was last seen. Their disappointment showed clearly on their faces.

“Aww. He’s really gone.” Cuphead sighed.

“It’s for the best.” Elder Kettle lectured from his chair. “I know it was... A novel experience, having him around. But you boys know what kind of character he is. He’s a swindler and a fiend. A man like that can be mighty nice when they’re getting what they want, but mighty violent when they’re not. Who knows what kind of person he’ll become when he gets back on his feet?”

The two cups turned to each other and shared a brief look. Elder Kettle could tell words he couldn’t hear were being exchanged in their stares. This silent communication between them happened often, which irked the old man. When the two teamed up, he never stood a chance.

“I guess you’re right.” Mugman shrugged, disappointment in his voice. “I just worry. Where is he gonna go? He has nothing and the townspeople won’t help him.”

Elder Kettle just shook his head. Even though the pair were troublemakers, his boys had hearts of solid gold. It worried him.

“People like that always seem to bounce back. That’s half the reason I don’t want you two chasing him up, you hear? You could get into some very hostile situations.”

Cuphead and mugman nodded, but it was rather listlessly. The old man knew they were only agreeing to appease him and nothing he had said mattered. They would look for King Dice.

After breakfast was finally finished and the boys had cleaned up the table, Elder Kettle allowed them to leave.

Walking to the front door, he could see the two running and laughing by the bridge next to their house. After a few moments they ran further, disappearing from sight. Elder Kettle felt a twist in his stomach. He wanted to run after them, but what good would that do? Their relationship was already strained enough, the last thing he needed to do was smother them so much they felt they had to sneak around and lie. He would always be here to help them; they needed to feel safe in that knowledge.

“Please be safe, my boys...”
“So… Where do ya’ think he went?” Cuphead drawled, looking out amongst the crowds of the fairground.

The day had become rather hot, so the pair had decided to spend some of their allowance in Inkwell Isle II. They came here often to play on the rides and sit at the big flower shaped tables shaded by towering rainbow umbrellas, all while snacking on the delightfully unhealthy food served there.

Mugman spluttered around his straw, choking on some of the chocolate milkshake that sat between him and his brother.

“Cup! We shouldn’t be even thinking that. Maybe Elder Kettle is right, he is a bad man after all.” Mugman scolded, reaching for a fry from their basket.

“Ahh, hooey. Elder Kettle might be right but that sounds boring. King Dice is in total tatters right now. No home, no job. How would you feel if we found out he got in trouble or something? And we just sat here?” Cup pried, taking a sip of their shared beverage with his own red striped straw.

Mugman shot his brother a look of indignance. Oh, we was going to play the empathy card? After the prank they pulled last night?

“Don’t act like you care about that! You just want an excuse to adventure again.”

Cuphead chuckled, throwing up his hands in surrender.

“Maybe! But… I also am really worried about him. The smuck was barely walking yesterday. Well, that and-“

The red cup hesitated, looking down at the plate of fries. His expression turned serious.

“- Do you remember what King Dice was rambling about in the forest? About the Devil being nothing but a beast, and he was fool to forget that? It sounded awful. I don’t think he was lying about how hurt he was. Ya’ know, about the Devil betraying him like that? He’s been serving that guy since before we were even born. Now he’s all alone.”

Mugman had a quiet, contemplative look on his face as he considered what his brother said. He thought back to when they had first saw King Dice, dishevelled and broken through the foliage. The young boy’s thoughts then went to the person who responsible for it.

“What do you think happened to the Devil?” Mugman pondered.

“I don’t know.” Cuphead sighed.

“That’s where I can perhaps help you two boys.”

“…”

The two turned to look at the person who had talked to them. It was an apple headed man, sitting a table over. The two recognized him instantly and gave him a warm smile; he lived close to their house.

His name escaped them, but his deeds didn’t.

The kind Appleman tossed them the occasional coin to spend on candy and toys in Porkrind’s shop, as well as vouched for them one time when they had stayed out late playing in the forest. They
hadn’t really been at the Appleman’s house; neither of the boys had any idea where that even was. Nevertheless when Elder Kettle had started to fill with steam and let out an awful shrieking, Appleman had heard the commotion and defused the situation with the blissful little lie.

They owed this man a lot.

“Sorry, I know it’s mighty rude to eavesdrop but, well, if you don’t know yet…”

He took their friendly demeanor as his cue to stand up and walk over to where they were located. As he approached, the boys noticed the newspaper he held in his hands.

“Have you seen the paper this morning?” Appleman said conversationally as he sat down, then laughed at the blank stares he received. “Course not. Young champs like yourself would care about boring stuff like that, would you?”

Sobering a little, Appleman slid the paper in the middle for all to see. Cuphead and Mugman leaned in, squinting at the front page.

“Mysterious Demon causes devastation in Nibsville.” Mugman read aloud, slowly.

“Where’s that?” Cuphead asked. Neither he or his brother had never left their hometown, even with all the begging for Elder Kettle to let them vacation somewhere exciting and far away they had done.

“It’s right over there.” Appleman pointed to a landmass that sat in the distance, no doubt miles away from their isolated little village. “They’re our closest neighbours; as such it’s usually the first stop for people leaving the island.”

“So this ‘demon’…” Mugman sighed.

Cuphead picked up the paper and loosley scanned over the article for himself. It took a bit of effort, as he still wasn’t used to the verbose words and tiny smudged print they used in newspapers, but he got the general gist.

“- The beast, which reports stated walked on all fours and howled in a tongue not understood by anyone, was seen smashing buildings and trees to the ground. When confronted it summoned minions, who then used their numbers to drive terrified residents out of their homes. The demon’s whereabouts is currently unknown, but eye witnesses say it fled into the nearby forest.”

Applehead shook his head, taking one of the boys fries and chewing it thoughtfully.

“Yeah, the whole Isle has been gossiping about it. Surprised you haven’t heard already. It says in the article it happened last night. Apparently half of the town is in ruin. Luckily only a few were injured, as a priest that lived in the center of Nibsville had been quick to drive him away. But... The description of this ‘demon’. Tall, black fur and horns. Apparently had glowing eyes and claws. Sounds mighty familiar, huh?”

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“Son of a bitch… The King is still alive?”

“But how...?”

“Is it really Mister Dice? He looks like what my dog ate for breakfast!”

King Dice kept his head down and pushed past the audience his presence had attracted. He had been
hoping that less people were out this time of morning, but apparently everyone around these parts was an early riser just to spite him. He could add that to the list of attributes inkwell’s townspeople had, just under their inability not to make stupid comments aloud and their uncanny ability to piss him off.

He continued on, walking up the red velvet stairs to the cave containing the Devil’s casino. He noticed more people hovering around its entrance. Great. All of them must have been there to gawk at the destruction before they started the work day. They stared at him with wide shocked eyes as he passed. Smarter than the last crowd, they parted to make room for him.

As he entered the cave, the atmosphere changed instantly. It was quiet and lifeless inside, with every step King Dice took echoing through the abandoned shell. He turned, looking back. No one had followed him in, unsurprisingly. He was alone with the wreck.

King Dice had known when he arrived that the casino would be nothing but charred beams and rubble. He thought that was rather obvious, all things considered.

That logic apparently hadn’t settled into his brain, however. Looking at the razed and empty space, he realised he wasn’t as emotionally prepared for this as he thought he had been. He felt like he was going to be sick, as he numbly walked around the ashes. The shock and grief felt as fresh as ever. It was as if someone had just told him of the news.

It was suddenly far too real. The Devil’s Casino was really gone.

Feeling tears prick at the back of his eyes, he wiped them away with a grey frayed glove. He was mighty glad no-one else was around to witness the pathetic display.

He shook his head, willing back the tears. The strong smell of soot was choking him all over again and he decided in that moment he wanted to make his time in this place as brief as possible. He just had to find that safe and get out.

Tracing over the layout in his mind, he slowly navigated his way around. There was a large husk of a counter which he presumed was once the bar, so all he had to do was go north a little and the offices should be around there somewhere. He knew he had hit the devils room when the could see the metal remains of a large throne. Well, that was a handy landmark.

It wasn’t long before he found the safe, sitting inconspicuously between two charred planks of wood. It was still sealed shut and appeared to not have been tampered with in any way. A wide grin filled his face as he twisted the knob back and forwards to the appropriate 4 number code. When he cracked it open gold and silver spilled from the safe like a fountain, glimmering and completely untouched. He greedily scooped the jewelry and ingots into his arms, only realizing now he should have brought a bag. All he had was the wrapped up towel he was using to carry food. He placed his treasure amongst the canned peaches and tied it back up; it was all he could do until he found a safer place.

His joy was cut short however when he head a noise. Footsteps, somewhere behind him. So he wasn’t alone after all.

Spinning around the caught a glimpse of the perpetrator. They were about knee height and a deep purple in colour. A long arrow shaped tail quickly disappeared around a far wall with the rest of it, as the creature fled. King Dice scowled. It was one of the Devil’s henchmen, he knew that without even double checking.

But why? Was the thing here for the gold, too? Was it here for him?
Or... Perhaps the thing was in the same situation as him? Lost and without a master, sorting through the ashes of their old home?

He quickly bolted around the rubble, trying to catch up with the imp.

“Hey, wait! I’m in the same situation as you, buddy!”

All King Dice did however was arrive in time to witness the creature look at him with big clueless eyes and beckon at him, before opening up a hole on the floor. The thing then vanished into the depths of hell. He scoffed in indignance. Well, so much for that last theory. The Devil still had some of his lackeys it seemed.

King Dice watched with a hesitant expression. The portal was still there. The imp was keeping it open for him. However he wasn’t naive enough to just jump into the hole and plunge himself back into that place. A few seconds after, the portal puckered and vanished.

It still felt rather foreign however, to watch it disappear as an outsider. There was a time where the act of plummeting into hell was second nature. Using the Devil’s magic was just how he got around. Now he wasn’t even sure of any aspect of his relationship with the Devil. Was he even supposed to be alive right now? The Devil was so hysterical in the final moments King Dice had seen him, he honestly had no clue.

Shaking off the thought he picked up his prize and hurried for the exit.

Once outside and in the cool morning breeze, his mind turned to the next task on his list; a new outfit. He refused to wear his current tatters for any longer. A gent such as himself should dress sharp, after all. But how to get some new threads? No one in town would be willing, even if he shoved all the gold in the world in their faces. That was more than evident by the cold glares he was getting as he walked through the town. He tapped a finger against a corner of his die as he walked, pondering all his options.

He was sure the tailor a town over could probably do some work for him. Scouring his memory he tried to remember what surrounded their isolated community. He didn’t leave the island much. Nevertheless King Dice was still surprised by how little he or the Devil’s name had spread to other places.

Not that he was complaining. It had gotten to the point where in the Devil’s Casino he had always picked the guy or gal with the fresh face to butter up. If they hadn’t interacted with the locals too much, they were as good as putty in his hands.

With his mind made up, King dice started heading to the dock, which was on the skirts of Inkwell isle II. He knew it shouldn't be too hard getting off the island, as it residents left small boats and dinghies all over the place, unsupervised and only loosely tied to the pier. The harder part would be navigating the busiest section of the isle at this time of the morning. Steeling himself for the verbal lashing he was about to receive, he started making his way over.

When he walked through the Dice house and into the brightest, busiest isle he immediately regretted his decision.

“Look at that, the Devil’s main squeeze is still alive!” He heard a mysterious person holler. Laughter rippled out at the man’s joke, as the townspeople again flocked to him.

Mr. Dice clenched his fist. Oh, this was going to be a trial of patience for sure. He took a deep breath; all he had to do was get off the island, after that these vermin could say what they wanted
about him.

Deciding to stick to the edges, he quietly walked to the shore.

“Hey! It’s King Dice!” He heard another voice holler.

Before he could flee, another voice rang out.

“Hey Dice, come over here! It’s important. We gotta tell you something.”

King Dice was confused at this point; the voices didn’t sound hostile. Turning to the noise, he quickly realized why. Cuphead, Mugman and some apple headed fool were sitting a few feet away and beckoning him to go over. More accurately the two cup children were; the Appleman looked positively mortified and was keeping his hands firmly to his sides.

King Dice sighed deeply. He wasn’t expecting to bump into them again so soon.

He watched them a moment, hesitant. He really didn’t want to go over there, he had business he needed to attend to. Besides, if the townspeople saw him slink over there and sit next to the boys like they were old friends, he would never live it down. The rumours would be intolerable. He was sure that Apple guy wouldn’t help matters, either.

He was about to turn around and ignore the two cups incessant chanting of his name, when something caught his eye. The mysterious third party, this Apple headed man, was wringing his hands as he looked down at the table. It was discrete, but Mister Dice had gotten good at reading people's emotions in his time at the casino, so he knew exactly what this man's posture portrayed.

Unease, stress, fear. None of them were directed at him like he had first thought, however. Applehead would look down at some object out of King Dice’s sight, then back to the boys.

It was obvious to the conman now. The Apple man was worried for Cuphead and Mugman’s safety.

Before he could ponder about why he felt so compelled to do so, King Dice walked over to the table in a few large, confident strides.

The least he could do was hear the boys out, right?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

A very dialogue heavy chapter this time. But that just means the next chapter will be full of action... Hopefully. I gotta say i’m having a lot of fun writing this fanfic. I hope it's just as fun to read :D

Thwap!

King Dice recoiled, only just managing to catch the offending object that had been thrown in his face. He glared coldly at the perpetrators, then looked down at his hands. A newspaper?

“Oh gosh- Sorry!” Cuphead gasped in embarrassment.

“Cup you could have just handed it to him!” Mugman scolded.

“I was tryna! But he was walking so fast that-”

“It’s fine.” Was all Mr. Dice grit out as he sat down on one of the technicolour stools. The seat was so low that his knees protruded out either side of the table. Clearly, they hadn’t accounted for a man of his height to be using these facilities. Or at least not with their dignity intact. He heard a snicker from somewhere nearby. The lanky man was regretting his decision already.

“Is this why you were both hollering at me like lunatics?” He groaned, waggling the paper in his hand.

They nodded sheepishly.

“You should read the front page headline; these kids seem to think pretty pertinent to you.” The apple man offered.

King Dice gave him a scrupulous glance. The amount of questions he had for the strange apple man were immense. Why did he care about the boys so much? Why wasn’t he joining all the other townsfolk in giving him hell? He shook his head; it didn’t matter right now. It felt jarring to realise but he was no longer a casino manager; it wasn’t his job to know the dirt on everyone anymore.

He looked down to read the paper with a theatrical sigh and a raised brow.

The cocky facade was dropped quickly however, as he read the first few words.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Cuphead egged on, when he saw the man’s expression shift.

King dice didn’t reply; he was too absorbed talking in every word on the page. The minute he had realised who it was about he needed to know all he could. What was the Devil doing? Where was he now? Dismissively he skimmed over paragraphs about the town and its people. To hell with them. The only thing he cared about was him. King Dice drank in every description that the eye witnesses had provided. They... Weren’t encouraging.

Thin, feral, unable to speak. On all fours constantly. What was more worrying was there wasn’t a
No, nothing about this was right. He had served this man for decades and he had never seen him use his beast form for more than a few hours. It was a matter of pride for the Devil. He might have been a demon but he walked and talked like man; heck, in his opinion he did it smoother than any of those fools.

Dice shook his head. No doubt this beast, alone and senseless, was slowly starving. He had spent many a tireless day trying to get his boss to eat and drink properly, as the man often forgot to tend to his physical form.

Mr. Dice begun to plan how he could get to the Devil as quickly as possible. To tend to him and feed him. To make sure he was safe-

He stopped.

There were a few seconds as he sat numb, slowly realising the mindset he had just worked himself into. King Dice felt his heart sink, while his face took on a violet blush of indignance and shame.

He couldn’t believe it.

After everything, he still cared about the Devil. King Dice tried to convince himself it was residual feelings; in reality he wanted to do nothing more than throttle the man. Despite this he could tangibly feel it, the concern and yearning sitting in a tight ball in his gut. Disbelief and frustration took over. He wanted to rip this emotion out and throw it into the orbit of the sun. It had no right to be there.

“Hey? Are you ok?” Mugman tentavaley asked, pulling King Dice from his thoughts.

He looked at the three faces that were staring at him from across the table. They held various expressions of concern, alarm and confusion. Uh oh. Glancing down he noticed he was clutching the newspaper with a deathlike grip, his knuckles white with the strain. He loosened them and let out a cough.

“I’m Just fine, kid. Swell, in fact.” He spat back, not particularly enjoying the looks of pity.

In something that could be regarded as either a blessing or a curse, the attention was lifted from him when two figures approached. King Dice recognized them immediately. Porkrind was walking over, with a steely eyed Baroness Von Bon Bon in suit.

King Dice cursed as he looked away. Of course sitting around with the cup brothers would attract attention. The townspeople loved them and as such would be protective of the two.

“Everythin’ good here?” The gravelly tone of Porkrind asked, when he finally reached the table.

“What are you asking that for!” Bon Bon shrieked, enraged. “That sleazebag is sitting right next to the boys! Nothing is remotely okay-”

Porkrind slapped a hand over the Baroness’s mouth, causing her to squawk in indigence. The pig only removed the hand when he was sure she wouldn't resume her rant. It didn’t bring King Dice any comfort, however. The shopkeeper didn’t take his eyes of him the whole time. Dice stared coldly back, petty as ever.

“Yer alive?” Was all the pig said.

“Obviously. And hello to you too.” King Dice crooned back, sarcastically.
“Uhh yes hello sir! Everything’s good.” Cuphead blurted, realising the hostility of the situation. “We’re just talkin’.”

“Hello, Porkrind sir. Miss Von Bon Bon, ma’am.” Mugman courteously provided as an afterthought, hoping that manners would diffuse the tension.

Porkrind flopped down into one of the small stools, filling the last seat on the table of four. King Dice happily took note that the man looked just as ludicrous sitting on the tiny flower shaped stool as he did.

“Mind if I join ya.” The pig grunted, obviously not waiting for an answer. He waved over the Baroness, who sat daintily on the edge of the table. Her full skirt blocked the view of Appleman, who was practically choking on the icing and fabric.

“Uhh why don’t you sit in my seat, Ma’am?” Apple offered, standing and opting to lean on table by Cuphead and Mugman. She gracefully accepted the stool.

King Dice noticed that this now set a clear divide on the table. ‘Us’ vs ‘them’ he thought, even though he knew it was more accurately ‘everyone in this town’ vs ‘himself’ . The boys were on his side now, but who knew if they would stay that way?

The Baroness glanced down and saw the paper that sat between them all, her eyebrow raising at the object.

Porkrind picked it up, giving it a cold stare.

“Catchin’ up on news?” He drawled.

The boys nodded.

“Tragic, aint it.” He sighed. “Ya know, I got a call on the telephone today. Can’t get no stock in because that beast is running around the outskirts of Nibsville. Apparently he’s plucking off travellers and drunks, so everyone is too scared to leave their houses.”

King Dice was caught off guard by a man leaning over the table, obscuring his vision and practically bowling over the two boys in the process. It was Appleman, and he had a scared glint in his eye.

“Was there any names mentioned?”

The pig gave a look of empathy, but shook his head.

“Sorry bud.”

“Golly… Who do you know in Nibsville? You must be so worried about them!” Mugman gasped.

“I have a sister who lives over there. S-she owns an orchard for a living. Spends all her time in the forest... I’m so awfully worried!”

“Woah wait. You have a sister over there? Why didn’t you tell us!” Cuphead exclaimed, straightening up.

“Well actually. Ya see I was going to tell you boys, but I was saving it for the right time because… I have a favour to ask. I’m so sorry but-”

The Appleman turned to the two children, his expression grave.
“I gotta go over there and make sure she is safe. But I’m not a man who can hold his own; not these days. Can… Can you boys accompany me?”

King Dices eyes narrowed as he felt his fists tighten into balls.

*That son of a bitch.*

So that’s why that Apple man was putting on the good samaritan act; he wanted them to protect him from the damn Devil himself. No wonder he looked afraid for them. He was the one that was going to put them in danger.

“Of course we will! We were gonna go to Nibsville and whoop his butt anyway, right Mugs?” Cuphead hollered with a smirk on his face.

“Wha- no! Not ‘right’ Cuphead!” Mugman shrieked back, horrified.

“Mugman’s right Cuphead; this man’s no joke. I know what yer capable of, but-” Porkrind started.

“*But what?*” Cuphead snapped back. “I’ve beaten this guy before; I’m more powerful than anyone here! And I’m supposed to just sit by and let him hurt people?”

“Don’t be a fool, Cuphead. You’ll stay here and that’s final!” The Baroness bit back, her finger resolutely tapping the table for emphasis.

“No I won’t!” The boy shouted, now furious. “I’m taking Appleman to his sister; and then I’m gonna put the Devil in a chicago overcoat. You can’t stop me! And I know you wont anyway, so don’t act all tough! C’mon, we’re going now.”

“Bro, please!”

Panic flared in his chest as King Dice saw the red clad boy stand up and start to walk away with that apple bastard sheepishly in tow. Mugman, forever following his brother into danger, eventually stood up and turned to leave too with a muttered apology. King Dice looked to the others, who were watching on in hesitance, but made no move to stop him. They stood stiffly in their seats. He locked eyes with the Baroness, who no doubt was looking over to gauge his reaction just like he was them. She glared at him and looked away, but there was little venom in the action.

He understood now. Their adoration was sincere, but the boy was *powerful.*

*They were scared.*

He scoffed.

Whatever.

King Dice was too tired to be shaking over some snot nosed brat at this point. All he knew it was going to be a cold day in hell before he was going to let the kid do this to himself. The other’s might have not wanted to step on his feet, but he didn’t care in the slightest if the child hated him right now. He was already battered and bereft, a few more cracks and scratches would just be the icing on the wretched cake that was his week.

With one languid motion Mr Dice stood up, ignoring the dull ache in his legs and head. He was in no shape to get into a spat, but he didn’t have much of a choice. He closed the distance in two large strides and grabbed the boy by his cup handle, yanking him back to his side. Cuphead kicked and struggled to get free.
“You ain’t going, kid. The Devil will tear you to pieces. Just cause you defeated him once doesn’t mean you’ll be so lucky twice. That’s not how gambling works.” Was all Dice grit out.

“T can take him on! I beat him!” Cuphead squirmed free and darted around to face Dice. Oh, he was mad. “Just like I beat you.” He said finally.

King Dice shook his head as he let out a dry chuckle.

“So what, kid? You gonna fight me? Go on then.” He scoffed.

Cuphead hesitated, but then raised his fingers in a mimic of a gun.

“Bro don’t please!” Mugman pleaded, trying to pull his brother away.

"Do it! Make your point! You’re a real tough guy! But know I'm still not letting you leave!” Dice spat, sliding a few razor sharp playing cards into his hand.

“Right. This has gotten out of hand.”

King Dice felt the warmth of a body beside him, and soon he was being ushered aside by Porkrind. The man stood in front of him, like a barrier. He made no protest.

“Kid. Put yer damn hands down. No one is fighting anyone.” Porkrind ordered as he walked over to the child.

“But I have to go!” Cuphead shouted, shaken up. “I gotta. Everyone is counting on me.”

Cuphead angled his hands to point at Porkrind, making the man reel back in shock. There was a tense moment where to the two stared each other down. Luckily Mugman, not interested in waiting to see what would happen, slapped his emotional brother’s hands down and pinned them behind his back. Cup broke free and the two siblings turned to meet one another’s eyes, Cuphead’s wild glare clashing with with Mugman’s worried gaze. The two looked like they were on the verge of fighting themselves.

"I gotta do this." Cuphead repeated, sadly to Mugman.

“You don’t gotta to do anything, ok?” Porkrind sighed, picking the red child up as he was distracted by his brother. Cuphead yelped and struggled for a few moments but eventually the boy deflated in his arms, burning his face in a broad shoulder. Porkrind gave the boy a few gentle pats on his back as he calmed.

“Lets wrap this up and take it inside, yeah?” Porkrind ordered to the rest of the table, nodding in the direction of the onlookers that had formed around them. There was probably a crowd of fifty or so and they were all scattered around from every angle.

King Dice whipped his head around, taking in the numbers. He had been so caught up he hadn’t realized that such a large audience had amassed.

“Good Idea. Come on, everyone. We can converge back at Porkrind’s shop.” The Baroness noted.

Appleman nodded, a penitent expression in his face. Soon him, Bon Bon, Mugman and Porkrind were walking off.

King Dice stood, dumbly.

Was he supposed to be walking with them? Did he fit in the definition of ‘everyone’? Or was this his
chance to quietly skulk away?

Deciding it was probably the latter, he turned to leave.

“Hey, boxhead!” The gruff voice of Porkrind shouted. King Dice looked over and caught a glimpse of Cuphead curled up in the pig’s arms as he turned to face him. He looked so small and tired.

“Well? Come on, hurry up.” Was all Pork grunted, “Oh, and I got some duds that are probably your size out back. Unless you like those tatters, ’course.” He added as an afterthought, before turning back around.

Well, that was his cue, he supposed. He wasn’t going to turn down clean clothes.

Breaking into a light spirit, he ran after them.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Woah this is a long chapter. I apologize for any spelling mistakes in advance haha.

Also I should mention I have a tumblr now, where I'll post art and updates. Yay! (http://innodle.tumblr.com/)

“I look like a damn chump in these threads.” King Dice scowled, looking down at his new outfit.

It was clean and comfortable, sure. But the pastel blue suspenders and ink blue slacks made him look like some shiny-shoed pushover. Not to mention his shirt was too baggy in some places, while being tighter in others. He had gotten so used to a perfectly tailored suit that every crinkle and lump stood out to him. It was terrible. It made him look like a child playing dress up in his father's clothes.

“Fine. Walk around naked with yer’ ass hangin’ out, then. That’s all I got in stock.” Porkrind grunted dismissively, as he draped a blanket over the two cup children. They had fallen asleep on the floor soon after everyone had filed into the small shop. Any chance for an argument had died then and there, as no one had the heart to wake them.

The more he thought about it the more King Dice wasn’t surprised; they must have only gotten a few hours at most last night. Heck, he was feeling exhausted himself.

“Please don’t. If you dare take any article of clothing off, your head will be swiftly removed with it.” The Baroness asserted with a crinkle of her nose.

“Okay, okay. The outfit stays.” King Dice mumbled defensively, walking over to where the others were and awkwardly sitting down on a pile of magazines. He joined the group in looking forlornly at the boys. They snored quietly as the dim glow of the caravan’s lighting illuminated them.

Right little angels, they looked like.

“You. What’s yer’ sister’s name?” Porkrind quietly asked, as he shuffled back around to behind the counter.


Porkrind didn’t answer, instead turning to his telephone and winding a number into the device. There was a moment of pause as it rang, before he spoke softly to the person on the other line. They talked back and forwards for a few minutes, before he hung up.

“Well?” The Baroness asked, not being able to glean anything from the pig’s neutral expression.

“Now apparently, according to the townsfolk over there, she’s safe. “ He said finally. The Appleman shot up, ecstatic.

“R-really?” He laughed.
“Sit down, boy. They said they’d seen her in town, but everything is in shambles over there right now. I told them to get her to call me. If we hear from her, then I’ll say for sure.” Porkrind sighed.

Appleman nodded, his mood sobering.

“Right. I understand. Thankyou so much, Porkind Sir.”

“’S’fine.” The Pig offered politely. “Just keep an ear out for the phone. Now.-” He turned to King Dice, his expression turning serious.

“-You. I got a few questions for you.”

King Dice gave an insufferable smile in response.

“What ever about?” He said in fake shock.

The pig pulled up a chair, so it was facing directly at King Dice. He then sat in it, his eyes never breaking contact the whole time. For a man with only one eye, he really made it count. His glare could melt ice.

King Dlce tried to match his stare with one just as scalding. It was interrogation time, he supposed.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I don’t want trouble Dice. Just gotta’ know what’s going on. The kids seem to genuinely trust ya’. Why?”

Mr. Dice leaned back. He tried to make it look like he was lounging, but really it was to create some distance between him and the large pillar of a man. Porkrind was a mysterious character and one he had never seen at the casino. He had no edge over this man. The shopkeep was either smart enough that he had no debts, or strong enough to fight his own battles. It was most likely a combination, he mused.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your busine-” Dice started, but was cut off.

“-Like hell it ain’t. I’m warning ya’; my patience is thin today pally.” The Pig growled back.

“Well that makes two of us, doesn’t it?”

Porkrind exhaled a shaky breath as he raked a hand over his face and adjusted his eyepatch.

“Yer’ got one more chance to play nice. Last warning, Mister Dice.”

King Dice looked at the man who was sitting in the chair across from him attentively. He could just tell Porkrind what he wanted to hear, it wasn’t hard to do. It would be the right thing to do. But these past few days had been cruel and treacherous. He wasn’t in the mood to make anyone’s life easy.

He looked around, like he was about diverge something scandalous. Baroness Von Bon Bon and The Appleman were less than subtle in their gawking. He watched as they sheepishly turned away and he set his sights back on Porkrind.

“Hey I gotta idea-” The man snapped his fingers and leaned in, perking the shopkeep’s interest. King Dice smiled. “-how about you go jump in a furnace, you overgrown pork cutlet-”

King Dice’s eyes widened as his voice suddenly vanished.

Desperate hands flew up to his throat, as he clawed at the large hand that was wrapped around his neck. He slapped and struggled to get out of Porkrind’s grip, but the other didn’t even waver. The
Pig wasn’t pressing hard enough to crush, but just the right amount to stifle. It was a warning, King Dice knew. He could press harder if he wanted to. Dice looked at the man, who was still a picture of calm. But there was something behind his eye that was glassy and cold.

“The next thing that comes outta’ that mouth better be answers. For yer’ own sake.” Porkrind whispered.

Cuphead groggily sat up on his elbows, letting out a yawn. Immediately, he noticed some things. First was the hard floorboards under his knees. The second was the blanket that was draped over him. It was made from a thick and luxurious fleece, certainly nothing like they had at home. He ran his fingers through the lush fabric.

Oh, right. They had gone to Porkrind’s shop, he remembered now. Looking around he felt slightly embarrassed about falling asleep on the floor, but the emotion quickly passed when he realised no one was paying attention to him. They were all sitting around stiffly, creating a sour mood in the room.

No one was talking, but he wasn’t oblivious. It was… tense. It felt like whenever he had a fight with Elder Kettle and later at dinner time the old man would pretend he wasn’t mad, all while quickly eating his food and cutting slightly too roughly with his fork.

What had gone on while he was sleeping?

Sitting up he tried not to wake Mugman, who was still snoring quietly beside him.

As he stood, finally someone noticed him.

“Oh your up. Hey. Sleep well?” Appleman commented cheerily. Or that’s what it seemed the man was trying to go for, but it came out sounding forced.

Cuphead didn’t reply to him; he was busy taking in the faces around him. Von Bon Bon was looking bored and was keeping herself busy with a thick green book on guns and explosives. She caught him staring and smiled.

“Just waitin’ on a phone call. You can back to sleep with your brother if you want.” She offered.

“I’m fine, ma’am. Not sleepy anymore.”

He moved on. It was Porkrind and King Dice that were acting the strangest, by far. The pig was keeping himself busy by cleaning the front counter with a ragged cloth. He scrubbed with a ferocity and concentration the task didn’t require even the slightest. Any longer and the boy was sure he’d polish a hole through it. King Dice meanwhile wore new clothes, slumped on the other side of the room. The same bandana wrapped parcel he had spied in the fair ground was sitting by Dice’s side. For a moment he wondered what was inside. Cup could see he was holding a glass of water in his hands, or at least that’s what it looked like. It was hard to be sure as he was facing away from him, staring out the window.

Cuphead walked over to King Dice, instantly reeling back when he saw the other up close.

“W-what happened to your face?” The boy gasped.

King Dice jumped at the question, not hearing the boy approaching.
“Oh, err. Your awake kid. G-good.” He fumbled out, coughing into his hand when his voice began to crack again.

“What’s with the black eye? Why is your voice all funny again?” Cuphead fumed, indignant.

“It’s nothin’-” King Dice tried to assure, but was cut short by the boy.

“Don’t tell me it’s nothing! I’m not stupid.” The boy snapped.

“Of course you’re not, but It’s adult business, ok sweetie?” The baroness offered, attempting to defuse the situation.

Cuphead felt his eye twitch at that phrase. He knew what that meant. It was just another way to say ‘you’re a child; we don’t have to tell you’. He felt his fists clench as he opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t find the right words. Dammit, why wasn’t Mugman awake yet? He always knew the right thing to say to get adults to listen to them. His bro was eloquent and level headed, everything he wasn't right now.

He flinched as he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning he saw Porkrind.

“Yer right kid. Your not stupid.” The pig sighed, pausing. “So... we won’t patronize ya’. Me and Dice got into a scrap. It’s over now though.”

“Why were you fighting in the first place?” Cuphead asked, his anger sliding slightly.

“He knows the truth, kid.” King Dice said with a shrug, not sounding particularly pleased. “Everyone in this room does now, I suppose.”

Cuphead stood dumbly for a second. Did he mean the actual truth? Or something he had made up? Or a mix and match of the two? He imagined King Dice would’ve preferred to keep the fact that he had gotten help from the boys a secret. Was that why they had fought? He was confused.

“Ok...” Cup finally said. “And what truth is that?”

King Dice let out a bark of laughter, which wasn’t the best idea as a splutter of coughs followed.

“The real, actual, one hundred percent truth. I’m impressed at how quick you were to jump on board with me though. It’s appreciated.”

“We know everythin’, boy. The importu sleepover -- which honestly I still can’t believe Elder Kettle allowed, plus the situation with Dice’s satanic squeeze burnin’ down the casino. The lot. Gotta say it makes the current situation make more sense.” Porkrind sighed.

Cuphead nodded. Honestly he was glad all his friends were on the same page. He felt slightly bad for King Dice though, whose pride was no doubt wounded right now. Not to mention the literal wounds he now sported.

“Did ya’ really have to beat him up like that, though?” Cuphead sighed, looking at the gross hue of Dice’s black eye.

Porkrind gave a scrupulous look.

“You ever met this man?” He replied, bewildered.

King Dice smirked around the rim of his water, obviously taking the snide remark as a compliment.
A loud chirp cut through the shop and it took a few rings before Cuphead realised it was a telephone. Before any of them could react Appleman was diving over the counter, scrambling for the receiver. The boy was reminded of an incredibly clumsy action hero defusing a bomb as he watched the man slide over the wooden surface and untangle himself from the cord.

“Umm hi? Hello?” Appleman finally spluttered as he held the phone up to his ear. 

The delighted laugh that spilled from his lips told everyone what they were wondering. Cuphead looked on, confused.

“Who’s on the other end?” He asked the Baroness, pulling on her sleeve. 

“I do believe that’s his sister.” She replied simply, a small smile on her face.

“Oh my… Gala! Are you ok? How’s the orchard? Are you safe?” Appleman blurted, quietening as the person on the other end listed their reply. 

He nodded, and hummed in agreement.

“You don’t have to worry about any of that, ok? I’m coming over there very soon.” Appleman cooed.

The conversation dragged on with a few more hushed reassurances that the next time the would talk it would be in person, before Appleman hesitantly hung up.

“She said she had to go. Something about getting ready to cook tea. The family she’s cooped up with are apparently real peaches though, so I’m not worried.” Appleman said to the group.

“I’m glad to hear she’s safe.” Porkrind offered, earnestly.

“Just can’t wait to see her again.” Appleman sighed.

“Oh, that’s another thing. I know I won’t be able to change yer’ mind about going with Apple here, Cup. So the least I can do is implore ya’ to do it properly. Anything yer’ need that I have in stock is yours. And you will go back to Elder Kettle and tell him. Old man deserves that much.” Porkrind lectured.

Cuphead eyes widened.

“Really? Golly thank you!” He gushed. “And yeah… You’re right.”

He turned to King Dice, who was staying rather quiet.

“And you’re ok with this too?” Cup asked.

“Don’t cha see my black eye? Of course I am.” King Dice said snidely.

“More than that, he’s comin’ with ya’. I am too.” Porkrind stated simply. “This shop is at thirty percent capacity with stock right now anyway. Might as well not be open at all. And heck it’s might grim, but while I’m over there I might finally be able to stock up on some needed supplies for cheap.”

“And I am staying here!” The Baroness said resolutely. “I’m awfully sorry. I would go, but there’s no chance in hell I’m leaving this place in the hands of that clown and the genie. Inkwell Isle II would be in flames within the hour.”
“I… Feel I just missed something important.”

Everyone turned to where the now awake Mugman sat on the floor, bewildered.

Cuphead looked at his brother, who was wiping a sleepy tear from his eye. He let out a chuckle.

“Yeah, you definitely did bro. Don’t worry, I’ll fill you in.”

“Do you think he’ll be mad?” Mugman looked up at his brother, nervously.

“No. I think he’ll be calm and understanding, which is even worse.” Cuphead replied with a sad tone. “I already feel mighty guilty.”

The two plodded towards their small house, feet scuffing at the grass as they did so. King Dice could see their resistance in every step. He too was holding up a similar pace, not particularly wanting to revisit the old coot so soon.

“Come on, yer lagging behind.” Porkrind huffed, waving at the three. “Walk with some conviction, for crying out loud.”

The group picked up their pace and soon they found themselves loitering on the porch, awkwardly listening to the muffled music that was playing inside.

“Well. You kids should knock. It’s only right.” King Dice said, waving the two to the door.

Hesitantly Cuphead wrapped his hand around the brass ring, poised to knock. It opened on its own however, revealing a tired looking Elder Kettle already at the door. The older man seemed taken aback by the presence of Porkrind and King Dice, looming steely behind the two tiny children. Appleman peeked out from behind them, giving at cautious wave.

“There you are, boys. Also I should say hello to your, er, company- ” He said with a chuffed sigh. “I was getting worried. Come in. All of you.”

They piled in, as Elder Kettle disappeared into the kitchen, no doubt to fix a warm pot of tea. Porkrind looked around the cozy home, before leaning coolly against the archway.

“Not much of a sitter?” King Dice noted conversationally.

“I work in customer service. So no.” The Pig mumbled back playfully, picking up a trinket from a nearby shelf and inspecting it.

King Dice decided to settle into the couch, glad to finally have a comfortable seat. Appleman joined him, sitting on the other side. The boys - obviously having the same idea - piled on top of the two.

“Ack! Get off me!” Dice snapped at the giggling children, as they eventually squirmed and kicked their way to Appleman’s side of the couch. Appleman ushered the two onto his lap, where they calmed.

“Sorry, Dice.” Cuphead grinned with a smile that told everyone he wasn’t remorseful even the
“Here’s some tea and biscuits. Feel free to take what you want.” Kettle hummed, placing down a large silver tray on the small table in the middle of the room.

As everyone tucked in, Elder Kettle sat in his own baby blue armchair.

“Why do I get the nagging feeling that you all are here because of this?” The old man held out a newspaper, folded in such a way that the front headline was visible.

“That’s ‘cause we are.” Porkrind grunted around a mouthful of shortbread.

“What Porkrind is saying is this whole demon fiasco is indeed the reason we’re here.” Appleman started sheepishly. “Cuphead and Mugman promised to escort me to Nibsville because my sister is over there and... Gosh I’ve said this so many times today and each time people have gotten distressed. Im awfully sorry, Elder Kettle! You must think me a monster putting your boys in danger.”

“Don’t bash yourself up, Appleman.” Elder Kettle sighed. “I knew as soon as I read this headline that my boys would find themselves entangled in it some way or another. They take after their father; after all.”

“Well even so, ya’ don’t need to worry.” Porkrind interjected. “Unlike the whole soul contractor shebacle, the boy’s will be accompanied this time. Me and Dice are joining them, as well as Appleman of course.”

“Gosh, that is good news!” Elder Kettle tooted, surprised. “I will sleep far better knowing my boys are not alone.”

The old man got up, picking up the now empty tea tray.

“Now, onto matters. Boys, why don’t you go to you rooms and pack? I want you two to be sensible! Only the necessities.”

Cuphead and Mugman chimed their understandings and raced down the hallway, out of sight.

“And as for you, why don’t you pick supplies from the cupboards?”

King Dice shunk back, darting looks towards Appleman.

“Me?”

The Kettle laughed.

“Yes you. After the stunt you pulled this morning I imagine you know the way around my kitchen quite well, Mr. Dice. I do believe you even took some for the road already.” The man nodded to the small swaddle of supplies King Dice had been carting around all day.

The man stood up, shrugging. He ignored Porkrind’s amused snickers.

“Can’t argue with what logic, I suppose.” King Dice coolly said, picking the bag up and sauntering over to the kitchen.

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King Dice ambled around the kitchen, gathering cans and other supplies. He had found an old
canvas satchel under the sink and so had set to work filling the bottom compartment. His bandana full of precious jewels was sitting in the zipped compartment at the front, as it seemed the safest place for it.

Dice frowned. People were starting to notice now he carried it around with him everywhere he went and was sure they’d soon start asking questions.

Just then, Elder Kettle puttered into the room. He had been talking to the others about everything he knew about Nibsville and the surrounding areas. King Dice had tuned out about fifteen minutes ago.

“Everything coming along?” The man asked cordially.

“All aces in here, Kettle.” King Dice crooned back. “Don’t ya’ worry your little lid.”

The old man only shook his head fondly at the man. Elder Kettle pulled out a seat from beneath the small dining room table, settling down with the assistance of his cane.

“I need supervising, now?” Dice cheekily noted.

“Not at all. I just came here to ask one thing from you.” Elder Kettle said back. “Please... keep my boys safe. It’s my only request.”

King Dice scoffed.

“Why you telling me this? Shouldn’t you be relaying that to Old Porky or Appleface over there?” He said, pointing to Porkrind and the Appleman, who were chatting away in the living room.

“They do dote over my boys a lot; the whole town does. But they don’t need someone to dote over them, they need someone to protect them. Someone to pull Cuphead back from charging into fights he can’t win, or Keep Mugman’s feet on the ground when his head start swelling up with big ideas. They’re just children, and their souls are pure but foolish. It terrifies me.”

Placing a can down gently on the table. King Dice finally stopped what he was doing to look at the old man.

“You giving me permission to discipline your kids? Because i’ll take it. Those boys need a good whooping.” He joked, but the usual venom was lacking.

“I only hope…” Elder kettle started cautiously, picking his words before starting again. “I’m not sure if you’ve fully noticed yet, but everything that has happened, has changed you. I can see it, in the way you walk and talk. You’re far from humble, but you’ve… changed. Irreparably, one might even boldly claim.”

King Dice went to disagree, but stopped when he realised his situation. He was about to go on a journey to defeat the devil - his former boss and lover - with a legion of people he would have previously killed or swindled without hesitance, for reasons even he couldn't articulate. It felt confronting to realise how much of his identity was tied to the devil. The minute he was stripped of all his titles and pomp, he truly did become a different man. But he knew that only so much of his predicament was due to circumstance. He stood stiff for a few moments, as he realised not only had he changed, but he didn’t even recognize himself.

Who was he?

“You saying I’m damaged goods now the casino’s gone?” King Dice bit back, defensive.
“No, not at all. I only use the word irreparable as it’s impossible to ever go back. I realise you’re nothing like that charred building on isle three, Mr. Dice. You’re not dead. You’re empowered to do whatever you please. Even... grow from this.”

The kettle stepped closer, and for a second Dice thought about fleeing the room. It had gotten far too heavy for his liking. His mind was too fuddled to think of something sarcastic to say to ruin the moment, however, so he remained.

“I only hope that now, after experiencing such unjust loss by the devil's hand... That you would never wish that awful fate on anyone else. Especially not my boys. They are the only family I have. Please don’t betray them.”

With that elder kettle walked away, his cane making a dull clack with every step.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Not much to say this chapter, other than the first f-bombs have been officially dropped. And I swear I actually really love the Devil as a character! But ooh boy he's not a nice man in this fic. Who knows, that might change later on. Sorry for people looking for some quick snake eyes :P

By the time they had escaped Elder Kettle’s endless lectures and speeches, it was dark. The old man opened his home to any that wanted to stay the night and everyone - tired and not particularly wanting to walk home in the dark - accepted the offer. Before any arrangements could be made King Dice announced he was going to take the spare room, which none seemed too happy about.

Even so, Appleman ended up with a rickety wool blanket lying on the two seat couch, while the last Dice saw of Porkrind he was still standing up, leaning against the archway like he had been since his arrival. King Dice laughed as he entertained the idea that the man would sleep that way, like some sort of vampire swine. He imagined he slept with his eyes open and the same cold stare, too.

Walking down the hall he located the spare room and slipped inside.

Yep. Still tiny and shitty. But he was so tired it looked like a palace right now. Small victories.

Flopping down onto the bed he shimmied under the covers, only realizing after settling in he should’ve probably taken off his shoes.

Kicking the offending articles off, he heard a clatter as they tumbled out of bed and onto the floorboards.

Pulling the sheets closer in, King Dice soon fell quickly asleep.

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Mr. Dice?”

The man in question opened his eyes, hissing at the light that poured through the windows. He clapped an arm over his face and rolled over. Damn this; he was a night owl. Why did these chumps think he ran a casino for seven years? All these early mornings would be the death of him.

“H-hey! Don’t go back to sleep! Ya’ gotta get up. Everyone’s almost done having breakfast.” The voice he now knew to be Mugman said, in the same worried tone he used for all conversations.

King Dice let out a huff and rolled back over to look at the boy. He could only assume he had drawn some sort of short stick; the younger brother hardly liked to step on people’s toes. Hesitance showed on his round little face.

“Allright kid, m’ up.” Dice sighed, rising to a sitting position. He felt a suspender gracelessly flop off his shoulder. He was regretting sleeping in his only pair of good clothes, now. He must look a mess. “Don’t ya’ blow your straw bout’ it.”
The boy let out tiny giggle at the comment, easing once he realised the man wasn’t mad. He then offered a gloved hand. Dice gave a confused look. Was he going to help him up? Him? The man that was three times his size and weight? He didn’t see how the boy could exactly do that, but nevertheless he accepted the hand.

Like suspected, Mugman was zero assistance. He stood with a groan.

“C’mon, let’s go to the kitchen.” Mug hummed.

As King Dice began walking into the hall, Mugman kept their hands intertwined. He tried to yank his hand away as the boy led him to the kitchen, but the other had a vice like grip. Dice couldn’t help but feel slightly patronized. He was well familiarized with this house by now, after all. He shook his head, but gave up his escape. Keeping his arm limp and pace accommodating, he followed the child’s chippy lead. He wanted to make some snarky comment, but then the boy began to sway their hands slightly and hum. He watched Mugman with curiosity. The kid was was in a good mood, that much was obvious. But why?

He felt foolish for a moment, as he realised how out of his element he was.

Was this a thing kids did? Was it something they did to adults they liked? Hated? Or did Mugman really think he was just an idiot? Should he be flattered or angry? He had no clue, the times he had been around children he could count on one hand.

And all of those moments, ironically, were with the cup bros.

It wasn’t like children were marching into the casino every day. Even less had he bothered to interact with them. Most were snotty little brats who clung to their parents legs as they drooled around some toy shoved in their gob. When cuphead had sauntered over to the craps table that fateful day, he had done a double take for sure. It was only once he had seen the fire in his eyes that had he known the kid wasn’t messing around.

As they made their way to the kitchen, he was greeted with a wave of stares. He saw Porkrind suppress a snicker. Indignance filled him. Why were they all gawking? He quickly realised why as he looked down. Due to his tall stature, he had been bent over in half to reach Mug’s hand this whole time. He snapped up straight with a cough, letting go. Mugman seemed clueless to the attention and ran over to a chair.

“This seat is for you, Mr. Dice sir.” Mugman said.

King Dice plonked himself down in the wooden chair with a muttered thanks. A plate filled with eggs, soggy toast cut into haphazard shapes and a sad smattering of beans sat in front of him. Its careless plating suggested it was the leftovers of the other’s meals, scraped onto one unfortunate platter.

“Uhh… You slept in so… That plate is all that’s left. Sorry! I tried to get them to leave a portion for you.” Mugman shrugged sympathetically. “-And they did, kinda.”

“It’s fine. Really.” Dice reassured.

He thought about complaining, but shrugged it off. Today would be arduous. He needed a good feed and apparently this was the best he was going to get.

Besides, he was hardly a stranger to eating scraps.

He was ashamed to say, but there were days in the casino where he had been worked off his feet. On
those days, it often came to the point he found himself picking from the plates that passed in and out of the kitchens.

The boozed up patrons wouldn't notice a piece of battered fish missing from their sea platter. Or some fries being put aside instead of going in the trash. He wasn’t proud of it, but it was more convenient to scull the glass of whiskey abandoned at the bar, or take a sneaky drag of that lit cigarette sitting unattended. After all, it took time to fix his own vices to keep him awake. And that was time he didn't have.

It was ridiculous, a man with his prestige living like that. But ‘lunch break’ wasn’t exactly in the Devil’s vocabulary, son of a bitch was immortal. He didn't need to eat, or sleep.

He just couldn’t get the man to understand.

No matter how much he begged.

A wave of nausea filled him.

He stabbed at a chunk of egg white with his fork and casually began to eat.

It tasted like salt, soggy bread and palatable surprise. The latter was supplied by his fellow tablemates. They had gone silent, obviously not thinking he’d eat without throwing a tantrum.

*How spoilt did they think he was?*

Looking up he caught Porkrind’s stare just as it was darting back down to the table.

He directed his gaze back down to his own food.

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“Right. The plan is we meet back here in an hour, then we’re leavin’. Anythin’ yer’ gotta do, do it now.” Porkrind said to the group, shifting the backpack on his shoulder with a bounce. King Dice cringed at the action.

He had desperately tried to convince the others he should carry it, but if was an uphill battle he would never win. Porkrind, of course, was the logical choice for being the designated pack mule of this journey. Eventually Dice had dropped the subject, not wanting to draw attention to himself. Nevertheless he sighed at the image of all his precious jewelry bouncing around on that oafs back.

“Ok! I’ll duck home for a bit, tie off some loose ends and see if I can get my neighbor to check my mail for me while i’m away.” Appleman said resolutely, marching of in a set direction.

Porkrind looked down. “Boys; you got anything ya’ need to do?”

Mugman and Cuphead looked at each other for a moment, before slowly shaking their heads.

“Not that we can think of, Sir.”

“Hrm. Well think harder; this is yer’ last chance.” The Pig said. “ I have to close the shop and rope in a few last favours. Meet ya back here in an hour.”

With that Porkrind let the bag fall off his shoulders with a thud. He rested the rucksack on some rocks and wandered off in the direction of his nearest shop.

“You got anything you need to do, Dice?” Cuphead asked conversationally.
“There is one thing,” Dice hummed to himself, “though not sure if it’s worth the hassle.”

King Dice regarded the bag that the other had left behind with a thoughtful stare. He knew that in its front pocket sat a ring he had promised to a certain someone. He had been tossing up whether to return it or not all day.

“N’ what’s that?” Mugman asked.

Dice hesitated for a moment, but eventually decided just to tell them. A problem shared was a problem halved and all that mushy nonsense. Plus, he was still nursing his wounds from lying to Porkrind. He hardly wanted to go through that again.

“Ya’ know the Doc that patched me up? I got his wife’s ring. Like promised.” Dice admitted.

The boy’s eyes widened.

“Really?” Mugman gasped.

“You gotta’ give it back!” Cuphead lectured, jumping up to his feet. Dice scoffed at the boy’s wagging index finger and stern frown. He did a pretty good impression of Elder Kettle when he acted like that.

“Yeah, yeah. I will. Who knows; I might get something cushy for being such a good samaritan.” Dice smirked, rubbing his chin.

“But wait, that means… No way! You have all that loot from the casino with you now?” Cuphead said, excited. Dice let out a bark of laughter. This kid had the moral compass of a wet towel.

“Yeah, I do.”

He leaned in and the boys swayed with him.

“Now I’m gonna tell you where I’m stashing it, ok? But you gotta promise to tell no one…”

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As King King Dice strolled down the road, he pretended not to notice the eyes that followed his every step. Walking around the heart of town alone wasn’t his brightest idea, but it was better than having Cup and Mug standing behind him as he handed back the ring. He had convinced them it was better to stay and look after the group’s gear (and his stash), but in reality he didn’t want them around. It would make it look like he was being strong armed into returning the ring by a bunch of kids. How embarrassing.

Besides, with his new clothes and patched up head, he was feeling far more like himself. For the first time since the fire, King Dice felt relatively content. The residents must have caught onto this, as they kept a respectable distance. Keeping his head high, he played with the small gold object in his hands as he ambled in the practice’s direction.

Just then, he heard a woman shriek.

“Oh god, get it away!”

“Where did that thing come from?” Another voice hollered in terror.

“Great.” Dice hissed.
Quickly King Dice picked up his pace as he ignored the voices behind him. He didn’t know if those were directed at him or something else, but either way it was best to split. As he went to cross the road however, he felt a yank on his hand. He pulled it away and swiveled around to see who was responsible.

An imp was standing in front of him. Its tail wagged in excited motions, as it looked at Dice with curious eyes. Dice let out a groan and flopped his head in his hands; this wasn’t happening. He looked at the faces around him, which were contorted in horror and repulsion. God dammit. The last thing he needed was whole town driving him out with pitchforks because he was talking to one of the devil’s minions.

It was then he noticed the shiny object in its tiny hands.

*The ring.*

Hey! Give that back!”

Taking a step closer he took a swipe at the creature, but stopped as it summoned a pit. The creature stood at its edge, beckoning Dice to follow. The flames of hell flickered below; King Dice could feel their heat. This must have been the same imp from before. Dice had no doubts now, someone downstairs was requesting his presence. He didn't want to know who.

“I’m not going with you! Give me the ring, you little pain in the ass-” King Dice shouted as he lunged forward.

He regretted it immediately.

Panic shot through his heart as his foot gave way and burst through the rocky ledge. He watched in horror as the floor crumbled away and the hole widened. Scrambling he tried to find solid ground, but it was too late. The earth was falling in chunks around him and he was going with them.

Satisfied, the imp hopped in after the screaming man.

The townspeople looked on in shock, as the hole slowly mended itself, shrinking back up.

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Dice plunged gracelessly through the air, before reaching the hell’s molten floor with a cruel smack.

“Shit.” He croaked, as he shakily lifted himself to his elbows. A hot pain shot through his right shoulder. No doubt that was the side he had fallen on; as such it had taken all the grunt of the force.

“Oh. That looked like it hurt, Boss.” A voice commented.

Dice looked in front of him with unfocused eyes. He saw the small imp scamper behind a pair of legs before vanishing. Brown corduroy trousers, with yellowed spats over meticulously shined black shoes. He only knew one person that would wear such impractical attire in the scorching pits of hell. Well besides himself, of course.

“Wheezy…?”

“Who else would it be?” Mr. Wheezy joked, as he stepped forward and offered a hand. Dice took it and the other hoisted him to his feet effortlessly.

King Dice looked at the man with disbelief. It was like looking at a ghost. How was he alive? Why
did he have the gall to act so casual about it? He had a multitude of questions. Yet when he tried to announce them, they all got stuck in the doorway of his mind, so it came out instead as a confused rasp.

“I… You…?”

“What’s wrong, Dice? You are looking at me like I just grew a second head.” Wheezy chuckled, as he walked away. “C’mon. Now I’ve finally dragged you back down here we can get started. I tell ya’ I don’t get you sometimes, Dice. What were you doing mingling with the locals? We’ve got business to attend to.”

Dice stood in spot, flabbergasted. The heat that rippled in waves around him was suffocating. The smell of sulfur and ash was constantly in the air, and it was taking him back to the fire all over again. This must be a hallucination. Was... He dead, too? Did he hit his head in the fall?

When he cigar headed man realized he wasn't being followed, he turned around. Irritation showed on his face.

“Are you coming or not?” He scoffed, indignant. “We have a lot to sort out. And these damn imps never listen to me. Perhaps you’ll have more luck than me or Mangosteen over there.”

Dice looked over to where Wheezy was pointing. Sure enough his lackey Mangosteen was rolling around, trying to make a get away from flying demons. Dice shook his head; who the fuck else was alive? Pirouletta? Mr. Chimes? Heck, was Houdini going to rise from the grave too?

“I… No?” Was all Dice could get out, hearing a baffled laugh spill from his lips. What the hell was going on?

Wheezy let out a huff, crossing his arms. Dice noticed his jacket didn’t accommodate for the action and rippled around his elbows and biceps. The thick corduroy never did work for such a tight suit; he had told Wheezy this many times. His mind numbly pondered this, as he came to terms with the fact he man in front of him was very much real, alive and breathing. So was Mangosteen.

He had been so sure everyone but him had perished in the fire.

He was still mourning. Rage and relief rippled over him in a confusing turbulence of waves. Dice soon realized it didn’t matter how he felt; either way he was drowning.

“Are you that huffy about the casino? C’mon man, the Devil’s done worse. Don’t pretend you ain’t gonna crawl back to him like always.” Wheezy said.

The mentioning of the Devil must have been the jolt he needed, as King Dice found his voice once more.

“Go back to him?” Dice shrieked, trying to cut through the madness. “I’m gonna rip that son of a bitches throat out for what he did to me!”

Wheezy’s eyes shot up in shock and he bolted over to the other person, clapping a hand over his mouth.

“Ok! You’re pissed, I get it. Never thought you were that fond of the place, but I guess I was wrong. In any case, it would be best to not announce that in the place we’re in now, yeah?” He scalded, gesturing to the devil’s minions that were hovering a few meters away.
Dice closed his mouth with a stiff click, but kept his cold glare set on his old employee.

“Aren’t you mad too? He tried to kill you - no, everyone.” King Dice hissed, his voice shaking in rage as he swatted Wheezy’s hand away. “And I… I thought he did. I thought I’d lost everything, Wheezy.”

Dice expected some sort of empathy from the other man, but he was only met with confusion. He gave a exasperated glower in response.

“Boss. Can I ask you a question?”

Dice rubbed his eyes in frustration. If anything he should be the one asking damn questions around here. Even so he nodded, loosening his collar. God this place was so hot. He had no clue how he could stand it before.

“How many times have you died?”

Dice blinked dumbly. To say he was taken aback was a gross understatement.

“N-none! The hell kinda question is that?” He shouted.

It was Mr. Wheezy’s turn to look surprised.

“Wha- never? Not even once? I would have thought the Devil would’ve lost his temper with you eventually.”

Dice at this point was so confused and irate he could barely speak.

“Well do tell Mr. Wheezy! How many times is the ‘normal’ rate in which I should be dying? Once? Twice a fucking day?” He spat at the man.

“Calm the fuck down ok? I guess you don’t know. Colour me shocked, honestly. Do you think the big man downstairs would let us off like that? None of us are dying. Not until we pay our debts. For as long as he has that piece of paper to dangle over our heads, we’re immortal.”

King Dice’s face dropped.

His head was spinning. He had known his lackeys had re-signed their contract with the Devil essentially as soon as they had been burnt. Where else could they go? He never knew however that contract granted them such power.

But that wasn’t the reason he felt sick.

“Woah, you ok?” Wheezy exclaimed, placing a firm hand on pale man’s shoulder.

“I was just the manager, Wheezy. The only thing I was doing was co-signing the occasional soul contract if the big man wasn’t around. Oh, and your damn checks. I never gave my soul to that beast.”

Finally Mr. Wheezy’s face took on a look of understanding. King Dice would have been happy, if his world hadn’t been tipped on its head.

“Oh.” Was all Wheezy could say.

King Dice had honestly thought the Devil had burnt down the casino in a fit of rage. That maybe, he had regretted it. He had assumed at least the monster would feel grief for his brashness. Now he was
learning the Devil had lost exactly nothing. It was calculated. His minions, his workers, they could be re-animated again and again, like a puppets on a string.

The only thing that was supposed to be lying dead in those ashes was him.

Now he knew the truth. He was the only person the Devil saw as expendable. King Dice, the foolishly loyal casino manager who followed the Devil to his own grave.

Dice felt so stupid. His heart felt like it was being wrenched from his chest.

He couldn’t stand it anymore.

The heat was dragging him down and choking him.

“Get me the fuck outta here.” Was all Dice managed to slur, before collapsing.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Not much to say, apart from a big thank you to everyone leaving such lovely messages! I hope you all had a great Christmas and have a great new year! Now here's my gift to you: Lots of angst :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Porkrind shook his head as he picked up his pace. The large man gave another curt glance at his pocket watch, hoping by some magic time had stopped. The outcome was just the same as the last ten times he had checked, though. He was still late.

Porkrind mentally scolded himself. Here he was barking orders at the group to be there by a certain time and now he was the one keeping them behind. He was content in being many things, but a hypocrite wasn’t one of them.

“Sorry I’m late,” He grunted, slightly out of breath when he reached the group. “My shop was-”

He paused, looking at the three long faces in front of him.

They looked guilty, as well as apprehensive. Appleman shifted under his gaze.

“What’s goin’ on?” Porkrind asked, cautiously.

“King Dice hasn’t come back.” Cuphead said, in a small voice.

“I said I want out of here, Wheezy!” Dice barked, slamming a fist on the table. “I owe that man nothing; I shouldn't be down here!”

“And I said it’s not happening till’ the boss comes back!” Wheezy shouted back. “He’s been requesting for you. Well, apparently. I haven’t heard anything coherent come out of his mouth since the fire. He just paces around like a wild animal. His demon lackeys seem to understand him still, though. And they’ve been looking for you.”

Dice let out a sigh as he crumpled back down in his seat.

“He wanted me dead. Wheezy!”

“You don’t know that! The Devil isn’t in his right mind right now. Heck, he isn’t in any mind. Vacant in there, he is. Like a damn rabid dog. I doubt he has the capacity to even hatch a plan like that.”

“It doesn’t make it any better.” Dice seethed.

“No, it doesn’t. Welcome to hell, bud.” Wheezy shrugged, gesturing to the walls around him.

They had retreated to a small office, which to his surprise turned out to be Wheezy's. Apparently he
had taken up the mantle of right hand man to the Devil in his absence, at least to some extent. He could tell his ex-employee was easily in over his head.

“Just look the other way for a second-” Dice pleaded.

“I can’t, the Boss-”

“-And I’ll disappear. Just… Please, Wheezy.” Dice finished.

“You know I can’t do that! The Devil would set me on some torture device for the rest of eternity if I let you slip. Why the heck do you want to get back to the surface so bad anyway? It’s hardly like anyone up there will give you the time of day. You’ve got pals down here.” The man patted him on the shoulder reassuringly, then handed him over the drink he was fixing.

Dice picked up the tumbler of whiskey and coke, taking a sip. He almost felt angry at Wheezy’s words and how utterly wrong he was. Sure they had been cruel at first, but he had been shocked how quickly the townsfolk had adjusted to him. He calmed slightly as the burn made its way down his throat. He had to admit, he had missed a good drink. He had never considered himself an alcoholic, but after a few days of being bone dry he would happily never welcome that sensation again. Without booze to take the edge of life, everything was far too vivid.

“You underestimate Inkwell Isle's hospitality, Wheez.” Was all Dice said.

The man raised an eyebrow.

“They took you in?” He said in disbelief.

“Some did.” Was Dice’s vague reply. He vowed to say no names. Don’t overshare.

“Well damn. So you’re angry because now you’ve lost your chance to scam a bunch of gullible fools? That makes more sense, I suppose.” Wheezy let out a chuckle as he took a sip of his own drink.

King Dice gawked at the man for a second, before bringing the glass back up to his mouth. That’s now this scenario should have transpired, shouldn’t it? In this tale the sleazy manager should have used his charm and wit to sneak his way into the townspeople's good books, then run away with their money and belongings during the night. Or some nonsense like that.

So why hadn’t that occurred to him?

“Yeah. Got it in one, Wheezy.” Dice lied.

“Well, I mean there’s always time. I have no clue what the Devil wants with you. You have no contract with the man, so just leave after he sees you.” Wheezy rationalized.

Dice looked up at the man. Was he serious? He was going to try that with him?

“How about you don’t patronize me? You know as well as I do no man walks away from the Devil unindebted. Also don’t give me that clueless chump bullshit. I taught you that spiel.”

Mr. Wheezy cleared his throat, a bashful look on his face.

“Sorry Boss,” He chimed. “but hey! I gotta’ thank you for that. It’s served me well these last couple of days. I don’t know how you deal with all this contract nonsense.”

“You’ve had to sign soul contracts?” Dice asked, surprised. How was the Devil finding souls in his
current state?

Wheezy waggled his hand in a teetering motion, as he gave an apprehensive look.

“Nothing big. Word hasn’t spread that the Casino is in ashes yet. We got imps keeping guard in Inkwell Hell for any wanderers that come by, still hoping to strike a deal. Get a few stragglers that way. They’re desperate, so it’s pretty easy to sway them.”

Dice nodded. That made sense. But it also confirmed his previous suspicion. The Devil wasn’t making deals. Moreso he was leaving it to Wheezy of all people. The man was the best choice out of the pack for sure, but severely undertrained. That thought alone told him this situation was so immensely wrong.

“The Devil... “ Wheezy started, shaking his head. “He’s acting like nothing I’ve ever seen right now.”

“I assumed that much. I saw him mere hours before the fire, Wheezy. He was much the same then.”

Mr. Wheezy looked up. Two large demons had wandered into the office. It seemed like he was trying to find the right words. Words he could say around the Devils henchmen, that wouldn’t lead to him being torn limb to limb.

“Yeah I know. I’m not talking down to you. I promise. You’re the boss around here. I respect you and I’m glad your coming around to the idea of staying-” He laughed slightly. “-Even... Well even if you don’t really have a choice. Just warning you for when you see him next. He doesn’t react well to gawkers and he’s... Looking pretty rough.”

Dice finished the rest of his drink. That didn’t sound ominous at all.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind, Wheezy.”

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Porkrind didn’t want to throw the accusation right away, but he would be lying if he didn’t think Mister King Dice hadn’t just flaked and split. The conman had seemed genuine in his desire to go with them, but heck, maybe the guy was a good actor? It wouldn’t be a surprise.

“What did he need ta’ do?” The Pig said, scrupulously. He didn’t think the man had any business to attend to. “Where’d he go?”

The boys seemed hesitant in their answer. Porkrind was about to give them the spiel about telling the truth, but luckily they seemed far more easily persuaded than King Dice had ever been. Mugman stood up, retrieving the bag with a grunt. He peeled away at the front pocket, revealing the shimmering bounty.

“Oh my.” Appleman gasped.

Porkrind crossed his arms, gaze hardening.

That son of a bitch hadn’t-

“It ain’t what it looks like!” Mugman pleaded, knowing what the cold glare on Porkrind’s face meant. “They’re not stolen, we promise! Dice retrieved them from the rubble of the casino. He was telling us about a big safe that they had. It was so thick it could survive anything and in it was a ring that belonged to the Doctor that patched him up. Said he was going to give it back in exchange for
his services.” Mugman explained, eyes never leaving what was in his hand.

“So that’s where he went? Call me a cynic, but didn’t think he was the typa’ man to stick to his word.” Porkrind huffed, unconvinced.

“He said he might get some supplies out of it, too.” Cuphead shrugged.

Porkind let out a sigh. That sounded more like the truth. The man was hiding it from the children, but he was obviously injured. He’d know, he’d caused some of the damage. Painkillers would be worth their weight in gold to the battered man.

He took a closer look at the gems. They weren’t just costume jewellery like he had assumed. He knew the boys were telling the truth about them not being stolen, simply because nothing like this could be bought on the island.

“Let me look at those.”

Mugman made a squeak of surprise as Porkind plucked the small parcel from his grip. The Pig angled it in his hands, so they glimmered in the light.

Just amazing. He wanted to be mad, but up close he could see how stunning this collection truly was. It wasn’t wasted on him, as a salesman. He had sold and bought plenty of jewelry in his time. He knew what to look for.

Disbelief settled in as he realised he’d been carrying a literal goldmine on his back. No wonder Dice was giving him filthy looks every time he swung that thing around.

Porkind scrutinized the pile of rings, necklaces and wrist pieces. His mind mulled over every gem, dazzling in their clarity and size. He tried to commit to memory the signatures and symbols stamped into the precious metals. It wasn’t the largest collection in the world, but it was all high grade and rare. He was sure as he looked over these pieces, freshly ripped from the wrists, fingers and necks of the indebted and disgustingly rich, that most were custom. Family heirlooms. One of a kind. Porkind reeled at the figures these would fetch if sold to the right collector.

He instinctively wanted to reach for the small loupe he always kept in the front pocket of his overalls, but restrained. Now wasn't the time. He was supposed to be furious and whatnot.

“Right. We need to find him.” Porkrind said, clearing his throat.

The boys let out their hollers of support as they sat up.

“Ok… But what makes you think he didn’t just get cold feet?” Appleman asked.

Porkrind scoffed.

“No sane man would leave these behind. There is easily over a million in gems and gold here.” The pig said, gravely.

Appleman's eyes bugged out of his head.

“I… What? A million dollars? A-are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“Oh. Gosh that’s… That’s a lot.” Mugman stammered, looking down at his own hands, stunned that they held something so expensive.
“There’s no way he’d leave this behind.” Porkrind stated, placing the gems carefully back into their hidey hole.

That left the question, though.

*Where was he?*

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Hell, as most people would assume, was rather loud. It was full of tormented screams harmonizing with the shrieking and chattering of the Devil’s henchmen as they went about their day. The lava flows blistered and burst, creating their own bassy ambience in the ancient stone caverns.

Many years ago King Dice would have been stumbling around in terror, sheltering his eyes from the ghastly sights that surrounded him. The torture, the slaughter, the endless pain and suffering. He could remember the first time he had ventured down to Hell to retrieve some documents like it was yesterday; the experience was… Revealing. It had been so easy to forget that he was working for the Devil himself, up until that point.

It was a tad harder to pretend after that.

As it stood now however, after years of having to travel through Hell’s tunnels, the noise and heat now served as mere inconveniences. He had learnt to block out the agonized wails and pleas long ago. He no longer was what one could consider an empathetic man. He had become far too numb for that.

King Dice had tried to keep his humanity intact to some extent, though. As much as a uphill battle that was. But it was hard. Hell was a labyrinth of madness and despair, which only could be tamed by a single entity.

So when everything fell silent, King Dice knew it could only mean one thing.

The Devil had returned.

As he heard the distant clack of footsteps, he stood up. Dice only noticed he had done it after he teetered on the balls of his feet, slightly nauseous from the sudden movement. It was instinctual to stand whenever his boss entered the room. The action was something that had become ingrained in him, like shuffling cards or knotting his bowtie without looking at a mirror.

Now he felt more like a prisoner, rising for the executioner.

And who was to say that wasn’t going to happen?

“So loosen up; he ain’t gonna bite your head off, ok?” Wheezy reassured, seeing how stone-like and grieve King Dice’s expression had become. “He needs you. This place is a shambles; any fool can see that.”

Dice made a grunt of acknowledgement, but didn’t loosen his stance. He wasn’t exactly reassured. Turning, Dice went to make some comment about how he’d rather the Devil hate him as the feeling was mutual, but he caught himself and swallowed the words.

Wheezy was sympathetic, sure. But the man was still the Devil’s worker. He had to remind himself he wasn’t someone he could confide in. No one was. The game he had gotten used to playing with the Cup Bros. and Porkrind no longer applied. He wouldn’t get a pat on the head and brownie points for being honest and truthful. King Dice yearned for that sort of simplicity again. He was back in the
land of thieves and liars. He had to adapt.

So, adapt he would. After all, it was the business he had been in for most his life. But there was a reason for that; he was damn good at it. He could coax and con rings around most of the chumps in this room. He let out a breath steadily through his nose as he focused on the task at hand.

A large demon minion entered the room. Its eyes gazed lazily over King Dice. Once the lumbering creature gave the signal, two imps scampered in. Dice waited tensely for the man of the hour himself to show up. An uneven patterning of limbs could be heard, as the beast approached. King Dice swallowed down the lump in his throat, as he willed every fiber of his body to stay in place. There was no running now, he’d face the Devil with dignity.

A long, mattered black limb panned into view, followed by three more. The Devil was on all fours and walked with a strange, twisted gait. The beast was thin and death permeated from his fur. King Dice suppressed the urge to cover his nose with his hand, blocking the awful stench. God, now he knew what Wheezy was trying to warn him about. He could see pieces of meat rotting in his mane and the stale blood that was caked around his mouth fell away in flaky chunks with every movement.

The Devil looked up at him with dull, predatory eyes, finally stopping about an arms length away. King Dice shivered. He could feel the heat radiating off the animal in front of him.

Fiery red irises regarded him, before the Devil turned and spoke in tongues to his demon assistants. A brief conversation occurred in the mysterious language, before they then left the room quietly, leaving only the Devil, King Dice and Mr. Wheezy.

The Devil took one more step closer, before producing something from his fur. It glimmered in the dull cave lighting as he held it up to Dice.

It was the ring. King Dice stood, baffled. How did he know about that? He looked at it. The band was slightly warped from the imp playing with it (an imp who most likely met with a grim fate) and stained with blood, but otherwise intact.

The beast gestured for King Dice to accept it. He could have almost laughed at the imagery. The devil, on his haunches offering a ring to him. It was the proposal that the mushy, six year old girl part of his brain had always dreamed of.

But now, in reality, Dice regarded the man with cold eyes. To anyone else, the beast was merely returning a ring. He however, saw it for what it no doubt was. A favor. A service which would need repaying. The Devil never gave anything away for free.

This ring would keep him here.

“Thank you, but I don’t need that ring. It’s not mine to keep.” Dice said calmly, politely pushing the ring away.

The Devil did not like that.

He let out a low growl, as he shoved the ring into King Dice’s chest.

“What are you doing? Just take the damn ring! Don’t make him mad!” Mr Wheezy barked, stepping back from the two.

The beast grew more and more impatient with every moment Dice took to deliberate, soon slamming down a clawed fist in a rage. It morphed into a cloven hoof before their eyes and quickly heated up to a glowing molten red. He looked on in horror as the rest of the Devil’s body was quickly
following suit. Dice had seen this before. Once. From a distance. It wasn’t a form he wanted to get acquainted with up close and personal.

“Just say yes and take the fucking ring!” Wheezy squealed, terrified. He ducked behind the desk, cowering from the monster shifting in his office.

Dice swallowed, then opened his mouth.

“Ok! Ok. Yes, I accept the ring.” He declared.

The beast paused, then slowly shrunk back into his previous form. He was soothed. For now, anyway.

Happily the Devil picked up the ring, which had been dropped in his goat-like form. He closed the gap between the two, sauntering on all fours. King Dice held his breath as he got close; he didn’t dare breath in the decay now or he surely would vomit.

Dice held out his hand, open palm facing the ring which dangled enticingly above. He expected the man to drop the item in his hand, but yelped in surprise as the beast seized his wrist, turning it so his digits now faced up.

The Devil then slid the ring gently onto his finger.

No.

No no no, this wasn’t happening.

Dice paled as he realized which finger the beast had picked. It was the digit between his little and middle fingers. The gold diamond wedding ring with ‘To my dear Margery’ engraved on the inside was now on his ring finger.

And there it would stay. Just like him in this awful place.

Bound to the Devil’s side, forever.

With a tender stroke, the beast let go of King Dice’s hand. Dice let his arm flop numbly to his side. He spun around to look at Mr. Wheezy, who shared the look of shock.

As he turned back, the Devil was already walking out of the room, leaving to do god knows what.

“Congratulations, I guess.” Wheezy offered, after they stood in stunned silence for a few minutes.

King Dice could only let out a bark of bitter laughter. He looked down at the ring, deciding then and there it was the ugliest thing he had ever seen. He tugged at it, experimentally. Like expected, it couldn’t be removed and glowed with a hostile energy when touched.

The sound of a cork being popped was heard behind him; no doubt Wheezy was fixing him another drink. Dice hoped it was something a little stronger than whiskey and coke this time.

He looked out the doorway to where the Devil was pacing around some of his imp lackeys, a few feet away. They screeched in fear as he plucked one from the group and began to tear at it with razor sharp teeth and talons.

He looked away from the carnage, disgusted.

Suddenly escaping seemed the least of his concerns.
Chapter End Notes

We finally see the Devil! I hope it wasn't anticlimactic after so many chapters. I tried so many times to write him in so i'm glad he's finally shown up haha
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

 kinda small chapter this time! But as always thanks for the lovely comments. I hope you guys are having a good 2018!

King Dice sat in a room.

He could only assume it was his room, as it was the place the Devil’s lackeys had lead him after he requested a place to lay down. The space was large, with gold ornate walls. There was an en-suite to the left, while to the right were drawers and a desk, all lazily pushed to the side in what seemed to be a makeshift office. A large bed sat in the middle, which was where he was sitting now. The gold sheets were soft and luxurious.

It reminded him of his old quarters in the casino, which calmed his nerves slightly.

He clumsily wrapped himself in the sheets and let out a dramatic sigh.

In the first moment of silence and reflection he had gotten since arriving down here, he realised something.

He was very drunk.

It was unsurprising, really. First was the few glasses with Wheezy, then when word had spread of the surprise (forced) proposal, all of his underlings and ex-employers had crawled out of the woodworks to congratulate him with a round on them. He should have kissed his liver function goodbye as soon as the tipsy troop had shown up.

He looked down at his hands, as he raked them through the silky sheets. He frowned.

It was apparent that all of them lacked any real awareness of the situation, only dribbling on about how glad they were that King Dice was back to take hold of the reins again. Nothing about the Devil’s state or their own grizzly deaths were brought up once.

Nevertheless, he had managed to have some fun. It was actually pretty nice having the crew back together. However every time his eyes had caught that gold glint coming from his finger, his mood soured once more. There was no point in sugar coating it; he wasn’t here by choice.

His mind drifted to his new responsibilities. Everyone made it sound like it was on his shoulders to fix this mess. Typical. King Dice supposed it was assumed, now he was not only the Devil’s right hand man but also wedded husband. To be by this powerful beings side for now and forever; heralded as the only one to deal with such delicate affairs. It seemed the dream scenario to all involved but him.

He thought it was going to be easy to just smile and play along. Now he was realising that might not have been the best idea.

Hearing a clunk in front of him, he shot a lazily glance at the doorway. Two demons were poking their heads in. They gawked at him, then turned to chat to each other in hushed tones.
“Hey! Don’t cha’ have anythin’ better to do than stare at me? S’ rude.” He hollered to them, reeling at his own slurred words. God, he was wasted.

One demon entered the room, shuffling a few steps closer at a time until he was near enough to push a silver tray into the face of the tipsy man.

“I don’t want nothin’. No food. Getta’ heck out.” Dice waved the two away, dismissively.

The demon made a vocalization and gestured at it in frustration. Dice gave in and squinted for a moment. What was it they wanted him to look at so bad?

Oh, it was water. A large pitcher full, with a few crystal cups stacked off to the side. He let out a snort of laughter, which startled the two creatures. He had consumed so much booze even Hell’s servants were worried about him. That was a feat.

The minion took Dice’s bombastic sounds as a sign to continue. It muttered something and placed the tray on the bedside table with a careful clank, then took their leave.

“Thanks.” He slurred, flopping back down.

“Just following orders. You washed up trophy husband.” The demon drawled back.

Dice shot up.

Had... that thing just spoken?

Or more accurately, could he understand them now?

“Hey! Who ya’ callin’ a trophy husband?” He bit back, indignant.

The creature spun around in surprise, as its friend froze in spot. They stood scared in the doorway for a beat, until one of them stepped forward and spoke again. Dice listened to the creature tentatively.

He couldn't understand a lick of it.

The harsh hisses and tongues were just as baffling as they always had been. He did note this time something felt different though. It was similar to the sensation when one hears a song playing in the next room. It sounded muffled and unintelligible, but he knew it was still in his own language. The cadence and rhythm had been so drilled into his brain that he couldn't possibly ever forget.

So, out of curiosity, he tried to speak back to the creature.

The words that spilled from his lips were not his own, yet felt velvety and natural. Like his tongue could always roll and curl like that. Like his vocal cords could always go that deep.

He didn’t know what he was saying to the creatures, but they had flung themselves out of the room and scampered down the hallway before he could finish his sentence.

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“I swear on my good name, Mr. Porkrind Sir! It's what really happened!”

Porkrind sighed, raking a hand over his face. He prayed on every star in the sky what this lady was saying wasn’t true.

“So yer’ telling me a demon dragged Dice down there?” The Pig snorted, pointing to the hard
concrete below him. “Then just closed it up behind him. With no trace.”

“I could get more witnesses, if you don’t believe me.” The woman huffed back.

“No, that ain’t necessary.” Porkrind dismissed. “I talked to a few before ya’. Yer’ not the only one to say that. I just… How did one imp take him down? He ain’t no pushover.”

“The imp was taunting the man with something. It was too small to see, but it was awful shiny. Then Mr. Dice just kind of, uh, tumbled in after it. The imp really had very little to do with it.” The woman said, bashfully.

“Something shiny…” Porkrind looked up at the lady, a flash of realization in his eyes. “Like a ring?”

“Ooh yes! Could’ve been that. Looked small enough.” The woman nodded.

Porkrind’s attention was shifted when he heard two little sets of footsteps pattering from across the street.

“Boys! Look before yer’ cross the damn road! I won’t tell yer’ again.” The man grunted, as the Cup and Mug approached him.

“We’re sorry!” The boys sung in a carefree unison around a mouthful of… something.

“What you got?”

“Lollipops!” Mugman cheered, taking the blue sucker out with a pop and showing it to the man. Cuphead did the same, with his own red variant. “We visited Dr. Reginald and he gave us these! He said he hadn’t seen Dice, though.” The boy finished with a sigh.

“Yeah, I think I know the reason for that.” Porkrind murmured.

He had been hoping what the townsfolk had been claiming wasn’t true, but it was looking like Dice had in fact been dragged to Hell. But why? When the man had spilled his guts in the shop, he had mentioned and the Devil weren’t exactly chummy. Even before the fire, their relationship was strained. But did that even matter at this point? Porkrind would assume most of the Devil’s henchmen weren’t there by choice. Even if they thought they were.

That’s when he saw it. A patch of cloth, resting in the gutter by his feet. He picked it up, letting the small strip rest in his palm. It was navy, with the frazzled remains of thread looped on it. He tried to rationalise that it could be from anything. But it was identical in shade to the navy pants he had lent Dice. He imaged the man, tattered and tumbling into Hell’s embrace. Alone.

Porkrind shook his head, feeling guilt rest on his shoulders. He should have known the man was in danger. Soul contract or none. The Devil never let a man walk away that easily. Damn egotistical fool should’ve realized that, too. He felt anger bubble under his skin. He could only hope the stubborn fool hadn’t gotten himself in trouble.

He let out a scoff.

Who was he kidding? Of course he had. He would be shocked if the haughty idiot had his head still on his shoulders.

He sobered a little, as the possibility of death entered his head. No. He shook the thought off. It would do him no good to think like that. King Dice had to be alive.
The Pig looked over to Appleman, who was deep in conversation with a coin shaped man across the road. He couldn't hear the conversation, but he could tell from the everyone's lighthearted posture it didn’t relate to King Dice even the slightest.

“Rope him back in, will ya?” Porkind grunted to the boys, breaking up their emprotu playfight around a parking meter and pointing to their friend. Cuphead had finished his lollipop in a few crunches and now had his eyes set on Mugman’s. The blue bro was taunting the other by wagging his candy in front of the other. It was half eaten, but enraged Cuphead nonetheless.

“Come on. Right now. We ain’t got no time for chatting. Or playing. We meet back at the agreed point in a few minutes.”

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King Dice woke up with a start. His heart was beating in his chest and his breath came out in short gasps. He gripped at the sheets, trying to ground himself. The room was quiet, but his dreams had been full of blood and carnage. The sound of porcelain shattering still echoed in his ears.

Trying to shake the images haunting him he went to get up, but was stopped by a weight around his waist. Looking over his shoulder he saw the familiar tufts of black fur and froze.

So this wasn’t his bedroom after all.

It was his.

Breathing through his mouth he calmly tried to shrink out of the others grasp. With some maneuvering he squeezed out, falling indignantly on the floor by the bed. Poking his head up, he let out a huff of relief as the Devil was still asleep, his fur puffing slowly up and down.

Rising to his feet, King Dice rushed to the un-suite, locking the door with a gentle click.

He paced in the small space, as he considered his options.

There was no way he could share a bed with that… thing. He could still smell the putrid rot through the door. The beast was dangerous and unpredictable. He was resting his head on the gallows block if he lay beside that man. Sure, back in the casino he had woken up in the Devil’s bed a few more times than he cared to admit, but this was different. This thing wasn’t his Devil.

Or maybe it was. He was only seeing his true nature now.

He looked down at the ring. It only just could be seen in the sparse light of the bathroom. His thoughts went back to the demon’s scathing remark. Trophy husband. Gripping the small metal band he tried to yank at it with all his might. It sent white hot ripples of pain down his hand but he refused to stop. Eventually the burning became too intense and he let out a curse as he crumpled against the wall. He was no ones trophy.

He refused. He wasn’t going to be caged down here. King Dice vowed to himself that would get out. He’d meet up with those cup kids again, and keep them safe like he had promised. He wasn’t going to sit patiently and pretend like anything about this situation was ok. He was sure it was the alcohol speaking, but in that moment he felt utterly invisible.

They wanted to him to fix things down here? Oh, he would.

And he knew where he would start.
“Is there a tap anywhere?”

Mr. Wheezy turned around to the familiar voice of his boss. He looked King Dice up and down. The man was holding a pink plastic bucket and a stern look of determination. Wheezy approached the man, perplexed.

“Uhh… May I ask why?”

“To fill this bucket up, course. The sink in the bathroom is too small.” The man explained, casually.

Wheezy was speechless. That answered nothing.

“I’ll ask again, why?”

“He fucking reeks, Wheez. Can’t even share a room with him without gagging.” Dice elaborated. The man was starting to look irritated. Wheezy could smell the booze lingering on him from hours ago. He was obviously still drunk.

“Wh- are you talking about the Devil? What are you gonna do, Dice? Give him a goddamn bath? He’s a monster, not a labrador. You just got down here; do you really wanna die so soon?” Wheezy croaked. He was in shock; was his boss really serious?

Dice gave only a stiff shrug in response. It almost felt like a defiant ‘yes’ to the barrage of questions.

“I can’t believe you, I really can’t.” Was all Wheezy could splutter out. “A few hours down here and you’ve turned into a nihilistic idiot. You looked like you were having a blast a few hours ago! Now you’ve done a complete three sixty. So what, was that all a fucking act?”

“I guess so. You know being a hostage has some real fuckin’ ups and downs.” Was Dice’s bitter reply. It was slurred and thick.

Wheezy turned away from the man. His comment had felt like a kick in the teeth. So that was how he really felt? Fine.

“There's a pump up near the catacombs. I hope he rips your throat out.”

Wheezy heard the dull click of his office door closing, signalling the man had left.

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“Move it!”

Dice pushed past some demons with a sharp elbow. They tumbled and turned to the man in anger, but did little else. His stride told them it probably wouldn't be a good idea to mess with him right now.

King Dice walked on, oblivious. He was furious. How dare Wheezy think he had the right to get mad? Was he the one marrying the Devil? Was he the one put in charge of fixing this mess? No, because Wheezy couldn't handle that sort of thing.

Dice approached the pump. He placed the small plastic bucket underneath resolutely and began to crank the shaft.
He let out a scoff. No, he knew why the man was so fucking huffy. It was the same reason he had always been hot and cold all the time at the casino. The man was smitten with him. He never reciprocated. His employee would be fine with it, until Dice snapped at him. Then all the hostility he had been harbouring would burst and Wheezy would treat it like a personal attack.

And he thought he was self absorbed. Wheezy was on another plane of existence.

Did he really think he was happy here?

Bucket filled, the man picked it up with a grunt and headed back to the his - no, the Devil’s - bedroom.
Dice placed the bucket at the end of the bed. He went to roll his sleeves up, but decided against it. The extra padding might save him from claws and teeth.

Picking up a scrubbing brush, he dunked it in the warm water and approached the beast, who was still sleeping soundly. He hesitated, if only for the briefest moment, before running the brush over the thing’s back. It got caught in the harsh knots and tangles almost instantly and he cursed as the Devil awoke with a hiss.

“Hey! Shh.” He tried to calm the creature, but it wasn’t working.

The Devil swiped at him with a groggy swing, displeased. Dice quickly took a few steps back, so he was out of reach. The creature looked at Dice, then down to the brush still caught in his fur. Dice was expecting the Devil to realize what he had been trying to do and rip him apart any second.

Instead the creature tugged the offending item out of his fur and threw it across the room with a bored clack. He then curled up and closed his eyes once more. For some reason, that action annoyed King Dice more than other senario else possibly could have.

“Oh no. You’re getting a goddamn bath, you hear me?” Dice cursed as he retrieved the brush from floor by the far wall.

The creature gave a harsh, menacing snarl from the bed.

“Don’t give me that. It’s happening.” Dice snapped back, as he stomped back to the bedside, submerging the now hair coated brush back into the water. Black fur floated to the surface in wet clumps. Dice cringed as it brushed against his hands.

Approaching the beast, he prepared for round two. He tried to brush around his hind leg this time, letting the device run along the curve of his thigh. It was less knotty there and the brush made it through its first pass.

Dice looked up at the Devil. He was looking back with half lidded, sunken eyes. He didn’t know what that expression meant, but it certainly wasn’t joy.

Trying again, he heard a low growl start in the monsters throat once more. He paused for a second, but continued. The growling slowly grew louder and more frenized with every movement, but Dice continued anyway, combing away the knots and clumps with increasing force.

It cumulated to Dice dragging the brush through the knots, almost tearing at the fur as he went. The beast was loud; hissing and snarling at this point. It probably hurt. The Devil was probably furious and poised to rip his throat out at any moment. King Dice hoped so. He wanted the man to hurt, he wanted a excuse to fight and kick. He knew it was dangerous and stupid, but he was too irrational at this point to care.
Eventually he got his wish.

The beast lunged at him and before he could react he felt the searing pain of claws piercing through the flesh. He felt his back collide with the ground and the weight of the Devil on top of him. He groggily registered the creature raising a clawed hand. Dice tried to cry out for the others man's forgiveness as he covered his face with hands.

What came out was the same deep, thick language he had used with the demons earlier. He still had no clue what the words slipping out of his own mouth meant. The Devil however, reeled back, his claws making a clattering sound on the marble floor as he made his retreat.

The Devi wasn’t scared like the others had been. No, quite the opposite. The monster looked happy.

Dice could only sit on the ground, frustrated and confused.

“What the hell did I just say?” He hissed to himself, the familiar taste of his own language back on his tongue.

He looked up as the Devil suddenly spoke. The beast was reciting the heavy sounds, slowly and deliberately. He was repeating what Dice had said moments ago.

“If you don’t obey... It will hurt both of us.”

Dice understood the words perfectly, but still didn’t comprehend.

“Why would I say that?” He asked.

The Devil chuckled. It was gravely and he could feel the vibrations through the floorboards.

“They are not your words. They are mine. A warning.” The beast told the other in his satanic tongue.

Dice looked at the man, shocked. The words echoed in his head.

“So what, you’re possessing me?” Dice balked.

The Monster shook its head. He gestured at the ring on Dice’s finger. It glowed an eerie mist from the attention.

“That ring binds. Body and soul. We are merging. Your composure; my language.”

The Devil’s words were short and blunt. Even speaking his own laungauge, he still couldn't string a full sentence together. It was visibly draining for the thing to act like he was now. Was he really leaching off Dice’s composed nature right now? If so that was a pretty shallow well. No wonder Dice had been irate all day.

“So what does that mean for me? Am I gonna be crawling on all fours by the end of the damn week?”

Dice let out a huff as the Devil didn’t reply.

“Hey! Answer me!”

Walking back over to the bed, he looked at the creature beside him. The Devil’s eyes were closed and chis chest rose and fell slowly. It seemed the time for talking had passed; the Devil was too weak for such conversations.
Dice paused for a moment, before picking up the brush again. Soul bonds be damned; he was going to get something done today. He set back to work, running the brush over the Devil’s spine and shoulders (albeit a tad more gently this time).

Apart from the occasional nip or growl, the Devil didn’t complain.

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“Boss!”

King Dice turned, facing the noise. He was greeted by Mr. Wheezy and Chips Bettigan. The two were looking at him in stunned awe.

“How did ya’ do it?” Chips gasped as Dice approached the man.

“You’re one crazy son of a bitch, you know that?” Wheezy added, shaking his head.

Dice looked at them, brow furrowed. Chips noticed the look and laughed.

“The Devil? He’s squeaky clean. How’d ya’ tame that bad holl?” The man elaborated, flicking his hat up with a finger.

“Oh that?” Dice brushed off with a dismissive hand. “It’s nothing. Wasn’t going to let him walk around like that on my watch.”

“Well ya’ can say what you want. But I tell ya’ just seeing that man sparkling like new has really boosted morale. Ya’ gonna do great tidying this place up, Boss.” Chips said, giving an earnest pat to Dice’s back.

Dice nodded with a even smile. There it was again. The implication that he was the one that had been tasked to fix this mess. It made his blood boil. Did he always have this little choice at the casino? Or was this illusion of freedom something he was just noticing now?

Walking away, he was stopped by a hand. A black glove was wrapped around his forearm. It yanked at him to turn around. He didn’t.

“Wheezy what do you want?” Dice sighed.

“I just want to apologize for before.” The man pleaded, giving up and stepping into Dice’s view. “I was way outta’ line. You’re under so much stress right now, it was stupid of me to think everything would just go back to the way it was before.”

“No shit.” Was all Dice could scoff back.

“I said I was sorry! Ok? Can’t say much else.”

Dice let out a sigh, as he saw the face of his bashful lackey.

“Look. We’re both acting a little crazy down here. Cabin fever and all that. You’re forgiven, Wheez.”

Mr. Wheezy perked up.

“R-really?”

“Of course. I got bigger fish to fry. Keeping up some spat with my employee would just be
draining."

He saw Wheezy’s face fall slightly, once the other man realised a truce had only been formed for the sake of professionalism. Dice didn’t feel sorry even the slightest. It was the best he was going to get right now.

“Yes... Of course.” Was the numb reply Dice got.

His lackey quietly made an exit, leaving Dice to ponder when Wheezy’s next mood swing would blow up in his face. He shrugged. Time would tell.

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“I’m not leaving! I’m not!” Cuphead cried, wrapping his arms tighter around the post. Mugman tried to grip his shoulder, but he shrugged it off with a violent waggle. He wasn’t going anywhere until he knew King Dice was ok!

“I have to find him. The sun is setting and it’ll be too dark to see soon. What if he’s somewhere cold and alone?”

Porkrind let out another frustrated grunt. Cup felt two large hands wrap around his torso and lift him up. They attempted to pry him gently from the dock, but to little success. He braced himself, waiting for the shopkeep to grow impatient and just rip him off. The man was strong enough.

“We gotta go. He ain’t here no more, kid. Face it.” Porkrind repeated. “He’s not missing. You can’t find him here. We know exactly where he is. Somewhere very warm.”

Cup shook his head. He didn’t want to believe it. Dice couldn’t be back with the Devil. They had just become friends. Dice seemed like he genuinely wanted to turn his life around. How was this fair at all? Now he might not even be alive. All because he let him wander off on his own. Guilt ripped at his insides and it hurt. It hurt even worse than when he had dragged Mugman into the whole soul contract nonsense. A least then there was a clear way out, however challenging it was. Now he just felt hopeless.

“He’s not! He can’t…” Cuphead whimpered, burying his face into the cracked grey wood of the post.

“We will find him and bring him back, ok? He ain’t slippin’ away from us that easy. The Devil’s been stompin’ around Nibsville for days. If we find Dice anywhere, it’ll be there.” Porkrind offered, patting the boy’s back. “Besides. Yer’ promised to take Appleman here to his sister.”

Cuphead looked over to Appleman, who was sitting in the boat with an stiff expression. The boy had known him long enough to know the guy wasn’t the type to yell and cause a scene. But if he was, now would be the moment any decent person would snap.

Instead the man looked up at the boy with desperate, tired eyes.

“Please…” Appleman pleaded. “We have to get going. It will be dark soon. My sis is probably worry about me. And heck; I’m feeling sick just thinking about her. I hope she’s safe...” The man drawled off.

“He’s right, bro.” Mugman sighed. “Could ya’ imagine of that was me in her shoes? Wouldn’t you want to get there as fast as possible?”

Cuphead let out a huff. If his brother was in danger, he’d trek the corners of the earth just to see him
again. He hated to leave Inkwell Isle behind but he had to face the facts. Dice was in hell and it was cruel to halt Appleman’s journey any further.

Letting go of the post, he could hear the sighs of relief.

“C’mon, on yer’ get.” Porkrind lifted the boy up with one hand, plonking him into the boat. He scooped Mugman up, doing the same.

As the Pig got in and started to row, Cuphead leant over the back and watched the water ripple and fold behind them.

As he watched this, he had a thought.

“If I see the Devil. I’m gonna skin him and turn his fur into a fashionable coat. He’s cleary too much trouble to be anything else.” Cuphead drawled.

Mugman and Apple man looked on, silent at the boy’s comments.

Porkrind however offered a snort of laughter in response.

“That’s the spirit, kid.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh! This took far too long and I apologise. Last month was extremely hectic for me, so I'm glad I finally gobbled together enough words to make a chapter haha. And as always thankyou so much for the encouragement/ kind words! They inspire me to keep writing :D

“Well. This must be the place.” Appleman announced with a relieved sigh. “It’s the biggest house on the block… Not to mention the only one intact.” He added grimly.

Porkrind looked around once more, as he adjusted the bag on his shoulders with a heave. Appleman wasn’t exaggerating; this town was in ruins. What wasn’t crumbling or decrepit, was burnt or defaced in some way. It was sad, as even in the inky night he could see this small town would have been incredibly beautiful only mere days ago. Now however, the flower pots and striped shutter windows lay in ruin.

Walking up to the mansion’s door, Appleman hesitantly gave it a knock. The large polished wood absorbed the noise with little effort. Porkrind lent over and pressed the ringer, which immediately filled the air with gaudy bells.

They waited for a few beats, until finally the noise of hurried footsteps could be heard.

A small apple headed woman opened the door. She was wearing an apron, as the scent of something heavenly wafted out from the house behind her. Her face lit up once she saw Appleman.

“Hey, bro!” She beamed.

Appleman let out a laugh of delight as he ran to his sister, picking her up in his arms. The girl let out an indignant squawk in response and the two tumbled into the hallway.

“Oh my… I’m so glad you’re safe!” Appleman crooned, finally placing his sister back on her feet and pulling her into a more standard hug.

“I told you I was fine! You worry too much.” The woman sighed in response, her voice muffled as she rested her head on the other’s shoulders.

As the two finally parted, Appleman turned to the group.

“I… Uh sorry.” The man blushed. “Got a little caught up. Introductions first: This is Gala, my sister!”

Now they were parted, Porkrind noted Gala’s apple was a vibrant forest green, unlike her brothers red variant. He also noted that she was easily a head taller than her brother, even without the added levity that her high heels provided. Despite the introductions, her eyes never left her sibling’s face. She looked utterly relieved to be back in his presence.

“Pleasure to meet you. Gala. Heard a lot about you from yer’ brother.” Porkrind offered, outstretching a hand. Gala turned to greet the voice that had talked to her. Well, she tried anyway.
Her eyes met the front pouch of his apron.

“Hi- oh, sorry! Wow, your… big. ”

He waited for her to bashfully adjust to his height, her eyes shooting up to his face.

“I mean… Uh, sorry! That was shockingly rude of me to say-”

Porkrind made an noncommittal snort, amused. He was used to it, but the embarrassed reactions never got old.

“Oh! You! You must be shopkeeper, Porkrind!” Gala gushed as she made the connection. She finally shook the man’s hand, which still was extended. “Thank you so much for everything. My brother wouldn’t be here without you.”

Porkrind gave a dismissive wave. “It ain’t nothin’. You should be thankin’ these fellas, instead. They’re the local heroes. I’m sure you’ve heard of Cuphead and Mugman.” He pointed to the duo, who had been quiet up until this point.

Gala turned, her eyes lighting up once they reached the boys.

“Oh my gosh! Aren’t you two just as adorable as a pair of teacups! I can’t believe two little ones so cute beat the Devil!” She swooned, rushing to pinch Cuphead’s cheeks. The boy blushed under the attention, kicking a bashful foot into the dirt as he looked away.

“So… may I ask which one of you is Cuphead and which is Mugman?” She egged on, leaning to the boys level.

“I-I’m Cuphead, ma’am.” The boy spluttered out, his face still as red as his straw. “I’m the oldest!”

“And I’m Mugman! Hi!” The younger bro enthusiastically offered, outstretching his hand.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Gala smiled as she warmly shook the other’s hand. She leant in, her eyes twinkling mischievously. “Hey, you smell that? I got a cake cooking inside. It’ll be ready real soon. Why don’t you two have a race to the kitchen? It’s just down the hall to the left.”

The boys didn’t need to be told twice and without a second thought nodded excitedly, taking off into the house and disappearing around a bend.

Once it was clear the boys were out of earshot, Gala turned. Her face looked a little greyer.

“You two should come in. It’s dangerous around here.” She said in a grave tone.

Nodding, the two men followed her inside.

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Porkrind found that he was in rather strange scenario. Usually the man had to duck his head as he approached doorways, or shimmy in and out of small corridors. He didn’t have that problem anymore. He felt like a mouse, traversing the wide and impossibly tall gilded halls. The place was a mansion, plain and simple.

“Who’s the owner of this house?” Porkrind asked Gala. “Pretty flashy. Must have cost em’ a small fortune.”

“An… eccentric man. A rich man. I’m taking you to him right now.” She said.
“Eccentric? What’s that supposed to mean, sis?” Appleman jabbed lightly.

Gala’s face grew grim as she hesitated.

“I suppose I should tell you; you’re going to realise it the minute you start talking to him anyway.”

She shrugged, facing the two.

“The man who owns this place, Mr. Sterling… He’s utterly obsessed with the occult.”

Porkrind shot the other a scrupulous glance. He looked over to Appleman, who was doing much the same.

“Sis! You’ve been staying here? I thought you said you were somewhere safe!” Appleman gasped.

“It does seem like a bad place to be.” Porkrind grunted, agreeing.

“I would have too thought that once upon a time… We townsfolk never trusted him either. Why would we?. His house was full of dark artifacts. He rarely went outside and if he did, all he would do was go on about the Devil and how ‘facintating’ he was. We thought that he was crazy. That he was dangerous.”

“And now?”

“Well I’ve talked to Mr. Sterling a lot over these few days. He’s still utterly mad but - and this sounds crazy- he means well. Indeed he is obsessed with the Devil, but even he believes that the beast has gone too far and that a balance needs to be restored. He of all people understand how cruel that demon can be. He put a powerful blessing on his house to keep the townsfolk safe while he tries to find a solution.”

Porkrind nodded. So that’s why this was the only house standing. He was still skeptical of this ‘Mr. Sterling’ and his motives, but for now he was pacified.

“But I’m not the best at explaining such things; why don’t I just take you to the man himself?”

The two men nodded and followed Gala’s lead.

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“Now, do you know his phone number?” Mr. Sterling asked, kneeling down at the boys height.

Cuphead shook his head, bashfully. “No, Sir.” He mumbled around a large mouthful of cake. He stabbed his fork into the fluffy slice to scoop out another portion. Looking down at the fork, he noticed the ‘S’ monogram carved into its handle. Also the way that the cutlery resembled its owner. He held it up to compare. Glistening silver; three pronged. Just like Mr. Sterling’s head.

“L. think I do?” Mugman said, raising a questioning finger to his bottom lip.

“Well all we can do is try, right boys? A few wrong numbers never hurt anyone!”

“Yeah!” Cuphead hollered.

He flopped back further in the lush velvet seat; it felt softer than anything he’d ever sat in before. This whole place was utterly extravagant. It was a shame Mr. Dice wasn’t here to enjoy it with them,
he had a taste for the good life.

King Dice...

Cuphead felt his stomach drop. He placed the plate of cake carefully on a side table. He suddenly didn’t feel hungry anymore.

Mr. Sterling grabbed the telephone, bringing it over to the two children. The cord sat taught between them and the far wall but it reached, if only just.

As Mugman slowly wound in the number, Cuphead heard a noise in the hall. He looked up. Porkrind and Appleman were trailing behind the lady from earlier.

“Ah! These fine fellows must be the rest of the party!” Mr. Sterling hollered, turning to face them. “The pleasure is all mine, gentlemen.”

It wasn’t lost on Cuphead how Appleman and Porkrind gave Mr. Sterling a wide berth, briskly saying their greetings. It made him cautious. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard Porkrind’s voice.

“What are you two up to?” The Pig asked, resting an arm across the back of the chair like he would his counter at the shop. “Who ya’ callin’?”

“Elder Kettle! Or at least trying to.” Mugman sighed. “We wanted to call and tell him everything; it’s the least we could do.”

“Well first of all, that’s the wrong number at the beginning; we’re ‘345’ in Inkwell, boy.” The Pig grunted, leaning over to input the correct numbers.

As they tried to decipher the code, Cuphead looked around.

He might have been in a sour mood, but he was sure everything seemed… tense.

Sitting up from his reclined position, he decided to be more on guard from now on.

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King Dice let out a sigh. He had been chauffeured all around Hell for hours by a trio of pushy demons he could hardly understand. He had tried to drag someone like Wheezy or Chips along with him, but they were all busy. All his lackeys could do was offer their sorrowful looks of pity as he was yanked here or shoved there.

The wedding between him and the Devil was to happen a day from now, or so that was what he believed. The whole thing had been extremely crudely explained to him.

It had also been conveyed to him that upon unholy matrimony, the Devil would be strong enough to ‘return to them’. Whatever that meant. Did it mean he’d get his old boss back? Or some five headed beast from the void set to destroy mankind? He had no clue. A quietly selfish part hoped for the former. What he’d give to hear his sharp tongue and blunt humour once more. Tiptoeing around the beast the Devil had become was irritating at best and terrifying at worst.

Apparently the Devil needed a bustling bride in a white dress, with an intact soul that had never been married (the Devil was lucky on this front; King Dice had basically done everything under the sun with his past partners except marry them) and ‘reclaimed’ chapel filled with witnesses.
As they had explained these criteria to him, he had already planned ten ways to sabotage each. Now he knew that they needed to consummate this bond for it to truly be sealed, King Dice would personally make sure this wasn’t going through. He’d kick and scream the whole way.

He rubbed his face. Damn he was so tired. Night and day blurred into one in the pits of Hell. How long had he been down here? Weeks? Days? Was it dark outside? Light? Raining? Sunny? Who knew; certainly not him.

“Follow me.” One of the demons croaked in a twisted tongue.

Well he understood that.

The satanic language had been tricky for him today; he only understood every one in ten words these damn creatures said. He assumed it had to do with his Boss sleeping all day.

The Devil was weak; it was obvious. Dice guessed it hindered his abilities also.

Walking over he was greeted with something thrust in his face.

It was a veil, but not in the traditional sense. With its thick dusty material it looked more like a hood. He put the stupid thing on, at the demons persuasion. He was then led to a mirror. It looked like something a person would wear on death row. How fitting.

But for marriage? The supposedly happiest day of a person's life? It was the most hideous thing he’d ever encountered. Was this really what it was going to be for him? A tacky ring bearing some random broad’s name and a death shroud? He felt rage swell in him.

Even if it was a sham, he deserved a better wedding, dammit.

“Look.” Dice grit, at the end of his tether. “I know we have to adhere to the whole ‘white virgin’ cliche, but can we get a little purple on this thing? It’s really not my style. That’s putting it nicely.”

Dice bit back, tugging the veil off and chucking it back at the imp that had brought it to him.

He watched as the demons chattered amongst themselves, they were either considering his request or planning to throw him into the lava pits below. Eventually they nodded their agreements and turned back to King Dice.

“Oh! Are you- do you miss- Clothes?” One said.

Dice squinted, only catching a word here or there. Clothes? Well he wasn’t walking around in his birthday suit, so he could only assume the demon meant his old casino garb, rather than the threads Porkrind had given him.

He pondered the question before realising that yes, he did miss them. Quite a lot, actually. The royal purple and flawless tailoring gave him a confidence he had taken for granted. However as they said that, something also occurred to him.

These demons and imps… They knew him. They were most likely the very same he had tripped over and cursed at while managing the casino. Back then they had seemed little more than a part of the furniture. Now he was realising they were intelligent; capable of far more than following orders blindly. It made him a little self-conscious. He pushed the thought aside.

“My old suit? He questioned back. “Yes... I do miss that actually. But that doesn’t distract from his ugly that thing is.”
The demon nodded.

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll get you new clothes and a new dress - once we get to the surface.”

Dice stopped.

“The surface? We’re going up there?” He said, trying to hide his pure joy.

The demons seemed irritated once more. They had probably already told him this - one or ten times previous. But he had only heard it now, so how was that his fault?

“The surface- to secure chapel. We’ll come too. You’ll be guarded, so don’t get any funny ideas.” The demon repeated.

Dice nodded. He was glad to be understanding them again; the Boss must have awoken.

The imps and other minions must have sensed that too, as they quietened. They looked nervous, which didn’t fill King Dice with much reassurance. One brushed a shooing motion his way, indicating it was time to leave. Was this all being done behind the Devil’s back? He gave the creatures a scrupulous stare.

“He’s awake. Go to him.” Was all the demon said.

Turning on his heel he did as he was told. He didn’t want these imps torn to pieces now, no matter how rude or sassy they were. He wasn’t sure if he could stomach it after his realisation.
“Well your time has come, bride-to-be! The demons are opening a portal to the surface as we speak.”

Dice gave Wheezy the coldest glare he could manage. It probably wasn’t that terrifying, as the bags under his eyes revealed how little he had slept last night. The Devil had come in, covered in gore once more. It had somehow been even worse than the first time he had seen him; as the metallic tang that filled the air told him it was fresh.

He didn’t want to think what or whose blood that had once belonged to.

“Wheezy don’t get smart; I’m not in the mood.” Was all Dice grit out, leaving Wheezy’s office. Why the hell did the man still have his own workroom? He didn’t do any work. The tiny trickle of wanderers looking for the Devil’s Casino had stopped, it seemed. Dice would have found it a mockery of his own status if he didn’t loathe every minute he spent in this purgatory.

Wheezy raised his hands defensively as he stood to follow dice.

“I’m just using a bit of light humour to break the grim mood! No need to shoot me for it.” He said, giving the man a playful slap on the back. “Look, we’re all fuckin’ miserable down here. It’s basically company policy at this point. But you’re walking around like you’re the only one who has to deal with this. Maybe after some fresh air you might be a little more tolerable. You’ve been a right piece of shit these last few days, Dice.”

Dice turned to him to snap, but clamped his mouth shut.

The man was right, in a way.

Truth was he had been extra hostile lately, especially towards his lackeys. It was just getting harder and harder to bite his tongue. If he was being completely honest, he thought he would have found a way out of here by now. In response to his antics, his staff had become increasingly cold towards him. It was dangerous. If he kept it up, he might lose the only friends he had in this place.

It was ironic that for as much as he hated the man, Mr. Wheezy was the only one in the group who would confront him about such issues. The rest would never dare talk back to him.

Didn’t mean Dice appreciated his input, however.

“Look here.” Dice sighed. “Don’t think for a second you know what I’m going through. Are you getting hitched with the father of all lies?”

“Well, no… That’s a pretty specific scenario, boss.” Wheezy said sarcastically.

“Last warning about running that mouth, Wheez; I think I’m allowed to be a little fucking cranky.”

Not in the mood for conversation, Dice pushed past Wheezy’s sassy retort and walked towards the small congregation of demons in a clearing a few feet away. The sun poured through the gap they had formed above them. Dice could feel a warmth on his skin as he stepped in it. It was different from the blistering heat in Hell; it warmed his face and calmed him. He looked up to the blue sky above and let out a sigh. It looked like a lovely day.

“The portal is fully opened.” A demon commented, turning to Dice.
The imp then jumped up, wrapping his arms around King Dice’s right bicep. Before the man could protest, another joined him, this time gripping the left. Then the creatures kicked off with a flutter, lifting him up. As the demons flew him to the surface, he noticed they seemed able to lift his weight with little effort. Dice chalked that up to whatever the Devil had gotten up to last night giving him and his lackeys some much needed strength. Dice knew it was like putting a bandaid on a bullet wound, however. It was only a temporary fix.

As the Demons gently placed him on the ground and the hole him closed up, Dice could see he was in the middle of a town. It wasn’t Inkwell, he knew that much. He gawked at all the sights, such as the small, cottage style shops and houses that looked bright and cheery in the vibrant sun. It took every fiber of his being not to bolt then and there. How easy it would be to just run. But there was something more he could see. He was also noticing the occasional scars of destruction. A claw mark here, a hole patched up with a makeshift tarp there. Then finally, the splintered remains of buildings off in the distance.

The Devil had claimed this place; there was nowhere to hide.

From what Dice could see, there were two or three people within view, but they didn’t seem surprised by either him or the demons presence. They gawked at him through shop windows and from around corners, flinching only when their eyes met.

Feeling a demon nudge at his back he started walking forward.

Dice soon realised he was stumbling towards the tailors. The shop was unremarkable and seemed to have avoided the damage that the surrounding stores had suffered. He wondered how long it would stay in that state, especially once they graced the owner’s presence.

Stepping inside, Dice was greeted with sheets and sheets of gorgeous fabrics, all draped from the ceiling in angelic arcs. The soothing colours were a welcome sight after looking at the red walls of hell for days on end. He touched one, rubbing its silky texture between his fingers. It was quality, that was for sure.

As much as escaping was on his mind, he also was getting excited just thinking about some new threads. He saw a purple silk roll out of the corner of his eye. It was a pale lilac; his favorite.

“Wh-what do you want?”

Dice turned to the sound. A man was cowering behind the counter, with only the top of his spool head visible. Dice was about to make some snarky comment about how every object head in these parts seemed to get a career that correlated with their appearance, but he was one to comment. A dice landing a gig in a casino? That was as cliche as they came.

“Sir get up.” Dice said dryly, walking towards the counter. “If we wanted to kill you, you’d be dead. So show some damn courage and stand straight.”

The man sheepishly rose.

“Better. Now bring that purple roll of fabric over here; I want to take a look at it.”

The man froze, confusion on his features.

“Why S-sir?”

“Because I want to look at it? I just said. Do you ask such stupid questions to all of your customers?” Dice drawled.
The tailor's eyes suddenly flashed in recognition.

“You want… my services? So you’re not here to destroy my shop?”

“Well if this asinine chit chat goes on for any longer, maybe.” Dice grit. He hated talking to people in this state. Dealing with the emotional aftermath of the Devil was always the worst. Fear made man so utterly stupid. Conversations would just loop in circles if you weren't careful.

Luckily the tailor got the hint, racing over to retrieve the object.

“This roll- uh I mean fabric is very fine. A 100% silk weave. M-may I ask what you are looking for?”

“Two outfits. I need a suit and a wedding dress.”

The man looked up.

“Oh! A Wedding? So you need a suit and a dress for your bride?”

Dice raised an eyebrow. That would make more sense, wouldn’t it?

“Nope. They’re both for me. I’m your bustling bride. Also, the groom prefers an ‘ass out’ look, so no clothes necessary.”

The sheer confusion and despair that washed over the poor man’s face was priceless, he had to admit. He heard some demons behind him snicker.

“Might I ask... who the groom is?” The tailor finally asked.

“The Devil. Satan. Beelzebub. He goes by many names.” Dice said nonchalantly. He ran a hand over the lilac fabric. It really was the perfect colour.

“....Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.” Was all Dice could reply with. It lacked the pomp he was projecting earlier. He didn’t exactly feel great about this scenario either. He continued to stroke the fabric listlessly.

“So about this suit-” The man questioned, clearing his throat as he quickly changed the subject. “Do you want it in purple? I umm, see you like this shade.”

Dice looked up at the tailor. He lent in and read the name tag on the man’s shirt.

“Mr… Bobbin. How good would you say you were at your trade?”

The man was taken aback, but answered.

“Been doing this my whole life- I’m certainly not a novice, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good. Because my last suit was hand made by a French designer who is so in demand the only way to see him is to book years in advance. He had made it all by hand, with only the finest materials. The seams were invisible; it fit me like a glove. It was a nice suit. I’m still mourning it’s loss, Mr. Bobbin.”

Dice conveniently left out the part where the only way he had obtained the suit was through the Devil. He had originally saved up himself, but it was hopeless. They wouldn’t give a crook like him a second glance. So he had begged the boss until, shockingly, he had received it as a gift on his fifth
anniversary of being the Devil casino’s manager.

Everyone had been stunned; the Devil didn’t do nice things. He certainly didn’t give out gifts. But he had, and Dice never forgot it. Dice’s brow furrowed. Now that he thought about the whole scenario, he realised it was pretty fitting. The suit was burnt; destroyed. Gone. It hurt more than he anticipated.

Dice straightened his spine. It wasn’t the end of the world, however. He could just get a new one made. Move on.

Mr. Bobbin gulped, before stepping forward.

“I might not be some fancy french designer, but I know how to make a damn fine suit, Mr… Uhh sorry. I-I didn’t catch your name?”

“You can call me Mr. King Dice.”

“Well Mr. King, If you’ll follow me out back, we have some more fabrics I think you’ll like.”

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Cuphead rested his head on his brothers knee, closing his eyes. The days old water that sat in his cup began to trickle onto the floor.

“Bro! Don’t do that! We gotta pay attention.” Mugman hissed, grabbing his brothers handle and posing him upright once more.

“But it’s so boring.” He quietly whined in response, flopping once more.

Mugman let out a sigh. It was pretty boring stuff. Mr. Sterling had woken them up extraordinarily early, saying that he had found an important discovery. By know it was known about the man’s… eccentric hobby. Mugman didn’t trust this at all, but everyone else seemed ok with it, so he’d went along. Mr. Sterling had led them to a room that from floor to ceiling was filled with satanic scriptures and imagery. It was scary.

At first.

Now Mugman looked at the images with dull eyes, just like he had the past hour. He felt about the same joy he did when trapped in a classroom. Which was none.

“-And so you can see that with those calculations that are mentioned in this old inscription I found, paired with these coordinates… Nibsville is on the leyline of something truly awful. More interestingly; it all meets at this point! The local church, just a few blocks away. I’d investigate myself, but I’m not allowed in there for… Well, obvious reasons.” Mr. Sterling turned to the group, his black robe dramatically arching behind him. “In any case, I don’t think it’s coincidence the Devil decided to move to this place to recuperate.”

“So what does this mean for us? Ya’ want us to poke around a church?” Porkrind asked, irritation lacing his words. Mugman could tell by his tone that like his brother, the pig wasn’t too appreciative of being dragged out of bed.

“Well… That would help my research, yes. But I suppose I gathered you all to tell you one thing; the Devil is a cunning beast. It’s not a matter of if he has a plan, but rather what it is. We found the remains of something in the woods this morning. It was too minced up to tell what the poor creature was at first, but luckily we deducted eventually it was just a deer. Well two, actually.”
“What does that mean for the people living here? Are they safe?” Appleman said, worried.

“Maybe. Maybe not. This isn't the first time we’ve found something like this. Vigilance is key over the next few days.”

“Good. Then we'll keep an eye out and do any errands that need doin’. No one is gettin’ snatched under our watch.” Porkrind stood, clapping his hands on his thighs resolutely as he rose. “Now. Any further conversation will be over breakfast. The boys are gettin’ restless.” Porkrind pointed to Mugman and Cuphead that sat (or lay, in Cuphead’s case) behind him. They scrambled upright nodded their eager agreements.

“Oh! Right.” Mr. Sterling said, bashfully. “Of course. You all look like gent’s that enjoy a meal. Why don’t we go to the dinner hall? You can meet the other townsfolk.”

“*The townsfolk?*”

“Yes! It isn’t just Gala that is living with me; many are. My mansion is so large luckily it accommodates fifty or so residents quite well.”

“The town only has a population of fifty?” Porkrind grunted.

“Oh no. Those are only the people I could convince I wasn’t going to feed them to demons or whatever the residents think I get up to. Many were the ones closest to the destruction; the most desperate. Some still are bunkered down in their own homes, adamant that I must be up to something. The fools.”

“Well you can hardly blame them. Maybe if yer’ ditched the velvet cape and the heart eyes for Satan they’d trust you a little more.” The Pig shrugged.

Mugman made his way out into the hall, following his brothers lead. He didn’t know how, but Cuphead seemed to know where the food hall was. Actually that was pretty unsurprising, now he thought about his eating habits.

“Why? I *like* this cape. They should know I’m harmless from my actions. I’ve never hurt a soul the whole time I’ve lived here. It’s merely research; I don’t condone his actions.”

Porkind let out a non committal grunt in response. He didn’t sound too convinced.

Just then, hurried footsteps could be heard echoing through the hall

A small child came into view, rushing around the corner.

“Mister! Mister!” The small child cried, as she closed the space between her and the group.

“What is it, lass?” Mr Sterling asked, kneeling slightly to look into the girl’s eyes.

“Demons. In town!” The girl puffed out, her breath short from the sprinting.

“You went outside? I’ve told you it’s too dangerous right now-” The man begun his lecture, but was cut short when the child continued.

“But Mr. Sterling! There was a strange man with them this time! And he wasn’t scared or anything!”

*A man?*
Cuphead and Mugman spun around to look at the girl. Before they could even speak though, Porkrind had already asked the question on their minds.

“What did he look like?”

“He was very tall… had a die for a head.”

The Pig practically bowled poor Mr. Sterling over as he rushed to stand in front of the girl. He placed a hand on her shoulders.

“This is very important; where’d you see him? Was he ok?”

“H-he seemed fine!” The girl replied, overwhelmed by the sudden barrage of questions. “I saw him entering Mr. Bobbin’s store. He’s the town’s tailor.”

“The tailors, where’s that?” Porkind asked, turning to Mr. Sterling.

“Left of where you gentlemen would have entered the town. It’s pretty easy to find, as it luckily has received less damage than these parts.”

“Right. C’mont boys.” He gestured to Cuphead and Mugman as he already began to make his way to the end of the hall. They followed his lead eagerly. As the boys overtook him, Porkrind stopped and turned. “-And Appleman; ya’ stay here keep an ear open, ok?”

Appleman nodded, visibly relieved to not be expected to join them. After all what would he do? He wasn’t a fighter; not anymore.

“Will do. Good luck!”

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Mr. Bobbin flinched as he heard his shop door slam open for the second time today. Luckily, It wasn’t Mr. King or his demon friends. Instead it was a large pig man, with two children in tow.

“Can I help you-”

“Did a man with a die for a head come in here?” The Pig cut in.

Mr. Bobbin recoiled at the man’s demanding tone.

“I - yes, he did. Mister King Dice he called himself. Came in looking for a suit and a dress.”

It didn’t escape him how all of their faces suddenly filled with joy and relief. One of the boys, the red clad one with bigger eyes, let out a excited laugh.

“That’s great! Where is he now? Do you know?” The boy asked, rushing up to the counter.

“I.. I’m sorry he didn’t tell me.” Mr. Bobbin admitted.

“Wait.” The Pig grunted out. “I get the suit, but why did he need a dress?”

“Well - and this sounds crazy - but he said he was going to marry the Devil. Needed it by tomorrow.”

He looked down at the boy who still had his hands on the counter. His expression told him everything the man had been saying wasn’t a joke. Mr. Bobbin watched as they stood in a stunned
silence for a beat, processing the information that had just been tossed at them.

“He can’t be.” The boy mumbled, despair welling up in his eyes.

“No. *He wouldn’t.*” Porkrind said. “This must be some sort of ruse or plan on the Devil’s part. Can’t believe he’d go back to him just like that.”

“But what if he has?” The blue child interjected, sounding equally as torn.

“Then we find Dice and slap some sense into him. Like hell this wedding is going through, either way.”

Mr. Bobbin looked at the three, bewildered. Was the man really an unwilling participant in this? He seemed so cocky and sure of himself. Still, that might have just been a ruse to keep those demons off his back. He hesitated, before speaking to the group.

“He was talking an awful lot about the church before he left, maybe he’s there? You didn’t hear that from me though, you hear? I don’t want those demons back in my shop until these clothes are ready.”

The three nodded and gave their thanks before rushing off.

As the doors bell swayed back and forth from their exit, Mr. Bobbin set back to his task of sewing a lapel on the lilac suit. It would be a challenge to get them done in such little time, but he knew he could to it.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

A long chapter this time, oops haha. I couldn't find a good spot to stop writing, so i didn't! I apologise in advance for any spelling errors; there was no way I was going to re-read 5000+ words over and over again haha.

And thanks once again for the lovely comments :D they really make my day!

King Dice stood outside a chapel.

To the passerby it would look like he was alone; however he knew better. The imps had gone into hiding, not liking the proximity to such a holy site. No doubt they were still around though. Watching him. Waiting. His instincts told him it was finally safe to flee, but he knew it was a false comfort. Dice observed the building. The chapel was small, but still quite grandiose with its high spires and carefully carved sandstone bricks. From the angle he was loitering he could see that only one person was inside. From the black garb it was safe to assume he was the local priest.

Dice thought back to the news story he had read all those days ago. In the newspaper they had mentioned a priest had been responsible for driving out the Devil and keeping him to the outskirts. The priest had be doing a good job by the looks of things, too. It wasn’t that surprising, but everything in a twenty meter radius of the church was untouched.

As King Dice began to stroll up the chapel’s entrance, he realised why.

A twitch in his chest appeared. It was dull at first, like a slow poking sensation. As he approached though, it began to swell to a prickling ache that chilled his bones and made him shiver, even though the bright sun above told him he had no reason to be cold. Nevertheless he strode on, even if his body protested.

Finally he made it to the entrance, step by shaky step. His body was screaming at him my now to leave. The pain in his chest was unbearable. It was a distinct icy stabbing, mixed with a heart wrenching feeling he hoped to never experience again. It mingled in his very soul.

“Can I help you?” A steady voice asked.

Dice turned to the priest. He had a cross cautiously raised.

“I need.... help.” Dice grit out, as he took a step further into the chapel. Talking was hard. The priest took a step back.

“I think you should seek guidance from someone else. You look like a lost soul that needs more help than I can provide.” The man said, an honest inflection to his tone. “There’s a church to the west that-”

Dice let out a growl. It was low and not his own. He felt his hands press against the cold wooden floor, and only then did he realise he had collapsed onto this knees. This place was killing him.

No. Not killing him. Tearing him apart, separating him. King Dice - even though he was no means
an angel - could walk into a church just fine. The Devil on the other hand... He looked numbly at the ring on his finger. He knew the Devil would be feeling this too. They now held a bond, for better or worse.

“H... Help.” Dice gasped, as he felt his muscles spasm and give out from beneath him. He didn’t know if the plea was to the priest in front of him, or to the Devil.

It didn’t matter. Only one of them answered his cry.

Suddenly he was warm. Too warm. His very soul burnt with a fiery energy that could barely be held in his body. He screamed as he lifted himself upright.

Then it suddenly became all too much. Dice blacked out.

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His head felt like cotton.

King Dice could feel he was awake. He was aware of his own consciousness and yet... He couldn't see. Darkness shrouded his vision. It was like someone was holding their hands over his eyes. Dice tried to ground himself once more, but to little success. He was vaguely aware of his limbs moving, if he focused hard enough.

There was something else, though.

A voice, shouting in agony.

Whenever he did grasp onto any one of his senses however, the pain from before would also make itself known. Reality burned, so he would recede back into the soft numbness of his mind once again.

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Dice opened his eyes. He let a sharp intake of air fill his lungs.

It was a quick release. Like whatever had taken control of his soul had dropped him and run. Or simply lost the connection. It had been the Devil who had gripped his mind, that he knew. He had no clue what had just transpired, but his chest didn’t burn anymore. Nothing did, for that matter.

He whipped his head around, taking in his surroundings. He was still in the chapel, but it was... Different . The place was trashed. All religious imagery had been clawed and ripped at by desperate hands. He looked back at what he was facing before. It was a cross, but turned upside down. His own hand was still resting on the metal trimmings that decorated it.

Had he done all this?

His hand, he also noticed, was covered in blood. A lot of it. His eyes trailed down from the red on his digits to the smears down the wall. It ended at the still body of the unfortunate priest, now nothing but a pile of black cloth and pale, clammy skin.

Instinctively he recoiled. He felt bile rise in his throat. God no....

Dice’s thoughts were distracted as he heard a growl. The sound had come from a trio of imps that were now pacing at the doorway. They looked unsure of the chapels safety and loitered listlessly at the entrance. One looked at him and pointed to the far wall. A single cross on the right side of the...
church was still left unturned. The Devil hadn't had enough energy to completely finish his task, it seemed.

*Good.*

Dice stood in place. He didn’t *want* to turn the cross upside down. Any religious imagery would hurt the demons, no matter how small. Dice still had a shred of humanity left. The chapel was his last barrier against these beasts, the Devil and most importantly the wedding. He gave a sorrowful glance at the priest. Even though he knew he had been forced to kill, guilt still consumed him. The least he could do was make sure the man hadn’t died for nothing. He’d protect this church.

“Go back to Hell, you little shits!” Dice spat. “I’m not letting you in!”

Dice regretted his outburst the minute it left his lips. The creatures hissed and gnarled at him, enraged. One of the imps became emboldened, lunging over the threshold and straight at him. Apparently that was all the encouragement they needed, as the other two followed seconds after.

Dice darted off to the left, scampering around the seats to put some space between him and the demons. Spotting a downturned cross on the wall he bolted for it, ripping the wooden crucifix off its hinge and pointing it upright towards the creatures. A pain shot through his arms but he persisted, holding the object out in front of him. He felt the same icy sensation begin to grip him again; he couldn’t hold this thing for long.

Hope filled Dice when he saw that the demons were being driven back, remaining piled up a few meters away. All three looked to be in great pain, wincing and stumbling with every movement. They were wedged between the two remaining upright crosses. But so was he.

*Ok*. Dice let out shaky breath, readying himself. So it was a waiting game of which sinner would succumb first. He could do this; he knew quite intimately that he had a high pain tolerance. But then again so did these little imps; they basically were the Devil’s punching bag most days.

It had only been a few seconds but his arms already felt like lead. They were shaking uncontrollably and he grit his teeth. He couldn’t let go, he just couldn’t-

Just then he heard a noise. Footsteps. Bolting towards the church.

*“King Dice!”*

*“Dice? Are you ok?*

*“Run! We’ll take care of them!”*

He froze. *Those voices*. He knew those childlike tones anywhere. He didn’t even look at the door, he simply obeyed their orders, hurrying the the cross at the imps and running.

*“Boys! Help me!” King Dice cried, jumping over a row of seats. He could see them now, Cuphead and Mugman, finger guns raised in his direction. They weren’t pointed at him, but the demons behind him. Porkrind was standing guard off to the side, his shoulders squared. Dice forced his tired legs to run faster. It still was nothing more than a frantic stumble, but all he had to do was clear a meter or two and he was with them. Safe.*

As he approached, the pig outstretched his arms.

*“C’mere! Hurry!” Porkrind ordered, waving the other over fretfully. Dice obeyed, clumsily lurching into the others arms. There was no time to act coy. He was swaddled gracelessly next to Porkrind’s*
chest. Any other time he would have complained about the treatment, but now he simply felt ecstatic. He clung on to the man, like a lifeboat in turbulent seas. Dice could feel his own body shaking.

King Dice didn’t dare glance behind him. He knew the demons were mere inches away from him and the boys didn’t seem keen on shooting until he was out of the way. Just seeing the concern in the boys eyes triggered an indescribable emotion in him. He realised then and there simply couldn’t go back to Hell. Not again.

As Porkrind retreated with Dice in his arms, gunfire filled the air.

Dice turned back to see the boy’s firing at the demons. Their bullets were red and seemed to barrage the imps from every angle. Yet the creatures still stood their ground.

“Use the crucifix!” Dice barked at the children, his voice hoarse.

They glanced back at him and nodded.

Cuphead gave a running start and skidded into the chapel. Dice knew what would happen next; he had seen the move in action the first time he had dueled with the brother duo. Cuphead seemingly vanished into smoke, sliding through three rows of pews. He reformed next the cross that had been thrown at the demons, picking it up.

“Bro! Catch!” Cuphead called out, tossing the object to Mugman. The boy caught it with ease and held it in front of him like a sword. Dice looked on in awe as the mug then began to fire again. The cross acted like a conducting rod. It hummed and crackled with energy, before letting out a brilliant blue beam. Mugman, with some effort, lowered the beam of pure energy down onto one of the imps. Like an ant under a magnifying glass, it turned to dust. Dice could feel the energy from the beam, rippling off the cross in waves. Even from meters away it still made him nauseous.

The remaining demons, delirious and terrified, scampered for an escape. When they found none a hole opened up in the floor. It was small, barely big enough for anything to squeeze through but nevertheless they did, one after another. It disappeared just as fast as it had formed.

Only when the boys knew the demons were truly gone did they lower their guard. Mugman dropped the cross with an exhausted huff. The pair then raced over to King Dice.

“Dice! Are you ok?” Cuphead asked.

“I’m... fine. Just need to get away from this church.” He said. That was an understatement. He was shaking like a leaf and poised to pass out at any moment. He felt horrific.

“But the blood…” Mugman tentatively begun.

King Dice’s face dropped.

“That… ain’t mine.” He let out a sigh. “I.. I didn’t know what I was doing; you gotta believe me.”

He could feel Porkrind stiffen around him. He waited for the man to yell or drop him at any moment. It never came, however.

“What’d ya’ do, Dice?” The pig asked, evenly.

“The Priest…” Dice began. He didn’t finish the sentence, his expression told the others everything they needed to know.
“Right. Boys; you stay here. Take care of Dice.” Porkrind grunted. He put down Dice, propping him up against a fence. Dice watched the other man disappear into the church. He swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat.

Almost immediately Porkrind shot back out.

“He’s gotta pulse! Cuphead, Mugman. You run and get some help, now!” The Pig barked.

Dice sat up straight, desperately trying to use the wall behind him to pull himself back up. He peered into the church, but from this angle could see very little. Was it true? Was the man still alive?

“Yes sir!” The two cups nodded, running off back in the direction of the mansion.

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Dice rubbed the back of his head. He had only woken up mere minutes ago, but was pretty sure he could feel the start of a migraine forming. He looked around once more. He was in a room filled with medical equipment and two beds. The right one was occupied by himself, and the left by the priest. The place didn’t look like a hospital, though. With a high superfluous ceiling and large, ornate windows, it was more reminiscent of a ballroom.

Out of all the situations Dice could have found himself in, laying next to the priest he had almost killed hours earlier was certainly a doozy.

Dice glanced over to his left. The man was asleep, but in a lot better condition when he had last seen him. The thought crossed his mind to go over and apologise once he awoke, but he pushed it aside with a scoff. What would he say? What could he say? ‘Sorry I got possessed by Satan and tried to rip you to pieces?’

Yeah, that would go down real peachy.

King Dice threw off the thin cotton sheet draped over him and stood up. He was a little nauseous, but worlds better than he had felt at the church.

He walked over to the door and went to open it, but found someone was coming in from the other side. Porkrind’s face turned to one of surprise as he pushed through.

“Oh, yer’ awake.” He said.

“It would seem so.” Dice drawled back, as he peeked over the man’s shoulders and down the hall. It was just as extravagant and Dice raised an eyebrow.

“Where am I?”

Porkrind sauntered over to Dice’s bed and sat down. The mattress springs protested with a mighty groan.

“Not sure of the name. Some mansion. It’s holdin’ half of the residents of this town. Including Appleman’s sister. Got a ward on it to keep demons out. But don’t worry, I asked the owner if yer’ in trouble. He said it shouldn’t affect you too badly. It’s nothing like what that church would have had up.”

Dice nodded. So that’s why they wound up here, In truth he had almost forgotten entirely about the apple headed man.
“So his sister is safe? Good.”

“Hrm. But we got bigger fish to fry now.” Porkrind mused. “Is it true? Yer getting hitched to the Devil?”

Dice scoffed.

“Not if I have any damn say in it. But yes, unfortunately.”

“Why?”

“Not sure. Something about the ceremony restoring his powers.” Dice replied.

“Assumed somethin’ like that. But where’d you come into this? Clearly he’s got his sights on you, personally.” Porkrind mused. He didn’t sound too thrilled.

Dice froze at the question. Truth be told he didn’t know. Of course it would restore the Devil’s power; but why him indeed? If any chump would do, why would the Devil go to all of the trouble of dragging him down to hell?

“Cause I held that place together like damn glue.” Dice settled on. “I Was the only competent soul in that whole place; heck I still am by the looks of things. The Devil never could stand that he didn’t own my signature on a dotted line, even when things were dandy. Tried to rope me into signing shit all the time.”

Dice cleared his throat, realising how emotional he had gotten.

“Don’t yer’ worry. He’s not getting you back; me and the boys will make sure of that.” Porkrind assured.

To avoid Porkirnds gaze, he looked down at the ring bound to his finger. It was then he noticed his hands had been cleaned of the blood. On top of that, his clothes had been replaced with some soft, yet slightly too large pajamas.

“Who the hell undressed me -” Dice began, but was cut off by Porkrind.

“I did. Was either me or the doc, and I figured yer’ probably didn’t want to explain all the claw marks and scars to him.”

Dice let out an indignant huff. He didn’t like how presumptuous the pig was acting. It’s not like the two were friends.

“Can you do me a solid? Don’t ever touch a n inch of me again without my permission.”

“I won’t.” Porkrind promised. “Oh! Well after I hand this to ya’, I guess.”

The pig pulled a white chunk out of his pocket. Dice immediately recognized it. His hand flew up to touch the corner of his die. Sure enough there was a small crevice there that he could feel if he ran his fingers over it.

“It came off when you passed out. Told you yer’ weren’t right to walk on yer’ own.”

Dice gave the man a look of annoyance; he wasn’t looking for a lecture. Truth was he could barely remember what happened after they left the church. He vaguely remembered he had tried to walk, much to Porkrind and the Cup bros’ protests. He never made it to the mansion upright, so obviously the former had gone badly.
He took the chunk out of the man’s hands.

“Doc said it’s just cosmetic. There’s some glue over there.”

Grabbing the glue and a nearby mirror, Dice sat down next to Porkrind. He quickly realised the dilemma. It was either hold the mirror up or forgo the glue; he didn’t have three hands.

“Can you-?” Dice asked with an irritated sigh, passing the glue and die shard back to Porkrind.

“Course I can.” The pig replied.

As he worked away, Dice kept the mirror up. He was hardly going to let the man mess with his face without supervision. To his surprise, Porkrind did a decent job, slotting the piece back in place delicately. All that was left was a faint line, which blended in with the few he had received days ago. He examined all the hairline fractures that now littered his die. They looked so ugly. He had to stop being the universes punching bag; it was wreaking havoc on his ego.

King Dice must have looked exceedingly miserable about it, as Porkrind spoke up.

“You know If you need to talk, I’m all ears. I’ve travelled everywhere and seen everthin’, not much you can say will surprise me.”

Dice bit down his first instinct to say something snarky. He wasn’t in hell anymore, with staff that could turn on him in a moments notice. He didn’t need to lie. It would be smart to take advantage of that.

Still, his pride stopped any words from coming out. He would talk to the man later, when he was less emotional.

“Thanks, Porky. I’ll keep that in mind.” Dice drawled.

Porkrind didn’t push any further, letting the subject drop. Conversation turned to the boys, then the priest. Apparently his condition was stable, and the doctor expected a full recovery. Dice was glad.

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Dice walked into the lobby and immediately regretted it. The room was packed from floor to ceiling with people. Men, women and children all sat and went about their day in the room. He peeked through the door that led to the west hall and it was much of the same. This must have been the townsfolk Porkrind had mentioned in passing.

He was relieved when few looked in his direction. They had their own concerns he supposed. Besides, in Nibsville he had no reputation. To them he looked like just another man, who had been taken in after being attacked by the Devil. King Dice wasn’t a name anyone would know. Even the baggy pyjamas didn’t get a raised eyebrow, as many were still dressed in their dressing gowns and casual wear, even though it was a little past lunch time.

“Dice! You’re up!”

King Dice replied with a muffled ‘oof’ as two children collided into his shins. They grappled him into a hug, and he felt his irritation melt away. Even though Cuphead and Mugman had their little arms wrapped so tight around his legs that he was effectively tethered to the spot, it merely proved their enthusiasm and concern wasn’t just a act. The boys had missed him. That meant more to him that he had anticipated.
Untangling himself from the duo, he kneeled down to meet their eyes. They were nearly buzzing from excitement. It made a large, genuine smile cross his own lips. Their energy was contagious.

“What’s all the hugging for? Hope your boy’s haven’t been up to any trouble while I was asleep, hrn?” He asked.

“No sir!” Cuphead said back. Dice looked down at them. They looked so innocent that butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths.

Yeah right.

“Really, nothing? I don’t buy it for a second.” Dice said.

Cuphead let out a laugh. Something glinted in his eyes that told him his suspicions were correct.

“Well me and Mugs did find something.”

“It’s top secret though, so you can’t tell anyone!” Mugman whispered, looking over his shoulders cautiously.

Dice smirked, placing a hand across his heart.

“You have my word, boys.” He crooned.

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The secret as it turned out, was a shaft that led to the garden. The backyard to the mansion was just as decadent as the inside, albeit a bit overgrown. It was delightfully abandoned though, and Dice basked in the peace. He stuck to the sun warmed pathways to keep his pajamas clean, while the boys ran off into the foliage.

As he was walking, a sign caught his eyes.

*Sorry, but patrons are no longer allowed in the garden.*

*If you're reading this, get back inside! Go on, shoo!*

- Mr. S

King Dice assumed Mr. S was the owner of this place. A man he had heard very little about. It made him curious.

“Does the ward reach out here?” Dice shouted scrupulously to Cuphead, who was a few meters away.

“Probably. People used to be allowed out here. I think Mr. Sterling just doesn’t want kids trampling the plants.” Cuphead shrugged. “And even if it doesn’t, you don’t need to worry-”

Cuphead bolted back over to Dice, skidding to a halt by his side. Cup then extended his finger in the familiar gun shape. He squinted one eye like he was looking down its sights and pointed it at an imaginary enemy. Mugman mimicked his brothers actions with a laugh. The two looked like they belonged on the cover of a cheesy crime novel.

“-Ya’ got us to protect you!”

Dice tried not to let the cynicism show too strongly on his face.
“I feel so safe.” Dice deadpanned. “Who is Mr. Sterling?” He asked, changing the subject.

Cuphead huffed.


“Is he dangerous?”

“I don’t think so. His motives are… kinda all over the place from what I can see. Appleman likes him. Porkrind doesn’t trust him. Gets all stiff whenever he’s around the man. He thinks we can’t tell, but it’s pretty obvious.”

Dice raised an eyebrow. A talk with this man was definitely in order.

“We do know one thing, though.” Mugman said. “Mr. Sterling is mighty keen to meet you.”

Before Dice could say anymore, the conversation had turned to the fruit trees that lined the back fence. The two children were on each others shoulders, trying to grab at the apples and pears. He watched them, allowing them their fun.

Dice felt himself relax, sitting down in patio chair. The slight breeze was heavenly and the sounds of the children laughing and squealing as they played was worlds removed from the wails and bellows of hell. He could see bright orange halo’s outlining the clouds up above. The sun would set soon.

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King Dice woke up with a start for the fifth time that afternoon. He flopped back down on his pillow. Frustration fizzled in his chest. He felt so tired he could cry.

It had begun when he’d felt hands clawing at his feet. Hands that of course weren’t there. Then it was a scraping at his window. It was trees, it simply had to be. Shadows by the door, that disappeared once the light was switched on. A noise, just behind him. Always gone once he turned around.

His mind was leaping from cautious paranoia to straight up masochism. His own senses taunting him with false sensations. He couldn’t even enjoy being free.

He squeezed his eyes shut. This was ridiculous. The mansion had a ward on it. He could feel it, drumming faintly in his ears if he tried hard enough. It was irritating, but it meant he was safe.

So why wouldn’t his heart stop thumping in his chest?

With a huff he got up and stomped to the door. Opening it, he walked down the inky black halls. He was unnerved by how quiet everything now was. The only noise was the sound of his baggy pajama pants dragging across the lush carpets. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but it was obvious sleep wasn’t happening. Besides, he was in a mansion so swanky it make the Devil’s Casino look like a sleazy speakeasy. Dice was sure he could find something to pass the time.

He eventually came across the dining hall and kitchen. It seemed alien and large now with no people inside of it. He turned on the light and one by one three chandeliers lit up. Walking inside he looked around. In a quiet corner away from the rows of tables, was a cabinet. It had some shiny silverware displayed on its top shelf, but that wasn’t why Dice had approached it.

There was a carefully written sign in cursive that said:
Dice looked at the note with dull eyes, before ripping it off with the cold detachment one would a bandaid. It was nothing personal, but if he didn’t have booze in his system soon he’d go mad. It was a necessity, really. For the sake of his mental health. Besides this man was clearly too rich for his own good. Would a few bottles really be missed that sorely?

Opening the cabinet he looked around. There were some reds, a nice rosé… He parted the cluster of bottles to reveal his poison of choice waiting in the shadows: whiskey. The good stuff, too. Nothing like the cheap swill he was drinking in hell. With a loud pop he pulled out the cork, taking a satisfied swig. It was so smooth that the burn was barely noticeable.

He stood there a while, taking idle sips from the bottle as he thought about what had transpired this past week. If someone had walked up to him at the casino and told him that the place would be burnt to the ground and he would forge an unlikely bond with the cup children, he’d have them tossed out. If they had told him the Devil would try and kill him, well he would have throttled them.

His place by the Devil’s side had seemed so safe at one point. Now it hurt his heart to think how far away that ever was from happening again.

But yet here he was, still kicking.

He took a swig.

“Oh. I don’t think you were supposed to drink those.” A hesitant voice said.

Dice turned to look at them.

“No, I don’t think I was.” Dice agreed, bringing the half empty bottle to his lips once more.

It was Appleman’s sister, that much he was sure of. She both looked and sounded like the man. Damned if he could remember her name, though. His sleep deprived brain offered little help. Small talk seemed so arduous right now. So Dice just settled on not doing introductions at all.

The woman stood hesitant in the hallway.

A tense silence passed them.

“Do you want some?” Dice finally asked, sarcastically.

The woman remained silent for a few beats more, before nodding her head.

“I… Suppose it wouldn’t hurt?” She said.

Dice’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Well that wasn’t the answer he was expecting. He watched as the lady walked over into the kitchen. Dice wondered what she was up to. She disappeared for a moment, before returning with two glasses. Of course she had gotten glasses; they weren’t going to pass the bottle to and fro like naughty school children.

She sat down on one of the tables and Dice walked over to join her.

“You know, I’ve been eyeing off one of those bottles since I arrived.” She said with a nervous laugh.
“Can’t even imagine how expensive they are, or err, were.”

Dice just nodded; he didn’t really care. He went to pour the remaining drink into the glasses, but found his hand was shaking. He didn’t even know why. Was it the anxiety? The sleep deprivation? Had he not fully recovered from the church? Who knew. Certainly not him.

“You’re still not well -I’m so sorry I should have offered!” The woman provided, delicately removing the bottle from his hands and pouring it herself.

“You’re Appleman’s sister, aren’t you?” King Dice finally said. He really didn’t want to talk but the poor girl was trying, he might as well give her something.

“Oh! Yes. I am. We look quite alike, don’t we?” She laughed once again.

Her laugh was light and airy. Dice was noting now she was quite a beautiful woman. Whereas Appleman was short and round, she was tall and lean. If he was in a better headspace he’d try some moves on her, just for fun. Not that beautiful women were really his type. Never worked out logistically speaking. Dice was always the pretty one in relationships. Couldn’t have two people hogging a mirror in the mornings.

“Yes, you rather do.” Dice agreed

“Well, I should say you look just like how my brother described you, Mr… Uh, Die was it?”

“Mr. King Dice, if you would.” Not that many did anymore, Dice thought bitterly to himself. He never had been fond of nicknames.

“Well Mr. King Dice, i’m Gala.” She bowed her head in a faux curtsy.

Gala, that was it. The name had been on the tip of his tongue this whole time.

“Your brother talked about me?”

“A little bit. Gotta say, your story is an interesting one. Mr. Sterling… He’s going to hound you with questions about the Devil tomorrow.”

There it was again; another mentioning of this Mr. Sterling. He hadn’t gotten the chance to meet him before he had gone to bed.

“Why would Mr. Sterling want to know about the Devil?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” Gala said.

“I never know anything these days.” Dice sighed in frustration. “The past week my life has been people bumping into me, then robbing me of my time and energy as they bore me. And I don’t ever get anything out of it.”

“Well then I guess I won’t give you the runaround, Mr. Dice.” Gala said.

Dice frowned at how the ‘King’ in his name had already been chopped off. He hated how people did that; it wasn’t a title, it was his name.

“Mr Sterling… He’s into the occult. He has devoted many of his years to the study of it.”

Dice let out a groan; he knew where this was going. Goddamn; he was sitting in a mansion owned by a satanic fanboy. He had encountered enough of those in the Casino. They were always
disillusioned.

The Devil chewed them up and spat them out, every time.

“You don’t look too pleased.” Gala said, tentatively.

“I’m not. Let’s just leave it at that.” Dice grunted.

Gala sat in silence after that, obviously not happy to be the bringer of bad news. Dice sipped the rest of his whiskey. He was understanding Porkrind’s position a bit more now.
Dice ran through the halls, eyes darting from each number that lined the doors. His bones protested against the sudden movement, but he ignored it.

Damn, which room had Porky said he was in? Twenty something?

Letting out a growl of frustration, he slowed to a stop. The hall was swaying slowly back on fro; if he ran for any longer he’d end up on his ass. God, he was drunk. Maybe he should just crawl back into bed. His rational mind told him he could just ask Porkrind tomorrow, but a larger part shrieked at him to find the man now.

He had to know; what happened to his jewels? Before he had been kidnapped by the Devil, he had stashed easily hundreds of dollars worth of gold and diamonds in that knapsack. Did the Pig even know about it? He felt sick just thinking about it.

Just then, he heard hurried footsteps behind him.

“Wait up! W-where are you going?” Gala spluttered out.

Dice turned around. The woman didn’t look pleased. They had been having a conversation before he had bolted off mid sentence. It was just her shiny cocktail ring had reminded him of his own stash....

“-Porkrind?”

Gala threw a perplexed expression at Dice.

“Yes? What about him?”

“Do you know which room he’s in?” Dice elaborated.

“Why?”

Dice gave no reply, too busy wobbly scanning each door.

She let out a sigh.

“Ok. Firstly, you’re on the wrong side of the hall.” She pointed to the west. “He’s down there. Not sure the exact number, though.”

Dice retraced his steps along the dark corridor until he was in the west wing. Looking at the lines of polished wooden doors, he grew frustrated. They all looked the same, giving no clue to the people behind them. Well there were the little things. One had a gold strip underneath the crack in the door,
showing a light was on inside. One had music on, very faintly. But none of that was of any use to him.

“He’s definitely down here?” Dice asked, turning to Gala.

The woman nodded. “I’m sure of it. Now if I could only remember which one…”

Dice didn’t wait for her sentence to end. He knew exactly how he could find out.

Cupping his hands over his mouth, he hollered as loudly as he could into the still night.

He felt a slap against his shoulders.

“-What are you doing! Put a pin in it!” Gala hissed, but was drowned out by Dice’s continued screeching.

“Heyyy, Porky! Where are ya’? I need to talk-”

Dice didn’t even get time to process what happened next. A door slamming open. A pink blur. Then hands over his mouth, stopping any more shouts from leaking out. A sense of deja vu shot through him.

“Godammit, Dice! The hell are ya’ doin’! Shut up!” Porkrind growled. With a sigh, the pig removed his hand from Dice’s mouth. “People are sleepin’. Yer’ not in the damn casino anymore, so don’t go around screamin’ like you own the place.”

“I didn’t know which room you were in,” Dice said, airly. Like that justified everything he had just done.

Porkrind let out a sigh.

“You’re drunk.”

“A little.”

The sound of a door creaking open was heard behind them. A disgruntled man popped his head out.

“Can you people be quiet?! My children are trying to sleep!” The man scolded.

“I’m sorry for the noise Sir. We’re dealing with it.” Gala assured.

Porkrind turned to Gala, surprised by her presence.

“Oh, didn’t see ya’ there.” The Pig admitted. “You can go if you want. Sorry for Dice here.”

“It’s fine.” Gala assured. She let out a yawn. “But I will take you up on that offer. I have so much to do tomorrow.” She turned to Dice. “If the place riots because I’m not awake to make breakfast in the morning, I’m directing them all to you.”

Dice shrugged.

“That’s fair.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Goodnight, gentlemen.”
Porkrind ushered the other man into his room.

As Dice sat down on the bed, Porkrind opted to lean on the far wall.

“You can’t act like that, you know. People in here are on edge enough as it is.” The Pig warned.

“Look, I know-” Dice dismissed; he was in no mood for a lecture. It wasn’t like he was any less paranoid than them, after all. “I just had to find you asap.”

The Pig raised an eyebrow.

“Bout’ what? You in danger?”

“Yes, obviously I am. But that’s not why I’m here right now.”

Dice looked down at his hands to escape Porkrind’s critical gaze. When he was met with the wedding ring that sat on his finger, he glanced away. That was a problem for another day.

“The backpack you were carrying around…” Dice begun.

Porkrind’s eyes lit up in recognition. A smirk crossed his lips. Then, he laughed. It was deep and gravelly, quite like Dice’s own. Dice looked on in apprehension. He didn’t know what was more unnerving in this situation; the usual stoic act or seeing the man... like this.

“Yer’ damn gems are safe, if that’s what yer’ grovellin’ over.” Porkrind said lightheartedly. He pointed to the bag in the corner. Dices eyes lit up at the sight of the scuffed canvas bag. “Check for yourself.”

Dice accepted Porkrind’s invitation, walking over to the bag and pulling the front pocket open. Where the fabric swaddled gems once were, now sat a wooden box. He also noted that his cans and other preserves were gone. Not that that particularly mattered.

“I put them in somethin’ a little more protective. Yer’ welcome.” Porkrind said.

Dice cracked open the case. Necklaces and rings spilled from the container. Dice let out the breath what was trapped in his lungs up until that point. They were all there, by the looks of things.

“You have quite the stash there.” Porkrind finally commented after a few beats of silence.

‘Indeed I do.” Dice replied, cautiously. Dice was expecting the other to take the moral high ground at any moment. It surprised him, what Porkrind chose to say next.

“If your looking to sell them, I could find you a good price. For a cut, of course.”

Baffled, Dice turned to the man. Looking, he could tell Porkrind’s offer was genuine. The Pig shrugged defensively.

“What?” The Pig huffed. “I’m a merchant. I sell things. You don’t get into this business by being coy.”

It was Dice’s turn to laugh. His eyes showed his disbelief.

“I’m a bad man, Porky. I thought you wouldn’t want to deal with the likes of me. Aren’t you going to at least ask where I got them?”
“Nah. I know where; the boys told me. Make no mistake yer’ gonna’ give those wedding rings back. They ain’t worth much anyway and they’d be better in the hands of their owners. Well, that’s if the lucky couple is still together. If yer’ makin’ deals with the devil, then marital problems would probably follow.”

Dice sighed; of course the boys had spilt the beans.

“That’s a nice offer, but I’m not returning anything. The last time I attempted to I got kidnapped and sent to hell. Besides, I need all the dosh I can get.” Dice scoffed.

Porkrind gave him an even stare. Dice could tell the pig wanted to say something, but was holding back.

“What? If you have something to tell me, then say it.” Dice huffed.

“I… Dice. You have no damn clue what you got there, do you?”

Dice looked down at the jewels. Golds and silvers greeted him. Large gems encrusted many of them. They would fetch a pretty price, if that’s what Porkrind meant.

“Most of them are yer’ run of the mill scrap metal, but some... like that necklace.” The pig continued. “The one there, with the princess cut diamonds in the front—”

Porkrind walked over, pointing to piece that had fallen in Dice’s lap. Dice scooped it into his hands. He couldn’t help but pick up on the frantic energy Porkrind was now giving off. It was a stark contrast to the stern man he’d walked in with. He supposed there must have been some reason Porkrind had fallen into the trade he was in. The man clearly knew his stuff.

“- What do you think it’s made of? How much do you think that one’s worth?”

Dice shrugged. He didn’t have a clue.

The pig sighed.

“Least try, Dice.”

“It’s silver?” Dice guessed. “Or maybe white gold. The diamonds are big and clear. Too clear, actually. They’re probably fake or just quartz. Probably a few hundred if I charm them?”

The Pig laughed again. The sound was becoming kinder and more familiar. It didn’t startle Dice this time.

“It ain’t white gold, Dice. It’s platinum. And those are diamonds. Try a few hundred grand; then you’re gettin’ warmer.”

Dice balked. Platinum?! That simply couldn’t be true. He could renovate his whole life on that sort of cash. A new house. Maybe a small business. More than that; he could live in luxury if he played his cards right. And to think he was just going to pass these jewels onto the nearest pawn shop. They would have been laughing all the way to the bank.

Dice tilted his head. He regarded Porkrind.

“If this necklace is hypothetically that valuable—,” Dice started, ”I couldn’t sell pieces like this just anywhere, could I?”

“Smart man. No, yer couldn’t. The fuzz would be askin’ questions. But I know a few places.
Auction houses sellin’ top grade jewels; places not open to the average joe. They won’t even blink at you havin’ all this. Millions of dollars worth of gems pass though their doors every week.”

Porkrind edged closer.

“Ya know, when this Devil bull is all said and done, I’d be happy to take you there.”

Maybe it was the alcohol, but Dice couldn’t describe the wave of bliss he felt thinking about an after. *After this*. A time when this was all over with and he could finally move on. Even spending it in Porkrind’s company didn’t seem that awful.

Dice shook the thoughts away. That day would never come. It certainly didn’t look like it now.

“That’s mighty optimistic. I’m supposed to be getting hitched tomorrow; there might not be an afterwards.” Dice said.

‘He’s not gettin’ to you.” Porkrind growled. “The Devil will never have you again.”

Dice almost raised an eyebrow at the change in Porkrind’s mood. All previous elation was gone. Dice would have have chalked it down to Porkrind being screwed over by the Devil too, but he knew that not to be true. The Shopkeep had steered clear of the casino.

So why was he taking it so personally?

“You know how many people I saw in my line of work who thought they had outrun the Devil? Outsmarted him? A lot. They never had. His reach is long, Porky. He has been in this business a long time and he’s the best at it. Sorry if I’m not reassured.”

“Maybe. But they weren’t you.” Porkrind let out a scoff as he crossed his arms. “You were in that casino too damn long, Dice. Some kids with pea shooters sent the Devil out on his ass. He’s not a god.”

Dice looked back down at the gems, frowning. He bit his tongue. It was hard to stop talking up the Devil after he had coveted him for so long.

Porkrind leant in behind Dice, picking another piece up. A small ring. It was pinkish gold, with a diamond shaped gem inlay in it. The gem was a dark purple. It was beautiful, and reminiscent of something Dice himself would pick out for a real wedding ring, if the time ever came.

The pig made no comment like he had the necklace, which annoyed Dice. The man just wiped away some lint that had fallen on it, then placed it back into his lap. Was that a prized piece too, or just another bland wedding band of no value? Dice suspected he wasn’t going to get any more information unless he took Porkrind up on his offer.

“Just… Think about it.”

“I will.” Dice said, earnestly.

After that King Dice quietly put the gems back into their container, one by one. He then tucked them back into the bag. Sometime during, Porkrind had moved back to his bed to lay down. Dice turned to look at the man. The pig had his eyes closed.

Was he really going back to bed? A spark of fear shot through him at the thought. Dice didn’t want to go back to his own room. Back to the demons dancing in the shadows and the mind games.
Dice cleared his throat.

“Still here, Porky.”

“... Uhh? An’ what about it?” The pig groaned. “I’m tired. You should be too. Go back to bed, Dice. We can talk more in the morning.”

Fine. He could do this. He wasn’t going to grovel around in Porkrind’s room like a lost child. Standing up Dice walked towards the door, opening it.

“G’night, Dice.”

“Goodnight, Porky.” Dice mumbled, flicking the light off.

The door closed behind him with a quiet click. The hallway was cold and dark, but he stepped into it anyway. With a few bouts of paranoid sprinting he eventually made it to his own room. Flopping down on the familiar cot he let out a sigh. No sleep was coming to him tonight; that he knew.

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“Hey! Wake up!”

Dice’s eyes darted towards the door, squinting at who had barged in. The sun was only just beginning to rise. In the dim light he could tell it was Cuphead and his brother.

“Whaddya want?” Dice slurred. God he felt tired. “I’m still tryna’ sleep-”

“It’s Mr. Wheezy!” Cup plead.

“What?” Dice shot up from his bed. He was now very much awake.

“Porkrind spotted him in town! Well some ‘cigar-headed guy’, but how many of them do you know around here?” Cuphead paused. “But is it really him? I thought he had, well in the fire...” The boy elaborated.

Dice cursed. Of course the Devil had sent that slimeball after him. He doubted the other had a choice. Wheezy would do anything to save his own hide. He could only imagine how furious the Devil was now he was gone. Wheezy probably wasn’t going to be all that chummy either.

“Nah. He was brought back, kid. They all were. Re-signed their contracts, too.” Dice spat.

“Why would they do that?”

“They’re broken. You spend that long down there you can’t imagine being free.” I can’t myself was the next sentence that almost slipped out of Dice’s lips. He shook the thought.

“This is bad! Are they going to drag you back down to hell again?” Mugman said, running over to Dice. Small gloved hands wrapped around his arm. Without thinking, Dice placed a comforting hand over them.

He went to answer the boys question, but Cuphead spoke first.

“Ha! Let him try. C’mon, Mug. What are you worried about? We whooped his butt once, we can do it again!” Cuphead boasted.
Dice let out a grunt of agreement. He had been so caught up with the Devil’s plans he hadn’t thought about his lackeys and the Cup brothers facing off once more.

He hadn’t shared his new formed relationship with any of his colleagues. Why would he? It would be social suicide. All respect for him that his employees held would instantly vanish. They were loyal to the Devil; they had to be. He was the only one in this picture with a choice.

But Dice did need to burn that bridge at some point. He couldn’t play both sides forever.

“I don’t think he knows about you boys, not yet. Neither does the Devil, I’m betting on.” Dice was thankful for once about the lack of communication in that hole. The imps would know; but no one listened to them. Let alone the Devil when he was this enraged.

“Gosh, well he’s going to get a surprise then.” Cup said, sarcastically.

“Quite.”

Their attentions turned as Porkrind walked through the door. The pig took a glance at Cuphead and Mugman, gesturing to them.

“The kids already tell ya’?”

Dice nodded.

“So it’s really him? Shoulda’ rung his neck there and then. Was helpin’ the Priest clean up a bit around his chapel when some man strolled in-”

“- Say, that Priest is up and walking again? He looked like death on legs when I saw him last.” Dice interjected. He still felt inconsolably guilty about what he had done to the poor man.

“And he still does! He shouldn’t be out of bed, but he insisted on goin’ there and tidyin’ up anyway. Puttin’ all the crosses upright, cleansin’ the place with payers, all that jazz. I was cleanin’ a seat when this guy walks in. Real tall. Strange yellow eyes. Same accent as yours. Didn’t trust him from the moment I laid eyes on him. When he started askin’ questions about you, I knew instantly it was the Devil’s doing.”

Dice rolled his eyes. Of course Wheezy had gone to the church and poked around. That jackass had the subtlety of a sponge. At least it was in his favour this time. Mr. Wheezy had no clue Porkrind was a confidant to his escape.

“He ain’t a problem, Porky. Not this time. He would be in any other circumstance; I trained my lackies tough after all. But I already know he’s nothing against these boys.” Cuphead puffed out his chest at the compliment. Mugman meanwhile waved off the words, acting bashful. “I’m more worried about what the Devil is sending along with him.”

“You think the Devil is using him for some rotten scheme?” Cuphead asked.

“I know he is. Wheezy knows it too. He’s just a pawn. Everyone down in Hell gets real cozy with the fact they’re disposable. Either you serve a purpose or you don’t. The ones who aren’t clued into that vanish mighty quick.”

Porkrind grunted in agreement, but his eyes were on the halls outside. Dice wasn’t sure what had the pig’s attention, but he could hear people chatting just outside his wall.

At that point Dice became aware he was still sitting in bed, while everyone stood towering around
him. Sheepishly he pushed away the sheets and straightened up with a grunt. As he rose, Dice realised Mugman still had his hands wrapped around his forearm. Without really thinking, he picked the boy up. Mugman weighed little, and his tiny legs jabbed into Dice’s ribs as he placed the boy against his the left side of his chest.

It was only once his had completed the action that Dice froze. Was he allowed to do that? What age were these kids? Was it degrading to be picked up at their age? He had no clue. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had held a child in his arms. He probably had only been a child himself, or a bored teen. And he couldn't shake the feeling he was doing it completely wrong.

Glancing over, his spark of fear was abated a little as he saw Mugman looked fine with the situation, with his head resting on Dice’s shoulder.

“Right. First things first. Food. Breakfast is ready, from what I can see. We can deal with this Wheezy nonsense later.” Porkrind drawled, oblivious to the crisis Dice was quietly having.

The boys each hollered their eager agreements and soon the group was making its way down the hall.

As Dice was strolling down along the jacquard rugs that lined the long corridors, he noticed the flows of people all spilling into the main dining hall. The aroma of baked apples filled the air. It made sense he supposed, as the head cook Gala did run an orchard from memory. If anyone knew how to feed fifty or so people with apples, it would be her.

“Hey, can we sit by the window?” Mugman asked Dice. He pointed to a sunny corner.

“Sure thing, kid.” Dice said, shifting the boy’s weight to his other arm. In truth he was just going to walk to the table he had sat in last night, but now he was glad he hadn’t. There was still space, but a busy family had taken up residence. He really didn’t feel like talking to some random chumps right now.

As he changed course walked towards the corner, Cuphead and Porkind followed.

“Hey bro! Come down here, I’ll race ya!” Cuphead teased, his sights set on a seat a few meters away.

Mugman pondered the option, but shook his head.

“I’ll pass.” Mug said, haughty. “It’s much nicer up here.”

Dice raised an eyebrow at Mugman’s smug tone, but said nothing.

Cup crossed his arms, annoyed.

“Alright Fine! I’m coming up there too then!”

Before Dice could even process what was happening, Cuphead was trying to scramble up onto his back. He made some rather undignified sounds in the middle of the dining hall, before pushing the boy off.

“That’s it! Go! Both of you. I’m not a playground ya’ hear!” Dice screeched, enraged.

Mugman had the audacity to cackle as he placed him down. Dice bristled with anger. Neither looked scared even the slightest. Cuphead then shoved his brother and ran away, getting a lead in their impromptu race. Once Mugman realised what was happening he shot off too.
“Hey, no fair! You got a head start!” Mug whined as he ran after the other.

Dice was left in their dust, trying to straighten out the collar of his pyjama shirt and to ignore the unwanted attention his shouting had caused.

“I’m never being nice to those little shits again.” Dice cursed under his breath.

“Yeah yer’ will.” Porkrind said simply, slapping him on the back a few times sympathetically. “Those kids have grown on ya’ like a wart.”

Dice groaned, following the man over to the table that the boys were clambering on.

He hated it when Porkrind was right.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Not much to say about this chapter but a big thank you to the amazing comments :D they really are great and some actually super informative. I love hearing what you like/dislike, it really helps me figure out what focus on! :)

After a disastrously noisy breakfast with the hyperactive Cup bros, Appleman had shown up. He tried to chat with the children, but due to their particularly grating mood the conversation was short lived. Then unfortunately the stout man had uttered to King Dice what he had both been dreading and waiting for.

“Oh, Mister Dice? I heard Mr. Sterling is waiting for you in his office.” Appleman said, clearing up the plates from their table. The man was wearing a tattered yellow apron, showing his appearance was more in the name of work. “He wanted to talk to you one on one, but I told him that probably wasn’t going to happen.”

Dice nodded.

“Thanks, pally.”

Appleman was right. There wasn’t a hope in hell he was talking to Sterling alone. Besides, he had heard Porkrind loathed this man. He knew it was incredibly petty, but he really wanted to see it with his own eyes. Dice didn’t think Porkrind had the capacity to truly hate anyone. If he had the heart to tolerate Mister King Dice, everything else was surely a cakewalk.

Appleman nodded and turned to leave, arms piled with plates. Dice had no clue what Appleman did in this place, but it seemed to take up all his time. He had only seen him twice since his kidnapping. Dice watched the man walk away and contemplated.

It was strange, but the two had remained very strict acquaintances. Maybe he simply hadn’t talked to Appleman as much as Porkrind or the boys. Either way, it was telling that Dice felt closer to his sister than he did him.

“Are we going to see Sterling now?” Cuphead asked.

Dice let out a bark of laughter as he turned to Cuphead.

“With you? Absolutely not. You and your brother are bouncing off the walls right now. Go, play. Shoo. Me and Porkrind will be fine alone.” Dice said to the kid, standing up.

The boys, who were obviously overjoyed to not be burdened by another boring lecture, jumped off the seats and scampered away. Dice was once again left to stare at the empty space they once resided in, with not so much as a goodbye. He didn’t know what had gotten into those two, but he hoped they calmed soon.

“They’re just anxious and missing Elder Kettle. Don’t worry ‘bout it. It’s temporary.” Porkrind offered, noting the grim look on Dice’s face.
Dice turned to Porkrind.

“Hrm. *It better be.* The man sighed. “Nevermind that though, we have larger problems at hand right now, don’t we? I hear you aren’t all that fond of our gracious host Mr. Sterling?” Dice grinned as the pig let out a bitter scoff.

“You’d be too if yer’ knew what he was.”

“I do.” Dice said simply. “Gala told me last night.”

The pig’s gave a look of surprise.

“And yer’ don’t mind?”

“Oh no, I very much do. But I’ve met his type before. They would come to the Casino, all shiny eyed and bushy tailed. But trust me, they wouldn’t leave the same.” Dice shrugged. “I can’t wait to crush this chumps dreams.”

“Maybe yer’ met people like that in the past, but Sterling ain’t like that. He ain’t no chump. This guy isn’t blind to what the Devil is; he’s done a lot of research. And I don’t dislike him, I just... don’t know what he wants with ya’.” Porkrind said.

Dice regarded Porkrind. He didn’t like how that sounded at all.

“Well, I guess there is only one way to find out his plans.” Dice began to walk off. “Come on, Porky. Lets get this out of the way.”

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“Ah, I see you didn’t come alone.” Mr. Sterling sighed in disappointment as King Dice and Porkrind poured into the room. He slid off his oak chair and walked around his desk to greet the pair.

Dice took the man’s features in. He was a fork object head, but nothing like the previous ones he had seen back in Inkwell. The ends of each prong grew sharp and barbed. It reminded him of a trident. Apart from his silver head, the rest of his body was cloaked in dark shades.

“But that’s no matter! I completely understand, you’ve probably heard many things about me. I wish to put your mind to rest.”

The man smiled wide and offered his hand to Dice.

“Mister King Dice, it truly is an honour to finally meet you in the flesh. I’m Mr. Sterling.”

Dice pondered not taking his hand, but found himself reaching out anyway. It was probably because Sterling had used his full title. He was a sucker for people who did that and it happened far too little these days.

“Pleasure.” Dice deadpanned, as the man enthusiastically grasped his hand.

“No need for fake pleasantries. You’re not thrilled and rightfully so! You’ve been through quite the storm lately. Oh, how is your head by the way? You took a nasty tumble on your walk back from the church.”

“Better.” Dice said.

“Good, good. Well, lets all sit down then.”
Mr Sterling ushered the two onto some chairs and Dice found himself on the furthest end. It was then he noticed the rooms’ grim decor. Pictures of satanic symbols and illustrations filled the walls. Paper clippings, notes and hand drawn maps accompanied them.

“Anything ring a bell?” Sterling asked. Dice didn’t like how his tone had become so knowing. “You see your Devil isn’t the only demon on the block. Not even the only entity that goes by ‘The Devil’. But he has his own runes; his own calling cards. I’ve tracked him all the way back to the 1600’s. I’m sure he existed long before that, though.”

Dice watched as Sterling looked over his research, a hand tucked into his dressing gown lapel. The man looked so proud.

Dice suddenly realised why Porkrind disliked him.

“Do you have anything that can help me pinned to these walls, or did you just drag me in here to brag?” Dice said, impatient. He could already feel his patience waning for this man. “And he isn’t ‘my’ Devil, bud. Not anymore.”

“Ahh. I see. I was hoping perhaps it was some misunderstanding.” Mr. Sterling looked down at his desk. “If you will let me continue, I have information that is most imperious to you.”

“Then start talkin’. We don’t have all day.” Porkrind said.

“Indeed you don’t. In more ways than you know.”

Dice straightened up.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Mr Sterling sat down. “How are you feeling right now, Mr. Dice? Are you well?”

“I told you before; I’m feeling just peachy.” Dice’s eyes narrowed.

“You sure? No lethargy? Perhaps some dissonance?” Mr Sterling pushed.

“What’s with the questions?” Porkrind hissed, standing up.

“I… Came to a grim realisation through my research. I’m sorry, it gives me no joy in saying this to you but—” Sterling tore his eyes away from the angry pig and turned to Dice.

“-well, you would know what happens to person who has fled from an unfinished ritual, wouldn’t you? The dangers of leaving such a bond unfinalised, yes?”

Dice numbly nodded.

Oh.

Of course he did.

He had seen it before. Heck, he’d lost an employee at the Devil’s casino to it, long ago. A botched attempt to leave; it hadn’t gone well. The one thing few considered about rituals was that they’re fickle things. They need to be done at an exact time or place. Parameters have to be met or you put yourself in danger, either from injury, death or worse, possession.

An unfinished ritual is akin to running out into the street and begging any supernatural entity to do
Dice deflated, placing his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands. Why hadn’t this occurred to him earlier?

“I am being presumptuous, but the Devil didn’t do anything but place that ring on your finger, did he? No protective chants or wards. You can see where my dread lies. Your… exposed. I’ve seen similar cases of yours throughout my years. Broken deals are no laughing matter. They met extremely grizzly fates, Mister King Dice.”

“Now wait a minute! The hell’s all this talk about?” Porkrind huffed. “Nothings happened to you yet, Dice.”

“It’s not like that, Porky.” King Dice sighed as he rubbed at a forming headache, which now was wrestling for dominance in his head. “You don’t understand. Dark magic is not something you can run from. It eats away at you and leaves you open. If I don’t marry the Devil I’ll die. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but soon enough. And even if I don’t… It ain’t no life worth living.”

“So? He just put a damn ring on your finger! Dice you can’t just give up like this!” The Pig shouted, enraged. By now the large man was towering over the two, his voice causing vibrations through the wooden desk.

Sterling looked on, afraid. Dice remained where he was. He knew the pig wasn’t trying to intimidate. He was afraid. Afraid this was all for nothing. Dice could only sympathise. He had no words of comfort though, Sterling was right.

“Porkrind.” Dice started, quietly.

“-No. Don’t say a damn thing.” The Pig spat back. Anxiety and fear flashed in Porkrind’s eyes, before he shook his head and looked away.

The sight affected Dice more than it should have. Porkrind had been the rock of this group the whole time. Now even he was faltering. The promises he had made last night were looking further away than ever.

“I can only offer my deepest condolences. Sorry to be the bearer of such bad news.”

“S’ fine. Should have thought about it earlier, honestly.” Dice sighed.

“So what? That’s it? All of yer’ research and the most we get is a ‘sorry’? Ya’ better have somethin’ good to tell us.” Porkrind growled, his rage now focused on Sterling. “For yer’ own sake.”

“I-” Sterling let out a huff, retreading his words. “I’m- there’s one thing that might work.”

Dice perked up.

“What could possibly work? Short of gabbing the Devil and chucking him off a cliff?” The die headed man offered dumbly.

“Killin’ the Devil? Sounds like a plan to me-”

“-We’re not killing the Devil!” Sterling announced shrilly. He coughed, before composing himself once more. “That would do nothing in the least. It would probably kill you as well, Mister Dice, seeing your souls are linked.”
Dice shrugged, deflated once more. “What then?”

“Magic.”

“… Magic?”

“Yes! Magic.” Mr. Sterling elaborated. “It would need to be old and extremely powerful to combat the Devil’s thought. And one would also need to know how to use it. Even with all of these factors, it would still be safest to do it after the wedding, when bonds have settled.”

“Well where the fuck are we going to get all that?” Dice sighed. It really was looking useless.

Dice’s attention turned as he heard Porkrind begin to stand up.

“Where are you off to?” Dice said.

“Goin’ to make some calls. I know a guy who sells artifacts. Mostly kitschy tourist nonsense but he gets the real deal in occasionally.” The Pig explained. “Better than mopin’ around here. Keep yer’ head up, Dice. It’s not over yet.”

With that Porkrind walked away. Dice watched him as he left. Even after everything, his stride was determined. Dice had never idolised someone as much as he did Porkrind in that moment. How could he be so strong and kind for someone he barley knew? Dice wouldn’t know. He simply lacked the empathy to understand, even after everything.

“I can see now why you want to stick around; you have friends that care about you a lot.” Mr. Sterling said, conversationally.

“Buddy you don’t even know the half of it.” Dice sighed. He almost wished they didn’t. It would hurt considerably less when it all inevitably failed.

Cuphead looked out onto the horizon. Thick storm clouds rumbled in the distance and he watched on. Hearing a thump behind him, he turned. Mugman had torn a branch off one of the fruit trees and three apples had come tumbling with it.

Cup looked back to the storm. The dark heavy clouds were how his chest felt right now. King Dice was putting on a brave face but he knew that everyone was nervous. Wheezy was after them with the Devil in tow. Dice was on borrowed time. He wasn’t as afraid as he had been battling the Devil with just his bro, but he still was filled with a jittery energy. What if they were forced to fight? What if they lost? Would Dice really be gone?

Another thump behind him, as more apples fell.

“You gonna tear that whole tree down, Mug?” Cuphead joked. He noticed his voice sounded shaky.

“Sorry, just… anxious.” The blue boy replied.

Cup nodded. He knew it without even asking. His brother only got destructive like this when he was nervous. Although it was usually things like peeling the labels off bottles or digging holes in the mud with sticks, not felling whole trees.

“Hey… Do ya think we were too mean to Dice at breakfast? He seemed really peeved.” Cup sighed.

Mugman walked over it his brother.
“I doubt he was actually mad, bro. Why? It’s not like you to worry about what people think.” Mug offered, sitting on the steps next to his brother

Cuphead didn’t reply. He was so scared his final words with Dice would be bad ones.

“Look, nothing bad will happen, ok? Dice is here with us now.” Mugman re-assured, noting the grim look on his brother’s face.

Cuphead looked at his brother. Stern black eyes greeted him in return. Cup nodded weakly, showing he’d heard. He considered for a moment how strange this was. Usually it was him reassuring his brother, not the other way around.

“I just got a bad feeling.” Cuphead sighed.

Just as Mugman opened his mouth to talk, another thumping noise rang out through the yard.

Cuphead turned to Mugman.

“What? It’s not me.” The younger bro said defensively, showing his empty hands.

Turning to the source of the noise, the two boy’s eyes travelled to the far fence. The thumping started up again. Cup noticed the wood planks of the fence were buckling under the force of the thing from outside. Cup rose from the concrete stairs and began walking towards it. A stern hand wrapped around his arm and stopped him.

“Cup! That could be anything trying to get in!” Mug quietly warned as he tried to drag his brother in the other direction. “We’re going inside, now!”

“Exactly. It could be a person who needs our help!” Cuphead supplied back with a devious smile, knowing what a weak excuse it was. He then wiggled out of his nervous brother’s grip and raced to the fence. Mugman made some frustrated noises, before hastily following him.

About a meter away Cuphead stopped. Mug clumsily bumped into his back, a squeak tumbling from his lips.

The two looked up. The fence was wobbling like wild now. Whatever was trying to get in was big. Cuphead felt Mugman cling to his arm.

“H-Hello?” Cup blurted out. Maybe this wasn’t his best idea.

Then, the fence stopped shaking.

“Hey! Someone there?” A confused voice replied. It was deep and muffled from the layer of wood and plants separating them.

“S-sir? Why are you banging against the fence?” Mugman asked, walking closer. He tried to look through a gap in the wooden planks. All he could see was a brown suit; the mystery man’s face was too high up to catch a glimpse of. He looked… Familiar. Mug couldn’t place it, though.

There was a pause.

“No reason! Now run off kid.” The voice crooned back.

“S-sir? Why are you banging against the fence?” Mugman asked, walking closer. He tried to look through a gap in the wooden planks. All he could see was a brown suit; the mystery man’s face was too high up to catch a glimpse of. He looked… Familiar. Mug couldn’t place it, though.

There was a pause.

“No reason! Now run off kid.” The voice crooned back.

“There’s two of us, Sir.” Mugman elaborated. “Are you sure you don’t need help? It’s mighty
dangerous out there."

“Fucking two kids, really?” The voice muttered to himself. Mugman raised an eyebrow. He turned to his brother. By the look on his face he hadn’t heard the foul language from his distance.

“Well if you really gotta know. I Just… Wanted some apples! Yeah, the red ones along this fence. Tryin’ to shake some off, is all.” The gruff voice shouted back over.

“Oh! Well we can help you with that!” Cuphead exclaimed, running towards the fence.

Mugman clapped a hand over his brothers mouth and ushered him close.

“There’s something off about this, Cup.” Mugman whispered to his brother. “Get on my shoulders; get a look at this guys face for me, ok?”

Cuphead’s expression sobered. If his brother’s intuition was going off, he’d listen. It had saved their hides many times before and he wasn’t going to ignore it now.

With a grunt Cuphead stepped on the rim of his brother’s mug. Some cola sloshed out of Mugman’s head and seeped into his socks. Cup cringed at the sensation. Mugman stood up straight as did Cuphead. With their height combined Cuphead could just peek over the fence.

A familiar face greeted him. Wide yellow eyes full of shock gawked at him.

“Oh. Hello Mr. Wheezy.” Cuphead said.

Wheezy blinked. Once. Twice.

Cup waved at the stunned man, a cheeky grin filling his face.

“Still want those apples Wheezy?” He smirked, plucking one off and promptly lobbing it at the man. It wasn’t the best throw and Wheezy looked at the apple as it rolled to a stop at his feet.

“I…You… It’s you little shits! The hell are you doing here?” Was all Wheezy could manage through his haze of shock. “Where’s Dice? I swear if you’ve hurt him you’ll pay!” He demanded.

“That’s none of your beeswax! All you need to know is he’s in there safe and sound. No way you’re getting to him!” Cuphead spat back, wobbling slightly as he stuck his tongue out and pointed to the mansion. He leant against the fence as Wheezy fumed.

“So the boss is in that joint? Oh you two really are fucking dead now!” The man spat back, clambering up the fence to try and grab Cuphead. Black gloved hands desperately reached for the young cup’s throat and Cuphead squawked in surprise.

“Mug! Back! Get back! Retreat!” Cup ordered his bro as he fired a few warning shots at the cigar headed man. The light blue shots bounced of the man with a smack, stunning him. As Mugman tried to step backwards he lost his balance, sending them both tumbling to the ground. Cuphead hit the grass with a groan.

Cuphead looked up at the fence, expecting to see Wheezy crawling over it any minute. All he was met with however where frustrated huffs as the man tried and failed to scale the high fence.

“Having some trouble?” Cuphead hollered to the struggling man on the other side. No wonder he had tried to bust through; climbing obviously wasn’t Wheezy’s strong suit.

“Go to hell you little shits!” He shouted back, out of breath.
“Already there! Had to see your big stupid face today, didn’t I?” Cup laughed.

“Cup! Don’t anger him!” Mugman hissed at his bro, slapping his shoulder. “This is serious! We gotta tell someone!”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Cuphead agreed. Standing up he brushed the dirt off his shorts and picked up his straw from the grass, placing it back in his cup. “Come on, lets leave this chump in the dust. He can’t get in anyway because of the ward. We gotta find Dice.”
Dice looked down at the carpet, running a finger over the patterns. It had an intricate hand woven design. He could only imagine how much time it had taken to make. Now it just served as a distraction to a desperate man. Dice sighed as he sat up slightly, he knew he was just biding time. Glancing up at Porkrind, he still looked very much like the last time he checked. Tense, hunched over a tiny phone and talking to some mystery man on the other end.

“Look can you put me through to them, then? No I can wait to be called back tomorrow! I ain’t got that kind of time-” A huff of frustration fell from his lips. “Just tell me; do ya have somethin’ like that or not?”

crack.

The sound rang out as Porkrind slammed the receiver back into its holster. The phone split apart slightly from the abuse. Dice could only assume the answer on the other end had been a resounding no. The pig leaned back in his seat, rubbing at his temples. The small suede lounge chair he was sitting on groaned at the action, sounding just as distressed as Porkrind looked.

Dice wrapped his arms around his knees, pulling them in. He hadn’t expected much to come out of Porkrind’s attempt. It still stung a little that it had led nowhere so quickly. Resting his head on his knees, he felt another shiver go down his spine. It was getting cold and he could hear rain tapping on the windows. He hoped the boys were somewhere practical and not soaking wet.

“Sorry, Dice.” Porkrind sighed after a while.

“It’s fine. You did more than enough, really.” and more than I expected you to, Dice thought to himself.

“I suppose, but-.” The Pig stopped himself, obviously not pleased. “Hang on. I wonder if-?” The larger man picked up the receiver once more, dialling a number into the now slightly battered phone. “Who are you-?” Dice asked.

“-Shhh.” Porkrind hushed him, as he held the receiver up to his face. “Hey? Course’ its me, Charlie. Yeah I know, long time no talk. Look I just got a strange inquiry fer’ ya’-”

Dice almost wanted to shout at the man. Sneer, or just make some snide joke. Show the man he really wasn’t worth jumping through hoops for. He really didn’t get why the other was going to such lengths for him. Leaning his head back, Dice felt it thud gently against the wall behind him.

He could really use a hug right now.

It wasn’t a thought that surprised King Dice. He was a man that ran off the attention of others. Dice didn’t care if some people would call it superficial, it’s just how he was. It had been ever since he was about Cuphead’s age.
It was one of the main reasons he had worked in hospitality for so long. Talking to people all day was a job he was born for. Bars and speakeasies especially had always allured him.

“- Yeah, really. I told ya’ it was a strange one. Do yer’ have it or not-?”

Brushing shoulders with the men and women that frequented the casino grounded him. There was a reason he had spent so much time out on the floor or with his employees as manager of the Devil’s casino. It was so easy to lose yourself in a place like that. Get swept up in the madness and glitz and hedonism of it all. And he still had, to an extent. But that human connection was so important.

“-And this book, where did it come from? Hrm. I see-”

Looking down the halls, he silently hoped for the cup bros to come bounding down them at any moment. He could scoop one of the kids up and steal a quick hug, their hyper mood be damned. He especially wanted to now he knew it might be one of there last moments before he told the children the crushing truth. He hated to think how they would react to the news. Dice didn’t know how he’d deal with the boys crying.

“-Hey? I’m talkin’ to ya’. Are ya’ cold?” A voice asked, tearing Dice from his thoughts.

Porkrind was turned to him. He had the phones’ speaker covered with a hand. It seemed he had halted the conversation just to check. Dice felt flattered.

“A little.” Dice admitted.

“Then come over here, ya’ bum. There’s a heat vent right above me.” Porkrind chuckled.

Before Dice could respond to Porkind, the man had brought the received back up to his ear and was taking again. Well then.

Standing up and walking over to where Porkrind was, warm air blew onto his head and he looked up. A brass vent shaped like a daisy was installed in the ceiling, billowing out a toasty breeze. Like a cat coiling up to a warm heater, Dice leant on the small recliner Porkrind was in, half sitting on one of the armrests. It wasn’t the most comfortable position, he could easily just sit on the floor. But after a few minutes he decided he rather liked the close contact with the other man.

“-and how long will it take for him to come take a look at it? I told ya’ I need it pronto. I understand Charlie; it’s just-”

Dice leant into Porkrind, relaxing. Eventually Dice plonked his head on one of his broad shoulders. The pig made no comment, only shifting slightly to allow Dice more room. Dice noticed as the other talked he could feel his low voice rumble through his own body. Also now that he was so close, Dice could make out the man on the other end of the phone. His voice had a refined accent, but sounded friendly.

“-my apprentice will be here in a minute. Say, why do you want this artifact? Gotten yourself into a spot of trouble, hrm?” The voice on the other end said.

“Not at all.” Porkrind said. “You know me. I’m good at keeping clean.”

"Then who may I ask is in need of such a powerful object?"

"A guy callin' himself King Dice. He's a... good friend.”

The man on the other end made a knowing hum and chuckled.
“Oh, a good ‘friend’. I hear you loud and clear.” The voice said, exasperated. “King Dice, eh? Quite the flashy title. Sounds like quite the man.”

Porkrind sat up in seat a little, causing Dice to slip. The pig didn’t notice however, too caught up in the conversation. “… N’ What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh like you don’t know.” The man sighed. “You really should stop falling for people so quickly! Honestly. It’s always for a pretty face you’ve hardly met. Tell me, how long have you known this one?”

“I…Hey!” The pig protested. “It ain’t like that-”

“Oh poppycock it’s not! Honestly, your little acts of heroism are going to leave you in rags, eventually. Have you forgotten? It was only mere months ago you were calling me up needing a favour because you sold all of your inventory to some cup-headed kids for mere cents! Powerful potions and tonics. Some worth hundreds-”

“And those kids went on to beat the damn Devil himself, Charlie.” Porkrind countered. “I’m not some chump. But at the same time I’m not like you. Can’t just leave some kids helpless.”

Charlie sighed. “I know. It’s just... A merchant see’s many things, but one must remain detached. Wearing your heart on your sleeve just isn’t worth it. Know this is coming from personal experience, chap.”

Dice lifted his head, eyebrows raising at what he had just overheard. He felt slightly coy; this obviously wasn’t a conversation he was meant to be hearing. Nevertheless, it had just told Dice a whole lot. He could feel all the pieces slotting together in his mind.

Dice felt his cheeks warm slightly at the realization. His position nestled by Porkrind’s side felt far more intimate all of a sudden. He made no effort to move away, though.

The pig’s actions over the past few days were making far more sense.

The poor fool was smitten.

Sure Porkrind wasn’t he only one who had taken him in, but everyone else had their reasons.

The boys were just kids; still naive and quick to forgive. Elder Kettle had relaxed once he’d seen how injured the other was; Dice could do little in the state he had been. Appleman was desperate (and had sensibly kept his distance since they’d reached the mansion).

His sister Gala had no clue what he was like before. That girl had never seen the snide conman that stuck his boot in men and women who were already down on their luck. Dice sighed. He had damn liked it, too. Power was more addictive than any drug. Dice imagined the girl wouldn’t be so pleasant if she saw that side of him. And he knew that malice was still there. He didn’t particularly have any desire to change that, either.

It was then Dice came to another realisation. Porkrind knew him. He had no doubt heard years of his exploits at the casino. The rumours. The title of ‘sleazy manager’. And he certainly knew of his relationship with the devil. Being a shopkeep, he’d have heard it all.

Dice felt a little ashamed.

Despite that, here they were. But it wasn’t because of his ‘pretty’ looks like his friend had suggested; his die was cracked and he had been dressed in rags since their meeting. Nor his smooth personality,
which had been replaced with depressive episodes and bouts of rage the past few days.

Porky had truly dealt with him at his worst.

Yet he still liked him.

Dice tried to push the thought away, along with his growing melancholy. There was little that could be done now. He was chained to the Devil’s side. He wouldn’t even entertain the idea with being with the other man.

“It ain’t like that Charlie-” The pig said, stern. The voice on the other end only tutted in response. “Hey! It isn’t, ok? He’s just a pal-”

“-Sure. And have you taken any flying lessons lately, old bean?”

Dice watched on in quiet amusement, listening to the bickering. Porkrind had remained calm but was sounding increasingly irritated with the man on the other end. Meanwhile this ‘Charlie’ really didn’t sound too convinced. His sober, serious tone had been replaced with a borderline condescending one. It seemed the two had known each other for a while, as this conversation that had obviously occurred more than once.

Then a thought crossed his mind.

An awful, terrible, yet amazing thought.

Dice bit his cheek. He knew he shouldn’t. Dice had only found out about the man’s feelings and he was already tempted to toy with them. He should just keep his trap shut. But the opportunity really was too good to pass up. How could he resist? He was hellbound anyway. Might as well go out with a bang.

Before he even realised what he had said, the words tumbled from his mouth.

“Just pals Porky sweetheart? Why you insult me~” Dice purred into Porkrind’s ear, loud enough that he knew it would pick up over the phone. What definitely wouldn’t have translated into audio was the way he had dipped his hand underneath Porkrind’s shirt, resting a gentle hand on the man’s collarbone. Dice noticed unlike the Devil’s unruly coat, Porkrind’s pink fur was short and coarse.

“I-, what the? Dice!”

A large hand hastily pushed King Dice off the armchair and onto the floor. Dice fell with a rough bump. He couldn’t care in the slightest though; he was far too occupied laughing. It was the kind of laughter that made it hard to breathe. It filled him with a jovial warmth he hadn’t felt in a while.

“Oh, so yer’ think that’s funny? I swear to god Dice, you eavesdroppin’ little-” Porkrind growled. Any intimidation was lost though, as the man’s face had taken on a bright red blush. If Dice needed any confirmation his guess was correct, he had certainly got it. Porkrind looked utterly frazzled from his touch.

The pig looked away. “I... Look- Ignore him, ya’ hear? He’s just messin’ around’. A real funny guy.” He pleaded to the man down the line. It was fruitless, though. This Charlie man was laughing just as hard as Dice was. Even from this distance Dice could hear the man’s shrill cackle through the phone.

“Once I finish this damn call we’re gonna’ have a little talk-” The pig muttered under his breath to Dice, as he waited for his colleague to stop laughing. The pig tried to hide his embarrassment with a cough and impromptu adjustment of his eye patch. He wasn’t half as mad as he was acting to be.
“Sorry, Porky.” Dice grinned back.

“Oh, put a sock in it. Yer’ not damn sorry at all.”

Dice shrugged as a smile plastered itself on his face again. He really wasn’t.

Then, his attention was turned to the sounds of footsteps down the hall.

“Dice! Dice!” A voice shouted from down the corridor. It was Mugman, with his brother in tow. Their eyes were filled with worry as their little feet ran as fast as they’d allow. Dice noticed Cuphead’s porcelain face was smeared with mud and his straw had a clump of grass trapped in it. It was more than just some playing around in the rain, he could tell.

Something had happened.

“He’s here!” Cuphead said.

Dice felt his good mood dissipate as he stood up.

“-It’s Wheezy. He’s in the backyard and he knows you’re here.” Cuphead elaborated, slightly out of breath.

Dammit. Wheezy for once in his life had actually done some work, it seemed. He didn’t think the other would find him so quickly. He took some solace in knowing he couldn’t get into the grounds; the ward should be like pure acid to the Devil’s lackey. Should. Dice didn’t know if they were truly safe.

“Where is he exactly? Is he chasing you boys?” Dice asked, alarmed.

“Nah! Slob couldn’t even scale the fence.” Cuphead tittered, smirking slightly at the memory. Dice scoffed. That sounded about right.

“But that doesn’t mean he can’t get in another way. He was trying to barge down the fence when we caught him.” Mugman interjected. “He’s determined.”

Dice nodded. The man was a brute. He would find a way.

“I need to talk to him.” Dice said with a sigh. He didn’t want to, but he wasn’t going to let the boys fight for him. Not now he knew it was useless.

“Like hell you’ are.” Porkrind said from behind him. Dice turned. The man was no longer on the phone and was standing tall. “Me and the boys will deal with him.”

“And then what?” Dice huffed. “Porky. We’re just buying time. I can’t run forever. Call that man back; he’s the best chance we have.”

"I'll do it after." Porkrind grit.

Dice knew what that meant. It had been a dead end from the start. This Charlie man obviously didn't have anything like what they needed. Porkrind would have found out right away of they had. Dice sighed. It had been a pleasant distraction, if only for a moment.

“Woah. What’s all that supposed to mean?” Cuphead asked, voice laced with worry.

“Nothin’.” Pokrind said resolutely. “C’mon. I have some words for this Wheezy guy.”
Dice went to protest, but Porkrind had already begun to walk off. Dice shook his head and jogged to catch up. He wasn’t going to let Porkrind fight Mr. Wheezy alone. He was sure the shopkeep was anything but a pushover, but Wheezy had dark powers. If Porkrind got caught in the barrage of flames, he’d truly become his namesake.

And he wasn’t going to let the love-struck sap get hurt; certainly not by Wheezy of all people.

Ironically the two small children, still standing confused and innocent as peaches by his side were the only ones that could truly protect him. And even their sharp shooting couldn’t break his bond to the Devil.

“Dice?” Cuphead pushed again. He clearly wasn’t going to let this slide. "Who was Porkrind on the phone to? What did you mean by that”

“Kid, I’ll tell you later. Ok?” Dice offered. It wasn’t a lie, he would have to eventually. “I promise.”

Cuphead nodded, sated for now.

“Alright. C’mon, lets teach that sleaze a lesson!” The boy laughed, his boastful nature turning. “He’s gonna get a nasty surprise when he sees all of us banded together.”

Dice nodded. He certainly would.
Wheezy let out a sigh as he wiped some rain from his brow.

It had been a few minutes and Cuphead and his brother hadn’t returned. He thought they would have at least dragged someone out here to fight him, but it seemed not. With a grunt he started walking to the front of the building, shoes sloshing in the mud of the gutters.

After the fiasco with the fence, Mr. Wheezy decided it might be best take another approach. He kept walking until he reached the front door of the mansion. He had read somewhere if a demon was invited into a place, all wards had no effect. Well, it was time to see if that was true. Loitering for a few minutes, he finally plucked up the courage and knocked on the door briskly.

Almost immediately an apple headed girl opened the door. She was juggling a large vacuum in her right hand, and her face went from one of irritation to intrigue as she looked over Wheezy.

“Oh. Hello Sir.” She said. “What is it you need?”

Wheezy stood dumb for a minute. What did he need? He really should have thought about what he was going to say before knocking. As his mind raced for an excuse to be let in, the girl thankfully provided one.

 “… Do you need help? Are you injured?” She asked, concerned. “We can treat you, if you need.”

Wheezy nodded eagerly. He forgot between being beaten to an inch of his life by the Devil and standing in the rain for a good thirty minutes, he’d certainly look like he was on deaths door. He nodded again. Sure, that would do fine.

“It’s… M-my…” Wheezy winced.

To further egg her on, he touched his head and frowned. He had experienced what a concussion felt like enough times to fake one, so this should be a breeze.

“Ok, come on in hon. Think the first thing we’ll get checked is your head.” The girl cooed, now seemingly completely buying Wheezy’s story. “There’s a doctor just down the hall.”

Wheezy took a step into the mansion.

Immediately he could tell his plan had failed. A white pain shot through his whole body. It set every nerve ending in his body alight. With a howl he scampered back to the front door, ignoring the woman’s protests as she tried to drag him down the hall.

Once back over the threshold, his pain subsided immediately. He let out a shaky breath as he created
distance between him and the mansion; he wasn’t doing to do that again.

“Whats wrong- goodness, come back inside!” The woman cried, now frenzied. Her heels clacked as she ran out to join him in the rain. For a brief second Wheezy thought about what Dice had told him. How some of the locals had taken him in. Wheezy recalled Dice’s large pleading eyes as he begged for him to turn a blind eye and let him get back up to the surface, like what was waiting for him above was somehow better. He hadn’t believed it for a second, but now as this pretty lady fusssed over him, he couldn’t help but see its plausibility.

Then the thought hit him. As he mulled it over jealousy quietly crawled into his mind. What if in that small time frame Dice had met someone? It would make his actions far more reasonable. You don’t try and run from Hell without having something outside waiting for you. There was a reason all of the Devil’s lackeys were single and estranged from their families.

The men and women in Hell Were Wheezy’s family. He liked it that way.

He thought Dice had too.

“This place… Has a kicker of a ward on it, huh?” Wheezy said, as he stood up straight. “How’s a soulless fool like me supposed to get in?”

The woman was confused, until he saw it click in her mind. Kind eyes became wide and alert. Her hands dropped away from Wheezy’s face, like he was now toxic to touch.

“You… You’re… Get away from me!”

Wheezy only watched as she fled, hurried footsteps scampering away from him. He made no attempt to catch the girl as the thick oak door to the mansion slammed shut. Then he was left out in the rain, alone once again. He knew that broad wasn’t coming back. His plan had failed, annoyingly. He would light a cigar and smoke the sadness away, but it was still raining. His smoke would just fizzle out in mere minutes.

Wheezy grumbled as he walked away. He had no clue what Dice was on. It was nice to fantasise about a clean life, but these people would never accept him if they knew who he really was. Once you’d done a deal with the Devil it stuck on you forever like a stench. He felt another surge of anger towards his boss. He had ran away for this? Was he really that sore over losing the casino? Dying? It made no sense to Wheezy. The man knew what field they all worked in well. He knew the risks. Why was he getting cold feet now? He had to bring this fool home, and fast. This gamble he was making wasn’t worth pissing the Devil off over.

He looked back at the fence. It wasn’t something he was happy about, but the Cup bros were involved now too. What were they doing with Dice? He couldn't imagine his manager was with them by choice.

Leaning against a nearby fence, the man slumped. The ward was still pulsing through his veins, making him nauseous. He would find Dice, he just needed to rest for a bit. As his eyes grew heavy, a dark voice began to ring in his mind.

Wheezy could feel something.

As he regained consciousness, he realised it was a sharp pain in his side.

Alert eyes flicked open as his body protested, telling him to move and get up. Unfortunately his body
was the flabby, out of shape form of a 50 something smoker. Wheezy was good at throwing his weight around and little else. He got up with a wobbly groan.

“Ey, wait! Stop it!” Wheezy protested, trying to get himself upright. The assailant did no such thing though, and only began to shout louder.

Wait, *shouting*?

“-Get up, you coward! You think its funny to scare a girl tryna help you like that? We told you; this place has a ward on it to keep creeps like you out, so leave already!”

Wheezy groaned. He stood tall, staring the two thugs down.

It was those fucking kids again.

“And I told you little brats-” He spit back, “I’m not leaving without the Boss!”

The kids raised their hands in the familiar shape of a pistol. He hated how he flinched at the sight. No kids should ever shake him up like these two did. The cup bros however hesitated and Wheezy took the opportunity to take a step forward.

“*Don’t touch them.* Just leave. Or this will end real bad fer’ ya.” A dark voice rumbled. It almost sounded like Dice, but not quite. Raspier. Also with a rural accent he had heard a lot around Inkwell and Nibsville.

Turning, he was surprised to see a face he recognised. He had seen this guy once before, when asking around.

“You- I saw you earlier!” Wheezy said, accusingly. “You where in the church. You said you didn’t even know who Dice was-”

“Yeah. I did. And if I had known who you were then, yer’ wouldn’t have left that church in once piece.” The man commented darkly.

“Oh real tough guy huh?” Wheezy sneered. “It’s cute. The kids I can understand, they’re as dumb as bricks. But you? I betcha don’t even know what kind of man you are *protecting*-”

The Pig let out a laugh, cutting the other short. It was like a hacksaw and Wheezy cringed at the grating sound. What was so funny?

“You really don’t know who I am, do ya’? Guess a lackey like you didn’t leave that casino much. But yer’ were just a glorified bodyguard, weren’t ya? Beatin’ up anyone who got near Dice. That’s what I’d heard, at least.”

The Pig stepped forward. Wheezy froze. This guy knew about him. He wasn’t an ignorant Nibsville local like he had thought.

Something felt very off in the pit of his stomach. Who was this man?

“M’ Porkrind. Got shops all over Inkwell. Spend a lot of time with the locals. Got connections. Trust me, I know King Dice well.”

Confusion flooded Wheezy’s face. Of course he had heard of Porkrind’s Emporium. He had never seen the man in the flesh; why would he get out and about in Inkwell? He would be beaten to a pulp. The only one that braved the locals was Dice.
But oh, he had heard of the man.

The square would never trade with the Devil’s Casino. Not even if they were desperate for supplies and offering big bucks. Stacks of cash thrown at the fool only for him to spit in the Devil’s face. If that wasn’t enough to give him a bad reputation, it was well known the man stocked power-ups and potions in his shop to help folks who found themselves ensnared by the Devil.

A real good samaritan, Wheezy thought with a sneer. Almost as angelic as these damn kids.

So what was this brown-noser doing protecting Dice? His polar opposite? Was the man really that charming he had conned all these idiots that quick? No. That answer didn’t feel right. A bitterness grew. Why was this who Dice had been choosing to spend his time with?

“It just shows your a Bigger fool than I thought. The boss is real good at twisting people to do what he wants. You know who he is and you still fell for his lies.” Wheezy smugly announced back, trying to fight back the doubts.

Wheezy laughed and turned to the Cup brothers. They still had their sights set on him. Wheezy lent down, hands on his thighs as tar yellow teeth grinned at them.

“You know what kinda person Dice is, kids? You know who you’re protecting? A murderer. A thief. An ya’ know what? If it hadn’t all blown up in his face and he got all scared, he’d still be doing it right now.”

“He’s changed!” Cuphead squeaked, clearly angry. “If he was here you’d see that. He’s our friend now.”

“Aww, lookit’ you kids. So sweet n’ naive. Friend!? Oh that’s rich.” Wheezy jeered, smoke puffing from his head mirthfully. That was it; he knew this must have been a con now. He almost felt sorry for them. Almost. Dice fucking hated children and that would never change. It had to be an act on the boss’s part.

“They ain’t dumb.” Porkind bit back. “Dice has changed. Look at the facts. He doesn’t want to be around you, fer’ starters. Otherwise he’d be here, wouldn’t he?”

Wheezy felt stomach boil in rage. Jealousy began to rear it’s head. Why did Dice suddenly want to stay up here? For what? Some fat old Pig and two whiny kids? It made no sense. None of it. They knew who he was, why were they protecting him? It was hardly like they actually cared about him.

He needed to get to Dice, if it was the last thing he did.

And he knew how to draw the fool out. Wheezy shot a glance to the mansion. Hundreds of windows stared back. Dice was watching them from some vantage point. There was no way he would have let them just wander out without him keeping an eye on things; it was in his nature to be in control. Always fussing and giving orders. The man hadn’t been the manager of the Devil’s Casino for nothing.

“Hey! Dice!” Wheezy hollered to the Mansion. “Come out! Or I’ll make ya!”

Was Dice really ‘friends’ with these kids? Or was it just for show? Well there was one way to find out.

Without any warning, he swiped at one of the children. The blue one; he looked weaker somehow. Wheezy tried not to act satisfied as a flaming hand cracked against the side of the boys head, scorching his mug and sending him tumbling roughly to the ground. The child was sent skidding
until he lay still on the ground, unconscious.

The red one rushed to his side, tears welling in his eyes.

Wheezy smiled.

Boss always did tell him all it took was one good hit to end a fight.

“Enough!”

Large fists flew in his direction. Wheezy dodged with a grunt, eyes widening at the sudden attack.

Porkrind wasn’t the best brawler; it was clear by the sloppy, slow punches that rushed by him. All grabbing hands and expletives. Still, Wheezy didn’t want to find out what would happen to him if the other succeeded in trying to scruff him. He might have been a terrible fighter, but the Pig was still strong and could definitely crush a rib or skull if he tried.

Wheezy wasn’t a pro boxer himself by any means, but he had experience. Long ago he had learnt how to play dirty. Working in a seedy bar most of your life would do that. Low jabs. All elbows and twisting limbs.

And of course fire, white hot and searing in its intensity.

Wheezy watched the Pig, who had become his unwitting punching bag. The fool was already getting breathless and tipsy, not used to how exhausting fights were - or the smoke that had filled the damp air, it seemed. Wheezy was sure now; despite Porkrind’s hard appearance and eye patch, this schmuck was obviously a pacifist. How pitiful.

Feeling the embers of rage and resentment fill his body, he let them loose. It rushed in an orange tornado towards Porkrind. It sizzled in the rain, letting off a hot steam that hazed his surroundings as it shot through the air. Wheezy couldn’t see where it was heading but he wasn’t fazed; even with the water slowing it, the flames would still mar the fool.

The fire hit with a violent hiss and he smirked. The sound had told him everything.

Or at least he thought it had.

As the smoke cleared, he didn’t see that damn Pig crumpled on the ground like expected.

Standing in his place was King Dice.

He was clad in oversized pyjamas, now soaked from the rain. The Boss somehow looked even more frail and haggard from the last time he had seen him, mere days ago. Porkrind stood on, dumbfound. His eyes were fixed only on Dice. Wheezy felt jealously roll around in his gut again.

“You called?” Dice said. His voice was calm, but he held a look of utter rage and his eyes burned a furious emerald.

“Dice!” Porkrind said, finally coming out of his stupor. “Dammit, get back inside! We can deal with this-”

Wheezy watched as the Pig was pushed aside with a gentle hand.

“No offence Porky; but it was pretty clear you can’t ‘deal with it’. But don’t worry; this will be over mighty quick now I’m here.”
Wheezy shivered at the Boss’s words. King Dice was pissed. And he was ready to rip Wheezy to pieces.

“Boss. Please! I had to find you! The Devil, he... I had-” Wheezy pleaded, trying to get the words in before the inevitable smack-

He failed. Blurs of purple flew past him and he ducked. They were razor sharp cards, that he knew without looking. One sliced his arm and he sucked in his breath.

“You’re begging? Now? I thought you wanted to see me-” The Boss took a step forward, and Wheezy noted how strange it was not to hear the confident clack of his heels. Instead. The slap of wet slippers took their place. His presence hadn’t diminished any though, as Dice leant in close with a vacant, eerie smile on his face. “Well. Here I am.”

“N’ that’s all I wanted, Boss.” Wheezy croaked back. All he needed was to get Dice closer to him. Just a little bit more…

Dice provided just that, as he went to give him an uppercut. Wheezy let him, the pain blossoming in his face and neck not as bad as what he would feel by the Devil’s hand if he failed.

“M’ Sorry, Boss.” Wheezy slurred through the blood, that was now running down his lips and chin. Well, he wasn’t really. Wheezy would have felt empathy for Dice, but after seeing how swiftly he had betrayed him for these strangers, he wasn’t feeling quite so generous anymore.

Plus now his face was really starting to smart.

To hell with both of them they’d go.

Grabbing the Dice’s waterlogged top in a balled fist, he quickly grabbed the small black rock encarved with symbols out of his pocket and threw it on the floor. Wheezy had no clue what the fuck it was, but the Devil had instructed him to chuck it at his feet the minute he found Dice. Or something like that; the Devil wasn’t exactly the most cognisant right now and instructions had been vague.

But as a light enveloped them and he felt himself sink, he figured he had done it right.

Terror and renegotiation filled Dices eyes.

“No!”

“Dice, calm down-” Wheezy started, trying to hold the thrashing man in his arms.

Then, he felt something wrap itself around his leg. It was the red kid, that he was sure.

“Cup, dammit let go!” Dice warned, already fading away. “Were- just let go!”

The child squirmed closer, tiny hands refusing to do what they were told. Wheezy felt himself panicking; he really didn’t want one of these kids down in hell. With a swift kick to the child’s chest, he flew off.

Then just like that, the screams from the surface faded out until they were gone.

Wheezy braced himself. Dice delivered a slap, followed by a swift kick between Wheezy’s legs. Goddamnit. Wheezy shuffled away with a pained hiss, finally letting go.
He knew it didn’t matter; they were already in the familiar caverns of hell.

“You! How dare you-” Dice screamed, throwing a fist at Wheezy. The man dodged, but only just.

“Just stop! Boss you’re down here now. Give up! It’s over.”

Dice looked at him. A silence passed between them. Wheezy thought that for a second, Dice might have finally broken. Realised that this was his fate.

Instead, King Dice’s face contorted into one of pure rage.

Oh no. He knew that look.

Wheezy bolted for his office, not sparing a second to look back or pause at the screaming man behind him. As he slammed the door with a panicked thud, he knew he had made the right choice. He counted all of the small white corners poking through the door. Twenty, maybe thirty razor sharp cards had embedded themselves an inch deep into the hardwood.

He let out a scoff, as he locked the door.

“I think it would be best to leave you out there to calm down for a bit, yeah?” Wheezy yelled past the door, patronisingly.

He heard Dice shout something on the other side. Then a foot slammed against the door. Once. Twice. Wheezy paid no attention, instead slipping behind his desk to do paperwork. That door was all reinforced. There was no way he could get in.

“He’s completely lost it.” Wheezy grumbled under his breath, frustrated.

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As Wheezy sat in his office, he pretended not to hear the curses thrown at him through the door. Nor did any other the other lackeys, it seemed. Wheezy was sure they would have been re-animated by now. The Devil never left them dead for too long. But he hadn’t heard a peep from anyone since Dice had been dragged back down.

He figured it made sense. King Dice was the stoic one who dealt with all the others. It was his job to look pretty and stay composed. He was neither of those right now. Who wanted to deal with their manager when he was acting like this? This childish tantrum was just uncomfortable for everyone.

The place seemed to take on an even tenser silence when he heard the curses stop, only to be replaced with… What was that?

Wheezy shook his head. It couldn’t be-?

He slowly stood up, as he listened through the door in disbelief. Shit; Dice was really crying. It wasn’t those crocodile tears he’d often put on to con some fool, either. He knew what those sounded like. These were stifled sobs. Raw and sorrowful and real. Something knotted in his stomach. The traitor didn’t deserve to be consoled; Wheezy rationalised. He’d done this to himself.

He’d talk to the Boss once he calmed down. Yeah, he’d do that.

Whenever that would be. It didn’t seem to be any time soon.

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Porkrind lay a hand over Cuphead’s back, idly massaging in between his shoulder blades. The child continued to wail, only pausing to hiccup in more air. It was an awful sound that broke his heart and he could only blame himself.

Still, he wasn’t going to lie to the boy and tell him Dice was coming back. It was simply too late now. It had been miraculous they had got him back once. Twice required far too much luck and Porkrind had never been a serendipitous man. Nothing he considered ‘lucky’ had ever happened to him in his life. The things he had, he had worked hard for.

Still he had hoped that just this once…

He cursed, holding Cuphead tighter. It had been a fools errand. But Dice had deserved that chance. He would have given that man everything.

Rage bubbled in him. He should have done more. If he was in his shop, that cigar headed scumbag would have been dead where he stood. He had knives and guns hidden all over his small store. Some in plain sight, too. The potions and tonics also assisted him for more unruly customers.

But he wasn’t in his domain. He had been out in the open. Unarmed. He shook his head. How much of a damn fool could he be?

He had let Mugman get hurt- the boy was now asleep on the couch; thankfully not badly injured.

But Dice.

Dice was gone.

“I know it doesn’t mean a thing, but I am truly sorry it had to end this way.”

Porkrind looked at Mr. Sterling. His face was sincere as he placed the cups of tea down between them. They had shortbread cookies placed thoughtfully on the lip of the saucers. He scoffed. Like Porkrind felt like damn eating or drinking right now. He’d probably just throw it up.

“Thanks.” The Pig shrugged weakly. He was right. It didn’t mean a thing to him. Nothing did anymore.

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“Right. I went to the tailors and picked up all of your stuff. The Devil is mighty eager to get this show on the road. The wedding should be in a few hours.”

Dice gripped the sides of the seat. He should have been able to make out plush under his fingertips, but his whole body was just… numb. This was it. Everything that he had done had accumulated to nothing. It was like the past few days had never happened.

“Gotta tell ya, a lilac wedding dress is pretty unconventional but its definitely you, Boss.”

Dice didn’t answer.

Wheezy let out puff of frustration.

“Boss? Are you getting huffy again?”

Wheezy walked around his seat to face Dice, wedding dress draped over his arm and shoulder. He leant down lightly, clicking his fingers in front of the Boss’s face.
“You there? Dice? Boss?”

With a snarl Dice looked away.

“Hey! You still shitty? Look, I’m not the bad guy here. You know that don’t you? You’re the goddamn one who ran away. You’re the one who’d been bunkering down with those Cup kids! The fucking enemy? Really Dice? You know how quick everyone would turn on you if I told them? Hey! Fucking look at me.”

Wheezy forcefully tilted Dice’s head in his direction with a black gloved hand. Dice could smell the tar on his fingers. “I’m being a fucking saint to you right now. You kicked me in the balls. You left me for some fucking pig. The only reason I’m tolerating this shit is the Devil will have my head otherwise. Make no mistake; my respect for you is dead.”

Dice pushed down the desire to spit in his face.

Wheezy finally dropped his hand and Dice stared straight ahead, refusing to look the other in the eye.

Of course it was all about Wheezy. He couldn’t understand. Just like all the rest of the Devil’s staff, he was brainwashed. Freedom wasn’t something they even considered. This was just a hitch in the road to them. Dice couldn’t even begin to describe how he felt to a man who had willingly re-signed his own soul contract. Wheezy had no clue how desolate and furious and trapped he felt. He just wanted to be back with Porkrind and the children.

“I don’t want this. But that means nothing to you, does it?” Dice finally said.


Dice said nothing. It was true; of course he still loved him. That didn’t mean he wanted to stay in love, though. He sighed. Maybe he could learn to be happy with the Devil once more. He could have to, if this wedding was to happen.

But he had already been already happy on the surface, being with a certain shopkeep he’d only just found out fancied him.

Dice shook his head. There was no use in mulling over that now.

“N’ besides, we’re down here forever Dice. I’m sorry you got all caught up in this cute little fantasy where you turn over a new leaf and the Cup kids and that fucking dopey Pig kiss the ground ya’ walk on, but-”

Wheezy leant in. He patted Dice on the back with his free hand, smiling. His grin was malicious and knowing.

“-You’re a bastard, Dice. Ice cold. Don’t even try and convince me you wouldn’t go back to your old ways in a month or so. You know your skills are much better use down here.”

Dice could only look at Wheezy, tired beyond words.

The man just didn’t get it; even if he did go back to a life of debauchery that would be his choice. That was what meant so much to him.

The opportunities were endless. It was the freedom to do as he pleased. It wasn’t a sensation he had felt in decades under the Devil’s employ and now he knew it he wanted little else. He had been so
young when he had become Manager, that the idea of a future beyond that wasn’t something he had
considered.

Now it’s absence was maddening.

He felt like an animal pacing in a cage, now he was back in hell. Nothing would change now he was
down here. He had reached the top of the chain long ago. And he knew all that meant was more dry
repetitive managerial duties with the same old faces. Rinse, repeat. Then, he’d grow old and die.
That was if he was lucky.

Porkrind tip-toed out of the room, clicking the door shut behind him.

Cuphead had finally stopped crying, thank god. The poor kid hadn’t been consoled any, but he had
finally passed out. So Pokrind had decided to place the two cups in their room and let them rest. It
was about lunchtime, but could only imagine how exhausting it had been for the poor children.

He walked back to Sterling’s office. He wasn’t sure why. There wasn’t anything to do or say in
there. But it was quiet and not as crowded as the halls, so he welcomed it.

Mr. Sterling was standing by a window, looking listlessly out of the large panes. Porkrind shuffled
in. He had no clue what the man had to look glum about. He wasn’t close to Dice like he was.

“Oh. You’ve come back. I have bad news; come look.”

“What is it?” Porkrind grunted, apathetically. What could possibly be bad news compared to what
just happened?

“I… The church has once again been reclaimed by the imps.” Sterling said with a sigh, pointing to
the small chapel that was visible from from their vantage point.

Porkrind rushed over to the window. A black mist shrouded the whole building. It was nothing like
last time. He doubted he’d even be able to get near it. He felt sick just looking at the swarming mass.

“How? I thought we-”

“The church has already been compromised once. It would have been easier this time rather than
harder, I fear.” Mr. Sterling explained.

“That’s… Goddammit!” Porkrind hissed. He could only hope the poor priest was safe. He had only
been helping that man clean up this morning and now… He shook his head.

“The ritual will start soon. I can feel it. The Devil is weak and as such it all must happen now. He
won’t get a second chance after this.”

Porkrind sneered. He would hope for the Devil to keel over, but he didn’t know what that would
mean for Dice. They were connected, after all.

As if he was reading the other’s mind, Sterling voiced his thoughts.

“Dice.. was already connected. The moment that ring was put on, his chances of freedom
plummeted. An unfinished bond… It’s a death wish. I hope you don’t blame yourself. The Devil is a
beast that rarely looses.” Sterling consoled. Porkrind felt a gentle hand on his back. He wanted to
grab it and twist it as far as it would go. He still didn’t trust this freak.
“W-what do you mean by that?”

Porkrind turned to the small voice. Cuphead. He was awake, well rather the boy mustn’t have ever been asleep.

“Kid, I- Why don’t you go back to bed?”

“M’ not tired.” The boy said back. His eyes were red and puffy. Also angry. “What was that about Dice? The ring?”

“I was going to tell ya’,” Porkrind supplied. “But well. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes it does!” Cuphead croaked. “Tell me!”

Porkrind looked at the kid. He was still ready to fight. His little fists were clenched. He wished he had that much drive; he just felt tired.

“You see, when the Devil put that ring on Dice’s finger it wasn’t just a gesture. It was a seal. A guarantee that they would be tied. That’s why Dice couldn’t remove it; ancient magics are at play.”

Sterling leant down to Cuphead’s eye level.

“That’s why you see… This end might not be a bad one. The seal would have slowly killed him if it wasn’t either finished or removed. He knew this.”

Cuphead’s eyes shot wide.

“Why.. How can you say that! This isn’t a good thing! It isn’t!” The child’s voice was cracking and Porkrind feared he would start crying again. The kid wasn’t thinking rationally; he was tired and bereft. There was no way they could explain all of this to him in this state.

“I know its not-” Sterling backtracked. Porkrind pushed him aside. The man clearly wasn’t good with kids. You had to keep it simple. Tell them the bottom line.

“Look. Cuphead. Come ‘ere.” The pig sat down on the floor, scooping the child up. He felt the boy calm slightly in his embrace. “I want Dice back more than anythin’. You know that. But it was either find a magic strong enough to break this thing, or let him go. Anything else would hurt him. And I looked so hard for the first but-.”

“A magic?” Cuphead’s small voice asked. Porkrind was caught of guard by the tone. He didn’t sound sad at all.

“Yeah. Not just anythin’ though, kid. Somethin’ powerful. Old. Somethin’ that could combat the Devil’s and break it.”

Cuphead squirmed out of his hug and turned to him. Then, the kid laughed. His eyes were wild. Maybe the kid had been spending too much time around Dice, because Porkind swore they had glow to them.

Porkind gave the boy a strange look, he was a little unnerved. What could the child possibly be scheming up now?

“Wh-”

“A powerful magic, huh?” Cup smiled. “…Like a genie, perhaps?”
Porkrind stared at the boy.

“Djimmi? But he would never help out Dice—”

“Doesn’t matter!” Cup laughed. “He gave me and my bro a wish after we saved him. Think he was expecting us to just ask for candy or some junk like that. But we’re not that dumb! We’ve been saving it. Now he has to do whatever we want him to.”

Cupheads’ grin was wolfish and wide. Porkind found it quite contagious and soon was smiling too.

“You crazy kid; if this actually works...” The Pig laughed. It was a shot in the dark, but anything was worth trying at this point.

“Well! It seems we have some mad plan after all. I have to say, I’ve never seen a genie’s power against a demon’s before. This should be quite the sight!”

Sterling clapped his hands resolutely, then his face fell into one of realisation.

“Oh! But time isn’t on our side, friends! We have only hours left.”

Porkind nodded, smile vanishing once more only to be replaced with a stern determination.

“Right. If we start walking now we can probably make it back it Inkwell in time—”

“Walking?” Sterling baulked, “No need for something so primitive! We need speed! I have a small plane out back that will get us there in half the time.”

Porkind nodded.

“Kid, go and wake up your brother. We have to get going right away if we have any chance of finding Djimmi in time.”

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“Uhh... Say, you decent in there, Boss?”

“Yes, Chips.”

Dice looked in the mirror, humming. The dress unexpectedly did cheer him up, even if it was on the most superficial level imaginable. It was certainly the nicest thing he had worn in a while. It’s soft purple fabrics draped around his form perfectly. The tailor had been right, he certainly was good at his profession and it showed. It made him feel powerful. Looking in the mirror he spun a few times, watching the way the dress floated of the ground and then fell. It was mesmerising.

It was a shame that the stunning garment represented what it did.

The longer he had been down here though, the more he realised how unlikely it was that he would have ever successfully left. He was still tied to the Devil, even when he was on the surface. Mr. Sterling’s words rung through his head. It meant little that he was down here now. He had never truly been free.

“Ok! Commin’ in! Hey Boss! Got your veil here—” Chips walked into the bedroom, face changing immediately.

Dice raised an eyebrow. What was that look for?

Dice’s smile returned.

“Thanks. Chip.” He drawled, taking the time to do another spin.

He did look good.

A modest chuckle came from his lackey.

“I got your tux here too. Uh, for after the ceremony.” Chip said, placing the mauve suit down. It looked just as lovely and shimmered with a soft sheen in the light.

Dice just nodded. After the ceremony. It just all felt so surreal. A night ago Porkrind had offered him a chance to start anew. Promises filled with gold and shiny jewels. He thought that would be his after. Now it was this.

“I know this ain’t what you’re hoping for but-” Chips placed a hand on Dice’s shoulder. Maybe Dice was feeling vulnerable, but it somehow felt more sincere than when Wheezy had done it. “We’re glad you’re here. Boss. I hope this is the start of somethin’ happy for all of us.”

Dice just nodded. He didn’t share his sentiment, but he supposed he better start pretending to, at least.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

*shows up three months late with a new chapter*
I'm so sorry lmao. All your comments were so nice I feel super guilty for making you all wait so long! Anyway here's a long chapter to tide you guys over till the next :P

Porkrind watched in bewilderment as Cuphead sat in the cockpit of the small passenger plane, shuffling his body down to try and reach the pedals. He bit his tongue as he suppressed the urge to ask again if the kid could really fly this thing or if he was just joking.

Deep down, Porkrind knew Cuphead could. Mugman too. How else could have the boys beaten people like Hilda Berg and even Djimmi himself? But… they were babies. It was like oil and water; the two facts just didn’t meld in his mind. The pig let out a sigh. The feats these damn kids had to go through to beat the Devil really had been insane. He could only hope this time would go just as smooth.

“Are you-” Mr. Sterling tentatively approached, equally unsure. “I mean, perhaps we should-?”

“No! I can do this.” The child snapped back.

“Bro just let me.” Mugman said with a sigh, trying to push his determined sibling away.

“I can reach!” Cuphead cried, angry eyes shooting at his blue bro.

“Cup.” Mugman started with a sigh.

Porkrind kept his eyes on the pair. It was clear to anyone that Cuphead was too short for the adult sized plane. Mugman on the other hand had a few inches in height over his brother. Wasn’t he the younger one? He supposed he understood now why it might be a sore point for the red clad boy.

But this wasn’t the time for childish spats.

“Kids. There’s no time for fighting. Sort it out.” Porkrind grimly reminded.

The statement seemed to sober Cuphead a little, as his squared off shoulders deflated and he wiggled out of the front seat, letting his brother take his place.

Mugman slipped into the seat. It was a strain, but it was obvious from his posture that he could reach far better than his brother.

“All right then. Onwards! We need room to take off, so it would be best to get this old girl out to the courtyard.” Sterling said as he walked around to the planes tail, placing his open palms on it’s smooth surface. With a grunt he pushed. All he really managed to do was sink his shiny leather shoes an inch deep in the fresh mud. The plane didn’t move.

Porkrind let out a scoff. “Let me.” He insisted, walking to the man’s side and joining him.

Pre-emptively kicking himself a niche into the mud, Porkrind shoved the plane and it began to slowly
roll. After a few more heaves, the plane began to take traction and Porkrind walked forward, pushing the plane with every step. Sterling kept his hands on the tail, but it was more out of courtesy. Porkrind found the others pointless chivalry amusing. He steered the machine towards the gate and soon the plane was out in an open strip of grass.

It was then he noted the plane was only equipt to hold three people— one of those being the pilot— so it was obvious what was to transpire next.

Porkrind turned to Mr. Sterling, a stern expression.

“Someone has to stay.” The pig said.

He was surprised when he was met with a stare just as scathing. Sterling wagged a finger in his direction.

“-Oh no, don’t you give me that! I know you don’t much care for me, but there’s not a chance in the world I’m missing this! I’ll be kicking myself for the rest of my life thinking of the potential it had for my research!”

“Damn yer’ research! This about a life-”

Sterling took a step forward, silencing the pig.

“My plane; my rules.” The Sterling coldly reminded, before turning and clambering into the back seat.

Porkrind opened his mouth, but felt it clamp shut. Dammit, he did have a point. It was his plane. It didn’t stop the rage that boiled in him at the rich man’s words, but he knew lashing out would just waste time.

And that was already something they were extremely short on.

But that did raise the question. Where the hell was he supposed to do now?

“I can just sit on your lap? We can share a space.” Cuphead offered, noticing Porkrind’s dark look.

Porkrind pondered the boy’s words. The kid had a point. It was probably safer that way, if he was being honest. Cuphead was clearly too small for these seats and would be sliding around the entire time if on his own.

With a grunt of agreement, he slid in. Cuphead followed suit. When they were all settled, he felt the motor sputter to life.

“Everyone ready?” Mugman shouted over his shoulder. They all crooned their agreements and soon they were in the air. Once they were high enough, the familiar silhouette of Inkwell aisle sat visible beneath them. Mugman turned the plane to the sight, with a smooth arc. The practised move settled Porkrind’s nerves a little. The kid clearly did know how to handle this thing.

“Where are we touchin’ down?” Porkrind asked. Lifting off was the easy bit. Landing would be the real test.

“I’m going to try and land in the fairground.”

Porkrind balked.

“Like hell you are! That place is full of obstacles-”
“-But its the fastest route!” Mugman insisted.

“Only if we make it there in one piece!” The Pig croaked back. “And that ain’t a guarantee.”

“It is.” Mugman said back. “I’ve – no we’ve, me and my bro – have done this before.” The kid looked calm and his eyes were glimmering with concentration. It was a look that caught Porkrind off guard.

*He’s too damn young to be looking so damn hardened* Porkrind thought with a sigh. After this all blew over he made a silent pledge to spend more time with these kids. They needed to be out playing; not trying to pull off feats like this.

“...Now?” Mugman asked.

Porkrind looked up, but he knew the question wasn’t being asked to him.

“Yeah. Go for it, bro.” His brother supplied, not missing a beat. From where Cuphead was sitting, he couldn’t see the boy’s face, but he was sure he was holding the same intense look of concentration as his sibling.

Then, Porkrind could only watch helplessly as the plane began to dip. Everyone gripped the sides of their seats as the machine plummeted, breaking through the clouds and towards the earth. He could feel the gravity shifting as the plane lowered.

It all happened so quickly. He could see the fairground below him, small like a toy model town. Then it grew bigger until he could make out the people walking around. Then, their shocked faces, heads craned up as the watched the plane coming towards them.

As the plane reached mere meters from the ground, he clenched his eyes shut. He didn’t open them till the plane rolled to a smooth stop. As he looked around, the first thing that caught his eye was he small scattering of people that had formed around the plane.

For some reason he figured a plane landing in the middle of Inkwell Isle II would attract more heads. He felt Cuphead shuffle out of his lap.

“C’mon! Lets find Djimmi.”

“Yeah!”

Pulling himself out awkwardly, Porkrind followed the two boys. Sterling, visibly irritated by the sets of eyes on him, soon joined them.

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As it turned out, finding Djimmi wasn’t hard.

A short walk from where they had landed, a commotion was stirring. People were swarming the area like moths to a lantern. After the four pushed through the crowd of bodies, Porkrind saw the familiar flash of red and blue.

Well, Djimmi was certainly putting on a show.

It wasn't a magic act, but it was a show Porkrind was just as familiar with. Djimmi and Beppi were brawling again. The sky also happened to be blue. What else was new? It pulled in a big a crowd too, he bitterly noted. No wonder few had gathered around their plane; all of the Inkwell residents
were here.

Porkrind let out a tired sigh as the crowd cheered.

It was the two magic beings definition of a fight, anyway. It was a little different than his own. Much more showmanship. They weren’t throwing punches, but rather spells and tricks were being flung back and fro. It was as much a spectacle as it was foolishly destructive and dangerous. He ducked as a deflating balloon animal veered into the crowd. He heard a shocked “Hey, watch it!” from the man standing behind him as it popped.

Ok, that was enough. This ended now, before someone got hurt.

“Goddammit, I leave you two for a few days and yer’ already down eachothers’ throats again?” The Pig growled, daring to walk between them. He knew it would have to be either him or Bon Bon to end this fight. The other residents either didn’t care or were too scared to butt between the two destructive forces.

He was glad when they halted their attacks, choosing to drop their arms and look at him in puzzlement.

“Woah- Porkrind! There ya’ are, buddy! I was wondering how much of this place we’d have to trash to see your grumpy ol’ hide again!” Beppi said cheerily, running towards the shopkeep. “Bon Bon told me you were roped into some adventure! How’d it go? Get any cool swords? Potions?”

Porkrind sighed. The Pig really didn’t have the energy to deal with Beppi right now.

“It wasn’t that kind of adventure, Beppi. It went badly.”

The clown visibly reflated. The balloon he held in his hands let go of its air with a slow wheeze.

“… Oh. That’s no fun.”

“Yeah. S’ not.”

Porkrind turned to Djimmi to talk to the genie, but found the children had beaten him to it.

“-we’re here to use that wish.” He head Cuphead say.

“Are you sure about that?” The genie asked, perplexed. “This seems… Sudden.”

“It’s really important! We have to do it quick.” Cuphead pushed.

“OK. If it is what you want, I wont pry.” Djimmi shrugged, still not sounding completely convinced. “I will give a forewarning though; a wish from the likes of me is nothing to take lightly.”

“We know!” Cuphead snapped, impatient. “Now hurry!”

“Ok, ok.” Djimmi assured, raising a defensive hand. “Just making sure you are prepared. Are you ready? Have your wish prepared?”

The boys nodded eagerly.

“...Uh, I'm going to need a clear ‘yes’ on that fellas. Genie semantics and whatnot.” Djimmi added coyly.

“Yes!” Mugman said, a little louder than necessary.
“Yeah we’re ready, Djimm.” Cuphead added.

“Very well then, children—”

The change in Djimm’s demeanour was palatable. Gone was the playful magician that had been there moments before. The genie straightened up, proudly showing his full height. His eyes took on a white glow and the air around him turned to static. It was clear to everyone; this was now a powerful being performing a contract.

*Not unlike the Devil and his soul contracts,* Porkrind mused. The thought wasn’t comforting.

The crowd around him ‘oohed’ as it watched in anticipation for the wish. Beppi stood as still as a statue beside him. Porkrind was thankful for the clowns silence for once.

In truth it was easy to forget Djimm was a genie. Despite his flashy nature, outside of his performances he was a quiet and disarming charming man. Well, he was that in the Pig’s presence anyway. To the cocky or cruel his demeanour would no doubt change. Djimm said once that he was a mirror to mankind. Porkrind knew many people in Inkwell had been granted wishes from the being but few had gotten what they actually wanted. Genies were fickle tricksters who were more than happy to turn your own greed against you. The only solace was the fact Djimm wouldn't hurt the boys in any way; he had grown too fond of them to ever do that.

But he didn’t know if the man would extend that kindness to Mister King Dice.

Suddenly Porkind felt nervous. Clearly he wasn’t the only one, as Beppi placed a hand in his shoulder and lent into him pensively.

“Man I hate it when he gets all ‘I’m a being of terrifying power that could end the world with a blink of an eye!’”. Like we all know that already! It really kills the lighthearted vibe, ya’ know?” Beppi huffed, although his hush tone betrayed his nerves. The clown was anxious for the boys too.

Porkrind grunted in agreement. He made a quiet note that Beppi was either incredibly fearless or just too stupid for his own good. He knew Djimm’s power yet constantly riled up the man anyway. Why one earth would anyone do that? Porkrind could only shake his head.

“Now. What is it you wish?” Djimm bellowed. Porkrind shivered. The genies voice felt like it was resonating through the very earth they all stood on.

“I...” Cuphead started.

He then stopped, his little mouth snapping shut. The boy’s eyes bugged out in panic. He turned to his brother, but was met with just an equally as owlish stare.

“What do I say?” Cup hissed in hushed tones to his brother.

“I... I don’t know!” Mugman whispered back. “We only got one wish! It’s gotta be perfect!”

“How about we just wish for Dice to be happy?”

“No! That could mean he gets brainwashed into some cheery weirdo! He’d still be with the Devil!”

“Oh gosh, you’re right.” Cuphead murmured, the weight of the situation growing heavier on his shoulders by the minute. “Then just what about we just wish for him to be free?”

childhood for all we know! We have to be more specific!"

“Right. So... ask him to stop the wedding?”

“I... Yeah. I guess that's the one. Use that.”

“Uhh... Oh gosh. Here goes nothing.” Cuphead whined, this time a little louder. He clutched the straw out of his head and begun to wring it, nervously. Porkrind shook his head, only able to look on sympathetically. Poor kid was looking as pale as bone china. The crowd murmured and whispered over the boys hesitance.

Cup looked up, facing Djimmi once more. The genie looked utterly baffled, but was still a totem of patience and composure.

“Do you still wish to make a deal with me?” Djimmi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, we gotta.” Cuphead said, none too enthused. He took a deep breath, steeling himself.

“I wish... for you to stop The Devil from marrying King Dice!” He squeezed out, shutting his eyes when the anticipation became too much.

Nothing happened.

No bellowing laughter from the genie in front of him, or the chime of a magic spell.

Tentatively he opened his eyes once more, blinking at the pregnant silence that followed.

It wasn’t just Djimmi. No one was saying anything.

Porkrind dared a glance at the crowd behind him. Jaws were touching he floor as the swaths of people gawked on in shameless curiosity. Well, all of Inkwell knew now, for better or worse.

It was probably for the worse, Porkrind thought grimly.

“That’s one heck of a wish, kiddos.” Beppi said, his nonchalant tone breaking the silence rather cruelly.

Djimmi cleared his throat, snapping out of his daze. “I- We... should talk about this more in private.” he asserted.

Soon the whole group were enveloped in a puff of smoke, whisked away from the prying eyes of the crowds.

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The first thing the shopkeep noticed was the change in temperature. Balmy. Warm. Turning he saw the crackling of a large fireplace made of chiselled sandstone and framed by waxy green palm leaves. Below his feet was a colourful woven rug.

And also Beppi. Apparently the clown thought this was a good time to lounge on the floor.

Beppi waved at Porkrind, noticing the other man’s eyes on him.

Porkind didn’t wave back.

“There. We are in my tent now.” Djimmi said, rather redundantly. It was hardly like anyone else in
Inkwell had this décor.

Well, maybe Sterling wouldn’t know that. Porkrind looked on as the man gawked with wide eyes. Porkrind smirked at the rich fool getting thrown among all this. It’s what he’d wanted, wasn’t it?

“Damn. The Devil and Dice getting hitched. Talk about juicy gossip! The townsfolk are gonna be talkin’ about that for weeks!” Beppi mused. The clown had a silken pillow pulled up to his chest as he lay in front of the fire, like this was some sort of slumber party. How could he look so damn relaxed at a time like this? The familiar pang of irritation Porkrind got around whenever he was around the clown came back with a vengeance.

“I… We gotta stop it, Djimmi!” Cuphead plead. “The Devil kidnapped him! He forced a ring on Dice! I know Mister Dice ain’t exactly the kindest man, in fact he’s a scoundrel, but—”

“-That’s an understatement.” Beppi huffed, rolling onto his back. “Also an insult to scoundrels.”

“Silence! Another word from you and you’ll be thrown out.” Djimmi spat back to the clown.

“-he’s our friend. Please!” The boy interjected, ignoring the clown and instead clasping his hands together in a pleading motion.

The Genie let out a long sigh.

“You wish for me to combat the Devil’s magic? For a man who had no qualms against trying to kill you?”

“Hey, Djimmi?” The clown laughed, as he flung the pillow in the genie’s direction. “Pot meet kettle. We all tried to bump these kids off too, remember?”

The genie paled a little at the realisation.

“I thought I told you to be silent!” Djimmi bellowed. “I’m… nothing like that sleaze King Dice.” he finished quietly.

The air turned thick. The clown had struck a nerve. Djimmi was a proud man. Porkrind knew he must still feel defensive for ever caving into the Devil’s power. Beppi clearly knew this too. His face was ecstatic and he looked poised to rile the genie up with another comment at any moment. When the clown opened his mouth to speak, Porkrind made a point of beating him to it.

“Look, will yer’ grant the damn wish or not? I don’t feel exactly like listenin’ to you two squabble while Dice is in danger.” Porkrind growled.

Like a shot went off in the room, both Djimmi and Beppi snapped their heads to Porkrind at those words. He shrunk a little at the sudden attention. Perhaps blurting that out wasn’t the best idea.

“Wait… Did you say Dice?” Beppi let out a squawk of laughter. “What, are you on a first name basis with The King now? And why do you even care what happens to him?”

The clown leant in, a single eyebrow raising as he awaited his answer. Riling Djimmi up had been long forgotten; the pig was now Beppi’s new target, apparently.

“I never called him by that stupid title, not even before. Don’t plan on startin’ now.” Porkrind said. Beppi’s face stayed unflinchingly smug. The clown didn’t buy the excuse. “An’ anyway, it’s like the boy’s said; time is of the essence. We ain’t got no room to chat.” He elaborated, crossing his arms defensively.
“Pokrind, I understand your impatience,” Djimmi assured. “But I must ask, why do you think Dice deserves this wish?”

“Yeah! Why the emotional tone, buddy?” Beppi added as he grinned. “Bon Bon said you two almost killed each other back at your shop. What’s changed?”

Porkrind became stiff as a statue. He knew what Beppi and Djimmi were really asking.

Porkrind was a kind man, but still a blunt and reclusive one. He’d help out when he could, but had no close friends. Porkrind prided himself on being a calm and practical man when lots of Inkwells residents were very much not.

And he liked it that way. People were too much effort and as such for many years he had been content with all of his interactions being professional ones. People would buy stuff, chat, then leave. It worked well for him.

In any scenario, Porkrind did not get emotional over a man he only met days ago. Especially not self proclaimed swindlers like Dice.

“It’s because he became friends with Dice too! Right Porkrind?” Cuphead pushed. “Tell them!”

“Yeah tell em’!” Mugman echoed, nudging the pig.

Porkrind cleared his throat. Damn the kid’s child like innocence. They couldn't read the room like an adult could. No one was asking about *friendship*. They wanted to know something else. Porkrind silently wished the floor would swallow him up much like it had Dice many times before. That would be nice right now.

“I know he’s... changed.” was all the pig said in response. A guarded answer. Nothing like his usual blunt, unapologetic tone.

It raised even more questions than answers.

“Changed? Ha! Ya’ really believe that?” Beppi laughed. “Porkrind old pal! I never thought you’d get so soft!”

The Pig shrugged, frustrated.

“Alright. I might be wrong. Might not be. Shoot me for it. But all I do know is we’ll never find out the truth if he’s trapped down in Hell for all eternity.” Porkrind bit back, trying to fake the facade of a passive third party. It wasn’t exactly working, he suspected. He could feel the blush in his cheeks as his face grew hot.

Djimmi stood still for a moment, contemplating what he heard. He turned to Cuphead and his brother.

“You two boys... You gave me a second chance. No, you gave all of Inkwell a second chance. We all would have been indebted to the Devil for the rest of our days if you hadn’t stood up to him.”

The genie sighed.

“If you want to give Mister Dice this freedom too, I will assist you.”

The boys whooped and hollered at the others words.

“Yes! Then you can do it?” Cuphead perked up as flung an arm around his brother, giddy.
Mugman’s face had a toothy grin on it as he hugged back. Porkrind noted that even Mr. Sterling, who had smartly remained silent thought this conversation, had a reserved smile on his face.

“I… Suppose I have no choice.” He sighed. “I will do everything in my power to try for you children.”

Porkrind knew that wasn’t true. He was a powerful trickster. He could twist that wish into whatever he wanted. But he wouldn’t. He cared for the children - and they cared about Dice a whole lot. Probably more than the conman deserved, but Porkrind was thankful nonetheless.

Despite himself, Porkrind felt a small smile tug at the corners of his mouth too. This whole plan; just maybe it could actually work. His face quickly fell again as he saw that Beppi staring at him, same smug smile plastered on his face as before.

*Damn clown.*

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It was all happening so fast now. Dice could hardly process what was going on around him.

Staff that he hadn’t talked to since his escape flocked to him, all giving their praises and good wishes. Some felt more genuine than others. Either way, they all had their own motives. It was almost insulting how easy it was for them to pretend that this was in any sense normal. Like Dice wasn’t being dragged down the aisle by a beast. If he had ever wondered how disingenuous his lackeys really were, now he certainly knew.

“It’s so good to see you back to your own self, boss.’” Chips offhandedly mentioned at Dice’s calm demeanour, as they were walking through caverns of Hell. He didn’t dignify the stupid comment with an answer. It was clear to all he was in shock. As he was being guided to the portal they’d enter to get to the church, Dice noted he wasn’t just being escorted by a few imps this time. Wheezy and Chips both stood calm but stern at his side, feeling more like prison wardens than his own staff. The Devil wasn’t taking any chances of his bride fleeing again.

There would be no running this time.

He faltered as he stepped through the portal and back into the chapel. Memories flooded him and he felt woozy. The place pulsed with a dark magic; the same that had possessed him. Clearly the Devil had sunk his claws into the place once more. The whole church felt rancid and corrupt. He looked at the pew in front of him. When Dice saw the blood stains still splattered on the seat, his heart skipped a beat. Where was the priest now? Dice could only hope he’d had the sense to flee.

“Ya’ know? I think things are gonna get better around here once you two tie the knot, Boss.” One of the Tipsy Troop had slurred, as they shuffled around the church, booze in hand. Of course they would be the caterers. They placed the rows of alcoholic beverages on a long wooden table that hadn’t been there his last visit.

Dice made a b-line for it, ignoring Wheezy’s warnings to stay by his side and instead taking a long swig out of the first bottle he laid eyes on. A black glass bottle with a green lid. He cringed as he realised he had grabbed some absinthe. It burned terribly and did nothing to calm his nerves. God he hated the stuff. Chips appeared beside him and took the bottle out of his hands. His lackey then placed a hand on the crook of Dice’s arm, steering them back to where they were heading.

“Easy, partner. We can drink later.” Chips said.

Dice followed.
“I know it’s not the most ideal of circumstances, but! Hey! Ain’t this what you always wanted?!” Mr. Chimes chipperly sung to him, as Dice was sitting in a side room behind the chapel. He looked down at the monkey, who had banged his symbols between every word for emphasis. The crashing noise made him flinch every time.

King Dice suppressed the urge to punt the little retch across the room. He never really talked to the chimp much and now he was remembering why. He breathed a sigh of relief when Wheezy escorted him out of the room, sensing Dice’s foul mood growing.

“Don’t mind him, Chimes.” Dice heard Wheezy mutter around the dimly glowing cigar nub shoved in his mouth as he was closing the door. “The Boss is just nervous, ya’ know? Pre-marriage jitters and whatnot.”

Dice held back a scoff. He felt many things right now. Rage, betrayal. Regret. A deep dread that pierced his very heart. But nervousness about getting hitched wasn’t one of them. Turning to the table in front of him, he brought his attentions back to what he was supposed to be doing. Getting ready to walk down the aisle. Right.

Picking up a brush he fell into routine, applying powder to his face. Then, blush. Eyeshadow followed and then mascara. It was something he’d done a million times and luckily even though his mind was floating somewhere in space right now, his hands still knew what to do. Muscle memory was a heck of a thing.

As Wheezy went to close the door, a gloved hand stopped him and stepped inside.

“Hows everythin’ going Boss?” Chips asked as he walked in the room.

“Just swell.” Dice bit back, sarcasm dripping off his words. Chips sighed. Dice didn’t bother looking away from the mirror in his compact.

“Uhh… Ok, that's good.” Chips replied, obviously not sure how to respond. He sat down beside Dice. “Hey Boss, me and some of the boys were just wonderin’ who you were plannin’ to walk you down the aisle? We all wanna’ of course, but it's up to you to pick.”

Dice turned to him, surprised. He hadn’t even thought about that. Or any part of the actual ceremony for that matter. Still, words couldn't fully express how much he didn’t care. It would be like getting to pick the man who swung the axe at your execution. Sure you have the choice, but the outcome is the same.

“It don’t matter.” Dice waved dismissively. “Do me a solid and figure it out amongst yourselves.”

“Boss with respect we’ve tried that. It’s gettin’ pretty heated out there.” Chips said, scratching his head.

Dice inhaled slowly. The imagery of his goons standing around fighting over who got to drag him down the aisle was one that made his blood boil. Of course they all were thinking about getting some brownie points in with the soon to be second in command of Hell.

“And I said I’m busy!” Dice snapped as he slammed his compact of blush shut, the managerial tone feeling familiar and comforting on his tongue. If he tried hard enough he could pretend it was just another Friday at the casino and he was shouting at Chips for something frivolous. He stood up, staring the other down. “Sort it out before I go out there. Or damned if I’ll make you all regret it.”
Chips just nodded shakily.

“Got it Boss. I’ll get right on it, Boss.”

Dice heard the door shut. He walked away from his seat, stretching. He grimaced at the way his wedding dress constricted against his chest. The garment had been fun a few hours ago, but now it just was cumbersome and restricting.

Looking up, he noticed Wheezy was still in the room. The man had said very little since they entered the church. Not that Dice was complaining, he liked the newfound silence.

“You gonna beg me the honour too, Wheez?” Dice drawled, noting how the man’s face grew dark.

“Not gonna beg you for the privilege of handing you over to that beast, no.” The other spat back.

Dice nodded. Ah, of course. Wheezy’s little jealous streak wouldn’t be liking this scenario at all. Nevertheless his lackey was at a stalemate. The only way Dice would stay is if he got hitched. If he wasn’t forced by the Devil, he’d still be on the surface, free.

Either way, none of those scenarios contained Wheezy.

Still, Dice felt little empathy for the man. He had a chance to be free at one point, too. Only he didn’t bother to take it like Dice had.

“Well that’s mighty tough luck then, because I’m choosing you.” Dice smiled coolly.

Wheezy looked up at his Boss, surprise then spite filling his face.

“You son of a...” The man hissed. “Are you making it your personal mission to make everyone in this place hate you? Cause you’re doing a real fine job of that.”

“Not everyone,” Dice sneered, “only you.”

Wheezy went to speak back, but both were caught off guard when the lights flickered above their heads. The pulsing of the lighting was hypnotising and only grew stronger and more frequent as time passed.

“It’s the boss.” Wheezy said. “He’s here.”

Dice felt the blood drain from his face.

“Ceremony’s gonna start any minute.” Wheezy stated, his tone cold. “Get ready.”

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When the veil was placed over his head, it felt more like a blindfold. It was thick and he swore it kept trying to wrap around his throat, despite Chip’s reassurances that it looked fine and wasn’t moving.

Against his better judgement that told him no one was coming to save him this time, his eyes kept drifting to the chapel doors. How comforting it was to imagine them swinging open and the boys standing there, guns raised. There was no way they could win against all the ‘guests’ of this wedding, but a man could dream.

As he was positioned at the end of the isle, he felt a hot body by his side. The smell of tobacco filled his lungs and he turned to look at Wheezy. The man was smouldering, his rage clearly bubbling beneath his surface.
“Well. I’m here Boss.” Wheezy said, voice mocking. He looped an arm around Dice’s own, slightly too tightly to be friendly. “Ain’t that what you wanted?”

Dice just nodded. Strangely enough, the other man’s presence was comforting. Wheezy was one of his oldest employees, so perhaps it wasn’t so surprising. Despite their constant butting of heads, he was undeniably familiar.

It was with a stumble he began to walk down the aisle.

A strange music was playing as he made his way to the front. It was some sort of summoning incantation, he was sure. This wasn’t your run of the mill wedding, after all. It served a purpose.

He was surprised when he looked up and saw the priest, standing at the end. The man looked like a husk and his eyes dully regarded him. Dice was sure the other couldn’t see his face past the veil, but he flashed him an apologetic look anyway. Poor son of a bitch shouldn’t have been dragged into this.

He could only hope that the wedding didn’t require a sacrifice.

Then as he reached the end, the man of the hour himself appeared.

There was no fanfare like there had been with Dice. The Devil merely stumbled out, hooves and ragged nails clicking against the wooden floors as he walked on all fours. Dice swallowed thickly. The beast looked even more sickly then when he had seen him last and it made his chest feel tight.

As the Devil got closer, the stench of decay permeated from him. Dice fought against his instinct to recoil. The Devil stopped once he was mere inches away from his face.

Then, the Devil then ripped the veil off with a crude yank. Dice’s eyes flashed in annoyance but he didn’t move. He supposed the Devil hardly had the dexterity right now to carefully lift the lace over his face, but he still bristled with indigence anyway.

Dice then noticed the Priest had been handed something. A rod, intricately carved with markings and other strange symbols. It hummed with a strange power as he slowly waved it from side to side. An imp took the device away after a few minutes. The Priest then took a step forward, looking down at the small book he held in his hands.

“Usually I’d read something here, but I’ve been told to get straight to the point.” The Priest said. His bitter tone told all how he really felt about this arrangement but Dice knew he didn’t dare speak out of line.

The Priest turned to the Devil, hesitant.

“What you-”

The low growl from the beast promptly answered the others question.

“R-right.” The priest muttered as turned to Dice. “King Dice. Do you take this entity’s hand in marriage?”

Dice looked at the Devil, his pale glassy eyes staring into his very soul. Then the veil, laying on the floor in tatters. The front doors of the chapel, left untouched. No one was coming to save him this time.

“I...”

He bit his tongue and tried again. Tried to keep his mind blank.

“...Yes.”

Whoops and cries were heard from the rows of seats to his right. His employees where cheering and clapping in joy. But he didn’t look at them. No, he didn’t dare take his eyes of the Devil. He could feel something bubbling in him, molten and powerful.

The bond had been sealed.

“I now declare you man and...” the Priest faltered, and a groan of disgust fell from his mouth. “Just kiss already, My part of the deal here is done.” He spat, throwing the book down and turning away.

Dice cursed as the beast scooped him up, drawing their mouths together in a crude parody of a kiss.

“Get off!” Dice spat angrily, trying to push the beast away.

It was then he saw it. A thick black mist began to shroud them. It pulsed and twisted in front of his eyes, slowly changing in colour from a vorpal black to a pleasant sky blue. Soon he noticed it wasn’t just the smoke that was changing; the Devil was too. Overgrown claws receded back, fur became shorter. His stature grew taller as goat like haunches turned into human legs. No longer was he on all fours but standing. Soon he was being cradled not by a beast, but the Devil.

*His Devil.*

It was his Boss. His drinking buddy. His confidant. His partner in crime. The man he’d curse for leaving black hairs on every item of clothing he owned. A man who’d he’d consoled more times than he could count on both hands, saying soft words as hot red tears spilled down the Devil’s cheeks. Not that he’d ever admit that to a living soul, of course. He looked into those familiar yellow eyes. They were round and owlish as they looked back at him.

The Devil blinked. Dice blinked back. The two stayed like that for a while, frozen in each others presence. Neither believing what they saw.

“Ya look nice, Dice.” The Devil finally said, breaking the silence. He was slightly hoarse, but apart from that it sounded just how Dice remembered.

Dice knew after everything he should kick and curse. He wanted nothing more than to kill this man mere hours ago and yet all he felt in this moment was awe. He was really there. In front of him. Dice reached a shaky hand out, plunging it into the thick fur on his chest. The rest of him followed, as he realised he was being pulled into a hug. He let the other drag him into the embrace.

“Boss...” Dice muttered into his shoulder, awe and hatred mixing in his stomach into something intangible. “S’ really you.”

“Yeah its me, Dice.” The Devil assured. “It’s me.”

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