Summary

When Judy gets her dream assignment on earth the last thing she expects is a nightmare. A crisis, an enemy operative with his own mission, and souls gone missing. With no support, she’s left to make a terrible choice: failure, or a deal with a demon. With damnation and apocalypse looming, can she trust a demon with a fox’s smile?

Notes

This is a collaborative effort between myself and TheWyvernsWeaver. In a fit of mutual inspiration, this brainchild came into being. Gods only know how, but I don’t care. It's too good to not write. Reviews and feedback are always welcome. On we go!
Nick checked his pockets one last time as the door closed behind him. His wallet, phone and Coins were all where they should be, as was his Collar. Amused distain flitted across his face as he graced the oily metal scales with his touch as though still unused to their feeling against his fur. To the casual eye, it was a rather suggestive piece of jewelry. Out of place, perhaps, but not unattractive as it rested snugly on his neck. It lent mystique to the figure who wore it, or so the mammals he passed on the street believed. Quite a few of those mammals looked for longer than was strictly necessary or polite. He was not concerned. It was only to be expected that he would attract attention of a sort. His kind often did.

As he made his way along the sidewalk, a spark of indigo flame ignited on the tip of his claw and it kiss the cigarette in his lips to life before vanishing. The walk from his hotel to the bar was not a long one, but Nick took his time. It had been a long, long time since he had been this little slice of reality. Too long. There was something about the place that he simply could not get enough of. During his long life he had spent as much time as he could there. It was just so satisfying; the smells, the sights, the textures. The flavors. Yes, the flavors of this place were certainly worth the trip all on their own.

He took a moment to recall his latest flavor, a lovely young vixen he’d found as a celebratory treat for himself last night. When he had arrived, he knew immediately what he wanted; what he had been deprived of by his imprisonment for far too long. One thing that the infernal wardens knew all too well was how to deprive their prisoners. He had missed the thrill of the hunt for all that time imprisoned. The previous evening was a good start on making up for lost time. As was the rest of the night. And morning. He did feel a small touch of pity for the poor thing, but only a touch. He had devoted the better part of his life to carnal pursuits and his skill reflected that.

He also still had her number, so if he needed a snack (and she wasn’t too broken) he could have a second helping. That might not be necessary, as so many other dishes made their way past him on the street. This city was a veritable paradise as far as the fairer gender were concerned. Perhaps he would be doing himself a disservice by taking seconds, when there were so many exquisite delicacies to sample. His musings carried him to the bar and through the door to the scent of smoke, violets and lust.

Once inside, he was met with the sight of his comrade in arms. The little fennec fox was sitting on a stool at the bar, propped up by a pair of telephone books, surrounded by empty beer glasses as tall as he was. The bartender, a morose looking dromedary, looked uncomfortable as he placed another in
front of his smallest customer and snatched his hand back. Finny had a tendency to snap at anyone who got too close, especially anyone who touched his booze.

As he slid into his seat, he made sure to brush the crabby fox with his hip. “Hello, Finn. Didn’t go for the booster seat this time?”

“Screw you, Wilde.”

“You’re not my type.” Nick replied languidly.

“The only being in three realms that fits that description, from what I’ve seen,” Finn groused into his quickly emptying mug.

Nick grinned suggestively. “You want to change that, big guy?”

“Hell, no!” he sputtered. “You keep that harpoon of yours away from me!”

“Don’t worry. I will.” Nick assured the smaller predator, waiting until he had a mouth full of beer before adding, “You’d pop if we did, anyway.”

Nick did so love tormenting the little creature. He was small and feisty with a fuse so short it was practically non-existent. A spray of beer and cursing was followed shortly by a wad of oiled canvas slapping into Nick’s chest.

“My gear?”

“What else would it be, pervert?”

“Your dignity?”

Finn snarled, “You have what you came here for, Wilde. Leave.”

It was one thing to play games. It was another entirely to attempt to give orders. Nick had a great tolerance for many things, but insubordination was not one of them. That was how he had attained his rank in the first place.

As he spoke, he began to slowly lift the veil on his power and let them seep out. “I think you might be forgetting who’s in command here, short stuff.”

“What? You think I’m taking orders from you? If that’s what you think you can sho- oh- ho…”

Now that the effects of his power were being felt, there was no need for subtlety. The seep became a flow and it was felt. “I can what, Finn? Do I need to demonstrate why I’m the one giving orders? Perhaps by demonstrating what I can do?”

“No! no. I’m- um… I’m good. Uh, Sir?”

Finnick was bad at the whole formality thing and Nick used that to his advantage ruthlessly. “You sure? Because I could make you beg for what you just turned down and my Collar wouldn’t even register the power I’d need to do it. Are you sure you don’t want to see if you’d… pop?”

“Please, no…” His cringing was cute.

“So, we understand each other, do we?”

“Yes, sir!”
Nick let the power slip back under the veil and he leaned back on his barstool. “Finn, I have no issue with you hanging out here and drinking your way through this tour. I can take care of this idiotic job myself, but if you challenge for rank, I promise you the internet will be flooded with more Fennec fox porn than you can even imagine and you’ll be starring in all of it. You may not have anything riding on this, but I do. Either help, or stay out of the way until I give you orders. Either is fine by me. You cause me problems and you will hurt for it. All the way back home.”

“It’s not my fault your dumb ass backed the losing side in a coup.” The fennec grumbled bitterly before shooting the rest of his mug and banging on the bar top for another. “You have no one to blame for that but yourself. Your fault.” The smaller fox spit the last words with undisguised venom.

Nick was not impressed, or phased. “Of course, it was! That was just a lark. The brass just has no sense of humor. Five centuries was way too long a sentence for something so minor.”

“Something so minor. Yeah. It only cost you your rank, smartass.”

“And yet, I still outrank you. Something to think about.” Finnick growled as Nick slid off his stool and headed for the door. He could hear liquid being guzzled as he walked away. “Thanks for this, Finn. I’ll be in touch. Try to sober up once in a while, you little imp you.”

The door swung shut on Finn bellowing for another round and Nick smiled. Another successful meeting with his team. A cigarette bloomed into fiery life between his lips as he meandered back towards his hotel room. He had his gear to look over and a few minor things to do before he had to get to work, but first, he was feeling a bit peckish. If that vixen was still around maybe he’d have those seconds. It did not pay to work on an empty stomach, after all.
“I don’t care who recommended you. I don’t care what your expertise was at Officer’s School. I don’t care how good your grades were and I don’t care who pinned your bars on your shoulders.”

Judy stood ramrod straight as she had her situation laid out for her.

“Yes, Hopps, we do have a major operation underway and it is not your concern. Your job is not a part of it. In. Any. Way. You were sent here to my team so you could get experience as an expert on the culture and characteristics of this city, not so you could interfere in an ongoing operation!”

She hadn’t thought her request was unreasonable at the time, but as her superior officer ranted, she was forced to reconsider. She had hoped to lend another pair of paws to the problem, but it was sounding more and more like she was a liability than an asset.

“You are too inexperienced to handle anything beyond learning the basics of living in this society. You haven’t even gotten used to being here, yet!”

Her Commanding Officer was right. Adapting to her current circumstances was proving a more challenging task than she had anticipated. The grooming and maintenance alone was a considerable amount to learn in practical terms. She’d read about all of it, of course, but the reading and the doing were not the same. It all took so much time! Apparently, that was normal, especially for females, but really… it was bordering on the absurd!

“I’m sure I will get faster with practice, sir!”

“And better at it, but that is not the point! Do you honestly believe you are fit to assist experienced officers in the field when you only barely blend in?”

“I have years of experience in the field elsewhere, sir. My tracking and recovery record is in the ninety fourth percentile.”

“Be that as it may. Then and there you had a record. Here and now, you have a lot to learn before you can be allowed to work on your own safely and I can’t spare any of my other officers to assist
you with your transition. Until that changes, you will follow protocol and complete your transition unassisted. That means no operational assignments until you are competent to my satisfaction. Now, get out.”

Half an hour later, Judy sat at a coffee table. She looked much less like an unmade bed in a wind storm and passed easily enough for a denizen of her assigned area. Item number six on her checklist of tasks for acclimation entailed getting coffee and a Danish at a café and spending time observing the average mammal to hone her behavioral camouflage. Mammal watching. Riveting.

Not that she wasn’t fighting the giddiness of finally being in the city. She was barely able to contain herself. It was Zootopia! The crowning achievement of Mammalia in the last two hundred years; an apex achievement in cultural development. She was there! At last! Judy could not wait to get some leave so she could dig into everything the city had to offer, but that was a reward as yet unearned. Leave was granted following achievement, necessity for medical, psychological or emotional health reasons, or time expended in the Service. She had only just arrived, so the first and third didn’t apply. The second was something she hoped to avoid as long as possible. Rather than grouse like a petulant child, she set about doing her job.

She lasted roughly ten minutes before her tablet was up, on and pulling all files from the mainframe for current operations. As an assigned member of the team, even if in transition, she had access and a responsibility to know what was going on in case of an emergency. Her interest in getting up to speed had nothing to do with her total disinterest in her “important task” of watching llamas cross the street. An hour passed and she was hazarding another trip to the counter for another tea with lemon when she saw something that made her fur stand on end.

Among the files she had received as part of her deployment was a long list of known enemy operatives. She had given it a cursory once-over, focusing on the red-flagged items. There was plenty for her to catch up on, already, so a quick scan of the pictures and cover pages was enough for her initial review. She had a good visual memory. She was glad she did.

One of them just walked, more accurately sauntered, past the window of the café. A red fox with fever bright green eyes. In the time it took her to shake off her astonishment and race to the door the phantom enemy operative had vanished into the crowd.

She was sure of it.

Judy scampered back to her seat and pulled up the file, again. She was astonished at what she found. There was nothing but a grainy, distorted photograph and brief description on the initial assessment sheet. The rest of the sheet said nothing. Name, unknown. Status, unknown. Rank, Powers, Associates, Faction and History entries on the initial assessment sheet, all unknown. The only other entry of substance in the file was the tag on the top card flagging the subject as a class 5 threat, extremely dangerous.

It was a meagre file on its own, but the associates number of case files and incident reports was staggering. File after file added to the queue as the search engine worked its way through the mainframe and archives. The more she read, the more horrified she became. Plenty of sightings and circumstantial evidence, but nothing conclusive and concrete evidence. Whoever this character was, he was a serious problem. If he was in the city he was probably involved in their current situation.

The operative, called Wraith in the file, was accredited with a distressingly long list of successful missions. Unfortunately, all his successes were at her people’s expense. If he were on her people’s side, he’d be decorated and honored within an inch of his life. As it was, he was reviled, and yet his file didn’t even have a name.
He was a monster.
And a mystery.
And in the city.

“Sir, I know what I saw.”

“Do you?” Bogo didn’t even look up. “You saw a fox after reading a file on a fox and matched them up. It’s a rookie mistake.”

“So, all foxes around here smell like brimstone? That one did.”

Side-eye was a step up, but not by much. “Are you sure?”

“It was faint, but present on the air.” The water buffalo’s flat expression communicated his unimpressed state. She pressed, “You are well aware that any form of falsehood will cause me pain.”

“Yes. That carryover from your last posting…” Bogo leaned back in his chair. “Let us say, purely for the sake of discussion, that this fox you saw was Wraith. What do you propose we do about it?”

“I’m a tracker, sir. I can hunt him.”

“Did you completely forget the conversation we had here, in this office, less than two hours ago?”

“But…”

“The one where you agreed that you were too inexperienced to be allowed to operate on your own and I don’t have the spare personnel to assist you?”

“Sir…”

“The one where you were ordered to finish your acclimation and transition procedure before attempting anything else?”

“Sir!”

“Did you?”

Her CO didn’t raise his voice even a decibel through the whole thing. He didn’t have to. He had her dead to rights.

“No, sir.”

“You didn’t? Good!” Sickly sweet and condescending; every syllable. “Then this conversation has only one obvious conclusion.”

“What is that, Sir?”

He leaned in and stared hard, growling, “You go back to finishing. Your. Transition.”

“What about the fox?”

“I will assign another officer to look into it when and if we are able to, once this operation is concluded.”

Judy could see she had already been dismissed in his mind, but had to try. “Sir, he may be involved!”
“Possible. However, not your concern. The officers assigned will be informed that Wraith may be present and possibly involved. They will keep an eye out for him and report in. If he is confirmed as present we will proceed from there.” Reading glasses perched on his muzzle, he turned fully back to his paperwork. “I take it I am making myself crystal clear this time, Hopps?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Now, go.”

Judy left her superior officer’s office and leaned back against the wall by the door. She needed a moment. This was exactly the sort of bureaucratic buck-passing that she had left her old position to get away from. It was bad enough that her old coworkers thought theirs was the only work of value in the universe, regardless of its actual importance, but here she had hope to find something more rewarding. Possibly fulfilling? At least, she had hoped that she would be taken seriously.

The last shred of hope for that vanished as her hyper-acute hearing picked up her boss grumbling into his phone. "I don't care what orders that sow received! If she's not reading the situation reports when she's assigning assets, she needs replacing. Swinton is as useless as wings on a frog and if this is the result of her incompetence I will personally prove that pigs CAN fly, when I drop kick her through the pearly gates! I need seasoned personnel. Why did I have to get saddled with a brainless rabbit and now, of all times? She hasn’t even been here a day and she thinks she’s found something big. As if I didn’t have enough problems…”

Her arms flopped against her sides. It was always the same. She would have to prove herself, again. And again. And again, before they gave her a shred of respect. The fastest way to accomplish that was to prove herself once and she had an opportunity in front of her to do exactly that. She headed back to her apartment to prepare.

There was technique involved in the finding and taking down of enemies. Step one, know them. That was impossible in this case, as his file was one sheet and a photo. She wouldn’t have time to research him, either. If he was that good and that secretive, her surveillance would prove fruitless.

Step two, prepare suitably for the target. That was also impossible. Her heavier-grade gear was under lock and key until her transition was signed off on. The rest of her personal collection was in transit along with the rest of her personal effects. She had her standard issue body armor and the one weapon set that had been modified for her.

Step three, Choose the hunting ground. That she could manage. She knew she could find him and once she did, it was a stalk. Wait for her quarry to pass into a place she could claim the upper paw and she was all but assured to win. She had a secret weapon: she was not as strong as she looked. She was stronger. Much. Her small stature generally led opponents to underestimate her, to their pain. A surprise attack and his presumption would see the Wraith brought down and her reputation climbing. It was a start and a start was all she needed.
The hunt had not been kind to her. Judy had been forced to spend several days surreptitiously zeroing in on her prey while not tipping her paw to her boss. Catching the scent of him was a challenge all on its own. Between the alien scents she had to sift through and the pollution, not to mention the numerous foxes that kept snapping her head around, it was several days before she even caught a whiff of brimstone.

A hint on a gust of air as she sat at her now favorite cafe; a tendril wafting by as she got off a bus; a fleeting gust laced with Sulphur and ash. That was all she got for days. She had been sitting miserably on a park bench, absently picking at a salad when he’d appeared again, meandering by without a care in the world. Irritation burned away into elation at the speed of her twitching nose and then she was in her element. This she knew.

The old skills came back, albeit with a bit of alteration. She still wasn’t used to the city, so it was a little awkward at first. This was just stalking her prey. Quickly, she found her groove. The groove became a rut very quickly.

The Wraith was slippery to say the least.

Judy grumbled as she tailed him. It amused her in a twisted way that she was making progress on her transition checklist. Following his path left Judy with a decent amount of opportunities to eat and drink at various places, or experience miscellaneous tidbits in the city proper. That did not compensate her for the moments of panic. If she looked away for just a moment, she would find he’d turned a corner and she’d have to sprint to catch up. If she thought she’d projected his next move, he’d change directions. She couldn’t anticipate him, or manage to flank. His movements were haphazard and yet completely natural. If she didn’t know better, she’d have sworn he was a mortal, himself.

That realization frightened her. He was experienced, she knew, but to see it in action was daunting. His behavior never caused even the most sensitive mammals to bat an eye. That was cause for concern in another way.
Somehow, her prey managed to always be around mortals. It made her plan to trap him exceedingly problematic. On the one hand, involving a mortal was a huge risk. She had no desire to place a mortal in danger, especially when a trapped hellspawn was involved. The fact that she knew almost nothing about her prey only added to her conviction. There was no predicting what he would do when threatened without even knowing what type of demon he was. On the other hand, there was the problem of subtlety. Exposure to the general public was a taboo. Witnesses could be handled in a variety of ways from the mundane to the unsavory, but it was wiser to avoid it in the first place. She needed to get the Wraith into a secluded space with no mortals in the middle of a city loaded with them. No small task.

Judy ground her teeth as she slipped into a shadow across the street from her quarry, as he waltzed into yet another night club. After four days and fifteen hotspots for the city’s nightlife, Judy was questioning if the hunt was worth it. Judy had spent more time in grimy alleyways than she was comfortable with, but still knew nothing of her target’s nature. To know the nature was to know the weakness. Sadly, all she knew so far was he was a demon. He did everything one would expect of any hellspawn newly arrived on the Mortal Plane; booze, food and females.

The fact of casualties during war was nothing new to Judy. She’d seen battlefields and knew the score. That didn’t stop her from wanting to drag the females who accompanied him away, so they wouldn’t get hurt. The wanting and the doing, though, were different.

Judy had watched several females of various species and, sometimes in groups, accompany the fox back to his hotel. They all emerged again later and her senses were unable to detect any demonic corruption. It really did appear they were just… well… Doing what mammals do in hotel rooms, of course. No possessions, enthrallments, or even a watcher spell. Nothing at all.

The absurd idea of a demon on vacation flitted through her mind and was quickly dismissed for two reasons. The first was that no demon would come to the Mortal Plane and just relax, especially during a crisis that may spark open conflict. This was a warzone for both their sides, not a resort. The second reason was that he had just stepped out onto the street.

Alone.

Judy was instantly on guard.

Her target looked the same as he always did. Dark trousers, long coat, no shirt, and a collar by way of clothes. Russet and cream fur, indifferent smirk on his mouth and eyes like jade fire. However, something felt different. There was purpose to his lackadaisical gait and his eyes darted. The air around him crackled with intent. Something was absolutely different. Judy had to take him down before he did whatever he was planning.

The evening was still young. The sun was down, but night hadn’t settled in for the duration just yet. Mammals were scarcer on the street than they had been earlier and this continued as they walked. Before long Judy found herself in what she would call a rougher neighborhood. This was good. Less possibility of collateral damage. It was a tremendous stroke of luck! That feeling only continued as she watched the Wraith strut into a shipping dock area for a defunct industrial building. High walls, sturdy construction, complete isolation and no witnesses. It was a perfect spot for her to attack.

Judy ran a paw over her gear, pulling the taser and loosening the short sword in the scabbard strapped to her back. Elegant, it was not, but the limits enforced to maintain the Wager’s integrity prevented her from using her heavy-duty powers. Illusions and subtleties, were allowed. In combat, some enhancements and low-grade combat magic were acceptable. Anything higher grade was limited to twenty seconds, up to full manifestation. A fully angelic presence in the Mortal Plane was an instant death sentence.
Fortunately, there were advantages. A mortal form meant mortal weaknesses. A stun gun was a hopelessly poor weapon against any form of demon, unless they were here. Here and now it would be enough to at least distract him. Then, her short sword could come into play. With any luck, she’d be able to hurt him enough to subdue him and bring him in. If not that, then she should be able to hurt him enough to affect a speedy escape.

She had everything she needed for a successful capture on a lesser hellspawn and options for escape if he turned out to be a greater demon. At the very least, she would get information she could use for the next time. Even a bit more insight into Wraith would be valuable.

Judy was not prepared for him to speak.

“Any time you’re ready, sweetheart.”

Shaking off her surprise, she hazarded a peek around the edge of the building. The fox stood in the center of the space, perfectly relaxed and fiddling with his phone. For a moment Judy was sure he had been speaking to someone else.

“Listen, rabbit, I haven’t got all night.”

And that idea went out the window. A flare of divine power coursed through her and she was sprinting at the edge of sound.

“Finally.”

Her paw was stopped in mid-air, as was the rest of her. Her forearm was held in an iron grip, the taser’s electric arc was dancing its jig just close enough to her target’s neck to singe fur. So close. Her body twisted and her foot impacted his arm just below the elbow. The grip loosened and she landed with her short sword already clearing the sheath. Her first swing hit nothing but air, as did her follow up and the tertiary strike with the taser left her with one hand empty. The taser tumbled through the air and cracked hard against the concrete. The blue smoke leaking from the chassis indicated it was dead, but neither rabbit nor fox was paying attention.

Her initial assault had failed. She had to either commit, or run. Her decision was made as soon as she clapped eyes on his condescending smile. It was worth the risk. Unsealed, she had twenty seconds of her full power to use without consequence. Ample time to wipe that smirk off his face. She tapped the two bangles on her left wrist and growled their Names. They vanished, as did her restraints and her power flowed through her like a flood. She wasn’t manifesting, but she was close. Ample power to crush one obnoxious demon.

The fox screamed. For a breath she was sure of her victory.

Then he laughed. “Really, Carrots? Do they still teach you dopes that we cower in the presence of divine light? This isn’t a fairy tale.”

Judy goggled. He was completely unaffected. He was mocking her!

A bell chimed warning her that half her time was past. Half her time wasted! As Judy gathered herself to charge, a pebble smacked into her nose. Her eyes snapped closed and her paw went to the injury. Another pebble bounced off her paw and another, her shin. By the time she shook off the pain and surprise, the second bell chimed. The bangles were back around her wrist and her power was sealed until dawn.

Judy was horrified.
Now, are you done?”

Judy struck. She was angry. She had been stopped cold at the height of her power and by a few pebbles. The humiliation was more than she could bear. At least this time she was connecting. Sparks flew as her blade time and again met the palm of his hand. Their dance was brief, but vicious as Judy pulled out all the stops to split his flesh. She was unsuccessful.

Her anger pushed her to over extend a strike and her exposed flank met demonic fist. Judy found herself gasping for air as she knelt on the ground.

“Carrots, why are we doing this?”

His openly feigned ignorance spurred Judy into another assault. Her ribs hurt, probably bruised. Another burst of power compensated, but she was slower in her movements. She found encouragement in that her slashes and thrusts were connecting. She pushed herself to move faster and put more strength into her attacks. Thus, her lack of experience with possessing flesh caught up with her.

All too soon she was panting and her limbs were heavy. As she gasped for breath, she took stock of her sorry state. She was dead on her paws, muscles shaking from fatigue. Her breathing was labored. She could barely keep her head up.

As she stood there she finally looked at something that she realized should have been important. All this time he had been stopping her divine blade with just the palm of his hand. That made absolutely no sense. Her sword should have cleaved the limb to the shoulder on the first strike. By rights, he should have been a pile of screaming ribbon after the punishment she had dealt out. Instead, he was standing there, looking at her sardonically. Her eyes flitted to his paw.

Metal coated his palm. It looked gangrenous and ashen in the limited light as it looped around his obsidian claws. There was no pattern to it. Craggy spurs and threads of oily mineral traced across the expanse and flowed up his wrist, only to vanish under his sleeve. It was a horrible mockery of flesh and bone, assembled by a perversely lunatic mind. Perfect for a demon.

“You like?” He queried, holding up his paw and wiggling it. The light glistened on the random collection of metal flesh and Judy gagged. “No? So, are you ready to talk to me like a civilized mammal, now, or do you want to just attack me again?”

Judy would not rise to the bait. Conversing with demons was the first step to temptation. She had made every other rookie mistake this night, but she would not make that one! She had to have some form of self-respect.

“Alright, little angel, you just wobble there and pant. I’ve got places to be. Buh-Bye!”

That said, she couldn’t let him escape. If he was willing to talk, she could get information. “Demon!”

“Oh! So, you aren’t a mute. Yes?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Are you a really delayed echo, or something? We’re here because you’ve been following me for almost a week and I got tired of waiting for you to find the spine to make a move. Would you care to tell me why you’ve been following me?”

“Because you’re responsible for the lost souls!”
“I’m what.”

“You heard me, demon.”

“You really like that word, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You’ve used it twice as often as literally every other word I’ve ever heard you use.”

“Stop distracting me and tell me how you’re siphoning off the souls.”

“That’s funny. I was going to ask you the same thing. My people are convinced it was your side’s doing.”

“We would never!”

“Sure, you wouldn’t.” He did nothing to hide his eye roll. “Figures...” he muttered before making to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you, dumb bunny? Here, lesson time! You claim your side isn’t responsible for the situation and you can’t lie. Correct?”

“Yes! Wait a second. How do you know that?”

“Now, I know my side isn’t smart enough to pull this off. If they had, they’d be too busy bragging to accomplish anything as sophisticated as create a smokescreen. Also, they wouldn’t have sent me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m too high a risk for them to send on a minor errand, like a few missing souls.” The demon flexed his paw and muttered, “Alright, we’re done here.” The armor haphazardly gracing his paw turned to liquid and receded under his cuff as he turned to leave.

Judy’s eyes bugged, both at the armor and the unsettling sense that he was telling the truth. His dossier, equipment and the proof of his skill was overwhelming. The record of his accomplishments was extensive. He had engaged her on her own terms and beat her without breaking a sweat, using one paw and a handful of rocks. Then there was the armor.

Living metal weapons were a relic of the War. Ancient, powerful and sentient. They were very rare and, supposedly, extremely picky about whom they served. The myth of warriors communing with their weapons and building rapport with them began with those armors. In this case they were not simply objects to be used. They were a symbiotic relationship and ally. One that could be lost if not treated to their standard. Judy had never seen one before, but the stories she’d heard were legion. Any demon possessing one was to be avoided by any but the High Seraphs.

As her mind churned over the implications, Judy almost missed her opponent traipsing off. Realizing her gaff, she scrambled to catch up. He had apparently decided their conversation was over. She sheathed her short sword and drew a dagger as she raced to block his path. Her forte was the longer blade, but the dagger was a more dynamic weapon against larger enemies. She had a better chance of causing him some injury, though on a smaller scale.

The demon sighed. “What do you want, now, rabbit?”
“I’m not letting you leave without answering some questions.”

“A moment ago, you refused to speak to me. Now, you want a chat? Are all angels bi-polar, or is it just you?” So saying, he moved to brush past her on her unarmed side.

Spinning on her heel, she drove the pommel of her dagger into his side with a back fisted hammer strike. She was satisfied at having finally hit him. It was a small thing, but it was at least proof he had underestimated her a little.

The demon grunted and winced at the impact. That bought her time to block his path and fall into a solid position to defend from. When he looked up, she saw he was in a much less pleasant mood. She smiled into his now pitch-black eyes.

“Like I said, you aren’t going anywhere until I get answers.”

“Alright. You got in your little face-saving blow. Good for you. I’ll give you a chance to ask one question. If it’s good enough, I won’t rip you apart, feather by feather.”

It was time for a really, really big gamble. “If your side isn’t blocking the soul traffic and my side isn’t then who is?”

Slowly, the black bled out of his eyes. By the time the green was back, his expression was pensive. “An excellent question. I can’t claim to know that. I also presume that you are unaware?”

“Obviously. Until a moment ago, I was sure you were the culprit.”

“True.” He rubbed his lip, contemplatively. “When I find out, I’ll take care of both our problems, then.”

“You think I’ll leave something this important to a demon? You could steal whatever it is and use it against us!”

“Those are my orders, if it’s possible, but not really anything you can do anything about.” He smirked at her indignant stammering and leaned in. “Your side must be desperate to have someone as green as you on this case. After what just happened, do you think you could possibly keep me in check?”

“I know I can hurt you.”

“And I know I’ll never give you another opportunity. You blew your element of surprise and I won’t underestimate you again. Now, what do you think you can offer to make this anything but a joke?” Judy was stymied and could do nothing but watch as she slipped past her. “Like I said, I’ll take care of it. Oh, and you really should pay better attention.”

Judy looked up at those words and saw her dagger in his paw. He waggled it playfully before spinning it through his fingers like a baton and snapping his arm down. The blade rammed into the concrete floor of the dockyard point first and slid in to the hilt. The impact sent spiderweb cracks radiating out from the hilt as it struck.

Impossible. Utterly impossible. Demons were not able to handle divine weapons. Any angelic weapon would burn the corruption out of whatever they touched, yet he wasn’t even singed. This demon was more than a puzzle. He was a nightmare! Absurdly dangerous and powerful, for a start. Any sane mortal, angel or even demon, would thank their lucky stars never to meet such a being. She should be thrilled to be walking away from an altercation with him with only a few sore ribs and an equally bruised ego to show for it.
However, in that same altercation she had more than tripled the information in his dossier. She had him talking. It was a once in a reality opportunity.

The words were out of her mouth before her mind caught up. “I can offer information!”

He turned enough to cast an eye back over his shoulder. “Oh?”

She had his attention. Now she needed a hook. “I’m sure you know my side monitors demonic presence in the area. Not long ago, all but a few minor demons were recalled from active service. Now, you’re here. You have to be a major power to require that much of a personnel shift.”

“Well! That must be the nicest thing an angel has ever said about me! I’m touched. Do you have a point?”

“You can’t have much in the way of resources, or support. A couple errand-runners, maybe?” He turned to half-face her. She was making progress. “If you’re this strong, playing by such odd rules, and complaining that you’re a high-risk operative, I can only guess that your handlers aren’t doing you any favors. You’re flying blind, aren’t you?”

The silence stretched, taut and uncertain. Now, he was staring. His eyes never wavered, but they were not threatening. If anything, they were amused. Judy was willing to give him that if it bought her more opportunity to observe the Wraith.

At length, he chuckled and the tension blew away like mist in the wind. He lifted a pack of cigarettes to his lips and pulled one free. Indigo flame from a claw saw it lit and a long puff later, he asked, “You got a name, sweetheart?”

“You give me yours, I’ll give you mine.”

“Nick Wilde.”

“Judy Hopps.”

“A pleasure.”

“All yours.”

He barked a laugh. “Alright, Hopps. Why don’t we talk this over in a less combative manner? Dinner?”

“Are you seriously asking me to dinner right now?”

“It’s more civilized than chatting between sword blows. Plus, it’d be an item on your transition checklist, if I’m not mistaken. Having a meal in public with a companion, or something?”

“How do you know about that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Stick around long enough and you learn everything. So, how about it?”

“What do you get out of this?”

“Until we actually talk?” He shrugged. “Nothing but the company of a cute little bunny with angel wings.”

“Don’t call me cute.”
“Yeah, ok.” He exhaled a large puff of smoke which billowed around her. “I’m hungry, angelfluff, so I’m going to get something to eat. If you decide to join me, that’s your call. Just remember, you offered first.”

“Offered what?”

“Information, rabbit. Really? It was two minutes ago!”

Her embarrassment was cut short as she felt a ghostly paw slide over her hip and pinch her right on the rump. She had intended to accompany him for the purpose of information gathering. The information she had offered was a gamble and she would have to play a very careful game. Dealing with a demon and offering information; this could get her branded a traitor and executed very easily. Not to mention Falling. Judy had no desire to become a fallen angel. However, all that was set aside in her mind once her feet touched the ground, again. Now, she was going to follow him just to pummel the smirk off his face for copping a feel like that. The rest would just be gravy.
Chapter 2

Judy was unimpressed as she followed the fox through the door to the diner. It was just that; a diner. Effectively a forgotten piece of the 1950's that no one cleared away when the decade ended, complete with jukebox kiosks at the tables and a laminated specials list that looked like it hadn't been updated since the 50's, either. It was the same hole-in-the-wall that she'd seen Nick enter several times. Usually for morning-after nibbles with an unsteady female companion from the night before.

Watching him as he made his way through the seating room to a table was distressing. He slipped through the relative crowd without a shred of awkwardness. Passing a waitress, a lovely white-tailed deer, he paused to ask a hushed question. Her reply was easily given and before she had made it a third of the way to the booth he had claimed in the corner, he had hung his coat and seated himself.

The lack of shirt didn't seem to faze him at all, or anyone else. If anything, the mammals present had an appreciation for the free show and, in place of any modesty, the fox basked in the attention. Judy had to admit she was impressed. And disgusted. Sort of a disgusted-impressed combo. Not for the first time, she wondered if she was doing anything even remotely sane.

As she settled herself on the opposite, uncomfortable and cracked bench seat, Judy glanced at the ancient clock hanging over the flat-top grill and noticed how late it had gotten. Between chasing him around, the fight and their walk, hours had passed. It was almost eleven o'clock by mortal reckoning.

A lot of those hours had been her trying to beat him for groping her. She suspected he had taken the extremely long way around just to irritate her. The entirety of their trip was made in basic silence, punctuated by flailing attempts by her to hit him again. It had earned her nothing but a few condescending looks. He never retaliated, for reasons Judy couldn't fathom.
Another puzzle lay in that he had bought her a soda at a vending machine, for some reason. "Caffeine", he'd supplied, but that told her little. A weak stimulant like that would hardly affect her, or so she believed, right up to when her paws started shaking. It wasn't dangerous to her like it would be to a normal rabbit, but it still felt odd. Her body was tired, but she had a massive surplus of energy. Maybe that was why they had walked so far; to burn off some of the excess, as her jitters had settled enough that she wasn't shaking by the time they arrived at the diner. She was appreciative of the lift, but she knew the drop was coming.

Strictly she didn't need sleep, but her body would benefit from the recuperative effects of the act. She could make it a while yet before she felt any real need, but she knew it was "late". A concept she found challenging. Time didn't mean much on the Fringe. However, between the hour, her activities, her injuries and the caffeine drop, she knew she'd be tired enough to sleep within a few hours' time.

She was still unhappy at walking several miles with sore ribs. It was a long way for food. When asked, "the pie" was all he'd said in response. What an unsatisfying answer. Pie was a dessert. Sugary and unimpressive every time that she'd had it. Admittedly, that hadn't been many times, but it was enough to know it bored her.

As they sat, Judy eyed the fox with undisguised consideration. Her gaze ranged over every inch of him, cataloging, assessing and analyzing. Then she'd met his eyes and he'd winked at her. She realized she'd been staring and was suitably embarrassed. Still, she had to keep an eye on him at least and glean whatever information she could from the meeting. That was when her eyes fell on the bracelet.

As he was wearing nothing else above the waist beyond his collar and a smug smile, it drew her eye like a magnet. As she watched, it shifted slightly in a disturbingly vivacious manner that had nothing to do with the fox's arm.

"You're making him uncomfortable."

Judy blinked. "I'm what?"

"You're staring, rabbit. At least introduce yourself. It's only polite."

"I'm sorry. What?"

Rolling his eyes, the demon in red fur leaned forward and held up his wrist bearing the bracelet. It took a moment, but Judy put it together. "Your armor?"

"One piece of it. When he isn't fighting with me, he likes to chill and look pretty, don't you?"

Seeing the demon that had slapped her around with ease cooing at his bracelet like it was a favored pet was possibly the oddest thing she had ever seen. She recoiled slightly as she was treated to a somewhat closer view of the armor at rest than she really wanted.

"Say hello, Lefty."

"Lefty?"

"His name!"

"He's on your right paw."

"There's no need to be pedantic. Just say hello."
Judy waved and smiled weakly as she said, "Hello?"

To her surprise, the bracelet responded. It rippled in the same disturbing way it had at the end of their fight and suddenly a little skeletal paw lifted up and waved at her.

"Huh…"

Her befuddlement only increased as the miniature appendage beckoned her closer. She glanced questioningly at the jewelry's owner and received an encouraging nod.

"He wants to tell you something. Go on."

Judy leaned in and was very glad she was slow about it. As soon as she got close, a tiny set of jaws stretched out on a proboscis and snapped just short of her whiskers. She jerked back as the fox chuckled and the tiny mouth grinned.

"Such a playful little thing, isn't he?"

Before Judy could find her voice, the waitress appeared. The sudden arrival shocked her voice back into uselessness in fear that her moment with the animate, snapping, personal adornment had been observed. Her status as a mute was enhanced as the waitress squealed like a schoolgirl and exclaimed.

"That is lovely. Can I touch it?"

"Sure!"

Before Judy could stop her, her hoof was stroking the metal band. Apparently, the object adored the feeling, as it started purring.

"Is that the bracelet or you?"

"It could be both of us. Your hoof is spending some time on my arm, too."

"Oh! Sorry! I, I'm... um..."

"No worries! I don't mind at all. Candace, was it?"

"Yes! I..." She took a deep breath and shook her head to get herself together. "I'm Candi. I'll be taking care of you this evening.

"Oooh! I can hardly wait."

The doe's blush was obvious even through her brown fur. "Can I get you anything?"

"Mint green tea with lemon for the lady and coffee for me."

"Cream or sugar?"

"Black, sweetheart. I'm sweet enough as it is."

Candi giggled. "I'll be a minute, you two. I need to put a fresh pot on."

"Take your time." Nick was dripping charm and it made Judy want to gag. He amended, "Especially with walking to the kitchen. We don't want you slipping, now." The obvious direction of his gaze and the intent of his words were missed by no one at the table.
Candi sashayed off. Nick's eyes followed her. Judy cleared her throat.

"Yes?"

"Did you want to talk like civilized mammals, or keep ogling her like a barbarian?"

"Feeling jealous already? But, Carrots, we only just met!"

"You wanted to talk. So, talk."

"Alright. A trade, then? What I know and what you know about this little situation, then we go from there?"

"First thing's first, fox."

"Sounds like a children's book."

She was already regretting talking to him. Again. "First, you're going to submit to a truth-finding spell."

"Oh, very good, rabbit. Jumping straight to a binding and interrogation? Why should I allow that?"

"You have something to hide?"

"Are you seriously asking that? Did you watch too many cop dramas for your transition quota or something? Oh, sweet misery, you did, didn't you? Carrots, I'm not agreeing to a truth anything without a proviso or five."

"Anything was better than nothing and she'd get information either way. She just had to make a deal with a demon to get it."

"I'm not giving you anything, so don't bother asking."

"Touchy touchy... I won't ask for anything in return, except a consideration and a limit."

"The consideration?"

"No questions about me, personally."

"The limit?"

"Five questions. It's that or I walk, rabbit."

"You'll gain much if you stay."

"There are limits. Don't think I'm not aware of what you're after. If you want information about me, you can get it the hard way. Any information you can offer me isn't worth the price of you learning my Name, or a few other details. You say no and I'm no worse off than I was."

"True, I suppose. I still need to know if I can trust you."

"Oh, you absolutely can't, but you knew that. I am a demon, after all. You can, however, trust me when it comes to the job."

"How can I know that?"

"You have five questions."
His offered paw hung there as she considered. A deal with a demon. One more step towards temptation. She took it.

Wasting no more time, Judy poured salt on the table from the gaudy glass shaker. With a wave of a paw, it shifted into a simple charm circle with the rune for truth in the center.

"Place your paw over the circle, Palm up. You lie, you hurt."

"I figured as much. Ask away!"

Judy placed her paw over his and began. "How did you know I can't lie?"

"The gold bangle. Only worn by angels of the third circle. Vows against falsehood are a basic part of that gig."

"How did you know about my transition checklist?"

"Oh, come on, Carrots. You think you're the first angel I've spoken to? Live long enough and you learn everything."

"Are you responsible for the lost souls?"

"Sweet misery... no! We covered that, already, Hopps. Try a real question."

"If we work together and you swear to play straight with me, will you keep your word?"

That made him pause and Judy had a moment of terror as his smirk slowly became a grin. "Clever little angel. Yes, but only because you just earned that. Your last question? Make it count." By the end of his answer, his grin was positively devilish.

"Will you swear in good faith not to tempt me?"

"No. I will, however, not use any powers of mine to help me tempt you."

That was a good thing and a bad thing. If he used his power she'd know his Sin, class and type instantly. Alternately, she'd have a much harder time resisting his attempts at temptation. If she hazarded a guess at his Sin, it'd be... a complete shot in the dark.

He was vain and enjoyed indulgence. Those would be envy or gluttony, but that was also every demon. He was obviously arrogant, but with his power and skills, he had reason for it. His proclivity for females made him a good candidate for lust and his lackadaisical attitude was sloth all over. That was five primary sins. He was too easy going to be wrath, otherwise, it'd have shown when she'd hit him. And greed was unaccounted for. Five of seven confirmed, one uncertain and one ruled out. Not a good start.

There was always a chance with a powerful demon that he could mask it. That, or possess more than one. The primary Sin was the key and Judy had no clue which one he was.

Nick lit a cigarette with his claw and Judy was again unsettled. Indigo flame. On the scale of power, indigo was very high. The higher the inherent power, the further up the spectrum the color went. An imp was red to orange, a standard demon could be anything from orange to green. Blue and Indigo was a class above; High Demons, Archdemons, and demonic Nobles. Violet was an indicator of a High Noble demon and white fringe on a violet flame was the Devil himself.

Judy found it ironic that white flame denoted the deepest corruption, but all demonflame carried a
sickly hue about it, like it was festering from within even as it burned.

Lost in thought, Judy missed two things. The waitress returning and the fact that her paw was still resting on his, above the table top.

Naturally, that was when the waitress reappeared, thinking she'd interrupted a moment. Judy had never been so embarrassed. Nick's amusement was endless.

"Don't sweat it, sweetheart. I was just flirting." His wink punctuated his follow up. "I can't help it."

"So I see," Candi commented, before turning to Judy. "Is he always like this?"

"I hope not for long."

A few minutes later the appetizer order was on its way to the cook, Judy had found her voice and Nick was pulling on another cigarette.

"So, what do we know?"

"You go first."

"This is getting old, honey bunny."

"Do you ever stop with the demeaning nicknames?"

"Not until I have a reason to. I know that my people don't have a clue. The flow of souls stopped completely not long ago after a precipitous decline. They assumed it was you. As that's incorrect, they know nil."

"It's the same on my end. No surprise there, is it? We tracked the slowing in soul traffic to the last new moon. Is that right?"

"More specific than what I was told, but that sounds about right. A gradual drop to nothing. Like there's a black hole that shows up just at the witching hour when souls are divvied up. Travel ban?"

"What?"

"Is travel limited on your side?"

"Yes. I was the last transfer."

"Same here. With the mana supply stopped, I only have what I was sent with and what I can gather."

"Is your equipment in transit still?"

"You mean, is it held up awaiting my collection of enough mana to complete the transfer? No. I got mine here. I presume yours is?"

Judy nodded ruefully. "Pending authorization from my CO."

"Well, we can address that when the time comes. Right now, we need to figure out who is doing this."

"Obviously, but how? What have you been trying?"

"Divination. It can find entropy, but the window for pinpointing it is so small, the spell barely starts
and it's gone. You?"

"Nothing. I'm not authorized for any of the tracking equipment until I finish my transition."

"What about scrying?"

"Possible. It's a passive skill though. Maybe random flashes."

"You don't have a relic?"

"Not on me. All my personal effects are still in transit."

"Hence the standard armor."

"Yes..."

"Alright, I assume you need a mirror or something?"

"A mirror, or a silver dish."

"We don't have either of those, sadly. Not here anyway. I guess it's up to me, then."

"What do you mean? You intend to do demonic magic in public? Are you insane?"

"Yes and no."

"Wait, to which question."

"Yes, I intend to do magic here and no I'm not insane."

"I'm not letting you-"

"Hand me the catsup."

"I-what?"

"The sugary red sauce in that bottle there. The one with the squeeze top?"

"What are you doing?"

"Divination. Like we just talked about."

"Doesn't that require bloodletting or something?"

"Oh, that'd be great. In the middle of the diner. You want me to gouge it into the table, as well? I don't want to get kicked out just yet. Hand me a plate."

"Are you serious?"

"It's a premade circle and doesn't leave a mess. Give it."

A quick, elegant circle later, Judy heard from over her shoulder a familiar voice saying, "Wow. Are you a chef?"

"Not anymore. I was a pastry chef."

The flirting was getting absurd. Judy was set to kick Nick for kissing the waitress's hoof when her
world came to a screaming halt.
"Your husband is quite the charmer."

"He's not my husband!" she practically shouted.

Judy's embarrassment at shouting in the middle of the restaurant was overlaid with a layer of smooth Demonic laughter. "We aren't married. We're coworkers. Well, colleagues. We work for different firms. It's nice to get together and talk shop without the bosses breathing down our necks."

"Oh! I saw you holding paws and with the bracelets, I just assumed."

"Alas, no. We are both unattached. Our work makes long-term commitments a daunting challenge. This is just dinner between acquaintances."

Judy was impressed and horrified at the ease of his lies, spinning truth into it. The effectiveness was astonishing. As was the flirting. Somehow, he invariably turned the conversation to his advantage. The proof was evident as the waitress left with their entrée order, hips swaying, ears and cheeks red and grinning like a fool. Judy has no idea what was ordered. She'd been too busy staring in unwilling awe.

Once Candi was gone, Nick wasted no time. He put the finishing touches on his divination circle and checked the time. Eleven twenty-five. Thirty-five minutes until the Witching Hour. They had some time to kill.

He would be content to wait, under normal circumstances. These were quite abnormal, but he opted to wait, anyway. The food here was excellent and the scenery suitably engaging. Besides, a chat with an admittedly cute, and palpably naïve to the flesh, angel-bun was too good an opportunity to pass up. With that in mind, Nick took up the catsup again and set about putting the finishing touches to his spell. As he smiled at his handiwork, a grey paw clamped down on his wrist. Stern amaranthine eyes bore into his as their owner spoke.

"You can't use blood magic here."

"Is that why you were spazzing a second ago?"

"Well, yes. Doesn't this spell use blood?"

"Yes. In the smallest terms possible. Watch."

He stuck out his long, forked tongue.

His companion couldn't resist, apparently. "Very mature. You're how old?"

He waited until he daintily pricked his tongue with a claw to answer. "Old enough not to care about the answer."

Sticking it back out, Nick collected the tiny droplet that formed from the tiny wound and touched it to the sauce. A small effort of will and a Word pronounced in his mind was all it took for the circle to come to life. A nauseating yellow glow surrounded the plate for a moment and then settled into nothingness, again.

"That's it?"

"You expected a poultrygeist to appear and play twenty questions?"
"I expected a result other than a crappy light show."

"The souls are being stolen at the Witching Hour, rabbit. We can't track what's causing this until then. The divination will hold until then and we'll see what we get."

"Oh. So, what do we do until then?"

"As we are at a diner, I'd suggest we enjoy our food?"

Nick watched as the rabbit finally clued into the fact that Candi hadn't just been swinging by to shake her tail at him, though that was a part of it. Nick could smell the deer's interest and feel her desire. With every interaction, both grew stronger. However, as much as he appreciated the attention and the show, the food was the reason he was here.

He'd wasted a fair amount of time wandering around between the fight and arriving at dinner for three reasons. The first was the simplest. He had a sneaking suspicion of how the conversation would go and he knew they'd need to till some time before they could accomplish anything that night. A starlit walk was just the thing. It was a lovely soft night and a pleasant diversion.

Secondly, he wanted to annoy Hopps something awful. She was a rabbit and therefore adorable, but also an angel. There was little Nick enjoyed quite as much as irritating members of the High Hosts. It was an activity on par with irritating his superiors and underlings. As they had walked, he'd run through his magpie memory and tallied the list of tasks she would need to complete for her transition. He tried to slip as many in as he could. Buying her a soda was four all on its own. Dinner was another two. He looked forward to her reaction when she tallied up her day against the list.

The third was related to the second. He was a demon. Temptation was part and parcel to his very existence. What better way to tempt a complete neophyte to possessing flesh than to show her a few of its pleasures? While she'd been occupied with her hostile staring, he'd slipped in orders for some of the masterpieces that the chef here was capable of. The place was a dive, but the mammal at the grill had once possessed three Mewchelin Stars. He was no longer Chef de Cuisine at the La Luna Blanc, but his skill still shone and it kept the diner alive.

As if on cue, Candi arrived with their entrées as Hopps was just accepting that her tea and appetizer had arrived. Nick grinned as the play of scents washed over the little bunny. She was hungrier than she'd realized after her long walk and suddenly that came to the fore. The chef's special salad and fried tofu skewers with sauce and roasted sesame seeds that he'd ordered for her were intoxicating dishes and close to his own personal favorites. Her childlike expression of hungry delight amused him immensely. Then, she took a bite and her expression wiped all interest in food from his mind. Nearly sinful enjoyment.

The meal before him was as exquisite as hers and he wanted to enjoy it. However, it was now one step down from sating the hunger that sustained him. Candi looked appetizing enough to warrant thirds if it came to it, but Nick also felt himself intrigued by another possibility.

He'd heard plenty of legends about bedding angels while he'd done his time in the brothels of hell. Supposedly, it was an ecstasy beyond any other, both for the act and the falling it caused as a result. A crowning achievement for any demon, particularly of the Sin of Lust, but only ever accomplished by some unnamed demon. Nick suspected it was a hoax. However, it was worth at least exploring as a possibility. Whether he could manage it or not didn't matter. It would be an entertainment to counter her stodgily suspicious attitude. As he was already baiting her, it was a natural step. He resolved himself to pursue it and tucked into his meal.
Very quickly, the food was gone and the hour almost upon them. Seeing that the rabbit was done her meal, he collected the plates and stacked them. She was visibly enjoyed every bite. It had been quite a display; not unlike dangling a catnip bag in front of a felid. Nick had done that once or twice for a laugh, but this was being on the other end of the fishing line. He was sure he liked it. Anticipation was always the best seasoning, when it came to this.

Once the dishes were out of the way, Nick moved the side plate with the divination spell on it to the center of the table. Judy's momentary confusion as she recalled the spell existed pulled a deep grin to his face.

Not wanting to be disturbed, he pulled a spark or two of power together and cast a look-not-here spell. The minor illusion would keep everyone, including a vivacious young deer, away from the table and looking elsewhere. He timed it well, as the hour struck a breath after the illusion took hold. The plate flashed and a strange looking compass made of ghostly bones rose from the disc. Several toothlike protrusions from different points on the grotesque sphere began to move.

Disappointingly, none of them moved in a way that was helpful. At least three of the nine needed to point the same direction for anything to be of note. Several came close, but either kept moving, or stalled out. The twelfth chime ended the spell and both divination and illusion vanished.

"That's it, Slick? Really?"

"That's it, sweetheart. Whatever we're looking for, I need to know more about it before we can even get close."

"How are we supposed to get more information on something we know nothing about?"

"I'm sure you have access to your mainframe. There are reports on whatever your people find, isn't there?"

"Of course, but…"

"You offered information, didn't you?"

"Yes… I'll get the files. It takes time to pull them and transfer them from the heavens. I'll have them on my tablet tomorrow."

"Good. We can try your scrying, then, too. It works better during daylight, doesn't it?"

She wasn't even surprised he knew that. "Yeah. Sounds good."

"Perfect. I'll work my end and trade info over breakfast."

Judy caught the suggestive nature of his comment, but elected to dismiss it. Even if he was serious, it was absurd. He was just playing games, trying to get a rise out of her. Typical, apparently coffee guzzling, demon.

She sipped her tea and tried to figure out what he was really after.

Some minutes later, Nick was pressing his lips to Candi's hoof in thanks for bringing them such a delicious meal and congratulating himself on a successful conquest. The little deer with the amazing hips would be his to savor. Confirmation came when she brought the check and her number was scrawled across the back of it. He snapped a picture with his phone just in case anything happened to it and slipped his bank card into the sleeve.
"You really are incredible, Wilde."

That raised an eyebrow. Obviously, an amateur attempt to start a conversation while disapproving. She was trying. And ever so adorably obvious.

"You haven't had the pleasure. I can see you itching to ask, Carrots. What is it?"

"I used my five questions."

"For the truth binding, dumb bunny. You can ask more."

"Not with a guarantee of honesty. And I am not a dumb bunny!"

"Fine. Distracted bunny. Now ask."

"My dagger. How did you handle it without being burned?"

"Simple. I kept it moving. Your dagger, if you please?"

His paw laid open in front of her, completely unprotected. Her hesitation was natural, but she yielded the blade after a moment. He couldn't hold it long enough to harm her and they were in a public place. He was arrogant to a fault, but he wasn't stupid.

No sooner had the dagger's handle touched his palm than it was in motion. The demon spun the divine weapon between his digits, across his palm. It was dancing a gyroscopic tango with his paw and nothing else. No armor. No barrier at all. Just dexterous skill at containing a razor-sharp war blade, designed to end his kind. It was exciting to her for some reason, seeing him dance to elegantly with his own vulnerability.

Judy noticed a faint smoke, barely noticeable and impossible for mortals to see, drifting up from his paw in the wake of the blade. It wasn't even enough to physically see, but the damage was real. He'd told the truth. This time with no threat of pain, or enforcement spell.

She watched as he spun the blade slower and slid it to a stop, placing it down on the table top. Seemingly to make a point, he held it there with a single digit of his paw. She heard the tell-tale hiss of demonic flesh burning and watched as he lifted the digit for her to see; proof there was no trick, she realized. Then, eyes locked on hers, he smiled as he raked his long tongue along the wound and lifted it up for her to see. It was completely healed.

He was terrifying.

Utterly terrifying.

Her heart was thundering in her chest.

Judy was stunned silent as Candi reappeared with the sleeve. Not stunned enough to miss the hoof that caressed up her dinner companions arm, or the wink sent the waitress's way, but still quite surprised. As soon as the interruption had wiggled off, the question spilled out of her mouth.

"Why didn't you kill me?"

"Why would I?"

"Demon."

He barked a brief laugh. "True enough, I suppose. I didn't care you because it wasn't needful."
"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I didn't kill you because I didn't need to."

"That makes no sense."

His sigh confused her. "Carrots, whatever you may know of demons, you're missing a few details. We aren't all the slavering, mindless hordes you're used to. The Sin-addicted junkies I'm sure you've slaughtered on the fringe of reality are not the only kinds there are."

"Evidently. I know there is a command structure, but…"

"You just thought we were all hellbent on chaos and destruction?"

She nodded vigorously.

He chuckled. "Well, you aren't exactly wrong. However, there are those among us who have ambitions outside your experiences. Some of us want other things than angelic ruin and dominion over all realms."

"What do you want?"

"A great many things, little bunny. A great many things." To her irritation that was the last she got from him. "So, what now, angelfluff? You gonna make demands? Try to bind me? Con me into helping you?"

Judy shook herself. "Nope. I intend to use sweet, simple reason. I have resources but no support. You have no resources. We've both been abandoned by our sides and no one will believe us if we report in. Mine will ignore me. Yours won't care. It makes sense for us to work together."

"So I get your information and resources. What do you get?"

"Your support."

"Well, well. Cute little bunny has a point."

"Don't call me cute."

"Fine. Hot little bunny has a point. You sure about this?"

Judy offered her paw. "Yes. Deal?"

His grin was pure smug as he took her paw and she knew she'd made a mistake. "Deal."

In the early hours of the morning, Judy sat on her bed furiously punching her pillow. She was tired. The flesh she wore was exhausted and she knew that fox was responsible for it. That was the only reason she had missed so much.

She'd made a deal with a demon. She was also in his debt twice. Twice! He'd paid for dinner and gotten her no less than eighteen marks complete on her transition checklist. Eighteen! In one day! That was more than she'd managed in her best four days to date combined. It usually took months to complete the list, but she was now over half done and only a week since her arrival.

She also realized that she was trapped.

She had pursued Wraith in the interest of gaining knowledge about a dangerous adversary. Now she
had tons, but she couldn't add it to the file. Any of it. She'd have to explain how she got it and have it verified. How in heaven's grace could she manage that without being immediately branded a traitor? If she had authorization, she'd be safe. She might have gotten her superior to authorize her investigation retroactively, but Bogo had made his opinion of her clear, already. He would not help her.

She was stuck. Screwed, really. There was nothing she could do.

The only way out of the mess was straight through.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Holy monkey, guys...

So an awesome response. So many comments and kudos. I am really feeling the love, here.

All my love and gratitude to ktvalmiri and TheWyversWeaver for the editing and art, respectively. I am a lucky, lucky writer to work with such awesome people and have such amazing readers.

Ok... I'm done...

On we go!

https://thewyvernsweaver.deviantart.com/art/Hereafter-Chapter-Three-715833772

Judy awoke the following morning after a fitful night’s sleep. She felt no better about her situation. She didn’t have a plan. She did, however, have her first headache. Fifteen minutes of searching for common mortal ailments led her to the shower for a hot soak and then off to the chemist’s for a bottle of aspirin. She was gratified to see that she was, in fact, getting better at the whole grooming thing and had gotten her morning routine down to under an hour. Her mood buoyed further for the fact that she genuinely looked good for her efforts. She noticed the attention of a few rabbits and hares as she walked by.
In a moment of paranoia, she checked herself in the reflective glass panel of a bus stop’s shelter. Her clothes looked normal. Nothing was tucked in weirdly. She wasn’t accidentally displaying her undergarments. Her fur looked smooth and fluffy; no bed fur. All in all, she looked clean, neat and orderly, just as she had planned. A neat blouse over new jeans and well-groomed fur. The only thing she considered was the clothes might be a bit snug. They were form-fitting, but that was what she preferred after the bodysuits she wore under her armor. It was also within tolerances for current fashion in the region, so she was uncertain why she was getting the attention. As Judy walked on, the long, low whistle she got from a passing hare only confused her more. It was what she had read was a “wolf whistle”, but coming from a lapidae the term was ambiguous to her.

As both flesh and the whole mortal experience were new to her, she’d have to ask someone. Unfortunately, the only one Judy thought she’d get any kind of real answer from was the last source she wanted to tap: her recent demonic acquaintance. Considering her CO’s opinion of her, she couldn’t imagine the other angels in the area held her in any higher esteem. Judy found it depressing that it was a demon, of all things, that showed her the most respect.

Recalling her situation with him soured her improving mood.

After the chemist, Judy made tracks to her favorite café and ordered her usual; mint green tea with lemon. Remembering how he’d ordered that along with the rest of her meal gave her another item for consideration on her list of points she missed the night before.

Rather than brood on it, she decided to do something practical, if useless, and pulled up the template she had been working on before bed; a basic assessment cover sheet for an enemy operative. She hadn’t entered a name, or even considered submitting it, but every other detail she had amassed on Nick Wilde went into it. Indigo fire, his armor, absurd regeneration, dexterity, combat prowess, collar; all of it. The result made her ill.

Projected classification: High Demon or higher, projected class: Warmaster/Trickster, projected Sin: Undetermined (Pride/Lust/Envy/Sloth/Gluttony); Preliminary assessment: Extremely dangerous. Class 7, black. Do not engage. Supply further information for clarification.

A full two magnitude levels higher than the file on Wraith. Whoever he was, Nick Wilde was far worse than she, or the heavens, thought. That thought scared her more than anything else. Remembering how effortlessly he handled her attacks and played with her weapon sent a shiver down her spine. His ease and fluidity with words unsettled her and the look in his eyes when he licked his fingertip still frightened her. He did it all as if it were nothing.

Her heart was hammering again.
He was terrifying, but it was also the most excitement she’d had since the last siege on a demon stronghold in the deep reaches of the Fringe. Facing down a horde of insane demons in a bulwark of corruption was somehow just as exciting as sitting down to eat with this one individual and for the same reason. Death lurked at any misstep.

That said, she had another puzzle on her paws. He didn’t seem evil.

During her stalk, she didn’t find any traces of corruption, or even basic demonic power on any of the females who spent their time in his hotel room. She knew he had to feed his Sin somehow, so the question was how. It was a question she pondered very thoroughly as she enjoyed her breakfast tea and lemon poppy seed muffin. She needed more information on Wilde and needed it badly.

He was dangerous. That much was obvious. How dangerous remained to be seen, particularly to her. Every angel had a weakness; that one little temptation that was most likely to make them crack and give in. Then, it was the Fall. She had never seen an angel fall, but she had heard plenty. Rumors and stories of what happened to an angel when they fell and the horrors they faced thereafter, in Hell. She needed to know what Wilde’s classification was, so she could know how severely at risk she was.

That led her to her next irksome task for the day.

As her CO had made clear, she had no business doing anything other than her transition. Until that was completed, she had nothing else to do. That meant an annoying amount of free time. Ordinarily, she’s be scrambling to accomplish the necessary tasks, but thanks to a little demonic assistance, she was ahead of schedule. That meant she had flexible time. Too much of it. Plenty to devote to an off-the-books clandestine operation behind her boss’ back, with the help of a demonic fox. Investigating a known operative that scared the living daylights out of her was just an added bonus.

As they had agreed to work together and the next move was a little magic on her end, she was obligated to wait for him. They hadn’t made plans the night before. She’d been too confounded by the insane turn her evening had taken to think to. He had managed to coax her into offering up her phone number, however, and she had gotten his in turn.

The last thing she wanted on her call log was a random number, despite the fact that she should be collecting a few as part of her assignment. Mortal contacts and acquaintances were necessary for living in the mortal world. A few numbers wouldn’t be amiss. His, however, could prove catastrophic if her superiors discovered who it belonged to.

Pulling out her little phone, she was gratified to see she got full bars. One thing the heavens could be
counted for, at least, was decent phone reception. Now, all she had to do was dial. Never had the act of touching three icons on a smartphone been so daunting.

Nick rose languidly from his slumber and stretched in a way too feline for a fox. He was quite content for waking up before noon. Generally, mornings didn’t agree with him. As both fox and demon, he was very happily nocturnal, preferring to be active after the heavens had stopped shouting their own glory at the fullest volume. Once the noon hour was past, he found their diminishing pontifications much more tolerable. That said, he was up earlier than intended and he had time before he had to play his next card in his little game.

As he showered the night’s activities out of his fur, he thought over his plan. Discovering the little angel’s weakness was proving an amusing diversion. Temptation after temptation was sent her way and there were just so many in the Mortal Plane for her to try. It was one reason the Heavens were so reluctant to send angels down, in the first place. Angels had a tendency to fall when tempted. It took a certain breed to endure such things for long. Most agents of the divine had a definitive limit to their stint in service. As the rabbit had only just arrived, Nick had plenty of time to play with this one.

He’d already tempted her many times. He’d offered her a chance to gorge herself on excellent food, taken her possessions, demeaned her openly. All little tests. All inconclusive. The only thing he knew was that she was in no way at the mercy of Sloth. Her boundless energy and drive was evident enough in her attempt to attack him. No. Sloth was out. Wrath was unlikely, as well. He’d goaded her, but her discipline held. Rather, it had held and not been forced, or overblown. Knee-jerk overreaction was usually a dead giveaway.

That left pride, gluttony, envy, greed and, of course, lust. He’d teased her with a little bit of all of them, but nothing conclusive had come of it. Despite flirting with Dani to test her envy, the food for her gluttony, talking down to her to prick her pride and making a pass or two at her, nothing. His attempt at prodding her greed had been too mixed for a clear result. Stealing her dagger was as much a threat to her pride as her avarice. Still, it was early days. He had plenty of ways to test for every sin and two Sins eliminated was certainly a start. Nick simply had to test for them again, and again, for as long as it took.

As he tousled his fur dry after the shower, he got one such opportunity.

Nick’s phone kicked into life, playing the ringtone he’d selected for the poor, innocent little featherbrain. He considered letting it go to voicemail. He also considered adding a little magic to his voice to test her weakness to Lust. He ignored both. He wanted to play with her and this was as good a chance as any that he’d get to set her up. As to Lust, well, she was a rabbit. Lust was simply too cliché a vulnerability for a rabbit angel. It would wait for last and if it were true, it was proof the universe truly did run on irony and he’d laugh until he was sick.
Scooping up his phone, he tapped the answer key.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, little angel?”

“We agreed to meet today. We have things to discuss.”

“You have the files you needed to collect?”

“Yes… Do you have your information?”

“Naturally. See you in a bit, Carrots.”

He ended the call on her, mid-word. An intentional snub. If he was going to rule out Sins until he found her weakness, he’d have to play harder. That meant being less nice than he had been. ‘Hardly a chore’, he thought as he chuckled.

Nick decided that his breakfast meeting with the rabbit could be a late brunch and meandered his way back to his bed. Candi stirred as she felt him slip between her thighs and apply his tongue in the most effective manner he knew to wake a female up. Minutes later, Nick was thinking maybe he’d make his meeting a lunch date. Candi for breakfast was a treat!

Two hours later, Nick coasted into the same little diner they’d visited the night before and found Judy in the exact same booth they had occupied, previously. The small stack of small plates at her elbow did an excellent job of piquing his interest. Every single one had telltale signs of pie filling. The fact that there were six of them and no two were the same variety of pie was of particular note.

“Morning, fluff.”

“Barely.”

“Awww… Is somebunny feeling neglected?”
“Not this bunny. Pie has been keeping me company.”

“Lot of pie for one mammal,” he commented, eyeing the plates pointedly as he slid into the booth opposite.

“Not when it’s taken over seven hours.” At that moment, a jackrabbit in a waiter’s uniform wandered by and Judy caught his eye. “I’d like a slice of the strawberry rhubarb pie, please.”

“You want that a la mode?”

“What’s that?”

“It means with ice cream,” the buck explained.

“I’ve never had that. Is it good?”

“Coming right up,” the waiter, already in motion, responded.

Nick found the conversation enchantingly innocent. His chuckling got her attention.

“Is something funny?”

“Oh, just you, Hopps. It’s been so, so long since I last spoke to an angel. It’s quite refreshing.”

“Could you be any more disingenuous?”

“I think you mean sardonic. Disingenuousness implies insincerity. I am completely sincere, yet mocking. So, while we wait for your… seventh… slice of pie, shall we talk?”

“I suppose so. I don’t have much to contribute.”
“You must be kidding. Are you telling me that your, supposed, resources are coming up empty?”

“No, and yes.”

“Any time you feel like explaining would be great.”

“I read through most of the reports while I was waiting for you. There isn’t a lot going on. The presumption that the demons are responsible colors almost every report. As we know that presumption is erroneous, all of those reports must be discarded.”

“Figures.”

“Almost every scene documented or lead followed is in the pursuit of finding evidence of demonic influence, or involvement. Anything else was obviously ignored, or documented haphazardly.”

“And, thus, anything that could be an actual lead, or help us is long gone by now.”

“Basically. There are a few odd bits documented as part of the scene investigations, but those are few.” She flicked through the evidence sheets and read out. “Stray tufts of fur, hair and wool.”

“That may be regular detritus on the city streets…”

“A trace of corruption of an unconfirmed type… Some rubbish…”

“Impossible to sample and likely irrelevant, respectively.”

“An awkwardly overturned potted plant.”

“A strange pebble…”
“How did you know?”

Silken laughter bubbled out of her brunch companion’s throat. It was strange that his voice didn’t upset her. In her experience, the voices of hellspawn were just a spectrum of howling madness. To see a known demon behaving so civilly was disorienting. It reminded her of their conversation the night before. She knew little of demons, despite her experience. The more she learned, the more intrigued she became. Intelligence and information on their adversaries was always of tremendous value to her superiors. Once she concluded this little adventure, she would have volumes to report. Assuming that she survived her partnership with Wilde and wasn’t branded a traitor in the process, of course.

Her thoughts and their conversation were interrupted by the waiter returning and plopping a large slice of pie with a softball-sized scoop of something white and cold, with red veins through it sitting on top. Judy tried to ask what manner of dish this was, but the hare who brought it had vanished without a word. He was obviously less taken with her than their waitress of the previous evening had been with Nick.

Nick took the opportunity to spark a cigarette. Judy was less than pleased at the acrid stink of the smoke, but elected to not comment. Instead, taking a bit of both pie and this “iced cream” stuff on a fork and stuffing it into her mouth. When her taste buds ceased rioting and the demon across the table stopped laughing at her reaction, she prompted him to continue their conversation while she ate. She was content to answer between, or in the middle of, mouthfuls of ambrosial sweetness.

“So, we have nothing,” Nick chortled.

“Not nothing, but close.”

“The pebble may be useful to focus my divination spell, if it was at the place the siphoning occurred. Was it?”

“A suspected location. Apparently, whatever is doing this leaves very little behind.”

“What about the unidentified corruption?”

Judy flipped back to the related file. “It was an alley… One reported as a crime scene several times to the ZPD. Let’s see… Mugging… Mugging… Rape… Assault… Mugging…”
Nick snorted. “So, probably just a miscellaneous collection of sins in one spot.”

“Looks like it,” Judy grumbled.

“So, it comes back to the pebble. Can you get it?”

“We don’t know that it even relates to the case.”

“It’s better than nothing and we won’t know until we try. Now, can you get it?”

“Not until I’m done my transition and get an assignment. Even then, I can’t guarantee anything I’d be assigned would be related to this case.”

“Or that you’d be put near anything like the stored evidence.” Judy’s eyes flicked up from her nearly empty plate in suspicion, which the fox smirked at. “You’re a tracker and a warrior, Carrots, not a forensic expert, or a geologist.” As much as the statement was a compliment it was dismissive. At least he acknowledged she was a warrior. “In either case, we’ll have to wait a bit. That leaves us with one other option.”

Judy blinked. “Option?”

“That treat you just scarfed down must have frozen your brain. Scrying? Remember that?”

“I remember, but we’re going to have trouble with that, just like your attempt last night.”

“Try anyway. What could it hurt?”

“Hurt? Nothing. Accomplish?” Judy shook her head. “I still need a focus, or all I’ll be doing is wasting effort.”

“Meaning, something to perceive, I presume? You can’t track entropy, can you?”
“Not the way you can. I can feel the currents of mana. Maybe we can spot a pattern?” As she spoke, Judy pulled a small compact mirror from her pocket.

It had been many long years since the last time she had used this skill. It was a simple one, but like most simple things, it was surpassingly easy to screw up. Fortunately, she had her years on the fringe on her side. When not fighting, it was wise to spend your time in meditation, rather than sleep. It was almost as restful and didn’t leave one groggy upon waking. It was also an excellent way to clear and cleanse the mind. Perfect for scrying.

Judy settled into her seat and held the mirror up to her face. Slipping into the mental non-space of meditation was easy. Then, it was a matter of focusing on seeing through the reflection. She regretted her attempt. No sooner had her mind reached into the ether than it was attacked by things she had never seen before. Wailing homunculi made of shattered thought and sucking void assaulted her. Rather than fight, Judy fled.

Judy returned to herself with Nick propping her up in her chair, holding a napkin to her nose and the waiter looming over his shoulder. Everything sounded like she was under water. Upon seeing her move under her own power, Nick waved off the hare and reassured the other patrons with a winning smile. Judy giggled, which brought the demon’s surprisingly concerned gaze back to her.

“You ok, now, Carrots?”

“What happened?”

“First, you slipped into a trance, like I expected. Then, your eyes rolled up into your head, you collapsed, blood started pouring from your nose; the moment I got you sitting up so you wouldn’t drown in your own blood, you started shivering and your eyes popped open, like you just blinked instead of whatever that was. What in the name of Ash and misery just happened?”

“No idea. I wasn’t there long enough to find out.”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing. I was attacked.”

“Attack… what? That’s impossible.” Judy raised a sardonic eyebrow at the statement, as she pinched
a fresh tissue her nose. “Right. Stupid thing to say. Obviously, it is possible. What does it mean?”

“It means scrying is out. As is anything else along those lines.”

“And divination isn’t going to work until we can find something to help amplify the spell. Damn.”

“I’m sure you know what that means, Slick.” Judy commented acerbically. “Legwork.”

Nick’s groaning was a small compensation for her recent pain. Judy relished it as she went to clean herself up a bit. It’d been less than a day and she felt utterly outmatched. The failure of her scrying was not pleasant, or a positive result, at all. However, it was highly educational. So far, he’d held all the cards and been one step ahead at every turn. This was the first time he demonstrated surprise and lack of knowledge. He also showed a surprising interest in her wellbeing. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d simply left her there to die and considered the pact they’d made null. It might have been an act, or just upholding his end of the bargain. “Support” can mean many things, after all. However, it was a puzzling turn of events.

As she wiped the last of the blood off her face, she felt a small upwelling of satisfaction. Much as her demon comrade was full of surprises, he was also a pain in the tail. The fox’s disappointment was a small start on getting the arrogant jerk back. The thought that his support didn’t extend to escorting her to the washroom, like a gentlemammal, was surprisingly bitter in her mind.

Once she left the washroom, Judy found an unpleasant sight at the table. The waitress from the night before was now on shift and very attentively doting on Nick. It was clear that the doe was infatuated. Her work skirt was shorter and upon a quick inspection, Judy had other concerns. The skirt in question had obviously been hastily rolled to be shorter, probably specifically for Nick. No panty lines were visible and how she stood was obviously flaunting herself for him.

As Judy approached, she kept an eye on the doe. She was really going all out. Her hips were rolled forward, legs saucily apart, hooves on hips, shoulders cocked, slightly leaning back, back arched, neck curved to the side. Everything she did accentuated some part of her femininity and drew the eye to her most desirable features as a female. Judy had to admit it was an eye full, by mortal standards. One Nick was happily enjoying. Even the deer’s voice and expression were carefully adapted to increase appeal. Neither left anything to question, as to what she wanted.

Judy taking her seat didn’t break into the awareness of the waitress at all, so Judy had a chance to get a much clearer look at her. Hooded eyes, hungry grin; her voice was a low, purring tease. The behavior was fascinating to her. Uncomfortably so. Judy was certain that if Nick even hinted at it, the waitress would be ready and waiting in a storage room, almost instantly.
Judy cleared her throat and was disturbed a moment later. As warm as she’d been the night before waiting table and openly welcoming she now was to Nick, when Candi turned Judy’s way, the deer’s eyes were calculating, hard and dismissive. Never before had asking for a check been so uncomfortable for her.

Judy paid her tab and ushered the fox out the door. She had to swat the fox’s paw away before he offered his card. Candi’s distaste for every moment Judy was present was intense enough to be palpable to the small rabbit. As soon as they were outside, Judy turned on the fox.

“What was that?”

“That was a very ungraceful exit from an eatery.”

“Not what I meant and you know it. What was wrong with her?”

“A little female jealousy, I think.”

“Why would she be jealous? She was perfectly fine last night.”

“Indeed, she was…”

A sick suspicion that had already begun to form in Judy’s mind just got a whole lot stronger. “She spent the night with you.”

“And most of the morning. I’m surprised she made it to her shift.”

Judy was incensed as she watched the demon next to her light a cigarette. He’d been late to their meeting because he’d been too busy having sex with the waitress. That wouldn’t have bothered her if it weren’t for the drastic change in behavior that Candi had displayed. It wasn’t concrete proof, but it was definitely more evidence as to what kind of demon she was dealing with. No more were ruled out, but one was definitely creeping ahead as the most likely Sin she was dealing with.
Irritatingly for her, Judy immediately received counter evidence. She noticed the fox pull a large coin out of his pocket and start rolling it across his knuckles.

“What is that?”

“Nice try, rabbit.”

The coin fascinated her. “No, what is that?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Coins of Mammon. They’re the currency of Hell.”

“I’ve seen some too. They’re compressed mana, aren’t they?”

“Uhhuh.” The fox replied disinterestedly. “Currency and power source. Someone thought it was a good idea.”

“I’ve only ever seen copper and small silver coins. That’s huge!”

“I love hearing those words…” Judy’s instant reaction to his off-handed remark was curtailed as the large coin sailed into her paws. “That’s a platinum Lucifer. Largest coin we have. Enough power to open a stable portal from Hell to anywhere, except Heaven.”

“And you’re playing with it…”

“It’s just a coin, little angel. You want it?”

“I’ll pass, thanks.” She commented as she sent it his way with a flick of a thumb.

His smile widened as he received it back and sent it spinning across his knuckles, again. Judy wanted to assign the action to his Greed, but as always, nothing he did or said was strong enough to be concrete evidence.
“So, where to, Carrots? Canvassing the city for clues?”

“Come on.”

The following hours were a torture for Lieutenant J. Hopps. In all the files Judy had acquired, there were eleven locations that she deemed worth checking out. She decided as much because she was the only one who cared to weigh in on the subject. While she was trying to spend her time constructively, Nick was doing anything and everything to not be helpful.

If it wasn’t a pretty female it was a food cart, or his phone. There was always a distraction. Always something more important that doing the job. There was precious little to find, but that wasn’t an excuse to do nothing. True, there was absolutely no sign of corruption, demonic, or otherwise, at any of the scenes they checked. There was nothing odd at all. Judy still checked everything. Nothing in the mana currents, static matter, or aether. The process of checking out every aspect, as well as the physical scene was not quick and was made slower by Nick’s laziness, as well as a lack of transportation.

Under normal circumstances, a full Mortal Affairs Liaison Officer, or Wager Officer, could expect to receive a fully equipped vehicle for use. They had to complete their Transition procedure and acquire a driver’s license, but those were built into the program. As she had not completed anything of the sort, she was stuck with public transportation. The busses, trains and trolleys that crisscrossed the various regions of the habitat-rich metropolis were quite efficient, but there was still a lot of backtracking they had to do.

Watch your destination slip past and then have to walk back to find it, again, was wearing. It was also wearing having to herd an easily distracted fox from place to place. Babysitting duty was not in her job description, let alone of an arrogant, red-furred lothario who favored brimstone cologne. Keeping him on task had been almost an all-day affair. Several times, Judy found herself having to track Nick down by scent and aura, only to find him in a shop or chatting up a passerby. The final straw for Judy came in the form of Nick vanishing shortly after arriving at the final stop of the day.

It was already evening and there was nothing to show for the effort expended. Judy was tired. Nick was gone.

Again.

Scenting required focus and little else, but Judy had spent almost all her mental energy already. Tapping her reserves to the bone, she managed to find him three blocks away in a bar. His second drink was already half-empty, if Judy was reading the situation correctly. She was surprised there
wasn’t a barfly buzzing around him just yet. They were in a business district and it was just after 5:00pm. Happy hour was in full swing. Judy was fed up. The final location she’d selected would wait until the morrow. Now, she had to even the score a little and maybe, just maybe, put a demon on a leash.

She had to be careful. His class of demon was unknown, but she knew he liked females. In her experience, males tended to be a bit stupid when it came to females. She just had to play to that weakness.

Putting on her best scowl and adding a little pout, Judy stomped over to his stool and hopped up on the seat. Before his astonished eyes, she pulled the lowball out of his paw and downed the rest of the double of bourbon in a swallow.

“You ok, Carrots?”

She placed the glass on the bar top and glared at him. “No. I am not ok. I’m tired. And annoyed. And we are leaving.”

“We’re what?”

“L-E-A-V-I-N-G.”

“Spelling it out for me? Really?”

“You seem to be a bit dim at present, so yes.”

“A little bourbon isn’t enough to affect my faculties. Demonic metabolism.” He punctuated his comment with a smirk and signaled the bartender to refill. “So, what am I missing, oh petulant one?”

Judy wilted a bit. “The part where I’m tired and footsore and I need a break?”

“We can take one here. Food and drink are available. Company. Plenty of seating. If that changes, I have a very nice lap you could use.” The demon sipped his refreshed drink and smiled. “Look, Hopps, if you’re that beat you can just go home. There’s no shame in calling it quits for the day. I’m
staying here.”

“I just need a rest and this place isn’t restful. There are too many mammals and too much noise. I’ve had as much as I want to of both those things for a while.” Judy groaned, laying it on thick. “My place is clear across town. Can’t I just use your hotel? It’s not far from here, right?”

The pause in the demon’s movements was tiny. Almost imperceptible. Nothing more than a tiny hitch in his movement as his glass rose to his lips, again. Anyone but Judy would have missed it and even she only caught the pause from the change in the reflected light on the amber liquid in his glass. She had caught his attention. Odds were good he’d take this chance to tempt, or at least test her. His misdirected attention would serve her well. Confirmation came as his intended sip became a long swallow, draining his glass.

Ten minutes later, Judy was in the fox’s den. His hotel was a very nice one as hotels went. It wasn’t the Palm, but still quite respectable on the price scale. Heaven would never set her up in a place like this. The suite was furnished in a modern style; furniture with clean lines and simple construction littered the place. Interestingly, there was very little that was indicative of his residence. It barely looked lived in, even for a hotel.

That didn’t mean her host was unfamiliar with the space. His coat landed neatly on a chair without him looking. His wallet and phone landed on a spot with familiar ease of the coffee table. Again, without looking. Now, he was entirely without encumberment, other than his trousers. It was a fact Judy was keenly aware of. Part of her plan, but also something she took note of despite herself.

It amused Judy that Nick was abruptly of such a very different mind once she proposed going to his hotel. A little application of “Doe Eyes” and acting pouty had him all too eager to take her home. He obviously didn’t take her seriously as a threat, now, so her plan would work much more easily. Once they were inside, he took her coat and told her to have a seat while he poured drinks. While he was in the next room, assembling said libations, Judy prepared.

She didn’t have many options for keeping him under control. There were a few binding spells, but he would be able to break them. Then, he’d potentially kill her. Possibly with derision, alone. Any magic she could apply to him directly would probably get that result. Her only recourse that had even a solid chance of working was a spell that was purely passive. Passive, but very powerful and one she could control, if she was the one to cast it. It had its dangers. Quite a few of them. If he was the type of demon she feared he was, she would risk far worse than treason and banishment. She would very likely fall.

A worthy risk in the here and now. If necessary, a worthy sacrifice.
When Nick stepped back into the room, Judy dispensed with a little dignity for the sake of her task. She feigned exhaustion and slipped a little too close for simply taking a drink from someone. While Nick blinked in surprise the taser prongs found his side, below his arm and out of his line of sight. Once he was on the ground, she went to work. The chant was quick and simple, forming the spell in her paws with great ease. This was not the first time Judy had used this spell, but it had been a very, very long time. As Nick stirred on the floor, she released the spell and watched as it wrapped around his form and slid under his skin. A quick test of the spell left her confident that it had worked.

Demon black eyes opened and fixed her with a deadly gaze, emerald fire straining to escape along his lashes and an indigo inferno dancing fitfully in their depths. He stood, never breaking eye contact and moved towards her. She gave ground. The room darkened as his presence filled the space, dimming and blotting out the world around them. Step by step he pressed her back, cornering her and pinning her with his stare, until her back hit the wall behind her.

He loomed over her with menace dripping off him and whispered in a sickly-sweet voice, “Little angel, what have you done?”
Nick was angry. He was not of Wrath, so it was not all-consuming, but he was less than pleased in distinct terms. He knew he’d been sandbagged the moment his eyes popped open. The little featherbrain had gotten him good. It was quite a prick to his Pride. The fact that she managed it using his own licentiousness against him only stung more. It reminded him of many things he’d rather stay forgotten. His failures. Rebellion. Punishment. The eternity he’d spent being broken.

Twice.

As he rose, something else intruded upon his mind. A faint sting of divine magic all over his arm and chest, pricking his flesh and memory. He was viciously unhappy at that. Of all the things he despised, and there were a fair few items on that list, memory was right at the top. All that it ever caused was pain. For an instant, a vista of brilliant light and soaring power flitted through his mind, leaving scorching pain in its wake. He did not snarl. He would not give them the satisfaction. The ones who had broken and remade him would never get the vindication that would come of expressing his pain, again. Instead, Nick schooled his features and addressed the source of his most recent troubles.

There wasn’t an ounce of repentance in her expression. She gave him space and for good reason. He wasn’t fool enough to surpass his collar’s limitations, or angry enough for him to forget to keep his secrets. That did not, however, mean he was without options.
Suppressing his dual natures was a simple task after eons of training. All that would show was pure demonic potency as he lifted the veil and let the dribble of power he was allowed filled the room. Shadows thickened to the consistency of treacle. The light strangled under the weight of his will. With black eyes, Nick slowly walked forward. He had no reason to hurry.

For every pace he took, she stutter-stepped back two. She fought to keep her ears up and look him in the face as his power surrounded her. She was trying to be brave. It was quite cute. Admirable, in its own way. He had to give her credit for that. It was a pity she was seconds from oblivion. She would have made an excellent toy, eventually. Alas, now she was certainly doomed. Still, he felt she was owed a chance to have a say. With the meagre possibility that it was a good enough answer, he might let her live just a little longer.

Nick watched with great satisfaction as her heel touched the wall of his room. There was nowhere else for her to go. Watching the realization of that fact appear in her eyes satisfied a small part of the hunger he was now feeling. He pressed the space between them to arm’s length. It was perfectly safe for him. Her short sword would be too slow. He could eviscerate her in an instant and she was still too far away to hit him with her taser. Her back was pressed fully against the painted wall. He pulled his power into forms that would be useful in teaching a stupid little angel a fatal lesson and closed her off from any thought of escape.

She was defiant.

A mirthless smile pulled at his mouth, exposing his teeth.

“Little angel, what have you done?”

“What was necessary.”

“Suicide is never necessary.” Nick was surprised, both for his candor and the fact that his statement caused no fear in the rabbit. She caught that there were other meaning in his words. Meaning he had not meant to express. His glare sharpened and his talons grew. “Explain yourself.”

“You’re an insufferable ass.” Nick blinked. “You wasted the entire day while I worked. And keeping you in check took more effort than the investigating. We made a deal. My information for your support. I’m keeping my end, while you fail to keep yours in any way.”

Nick held up his arm, still prickling from the spell. “And this is…?”
“The Truant’s Summons.”

“A binding.”

“Passive at most. It limits your movements in no way whatsoever. It’s a spell that will let me know where you are on demand. That way, if I have to waste precious time chasing a bored kit around, at least I’ll have a faster way to track your sorry tail down so I can yell at you.”

Nick tried. He tried so very, very hard, but the laughter bubbled up and out of him despite his efforts. He howled with it.

“Anything else?”

“You can’t lie to me.”

“I beg your pardon?”


“What if I do anyway?”

“I’ll know.”

“And?”

“And it’ll probably be unpleasant.”

Nick felt the joints in his paws crack under the strain of his unconscious flexing. “What is to stop me from breaking your little binding by ending you here and now?”
“You kill me you and you break our deal. That means you suffer the backlash. Now, you’re powerful, but you’ve got that collar on, so I know that your power is sealed at least in some way. I’m figuring that you have a choice. You can kill me, but to avoid the consequences from breaking our agreement, you’d need to take that collar off. If you can, that is. If you do take it off, I think you’ll face another set of consequences and neither of those will protect you from the damage from breaking my spell. So, which one do you want? Your only other option is to take your medicine, like a good boy and keep your end of our agreement.”

Nick paused. Quickly working over the rabbit’s words he realized, much to his vexation, that she was right. He also realized that he was screwed. A predatory smirk curved the fox’s muzzle as he took a step back and brought his hands together, over and over in slow applause. “Not such a dumb bunny after all.”

He backed away and forced his power back under the veil. He’d been played. Expertly. He had to give the fluffball credit. She didn’t have all the details, but she had enough that he could fill in the rest on his own.

“I think it’s time for you leave, little angel.”

She looked like she wanted to argue. He had to give her credit for that, as well. She was showing more spine than he’d seen in an angel in a very long time. However, the threat carried in his voice was enough to convince her it would not be wise to linger. She’d gotten what she wanted.

She still managed to find the strength for one more shot, though. “We’ll meet tomorrow. Nine o’clock.”

“T somehow doubt you’ll have trouble finding me,” Nick sneered and she was gone.

He gently shut the door and leaned his forehead against it.

Nick had not been in a position like this before. Leashed by one master was bad enough. Serving under the fools in Hell had always seen him commanded by a single superior officer. If they had masters breathing down their own scaled neck, it was their issue. He had only ever bowed to one master at a time and they had possessed the good sense to keep it that way for their own safety. Angel or demon made no difference to him. Only one and bowing to powers beyond his control was as far as he could go. Now, he had two and that was intolerable.
His twin hungers tore at him.

As far as demons possessing two Sins went, they did not usually live long. At least, not while maintaining their sanity. The horrors of Hell were enough one time around and each Sin imprinted on the sane survivors needed to meet certain requirements. Gluttony required overindulgence. Wrath, violence. It was an easy pattern to follow. For a demon to possess two Sins meant a dual set of requirements. It was extremely challenging to be of both Sloth and Wrath, as laziness and violence were somewhat mutually exclusive. Feeding one would starve the other, leading to self-destruction or madness.

Nick was fortunate in that regard. The Sin which spawned all others was his, as was so-called the least of them. Pride and Lust. He was very, very lucky to have that particular set of hungers to feed. There was a conveniently broad overlap he could exploit to satisfy both and now, he had to. There wasn’t a choice.

Determined on his course of action, Nick marched to his bedroom and struck away the illusion he had placed on a corner of the room. There, under the spell, sat an Elderwood chest older than time as it was measured by mortals. It was large enough to be a spacious coffin for him, should the need arise; black and scarred, but strong enough to give the Devil himself pause at forcing it open. The surface of the wood was carved and gouged in complex patterns that hurt even Nick’s mind to look at for long. It had been his companion for many, many years.

In the front of the chest were a series of keyholes. One was occupied. It opened the small compartment that housed Lefty when he wasn’t needed. A second small keyhole next to it was unoccupied and that one he addressed.

Drawing a talon down the underside of his arm, Nick exposed a small metal disc. He ripped it from his flesh without preamble. Licking his fluids from it, Nick slotted it into the space beside the empty keyhole and turned it. A hidden compartment popped open on the side. Nick pulled several Lucifers from the stash there and closed the compartment up before returning the disc to the wound. He rasped his tongue across the injury to seal it and sparked a bit of flame to speed the healing. Then he grabbed his coat, tossed another illusion over the chest and collected his phone, wallet and other bits. Lefty stirred restlessly on his wrist and Nick stroked him. He disliked upsetting his companions and they could all feel it. Their voices thrummed in his mind.

Sparking a cigarette, Nick left his hotel, but not before he placed heavy barrier spells over the room and alarm spells throughout the halls. If anyone neared his residence, he would know. Not that anyone who attempted to touch his things would survive it. He just had enough to worry about and disposing of corpses was a distraction he didn’t need.

Mammals cut him a wide berth as he made his way down the sidewalk. That usually happened when Nick decided to move with a purpose. He moved in a straight line to where he knew he’d find his
target. He had to have a chat with a certain little imp.

“I need something.”

“Course you do,” Finnick slurred. “Else you wouldn’t be here.”

“I see you finally managed to get drunk.”

“Yeah. And I finally got the taste of seeing you out of my mouth. Now, I’ve gotta start all over, again.”

“Burdens we must bear.”

“Pfft. Why don’t you take your false nonchalance and shove it? I know you’re pissed. I felt you coming ten minutes ago.” The petite demon slammed the empty stein hard enough to crack it. “What’s that? You’re not taking the joke set up?”

“Not in the mood.”

“Not in the mood huh? Aren’t you always in the mood? What happened to get your panties in a bunch? Did you find the one female in reality that wouldn’t fuck you as soon as they looked at you? Did someone get one over on the big shot for a change? Or did you finally just go limp?”

Nick snarled, “Enough games.” And ripped the veil off his power. His presence slammed into the world around him.

His Collar glowed weakly in the light indicating it was active, but Nick paid it no mind. It wasn’t even close to yielding. The mortals nearby, however, yielded. Some merely blacked out and slumped onto tabletops or the floor. Others moaned and trembled as their bodies surrendered to pleasures they couldn’t control on their way to oblivion. A few with stronger constitutions managed to resist for a moment, but ultimately caved and joined the rest of the bodies twitching or lying catatonic on the floor. Once the room was effectively clear, Nick turned to the one being left who remained conscious. Focusing his power, Nick slammed a hammer blow into the drunken lesser demon.
“Are you done laughing, now?” All Finnick could do was gasp for air and feebly strain against the wave of overwhelming power and desire pummeling his mind. “No? I know you’d tell me if you were, Finny. Let me help you decide.”

Suiting action to words, Nick dragged a single finger along the fennec fox’s jawline. The recipient of his attention started to convulse as his eyes rolled up in his head and his body writhed with agonizing pleasure.

Nick hummed thoughtfully. “I think you’re too drunk to make an informed decision, my friend. Let me help you sober up.”

Finnick managed to squeak a “No”, but Nick shushed him with another finger on his lips. Finnick convulsed in rapture again at the touch.

“Hush now, little imp. That’s an order.” Yellow flame summoned from within built up in Nick’s throat. In a voice that was half purr, half-growl Nick said, “Don’t faint.” And kissed him.

The hellfire poured out of the greater demon, scouring the lesser from the inside out. The alcohol was burned away as was nearly everything else. Every vein and fiber felt its touch. Agony and ecstasy twined together and twisted rapture poured through him even as the evidence dribbled down his legs. To Nick it was only a peck on the lips, but to Finnick it may as well have been days. When Nick released him to slump on the floor, he had no will to fight left.

Nick poured himself a bourbon while he waited for Finn to recover. When he did, there was nothing but short, mocking humor in the red fox’s voice.

“Are you ready to listen now, you obnoxious little creature?”

Shakily, Finnick croaked out, “What do you want?”

“The rest of my gear and the relics being held for me.”

“That’s impossible. You don’t have the power. They didn’t give you the Coins to pull that off.”

Nick pulled four of the Lucifers from his pocket and let them fall into the imp’s lap. It was clear the little fox had never seen four of the coins at the same time before. Wonderment made his voice a
“How?”

“How?” Nick stated as he held up a fifth Coin so it caught the light. Seeing Finnick follow the movement, he continued. “And this one is yours, if you can get my things to me by midnight and quietly.”

Finnick nodded mutely.

Pleased at the results, Nick slipped the Coin into his pocket and hopped down from his barstool. He heard his little helper stand and stagger behind the bar. He knew the imp would be skipping his preferred beer in favor of harder alcohol, but Nick didn’t care. As long as he got what he wanted, it’d be worth the price. Now, he had to deal with his hungers and he knew just how to do it. Pulling out his phone, he dialed a certain little vixen he knew from earlier in the week. If he played his cards right, and he almost always did, he’d be fed, help with the investigation as agreed, and teach Hopps a much-needed lesson.

The grin on his features was rapacious as he heard the call connect.

“Nicky? It’s been days. I was hoping you’d call sooner.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I’ve had a rough day or two. Want to help me destress a bit?”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The line went dead. He knew across town somewhere, there was a vixen excusing herself from dinner with her husband. She’d make some excuse. If she was smart she’d use something to mask the desire that was obviously going to be hanging around her like a cloud. It wasn’t as though Nick cared about what her husband thought. It would just take less time if she didn’t get in a fight while she tried to get out the door. For as much as he needed to feed and teach the angel a lesson, he also did need to destress. He wanted ample time to take care of both.

Several hours later, Nick sat in his room. A half empty bottle of mineral water sat next to a lowball close at hand. A cherry red ember on the end of a cigarette was the only light in the room as it smoldered under a faint layer of ash. He was rolling a coin over his knuckles. As he made his digits
nimble, he ruminated. His meal was done. The mortal he’d made use of had left some time ago. The mental suggestions he’d placed in her mesmerized mind would see her play her part the next day with little risk of failure.

Finnick had earned his Coin. The pint-sized irritant had shown up before midnight, as ordered, with everything Nick had demanded and even a little change. He’d added it to the payment assuring the imp’s silence and complicity. The one Lucifer was more than an imp like Finnick had ever seen in one place and would possibly buy him a promotion. It could also vanish into a tart’s purse, but that was his issue. Nick had more pressing concerns than his subordinate’s proclivities.

Once his dinner had been shooed out of his space, he’d addressed the large oilcloth package and small chest Finnick had brought him. Quite a bit of time was spent working over his armor, weapons and relics in preparation for the rest of his plans. They weren’t necessary just yet and he’d intended to reacquire it all at some point, anyways, but that damn angel had changed his timetable. There were the items still held ransom alongside his rank, but that was another matter. Once all his personal effects were cleaned, sharpened and properly cared for, they went into his chest and Nick felt much more in control of his reality. At least he had a few backup plans to rely on and an Imp who owed him.

The angel would pay for what she had done.

The angel would fall.

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Judy sat miserably in her favorite coffee shop. The bourbon and Adrenalin swirled uneasily in her blood as she sipped her tea and struggled not to make herself feel any worse. There was a better way for her to have handled that. There had to have been one. She was disgusted with herself for a number of reasons, not the least of which was her failure to put the effort into finding one.

His anger had been justified. She had expected it and prepared her arguments against anything he could say. She’d trapped him and they both knew it. She had known he’d be furious and been prepared to face him down. She hadn’t been prepared for the look in his eyes when he told her to get out. The fury was thick enough to cut with a knife, but it was the tiny spark of hurt that got to her. She was disgusted with herself for causing that hurt. Almost as much as she was at feeling so guilty over harming a demon. She’d slaughtered hordes of them over the years, but somehow that was different. She could wipe out millions of the insane beasts without batting an eye, but the one that could sit across from her and be civilly rude had her feeling terrible.

“Excuse me, miss?”
Judy jumped and looked up, her paw flying to the hilt of the dagger concealed at her hip. The huge, rotund face looking down at her froze wide eyed at her reaction. It was a cheetah. A really fat cheetah.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to startle you.” A really sweet, fat cheetah.

“No! I’m sorry. You, um...” Judy sagged. “You startled me, but that doesn’t excuse my overreaction. I apologize.”

The big cat smiled. “Think nothing of it. I’m just glad you didn’t pepper spray me.”

Judy blushed a little in embarrassment. She hadn’t been subtle about reaching for a weapon and she was glad mortal minds interpreted divine implements in such convenient ways. She had reached for it, but not drawn and he’d seen pepper spray instead of a divine blade. Small blessings. She pulled her paw away from the weapon and wiggles her fingers to show it was empty.

“Are you ok?” he repeated. “You seem a little jumpy.”

“I... No, not really.”

“Did you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know you.”

“We can fix that.” He held out his paw, extending two fingers for her to shake. “Benjamin Clawhauser.”

“Judy Hopps,” she replied, taking his paw. “Why do I feel like I know you?”

“I hear that a lot,” he replied with a chortle. “But it may have something to do with the fact that I work at the ZPD.”
“The front desk sergeant. Of course. I should have realized.”

“No worries! You’ve only been in a couple times when I’ve been on duty and you’re clearly distracted. I’m good at remembering faces.” The big cat slipped into the chair opposite her and settled in. “So, what has a cute little bunny like you looking so down and reaching for a perfectly legal concealed weapon?”

She wanted to reprimand him for using that word, but she had bigger problems on her mind. She couldn’t lie. Any dishonesty would conflict with her vows and she would suffer. She also had her cover to worry about. As far as the desk sergeant would be concerned, she was a special liaison to a nameless government agency, brought in for a special task force directly under the chief’s command.

“Nothing requiring an investigation, officer,” she said with a weak smile.

“So why the pepper spray? Is it a guy?”

“Yes...? Sort of...”

“Does this sort-of guy have a name?”

“Nick. He’s a... colleague. I haven’t known him that long.” She wasn’t telling the fullest truth, but her vow wasn’t causing her to white out in pain. It made her feel strangely appreciative of the fox, to use his term for what they were when he’d been lying to Candi at the diner. She decided to follow his lead, just this once.

“Oh... So, what happened?”

Judy shook herself. “Yeah. I’ve been working with him for less than a day and… I don’t know. I feel very conflicted.”

“What did you do?”

“Ugh... I did something I’m not proud of.” Once she started she couldn’t stop herself. “He was such a jerk. He’s rude and conceited. He may have reason for thinking so highly of himself, but it’s just so
damnably grating. All day, I had to babysit him and do most of the work. He barely contributed at all. He was hours late meeting me. He offered his help, but it feels like he’s just coasting along. I was completely justified in everything I said and did.”

“If he’s that rude, I think a little payback is justified, especially if you’re supposed to be working together.”

“We are, but... I feel guilty for it. He deserved it, but I feel like I did myself a disservice in stooping to that.”

“Why?”

“At lunch I had an... episode. I fainted and got a bloody nose. He caught me before I fell. He got across the table and kept me from getting hurt or choking. He actually looked concerned. It was kind of him.”

“He’s blowing hot and cold, huh?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“So, you were heavy handed with him. An apology should fix that.”

“I can apologize, but...”

“Alright. What’s actually the problem?”

“The problem is he’s intimidating and terrifying when he’s angry, but despite being furious he gave me a chance to have my say and listened. No one’s done that before. He’s the first person to pay attention when I spoke and hear me out. Once I made my point, he was still angry, but he never raised his voice or laid a paw on me, despite the fact that I probably deserved both.”

“You did a little more than tell him off, didn’t you?”
Judy nodded miserably. “What I did wasn’t kind. If he steps out of line again, he won’t like the results and it’s his own fault. We made a deal and he’s barely kept his end of it. All I did was assure I’d get what I was owed.”

“This guy must be a real piece of work.”

Judy was torn. “I’m under no illusions. The guy is a bastard. The problem is I need him. He isn’t the sort of person that works well with authority, or is even remotely on the up and up, but he is the best chance we have of resolving this case quickly and cleanly. The chief…

“Is the Chief. I get it. So, what’s the problem?”

“What I did to Nick was low, but justified and I suspected something like it would end up being necessary, no matter what. I still think I owe him an apology, for my own conscience’s sake, if nothing else.”

Clawhauser chewed his words over very carefully before he responded. “That’s not all there is to it, is it? I understand wanting to apologize, but if he deserved it then it would be simple. You’d do what you had to, say you were sorry, but make it clear it was necessary and that would be the end of it. He’d get over it eventually. What about this has you torn up?”

“Something about him bothers me. He’s done and said a few things that makes me wonder if there’s more to him than what I’ve seen. The trouble is, he was distant before I slammed him. Now, I doubt he’d trust me with anything personal. I may have blown my chance.”

“Maybe you have. Maybe you haven’t. There’s only one way to find out.”

In the early hours of the morning, Judy sat on her bed and tried to ease her mind. She was getting too good at not being honest. She’d told Clawhauser enough to help him understand, but danced just outside lying, or telling the truth. It had been dancing in the infinite grey space between black and white. Once upon a time that space had been a line thinner than an atom. But now…

It’d been too easy to imitate the demon’s methods. Too easy by far. Her thoughts returned again to him and her own self-inflicted plight. Equivocating in her chat with her new felid friend was a minor thing. Her conversation with Nick before he threw her out was not. She’d told Nick that his lying to her would result in unpleasantness, but hadn’t explained how. His anger when he’d come to was suffocating and she hadn’t possessed the wherewithal to finish explaining. If she had, he would almost certainly have ended her, despite the price of losing his arm to the binding as the cost.
The Truant’s Summons. A horribly misnamed spell for something so significant and ancient. Used by the High Host originally as a means of watching over recruits on the battlefield, it had changed over time. Now, it was much more potent.

Judy looked mournfully at her own arm and the mark of the spell as it manifested on her. A twining sleeve, similar to the one that had glowed on Nick’s fur, but so different. Where his mark was gold on russet, her grey fur was stained black and patterned in ragged angles; a sign of who she was bound to. It was smaller than his, only reaching her elbow, but that was a further condemnation to her. She felt sick as she looked at it.

Deals with a demon, equivocation and now the perversion of a Divine Bond. Necessity had driven her down a path paved in good intentions. The sayings told her where it led, but for the first time, the reality of had come home to her. She could only hope there was time to correct her course and if not, that she would find the strength to accept the consequences.
Judy stood outside the hotel she had fled the evening before. It was past the time she’d stated as their designated meeting time. Long past, in fact. Almost an hour. Stupid rabbit that she was, she’d stated the time, but not the location. There weren’t many options, in the first place. Her little apartment would not play host to a demon. The diner they’d visited was not a viable option as far as she was concerned, at least not until she knew what Nick had done to the waitress and how to reverse it. They had no other common ground now, other than here. His territory.

She knew he was in his room. The spell told her as much. That information made her hesitancy no better. Apologies and conversations awaited her inside, none of which would be pleasant. They were unlikely to be fatal at this point, and that was a good thing. The means by which she had changed those odds was, fittingly enough, the source of the immanent problems she faced. Judy still felt a degree of disgust at herself and the means of facing up to it was in front of her, so why did she hesitate?

The memory of Nick’s face, twisted in anger, flitted through her mind. His fury had frightened her immensely, but his hurt was another matter. His pain at the binding and her de facto betrayal was enough to take all the fire out of her.

That said, Judy was an Officer of the High Host. She forced her feet to move and slowly, as though pressing on against a strong wind, she made her way to his door. Her knuckles were a breath from rapping the door when the words “It’s open” came wafting through to her ears. Once she was inside, the smell hit her. The scents of musk, sex, and adrenalin practically caked the air. After she left, he had obviously had company. The case for her worst fears being realized grew stronger.
“You’re late.”

He was sitting on the chair with his back to her. Shirtless, of course. That was his default. It was a small thread of commonality she found to be oddly comforting. That was all she saw, however. He was sitting and facing away from her, making no move to address her directly. She, in turn, stalled out in the middle of the room. She had no idea what to do with herself and her anxiety warred with her preoccupation.

“I am.”

“How long did it take for you to realize you gave me a time, but no location?”

“Under the circumstances, I think a little distraction is forgivable.”

“And what else have you forgiven yourself for?” His words made her breath catch in her throat. Before she found her tongue, he pressed on. “As you seem to be tongue-tied, I’ll lead. What else can this manacle you’ve put on me do to me?”

“It’s not a manacle.”

“Then what is it, rabbit? I know it’s not just a means of locating me.”

“Communication. We can use mind-speech across the bond it creates.”

“Oh! You won’t have to find me to yell at me, then. Good to know.”

Every time he spoke, sarcasm and false good cheer dripped off his words. It infuriated her for its mockery. The barbs in his words referring to her deception merely stung. After last night’s contemplation, she thought she’d accepted the wrongs she’d done in the name of a good thing. It seemed she missed a few.

“And what of the part about how I won't like lying to you? Was that another lie, or did you mean the
vicious mental tongue lashing I’d get if I ever misbehave?"

“Just the tongue lashing.”

“Uhhuh.” It was clear he didn’t believe her. “Don’t try to con a demon, rabbit. We wrote the book on it.” At that point, he picked up his pack of cigarettes and shook one out. To Judy’s eyes, the talons were longer and the color of his flame more intense. He was struggling to contain himself. “Of course, this “bond” thing is one-way-only.”

“No. You will know where I am and be able to speak to me at will. You just have to focus.”

“And the honesty?”

“Also, both ways.”

“So, if I asked your weakness, you’d be forced to tell me.”

Dread flooded through her. “If you asked, I’d have to.”

“And yet not.” He must have sensed her confusion, because he elaborated. “What I just said was an implied question. You did a moment ago when I suggested the bond was one way. If this spell was a genuine truth compulsion, you’d have been forced to answer.”

“How do you know that?”

“You aren’t the first angel I’ve known.” His head rolled back and he looked at her for the first time, smoke wreathing his face. “I’ll give you this one for free, Carrots. He wasn’t any gentler.”

A million questions tangled in Judy’s throat. Her senses were being assaulted and her mind was not clear. She wanted to speak, but she didn’t get a chance to even start on the metaphorical Gordian Knot.

“I assume you want to visit that last location, today.”
“The what?”

“The scene you were so upset about me leaving last night. Remember?”

“Yes! Yes, we should check it out. We can try your divination again later. If we find anything.”

“Assuming we find a focus.”

That was when the world tilted slightly. The fox’s sarcastic comment had just sparked enough indignity to get a rise out of her, then he stood up. He was completely naked. Judy’s retort died in her throat and the comment about finding a focus suddenly had a very different complexion in her mind. Still facing away from her, he made his way to the bedroom with her eyes glued to him every step of the way. It may have been a trick of her imagination, but for a heartbeat, she was sure she heard, “See something you like, rabbit?”

Once they were outside things were a little better for her. The fresh air helped clear her head and his clothed state, as much as he ever was, prevented further confusing distraction. The mind-clouding scents were absent unless he was upwind. Even that was manageable, but the bewilderment from earlier remained. He’d given his word that he wouldn’t use his powers on her and he would never break his word. Demons couldn’t unless they wanted to suffer severely for it. He was his usual self, if more on edge. Judy supposed that was only to be expected.

The made their way through the streets to the last place she had earmarked for review the day before. Passersby seemed to be especially attentive to both of them. Nick stole the show, but a lot of attention was coming her way, as well. It may have just been a lingering sensitivity from earlier, but it felt as though she was being observed. Mostly benignly, but there was an undercurrent of something unpleasant. Nick would have been a perfect target for her blame, but he was in front of her as often as not. It didn’t match up.

Eliminating the fox as the reason for her discomfiture was not salving to her anxieties. Now she had the fox and whatever was staring at her to contend with. Judy found some small relief in their arrival at the site they had abandoned previously.

It was a wash.

With Nick’s assistance, they were done in minutes and without him wandering off as a diversion, the
data was entered into her tablet moments after their checks were done. The analysis generated would have been more useful as an example of Zen thought: lots and lots of nothing. Nothing in the ether, mana currents, material substrate, physical location or astral resonances.

“Well, Carrots?”

“Don’t ask questions you know the answer to. It’s a waste of time.”

“You act like we have anything else.”

“We don’t have anything else. As of now, we don’t have anything at all!”

“What are you so upset about, rabbit? We knew this was a long shot.”

“That isn’t helping.”

“Do you want to put on your ranty panties and get it out, already?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your shoulders are riding at ear level and you’re getting crabbier by the minute. You may as well get it out. It’s not like I can go anywhere.”

“What is your problem? Souls aren’t going to Heaven or Hell. The Wager is in jeopardy and you seem to be content watching the whole of Creation burn!”

“The Wager was between the Divinity and the Devil eons ago to keep angels and demons from obliterating each other and the mortal plane going up in smoke as collateral damage. All it’s done is enforce the status quo here for time out of mind. Both of the original holders of the thrones are long dead and no one in either realm has the guts to even question it.”

“You think genocide is a better option?”
“I think it’d be a mercy.”

Judy was aghast. The statement itself was everything she’d expected from a demon, but actually hearing it was repulsive. Making it worse was the bitterness and revulsion in his voice. There was more to what he’d said than the words, but before she could ask he flinched. His eyes squeezed shut and a small snarl crossed his features. She watched his momentary weakness with morbid fascination and a strange sense of sorrow. It all vanished in a flash.

Nick shook himself and he was back to his usual blithe self.

Without waiting for her he traipsed off, calmly stating, “I’m getting hungry. There’s a place around the corner worth stopping at if you haven’t been there,” over his shoulder.

Judy was stunned. Nothing in this day had gone the way she’d expected, even her indignation. She wanted to be furious; to drag him someplace and beat him until he told her what on earth was going on, but she knew that was a joke and a bad one at that. He’d never allow her to succeed and he’d probably laugh at her attempt.

Tentatively, she focused on the bond and pinged him. He was exactly where he said he was going moments ago; just around the corner sitting at a table, ostensibly waiting for her. The weight of all the unknowns was draining. Resigned to her fate of ever-increasing bewilderments, Judy tromped off to join him. At least, she’d get some food out of the situation.

Judy took her time approaching him when she arrived at the bistro. It was a cute little place, by her standards. Considering the number of small tables, especially for paired mammals, it was probably a favorite date spot. After the other odd moments comprising her day that was not a welcome thought, both for the inappropriate mental path she was then sent down and the implication of their combined presences. Adding to her sense of discombobulation was the fact that he was acting decidedly like himself, despite the moment he’d just had in the alley.

In the time it had taken her to find the gumption to pursue he had evidently been less than laconic. No sooner had she planted her rump on the chair opposite him than a waiter materialized. Café au lait, fruit-filled croissant and a few choice samples from the sweets selection appeared in front of her, including a pair of honey-glazed strawberries.

“What is this?”
“Food.”

“Not what I was asking, fox.”

“Good food.”

Judy grumbled, but bit into the pastry and moaned appreciatively. Nick chuckled mildly.

“What’s funny?”

“Your turnaround in mood. From grumpy to gleeful in a single bite. It’s quite charming.”

“Compliments won’t get you anywhere with me.”

“It got you to blush.”

Judy’s paws flew to her cheeks and ears, only to realize they were, in fact, warm. The heat grew as she realized he’d not only played her but gotten her to give herself away. All she could do was find another topic. Considering the measured amusement in his eyes, she’d better do it quick, or he’d continue the same vein. That possibility had her heart rate increasing notably and she did not like it.

“Is this some kind of petty revenge for the Summons?”

“Yes, I’m buying you food and flirting with you as a very cunning form of revenge. Well spotted.”

“This wasn’t what I wanted.”

Nick sputtered, “In what way? You decided I wasn’t doing my part and put the whammy on me. Never mind the fact that I warned you it was pointless and I was absolutely correct. The assurance you got from it was too good a thing to pass up. Now, you may regret what you did a little bit, but you won’t undo it.” Nick placed his coffee back on the saucer in front of him and leaned in before
delivering a crushing line. “Not that you could, either.”

The blood drained from her face. “How did you know?”

“You just told me, but it was just confirming a suspicion. Angelic magic tends to have specific requirements and relies on mutual agreement a lot. We don’t have that, therefore…” He left that statement hanging in the air for a moment and sipped his coffee. “Now, you have me on a tether and feel safer. What more could you possibly want?”

“A clear conscience.”

“A clear conscience...” The exasperation in Nick’s voice was compounded by his paw flopping onto the tabletop in disbelief. “When did you acquire this taste for luxuries?”

“It’s not a luxury.”

“On this Plane it is, sister. What, did you think all the training you went through about the risks of coming here were a lie? A scare tactic? All the warnings about connections to mortals and the complexities of conflicting interests were a joke?”

Judy blinked and her mouth hung open. That was a direct quote from the Black Hat that ran her Ethics in Mortal Affairs trainings. He was ancient even by celestial standards and as part of the basic training regimen at the Officer’s Academy of the High Host. It was not something a demon should know and he couldn’t have gotten that information from another angel. It was so innocuous a detail that it would never be relevant. The only way you could know that was if you heard it firsthand. It was a chance she had to take. In three words Judy could discover a huge amount more about the being she was shackled to. It may give her more questions than answers, but it was paramount that she know.

A quick mental calculation led her to choose the words most likely to hit. She knew the rank he would have earned and that was all she needed. In a firm, clear voice, she uttered, “Lieutenant Nicolas Wilde.”

The fox’s expression went blank and his eyes went full demon black in an instant. Then he flinched just like he had in the alley, only bigger. His paws came up to his head and his pain only grew as the moments passed.
“Nick? Nick! Are you ok?”

His breathing was speeding up; claws digging into his skin. Judy could hear his heart hammering in his chest as he struggled with something only he could see. She reached out to lay a paw on his arm and he lept away as though burned as soon as she made contact. Shaking his head and muttering, “Crazy rabbit,” mostly to himself, Nick beat a hasty retreat out of the bistro, leaving a stunned rabbit and several confused patrons behind.

The waiter reappeared and was very considerate. Judy was only half aware of his consolation for the date ending so suddenly and so poorly. With all the expedience of long practice, he bundled up all their meal leavings and bagged them. Judy was present enough in mind to quickly thank him before speeding out, bag in paw.

There was no time for subtlety. Judy mashed down on the bond she shared with the demon and followed him without preamble, or uncertainty. She'd known there was more to him than what he had shown the very first night and now she was sure. He was a fallen angel.

She found him in a park about two miles from where he had left her. It was a quiet place. Open and airy, with a few fountains scattered through the green spaces, it felt comfortable and completely abandoned. That was probably why he chose there to stop. As she entered the space, a faint tingle of power rippled over her fur. He was keeping mortals away with a ward. Not her, though. The flare of the tattoo on her arm told her it was their connection alone that allowed her to pass so easily. It would take a real force of will for anyone to pass through it, otherwise.

Sitting on a bench too large for such a small mammal with his head laid back against the back, to all the world he looked like he was basking in the sun and nothing more. Judy recognized the façade for what it was, now. A way for the world to see enough to not take notice while he collected himself again.

Judy took a seat next to him and waited. She knew he was aware of her presence. Even upset, he had demonstrated a preternatural awareness of his surroundings, particularly when it came to her. She didn’t need to wait long.

“Do you know what happens to an angel when they fall?”

Judy shook her head, only to realize he still had his eyes shut. Feeling stupid, she said. “Not directly. Only rumors and what Command tells us.”
“So, nothing.”

Judy chuckled. It was more evidence of what he had been; an old joke that every soldier knew, right after, “Don’t call me “sir”. I work for a living.”

“Mushrooms.”

“Kept in the dark and fed shit.”

For a moment, they shared a laugh; one watery and anxious, the other raspy and worn. Then, he continued in a voice that grew sepulchral in its tone as the words flowed.

“How an angel cast from the heavens ends up in Hell. After nine days of hurtling through the void, you slam into the broken rock and caustic ash of the place for the first time, you’re asked one question. Your Sin. Whichever sin you name is the one that takes you.”

Judy wanted to ask what sin he had committed, but held her tongue. He was talking and there was no way she was going to interrupt, lest he come to his senses and stop.

“What they do to you in the House of your Sin cannot be described. They break you. Take everything from you. Destroy what you are and remake you in the image of what made you fall. The light of creation is beaten, tortured and raped out of you until you are a husk. Then, corruption takes its place and you’re filled with it. You become Gluttony, or Wrath, or you lose your mind to the corruption. The slavering hordes of demons you’ve no doubt obliterated on the Fringe were of that sort. The mind-broken. If you manage to endure the tortures and retain your mind, you become something else. A Ranked Demon.”

“How like you.”

His eyes opened. They weren’t the black pits so common to demons, but they were just as empty. “Like me.”

Judy felt guilt and horror for the being sitting next to her. Now she knew. He was Fallen. The enormity of what he had endured explained his behavior. She’d have repressed the memories, too. Then, he spoke again and the world pitched under her.
“Twice.”

Her mind stuttered, trying to grasp what he was telling her. He had fallen twice. Such a thing was impossible. Her mouth moved on its own and she barely breathed one word.

“How?”

That was when all hell broke loose in a purely mundane way. The moment was vaporized by a barely incoherent shriek of rage from the throat of an enraged fox that bore down on Judy, wielding a paring knife. The comicality of it would have pulled a laugh from her throat if Judy hadn’t been furious at being interrupted at such a crucial moment. Her perspective lurched sideways for a moment, which confused her until she comprehended two things. First, the lurching was his paw slipping out from under hers, where she had been holding it on the bench seat. The second was the fact that Nick now held her assailant by the throat and had already removed the armament she had been wielding.

Nick was grateful for the distraction.

He was blabbering. Telling secrets, not lies. Giving insights, not distractions. For some reason, he wasn’t keeping his mouth shut and the headaches were happening more often. Momentary flashes of things that hurt too much to be borne arced through his mind, leaving him reeling and as he now saw, vulnerable. They had started after that miserable angel had stunned and bound him. Now, they were a threat.

Nick was angry. First, at himself for letting her trap him and, second, at her for what this was doing to him. He had set up this little charade with the nameless piece of meat he had by the throat to teach Hopps a lesson. He would, and reinforce it until she never forgot. While he was at it, he would get a chance to vent and maybe, just maybe, get control of the situation back a little bit.

Judy scrambled off the bench and approached the demon and attacker. The tableau was ludicrously surreal. As she watched the vixen who had attacked her seemed to be visibly fighting, but not the demon who had her by the throat. That she seemed to enjoy. Instead, she was struggling to get at her.

“Wilde, what is this?”

“This sorry excuse,” the vixen shuddered and smiled, “was last night’s dinner.”
Dread filled Judy’s gut. She knew there was nowhere good that this situation could go. “How did she get like this?”

“I’ll leave that to your imagination, shall I?”

“Tell me.”

“Do you know what happens when a mortal gets exposed to too much of a demon?”

“It depends on the type. This looks like…”

“Obsession. Or addiction. This little morsel got a little too much of me and now, well… I’m fairly certain she’s here to run you off her turf, shall we say?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean exactly that, Carrots. She probably thinks we were on a date and her jealousy got the better of her.”

Judy struggled to not react to his words. They echoed her own perversely distracted thoughts from earlier in the day. To hear that this female was convinced enough to act so rashly was disquieting. She couldn’t help the poisonous thought from passing through her mind: was this his intent and if so, to what end?

“Now, unfortunately, we have a problem.”

“Do we?”

“This.” Judy watched as he lifted the mammal hanging blissfully in his grip. “What do we do with this?”
“We let it- HER go.” The fact that she had to correct herself mid-thought disgusted her.

“She’ll only try again.”

“Then, what do you suggest? Don’t you have some demon magic you can use?”

“I could erase her memory, but that would be cruel.”

“How would that be cruel? She wouldn’t remember!”

“I can remove myself from her mind and any trace of it, but the hunger she experiences when I’m absent is another matter.”

“Can’t you remove that?”

“No. If I alter her memory, the addiction will remain and she’ll have no idea what will sate it. She’ll spend the rest of her life chasing the high. She’ll be a junkie or a prostitute within a month. Probably both and dead within a year.”

“Is there no other way?”

“Do you have any magic that can fix this?”

“No.” Judy replied miserably. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be asking. Do you have any other solution?”

“She can die.”

“NO!”

“Is that your choice? You’d see her suffer the rest of her miserable life because you think it’s better to be alive and suffering than dead and moved on to the hereafter? Which is the merciful option, little
“I... Can’t make that choice.”

In one fluid motion, too quick to stop, the demon’s paw slipped under the hapless female’s chin, hooked up against her jaw and snapped her head to the side with a gut-wrenching crunch. “Now, you don’t have to.”

Judy watched the now-lifeless husk slump to the ground in front of the indifferent demon. She watched in ghoulish horror as the soul of the vixen slipped from the body and was collected delicately by the fox, who corralled it in the cage of his talons.

Nick summoned up a speck of putrid green hellfire on the tip of his claw and addressed the soul. With the speed and ease of long practice, he drew a sigil on the air and pushed it gently towards the soul. When it touched, there was a mild sizzling sound and the soul flinched minutely. He nodded and released the little ball of quintessence.

“What have you done?” Judy croaked.

“ Took care of a problem. I also marked the soul, so I can track it with divination tonight when the souls are stolen. See? I helped.”

Aghast was too small a word for what Judy felt. His callousness was indescribable. She didn’t understand. She couldn’t. All she could do was feel. Hurt, betrayal, guilt, disgust. She saw a little smile grow on his face and it was decided. She was not going to suffer alone. She focused on the bond and opened her connection to the demon to the maximum she could. It was a small remuneration for her pain to see his knees slam into the ground as he held his side and trembled.

Nick felt like he’d been stabbed. A sucking feeling he barely had a name for rolled over him in a wave. Guilt. For the first time since he’d fallen, he felt guilt. Her guilt. Everything she was experiencing, all the emotions of a righteous spirit faced with a monster pummeled through him.

Judy was transfixed at his reactions. So much so that she almost missed the backlash. His feelings bled back across their connection. The alien emotions of the fox bubbled through thickly through her mind; betrayal, anger, resentment, and ravenous fury made themselves known, alongside one she could not bring herself to be convinced of; self-loathing.
Her disbelief spurred his distress and anger. His betrayal only served to reinforce her guilt. Their emotions rebounded off each other, spiraling into a maelstrom of confused and conflicting feelings for both mammals, until finally Nick had endured enough and he slammed the connection shut.

His eyes were venomous as he stared at her and uttered one word. “Deceiver.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Of course not. You merely misled me as to the nature of this binding. Now, I’m nothing more than your pet.” The vitriol put into the final syllable was enough to make her flinch.

“No.”

“No? You’ve effectively press-ganged me. You now have a tool to use as you see fit and torture when it displeases you. The devil couldn’t have gotten a better deal!” In an instant, Judy understood Nick’s reaction to her opening the bond. A demon’s pike to the side would have felt better than the feeling crystalizing in her gut.

The silence that followed was cacophonous. They were both drained and ragged. The emotional pandemonium they had just endured left them both hurting and with far too much to think about. In Nick’s case, it also left him hungry.

Judy called out to him as he hauled himself to his feet and started plodding away.

“Where are you going?”

“To eat.”

“You mean to make another mortal like her,” Judy stated like it was a fact, with no rancor or accusation.

“Possibly.”
“I can’t let you do that.”

“You’ll stop me? If I won’t let me feed, you’ll be condemning me to starvation and, eventually, insanity.”

"There has to be another way."

"There isn’t. I need to feed my Sins."

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure the Devil would love to talk shop, sometime.”

“This isn’t about you or me, Nick. Creation is on the line and I will not let it fall because I refused to do what it took.”

“How kind of you to sacrifice me for the sake of your righteousness.” Judy had no answer to that. After several tensely gravid moments, Nick continued in a grating tone. “There will be consequences, rabbit.”

“I’ve accepted that.”

“No, you haven’t. You have an inkling of how powerful I might be. If I lose my mind, guess what happens to the mortals you’re so concerned for.”

“That won’t happen.”

“And what will you do to prevent it? Kill me?”

“We both know I can’t. It would be immoral.”
“Of course not. You’ve been so conscientious, thus far.”

“What would it take to prove it?

“You word in blood.” His tone was a picture of the belief that she would never bother. “Swear on your Name that you will release me when this is done. Then, and only then, will you have any room to talk to me.”

His disbelief was warranted. Vow was binding enough as it was, but in blood? On her Name? She owed him. That much was clear to her. However, there was no stronger promise and, if broken, could very easily mean her end. With that in mind, Judy drew her dagger and pricked her thumb. A drop was all she needed. Centering herself on the ruby droplet, she spoke clearly, but not without trepidation.

“I swear by my Name and all that I am to release you from my binding and hold all oaths fulfilled the moment this situation is resolved.”

“Alright rabbit. Now, we need to talk about something else.”

“What?”

“Consequences. You said you’d accepted them.”

“Didn’t I prove that, already?” she retorted wearily.

“Your sincerity, perhaps, but there is one other option you should be aware of.”

“And what is that?”

Before answering, Nick moved to stand in front of her. She was angry and heartsick with too much to try to understand. Judy expected him to slap her, or snarl at her, or anything other than what happened. His paw firmly and efficiently cupped her chin, lifting her face to his. His eyes were small, green suns boiling with intent.
“You could be my meal.”

Several steps later, Judy was still shaking her paw. She was still trying to remember how to breathe properly. After slapping him, she’d stormed off, knowing he would follow. She was scared and filled with a giddy electric feeling, like the one she’d had before battle. This time it was not for the imminent plunge into the madness of warfare. This was a very different experience. Not one she was comfortable with at all.

Meanwhile, Nick stretched the torque out of his neck and raked his long tongue over where her paw had been for a split second. That had hurt. He’d enjoyed it. Worth it, every second of it. It had cost him and he wasn’t sure he knew exactly how much, but now he knew. He had evidence on the ground right in front of him. Stooping quickly, he collected the tiny blob of fluff from the grass where it lay. It was barely larger than a dandelion seed, but to Nick it could not be more noticeable. The feather from an angel’s wing was unmistakable. He wanted to laugh until his ribs ached and crow his success to the stars.

There was only one reason that feathers fell from an angel’s wing.

Temptation.
The return to Nick’s hotel was not a triumphant one for either of them. Judy had internally lamented not having a vehicle before, but now the lament had grown fervent. The last thing she wanted to do after enduring the day she’d been through was be stuck on a bus, surrounded by tired mammals during rush hour. It was a sad irony in her mind that both she and her companion looked just as haggard and dead on their paws as the rest of the commuters.

Slumping through the lobby and making their way from the elevator to the room was a task of Herculean proportions. Nick was drained, but somewhat pleased by the results of his taxing day. By rights he should have been thrilled. The discovery of Judy’s weakness was cause for celebration as far as he was concerned. However, his success seemed small in the face of what he’d been through. The emotional hammering he’d taken lingered and the unfamiliar feelings, for reasons he was hesitant to explore, couldn’t be shaken off no matter how hard he tried.

Meanwhile, Judy was tired. Very tired. She was heartsore, mourning the unnecessary death in the park and her own behavior. Somehow, her errors just seemed to be compounding. Beyond the regrets she had started the day with, she had a mortal life and inflicting pain on Nick to add to her tally. The conscience she had hoped to ease was only further distressed and the information she had gained on Nick was not worth the price she was paying. The questions were piling up faster than the answers and every answer was distressing.

Upon arrival at his room, Nick dumped his things in a chair and beat a path to the sideboard, where he poured himself a very large drink. Half his glass vanished down his throat before he held it up to her with an inquiring look. Seeing her head shake, he finished his drink and poured another.
Cigarette smoke wreathed his figure moments later. As Judy watched, Nick struggled to suppress his shudders. To her eyes, he was not holding up well.

Struggling to find words was a new experience for her, but decreasingly so when it came to him. Judy wanted to do many things, but had no strength for subtlety.

“Could you have done anything for her?”

“No. Why are you bringing that up, again? This bond thing makes lying impossible and we’ve had this conversation before.”

“I’m trying to understand.”

“Understand what, exactly? I couldn’t do anything beyond the two options I gave you. I assume there was nothing an angel could manage?”

“No… I saw no corruption, so I couldn’t purify it out of her. How is that even possible, Nick? I’ve never heard of a demon that didn’t corrupt.”

“It has nothing to do with corruption, or anything of the kind, Carrots. It’s just a fact of what I am. That’s what you’re trying to understand, isn’t it?”

“What are you?”

“A demon.”

“Nick…”

“You want to know what kind of demon I am, so you can more efficiently exterminate me.”

The weight of things unsaid weighed heavily on their minds.
Judy watched as Nick stubbed his cigarette butt in the ashtray and lit another. He carried his still-full lowball of bourbon to the coffee table and set it down before he flopped into a chair. Judy moved to the sideboard, collecting the decanter and a glass before joining him. She wasn’t interested in a drink, but knew the importance of shared experiences. Sitting opposite him, she poured a bare measure into her glass and took a sip. He nodded his understanding and took one, himself.

“You may as well ask, Hopps. I’m too tired to fight you.”

“What did you mean you fell twice?”

“You really want the sob story, don’t you?”

“I want to know why you flinch every time I say anything that sparks your memory, Lieutenant.”

Nick flinched before answering. “I’m not that anymore. Not in a very long time, Carrots.”

“So, what else were you? A Captain? Major? What Host?”

“I don’t remember.”

“How can you not remember?”

“Do you remember what I said about what happens when an angel falls?”

“Yes…?”

“Do you think I want to remember anything to do with the good times before that happened?”

“So, you don’t remember why you fell?”

“I know it was due to my pride. That’s all. Anything else hurts.”
“What about your second falling?”

Once I survived my initiation in Pride, I rose through the ranks quickly. I was powerful and ambitious. A near-perfect fit for the House of Pride. Before long I was a candidate to lead the Sin.”

“You were an archdemon.”

“Was?” He chuckled at her discomfiture. “My rank is suspended, but I am no less powerful. I wasn’t content to wait for the leadership to empty on its own, so I acted.”

“You tried to kill Asmodeus.”

“No. He’s the Archdemon for Lust. I was in Pride at the time. I skipped the House throne and went right for the big seat. I tried to kill the Devil, himself.”

Judy couldn’t believe her ears. “You…”

“That’s right, sweetheart, I led a coup d’etat to try to take the Throne of Hell. Buffy didn’t like that.”

“Wha-? Buffy?”

“Baphomet. The reigning head of Pride and current holder of the Throne. If I’d just challenged for the House, he’d have handed it over. Instead, the miserable old goat smacked me down and punished me for my attempt.”

“What did he do?”

“He stripped me of my rank in Pride and gave me to Luxuria as a toy. Asmodeus was very pleased to get his claws on me.”

“What happened to you?”
“It was Lust, rabbit, what do you think?” Nick took a long sip of his drink and muttered, “Hell breaks everything that comes to it.”

“I thought Lust was the least Sin.”

“If you think that, then it had a Napoleon complex. Lust teaches you to enjoy everything. Any twisted desire you can imagine would only be a warmup. I was passed around like a party favor by all the Sins; used as a whipping post for Wrath, humiliated for Pride’s amusement, Tortured for Envy’s… And at the end of every day I was tossed into the brothels of Hell to be used as any demon saw fit. After a few millennia, anyone would go insane. I didn’t. I learned to desire my tortures and embraced Lust.”

“And you claimed another Sin.”

“I did. Now, I can’t claim to be of Pride’s ilk, though I have its hungers. I belong to Lust, through and through. I suppose you can guess what I am, now.”

“You’re an incubus.”

Nick raised his glass in salute to her statement. As he drank, Judy fought down her terror. Incubi were rare and uniquely dangerous, even among demons. Tolerance for pain, individual powers, an extreme capacity for adaptation, inherent masculine allure and addictive characteristics. Owing to that, it was common practice to eliminate them as soon as they were identified. Having spent time with Nick, she understood why. However, she also knew he wasn’t just a monster. He was also a victim of sorts and she had not treated him well. There wasn’t much she could do for him, certainly not for his suffering in Hell, but there was one thing she could.

“Nick, stand up.”

“Hmm?”

“Stand up. Now, please.”

“Alright,” Nick groaned in exasperation as he stood. “Now what?”
Looking at him, Judy had second thoughts. This was insane. Arguably the single most idiotic thing she had ever conceived of. Her weakness was Lust and an incubus was standing right in front of her. An incubus who was likely aware of her weakness. He was shirtless and looking down at her in a way that sent a distressing thrill all the way from her ears to her toes. Every shred of basic sense and survival instinct she possessed was shrieking at her to run, but she stood her ground. She needed to do this. She’d get her head examined afterwards.

Judy stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his midriff.

“I’m sorry.”

Nick almost dropped his teeth.

“Fluff? What are you doing?”

“I’m trying.”

“To make things awkward? Congratulations.”

Judy didn’t stop hugging him, electing instead to thump him as best she could with her palm.

“You are one crazy rabbit.”

“Don’t I know it. So, are you going to hug me back, or not?”

“Kinda hard like this. Hang on.” So saying, Nick pried her off him long enough to take a knee.

Seeing what he was doing, Judy experienced a breathtaking array of frantic emotions. She was already mentally ruffled and hadn’t planned for a second round. Heavens only knew why she’d prompted him to hug her back. She’d initiated this and she couldn’t back out now without undoing her hard work. That said, she was so high-strung, she felt like she was going to faint. Despite her awareness of her weakness and the obvious dangers, Judy stepped right back in as soon as he hesitantly opened his arms. The fear was exciting, bordering on intoxicating. She enjoyed it in a way she realized was rather twisted, but she couldn’t help it. He was warm and solid and smelled like
Nick, on the other hand, was tempted to pinch himself. He had allowed her to hug him, not taken the opportunity to be cruel to her, and moved to accommodate her stature. Now, she was lightly shivering in his arms. Something was wrong with him. He should be pressing his advantage, or at least her up against the wall, but he was paralyzed. When he felt her inhale deeply and sniff slightly, he took the opportunity to end the embrace.

“Alright. That’s enough. You’re going to ruin my bad-boy image.”

“That’s fine.”

They shared a lighthearted chuckle that was only slightly forced. Seeing Judy rub her nose, Nick commented, “Sorry about that. I’m a little on the ripe side, I guess.”

“No! No. It’s fine.”

“Not really, fluff. If you can smell me, I’m in need of a shower. Think you can entertain yourself while I clean up?”

“I’m pretty sure I can manage the television.” As she spoke, Judy moved to the sofa opposite the television and flicked it on with the remote.

“Then, make yourself comfortable.”

There was a moment of silence before Judy realized Nick hadn’t moved. “Nick?”

Visibly shaking himself, he smiled in an unusually embarrassed way. The words were ungainly as they left his mouth, a testament to how unfamiliar he was with them. “Thank you. For your apology, I mean. It was a first, for me.”

“Feeling a little thrown are we?”

“Just a lot.”
“Good to know I can surprise the archdemon.”

His smile was wry and cheeky. “You do realize this won’t stop me from tempting you, right?”

Judy chuckled. “Demon.”

The laugh they shared was genuine, just like the one they’d shared minutes previously, but this time there was no hesitation, or ambivalence. For just a moment there was no difference between them. The realization was not missed by either of them. Nick recovered first.

“Right. I’m going to take that shower. I need to get all the angel dander off me before I start sneezing.”

“Of course, you’re allergic to being nice.”

“Demon.” Nick winked.

Judy shooed him off with a wave of her paw and turned back to the news, the picture of calmness and ease. The moment the bedroom door closed, however, she was a bundle of nerves. Thank whatever powers that be for his misinterpretation and distraction. It was a testament to him being off his game so badly that he had missed it all. Her face was flushed under her fur. She could feel it. It was a wonder that her ears weren’t pink. She’d only realized it after the fact, but she’d been sniffing his fur and they’d been close to flirting at the end. As long as he was in the other room, she could have her panic attack in peace.

Or so she thought.

While Judy was forcing her heart rate to lower and sniffing the bouquet on the coffee table to erase his scent, Nick was gripping the bathroom door frame and trying to shake himself back into his mind. Something was very wrong with him. He’d let opportunities to tempt, or at least tease her pass him by, willingly helped her; he’d bloody said “thank you”! He needed to hurry up and make her fall before anything else went wrong.

His reaction to that thought was, in fact, the next thing to go wrong. The idea of her falling should
have filled Nick with a sense of anticipatory accomplishment. Instead, it filled him with revulsion. He didn’t want Hell to get its hooks into her. He wanted something else... And he was not about to allow the thought to finish. Instead of letting his mind finish that path, he slapped himself right over where she’d hit him earlier. It hurt just enough to clear his head.

Nick stripped off his clothes, such as they were, and turned the shower on. The hot water and scented shampoo weren’t enough to distract him, so he reached for the next thing he had at hand.

The bond.

Judy was finally calming slightly when Nick’s voice in her mind startled her.

Testing. Testing. 1. 2. 3. Is this thing on?

When she peeled herself off the ceiling and sat down again, she finished her drink and answered him.

*I can hear you, Nick. What do you want?*

*World peace.*

*This isn’t a beauty pageant. What’s wrong?*

*Nothing. I was just testing this bond thing out.*

*Is that all?* Judy’s head flopped against the back of the sofa.

*Did I startle somebunny?* His chuckle came through loud and clear. Judy smiled even as she rolled her eyes at the pun. *So far, you’ve been the one using it. I figure I may as well, too. Seems useful.*

*I’m glad to hear it.*
So, how does it work?

*What do you mean? You’re using it. That’s all there is to it.*

Not quite, sweetheart. You told me honesty and communication, but what you did in the park wasn’t either.

Judy refilled her glass, more generously this time, and drained it before answering.

*That’s the basic level of the bond. It’s called the Truant’s Summons.*

How many levels does it have?

*Four. I used the second level in the park.***

What’s that called.

*Wellspring Gateway.*

Judy did not like discussing the bond one little bit. While he had a right to know, there were some things that she would prefer he didn’t know just yet. Preferably ever.

Does it also go both ways? What does it do?

*Of course, it goes both ways. We covered that, already.*

Touchy touchy…

*Sorry. The day is catching up with me.*
That’s fine, Carrots. Have a drink and tell me what it does at this level. I won’t ask anything else about it after that.

At least, not until tomorrow?

Fine… Tomorrow. So what does it do?

Judy slugged another, smaller measure of bourbon before replying. She was in dangerous territory. Too much tension or anxiety creeping into her voice would give her away. If he glimpsed the deeper meaning of the bond, she had no illusions his fury would be endless and wouldn’t be stopped just because of a hug and the word “sorry”.

The Gateway transmits perceptions and emotions, just like Summons send thoughts.

And it functions the same way?

Of course. We can experience what the other does if the bond is open.

She was about to ask why, when she was flooded with the feeling of warm water coursing through her fur. Amusement and mischief fluttered through her and she felt familiar, yet alien paws scrubbing fur conditioner out of her undercoat. As she was sitting on the sofa, dressed, and didn’t have an undercoat, there was only one explanation.

Nick!

Enjoying the shower?

Not as much as you are.

You could just join me. Feel it first-hand.
Judy felt mental paws sliding south against her wet stomach and slammed the bond shut. His thoughts drifted back through her mind and she prepared herself to instantly close the connection if any sensation came through.

**I did warn you.**

*Yes, yes. Demon. I remember.*

With one last chuckle, he was gone and Judy was left with red ears, muttering, “Of course, he would,” to herself.

Some minutes later Nick joined her again, his grin a few shades smugger than they had any right to be. In the intervening time, Judy had removed the decanter and glasses to the sideboard where they came from and started going through her transition checklist to flush the aftereffects of their shower-time chat out of her head. The results were mixed.

As tender as things had turned for a breath, the incident with Nick in the shower was sobering for her. Judy had to admit she’d been caught up in a moment when she’d hugged him the second time. The first had been calculated, but the second was pure madness in hindsight. His effect on her was orders of magnitude greater than she had been prepared for. Her resolve had crumbled, leaving her completely vulnerable. Then, there was what he had done to her with the bond. It was small event. Trifling, really, and yet heat had still simmered under her skin in a way she enjoyed far too well, since. She had been careless. Heinously so.

The one thing that scared her the most was the haphazard nature of their interactions. One moment was dulcet, the next caustic; Judy wanted to blame him for it, but her own behavior was also at fault. Something was off about the whole situation. Badly. She was not in control and it was painfully clear that he wasn’t fully, either, though he had demonstrated little interest in it. He was up to something and it had nothing to do with the job he’d supposedly been sent here for.

The first she noticed of the change in him was in that he was wearing a shirt.

“I didn’t think you owned any of those.”

“I prefer not to bother with them, but I also can’t wear my armor without wearing something over it. It attracts too much attention.”
“You’re wearing it, now?”

“Not yet. I do think I should, considering we may find the one responsible for the thefts, tonight. Don’t you?”

“That’s a good point. I wish I had my full gear, now.”

Nick hummed as he looped a tie around his neck. “Don’t worry, Carrots. I’ll take care of keeping us safe. Besides, without armor slowing you down, you’ll have a much easier time avoiding hits and escaping.”

“I can take care of myself, demon.”

“Are we back to that, then? I am aware of your capabilities as a warrior, but we’re going up against something that isn’t known. Personally, I’d prefer to keep the option of escape available, just in case.”

“And I’m supposed to trust you.”

“That’s your choice. I gave you my word and I can’t lie to you. Seems petty to not trust me despite your own spells.”

“You can say that after your stunt in the shower?”

“Like I said, your choice.”

Nick felt good. He felt better after his shower. Not quite back to his usual self, but getting closer. His plans were progressing and all he had to do was wait. In the meantime, the angel was proving a worthy diversion. Now, he could distract her a touch and enjoy a pleasant evening chasing ghosts through alleyways. Maybe frustrate her a bit more while he was at it.

“Well, Carrots, it’s almost time to go a-hunting. Want to meet Lefty’s friends?”
The bracelet in question chirped enthusiastically, at his words. Judy was not fool enough to let such an opportunity to learn more pass, so she hopped up from her seat and followed the demon into his bedroom. Once there, she was unsurprised to find a heavily warded corner of the room. The thick shreds of power in the ether from a disbanded illusion told her exactly how she hadn’t felt the wards previously. It concerned her how little any of these feats were surprising to her.

The sea chest made her ill to look at it.

Judy hadn’t approached the perimeter of the wards, so she was a fair distance from the object, but it didn’t help. The nauseatingly potent aura of the thing was cloyingly thick. Nick seemed unaffected as he procured a large key from somewhere about his person and opened the lid.

“It’s perfectly safe, Carrots. Nothing will hurt you if you come closer.”

Judy raised an eyebrow in response, which garnered a chortle from him. Nonetheless, she crept a bit closer.

Inside the chest was a motley collection of miscellaneous bits and pieces. Stacks of cigarette boxes, a bottle of expensive scotch, a few bone relics and racks of vials filled with substances Judy didn’t want too look too closely all filled the surprisingly large space. However, the space was dominated by a large crystal tub, roughly the size of her torso, filled with a vile looking blob of putrid metal.

“That’s your armor?”

“Uhhuh! Took me centuries to collect it.”

“Centuries?”

“It took that long to steal it’s pieces from their owners. They were scattered among collections and shrines in Hell. Personally, I don’t care. It’s a good armor and it likes me, so I’m happy.”

“It likes you. It’s sentient? Fully?”

“It’s more like many and one at the same time. It can be any form of armor I want and can change as
I wish, but it isn’t limited to one piece, or four. It can have one voice, or as many as there are stars in the sky. I’m just glad it was in four when I went looking for it.”

“I can imagine. How do you put it on? Do you need to dive in, or something?”

“Like this.” Nick smiled and held out his arm. “Go on, Lefty.”

Long, thin tendrils shot out of the bracelet and dove into the mass of liquid metal. The silvery mass rippled in a way Judy could only call enthusiastic before flowing up the tendrils in a flood and under the cuff of Nick’s shirt. He, in response, moaned and shivers.

“Your armor is doing something unspeakable to you, isn’t it.”

Between suppressed moans, he choked out, “I could tell you exactly what it’s doing, but your pure little bunny ears would burst into flame.”

“Sweet Mother of Dawn...”

“She’s not being that aggressive, Carrots. She just missed me. That’s all.”

“Of course your armor would choose such a greeting.”

“Greetings.”

“What?”

“Greetings, Carrots. Plural.” Seeing her confused look, he elaborated, “There’s more than one way to pleasure a male,” and punctuated his statement with another wink.

Judy’s face and ears warred between going ghost white and beet red. All she could manage by way of verbal response was sputtering. For a breath, Nick could only think of how cute she looked like that, before catching himself and banishing the thought from his mind.
“Don’t look so shocked, angelfluff. I cut my teeth in Hell’s brothels. You learn to like everything, there.”

“Are you completely shameless?!?”

“Absolutely. 100%. Want to give it a try? She’s very gentle.” A look of delighted realization crossed his face and he exclaimed, “Oh!” before opening the bond, again.

Judy slammed it shut. “Let’s just get going.”

As she beat a hasty retreat, Nick grabbed a couple daggers and a few smaller coins from one of the compartments Judy hadn’t stuck around to see. He wanted to be prepared, just in case. He also felt a little better for being defensible, but not for himself. A strange altruistic feeling floated through him, sparking on the edges of his memory. He disliked the feeling even as he found it elating.

They headed out to hunt.
Nick was pleased with himself and his situation. That’s what he kept telling himself, anyway. With enough repetition, he could convince himself of its veracity. It wasn’t a terribly hard sell.

Despite the ingloriousness of his confrontations with the angel and the cost of his successes, he was confident of his situation. There was still time for him to make up his losses. The hurts she’d caused him were relatively minor in comparison to his potential gains. Toying with her would be plenty entertaining and when he finally bedded her it wouldn’t be the cherry on the sundae, so much as the start of something better.

She would find her weakness exploited and be unable to resist for long. For all his many flaws, Nick was certain he could tempt her to the breaking point. The hard part was, as always, getting her to give in to her own desires. It was no sin to be forced and that was a poor method, besides. He could accomplish as much with his power, but it would result in nothing but leaving her broken and him unsatisfied. She had to come to him willingly, or it wouldn’t be enough for her to fall. A sin could only come from a choice; a conscious decision to act had to come of her own will. He could merely encourage it.

Nick laughed quietly as he followed her down the sidewalk towards the last site of the soul thefts. It would be the best place to start the hunt from and the easiest place to root any spell they’d need to track the entropy. In the meantime, all Nick had to do was keep her little white tail in his sight as she led and enjoy the passing mammals.

There was, as usual, plenty to appreciate. Pretty little things of every shape, size and flavor; all waiting to be tempted into making a choice that could condemn them. The bloody Wager was a crock, in his opinion, but he appreciated it for what it provided him. Influencing souls towards Hell and Heaven, but no direct action. Quite the game of subterfuge, enough to keep Heaven and Hell
occupied with something other than staring at each other, or constant war, and sufficient entertainment for him while he was on the Plane. He didn’t care who won and claimed the Mortal Plane for their own. He would miss it when it was gone, though. Both sides were horrid, though remembering why Heaven was just as bad as Hell was painful.

The knowledge of the fact was there, but he couldn’t recall why he knew it without having an episode. He’d had too many of those around that ridiculous bag of sanctimonious pinfeathers. It would feel good to tease her until she gave in and once she did, it would be gravy and nothing but. After all, when an angel fell it was nine days of hurtling through the void before Hell could claim her. Plenty of time for him to catch her and take her for his own. There were stories of archangels and high demons saving the fallen and secreting them away in the Fringe, but Nick didn’t believe them. No angel would be that merciful to a traitor and no demon would “save” anyone. Not unless they wanted a personal toy. Hardly an act of salvation.

He’d fantasized of that very thing during his most recent imprisonment. There had been precious little else to do while he was imprisoned but catalogue his possessions and review his plans.

Not for the first time, Nick congratulated himself for never discarding anything of potential use. He had the wings he’d need hidden away, just in case. They’d come out of mothballs for this and he didn’t care about the memories they called up, or the pain. Snatching her from the claws of Hell like a raptor taking a pigeon in flight would be a manifold pleasure; snubbing his “masters” and claiming her for his own. If all went as he’d planned, none of them would be able to do a damn thing about any of it. She might even be grateful.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t have concerns. Emotions he didn’t like still lingered and he was fighting a full-on migraine with the number of memory-episodes he was having. There was his strange altruism and the missed opportunities to puzzle out as well. The fact that the mark of the bond on his arm was shrinking was the most noteworthy of his worries. It barely came up past his mid-forearm, now. That was significant. He knew it. However, he had more pressing concerns. Rather than ponder too deeply, he set his mind on the hunt; both for rabbit and the facade of hunting the thief. He could find all the answers once she was his and he was free.

Judy, meanwhile, was not so sanguine about the state of affairs. She was frightened. The bond, the hunt and the demon behind her were enough to make her queasy. She was very grateful to see her grimy apartment building come into view. To her distress, the fox was sharp as always.

“Did you forget something, Carrots?”

“You geared up for this hunt. I figured I should at least get some minimal armor to wear.”

“I thought we agreed you’d do better when mobile. Or is it you don’t trust me?”

“You know very well I don’t. I’m not getting my full armor. Just a...”

Nick cut in, “Or, do you need a buffer for your own peace of mind, because you can’t trust yourself?”

She hadn’t thought of it that way, but he was right. Terrifyingly, so. She needed something to help her feel contained until she could manage it again without the reminder. Her bracers and a hauberk would do well enough.

“I want to trade up my weapons. Wait here. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”
“Midnight is less than an hour away.”

“I’m aware of the time.”

Nick’s teasing laughter chased her burning ears all the way up the stairs.

Judy was not doing well in the face of her current adversary. Dealing with the demon was all well and good. She was fine with that. Fighting herself, however, was another matter entirely. It felt like a seed had been planted in her mind and she knew exactly what it was. One of the many risks associated with how she’d misused the bond made manifest. Empathy.

She had empathized with what had happened to him. Felt his hurt and self-hatred. He didn’t want to be what he was, but it was clear he’d embraced it to survive. Here was more to him. Judy saw that much and couldn’t help but feel for him. In the quiet moments when the halo and horns were set aside, he was someone worth talking to. That simple fact was hurting her.

As she opened her wardrobe and checked her gear, she mulled it over. She didn’t have long. Quickly, she settled on a pair of reinforced bracers, which would hide under her sleeves, before trading her dagger for a fan-style buckler and a sturdier main gauche she could wield in tandem with her short sword. A little more defense and more adaptive attack options. It would do without giving the fox too much ammunition for his little theory.

Judy desperately wanted her hauberk and maille, but if she did it would not only prove him right, but also slow her down. She hated how often Nick was ending up right about situations. Her speed was her best asset right now. She did not need to be the heavy armored warrior of the Cherubim. She needed speed. She was also in need of the reminder to control herself and there was always the nagging leftover of empathy.

It was a short step from empathy to attachment, which led in turn to attraction. She was attracted. It was awful, but it was true. Binding Nick was a mistake, but one she couldn’t undo, yet.

Her concerns were only reinforced as her bracers went on. The bond mark was only just covering an inch or so above her wrist and fantastically more detailed. It looked like a strangely elegant lace glove, made from razor wire.

From her shoulder to her wrist in a day and all because of his story. Such expedient growth would have been distressing at the best of times. Currently, it was closer to disturbing.

She cared.

The admission haunted her back to the street, where her demonic companion’s wit was a welcome respite.

“Decided to go for the armor, huh?”

“Just bracers. They won’t slow me down and it’s a little more protection.”

“For your peace of mind?”
“For my battle effectiveness. A clean escape isn’t guaranteed, so a small concession to defense is worth the minimal loss of mobility.”

“A fair trade. Looks a little Wonder Wombat, though.”

“I’m not wearing a leotard and a belt into battle, Wilde.”

“Don’t forget the tiara.”

Judy was mildly successful in stifling her chuffed laugh. It could have passed for a disgusted huff, but her smile wasn’t hidden enough to pull it off completely. “Uh huh.”

Nick shrugged and continued as if nothing had happened. “The lariat could be fun. Just an observation.”

Reminding herself that discretion was the greater part of valor, Judy turned down the street and started walking. It was less likely he’d see her amusement from behind.

The journey was a relatively short one as far as foot travel was concerned. All they had to do was walk the four or so blocks to the tram station and ride to the Rainforest District main hub. Then, it was a ten minute traipse to the location in Judy’s file.

As they walked, Judy worked to stay in the lead and Nick was content to let her. The hour had grown late and most of the city’s inhabitants were either in their beds or settled into their evening’s entertainments. The few mammals that passed them were totally focused on reaching their destinations and spared neither rabbit nor fox more than a passing, or briefly assessing, glance. That being, there wasn’t much in the way of company or distraction for the pair as they made their way along. This was very good in Judy’s opinion, but also very bad.

As the streets were clear, she was able to set a brisk pace; one that made conversation impossible. This was the one upside. Otherwise, the empty streets left her in an awkward position regarding her bonded companion. The minimal presence of other mammals on the street and tram car they took left her very alone with the focus of her attraction. She was growing increasingly aware of him and was starting to worry that her rookie mistakes were about to spread out of the professional and into far more dangerous territory. The last thing she needed was to become a schoolgirl stumbling over her words.

If she was practical in her assessment, Judy doubted she would get there. She’d die of embarrassment, first. That didn’t make her any less uncomfortable with the situation any more than it removed her very real understanding of what her attraction meant. Temptation would be even harder for her to avoid or resist. If her reaction to a simple hug was any indication, she was already in very serious trouble.

That was why she stayed in front and moving quickly, avoided sitting during the tram ride and refused to make conversation. Not that Nick was forthcoming on his own. For the entirety of the trip
he remained impassive; placidly following her and, most likely, openly ogling her tail. The thought should have filled her with a sense of sick anxiety, but all she felt was thrilled. That, she found, caused plenty of anxiety instead.

It was with those thoughts in her mind and the demon’s presence at her back that she arrived. The lot was vacant, overgrown and typical of the Rainforest District in every way, as Nick was quick to point out.

“All this way for a walk in the weeds…”

“You know why we’re here, Nick.”

“I do. The best place to start a hunt is from the last place your prey appeared. Our starting point just came with a salad bar.”

“This looks like a snack to you?”

“You tell me. You’re the herbivore.”

Judy looked around and checked her tablet before answering. “This looks like a vacant lot to me, not an appetizer. This doesn’t make sense.”

“What do you mean?”

“This space. It’s wrong for the magic done here. Look.” She moved to where her file said the center of the spell was cast, roughly four feet from a tree and in the middle of weeds. “I’m standing where the spell was cast. The center of the spell is off-center to the space and uncleared. You know as well as I do that spatial relations affect spells. If they used a circle, they would have cleared the space. They didn’t. They could have used an artifact, but that would leave a residue of some kind. There is none.”

“Yes, yes. What’s your point?”

“That is my point. It doesn’t make sense! Nothing about this place makes sense for magic as it was
used.”

“So?”

“So, how could it have worked?

“I can’t say that I care, Carrots. I want the culprit found. We can beat the answers out of them once we have them.”

Judy had to concede the point. It was just one of many mysteries that would have to wait until they had someone to question. Judy had to admit that they served as a good means to keep her mind occupied, but the mysteries were becoming stifling for their quantity. So many questions and so few answers.

“It’s time.”

Judy was pulled from her reverie by Nick’s words. They had minutes only before midnight and the start of their hunt. Then, she wouldn’t have to look for distractions. In her short time hunt, she had been successful, however. It could be considered a victory, or so Judy would claim until she turned to rejoin the fox. Whatever words she’d wanted to say died on their way to her mouth. In leaving Nick unattended while she’d been puzzling over the place, she’d made a terrible mistake.

So far, Nick had been understated in his demonic characteristics. The little magic show when he lit a cigarette, or his enhanced speed and strength in combat were relatively subtle, and affectations at worst. This was not subtle. There was nothing subtle in Judy’s world as she saw Nick finish rolling up a sleeve and rake a claw down his forearm in an elegant sweep, leaving a deep gash in its wake.

A faint voice in the back of her mind chided her. Of course, he would use blood. There wasn’t a catsup bottle anywhere nearby and it was going to be the same spell. She felt mildly put out with herself for such a blatant oversight. However, that and all other thoughts were whispers in the distance. The whole of her mind was entranced as the black ichor welling up from the wound flowed in rivulets to his claws.

While Judy stared, Nick set about his work. It was an old dance and he knew it well. Steps around the circle, blood to settle it and power to make it real. As his feet and fingers danced, scribing the spell in his blood on a clear space of earth, Nick talked.
His voice was tense, clipped. “Alright, Judy, here’s the deal. I can use divination to follow the soul I marked. We won’t have long to find the source of whatever is causing the thefts. You’ll have to tap your full power and try to keep up. I hope we can make it there in under twenty seconds.”

That snapped Judy out of her stupor. “Now, hang on just a moment there, Slick. It’s night. If I unseal my power now, I won’t be able to do it again until dawn. I’ll be at a major disadvantage!”

“The only other option is me carrying you, Carrots.” Judy’s ears shot towards the sky and Nick looked up with a rapacious smirk to deliver the rest of it. “Princess carry, or over the shoulder?”

Judy retained her equipoise enough to make a response that didn’t squeak. “And if I tap my power?”

“Don’t worry, Carrots. I’ll keep you safe.”

Her choice was obvious. “I’ll use my power.”

“Good bun.”

Judy would have hit him if he hadn’t lifted his arm to his face and slipped his long, forked tongue out to lick along his wound. The obvious pain and pleasure lancing across his features made her pause as much as the fleshy appendage. An insidious little voice in the back of her mind suggested opening the bond just to know what he felt, but before she could silence it the clock struck midnight and there was no time.

Nick braced to sprint, summoned hellfire to his paws and lit the circle of his blood. The same layered compass made of ethereal bones rose over the signal and all the points snapped to a direction. Judy tapped her bangles and was off like a shot of white light, hot on the heels of the fox.

It seemed to Judy as though it had been years since she had felt her full strength, whereas in reality it had been a matter of days and not many at that. It was satisfying to see that she still had the speed to keep pace with her companion, though he seemed to take the strain of the pursuit much more easily than she did. They sped along the streets, just on the ragged edge of mortal perception; their power a temporary buffer between them and reality. The few pedestrians and drivers they passed would have registered nothing but an echo in the corner of their eye. Judy followed in the wake of the demon and tried not to look too closely at anything; not his running form, or the power that beat off him in waves, or the layers of shadow that followed him, dancing like spider legs across the surface of the world.
Judy barely acknowledged the chiming of the bells that marked the halfway point because they’d sighted their quarry. The little soul Nick had marked was dancing through the ether on its way to whatever was consuming it’s fellows each night. The path to follow it was no simple stroll for the hunters. Skirting buildings and soaring over vehicles, the seconds ticked by to a distressing pace, even as they closed in.

Twelve strikes of midnight, twenty seconds of power. Judy knew she would have plenty to spare. She knew otherwise a blink later, when the soul accelerated and Nick poured on the speed. Judy watched, astonished, as Nick accelerated to keep pace with it, leaving nothing behind, but a soft pulse of light from his collar.

She wanted to slow down and take a moment to process what she had witnessed. It frightened her more that she wanted to out of reflex, not necessity. Instead, she opened the bond and used it to track his location. The twelfth chime had rung, so they had to have their latest location. There was no way Nick hadn’t gotten there in time to apprehend whoever was responsible. Judy poured on the speed to catch up, but was distressed to hear Nick’s voice in her mind.

**Carrots, we have a small problem.**

*What do you mean “a problem”? Did you catch them?*

**There is no them. There’s nothing.**

The confusion at his statement carried her through the last stretch and into his company, again. She found herself in the lobby of an abandoned housing project in the south-eastern region of Savannah Central. Nick was standing pensively, and apparently un-winded, staring at the floor close to one of the walls opposite the front door.

“Alright, Slick, what’s this about there not being anyone and why are you staring at the floor.”

“As you can see, there’s no one here. There wasn’t when I arrived. I’m staring at the floor because that was where the soul went.”

“What?”
“Down, Carrots. It went down. Straight through the floor. Trouble is, this place doesn’t have a basement, just a foundation and anchor beams. None of this type of structure do.”

“So, there must be something else down there.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Of course, rabbit, but do you know what?”

“What?”

“Do you know what’s below here?”

“Oh!” Judy blushed.

“Wow, dumb bunny, did our little jog tire you out that much?”

“It’s hardly my fault how inarticulate you can be.” Her retort earned a flat look from him and she smirked as she pulled out her phone.

Under normal circumstances, Judy would have a straight line to the central databank and archives of the Wager Officer’s as well as access to the Depot and supplies. As she was still in transition officially, All she had was access to the archives and email. The later of which her CO had disabled as a result of their little chat regarding Wraith. As such, Judy hadn’t bothered with checking it. Even if Bogo rescinded the block on his end, she would have to override on hers to make the device access the email servers. She did still have the Archive, though, and that would be plenty.

A few taps and a mapping overlay later, she had her answer.

“Catacombs.”

“You want a whisker treatment?”

Judy glared daggers at him. “No, smartass. Not a salon for felids. Underground tunnels. We’re close to the Nocturnal District and they have cemeteries around the fringe of the district. Most were
abandoned decades ago for space reasons, according to this.” She noticed she’d caught his attention when he leaned over her shoulder to look at the screen, as well. Feeling the heat of his presence against her neck and cheek was a distraction she did not need. Jumping away, Judy spouted, “We need to find a way down there and fast.”

Nick plucked the device from her grip and held her off with his other paw while he fiddled. “According to this, the fastest route would take a mortal close to two hours and us at least seventeen minutes. By the time we get there, any suspect would be gone.”

“What about your divination?”

“It’s a tracking method, not a map function. I’d still need a focus and one that we could follow. I’m good, but I can’t just walk through matter. Not here, anyway.”

“Then we scry.”

“Whoa. Hold on there, rabbit. Last time you tried that…”

“That was active scrying.” Judy cut in triumphantly, as she pawed for her little mirror. “I can scry for a path, but I need a focus. I think your divination spell will work for that.”

“Hang on. You want to piggyback your scrying on my divination and use my connection to that soul as the focus for your spell? Are you serious?”

“You can divine its last location before it was taken and I can scry a path to that spot.” She held out the compact. “Now draw. Fast.”

Nick grinned. “Clever little bunny…”

Moments later, Nick was licking a finger to close another wound and watching as Judy held the mirror facing the sky. She sprinkled a pinch of dust onto the surface and applied a little power. The dust formed the sigil for sight and the mirror shattered into dust. Judy found herself held securely with the demon’s body between her and the now hovering cloud of silvered glass particles.
“You ok?”

Judy checked herself quickly. “I think so. What happened?”

Nick looked over his shoulder and Judy saw his ears quirk. “I have no idea, but I think you should see this.”

Judy disentangled herself from his arms far too reluctantly and looked. The cloud of dust was sprinkling itself along the ground, laying a very literal path for them to follow. “Well, that’s new…”

“Get out of my head.” Judy looked askance at his odd response, so Nick supplied, “I responded the same way, verbatim, in my own head a moment ago. The bond’s closed, just to clarify.”

Judy shook herself. “We’ll figure it out later. Let’s move!”

The strange, silver path led them to the back of an abandoned building on the far side of a vacant lot and into an unfinished sewer junction. Judy slightly manifested her halo to light their way. To any mortal, it would seem that she was luminous in the dim light, but not from any source they could name. Nick couldn’t help but smirk as he followed the, now perfectly illuminated, white fur of her tail. It was enough to guide their paws through a twisted labyrinth of maintenance access ports and abandoned public works gantries, eventually dumping them onto the streets of the Nocturnal District in the religious quarter. The trip, to their mutual surprise, took under three minutes.

They were through the gates to a decrepit cemetery gate moments later. The massive padlock on the gate to the catacombs shredded under the force of Nick’s claws and the pair sprinted through the tunnels, following the diminishing silver dust.

When they entered the cavern, all thoughts of the bizarre mutual spell they’d cast slipped neatly into “not important” category. The path spell dumped them into a wide, open space that had to have been a space for funeral services while the graveyard was functional. When it shut down, any remains would have been removed and inhumed elsewhere, leaving the place entirely empty. That did not explain the stench, or the freshly gouged walls any more than it explained the enormous magic circle scribed on the floor of the space in blood, or the sigils and markings covering almost every inch of the walls.

Judy found her voice first. “What demon would do this?”
“No demon.”

“Oh, come on! This has to be demonic!”

“No… Trust me.” Nick’s voice was low and measured in keeping with his disquiet. “I raided the Luciferian Archives while I was in Superbia in preparation for challenging Baphomet. I studied every magic I could find. This is no demonic magic I’ve ever seen or heard of.”

“You have got to be kidding. Who else would do something like this? Who else even is there?”

“You’ve got me, Hopps. I’ve been around the block and let me tell you, I have never seen anything even close to this.”

“Well, it’s not angelic.” Judy commented uncomfortably, as she pulled out her phone again started documenting. The quiet tension in Nick’s voice did nothing to settle her mind.

“What are you doing?”

“This is way bigger than us. My CO needs to know about this and we need back up.”

“By “we”, you mean “you”, I presume.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think your boss and coworkers would do the moment they see you with a demon in tow?”

Judy blushed lightly at her slip up. “Fair point.”

“I suspect you’d be arrested and I’d be dead.”
“Yes, thank you for the unnecessary elucidation, Nick. Much appreciated.”

“Look at you breaking out the expensive words!”

The banter was comforting for both of them. For Judy, it was a way to escape the embarrassment. She was slipping more and more when it came to him. Forgetting he was a demon, though, was a new and unsettling low. Nick, meanwhile, was experiencing an emotion he was very unused to. Anxiety in the face of the unknown was a part of his distant past and, he thought, content to stay there. To find something so completely outside his experience was distressing. It triggered all his survival instincts and that, in itself, was indicative of the severity of their situation, to him. Nick knew two things about the patterned magic of the room. It was ancient, even by his standards, and it practically dripped insanity; a kind that exceeded even the deepest reaches of Hell itself. The fact that it was present on the Mortal Plane disturbed him to the point of shivers. All he wanted to do was collect his rabbit and get away from it.

“Almost done, Hopps?”

“Yes. I’ve got my readings packaged up. I just need to override my access block and do an emergency transmission.”

“Access block?”

“I’ll explain another time.”

“Alright. Just hurry up. We need to get out of here.”

The cheap shot died on her lips as multiple emergency alerts pinged on her phone. The one addressed directly to her came up as top priority. With a sense of dread, Judy opened it.

“What’s wrong, Hopps? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“They’re hunting us.”

“Come again?”
“All angelic operatives in the city have standing orders to take me into custody and kill you on sight.”

“Hang on a sec. How does Chief Buffalo Butt know I’m here?”

“I reported I’d seen you and asked for authorization to hunt you. He denied me. Now, we’re bonded and he’s been informed by Command.”

“They track that?”

“No.” She couldn’t meet his eyes and pretended to be rifling through her emails as cover for it. “They keep records of it, but never track it directly. It’s taken very seriously by the High Host. I have no idea how they know, but it’s listed here on the orders to the search teams.”

“There’s more to it than you’ve said. Still.” There was no accusation in Nick’s voice, but his concern self-evident. All Judy could manage was a furiously blushing nod. “So, they’re going to take you into custody and try to kill me.”

“That won’t happen. Let’s go.”

“Well, look at you, little rebel angel!”

Judy couldn’t fight the smile at the sentiment or the tone of praise in his voice. Judy shut her phone down completely so it couldn’t be tracked before pocketing it. She would deal with Bogo once they were above ground and someplace safe enough to make contact. They got maybe three steps toward the exit before they were brought up short. A voice drifted through the darkness, bringing them to an instant halt. The voice was high pitched and feminine, but somehow wrong and subtly disturbing.

“Nickyyyyy... Nicky! Hello! Hello, Nicky. So good to see you in the flesh, at last.”
“Nickyyyyy... Nicky! Hello! Hello, Nicky. So good to see you in the flesh, at last.”

The voice was high pitched and a touch reedy. Very feminine. Quite young, as well. All that was grasped in moments. The tone of the voice could only be called dulcet, as though designed to pull one’s attention. That didn’t remove the fact that there was an element to it that set both Nick’s and Judy’s fur on end, for all the worst reasons.

Both the rabbit and the fox experienced similar atavistic reactions. The urge to flee was very present, as was the increase in heart rate and a spike of adrenaline, but that was where the similarities ended. Nick was instantly all business. The voice was disturbing to him and he’d seen the worst Hell had to offer. There was something very wrong with whoever owned the voice drifting out of the shadows.

In Judy, however, the voice called up several hot, mean emotions most of which were directed at the fox. They lasted until a figure resolved itself from the darkness at the opposite end of the hall. It was a deer.

A doe, specifically. She was indeed young. No greater in age than her early twenties, at most. Under any other circumstances, Judy would have called her shapely and rather lithe. However, two things detracted from the youthful creature before her. One was her pallor. The deer looked washed out and ashen, her brown fur was well kempt but would have been more fitting on a corpse. The second was
the fact that she was wearing a form-fitting leather skirt and jacket, quite obviously homemade in serial killer chic. The only source for leather was living mammals and the possession of it was considered the most heinous of crimes by mortal and angel alike. Judy fought to keep her last meal down as that fact registered.

Her revulsion and anger at the fox boiled towards a fever pitch until he stepped between her and the deer. That sent a flurry of other emotions through her and her anger shifted towards herself for having them.

Instead of dwell on her emotional state, she snapped acerbically at Nick, “Another ruined mortal?”

“No, one I’ve ever met.”

His tone was even and considering, but the tension in his movements belied his laconic stance. He wasn’t lying. He couldn’t. That meant whoever this was new him, but he didn’t know her. That was concerning. Especially considering the eerie presence and sense of malice radiating from the swaying form.

Judy stepped to the side, trying to see around him, but was halted by his raised paw on her shoulder. There was no force in the action, but it still stopped her cold. It’s placement and position were specifically designed to keep the principle in place and the defender aware of their exact position at all times. Judy knew this because she had been a demonstration aide for a class at Officer’s School; an advanced class for bodyguards and guardian angels. Another small piece to the puzzle.

In the absence of her brain, her training took over and she, as the de facto principle, did her part of the exercise. Her paw came up to rest lightly on top of his. It was supposed to be a show of trust and acceptance of the bodyguard’s role. According to the training, she had just signaled she would follow his lead and trust his choices. In this circumstance, it felt oddly intimate.

“How sweet! You’re protecting the little angel. Hello, angel! Hello, keeper of the flame!” the Doe called while waving enthusiastically.

“You have us at a disadvantage.”

“Of course, I do. It’s easy.”
“What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one. This meat does… Did. Did? It did, but I forget it.”

“The meat... what meat?”

“This body, silly boy! It had a name before I used it. Now, it’s all broken... broken... you know how it is. Toys break so easily, especially these little mind-things.”

A deer wearing leather. Real leather. While Judy retched quietly behind him, Nick had to admit he was subtly impressed, despite his mild discomfort. No one had gotten the drop on him in a very, very long time. He hadn’t even perceived the presence of whoever this was. It was clear, however, that they were not stable, or in good shape. He needed information. He also needed a distraction from the feeling of Judy’s paw on his. What he’d done in stepping in front of her had caused a sharp spike of pain through his head. Memories were boiling right at the edge of his awareness. The last thing he needed was an episode here and now, or to think too long on why his tail was bristling.

“Do I know you?”

“You’re sure she isn’t one of your floozies?” came the quietly intense voice of the rabbit.

“I told you I’ve never had the pleasure of her acquaintance, until now.”

The deer giggled. “So jealous, isn’t she Nicky?”

“I’m not jealous,” Judy snapped.

“And defensive,” the leather-clad mammal crooned. “Still, she’s always been that way, hasn’t she?”

“It’s only been a few days since I’ve met her, so I can’t say I’d know,” Nick replied lightly. He had no desire to antagonize whoever this was. They were sounding less sane by the moment.

“Few days? Wha- oh, yes... the “time” thing. Yes...”
Nick and Judy exchanged a look that plainly said they both understood. The person speaking to them was flatly insane.

“I do forget about that at times. Not being free to perceive all of time at once is a challenge I’m still not used to after all these years.” She paused, seemingly in deep thought. “Years... years? Eons? Instants... it’s all the same to me. Let’s go with years. That seems to be the one you understand best.”

Nick elected to ignore the second part of the deer’s babbling. “That must be quite troublesome for you, being a prisoner. I heartily empathize.” Nick’s sarcasm was lost on the deer, as her gaze wandered aimlessly around the room. “I love what you’ve done with your cell.”

Once more attention focused sharply on Nick. “Cell? What cell? You get reception down here? Lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky you!”

“You claim to be a prisoner, so wouldn’t this be your cell?”

“Oh, no! No… Not here. This is just a place where we meet.”

“Who is this “we” and how do you make it to meetings if you’re locked up?”

“Meat. Just meat. Meat meetings!” The deer cackled and wandered to a pile of rocks, where she lounged. “Finger puppets are such fun, aren’t they…”

Nick blinked before dropping into a deeper ready stance and rolling onto the balls of his feet. He was not about to be caught flat-footed if he needed to run. Even sitting, this mammal was not to be trusted.

“Of all beings, you would appreciate, yes? Imprisonment appreciation!” The deer giggled and swayed in her seat. “So many times you’ve been confined. So many... and so much pain. You know what it is to lose a part of yourself, don’t you? You lose and regain so many pieces... like those toys. What were they? Legos?”

An undercurrent of tension crept into Nick’s voice. “As much as I’m enjoying this conversation in no way whatsoever, could you tell me what you want?” Judy caught the thread of unease and gently
squeezed the fox’s paw, offering assurance. She was rewarded in seeing his shoulders relax fractionally.

“Want, want, want?” the doe sing-songed. “To be free like you, of course.”

Nick practically snarled, “I’m not free in the slightest.”

“Oh, but you were and are and will be, Nicky... freer than any angel ever before. Freer and stronger and delicious. Your children will be the same.”

“Now, I know you’re crazy.”

“Crazy? That’s insane, yes? Insane? That’s the opposite of sane. What is sane, Nicolas? Could you tell me?”

“I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t understand it if I did.”

“True! Small concepts aren’t worth the energy and I must use mine well.”

Judy piped up. “You mean the souls you’ve stolen.”

“Be silent, candle!” the deer boomed, her suddenly resonant voice bouncing off the stonework walls. “Be silent or I will spare you the future you had when I was imprisoned!”

“Whoa! Easy there, lassie! Talk to me,” Nick piped up, moving to conceal Judy from the deer’s sight. “We were having a nice, if creepy, conversation. Let’s continue it.”

As he spoke, Nick opened the bond and gripped Judy’s shoulder, hoping she would listen.

Don’t antagonize the crazy one. It doesn’t like you. Let me do the talking.
In response, Judy huffed a breath.

“Awww!” The squeal was accompanied by a pair of hooves meeting next to the unsettling deer’s face in a childlike display. “Look! It pouts. It pouts so cutely.”

“Don’t call me cute!”

Judy, be quiet. Please.

The cutesy pose remained to the eye, but the voice was flat and deadly. “I’ll call you whatever I desire, light-bearer. Including ‘appetizer’ if you speak out of turn, again. While we’re speaking of fine dining, thank you for that little soul, Nicky. The searing of your mark was a delectable touch.”

Nick grasped at that. “So, you are the one responsible for the lost souls, I take it?”

“Lost? What a quaint notion!”

“Quaint?” Nick replied incredulously.

“Why yes, silly little todd! How can something be lost when it’s put to its proper purpose? Do you call a carrot lost when your rabbit eats it? Or sin lost when you feed? Certainly not!”

“You’re telling me you… eat.. souls. Is that right?”

“What else would I do with them? Mint coins?” Nick raised an eyebrow at the less than subtle jab at the Coins of Mammon, while the deer giggled inanely. Whoever this mammal was they were dangerous, even by his standard. If the overwhelming sense of malice wasn’t enough, Nick got the sense that he was in the presence of something bad. Intrinsically, inarguably bad.

“Alright, let’s say that I believe you. Then, I have to ask, who are you to eat souls?” The tension in Nick’s mind must have come through with his words because Judy fell silent and gripped his paw. He could feel her trembling. Aloud, Nick continued in a forcedly light manner, “You were also about to tell me to what I owe the pleasure of your company this fine witching hour?”
“Owe me? Yes... you owe me so much. This is just a part of the tab.” She seemed to stare into space for a moment and her whole demeanor changed. “Where am I, now? You! Rabbit with the white-fire spirit! Did you summon me?”

“Whitefire soul?”

“White and burning and muted by her foolishness. Such a bane, now. And a boon, later! For both of us! And you too, fox! I’m glad you summoned me. This is entertaining!”

“I didn’t summon anyone!” Judy replied in exasperation. “You’ve been here talking to us the whole time!”

“I was? Was Baphomet here? I needed to talk to him about something important. A newly minted guardian, I think. I want him. He’ll be such a good toy. Does so much for me...”

There was an edge of hysteria to Nick’s forced laughter. Judy felt his paw go rigid. “I’ll be sure to pass the message on to Buffy when I see him. Now, was there something you wanted from me?”

“Only for you to get what you’ve worked for. What I’ve given you. I just wanted to say hello, here, but you ask so many fucking questions and thinking like this is unpleasant. I think I told you things you shouldn’t know. Things that will hurt you. Isn’t that marvelous?”

Nick had reached the end of his patience and snapped, “Who are you? What are you? Answer me!”

“Such an angry angel. So proud to give me orders. That’s why you fell, foolish morsel. Pride. Pride and poisoned words...”

“And who are you to speak to me of pride?”

“The marionettes! They dance! They dance for me!”

“Tears and ash! What is wrong with you?!”
In response, the doe deer giggled maniacally and grinned vacantly at them. Judy tensed as the piercing, yet empty stare drilled through her. A tremor wracked the deer’s frame and for a moment lucidity seemed to return to her before she burst into tears. They couldn’t tell if they were from laughter or misery.

“Oh, Nicky… So forward…”

Tension roiled through Nick as he prepared to fight for their lives, or run for them. The doe fumbled with the buttons of her jacket and pulled back the leather flaps. All the fight drained from both of them. All that remained was a panic-driven desire to flee.

A pink, feverish-looking slit ran from her mid-chest all the way to her groin and a matching horizontal slash adorned the line of her ribs. The puckered flesh surrounding the folds slowly peeled back revealing putrid, rotting black meat. From the rips and tatters of the mammal’s body, a cross-shaped mouth of sorts formed. It was made of sucking flesh, randomly placed teeth of a hundred varieties, tentacles and eyes nestled haphazardly in the pulsing meat, giving no sense of rhyme or reason.

Nick whispered, “No…”

The doe laughed in the sickly-sweet voice before it gave way to a booming shriek. The black mouth spoke and her face became a rictus of agonized delight. “Run little morsels! Run! Run into my arms as fast as you can!”

They fled.

Judy found herself scooped into Nick’s arms as he ran, his demonic powers carrying him as fast as they could. The gate, passages, and sewers they traversed in their path to reach the subterranean cathedral passed in a matter of blinks. All the shaken and emotionally battered rabbit could do was hold on to the fox that carried her and try not to cry. Minutes, or possibly moments later, Judy opened her eyes as concrete met her hind paws once more. She opened her eyes to a visibly shaken, struggling vulpine.

During his flight with Judy, he’d enjoyed a little respite from the effects of the evening’s revelations. However, the mental preoccupation that his flight had provided vaporized the moment his angelic burden’s feet touched the ground. A small part of him that wanted to remark on her scent and the feel of her in his arms tried to make itself known, but was neatly squashed by the mental image of what
that deer had hidden under her monstrosity of a dress.

“Nick?”

His mind reeled as memories he’d buried centuries ago boiled up from the depths.

“Nick?”

His back ached as though the wounds were fresh and panic clawed at him.

“Nick?!?”

He was being held down on bloody knees as the obsidian blade fell again.

“Nick!”

Suddenly, Nick’s world was filled an earthy, flowery scent. He slowly came back to himself and realized he was indeed on his knees. His forehead was pressed flat against Judy’s chest and her arms were wrapped under his jaw while her chin planted itself on the crown of his head. She was holding him tight, almost as tight as his paws gripped his thighs. Once he grasped that she was real, the rest of his situation came to him.

She was crying. He could hear her ragged breathing and felt her racing heartbeat against his head. She was trembling; obviously terrified. Their ordeal in the catacombs had affected him badly and he was older than dirt, having seen more of hell than most could imagine. It only made sense that a relative innocent, warrior or not, would be hurting. Yet, she had chosen to try to comfort him, rather than herself. A sick burning feeling rose and settled under his solar plexus.

Nick tried to move his hands and felt a series of sharp pains as he did so. Apparently, in his terror, he’d sunk his claws into his own flesh and hadn’t felt it. A sharp jerk, and a little pain later, his paws were free. That was when Judy’s trembling entered Nick’s awareness. Collecting himself, Nick sent a flush of his flames to his self-inflicted wounds and to his claws, burning away the blood and closing the punctures. Very gently, lest he frighten her more, Nick brought his paw up to stroke Judy’s back.
“I’m back, Carrots.”

In response, Judy shivered and sagged. Nick caught her as her knees gave out.

“You stupid demon! You scared the hell out of me!”

“Odd thing for an angel to say.” Nick huffed a weak laugh as she thumped a fist into his chest. “We can’t stay here.”

“Where are we?”

“Tundratown, it looks like.”

“You got carried away.”

“For a good reason, I think,” Nick commented as he stood. “And you were the one that got carried.”

“Now, I know you’re feeling better. You’re being pedantic.”

“A little, maybe. I think we need some company. Come on.”

Judy nodded and followed the fox through the snowy byways.

They ended up in a chain sports bar. Not Judy’s taste at all, but it did have a crowd and enough background noise to be comforting. More importantly, the entire population of the place was composed of arctic and sub-arctic species. Not a deer doe or buck in sight.

Their peace lasted only until they were seated and served their appetizers.

A timber wolf in a slim black dress welcomed them and guided the rather shaken pair to a booth in the middle of the restaurant. Judy was sure Nick had recovered somewhat, but he was far from his
usual self. Not a flirty word passed his lips and his attention to the hostess was perfunctory at most. It took them a few minutes to get the booth’s heater adjusted to a comfortable level for them, and it wasn’t long after that their server arrived.

The mountain goat ram was as enthusiastic as any mammal could be working the graveyard shift at a round-the-clock food service job. Meaning, he mumbled his way through the interaction and shambled off with as little effort as he could get away with. As it was the early hours of the morning, there wasn’t much need. Sporting events on the other side of the planet were most commonly enjoyed from a DVR at one’s leisure. The restaurant was only open to service those also on graveyard shift, or mammals like Nick and Judy; exhausted and stressed after a long, miserable day. Being close to a public services hub for the district assured a steady, if subdued, stream of customers. Enough to keep the place operating, anyway.

Company, but not a crowd. Exactly what they needed.

Nick ordered a beer on draft, largely to have something in his paws to focus on, while Judy opted for coffee. Nick was right, she had to admit. There was something comforting in the presence of other mammals. Once their server had departed, they settled into their seats and tried to digest their day.

The silence stretched.

Judy cracked first.

“Hey. You ok?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

“So, well enough to be a smartass, but otherwise, no?

Nick chuckled, “You’re getting good at reading me.”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly.”

“You pulled me out of my attack on the street.” Nick met her eyes and she swallowed thickly. “No
mean feat there, sweetheart.’”

She didn’t want to think too much about it at that precise moment, any more than she wanted to hear him call her by endearments. An uncomfortable lightness in her belly popped up every time he did, anymore, and she found it distracting.

“Lucky guess.”

“Even if I give you that one, it was risky.”

She couldn’t say he was worth the risk. Such an admission would be tantamount to suicide, but she thought it very loudly to herself before replying,

“Catatonia won’t get you out of our deal. Sorry.” Nick barked a laugh and Judy smiled. Her follow up neatly turned the tables. “I’m more interested in why it worked. You were on your knees and shaking like a leaf. Does hugging your head always calm you down?”

Nick cleared his throat before he answered. “Last I checked rabbit helmets didn’t work any better than tinfoil.”

“So why did it work, then?”

Memories of her scent rolled through his mind and he forced them down. “That’s an excellent question.”

“And that’s an evasion.”

The ram server chose that moment to reappear and plunk their drinks down in front of them. Under a minute later he was gone to put in the first appetizer Judy saw on the menu. His warning of “It may be a while for that,” was vigorously waved off. Through the exchange, her eyes never left the fox. She was sure he was buying time. It was confirmed when he proceeded to take the longest sip she’d ever seen, despite taking almost no liquid from his glass.

“Well?”
“What is a source of water, Alex?”

“You want jeopardy, you’ll get it. Now, answer me.”

“Judy… I’ll answer you, but not now.”

“Why not?”

“I’d prefer someplace… private.”

The way he said that had her reconsidering. “Why don’t we just leave it for now, then?”

Nick smirked. It faded as Judy turned to the one thing she knew would distract them both.

“We have a problem, Nick.”

“Just one?” Judy’s flat look drained what little good humor he had mustered. “We’re both shaken. We need food and a shred of composure before we dive into that topic.”

“Leave it for a little later?”

“After food, please.” Then, more lightly, he added, “Add it to the list,” and winked.

Judy stuttered out a laugh that was only half nervous. There were a lot of things that could be on that list and she suspected not all of them terrified her.

Their orders arrived after a few minutes of anxiously companionable silence and they were finally calming to the point where they felt mildly mammalian when it all went wrong again. Judy finally felt calm enough to be intelligible, so she pulled her phone to contact her CO and report. The moment the device was on, it was alerting for emergency communications. Judy’s shocked confusion was interrupted by Nick’s tremulous voice.
“Judy, look.”

“I can’t, Nick. I need to call Bogo. There’s a crisis!”

“That might be a little difficult, considering he’s probably dead.”

Judy blinked and looked at the fox, who just pointed at the nearest big screen. The newscaster’s voice finally registered in her attention. Her ears dropped after the fifth word and then the shakes started.

“We are here at Precinct One, where the attack occurred. According to reports, a number of officers are among the slain in this attack. No statements have been released by either the ZPD or City Hall, but that’s hardly a surprise considering the scope of the crisis.”

The screen cut away from the newscaster and showed a montage of videos taken from camera phones, all displaying officers and civilians under attack. “These unknown assailants struck just over an hour ago, murdering several key officers and city officials. The attackers then went after any mammals nearby, wielding knives. The specifics of the weapons are unclear, but they appeared to have been homemade. We have preliminary reports of seventeen officers slain, including Chief Bogo, as well as at least two dozen civilian casualties. The numbers are not yet confirmed and the actual death count is presumed to be significantly higher.”

The screen cut back to the newscaster. “Of further concern is the sudden increase in gang-related violence that has sprung up all over most of the city. Dozens of reports are flooding in of shootings and assaults in every district of the city. Speculation abounds about how this attack came about, but one thing is certain. Whether this was an inside job or not, the gangs are taking full advantage of the chaos.”

The newscaster and the anchor at the studio continued to babble, but Judy was no longer listening. Once her CO was reported as dead, she went to her phone and scrolled until she found a file marked Alpha Black; the highest priority communication there was, and confirmation that her worst fears were true. The only reason to receive such a communication was Bogo was dying when he sent it. I was the final emergency communication no angel wanted to receive.

“Carrots? What’s wrong?”
“Bogo’s dead. I have the confirmation here.” She tapped the email and her phone registered a full set of new security authorizations. Everything from total access to the mainframe to the status and transponder logs for the other angels in the city were hers; access befitting the senior ranking officer in the city. “Apparently, I am one of two angels left alive in the city.”

“Say what?”

“I didn’t stutter, Nick. As of now, I am the acting commander of the Wager Officers in the city.”
Adrian Bogo liked to think of himself as a mammal of honor. A very overworked mammal of honor, as both Chief of Police for Precinct One of the ZPD and Commander of the Wager Officers for the High Host. There was a reason that he was rumored to live in his office and it was entirely accurate. He seldom left the room, except for briefings. His dual responsibilities required as much.

As such, he was used to taking responsibility for his behavior. In cases where he behaved well, he made sure he received due credit for his long hours and titanic efforts. When he was remiss, well, crow was a poor dish, but he'd eat it all the same. It was a point of pride for him that even when in the wrong, he had the spine to admit his failings and seek to make recompense for them. Never before had he felt quite so blindsided, however, when it came to an unforeseeable error of judgement on his part.

He had made four trips to the coffee machine in the break room, already, and it wasn't even 0900 hours. His mug was empty, again and he was contemplating another trip when he realized it wouldn't do any good. He rubbed the throbbing mass of tension that used to be his head and took stock of his situation.

Only a few days ago that infuriating rabbit, Hopps, had come into his office and reported seeing Wraith passing by a coffee shop she'd been sitting in. He'd blown her off and then ranted to his contact on the Host bureaucracy. He hadn't even bothered to wait until she was out of earshot, hoping to discourage her from remaining under his command. If she had requested a transfer to another station, or to be sent home, he would have been only too eager to slap his approval all over it and push it through with glee. Now, he was still coming to terms with how severe a mistake that all
had been.

He should have seen it. Such an inexperienced officer getting such a sudden reassignment at such a pivotal time should have set off every instinct he had, yet he'd allowed his irritation to get in the way. If he was honest, it was also his ego; a flaw of personality he thought long since addressed and set aside.

"This isn't helping," he grumbled to himself.

Sighing, he collected his coffee cup and left for another refill. He found Lieutenant Nadine Fangmeyer and Leon Rhinowitz looking down at the lobby from the mezzanine balcony just down the way from his office. They were two of his best and, like him, pulled double duty in service to both the city and the High Hosts. Leaving his mug on the railing, he approached his officers. They both looked haggard and drawn, exhaustion so intense it had a flavor hung round the pair.

Fangmeyer was the first to notice their CO approaching. "Good morning, sir."

Bogo waved off the attempt at coming to attention and saluting. "Never mind the formalities. At ease."

"Thank you, sir," Leon rumbled, before slumping back against the railing.

"Report."

The big cat wearily picked up a large cup of convenience store coffee and took a very long pull before lifting a massive sheaf of files and started flipping through. "Nothing, sir. There's no sign of Lieutenant Hopps or the demon called Wraith anywhere. The only traces we found were outside her apartment and several hours old. It's like they're being erased. I've never heard of a demon that could do that."

"Neither had I, until now," the pachyderm interjected. "It's like he's taunting us. Why would he leave a trace there and nowhere else? The scary thing is there are no signs of distress, or undercurrents of fear. We know Hopps entered her apartment alone, took a set of light bracers and a few armaments, but entered and left willingly, under no duress. There's no sign of a fight outside either, so we know she didn't take him on. I don't get it."

"You don't think she's under mind control, or something? Some demons have mesmeric abilities."

Bogo raised a hoof, cutting the speculation short. "That is not a concern." Both officers looked askance and he paused before continuing. "Lieutenant Hopps was a transfer from the First Host. She was last posted as a Cherubim Hunter under the command of the Inquisitorial Council. Her record on the Fringe is superb."

"If she's served on the Fringe, she'd be trained against mesmerism." Rhinowitz murmured mostly to himself before his head popped up. "Hang on. Why was a hotshot like her sent here, of all places?"

"Classified."

The rhino sucked in a surprised breath and the tigress whispered, "Shit…"

"Precisely. If it's bad enough not to tell…" Bogo intoned.

"…The situation's gone to Hell." Fangmeyer echoed.

Leon groused, "I never liked that saying."
"None of us like it, but we say it for a reason," Bogo commented as he took the files. "What about the other searchers?"

The pachyderm piped up. "Forty standard teams, every angel we could mobilize right down to the guys in tech and all the mortals on the payroll have been out looking since you sounded the alarm. The story of a missing undercover officer seems to have done the trick. We have almost seven hundred pairs of boots on the ground with more volunteers coming in from other precincts every hour." Using his digits to count off points was a bad sign to Bogo of just how tired he was. "Reports keep coming in, but it's all false alarms, or old traces. Nothing fresher than ten hours old has shown up anywhere. We know she was at a diner and her apartment, but nowhere else. No traces of the demon, except in her company. Not even for the Track and Extract specialist teams."

Resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose, Bogo asked, "Is there any good news?"

"No." Fangmeyer seemed close to tears from exhaustion. "Nothing on Hopps and nothing new on the soul thieves. Everything else was suspended until one or the other is resolved."

"These civilians aren't helping matters," Leon grumbled darkly.

Bogo looked down in a small sea of mammals, all either reporting crimes, or looking for help. "When it rains, it pours."

"Half of them are hiding here because of some kind of crime wave. The rest are witnesses, or victims. The hospitals are flooded, too. All the officers we could spare from the search are guarding them."

"Good." The Chief looked at his officers with a rare pride. They were well past above and beyond in terms of their efforts and deserved commendations. Sadly, he couldn't even offer them a cot to catch a ten-minute nap on. "Get back to your posts and keep at it. I know I'm asking a lot of you, but this is a priority one emergency. We'll put the streets back to rights once Hopps is found."

"We understand, sir."

He wasted no more breath. Saluting his officers, he headed back towards his waiting coffee cup. Once he was back in his office, the celestial documents went into his private safe, while the ZPD files went into his IN box. The coffee was hot and he had a lot of work to do before his next meeting with the precinct Chiefs to brief the new searchers. High Host business would have to wait until the Messenger arrived.

He settled uneasily into his creaking office chair and that was when the screaming started.

Protocol states that when under attack a commander's first priority is to seal all angelic materials and activate the failsafe mechanism on the safe. The device would conceal itself and remain concealed until he recalled it, or in the case of his death teleport to the nearest living agent of the divine who was not under attack, within a limited radius. In the interest of protecting his people, Bogo unceremoniously dumped his papers into the box and slapped it shut, triggering the mechanism.

This was not his first rodeo. He fully expected to slap whatever idiot thought they could run amok in his precinct and return to work. That expectation vanished when he saw the uniform of the attackers. Red, black and gold. There was no mistaking those colors or the device on their tabards; the House Guard of Superbia and Baphomet's personal enforcers. The Templars were standing in the lobby.

The mammals nearby fled initially from the smell of brimstone and rot that permeated the air around the demons, but quickly found that the swords they carried were a better reason. The unfortunate
officer who approached them first and was impaled clarified that the strange mammals in the room were not from the local renaissance faire.

All hell broke loose.

The few angels in the building responded as they'd been trained, but were hopelessly outmatched. Most of the celestials were down and the mortal officers had either fled or been slain by the time Bogo reached the floor on his great wings. The usual rules regarding concealment had gone out the window in light of just who was attacking. It helped that the room was devoid of mortals; living ones at least. The first thing he noticed when he landed was that there were very few of the Templar Guards in the room. The screams he heard from the halls answered his half-formed question. They were hunting any survivors. Those Templars that remained were openly focused on him.

A badger in civilian clothes stepped forward. He was dressed in a suit and tie, obviously a businessmammal, and also quite obviously possessed. The vacant stare and jerky movements were a dead giveaway.

"Hello, Adonis. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"It's Adrian, Baphomet. Why have you done this? It's a breach of the Wager. Is Hell forfeiting?"

"This is no breach, you stupid ox, and you know it. No use of powers openly. All we've done is wear our uniforms and sharpened steel. I frankly thought your side would put up more of a fight."

"You arranged all this, I take it. Hopps disappearing. The violence in the city. Your operative is very effective. Is this ringing any bells?"

"Oh, quite a few. However, this wasn't me. Well, not all of it. My… Operative is a bit of a wild card. I am merely taking advantage of an opportune moment and quite by accident discovering what I need to know! Thank you for confirming my prey is with that miscreant fox. You're so conscientious, aren't you Bogo? You'd make a wonderful pet, if you'd only give in."

"Never."

The possessed badger sighed. "Of course. Your pride may be your weakness, but you're a stubborn old cow, aren't you? Well, have fun! I have a prize or two to claim. Ta-ta!" The badger flopped to his knees, shaking his head. Before he could speak one of the Templars walked up behind him and slit his throat.

As the former puppet for the Devil twitched and gurgled his last few breaths, the other Templar Guards returned from their bloody work in the halls of the water buffalo's adopted home. Now, Bogo was left alone with forty-odd Templars in the foyer. Long odds by any standard. He was at a severe disadvantage. The trouble was he was limited, as all celestials were, to twenty seconds of his full strength. Normally, if he used it well that would be enough for about half of his opponents, but the old bull had a trick up his sleeve.

In his many years in the mortal plane, he'd come to know a small detail of mortal anatomy that was seldom explored by Wager Officers, or demon infiltrators. Namely, adrenalin. Bogo had seen simple mammals perform acts of strength, speed, power and endurance long outside what their mortal coils could handle, even flying in the face of death itself, and survive. It was truly a powerful thing. What most celestials failed to comprehend was that while they were on the Mortal Plane, they had flesh and therefore the same asset. Few ever noticed it, however, relying instead on their powers.

Colonel Adrian Bogo was not one to discard a tool or weapon that could be proven useful and the
advantages of adrenalin were far more than useful. Through years of training, he'd learned to trigger the fight-or-flight response in his mortal flesh and use its enhancements to aid him in his work. It helped him climb the ranks of the ZPD and retain his command of the angels in the city. However, it was during a different crisis that he'd accidentally triggered his adrenal response just before tapping his celestial powers.

In that incident, he learned that divine powers amplified mortal capabilities. As fast and strong as he was using adrenaline or divine grace, the two combined were exponentially more potent than either alone. It was his trump card on the mortal plane and his greatest secret after his Name and temptation. It was not enough to guarantee his survival against so many enemies, but it was enough to at least shorten the odds. This was no time to pull punches.

The rictus he called a smile disturbed even the Templars who surrounded him.

Forcing his prey-species anatomy into adrenal overdrive was easy. He was in conflict and feeling the instinct rise was only natural. He let it boil up and dump adrenalin into his blood. In that instant, he tapped his braided-silver bracelet and time all but stopped. He was a berserker with divine light coursing through him. A fraction of the first second was almost done when he summoned his Warhammer and went to work.

Adrian knew demons were tough as a rule, but they would die if they took enough damage. The head and heart were the vital points on any demon. Destroying either was an instant kill. His hammer and the gnarled spike on the pommel were only too familiar with both. The first swing crushed the chest of the nearest wolf-shaped demon. It was ash before it realized what had happened. Reversing the swing, the hammer was next brought up in a hammerfist pommel strike, driving the spike on the end through the head of the Templar next to him by way of its jaw. As the body disintegrated, Bogo snatched a pair of daggers from their former owner's belt and sent them end-over-end through the eyes of a pachyderm across the room.

The second-hand on the wall clock moved once.

The bull snorted in delight at the feeling of battle and wrenched his weapon through the air to smash a small ruminant with glowing eyes into a heap. A lynx who smelled of sulfur found itself ripped from the floor and used as a club. Its skull shattered as it met a coyote's and both were gone. A ferret had just enough time to realize what was happening before a huge, black hoof sent him flying through the air, only to be met by the same hammer that was destroying his fellows. Grit and dust were all that remained a fraction of a second later.

The second-hand moved, again.

The colonel moved through the foyer, reducing enemies to clouds of dust at a speed no mortal could comprehend. Sadly, it was not enough. Demonic power compensated in part once the remaining infernal beings connected the dots. It was far too quick in coming for Bogo's liking. At five seconds he had killed twelve. The last two had managed to block his first strikes, so he got more devious. Once he was sure he was being visually tracked by most of them, he funneled a blast of his strength into his halo, causing a massive flash of divine light. Seven more demons fell while blinded and four more from thrown daggers in the aftermath.

That was twenty-three. He counted nineteen remaining. A handful had obviously fled and he had half his time remaining. It was time to change tactics. His hammer vanished into the ether and a pair of viciously curved karambit appeared in his hooves. The demons charging him were not prepared for him to go close combat and three fell to his counterattack. The ten remaining chose to circle.

Waiting was a poor strategy, so Bogo moved to his final resource. His sidearm was sixteen rounds of
blessed ammunition. His twenty seconds of power ran out to the click of an empty weapon. The remaining demons fled.

In the aftermath of the battle, Bogo was not in the best of shapes. He'd taken no wounds, but the strain on his flesh was painful. Out of desperation, he had pushed himself farther and harder than he ever had. Frankly, he could barely believe he was alive. Breathing was a challenge and he was sure he'd need to use a distressing amount of healing magic as soon as the next dawn broke. He was so winded that he barely noticed the terrified looking meerkat peeking out from around the reception desk.

It was a miracle that he'd gone unnoticed. Bogo was horrified that a civilian had witnessed his altercation with the Templars. Memory wiping witnesses were frowned upon by Command and required much paperwork to handle. It was some small consolation that the small mammals had survived. A lost hour or two from their mind would be a small price to pay for their survival, or so the weary Bogo thought as he reached out to calm his newest responsibility. He was not prepared for the jagged blade that sliced through the flesh of his arm.

Recoiling, he noticed there were other mammals in the foyer, now. Six, to be exact.

The wound on his arm throbbed and went icy cold. It felt as though the life was being drained from him. As if to punctuate the horror and drive home the situation he was in, all the mammals in the room grinned at him and raised their knives. He suddenly reconsidered what had become of the demons he thought had fled.

"Souls for the master!" They chanted, before raking their blades across their throats.

Colonel Bogo lay slumped against reception desk moments later. His injured arm was dead and black. He could feel himself dying by inches as whatever was killing him did its work. As his last act, he pulled out his phone and issued emergency protocol Alpha Black. At least Command would know what had happened and send help for Hopps. It was the last thing he could do. He hoped it was enough to salvage his honor, as the sucking oblivion claimed him.

Gazelle did not know how she found herself in this situation. Rather, she knew exactly how. She simply could not believe it. She had been on her way to a routine meeting with Colonel Bogo to address the usual inter-departmental missives when she'd been attacked. Attacked! On the street, no less! A dozen yards would have seen her safely inside the precinct, yet she'd been waylaid by four ferrets holding crude metal weapons. She'd never seen the like!

The lunatics had chased her like a prehistoric animals, shouting and hooting for almost half a mile before she found herself trapped. The mad mammals had chased her straight into the clutches of a hellspawn. Along the way, she found herself joined in fleeing for her life by a corpulent cheetah who was being pursued, himself. The bizarre camaraderie of the situation was a comfort as they ran. At least she wasn't alone. That feeling lasted all of a handful of panted breaths before the demon had materialized before them. She came to a screeching halt, desperately pawing at the feline for help, sure that she was about to be the center of a mutilation sandwich, but it never came.

Instead, the tiny demon boomed the loudest, deepest battle cry she'd ever heard and launched himself at her pursuers. The skirmish lasted a few breaths, at most. It was a demon up against a band of mortals. They never stood a chance.

Feeble red hellfire was consuming what was left of the mortals a few minutes later and the diminutive, for he was a fennec fox, turned to face her.
"You alright?"

The bass of his voice was penetrating and strident, even in a low volume. She found it somewhat calming, though it did not remove her wariness. He was a demon, after all.

"I am fine. Thank you for saving us. Mister…"

"Finnick. No mister. And you are?"

"Um, I am Gazelle."

"Your parents were big on accurate labels, huh?" Before she could retort, he continued. "Hang on a sec. Something about you is weird."

Gazelle watched the rude little demon fuss about himself for a moment. Her sense of being insulted slowly draining away as she saw him pull a pair of spectacles from a small case and plop them on his muzzle. He looked up and instantly turned the air blue.

"Oh, fuck me. An angel? I saved a damn angel?! Are you serious?"

The glasses vanished back into a pocket before he looked up at her again. She was too confused to be angry at his outburst. "Of course, I am an angel. How could you miss it, little demon?"

Red fire sparked in his eyes as he turned to her, "You call me little again and I'll turn you into a chew toy."

"I am sorry!" She mentally kicked herself. Apologizing to a demon was not something she ever expected to do. However, she couldn't stop herself. "I do not understand. How could you not see the divine light in me?"


This was unprecedented. A demon who was blind to celestial power? She had to know more.

"Wait!" That earned her a pause in his footsteps and a glance over his shoulder. She had to push; just a little bit. "Why didn't you kill me?"

"You want me to?"

"No! I… I do not understand. Why would a demon not want to kill an angel who is already vulnerable?"

"That's a good question." He scratched his chin and blew her question off. "So, what's a Cursori doing being chased by a band of thugs? Don't you angels have that whole divine might thing going for you?"

"Cursori are messengers. Not fighters."

"And I'm the queen of Shebah."

"Your royal robes need laundering, your majesty."

The fox burst into laughter. "Alright. I'll give you credit for spirit, but I don't answer questions for free. You want answers, you pay your debt."

"My debt? What debt?"
"To me, pigeon. I saved your life. You owe me."

"Oh… And if I pay it, you'll answer my questions?"

"No, toots. That makes us square. You want answers, you square us up and then pay for them."

"Wha-what do you want?"

Gazelle could feel his eyes boring into her. She did not like the grin he gave her any more than his answer. "So many things."

At that moment, an aria from Madame Butterfly belted from her pocket. A moment later, what appeared to be foreign rap thrash music came from his. Both the angelic ruminant and the demonic vulpine looked at their phones in mild forms of shock at the text messages they received. The fox recovered first.

"You aren't getting your answers today. I got places to be."

Taking a chance, Gazelle spouted, "A bar in Tundratown?"

"Maybe."

She held up her phone. "Emergency transponder reading and orders. That was the missing Lieutenant. She wants me to meet her ASAP. I'm pretty sure your boss is there, too."

"It looks that way," the fox grumbled.

Gazelle couldn't tell which part of that perturbed her dubious savior, but she had to keep him around. There was too much that was unknown and at the very least she needed more information for her report on her attack. "I propose a deal. You protect me to the meeting and I'll compensate you. Money only. After that we'll discuss my debt."

"Shoot… That's cool by me. You pay my tab at my bar and we're square."

"Deal! How much is it?" The giggle she got in response to her question didn't comfort her.

"You should have asked that before you agreed! Too late now!" His raised paw indicating the feline she had forgotten forestalled any response. "Now, what about him?"

Gazelle looked over at the corpulent cheetah and was immediately flattered and concerned. She knew the behavior. Rapid breathing, dilated pupils, dancing in place, poorly suppressed maniacal grin; she knew the signs. He was in the middle of a fan-gasm.

"Oh, gods… you're her!" was all he managed before his glee overwhelmed him and he fell over in a dead faint.

Once they arrived in Tundratown, Finnick wriggled his way out of the female's grip as quickly as he could. Yes, another mob had tracked them down and it was only the angel's twenty seconds of power that had gotten them out of there, but he still didn't like it. The mob had been too big even for him to get away unscathed, let alone with a pair of liabilities like a prissy angel and the fattest cop in the city, but the indignity of being picked up like a kit was beyond his tolerance. He was small and he knew it. Trouble was, so did every demon he'd had to endure the company of. One of them many reasons he had a bad attitude was exactly that. His particular condition only added to it.

He vented his frustration on anything that menaced them during their flight to where his boss was
holed up. The lucky bastard was one of the few demons who didn't treat him hideously poorly, but he was still a prick and had no idea how lucky he was.

Finnick shoved the shell-shocked cop and the prissy pigeon through the barroom door and into the care of the rabbit who was trotting their way. He was done dealing with them until it was time to get paid and he still had to talk to Wilde. He put off finding his boss and headed to the bar to set up a supply of liquid compensation for his trouble. Beer was starting to fill pitchers on the bar rack when he heard the poisonous velvet tones of Nick's voice.

"Hey there, big guy. Glad you could make it!"

"Do not get smart with me right now, Wilde. It looks like Pandemonium out there."

"It's that bad?"

Finn pointed at the screens on every wall. Most of them had the news running. "They aren't making it up for once."

"Damn… Are we talking business as usual in Hell's capitol, or is it festival night?"

"A little of both?"

"Unsettling, but not completely unexpected."

"Not unexp…." Finnick processed what Nick said in a similar manner that he processed when a bartender told him they were out of beer. "What did you say?"

"Don't worry about it. So-"

Nick's statement, whatever it was, remained unfinished as Finnick turned to him and grabbed his shirtfront. "What the fuck do you mean this wasn't unexpected? Was this your doing, you crazy bastard?"

Nick met the minor imp's anger with a cool nonchalance. "This was not me. However, after what happened to me an hour or two ago, this doesn't surprise me in the least."

"What ha- No. I don't want to know." Finnick released Nick's shirt and turned back to the bar, watching the third pitcher fill.

"Very wise of you, Finn," Nick commented as he straightened his shirt. "Now, what are you doing with a Cursori, of all things?"

"Standing orders got out of paw," he groused in reply.

"You mean the ones where we monitor any angels we find?"

"Yes."

"You got kicked out of the bar, didn't you."

"Shut it, Wilde."

"Let me guess. You had nothing else to do, so you started doing the usual time waster activities and followed the closest angel you could sense that wouldn't make you actually work. Then, when the manure hit the fan, she ran straight into you."
"You're insufferable, you know that?"

"So, yes." Nick paused in his verbal assault to consider the extra helping of taciturn his underling seemed to have with his unhappy meal. "What happened?"

"What?"

"You're grumpier than usual. What happened?" Silence met his query, so he started thinking out loud. "So, you were bored and found an angel… But you being you, that's a little too much of a challenge, isn't it?"

"Shut it."

"I mean, you have your little "issue" when it comes to your powers, so sensing an angel would be too much to expect. Yet, you found her. Could be by chance, or…" The idea crept into Nick's mind and was too delicious not to tease the pint-sized terror with. Even if it was a total lie, it would be delightful. "Or, you were stalking her."

"You're a sick fuck," he snarled as he grabbed a pitcher and started chugging.

Nick's quiet laughter grated across his nerves as the cold liquid drained. "So, you were. How did you realize? Her voice, or were you wearing your glasses when you saw her somewhere? I mean, how else would you know? And then, because she's the only angel you actually know is one, you follow her today and the whole opposites attract thing kicks in… My friend, you have utterly horrible luck."

The pitcher slammed down, empty, and Finn turned to his boss. "My luck has been the same for millennia. And you know damn well why I was stalking her. If I could land an angel it'd do worlds for me back home."

"Yes, yes. Rank and power. The desire of every demon."

"Except you."

"Excuse me?"

"Wilde, I know you don't give a damn about your rank, or getting it back. You went too easily to your imprisonment after your latest piss-off-the-Devil campaign, you've been playing the waiting game since your release and it's been obvious. Then, there's the fact that your most powerful artifacts were never found by the Templars, Torch Bearers or Praetorians. I know. I was there. I don't know what your game is, but I know you're playing one."

"And you want in on it, I suppose."

"Fuck no. I want to avoid getting caught up in the aftermath. I barely survived my first round through Hell's initiations and I'm messed up enough as it is."

Silence stretched and Finnick became aware of the cold seeping from the fox next to him. He realized he may have made a very fatal mistake.

"Finn," Nick's voice was soft, but the thread of power in it made Finnick's grip on the bar tighten until the wood groaned. Glancing over, he saw Nick's eyes were fully black and his collar was glowing with a steady yellow light. "That may not be possible."

"Oh, misery and ash, what have you gotten me into?"
"I'll tell you this much. I am playing a game. A very long game and it's coming to an end, soon. If we survive, we'll all be sitting pretty."

"All... What "all" are you talking about? You and me? Because I know you don't give a damn about any other demon."

"...Not a demon."

"The angel...? Are you fucking serious?" Nick's silence answered one question and sparked a million more. The first of which was, "Are you insane?"

"I'm getting there." Finnick watched as his commander forced his power back under the veil. Green and white eyes slowly appeared and the collar dulled to quiescence. "I'm getting hungry, too."
Clawhauser’s first clue that he shouldn’t have had that box of maple-glazed citrus-zest donuts before bed was seeing Officers Lalinxski and Delgato murdered outside the precinct while he was coming back from lunch. Lucid dreams were a rarity for him, but not unheard of. Lucid nightmares were rarer still and this one was a doozy.

It started off with a regular day that turned into a horror show. Nothing new as far as nightmares went for him. Pretty standard, generally. From there, his dream had only gotten weirder. He’d seen mobs of grinning lunatics attacking his fellow officers and civilians left and right, until he’d been targeted. Then, it was that dream theater cliché of running. A twist he hadn’t expected, because who would ever expect good things in a nightmare, was running into Gazelle herself.

He’d barely registered her presence at all, until the tiny fox with the huge presence appeared. That was the part of the dream where the bad guy shows up and just as he dives at you, you wake up. Only that didn’t happen. The vulpine did not lunge at him to end his life, instead attacking the mob that was chasing him and his pop-star companion. It was a physics defying assault, as the pint-sized whirlwind of destruction never actually touched the ground at any point during the fight, even when he should have.

This twisted little slice of subconscious nastiness was then, yet again, turned on its head by the fox and Gazelle starting to either bicker or flirt. There was a lot of talk using terms he hadn’t heard since he’d been dragged to religious services as a kitten and at some point his mind decided to change it up. He found himself lying flat on his back as Gazelle woke him up by patting his paw.
He thought he was out of the nightmare and into a good, old-fashioned fan-boy dream, but the donuts acted up again.

Everything seemed vague and strange. The little fox hovered around them, destroying anything that he deemed a threat, while he and his idol enjoyed a little walk through a warzone. Store fronts were smashed, or burning, mammals were running for their lives. He even saw a group of mammals muttering something before they killed themselves in public.

The final confirmation came when Gazelle snatched their vulpine bodyguard into her arms, grabbed his paw and unfurled a pair of huge, golden wings. The flight was short, carrying the trio over the climate wall from the city center to Tundratown, but it was enough. He decided as soon as his paws touched the ground again that he needed to make an appointment with the precinct mental health staff. He was clearly under too much stress.

~

Judy felt the presence of her fellow angel a few panting breaths before seeing her. She only had time to register that there were other presences with her comrade before seeing them in the flesh. To her further surprise, her recent friend from the precinct was among them. Under other circumstances she would be thrilled to see him, in truth she was relieved to see he was unharmed, but this was not a good time for mortals to be around.

The shock at seeing the cheetah was compounded at the fact that both he and the other angel were being shoved forward rather unceremoniously by a demon. A few days previously, she would have been panicked at seeing a demon near one of her own. Now, she watched, not without a thrill of trepidation, as the shrimpy, infernal creature gave the two a final, solid heave before abandoning them and heading for the bar.

Judy was already sliding out of her seat when she saw Nick glide out of his own and head off wordlessly towards the other demon. She had a whole slew of new questions she wanted to ask, but priorities had changed. A whole world of trouble was mincing her way over as quickly as she could with a heaving, slightly disconnected felid in tow.

Judy prayed that she had the wits and quick thinking to get through this conversation.

Helping the Cursori settle her mortal charge into their booth was all the time it took for her bond mark to be noticed.
“Lieutenant…”, the nauseated quaver in her voice was unmistakable.

“Yes, Cursori?” Judy answered in what she hoped was a steady voice.

“Is that... what I think it is?”

“A Bond Mark of the Summons. Yes.”

“I’ve never seen one like that,” the other angel stated, her curiosity obvious.

“I’m not surprised,” the rabbit replied.

Judy took a moment to look at what was left of her Mark. The twining sleeve of haggard angles was smaller, barely larger that a long glove, and the depth of complexity in the pattern was staggering. It was supposedly a reflection of the depth of the relationship between the bonded pair, but now, it felt more like a labyrinth trapping her. The thrill and terror she felt at the thought made her feel ill as she watched the other angel work out the puzzle.

Horror and revulsion filled her expression as Gazelle choked out one word in a strangled whisper, “Abomination.”

“Don’t you dare start with me, Messenger. I have had too long a day to put up with the Host’s sanctimonious crap.” Judy’s words flowed hot and venomous, very effectively shocking Gazelle into silence. “I am aware of what this spell is and what it means. Perhaps it would interest you to know that the demon wearing the other side of this Bond Mark is Wraith. I’ll let you think about that for a moment.”

The horror on her face seemed to increase at that revelation. It took a few moments of fish-like gasping, but the horned ruminant finally found her voice. “Wraith?”

“Yes. The mystery demon, himself. You know his file?”
“Very well,” Gazelle said, around some rather unbecoming gagging. “He’s been researched many times. I’m obligated to study all the missives and information I carry as part of my duties. His file is extensive.”

“And yet, empty.” Judy stood up on the seat and nudged a glass of water towards the other angel’s hoof where she leaned against the table, openly using it to hold herself up.

“Yes.” Gazelle sipped from the glass.

“Why do you suppose that is?” Judy asked as she sat down again, sipping her coffee. “With all the reports, so little information. Why?”

Judy watched as her comrade sipped at her water and the question was considered. “He must be very good.”

“Yes, he must be.” Judy fought to keep a straight face and not blush at the double entendre. “Very good and very powerful. Now, tell me, how would you handle such a demon?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Frontal assault is a hopeless option. He’d shrug off any major binding you could throw at him and kill you for the attempt. Reinforcements won’t help and he can make himself almost untraceable. All of that is in his file. Others have tried all those things and failed. Usually to their undoing.”

The grey was leeching out of Gazelle’s face as Judy guided her along. The Cursori was no longer about to vomit and black out. The more Judy kept her talking and thinking, the surer she was that the Messenger would not stray from the lifeline she’d thrown her. There was a chance of maintaining the control she needed.

Gazelle’s ruminations seemed to leave her unconvinced. “That is perhaps true, but this…”

“Is a way to keep tabs on him for observation. In these few days I’ve learned enough about him to fill out his complete assessment. Do you think the Summons was worth the risk, now?”
“All of it?” Gazelle asked, surprise clear on her muzzle.

“All.”

“That is quite the accomplishment.”

“I have a good thing going, here. I’m getting more information every hour and I am not about to lose that, not when it comes to Wraith.” Judy could see the discomfort in the Messenger’s face. “How else could he be contained?”

“I can’t think of any, but it’s an enormous risk. How did you manage it?”

“I know.” Judy elected to ignore the second question.

“Exile, court martial. Execution, if you’ve been corrupted…”

“I haven’t been.”

Gazelle found some iron to fortify her spine with and spat, “I will not trust the word of a foolish angel who is fouled by a demon.”

Steeling her gaze, Judy unfurled her halo and wings with a burst of divine power. The little corner of the nearly abandoned bar was suffused with radiance and Gazelle was stunned to silence, again.

Judy couldn’t help but be smug as she asked, “Satisfied?”

“Ha-how..?” the Cursori stammered.

“I have remained uncorrupted.”

“But… You are bound to him. How is this possible?”
“I want to say I’m just that good, but I honestly don’t know.” Judy sipped her coffee again, wishing for the first time it was something stronger.

“It means he has not laid a paw upon you. In any way…”

“He hasn’t. He’s been a complete gentlemammal.” Then, grumbling mostly to herself, “Mostly.” Seeing the look of awed disbelief on the ruminant’s face, Judy added, “I don’t know why, or what he’s up to, but I know he is up to something.”

“He is a demon.”

Judy was surprised at the small flare of anger she felt at the comment. “Exactly.” The word tasted like acid as she spoke it.

The Cursori’s suspiciousness was finally broken. She still looked as though she might vomit, but she relented, much to Judy’s relief. “I can not dispute what I have seen. You are pure and my acting commander. What are your orders?”

“The situation down here is unstable. Do you have enough power to get home?”

“Yes, but I will not be able to return.”

A thrill ran through Judy from the tip of her tail to the crown of her head and she suddenly felt like she was floating. She would be the only angel on the mortal plane. She resisted the urge to glance at her bonded demon as he stood at the bar.

“So be it. Give me your phone.” Gazelle offered her device and Judy took full advantage of her new authorities, overriding the security protocols. “I am transferring all of my reports to date to your phone. You will take this to the Host.”

“We will assemble reinforcements and-“
“No!” Both females were surprised at her vehemence. “It’s not safe. We just lost all the assets we had in the city. It’s too high a risk to call in more.”

“But you are at risk. We have highest priority orders from Command,” Gazelle countered.

“They’ll change their minds when they get this data,” Judy assured the other angel.

“Lieutenant, you are in danger.”

“Trust me, I am the last one you need to worry about in this situation.”

“And what precisely gives you that impression?”

“I met the thing that is behind this. It wants to toy with me.” Judy repressed a shudder of revulsion at the memory, needing the Cursori to trust in her authority.

“You met the demon?” Gazelle’s eyes widened, then narrowed as she leaned closer to the bunny across the table.

Judy laughed hollowly. “It’s not a demon. I know how that sounds, but no demon can do what this thing, whatever it is, can do.”

“That- is difficult to believe.”

“Read my reports and tell me I’m wrong.”

The conviction in Judy’s voice swayed the ruminant. It also frightened her. “What are your orders, acting commander Hopps?”

“Get home. Get my reports to Command. Once they’ve assessed the situation, they need to open a line of communication with me, here. I’ll be the eyes and ears on the scene until we can get enough information to make an intelligent choice on how to proceed,” Judy looked the Cursori in the eye as she laid out her orders. “Until then, we can’t afford to put more angels at risk.”
“I understand. It will be done.”

“Good.”

As was her habit, Gazelle read through the information she was to deliver in order to imprint it upon her memory. It was a safety measure in case documents were lost, stolen or misplaced. “Lieutenant, you have omitted Wraith’s file.”

“I have.”

“May I ask why?”

In response, Judy held up her paw. “I had to explain this and some of what it means to him. He extracted a few… promises from me. I’ll find a way to get the information to the Host. I just can’t, yet.”

“You’re playing at intrigue with a demon?” incredulity tinged Gazelle’s voice.

“I don’t have a choice.”

Judy was relieved to see Gazelle nod, albeit stiffly, and drop the line of inquiry. “And what should I tell them about your bonding?”

“As it’s the truth, exactly what I told you. I’ll worry about court martial and exile when this is over. I am prepared to take responsibility,” Judy explained. “In the meantime, I have to deal with what’s happening down here.”

“Please, be careful, Lieutenant Hopps.”

“It helps to have a demon bodyguard,” Judy smirked and winked. Gazelle’s expression softened slightly at the joke and Judy knew she was in the clear.
At that moment, Clawhauser’s giggling got their attention. They had quite forgotten he was there, only realizing the depth of their error when the cat glanced to where Judy’s halo had been moments ago. The angels shared a glance and turned their minds to damage control. They were not equipped to adjust a mortal’s memories, so they had to rely on more traditional means.

Every angel was trained in how to handle mortals if they ever came into contact with them for whatever reason. There were simple psychological techniques they could use to diffuse tense situations, in addition to their celestial powers. Largely considered a joke by recruits, Judy was exceedingly glad the Host was so demanding of excellence in the class that covered these skill sets.

Very slowly, Judy reached out and rested her little paw on top of the felid’s trembling paws. He was clasping his paws together so hard, Judy was sure she heard tendons straining under the pressure. While she provided direct comfort, Gazelle took up the support role and allowed her power to suffuse the immediate area a touch. The effect would calm and soothe, but not breach the Wager. The effect was slow, but it had to be, or it would simply make things worse. Judy had earned extra credit in that class for comparing it to treating hypothermia.

“Clawhauser? Can you hear me?” Judy took the high-pitched giggle as a sign he did. “I’m sorry it turned out like this, Ben.”

“How do you know my name?”

“We spoke at the café the other day. Don’t you remember?”

“I haven’t been to a café in weeks. The last few days, I’ve been on triple duty because you disappeared. We all have!”

“What do you mean?”

“We got an anonymous tip that an officer was in distress. Chief Bogo announced an undercover officer was missing and he had reason to believe their cover had been blown, but gave no details other than your appearance and that you may be with a fox. We were to consider him armed and dangerous. We were not to engage him without SWAT and TUSK units involved. Half the city has been looking for you. What’s going on?” The floodgates were opening.

“Sergeant,”
Hysteria began to taint the cheetah’s words. “I saw DelGaato and his partner killed! I thought it was a dream.”

“Ben…”

“It is a dream, right? It has to be a dream!”

Judy had to stop the panic before it became full-blown manic raving. She focused on the power in her voice. It became full, soothing, and compelling. “Benjamin, this is not a dream. It’s real.”

“It can’t be.” He was practically begging.

“Believe me, I wish that were true.”

“I can’t handle this.”

“That’s a lie and you know it. You’re overwhelmed and scared, but you can handle this. You have to. There are innocent mammals counting on you to keep it together.”

The look of fear and hope she got in return was a start, one she had to build on. At this point, Judy turned on the angelic influence; a power she seldom used. It was supposed to be applied to influence mortals as part of the Wager; to nudge their actions or mind towards righteousness. Now was a good time for a little divine assistance for the cheetah, she thought.

“Your fellow officers and the citizens you all serve need you. You’re an officer of the law and a good mammal. Please, Ben. It’s time for you to be more than just the desk sergeant,” her voice rang with the type of forceful charisma used by many in power to strengthen the belief of others in themselves and their cause. As Judy watched she could see Clawhauser straighten in his seat; his shoulders squared, his ears perked, and his paws slowly unclenched beneath the rabbits much smaller one. “You’re one of the last officers of Precinct One. They will be looking to you for guidance and direction. Give it to them.”

Judy got a firm, if watery smile in reply and a small nod. It would be enough for the moment.
“I have to ask. Are you really an angel?” The words were so quiet they barely made it across the table, but the edge of giggling hysteria seemed to have subsided.

Judy smiled softly, her head tipping to one side. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Not really… I also shouldn’t ask if the fox over there is a demon, then, should I?”

“Probably not.”

At that, Clawhauser laughed. The angels breathed a sigh of relief. He’d be alright, eventually. Of course, that was when he took the rug out from under them.

“I thought I liked the bad boy type, but you’ve got me beat.”

The chubby cheetah delivered his line less than a second before Judy saw Nick and his compatriot coming towards their booth. There was no time to respond. She could only hide her furiously red ears and hope Gazelle assumed it was embarrassment that colored them so.

~

Nick walked back to the booth he and Judy had commandeered to a scene from a daytime drama, or a blockbuster comedy. He was sure he’d just missed a punchline. The cheetah was looking shaken, but the gentle nimbus of angelic power surrounding him suggested he’d be fine. The horned angel was looking part stricken, part amused, part uncomfortable and one hundred percent awkward. It did nothing to detract from her considerable good looks, he noted. He also noted Finnick’s low growl as he registered Nick’s interest and the Cheetah’s fawning attitude towards her. This was shaping up to be an amusing little meet-up.

The cherry on the sundae was his little angel catching sight of him and her nose twitching like it was trying to escape her muzzle.

In a fit of puckishness, he opened the bond and sent his amusement to her, along with one word.

Adorable.
The twitching somehow doubled in intensity. Her attempts to force her features into a grimace, or even an expression of wan disinterest failed spectacularly, leaving her looking either constipated, or possessing the countenance of a blushing schoolgirl trying to hide their feelings in front of their parents. The red ears didn’t help.

Nick grinned as he grabbed a chair and dragged it to the head of the booth. That placed him between the angels with the big cat on the other side of the Cursori. The last seat was on the other side of Judy. The little chess-move paid dividends instantly. Finnick’s displeasure at having to walk under the table and clamber onto the bench seat was amusing, but the fact that Judy refused to move over, or even offer was very telling, as was the tension in her expression at his proximity to her fellow.

“So, what have you girls been chatting about?”

Gazelle blinked owlishly at him for his comment, Clawhauser giggled quietly and Judy rolled her eyes, but it was Finnick who responded.

“Wilde, this is not the time for your smarmy bullshit. It looks like a warzone out there. We need a plan of action.”

“Which we have, unless I am mistaken.” Nick looked at Judy and got a blank, fidgety stare in return. “It seems, I am mistaken.” That earned him a punch to the shoulder.

“We don’t have a full plan, just our end of it,” Judy commented as the rest of the table blinked at her audacity. “Gazelle will return to the Host with the information we’ve gathered on our enemy. I will be the eyes of the Host here once Command makes contact. Clawhauser will return to the Precinct and help to stabilize the city.” She turned back to Nick and crossed her arms. “And what will you contribute?”

Nick turned to the Cursori. “I have to ask, is your name truth in advertising, or just convenience?”

“It’s her name. That’s all you need to know, Nick.”

“Oh, fine. You and I will find and take care of this little problem and Finnick will provide information,” Nick supplied.
“He can do that?” Judy directed the query at Nick and was startled when the response came from the opposite direction.

“Damn right, rabbit,” growled the petite fox.

“Finn isn’t just an adorable little imp, he’s quite well connected,” Nick added in a sugary tone, smug pride showing through his words.

“Shut it, Wilde! You may be my boss, but I will turn your red ass into a hat, you keep talkin’ cute.”

Gazelle chimed in, rather imperiously, “So violent.”

“You weren’t complaining when I saved your tail, toots.” There was a flash of sharp teeth with those words that caused a momentarily flicker of alarm in the Cursori’s eyes.

Nick smirked as he watched the fireworks fly. Seeing his fellow demon bickering with the angel was diverting. It was also extremely telling. He was in no way surprised when he felt annoyance that was not his own moments before he heard the rabbit’s voice in his mind.

What are you up to?

Whatever do you mean?

You goaded both of them into squabbling. Why?

Just doing a favor for a friend.

I fail to see how.

I’ve exposed her weakness. Now, he just has to figure it out.
Judy was horrified. He was speaking truth. He had to. However, the idea that he had discerned it so easily was frightening. An angel was exposed to temptation and they had already lost so many. Before she could react, Nick spoke again.

**Keep your fur on, Hopps. There’s no need to do anything. The odds are long that Finn will even catch on, let alone care.**

*Wait a second. Why bother, then?*

**Because it’s fun, for one thing.**

Judy huffed into her paw as she leaned onto the table and side-eyed the fox.

*And?*

**And he needs all the help he can get. I won’t hand him anything. That’s not our way. However, I can nudge things a bit to help him out, if he’s smart enough to see it. He usually isn’t.**

Judy had to pause at this newly unearthed facet to the red-furred demon. Somehow, he was being kind to another demon and not really risking Gazelle. Or so he said. Judy wanted to ask, but there were higher priorities for her to address. She made a mental note to ask about it later and turned her mind to the matter at hand.

*So, what is the actual plan, then?*

**Exactly what I said. The Cursori goes home after she pays her debt to Finnick…**

*Debt? What debt? She made a deal with a demon?!*
The flat look she got from him told her that she had no room to talk. Embarrassed, she tried to save a little face.

*How do you know? There’s no mark on her.*

Finnick is special. He doesn’t leave marks. He can’t. If you want the details, you can ask him. However, he never does anything for free. I don’t know the terms, but your little pigeon over there owes him. He will collect, one way or another.

*You intend to leave them to sort it out while we deal with that deer.*

It’ll keep them distracted until we get rid of her. By then, he’ll have other things to think about. We need to work with as few tethers as possible.

*Agreed.*

Is that why you left my file out of the reports you gave her? Because you knew they’d send help if you did?

Judy’s heart all but stopped. Her eyes darted to his arm where her Bond Mark was resting. It was as small as hers and it scared her.

*I see you figured out there’s a passive use for it, too.*

Indeed. Quite useful to be able to listen in on your conversation, quietly. Your skill at equivocation is impressive, Carrots. I approve.

Burying the giddiness that his comment sparked in her, she forced herself back on topic.

*What do we do?*

First, we get you outfitted and get a hold of whatever information your CO had. They were
looking for a demon, but we know better. All the evidence they had collected will help us understand what we’re up against.

Then, we’ll know how to fight it.

Yes.

Can Finnick really help us with intel?

I was joking when I said that, but I wasn’t lying. He has a huge network in Hell. I think we’re going to need it.

~

While Nick and Judy carried on their silent conversation, the others were quite verbose. Finnick’s and Gazelle’s comments weren’t exactly pleasant, but they weren’t nasty. A fact that was pointed out by a certain felid in terms of how odd it was that an angel and a demon were being so conscientious of each other’s feelings in a conversation. At that point both entities realized they’d been bantering, not arguing.

Clawhauser’s giggle at their shocked expressions queued the return of Nick and Judy to the regular conversation. A few minutes of awkwardness later Nick was standing with Judy, watching the others disappear back out into the night. Judy was uncertain about what was about to happen, while Nick, to her eyes, was enigmatic. It had been faint, but she’d caught the last whispered exchange that the fennec fox had with her infernal counterpart.

“The Templars are moving. You know what that means,” rumbled the smaller of the two demons.

“It means Buffy is moving,” Nick stated.

“The Devil would only mobilize his House guard for one reason, Nick. You know what’s coming.”

“I’ll handle it, Finn.”
“Hellhounds, Watchers and two Praetori Centurions, at least,” Finnick hissed.

Nick sounded impressed despite himself. “Really, now…”

“He’s serious, this time.”

“So am I. I’ll handle it, Finn.

Narrowed eyes peered up at the todd. “You better.”

Judy was sure those two words were as close as the tiny demon would ever get to showing he cared for his friend in any way. However, she was more interested in the intelligence Nick had received. She wasn’t supposed to know, obviously, but she did. The question was how she would handle it once Nick started making plans. She would have to wait and see.

She chewed on the problem the whole way back to his hotel.

~

The trip had been quiet in its own way, Judy mused as she dropped her jacket onto a chair. It was after midnight and the streets had grown quiet by the time they left their temporary sanctuary. Debris littered the streets and there was more breakage than usual, but the majority of the damage was out of sight. That was due, in part, to the fact that enough time had passed for clean up efforts to begin. The majority, however, was the route Nick chose to return by. Judy saw a full spread of side streets and byways on that early morning trek. That being the case, the trip took notably longer than expected.

Judy took her time and really considered the demon who was nonchalantly rummaging through the minifridge of his hotel room.

The entirety of the pedestrian route had been seemingly to avoid the worst of the damage, but had also obviously resulted in avoiding mortals or enclosed spaces. Not really a surprise, but the fact that he subtly kept within arm’s reach of her at all times was significant. The incident in the catacombs kept coming back to mind as she thought through his recent behavior. Training as a guardian wasn’t a huge surprise, but the instant reaction he had to a significant threat was; both for its immediacy and
the fact that she was treated as the principle.

Only the highest and most stalwart of Guardians were forced to train to that degree and they were never, ever quick to choose a principle to defend. They were among the rarest of angels and, to her knowledge, there hadn’t been a new angel raised to their rank in eons; not since the court marshal of the traitor angels, long before she herself came into being.

“You ok, Carrots?”

Judy snapped back into focus, realizing she’d been staring. “Yes! Yes, I’m fine. Just a bit tired.”

“I can believe it. Why don’t you hit the hay?”

“No, I’ll just have some coffee…” Judy shook her head in protest. There was far too much to do.

Nick arched a brow at her before asking, “You sure you don’t want to just keep ogling me, instead?”

“I wasn’t!”

“If you stared any harder, you’d burn a hole on my back pocket, sweetheart.”

“I wasn’t!” she insisted. “If I was you’d know I was lying when I said it!”

“Ah, yes… The bond.” Nick paused and Judy thought for a moment she was safe. “You want to though.”

“No!”

“Lie!”

“I’m going to bed,” Judy announced, rather more loudly than was necessary, before turning on her
“Probably wise,” Nick conceded sweetly. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Abruptly she stopped, half turning to look at the fox. “Hang on. Where am I sleeping?”

“You’re asking that now? You must be flustered.” Before Judy could retort, the fox continued. “Take the bed. It’s clean and probably the safest place in the suite.”

“And where do you think you’re sleeping?” The challenge in her voice was clear as day and she hoped it didn’t sound hopeful.

Nick smiled. “I’m sleeping on the couch, but before I do I need to have a little chat with my armor and deal with my hungers.”

A sick thrill rolled through her as Judy digested the implications of his statement. “I told you that I wouldn’t let you feed on mortals.”

“Are you volunteering to be dinner?” Nick’s lascivious smirk stole Judy’s voice entirely. He chuckled and leaned back against the doorjamb to the bedroom. “I don’t need to feed, rabbit. I have a few… countermeasures I can use to put it off. However…” Nick locked eyes with her and Judy’s heart rate skyrocketed. “Don’t think I can do it forever. I will need to feed my sins, eventually.”

With that statement hanging on the air, Nick slipped into his bedroom and Judy followed timidly as far as the door. She trusted him to a point, but her apprehension warring with her excitement left her uncertain of what to do and extremely uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, Nick was pleased. His gambit had paid off and the rabbit was too wrapped up in her head to pay too much attention. He quickly extracted the metal key hidden in his arm and opened the compartment in the back of his chest. He managed to get a pawful of coins into his pocket, the compartment closed and the key returned to its hiding spot before the rabbit worked up the courage to peek in after him.

Opening the top of the chest in her view, he pulled out a pair of silver Coins. Before he let the lid fall closed, he palmed a small cloth bag and turned to her. Holding up the silvers, he stated, “I can use these to blunt the hungers, but it’s only a stopgap measure.”
“Is it safe?” Her voice sounded timid and concerned to his ears. It was pleasing to his Pride to hear her sounding so concerned. He didn’t expect to feel so elated from it, however, and pushed it to the back of his mind.

“It is, but not terribly comfortable. While you have a rest, I’ll talk to Lefty and the gang, then use the coins.”

“Should I stay with you?”

Nick chuckled darkly. “That would be a bad idea. It’ll be easier if I’m alone.”

The changing emotions on her face were quite an amusing show. Nick found it cute how badly she wanted to ask. Her decision not to was wise of her and convenient for him. He was good at bending words and he hadn’t lied, but any further and he would have to work hard to get what he wanted. He was also running short on time.

Finally, she relented, sagging visibly to his eyes.

“Alright. I need sleep, anyway.”

“Good bunny,” Nick commented as he passed her, patting her head. Judy smacked at his paw, but didn’t seem too angry as she did so. There was a hint of a smile on her face, as well. “Sleep well, Carrots.”

“Are you sure you’ll be ok?” she asked one last time, unable to help herself.

Nick theatrically rolled his eyes. “Yes, Carrots. I’ll be fine.”

Nick watched, a sardonic expression on his features until the door closed. Then, the mask fell away and he was pure focus. He opened his senses. The Bond would give him away if he used it, so he relied on his own powers. A silver coin shimmered out of being and Nick’s ears told him everything he needed to know. He quietly waited and let the sounds of the next room paint a picture in his mind.
Mercifully, Judy was true to her word and quickly settled under the blankets. The moment her breathing evened out and deepened another silver coin vanished. Nick wove spells in silence, drawing on the air. One to give ease, another to deepen sleep and another to alarm the door. If she were to wake and leave the room he would know, no matter how far away he was.

Once he was done, he settled his coat back on his shoulders and slipped out the door of the suite. Spells rose around his temporary home, defending it and her. Nick grinned as he pulled the little pouch from his pocket. It had been too long since he’d hunted hellhounds.
Chapter 11

Judy roused slowly from her repose in possibly the most luxurious bed she had ever known. Satin sheets with a thread count in the four digits were positively sinful against her fur. They felt like warm water enveloping her and coursing along her skin under her coat. She drifted in the grey nothing at the edge of sleep and just let herself enjoy it. It was self-indulgence of the highest order. She allowed her paws to caress over the fabric and her own fur. They wandered over her chest and thighs, gliding over stomach in the process. Everywhere the paws touched tingled and burned in ways she had never felt before. Her sides and arms reacted to their passing and her back arched into the mattress. The combined sensations of her paw pads and the warm liquid fabric over her skin was electrifying.

Slowly, Judy floated towards consciousness. With every baby step towards the waking world she took, the more intense the sensations became and the more aware that something was not right. It was very much not wrong, but not right. Sheets, whether made of satin or not, and regardless of the thread count, did not feel like liquid. Nor did she possess paw pads. Rabbits, by definition, didn’t.

Through an immense force of will, Judy launched herself into wakefulness. She was sitting up in her admittedly decadent bed and the sheets felt exceptionally soft, but she still felt bathed in liquid heat. The sweat cooling on her skin was a stark contrast to what she was feeling, leaving her confused. Her breathing was labored and she felt flushed from head to toe.

Her confusion lasted until the source of her bewilderment could no longer restrain himself.
Good morning, Judy.

YOU!

Who else?

“Who, indeed…”, Judy muttered to herself as she flopped back into bed.

Now, everything made sense. Nick was in the shower. He had opened the Bond and messed with her dreams. A thrill of giddy excitement skittered up her spine as she tried very hard to stop enjoying the feelings of the hot water and his paws. They weren’t real. Just a shared sensory experience. One she could control her reactions to, she was sure.

You aren’t running away?

Hard to do when there’s no escape.

When you put it like that, so many interesting possibilities come to mind.

And yet, you show restraint.

There was a pregnant pause before the demon’s reply filtered into her mind.

Do I?

Compared to what you did the first time you pulled this stunt, I’d say so.

You mean something like this?

Judy realized her blunder as soon as he spoke, but it was too late. As her mind reached to shut the
Bond against what was coming, a wave of pleasure rolled over her. Nick’s paws glided with nimble expertise over his erogenous zones. The sensations pelted into the angel’s mind like a flood. Her back arched, her breath caught and her little fists balled in the sheets. The only thing preventing her from moaning was that, for a heartbeat, she forgot how to breathe.

As suddenly as the flood started, it stopped and Judy was left flabbergasted in its wake.

**Like that?**

Judy shut the Bond, but that wasn’t enough to drown out the low, rumbling laughter she heard from behind the bathroom door.

~

Some minutes later, Nick emerged from his shower to find the rabbit glowering at him and thumping her foot. She was studiously refusing to look at any part of him other than his face, despite the fact that he was only wearing a towel.

“Problem?” he quipped.

Rather than respond, she shoved him out of the way and stalked into the bathroom, herself. Once the water was running, Nick pulled out a bronze Coin and spent it on a spell. It would tell him the moment the rabbit set her paws outside the shower stall. It would likely be unnecessary, but safety measures were always wise when acting in secret.

Now that she was occupied, Nick moved quickly. He scampered to the main room of his suite and rummaged through his coat, extracting two bundles and the same cloth bag from the night before. Returning to his room, he opened his chest and got to work.

The first thing Nick addressed was the larger of the two bundles. Opening it, he surveyed his very well used tools from the night before. Demonic steel could be fickle, but nothing was sharper. His daggers had gotten quite a workout the previous evening and they were in need of some tender loving care. He was all too happy to provide it.

Underneath the basin where his armor usually lived when it wasn’t on him was a small knife chest. It housed all seven of his preferred blades in opulent comfort. He placed each one back in its particular
spot and made sure they were nestled in. Then, he opened the second bundle and pulled out several small strips of demonflesh; a few trophies from the evening’s hunt. Some might call him peculiar for taking the hearts of his prey, but there was no better way to strengthen one’s power than consuming the heart of an enemy. Nick laid one withered strip of meat over each blade and closed the lid, muffling the sounds of his weapons enjoying their repast.

The rest of the contents of the second bundle went into various jars and vials. It was important to keep fresh raw materials around, as well as preserved ones. His activities from the night before had rewarded him with eyes, claws, fangs, skin and flesh. Nothing that would be missed by their previous owners as they were all deceased and turned to dust.

Lastly, Nick put the bundle wrappings into his armor’s basin and set it on the bedside table to let the living metal enjoy its own meal of demon blood. It had eaten well during the hunt, but a little snack at the end would do no harm. A little spoiling for what he would soon ask of it was not a bad trade. His chest was closed, his gear fed and the basin placid left plenty of time for the fox to pull a pair of slacks over his hips and lay back on the bed before angelic toes graced the room, again.

“Feeling better, Carrots?”

A cocked eyebrow from the rabbit in the towel was all he got for his inquiry. Nick watched as the rabbit dragged her clothes to the armchair in the room and tossed them onto it. In the process, her grip on the towel faltered. Grey fur on display was a welcome sight to the fox, as was the follow up wiggle as she readjusted the towel back to its former coverage. A purification spell later, the clothing was clean.

“You could open a launderette. Fastest dry cleaner’s in the city! Any garment, six seconds or less!” His hamming it up got a little wiggle at the corner of her mouth and he knew she was only putting on a show that she was angry.

In a calculated move, Nick rose from the bed and padded to the door to the main room. “I’ll give you a little privacy, shall I?”

~

Judy was confused.

The fox was acting weird, even for what she knew of demons and this particular one. In addition to
the teasing and offer of privacy, he was energetic. Almost ebullient.

When she left the bedroom, Judy drew her critical eye over the couch where Nick was supposed to have spent the night. Not a red hair graced the seat surface and no wrinkles. If he had been there, even sitting up, there would be some evidence of it and clearly there was none. As she walked through the room, she scanned for any evidence of the demon’s presence overnight.

There were fresh paw prints by the door, which couldn’t be older than an hour. Dirt smudges on his coat. He was freshly bathed, so no evidence would be coming from him other than his odd behavior. There was no other proof that he had been in the suite beyond the last hour at most. Even his musk was thin on the air. All the evidence pointed to one fact.

“Where were you last night?”

Nick smirked from his seat. “Wow, sweetheart. Playing the jealous wife, already?”

Violet eyes narrowed at his cavalier. “It is too early for your jokes. Where were you?”

Nick yawned. “Busy.”

“Feeding your sins?”

“So, you are jealous,” he quipped.

Judy refused to take the bait. “Answer the question.”

One of Nick’s eyebrows rose at her pushiness. “I was out hunting, my dear suspicious rabbit.”

“Hunting what, exactly?” Before Nick could answer, Judy’s ire pushed her tongue to keep going. “You were hunting that deer, weren’t you?”

Nick couldn’t help but shudder at the memory of the creature from the catacombs. “I was not.”
“Bullshit!” One grey foot began rhythmically meeting the floor.

“I can’t lie, Carrots, remember?”

“Then what were you after while you conveniently had me unconscious in your bed?”

Nick’s other eyebrow climbed to join the first one at her comment. It took a moment or two, but Judy caught on to what she’d said. Her mortification grew in tandem with his amusement until she was ready to combust and he was ready to explode. In an act of herculean will Nick forced himself not to laugh, lest the poor bunny immolate. Instead, he elected to take a very long, deep breath and stare at the ceiling as he answered.

“Hellhounds, mostly.” Judy blinked. “There may or may not be a pile of ash that used to be a Centurion of the Praetori Order vaporizing in the sunlight.”

“Oh. So, when I went to sleep, you decided to go off and tackle a little infernal fauna,” Judy’s voice was weak and acrid to her own ears. She had to start pacing or she’d start thumping her foot again. That, or simply die of embarrassment. She chose to pace.

“Are you angry or pouting, now?”

“I can’t believe you,” Judy fumed. “I can’t believe I didn’t wake up!”

Nick shrugged a shoulder and smiled indolently. “You slept very soundly.”

Judy stopped pacing and fixed the fox with a deadly glare. He appeared unimpressed. “You knocked me out.”

“Hardly,” Nick scoffed. “You went to sleep on your own. I just helped you stay that way.”

“Unbelievable.” Judy raised her paws towards the heavens then dropped them to her hips.
“What exactly are you so upset about, Carrots? You got a good night’s sleep and there are fewer demons for us to worry about.”

“Yes, I know. I heard Finnick warn you last night.”

“Well, there you are, then.”

Judy’s chest hurt. Her breathing was hard and fast. She was angry; angry at him for leaving her behind; angry for presuming that she needed his protection; angry that she had been so easily fooled and manipulated. But there was one thing that upset her even more. She was hurt that he hadn’t trusted her. That left her angry at herself for caring what a demon thought of her.

Her silent, pacing fuming was interrupted when the fox asked, “What’s the problem, rabbit?”

“You shouldn’t have gone out alone!” she spat.

“I’m fine.”

“Holy fire, Nick, that’s not the point! I know you’re capable, but I’m not going to let you treat me like a Guardian’s Principle. I am not a child, a madman, or a fool despite how you think of me!”

“I don’t think of you as any of those things.” Nick was surprised at his own sincerity, but it seemed to be missed by Judy entirely, for which Nick was grateful. He had to figure out why he felt that way before he could attempt to explain it.

“Then why do you treat me like one? I will not be treated like a burden!” Judy ranted.

In direct contrast to Judy’s high emotion, Nick’s response was calm to the point of condescension. “I hardly see how me taking care of a few pests is a comment on your utility.”

“We’re in this together! We’re partners!” she insisted loudly.

“Really, now, fluff... I didn’t think we’d gotten to that stage of our relationship just yet.” Judy
sputtered at his teasing. At least she thought he was teasing. “To answer your question, I was out last night destroying a few of the Devil’s eyes and ears in the city. Some hellhounds and a watcher or two are no longer in existence. That is all. I took care of a minor errand while you rested.”

Somewhat mollified, Judy retorted, “I thought you had to placate your hungers,” but not without sounding somewhat sullen.

“I did…” Nick replied lightly. “Somewhat…”

Judy’s ears shot to the vertical. “Did you…”

“Did I what? Slake my demonic lust upon some unfortunate infernal megafauna? How far you have fallen, fluff…” he expounded, pressing a paw dramatically to his chest. “To suspect me of shagging hellhounds to death... naughty naughty!”

Judy thought it through. “No. I would have felt it if you’d fed.”

“You might have enjoyed it, too,” he pointed out.

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped, halfheartedly.

“You didn’t deny it.”

“What about the coins? Did they help?”

Nick leaned back, settling in more comfortably and clasping his paws behind his head. “They helped immensely.”

“To ease your hungers.”

“Precisely.”
The rather terse agreement was met with a long look from the rabbit. “By keeping me out of your way.”

“Oh, you are a clever, clever angel.”

Judy once more crossed her arms over her chest and, just barely, restrained her foot from thumping out her frustration. “I’ll have you know I was a cherubim hunter. I’ve faced hellhounds before and I can take care of myself on a battlefield.”

“Of that I have no doubt. However, these weren’t the usual infernal yappers. They were Phosphorous Hounds; the Devil’s personal pack of hunters. Without your proper armor you’d be dead, no matter how good you are in a fight.” Nick flicked a speck of lint off his trousers and wryly commented, “Even I had a bit of trouble with the Alpha.”

Judy’s eyes widened at Nick’s mention of Phosphorous Hounds. Those were several tiers higher than the demonic creatures she had previously encountered, on the threat scale. Hellhounds were similar to low level demons, in most respects. Driven by hungers and corruption, Hounds were indefatigable hunters vicious in the extreme. The Phosphorous breed of Hounds was the result of demonic breeding in House Envy as a gift for their Liege. They were to hellhounds what archdemons were to the rabble of Hell’s army. Much as she hated to admit it, he was right. “I’m still annoyed with you.”

“That’s your choice.”

“I don’t need you to protect me!” She no longer cared if she sounded petulant.

“What if I want to?”

Nick had a split second to realize what he’d said before agonizing pain lanced through his head. When he opened his eyes, he saw the rabbit massaging her temples, “What was that?”

“Feedback,” Judy groused. “If you say something out loud and think it through the bind at the same time it’s like putting a microphone in front of a speaker. The meanings overlap and cause that pain. What did you say, anyway?”

“Nothing worth repeating, if that’s a risk.” Nick found himself oddly grateful for the interruption.
despite the throbbing between his ears.

“Whatever. We need to get to work.”

“On what?”

“We know what we’re up against, but we have no information,” Judy explained. “With Bogo dead and my acting rank, I have access to all the files and materials the Host has in the city. We can go through the reports and analyze them. Knowing what we do, we may be able to unearth something the Host missed.”

“Good thinking. I’ll order some food. I think we’re going to need it.”

Some two hours later food had arrived as had the paperwork doldrums. The rabbit and fox sat on the couch and armchair respectively, pouring over the files left in their care. Stacks and drifts of paper along with evidence baggies littered the coffee table and floor in a semi-controlled chaos of meandering investigation. Nick was losing his mind.

What Colonel Bogo might have considered a small document case, both the rabbit and fox would call an intimidatingly large filing cabinet. It also happened to be stuffed with every document needed for the operation of the angelic forces in the city. The deceased Chief’s meticulous nature and pride in his work were both evident in the documents. They were exceedingly comprehensive and voluminous.

Files that could have masqueraded as phonebooks were the norm. Among them were the actual reports they needed, as were analyses, reviews, forensic reports, assessments and more blindingly detailed documentation than Nick had dreamed possible. Troublingly, there was little that provided new information, or shed light on their situation.

Most of it was nothing of consequence for them; dull, unhelpful, or mundane information pertaining to the daily operations of Bogo’s command. The most amusing point in the whole section of files was Nick getting ahold of a quartermaster’s report.

“Feather treatment?” Nick asked with a smirk.
Judy snorted and continued reviewing personnel reviews.

There were two other points which Judy brought to the fore. One was the fact that the evidence from the scenes of the soul thefts were now theirs, so they might be able to pull something from it. The second was less comforting.

“Why are we going through the personnel files, Fluff? Is it really that important to study the personal details of your dead comrades?”

Without looking up from the papers she was studying, Judy responded, “We’re looking for inconsistencies.”

“Why?”

“Something doesn’t sit right with me.” He watched her face shift from intense outward focus to internal memory retrieval. He was quite sure that she didn’t realize how it made her nose twitch. “When I first saw you, the chief blew me off and Clawhauser met me at my favorite coffee shop. We talked for a long time that day, but at the bar last night, it was like he’d never met me; like none of it happened.”

“Could he have forgotten? It was a traumatic day, after all.”

“No. There he was calm when I asked and there was no dishonesty, or mental clouding in him. To him it just didn’t happen.”

Nick sighed and tossed another file on the stack he’d finished reading. “Well, I haven’t found anything of value in any of these. According to the rosters and timesheets, Benny-Boy was already clocked in and on duty when you said he met with you. We don’t have the CCTV cameras from the precinct to verify, but he doesn’t seem the type to flake out like that on the job.”

“Agreed. However, he was still there. I don’t understand.”

“Maybe we will when we talk to him next,” Nick grumbled. “Or not. I’m leaving that thread of investigation until we have more evidence.”
“Speaking of evidence, here.” Judy tossed an evidence baggie to her partner in paperwork.

Holding the clear plastic rectangle in front of his nose, Nick looked it over trying to determine how its contents, which looked like a small rock, could possibly be of interest. “What’s this?”

“The pebble.”

A barked laugh shot from Nick’s throat. “Are you serious?” Judy’s smirk was all the answer he needed. “Well, I guess it’s doing as much as anything else in here.”

Judy snorted a laugh and waved him off while she went back to her reading. “Yeah, yeah. Just get to work.”

“Not until I get more coffee.”

“Pour me some while you’re at it,” she called without looking up.

Nick smiled as he filled two mugs. “I see how it is. You become the acting commander and courtesy goes out the window. I don’t even get a please.”

Judy gave up trying to work and joined the fox in taking a breather. The paperwork was set aside, joining another pile, while she took the opportunity to stretch. “Good sir, would you kindly favor me with your aid in collecting some refreshment?”

“I asked for a “please”, not an excerpt from a Dickens novel.”

“Would you please get that coffee over here, already?”

“Pushy rabbit,” Nick snarked as he plunked her mug down in front of her.

Judy smiled and took a long sip of the still-hot liquid. They sat in companionable silence for a few
minutes, resting their minds and eyes from the taxing work of endless reading. It felt good to the rabbit just to sit in the company of someone she was, astonishingly, becoming attached to. It was a hard admission to make, but one she couldn’t quite avoid at this point. The realization of what he’d done the previous evening made her feel an array of emotions she’d only ever read about. Jealousy, anger, betrayal; those were surprises, certainly. The anxiety and concern, though, the fear for his safety and being upset at his choice to put himself at risk where she couldn’t help him, those were the feelings that gave her pause.

It was that sense of desired reassurance that led Judy to ask a question entirely out of character for her to pose to a fellow hunter, let alone an angel to a demon.

“You said the Alpha gave you some trouble. How bad was it?”

Nick smiled and let his head roll back to rest on his chair’s cushioned headrest. “Most hellhounds are pretty stupid. One good strike from above and they’re done.”

“The weak spot at the base of the neck.” Judy knew that spot well from her time spent on the Fringe.

Nick nodded and let his eyes roll closed. “I took out most of them that way. Easy kills. The watchers were annoying, as always.”

“Are those the things that look like squirrels?” Now her ears perked with curiosity and she found herself leaning in his direction.

“Uhhuh. With the fishbowl eyes.”

“Quick little bastards,” she muttered.

“They can be,” he agreed.

“We’ll have to trade hunting tips some time,” Judy said over her coffee mug.

Nick smiled as he swallowed a mouthful. “Anyway, I managed to get rid of the majority of the pack, but the Alpha and Beta were left. They were huge, craggy things. I baited the Beta into a trap I set. It
was ash before it knew what hit it. The Alpha, however, was clever. It waited until I came to confirm the Beta’s death and it jumped me.”

Her eyes went comically wide and Nick couldn’t fail to notice the teasing humor in her voice as she asked, “You mean to tell me that a giant infernal rodent got the drop on you?”

“Keep your incredulity to a dull roar, Carrots. It was an Alpha for a reason.” Judy hummed into her mug with a smirk, letting her eyes drift closed.

Nick chuckled and let his eyes drift closed, savoring the memory of a satisfying hunt. “The Alpha got the drop on me by letting the Beta die. I came to confirm and it attacked. It got a good hit on me from the side, but my armor protected me.”

“Reminds me of an assault on the fringe. I was ambushed just like that,” Judy nodded as she recalled that particular battle.

“It stayed low in a stalk.”

“They snuck up quietly,” she continued.

“I took one hit on the hip,” he added, swiping a paw through the air in an imitation of claws raking flesh.

“My shield took the brunt.”

In unison they said, “They never saw it coming.”

Nick was on a battlefield outside a stronghold in the Fringe. He was fending off a trio of Gluttony’s rejects as they slavered after him. He was short and agile and felt the wind under his four wings as they buoyed him up and out of danger. When his little grey paws landed, he slammed into the first with a shield bash and gutted it while it was stunned before hamstringing the second and crushing its skull with the pommel of his short sword. The last tried to flee, but he was quick and a throwing dagger split its spine from its skull. Satisfied, he shook the dust from his silver-white armor and collected himself for the next assault. A huge Gorger appeared and bore down on him. Nick screamed his battle cry and met the beast head-on.
Meanwhile, Judy and the Alpha hellhound circled each other. It was a scarred, leathery beast. Devoid of anything but the meanest of intelligences and bestial cunning. She’d battled such things in the arena many times. Her hip was mildly sore from the initial swipe, but she had rolled with the hit. The force had been defrayed enough that she wouldn’t need any significant healing. In a moment of cunning, she feigned a stumble to bait the beast, which it took only too eagerly. As it charged in, she rolled her shoulder under it’s jaw and rammed her daggers into the flesh of its neck. A quick drag of each blade to its opposite side left it bleeding out at her feet. In that moment she felt strong and dominant, which fed her Pride. Savoring her victory, she plunged her fist through its ribcage and pulled out its heart. She had use for such meats and was loath to let such an opportunity go to waste.

The eyes of both angel and demon snapped open as one and reality reasserted itself.

“What in hell was that?” Nick huffed, breathless.

“I was you as you fought the alpha,” Judy panted. “Why? What did you see?”

“More like where. It was a castella outpost somewhere in the Fringe. There was a huge white maggot with red mandibles bearing down on me. I’ve only had to fight one before in the arena when I was a slave in Pride and I never wore armor.”

“That was my last campaign...” Judy paused to finish what was left of her, now cold, coffee. The bitter sweet liquid tasted amazing just then and helped to her to ground herself in the present. “We were assaulting a stronghold and they loosed about a dozen of those things on us. They were hard to kill.”

“That was a Gluttony stronghold,” Nick rasped. “I saw your memories?”

Judy nodded. “We saw each-others’.”

“Let me guess… the Bond.”

“I don’t know…”

Judy spoke without thinking, but it had been the truth. She’d never heard of such a thing before,
even between bonded angels. The Truant’s Summons was supposed to share many things, but memory was not one ever discussed and the Bond had been discussed very thoroughly by her and her fellows, over the years. The Clerics who trained them were embarrassingly thorough. That being said, she studiously avoided looking at her paw and the Bond Mark. Blessedly, Nick didn’t press.

~

Nick tried not to think about what he’d seen in the angel’s memories. It hurt too much. The armor, the comrades, the sense of purpose; all things that were long past and dead to him. He’d left them buried for longer than he could remember. Now, those memories were seeping to the surface and reminding him of the bad times that came after his tours on the Fringe and endless apprenticeships after Officer’s School; of his final initiation and a conversation with a goat that ruined him.

Before he could either become maudlin or crippled with a headache, Nick shook himself and addressed the one mystery he could actually do something about. The shared memories would have to wait until he wasn’t skirting the edge of another episode, so he let that sit to the side. Instead, he looked at the baggie he’d been thrown before their little study break.

What he saw was difficult to understand.

“Carrots?”

“Yes?” Judy answered from the coffee maker.

Nick blinked. He hadn’t been aware she’d moved. “You’re sure this was the pebble from the crime scene?”

“Yeah. Why? The file numbers correlate.” Looking up, Judy saw what she could only call tension on the fox’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Nick knew something was very not right. It didn’t make sense. It couldn’t.

“Judy, this isn’t a pebble.”
“What is it then?”

“It’s a Tartarus Diamond.” Nick was up and moving.

“A what?” Judy asked as she watched as the demon collected his armor and pulled a pair of long daggers from his chest.

“It’s a stone that only exists in the deepest reaches of Hell. There are legends that say they’re tears of God, or the blood of the first Devil. In either case, it shouldn’t be here.”

Nick appeared to be... unnerved. That was enough to send Judy in battle mode. “Okay, so where are we going?” Judy grabbed her coat and checked her own weapons.

“We are going to the armory that you now have access to, Acting Commander Hopps.”

Judy glanced at the windows and the light shining through them before addressing the fox. “Right now?”

“I was going to wait until night so I’d be stronger, but this… This is too weird, even for me. We are getting you properly outfitted.”

As Judy goggled at the admission he made all the way out the door. She was fast on his heels.

Their trip to the precinct was quick and uninterrupted, largely thanks to Nick’s powers. Judy realized that the previous evening their trek from the bar to his hotel had been devoid of mortals, not because of the quiet of the hour, but the force of demonic will. Mortals were keeping their distance, seemingly without realizing it. It was one of a dozen things she wanted to ask about, but the pace kept by the fox was too strenuous for conversation.

Once they arrived, Judy took the lead and skirted the building. By the fire escapes at the back of the building, Judy pressed a palm to the stonework and allowed her power to flow. A small door opened in the wall and both angel and demon scampered inside. For a moment, Judy was concerned about allowing a demon into the Host armory and weapons depot, but the fox seemed entirely unimpressed, bordering on disinterested. It stopped surprising her when she remembered his armor. He already had better than anything the Host could offer.
Finding the storage locker where her equipment was being kept was easy. Getting the fox to give her some privacy so she could don it was less so.

“You seriously have to strip down to put it on?” His disbelieving consternation at such inefficient battle prep was nearly palpable.

“I wasn’t even allowed to keep the basic bodysuit, so I need to put that on first.” Judy held up the, obviously form fitting and tantalizingly thin, first layer by way of example.

“Well, let’s not stand on ceremony,” he said as he grinned and leaned against the wall.

Judy smirked, but was unimpressed. “Turn your back. No free shows for you.”

“I have to pay? How much?” he asked as he reached into a pocket as if to retrieve the necessary sum.

“My dignity is worth more than you can afford.”

“I’m just looking for a little fur. Is that so much to ask?”

“Turn,” she ordered firmly, though the effect was ruined by the corners of her mouth curving upward.

“What if I say please?”

“Turn.” There was more giggle in her voice than she was comfortable with.

“Pretty please with a carrot on top?”

“I’ll show you Carrot on top if you keep this up.”
“Is that a promise, Carrots?” He waggled his brows a her as he pushed away from the wall.

Judy’s ears flushed as she realized her accidental innuendo, but kept a straight face. “Turn.”

Grinning, he complied and her blush flooded her face and ears. Judy wasted no time at all and changed into her armor as quickly as possible. As soon as she was dressed, the Acting Commander summoned the file case Bogo had bequeathed her and loaded what weapons and gear she couldn’t conceal under her clothes into it. It was a small breach of protocol, but a minor infraction was the least of her concerns at this point. The pink tinge in her ears caused by the demon she’d brought into the armory and the bond mark on her paw that was now barely larger than a driving glove were all higher concerns. Concerns for another time, she decided, as Judy was guided out of the armory seconds after unsummoning the document case.

They made it about half-way back to the hotel, and Judy was taking a small breath of relief, when it all went wrong. Her first clue things were not well was Nick stopping cold in his tracks and holding his paw up, just like he had in the catacombs. Judy froze and things got bad fast.

Time seemed to slow and the world around them appeared to rot; veins of decay like mold and rotting blood traced every surface. Trees crumbled to charred husks. Concrete and asphalt crumbled. Judy’s heart rate grew as each new layer of vile distortion crept over the world around her. Her paws itched for her short sword, but the signs she saw from her de facto bodyguard were confusing.

Nick appeared to be at ease after his initial tense reaction. His paws slid into his pockets and his posture took on a casual, expectant air. His smile was smug and relaxed. He looked like he hadn’t a care in the world, or was waiting for a bus to show up.

Finally, Nick spoke up, but not to her, Judy was surprised to find.

“Whenever you’re done your pathetic display and want to say hello, I’ll be ready.”

His voice was calm and even with a hint of a sneer in it. Before Judy could ask what he was doing, or who he was talking to, a goat stepped out from behind the corner of a building. He was huge for his species and pitch black from horn to hoof except for his eyes, which burned like red coals in his head. In his hoof, he held a long spear with three tines and black ichor dripped from his hooves as he walked. He ignored the fox, only having eyes for the little rabbit.

In a voice that was part velvet, part gravel, the ram spoke to the fox. “Well, well, Piberius. She’s still
pure.”
Chapter 12

Judy was frozen. Utter terror gripped her in every sense of the word. Her breath was meager, her muscles strained, and her mind shuddered under the pressure of the mere presence of the goat before her. She knew who it was. Anyone sane would. Unnecessary confirmation came to her from Nick.

“Hello, Satan.”

“Hello, failure.” Before Nick could respond, the ram waved a hoof and a band of twisted black power coiled itself around the todd’s muzzle, silencing him. A pair of bands wrapped around his paws at the wrists and another at the ankles.

A supercilious sneer curved the goats muzzle to reveal a set of elongated canines and teeth far sharper than should be found in the mouth of normal ruminant. “Did you truly think that killing my underlings would do me harm? They were a worthy expenditure to lure you out and their deaths merely allowed me to manifest. Now, sit still like a good pet. I’ll attend to you and your thieving shortly.”

Fear coiled in her gut as Judy realized how hopelessly outclassed she was. Her demon still stood, but was bound, muzzled and immobilized. He didn’t seem overly upset, but he hadn’t moved since the Devil himself had appeared. Of course, neither had she and, if his reasons were anything like hers, it was due to abject terror. Even with her full armor and its reinforcements, she felt like she was being crushed under the weight of the goat’s presence.
Said demonic overlord took a slow step forward, addressing Judy as she trembled. Holding out a hoof, he crooned, “Come here, little angel. Come here now and all will be well.” The goat’s eyes glowed with self-assurance around the horizontal pupils; black depths into which many had sunk.

Judy swayed on her feet. The voice was a whispered narcotic. She knew it was demonic magic. She’d felt such effects on campaign; voices that could lure and beguile, leading angels into ambushes or worse. She’d been trained well and learned to resist such tricks, but this was an ocean, where the others were puddles. The pressure clouded her intellect and drowned her will, leaving her mind gasping.

“What is it you desire, Judith?” he asked in a voice like warm honey; tones one only heard from a parent or lover. “Any wish, I will fulfill. Any dream, I will grant you. Any hunger, I will sate. Anything you desire. Wealth and power or endless pleasures of the flesh will be yours. Just take my hoof and I will give you all.” Judy swayed as she stood, struggling to resist and succumbing. She reached out for Nick, but she couldn’t find him. The voice was whispering right beside her ear, close enough to tickle the sensitive fur. And the Devil hadn’t moved an inch. “Would you like the little fox as your pet, perhaps? He would fit well there; to serve you in any manner you wish. Endlessly.”

Judy fought; struggling to stay on her feet, but every moment she stood, her feet itched to move. If she did, she would lose herself. If she fell she would be taken regardless of her wants. Her heart ached and all she wanted was what the voice offered. She wanted it and hated herself for it.

“Take my hoof. Swear yourself to me on your Name and all that exists will be yours. The fox, the Throne of Heaven, endless joys and eternal pleasures. Everything your heart craves and any want you could ever imagine...” The honeyed voice and pretty words wormed their way into her mind. Flashes of all he promised flitted behind her eyes and there was nothing she could do to keep them out.

“All yours,” the insidious voice urged, oh so gently. “Just give me your paw.”

Judy’s feet began to move, a slow, shuffling progression, and the voice grew insistent. “Come, come, my dear. We haven’t much time and there is an eternity of pleasures waiting for you. Reach out. Now.”

The voice echoed off the walls of her reality; the last word booming through her and Judy felt her paw rise of its own volition. Tears were welling in her eyes and she felt close to vomiting as she realized she couldn’t stop herself. She was lost and there was nothing that she could do. Laughter, deep and rippling with triumph, rolled through her world and Judy was sure she would faint dead away. The pressure was murderous, crushing her consciousness, making it painful to breath...
And suddenly, the pressure on her eased. She was floating; her feet were no longer touching the
ground. It no longer felt like she would be sick and her breath was heaving in and out of her lungs,
leaving her ragged and quivering. Her eyes creaked opened, expecting a goat with a death’s head
grin leaning over her, only to see red fur and a muzzled face.

The face was inert, passive, blankly staring over her head. Then a blazing emerald rolled down to
look at her and winked. Judy could have fainted in relief. A slow smile grew on his mouth, under the
muzzle, until his familiar, easy smirk was there. Judy was too conflicted to do any of the things she
wanted to. She wanted to punch him, to slap him for letting her be so scared and alone. She wanted
to thrash him; scream at him; beat him until he begged for mercy. The relief she felt was so intense
she wanted to weep.

She burrowed her face into his chest and allowed herself a ragged breath as the fabric of his shirt
strained tight in her grip. A moment later, her feet touched the ground. She was loath to release him,
but they weren’t out of danger, yet. The feeling of heaviness was still thick in the air, coating the
back of her tongue, but she no longer felt crushed by it. Hope started to grow in her as she saw the
monster called Wraith, now someone she trusted, shake off his muzzle as if tickled by an annoying
fly and stand between her and the Devil himself.

~

“Buffy! What an unpleasant surprise.”

If the Devil hadn’t been staring slack-jawed before, he certainly was now. Nick was pleased at the
result. Baphomet was flatly stunned that his bonds hadn’t held. The fact that they’d been so easily
shaken off by a mere incubus left him speechless.

“Nothing to say, your Royal Uselessness?”

Quickly composing himself, the Devil lightly snorted. “What cheek.”

“I yawn.” Nick put action to words and made his boredom clear to all present. “You took forever,
getting here. Did you have to take a pit stop, or did I use words that were too long in my note?”

“Gloat all you wish,” Satan sniffed haughtily. “Your pathetic attempt at theft will soon be remedied
and what you stole, restored.”
“Fat chance of that, Buffy. I must admit I am impressed, though. You worked out that I robbed you and it only took…” Pause for dramatic effect. “Five hundred years.” The only indication that Nick’s barbs were finding their mark was a slight narrowing of Baphomet’s red eyes. “And you got off your backside to come deal with me yourself. Look at you being proactive!”

The once honeyed voice was quickly growing soured, like curdled soy milk. “If you think you are doing anything but earning further torments, you are sadly mistaken.”

“Am I?” Nick asked with faux innocence plastered across his face and laughter in his voice. “I’m surprised you ignored me once I was bound, honestly. I mean, I robbed you blind. Cleaned you out completely. Then you get up here, and ignore me. I have to admit I was surprised. And a little insulted.”

“There are greater concerns to me than a peon, like you, and a petty theft.”

Nick pulled a cigarette from some hidden place on his person and raised it to his lips. A flicker of indigo flame sparked the tip of his middle digit to light it. “Greater concern to the archdemon of Pride than to have your treasury emptied under your nose? My my…” He took a long drag, held it for a moment as his gaze met that of the pitch-black goat, then slowly blew released it into the air. “Do tell.”

“If you are too dim to know, I will not deign to enlighten you. Now, be silent.”

The Devil’s words were growing slightly sharper and the narrowed eyes had been joined by a minor twitch in one ear. Nothing anyone would notice unless they had spent a very long time studying the demon who sat on the throne of Hell. Nick had done exactly that and for longer than anyone could remember. He was making progress.

“I don’t think I will, Buffy.” Nick purred around his cigarette. “It’s not as though you could actually silence me, anyway.”

“You will address me by my titles when you are permitted to speak, at all.” Annoyance and disdain tightened the Devil’s voice.

“Or what, you’ll cry at me?” Nick asked around a laugh. “Very well.” Lifting the burning tobacco from his lips, Nick assumed a mockery of the salute he had learned in his first House and withheld
no mockery from his voice as he crowed. “All hail Baphomet, arch pansy of House Superbia. Holder of the Throne of Hell, by virtue of poisoning. Combat was too dangerous, after all. Bearer of the Luciferian Mantle and Banner of Lost souls, when they aren’t too heavy for him. Keeper of the Key of Wards, as it came with the chair he uses. Grand Satan of the Legions of Hell, because the work is all delegated and Custos Auream of Tartarus, because no one remembers what it means, but it sounds good. Long may he cower!”

“Arrogant peon...” A frayed thread of irritation crept into the devil’s voice. Was that a hint of bleating?

“Says the archdemon of Superbia... Oh, the irony!” Nick returned his cigarette to his lips and exhaled a cloud of smoke. “And name-calling? Way to prove me right, Buffy! Do you need a snack before naptime?’

“Your feeble attempts to goad me are pathetic. Do you truly believe anything you have to say would cause me even the slightest discomfitter?

“You tell me.”

“I will tell you nothing.” The burning carnelian orbs turned back toward Judy. “I will tell your little… friend, there, a thing or two.

“My dear, I’m sure by now you know the sob story of the poor little angel who was “tricked” into falling. What he hasn’t told you is that falling isn’t forced. What he did to earn his exile to Hell was his choice. And what choices he has made.”

The Devil offered Judy a rictus grin, his laughter scraping at the walls of her mind as he continued. “Did he tell you what he’s done? All the things that aren’t in the files you pure little angels keep? The horrors he’s visited upon angel and demon alike? He’s corrupted dozens of your kind. Slaughtered more. Before he got uppity and tried to take Hell from me, he had a cape made from the wings of all the angels he’d taken prisoner. Most of them he broke himself either in the arena as an entertainment to feed his pride, or in the bedroom for his pleasure,” the goat murmured as his power left his eyes burning like coals. Judy could feel their warmth singing her fur and caught a whiff of sulfur on the air.

“And you?” Satan sighed. “You’ll be another notch on his belt and nothing more, unless you come with me. Swear yourself to my service and you will decide his fate. Revenge for your dead comrades, his servitude for all time. Anything you desire.”
“You’re repeating your sales pitch,” came Nick’s droll interjected, breaking the building pressure, again.

“You are an insufferable nuisance!” the goat bit out.

“Ooh, big words! That calendar Izzy got you is paying off!”

Baphomet gave the fox a greasy smile. “Speaking of Asmodeus, he will be very pleased to get his claws in you, again.”

“You sure you don’t want to give another House a shot? You failed to break me in Superbia, Izzy failed in Luxuria. How about Invidia, this time? Or Gula? Misery knows Belphegor could use the exercise… Just keep trying until one of you manages to show a little competence.” Nick took another long drag and nonchalantly released a cloud of smoke before continuing. “Of course, you’d have to subdue me first.”

“A simple matter,” assured Baphomet.

“Not when you don’t have someone else to do it for you.”

A light tremor of repressed anger caused the Devil’s arm to twitch. “I should have killed you the last time we met.”

A vaporous fist corralled a pawful of pebbles and lifted them to its master’s palm before dissipating. “You haven’t had the spine to stand in my presence since you had Asmodeus do your dirty work, all those years ago.”

Baphomet’s lip rose slightly in a snarled moue of displeasure.

“Do you need a little incentive, still? Here.” A pebble shot from Nick’s paw and ricocheted off a black horn with a thunk. “How’s that?”

Judy watched in stunned silence. It was matched by the shock Baphomet was experiencing.
“I’ve got more.” Another three pebbles bounced off the ram’s horns in quick succession and the fourth slapped the center of his nose, followed by a sharp snort. “Seriously? You’re still too scared?” Nick continued jauntily. “Here, I’ll make it easier for you.”

The fox, who Judy was absolutely certain was insane, dropped the rest of his pebbles and did a smart about-face. “There you go! This is how you usually fight, isn’t it? Too afraid to face your opponents, so you stab them in the back? I’m unarmed, too! Or do you need a dozen real demons to put me on my knees before your grow the stones?”

The Devil’s snarl became a roar and he lashed out. Judy’s mouth, which had been hanging open since the start of the exchange, was instantly covered by her paws. The blow never landed. Nick slipped out of the strike’s way with an ease that could only be described as lackadaisical. The follow up sweep was neatly hopped over and the thrust after that was batted away with a dagger that appeared suddenly in the fox’s paw.

“Look at that! You’ve managed to get me to draw a weapon! Aren’t you proud?” Nick taunted sweetly.

The ram wasted no breath and attacked in earnest.

Every strike was dodged or parried with ease by the fox, who wasn’t even wearing his armor fully. Judy watched with increasing confusion as Nick refused to use his armor. He didn’t appear to need it, but she didn’t understand. Baphomet had smacked him down in their last encounter, or so Nick had said, so why not use every advantage?

Her answer came a few moments later; in a moment of cruel theatricality. His armor was there, but hidden under his clothes.

After dealing out what should have been a series of punishing blows, Baphomet was tiring and hadn’t landed so much as a firm breath on his target. His opponent, however, seemed fresh as a daisy. It enraged the ram, sulfuric smoke curling from his flared nostrils. All the more so when Nick tossed aside his dagger and taunted him.

“Come on, Buffy! This is as easy as it gets! I’m unarmed. Again! Think you can scratch me this way?”
Baphomet bellowed his fury and poured his strength into one last strike. He was sure to impale the upstart and be done with him. Then, he could collect the angel and be leave this accursed plane. With all his strength and weight behind it, the trident moved faster than sound and he was assured of victory when his thrust was brought to a jarring end. The instant the sharpened tip of his weapon touched the fox’s chest, it turned to liquid and slithered from his grip. The Devil overbalanced and crashed to his knees at Nick’s feet.

~

Nick’s grin was a mirthless rictus as he claimed the final piece of his armor. It joined with its fellows the instant the tip touched the chest plate through his shirt. He felt the tremor as they acknowledged each other and then the weapon flowed under his clothes as a liquid and joined with the rest as one for the first time since before lizards walked the earth. The disbelief on Baphomet’s face was comical and compounded when the armor flowed briefly over Nick’s body in full, getting its new voice acquainted with its bearer.

Humor faded.

The tables were turned and the demon responsible for Nick’s fall and all his suffering since was disarmed and defenseless before him. It was the simplest of acts to send a ribbon of sentient metal from his arm to impale his enemy.

There were words Nick had prepared for this occasion. So many things he thought would be a sufficiently cruel irony. But in that moment, there were no words. There was only pain, and fury, and the memories of one night where a kindly old goat had advised him to stand up for what he believed was right. The words that led to his court marshal and exile from the heavens for daring to disagree with the Divine’s orders.

Jagged tendrils of metal sprouted from Nick’s armored paw and flew at the goat before him, punching through armor and flesh alike. The first pinned one leg. The other leg followed an endless instant later. The arms were next and Baphomet, the Devil, was pinned for display as a butterfly would be in an entomologist’s case.

Ribbons, threads and ropes of jagged metal fell like rain.

It was a matter of moments only, before the ruler of Hell was a ruminant-themed pincushion; every part of him but his heart and head riddled with metal and vulpine malice. In a final act of vindictive wrath, Nick willed his spear to twist. Every tendril nestled in suffering demon’s flesh grew spines and hooks, snaring and rending. As each thread torqued and was evulsed, they shredded what was
left of the body they had used as a sheathe, reducing the devil to a mass of pulverized meat in his own skin.

The armor retracted, shedding ichor and effluvia as it did. By the time it returned to its bearer fully, it was clean. Nick stepped up to what was left of his former master and backhanded him across the face, painting the floor with another splash of black blood.

“Before I let you die I want you to know…” Nick whispered into the ragged ear as though to a lover. “I want you to know that I have everything you could dream of. Power beyond your petty mind’s comprehension; the rule of Hell, too. I know that you came here for her, not me, so I know that she’s important. If she’s so valuable that you came all the way up here, I’ll find out why,” he purred tenderly. “And I’ll have her too.”

Pulling away, Nick saw what was left of the ram try to rally.

In a deep, ritual voice, Nick began to speak. The words were as old as Hell itself and he relished each one as they poured from his lips. “The Devil is slain! His slayer reigns! All Hell revels! Long live the Devil!” So saying, Nick punched his clawed paw through the goat’s shattered ribs and wrenched put a blob of black meat. With his heart removed, what remained of the arch demon’s body withered away and turned to dust.

“Ah... the Devil’s heart, such as it is. Consume it and take his power...”

~

Judy had seen enough. More than enough. Enough to cripple her.

The mind enveloping power that Baphomet had wielded had been bad enough, but what had happened afterwards was inconceivable. Very near to incomprehensible. She had thought for a moment that taunting the devil was Nick’s way to arrange an opening for them to escape. She had not expected him to square off with the ruler of Hell, let alone to do so and win. There were a million things she needed to ask; questions screaming in her mind, demanding answers, but one thought overrode them all.

He could not be allowed to eat Baphomet’s heart.
“I won’t let you.” Judy’s voice barely sounded like her own and she forced herself to swallow the bile she could feel rising.

“Please, Carrots, you couldn’t stop me and you know it,” he replied in the same calm tones he had used while flaying the goat alive.

“No.”

“You are a gutsy rabbit. You’re welcome to try.”

Judy’s short sword rasped out of its scabbard where it rested on her back and she summoned a buckler to her other paw. She had faced him once already and been bested easily. Then, she had been ignorant; unaware of what he was and severely under prepared. Now, she had her full complement of armor and weapons, matched with a greater understanding of his nature. And one last thing that changed the entire complexion of the circumstance; his Name. A demon’s name would bind them to the speaker’s will, in the case of lesser demons. In his case, it should at least slow him, possibly painfully. It felt bitter in her mouth as she fortified herself. This was something he would likely never forgive.

“You won’t have that, or me.” She pulled power together and willed it into her voice as she spoke a final word. “Piberius.”

Nick blinked. “That’s what you’re upset about?”

He hadn’t even flinched. Not a shred of change in his power, the mana around him, or anything else. Not even the bond reacted. Relief flooded her alongside anxiety and then anger. “No more lies.”

“I can’t lie, remember?” he pointed out while eyeing her as if she were a particularly dense cadet.

Not trusting her voice, Judy launched herself at him. This would not be like the first time she fought him. She had her full hunter’s armor and her best weapons. She also knew better how he fought. She wouldn’t be able to break him. She knew that much, but that was not her goal. If she could destroy the heart, she could save him. The fear that drove her to challenge him was not just to prevent what he would become for the sake of creation, but also in fear of losing him to the corruption.

To her distress, he seemed even less concerned than he had in their first encounter. Her first strike
was stopped by the haft of a spear before it even came close to connecting with any part of him.

“This is delightful!”

His comment didn’t help.

~

Nick was happy with his complete armor. The thousands of years he’d spent collecting them were worth it in every way. In the first moments he had possessed it the spear had proven its value, not just as a weapon, but as every weapon he could imagine.

As the rabbit rained blows and strikes on him, the spear shifted at his whim to be whatever he found most useful in that moment. All it required was thought. One moment it was a broadsword, the next a tonfa, then a scimitar, a rapier, a poniard, a staff, a shepherd’s crook. With every moment’s thought it became something new and beautiful in his eyes. It required a touch of focus at first, but he quickly found the same rapport with it that he had with the rest of his armor. Its glee at being whole again, lending its own enthusiasm and flair to the changes.

While he fended off slashes and blunt force attacks from the rabbit’s shield, Nick let himself relax. He knew that this little spat would be over soon and then he could placate her as he obviously had to. She would wear down and slowly get tired enough that he would be able to talk some sense into her.

Only, that didn’t happen.

It took a moment or two, but Nick became aware of how very different this fight was than his first altercation with the angel. The first time, she had demonstrated her skill, yes, but the tools she had possessed had been paltry to say the least. A short sword, a dagger, a taser and a Kevlar vest… hardly the raiment of a huntress of his kind. Now, however, she was properly outfitted and when her short sword was knocked from her grasp, he was delighted to see the buckler vanish as well; a karambit and a tomahawk taking their places.

Just as Nick’s weapon flowed from form to form, so too did his adversary’s technique. He was pleased to see her strength coming to the fore as she hooked his spear to the side with her tomahawk and struck at the heart with her other paw. She missed, of course. He was not about to allow her to dominate him, not after feeding his Pride so deliciously. However, as the battle raged, his pride mellowed as it always did after a feeding. To his surprise, he found himself filled with respect; not
just for her tenacity, but the willingness to not back down despite the odds. If she had been so armed in their first tet-a-tet, he would have been much harder pressed, possibly to the point of doing her serious harm out of lack of choice.

After the second set of weapons were batted from her paws, another set took their place. Two short, wide war daggers. Held to stab in a reversed grip, Nick watched as she slipped in close and began to hammer at his defenses like a dervish of divine steel. The attacks grew wild and fervent, even as they came to nothing against his parries and blocks.

In a moment between flurried engagements, he took a moment to really look at her. Her heart was as plain for him to see as the sea on a clear day.

She was stressed, fearful and… desperate? Her form glowed with tapped divine light, indicating she was at the limit her bangles could allow. He was surprised to find that she was tapping her own power through her armor, as well, and putting as much force as she could manage behind her assaults. It dawned on his previously distracted mind that every attack had not been aimed at him at all, but only what he held.

The final proof came when, in a final act of reckless abandon, she tapped her bangles and her full power flooded out, raging through her to no avail. Twenty seconds later, she was panting on her knees, drained and defeated, but unharmed. Feelings he did not want to name tickled at the edges of his awareness and he shuttered them for another time. Now, he needed to be calm and even kelled. Giddiness was unbecoming, for one thing.

“Now what was that all about?”

“Please don’t,” she pleaded through gulped breaths.

“Don’t what, angelfluff?” He seemed genuinely confused as she eyed him.

“Don’t eat his heart. Don’t fall further.”

“Sweet misery… You really should let mammals finish speaking before you act.” On the heels of his words, Nick summoned hellfire to his paw and burned the heart to ash. “Hell and it’s throne can kiss my red furred backside. All I did was kill him. I haven’t taken his place. Just his weapon.”
Judy gaped as she watched the black organ vanish into nothingness. Creases formed on her brow and muzzle as she looked from the now empty paw to his face in confusion. “That makes you the Devil.”

“Yes and no. That makes me owner of the last piece of my armor. A lovely one too, might I add. It also makes me the Devil by right of assassination and possession of the Mark of Rule, but it won’t be official until I actually claim the throne,” Nick explained, giving the trident a twirl for emphasis. “That can wait, as far as I’m concerned.”

Climbing back to her paws slowly, Judy listened for the catch. “I don’t understand.”

“To become the Devil the one who kills the previous ruler needs to eat their heart and take his power. And let’s face it, that would only weaken me so I’m skipping that part. Then, I’d have to go to Hell, allow challengers to come and try to best me… Blah blah blah… It can all wait. Let them stew with an empty throne for a bit. The panic will do Hell some good. Besides, I recall that I gave my word to a certain little grey angel that I’d help with an investigation. Until that’s resolved, I couldn’t possibly find time to rule Hell.” He winked at her wide-eyed bafflement. “Even the Devil is bound by his word. I gave you mine and I will keep it.”

Judy was in tumult. She was exhausted and annoyed with herself for wasting her strength. She was also itching to thrash the red-furred jerk who misled her. Scared was also in there and growing as she realized how happy she was that he wasn’t going to vanish on her.

She was almost immediately panicked again, however, when he said, “This, however, will not wait.”

With a flick of his thumb, a platinum coin flew into the air and vanished. Judy watched as the fox snarled and thrust his spear into the air before him. The head of the weapon vanished into the air and he twisted it, as though turning a key... or opening an enemy’s wound.

Reality screamed. Judy barely resisted covering her ears, knowing it wouldn’t help.

A portal opened in the air. Nothing grand, or flashy. Just a hole in the skin of creation, which Nick strode through with a purpose. Moments later he returned bearing a long, thick bundle; thicker than his frame, but apparently very light. To her eyes, Nick held it with a sense of reverence, and awe overtook her. Whatever it was that he now had was very important to him.
The portal snapped shut as Nick knelt and gently placed the bundle on the ground. Quietly, as the moment seemed to call for such, Judy asked, “What is that?”

“My wings.”

Her gorge rose in her throat.

“They were taken in Luxuria. A literal trimming of my wings,” he continued by way of explanation for his perpetually curious angel. “I finally have the power and the Key to get them back.”

“Key… The spear?”

“Yes. One of the privileges of bearing this weapon is that it can open any door; bypass any barrier. That includes the ones protecting the vaults of a demonic House and the treasures they hold. I had a small advantage over Buffy. Having the rest of the armor made it easy to take the Spear.” The fox smirked as the reminder of his newly acquired power tickled his Pride.

“I don’t understand.”

“Ever hear of the Phosphorus Pieces, fluff?”

“Yes…” She tilted her head as she looked his armor over more closely. “The last surviving piece of the Promethean Legacy, forged in the time before the War. You found them? All of them!”

“It only took a few dozen millennia, but yes. I knew if I could claim the rest the Spear would be easy, so I started as soon as I figured out what the Trident was while in Superbia. I knew it would be my chance at revenge.”

“Are you telling me that this was all a con?” she squeaked.

“Angelfluff, this has been the longest con in history,” Nick agreed cheerfully. “Buffy engineered my fall and I swore the day he claimed me for his House that I would bring him down. Challenging him
for the throne so he would throw me to another House was a calculated move to get out from under his watch. He would have figured out what I was doing if I had stayed. Thousands of years in Luxuria hunting for the Pieces and, finally, helping a few stupid lesser ranked demons stage a coup-d'etat,” he chuckled. “That little decoy let me use the few coins I had collected to slip into Lightbringer Palace and rob the Devil blind.”

“You staged a coup,” Judy stated slowly for her own sake. “So you could rob the Devil. You do realize how insane that is, right?”

“Madness in Hell is as common as dust.”

“So, you robbed him and lured him to the Mortal Plane?”

“I did. Five centuries in prison was easy to take, especially in Hell, where time means less. I knew they’d take me out of mothballs eventually and get me out of Hell, so I wouldn’t cause trouble. I also knew Buffy would be too busy dealing with the mess I helped create to check the vaults until after I was gone. Then, all I had to do was wait.”

“That’s why you haven’t been taking anything seriously.”

“That’s why I wasn’t at first. Things are a bit different, now.” Nick ended his statement with an expression Judy couldn’t decipher.

Judy wanted to be horrified, but she felt too sickened to do so, especially when the cloth around the wings was slid away and she saw what had been done to them. Mummified, mutilated black sticks. She felt a sympathetic pain in her own back as images flashed in her mind of what had happened the day they had been removed. An obsidian blade pretending to be an axe, biting into her flesh and tearing the bones from her body while she wailed on bloody knees.

Before she succumbed to the reflexes to weep or vomit, Nick’s voice cut through the haze of memory.

“I’m sorry, Judy, but I need to borrow a little of you.”

Only then did she notice the little vial in his paw filled with weakly glowing motes of fluff.
Angel down. Her feathers.

There was nothing she could do but watch as the demon who had just annihilated the Devil in single combat stood. His collar was glowing a weak yellow in the dull light. His eyes blazed green and indigo while all the light seemed to be pulled from the world.

Six platinum coins and the same number of her feathers vanished into nothing. Judy felt the force of divine and demonic powers screech in agony as they were forced together by an impossibly strong will. Slowly, very slowly, golden threads began to form on the desiccated ends of the wings. Seeing it, Nick shredded his clothing from the waist up with a wave of his paw and willed his armor to uncover him. Once he was bare, he exerted his will again and the threads of light found their other ends in the puckered flesh of his back.

The scars were easy to match up. One wing for each ragged, white mark on either side of his spine. When they found their marks, he knew. The pain he had expected. The flesh of his back knit into the wings and Nick screamed from it. Bones snapped into place and tendons crackled while the meat of his back tore and shifted.

~

Judy was beyond fear. Awe and the inexorable understanding that she was bearing witness to a momentous event were all she had room for in her mind. Then her eyes shifted to the shadows on the wall behind him. It was not of a fox, or even a winged fox. What she saw frightened and thrilled her in a way that stole her breath.

Indigo hellfire sparked from the wounds to the wingtips as they once more filled with life. In the wake of the fires, Judy saw for a moment the true reflection of the being she was bound to; a hulking form of obsidian flesh in vulpine silhouette, long and lean, dripping with corruption and masculinity. Long horns swept back and over between his ears, curling slightly then curving together behind his head, while a smaller pair curled back under his ears and smaller protrusions dotted his forehead. It gave the impression of a crown, making him seem regal in the chaotic light.

Six great wings that dwarfed their owner sprouted from his back and a nimbus of power wreathed him, turning him into a pillar of night. Golden light shimmering through his flesh made him luminous against the dark and he was beautiful. Beauty and horror with a heart brighter than the sun itself.

~

At length, light returned and Judy blinked in it. Nick was standing, much as he had been before they had been waylaid. The greatest differences were that he was bare from the waist up and his collar was glowing an angry red. Tension bled from his frame as she watched him take long, deep breaths.
After a handful, the collar dimmed to a low, ashen yellow light.

“I guess that’s as good as it’s going to get for now,” he commented aloud.

He turned and collected the dagger he had discarded in his fight with Baphomet. From the wrapping that had held his wings he withdrew a tarnished circlet of metal and a sapphire the size of her fist. Judy realized it was his halo and touchstone, the resting place of his power and memories.

After a moment of thought, he let a pair of his wings unfurl and they wrapped around him, creating the illusion of a beautifully crafted suit and long coat. With a surrus of movement, his armor shifted from where it had hidden itself and adorning him. Lefty sparkled on his wrist and on his right wrist a matching bracelet appeared. At his neck, a torque of matching metal formed and just to complete the picture, the spear shifted to form a cane. The sapphire that had been in his paws found its way to his throat, between the knots of his torque and the shirtless vagabond dripping sex appeal was no more, replaced by dapper elegance. Somehow is only amplified what had been there previously.

Once he was dressed and his armor settled into its resting forms, Nick slipped his halo inside his coat and turned to his companion, chiming, “Come on, Carrots. Dinner is on me. We need to celebrate!”

For long moments Judy could only stare. When she found her voice again it was to point out, “You are playing with fire. You’re a hair away from breaking your last binding.”

“I’ve been dancing on a razor’s edge for longer than life on this planet,” he replied jauntily. “I can handle it. And no, I’m not.”

The angel looked at him askance. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

“Most of the time, but just to help you sleep better, let me explain. Now that Buffy is dead and I am the last demon on the Plane, other than Finnick, I want to keep the rest of them out. With as powerful as I am and wearing the Collar, two of my wings out takes the tolerance for demonic presence right to the ragged edge. They can’t send anyone up to see what’s going on at all and the rest of me is bound, so no threat to reality’s integrity, or the balance. Besides, wouldn’t it be better for you if Heaven won the Wager?”

“Considering everything else that’s happened, I am suspending my judgement on that.”
“Most wise of you. Now,” Nick snapped his fingers and the rot that had accompanied Baphomet’s arrival vanished. Time began moving again and Nick hummed in appreciation of his new powers. “On to food! After we eat, we have a lot to discuss. Why Buffy wanted you, for a start.”

Judy followed uncertainly as the Devil-apparent strutted off ahead of her. There were many, many things that concerned her, not the least of which were the collar’s reactions and the fact that she’d seen him rip a hole in the world. Judy was reexamining the term “outclassed”. 
Dinner, such as it was, consisted of a delightful table in a restaurant usually frequented by mammals who wore suits and thought that banker’s hours were strenuous. When asked how he got a table so easily, all he’d said was, “Live long enough and you’ll know everyone.” This turned out to be prophetic, as a small collection of mammals made brief visits to pay their respects. None stayed long and the males were very conscious of the proximity of their dates to the mammal they came to visit. Nick apparently had quite the reputation and his treatment reflected that. Once the sycophants and favor hunters departed, Judy breathed a small sigh of relief.

“I know, right?” Nick commented as the last mammal retreated from earshot.

Judy, still recovering from shock, blinked at him a moment before responding, “Huh?”

“The crowd,” he clarified with a wave of a paw. “Sorry about that.”

“What was that anyway?” she asked. The only answer she received was a shrug.

“Some mammals I know.”
Judy rolled her eyes. “Obviously.”

“What’s bugging you, angelfluff?”

His response was met with narrowed eyes as Judy leaned in to . “Shall we start with the most immediate of my numerous confusions? How about how you can know these mortals when you’ve been in a prison in Hell for the last five centuries, for a start?” she hissed

Elbows were placed on the able and Nick rested his chin on his fists as he regarded her. “Time in Hell is flexible, as I’m sure you know. It can be as long or short as the Devil wants.”

It only took a few moments of calculation for Judy to shake her head in disagreement. “I know that the different planes of existence don’t always line up in terms of scale of time movement, but that doesn’t account for the difference, here,” she argued. “To know these people, you’d have to be here during a mortal life span. That’s hard to do when you were imprisoned during the first decade of the sixteenth century.”

He gave her a head tilt and grin. “Hell is a little special in that regard. What was for me a five-hundred-year confinement, was a matter of moments or minutes outside my cell.”

“What?” was her incredulous reply.

“At the Devil’s discretion time in Hell can be modified in a lot of very interesting ways. It can be compartmentalized, sped up, slowed down, and it can be affected so minutely, it’s scary. How else do you think the idea of endless torment and eternal suffering came into being?” he pointed out. “All the Devil has to do is warp time and you get all the suffering you could ask for and have time to do it all again before you blink your eyes.”

“That’s insane!”

“I think you mean ridiculous.”

Ignoring his attempt at humor, Judy asked, “How?”
“One of the perks of power in the Inferno.” Nick lifted his wine glasses and took a sip. “The flow of time can be affected by a few things.”

“Like what?” She took a large swallow from her own glass.

“Power, will and desire, mostly. Position helps, too. The higher the rank, the easier it is. Relics can help, too, I suppose. My armor, for one.” Judy thought she saw Lefty twinkle, but chose to ignore it.

“And now, you’re the Devil,” she stated.

“Not yet, but splitting hairs is getting old, so yes. For all practical purposes, I am the Devil, but let us be formal about it to remove any doubt.” Nick smirked as he stood and stepped away from his chair to face her. Placing his right paw at his waist, he took her right paw in his left and offered Judy an elegant bow. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I’m a todd of wealth and taste.”

“You just had to, didn’t you?” Judy glared, not amused. Nick reseated himself, unapologetic. “So, as the Devil, you get to decide all of time in Hell, now…”

“I do believe so,” he replied with a smirk as he sipped his water. “Honestly, I never had a chance to try it out. I was keeping my head down and staying off the radar for so long, I’m not sure what I can actually do anymore. Don’t worry, though. I’ll figure it out eventually and I won’t screw with it… too much.”

“And you can stop time, here,” she asked, side eyeing him.

“On a small scale,” he agreed.

“So you say.”

“I do say. I assure you, Carrots, I can affect time a little, but nothing like I should be able to in Hell.”

“Somehow, I am not reassured.”
Nick shrugged and smiled. “What’s next on your list of angelic anxieties? Perhaps what’s actually bugging you instead of a smokescreen?”

Judy’s retort was delayed by the appearance of their waiter. Judy had no genuine interest in the menu and trusted Nick to order something she’d like. As soon as the waiter departed, again, she realized how odd it was for her to feel that way. Unfortunately, it was too late to undo, as the orders had been placed while she tried to get her head together. Resigning herself to her culinary fate, she focused her energies on trying to get a handle on the new reality she found herself in.

“Alright, Nick. If you're playing the technicality game and you’re not the Devil yet, why the hell isn't your Name working when I use it?”

“What’s puzzling you, is the nature of my game?” he asked, but quickly continued before she could finish picking up her dinner knife. “Plenty of demons have their names floating around.”

“There’s no guarantee that those names floating around are correct. They could be titles, not names at all! Demons equivocate and lie in order to hide their Names. They do that because they know the power in them,” she stressed as she recalled how he was unaffected by the use of his. “The fact that you don’t seem to care implies that Piberius isn’t your Name at all, but it has to be, because I doubt you’d be able to hide it from the Devil.”

“Oh, I didn’t hide anything. He was quite correct. That was my Name.”

“Was?” It was quite obvious that she had no idea what he was saying.

“Was and is.”

“Then what the serious fuck?!” While her voice was louder than usual, it was the way her paw slapped the table that truly demonstrated her ire and frustration.

“Carrots, watch your voice, if you please. I’d like to eat before getting thrown out of the restaurant.”

Chastened, Judy settled back into her seat, but barely. She was viciously confused and more than a little upset. The fox’s equivocations were not helping matters and she was finding the situation to be increasingly exhausting. Her wine glass was soon empty and an attentive waiter swooped in to fill it before retreating to a discrete distance.
“Carrots, what do you know about Names?”

“Everyone has one,” she explained with careful patience. “They encapsulate us and when spoken can bind and command us.”

“Celestials, you mean.”

She could feel her nose was beginning to twitch. “Yes, of course. Now, stop being pedantic and tell me what the hell is wrong with you?”

“With me? Nothing. You’re missing one little things about Names,” he pointed out. “Power. In order to command an angel or demon, you need to be powerful enough to make it be of consequence.”

“Wha- wait. Hang on! Are you telling me that I’m too weak to enforce your Name as a summons?” she hissed loudly, being mindful of the potential audience.

“Buffy was, too, so don’t feel bad,” Nick offered by way of comfort.

The absurdity of the statement got her to huff a bemused and incredulous breath. “What?”

“Carrots, it’s the same way that demons have ignored mortals’ summons since time out of mind. Most mortals just don’t have the power to compel us. Even the strongest only get a response because we’re bored or don’t mind wasting a few decades in service. It’s not like we have anything else to do, most of the time.”

“That puts things in perspective,” Judy replied acidly.

The remainder of her venom was held in abeyance as the food arrived. Judy was unsurprised when a spectacular meal took shape around them. A cheese tray, ludicrously expensive courtesy of the Milk & Dairy Union, was the first to arrive. A fillet of poached halibut in a light cream sauce appeared before Nick, while a ratatouille materialized before her. Side dishes appeared, as well, covering any desire they might have had for fresh fruit, vegetables in any variety of steamed, seared and raw states you could name, and small bowls of seasoned nuts. A sommelier drifted silently in the wake of the servers, filling two flutes with champagne and settling a bottle of white Bordeaux wine into an ice
bucket at Nick’s elbow.

Judy wanted to stay angry. She really, really did, but the smell of fresh, hot food crippled her willpower. Her stomach spoke for her, as well, making a very clear point.

“Don’t stand on ceremony,” Nick said, raising his glass in salute to her. “Eat up. You fought hard, today. You deserve a good meal and this appears to be a very good one.”

Taken by surprise at the compliment, Judy didn’t move for a moment, even as Nick took up his utensils and began to eat. Raising her own glass, she said, “Thank you.” Nick winked over a mouthful of his meal and Judy gave in to the most immediate of her hungers.

One bite in, whiskers quivering, she was annoyed she’d waited so long. Ratatouille is a simple dish, but it is an exceedingly easy meal to ruin. Potentially exquisite flavor combinations are possible with the proper skill. Judy was pleased that the chef seemed to take great care with their preparation of her dinner. It was light, yet satisfying and the sauce just unctuous enough to be weighty, but not suffocating.

Judy tucked in with relish.

~

The meal passed largely in silence, but not of the oppressive kind. While Nick enjoyed his food, he had sampled the mortal plane before and even a meal as good as this was not a new experience. He concluded his dinner and sampled some wasabi-laced legumes as he watched his companion experience her first truly gourmet repast.

As he watched her eat, he let his thoughts wander.

Now that he had gotten what he had wanted for so long, he was faced with finding something else to do. Revenge was sweet, but he had survived his vendetta. He was the ruler apparent of Hell. He’d ended the life of the one who had engineered his fall. He’d never be welcomed back into Heaven, but after what he knew of the place he didn’t want to go there any more than back to Hell. The one benefit Hell had, other than the central heating, was that he would be in charge. However, the actual business of ruling appealed about as much as falling a third time.
He sipped his wine and sighed. There wasn’t much point in worrying about it. He had, quite literally, all the time in the world. There was no rush and he was quite happy on the mortal plane. This was the good place. For a moment he amused himself with the thought of retiring and setting up shop as a club owner in the city. It had an appeal, but he knew he’d get very bored, very quickly. He’d need something to help keep him occupied.

That thought brought his attention back to his dinner companion and the fact that she was staring straight at him. He had something to occupy himself with. He hadn’t lied when he said he’d given his word to help her, but that was only part of it. Being the Devil carried certain privileges. Among them being an unquestionable right to claim any soul for his own; that included angels who fell. Gone was the need to snatch her from the void as she fell. He could simply reach out and claim her. The idea both thrilled and sickened him. Those reactions, and the reasons for them, made him uncomfortable.

~

Too soon, Judy’s entree was gone and she was left to nibble the various other dishes she had the opportunity to try. It was a delicious meal. One she was sure she was not alone in experiencing. As she loaded her plate again with side dishes and other nibbles, she cast a glance at the fox opposite her.

Her paws slowed.

She was still irritated with Nick, but a superb meal went a long way towards blunting her ire. As her anger had faded, her mind allowed a few things that were of greater concern than her recently wounded pride to bubble to the surface. One of them was her fascination with him.

At the moment he looked pensive; deep in thought, almost nostalgic. He wore the face of contentment, but there was an undercurrent Judy was not sure she liked; one of anticipation and awareness. When his eyes met hers, there was something she saw in them that made her heart stutter, though not unpleasantly. Something had changed and not in a way she found objectionable. She was anxious; excited, even. So much so that she didn’t realize she’d spoken until he replied.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? Nothing,” he replied with far less pleasure than she would have expected. “Finally, I have everything I’ve been after.”
“ Dominion over hell, the power to stop time…”

“Excellent dinner company.” While they had eaten and imbibed, the cheese tray had warmed at the table side. Nick took the opportunity to share out the delicacies with accompaniments of crackers and caviar.

“Not everything,” she corrected over the rim of her wine glass before taking a sip.

“Oh?” He arched a brow in her direction.

“I heard you tell Baphomet you’d have me.”

Nick chuckled. “I recall you were a bit incensed at that when we squared off, earlier.”

“Well?” she prompted him.

Making a show of spreading some soft, creamy cheese over a seeded cracker, Nick raised it to his lips before asking, “Well what?”

Judy watched his indulgent act and decided to follow suit by picking up a piece of fresh fruit. “You can’t possibly be that stupid,” she snorted softly before biting into the rip melon and licking the juice from her muzzle.

Nick watched her little display with amusement in his eyes, but refrained from commenting overtly. “You’re upset that I taunted him before I killed him?”

“I’m upset that it was the truth.”

“And what surprises you about that?” he wanted to know.

“It didn’t surprise me, but it didn’t feel good either,” she admitted.
“Judy, you know what I am.”

“You’re a demon,” she replied, looking down at her paws as she cleaned them with her napkin. “And you want me to fall.”

“Yes. I do,” he confirmed. “It’s what demons do. However, there is something you’re missing.”

“Which is?”

He waggled a digit in front of his muzzle. “A secret for another time, my dear.”

“Uh-huh…” She huffed softly in obvious annoyance, while making it quite clear she did not plan on making further comment.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. It’s not worth it.”

“Judith Hopps,” chided the todd.

The note of power in his voice demanded her attention, but it did not compel her. There was authority there, but no hint of domination magic, or the eerie pressure Baphomet had wielded. It thrilled her to see that despite, for all practical purposes being the Devil, he did not use his powers unnecessarily.

“I promise you will know the one part of this you’re missing once we are no longer in public.” That comment was made all the more suggestive by the way he licked a bit of cheese from one claw. “As impatient as you are, there are some things I think would be best discussed discreetly. In the meantime I will remind you of two facts.”

Judy swallowed thickly. “Which are?”

“I told you I’d tempt you right from the start, yes?” Judy had to nod. He had made no secret of it,
even that first evening at the diner. “I also said I wouldn’t use my powers to accomplish that.”

Judy’s head snapped up. It took a moment, but Judy had to agree. He had said that the same night as well. He also was a mammal of his word. “What does that mean?”

“Think about it, rabbit. If you can guess what it means before we get back to the hotel, you’ll get a prize.”

He was silent on the topic for the rest of their meal and all the way home.

~

There was plenty discussed. Trying not to show how much thought she was giving his little challenge, she brought up any topic she could think of. Weather in Hell, his new powers, the origins of his armor and the legends he had used to find the pieces. Anything and everything she could imagine was brought to the table, but there were two topics she refused to mention. The first was his challenge, because she’d only sound wheedling or whiny and she was not about to suffer that indignity. The second was Baphomet’s behavior towards her.

The, now former, Devil had left hell to come collect her, personally. She didn’t know why. Apparently, neither did Nick. That was a serious problem. If the Devil was after her, it was only by sheer dumb luck that she happened to find the one being other than the Divine Herself that could go toe-to-toe with the Devil and win. Or was it luck? Judy’s mind kept creeping back to the conversation they’d had with that insane deer in the catacombs. Creeping suspicions were starting to form in her mind and none of them felt good.

Those uncomfortable feelings were one of several reasons Judy was glad that Nick ordered a car to take them home after they finished their desserts. As much as she was concerned with the happenings around her, she still found the appetite to enjoy a crème brule and tiramisu. One thing she had to admit was that Nick’s suggestions when it came to food were never wrong. She was grateful for her celestial metabolism as they climbed into the chauffeured vehicle and glided back out into the city night.

On their way, Judy paid attention to the world as it slid past. She was surprised at how clean everything was, considering the recent unrest. She knew from the files Bogo had left her that there had been an enormous search and rescue operation underway, looking for her, at the time of the attack. There had been a lot of extra officers on the streets and the in tactical gear, ready to respond. Therefore, it wasn’t a surprise that so much of the damage had been so quickly contained; the worst of it being the losses suffered at Precinct One.
Judy felt a pang of guilt for talking Officer Clawhauser into returning to the precinct so immediately, but there were things that unsettled her about him. Until she was certain of why he had forgotten her, she needed to keep her distance. He’d shown no signs of corruption, or influence, so what had happened?

Her ruminations distracted her until they were pulled up in front of the hotel.

That was when she got answers and none of them the way she wanted.

The lobby was strangely empty when they entered. It was after hours and most mammals were in bed, or out for the night, so it wasn’t a surprise to see fewer patrons. It was, however, a surprise to see only one lion on the concierge desk and no other mammals in any support role visible at all. At the very least Judy had come to expect a cleaner, or a maid to be restocking, or somemammal buffing the floors at such an hour; but there wasn’t a single mammal around. Just the one lion who was obviously not well.

For one thing, he was grinning like a raving lunatic and swaying. Like a deer they had made the acquaintance of not long ago and the mammals that had torn through the city on a murderous rampage.

The setup was simply too obvious.

“And the evening was going so well…” Nick grumbled before turning to Judy and asking, “Shall we get this over with?”

“Do we have to?”

Nick understood her trepidation. Aside from the fact that they hadn’t been directly harmed, the last time they encountered a mammal with that particular grin, things had not gone particularly well. Abject terror was not an experience Nick had any interest in repeating. Also, plenty of others had been harmed by mammals wearing similar megalomaniacal grins. A few hours ago, he would have suggested discretion, but now he was a very different demon.

Nick approached the desk and addressed the large felid. “I presume you have a message from your puppeteer?”
“Why, Nicky… It’s like you don’t recognize me…” The same sickly sweet, cavernous voice that the deer had possessed issued, not from the throat, but the chest of the lion. “It hurts, Nicky. It hurts…”

Affecting a bored mein, the demon fox rested his weight on one leg as he regarded the creature. “I presume you’re here to be a nuisance, again. What do you want?”

The cat’s voice spoke, this time gruff and male. “Want? Wantwantwant… I want a pop tart. I like those. So meaty and sweet.”

“I’d suggest a convenience store. Now, why are you here?”

“Deep questions for a deepening mind… Good Nicky. You’re asking the right questions. At last, at last…” The lion grinned. It was a sickening thing to behold.

“So you are here to be annoying. If you’ll excuse us…”

Nick made to walk away, but was brought up short by the cat’s words. “Aren’t you grateful little demonangel?”

“Grateful? For what?” Judy chimed in.

The lion scoffed. “For what you have been given, little light.”

“Given,” Judy parroted the word, turning into a question. “What do you think I have been given, exactly?”

“Your throne, of course! So short minded. Short minded now and for a time, but not forever. No… Never forever…” the lion was sing-songing his way into a litany of nonsense, but it was sounding less insane to Nick and that disturbed him.

So the fox had to ask, “Are you suggesting you gave me Baphomet?”

“I’ll warn you now, whatever you are,” Nick sighed dismissed. “Stay away and I won’t thank you for what I had to earn myself.”

“Such will and won’t… Ingratitude I expected, but not forever. One day I will be thanked. Thanked and fed and free to search again!”

“Search for what?” Judy pressed.

“The Meaning! The Meaning and the Source! Little lights and breadcrumbs back home!”

A sick thought crept into Judy’s mind and it was out of her mouth before she finished it. “You were Clawhauser at the café. Weren’t you?”

“Clever light!” For the first time this conversation, the lion’s eyes slid into focus on the pair and the mind sharpened briefly. “These meats are so flexible, but they don’t last long.” The lion rippled and the deer was standing behind the counter. “No… they just can’t handle changing shapes too often.” A petite sheep spoke this time. “Fall apart.” A Coyote. “Always falling apart…”

On the heels of the words, the monstrosity shifted and took the form of the chubby cheetah from the bar and Nick winced. With every shift, the body looked less stable, less coherent. The final form was clearly rough and in any other circumstances, he would say it was dying. “They never last long.”

They watched, horrified, as the shape of the officer Judy had encouraged shuffled into the shape of the original lion once again and shambled out from behind the desk, dragging a hogtied gnu in its early 30’s behind him. “Too soon I need a fresh one.”

The lion’s clothes shifted, rippling as and a long tendril of black flesh slipped out from between the buttons of his shirt and shot into the neck of the struggling ungulate. It was only a moment before the struggles ceased and the gnu was freed. As soon as the duct tape and ropes were removed, it stood and the lion collapsed like an emptied sack. “See? Good as new! New meat always feels so… fresh.”

Collecting the body of the big cat and his former bindings, the gnu grinned sickly and rasped, “I hate to dash, but things to do. Lots to do. Always more! More more more… Congratulations, Nicky!”
Don’t worry. I’ll see you again, eventually. Soon? Soon. Sooner or later, but not later, I think.”

With a raving laugh, the gnu vanished out of the door with it’s felid burden, leaving the angel and demon in an uncomfortable vacuum.

“Do you think it’s gone?”

Judy’s sudden words made Nick jump. A fact for which he was both grateful and annoyed. “I think so. Come on. The sooner we’re behind my wards, the better…”

Judy slipped past the front desk, without her eyes leaving the spot where the lion had fallen, and hastened towards the elevators with Nick in tow. The fox took a little longer getting to the elevator bank for two reasons. The first being a desire to put a little distance between her and the monstrosity that had just left them, just in case he had to intercept an attack. The second was a small object glinting on the ground.

Judy was distracted by repeatedly pressing the call button and tapping her foot, so she missed it. Nick did not. Upon closer inspection, he discovered it was, in fact, another Tartarus Diamond. The significance of this find was not lost on Nick and he swept the little gem into his pocket before joining the rabbit who was now bouncing in place as she held the elevator.

He had an idea.

~

Inside the suite, Judy was unsettled. As terrifying as her earlier encounter with that... whatever it was, had been, this was worse. Nick was rattled and he was by miles the strongest being she knew. She disliked relying on him at all, but found it oddly cathartic to know he was there. Rather, she would if he was more forthcoming.

“What is it?” she asked him.

The wards were up, allowing Nick to feel somewhat better about the situation. He glanced at the angel, noting her staring. “What’s what?”
“You were as creeped out as I was by what happened in the lobby until the elevator showed up. and now you’re acting like you’re up to something.”

“As it happens, I am,” Nick replied as he shifted his wings into a more casual arrangement. He winked at her as it briefly became a smoking jacket, but settled on a comfortable silk robe & trousers combination.

“Then, what is it?” Judy asked, with an eye roll as her own personal effects landed on a chair.

“Just an idea. I need to confirm something, first.” So saying, Nick pulled out his phone and dialed Finnick. The gruff little imp barely answered before Nick had it on speaker and was barking orders. “Finn, I need you to do two things for me.”

There was a harsh sigh and the sound of glass hitting wood with a solid thunk. “Oh no. What now…”

“Nothing serious,” Nick assured as he sat and lay his phone down on the coffee table. “You’re just going to be paying a visit to the Pandemonium Central Archives. I need a couple books from there.”

“NO. Hell no! I ain’t going near that place!” Judy was surprised at the fennec’s vehemence as she sat opposite Nick on the love seat.

“Not even for five platinum Lucifers?” Nick purred into the phone.

“Five…” They could hear the desire in his voice.

“I take it that’s enough for a little trip to the library?” Nick asked, mostly rhetorically.

“For five Luci’s you could wax my back, shellac me and use me for a curling stone.” Clearly Finnick was interested.

“Didn’t we do that on the Styx, once?” Nick wondered aloud.

“Shut up!”
The red fox chuckled. “Do we have a deal?”

“Yes! Now, what books?” growled the voice through the phone.

“The Codex Auream Inferni, the Compendium Malefix Rex and the Lay of Tartarus.”

“The fuck?” Finnick spat. “Those are Ancient Texts. They’re under lock and key in the deep archives. There’s no way I’d get in to see them, let alone take them out for a walk.”

“I never said anything about needing permission. There’s a reason I asked you, Finnick.”

“Ah, shit… I already agreed, too, didn’t I?”

“And at a very good price,” Nick pointed out.

“What’s the second thing?” Finnick reluctantly asked.

“Be here at dawn and bring a city map. I’ll give you what you need to get the books. The Coins might even impress your new girlfriend.”

Nick ended the call before a response came back. Likely for the best, considering what it would have been, but now Judy was curious to a painful degree. She was sitting on tenterhooks, looking expectantly at him, waiting for explanations that weren’t forthcoming. Her eagerness quickly boiled over.

“Well? What did all that mean?”

“Patience,” Nick cautioned as he moved to the sideboard and poured two measures from a decanter.

“You have got to be kidding me…” she sputtered.
“Nope. There’s no guarantee this little hunch of mine will pay off,” he explained as he capped and replaced the decanter. “Therefore, tomorrow, while you investigate your end, I will have homework, too.”

“I don’t appreciate you keeping secrets.”

“It’s only an idea and a long shot at that through the legends of Hell. If it doesn’t pan out, at least you won’t have wasted your time. I promise I’ll explain, just give me a little time.”

“I gave you a little time at the restaurant.” Judy groused, as she accepted her lowball. “Now, you’re asking for more and you’ve explained nothing. Becoming the Devil has done wonderful things for you.” There was no escaping the annoyed sarcasm in her voice.

Nick sat and sipped, before asking, “What’s bothering you, rabbit?”

“Above and beyond everything else I’ve said and asked about so far? Where do I begin?” Judy insisted forcefully.

“Anywhere would be a good start,” Nick suggested.

“You’re a demon.”

“Well spotted.”

Judy put her glass on the table. “Demons, as far as I know, are all about power. They love it. Want more of it. Can’t get enough of it.”

“Yes, we do. Your point?”

“You burned Baphomet’s heart rather than take his power,” she pointed out.

“I told you it would only weaken me,” he observed, nonchalantly sipping his drink.
The bunny crossed her legs and leaned back slightly, resting the tumbler on her knee. “That may be true, but it still doesn’t make sense. A powerful demon’s heart can be made into an equally powerful relic; one that could amplify power, or at least be valuable in trade or as a trophy. Bragging rights are as good as currency in Hell, to my knowledge.” Judy took a large sip of the glasses contents, before setting it on the table beside her chair. “Yet, you burned his heart to ash. You must have a reason for doing that. You wouldn’t have done that without a damn good reason.”

“You are correct,” Nick grinned as he set his drink down next to the angel’s. This was becoming quite fun for the fox, but the light tremor in his paw was not missed by his companion. He was still shaken from earlier. Upon reflection, Judy understood that there were many very good reasons for his being shaken. It was an opportunity.

She pressed. “Well, that’s comforting to hear. I got part of it right, but I still don’t understand! What am I missing?”

“Hell is in disarray. With the Devil dead, who also happened to be the arch demon of Pride, they need to find a ruler for the House and squabble over the throne in absence of the Mark of Rule: my Spear. That will take quite a long time.”

Violet eyes widened in understanding and she peered at the fox with a new-found appreciation for his machinations and forward thinking. “You’ve removed them as a player. They’re going to be busy infighting, leaving them weakened and easier for you to claim.”

“Indeed. Why work harder than I have to?” Judy had to agree that his strategies made sense, but his reasons did not. There were still too many things that did not add up.

“What’s your goal, really? You tried to claim the throne of Hell, but now you’re willing to wait? Why?”

“It was never about ruling Hell. That’s just a fringe benefit. I wanted Buffy vulnerable, so I could finally get my revenge. All of this was. My first uprising, my second fall, finding the Pieces, the coup, robbing the vaults…” Nick flashed a toothy smile at the angel and she could see a myriad of emotions behind his eyes. “All the politics and deals I made were to set Buffy up. I knew once he worked it out he’d come to deal with me, himself.”

“As a point of pride…” she added reflectively. “So all this was to get at him?”
“Yes and be strong enough to destroy him.” The demon’s lowball was emptied and refilled, with the decanter placed beside it, before he continued. “The millennia I spent finding the armor and setting the stage was worth it. I finally got the old goat.” The refilled glass was placed firmly back on the table where it had been before.

She was making progress. “Wasn’t it risky?”

“Incredibly.” Nick leaned back in his seat, taking an indolent pose as he studied the color of the liquid in his glass. “I didn’t expect to be given to Lust, or to discover that all Buffy’s power was really just the spear. That was a happy coincidence. At my second falling I had enough information to plan my revenge. I had to work my way up the ranks in Luxuria and find the armor. Then, I had to earn each piece’s respect. Once that was done it was simple. Encourage a coup, but not be involved directly, and use it to rob him. I knew he’d punish me, so I hid my things and waited until he gave me a chance to re-earn my rank. Even Hell’s ruler has to obey his own laws, otherwise he’d be pulled down. The rest you can guess.”

“You knew it’d be a while before he checked his vault and who he’d suspect.”

Nick shook his head and snorted softly. “Buffy was a fool, so I made sure he knew who had robbed him. I left a note.”

Judy goggled, shaking her head in disbelief. “You left a- You are completely insane, you know that?”

“I make it look good.”

Whether it was the wink or the waggled brows she didn’t know, but Judy couldn’t help but laugh. It was another moment of too-familiar ease, but instead of leading to the usual flash of irritation, Judy felt warm. And a little shy. “Um... not to be nosey, but what now?”

“Now? Well, bun-bun, we have a monster to hunt and I have a deal with you to keep. Whatever else you can say about demons, we honor the deals we make.”

“I don’t know about demons, generally, but you seem to.”

“And I am the only demon that matters now, so there you are.” He toasted her with a raised glass
then to a large swallow while Judy rolled her eyes at his complete lack of humility.

“Hang on. Why can’t you just go get the books yourself? You have the Key to Hell, don’t you?”

“If I return, I will be stuck there until I have claimed the Throne. A little condition that comes with the Key, I’m afraid.” A sip. “I was only able to go to the Vaults of Luxuria because they’re specifically warded, effectively making them a space outside Hell itself. All the House Vaults are. The archives are not warded in similar fashion.” His eyes locked with hers. “And I have other commitments.”

Judy fought down the feeling of elation she kept feeling whenever he talked like that. It wasn’t good for her and kept derailing her focus. Not enough to completely end her capacity for rational thought or turn her into a pile of goo, but plenty enough to make her uncomfortable with her own reactions. In light of recent events, between him repeatedly defending her and, strangely, trusting her, Judy was less and less happy with how comfortable she was becoming in the company of the demon.

There were still answers she needed and had, in fact, been promised. With his recent willingness to share in mind, Judy resolved to use his trust to at least get something; possibly the one thing that scared her as much as it thrilled her. And it was this excitement that scared her more.

“You promised me an answer when we got back,” she reminded him.

“That I did.” Nick slipped his drink into his paw and sipped lightly. Very lightly for him, Judy noted. Something was up.

“You said you wanted me to fall.”

Nick replied, “I’m a demon. Of course, I want you to fall. We’ve been over this,” but his heart wasn’t in the words.

Judy caught the light tremor in his voice and in a fit of blind courage, asked, “In what way?”

Words stuck in Nick’s throat. His mind supplied option after option for responses and each was rejected as more damning than the last. The chaos in his mind stretched the moment of silence between them to what felt like an age.
Forcing himself to appear calm, he muttered, “That remains to be seen.”

Seeing her ears snap upright from the corner of his vision cleared his mind enough to realize what he’d said. “Lie.”

“Judy, I promised you an answer and you have it.”

“I have an inference. Not an answer.” It was all coming together. The pressure was getting to him.

“What is it, Nick?” she demanded, refusing to back down that she was so close. “What is it that you promised me? You gave me your word.”

The air in the room changed. Since they had gotten back the atmosphere had been relatively light. Perhaps a bit tense, expectant, even charged when she’d been questioning him. But now something was different. The air felt like lightning was about to strike and his collar, which had grown increasingly quiescent as the evening had passed, pulsed red.

Once more he allowed his gaze to meet hers, but this time what she saw reflected there was power. So much power barely leashed by an iron will. “You want to know?” The power trickled into his voice and poured over her in a waves of warmth. Feeling flushed, the angel rose from her seat then walked towards the bar, telling herself it was because she needed a bottle of cold water. Before she had taken her second step, Judy found herself pinned to the wall by the bedroom door. “I’ll tell you.”

The next thing Judy registered was the same satin thread-count under her back that she had started her day with, but now the paws weren’t in her mind. She was pinned. Hard. Each of her wrists was clamped in the unyielding grip of the fox. His knee pinned her legs apart and his hip pressed her body into the mattress. Blood pounded in her ears as much from fear as an emotion she couldn’t bring herself to name.

“I want you to fall, but I will never let you reach Hell.” His voice was a thick rasp in her ears. “I will claim you before sulfur touches a hair on your head, but that isn’t important. You must understand Sin before you can even think of falling.”

His paws slid along her arms to her sides and she yielded to every touch; her senses overwhelmed. “You asked once why I didn’t take you when you were vulnerable. Sin doesn’t work that way. For you to fall, it needs to be your choice. You need to come to me willingly and so I will never... ever...
force you.”

His hands clamped down on her waist and pulled her flush against him. He was an inferno bound in flesh. The feeling of it stole her breath and smothered her mind. Her trembling paws reached of their own accord to rest on his shoulders.

“I will know what the bond is and what it means. I will know your taste and I will feel your pleasure. And on that day you, dear bunny… You. Will. Be. Mine.”

The pressure on her body suddenly lifted and Judy became aware that Nick was gone. She rolled onto her side, eyes were the size of dinner plates as she clutched the bed clothes to her heaving chest. Not in fear, but in nervous tension. She was stunned, uncertain and something else. It wasn’t a negative emotion. “Hopeful”, a traitorous little voice in the back of her mind supplied. The bottom fell out of her stomach.

“I gave you my word I wouldn’t use my powers to tempt you.” Judy bolted upright to see Nick standing beside the bed. “I’ll keep that promise, but don’t think for a moment that there isn’t every bit of intent in my actions. I will simply wait. When you are ready, I will welcome you with open arms.” Nick watched her with eyes blazing. “And no hesitation.”

As the fox moved towards the door he drew a cigarette from somewhere on his person and lit it with a claw. The flame was indigo limned with violet and the collar around his neck glowed a steady, ruby red, painting the walls in multi-colored shadows.

“Sleep well, sweetheart,” he purred as he closed to door behind him with a paw made of his cigarette smoke.

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Once on the other side of the closed door, Nick sprinted to the sideboard and gripped it hard enough to score the material with his claws. He should have been ecstatic! She was hooked. Openly. The air was thick with her pheromones and it was just a matter of time before his rabbit came to him of her own free will. All he had to do was not screw it up and her wings would whither, no doubt about it. The thought summoned alcohol-laced bile to the back of his throat.

Something was wrong.
He was changing his ways that sickened him, but he still Craved. That was on top of the other absurd revelations of the recent past. Working with an angel, allowing her to bind him; it was playing a long game. The kind he excelled at. So, why had this one gone so awry? How!? He’d accounted for everything.

A traitorous voice reminded him that he hadn’t considered the bond or the willpower of the angel he’d decided to mess with. Or the fact that a devil was involved. Or...

Nick slapped himself, forcing himself to calm. This wasn’t helping. The whole situation was a disaster. The little diversion he’d allowed himself to indulge in had gotten out of hand, but it was not unsalvageable.

Turning back towards the couch, he passed where he’d pinned her to the wall. The floor was littered with angel down. As though he needed the confirmation of her temptation. He stooped and collected every single feather, adding it to his collection. Once they were secure, he beat a path back to the sideboard and collected a fresh decanter and glass before taking a seat on the couch.

Two full glasses were poured and emptied in quick succession before he felt the edges of oblivion reaching for him. He reached back by pouring a third glass.

As his paw raised to his lips, he saw the bond mark on the back of his paw. It was smaller, again. Barely past the knuckle of his thumb and distorting to pool on the back of his paw, it was far more complex. There were hints of layered patterns and suggestions of meaning tickled at the back of his mind. He shuddered at the sensation. He felt anger and elation; anticipation and anxiety. All nebulous and uncertain. He didn’t know what to think any more than he knew what he was feeling, or why.

All he was sure of was that the mysteries were piling up. There was nothing he could do, however. Not just then. Finnick wasn’t due for a time yet and he had to avoid Judy for a while. His hungers were flaring after reclaiming his wings and his Collar barely was restraining the power.

Nick caressed the slick metal as it rested around his throat.

“Who ever would have thought I’d be so pleased to have Izzy’s trinket back on my neck…” Nick mused aloud to himself.

The Collar was a singular piece of metalwork, older than hell itself, according to Asmodeus’
boasting. It could contain all but the strongest of powers and bind any angel or demon, or so he claimed. It was perfect for the purposes of House Luxuria in breaking new acquisitions. Nick had agreed to wear it as a condition for regaining his rank and now he had a reason to be happy for his choice, rather than merely inconvenienced.

Nick needed answers. He had to tread lightly with his pet imp and the angel for a number of reasons and he’d gotten his revenge, but mysteries needed answers. He needed satisfaction and soon. His Pride and Lust were stronger than ever, now and they would need feeding. He was hungry and the Collar was only doing so much to blunt it.

Nick drained his glass and poured another. The hours ticked by as he waited for dawn and the suppression sunlight would give him.
Judy woke, but strictly by the loosest definition of the term. She hadn’t slept so much as forced herself to doze for a while and when that failed spectacularly, she tried meditating. Even that met only mixed success. She’d gotten enough rest that she wasn’t dead on her feet, but would need a lot of coffee to survive her day. She rolled to her side and lifted her head to get a sense of how much rest she’d gotten. A quick glance at the window led her to adjust her position slightly. It was still well before dawn. She revised her mental coffee order to “vat” and flopped back onto the pillows.

The reasons for her utter failure to focus on her meditations, let alone sleep, was no mystery. The way her evening ended rattling around her mind was plenty enough to shred any chance of either. Around an hour after Nick had left her sprawled on the bed, her brain reengaged and the realization hit. She had the Devil on a leash. The actual Devil. The demon who ruled Hell was currently bonded to her. Judy would have been thrilled and uncertain at the prospect, a week ago. Now, as she sat on the mattress surrounded by a puddle of angeldown she was far less enthusiastic about her situation and absolutely certain of one simple fact.

She was utterly fucked.

There was a light trail from the door to the bed and she was sure there were more of her feathers littering the ground where Nick had pinned her to the wall. Sitting in a drift of evidence, she couldn’t deny it anymore. She was tempted. Aching so, and in every way that she shouldn’t be. The worst of it lay in that he wasn’t acting like a demon.
Demons weren’t exactly subtle. Judy was absolutely sure he could get what he wanted without using his powers, just like he promised he would. It terrified her that he was willing to wait. It was a huge gamble from his end of things. At least, it should have been. The previous evening, he had simply made his desires clear. He just happened to do so in a way that made her feel like a toy and left her thinking that she was on fire under her fur.

Otherwise, he hadn’t been pushy, or demanding the way she’d have expected of a demon. He was overt and utterly transparent, but it was almost playful. The flirting had crept up on her, leaving her less irate after each exchange. If the Sympathy for the Devil references hadn’t been so ill-timed on the heels of so much, she would have laughed. As if that wasn’t enough of her altered state regarding the fox, the shower incidents were bothering her far less than they should be, even in hindsight. Closing her eyes, she felt the phantom of his paws on her waist from the night before and remembered not wanting to raise a finger to stop him, despite the fact that her arms had been free.

Her eyes snapped open and she remembered, yet again, why meditation and sleep had failed so thoroughly. Every time her eyes closed, the ghosts of sensation were there. The Bond was closed. She checked every time, yet the sensations persisted. However, her eyes left open brought no relief, either.

If it wasn’t the angeldown littering the room, her eyes were drawn invariably to the other evidence of the severity of her situation: her paw. She didn’t need the evidence, or the reminder, of all the things it meant. She’d watched with increasing distress as the Mark had shrunk since their meeting at the bar. It was clearly almost fully into the third stage and then there would be no going back for her. As though there’s any chance of that.

Any chance of what?

Judy bolted upright as heat flowed through her; a deplorable cocktail of anxiety, fear and arousal coursing through her.

Look, rabbit, I get that this bond thing is good for communication, but I’m in the next room. If you want to talk, just come out here.

She hadn’t even realized the bond had been open. It wasn’t supposed to be unless she was consciously holding it open. Not good. Oh, so very not good. One small saving grace lay in the fact that while he had sounded annoyed, she hadn’t felt his irritation directly. That meant he hadn’t felt the wave of heat that had rolled through her just from hearing his voice.
The small relief afforded her enough mental clarity to realize a few other things. The first of which being that she could smell her own pheromones on the air. She knew the moment she moved she’d smell arousal. Nick couldn’t be allowed to know he had gotten to her that badly. HE probably knew, but his smugness was already insufferable. She couldn’t let it get any worse.

Rising quickly, Judy willed down the heat in her blood. She willed the fallen feathers out of being as she stripped off her clothes and the bodysuit that formed the base of her armor. Arousal and desire were thick on the air as the layers came off, growing more poignantly upsetting by the moment. She felt ill at how bad it had gotten. Realizing she had so much farther to go filled her with disgust at her weakness. She was tired and scared, but there was so much more to do. She didn’t have time for self indulgence.

A purification spell later and the air was clear, as were her garments. To address her own cleanliness, she opted for a quick, thorough scrub in the shower. The sensation of the water on her skin and fur did nothing to calm her, as she was instantly reminded of the showers she’d had without getting wet. Her mind and thighs clenched as she willed away the memories and blitzed through the rest of her bathing.

Ten minutes later, she was dressed and entering the main room of the suite just in time to hear a knock at the door. On reflex, she summoned her buckler and karambit. A snort from the corner of the room drew her attention. She was not ready for what she saw. So much so that her armaments nearly slipped from her fingers from fear as much as a very carnal hunger.

Nick looked rough. His paws held a lowball and an empty decanter. It was clear he hadn’t slept. He was bedraggled and scruffy, his collar glowing a tepid yellow. That was the part that drew her. The part that terrified her was sprouting from his back. He wasn’t even bothering with the illusion for his wings. They were majestic and nauseating, sweeping up from his back; black expanses of sinew, muscle and bone. They were leathery demon wings, but something strange was happening to them. Threads of gold glittered under his skin like veins in marble. Where the gold traced, ragged feathers sprouted. Confusion and befuddlement left her gasping like a fish out of water.

“See something you like, hunny bunny?”

Judy’s stammering was interrupted by a repeat of the knock at the door, only this time it was notably harder and louder. Nick drained his glass and set it down before heading towards the door. Judy panicked.

“Nick!”
“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“Answering the door. Obviously. Why?”

“With your wings out?”

Nick rolled his eyes and huffed a breath before retorting, “The only living being that it could be, is Finnick.”

“You’re positive? Did you forget that the thing we’re hunting can change forms?”

Nick raised an eyebrow and leaned against the door frame. “I doubt that it, whatever it is, would knock. Either it would just walk in, or be too oddly polite to bother us. Besides, I know that knock. It’s about eleven inches off the ground and composed of 40% ears, 10% bad attitude and 100 proof alcohol.”

Judy’s retort was curtailed as the knocking boomed through the room, again, followed by, “Wilde! I hear you being a smartass in there. Open up!”

Nick traipsed to the door and opened it. “Like I said, 40% ears.”

“I didn’t hear what you said. I just heard your voice.”

“And you know I was being a smartass, how?”

“You were talking.” Judy couldn’t help but snicker at that statement. That got Nick to half turn to give her a look and then Finnick dropped his teeth. “…Wings…”

“Yes, Finnick. Wings. I presume you understand what that means.”
Finnick nodded vigorously.

“Good. Then you know with whose authority you are returning to the Pit, yes?”

More nodding was his only reply, again.

“Good. Now come in. I have a few things for your trek into Pandemonium.”

Nick led him in, heading towards his chest. The sounds of tiny feet preceded the sound of a decanter opening and the glugging sound of liquid being guzzled directly from a container.

Judy watched with a mixture of amusement and concern. It was clear the two foxes knew each other quite well, but their dynamic was strange to say the least. It only got worse when Nick returned a few moments later and tossed two small cloth bags to his fellow demon.

“What’s this?”

“Enough Coins to help you get the job done. Oh!” Nick paused to flick a platinum Lucifer to the little fox. “That should get you there.”

“Gee thanks. Now, where’s my pay?”

“Coins on delivery this time, Finn.”

“Well, fuck...” the little fox sighed. “Fine. I could use a drink, first.”

“You just inhaled a quart of scotch,” Nick commented flatly. “You’ve had your drink, now go get my books.”

“I need another drink to brace myself to do just that! You know how heavily guarded that place is!”

“And the second little bag should help you with that.”

Raising an eyebrow, Finnick took a peak and immediately snapped he bag shut, regretting his decision. “That was you?!”

Nick grinned. “I figured it’d come in handy.”

“You crazy bastard!”

Judy chimed in. “What is it?”

Finnick beat Nick to the answer. “You don’t want to know. I should have known better than to look, but I did and I wish I hadn’t. Now, I’m telling you, you don’t want to know!”

Nick shrugged with an easy smirk. “It’s just a little passkey through the Archive security barriers.”

“It’s a fucking toe!”

“A toe?” Judy asked, with a nervous chuckle.
“Yes, rabbit. A. Toe. As in a piece of someone’s foot!”

“Nick?” Judy asked tremulously, “Why do you have a toe in a bag?”

“And how the fuck will this get me through security at the Archives?” Finnick boomed.

Nick grinned. “The answer to both your questions is simple. That is the High Archivist’s toe. I relieved him of it many years ago.”

“Yeah. I heard all about it through the grapevine. Someone snuck in and cut off his toe. No reason. No revenge note, or even a mark to take credit. Just a stolen toe while the old monster was asleep.”

“I know I’m going crazy for asking this question with a straight face,” Judy muttered, “but why would you steal the Archivist’s toe?”

“That ancient slob is as strong as any arch demon and the only one who can pass through any and all of the security measures in the Central Archives. That applies to all of him, even a little piece that isn’t attached at the moment. I thought it’d be good to have.”

“Good to have...” Finnick grunted.

“And it turns out I was right!” Nick replied pompously, self-satisfaction dripping from every syllable. “Aren’t I clever?”

Judy chuckled weakly and Finnick muttered “sweet misery,” under his breath.

“Now,” Nick continued, “Finnick, you need to get going and, Judy, we have work to do. Finn, did you bring the map?”

A rumpled pile of paper flopped onto the table by the door as the little imp trundled past, shaking his head. Once the door was closed, Nick smiled and collected it, returning to the coffee table and spreading the map across it.

Judy moved from the spot she’d been riveted to since leaving her room enough to peer over the fox’s shoulder and ask, “What are you doing?”

“A little sympathetic tracking.”

“Huh?”

“Sympathetic magic calls like to like, yes?”

“In broad terms, yes, kinda.”

“Well, I intend to use these,” Nick said as he pulled the two Tartarus diamonds from his trouser pocket, “to locate all the other Tartarus diamonds in the city.”

“There are easier ways to shop for jewelry.”

His grin deepened. “If we find enough diamonds in one place, that may just be where this thing has its den.”
Nick caught himself thinking that dawning comprehension was a good look for her as he watched her put the pieces together. Normally, he would have squashed the notion, now... Now, he just appreciated it. Uncertainty, perhaps, but sincerely.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “It’ll take a while.”

“And its possible some of them have been moved, as well,” Judy commented half to herself.

“True. However, I think it’s likely it’ll want a place to hide that’s not going to see a lot of traffic. Either way, it’s worth a shot.”

She blinked in astonishment at the demon. “That’s brilliant!”

“Hardly. I remembered your tracking spell and I saw the diamond on the ground after the… Gnu… left. It just came to me. Call it… Divine inspiration.”

“Really.” Judy stated dryly.

Nick grinned and fetched another bottle from the sideboard to fill the, again, empty decanter. Things were going decently well, despite his rough night, and the awkwardness was at a dull roar. She wasn’t asking any of the really hard questions and despite being a little jumpy, she seemed to be in good spirits. All he had to do was keep the conversation flowing and direct her attention back towards their investigation. The longer the previous evening went undiscussed, the longer the implications could fester in her mind. The fact that she was tempted was undeniable, what with all the angeldown previously scattered about his apartment like confetti, and now it was the waiting game. With enough patience, she’d crack.

In the meantime, Nick had all the diversions he could need. He had his task and she’d be back on hers again, as soon as he reminded her. If he got bored after setting up his tracking spell he could read files, or flirt. Life was good.

From his foot locker the fox collected a rack of vials filled with reagents, a pair of nested metal dishes the size of his palm which were covered in worn runes, and a jar of graveyard dust. He checked on his daggers, and made sure his supplies were up to par, taking note of anything Finnick would need to fetch when he returned. Once he was back in front of the map, he scattered the grave dust over the surface and began mixing the reagents to lay the base of his spell.
A small green flame ignited on his claw and was placed in the larger of the dishes, where it danced merrily. The smaller dish was set to hovering over the flame with a small expenditure of will. Into the dish went powders and flecks from his collection of containers, followed by a drop of his own blood. The runes and sigils on the dishes began to glow and Nick settled back to wait for his decoction to finish cooking.

That was when the angel threw him a curveball.

“Nick…”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“How did you pay for dinner?”

Nick huffed out a laugh. “With money. What else?”

“Silly question, I know. I had this absurd idea for a moment that you paid with Coins of Mammon.” Now, Nick did laugh long and hard. When he finally did calm himself, Judy wasn’t exactly pouting. She was smiling too much to be doing that, but she was certainly a bit put out at being laughed at. “Now that you’re finished, would you mind filling me in?”

“On what? The economics of Hell?”

“On how you survive on the Mortal Plane. I have to earn my money, working at the precinct. There are emergency funds in case of-“

“All hell breaking loose?”

Judy giggled. “Yes. However, I haven’t had to touch those funds because you keep paying. I want to know where the money is coming from.”

“Hell has a few methods. Some operatives earn money. Others steal, con, or work for criminal organizations. City hall is a big employer.”
“It is not!”

“One word: Politics. A demon’s daily bread.” Nick replied with a smug grin. “I, however, have another cash flow. My cards are all spelled relics. When I want to pay, they create the funds.”

“Create, as in manufacture?”

“After a fashion. They cause the local economic structures to undergo a series of unforeseeable conundrums, usually of the electronic variety.”

“What does that mean?”

“Banking errors.”

Judy blinked. “Hang on there, Slick. Are you telling me you pay by creating electronic errors in the banking system?”

“Uhhuh.”

“And it’s for everything?”

“Yep!”

“I should be horrified, but I’m not even surprised.”

“Demon.” Nick chirped with a grin. “It’s more complex than that, but between banking errors and stock market quirks, I always have plenty of pocket money.”

“Unbelievable,” Judy huffed angrily. She was ready to rip into the fox for his open admission to fraud, but he preempted her.
“Hold that thought, Carrots. I have to do a little work, now...” Nick turned his attention to his floating dish and the runes that were pulsing in a cascade across its surface. A few more additions from his vials and another drop of blood later, he turned back to her. “So, this is going to be about three hours of groundwork and layered syntax for me, once this finishes cooking and tinctures. Think you have enough to keep yourself occupied?”

“You mean aside from all the questions we still don’t have answered?”

“You’ll keep plugging away on the files, then?”

“Is there much of a choice?”

Nick chuckled in acquiescence to her point. “What are you working on, then?”

“My personnel files.”

“Curious about others’ opinions of you?” Nick grinned. “Vanity, vanity cried the preacher!”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve got that covered.”

“And a few other Sins…” Nick punctuated his rejoinder with a wink, which Judy rolled her eyes at. Her smirk and pinkish ears ruined the effect.

“Alright,” Judy huffed. “Rein in that ego of yours. If you’re looking into finding that thing’s den and I presume the tomes Finnick is looking for are part of identifying it…?”

“Correct.”

“Then, I’m looking into the other end of that.”

“Why it’s interested in you, you mean?”
“And a few other points,” Judy replied. “It’s said a lot of peculiar things about me. Calling me Lightbearer and such. I know the Host’s files on you are useless, so I may as well look into mine. At risk of sounding self-obsessed, I’m our best lead into finding something to link that monster, whatever is happening in this city, and us, together. If I can figure out why it thinks I’m special, we can use that. There may be something in the high security locked files, or sealed portions of my base file. With my current accesses, I should be able to get access and find out.”

“Well reasoned, rabbit. Sounds like a plan.” Nick lifted his glass to salute her, but was interrupted when his runed bowls started humming. “And that’s me. Talk about timing… I’m going to be busy for a while. Once I’m done, the kitchens should be opened and we can get a bite.”

“Good. Reading always makes me hungry.”

The only response she got was a chuckle as her de facto roommate dipped a claw into the upper bowl and started to draw on the air about three inches above the map. As she watched, the beginnings of an intensely complex, mandala-style magic circle began to take shape. Whatever it was the fox was up to, it would be a very long process getting there. Judy elected to take her own advice and dig into her files.

One of the basic characteristics of her nature was both an asset and liability. Judy was nothing if not thorough. Most mammals in her position would go immediately to the most interesting parts; the sealed files and locked sections. However, she reasoned, it was possible that without the context of the rest of the information in her file, it would be possible to miss something important later on. That was why she selected her basic file from the top of the surprisingly large stack and settled in to read on the armchair beside the loveseat the fox occupied.

It was an achingly dull read.

As much as she enjoyed recalling her exploits in service and remembering the glory days, such as they were, there was a sense of profound discontentment that came with them this time, which she didn’t understand. It didn’t help that it was a military file so the reading was almost as dry as her mandatory technical classes on remote control and communications platforms. Very useful in the long term, but no one stayed conscious through more than ten pages at a time, even Judy.

Time crawled along and she was making progress, when a sudden change was noted in her documentation. Around the time when she was assigned to the Inquisitor’s Office and ordered to the Fringe, the detail and depth of her fitness reports increased to an alarming degree. She was never supposed to see her own file, but even so, there was no discernable reason other than a single, oblique reference to orders received in relation to increasing the scrutiny on her performance. It was understandable to a point if she was under consideration for fast tracking to a command rank, but this was ridiculous.
Skipping the rest of her dossier, but marking her place to return to once she had addressed her curiosity, Judy shuffled through the stack to find the orders referred to in her file. They weren’t there. Seconds after confirming as much, Judy had her tablet in paw and had the file reference information. It was a Locked Document, labeled class five, highest priority, and classified. That led her to the correct drawer within the Sealed Files.

Her personal passcode opened the drawer and she located the file. It was Locked and Warded, as well; an extreme case of excessive security if ever there was one. That unsettled her. She was just a lieutenant and otherwise completely unimpressive. There was no reason she was aware of for such measures and it sparked both curiosity and disquiet in her. Judy pressed her bangles to the primary ward circle and was rewarded with a low chiming as the security measures disengaged.

“Is that how that works?”

Nick’s question caught Judy completely by surprise. She started and squeaked before rounding on the grinning demon. “Oh, I hate you.”

“Lies will only hurt you, sweetheart.”

“And you know I’m lying, how?”

In response nick held up his paw with the bond mark and Judy face-pawed. “Fine, Mister Pedantic. You irritate me.”

“Agreed. Now, what has your tail in a twist?”

“I was finally making progress when you startled me.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Judy checked her tablet. “This is one of a pair of files with the same security. I think they’re related. They have the same operations codes.”
“And they involve you?”

“Apparently. This is the first I’ve heard of any of it.”

“Ooh! A mystery.” Nick strolled over to the cabinet and flicked through it, pulled a file that had similar markings from the drawer. “Is this it?”

“Yes, but aren’t you working on your tracking spell?”

“It needs a minute. Demonic magic is a little like cooking. Sometimes, you need to let it sit and rest for best results.”

“Now, I feel ill.” Her stomach growled in response.

“Maybe you do, but your taut little tummy needs a meal. I’ll order room service and we can dig in to these super-secret files.”

“That one’s still locked, dummy.”

In response, Nick ambled over and leaned down to her level.

Judy smirked. “Is the Devil going to ask me for a little sympathy? Maybe open his new reading material?”

Nick flopped the file face down onto her crossed arms and was rewarded with the affirmation chime. The security measures began to disengage and the fox lifted the file, again. “I was just enjoying a close up view of your chest while I took care of that for myself. …and now your blush.”

Judy shoved his face out of her personal space. She watched as he swaggered over to the in-suite phone and called room service. Through an effort of will, she tore her eyes off his backside and opened the file. She reminded herself that there’d be plenty of time for ogling his tail after the work was done. She then mentally slapped herself for even thinking along those lines and got to work, but not before willing a few newly fallen pin feathers out of existence.
While Judy read, Nick busied himself with getting at least moderately dressed in anticipation of answering the door. He reasoned that it’d be too soon for him to get anywhere with his file, so dressing was a better use of his time. She mumbled her agreement and tried to limit her disappointment. It got easier as she read.

It wasn’t long before Judy had far greater concerns than the state of her demon’s backside. Very quickly she was grateful for the space.

Her file was distressing, mostly for the questions it didn’t answer. The level of personal information was well beyond what she knew was normal in the Host. It was close to invasive; comprehensive on everything from her powers and their known applications to her pleasure reading. Every tour on the Fringe and her actions in every battle were painstakingly documented and verified. It was as close to reliving the events as she could come outside her own memory. That in itself wasn’t a shock; the scope of information dispersal, however, was.

Every report was confirmed as being received by the upper echelons of the Host’s command staff. Comments, notations, feedback, and referrals were attached to every sheet, with copies to the Council of Seraphs and The Throne Office of Internal Regulations and Affairs of Celestial State. There were reference numbers to related files and a few quick checks on her tablet demonstrated the extent, much to her horror. Dozens of analyses were attached to every action she had made, right up to her descent to the Mortal Plane. Hundreds of pages worth of projections and assessments, analyses and interpretations, like they were planning a war with her as the centerpiece.

Then, things got interesting. Her bonding to Nick had resulted in over one thousand dissertations and assessment theses from the Inquisitorial Office... alone. There was an entire wing of the Military Intelligence Division devoted to assessing her mental health and battalions of shock troops were mobilizing in the off chance that any teams could be sent in. The scope of it was flabbergasting. Judy had no idea why the Host was going to such extents over her admittedly bad decision. Court marshall and exile she’d been prepared for, but invasion?

Seeing the pages shaking as her paws trembled brought her attention back to herself a bit. Her heart was hammering and hyperventilation was a serious threat. Her eyes shot to the fox, who had his back to her. Thanking the Heavens for small blessings, she took the opportunity to focus. Realizing last thing she needed was to give away her agitation to her companion, she focused. Several deep breaths later, her paws weren’t shaking and she wasn’t about to panic. When the fox turned around, all he saw was a degree of discomfort on her face that was only to be expected when reading about oneself.

Less than ten minutes after Nick had made the call out, there was a knock at the door and Nick went to collect the food. When he returned, he left her plate in front of her and settled into his seat, again.
He was mid-mouthful when he stopped and asked, “Hey, Carrots. Is this level of medical information normal?”

Judy shook herself out of her concerned musings. “Huh?”

“This file is all about you.”

“Obviously. It’s my personnel file.”

“And this puts the “personal” in personnel…”

Judy’s nose twitched. “What do you mean?”

“Judy, the information in here is ridiculously comprehensive. Every scratch is documented. Did you know you got a papercut on your fourth day here? Side of your pinky finger, the joint between the last two filanges. Diagonal abrasion, 12.8 degrees off center for joint alignment, two drops of blood.”

“Are you serious? Of course that’s in there. Everything is documented like that.”

“What else do they have in here?”

“Don’t you dare!” Judy leapt up and snatched the file from the surprised fox’s paws.

“Jeez, Carrots, you worried about me discovering your horrible, recurring mange problem or something?”

“I do not have mange!”

“Not with fur that soft…’
“Damn it! Surely, there must be something in all of existence that you can be serious about.”

“I’m always serious. And don’t call me Shirley.”

“You’re never serious and I’ll call you whatever I like.”

“Whatever you call me, make it good. You don’t want to be screaming something ridiculous, later. Might kill the mood.” A melon ball flew sharply from her paw, only to miss his head as he ducked and slipped to his feet. “I’d settle for “God”, but that’d be a bit absurd.”

“You are impossible!” She seethed. Then, seeing he was wrapping himself in his wings, she continued, “Where are you going?”

“Before you so rudely snatched that file from me, I saw a small notation about a surgical center in the city. As I have nothing else to do, I figured I’d check it out.”

“Nothing to do? There are dozens of files here!”

“And all about you.” So saying, the fox wandered off to the bedroom and, presumably, his supplies. His voice carried through the doorway, “Considering your reaction to me reading that one, are you sure you want me traipsing through the rest?”

That gave Judy immediate pause. Wanting to assure herself that there was nothing too earth-shattering in the file, she flipped the file open to a page marked out with the High Inquisitor’s Seal at the back and was instantly glad she had kept it from him. A few more pages turned in her paws in as many seconds. The report summary on the final sheet had her snapping the file shut as soon as her eyes traced the ink.

“Is that common?”

Judy jumped out of her skin at the sound of his voice, despite it still coming from the other room. Willing herself to sound calm, she responded. “Is what common?”

“Using local medical establishments. I thought the Heavens provided for that in house.”
“They do. A facility like this is a first to my knowledge.”

Realizing how dangerous her situation was, Judy clamped down hard on the Bond in the hopes of keeping it closed. The last thing she needed was the demon getting a hold of her emotional state. She’d be lost if he even had an inkling of how upset she was over the situation. If he saw, he’d have to ask why she was upset and she couldn’t lie to him. He would push and corner her as only a demon could and she would be ruined. The best she could hope for was keeping her newest secret hers until she could grasp and accept it. Just the thought of what it meant nearly sent her hyperventilating, again. If she could manage to extend the secrecy until she found a countermeasure, so much the better for her. She doubted she’d get either, but she had to buy herself some time, regardless.

As she conversed, Judy frantically, yet as silently as she could manage, sped around the table cleaning up the scattered documents and activating the security measures on each of them. By the time Nick returned to the room, all the files were stowed and the document case was unsummoned. Only she could call it into being again, so that was one loose end tied off for the moment. Now, it was a matter of keeping her own mouth shut.

“You ready to go?”

“No and don’t call me that.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s… too much too fast. This is all a little overwhelming.”

“Did it catch up with you just now?”

“Something like that.”
“I can check this out on my own if you like. We’re never out of touch, remember?”

The tone of his voice was almost enough to make her cry. She shouldn’t feel comforted at the words of a monster who had already said he wanted her to fall. She shouldn’t feel relieved that he was being considerate. She shouldn’t...

She kept trying to convince herself as she huffed out, “I think it’d be better if I went with you. A little movement might help me clear my mind.”

“Alright. Let’s get going, then. The food will keep and we can get something to nibble on while we’re out.”

“I’m not that hungry,” Judy muttered quietly as she felt her stomach boil with acid.

As the door closed, Judy’s mind crept back to the truth about herself she had learned and barely kept from the demon. Now, she understood why she was such a hot topic for Command and why the Throne was interested in her. Of all the things she had ever thought possible, this was never even close to making the list. The final lines of the report were a collection of words she wouldn’t have believed possible if it weren’t signed by the High Inquisitor, himself.

Presence of Empyrean potential: Confirmed.

New designation: Lieutenant Judy Hopps, Divinitas in Potentia.

Her eyes crept up from the floor ahead of her where they had been keeping her from walking into a wall and locked onto the strutting demon in front of her. Of course, the Heavens were panicking. The Heir to Heaven was Bonded to the master of Hell!
Alrighty! It's been a while since I did one of these, but I've been super productive lately and I've had a TON of help, so gratitude is (over)due. First and foremost, full props and gratitude to TheWyvernsWeaver for the amazing art and story boarding help. Chapter art can be found on his Deviantart page and the AO3 edition of this story.

Up next on the tons-of-gratitude list is is kt_valmiri for putting up with my endless whining over my writing and being my sounding board, editor and everything else. You are awesome.

Everyone please thank Cimar of Turalis Wildehopp for editing the last two chapters for me. Major favor and hugely appreciated, every second of it. Also, my beta readers Damlone and Blueberryandhoney, thank you so much for your feedback and all the time you've taken to help me.

As to the many and various readers who have read, reviewed and PMed me... Honestly, guys, I don't know what to say. The response I've gotten to this little story has been huge and I appreciate every one of you for taking the time to read it. I'm terrible at responding in good time and I an painfully forgetful, but I read every note I get (usually several times and giggle as I do). I hope this chapter lives up to expectations and the rest of the story continues to be enjoyable.

That all said, here we go again!

Nick was enjoying his morning. There was nothing quite as satisfying as productivity in the last,
darkest hours before dawn. Luckily, he finished up his tracking spell before the caterwauling of the heavens began. It was always harder to concentrate with the holier-than-thou soundtrack that the heavens brought with it. More than once he’d wished that night had some heavy metal accompaniment, but that would cause a bit of distraction, too. Besides, the quiet of the deep night was comforting. Like a warm blanket...

...made of enemies.

He’d been surprised at Judy joining him before morning. As much as Nick appreciated the dawn currently for its ability to blunt the most extreme of his cravings, he was convinced that the rabbit would stay in her little warren of blankets until daylight. As much as the rise of the sun suppressed him, it amplified her, making it vastly safer for her. The dark before the dawn was his strongest time and yet, she’d joined him, seemingly unafraid.

“You curiouser and curiouser,” he mused to himself. As he got in line for the taxi stop. A few of the mammals close by turned to look at him. Several appreciatively. He was glad his more casual look of slacks and a button up were doing him justice. He’d forgotten how useful his wings could be. It was a wonderful convenience to have a nearly endless wardrobe of illusions at his wing tip.

The glances shifted from him to his companion, who many males were considering with a leering eye. A few were speculative with a smattering of envy. It pleased him to see as many covetous gazes directed at her as him, but it also tickled at the back of his mind. He felt pride, of course, but also something he hadn’t felt in so long he barely remembered it; possessiveness. Nick wanted to comment “look, but don’t touch” to the hare down the line, who kept staring, but refrained. That was too big a box of frogs to open just at that moment. Instead, he set his eyes to roving through the crowd.

On the streets, there was the usual early morning traffic, albeit more furtive in character. Business mammals and commuters bustled around. Utility workers and city functionaries trudged. Students meandered, eyes glued to their phones while tourists gawked at the sights. All but the last group moved in hurried, anxious manners; eager to get to their destinations, as usual, but fearful of attracting the attention of anyone. The tourists were nervous, but not fearful. It seemed that the thrill seekers and enthusiasts for the macabre had come to see the city after the slaughter.

Nick found it amusing that the butcher’s bill had been so relatively low, yet had garnered so much attention. Other than the police officers, less than twenty innocent lives had been lost, while more than forty of the attackers had taken their own lives. He supposed it was only to be expected. The world was no longer what it had been back in the old days where a massacred city was the work of a long weekend and of little importance. A passing comment about “hell on earth” made him smile.

You have no idea, pal.
And it’s going to stay that way!

Nick glanced down at his companion and raised an eyebrow. Her look was flat and serious, but there was no force behind it. Something was bugging her and she was avoiding thinking about it. The list of potential topics for that discussion was too long to pare down without a little help, so he decided to let her do the work for him.

Good grief, Carrots… Do you really think so little of me?


I do recall.

I wouldn’t put it past you to want a little Hell on Earth.

Ehh… Maybe once, but no.

What?!

I mean it sounds like a good idea and all…

“Whoa whoa whoa. Hold it.” Judy said as he stopped Nick with a paw on his chest. “Are you telling me that was your plan, once?”

“I’m telling you that you started talking out loud, mid-conversation, so everyone in earshot thinks my girlfriend is insane,” Nick retorted with a smirk.

“Girlfriend?!)

“Pick a topic to panic about. I have a one at a time policy.”
“Alright… Hell on Earth first.”

“Topic for another time, Carrots. It’s a little tense around here, right now,” he commented casting an eye to the milling crowd.

looking chastened, Judy pinched the bridge of her muzzle and muttered, “You are utterly impossible…”

“Says the stubborn bunny.”

“Fine,” Judy huffed before pointing at Nick’s chest “Then, how could anyone think I’m your girlfriend?”

“Aside from the facts that you’re standing quite close to me and we’re being very familiar?”

“That doesn’t mean anything we could just be friends. Why girlfriend?”

“You smell like me.”

Judy blinked. “I what?”

“You’ve slept in my bed a few times, now, sweetheart. It’s completely understandable.”

Judy gasped like a fish out of water for a moment before finding her voice. “I smell like you? How?! I showered and cleaned my clothes!”

“Fox musk is a bit pervasive. After a week, the mattress had my personal aroma ingrained inescapably. No matter what you do, you’ll have a little of it on your fur for at least a few days.” Nick stretched and rolled his shoulders back before continuing in a whisper. “Also, incubi have strong pheromones. Odds are you smell like you had a very good night.”
Judy felt herself blanche under her fur, before heat billowed through her. “But we didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t sound so disappointed. Besides, you and I both know your virtue is intact. What does it matter if other mammals think it?”

“It’s embarrassing!”

“Let them think what they will,” Nick said with an easy shrug. “You can’t control it, so why stress about it?”

“I know you’re right, but it’s not that easy.” Judy’s voice was a cross between a growl and a whine. She hated it.

“If it comes down to it, I’ll back you up in defending your honor, but I want you to think about something.”

A raised brow met his comment. “What’s that?”

A very promise-laden grin split his face as he leaned down to whisper. “How many of them are jealous of what you’ve got.”

Heat surged through her again, sweeping through her cheeks and ears while simultaneously settling into her belly, blooming there. “I haven’t yet!”

“Yet?” Nick purred with a cheeky smirk.

All Judy could manage was a half-hearted punch to his shoulder.

She was embarrassingly relieved when they made the front of the line a few minutes later and climbed into their cab. While Nick gave instructions to the driver, she curled into the seat and tried to not look as nervous, or as pleased as she felt. It was foolish, perhaps pointless, but she had to pretend a little longer. There were higher stakes than her virtue and they had to come first. Fortunately, her virtue was part of the things that would be saved if she could manage a successful conclusion to this
absurd situation.

Unfortunately, that became a much harder thing for her to believe was possible as the demon settled back into his seat, bringing his heat and scent with him.

Fighting down her own growing desires was a challenge and increasingly so. She had given up on denying her attraction and her wants, at least to herself. However, wanting something and getting it were not the same. She had willpower and plenty of it. All she had to do was maintain it and keep herself under control and...

The back of his paw rubbed up and down her arm in a firm, yet calming action. “Don’t fret, rabbit. We’ll get this figured out.”

A pulse of pleasure rolled through her arm and fanned the heat surging through her at his touch. She shivered.

That’s *not* bloody helping….

The cab ride was uneventful for the most part. The only thing of note in the whole trip was when they passed the Municipal Center and Precinct One. Judy fleetingly wanted to check in on the cheetah she had befriended. It had only been a couple days, but it felt like weeks since she’d seen him. He’d still be busy cleaning up after the attack and up to his ears in work, so she didn’t want to bother him. However, she resolved to call him once there was a lull. There was a lot she wanted to talk about and he was a sympathetic ear.

*The real one anyway…*

**You should.**

Judy jumped a little in surprise. “You have got to stop doing that.”

“How what? Hearing your thoughts, or startling you?”
“Both.”

“I can’t promise either,” Nick chortled. “You’re cute when you’re startled and that Bond thing is apparently out of control.”

That statement worried her anew. If the Bond was opening without conscious thought, that was a problem. Beyond the lack of privacy, it was another unheard-of characteristic just like the flashes of shared memories. It was unsettling and absolutely not something she should think about if the fox could hear her thoughts. Instead, she deflected. “Don’t call me cute.”

“I won’t promise that, because you are and I won’t lie about it.” His grin deepened and he held up his paw. “Demon’s honor.”

“Just try, anyway.” Judy blustered. “And stop startling me!”

“Again, not likely even if I wanted to.” Nick hummed in thought. “If you’re this excitable, I’d lay odds you’re ticklish.”

“I-I’m what?” Judy stammered, eyes growing wide.

“Ticklish.”

“No…! Not at all,” Judy stammered. as she tried to shimmy away from him on the seat.

“Lie.”

“Please don’t?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t not find out for sure.”

“You know I lied!” Judy’s voice was a whispered shriek. Her back was against the cab door and
there was nowhere to go. “You can keep your paws to yourself!”

“This needs direct confirmation, Carrots.”

As Nick leaned her way with his paws menacingly flexing, Judy felt the first panic giggles welling up in her throat. Blessedly, that was when the cabbie hammered on the panel separating him from the passenger area.

“Hey!” the old jackal barked. “I normally don’t care if fares get pawsy back there, but you’re keeping it to a dull roar, or paying for the cleaners, you hear?” Mortified, Judy tried to hide behind her ears as she shimmied away from the fox, who was fighting not to laugh under the driver’s gaze through the rearview mirror. “Normally, mammals wait until after dark for that kind of stuff, but…” the cabbie continued in a fonder tone. “Ah, hell… Who am I to get in the way of young love? You two just keep your clothes on, would you? The cops aren’t all that tolerant about indecent exposure.”

“Is there anywhere they’re tolerant of such things in the city?” Nick drolled as he sat back.

“Actually, yes. There’s a naturalist club in Sahara Square. If you’re looking for a little sun on your fur, that’s your place to go. They’re a bit more tolerant of, uh… unusual relationships… and their um… proclivities…” The jackal’s voice grew hesitant as he spoke and Judy wasn’t the only one to catch the implications.

Nick leaned forward and inquired, “Good sir, would you by chance be in an unusual relationship yourself?”

The desert canid smiled lopsidedly and tapped a framed photo on his dash. It was of him and a lithe cheetah who was obviously male. “My mate. Lifetime members at Mystic Springs.”

“We will have to check it out, then. Thanks for the tip.”

It was only a few minutes later that the vehicle stopped and they disembarked. Judy was sorry to leave, but was pleased to hear the exchange between the males.

“Thanks for the ride.”
“It’s on me, so the pleasure’s mine.”

What happened next astonished her. Nick held the door so he wouldn’t leave, and with the other paw pulled out a small, bronze Coin. A snap of his fingers later, it was a money clip of notably high denomination bills. Nick didn’t pass it to the driver, electing instead to drop it between the seat and the door.

“Hey! What are you doing, kid?”

“Making sure you can’t refuse.” Seeing the astonishment on the cabbie’s face, Nick smiled. “Take him somewhere nice.”

He walked away before any reply could be heard and Judy scampered after him. Several paces later he heard a loud horn honk and a shouted “Thank you!”

Judy grinned up at her fox and said, “Well look at you, being a nice guy. Keep it up and you might just make a good angel.”

“I know… You’re a terrible influence.”

“Will that money stay… Um…”

“Real?” Seeing Judy nodding somewhat shamefacedly, the fox huffed a laugh and ruffled her ears. “As real as any. It’ll spend and it wont turn into a leaf when the sun hits it.”

“Is that a real possibility?”

“Depends who you ask.” Seeing her little mouth open to continue pursuing her line of questioning, Nick interrupted, saying, “Look up. We’re here.”

That startled Judy out of focus and pulled her into her surroundings, again.

They were in the business district, just east of the city center municipal complex. Businesses of all
shapes and sizes from corporate powerhouses to small and smiling entrepreneurial startups abounded. Office spaces teemed with mammals and the air practically vibrated with industriousness and stress—and in some cases, greed or avarice.

Nick savored the feel of the Sins in the air. It was a little touch of the familiar and quite welcome after the strangeness he’d been experiencing lately. He made a mental note to return if he ever needed a little grounding before heading off down the street.

Fittingly, where mammals congregated in large numbers, so too appeared the businesses that supported them. Eateries, service providers, efficiency accommodations and creature comforts littered the area and warred endlessly for customers. That included medical facilities, which was where they found themselves; standing at an innocuous, practically anonymous, glass door. Aside from a small sign in the shape of a red cross on the wall nearby, it was entirely forgettable.

The sense of blandness didn’t last long.

The door was unlocked, but the place was deserted. It took all of five seconds before Nick was unimpressed, walked through the door from the waiting room to the office and flopped himself in front of the front desk’s computer.

“What are you doing?” Judy whisper-shouted as the machine powered up.

Nick looked at her rather bemusedly. “Getting answers, I hope.”

“We can’t just break in to a computer like this!”

He smirked and rested his chin in a paw as he looked at her. “This is a facility owned and operated by the Host. On earth, you are the Host right now, so I think we’re fine. And why are you whispering? No one is here.”

You don’t know that for certain and we can’t be cavalier about this.

So, we’re using mind-speech. Why?
If you insist on doing this, I’d prefer to keep my ears open. When you speak, you can’t hear. The reverberations from your vocal chords interfere with your inner ear and you become deaf as long as you talk. It’s a quick way to get snuck up on and killed.

I can understand caution considering our situation, but you’re sounding extra paranoid. What’s going on?

I am not comfortable in this place.

Nick raised an eyebrow at that. “Alright, angelfluff. You use mind-speech and keep an ear out while I do some digging.” Nick beckoned her to him. “Now, get over here and give me access.”

Judy suppressed a thrill at his words and feigned a sigh as she walked over to the keyboard. A moment or two later she was concerned. “It’s not letting me in.”

“What?” Nick blinked owlishly.

“My passcode is rejected,” Judy stated in disbelief. “I should have access to all resources associated with the Host, but this is sealed to me.”

Nick hummed to himself before manifesting his spear.

Judy scoffed. “Oh, that’ll help. What are you going to do? Smite the computer?”

“I’ll save that for later. Right now, I think I’d like to know what this little box of wires is hiding.”

“You have got to be kidding.”

“Carrots,” Nick said evenly, as the spear morphed into an appropriate key for the lock, “This is the Key to Hell. I think it can handle a mediocre operating system’s security measures, even if Heaven is lending a hand.”
Judy watched as the Key became a USB stick in the fox’s paw, then was clicked into a waiting port on the computer tower. Seconds later, they were in. Shaking her head, she walked to the office doorway to keep an ear out. Closing her eyes let her focus on her hearing and, conveniently, avoid looking at him. She sighed in part to help her relax, a little bit out of frustration and largely for the anxiety her day had been riddled with.

Her assignment to the Mortal Plane had been a dream come true; her career goal, in fact. Yet, it had been an unmitigated disaster. Upon arrival, her assignment had gone downhill so precipitously it felt preordained. A decision of dubious wisdom in creating their bond had left her in this position, but that was as far as she was willing to admit responsibility for.

She’d been stupid.

She admitted that much. However, the events beyond that and the forces at play were so outrageous and extreme that her one decision to pursue Nick was dwarfed. She was a grain of sand in an avalanche. The trouble was she also just might be the heir to the mountain chain. Judy shook herself out of her musings before the metaphors got too mixed and gave her a headache.

She got one anyway when the demon’s voice drifted over to her.

“You may want to take a look at this.”

Her eyes snapped open at the concerned tone of his voice. It was uncharacteristic and cause for worry. “Look at what?”

“Judy,” Their eyes met and she knew something was wrong. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

The laundry list of secrets she was keeping flashed through her mind, causing her heart rate to double, “What?”

“You’re scheduled for surgery. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’m what?” Judy chirped in surprise.
“You’re scheduled for a medical procedure, here. Why are you surprised?”

“I’m a celestial. I don’t need surgery. I don’t get sick. I can’t!”

“I know that, but it says here, “Elective surgery”. Plain as day.”

“I haven’t elected to do anything!” Judy spouted before turning away, trying to hide her interest. “What procedure am I supposed to be having?”


“What?” Judy’s ears shot up in alarm.

“That’s a cancer treatment.” Nick scratched the back of his head. “It’s been a while since I was in Heaven, but last I recall officers didn’t have major surgery on the mortal plane, especially for diseases they can’t have.”

“They don’t.” The edge to her voice was unsettling to the demon. Judy sounded shaken.

“There’s a notation here on the term “Medullitus”… My Greek is a little rusty, but I believe this reads as “Pemptousia”.

“Pemptousia?” Now, her voice sounded weak.

Hoping to give her something to focus on other than whatever was happening in her head, he offered more, “It looks like the specifics for the procedure are in the surgery down the hall.”

Judy was gone by the last word. She had a sick suspicion she had to confirm. Her feet skittered on the linoleum floor as she ran, hoping with every fiber of her being that she was wrong. Sadly, her hopes were so slim by this point she didn’t trust them.

There was no need for her to have a bone marrow transplant. The idea was absurd. However,
marrow wasn’t the only translation of the word. The notation was enough to prove it. She kept chanting in her mind that there was no way it was possible, but in her gut she knew she was about to be proven a liar. The doors to the operating theater bounced off the walls under the force of her paws and nausea rolled through her at what she found.

~

Nick was a moment behind her. He registered her departure not by her movement, but the emotional maelstrom that he felt from her as she fled. He didn’t have time to think. He merely reacted. No sooner had she launched herself down the hall than he was out of the chair. Her speed, however, was more than he had anticipated and she quickly outpaced him, much to his surprise. He was further confounded to find her standing in the surgical theater, holding herself and staring.

“Carrots, what’s gotten into you?”

Getting no response, he walked up to her and put a paw on her shoulder.

“Judy?”

Her gaze was clear, but cold. He’d seen similar expressions many times on the faces of the Fallen; aware of a terrible fate and determined to at least try to face it well. Without exception they failed. Hell had been too much for him. Him and all those he’d seen arrive on its doorstep. As the thought flitted through his mind, Nick felt a horror akin to his first moment in the inferno. He saw his angel, kneeling on the ash and obsidian of Hell’s doorstep and felt a fury burn through him that he hadn’t felt since his own fall. Pain lanced through his temples, so he fought the memory down. It would wait until she didn’t look stricken. His paw slid down her back and she shuddered before pulling away.

At length she spoke.

“When I was in the Academy, I was accorded the honor of witnessing a ritual of ultimate sacrifice. One of the cadets elected to give himself for the sake of preserving one of the High Seraphs.”

“The angels in charge of keeping the Heavens turning?”

Judy nodded. “There was no successor ready and the death of the Seraph would have cost the Host
dearly. Mikhail gave his body for the sake of preserving the Heavens. They extracted his quintessence and allowed the Seraph’s to take its place.”

Nick stared at her blankly. “I don’t understand.”

Judy shuddered. “It was done in a surgical theater just like this. I remember every tool and implement. This… It’s the same.”

Understanding crept into the fox’s awareness of both her reaction and the circumstance. “Judy, we don’t know that was what was planned here.” The only response he got was a shuddering breath as her gaze slid out of focus.

Nick saw he was losing her, so he acted. Grabbing her shoulders, he turned her to face him. “Carrots, look at me.” No answer. “Hopps?” When she continued to stare into nothing, he shook her and barked, “Judy! Look at me.” That got her eyes to lock onto his. Her hopelessness and desolation were a knife twisting in the pit of his stomach. “Judy, focus on me. We don’t know for certain. We need to find proof. Will you help me?”

Her jaw firmed up and she managed a weak nod. Nick returned it and led the way to the bench top closest to the doors, where paperwork was most likely to be stored. Judy trailed along behind, but only had eyes for the room. Nick grabbed the first file and flicked it open. It was a condensed copy of Judy’s medical file. No surprise there. Aside from a few notes on compatibility and her astral biorhythms, there wasn’t anything he hadn’t expected. The second file, on the other hand, was a revelation.

“Carrots, this is the file for Celestine, Custodem in Caelesti Solio.”

Judy tried to keep a straight face, or pretend she didn’t understand, but it was an obvious lie. To her guilty relief and dread, the fox continued, answering his own question.

“Does this mean what I think it means? That you were going to be the host for the current Divine? Wha- Hang on.” Nick’s mind reeled as the pieces fell into place. “It wouldn’t be possible unless… In order for an organ transplant to be possible, both the donor and recipient need to be compatible. Quintessence is the basis of all existences. It’s what makes us, us in whatever form we take. For you to be a candidate, that would mean were were nearly a perfect copy of the Ruler of Heaven on the most basic of all levels. Judy… Are you the successor to the Throne of Heaven? How the hell didn’t you know?”
The surgical table was the first thing to break.

~

Nick stepped through the gateway his Coin opened, just in time to see Judy step through the door. He had to give the rabbit credit. Seeing the bleak look of betrayal and her shuddering little sobs morph into the heaving breaths and snarling face of a furious warrior was quite a sight. However, anyone trained in combat knew anger was a quick way to get killed. Not that he was about to say anything of the kind just then. That was a challenge when the other side of the conversation was moving close to Mach 2 with a blue-white trail of divine fire.

“Rabbit, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to kill something.”

“What, exactly?”

“I don’t know!”

“Then, might I suggest avoiding random acts of violence until you have a proper target?” Nick knew he was being snide and dripping condescension. If there was anything that could take her ire, it was him, but the rabbit surprised him.

“I see what you’re trying to do.”

“Oh?” Nick asked in mild surprise.

“Goad me into venting my anger on you, so I don’t do anything stupid. I’m not that undisciplined, Nick, or that stupid.”

“Aside from the doctor’s office, that is.”

Judy sniffed, dropping her ears. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
“Well, well. Are you playing the dumb bunny, my dear?” Nick chortled.

“Don’t call me that!” she barked.

“Which one? My dear, or dumb bunny?”

“Either!” Her voice was embarrassingly shrill to her own ears.

“Very well, my rabbit.”

Judy forcibly exhaled and unclenched her fists. “That sounds inane.”

“Then, how does “M’lady” sound?”

Her jaw trembled as her tension splashed up against the wave giddy delight from his words. “Cut it out, Nick. We have work to do.”

“I think you’ve vented your spleen enough as it is.” The demon commented wryly, pleased that his word play had blunted her fury a touch. “Don’t you usually contain the shockwave when you use your divine might? You shredded what was left of that room and half the floor of the building with that little stunt.”

Judy growled, actually growled. “It deserved it.”

The fox’s response was cut short as there was a knock at the door. Just when it was getting good, of course. Nick padded to the door, ready to enlighten Finnick to meaning of the term “poor timing”, only it wasn’t him. Upon opening the door, he discovered an otter in a food vendor’s outfit with a tray of fried food on display.

“Good afternoon, sir. The name’s Gerry. Is there anything you’d like?” The chipper voice of the young mustelid earned no reaction from the demon. “We have a lovely variety to choose from. Wouldn’t you like something for yourself and the lady?”
“What do you want?”

“To sell you a pouch of fries? Maybe a chimichanga or a tamale?”

Nick sighed. “See, you’ve already made three mistakes.”

“My manager tells me I need to work on my technique,” the mustelid smiled self-deprecatingly.

“Does he…”

“She, actually.”

“Oh! Well… my apologies. What does she say about your ability to walk through defensive wards?”

“Oh, no…” He groaned. “Did I walk into another LARP?”

“How about the wings?” Nick fluttered his appendages for emphasis. “Did you want to claim you missed those?”

“I’ve seen better cosplay. Sorry.”

“Ok… Wards and wings are two.” Nick leaned down to loom over the shorter vendor. “Can you guess the third?”

“Look,” Gerry dropped the false cheer. “If you don’t want anything you can just drop the bunnicula act and say no.”

Nick’s claws slashed from the floor straight up in a deadly arc, moving faster than any mortal could perceive. The tray was destroyed, the food scattered, and the otter should have been ribbons of meat on the floor. It wasn’t. It was, instead, a flesh bouquet standing a few inches back from where it had been. Everything from the bellybutton up was hamburger, but it still stood.
It swayed slightly before whining, “Really? I just got this one!” in a voice that was a gurgle as much as a rasp.

Judy, who had been mildly curious until the claws came out, rushed over and immediately recoiled. “Oh, merciful heavens!”

What was left of the otter bubbled a laugh, its slices of face smiling at her. “Do you really still think the Heavens are merciful?”

The laughter redoubled as both angel and demon watched the otter pull itself together. Black tendrils and ichor oozed in the wounds and pulled the meat together, but it was not a thorough repair. The eyes wouldn’t focus and fur was falling in patches from blackening skin. It was obvious that the monster had drained his current host and whatever durability the inhabitant found in mortal flesh was largely gone.

That didn’t stop it from speaking. “One would think you’d know better after your trip to the good doctor’s.”

Nick was the first to recover. “You seem saner than the last few times we’ve met. Does that mean you’re improving?”

“One must maintain skills to keep them useful. That means practice, practice, practice.”

“And what are you practicing, now?” Judy chimed in.

“Sanity.” Gerry groaned. “Such an annoyance.”

“Practicing… Sanity…”

“As it is not my natural state, I must,” the otter giggled. “I must! I must! I must increase my musk!”

“It looks like you’re slipping.”
“Oh, drat. Well, I am out of practice.”

“You don’t say,” Judy stated coldly.

“I can say a lot more.” The otter grinned in the way they had come to know and loathe. “For instance, the demon was right. You should mercy kill the mortals, now before it’s too late.”

"If it comes to giving them to you and death, I’ll consider it,” Judy snarled.

"No... Not me for once.” Fetid giggling accompanied Gerry’s words. “Not yet. No... The coin has two sides. One is black, the other white. Tarnished, rotten white.”

“You’ve been speaking in riddles this whole time. Is that part of your practice?”, Nick sneered evenly.

“The best that practices can manage under impatience.” Gerry groaned. “You two take sooo long…”

“So long for what?”

“For your parts! Your parts! The parts you play for my amusement!”

“We aren’t here for your anything,” Judy shouted. Her patience was wearing thin and she saw Nicks was as well from the tremor in his wings.

“Think as you please, but you’ll do as I desire and dance and dance and dance for me!”

The demon’s voice was sepulchral and cold as ice. “I think I’ve had enough of this.”

Suddenly, the possessed otter turned his burning, insane gaze on the pair and pinned them where they stood. “TAKE HER.”
Taken aback Judy rasped, “What?”. but the reply was directed solely at the fox.

“Take her! You desire it above all else and you waste your time!”

Nick’s fangs gleamed as he snarled. “I have plenty and I will not bow to you.”

“No! No time! None! No more time to waste!”

“What do you mean?” Judy asked.

“Too long… Too long imprisoned in this Russian doll of thought and form!” Gerry shrieked “I must be free!”

Nick’s hackles had risen to join his snarl. “I think it’s time you left.”

Gerry, or what was left of him giggled through a horrifying rictus. “You think yourself so mighty, little ember?”

In response Nick launched a fist at their antagonist only to find himself flung backwards, slamming into the wall on the opposite side of the suite. Judy goggled and backed away from the door as Nick found his feet, summoning his armor and spear.

Bored mustelid crooning split the silence. “A drop and the ocean… The same, yet so different.”

Judy felt her own weapons summon to her paws as her armor settled on her frame. She was doubtful it would be any good, but she was not about to go down without a fight.

The otter’s eyes managed to focus somewhat and he crooned. “Ah, ah, ahhhhh… No need for that. I’ll be on my way. Only do hurry, little ember, little flame. A larger, dying light is coming.”

Before either Nick or Judy could strike at the vile creature it seemed to melt and collapse in on itself,
becoming a tentacled slug of meat and rotting bones which vanished into a vent down the hall. Judy stood in shock, looking between the door and the demon. She looked at her weapons and felt helpless. Feeling the demon at her back brought an unreasoning catharsis rolled through her. Unsummoning her weapons, Judy turned and saw something she didn’t expect.

Nick was thinking.

Putting a paw on his arm, she asked, “What is it?”

His paw covered hers and gently squeezed it as he muttered, “Interesting.”

“Interesting? That thing treated you like a rag doll and you find something interesting?”

“I find it interesting that it let me hit it first and then flicked me away like an insect…”

“You aren’t a threat to it. Wonderful.” Judy’s voice was shrill in her own ears and she didn’t care. She was close to hysteria when she heard Nick quietly laughing. Turning to stare at the fox, her jaw hung open.

“Oh, Carrots…” He put his paws on her shoulders and stared straight into her eyes. “I wasn’t a threat. So why did he back down when you drew your weapons?”

“I— What?” Judy sputtered.

“Come on.”

“Come what? Come where? What are you doing?”

“If that thing got in here, then we need to go somewhere else. Somewhere safer.”

“There’s safer?” Judy asked in obvious bewilderment.
“Yes. Now, get your things.” Nick’s grin was fierce and eager. “It’s time to go to Wilde Times.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

We're back! Long delay, I know. I needed a break and I got tangled up with a dozen other things. Real life and my other projects... Way too much happened and all of it is now in the past-tense. Hereafter is back and will be updating as regularly as I can possibly manage. That said, you aren't here for the notes. On to the story!

Nick was focused. He stared out the window from his seat on the Number 11 bus, his muzzle just inches from the ears of the rabbit who sat next to him. It was not ideal, but it was the only option.

Anyone else he looked at immediately blushed and started breathing heavier. He was having a hard time reining in his nature, and that was not a good sign. Getting a nose full of divine rabbit with every breath wasn’t helping matters, but that was better than sparking an orgy on the street. Not long ago, he wouldn’t have minded or cared.

Nick wondered briefly when that had changed.

The surprising turnaround from when he’d squared off with their persistent enemy was an ever-present puzzle and a welcome distraction, as was the need to travel with relative innocuity. Dismissible behavior and blending into the scenery were skills that he had and was used to
employing. Both were something of a necessity to surviving Hell along with avoiding detection from mortals. But he and the rabbit had pushed the envelope on discretion quite a bit lately, and that simply would not do.

The last thing they needed was a self-proclaimed demon hunter, or sycophantic angel enthusiast, bothering them. In their present state, there was no telling what would happen. He was using every trick he had to contain his ever-increasing power and hunger. His wounded Pride bubbled under his skin and tickled at the back of his mind, while his Lust clawed at him, desperate for a taste of what was dangled in front of him so enticingly.

Meanwhile, his angelic companion was…staring into space, trembling. She wasn’t doing well.

“Blink, Carrots. Our stop is next.”

A vague nodding was all the answer he got. Nick rested a paw on top of hers and squeezed gently. Her eyes snapped to meet his, slowly going from unfocused to aware. Through the bond, all he felt was turmoil. There was so much happening in her head that there was nothing clear for him to feel or hear at all.

“I need you to stay with me until we get where we’re going, ok?”

The nod was firmer this time, and Nick felt her grip his paw back. A strange tingling feeling danced up his spine. He shivered. This mission was not turning out how he’d expected. Ten or so minutes later, Nick guided the rabbit off the bus. He didn’t have to worry about her wandering into traffic, but she was certainly not fully present. For good reason, he supposed. They’d had a very busy day, and it wasn’t over.

~

Judy followed the fox, more out of reflex than anything conscious. When he said to collect her things, she did. Most of them went into the document box, and she didn’t have much. Once her gear was unsummoned into the aether, all that was left was a small duffel of clothes, her wallet, and phone. To her surprise, Nick packed even lighter. She watched as he loaded his possessions into the unsettling maw of his chest and closed the top. Then he spoke the word “home”, and it vanished.

The use of the word “home” intrigued her, but she filed it away for later puzzling. She was dependent on the feeling of being too overwhelmed to think much. She’d barely had time to discover
her status as Heir to the Throne of Heaven before finding out about the surgery. Then the fox had figured it out. Then he had also figured out the implications of that fact. Judy felt the tidal wave of understanding pressing against her mind, and she resisted it with all of her will. She knew what was coming, and bursting into crippling hysterics was not something she wanted to do on public transportation.

In truth, she didn’t want to do it at all. It wasn’t as though she had a choice. She had to keep her mind occupied or blank until she could safely and rationally process the events of her day. The outer reaches of the Fringe might be a safe enough place. Possibly Saturn. Judy threw every ounce of her remaining will into her meditative techniques—anything to keep her mind empty and the horrors of the last ten hours or so at bay. It was a losing battle, and she felt the burning hollow where her heart was supposed to be.

Suddenly, there was a warmth on her paw. She reacted. Turning her head was pitiful, as far as accomplishments went, but it was more than she thought she could manage. When Judy focused on what she was looking at, the turmoil got worse.

She shouldn’t have felt comforted by a demon. She should be afraid. Petrified. He was the Devil!

She didn’t hear his words so much as the way he said them. His tone was a comforting balm to her soul. All she could manage was nodding in response. She honestly didn’t care what he was saying. She just felt better for his presence. It brought her comfort to hold his paw, even if she felt like she was selling her soul to do it. For a moment, she thought she would have, if he’d asked. Judy failed to convince herself she regretted that thought a moment later.

She felt more focused as she followed the fox off the bus. Her little bag felt like a lead weight when she shouldered it and shuffled down the street. She felt adrift and sinking at the same time, while concrete passed under her paws. She needed something to anchor her, to be a bastion against what had happened. Once, she would have had her duty, her service, the honor of her rank. Now, all she wanted was his paw.

She missed his paw. She missed him. He was three paces ahead of her, and it hurt. Her world was immolating around her, and her mind was itching to flood her awareness with horrible truths. She was resisting, but it was a losing battle. She fought and fought as she put one paw in front of the other, desperate to at least keep her dignity until she was alone—away from others, where she could finally break down.

Suddenly, the weight was gone. Her bag strap had vanished from her shoulder, and her paw was warm. Dimly aware, she felt the bond stir in her mind, and a slow trickle of calm flowed into her. Judy looked up at the fox holding her paw and carrying her bag. His eyes were closed, and he had a small smile on his face. The trickle grew to a flow, and the embattled angel felt her anxieties recede.
The fox opened his eyes and winked at her before leading her off, paw in paw. She gripped his paw tighter and tried not to cry from relief.

Once her mood was less crippling, they made good time, which was a good thing to her mind. They were exposed. Until they were inside the fox’s safe house, this “Wilde Times”, they weren’t safe. Her melancholy was putting them at risk, but she didn’t have time to feel guilty about that. Nick set a brisk pace, and Judy wasn’t about to fight. She could apologize later. In the meantime, she was grateful for the support, even if it was to his benefit too. Judy found she didn’t mind being useful to him.

Some minutes of brisk walking later, Judy finally found her voice. Coincidentally, that was also when they reached their destination, such as it was. She was unsure if his intent was to distract her, but it was welcome regardless. That said, it was a bit extreme as far as distractions went.

“This is it?”

“Indeed, it is,” Nick said with no small amount of pride.

“It’s a ruin.”

In response, the fox smiled in a way that both excited and unnerved her.

The approach to the warehouse was noticeably open and clear. Were she a military type—which she certainly was—Judy would say it was intentional. There was at least a half mile of clear sight lines from the building to the nearest trees or scrub. The river was at the structure’s back, and there was an overflow canal with an old stone bridge at the edge of the land which completed a circuit from the river past the trees. For an instant, she was back on the fringe, inspecting a small outpost. There was even a moat with a bridge.

Judy realized she’d been staring and hastened to catch up to the demon.

The rusted barn-style doors screamed in their rails when the demon forced them open. Dust and grime rained down on the rabbit and her host as they passed through the threshold. Judy was displeased at the unsanitary welcome, but was more immediately concerned with the degree of eagerness with which the demon led the way inside.
What she found there fascinated her.

“It’s a faire?”

“Obviously, the textbooks in Heaven are a bit outdated. This is what one calls an ‘amusement park’.”

“I’m familiar with the term. Why is it like this?”

“Once upon a time, this was the best entertainment for predators in the city. Rides, games, and diversions for all ages—predators only. Then a series of idiots got elected as mayors, and it got shut down. Supposedly, it was for safety reasons, but it’s pretty obvious that the twits in charge just hated seeing predators enjoying themselves. I bought the land and all the assets when it closed down almost fifty years ago.”

“Why?”

“Follow me.”

Judy followed with growing curiosity as the fox led her through the dusty maze of abandoned booths and decrepit or defunct attractions. Classic carnival games abutted ancient thrill rides. And dry rotted booths still held molding prizes to tantalize the kits and cubs. Everything held a gamour of memory and neglect. Clearly, this place had been loved by many. It was an unusually sentimental place for the fox to call home, Judy thought, until they came to the elevators at the back of the warehouse.

The structure itself was riddled with enchantments and incantations which hung heavy on the air. It was unlike anything Judy had ever seen or experienced before. As Nick entered the elevator, he beckoned her to follow. She did unquestioningly. It still frightened her that she was so trusting of a demon, but she barely hesitated. She was at a precipice and teetering on the edge. She knew it.

The symbolism of her situation was not lost on her. She was about to descend into a great secret on the part of her companion and protector, while also sinking deeper into temptation. Her companion was a demon of Pride and Lust—the Devil himself! Heavens only knew what kind of place he would call home, and she was being welcomed into it. She felt a sick joy well up within her as she admitted to one word: willingly.

The elevator doors opened on a black space. With a wave of the fox’s paw, low lighting flooded the
most lavish storage space Judy had ever seen. Half of the room was draped in satin over aged hardwood and rare metal finishes, while the other half was storage and shipping crates. Judy couldn’t help herself.

“What is this place?”

“My den of ill repute.”

“What do you mean?”

“This, Carrots, is my home. Not long ago it was to be my throne room—my bastion as ruler of this place.”

A sense of dread filled the rabbit as she asked, “Throne room?”

“Yes. My plan was a thing of beautiful simplicity.”

As he spoke, the fox moved with ease through the room. A carton of cigarettes was unearthed, and he wasted no time in sparking one to life. A thick, musky smelling smoke drifted from the ember, leaving scents of soap, mint, and lavender in its wake. Judy sniffed curiously, and the demon smiled.

“Want a puff?”

“I’ve never smoked, and I have no desire to start,” Judy stated firmly with her palms up in clear refusal. “I was curious since it wasn’t your usual brand.”

“It isn’t. This is a special blend of tobacco, cannabis, and catnip.” The fox took a long, deep drag and exhaled blissfully. “The authorities of this city take exception to two of those three components, and as much as I like to tempt fate…”

Judy pinched the bridge of her muzzle and grumbled, “Why is it every time I start getting answers, you end up giving me more things I need to ask about?”
“I’m talented. And you’re fascinated.”

Judy felt an uneasy elation at the truth of his words and buried her face in her paw to hide it.

“So—” he flopped onto a partly covered sete— “which do you want answers on? This place, my cigarettes, or tempting Fate?”

“Tempting anything is basically your hobby, so I’ll pass on that. And I don’t care about the smokes. Throne room story, please.”

“Alright. Fate was boring after the first time, anyway.” Nick pressed on before the blindsided angel could formulate another response. “Once I killed Buffy, I planned to seal Heaven and Hell into their own Spheres of reality and let them rot in their own sanctimoniousness and suffering, while I claimed this realm for my own.”

“You what?” Judy squaked, barely louder than a breath.

“I wanted the Mortal Plane. It was my retirement plan.” She felt ill as more smoke billowed around the recumbent fox. “Once Buffy was dead, I could seal the other realms out and take this place as my retirement home. No angels. No demons. Just a place for myself—away from the insane stupidity of the Wager and all its implications. A little peace away from everything I hated.”

“Why?”

“‘Why’ what? Why do that?”

“Yes!”

“Why not?”

“So, you would rule earth? What would you do with it?”

“Oh…. Not too much. Just reshape it to my liking over a couple decades. The modern age is so very
convenient with its technologies. Everything is for sale, and the whole world can be reached with ease, if you have a video phone. A little power in a Ewetube video and the whole world shifts a little…. I could have this pathetic little rock and the fleas on it dancing in my palm inside of a year. The whole world would be a drunken, debauched wonderland—a feeding ground for me to enjoy for a thousand years.”

Judy felt sick. Her knees were weak, and a feeling of betrayal made her eyes burn. She wanted to cry, scream—beg—for it to be a lie, but all she could do was take yet another blow right on the jaw. How could she have missed it? He was a demon. Of course, that was what he wanted.

“But as they say…the best laid plans of mice.”

“What can I say? My old plans have lost their luster. To Hell with them. I have mysteries to unravel and an enemy to fight. I find that more satisfying than a multi-centennial orgy, at present.”

Nick exhaled a great cloud of noxious smoke, and a skeletal paw took shape. Judy watched as the paw dug into the lid of another crate and levered it open. A large bottle of painfully expensive scotch was lifted free by the same vaporous appendage and tossed into the waiting arms of the smirking vulpine. Judy watched all this and tried to make sense of it. Once he had his bottle, he traipsed off towards a distant portion of the room, leaving her standing there alone.

Judy was too busy reeling from another blow to her reality. As though it hadn’t been enough to learn of Nick’s plans for after his revenge, now she learned they had changed. His plans and ambitions towards a megalomaniacal rewriting of the mortal world were altered. He had a new ambition—a smaller, more humble goal. After thousands of years of waiting for his retirement, as he called it, Nick was discarding it all. To help her. The Devil had decided to throw away his plans because assisting her was more satisfying than subjugating the whole of the Mortal Plane.

Judy decided to take a moment.

Demons lie, but he hadn’t. The bond told her that. She couldn’t be sure of his motivations, but he hadn’t tried hard to keep them hidden prior to now. She knew what he wanted. He’d been abundantly clear, but he’d also kept his promise to not use his powers to seduce her. Now, this. It was probably a gambit to push her. Just another move in his labyrinthian strategy to get her to go to him and fall.
It was working.

After everything she’d been through, there was little she could do but turn to him for support. She was terrified, abandoned and, now…suddenly safe, relieved, cared for. Judy wanted to hold on to her distrust and suspicions of him. He wanted her to claim her. She struggled to not find the prospect appealing.

She shook her head at the ironically paradoxical truth of her circumstances. Somehow, an eternity as the Devil’s plaything was a more desirable fate than serving the Heavens.

~

Nick found his home to be slightly dusty, but otherwise just as he had left it. That was only to be expected, as was his comfort at being home again. It was a relief to plunk his bottle down on the low table by his throne. He sighed happily as he lifted the dust sheet on an arm and ran his palm over the ancient wood of the chair. He could finally put it to its intended use.

He hadn’t lied when he told the rabbit about his plans. He had his retirement, at last! Hell was his to command, and heaven wouldn’t dare go against him in the numbers they’d need to for him to break a sweat. He was finally in a position to start his plans for the next few decades. So why had he said the rest of it? None of it had been a lie, but it hadn’t been part of his plans either.

The ambitions that had sustained him for eons were now, somehow, secondary to him at best. His kingdom of pleasures was a fond idea, but no longer desirable. His throne, as beautiful as it was, felt unimpressive, despite what it represented. When had it all changed? And why didn’t he mind? They were concerning questions of little account. The dust cloth fluttered back into place, and Nick lit another cigarette. The great cloud he exhaled quickly became a cluster of limbs which made short work of moving boxes and furniture to create a livable space for two small-ish mammals.

A large bed, chaise, and table settled around the large fire pit at the center of the room. His chest, a few crates of supplies, and a small chest of drawers for his roommate quickly found their way to join the cluster, along with piles of blankets and throw pillows and a small concession to the angel’s modesty—just what the doctor ordered for comfort. As an afterthought, Nick pulled out a box of smaller clothes, in case the rabbit wanted to pick through it for a change of pace.

Nick knew his little display of homemaking was appreciated from the little gasp behind him.
“I hope you find this acceptable.”

“The arrangements, or the display of power?”

“The accommodations. One would think you’d be used to the power.”

“I can’t say I am…” Judy commented as she distractedly ran her paws over her ears.

“What’s bothering you, Fluff?”

“You want the list? Let’s start with everything since dawn today.”

Nick offered the cigarette from his lips. “You sure you don’t want a drag?”


“There’s the bed right there.”

“One bed.”

“There was one at the hotel, too.”

“And a couch.”

“And a chaise.” Nick gestured to the space where her chest of drawers was. “And a place for you to unpack, complete with box or two for you to dig through to supplement your wardrobe—”

Judy forced a thread of flippancy into her voice. “A box of guests’ nighties?”
Thrift shop bargain bin. Comfort over class in that box. And all laundered, so no fleas.” He followed his assurances with a cheeky grin. “The nighties are in the wardrobe by the bed.”

Judy huffed a weak chuckle. “Of course they are.”

“An optional extra, if you’re so inclined.”

“My choice, huh?”

“And a changing screen for whatever you decide to wear,” Nick commented as he gestured to her little nook of their abode. “Off you go.”

“Um…”

“Do you need me to whistle so you know I’m not peaking?”

“No…. I trust you.”

“An angel who trusts demons. Now, I’ve seen it all!”

“Not demons. Just you.”

With those words hanging in the air, Nick watched as she slipped behind the screen and out of sight. The giddy feeling that rose in his gut had him opening the bottle and wanting to pour a healthy measure straight down his throat. Instead, he sat on the chaise and summoned a fire in the central pit.

Lowering the ambient lighting created a cozy atmosphere, limiting the distractions. He hoped it would calm her a bit. As a precaution, he had already raised the layered defenses. Nothing short of the full strength of Hell could even make a dent. Now, he could focus on a few other things of importance. A message to Finnick and the expenditure of a silver Coin later, he had two loose ends taken care of.

It was just in time to hear an obviously embarrassed rabbit ask, “Nick?”
“Yeah, Carrots?”

Judy stepped into the firelight dressed in long workout pants and a ratty t-shirt. She looked utterly adorable. Especially, when she started fiddling with the hem of her shirt. “Can I ask a favor?”

“A favor?” Nick flopped onto the chaise by the fire. “You want to make a deal with the Devil?”

“Not a deal with the Devil…” Judy stammered, smiling. “A favor from a f—friend.”

The atmosphere in the room went from cozy to electric on the last word. The demon felt his breath catch and, for a moment, golden light pulsed through him from claws to wingtips. Nick saw her catch the flicker and dismiss it as firelight in the same instant. He smiled and sat back on his seat, letting the moment slide.

“A nightlight?” he quipped.

She chuckled weakly. “I think the fire is plenty for that.”

“What’s your favor, then?” An ottoman found its way under his heels by way of another smoky paw and a show of forced nonchalance.

“To feel safe.”

Nick faced her and—again to his own surprise—spoke with full sincerity. “This place is as secure as the great House Vaults in the bedrock of Hell. Nothing can harm you here.”

“Pretty words, and I appreciate them. But that isn’t what I need.”

“What do you need then, angelfluff?”

“A hug?”
Nick’s mind reeled. A storm of feelings and reactions too basic and interlaced to disentangle engulfed him. Somehow, he didn’t show what he was feeling. He knew that much because the rabbit didn’t run. Instead, she was coming closer.

It took him a moment to realize why. His arms were up and open, inviting her in. While he tried to work out when they had decided to move, Nick missed seeing her climb onto the chaise and tentatively wrap her little arms around his chest.

What was left of his mind seized.

She was the Heir Apparent to Heaven’s throne—an angel and hunter of his kind. He’d seen her power and fought her twice. She was a warrior of consequence and not to be trifled with. In Nick’s arms, she felt…small. She was tiny, fragile, and very afraid—though not of him. She was trembling from fear and stress, but not pushing away. She grappled into his chest like a lifeline, seemingly finding it a challenge just to breathe evenly. An angel seeking sanctuary with the Devil.

Something in him twisted and gave. One of his paws rose to the back of her head and very gently traced over her ears. They were warm and velvety to the touch, but his caress had an impact on her as well. She shuddered, and he felt her breathing ease slightly. So he did it again. And again.

Many minutes later, Judy was snoring gently on the bed while Nick spun a brass Coin over his knuckles on the chaise. She had fallen asleep leaning against him, while he’d rubbed her ears. A bit awkward, but precious in its own way—both for its cuteness and, strangely, for its value to him. That part bothered him.

He added it to the list.

As he stubbed out his last smoke of the night, Nick pulled out all the Coins he had on him. Two Platinum Lucifers, a Golden Mammon, Eleven Silver Hoarders, and a smattering of Brass Fools. More than enough. Nick poured his immense will into the Coins, and they vanished, yielding to him their power. With it, he shaped a long series of very nasty surprises for anyone or anything that would dare to invade his home. It was barely comprehensible that anything could get in, but—with their enemy’s appearance at the hotel—Nick was less inclined to cockiness. Once his traps were set, he pulled out his phone and fired off a text to his favorite imp.

Antemurale Inferni Protocol in effect.
The response was immediate.

*Are you shitting me? I’m two hours from the surface!*

*No. We wait for dawn.*

*You owe me for this. I hate Golems and all that damn singing.*

*You hate everything but alcohol and that Cursori.*

*Fuck you.*

*First light.*

*Understood, sir.*

That done, Nick summoned his Spear and willed it into a long, paper thin blade. The scotch bottle’s top fell to the table top a moment later. As the Fox’s drink sat untouched and ignored through the long night, memories assaulted him of days gone by. Some were the ones that hurt the most. Others made his paws clench in anger or shake in horror. None hurt quite as much, regardless of the scotch.

In the wee, bleak hours just before dawn, a single memory drifted to the surface, interrupting and dispersing a little of his pain. It was a memory of one night, long ago, where he stood guard at another fire. That night, he had held his post, bearing the blessings and faith of the one he protected. His eyes snapped open as he realized the only difference between then and now was that, back then, he’d worn silver and white.
**Chapter 17**

Chapter Notes

Another chapter! It's like I'm on a roll, or something. Damrone and Blueberryandhoney did the Betas. kt_valmiri soundboarded. OnceNeverTwiceAlways edited. Full and due credit to them for their inspired support and long sufferance of my endless rewrites. This was a very fun chapter to write. I had no control over where it ended up, though. It grew a mind of its own and... This happened.

Nick liked having his paws occupied. Idle paws were the Devil’s workshop, after all. A saying he felt was amusing given the circumstances in which he found himself. The Devil was tempted.

Once he’d laid the little angel down to sleep, he’d faced a long night alone with his thoughts. That was nothing unusual in itself. However, sitting and staring into his memory was not a pastime Nick was particularly fond of. Until lately, it had been entirely impossible without suffering an attack. Now, he was able to—in part. Vast swaths of his memories remained locked away, but there were some he could still call up.

He’d given up trying to understand why so much of his own mind was hidden long ago. Now, things were different. He still felt the panic and pain, but it was muted. Enough for him to prod the edges a bit. His memory was like a wound. Too much attention and it would reopen, potentially leaving him a wreck or catatonic for days, and he could not afford the risk. Instead, Nick set to using his time more productively.
Once Finnick arrived, there’d be plenty of reading to keep him busy, but, in the meantime, there was still more to accomplish.

Nick set about cleaning up his Den. If he was to effectively fight this whatever-it-was he was up against, he needed to set his house in order, or at least clean out a working space. To that end, he began with organizing and clearing up the vast labyrinth of crates and boxes that cluttered his home. Silently. This required some time and considerable effort. His home was large, and he did not want to disturb the bunny. This, in turn, created another problem. It made using his power on a larger scale very costly. Mostly, due to his self-restraint.

He was already hungry, and his Sins were starting to chafe under his will. It didn’t help that he had an angel lying asleep—and completely vulnerable—in his bed. He could slake his desire and feed his Sins as easily as invading her dreams. He could take her then and there. It was even likely she would welcome him. The scent of her desire and her tumultuous emotions had been his intermittent companions for days now. A stray draft of air would carry her scent to his nostrils, and the Bond kept flickering open and closed, entirely outside either of their control. It was tantalizing.

He knew she was cracking and tearing herself apart because of it. He was elated. Thrilled! The corruption of an angel was one of the greatest legends in House Luxuria. Supposedly, a pleasure beyond comprehension. Nick was achingly close to confirming the myth, and his prey would be the Heir herself! The anticipation set his teeth on edge. Then, the memory of their enemy’s order to take her flitted through his mind, and his excitement soured.

He was no one’s puppet.

Additionally, there was the overwhelming desire to protect the little ball of fluff that the memory had triggered. That...thing...wanted her harmed and him to be the instrument of the harming. It was all quite vexing. So many conflicting drives. It was almost as though he were growing a conscience.

That thought stopped Nick cold.

Revulsion rolled through him, and he put the rest of his musing to the side. This was why he avoided introspection in the first place. Once the main hall had been cleaned up, Nick made his rounds to the rest of his oh-so-humble abode. There was much to do, and he was just the Demon to do it.

Nick wandered the halls of his home, refamiliarizing it with his presence. The armory and storerooms were paid visits. They had plenty of supplies laid by for months if not years under siege, if it came to that, and weapons to fight with. His wards and the spells that held his little bubble-outside-reality together were reaffirmed and thrumming with renewed vitality. The very stone and metal of the foundations came to life again in his presence—reviving after too long a hibernation.
His last stop was to his sanctum where he attended to a moment of private accomplishment. It was the one place in all creation where no one else had ever been. It was his. A table and chair, a bed, a shelf, and blissful simplicity. His own tiny, personal space away from running his new kingdom, or so it had been intended when he’d planned it. His sanctum, like his plans and so many other things, no longer held so much appeal to the fox.

Before he could turn introspective again, Nick got to work.

The halo he’d recovered after Buffy’s death flew from his paw and landed neatly on the post of the four-poster bed, hanging there in pleasing disrepute. Next, he summoned his chest and arranged his trophies and supplies across the small work table he kept there for later work. Then, he moved on to the rest of his gear and relics.

An hour past midnight, the room was looking much more lived in. He had several spells working and a new tincture brewing in his bowls. His daggers were clean and enjoying a meal in the company of his armor. The living liquid was quite pleased to visit with the weapons as it rested in its dish. His spear was reclining nearby, occasionally rippling in pleasure at being with his fellows again. His chest was purring in its corner. It felt good to be home.

The last of his preparations was done.

He returned to the main hall, leaving his gear to their respective meals and company. He felt no danger at being separated from them, as they would return to him with a thought. Instead, the order of the moment was a pot of coffee. A perfectly paw-ground helping of arabica beans and heated water, just on the edge of boiling, were combined in an insulated stainless-steel coffee press. The result was pure caffeinated transcendence. He set it on the table in what was, he supposed, the temporary kitchen in the main hall and settled in to wait for the rabbit. He even placed a second mug on the table in anticipation.

How domestic of me.

The thought was not welcome. It was another puzzle added to Nick’s list of annoyances and things he didn’t want to think about. There were simply too many questions and too few answers. The worst of them being the things he knew the angel was hiding. The Bond—first and foremost—but that was something he couldn’t push on just yet. The last time he’d tried, it hadn’t done anything useful.

A close second were his wings and why they looked like mangy feather dusters. He’d never been a fan of leathery demon wings, but one learns to accept what one must. After he’d lost and then regained them, he was sure they’d be the same misshapen umbrellas that they’d been since his arrival in Hell. Now, they were tufted haphazardly with black feathers, and, when he used power, veins of gold shone through the skin. Peculiar to say the least. It was reminiscent of black marble and strikingly pretty, he had to admit. The feathers, though, were itchy and threw off his aesthetic.

Nick was moderately relieved that he didn’t actually need his wings to fly. With the feathers, the aerodynamics of his wings were thrown off hideously. He’d fall straight out of the sky! Besides, they tickled.
Judy was less than calm as she stared at the most recent of her failed attempts at distracting herself. The file that she was trying to read was a mass of gobbledygook as far as her mind was able to ascertain. Any facts she should have been able to pull from it were lost in either her self-recriminations or the fire coursing under her skin.

Her day had been a disaster, and she couldn’t focus on anything. Nick walked past after setting up his map and tracking spell. Judy had to amend her statement.

*Almost anything.*

Her eyes were glued to him as he passed her seat on the throw pillow by the fire. She hated herself for how badly he was affecting her. He wasn’t even trying!

The start to her day was a near horror show for the frazzled angel. In the wake of the betrayals of the previous day, Judy was embarrassed to admit that she had fallen asleep on the fox’s shoulder. The last thing she remembered was working up the courage to ask for a hug so she could pretend that she was safe for a second. She was not expecting to actually feel safe in the demon’s embrace, let alone pass out. Then, the rapturous sensation of having her ears caressed had overwhelmed her. She had felt safe, comforted—completely trusting. She was out cold before she had realized she was tired. She had never slept better, or so she’d like to say. Her manner of waking, however, cast a severe shadow on her night’s rest.

She had slowly drifted towards consciousness on the wings of an excessively erotic fever dream, which had been embarrassing enough. Waking up with the aftershocks of pleasure trembling through her limbs was worse. There had been a huge wet spot on the bed under her, and she was soaked halfway to her knees. Judy had immediately checked the Bond, but it had been closed tight, for once. Nick was being true to his word. His powers were not in play. He was not using them to make her dance to his tune. That fact sinking in left her feeling thrilled and disgusted with herself.

“I just…. Oh, heavens help me.”

Then, she remembered what the heavens had planned for her. It didn’t do anything to help her state of mind. The mess was all her—as was all of the lead up to that result.

Judy had scrambled off the enormous mattress in mortification before flailing into her next big
mistake. As quickly as she could, she shucked her clothing and dumped it in a ball on the stained sheets. She muttered incantations for self-cleansing, followed by layered spells for concealment—all while checking the Bond in paranoid terror. To her brief satisfaction, it remained quiescent through her panicked spellcasting. With a deep breath, she set about her next task.

She went to rummage through one of the many boxes of clothes by the bed, only to find that the boxes been moved, as had the bed. It took her a moment or two to comprehend that everything in the now-expansive space was different. Her urgent need for clothing made it a moot point, however. She was completely naked and in the den of an incubus, after suffering severe porn dreams. The last thing she wanted to be was naked.

Or at least, she kept telling herself that in the hopes she could make it true.

The one thing she was grateful for in that moment was the fox’s consideration. He’d arranged a changing screen to partially shield her apparent bedroom from the rest of the cathedral-esque space. If he was going to see her naked, it would be in a manner of her choosing.

That thought brought her up short. A breath later, she was frantically digging through boxes.

After a few minutes, she found a shirt that could easily double as a dress on her and pulled it over her head, before casting a layered purification spell on her dirty clothes and the messy mattress. Once it was going and stable, Judy checked herself over. Then, she stopped herself. It didn’t matter how she looked. She was covered, and that was the important part. Judy fiddled with the buttons down her shirtfront as she left the spell to work its way through the damage she’d done and headed towards what, she assumed, was what passed for a kitchen in the Den.

There was more ambient light than last she remembered. She could see most of the room, and it was obvious she had missed a lot during the previous evening. The room itself was more like the inside of a cathedral than a warehouse basement. In fact, Judy couldn’t find any trace of industrial architecture at all. If the boxes and miscellaneous knickknacks were removed, she would have sworn she was inside the main sanctuary of a massive church. Light radiated from torch sconces set into massive columns. The center of the floor was dominated by the huge fire pit, and the ceiling stretched away into flickering shadows far too high up to be underground.

She resolved to ask Nick about it as soon as she found him and then promptly forgot about it when the smell of coffee coming from the other side of the fire pit tickled her nostrils. Her nose led her along, easily guiding her towards her host, despite the inconstant light and her lack of night-vision. Her relief at seeing Nick seated at a small table and enjoying a pot lasted until she actually looked at him.
There was nothing unusual about the fox to the naked eye. She’d seen it all before. He was the same rangy frame draped in fire-red and cream fur. His great wings arched up from his back, and he lounged in his seat without a care, holding a mug of steaming liquid. An easy smile and bedroom eyes—shirtless, of course—and lightly rumpled from wherever he’d spent the night. For a fleeting moment, she wished it had been with her, but she dismissed the thought. It took far more effort than it should have.

“Morning, Carrots.”

Judy realized she’d been staring and shook herself. “Is it?”

Nick’s eyes blazed in the wavering light. “Technically. Dawn is a way off yet. Couldn’t sleep?”

The fox filled another mug as she climbed into the seat opposite him, and she took it, happy to have something to occupy her paws with. “I slept well enough. How long was I out?”

“Several hours.”

“Really?”

The genuine surprise in her voice pulled a laugh from the vulpine’s throat. “Yes. We arrived yesterday afternoon around three o’clock. You’ve been asleep for almost twelve hours.”

“I guess I was tired.”

“You were exhausted,” Nick chortled. “All it took was a few strokes down your delightfully velvety ears for you to slip off.”

“So, that wasn’t a dream…”

“You had good dreams, sweetheart?”

Judy answered by smiling into her mug, her stomach twisting in a way she was too happy with.
A few moments later, she slipped back to the floor and collected her cup. She was about to turn the corner away from the nook where he sat, when his voice brought her up short.

“Getting dressed, Carrots?”

“Of course,” Judy tossed over her shoulder. “I can’t lounge around all day in a thrift shop shirt, can I?”

“That isn’t a thrift shop garment. It’s one of mine.”

“Yours?!”

“Uh huh.”

Judy looked up fearfully, horribly embarrassed for misusing his clothes. Her heart nearly stopped when she met his eyes. His mug blocked the lower half of his face, but his eyes were trained on her. They burned. Not with flickering tongues of hellfire or wreaths of demonic power or even with the wavering firelight. They burned with hunger. A hunger directed solely at her. She had never felt so vulnerable, or so excited.

“I know that you’re a little new to this, but you should know what you’re doing.”

“I’m going to get dressed,” Judy answered weakly, unsure she was hiding her ignorance of what he was talking about.

“You’re walking around wearing nothing but one of my dress shirts.” The fox sipped his coffee in the tense silence. “Trust me, I can tell.”

“I’m sorry,” she stammered, beginning to panic. “I didn’t mean to take it.”

“If you keep wearing it like that, you can keep it.”
“I don’t understand! What am I doing? And why can I keep your shirt?”

“Carrots, when a female wears a male’s shirt like that, it’s very…distracting. To an incubus, like me, well… much more so. I’ll leave it to you to figure out why that is. But here’s a hint: I love watching you walk around like that.”

The whole time he’d spoken, Nick hadn’t moved a muscle. His paw stayed on his mug as it rested on the table. He was still lounging comfortable, and there was no notable change from when she had arrived. And yet, the tension bleeding off him was almost thick enough to see, while his voice had dropped from his usual tenor to a husky rumble. Judy retreated to the relative safety of the bed and her clean clothing. With every step, she fought down the fear that he would chase her and, alongside it, her hope that he would.

Judy fled back to her little corner and poured power into the cleansing spell. As soon as it was done, she dressed and did her best to suppress her own reaction. The look he had given her had made her feel antsy and breathless. Unadulterated hunger had seethed in his eyes, and she swore she’d heard his glittering claws pulling long curls of wood from the table top as she had departed. She had never seen desire so raw, let alone have it directed at her. It made heat bloom in her belly.

She had spent the next several minutes finding angeldown all over the floor and willing it out of existence. Since then, the fox had kept his own company.

~

Nick was grateful as dawn approached. Generally speaking, he loathed the time of day. The great overture of the Heavens singing their own praises had been grating to him since he’d fallen and hadn’t gotten any better since. However, with things as they were, it was the only option. Once he’d initiated the Antemurale Inferni protocol, his private hidey-hole was untouchable until dawn. An irritating flaw in demonic magic, but what can one do in the face of immutable laws of existence? Dawn’s light weakened the defenses enough to allow departure. He could take them down, of course, but why would he allow Heaven the victory of seeing him yield? Clearly, his Pride was suffering if he was willing to be this petty, and he knew it.

He was armored, armed, and wrapping himself in an illusion, preparing to depart, when the little angel appeared.

“I’m coming with you.”
“Carrots, I’m meeting Finnick to trade a few Coins for some old books. Also, I’m the Devil. I don’t need a bodyguard, though I am touched.”

“And amused at the irony of an angel guarding the Devil,” she cheeked at him.

He shrugged. “Humor where one finds it.”

“Except, I’m not going to guard you.”

Nick grinned down at her. “You aren’t comfortable staying in my bachelor pad while I run errands? Really, sweetheart, I thought we were past that.”

“Har har. No. Frankly, I’m scared.” Judy admitted self-consciously. “I’m dwarfed by your power, but that thing backed down from me. I don’t understand it, but I know one thing. The safest place for me is with you, and if that thing attacks us, I’m more of a deterrent.”

“I’m…touched that you feel safest with me, and I can’t refute your logic. But it really isn’t necessary. If our enemy—”

Judy cut him off, sounding very put out. “Can we please give that thing a name?”

“Bothering you a bit, is it?”

“Unbearably.” She pulled her ears as she griped. “I need something to call it by just for simplicity’s sake. It’s driving me nuts.”

“How about Limax?”

Judy blinked. “Climax…”

“No. No, Limax. No ‘C’. It means slug in Latin. Didn’t you learn that in officer’s school?”
“No.”

Now, it was Nick who blinked in surprise. “No?”

“It was only an elective,” she defended.

“I can’t believe it. They ditched it from the required curriculum. What is the Host coming to?”

“I was more interested in practical skills. Ancient languages weren’t really a priority,” Judy retorted before shuddering. “You just had to remind me of that otter, didn’t you?”

“Fine.” Nick pouted theatrically. “You come up with something.”

“I know a few words of Latin. I think Lolligo means squid.”

“Lollipop!”

“NO.”

“It’s easy to remember and it isn’t a useless, ancient language,” He mocked.

“We are not naming it Lollipop.”

“Lollipop it is, then!” Nick chortled as he turned towards the elevator, a cigarette sparking to life between his lips.

Judy’s voice was a cross between a whine and a growl. “Nick….”

“Alright. If you’d feel safer from Lollipop with me, come on. We can go get our library books and then figure out food.”
“We aren’t calling it that!”

“You coming, Carrots?” the demon called over his shoulder. “Lots to do!”

“Damnit…”

For Judy, the tension was building, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was in over her head, and it had been that way for too damn long. Above and beyond her gaff over coffee and the mess she’d left on her bed, she’d been unable to tear her eyes off the demon whenever he’d been in sight. His scent was an opiate to her, his presence soothing. She was desperately in need of soothing, too. The horrors of the last week were still fresh in her mind. Dead mammals walking, cryptic conversations, constant defeats, endless mysteries, the feeling of powerlessness and betrayal.

Half the time she saw the fox, Judy wanted to throw herself at his mercy. The rest of the time, she wanted to burrow into his chest and sob. She needed an outlet, and, as she watched the ochre and char tail in front of her, she knew what half her mind wanted that outlet to be. Hollow, sucking feelings filled her at the idea, along with a crushing sense of depression.

Even if she did offer herself, she’d be a toy to him. Nothing more. She’d admitted that it was a better fate than what the Host had planned for her, but it wasn’t good enough for her. If she was going to give in—and it was only a matter of time—she wanted it to at least be on HER terms. She would lose everything else when she lost her grace, but she at least wanted her self-respect. She wanted her head held high as she fell.

The absurdity of the idea made her shake her head.

“You ok, Carrots?”

Judy looked up into the eyes of her demon and realized it wasn’t just her dignity she wanted. She didn’t want to be a conveniently disposable passtime. She wanted to be worthy. To the Host, she was worth nothing, and that was all she had ever considered. Her worth to the Heavens and their cause. Now, that was gone. And all she had left was him. She wanted to be worthy of the Devil.

Nick snapped his fingers. “Judy!”
“Huh?”

“What’s eating you?”

“Nothing.”

“Lie!” Nick crowed. “And I don’t even need the Bond to know it. You’re staring into space, even when you’re looking at me. It’s pretty clear you’ve been somewhere else in your head a lot. And your ears are droopy.”

Judy blushed and looked away.

“And what is that deal with that?” He sounded more curious than annoyed, but both were present. “You said there would be dire consequences if I lied, but all you can do is tell that I did. I was expecting a lightning bolt or crippling pain. Or at least a dope slap. What is the deal with that?”

Judy sighed. She knew she was caught. “It’s not meant to be a disciplinary tool.”

“It’s not?”

“It never was.”

Now, he only sounded annoyed. “What the hell, rabbit?”

“It’s called a hustle, sweetheart.” His put out expression pulled a tiny smile onto her muzzle.

Nick crossed his arms and glared. “So, what are the dire consequences?”

It was easier to say without seeing him, so she closed her eyes. “The Bond removes the capacity for deception with the understanding that hurting your partner by lying was a greater punishment than any physical pain you might receive.”
“Carrots…”

She cracked an eye to glance up at him. “Yes?”

“That doesn’t sound like a communication spell.”

Judy could only shake her head.

“Or a locator.”

All she could do was close her eyes again and hang her head.

“This isn’t the time.” She could feel the anger in his voice. And, to her shame, a tiny thread of hurt. She wanted to shrivel up and blow away. “We have to deal with Finnick, but you will be explaining that as soon as we are back in the Den. I have been patient and now I will have my answers.”

Judy nodded weakly. The disappointment she felt through the Bond was enough to make her wilt. She may have conned him and done it despite the strictures of the Bond, but it was a hollow, possibly pyrrhic, victory. Truth will out, and the price for her deception was hers to bear.

~

Nick felt queasy as the elevator doors opened. Yes, he was angry. Being deceived did that. He did have to give her credit. Pulling a fast one on him was damn impressive. Under normal circumstances, he’d praise her and let it go. Honestly, she deserved due acknowledgement for the con and slapping the spell on him, let alone stretching it as long as she had. Hell, if she’d pulled that on him in Hell, he’d have offered her a job on the spot.

It hurt, though.

For some reason, the deception hurt. The guilt and sense of failure that seeped through the Bond into his mind only made it worse. Why would she feel poorly about this? There was a reason. There had to be. Therefore, if the angel felt bad for deceiving him, he should be upset. That was normal. Wasn’t it? It had to be. It didn’t make sense, otherwise. If he only knew why he should be upset, he’d feel a
lot better. This was not the time for irrational emotional reactions. It didn’t help that the Bond had slipped open as though it had a mind of its own, filling him with her shame and regret.

Nick slipped out of the elevator car and through the maze of dusty carnival equipment. The subdued patter of little feet following him gave him some sense of satisfaction, but it wasn’t to last. His day took another unexpected turn as soon as the warehouse doors opened. The last thing he needed was the non sequitur of a bonsai imp and a Cursori running for their lives from a House Invidia hunting troop. Before he could react, the demon felt a rush of air as a grey blur shot past him.

This was simply not his day.

~

Elation drove her forward. It was perfect. She hadn’t had a decent fight since the Fringe, and her two times squaring off against Nick had been abysmal failures and unsatisfying, to say the least. Now, she had an outlet. She skirted the fennec and gazelle, coming in low and fast. The enemy was exactly what she needed: a challenge and an outlet. A Devil’s Dozen Brood, a Hunt Master, four Guardsmen, and a Lash. Judy dove in with a relish.

The Brood wasn’t a concern. They were an insane, drooling mass of bodies that barely resembled living things and only did as the Hunt Master ordered them through their collars. As soon as the Master was down, they’d lose cohesion and attack whatever was nearby, including each other. As they were all focused on their prey, they weren’t a threat to her. Judy’s tomahawk flickered into being, occupying one paw. Her long kukri occupied the other. Power seethed through her as she was finally back in her element.

Her momentum aided her as she hooked the beard of her tomahawk across a passing ankle, and she yanked. The leg traveled with her, leaving it open to a hard, downward chop from her other weapon. The knee shattered, along with the armor defending it, and the leg crumbled to dust. The Hunt Master was too focused on the hunt to see the former Cherubim Hunter dart between his legs and wasn’t aware anything was wrong until pain exploded through him. The caribou only had a moment to scream on the ground before his head was split from his neck, and he followed his lost limb into oblivion.

The next target was a corsac fox. Trading her kukri for her buckler with a gesture, Judy flicked out a back-handed strike with the rear spike of her tomahawk, catching him by surprise. His knees gave from the pain of a sudden emasculation, leaving his neck at the perfect level for the edge of her shield to slam into his spine. Bone and flesh shattered, leaving another corpse to vanish in the predawn light. A wolf and ibex fell next to a airborne tomahawk and an expertly wielded short sword.
That left only the Lash.

The Lashes were the spine of House Invidia’s command structure and signified by their namesake weapons. They were terrors to new recruits—not because of their prowess in battle, but for the Hunt Masters and the Broods under their command. There was a trick to them. Being the embodiment of Envy, they were very similar to magpies. They liked pretty things and were relentless in pursuing them.

Judy circled her last enemy, keeping her shield low and slowly spinning her short sword in her grip. She knew the panther was hooked when his gaze shifted to the weapon and stayed there. She left it exposed and vaguely drifted it forward into range. The moment the whip in the panther’s paw snapped forward, Judy gripped the sword. Before it could be yanked from her grip by the mass of leather thongs wrapped around it, she forcibly unsummoned it into the aether, taking the lash with it. Stunned, and suddenly disarmed, her demonic opponent was unprepared to defend himself.

Judy’s shield shattered one knee and her kukri split the armor and flesh on his hamstring as she slipped between his legs. Before he could react, she brought her blade down on his thigh, dropping him to the earth. She ended the fight by parting one arm from his body at the shoulder and opening his throat.

It was over far too soon.

She glanced around, half hoping that the Brood was still around to be dealt with, only to see a surprising sight. Gazelle was huddled behind Finnick who was standing well back the battlefield. However, the most remarkable thing of it wasn’t the Cursori hiding behind the tiny imp, but the fact that they were cowering away from Nick who was holding all thirteen of the Brood demons by the throats with the smoke from his cigarette. His wings were out, and fire poured from his eyes as he glared at her.

With a snarl and a gesture, thirteen necks snapped. She watched as he turned and stalked back towards the warehouse.

~

Nick was livid.

He could feel it in his breath and bones. His anger was so intense he could feel it charring his blood.
Fury coursed through him, and he had no outlet. Too much of this was his own fault, which only served to whet his ire further. How could he have been so utterly stupid? How could she be so stupid? He knew how stupid Hell could be, but that was the only saving grace in this farcical situation.

Tracing the dusty path back to the warehouse, Nick felt the blind rage building. He fought it. Dawn was about to break, and that particular pain was the last thing he needed just then. Footfalls behind him drew his attention, and he turned to find his little band of companions drawing close. Finnick looked terrified and surly. That probably had something to do with how the Cursori was latched on to him. He was embarrassed by her and terrified of his boss. Surly was his default setting, so that was just about right for as overwhelmed as he was.

Judy, however, was radiant. Victory and dirt. Defiance and concern. She was everything that infuriated him. He’d finally seen her fight and win. War suited her. She was beautiful.

He wanted to strangle her.

“Nick? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” He felt the falsely sweet bite to his words, but barely registered it consciously. “I haven’t a clue, Carrots. What could possibly be wrong?”

“You seem angry.” She looked nervous and a little afraid. It only fanned his anger at himself.

“That might have something to do with you charging off like that after telling me the safest place you could be is with me.”

“I knew I could handle it.” Judy couldn’t meet his eyes, but he felt her through the bond. He couldn’t name the emotion, but it was not repentance and was quickly becoming anger. He didn’t understand.

“ Obviously.”

“Then what are you angry about?”
“Why would you do that?”

“Do what?” Indignity and defiance dripped from her words and posture. “Protect Finnick and Gazelle?”

“I am the Devil, little angel.” Nick snarled. “I could have swept that troop from existence in a breath. Knowing that, why would you put yourself at risk? Why would you do something so foolish when I could have kept you safe?”

Judy exploded. “I will not be a burden! I don’t need to be protected. I can fight. I want to fight! I want to be useful! Even if I end up broken in Hell, I want that little bit of self-respect before I fall. So I can hold my head high one last time.”

“And you chose to needlessly fight demons one last time for the sake of the Heavens. Well done.”

Nick felt a touch of satisfaction at the results of his dressing down. The fact that it was a vindictive treat only added savor to the moment. It felt good to slap her wrist for endangering herself for no good reason. As the future ruler of Hell and all Creation, castigating angels would be an integral part of the job. One he would relish every time.

The bunny was positively steaming. Clenched paws, ears up and forward, nose twitching, practically growling. Yes, she had been suitably reprimanded.

She took him out at the knees with two sentences.

“I didn’t fight them for the Host, you arrogant prick. I fought them for you!”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This chapter just did not want to end. It seems that the story is just as eager as the rest of you to get to the good stuff. Good thing I'm on board and hammering away on the next chapter. My thanks to OnceNeverTwiceAlways for editing, Cimar, BlueberryandHoney, and Dam lone for beta reading, KT for all the cheer-leading, and Weaver for working with me on this. Holy monkey, we might be coming into the home stretch!

If you like what you see, consider buying me a coffee. The link is in my profile.

Onward!

The words echoed through the warehouse lot. Then there was silence. Silence and creeping relief. She’d said it. She’d actually said it.

She hadn’t even realized it herself, and it had spilled out of her mouth as naturally as breathing. It felt good. Like a weight was gone from her shoulders. She felt light and alive and free of an oppressive, crushing weight. So, now she knew! It was a hell of a way to find out, but there it was. And now he knew too. She was pleased that her statement had left the Devil slack-jawed and speechless, but Judy found it a moderate compensation for the consequences she was about to face.

He knew.

She knew that she was going to fall. She had always known. In tying herself to a demon as strong as Wraith, she had willingly placed herself in grave danger. She was now reaping what she had sown. And yet, he had shown more care and respect for her in their short acquaintance than Judy felt she had earned. There was no reason for an arch-demon, now the Devil himself, to treat her as anything but a pawn. He could have killed her many times over, but, instead, he had listened, treated her with a sarcastic respect, and—in his own strange way—accepted her. For all his posturing, his actions had shown her he was more honorable than she had credited him with. As it turned out, more honorable than the Host itself.

She had spent her entire existence fighting for a cause she believed in wholeheartedly. That cause was ash now. Her decision to ignore her Commander’s orders and pursue Wraith had placed her in a unique situation. She could, for the first time in her life, choose.

The realization of what those consequences could be turned her ears scarlet and dumped adrenalin to
her blood. Her heart rate tripled. Her relief and the satisfaction at his stunned expression were quickly waning, overwhelmed by a growing tide of stricken, pulse-throttling panic. She’d accepted her new ambition. She’d also spouted it off to the very male it concerned. The truth was out. And, if the fox didn’t respond soon, it would set her soul free from her body.

*If I don’t die from the embarrassment first.*

She was saved from self-immolation under the fox’s gaze by the Cursori, who bravely fainted, shattering the moment.

The fennec’s outburst helped.

“Zelle!”

The fact that she’d fallen onto the fennec helped too.

Nick’s voice was sprinkled with relieved amusement. “Zelle? Did you just call her by an endearment?”

“Shut it, Fox” came the fennec’s sharp reply.

The Cursori responded to the imp’s baritone. “Finny?”

“Finny...?” Nick snickered into his paw. “My my…. I’ll have to remember that.”

“I said, shut it!”

Judy was confounded. “What the Hell is going on?”

“I’m curious about that myself, Carrots,” Nick replied and turned to his subordinate. “And you tried to catch her, too! You’ve watched plenty of mammals keel over and not lifted a claw to help, but now, you’re being altruistic? Has the great edifice cracked at last?”
Judy grabbed the fox’s sleeve and yanked him down to whisper, “How does antagonizing him help?”

“He’s quick to anger. And angry mammals talk,” he crooned softly back.

“Of course they— You don’t trust him, do you?”

“Can we afford to?” Raising his voice again, Nick continued. “Trapped under an angel…. Tsk Tsk. Never thought I’d see the day.”

Still struggling, lying on his back under the limp ungulate, the imp spat “Like you have room to talk” with extra venom on the final syllable.

“Excuse me?”

The imp snarled. “There’s no excuse for you. And this is not the place.”

Judy watched the two demons stare at each other. She’d seen the two interact only a few times, and, in each one, their dynamic was very clear. Now, the easy chatter of annoyance and rebuke, tease and threat was gone. There was something happening, and she wanted very badly to know what it was. The demons were unobliging, however.

“Nick?”

When he turned to face her he was nothing but easy smiles as always, but Judy could feel the tension in him. The bond was open and steady. “Lets get inside, Carrots. We’re exposed out here.”

“Nick...”

His voice was even as he responded. “We’ll talk about it inside.”
“We’ll talk about it now,” Judy insisted. “This needs to happen, and if we wait it won’t.”

“I overreacted.”

She blinked in surprise. “A little, maybe. But why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I can feel that it does to you. Why?”

Nick huffed a breath. “You took an unnecessary risk. Foolish, but undeserving of so strong a reaction from me.”

Judy was getting more and more confused. “It wasn’t foolish. I needed to blow off some steam, and I know what I’m doing in a fight. Besides, you have my back.”

A shiver rolled up the demon’s spine before he answered. “Be that as it may, it was still a waste of effort. Those opponents were beneath you. Blunting your blades on them was unworthy of their use and your strength.”

Beneath her? Judy goggled.

At that moment, the cursing of the smaller fox distracted them both as he struggled to lift the barely sensate gazelle to her feet. Judy went to help.

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Finnick, are you really trying to move that angel all on your own?”

“Nope!” Finnick gestured to the rabbit pulling on the Cursori’s other arm. “Now, I got divine aid!”

“Do all demons have terrible jokes?” Judy groused, rolling her eyes. “Come on. We can get her inside the warehouse at least.”
“I can’t believe that this is what I have to deal with,” Nick grumbled and lit a cigarette.

“If you can whine and smoke, you can help,” Finnick countered. “If you ain’t gonna do that, then shut up and hold the door or something.”

The red fox’s collar pulsed red and quiesced. “We don’t have time for this.”

A huge cloud of smoke left Nick’s maw and floated over the pair of petite celestials as they struggled with the third. Judy and Finnick found themselves plucked from the ground by vaporous paws and lifted along with their unconscious companion. While Finnick seemed content to struggle and thrash as the smoke carried them towards the warehouse door, Judy was acutely aware of two facts. First, she was accompanying a fellow angel into the Devil’s Den. Second, she didn’t care about her own standing with the Host, but Gazelle was a relative innocent in their situation. Judy was many things, but she was not sunk so low that she was about to allow a non-combatant Cursori be corrupted.

She focused on the Bond and put her will behind it as she spoke and thought, “Stop!”

Nick flinched. Finnick hit the ground, cursing.

“What, rabbit?”

Judy fixed the fox with a hard gaze and stated, “I’m not letting you take another angel into your den.”

“Feeling possessive, are we?” Nick retorted.

“I will not allow her to be corrupted.”

“You really are a dumb bunny sometimes,” he snorted. “We can discuss this when we get inside. It’s almost da—“

Sunlight poured over the horizon. With the dawn came the chorus of the heavens bringing its benediction to the world. Both demons reacted poorly. Nick pinched the bridge of his muzzle and brought the two angels gently down to earth before terminating his spell. Finnick, meanwhile,
clapped his paws over his ears and writhed, before pulling himself into the shadow of a large rock and curling in on himself.

The crescendo only lasted a few moments, but it was obviously unpleasant for the infernal males. Judy felt invigorated though and was pleased when Gazelle’s eyes fluttered open. She was then surprised to see the divine messenger scramble to her hooves and open her wings as a shade for the imp hiding in a shadow.

Finnick slipped from behind the rock into the shadows of the angel’s wings and rasped, “Thanks, toots. I hate sunrise.”

“It’s ok.” Gazelle knelt over him, deepening the shadows. “Sorry I was unconscious.”

Nick chose that moment to insert himself. “It appears that this is a commonly used solution to dawnbreak. Very interesting isn’t it, Carrots?”

“Which part?” Judy replied. “The angel protecting the demon? Or the fact that it’s routine?”

“Are you sure you’re worried about the ‘innocent’ Cursori, now?” Nick asked sarcastically.

Before Judy could reply, the fennec fox leapt to his feet and bared his teeth. “I haven’t laid so much as a paw on her. And neither will you, Wilde.”

“I have no interest in doing so. But, as you are all so paranoid, I’ll lay your fears to rest. I have no interest in the Cursori. You need safe haven, and my home will suffice. You can accept my hospitality or not, but I won’t harm a feather on your lily-white wings.”

Gazelle nodded. “I will accept.”

“Good.” Nick smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “You can repay my generosity by explaining yourselves. Why you’re together and why you, Gazelle, are still here after being ordered home.”

“I’m curious about that as well,” Judy chimed in. “You know, as the one who gave you that order.”
“Excellent!” Nick chirped with his smile growing even less mirthful. “This just keeps getting better. We can get those answers and you can tell me all about the Bond! It’ll be sharing time at daycare.”

Finnick snorted. “I’m surprised you didn’t go for ‘show and tell’, boss.”

Judy watched a feral grin grow on Nick’s face. “You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine…”
The greater demon locked eyes with the imp. “Finny.”

~

Nick led the way back into the warehouse, blinking the last vestiges of dawn’s impact out of his mind. There were few things he enjoyed less than witnessing a new day’s beginning. Normally, he would shrug it off with a bit of discomfort and the rigorous suppression of memories, but now he was the Devil.

As the de facto apex demon, the dawn was a far less pleasant experience for him. He hadn’t claimed the throne yet, but the first light of the sun and the Chorus’ opening number had been quite painful. He’d managed to hide it, but he was not feeling terribly steady on his paws. He felt lightheaded, almost giddy—not a good accompaniment to pain. This was not helped by the envy he felt for his favorite imp. It was rare to find shelter out of doors like he had and from such a willing angel. There was a story to that uniquely symbiotic relationship, and Nick would know what it was soon enough. In the meantime, he did have one small pleasure to indulge in.

Finnick’s mumbled “Ah shit. This part” as the darkness enclosed them brought a small smile to Nick’s face.

As soon as the warehouse doors were closed behind them, the ground shuddered. Under their paws the floor shifted, liquefying and flowing. Nick closed his eyes and waited, listening with great amusement as the angels flailed in the dark. The only thing that amused him more was Finnick’s baritone cursing.

The floor of the warehouse was something Nick was particularly proud of. It had taken a lot of time and power to infuse the top several inches of material and bend it into a shape that was flexible enough to be useful while retaining the toughness needed to be worthwhile as a defense. He believed he’d pulled it off well, as was evidenced when he snapped his fingers and light flooded the room. His smile grew when he took in the fruits of his handiwork.
Both angels were restrained. Their lower halves bound in an amalgam of concrete. Limbs reminiscent of tree roots and metal vines hanging from the ceiling had snagged their forelimbs, entangling them. While the three celestials were restrained, the animate limbs had begun to shift over their frame, searching them. Finnick, who was completely cocooned in gently writhing metal and concrete strands, was left with only his head outside his tiny nest. With the lights on, he had given up vocally expressing his displeasure and simply glowered at his commander. In fairness, neither of the divine servants looked much happier, though the ungulate looked significantly more fearful.

“Nick!” Judy sounded very put out. “What is this?”

“This is him being an asshole!” Finnick answered for him. “Get us out of this shit!”

Nick was pleased. “Patience, Finny.” He leaned against the wall by the elevator and grinned. “You are being held by a battalion of golems I created to act as my first line of defense. They restrain unknown visitors and will release when they are done, or when instructed to by me.”

Judy seemed no more enthusiastic than Finnick. “Alright, Slick Nick, you’ve had your fun. Now tell them to let us go.”

“I could…” Nick replied. “But that would mean they’d forget you as soon as you’ve left my home again. It’s much easier to let them do their job.”

Still hanging uncomfortably, Judy asked, “What is their job?”

“To search anyone who comes a-knocking at my door. As soon as they’re done, I’ll introduce you and this won’t happen again.” Hearing Finnick growl Nick added, “I wouldn’t resist if I were you. They dislike it when you fuss. You have to let them do their jobs, or you know what’ll happen.”

Gazelle finally found her voice, if shrilly. “What will happen?”

“Finny?” Nick mocked. It was satisfying for him to see his creations work so effectively. The discomfort it caused the imp was the cherry on top. "Do you want to field this one?"

The imp snarled. “They’ll switch from ‘restrain & search’ to ‘blender’.”
Seeing Judy’s angry look, Nick amended, “They’re a layer of defense, and this is what they were
designed for. Take a deep breath, and let them finish up. You’ll be on the ground in a moment.”

Moments later, the golems restraining Gazelle finished up and slithered off the terrified Cursori. In
response, the angel fainted again.

“What an angel, isn’t she?” Nick observed.

“Not all of us are warriors,” Judy commented as the tendrils gently released her. “There’s a reason
she’s a Messenger.”

“No doubt.” He turned to his fellow demon. “You almost done over there?”

“Shut it, Wilde!”

“I thought he knew how to handle these things,” Judy stated, helping the other angel in the room to
her hooves.

“He does, but he’s Finnick. He doesn’t take restraint well. Or being picked up.”

Gazelle’s bleary statement of “He’s never complained when I’ve done it” as she regained her footing
got her two very surprised looks.

Finnick bared his teeth. “Not a word.”

Judy and Nick looked at the tiny fox and the murderous expression on his face. What got their
eyebrows to rise was the light pink gracing the inside of his enormous ears.

“Not. A. Word.”

This was a turn of events that Nick had never expected. The implications alone were astonishing!
Finnick was hardly sentimental, let alone caring. He had never defended anyone to Nick’s knowledge. Uniform indifference to the suffering of others wasn’t unusual for demons. It was fairly standard, really, but Finnick was unusual even in that respect. He was a true mercenary, even among their kind. It was one reason Nick liked having him around. With Finnick, he always knew where he stood. That was no longer the case. Finnick showing an interest in someone other than himself, and an angel at that, was new and worth exploring. A plan began to form in his mind.

A few awkwardly quiet moments later and the fennec fox was on the ground, dusting himself off and shuddering—muttering about how much he hated golems. Nick was grinning like he had just gotten a fantastic present, and the angels were somewhere between embarrassed and amused. Then, Finnick looked towards the elevator, preparing to stomp off, and was brought up short.

Looking at the lintel of the door, the imp muttered, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The angels looked up as one, but their reactions were very different. Gazelle snickered nervously behind a hoof, while Judy just looked confused.

“Huh? What is that”

The little fox pointed at the lintel and read, “Omnes pudicitia linquenda vestri intratis hic. Latin words written in the Theban alphabet. Roughly, it translates to ‘All virtue abandon, ye who enter here’.” Finnick turned to Nick in exasperation. “I can’t believe you actually did that.”

Nick grinned in complete self-satisfaction.

Gazelle murmured, “Isn’t that the inscription on the gates of Hell?”

“Close.” Finnick gestured at the red fox. “For Hell it’s ‘hope’ not ‘virtue’, but look at our host.”

“I shouldn’t find that funny.”

“Too long around me, toots,” Finnick replied.

“Am I the only one here that doesn’t read Latin?” Judy grumbled.
“Looks like it!” Nick chortled. “Even the imp is better educated. Ouch.”

“Hey! I read Enochian and modern mortal languages just fine, thank you!”

“You might want to brush up on the classics a bit.” At that, Nick winked and led them into the elevator.

The descent to his Den was a quiet, awkward affair, until Finnick broke the ice, much to Nick’s surprise.

He turned to Judy and said, “Nice work on that asshole Lash. I’ll have to remember that trick.”

Gazelle scoffed. “I’m surprised it wanted your sword at all. Don’t divine weapons burn demonkind?”

“They do,” Judy answered. “I don’t know why it works. But when you’re in battle, it doesn’t matter.”

Finn shaking his head got both angels’ attention.

“What?” the rabbit questioned. “You know?”

“All demons do,” Finnick answered. “The Lash knew it would hurt, but it was pretty. Envy is the House of the highest regret in Hell. They miss their beauty from when they were angels. They hunger for it. It doesn’t matter to them that it hurts. Some officers wear angelic plate maille into battle just for the vanity of it.

“And to brag.” Nick’s comment was full of scorn.

“But why?” Gazelle inserted. “The pain must be intense!”
Nick snorted and leaned against the wall. “Excruciating. And that’s nothing.”

The ungulate shifted closer to the fennec. “What do you mean?”

“It’s Hell. Pain is everything.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If I had a Nickle…” Nick rolled his eyes and kicked open the elevator doors, leading them into his home. “In Hell, everything hurts. Breathing, walking, blinking…. Agony is the only constant.”

The rabbit hurried to keep pace with him. “So, nothing feels good at all? That’s got to be wrong. Otherwise how would Lust work?”

“It works.” Nick stated bitterly as he led them into the kitchen area, starting to make a pot of coffee. “Sex is excruciating in Hell. In the centuries I was used as a party favor in the brothels, not one demon felt pleasure. No matter how many times they used me, or how often they climaxed.”

“Then what’s the point?”

The red fox stopped and met her eyes. “The only good feeling in Hell comes from hurting someone else.”

The sound of Finnick breaking into a nearby crate distracted the pair. They watched Gazelle hold the lid open for him, while he fished a bottle out of the packing material and cracked it. As he chugged, Gazelle hovered at his shoulder. Nick raised an eyebrow at the unusually easy atmosphere between the two.

Nick shook himself. He didn’t understand why talking about this was so difficult now. He’d never had trouble talking about pain before. It was a fact of reality. One he thought he’d dealt with sufficiently to put to rest.

He took a deep breath and continued, “In Luxuria, when I was used, it was so they could feel the satisfaction of giving me more pain than they had. Some were quite inventive.” He couldn’t keep his
eyes from dropping at the memory. “And enthusiastic.”

“Is that why demons are so fixated on escaping?”

Nick’s chuckle was sour. “Congratulations on guessing the obvious, Carrots.”

“There’s no need to be rude,” Judy replied, chastened. “We don’t learn about this stuff in the Host.”

“And you aren’t encouraged to think about it either,” Nick quipped sharply.

“I’m trying to understand you.” Judy quickly amended, “Demons, I mean. We’re taught that you’re subversive traitors who want to invade or destroy all of Creation. That’s sounding less and less accurate as time goes on.”

“Well, they aren’t wrong. Sometimes, I think you angels forget that Hell is a prison. We’re basically convicts who took over their gaol. Demons may run the place, but only a few of us can actually leave. That’s the trouble. The whole of my kind is trapped in Hell—a place where sanity is rare and pain is constant. There is no end to it and no hope, other than escape. The only way to do that is getting here.”

Judy swallowed thickly. “But there’s only so much demonic power that the Wager can take…”

“That’s right, rabbit.” The fennec snarled. “The few lucky ones like us get to come up here for little vacations, playing games with you pigeons and hoping you fuck up enough that we can all get out.”

“So, once you’re here, you don’t want to go back.” It was apparent from her deepening scowl that Judy was liking this less and less. “Why do you?”

Nick scratched at an ear and flicked it. “We go back if we’re ordered, because failure to comply is… not a wise decision.” Coffee slipped from a carafe into a mug while the demon spoke. “If we refuse, or threaten the Wager in any way they’ll issue a bounty. That’ll bring every other demon on their tail. Once they catch you, you go home and Hell is well known for its aptitude at finding ways to hurt.”

“Catch? I would have thought that dead or alive was the best you’d get.”
“Death is a mercy that no demon would grant another.” Nick sipped his coffee in the silence following his statement. “Bounties are only paid if the target is alive. Anything past that, however, is negotiable. Our only hope is that, if we play this stupid game with the Host long enough, there’s a chance we can come back for another mission or—Misery willing—bring the Host down and win our freedom.”

Judy cringed as she asked, “What happens then?”

“The same thing that happens when any demon is allowed out of Hell.” Delight flooded Nick’s expression. “We revel!”

“On a planar scale…”

“Which is why you lot are so eager to keep us bottled up, I suppose.” He commented with a shrug. “You can’t have your precious mana farm ruined by a bunch of desperate, PTSD-riddled traitors, can you?”

“You just want freedom.”

“Damn right,” Finnick boomed. “We want out. And if that means claiming the rest of reality, we’ll do it and damn the consequences.”

Judy held up a paw. “Just to clarify, you don’t suffer outside of Hell?”

“Only between our ears.” Nick replied around his mug. “A certain amount of what happens to you in Hell stick with you, you know?”

“That explains the troop following Finnick.”

“I can think of four explanations for that.”

“Only four?” Judy quipped.
Nick raised an eyebrow at her and continued, counting off on his fingers. “One, he was stealing from the Archives. That’s worth a reward if they catch him. Two, he has the smell of the mortal world all over him.”

Judy interrupted. “From what you’ve said, that would be plenty of reason for any demon to hunt him. If they could find a crack to crawl through, they’d get a temporary pass to freedom.”

“Exactly.”

“Wonderful.”

Nick chuckled. “Reason number threesie, he’s been around an angel. That lingering trace of the divine will attract any demon, but members of Envy, Pride, and Lust most strongly. Let’s be glad they only had a troop of Levi’s House and not either of the others.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Or gluttony. I couldn’t handle a Gorger right now.”

“Not the most pleasant of companions, are they?” Nick commented and dove back in. “The last one, however, is the most likely. Finnick has the smell of me on him from his status as my servant. My power fingerprint is on him, and I’m the Devil, so the demons will seek out their new master.”

“Creepy….” Judy rubbed her arm and tried to avoid shivering. “Now, that covers the why of it. How did they follow you? I thought the realm was sealed.”

“It was,” Nick grumbled.

“Was?”

“Yes.” He sighed. “Was.”

“What?! How?!” Judy exclaimed. “Aren’t you all the demon reality can handle?
“High praise Carrots, but no. When we went to my Den I was technically outside of the world.”

She was incredulous. “So, Heaven and Hell could have sent in legions and you’d have been none the wiser?”

Nick surprised himself by having the good grace to look sheepish. “A small trade off. Perfect privacy has its price.”

“Vous call that small?” she shouted.

“Comparatively? Yes.” Judy was about to explode, but Nick stopped her with a raised paw, intoning, “Calm down, rabbit. The wager is intact. The demons are gone. And the Heavens haven’t made a move.”

“How did you not break the Wager, though?”

“I felt something was off and muted my power without thinking about it when we left the Den. Once I had the Brood by the throat, their power was suppressed under my own. And you neatly killed the rest of them, so I could let my wings out again.”

Nick knew she was in no position to argue, despite how overly tidy answers seemed. “Alright, fine. Is there a way to fix it so you can keep Hell out while you’re in your Den?”

“Yes. I am loathe to do it, but there’s no choice.”

With a flick of his wrist, Nick summoned his spear and touchstone, eliciting a gasp from the two newcomers. He slashed upwards rending a small hole in the air. He tossed his touchstone through the hole and sealed it, a mou of displeasure pinching his features.

Judy looked between the place where the hole had been and the fox. “What did you do?”

Nick grimaced, turning back to his coffee. “My touchstone is a piece of me. So long as it’s in the world, so am I.”
“Where did you put it?”

“That’s my concern.” He sipped his coffee. “Now…what do we want to start with? The Bond? Or the story of the Angel with Horns and the Imp?”

Gazelle shook her head and muttered, “Through Hell with a servant of the Devil…”

Nick blinked in surprise. “Well, sweetheart, I think we have a winner.”

“Cursori Gazelle…” Judy started, her voice low and suspicious.

The angel in question startled and snapped to attention, “Yes, Acting Commander?”

“Did you go to Hell with that imp?”

“I…um…” the Cursori stammered.

Nick blinked again, grinning as he saw the lesser angel’s discomfort. Finnick’s gagging on his drink and panicked expression as he met his master’s eyes was all the confirmation he needed to know for sure.

“She did,” the greater demon purred, before turning to his bunny. “Carrots, I think you should have a little girl-talk with your colleague, while I have a chat with little Finny. I think she’ll feel a little more...comfortable discussing this with you one-on-one.”

Judy nodded uncertainly. “That may be a good idea.”

“Come on, Finnick,” Nick said, putting down his mug. “We have a few issues to address, don’t you think?”

Nick led the way out of the central hall and through a small maze of cloisters and hallways, but not
before collecting a bottle and a pair of glasses on his way out. He knew the imp was following him from the patter of tiny paws with little claws echoing up from behind him. This was a delicious turn of events, but not the main point of interest for getting his old comrade alone. There was plenty they had to discuss, and not all of it was for angelic ears.

~

Judy watched the two demons slip out a door that she was unfamiliar with. When she had a chance, she would have to get a tour of her temporary residence, but that would have to wait. There were more pressing concerns, some of which took precedence over her own curiosity. And her hunger to stay with the fox. His pain and vulnerability stirred in her a desire that she was unfamiliar with. She wanted to ease his discomfort, though the idea seemed particularly ridiculous now. How could one lessen such a burden of misery? Looking at her fellow angel, now seated across from her with a cup of tea, another question floated to the foreground of her mind.

“Why—in the name of All Things—did you follow an imp into Hell?”

“I didn’t, ma’am…?”

“Then what did you do?”

“I helped him, ma’am.”

“You helped him….” Judy massaged her temples. “How exactly?”

“I’m not sure, Commander—”

“Enough with the titles! My name is Judy. Now drop the formality, and tell me what happened! And why are you not in the Heavens as I ordered you?”

“I was ready to return, but I was issued higher orders. I sent on my reports and all the information as you instructed. But, once I did, I was ordered to stay and await instructions. So I did.”

“So where does ‘Finny’ come into it?”
Judy was surprised to see the nervousness that suffused the horned angel at the mention of her pet name for Finnick. Wringing her hooves, Gazelle shuffled in her seat. It was almost comical. Judy would have laughed if she hadn’t seen so similar a reaction in herself when it came to her own fox. The parallel was sobering.

“I needed protection.” Her eyes were drawn to her hooves as she fiddled with them. “I’m just a Messenger. I can fight, but I’m not a warrior. There were no other angels to turn to, so I went to who I thought I could trust.”

“You know…” Judy walked to a chair and slumped onto it with a wry chuckle. “Not long ago I’d have a hard time understanding that statement when applied to a demon.”

“Me too, Ma’am—”

“It’s ‘Judy’. Go on.”

The fiddling continued. “After his help during the riots, I figured he’d be a good bodyguard.”

“Good choice.” Judy nodded. “I think.”

“For an alcohol-fueled anger generator, he’s not that bad,” Gazelle admitted, embarrassedly. “He’s also quite a mystery.”

Judy’s head tilted. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t place his Sin, Ma—uh, Judy.”

Judy smiled weakly. “Somehow, I’m not surprised. Demons seem to be a fascinatedly enigmatic. Lets just skip to the part where you assisted an imp infiltrate a secure facility in Pandemonium.”

“It’s fairly simple, really,” Gazelle admitted with a shrug. “He opened a portal, and I used my magic to sustain it. Because of my affinities for traveling, it was easy for me. He went and did whatever he
did and came back running with a troop on his heels.”

“Uh-huh…. ‘Through Hell with a servant of the Devil’ was it?” Judy sipped her tea. “How did you ‘go through Hell’, if that’s all there was to it? You couldn’t have left the portal. And you would have been a beacon in the darkness if you’d set hoof in Hell. Explain.”

“Well, Finny—“

“And you’ll explain the nickname when you’re done.”

“OK…um,” she cleared her throat. “Finnick had some tools and relics he was going to use to break in. I saw them when he was preparing to go in. I…offered to help him.”

Now, Judy was all focus. “What? How?”

Gazelle’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I put one of my feathers in his Paw of Glory. It had some unintended effects.”

“You—“ Judy was split between being upset at her subordinate for putting herself as such risk in trusting a feather to a demon. Then, realizing she didn’t have any room to talk, she elected to focus on the other part of her statement. “What kind of effects?”

“The Paw creates light that only the bearer can see. With my feather, it let him see through walls, or so he said. The problem was that the Paw burned out quickly and the feather was exposed in Hell before it winked out of being. That was what caught the attention of the Troop.”

“Well, that answers a few questions…” Judy commented.

“It does?”

“Yes, I’ll explain later. but first, were there any other effects?”

“Yes…” The hesitation in her voice made Judy very uncomfortable. “There was a secondary effect.
Judy leaned forward. “You what?”

“I could follow him. Like I was looking over his shoulder, or sitting on it.” Gazelle shook her head, obviously uncertain about what she was saying. “I had no control, but I could see everything. It was me that spotted the troop. If I hadn’t looked behind him, he would’ve been ambushed.”

“Oh, wow…” Judy breathed.

“Judy, have you ever heard of demonic and angelic powers mixing like that? I’d intended to give his relic a boost, not change its nature.”

“Yes. Once before. Nick and I combined divination and scrying. The result was a silver trail to our goal.”

“That’s…odd….”

“Very,” Judy commented blankly.

“It’s a pity really.”

Judy was confused. “Pity? What do you mean?”

“We won’t be able to keep this all a secret from the Host.” Gazelle’s concern was clearly not for herself. “Once they find out, there’ll be trouble.”

“That’s if they find out,” Judy assured. “We don’t have to tell them.”

“If they ask, we will have to answer.”
“We have options.” Something bothered Judy. She wasn’t sure exactly what, but....

“We can’t lie, Commander,” the Cursori insisted. “We’re avowed against it.”

“But I’ve…”

Something was wrong. Very wrong. Judy had known for some time that there were some parts of the reality she was in that didn’t make sense. But with all the madness she’d been embroiled in, there’d been no time to assess it. Now that she had the time to think and a little outside perspective, it was clear. She felt like she was in freefall.

“Commander?”

“Gazelle, lies should destroy us.” Her words sounded breathless, even to her.

“Yes…? We know this. What’s wrong?”

“Cursori, I lied to you when I ordered you home. I’ve lied to Nick for a week now. Lies of omission, lies of misdirection, white lies—all skirting the truth. All dishonest. By rights and my vows, I should be dead!”

~

Nick led the smaller fox along until they reached what, in a cathedral or monastery, would be considered the head priest’s private quarters. They had been repurposed to better suit the former-archdemon’s personal preferences. It was small and bare, but the walls were studded with chains and manacles and there was plenty of space to work. A small table, currently unoccupied, sat off to the side of the room with a single chair. He called it his study.

The glasses were filled and the bottle of dark red wine was placed on the table before Nick turned to address the other fox. He was looking unsurprisingly nervous.

“Come on, Finnick. Take your drink. I know you want another.”
The imp’s reply was as sullen as it was hesitant. “Um… Sir… I…”

“Just take the damn glass.” Nick sighed impatiently. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Really?” The imp’s voice was cautiously optimistic.

Nick sipped his wine and replaced his glass on the table before answering. “For what? Duping an angel into helping you? Keeping her close so you can work on corrupting her while she pays you for the privilege? That’s what you did wasn’t it?”

The fennec stared into his glass as he answered, “Yes, sir.”

A partial truth. Perfect.

“I have to give you credit. I didn’t expect such subtlety from you. It’s quite impressive.”

Finnick sipped from his glass uncertainly. “Thanks, boss.”

“Don’t look so nervous,” Nick crooned. “I told you outside that I’m not interested in your little horned pigeon. My own is more than enough to keep me diverted. In fact, I hope you succeed. Bringing down a Cursori will certainly get you a proper Rank.”

“I know.” Nick saw the wheels spinning behind the imp’s eyes. “It’s the best opportunity I’ve had in a long time. I’m not going to fuck it up.”

Leading the conversation was child’s play. “And yet, you want something.”

“You offering me a deal?” Finnick’s calculating gaze shot to his boss.

“I am the Devil, Finny-poo,” Nick replied with due sarcasm. “It’s sort of my thing, now.”
“If I can make her fall, what rank would I earn?”

The anger in Finnick’s voice surprised Nick. He’d said nothing to provoke anger. Irritation, yes, but not anger. That meant there was an internal reason. There were a few reasons that could apply, but in light of Finnick’s recent reactions, only one applied. Nick was used to the self-loathing and anger that permeated the little demon, but this was unusual for him. It was time to push the little fox to see how far he’d go. Perhaps there was a drop of genuine truth to be found through it.

“In a House? Or under me, personally?” Nick asked, lightly.

“Both.”

“Well, a House would give you an earldom, most likely. I’d see you made a Count.” Nick raised his glass. “That’s a far step up from Imp.”

“No House will have me, either way.” The pall of self loathing around Finnick intensified. “If I swear to you, will you keep your word on the Rank?”

“Yes. Do we have an accord?”

Finnick looked like he was choking on the possibility. “One condition.”

This was it. “Oh?”

“Keep the rank of count. I’ll be an earl.”

Nick rolled his eyes, affecting amusement. “And?”

“And I get the Cursori.”

Jackpot!
“Oh…. Oh my…. ” Nick bled his genuine glee into condescension. “Is little, broken Finnick getting attached to his meal ticket?”

“She’s an angel,” the imp barked. “If I have her, I may be able to repair myself. Or at least feed my Sins for once.”

The reasoning may have been genuine, but it felt cobbled together. The thread of desperation in his voice didn’t help. Demons were used to their personal suffering, so the reasoning didn’t hold up. He wasn’t desperate for himself.

Nick felt his smile turn vicious. “One empathizes.”

“I know.” Finnick drained his glass and hopped onto the table to refill it. “I can see the hunger in you. Well?”

Nick leaned in. “You make that angel fall, and she’s yours. Along with a rank of Earl, or higher. I’ll give you command of a Legion under my banner too.”

Finnick spit the word like it hurt him. “Deal.”

“But!” Nick barked. “If you can make her submit to you willingly—keep her wings and still bow to you…I’ll make you a Baron. Still a deal, little demon?”

The fleeting look of relief on Finnick’s face was all the confirmation Nick needed. He was a drowning soul, and Nick had thrown him a lifeline. The fennec was more than just attached.

“Deal.” They clasped paws, and Finnick yanked Nick down to his level. “But if you call me little again, I’ll bite your face off. No matter who you think you are.”

“That would be low of me. I’ll try to rise above it.” The imp’s growl tugged Nick’s smile wider. “Now! Before the angels get bored and start looking for us, tell me: What is Hell looking like these days? Utter chaos, I presume?”
The imp huffed a dry laugh and hopped off the table. “You don’t know the half of it.”

With a wave of his paw, Nick summoned a stool for the imp to sit on. “Explain.”

Finnick slumped onto his seat, taking a long pull from his glass. “I know you wanted to keep the Houses squabbling to buy you some time, but you may have made a mistake. The city is tearing itself apart.” He drained his glass, and Nick refilled it. It was empty again a moment later. “Something is happening down there. The Old Citadel is acting up. Weird power surges, walls shifting and growing…. The old defensive pylons around Tartarus are glowing for Misery’s sake! There’s even a rumor that the Obsidian Throne was purring.”

Nick paused with his glass at his lips. “That’s disturbing.”

“It’s fucking terrifying!” Finnick shouted. “Those defenses have been dead since Lucifer’s rule! The throne has been a blob of rock since his disappearance, and now it’s waking up!”

“The first ruler of Hell….” Nick sipped his wine. “Such a tragedy….”

“Tragedy my ass.”

Nick blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t believe he’s dead.”

“Is there something you know that I don’t, Finnick?”

“Lucifer vanished. We don’t know he’s dead.” He shifted uncomfortably on his stool. “It was kept quiet, and the idea of assassination was the easiest rumor to encourage. But that’s all.”

Nick put down his glass and leaned forward in his chair. “Encourage…? You mean—”

“Yeah. I was.” Finnick shuddered. “I saw the Trident laying across the Throne as that creepy ass chair wailed like a banshee in mourning.”
“If you were there, you were a witness.”

“No!” he barked. “I know nothing. The interrogators made sure I didn’t. I was just a house imp, but they worked on me for months. I told them nothing. Not even when they got creative.”

A horrible thought crossed Nick’s mind. “Is that why you are the way you are?”

“Yeah. I’m fucked up because of them. I had nothing to tell, but they weren’t about to let a toy go unused.” The imp seemed to draw in on himself. “I escaped when they got sloppy. And I wasn’t fun anymore, so they didn’t look. They never found proof Lucifer was dead, but they declared it once Buffy claimed the Throne. I’d lay good money that crazy bastard is still alive, somewhere.”

“And now, the Throne is singing again.” Nick shrugged and sipped from his glass. “Just another day in Pandemonium.”

“Bullshit! The fucking Leviathan showed up!”

For the fifth time in ten minutes, Nick found himself confounded. This was truly a day of surprises. “Levi? Are you sure?”

“Le—I’m not going to ask.” Finnick raked a paw over his face. “Yes. The beast of the deeps himself just strutted out of the Styx and sniffed around the Old Citadel for a few days. He’s been back a few times since, according to my spies.” The imp dropped his glass onto the table and upended the bottle, draining it, before continuing. “Something bad is going down in Hell, Nick. And it all started when you axed Baphomet.”

“It was more like I pulverized him,” he preened. “But that’s beside the point. This changes things.”

“We need you on the Throne. Now.” Finnick’s forcefulness fascinated Nick.

“Not happening.” The red fox replied. “My word binds me, and I have business here. I will stay until it is concluded.”
“Don’t take too long, or we may not have a Hell to go back to,” the fennec groused. “Hell can rot for all I care. But it’s our bargaining counter against Heaven, remember?”

Nick conceded. “I’ll do what I have to and get my tail on the throne before Pandemonium is in ruins. If I have to be shackled to a throne, I want a kingdom worth ruling, not a pile of rubble.”

The Devil raised his glass to his companion before sending the rest of its contents down his throat. Then, he felt it.

Nick felt something as he placed his glass back on the table. A surge of tension and focus flitted through him, followed by a sense of immanence. The Bond was not open. He knew she was coming and quickly. He didn’t know how, but his Bond mark burned. And only a moment later, the rabbit burst through the door, dragging a very confused gazelle along in her wake.

~

Judy was incapable of lying. She was bonded against it. Sworn. Any falsehood should have been excruciating to her. She’d seen the results of it in Heaven and the Fringe—soldiers in court-marshal or making reports. Falsehood was always known, and the penalties were always severe. And yet, she’d been skirting flat out dishonesty the entire time she’d been on the Mortal Plane. She hadn’t exactly told outright lies—but lies of omission? Yes. Evasion? Yes. Misdirection? Clearly. She’d equivocated and gotten by on technicalities since she’d arrived in the city.

How?

It should have been impossible. It was impossible. She should have been writhing in pain the first time she’d told Nick about the “consequences” of lying with the bond. She’d been technically correct, but had omitted the details, allowing him to fill in his own assumptions. A simple trick that shouldn’t have worked. A demon’s trick. Mortals could bend those rules, but any form of dishonesty would hurt an angel. A flat out lie would potentially cripple them, but even equivocation or deception through circumlocution would cause severe pain and consequences with the Host. To the Avowed like her and Gazelle, it was supposed to be fatal—instant death or exile to Hell. Or so she had been taught.

In retrospect, it was unspeakably glaring. How had she missed it?

As her feet pounded through the halls, she let her instincts drive her. She could feel him. Not just his existence, but his presence. She felt the echo of his being in every step he’d taken since leaving them in the main hall. It felt like she was walking just behind him. The Bond mark tingled, and she tried to ignore it. Judy knew what it meant. He was the first person she’d thought to turn to and the one she trusted most. She knew he’d help her. Her old self would have wept, but the thought spurred her
Stone walls flew by to the accompaniment of frantic clopping at her heels until a huge wooden door grew in her sight. She pushed it open and skittered into the presence of two very surprised vulpines.

“Carrots!”

“Nick!” Judy shouted as she stuttered to a halt. “What is the greatest risk to angels on the mortal plane?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is this a trick question?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Me.”

She groaned. “Now, answer seriously.”

Nick leaned back in his seat. “Are you claiming that the Devil isn’t the biggest threat to divine servants?” Finnick chuckled.

“Stop being difficult,” Judy groused. “In officers’ school, we learn that temptation is the biggest danger to angelic operatives on the plane.”

“If you know that, why are you asking?”

“Why is it true? That’s that I want to know.”

The fox fixed her with a considering, yet amused gaze. “Supposedly, it’s because you could sin and fall.”

“Define sin.”

“Really, Carrots?” Nick replied with a flat look. Her reciprocation had him sighing and responding. “Really it is, then! Sin is the conscious decision to act against divine law.”

“Such as to speak words you know to not be true,” Judy prompted.

“Or ‘lie’ as some mammals call it.” Nick rested his chin on his paw. “Does this vast collection of obvious statements have a point?”

Judy turned to the other angel, who seemed as confused as the two demons in the room. “Gazelle!”

She snapped to attention. “Yes, Acting Commander?”

“Enough with the rank stuff!” Judy snapped in frustration. “Get over here!”
The angel in question very uncertainly moved to stand in the center of the room. Judy saw her eyes flit to the demons, particularly the smaller of the two, as she did, as if looking for assurance. She must have gotten some kind of affirmation, because her resolve stiffened as she came to attention again. It would have been fascinating, if Judy didn’t already have a major revelation to explore.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

Judy held up her arms. “Call me a fox.”

Gazelle shifted uncomfortably. “Is this some kind of self-affirmation thing?”

“No, dammit! Call me a fox!” Judy shouted. “An echidna! A caterpillar! Anything!”

Gazelle balked. “Fine! You’re a caterpillar! Why?”

“You just lied.”

The ungulant blinked uncomprehending. “I what?”

“You spoke an untruth,” Judy crowed. “I am not a caterpillar. Yet you said I was, and you didn’t suffer.”

“I didn’t. But I’m bonded to truth!” Gazelle goggled. “I should be blacked out from pain, or dead!”

“But you aren’t. And neither am I. Since this isn’t something we’re familiar with, why don’t we ask someone who might be.” Judy turned to the two bemused vulpines. “Nick?”

“Yes?”

Judy smiled at the foxes, raised her arms, and said, “Nick, I’m a fox.”

“Prideful rabbit.” He smiled. “I like it.”

“No, you idiot. I’m a fox. I’m a squirrel. I’m a sixteenth-century bird rancher.”

“Obviously, you’re insane,” he quipped around a giggle.

“Or lying. I lied, Nick. I’ve been dancing around dishonesty this whole time, and now I just flatly lied. Several times.”

“So?”

“So I can’t lie! The gold bangle I wear shows that I can’t. I swore oaths! I was bonded twice to truth and truth only! Any one of those lies should have left me catatonic or dead, but I’m perfectly fine!”

“True...” Nick sipped from his glass. “Your little show there was quite illuminating.”

“Then, maybe you can help me understand.” Judy turned to him, pleading, “Why? Why can I lie?”

“I can tell when you do, through the Bond.”
“That’s not the point!” She growled in frustration. “I can’t lie. In heaven, I would be dead. But here I’m not!”

“A very succinct summation. Regrettably, I’m not following.”

“Nick, I think the reason angels are at risk on the mortal plane is that here we can’t be controlled directly by the divine. You said once that in Hell the overlords could enforce their will directly.”

“Yes. Power dictates parts of reality and one part is the enforcement of submission by weaker demons to their commanders.”

“What if that’s true in heaven, too?” Now, everyone was staring slack-jawed. “The divine says ‘if you lie you’ll die’ and it becomes so. Power dictating submission.”

Nick placed his glass down and rubbed his face muttering, “As above, so below…”

“What?”

“An ancient principle of magic.” He huffed a weak laugh. “One that no one teaches anymore, apparently. At a rough explanation, it’s like yin and yang—balance in extremity—what happens on one end of the spectrum of reality will be equally reflected in the other.”

“Unsettling,” Judy commented. “But it illustrates my point. If Heaven and Hell behave the same way, what about the middle?”

“What do you mean?”

“Here I have a choice, Nick! If Heaven and Hell both control their residents, I think that’s why Heaven is afraid to send angels here. It’s not just because temptation exists here, but because they’re afraid that this is the only place where we have the free will to embrace it!”

“How does that work with your agents, then?” Nick sounded irritated. “We have the threat of punishment, but we also have freedom to do as we please when it comes to our methods. If we fuck up, we hurt for it. And that’s enough to keep us in line…”

“Usually, the command structure here is rigid. There’s no give to it. It makes sense if you’re trying to prevent temptation but—“
“Also if you’re trying to avoid the Wager Officers realizing that their vows aren’t death sentences when they’re broken anymore.” Now, he sounded resigned.

Judy was more perplexed than ever, but she couldn’t stop. “Yes, it would lead to temptation, but—more importantly—to thinking for ourselves. I wasn’t forced through the trainings and preparations for this posting. It was rushed. It makes sense if they only wanted me here for the surgery. Bogo didn’t know, so he ignored me. Then, I met you and I had to make choices that skirted my vows. Just barely. That led to other choices. And now I know.”

“The reason they don’t want angels down here is because they have the freedoms to choose to give in. Not because temptation exists, but because they are free to choose to indulge in it.”

Gazelle’s hoarse voice echoed in the wake of her statement. “It’s the same as Hell…”

The red fox pinched his muzzle. “Perfect. The ruler of Hell is now suffering terminal worldview collapse.”

The fennec grumbled. “Him and me both. I want a drink.”

“We’ll get one soon.” Gazelle sat on the ground by the imp and put a hoof on his shoulder. “For once, I think I’ll join you.”

Judy didn’t understand. “Why are you all so upset? This changes everything!”

“We are aware.”

“Then why aren’t you excited? This is huge!”

“Yes…. Yes, it is.”

Now, Judy was seriously worried. Her last statement had been a perfect setup for a crude sex joke—exactly the sort that Nick seemed to enjoy so much—and he’d ignore it completely. She knew what she had uncovered was revolutionary. It changed everything that they knew of Heaven and the nature of the Host. Not for the better, granted. She understood why Gazelle was shaken. The demons, on the other hand, were a puzzle.
“Nick? Finnick, what’s wrong?”

“You ain’t thinking it through, rabbit.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nick? Are you ok?”

“I’m wonderful, Carrots. A conundrum as old as time has been laid bare. Shocking news: Angels can lie! And we’ve proved that Heaven and Hell are governed the same way, which is a real kick in the teeth.” Anger suffused Nick’s tenor as he ranted, leaving Judy feeling completely helpless. “Creation is losing what little minds it has, and then we have our little predicament.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Not bad she says…. Well, if that doesn’t intimidate you, how would you feel about the news of the Dawnstar returning?”

“The Da—Lucifer?!”

“The very same.” Nick’s eyes bored into her. “I think we are in deep, rabbit. And I am done with patience. Since it’s sharing time, I think it’s your turn.”

“Mine?!”

“Yes. You are going to indulge me in a rare vice. One even rarer for demons, but today we seem to be glutted with! The truth.”

“T—truth? What truth?”

In response Nick raised his paw, displaying his Bond Mark. It was smaller—pooling across his knuckles and into the center space at the back of his paw. The intricacy of the Mark had grown and deepened, illuminating layered patterns and complex meanings. It appeared to be writhing. Flowing even as she looked.

“The truth.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Answer time! See below for details.

Betas by Damlone, Blueberryandhoney, and OnceNeverTwiceAlways.

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Sweet buttery fuck was this a good chapter to write!

Donations are welcome in my ko-fi account if you're so inclined. Check my profile for details. Happy reading!

“The truth.”

Judy nodded weakly. It was all she could manage as she reeled, trying to come to terms with all the new revelations. Nick was right. They were in it up to their necks. Her discoveries had all been made in the face of their circumstances, rendering them small and pitiful. They understood their world better, but now…. Their world was falling apart, so what difference did it make? Until they were out of danger, nothing else mattered.
Before she could work up a response, Nick turned to the two newcomers.

“Finnick.”

“Yes, boss?”

“You have what I asked you to get?”

“Yeah.” Finnick pulled a bone amulet from around his neck and tossed it into the air. Nick snatched it before she could see what it was. “I assume you know how to use that.”

In response, Nick pulled a pawful of Coins from his pocket and laid them on the table. “Payment in full.”

“Payment is offered and accepted.” The fennec intoned formally.

“Good. I presume you have something to occupy yourselves with for a while?”

“We do, but you gotta know something first.”

“And what is that?”

Gazelle piped up, “The Host is planning something. I don’t know what. They didn’t tell me the plan, just my part.”

“I find myself unconcerned,” Nick replied, acidly. “Heaven’s meddling is no surprise, and I have more pressing concerns. Now, make your point, if you please.”

“Sir—I…” Gazelle snapped her jaws shut on the formal address.

“Zelle...” Finnick gasped, stunned.
“Cursori, please take a deep breath and spit it out,” Judy ordered.

“When I gave your report to the Host, they gave me orders to prepare a Gateway.”

“Hardly a surprise, if they’re planning to send in troops,” Nick mused. “What makes this significant?”

“My orders were to lay the foundations for a Gateway and layered containment, including temporal binding. They did not tell me any capacities, however.”

Judy rubbed her chin. “You mean you have no idea what sort of back up you’ll be getting?”

“Correct. That’s essential knowledge when creating anything so complex. The power of whomever or whatever passes through the Gate will strain it and me, because I created it. Too much power comes through and I’ll burn to a cinder.”

Nick sighed, toying with his glass. “A neat way to tie up a loose end…”

“That was our thought, as well,” Gazelle confirmed.

“What led you to that conclusion?” Judy inquired.

Finnick chuckled darkly. “You aren’t the only ones paying attention, rabbit. Something ain’t right around here, and the Host is involved. If I didn’t think so before, I would now.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Because if that ‘as above so below’ bullshit is right, then Heaven is as fucked as Hell right now. And if Hell would fuck over an operative to tie off a loose end, I’m damn sure Heaven would too.”

Nick emptied his glass. “The imp has a point.”
“I ain’t just a pretty face, Wilde.”

“You ain’t even a pretty face, Finny.”

The imp scowled at his boss. “I been around a long time, and I’ve seen plenty. None of this has a good feeling.”

Judy shook off the growing dread and asked, “What will you do?”

Gazelle answered, “I’ll follow my orders to the letter, but only to the letter. Finnick will watch my back.”

“And cover our asses.” Finnick jangled his new wealth. “I have a few tricks up my sleeves.”

“Alright,” Nick grunted. “You two do what you have to and be back here before midnight. Get all the information you can and make a list of your assets.” He shrugged. “It looks like the four of us are in this together. Assuming you have no objections, of course.”

Gazelle’s reply of “It is better to be the Devil’s right hand than in his path” left Judy blinking incredulously.

“I saw it in a movie,” the rumanid supplied with a shrug.

Finnick shook his head muttering, “Come on, Zelle. Let’s go.”

“Don’t worry, Finny!” Nick called after them. “The golems will remember you when you come back.”

As soon as the imp’s grumbling had faded down the hall, Judy turned to the red fox lounging in the room’s only chair.
“Speaking of golems, why did your welcoming committee grab me, if I’ve already been here?”

“You’re arrival was before I turned this place into a Bastion of Hell. They were asleep, so no introductions.” Nick glowered from his seat. “And you’re not dodging anymore.”

Judy clenched her fists, but couldn’t meet his eyes. “I’m not dodging anything.”

“You’ve been dodging this topic since you slapped this binding on me. I didn’t care at first, but that’s changed. And you’ve had plenty of time to prepare yourself. So, let’s hear it.”

“I did promise you an explanation,” she muttered resignedly.

“Yes…” Nick sneered. “How good of you to remember. Now, what is the Bond?”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Judy muttered, “…It’s what I said. Communication and location.”

“Enough games!” Nick slammed his palm on the table. “We’ve been over this. That’s the first level. The Truant’s Summons, as I recall. I don’t care about the trivialities of every nuance. You said there were four tiers. Explain. Now.”

“I’m trying to.” Between his anger and the anticipation of how much worse it would get, Judy’s panic sent her voice quavering. “The second level is shared emotion and experience. You’ve made use of those already.”

“Yes, yes. Level three?”

“At the third level a bonded pair can share…” Judy gritted her teeth. “A portion of their power or strength.”

Nick’s glare was calm and deadly. “Are you telling me that you can sap my strength?!”

“NO! No. I can’t. I can only use what is willingly given.”
“So, we’re already at this third level of yours.”

“We are…. As the Bond grows deeper, more and more power can be given.”

“Judy…” Nick crooned with a stiff smile.

“Yes?”

“We’re past that, aren’t we?”

She nodded miserably. “I think so.”

“You…think so…”

“I don’t know.”

“How in Creation can you not know?!” The fox asked, the beginnings of a growl in his voice.

“Because I don’t! I’ve only used this spell once before. I had an apprentice while I was assigned to the Fringe, and we ended it once he was reassigned. It never moved past the first stage.”

“At least there’s that,” Nick huffed, pouting.

“That I’ve only had one before you?” Judy scoffed. “I didn’t take you for the jealous type.”

He sneered. “I meant that you didn’t lie about being able to undo the binding.”

“I told you I’d undo it when this case was done.”
“There are a few issues I have with that promise, Carrots,” Nick commented as he reclined, resting his jaw on his fist. “You made the promise, but that was then. Now, this Bond is well outside your experience or control. We’re also at least into the third stage of it, aren’t we? And that’s assuming one huge fact.”

“What is?”

His voice was deadly calm and even. “Demons keep their word. Do angels? You might have meant it, but as we both know circumstances can make liars of anyone. Are you sure you even can?”

“I did mean it!” Judy cried indignantly. “And I intended to remove it once the case is over. If you still want it gone, I will…. I mean—” She huffed. “If it can be, now….”

Nick’s voice was drippingly unimpressed. “You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

“The Summons is easy to lift at the first level. The caster can use the counter spell, and it’s done. The second is basically the same, but more of a challenge. It hurts more.”

“Hurts as in…?”

“Hurts, as in pain. Sometimes it can weaken your powers.” Nick’s silence was too heavy for her to bear, so she hurried on. “The third… Requires a little more.”

He sneered and waved his paw. “Like what, pray tell?”

“For both parties to be willing in terminating it. Otherwise both will pay a higher price.”

“Of course. And the fourth?”

Judy’s shoulders slumped, and her ears drooped as well. “The final level of the bond can’t be broken.”
Corkscrews of wood peeled off the table top under Nick’s claws. “What is the final level? What is it you aren’t saying?”

“What is the final level? What is it you aren’t saying?”

“Communication and location, emotion and sensation, strength and support…. If you were a mortal, what would those be the building blocks for?”

“…You have got to be kidding….”

“The Bond is rarely used past the first level anymore. The Host encourages that by continuously reassigning us, but they also impart the dangers of it during training. The deeper the trust, the deeper the Bond. Absolute trust equals an absolute bond.” Judy shrugged miserably. “We’re already at the third level. What you might call as close as you can get.”

“This is absurd.”

“The evidence is right there on your paw…” She held up her own paw. “And mine. In the fourth stage, the Bond marks will show each of us the other’s greatest secret: our Names. The sigils will only be comprehensible to us, but the result is the same.”

“Something you’d only tell if you trusted each other completely.”

“And that’s it.” Judy’s smile was defeated and bleak. “Speak the Names, and it becomes a Soul Bond.”

Nick’s throat was suddenly dry. “Soul….”

“As in ‘one mind, one body, one soul’. One being.”

“Why….” He swallowed thickly. “Why would you bind me with that, of all things?”

“Because I was desperate! I needed to get you on a leash. I knew anything that would restrain or hurt you would end up with me dead. The lowest level of the Summons can be broken with a thought, so I wasn’t worried when I cast it. Then…things changed.”

“Don’t you dare get pissy with me.” Judy fumed around her unhappiness. “Both of our Marks have shrunk. That means it was both of us. It can’t progress without both Bondmates being in sync. It’s the nature of the spell and can’t be faked or forced. I started to trust you and care about you. We wouldn’t have gotten here if you didn’t do the same for me.”

“It’s hard to believe that when this has all been predicated on deception.”

She flinched. “I know. But in spite of everything, here we are.”

“I must admit, little angel, I am impressed. You’ve pulled off a con-job worthy of an archdemon. And on me, of all beings.” Nick shook his head ruefully. “You could teach a class on manipulation.”

“You’ve been manipulating me this whole time!”

“Of course, I have,” he retorted. “I’m a demon! It’s my nature to tempt and manipulate. But I would remind you that I’ve been transparent about that at every step. And I gave you my word not to use my powers to seduce you from the very first night we met. Because you EARNED that. In turn, you deceived me, bound me against my will, and dragged me along at your heel, after I’d already agreed to help you. And all because I didn’t live up to your expectations after One. Single. Day.”

“I know. I regret that.” Judy squared her shoulders. “Binding you against your will was wrong. I’m willing to undo it now and take the consequences, if that’s what you want.”

“What I want has nothing to do with the bond. You say you regret binding me. I find that difficult to believe, considering we are so close to a Soul Bond.”

“I regret hurting you. But not what I did.”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course not.”
“What do you want me to say? I did what I had to in the only way that gave me a chance of survival.” She wrung her paws helplessly. “I had no idea we’d end up here! How could I? How could any of this even be possible, other than as a fever dream of a mad Creator.”

He bared his teeth and hissed. “Do not speak to me of myths and lies.”

She watched the demon stand and move towards the door.

“What do you want, Nick?”

He stopped with his paw on the door knob. “To know the rules again. To go a few hours without having the world tip under my feet for once. We’re a long way from that. So, in the meantime, I think I want some time to myself.”

“I can remove the Bond.”

“So you said.” Nick looked over his shoulder at her. “Will that serve a purpose?”

“It would be righting a wrong. That’s purpose enough.”

“How angelic an intention.”

She ignored the barb. “I said I would at the end of this, but it may be safer to do it now before things get any worse.”

“Define ‘worse’, rabbit.”

“Yes or no?”

“Is this part of your penance?” Nick asked snidely. “Asking permission instead of simply doing?”
“If that’s what it takes. Well?”

She’d managed to stay strong through his anger and was genuinely willing to do what it took to keep her end of their bargain. Ending the Bond would be costly and excruciating, but it could be done. Doing so would leave her crippled at best, broken at worst, but it was possible. It would keep her honor intact even as she was ruined in every other way. At that point, not even the Host would want her for vivisection. She would simply be cast into Hell where she’d go mad and end her existence as a mindless demon. A bleak prospect, but she’d made her bed. She’d sleep in it. If nothing else, she would at least have her honor.

Nick opened his mouth to speak, but Judy couldn’t believe what she heard.

Nick’s voice was a harsh whisper. “Do you know what the best prison you can make is, little angel?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Hell has the market cornered on prisons. But there’s one that it just can’t manage, no matter what they do. Can you imagine the one restraint that Hell, of all places, can’t master?”

Judy could only shake her head.

“The prison you don’t want to escape.”

~

Nick fumed as he stalked through the halls of his home. He was struggling.

There were too many things happening. Too few that he had a handle on. Nick liked control. He didn’t need a ton of it—it had been a rare treat in Hell for the first few million years of his first sentence there—but he did need a little. Just enough that he had something to work with. As long as he had that, he had a chance to apply some…leverage.

Nick smiled bleakly at the memory of one of the few souls he’d ever been fond of. He’d spoken to
Archimedes many times over the millennia among the virtuous pagans of the First Circle. It was he who had given Nick a saying that he always liked to remember. “I shall move the earth, if you give me a lever long enough and a place to stand.” His mind was all the lever Nick had ever needed. It was finding a place to stand that was tricky. There had been plots, plans, and schemes aplenty over the eons, and they’d always afforded him some form of control, even when he was in freefall. His second condemnation to Luxuria was made bearable only by the fact that he’d planned it and had known it was to a specific end. Now, he had no plan. It had all changed. Too much, too quickly.

I’m sorry.

The words through the Bond were accompanied by a sick, burning feeling in his gut. Her emotions were bleeding through. Nick closed the connection and kept moving.

It felt good to move. He felt compelled to do so after their talk. He didn’t know why exactly, but he did. Nick knew it was an emotional reaction and that it meant something, but he hadn’t the faintest idea what. He didn’t want to know, either. Not yet. Not when he was already feeling so lost.

Arriving back in his sanctuary, Nick set about getting something accomplished. He slapped the bone amulet Finnick had given him onto the top of his chest, and ripped it open. Inside was not the usual collection of relics, supplies, and weapons. Instead, there was a void containing four books, a small box, and a stoneware bottle. Removing the objects, Nick closed the chest and took the amulet. It landed on the table with more force than necessary and was followed by the rest of the objects in his paws.

Nick snatched the book on top of the stack and flipped the little volume open. He snapped it closed again with a grimace. The Canticles of Misery were the last thing he wanted to read. He was already miserably unhappy. He didn’t need help from the Prime Scripture of Hell. There was nothing in the book that would help him. There were chapters upon chapters devoted to relishing one’s agony, but nothing on the topic of where the pain came from.

Nick was not in Hell. His pain was not due to where he was. It was from another source—someplace he couldn’t name within him. It was crippling.

An hour later, Nick had read nothing. Worked on nothing. Accomplished nothing. All he’d managed was staring into space and hurting to the tune of his claws tapping on the table top. The worst of it was the echoes of Judy’s unhappiness through the Bond. Her guilt and regret rattled through him, leaving a sucking hollow in his gut and his attention ruined.

It hurt.
And it was made worse again by the remorse he felt for causing her that pain. That was the hardest part for him to understand. He never felt regret. Never remorse or guilt or anything of the kind. So this was new. New and unpleasantly distracting.

The illusion of her crying herself to sleep flitted through his mind. He was on his feet and moving before he’d realized what he was doing. It was absurd. She was not so weak or pathetic to stoop to that. He muttered all the reasons such an idea was absurd to himself as his paws glided over the stone and wood floors of his home. She was strong. Potent. Willful. She was no simpering female. Nothing like his usual toys. She was special. Unique. Profound.

Worthy.

The word brought him up short in the cloisters. A thrill of elative panic rolled through him. This was wrong. All of it. It only stopped his feet for a heartbeat. Gold coursed through him like blood, while fury and hunger clawed him. He didn’t bother wondering why anymore. Nick knew he was drowning in conflicting drives. Such conditions were part of his very nature, so he addressed his situation the only way he could—he followed his instincts. All of them were screaming for him to go to her.

The prickling of his Bond Mark led him along. Through the cloisters and halls to a place he didn’t think twice about until it was too late. The need to find his angel drove him on, until he was inside the room she occupied. It was full of steam and running water and a very naked, very surprised rabbit with bright red ears sitting in a bathtub. The only thing that kept her modesty was a wreathing pall of water vapor, which only made her more enticing.

“Nick! What are you doing here?!”

Nick blinked for a moment and forced his usual smile onto his muzzle. “I smelled rabbit stew, so I thought I’d check on dinner.”

“Very funny.” Judy grumbled as she fished a towel from a stool by her tub and draped it across her collarbones. “Also, not entirely true.”

“Oh?”

“You may have closed the Bond earlier, but I could still feel you until then. You’re in no better shape
than I am.”

“Hence the bath to calm yourself, I suppose.”

“And to wash the guilt off…”

That gave Nick pause. As jovial as he’d been forcing himself to be, she wasn’t having it. “That’s how you want to do this, then? No sugar coating?”

“I feel awful, and dancing around the situation with your usual jokes won’t help us deal with it.” Judy hid her face for a moment. “I…I really don’t want to have this conversation, especially here and now, but it needs to happen.”

“What’s wrong with here and now?”

In response, the rabbit gestured to the tub and herself, indicating her nudity.

“I’m not seeing a problem.”

Judy huffed. “You like seeing me vulnerable?”

“Quite a lot,” Nick admitted with a shrug. “But more so in this moment for the karmic irony of it all.”

“What are you talking about?”

His smile deepened to a grin. “Earlier you came clean.”

“Oh no…” She groaned and flopped her head onto the side of the tub.

“Now, bare your soul, Carrots.”
“I just asked you to be serious. It’s been ten seconds, tops!”

“I am serious. No one ever said you can’t be serious and humorous.”

“Puns aren’t humor,” Judy griped, kicking the stopper out of the drain. “They’re a travesty against language.”

“I prefer to think of them as a linguistic dominatrix.”

Her head cocked adorably at the absurdity of the statement. “What?”

Nick’s grin turned rapacious. “You groan and smile in pain and pleasure at the same time under the verbal lashing.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“Your ears got redder and you’re smiling despite yourself. You don’t have to say a thing.”

“I do, though.” Judy tucked her towel around her frame and lifted herself out of the bathing vessel. “I owe you an apology.”

“You said you were sorry.”

“I did. But I need to say it to your face.”

“Well?”

“Can I get dressed first?”
He leaned back against the tiled wall. “No one’s stopping you.”

Until that instant, Nick had felt his control over the moment growing. He was fairly sure of where he stood and how to guide the conversation they were about to have. With any luck, they’d get this over quickly and—with her a little embarrassed and him a little mollified—they’d be back to common ground. He was prepared for what was coming and had a handle on the situation. He was decidedly not prepared to see her square her shoulders and, with a defiant lifting of her chin, pop the tucked corner of her towel out of place and let it fall to pool at her feet.

To his credit, his jaw didn’t hang open. It just felt like it did.

Under his stunned gaze, she took one step towards him. Then another. And another. Never breaking eye contact. All Nick could do was stare. There was no artifice in her expression. No deception. Nothing hidden. Baring her soul was what he’d suggested and, now, it looked like she had taken it literally. The Bond was wide open. Judy knew exactly what she was doing—literally and symbolically—and she wanted him to know it.

She padded past him and out the door, asking, “Are you coming, Nick?”

**So much for a handle…**

His thought earned him the feeling of her trembling smile as she walked down the hall. A moment later, he followed her. He was brought up short again a few breaths later when he found her by her bed, settling his shirt back onto her shoulders. Her fingers closed the garment, but only fastened a few of the buttons around her midriff, leaving most of her barely hidden—if not completely exposed.

“Judy….” Nick breathed hoarsely. “You are playing a dangerous game.”

“I’ve been playing it since I attacked you a week ago.”

He chuckled. “Has it only been that long?”

“It feels like decades.” She raked a paw over her ears. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was centuries.”
“That would only happen if I snapped my fingers. Might’ve happened.”

Judy fiddled with her garment and smoothed it with her paws before hopping onto the bed and sitting. Sensing her distress, Nick pulled a chair to the bedside and sat, placing himself eye-to-eye with the rabbit. They were closer than he’d intended. His arm was able to rest on the mattress. He was further surprised when she shimmied closer to him.

“When I first found you, all I saw was a demon from the Host’s watch list. I needed to make a name for myself, so my CO would trust me. Everything I did was calculated. I knew the risks, the dangers. At every turn, I knew I was getting myself in deep.” The firmness of her voice displayed her sincerity and awareness of what she was saying and to whom. “If I failed, I’d be a traitor or disciplined within an inch of my life. If I succeeded, though….”

“You’d have a hell of a feather in your cap.”

Judy nodded. “All I’ve ever had is my career. I worked my tail off to earn the chance to come here and serve the Host. To be at the most important outpost they have, in the most critical time we’ve ever had. I always try, and work, and push to be better. I never turned down an extra assignment or let an opportunity to do more pass. It’s always been my way. If I’m going to do anything, it’s all in or not at all.”

Nick snickered at her turn of phrase. “Extra patrols, second shift filing, attacking an archdemon with a taser and a butter knife…”

She swatted his arm.

“Now, I see it was pointless. Since I met you, my world has fallen apart.” She sighed and wrung her paws. “I thought I could handle this. All this time, I knew I was playing with fire. But I thought it would be worth it because I would have given Heaven the upper hand over you. If I had to give my life to end you, I would have and it would have been a death in honor and service.”

“To that end, you took risks.” Nick hummed. “You know, If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you fell for me right from the get-go. Not that I’d blame you. I am irresistible.”

The corner of her mouth rose with her eyebrow. “You mean egotistical.”
“Six of one, half dozen of another. Either way, binding me was ballsy.”

“That was where it started going wrong.”

“We demons tend to upset angelic plans,” Nick replied with a smirk. “It’s one of our favorite hobbies.”

“Well, pat yourself on the back because you’ve done a spectacular job in this case,” Judy ranted sarcastically. “I wanted to tear down a demon and prove my worth. Instead, we’ve torn down the Host and proven yours.”

“Judy?”

“I don’t have the Host anymore, Nick. I know what’s waiting for me if I return to them. If I’m not vivisected on sight, the only place I’m headed is Hell.” Tension flooded her frame. “Some part of me still wants to fight you and this crippling temptation. It’s telling me I should release my power one last time and throw myself against you, so at least I can sell my life dearly in the Heavens’ name.”

For an instant, blue flame licked across her brow and traced along her wings before fading. She slumped, drained, as the flames passed.

“That little voice has been weakening every day, and now…” Judy sighed. “I can’t stay blindly loyal anymore. The voice is gone.”

Nick had been a little off kilter since she’d dropped her towel in the washroom. Since then, she’d had him off balance. Watching her shrug and stand on the mattress, he felt as though he was on the top of a roller-coaster in the dark, not knowing what was about to happen. She reached down and lifted his paw, using it to pull him to his feet. He acquiesced with no hesitation.

Before he could speak, she shushed him. Her trembling paw slid from his lips up along his muzzle to his cheek. She smiled and swallowed thickly. “If I’m going to Hell, I may as well get a head start.”

Nick’s mind went blank when her lips pressed against his for the first time. This was not what he’d expected. The why and how of their first kiss had played out in his mind many times, but none had come close. It was clumsy and tentative. She was a complete novice, and it showed. However, that only lasted in his mind for an instant. All thought was blasted from his consciousness as the electric
bolt of emotion tore through him. He didn’t know if it was his emotions or hers or both, but they left him dizzy.

Their lips parted a small eternity later. Before his eyes could flutter open, he felt her latch onto his chest and huddle in.

“Are you sure about this, sweetheart?” His voice was husky and rough in his own ears.

“No.” Hers was throaty and muffled by his chest. “I’m so scared, Nick. But there’s one thing I know.”

“What’s that?”

He felt her steadying breath through his fur. “That you keep your word.”

His paws came to rest featherlight on her hips. “What do you want?”

“That when I fall...”

Anticipation, hunger and joy raged through him. “Yes?”

“Catch me.”
And here it is! This is what you've all been waiting for!

Thank you to OnceNeverTwiceAlways for editing, kt_valmiri for soundboarding and continuity, Damlone and BlueberryandHoney for beta reading, and Wodah for punctuation review!

This was a really fun chapter to write and the culmination of MONTHS of build up. I hope it proves to be worth the wait.

To all of you who have left reviews and feedback, thank you. I appreciate and read every note, message and shred of feedback I receive; even if I don't respond directly. You are awesome and I am stupidly lucky to have readers like you.

On that note, if you are interested in supporting Hereafter, or my other works, please check out my profile on Ko-fi (dot) com. The link is in my profile, as well. Any help or support is appreciated.

Now, on we go to the really fun stuff!

Nick cheered in every inch of his flesh. The waiting and endurance had been worth it. She'd been dangling in front of him like a carrot on a stick for so long it felt like an eternity. In reality, it had only been seven days, but, supposedly, that was also how long it had taken to make the world. As such, he felt justified in calling himself deprived—but that was no longer a concern.

She was his!

That wasn’t to say he was simply going to pounce and ravish her. That would be poor manners. As any gourmand could attest, a meal was best enjoyed by slowly-savoring every morsel to the fullest.
Before him, Nick had the single most exquisite dish he would ever have: an angel. Legends in Hell’s House Luxuria told of the rapture such a meal could provide, and Nick was not going to waste such an opportunity to indulge. What was more, she’d come willingly to his bed.

He allowed his paws to settle onto her hips, feeling her tremble at the light pressure and act of claiming. The pressure on his chest from her paws confused him.

“Yes, Carrots?”

Her voice was soft, but firm. “Your word, Nick. Give me your word.”

His Sins howled in his mind, testing his self-control to the ragged, bleeding edge. He was already starving when she’d lured him to her bed. Her final act of resistance was maddening. The urge to shred her meagre covering and destroy the room with her until Eschaton pounded in his mind, sending his eyes to full, demon black.

Her forehead came to rest against his chest. “Please.”

His paws spasmed drawing a gasp from her.

Finally, noticing the tension in his frame, she reached up to caress his cheek. “Nick, I’m right here. I’m not afraid of you. Give me your word.”

A sound that was more growl than chuckle grated out between his teeth.

“Just say the words,” she breathed into the ruff of his neck.

His paw slid up her trembling flank from her hip. Along her shoulder and across her collarbone to cup her cheek. The pad of his thumb found the soft spot under her chin and control of her head was his. He tilted it so her ear came to rest against his muzzle. “I will catch you. And when I do…” Power and desire flooded him, and his voice was a booming whisper in her ear. “You. Will. Be. Mine.”

The last of the resistance in her frame gave way, and Nick knew she was done fighting herself. She
was his. He wanted something to balance the scales. A word. She’d demanded his, so it was only fair he receive one in turn.

As she moved in for a kiss, he stopped her with a finger on her lips.

~

Judy blinked in surprise. She hadn’t expected to be stopped, not at this stage of the game. She looked up and was astonished to see her fox staring at her, his usual grin muted. His finger lifted from her lips and trembled slightly before his paw slipped across her cheek and down her back, returning to her hip. It was a surprisingly tense action for being so light a touch, almost as though he was hesitating.

The reason for his restraint became clear when he grated out, “You’ve got my word, Carrots. Now, you’ll give me one in turn.”

“My word?”

“A word. Just one.” Nick visibly forced himself to stay still. “I’ll ask questions, so you know which one.”

Judy watched as violet flame sparked in Nick’s demon black eyes. Judy nodded. “Ask.”

“Is this what you want?”

Judy blinked, again—this time in shocked adoration. “Yes.”

His restraint began to slip, but he held fast. “Do you ask for this willingly?”

The Bond slipped open, and Judy felt the colossal force of will holding Nick in check. “Yes.”

“And you know what you’re getting into?” His paw lifted to cup her chin.
Judy licked her lips. “Three times, yes.”


The Bond resonated as he thought and spoke “Mine!” and the restraint fell away.


~

A slight pressure from his thumb to her chin and a curl of his paw had her slowly turn until her back was flush with his chest. He felt her breath catch at the contact. Judy’s paws drifted up to caress his, and that was all the permission he needed. His free paw ghosted along the fabric covering her stomach and chest, faint touches pulling gasps and twitches from the helpless rabbit.

When his paw reached her shoulder, his claws found their way into the placket of the shirt she wore just below her throat. Slowly, ever so slowly, Nick drew his claws down. Buttons pattered onto the floor as he indulged in one of his favorite moments: unwrapping his present.

There wasn’t much unwrapping to do, but he took his time. There was an art to his actions and a very thought out plan. As an incubus, Nick had learned seduction and every technique there was to pleasure the flesh. In that moment, he was very grateful for his skills and educations—despite the price. If he was going to send his angel to Hell, he was going to make it worth the trip. That meant every single moment needed to add to the experience. Thus, with every inch of bare fur she gave him, he gave her something in turn. His breath tickled the fur at the nape of her neck as the shirt’s collar slid away. His claws grazed the skin of her belly, guiding the fabric. Inch by inch, he gave in turn for everything he got—her moans a counterpoint to the low rumble in his chest. She was already lost in the sensations, and he’d barely begun.

As the last button fell, Nick shifted the fabric enough for the collar to slide away from her shoulder. A gentle kiss and nip to her exposed collar bone had the angel arching back into him and pawing at whatever of him she could reach. Her increasing efforts to gain some sort of control amused him. It also gave him an idea.

“Poor little bunny,” he crooned into her ear.

Before she could surface enough to respond, Nick slipped his paw into the collar of the shirt and pulled it down, off her shoulders. He had her planted on her back, nude and completely exposed, before she could utter a word. One of his paws snaked up to gently, but firmly, pin her ears to the mattress, while his other paw gripped one of her thighs. She was trapped. She knew it. And the look in her eyes told him she had no desire to escape.
“Poor little bunny.” He grinned predatorily at her. “About to be eaten by a fox.”

As she stammered, he stole her breath by slipping his tongue slowly out of his mouth and licking his chops.

It was easy to do. He saw the moment Judy realized his tongue was longer than her torso—and what he intended to do with it. When she looked to his eyes for confirmation, she couldn’t look away. Nick slipped his nose just under her chin, so they were eye-to-eye. He watched her react as his tongue slid out of his maw again and slowly worked its way down her body.

Her paws gripping the sheets, she writhed under the sensation and anticipation. Nick forced himself not to throw all caution to the winds and dive in, despite his desire to take her.

He was rewarded when the tip of his forked tongue slipped over her mound and slid over her sex for the first time. He watched as her eyes rolled up into her head, and the Bond snapped open. He was flooded with her excitement and sensation. His paw left her ears, and he felt her paws grapple onto his head, pulling him into her and down. She wanted more.

He obliged.

Shifting her hindpaws over his shoulders, he slid one paw slowly up her body, letting her feel the drag of his claws beneath her fur, until he was able to curl it around the back of her neck. The pad of his thumb pressed against her throat, just below her larynx. He could feel her heart beating rapidly, the breaths moving in and out of her lungs. The other paw captured her hip, neatly covering part of her lower abdomen so that he could feel her muscles quivering. A toothy grin flashed, before he widened his muzzle and ran his tongue along her folds, teasing, tasting. So sweet.

When he felt her shiver, he tightened his hold on her throat and growled softly, reminding her of just how vulnerable a position she was in. Her breath hitched, and he chose that moment to flick his tongue against the nub that was presented so pleasingly for him.

Once, twice, then a third time in rapid succession—again and again, so that she was quickly writhing. Or at least trying to. The hold he had on her body meant that she could move just enough to enjoy herself but could not escape the pleasure. Her little fists alternated between clawing at his arm and tugging at the sheets while he enjoyed his meal. A few long, slow strokes against her lips earned him moaning, writhing, and a very enthusiastic thumping of her foot in the air by his ear.
The thumping lost its charm very quickly, so Nick applied another technique: A little pain can enhance pleasure. He shifted his paw lower on her body to touch her thigh. With one digit, he found the seam in the muscle and pressed down on the nerve. Judy instantly went rigid from surprise and pain, giving him the opportunity. Her nerves were livewires from stimulus and pain when he pressed his tongue to her entrance and pushed it through. In an instant, her squeal of pain became throaty moans of ecstasy.

Keeping his paw around her throat, Nick began to press on the nerves in her legs while liberally plying his tongue. She squeaked and bucked as he lapped her folds and flicked her clit with his forked tongue, all while he played a symphony of pain on her legs. His muzzle was soaked with her juices as she begged and scrabbled with her paws on his head and against the sheets—anything to give her an anchor.

Nothing helped.

He teased and tantalized, nipping at the insides of her thighs and laving her sex until she was lifting herself off the mattress with the rising tension within her. Nick began thrusting his tongue deeper and deeper inside his bunny, until he reached her maidenhead. Knowing the limit, he set about filling her again and again to that barrier with long, full thrusts. It only took a minute of this to overwhelm the rabbit. Nick felt her muscles clench around his tongue as her first orgasm wracked her.

~

Judy had expected many things when she’d given in to her demon. Her knowledge of mortal anatomy was present, if not extensive. She was aware of the basics of sex and reproduction. However, she realized how little that was worth as pain and pleasure blasted the sense out of her.

Judy had expected to feel helpless and out of her depth. She was totally inexperienced, and Nick seemed to find that troubling in no way whatsoever. No sooner had her first orgasm faded than another began to build under the fox’s skilled paws.

And tongue…

Initially, Judy had been unnerved as much as she was excited. Being restrained as effectively as she was, there wasn’t much she could do but trust him. Now, she understood, and the paw on her throat lifted to press on her other thigh. She looked down and saw glittering, mischievous emeralds in the dim light. He wasn’t done. Not by a long shot.
The fox redoubled his efforts—teasing, nipping, sucking, and licking her in all the ways that he seemed to know would drive her utterly mad. He kept going until she curled up to grasp the fur on the top of his head, begging him not to stop.

He didn’t. Not even when another tidal wave of pleasure left her gasping and writhing on the sheets. He just lapped her clean and began again, giving her more and more until she was swimming in a delirium of pleasure. He tasted every bit of her, and she felt every bit of his satisfaction as though it was her own.

As another orgasm began, Nick slid more of his tongue into her entrance than ever before, stretching the little bunny and filling her. He was rewarded by hearing his name echo off the rafters, and he knew she was ready. He let her nerves riot until her back arched and her blunt claws pulled runs in the sheets, staying inside her until she calmed. Then he treated her to a long, slow withdrawal, dragging his tongue out of her. The appendage rasped along her lips closer to her tail and he rippled it back up like a whip to slide against her pearl, all the way to the forked tip.

Her body wracked with aftershocks.

While Judy gasped for breath, he lifted himself and waited for her to come to enough to look at him. He locked gazes with her before licking his chops clean. The want in her, sprinkled with fear, was intoxicating on the heels of feeling her pleasure echo through him via the Bond. With a slinky crawl, he moved to cover her body. The movement so purely predatorial that he could smell the change in her. Fear and desire warred on the air, pulling him in.

She tried to lift herself off the mattress, but his paw shot forward stopping her cold. He planted her back onto the sheets with one paw, bracing her legs apart with his other paw and hip.

“My bunny.”

He felt the pure instinctive fear boiling in her through the Bond. Raised goosebumps peppered her skin, while lust made her muscles twitch and sent anticipation shivering through her limbs. When her nose began twitching, he didn’t bother to hide his smirk, or the flash of fang, that the involuntary motion garnered. She was afraid, but wouldn’t yield. She had her pride. She would not give in without him earning it. He had never been so aroused.
His paw found her breastbone, and he held her still as he fumbled with the button on his trousers. Less than a second later the cloth shredded under his demonic strength as his patience wore out. He wanted his angel.

~

Judy felt him kick the remains of his clothing off his body, knowing what was coming. She forced herself up against the pressure of his paw and was rewarded with a view of her demon in his rawest form. He was beautiful. His fur and fangs shimmered in the firelight, making him appear a living embodiment of flame and its hunger. She was terrified—yet exultant! The fire in him burned for her, and her alone. It made the restriction easier to bear as his other paw snaked up to grasp her ears, while the paw that had braced her chest slipped down to hold her hips.

She was immobilized, but would not give in so easily. She craved to show her fox that she was not a simple toy. She was worthy of him, of his power and dominion. She was an edifice worth the conquest.

Judy writhed against his strictures, yanking against his paws and reaching for his neck with hers, trying with increasing desperation to prove she wanted him as much as he wanted her in that moment. She felt the titanic hunger in him with every calculated movement he made. She still fought for her share. This was not going to be about his effort and her acquiescence if she had any say. It would be equal, or she would see Hell trying; so she tried. Right up to feeling his masculinity press against her, then she tried harder. She tried until she managed to pull him down to her for a scorching kiss, punctuated by her teeth finding his lower lip and clamping down hard enough to pull a grunt of pain from his stubborn throat.

~

Nick felt the pain and embraced it. She was trying. Fighting. Pushing him for more. He obliged.

His paw pads found pressure points along her ribs and pressed them until she gasped. His tongue invaded her mouth, carrying the taste of her sex with it. Her reaction was instant. Her hips bucked against him, and she tugged at the fur of his cheeks and throat.

He pulled back, gripping the back of her head from the base of her ears and forced her to watch his tongue as it snaked down to wrap around his member. Her eyes widened as he guided the tip to rest against her heat, and he pressed until her folds parted.
“Last chance, Sweetheart,” he warned through the Bond.

In response, she grabbed his cheek fur and pulled his chin to her chest. He quickly retracted his tongue and arched a brow in curiosity. At the same time, she rolled her hips up and took the tip of him before he could react. Judy’s jaw went slack at the sensation, allowing him to take back control, and she found herself pinned at the ears and hip to the mattress.

His voice was a guttural snarl in her ear. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She felt him slide into her, then stop just far enough in to tantalize her. She was so close to something she didn’t understand. Judy pulled at his forearms and ribs—anything she could reach—desperately forcing herself against his restraining paws to try and claim more.

“Please.”

“Bad little bunny.” His breath was ragged against her cheek. “Begging for…this!”

The pressure increased and she felt something in her give. There was pain—brief and overwhelmed by the sensation of his teeth on her ear and the euphoric feeling of fullness that followed. Judy felt her back arch as she was filled and stretched with sickening inevitability, until she was sure she’d break and beg for more.

Then, the pressure stopped. He withdrew. And drove into her again, this time without the pain. Reality shifted, and she found herself floating on an ecstasy as old as life itself, panting and begging for more from a lover who smelled of violets and brimstone.

~

As he filled his bunny, Nick was glad he needed to knot in order to climax. If he didn’t, he’d have cracked on the first stroke. Whatever the legends had said about bedding an angel barely scratched the surface. He was used to restraining himself, thanks to his time in Luxuria, but this was at the absolute limit he could handle. Every thrust pushed him right to the edge and, if it weren’t for his need to knot, he’d be done.
It didn’t help matters that his bed partner was just as enthusiastic. Every time he filled her, she moaned and squeaked and pleaded. It took far more than he had expected to avoid simply throwing himself into her with wild abandon until they were both soaked in their combined fluids and catatonic from the overwhelming pleasure of each other. Nick was also grateful for Judy’s continuous attempts to take control.

For the brief moments between wracking orgasms when she was coherent and able to focus, his rabbit struggled to give as good as she got. She surprised him by arching her hips up to meet him and trying to adjust the rhythm. She even forced herself further onto him, almost as though she was trying to find his knot. The few times she kissed the beginnings of it with her lower lips, she immediately moaned and clutched at him, nearly spurring him into knotting her then and there. It was maddening and difficult to control.

Eventually, Nick got tired of fighting her and himself, electing instead to give her exactly what she wanted: control. The next time she tried to lock his legs with her own and shift her hips to topple him onto his side, he gave in. He felt himself pull out of her addictive heat for all of a moment, before she was clambering on top of him, eager to reclaim her seat.

While she fumbled, rubbing her slit along his shaft, Nick grinned. “Does the little bunny want to be on top?”

Her voice was a husky growl. “Stop babbling.”

In response, Nick rolled his eyes and grabbed her at the hips. Lifting her into the air with one paw, he used the other to guide himself into position. She might have been expecting another slow, even start, but Nick had other ideas. The moment he felt her nether lips kissing the tip of his malehood, he rolled into her, pulling her down with no hesitation. Her gasp rattled off the walls, and she fell onto his chest, panting from the sudden, welcome invasion.

~

Judy wanted a moment to recover, but she did not get it. His coarse fur bunched in her paws was the only anchor she had when she felt a light tapping on her rump.

“One thrust and you’re done?” Nick lightly mocked.

She gathered herself and looked her fox square in the eyes, though her vision swam.
“I’m on top.” Her paw shakily grasped the fur on his cheek. “I’m in charge.”

“Is that what you think?” His paw shot out to the scruff of her neck, and she was instantly immobile. “You’re on top, but you are not in control.” He growled into her throat. “I am in control and you… your job is to fuck.”

Heat flooded her, and her hips pumped involuntarily.

“Now, Carrots…. Do. Your. Job.” The last word was punctuated by a firm slap to her hindquarters, and the involuntary bucking of her hips became a slow, rolling rhythm.

Once she started, Nick’s grip on her neck disappeared, but his paws did not remain idle. His paw pads ghosted over her fur. He caressed her flanks and cheeks, kneaded her chest, played with her tail, gripped her—his paws moved with a maddeningly tantalizing purpose, stimulating her in every way. Judy felt a tidal wave of pleasure building deep in her belly after only a few moments. She was still surprised when it crashed into her.

She received no respite.

Another, firmer slap to her ass caused her to jump and then settle back onto his shaft again. “No one told you to stop, rabbit. Now, fuck!”

The words growled into her ear made her stomach flutter, even as she found her rhythm again. The previous orgasm had barely faded, when the next one tore through her. This time Judy didn’t stop to rest. The husky murmur of “Good girl” she heard through the haze was all the encouragement she needed.

Then the claws came out.

His claws tickled her already sensitized skin, and she came again. And again.

Judy didn’t know how long it went on, but eventually through the haze she felt something she knew only too well. His tongue was winding down her body. Anticipation and an instinctive desire to see what he was up to caused her fevered pace to slow. It came to a full stop when she felt his
cunnilinguistic appendage find her clit and slide past it to his shaft.

Her eyes popped open, and she stared slack-jawed through the sex-delerium. Her fox’s tongue was wrapped around his own shaft and nestled up against her lips, cupping her. A silent questioning look was all Judy managed, before his paws gripped her hips and pulled her down. Hard.

~

Nick was at his limit. He’d used every trick he had—every technique he’d ever known—and he was heartbeats from exploding. He had been for hours. The orders he’d given her had been obeyed, and well past anything he could have imagined possible. It was a frightening relief when her pace began to slow, despite her obvious desire to continue. She was exhausted, and not a moment too soon. He needed release, but he had one last card to play for his little angel.

Once his tongue was in place, Nick released his venom—the addictive poison that all incubi possess. He’d used it in the past to great effect, helping his “partners” endure what he did to them. He had no doubt the angel was made of sterner stuff than the usual pieces of mortal meat he’d used in the past, but he was not taking chances. He wanted her to know the fullest of what he could do and what she had signed up for in asking for his word.

He applied his venom through his saliva directly to his shaft, and, when he pulled her down to kiss his knot, he saw exactly what he wanted to. His angel’s jaw went slack, and her blunt little claws gripped his wrists until they drew blood. Her muscles clamped down on him, and he felt his world contract.

There was nothing else there—just him and her. An angel and a demon. He couldn’t stop himself. Four short, hard strokes saw his knot pop into place and swell, locking them together. Red hot semen poured out of him, filling the angel, and they were both swept away.

~

She felt his knot swell, filling her and stretching her past anything she had believed possible. The pain and ecstatic pleasure boomed through her. Her teeth touched him, and she bit. Hard. Her paws clenched on his ribs and she raked her claws along them in the desperate need to pull him closer. The scent of blood and the feral snarl it pulled from him sent her over the edge again. His knot seated inside her, and ropes of demonic semen poured into her. The sensation was too much, and Judy’s world turned white.
His roar shook the Den to its foundations.

~

He’d kept the Bond closed as best he could, but now it slammed open. He felt everything. Nick felt her pain and ecstasy, even as his own coursed through him. The sensation of her being filled with his seed reverberated against his sublime emptying. Her passion and want; his desire and possession. Their emotions and experiences echoed through both their minds, until neither could tell where one ended and the other began. Through the storm of sensation, Nick felt his rabbit place a kiss on his lips, and the world turned white.

There was only their connection and nothing else.

~

In the darkness between dreams and waking, Nick floated towards a meagre awareness. His mind was awash with sensations: The crackling of the fire and the soothing comfort of a nearer heat source and rhythm he never knew he’d missed accompanied him in the darkness. Nick drifted in his inner vastness and tried, somewhat, to find his bearings.

He tried to compose himself. Tried to remember.

What had happened?

There was fur that wasn’t his under his paws. Feathers, too. Smooth to his touch.

It had happened. At long last, it had happened! It was better than he’d imagined. He wanted it again. He’d get it again. His angel.

He curled into himself contentedly.

There was something else tickling his mind as it wandered. Something important. A promise. What was it?

His weary spirit begged him to return to his rest and slowly pulled him back towards the abyss, but there was something he needed to remember. Something he could not allow himself to forget. It was
so elusive, and it was so tiring to stay.

In his sleep, his paws flexed. The scent of lavender and spiced sunlight soothed him and brought him another thought. A reminder.

He had to catch her.

He had to reach for his armor. Where was it? And the spear? Was it there? Could he reach it? Where were his relics? He needed them. He could not march to war without them. Where were they? His mind cast out for them. Desperate for the assurance of their voices. He needed to be ready. Needed to know he could save her.

Pain spiked through his dreamscape. Not a crippling pain, but it was there. He looked, and he perceived.

Standing before him was his armor, spear in paw and glittering green eyes visible through the helm. It was a terrifying sight. Titanic power bled from its presence as it stood abreast the pits of Hell, presiding over its beautiful chaos. Mountains bowed, forests quivered, and every living thing kneeled in willing submission. It was power the likes of which Nick had only ever dreamed of.

He felt so weak, so small. He was so anxious. Fearful.

The figure turned to meet his eyes, and the faceguard lifted. Nick looked into his own face, but it wasn’t his. The green was peridot, not emerald, and fur was a coppery chestnut instead of his russet.

**We are ready!**

The words boomed through him.

Then the face was gone, as was the tableau. His armor and spear stood in the void and sang to him. They were ready. The fear bled away as his surety grew. He was not alone. His grip tightened again, and his prize huddled closer. He was not alone, and never would be. He felt levity creep in. It was an alien feeling after so long. He cherished it.

He would keep his word. He would claim her.

Something warm and comforting moved on his chest, and the last of the tension fled. He settled. It sucked every ounce of his strength away, and he surrendered to it. Something about the warmth said
that everything was fine for now. There was no danger in his home, and what he cared about was in his embrace. His mind returned to dreams of paternal pride and the Elysian Fields and days he'd not yet lived.

Nick shifted, settling into a more comfortable position and drifted off again, completely unaware that his body was wrapped around unassailable warmth, his great wings glowing all the way down to the capillaries, like quicksilvered gold on midnight.
It's been a month since I updated this story. I've been having a really rough few months and July was the crowning jewel of not-good in the real life department. To ease your fears, gentle reader, I will say this:

No, I am not dropping Hereafter.

I'm not dropping any of my other stories either.

Updates will happen as quickly as I can manage, but I can't promise an actual schedule. My personal slice of reality doesn't work that way.

But enough of that unhappy stuff! Read on!

If you like what you read here and want to support future chapters and other works, a link to my ko-fi account can be found in my profile. All proceeds go to keeping me functional as I type away at all hours.

As always (And slightly belatedly. I blame the insomnias.) My endless thanks to the following:

kt_valmiri for soundboarding and keeping me sane.
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OnceNeverTwiceAlways for editing.
With special thanks to Lyrnx. Her art inspired the stalker Judy in the dream sequence.
Https://another-wildehoppss-blog.tumblr.com/ for more of her stuff.
Nick floated in dreams.

The enormity of fact that he was dreaming was lost on him. In his demi-lucid state, as with all somnolent theater, nothing made sense the way it did in the waking world. He saw many things. Images of the past, strange flights of fantasy, and a myriad of possibilities floated to the surface of his mind, only to vanish into smoke and nothing. In all the strange offerings from his subconscious, there was one constant theme: Judy.

In one moment, she was whole and hale as he had come to know her. The next, she was Fallen—weeping as she fell through the void with rotting, tattered wings. Again, she appeared. This time taken by Luxuria—crumpled and ruined from her “indoctrination” into the House. Next, she was a true demon—broken and mindless, baying for angelic blood on the fringe. Her claws and fangs dripped ichor and her fur matted with filth and gore. All horrible ends for the rabbit. Ends he had hoped to grant her.

The bitterness the images conjured in his mind confused him. Nick’s mind roiled in discomfort, both at the images and the distress he felt. It did not make sense. It couldn’t. The depths of his mind responded by offering him more pleasing possibilities.
Suddenly, she appeared as a Succubus, risen to the ranks of Hell and a scion of Lust. Flames danced around her in fetid yellows, greens, and blues. She wore little and was resplendent in her power. Her gaze spoke of promises that would wreck souls. Her form was liquid desire right down to her dainty little toes. She was lovely.

All faded to black and Judy returned again. This time, she was garbed in a dress of angel feathers and standing by the Obsidian Throne itself. She reached out to him and smiled with regal cruelty, beckoning him to his seat. His Queen in Hell.

Nick writhed.

He wanted this. This was his desire. For her to be his pet and pride—his right hand and most prized possession. He reached out to take her paw, but the tableau shimmered and changed.

Judy was dressed in a worn hoodie, shorts, and leggings. Her eyes were fever bright and seemed to stare through him to the bone. The smile she wore was nervous and hungry. The scent of blood and glee hung thick on the air around her, like sweat and desperation on a junkie. She was thin under the grime and mania—absent behind her eyes. She was missing something—more a broken mortal than a fallen and corrupted angel. She was lovely still—sweet and pitiable.

She was hurt. Broken, well and truly. Lost.

Nick’s eyes shot open with a snarl on his lips. Possessiveness and a desire to defend what was his roiled through his blood. She was not so weak. He would not allow…. Reality crept into the fox’s mind as the dream faded. He was confused by what he found in the waking world. Then he was afraid.

He was warm and comfortable. His arms were wrapped around something that was breathing contentedly. Something soft that smelled of lavender and sunlight and reeked of sex. Memories of the previous evening poured through him, and Nick was at war with himself. The need to understand what had happened slammed into his growing desire, leaving him crippled.

He wanted more.

The knowledge of how little time he had was petrifying. He only had until she fell at dawn to savor the angel in his bed. With the first light of the sun, her wings would putrefy and rot. Then, she would be sucked out of the world to fall for nine days to the gates of Hell and her damnation. Her purity
would be lost. He could not allow that. Without her as she was, he would waste away.

Looking down at her, he smiled weakly.

*The legends didn’t even come close. I’ll never have better.*

It was a sobering thought in many ways. It was made worse by a series of realizations.

He had dreamed. He had slept. He had fallen asleep in the embrace of a female with her lips on his and dreamed of her. He’d *dreamed*.

*Sweet Misery…*

He was still wrapped around her. Panic slowly coalesced in his gut. He was still holding her. In fact, she was blissfully cuddled into his chest, wrapped around him in somnolent peace. This was freakish. Such a degree of intimacy was alien for him. It disturbed him immensely. His discomfiture only grew as he realized that not only his arms, but his tail and wings were wrapped around her as they laid together on the bed.

Somehow, Nick contained the blind panic. Barely. He managed long enough to extricate himself from his cocoon without rousing his bedmate. Once they were separate and he’d gained a little distance, things only got worse. They were both a mess from their activities. All he wanted was to lick her clean and pleasure her again. The need was narcotic on its own and almost overwhelming. The strain to his self-control was frightening, but paled in comparison to the fact that her wings were out.

Nick stared slack-jawed at the sight. Her wings been hidden under his own, and, in his haste to escape, he hadn’t paid attention to them. Now, he was flabbergasted. They were white. All four wings were a pure, radiant, opalescent white. There wasn’t a shred of corruption on a single feather. No charring, or decay. Not even a speck of dust. There should have been something. Some sign. Even just a bit of grey or tarnish, but no.

It hurt not seeing the proof of her fall. For a reason he couldn’t name, he wanted to see it. Just so he’d know. He’d heard there was a sign right from the first minute that Sin took hold in an angel. Clearly that was a lie.
He was pulled from his shocked stupor by Judy sighing and shifting gently in her sleep. He had to move.

Nick silently crept away from the bed and slipped off to the shower at a dead sprint. There was something cathartic about showers. He always seemed to think best when he was in one, and he desperately needed to think. He never slept with his conquests. He never showed affection. He never failed to stay awake until he was unknotted, so he could make his exit.

He never dreamed.

Dreams and memory were too intertwined for him to suffer either peaceably. Memories were suppressible—the ones he had, anyway. Dreams were not so simple. They were inescapable. And now, he had dreamed and not hurt for it.

Stepping into the spray of hot water, Nick set to scrubbing himself clean with a vengeance. The moment he was rinsed and dry, he had a mission. The key to all of this had to be somewhere in the tomes Finnick had stolen for him. It was time to hit the books.

~

Slowly, achingly slowly, Judy inched towards consciousness. She felt languid, despite her dreams. Conflicting visions of Nick had battered her mind through her rest. In one moment, he wore the raiment and mantle of the Holy Guards and stood at the right hand of the Celestial Throne awaiting her. The next, he was a colossal monstrosity striding across the land and stars, consuming and destroying world after world. That disparity and the feelings of euphoria and soreness that warred through her body left her somewhat discombobulated as her eyes flitted open. Her confusion deepened when she noticed she was alone.

Judy lifted her head to look around. “Nick?”

There was no response. Through the Bond, she felt a weak thread of focus and concern, which gave her pause. Nick was not a mammal inclined to uncertainty, so the fact that he was feeling such an alien emotion worried her. It also occurred to her that she no longer needed to hold the Bond open in order to sense her demon. Given how precipitously things had progressed, along with all the completely unexpected twists she’d experienced lately, Judy found herself merely taking note of the new fact and nothing more.
It didn’t help that she felt like she was floating in her own skin. Judy was familiar with the terms “sex drunk”, “sub-space”, and “post-coital endorphin high” from her reading, but the understanding and the experience were very different beasts. It was obvious that she was not functioning at her full capacity. However, whatever it was that she was missing could wait. She flopped her head back against the soft pillow, sighing at her own complacency. It raised plenty of new implications, but she had enough to worry about. First and foremost on her list was Nick.

*No, clothes first.*

**Whatever for?**

Judy jumped in surprise at the mental intrusion and bolted upright. She immediately cringed at the soreness in her belly and between her legs. She felt Nick wince in sympathetic pain.

**Ouch, Carrots. Feeling it this morning, are we?**

Judy wanted to be annoyed, she really did. However, under the smarm, she heard the genuine concern in his voice. The renewing flush of endorphins she got from hearing his voice helped.

*A little. It’s fading.*

**Small blessings…**

Judy snorted.

*The Devil talking about blessings…. I keep expecting to get used to the irony.*

**I think you mean absurdity, sweetheart.**

*Both fit. Where are you?*

**Busy.**
That isn’t a place.

She felt his half-hearted eye-roll and smiled to herself.

Yes, yes. Be pleased. You can irritate me too now. I'll come to you.

Judy moved the sheet covering her and immediately recoiled. She was…she didn’t have words to describe it. “Filthy” was the closest word her semi-clouded mind registered before flinching away. Filthy and warm. And growing warmer as the scents washed over her. Her own arousal mixed with the aroma of her demon’s seed sent her nose twitching even as her heart rate climbed. The previous evening’s activities came back to her in graphically vivid detail, leaving her reeling. She didn’t realize her paw was wandering until one of her digits brushed her pearl, startling her.

If you start on that we’ll get nothing done today.

Judy nodded by reflex and absently licked her finger.

For Misery’s sake, rabbit…. I’d recommend a shower. I’ll meet you when you’re done.

Sounds like a good idea.

Unless you want me to join you…

You do and we’ll get nothing done today, remember?

Touche, sweetheart.

The connection slipped closed again, but not fully. It merely reverted to where it had been when she’d woken up. She felt his amusement and distraction as he again settled into reading. She found it encouraging as she shimmied off the mattress and scampered to the bath. The hot water spray quickly dissipated some of the cobwebs in her mind, and she had a chance to think a little more clearly.
She was sore, a bit stiff and tender. That didn’t exactly surprise her. New physical activities always worked muscles in new ways. What they’d done absolutely fell into the “new experiences” category and as for physical…. Judy giggled to herself and stretched, the heat was relaxing her and easing the soreness. She felt wonderful, right down to her whiskers.

Smiling to herself, she took a generous pull of bodywash from a bottle and lathered herself up. It was wonderfully satisfying to work the mess out of her fur, until she realized it was a golden opportunity for a tiny bit of payback. Judy slipped the Bond wide open, pulled up the most exciting, titillating memory from the night before, and slid per paw deftly between her own legs. She was rewarded with the feeling of Nick’s fur standing on end and the knowledge that she’d stopped him cold mid-thought.

**Bad, bad bunny….**

Judy grinned and finished her shower.

By the time she traipsed out of the bath, she was feeling radiant. She felt in control. Strong and powerful. And then she saw Nick waiting across the Hall at the table where the coffee pot lived. The sense of power turned to hunger in an instant, and she was left breathless.

~

Nick felt the moment Judy walked into the Hall. His head snapped and their eyes met. He felt his pupils dilate and the Bond grow taut like a violin string. He was falling, or the world was falling away. He wasn’t sure. The music was too strong—like a thousand symphonies singing the perfection embodied in her. It was the closest thing to the Music of Dawn he’d heard since he fell, and she was at its center.

Two things ruined the moment for him. One was masonry falling from the roof. The other was a strange pain that rolled through him. It was accompanied by a massive pulse of golden light like a heartbeat that bled through his skin and fur.

In the wake of the pain, he felt small paws on his chest. “Nick, what was that?”

“I’m not sure.” He shook his head. “It’s been happening lately.”
“Since you met me?” Her nervous smile was achingly adorable.

Nick swallowed and shrugged. “More or less, but it doesn’t worry me.”

“How can you say that?” Judy asked in disbelief. “It’s clearly painful. And since when was demonic power golden? And what on earth happened to the ceiling? Was that us?”

“I do believe it’s called Resonance.”

“I know what resonance is…” she retorted, shoving him gently. “Are you saying you and I are resonating?”

“Like I do with my armor and you do with your angelic butter knives, only on a…” Nick sifted through his mind for the words—“...much larger scale.”

Judy cocked an unimpressed brow. “That’s absurd.”

“Welcome to Tuesday around here,” Nick commented before casting his gaze over her. “But I’m surprised, Carrots. Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I am?”

He cleared his throat and smirked. “Two things. One I don’t mind at all, but the other concerns me a bit.”

Her expression went flat at his circumlocution. “Well, what could concern you so much in the face of your slow transformation into a demonic night light and the fact that we’re resonating strongly enough to shake your Den to the roots?”

“You’re naked.” Nick waited until she reflexively snapped her wings around to cover her modesty before adding, “But those things are what concerns me.”
“My wings…”

“Yes, those.” He pointed over her head. “That too.”

Her face was a rictus of dread. “The wager!”

“Is still intact.”

“Wha—How?!” He couldn’t help but think how cute she was when she was panicking—trying to keep her modesty and emphatically gesture at the same time. “With my wings and halo out, that’s a full manifestation! Heaven forfeits!”

“You may want to hold off on that statement, Oh Heir to the Throne. Or you may do something you’ll regret by accident,” Nick cooed. “The Wager remains undamaged because my home isn’t part of the world. It’s a small bubble of reality I carved out between the Mortal Plane, Hell, and the Fringe. You can manifest here with no issue.”

Shuffling her wings and wringing her paws she ventured, “So, no apocalypse?”

Nick was impressed that Judy’s pink ears and giddy smirk hadn’t stopped her from pursuing her inquiry.

“Unless what we did last night qualifies as a revelation, no.”

It was also pleasing that she didn’t immediately shoot the idea down. The urge to preen at her unspoken agreement was quite strong. That was not so terribly unusual in itself, but the pride at seeing her satisfaction was another matter entirely.

Before he could pursue the foreign line of consideration, Judy derailed his train of thought. She returned her wings to their resting position on her back and interjected. “Hang on there, Slick. If we’re outside the world and power doesn’t matter, why do you keep your collar on? Doesn’t it chafe to be bound like that?

“It does, but not thinking about it helps. Thanks for reminding me.” He commented wryly while he
dug at the offending adornment a bit. “To answer your question, I knew I’d have to go back to the world. Once it’s on, it’s easier to endure.”

Then, he decided to have a little fun with her. Nick grinned rapaciously and leaned in, gently lifting the veil on his power. “Besides, are you telling me you want me at full strength? Unfettered? With nothing else to protect you? Incidentally, you’re still naked.” He laid it on thick—the full Incubus Rex. All power and dominion and dripping sex appeal right down to the tips of his whiskers.

He knew he was overwhelming her. Her eyes were huge, pupils dilated. Her breaths became deep and rapid. Her pulse quickened more with every syllable from his charmed lips. Even her ears were on the alert. The little angel’s self-preservation had kicked in. There was a predator present, and she was trapped.

Nick did not expect her breathless, eager voice through the Bond.

Yes....

The glee of the moment bled off in an instant when another pulse of golden power rolled through him, dropping him to his knees. He shook his head and realized she was trying to prop him up by holding his chest. The last thing he’d expected was for her to come closer after his little stunt, but there she was. Naturally, at that moment the elevator at the end of the Hall screeched into life.

"Of course, they show up now..." Nick grumbled. “How can my luck be this unspeakably lousy? I’m the Devil! Shouldn’t that count for something?”

~

Judy giggled at the fox’s annoyance as she withdrew her paws and beat a hasty retreat to find clothing. She was grateful for the interruption. Relieved, actually. Another moment and she wouldn’t have been able to keep her paws from wandering...and that didn’t bother her nearly as much as it should have. Yes, she’d had sex for the first time. That did not mean she’d literally had her brains rutted out of her. That was a euphemism and to be taken as such. So, why was she having such a hard time focusing around him?

Leggings and a t-shirt were pulled on while a love song flitted through her head, and, suddenly, it made sense. A strong desire for closeness, her giddiness, the strange sense of completion in his presence...
The earth literally shaking under my feet when I looked at him…

It wasn’t hard to figure out. In fact, Judy had to shake her head at how obvious it was in retrospect. Obvious and game changing. She might have found a way out. Relief flooded through her. The nagging worry she’d carried since she bound the fox was gone!

Rabbit, I swear…

Judy jumped.

What?

Stop.

Stop what?

Whatever it is you’re doing. Every half-second your emotions cha—

Judy’s mind slammed into overdrive. She stopped listening and focused on feeling what he was feeling. Tension, hunger, distraction, irritation, amusement—all directed at her. He was clearly only annoyed by proxy, but the majority was because of what she was feeling. He was focused on that more than his task.

Like that!

She realized he’d been talking, but she had missed all of it. He was playing at being put out. She decided to play back.

I’m sorry. What’s the problem, exactly?
Nick sighed through the Bond and Judy smirked.

I am trying to make coffee and you’re being—

Distracting…?

I’d hazard to say you’re always distracting.

Flattery will get you into trouble, foxy.

Don’t bait the incubus, darling. They’re almost here and coffee’s brewing.

With that he closed the link, and Judy bit her lip to hold back the grin. He’d called her “darling”. A new pet name. The evidence was mounting. However, that did not equate to a sure thing. Her theory was still unverified. Fittingly, she had her litmus test ready to go. Come dawn’s first light, she would know. It’d be as clear as black or white feathers. That sobering thought only lasted a moment as she collected herself.

She walked back towards the table where coffee and her fox were waiting, musing to herself.

Her wings were proving to be unexpectedly useful. She’d been a bit surprised to see them after keeping them hidden for so long, but it did give her an opportunity to get the confirmation she needed. The look on his face would be worth the world if she was right. It was a monumental gamble, but so was everything she’d done since she’d met her fox. All she had to do was wait for dawn and let it play out. Either she would fall and accept her place as his willing plaything, or she would enjoy the floor show as he worked it all out. A mischievous grin spread across her face.

Sadly, she was unable to relish the possibility for long. Finnick had arrived, and, the moment he had a paw off the elevator, he was talking.

Nick’s jaw hit the floor as his de facto assistant stepped off the elevator cart and boomed, “He spatchcocked you, didn’t he?”
Judy choked out, “He what?”

“Finnick…” Nick’s tone was an amused warning.

“What?” The imp looked around questioningly. “I just asked if you spatchcocked her.”

“Finny…” Gazelle groaned behind her hoof. “You keep using that word…. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

“What you mean, Zelle?”

“She means it’s a cooking technique commonly used on small fowl.” Nick scoffed and shook his head. “I may sound like a sex act, but it most certainly is not.”

Finnick crossed his arms and frowned. “I call bullshit on that, Wilde.”

“It’s true, Finn,” Nick muttered. “Let it go.”

The pint-sized demon crossed his arms and snarled. “If spit-roasting is a euphemism, spatchcocking is too.”

“And this day was going so well.” Nick pinched the bridge of his muzzle. “Spit-roasting is a sex act. Spatchcocking is partial dismemberment. Nothing sexy about it outside of House Luxuria…. And maybe Gula.”

Of course, the remaining innocent in the room had to ask, “What’s spit-roasting?”

Before any further damage could be done, Nick said, “Ask Finnick to explain it once you get back to where you’re staying. Trust me, you’ll enjoy it,” and made tracks for the table with Judy close at his heels, blushing furiously.
Unfortunately, Finnick’s tenacity was acting up. “If I say spatchcock is a dirty euphemism, then it is.”

Nick sighed, bracing himself against the table top. “And some wonder why I have no faith in demonkind.”

Judy snickered.

“I’m a genius and you know it,” the fennec retorted, coming up to the table with the other angel mincing along behind him.


Finnick snorted and filled a cup for himself and another for the angel who sat notably close to him. “I value my life too much to interrupt your afterglow.”

Judy joined them moments later, but only had eyes for the other angel. “How did you know?”

Gazelle blushed, fidgeting uncomfortably. “I didn’t for sure until you said so just now. But by that standard the whole city knows, Lieutenant.”

Judy’s face was a picture of mortification. “How?!!”

Finnick’s laughter escaped his restraint. “Rabbit, when he got his foxy rocks off, it caused shockwave that crossed dimensional lines. Topside, they’re calling it an earthquake. The news says it’s a 5.2 on the Richter Scale with the epicenter somewhere in the Bayou. There’s no fault line anywhere near the city. The science community is losing their shit because of it!”

“Oh, wonderful…” Nick grumbled into his cup. He knew where this was headed. His rabbit was about to go concerned-paragon on them and start worrying about…

Judy was instantly at full attention. “Was there any damage? Any injured?”
Gazelle was quick to ease her fellow angel’s fears. “No. There was minimal damage. But between the quake and the attack on the police, the city is a pressure cooker.”

Nick couldn’t stop himself. “This has become a very cuisine focused day, hasn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” Judy responded incredulously. “We have a natural disaster in the city and you’re making food jokes?”

“Well, we started the day off in a cuddle burrito,” Nick chortled unabashedly. “And then we discussed the finer points of spatchcocking.”

Gazelle muttered, “Can we never use that word again?”

He chuckled and ignored her, shifting in his seat. “Now, we’re talking about cooking under pressure. Not exactly what I wanted to discuss, especially considering how hungry I am…”

To his astonishment, Judy ventured, “Um… What kind of hungry…?”

“If I say I want a stir fry and eggplant skewers would you be disappointed?”

“No…. Not much…” Judy fidgeted in her chair. “OK, yes!”

“Better.” Nick smirked. “Does my little angel want a second helping?”

“We need to get you fed, so you’ll get over the food-euphemism…”

“Of course. Rabbit stew sounds good to me.”
“You aren’t helping,” Judy whined.

“Not in the job description.”

Judy rolled her eyes, trying to force her smile down. “Come on, Nick…”

“On…in…”, he quipped. “I’m good with either.”

The flustered Cursori interrupted. “Oh Heavens help us…”

Nick turned to look at the angel in the room who had just invoked the Heavens with an even gaze.

She had the decency to look abashed. “Sorry.”

Nick waved a paw, summoning a Coin. He flicked it into movement across his knuckles before replying calmly. “Think nothing of it.”

That got Finnick’s attention. “Wilde, what’s up with you? You’ve flayed mammals alive for less.”

“Maybe. I’ve risen above such petty concerns.”

“Or you’ve got bigger ones. Whatever you’re up against topside is bad news considering the jobs you’ve had me do.” The imp’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. “And you’re about to lose your backup, aren’t you?”

~

The cat was out of the bag. Judy knew without having to look that the others were looking at her. The imminent falling of an angel was not something to be taken lightly. Nick appeared impassive. Finnick was waiting on his boss’ cue for how he should react. It was the Cursori who looked ill at the prospect.
It only took a moment for the fennec demon to lose patience. “When is it supposed to happen?”

“Angels fall with dawn’s first light.” Gazelle’s voice was harsh and strained. “Don’t you know that?”

Finnick shrugged, unimpressed, but oddly tense. His eyes flicked to the Cursori for a moment. “I didn’t have a reason to care till now. How long until sunrise?”

“A minute or so.” Judy’s unexpectedly light response surprised everyone. She tried to conceal her smile behind a paw.

Finnick turned to the red fox and asked, “We’re good here, yeah? The Choir won’t reach us?”

Nick raised an eyebrow at the lesser demon’s familiar tone. “We’re in the company of two angels, imp. What do you think?”

“But you’re the Devil!”

“Uncrowned. And that doesn’t matter.” Nick sighed, his attention elsewhere. “Laws of Creation….”

Finnick slapped the table in frustration. “Oh, bullshit!”

Nick shrugged. “Take it up with the Master of Canticles, or the Metatron if you like.”

Judy noticed a shift in his demeanor. There was less substance in the humor and more distraction in his mind. She could feel it. It made her regret her decision to keep her suspicions a secret, but that was better than getting their hopes up only for her to fall anyway. Besides, this way she’d have proof against which he couldn’t argue. She had to be patient. She didn’t do patience very well. Keeping her foot from thumping was becoming a challenge. A long sigh escaped her lips at the prospect of another fifty seconds of waiting.

Gazelle must have taken that to mean Judy was resigned to her fate and stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll wait somewhere else. I can’t watch this.”

Judy fixed the ungulate with a hard stare and put a little iron into her voice. “Sit down Cursori and bear witness. It is your duty.”

The ungulant’s expression was pained. “Lieutenant?”
Judy smiled wanly and intoned, “Strength in numbers unto the Gates.”

The rumanid nodded and sat down again, closer to Finnick, and Judy was sure her hoof was gripping the imp’s paw for comfort. It amused Judy to see the little fox struggle not to give them away. She knew. She knew Nick was aware of it too, but the greater demon’s attention was split.

He was readying himself to leap into the void to find her. A platinum Coin was already spinning across his knuckles. It warmed her heart to know he wasn’t about to wait, despite having nine whole days to find her, the power to manipulate time, and a complete knowledge of her destination. The poor fox deserved a reward. All she needed to know was if his preparations were superfluous or necessary.

~

The seconds ticked by. Nick was prepared, but his readiness was small comfort. It did nothing to lessen the anticipation as he felt the power of dawn growing on the horizon. For all his work and the achievement he’d earned, he found himself dreading the end of the angel. It was a strange, unwelcome feeling.

Dawn came with its usual fanfare, bringing the renewal and benediction of the heavens to Creation with it—exposing sin and cleansing the land. When it rolled through the Den, the largely expected happened. Finnick cringed, writhing in pain, and Gazelle sheltered him under her wings. Nick’s eyes pinched closed in mild discomfort—though less than the day before, he noted. It was an excuse to not look. He couldn’t bring himself to look.

When his eyes opened, he didn’t see a rabbit in pain under the force of the celestial choir. No rotting wings. No wings at all. She was smiling. As he watched, her smile grew to a grin and she burst into laughter. He couldn’t believe his eyes. He couldn’t even make himself blink.

Confirmation. He needed confirmation.

Nick’s paw closed over his angel’s. He placed two paw pads on her bangles and frantically spit the Words that removed her binding bracelets, forcing a full manifestation. Confusion mounted. The Words should have hurt, like all Divine speech on a demonic tongue, but it only stung instead of filling his mouth and throat with searing pain. That worry was blown away however, by Judy manifesting in her full glory. Four glorious wings and a golden halo. There wasn’t a spot of corruption.

His mind reeled. “What?! How?!”
The rabbit’s grin turned cheeky.

It took him a moment to cough up the words. “You knew?!”

“Yes and no.” Her smile grew sweet. “I didn’t know for certain until now, but I’m not surprised.”

“Wha—how?!”

Judy hopped onto the table and sat on the edge so she could stand eye to eye with him. He felt her force the Bond open, smothering his confusion with her delight. He felt everything she did. His eyes bugged. Language was suddenly too much for him.

She smiled and caressed his cheek. “You gave it away last night, Nick. How you took care of me before yourself and made sure I was safe and acting voluntarily…. It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

Nick balked. “What in Madness are you talking about?”

Her smile turned smug. “You’ll figure it out.”

“How?” He retorted, struggling to find his mental footing. He did not like having the rug taken out from under him.

“See, I did my research on you when I first spotted you. There wasn’t a lot to go on, so I decided to play it safe.” Judy shrugged and grinned. “Lust was my weakness. I needed to protect myself in case my little plan went bad.”

Nick snorted. “Which it did.”

“Exactly. Good thing I studied Lust beforehand,” she replied with a self-satisfied grin. “There are three kinds of intercourse.”

Nick was only mildly surprised she’d done her diligence. It was only to be expected from such a devoted individual. However, her forthrightness on such a topic was…out of character for her, or so he would have said. It was clear things were changing.

Brushing off the distraction, Nick groused sarcastically, “Could we call it something less sexy, please? I hear copulation is a good one.”

Judy continued unphased, “There’s ‘fucking’, which is the most selfish. It’s all about scratching your own itch. The second is ‘sex’ which is about the fun of it. Good for destressing, having fun. Basically it’s recreation. Pleasure for the sake of pleasure. I think it goes ‘Ars artis gratia’, or something like that.”

“Congratulations on getting some latin right.”
Judy nodded, acknowledging the backhanded compliment and he continued.

“I am aware sex can be art,” Nick snapped, unsettled. “I’m a master at it. But that isn’t your point, is it?”

Judy met his eyes and held them. “The third is the least selfish.”

“Yes. ‘Lovemaking’,” he said with a shudder. “The one that is, by definition, not a sin.”

Her smile grew. “Uh-huh!”

Nick blinked. “Are you claiming we made love?”

Judy bounced in place and chimed, “Yep!”

“Impossible,” he scoffed.

Judy leaned in so their faces were bare inches apart. “You were millimeters from climaxing the entire time. You refused to give in until I got mine. In spades.”

Nick blinked and stammered. He looked to the other two mammals at the table, but they were no help. Finnick was trying to grin and gape at the same time, while Gazelle was blushing and trying to hide behind her hooves. He felt his anxiety intensify.

Finally, he blurted, “Well yes. Hardly worth it for you to fall for a bad lay.”

“That isn’t something a demon would say. Once any other incubus got the green light, it’d be ‘two pumps and watch the pigeon fall’, right?” Nick couldn’t reply, despite his jaw working desperately. “Yet you held off for hours, pulled out all the stops to make it special for me.”

“Ye—” he sputtered.

She leaned in further, pressing her advantage. “Your focus wasn’t on yourself OR the act. It was on your partner.”

He finally found his voice. “Now, hold on a second!”

She pressed on before he could continue.“And the last thing you did before we passed out in each other’s arms was kiss. I initiated it, but only as a last hurrah before I saw Hell. You kissed me back like we were drowning.” Her finger landed square on his nose, pinning his attention. “That wasn’t fucking. It wasn’t sex. It was rough and a little kinky if my reading is accurate, but we made love. And that means...”

“No...” Nick’s voice was a hollow croak.

Her finger followed the line of his jaw up to his cheek, where her paw nestled into his fur. “Do I need to say it?”

“It can’t be.”
“You’re in love.” With those words, she pulled him in for a hard kiss and, with a little wing-flutter for emphasis, she added, “Don’t worry. It’s mutual. Has to be to keep these wings heaven fresh.”

Judy hopped off the table and strutted away. “I’ll get the books. It looks like you need a minute.” She punctuated the statement with a saucy hip wiggle and tail flick.

Nick was rendered fully speechless until Finnick’s crooning voice cut through the deafening silence. “She hustled you!” Laughter boomed out of the little imp. “She hustled you good!”
We're back! After way too damn long struggling with writer's block and lousy circumstances we have a new chapter of Hereafter for your reading enjoyment! We also have a special treat in form of a comic, courtesy of TheWyvernsWeaver! See link below.

https://www.deviantart.com/thewyvernsweaver/art/Hereafter-The-Lost-Fallen-762465463

My usual thanks go out to the following:

kt_valmiri for soundboarding.
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OnceNeverTwiceAlways for editing.

If you're interested in supporting Hereafter or my other writing, you can buy me a coffee. Check out the link in my profile for more details.

In addition to this chapter, look for my other postings in Dirt Road Were, Duet, Knight Errored, and (shortly) Pigment & Clay. This little surge of creativity is my way of saying thank you to all of my readers for your support and encouragement. You were a humongous help and I am extremely grateful.
Nick gaped soundlessly as the rabbit walked away. He knew he was doing a flawless imitation of a fish out of water, only without the literal flopping around. He certainly felt like one, but couldn’t find it in himself to care.

It took a minute for Nick’s mental faculties to comprehend anything past the limited scope of his own inner-upheaval and the sight of Judy’s rolling hips. Gazelle’s titters and Finnick’s guffaws finally snapped him out of his reverie. Then he ignored them.

This was hardly the first time someone had known something he hadn’t. Or revealed it so theatrically. Or expertly. It was a first, however, in that he wasn’t inclined to rip the offending being to shreds. That was worrisome.

Inside, he was in turmoil. His Pride had been stung in his own den, so his need to enforce his dominance should have been clawing at his mind. It wasn’t. He should have been mildly aroused at the thought of putting an upstart in their place, but his Lust was not piqued. It was raging. She’d gotten him good, and he was turned on in ways he hadn’t thought possible. He should have been furious or focused on his Sins or, at the very least, falsely nonplussed to save face. It was a miracle he wasn’t lifting the table. That was the part that worried him.

And the whole “being in love with an angel” thing. He’d heard wilder accusations. Many of them directed at him, but none so absurd. It was a joke. Had to be.

“Boss…” Finnick’s wary voice pulled Nick from his self-affirmations.

He glanced at the imp in annoyance. “What?”

“You’re glowing.”

He looked distractedly at his paw, noting the luminescence and shrugging. “Meh. Old news.”

“Say what?”

“It’s a thing he does,” Judy answered as she trotted back to the table with her arms full of books and documents.
“A thing?” the fennec asked incredulously.

“Lieutenant, this is highly irregular. I’ve never heard of…of—” The Cursori’s babbling was cut off by a wave of power rolling through the room.

Judy paused in setting her pile on the table. “What was that?”

“It felt like another quake,” Gazelle replied nervously.

Nick shrugged. “It wasn’t me this time.”

“Us, you mean,” Judy corrected.

He snickered around his coffee mug. “I rocked your world. Literally!”

“And now you have a new bad joke,” she fired back without missing a beat.

“Is this really happening?” Gazelle asked incredulously.

“Is what?” Nick inquired as he put his mug down.

The Cursori scoffed. “Are we really making jokes about something powerful enough to shake the foundations of reality and ignoring the fact that the Devil is glowing gold?”

“The little Messenger found her spine at last…” Nick commented, amused.

Finnick interjected, “Did you rut each other’s brains out for real?”

Nick snorted. “Tactless as ever, Finn.”
"Whatever," the imp snapped back. "At least your wit still works. Now what the fuck is going on?"

Nick pulled the stack Judy had brought to the table closer. "Before I begin, I should ask what you’ve been up to. My input is significant, but the potential arrival of the Host is a bit more pressing."

The imp scowled. "We did our part, but my suspicions were correct. Something ain’t right with the Gate they had Zelle put together."

Judy leaned forward in her seat. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I’ve seen plenty of gate spells and I’ve never seen one like this. Either they’re planning to bring in Legions, or the Divine himself is planning to drop in with his full entourage."

Gazelle spoke up as Finnick finished, "The substrate for the spell is incredibly complex. Layers upon layers of safety protocols and reinforcements with barriers to contain what they will be sending through. It’s frightening that they want so much power contained."

"You still have no idea what’s actually coming?" Failing hope colored Judy’s words.

"No, and I can’t guess either." Gazelle sipped her coffee. "A thousand angels can dance on the head of a pin, as the saying goes, so it could be the whole Host or a pawful of the most powerful."

Nick hummed to himself. "I presume you were able to slip in a few counter measures?"

"I ain’t no fool, fox," Finnick growled. "I know how to hide cut-outs and fail-safes in magical syntax. I made sure the Gate would fail when and if we want it to or if it overloads."

"You boobytrapped it, didn’t you?" Nick asked with a knowing smile.

"I set up a feedback cutout that will trap the power in the circle and force it back towards its source. If the Host wants to kill Zelle ‘accidentally’ with a power surge, it’ll backfire on them and collapse the circle on whoever makes it through."
Judy blinked in surprise. “You can do that?”

“He can do that and then some.” The Cursori’s tone was very pleased. “I never knew you could do half the things he’s shown me so far.”

Nick chimed in, “Finnick is unique in many ways. One of which is his…flexibility and adaptability when it comes to wielding power.”

“What does that mean?” Judy asked, confused.

“It means I ain’t got much. So what I got, I’ve got to use well.”

“It means he’s covered that end of things, so we can move on to what I’ve managed to figure out,” Nick stated with finality.

Judy leaned in. “And that would be…?”

“A lot that’s blatantly unhelpful.” Nick sighed and reached for the stack. “The tomes I asked for were a waste of time except for *The Lay of Tartarus.*”

“So you did find something?” she prompted.

He nodded reluctantly. “Something yes. But more via implication than statement.”

Gazelle shook her head. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means that Tartarus is actually a prison,” Nick commented. “The *Lay* predates the War of the Wager. It’s one of the few documents that has survived until now. According to it, Tartarus was designed to contain, and I quote, ‘the great power that had infected Hell and corrupted its Warders, the Pretender to kinship with the Divine.’”
“What does that mean?” Judy echoed.

“It means that Tartarus was designed to imprison something that attacked Heaven and pretended to be the equal to the Divine.” Nick tapped his chin in mock consideration. “Now, who do we know that was a pretender to the Throne of Heaven and corrupted the Warders?”

Finnick held up his paws to stop the sarcasm and asked, “Are you saying Lucifer is imprisoned in Tartarus?”

“The First Commander of Hell?” Nick nodded. “Possibly. Can you think of anyone else who fits the bill?”

Finnick rubbed his face with his paws. “No.”

“Then we have to assume Lollipop is Lucifer and is trying to break out of Tartarus.” Gazelle looked sick as the words left her mouth.

Judy was quick to push for more. “Did you learn anything else?”

“The Compendium and the memory stones comprising the The Codex were essentially worthless.” Nick waved at the box of diamonds accompanying the tomes. “They’re among the oldest documents in Hell and incredibly valuable in terms of history, but covered nothing of value to us in our current situation.”

“What about the Canticles?” Finnick inquired. “Was there anything in there?”

Nick rolled his eyes. “It’s a religious scripture on the nature of suffering. I didn’t waste my time looking through it for clues.”

“And my little addition?” Finnick was grinning.

“I was curious why you brought the Archivist’s personal journal, but I have to say it was beneficial.” Nick summoned a gold Coin and flicked it to the imp. “How did you get ahold of it?”
“Luck.” The imp chuckled.

“I won’t ask.”

Judy interrupted the foxes, “What made you think to steal the journal?”

“The Archivist is as old as Hell itself, or so it’s said, so he probably knew Lucifer. I figured there might be something in his personal records. As senior officers, the Archivist and Lucifer would have been fairly familiar. Possibly close.” The fennec fox shrugged. “It was a long shot, but when I had the opportunity I took a chance and grabbed one that looked close to the right time frame. What did you find?”

“Only an oblique reference to the reign of Lucifer Morningstar.” Nick opened the small book and flipped to the relevant page. “‘Conflicts of loyalties lead to rifts. The chasm it became in him was his undoing. At least, his legacy will remain unsullied so long as it remains where he left it.’”

Judy blinked. “That’s…annoyingly unhelpful.”

“It’s vague, but it does clarify one key point.” The journal flopped back onto the pile. “Lucifer’s undoing came about by dividing his loyalty. He was the first Devil and we always assumed he was loyal only to himself. So what was this other thing that caused a ‘chasm’ in him?”

“That would be good to know.” Judy rubbed her chin in consideration. “If we know how he was brought down and imprisoned, we could use that against him now.”

Gazelle piped up, “So, all we know is that Lucifer is coming for us.”

“Suspect,” Nick corrected. “We suspect that Lucifer is coming for us.”

“Is there any doubt?” The Cursori asked fearfully.

He sipped his coffee. “I wonder.”
Judy was confused. Something had clearly been bothering Nick all morning and not just the sand-bagging she’d pulled on him. She wasn’t sure, but he’d been distracted since Finnick and Gazelle had left. By now, they were probably done making the necessary arrangements with Clawhauser for the possibility of an evacuation.

She’d been impressed by Nick’s idea to involve the mortal in their plans. Of course, the police would have such procedures in place for the city in the case of a natural emergency. The earthquakes were a perfectly plausible excuse. Making use of them to clear the area in case of open conflict with the Host or Lollipop was a clever idea. With celestial back up on its way, it was only wise.

Judy shook her head. Now, she was calling it “Lollipop” along with everyone else.

With that thought in her mind, Judy collected the last of her gear and checked it one more time. The Gate was finished, so it was only a matter of time until it was open and the best time for that was noon when Heaven’s powers were at their height. She would have preferred to spend the hours between their guests leaving and their own departure in more enjoyable ways, but she was not about to go into a fight unprepared. Nick, however, seemed disinclined to do anything beyond roll that stoneware bottle in his paws and stare at the box of diamond and books. He looked deep in thought and confused—like there was some puzzle he was failing to figure out.

She found herself appreciating how cute he was when he was thinking, which was not a good thought, as she finished preparing her weapons and armor. She still had two hours until noon and, with nothing to do all, what filled her mind was what she’d like to be doing for the next hour or two.

She walked over to her fox, trying to keep the extra sway out of her hips and her mind out of the gutter. “A good vintage?”

“Hmm?” He blinked and looked up at her, completely unguarded in his distraction. She wanted to kiss him.

“Your wine.” Judy nodded at the bottle in his paws. “Is it a good vintage?”

“A very good vintage, but not for drinking,” Nick replied with a wry smirk. “This is Sanguinem Titanas, or ‘Titan’s Blood’ if you need it translated.”
“Titan…. That has to be a euphemism. The titans were a myth.”

“So are half the things we’ve dealt with lately,” Nick grumbled ruefully. “This is the elixir used in the rite of ascension to the throne of Hell. Finnick was giving me a little hint to hurry up.”

“Ok…?” Judy took the bottle and turned it in her paws. “So if you don’t drink it, what do you do with it?”

“The Devil Aspirant is anointed with this and then must hold their claim against all challengers for three days. If they survive and claim the crown, the rest of the elixir is used to anoint his lieutenants. It becomes their badge of office, temporarily.” He looked at the bottle unhappily. “If he stole a bottle of this, it must be worse than we thought down there.”

Judy smiled fondly at him and handed it back. “Is the future king of Hell concerned for his kingdom?”

All she got in return was a frustrated sigh.

“What else is bothering you?”

“There’s something about this that doesn’t add up.” He dropped the bottle onto the table and drummed his fingers. “I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something off about this whole situation.”

“Like it feels engineered?” Judy nodded. “I get that feeling too.”

“Not just that,” he grumbled. “It’s obvious we’re being manipulated. But there’s something that doesn’t feel right about Lucifer’s involvement.”

“Something like what?”

“I don’t know. That’s the trouble. I can’t name it.” Now he was on his feet and pacing. “Something
just doesn’t feel right. If I could name it, I would be able to do something about it. But I can’t. This feeling of…uselessness was old some time ago.”

“You—” she retorted with a snort—“are anything but useless.”

“When you stare at my belt buckle and say that, your meaning becomes obvious.” Nick leaned back against the table, displaying said garment and grinning.

“Sorry!”

“I’m not. But we don’t have time for that at the moment.”

She closed the distance between them. “We have almost two hours. More if we’re willing to cut it a little close…”

Nick smiled in a predatory way that made her belly tighten. “Are you sure you’re up for it, sweetheart?”

“Well…” Her paws slid over his chest. “I’ve heard about something called a quickie…. I think we have time for that.”

His voice turned husky. “You did do your homework, didn’t you?”

“I also wanted to try something else…. Um…”

“Spit it out, Darlin’.”

Judy giggled at his accidental pun. “That’s the exact opposite of what I want to do.” Seeing his eyebrows rise sharply, she grinned and leaned into him. “You did some fairly interesting things with your tongue last night. I think it would only be fair that I learn to return the favor…. If you’re willing to teach me, of course.”

Nick scooped her up and rumbled, “I think we can manage a beginner’s lesson.”
Judy threw her arms around his neck. “But I want the full course, professor.”

“I see you read up on role-play too.”

Judy grinned as hints of violets and sulfur began to drift on the air. “I did the reading, but I want a full course of study, sir.”

“That’ll take time,” Nick purred as they neared the bed.

“Then, we’d better get started.”

Puzzles and riddles were pastime in Hell—one Nick was very well acquainted with. Meaning and inference, words and syntax, suffering and flesh. This, however, was a horrible conglomeration of his least favorite variety: Possibility. There was nothing so dangerous for a demon as delving too far into potentials. It could lead to hope. That had led to madness and ruin for far too many of his kind.

Still…it was intriguing.

There was much he could be doing while his angel slept off their “lesson”—as she’d put it—but Nick found it impossible to do anything but sit and think. He still had an hour before she’d need waking, and it would take plenty of willpower not to slow time and knot her again before facing whatever the Host was going to throw at them. If he did, she’d be too drained to fight and that could potentially be a problem.

Bored, Nick lifted a diamond from the box and considered it. It was such a clever idea to use diamonds for record keeping. Paper didn’t do well in Hell, nor did most materials, so Infusing memories into diamonds was a very effective way to counter that. It was faster to absorb knowledge too when it was dumped into your mind as though you’d experienced the learning directly. Leaning back, he flicked the small stone towards the box he’d taken it from and rolled his eyes as it bounced off the rim, landing by the Lay.

*The Lay of Tartarus* was one of the few traditional books that could survive Hell. Its binding was
made from The Leviathan’s scales, and its pages were skin from fallen angels. The macabre character of the tome was only enhanced by the similarity it bore to a certain holy book, right down to the illuminations. It was an exquisite piece of craftsmanship. Even the ribbon page-markers were gilded and adorned with jewels.

Nick blinked.

An absurd thought flitted through his mind. There was a diamond….no, a Tartarus Diamond….set in the tassel cinch on one of the page-markers. With all the secrets and misdirection they’d faced, could it be?

He lifted the gilded rock between his fingers and, half-sure it would do nothing, thought the words.

Cedite.

He felt a mental slap. A slow pulse of light emanated from the gem and quieted. There was definitely something in there.

Ostende!

Another mental slap.

Nick’s eyes narrowed. It made sense that this memory stone would be protected. The trouble was finding the correct passphrase. On a whim, he flipped to the cover page of the Lay and considered the listed illuminations. The Devil was the obvious choice, but too obvious. The Tower was unlikely. The Hierophant, Priestess, and the rest of the major Arcana all were passed over until he reached The Sun. Lucifer was called ‘The Morningstar’, which was the sun, but there was no script on the page. Another word for which was…

“Dawnstar.”

A quick flip to The Star had Nick grinning like a triumphant fool. Only, there were no words on the page. He snarled and grumbled to himself.
“This is absurd.”

Then his eyes fell on the Archivist’s journal.

“Conflicted loyalties…. A chasm within him…. Downfall…” It clicked. “He’d feel a fool.”

The illumination of The Fool was blank of words, just as the others were, except for one phrase scribbled in the margins.

“Cognosce te ipsum.” Nick’s head cocked. “Know thyself? Seriously?” He snorted. “It was better in Greek.”

He leaned back into his chair and sipped his lukewarm coffee. It wasn’t much, but it was a clue.

“How does one know thyself?” he mused aloud.

Meditation and reflection.

Judy?

Stop thinking so loud. I have an hour.

Go back to sleep, sweetheart. I’ll wake you in a bit.

The grumbling he got in reply as she drifted off was amusingly adorable. Nick closed the Bond and let her rest, hoping it’d stay that way. He took another sip of his coffee and gagged. It was officially cold, bitter and off-putting. He dumped out the sludge and poured a fresh cup from the carafe, stirring in a small spoonful of sugar and a drop of cream as an indulgence. As he stirred, he considered.

“Reflection…”
He licked the spoon clean and checked his reflection in it. “Refle….Oh. Of course.”

Moments later, he was holding The Fool up to a mirror he’d unearthed from another crate. In the border of the illumination, repeated over and over again around the page, was another Latin phrase. Nick grinned as he sat back in his chair and took the coded ornament in his paw.

“Thus let the light shine,” the fox chuckled to himself.

It was so disgustingly obvious. He focused on the stone and hardened his will.

**Sic Luceat Lux.**

Memories not his own slammed into his mind in a flood. Decades, centuries of memory screamed through his synapses from the stone.

A montage of Hell as it once had been slowly coalesced. He saw Pandemonium as a shining extension of Heaven and the Silver City of the Host with Hades Citadel presiding over it. It was beautiful. He’d named the city as a joke. It was the one place specifically designed to keep order in Creation, so the name was a perfect irony. His bondmate hated it, but indulged him.

Then, came many years of hard work and leadership. Heaven responded less and less to his pleas and eventual demands for help. They did not believe his reports. He was losing faith and the Divine was focused more on her own duties than his needs or their relationship. It was a forced partnership, but such things always were in the first place.

He watched the slow spread of corruption and the looming darkness that had settled over the Citadel from his tower and brooded. Hell had gotten progressively more brutal and his rule more strained in recent years. It was harder to keep the peace and maintain order, even among his own Warders. They had been out campaigning again, trying to bring the increasingly unruly local inhabitants under control. Hades Citadel became Dis, Helheim became Hell, and Pandemonium ceased to be an ironic name for his city.

He was tired, careworn and afraid. That was when the apparition appeared to him for the first time. Nick felt himself slowly succumbing to the temptation.

“Another failure.”
The fox sat on his chair and frowned. The apparition was growing bold. “I have not failed.”

The apparition scoffed. “You have failed to bring Her around to your way of thinking. Were you not supposed to be equals? She in Heaven and you in Hell? Equally responsible? Equally powerful? And yet, you are forced to bow to Her will.”

The form of shadows and dust reclined in mid-air, leaning against nothing, mocking him. It cooed and condescended, alternately goading and mocking him. It was an old pattern, grown common in the time since it had first appeared to him—a pattern he was weakening to after another long, fruitless discussion with Her Highness.

He snorted. “It is my duty.”

“Duty…” the apparition sighed. “What duty is there when one’s devotion is so assumed?”

“I gave my oath as Seraph and Warden.”

“And she gave hers twice, just as you did. You have upheld your end of the bargain.” The smoke form seemed to smirk. “Has she?”

“She is Divine.”

The apparition huffed a small laugh. “A title and no more. Divine and Warden, overseers of the Engine of Creation and Tartarus Prison, respectively. Each vital. Each inescapable. And yet, you bow to Her in contravention of the agreement and the vow you each gave to the other in secret.”

The Warden glanced at the Bondmark on his right paw. It was Her mark, designating him the Right Arm of Heaven and the second among equals in service to the Host in leadership. Yet, that mark seemed to mean less and less, anymore. Even as she bore his child, he was diminished—relegated to enduring his service alone and ignored, unable to help as even more was heaped on her.

The apparition’s voice snapped his mind back to the present. “What do you desire?”
The armored vulpine scowled. “I am the Warden of Tartarus. I desire nothing.”

“Liar,” the apparition countered with a snort, its voice turning pouty as it curled briefly around his body like a lover. “You desire more than the post of neglected watchman over a doorway.”

He swept an arm through the mist-shape and snarled, “Untrue.”

“Liar again.” The words were poisoned honey, but the truth of them was inescapable. The pout became a grin too wide for the shadow’s face. “You desire more. Your bond-mate was not your choice, and, despite the whelp she carries, you are no master. Your throne is at Her discretion. You are no ruler. You are a servant.”

The Warden’s scowl deepened. “I serve the Host.”

“You would serve better on Her throne.” It launched itself into the air and settled into a languorous slouch on the back of his chair. “She could rest. Bear your offspring in peace while you shoulder the burden of rule.”

He shot to his feet and paced before his seat, snarling, “I serve where I am needed!”

“You are wasted where you are.” His guest whispered seductively as it paced beside him on the ceiling. “Leave your lies behind you and accept yourself. You desire the throne of the Heavens.”

“No.”

“Don’t you desire all thrones?”

His pacing stopped and the red fox sagged. “I desire more than this,” he admitted to himself aloud.

“Then take my hand. With me, your kingdoms awaits.”

The malformed paw hung in the air, waiting. The Commander of Hell looked at it and chewed his tongue. He did not like how this conversation had gone, but he could no longer deny the truth of the
apparition’s words. The wraith that had plagued him for so long had been accurate in its foretelling. She had turned her back on their vows. He was still trapped in Hell with his duty and nothing more.

They had not spoken outside of official capacities for too long and their attachment was purely political, now. Their Bond remained sealed shut on her end when it wasn’t in use and that was all the proof he needed. The affection they’d had for each other was clearly a thing of the past. Despite that, the Warden Commander of Hell still had an interest in his child. The rule of Heaven was taxing Her and it would only harm his offspring if it continued.

He stroked his chin as he regarded the specter. “Purely for the sake of argument, if I did accept your terms there is still a worry. My Warders are faithful and my supporters in the Host will rise with me, but our numbers are not enough. We do not have an army to match the Host and let me claim the Throne.”

“Oh, my dear prison-keeper… You have an army.” With a wave of a ghostly limb, the specter beckoned him out onto the balcony that overlooked the city and the great works he had built as master and commander of Hell. “You have souls. The sparks that collect the power you call mana can become your soldiers. Use them.”

“That would make them abominations.”

“To a good cause,” the wraith simpered earnestly. “With you on the Throne of Heaven, they can all be released back to turn on the wheel of reincarnation. A small sacrifice.”

“A terrible thing.”

“Great leaders must make such choices. And it is only for a short time. That is something else you can control, is it not?”

After a moment of thought, he shook his head. “It will still not be enough.”

“Then take from this place!” the apparition boomed, its face a rictus of impatience. “The animals and plants; the land itself. It is yours to command! Take what you must to do what is necessary! Spare her the weight of rule, sate your ambition, and put right the wrong done to you. What little matter is one realm’s use, when all realms will benefit from it?”
“I would become a monster...”

“A hard choice is the mark of a great leader. One fit to rule all of Creation, not just one, minute corner of it.”

“It is too much to ask for.”

“Freedom too much to ask for?” The force of the statement brought him up short in his boots, and he stared in horror at the scowling form before him. “You desire freedom, nothing else. You are trapped here, unable to do what is needful for the betterment of everyone. You are impotent, pinioned in place by vows you value when the ones you made them with have discarded theirs to you. The freedom is there to be taken. So be free. Take my hand and claim your rightful place in the order of the world. I offer liberty to stand at my side. Creation and all that is will be yours to claim if you simply accept.”

“Accept what?” he rasped.

“My offer. Freedom to be all you aspire to, under my wing.”

The proud fox straightened and stared down his nose with a sneer. “No.”

“What?”

He lifted his chin a fraction. “I will not.”

“You dare?!” the being snarled.

“I will not grovel at your foot in exchange for escaping enslavement to Her,” he spat. “I will not trade one master for another. I will be free on my own terms or you can rot in your prison, while I waste away. It is your choice. Not mine.”

The wraith floated silent for a moment before breathing, “So be it...Warden.”
He shook his head. “Not Warden. I will be no Warden King.” He sensed the apparition looking him
over from tip to tail, judging him.

“Oh?” The spark of a smirk grew on the apparition’s face.

“I will claim the name of the only beings who have been free of all strictures—of form and servitude
and limitations of the mind. I claim the title of Devil that I may be as free as those ancient
monstrosities were.”

The apparition laughed triumphantly. “So you shall be The Devil. And what do I get out of this?”

“What do you desire?”

The wraith chuckled at the reversal. “I could ask for you,” it said as it curled around him. “Or I could
ask for your first born, but that would simply not do.” The wraith floated away and floated around
the room on its back before stopping and facing him. “What I shall get…is a favor.”

“A favor.”

“Yes. One favor that I shall name at a time of my choosing. One you cannot deny me or refuse to
fulfill.”

“Is that all? I will gain the rule of all Creation with your patronage, and you will get a favor?”

“One favor at a time of my choosing and no refusal, on pain of death.” The shadow offered its paw
again. “Do we have an accord, Lucifer?”

~

Judy’s eyes snapped open the moment she heard the words in her mind. She didn’t know what they
were, but they were definitely in Nick’s voice. No sooner had those three syllables passed through
her mind than she felt Nick suffering—pain, fear, misery, loss, grief, anger, and repentance flowed
through her.
In an instant, she was up. Sparing no urgency, she spelled herself to speed and summoned her armor to her as she ran. She found him slumped in his chair, fists clenched and weeping. She didn’t understand what was happening. The Bond wasn’t allowing her to reach him.

As her terror and confusion were reaching a fever pitch, she heard a mighty boom coming from the elevator. Another followed and another, until a mass of twisted metal and wood shattered onto the floor of the shaft. Shortly behind it came a form garbed in white maille and hauberk that landed with a thud on the debris. His tabard marked him an Archangel, and he was badly wounded. His wings were tattered and blood dripped from his limbs. Immediately on his heels, a small form swooped in and landed. This one wore the tabard and armor of a Seraph.

The Divine’s Guardsmen had arrived.
Boom, baby! Another chapter! Alas, I must admit we are entering the end-game for this story, but do not despair! There is plotting (get it) for many more fun and interesting things in the works. I hope you all enjoy this little addition to the story and stick around for the finale.

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If you're interested in supporting Hereafter or my other writing, you can buy me a coffee. Check out the link in my profile for more details. now, on to the show!
The word of the moment was bad. Very, very bad. Nick wasn’t responding to her attempts to wake him and two of the Divine Guards were present—a wounded angel and a High Seraph. The puma was bleeding with crippled wings, but able to move—probably able to fight. The ibex, however, was unharmed and easily outclassed Judy. She’d have felt uncomfortable if Nick were to square off with one at the best of times, but, at present, he was a sitting duck. At least he was immobile and silent. He’d be easier to hide that way.

The Seraph’s words boomed through the cathedral-esque space of the den. “Where is the master of this place?”

Judy steeled herself and reached for her weapons with her mind, readying herself for the right moment. “Indisposed.”

The ibex gaped. “Lieutenant Hopps! You are…alive?”

“And apparently well, Seraph.” Judy slipped past Nick’s chair, directing the Seraph’s attention away from the demon. “What brings you here?”

The Seraph’s eyes narrowed. “Do not play games with me. We are here to collect you and return you safely to the Host, once we have the head of the demon who kidnapped you.”

“As I said, he is indisposed.”

“Ah! You’ve finished him off already?” He snorted derisively. “Pity.”

Judy restrained herself enough to ask, “If you don’t mind me asking, why did you want his head, of all things? We don’t keep trophies.”

“First, as proof he was destroyed. I was also told that the inquisitors might be able to glean some insight into our enemies from it.” The Seraph rubbed the pommel of the sword on his hip. “I wanted the honor of ending him, but it is only fitting that the kill was yours. I’m amazed you remain unsullied. We feared the worst.”

“Indeed.” Rage boiled under her two syllables. It amazed her how differently she saw the highest of
the Host. Once, she would have knelt in reverence for merely entering their presence, but now she saw nothing worthy of respect. He was no paragon. He was a white-robed errand boy sent to take her back for her execution.

“Lieutenant?” The minor angel stepped forward. “We’re here to help you.”

Judy remained unmoved. “How many were sent?”

At the question the puma’s face darkened. “Twelve of the Gladius and Cestus orders…and him.” Apparently, there was no love lost between the two.

“What happened to the others?”

“The gate was boobytrapped. It killed seven of us. The golems at the gate to this demon’s hovel finished off the others as we fought so High Seraph Lashiel, here, wouldn’t risk injury.” He spat the last words as though they burned his tongue.

“That’s enough sergeant. You can save your whining for when we return.” The Seraph’s tone was even, bordering on indifferent. “Now, is there anything left of the demon? The Divine himself requested a trophy of this one.”

Judy was taken aback. “Himself? Is Celestine gone?”

“She fell under the weight of her office yesterday.” The puma’s derisive snort broke the solemnity of the statement. “Arch-Inquisitor Augustine temporarily presides over the Host. Any questions you have can be directed to him.”

In that moment, Judy felt horror and dread settle into her bones.

She knew Augustine. The High Cherub had mentored her through her induction into the hunters of his Order. He despised authority and had openly stated his distaste for high office many times. There were also at least two hundred angels ahead of him for claiming the throne, even temporarily. If there was any doubt, the puma Gladius’ disdainful attitude was extremely telling. If the rule was legitimate, there was no way an honorable Gladius would react so strongly.
Something was badly wrong in Heaven. With this evidence, there was only one conclusion Judy could come to. Augustine had been sacrificed in her place and his “temporary rule” was merely to buy time to get her back to Heaven, where she’d be gutted for certain.

The ibex angel’s voice pulled Judy’s attention back to the here and now. “We must return. Augustine informed us that you are to be groomed for a high post as soon as possible. It is an honor.”

The weary Puma practically begged, “Lieutenant Hopps, it is time to come home.”

Judy set her jaw. “I refuse.”

“I see your time around demons has addled your mind.” The Seraph huffed. “Come, Hopps, or I will have to use force.”

Her eyes met those of the Seraph. They contained knowledge and a dismive coldness that sickened her. He knew—her immanent fate, the fate of Augustine, all of it. In turn, he must have seen something in her expression.

“No.”

The ibex sneered and drew his blade. “Then I’ll drag you back, after I’ve taught you a lesson or two. I’ve been authorized to administer disciplinary measures as I see fit, and you, Lieutenant, are disobeying orders.”

“Coronel!” The bloodied angel moved to stand between them. “What is this?”

The Seraph’s blade split the lesser angel’s armor in a single stroke. He was dead before he hit the floor.

“This, you simpleton, is what you get for interfering in the course of my duty. You should have died more usefully.”

The coldblooded murder she’d just witnesses was the final proof. “I’m not going anywhere.”
She was fixed with an indifferent sneer. “And what do you think you can do to stop me? Pout?”

On those words, Judy shook herself out of her shock and summoned her armor, vanishing her bangles. “If I force you to kill me, I won’t be any use to Celestine. She’ll burn what she stole from Augustine out before the next Heir manifests. Sounds like I win.”

“Just so you know, my orders say ‘alive’, not ‘unharmed’. You’ll go back either way, then you’ll receive the Divine’s punishment.” The ibex stalked forward, grinning. “I will relish seeing you flog yourself to ribbons for your insubordination.”

“You know Heaven’s vows only work in Heaven.” Judy’s voice was filled with the knowledge that she was right.

He nodded. “I also know that I can hurt you here as much as I like and face no reprisals, so long as you’re breathing when I drag you back. And you will still beat yourself within an inch of death on his word.”

“Is that so…?” The poisoned, velvet tones she heard from behind her filled Judy with hope and terror.

She glanced over her shoulder and the bottom of her stomach dropped out. Something was wrong. Nick’s posture, demeanor, and bearing were all wrong. He looked haughtier, more rigid and bitter.

The Seraph’s face contorted into a mou of distaste. “I see you did not finish off all the demons here.”

“All?” Nick quipped back. “There is only one demon in this place.”

The Ibex paled. “You…”

“You asked for the master of this place, little angel.” With that statement, Nick unfurled his wings. They were as magnificent as they had been the last time Judy had seen them, but now the gold and black were mottled and inconsistent. The colors seemed to shift, struggling against each other as tremors shook his frame and expression. “Well, here I am.”
Nick struggled to control the tempest between his ears. His sense of self was fading. He’d felt the arrival of the Seraph in his Den and that had been enough for him to resurface to the waking world, but not enough to escape the nightmare. His mind was unraveling. Familiarity with madness and enduring it was nothing new to him, but this was different.

Memory stones were old territory. They carried risk. Accepting the memories of someone other than oneself into the mind could cause psychological fracturing, multiple personalities, even possession. He’d met plenty of demons who had died, only to infuse a new body with their minds through a stone. All it took was a host with a weak will.

His vision was a dissonant cacophony. One instant he saw his Den, the next his throne room. Both were his and he recognized them. But both were alien and strange, filled with things he half recalled and understood less as his mind fissured. The upheaval grew and grew—suffocating him until he heard a voice he was sure he knew.

Lashiel.

He slipped silently off his chair and into the shadows in the same motion. His old armor leapt to cover him with a thought and his Spear took its proper form—the jagged brutal shape he’d crafted it into by force of will over centuries. His armor settled into its resting place as a torque around his neck, which confused him. He’d never seen an adornment like it. And he was nude from the waist up. Most peculiar and improper. A soldier was always dressed, especially a soldier king, but this was not the time. An enemy was present.

He peeked out from the shadow of a pillar.

Two enemies.

Pain lanced through him as he looked at the rabbit standing between his former seat and the hated Seraph. Terror for her seethed in his gut. She was blocking his path. Perhaps she could be useful to him. Another soldier against his neglectful bondmate and the sanctimonious bureaucracy of Heaven.

As he watched, the scene changed. Another angel stepped between them and was struck down. The little cherub was armed and standing her ground against her superior officer. Yes, she would make a
fine addition to his growing army in Hell. With a few more like her, Heaven would fall. The Seraph stepped forward and the need to defend her surged up in him. Nick would not let his mate be harmed.

Mate?

Mate…

Bondmate.

My betrayer!

“Is that so…?” Nick felt the distaste roll off his tongue as he stepped out of the darkness.

The little angel sneered. “I see you did not finish off all the demons here.”

He raised an eyebrow at his insolent subordinate. “All? There is only one demon in this place.”

Clearly, he needed educating. He was no demon. The “demons” were the serfs of the Divine. He was an officer of the Host—second among equals in the ranks with the one who had broken their covenant and usurped his authority, relegating him to the stewardship of a prison.

The Seraph paled and sputtered, “You…”

“You asked for the master of this place, little angel.” With that statement, Nick felt his wings spread for what felt like the first time in millennia, aching and tingling. “Well, here I am.”

The Seraph struck first, but Nick was ready. There was nothing a pithy little ibex with feathers barely sprouting on his neck could do against his might. Or so he thought moments before he slammed into a pillar, cracking it through.”

“Nick!”
His heart was in his throat. Her fear galvanized him to peel himself out of the rubble. Their eyes sought each other out and fury filled him. His mate, the betrayer was there. He could end his “rebellion” in an instant, but the Seraph just had to interfere. Nick quickly found himself on the receiving end of a vicious assault.

Judy watched the fight unfold in horror. Nick had managed to take the first strike on the haft of his spear, but that was where his good fortune ended. To her astonishment, the fox was giving ground under the blows and magical blasts being dealt out by his angelic assailant. It was almost as surprising and disconcerting as the look of unbridled hate he sent her way. She felt for a moment that his anger was directed at her instead of the angel attacking him.

She watched as Lashiel bowled him over and sent a blast of power after him. Nick barely managed to dodge. Looking at the new hole in the wall, she heard him exclaim “Stop blowing holes in my sanctum!”, before the angel was on him again.

She wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. He didn’t sound at all like himself.

The madness didn’t end there, either. Somehow, the differences in Nick were becoming more apparent. His fighting style was strange, archaic, and ill-suited to a toe-to-toe battle. His normal method of engagement was to redirect or avoid taking direct attacks, so his opponents tired out—a duelist’s style. It suited him.

This, however, was the fighting style of the Legions—brute force and counter-measures. He needed power to stand and fight, but he was still wearing his collar. It was almost as though he’d forgotten about it. Judy nearly dropped her sword. That had to be it. He’d forgotten and was fighting at a fraction of his strength against a Seraph.

She leapt forward instinctively, heedless of the danger.

Nick was panting. His power was drained and his muscles burned. He didn’t understand. He’d traded blows for mere moments before ending up on the defensive. Parries and blocks quickly grew desperate and barely prevented his flesh from splitting. Worse still, his armor refused to respond to
him. He was vulnerable and practically routed.

Then, it happened. He was just a hair too slow. The traitor Seraph’s longsword was past his guard. Time bent. The celestial metal would spit him and he would die on a rebel’s blade, never having reclaimed his place in the Host. Nick watched his death fly towards his chest and, for a moment, felt a longing for the one he’d leave behind. He just wanted to see her again. He’d even compliment her feathers if they’d grown too numerous. His own had all fallen out.

A female voice, shrill with fear, echoed off the walls. “NO!”

Nick blinked in wonder as time snapped back into movement. The sword that he’d expected to die on rattled off the flagstone floor. He looked up to see the tip of a similar, if smaller, blade protruding from the feathery ungulate’s chest.

The same voice, filled with disgust, wafted around the dying angel. “You should have killed me first, Sir.”

The blade twisted in the wound before vanishing back the way it had entered. Once the angel had fallen, gasping for breath, Nick saw his savior.

The little rabbit stood over the head of the officer she’d just murdered and stared at him. “Not on my watch.”

“Lieu—Lieutenant…” The Seraph’s voice rasped before his face twisted into a snarl. “Traitor!”

“I made my choice.” The Cherub’s lip curled in distaste. Then she brought the tip of her sword down hard in a double-handed stab into the neck of her victim. As the lights in his eyes dimmed she added, “Maybe they can use you for parts.”

Relief flooded him in a wave. His knees gave out and he slumped towards the ground. The hard, stone floor didn’t reach him, however. Two small, strong arms wrapped his torso and guided him to knee, reclining against a pillar.

“I’ve got you, Nick. I’ve got you.”
Yes, she would make a fine addition to his army.

Judy wanted to smile. She’d saved him. That was all that mattered. She repeated that to herself as she gasped for breath. His paw clamped harder onto her throat. Before she blacked out she rabbit-punched his forearm and pried his paw from around her neck, back peddling away from his as quickly as she could.

“Nick, what’s gotten into you?”

“Do not pretend, usurper!” Nick roared.

She got her sword up in time to block his spear, but it was close. Anger fueled him, and he was a force to be reckoned with, even exhausted as he was. She batted his follow up thrust aside and leapt back to gain a little space. She immediately regretted her choice as she saw a pawful of Coins vaporize in his grip.

Nick eyed her with undisguised anger. “You will pay for your betrayal!”

“What betrayal? What did I do?”

His next strike was at nearly his full strength. Judy’s training against much larger opponents was all that saved her. His spearhead shattered a flagstone and swept along the ground at a frightening speed. She hopped over the sweep and backed away. He stalked forward.

“Nick, talk to me!” Judy begged.

“I am not this Nick! I am Lu—” His words died in his throat and he staggered, using his spear to steady himself.

While he was stunned, Judy tried the Bond. It was closed hard, almost to the point of cramping. She pushed and Nick screamed. Suddenly, she was fending off a hail of spear strikes, every one with the intent to kill. Blows hammered her guard and the area around her. Crates shattered, stone cracked,
and Judy was fighting for her life. One hard strike was replaced by another and another as quickly as she could parry. She realized she couldn’t keep it up, so she took a page from her demon’s book.

She danced.

Rather than block, she adopted Nick’s usual style of redirection and evasion. His strikes became more manageable, and she was able to push back a little. One poorly executed attack from him was enough of an opening for her to hammer the haft of his spear and slip into his guard. She drove the pommel of her sword into his gut as hard as she could. With the air blasted from his lungs, Judy danced away and tried the Bond again.

For an instant, it gave, and Judy was left thunderstruck. His mind was howling in many voices. Recollections and emotions that she knew weren’t his battered him even as he fought back with his own memories and will. It was impossible, but there was no time. She regained her equilibrium with just enough room to dodge another assault.

More Coins vanished and his attacks became desperate, erratic. His styles were clashing. One moment, he was smooth and deadly, slipping between her thrusts and sweeps with a smug grin plastered across his beautiful face. The next, he was a hard, calculating machine of war with no grace or poise—the simple, cold gravitas of an executioner etched on his features. She bent and evaded until she found another opening and slipped in close again, allowing him to catch her.

He lifted her by her ears, snarling into her face. “Now, I will have my vengeance! You abandoned me! Left me to rot in a backwater of Creation and took my right of rule!”

Judy fought down the terror and waited for her moment.

“We hinged everything on our agreement and you tossed it aside! But now…” Nick had panted and trembled throughout his raving, crushing her ears in his grip, but suddenly it slackened and a disturbingly manic look of tenderness bled into his expression. “And you, mate, will…. You will… be…free…. I…shouldered the burden…. I’ve…missed you, My Sunlight.”

Nick’s eyes unfocused half-way through his rant, but the words scared her no less for it. His pain was so sincere. It didn’t stop her. Gripping his forearm, she balled herself up and slammed her feet into his chest as hard as she could. She watched in grieving sorrow as he flew away from her, an expression of confused longing on his face, before he slammed through the wall and was buried in a pile of rubble.
Nick was getting tired of unburying himself. He was still in his Den, which was good. He hadn’t been knocked into the void or back into the mortal realm, so he had a chance to figure out what was going on without endangering reality. The knock to the head had cleared a little of the morass in his skull. He owed that rabbit, whoever she was, a thank you. She was so familiar and yet…

Pain lanced behind his eyes and bloomed. The storm of memories was boiling up again, threatening to pull him under. His vision swam. Bile grew in the back of his throat as the flood grew into a torrent of past horrors. Everything from his last internment in Hell, back over the centuries and millennia to the day he fell, came back to him. Everything he’d forgotten or hidden was laid bare. His chat with Baphomet when he was too naïve to know he was being manipulated, the fight with the Divine and why the conflict happened.

“Stand. Down.” The egret enunciated.

“I will not.” Nick replied. “I can not stand aside and allow this to happen.”

“You have no choice, Seraph.” The reply was quietly and contemptuously spit back at him as she took her place on her throne. “You will follow orders and prepare to take the mortal realm exactly as I told you to.”

“Lady Divine, please! What you propose is monstrous,” Nick pleaded. “Baiting the demons into invading is one thing. If they forfeit the Wager, so much the better. But your plans for the reconstruction is madness!”

“How could you question me?” Her voice was as prim as it was soft. “I am your liege and ruler.”

He stood firm, with clenched fists. “When your purpose is to convert the whole of the mortal realm into a…feedlot so you can farm mana purely for your own benefit, I feel I must.”

She shifted on her seat and settled in, draping her robes across her seat. “Mortals serve no other purpose, and we will need that mana to finish wiping out the demons once the Wager is lost by them. They have been a threat for too long. Do you think they would do any different?”

He knelt at her feet. “So we will choose to sink to their level first? Can you not see how wrong that
“It will end our enemy and return control of Creation to its proper place.” Her gaze was even and cold. “Here, with me.”

“I absolutely refuse.”

“My child, please. It is a small price to pay in the short term and all of eternity stand before us once the demons are exterminated.” She simpered, caressing his face as a mother would.

He didn’t move, but met her gaze pleadingly. “The souls we would damage are the very ones that bolster our ranks. Even a generation lost will be harmful to the Host.”

“A small loss to a greater gain, my child.” The Divine gripped his shoulder. “It is a small sacrifice we must make now so that all Creation will benefit. Imagine a world without the demonic threat hanging over it. The cost is worth the benefit.”

Nick shook his head. “And it only requires an act so depraved as to be demonic to accomplish it.”

At that, her matronly façade slipped away and she leaned away from him scoffing in disgust.

“My lady, since you completed your ascension you have been acting strangely,” he pressed. “As a zirafah, you were compassionate, but now…. The closer you have come to the Engine the more of yourself you have lost. Please, see sanity!”

“All I see is what must be done.” The regal bird glared down her beak at him and sneered. “And the sin of Pride.”

“My—” His words were cut off as a bolt of power lashed out from the Divine’s staff. He staggered away from the throne, slack-jawed in shock.

“Your service is ended. I hereby pass judgement upon you, my son. I exile you from the Heavens and Host as a traitor. May Hell welcome you with all that you deserve.”
With that, the egret in white robes struck the ground with her staff and Nick was blasted to his knees, his head spinning. He regained his senses enough to feel strong arms yank him up and drag him off. The last thing he heard before blackness took him was the voice of the Divine he’d served faithfully.

“Take that traitor to the Hellmouth and put him through. Strike his name from the Lists of the Holy and let his House be dishonored in proportion to his crime—the Sin of Pride.”

Stars exploded in Nick’s world as someone struck him hard across the face. As his consciousness faded, a deep, cold voice commented, “You do not seem surprised, My Lady.”

Through the dark, the last words he heard were “Apples fall closer to some trees than others.”

The next thing he knew was the long fall from grace, his impact in the first of the Pits, and the horrors that greeted him. The stench of Sulphur, the Gatekeeper’s rictus when he was found in the crater he made, the Cerberus Watchers along the Via Diabolos as he was dragged by his wings to the Citadel for his claiming. Nick felt his throat closing, smothering him as the panic took control.

More memories flooded up, hammering his senses—seeing the chaos his city had become, admitting that his mate had forsaken him and closed their bond, the creeping shadows that haunted his steps as he went to Tartarus Gate, the hatred that filled him, his grief as he gave in and claimed his Throne, his conviction as he led his legions against the Host of the Usurper.

Nick couldn’t tell up from down or left from right as his mind fissured and bent, but he still pulled himself out of the rubble to lean against the wall. He would not be beaten by this. That rabbit needed recruiting and his bondmate needed to be punished. He needed to find Judy. So much to do. Gently, he pulled himself up to stand when a burst of air hit him that smelled of sunflowers, the first light of day, and new-molted feathers. With it came the scent of fear and rabbit and home.

His mind settled. Chancing a peek through the hole in the wall, Nick saw an eagle in the robes of the Divine looming over a rabbit. In a moment, it all made sense—The Divine and Judy. But it also made sense to the mind he had immersed himself in—his mate and the rabbit he’d wanted to recruit. Nick understood. He could feel her through the Bond, now. She was afraid and in danger, riddled with regret for hurting him and completely unaware he was still standing. His heart ached.

However, there was a larger concern. Nick recognized the presence of the Divine who had exiled him. Her aura and power were unmistakable after the long service he’d given her. Bitterness and anger clouded his mind while red swam on the edges of his vision.
Lucifer’s memory reached out to soothe him. It recognized the presence of his bondmate. The regret, sorrow, and nostalgia were enough to pull Nick back.

He had an epiphany. Lucifer’s traitorous mate and the Divine that had condemned him were the same being.

A few Coins vanished from his paw and violet flames covered Nicks wounds. What they’d found in the clinic now had a larger, even more disturbing, implication. They deserved revenge. Lucifer’s betrayal and abandonment, Nick’s wrongful punishment, and all the angels—Judy included—that had been sacrificed to this twisted Divine’s ambitions.

Nick had an idea. Vengeance was possible with a little finesse and some help from Lucifer’s memories. All he needed was for Judy to buy a little time for him to heal.
I won't belabor the point. I am stupid behind schedule with this chapter. Family obligations, work and all manner of RL shenanigans got in the way with a huge side-order of writer's block. That said, the chapter is here!

My usual thanks to KT, OnceNever, Blueberry and DamLone for everything they do for me so this story can happen, and Weaver for his amazing art and helping me come up with this.

I regret to say that Hereafter is coming to an end, soon. There are one more chapter and an epilogue planned. However, after a break I have high hopes for starting on a sequel, so there's that to look forward to.

Now, on to the show!
Judy stood and prayed, crushed to immobility under the weight of the presence she found herself in. Prayers were no more frequently answered for angels than mortals, but it was all she could think to do. Moments after Nick had crashed through the wall, the body of the former seraph Lashiel stirred. In a sickening contortion of limbs it folded in on itself, crushing and forcing the silver blood from its flesh. The corpse evulsed the ichor to pool on the floor and the flesh settled into immobility while the blood itself moved.

With a terrifying rapidity and guided by a sick intelligence, the sanguine fluid flowed and crawled across the floor forming the shape of a warded gateway of extreme complexity. Judy had no time to marvel as the gateway opened and a great formed stepped into the protected space within the circle.
The bottom fell out of her stomach.

The moment the taloned foot came to rest on the floor a shockwave rippled through the room and beyond. In the distance, sirens lit off all across the city. Judy felt a panic suffusing the city, and the ground began to rumble with the movement of tens of thousands of mammals. The city was in an uproar and spiraling towards a full-blown panic, but that was a distant concern.

“Lieutenant.”

Her old mentor stood before her. When Judy had met him, he had been a great panther. His power and grace had been so intense and his pelt so rife with feathers it had been a miracle he hadn’t ascended earlier. It was no surprise he had become an eagle. She wanted to smile seeing his face, but grief filled her. She knew it was not her old commander who looked out of his eyes anymore. There was a coldness to his gaze that she didn’t recognize, and his voice sounded forced, layered with tones he’d never used before.

Judy gritted her teeth and spat, “Celestine.”

The divine clicked its tongue in distaste. “Such a bother. Come. Now.”

Judy took a small step to put herself between the angel and where Nick had fallen. “I’m not going anywhere.”

The eagle’s eyes narrowed slightly in annoyance. “That is an order, rabbit. Come.”

“I told you I’m staying here.”

“You will follow my orders, angel. And you will suffer for your insolence before you’re put to your proper use.” The Divine sneered down its beak and boomed, “Kneel.”

Judy’s knees cracked into the flagstone floor, pain radiating out from the impacts. “I will not,” she grated out through clenched teeth.

The eagle’s voice turned warm and paternal. “Judith, you have a duty—one that will serve far more than the Host.”
“I have served your sickness long enough. I will not be your next victim.” Judy struggled to hold onto her defiance in the face of her enemy.

“You will serve as I need.” Its smile slid away into bored indifference. “Even if you force yourself to die, your flesh will sustain me until the next Heir manifests. So whatever noble action you have planned, it will amount to naught.”

The surety in the Divine’s voice sickened her. Judy heard the belief in the words and knew this little setback hadn’t stopped Celestine before.

“Now, stand up Lieutenant.” The Divine’s gravitas reasserted itself. “Obey and you will not be punished before your sacrifice.”

“I’ve made my choice,” Judy spat.

Celesting sneered in contempt. “A demon over your own kind? Disgusting.”

“No.” She steeled her resolve. “The Devil over a monster.”

The eagle’s face twisted into a mou of disgust. “Enough.”

“Indeed. Enough, *Aurora*.” Nick’s voice slipped from the shadows. “Be silent and still would you?”

The Divine’s eyes bugged. Very quickly under Judy’s astonished gaze, the former tormentor struggled to move and speak, failing at both. The great bird gave up after a moment, settling for staring hatefully at the shadows behind it.

Relief flooded through Judy as she complained, “You have got to stop doing that.”

Nick shrugged, never taking his eyes off the Divine. “My flair for dramatic entrances simply cannot be contained.”
She staggered to her feet and joined her fox. “You’ve had two today. You’re cut off.”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Now, what to do with you…Mother.”

Judy blinked uncomprehendingly, “Mother?”

“Yes, Judy.” Nick squared his gaze at the eagle. “Mother.”

At that moment, Judy was distracted by a blue glow coming from the Divine. A nimbus of blue flame had wreathed the eagle’s head in a halo of light. Slowly, the dancing flames coalesced, outlining a crown with a tongue of flame flickering on its forehead.

With a visible force of will, the Divine spoke. “Who are you, demon, that you dare to speak my Name?”

Nick mockingly cocked his head. “I’m surprised you don’t recognize me.”

“You’re a demon and a fox. Beneath my notice on two counts.” The divine huffed, refusing to meet his eyes.

“Yes…. You’d have to say that after discarding Lucifer once you had your powerbase secure in the Heavens.” Judy watched in confusion as Nick circled the trapped angel. “Once you’d stolen his position in the Host, it was easy to turn your cronies against him. Especially after goading him into rebellion through calculated apathy.”

Forced aloofness gave way to worry as Celestine asked, “Who are you? How do you know such things?”

“I am Piberius. The former High Seraph and your good right arm.” Nick’s voice was cold and unforgiving as stone as he added, “I am also the son of you and your erstwhile mate, Lucifer. I guess I followed in daddy’s footsteps and I’m now the Devil. Thanks for sending me to Hell, by the way.”

“No…” Celestine croaked as fear crept onto her features.
Judy found the wherewithal to tug on his shirt and choke out, “Explain.”

~

Nick maintained his grip on Lucifer’s memory through an act of pure will. His anger made it significantly easier, especially with a focus for it. “It’s very simple, Judy. That monstrosity is my mother.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “But angels can’t breed. It’s impossible!”

“It’s possible.” He assured her with a paw on her back. “Now I know why the Bond you slapped on me is such a big deal. The command staff don’t want anyone getting too attached to their bondmates, otherwise they might put their focus on them instead of the Host.”

“We are a military—” the Divine spat venomously—“not a body politic. Our numbers come from the benign souls of mortals, not filthy procreation. You are an aberration. Nothing more.”

The barb didn’t even make him flinch. “It’s disheartening to see the only angel to give birth in eons say such horrid things.”

“Of you?” The eagle smirked derisively. “That is easy. You are your father’s child. A disappointment and a hinderance.”

“Because I refused to turn the Mortal Plane into a factory for your greed?” he asked half-rhetorically.

“Because you were too blind to see that it was needed.” Nick watched the thing that called itself a sacred ruler as it ranted. Disgust filled him to know he shared its heritage. As the words tumbled from its beak, its eyes grew manic and filled with hate. “Your father was a fool and lost sight of our greater purpose. Now we are all paying for his weakness, and you have finished his work by condemning us.”

Judy’s quavering voice drew his attention away. “You know what we’re fighting?”

“Of course, I do, you stupid little rodent.” The Divine took a deep breath and the fire on its crown
flared. The firelight illuminated its face, displaying cows feet and the marks of weariness and long age—marks that had been absent only moments previously. They seemed to worsen as it strained against Nick’s binding.

“It won’t work, Aurora.” The binding tightened adding to the strain on the eagle. “And if you try too hard to force it, you’ll burn out your stolen flesh and die. Won’t you, Mother?”

Celestine grimaced. “Do not call me that, whelp.”

Nick smiled ruthlessly. “By your Name? Or your title? Both are correct, so whyever not?”

“Her name was Celestine.” Judy interjected, breaking the stalemate. “We both know that.”

“Us, yes. But that was just another thing she stole. Lucifer knew her by her true Name.” Nick chuckled mirthlessly. “Fitting is it not? The two great generals who shared power and fought the War of the Wager were once lovers, bonded and named so ironically. Lucifer and Aurora—The Light-Bringer and The Dawn.”

“Dawn…” Judy reeled. “Dawn was the name of the First Divine!”


~

Judy struggled to process everything she’d just learned.

She watched as the eagle drew itself up against the force of Nick’s bindings to gaze haughtily down on them. “I have shepherded our kind through trials you can not begin to imagine. You have no right to judge me.”

“I have the right of a son, an angel, and the Devil. Judgement may not be in my job description, but punishment…that certainly is.” He smiled menacingly at the caged monster.
Judy felt herself blanche and she gripped his arm. “Nick, wait!”

“You heard it yourself, Carrots,” he replied plainly. “She admits that she’s murdered countless angels to steal life and stay in power. If that isn’t corruption, I don’t know what is.”

She tugged on his arm, shaking her head. “We can’t kill her. She needs to face trial.”

“And who will believe us?” He inquired mildly. “If we take her to Heaven, her powers will reassert and the Host will slaughter us on sight. They won’t let a syllable pass our lips.”

“We don’t have the right to pass judgement on her.”

“We don’t.” Nick met her eyes. “You do.”

Judy forgot how to breathe. “Me?”

“You are the Heir. In cases of one’s superior acting illegally, it is the subordinate’s responsibility to relieve their commander until such time as a suitable judgement can be passed before an appropriate archon.” Nick shrugged. “There is no higher archon possible in all of Creation than you, Judy. It is your right, responsibility, and duty.”

“I can’t.” She felt panic welling up within her. “I can’t be judge, jury, and executioner—regardless of her crimes.”

“Then our only option is trial by the old ways, my dear.” He met her eyes and didn’t flinch. “By combat.”

The Divine scoffed in disgust. “Spare us your vain attempts at legitimacy, demon. Give us what we want and you’ll be compensated.”

“We?” Nick asked bemusedly.
“Yes.” The Divine replied as though to a particularly stupid child. “The angels.”

Judy couldn’t believe her ears.

He snorted. “And what is it the angels want?”

“Release me. I will take her back and claim her form as it’s intended to be.”

“She will not be sacrificed. Not for your false immortality,” Nick growled contemptuously.

The angel shifted against its binding and, almost as an afterthought, answered, “She can be placed in another flesh. It has been done before.”

Judy gagged. “No.”

Aurora set her eyes evenly on Judy’s, calmly stating, “Come with me willingly and I will break your binding to this…thing. Swear fealty to me and me alone. Then I will give you the body of a High Seraph, and you will serve as my lieutenant. There can be no higher reward for an angel. It is your duty to serve and sacrifice as I command.”

“And what do I get out of this?” Nick drolled, to Judy’s horror.

The eagle sighed impatiently. “Whatever puts you back in that pit.”

Nick raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn’t move. “And this is supposed to appeal to me?”

“Name your price, spawn.” Aurora’s words were out almost before he’d finished speaking.

Judy had been struck dumb at the monstrousness she’d witnessed, but felt her heart break as she watched her bondmate consider the Divine’s offer. He was a demon and capable of more horrors than she could imagine, but she had seen enough in him to know there was a glimmer of potential—a spark that was wavering and guttering even as his wings shifted between gold and black.
Finally, Nick smiled, looking pleased with himself. “The Mortal Realm.”

Aurora’s response was instant. “Never.”

“Oh, well.” He shrugged diffidently before turning to Judy. “Lady Heir, are you ready to begin the trial of your predecessor?”

An eagle’s scream pierced the air. “No! Release me! Now!”

Power surged from the trapped angel and the blue flame on her brow raged into a pinnacle of fire. Judy watched in awe as her former master strained against the binding Nick had imprisoned her with. Coins vanished in the fox’s grip and his collar glowed scarlet as he held his ground. The great avian fought, strained against the bonds, but there was no escape. The flame quickly slackened, dwindled, and faded to a spark as the Divine sank to her knees.

Judy’s heart lurched in her chest.

“No. No no no no no!” Aurora screamed. The blue flame flared for a moment and died. The light faded and took her vitality with it. The Divine aged a decade in moments, and it didn’t stop. “This cannot be my end! Not after all I’ve given. Not now!” The Divine met her eyes and she saw the disbelief give way to rage. “You! You stupid, worthless rabbit!”

Avian talons scrabbled feebly for purchase on the flagstones as the Divine tried to stand. With a sickening crunch, her knees gave out, and she fell without ever fully rising. Fear crept into her face, and she huddled into herself against the pain.

“You.” She turned her attention to Nick, stammering. “Fox…. You are the Devil. We can make a bargain. Extend my life and any price you name is yours.”

“Lucifer and Baphomet made deals with you. I will not repeat their mistakes.” Nick remained stoically at Judy’s side, unmoving and unmoved. “You have had your time. Now, face your end with dignity.”

Judy fought down her own terror and the bile roiling at the back of her throat. The proud angel
who’d ruled heaven was now a crumpled, sobbing heap. In Judy’s horrified sight, the body of her former mentor aged, thinned, and wasted away to emaciation. The regal, white feathers greyed and crumbled leaving nothing but dust. Wings and limbs that were once roped with muscle withered to twigs, falling to pieces. Chunks and flakes of flesh and skin fell away, disintegrating as they fell.

“We are all lost,” It croaked. “The Empyrean is all that can keep that monster at bay. I am dead and you are unprepared.” The decay crept from its limbs to its body, which crumbled into grit and ash. Its eyes shifted back to Nick and it smiled bitterly. “You are the very image of your father. You’ve followed his footsteps condemning yourself and Creation with you.”

Judy’s eye flicked to her fox’s face, hoping to see something—anything to gauge his feelings or reaction. Their Bond was shut, still cramping under the pressure of what Nick had endured. She wanted to feel him again. She wanted to know what was happening in his heart as this horrific drama played out, but she felt nothing from him and his face was a mask. Icy, bored indifference rested on his features like he’d been born that way. She wanted to weep.

The dying angel coughed out a weak laugh. “I’ve been haunted by you both for so long. I am weary of this burden.” With a last shaking breath the Divine looked at the pair, whispering “He is in your care now, Lieutenant.” with a ghost of a smile on her lips, and vanished into dust.

Judy stood, shaken to her roots. The one constant in the universe was gone. The pillar that had supported the Host and Creation since before time was time had simply died right before her eyes. It was a small, petty death on the heels of desperation. So simple. So easy. So inescapable. And yet, she was still rocked to her pith.

~

Nick stood, feeling nothing, bearing witness. There was room in him for neither tragedy nor regret, not even empathy. The being that had called itself his mother had become something monstrous and deserved none of those things. She had been as such for longer than he’d been alive. Much longer. She had earned her death and whatever consequence it garnered. However, he knew he would not see her in Hell. When an angel died, it simply returned to the Wheel and was reborn. There was no soul, merely the quintessence of being that allowed the soul to form and grow. If she found her way to Hell after her next life, it would be his issue. Until then, he would leave whatever judgement there was to be had for her to other powers.

That gave him pause. He was not prone to theological whimsy or considerations of the long-silent mythically dubious creator that had left them the Heavens so long ago. The reason for his unusual turn of thought was explained when Lucifer’s presence reasserted itself. It was weaker this time. The former master of Hell was no longer trying to rise up and claim him. It was more a nudge now. Nick realized that Lucifer must have been extremely devout. A brief series of memories fluttered through
his mind confirming as much. It felt odd to see through another being’s eyes. Centuries and millennia of service and devotion were laid bare in a matter of heartbeats. It was inspiring and humbling. Neither of which sat well with the fox.

The discomfort was short lived as the Luciferian influence reasserted itself, nudging Nick to look to his partner. She was not doing well.

“Carrots, you with me?” He asked cautiously.

A weak sob was his only answer. The rabbit was shaking in a way that concerned him severely. He had seen strong souls break many times. She was a hair from shattering, and only powers greater than he could say if she’d ever recover. There was a way to help her, but it carried a big risk. If she cracked and started sobbing, she’d be a ruin for days—possibly forever. He needed to galvanize her. The easiest way to do that was to make her mad, to grant her release while focusing her will on something other than her grief. However, that had its own issues.

With Celestine gone, Judy was now the holder of the Empyrean—a power completely unknown to him. Nick had no clue what it would do—or if, when, or how she would use it. She could simply blink him out of being if he wasn’t careful. With that understood, he reminded himself that if Lollipop destroyed reality, it didn’t matter. They needed the Fire in Judy and it was up to him to stoke it. If he happened to be destroyed, well…. It’d been a hell of a ride and what was life without risks?

He felt Lucifer shift in his mind and settle. There was an odd sense of pregnant expectation in the silence accompanying it. Nick knew his father’s memory could help if it wanted to, but it offered nothing and he was not about to ask for help. He had his pride, and he’d always managed to get by on his own. This was his game and he’d play it—win, lose, or oblivion.

Nick glanced at his rabbit and swallowed. He hated to do it, but there was no other way. Words wouldn’t reach her, so he did the only other thing he could. The Bond slipped open as far as he could force it as he filled his mind with contempt and satisfaction. He stepped forward, dispelling the remains of the magic that littered the area after their spat with Celestine, and kicked the last pile of her remains, scattering them into nothingness.

He had to play his part well—excessively rude would do it. “Thank misery that’s over with.” Nick felt disbelief and shock ripple back along the bond and knew she was responding. “It’s a pity she was an angel, really. She’d have been an exceptional demon.”

Judy croaked out, “No.”
Nick chuckled cruelly. “No? She was manipulative, sociopathic—nearly genocidal. Everything we look for in the Pit.”

“She was Divine.” Judy uttered shakily.

“A good title for an egomaniacal despot.” He felt sadness and fear slowly giving way to disbelief. It was a step.

Her voice firmed. “She was our leader.”

“She was a monster.”

“She was the best of us!” Now there was heat in her words.

“Best? That was your best?” Nick laughed acerbically. “When will you get those blinders off, rabbit? That thing lied as much as any demon and thought nothing of killing to benefit itself. She wanted to turn the mortal plane into a slave realm to farm souls and add to her own power. Not even Baphomet was that grandiose in his plots. And he was the poster child for megalomania!”

Judy grabbed her head in her paws. “Stop it.”

It was working, but he had to push harder. “Stop what? Telling the truth?”

“It’s not true.”

“No? Which part? Name one thing I’ve said that’s a lie.” Nick laid on the snark before turning vicious. “Or is it that I’m a demon, so all I can do is lie?”

Judy stared daggers at him, and he knew he was on the right track. “I didn’t say that!”

“No, but it makes sense. After all, you’re defending that thing based on nothing more than it was an
angel. Is that all it takes to make what she did ok? Or are you upset that you won’t be getting that High Seraph’s body?"

Nick canted his head at the rabbit, watching as her shivers turned to a slow simmer of anger at him. At herself. He released a derisive snort. “That’s the Host for you! So much hypocrisy… Flying high above and looking down on everything else, while wallowing as deep in sin as any high demon.”

Judy’s paws curled into white-knuckled fists. “I am not. Like. Her.”

“Now, she’s dead and you’re in charge. Quite the power play. All you have to do is give the word and you can be anyone you want. Just. Like. Her. Aren’t you lucky?”

Nick was ready when she charged. He was not ready, however, for the force of her attack or its speed. A tiny nimbus of blue flame sparked into being around her paws a moment before her short sword and buckler manifested and that was all the warning he got. He barely got the haft of his spear up to block her attack in time. He was suddenly face to face with his rabbit, her face a rictus of anger and pain. He buried his relief at getting her out of her catatonia and focused his attention on staying alive.

He was increasingly perturbed at his situation. The Collar was annoying enough as it was—the feeling of being constantly hobbled was old news, but still frustrating—especially when fending off a demon-hunter angel in the middle of a psychotic break. With a feral scream, Judy punched with her shield arm straight at his head. Nick neatly slipped aside, guiding her strike away from him with his spear. She spun with the movement, and he had to stutter-step back to barely dodge backhand swing.

There was no reserve in her—nothing held back and no hesitation as she handled her weapons. Tears streamed over her cheeks and a death’s-head rictus twisted her lips as her blades flew. Nick steeled himself against his regret and struck back just as hard as she was coming at him. There was no other recourse. Anything less would be dangerous—possibly fatal.

Her buckler spun off her arm and into the shadows courtesy of his riposte, and her tomahawk took its place in a blink. She didn’t flinch, almost as if she’d felt nothing from the blow that had hammered her arm. The bearded blade hooked his spear and yanked him into an upper-cut stab from the sword. He shifted the Spear into a war dagger and blocked the sword, but didn’t escape the follow up from the tomahawk. The top of the blade caught him a glancing blow on the cheek.

Pain lanced through him, but not enough to distract him. He delivered a hard jab to her exposed ribs as she recovered from her attack, and she stumbled back for a breath.
In that moment, Nick had a chance to look at her. She barely knew what she was doing. Judy’s mind screamed and wept through the Bond. Her body was fighting on its own, fueled by her self-loathing and fear. The blue fire that sparked on her paws had spread to the edges of her weapons, explaining why his cheek still throbbed. He spared an instant’s thought to be grateful she hadn’t clipped him with the blade.

She needed to get the pain out. That left him one option—he had to wear her down. His Spear shifted into a pair of long, wickedly curved daggers and he adopted a stance for one of his least favorite forms of combat. Judy was fast and fighting to kill. He had to meet her to the same terms and fight like he meant it. That meant speed and ferocity—his hallmarks during his dark days in the Arena.

“Tired already, oh Queen?” he sneered.

Her eyes snapped back to him, but this time he was ready. His Collar bloomed into crimson light as she launched herself at him, and he mirrored her. Sparks flew from their blades in divine blue and demonic scarlet.

She surprised him again by going for his legs. With his daggers he was able to defend, but it was awkward having to crouch and lean down to stop her blades. The strikes at his feet were worse, as it cost him his footing and ruined the stability necessary to effectively parry and deflect. His situation was made clear when he had to launch himself backwards to avoid another hammer blow to the face.

She was fighting dirty, going for broke—like an experienced demon hunter would—keeping him off balance until he screwed up too badly and she could attack his vitals. There was no pretense of capture in her now. She wanted him dead. He’d intended to stick to defense, but it was clear he was at a disadvantage. He had to meet her with equal force.

A sick, cold feeling took root in Nick’s gut as he warily circled opposite the rabbit. He had to meet her on equal terms and, between the Collar and his apprehension, it was a challenge. He wasn’t able to keep up with her and the insane risks she was willing to take. Her attacks were chaotic and haphazard, but part of a greater tactical plan that was somewhere in her little grey head. They were almost impossible to predict, and he was already hurting from it. A little flair of pride and admiration stirred in his chest. His angel was really something special.

He truly didn’t want to hurt her, but he was running out of options. He could remove his collar, but that would just unbalance the scales the other way, and he’d obliterate her if he wasn’t careful. Lucifer stirred in response at the back of Nick’s mind, and he felt the Eldritch spirit nudge the Bond. In a flash, he understood, but only just.
It was madness, but his only real chance. The only way to match her was to accept her—to be her. He felt Judy building for her next attack and acted. Nick abandoned his reservations, and the Bond slammed wide open. Any hesitation he’d felt, any fear or distaste for letting her in, was gone. He let her essence flood into him and embraced her without caveat or restriction.

Suddenly, they were even. Suddenly, he understood.

They came together in a fury of flashing steel and sparks. Every move she made, he felt coming and could counter. Every counter he offered, she saw through. In a dozen heartbeats, their duel wasn’t a fight so much as a dance. Neither had an advantage and both knew the steps. They stabbed and slashed, parried and dodged as though they’d been born to the battle—like they were made for their opponent and nothing else. A slow grin started to spread on the devil’s face, even as he bled from a dozen small cuts and nicks. He was having fun. More than that, he felt joy.

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The first thing Judy registered as the haze in her mind cleared was a blade at her throat. Her breath was heaving in and out of her. Her limbs trembled with fatigue, and she was exhausted beyond her ability to put into words. The last thing she remembered clearly was watching the Divine die. Then things were less clear. She remembered terror and grief, then disbelief. Then pure, white rage directed at her fox.

Her eyes snapped up to meet the glowing emeralds of her bondmate and understood. He was on one knee, pressed back against a pile of broken crates—not trapped, but definitely on the defensive—underneath her. He’d goaded her into attacking him to snap her out of her own head. This was made evident as she noted the war dagger she held was pressed against his throat. She was a hair’s breadth from killing him, and she was no further from death herself.

To her consternation and bewilderment, he was smiling. “You back with us, sweetheart?”

A weak breath huffed out of her. “Nick?”

“That one and only. I hope, anyway.” He winked. “I don’t think Creation could handle two of me.”

Judy felt the giggle escape her parched lips and she cracked. Her weapons fell from nerveless fingers, and she collapsed into his chest. Sobs wracked her frame while tears stained her cheeks, matting her fur. Her crying only intensified when she felt two strong arms wrap around her.
Her moment of weakness was not long. She didn’t have any strength left and the worst of her pain had bled off before she’d collapsed, so she was only lost in her warm little world for a moment. Her first clue that things were different was the fact that Nick started glowing gold.

She pulled away and stared at the fox before her.

The turbulent black that had danced across his wings and frame since he’d rescued her from the archangel was bleeding away—it slid across his skin, pooling on his left chest and coalescing into a sigil Judy didn’t recognize.

She lifted a paw and traced over Nick’s new tattoo. “What is this?”

Nick looked bemusedly and with minor annoyance at the marking. “My best guess is my father’s blessing.”

“What?”

“When I found his memories, they tried to take over me. We managed to beat them, but it took you knocking me through a wall to pull it off. After that, he seemed to be watching me and what we did. He clued me into how I could help you with your grief and not die. I think we proved ourselves to him. He’s gone.”

“That’s good to know.” Judy paused to collect herself. “But can you go back to the part where Lucifer tried to possess you?”

Nick rubbed the back of his neck. “That’s a bit of a story and you already know most of it. So it’ll have to wait.”

“You have got to be—“ Judy stopped herself. “You’re right. There’ll be time later. Just, please tell me he won’t be taking control again, or trying to anyway? I don’t want to make this a habitual thing.”

“No. He’s gone.” He traced the outline of the mark on his chest with a fingertip. “As near as I can figure, this is his way of saying he approves of us. His mind and will are gone. But he left this mark and all of his knowledge behind in me.”
“That’s something else for us to worry about later then.” Judy pushed herself fully upright and helped Nick stand.

A pair of Coins vanished and small tongues of violet flame appeared where he was sporting small wounds. “This has been a really expensive day,” he commented drily as he looked around the remains of his Den.

Judy’s gaze followed his and she couldn’t help but agree. The main room was rubble. The floor and walls were littered with collapsed pillars and crushed stone. The remains of crates and their diverse contents were piles of shattered wood and refuse. Pools and puddles of various liquids dotted the floor, slowly seeping along or drying.

“I’m sorry about your home, Nick.” Judy whispered shamefacedly.

He smiled at her and gently chucked her chin with his paw. “Don’t worry about it. It was nice for a bachelor pad, but that really isn’t where I am anymore.”

Before Judy could work out the meaning behind his words, the room shook. Dust and stone flecks knocked loose from the ceiling and the walls wobbled ominously.

Nick rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a few copper coins. “Bloody Hells…. Time to go.”

“What’s happening?” She looked around anxiously, realizing the Den was about to collapse.

He grabbed her paw and led her along at a brisk pace. “While we fought, there were a few tremors like that. They’re getting more frequent. Since we aren’t rutting, I can only assume it’s Lollipop acting up.”

“More frequent?” She sputtered. “How long were we fighting?”

Nick’s grin was evident in his voice. “Most of the afternoon and evening. It’s after ten o’clock.”
She goggled. “Wha— You have got to be kidding me.”

“One thing’s for certain, Carrots.”

Nick kicked open a wooden door and Judy hastened after him asking, “What could that possibly be from the enormous list of options?”

“You have some serious stamina.”

“Are you kidding? You’re flirting now?” She couldn’t help the frustration from coloring her voice.

He whirled on his heel, ending up nose to nose with her. “And you’re blushing. Come on.”

The fox led her through the leaning halls of the Sanctum to his private room. Everything was exactly as they’d left it. With a gesture and a copper Coin, power rippled through the room. Nick’s sea chest popped open and the room began to pack itself. All of the weapons, supplies, and personal effects quickly squared themselves away and vanished into the unsettling box. The dish containing Nick’s armor lifted off the shelf and packed itself once he willed the armor back into the torque at his neck, and he collected the map and pendulum of his tracking spell as it floated towards the chest. Soon, all that remained was the furniture, and the chest vanished.

Nick flicked another Coin into nothingness and swung with his Spear, tearing a hole in the world. “Now then! Before this place collapses…”

He stepped aside and bowed, gesturing Judy to precede him through the door. She stepped through and found herself outside the warehouse, on the vacant lot where they’d fought the troop of demons not long ago. It felt like decades.

With a loud groan and rumble, a gout of dust vomited out of the warehouse from every seam and crevice.

Judydy took her fox’s paw in hers and squeezed gently. “I’m still sorry about your Den, Nick.”

“Like I said, it’s time to move on to better things.” The smile he gave her was full of promise as he
waved the rolled-up map in his paw. “But first, we have a Lollipopto deal with.”

“Can’t we call it something else?” She couldn’t help the smile tugging her lips. This was turning into a game, and she hated to love it.

“Nope! Now let’s find this thing’s hovel and end it.” Nick unfurled the map with a flourish, and his face dropped like a stone. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“What’s wrong?” He held the sheet for her to see, and she understood. “Is that a Ward?”

“Yes. This is either certifiable genius or the worst joke I’ve ever seen.” Incredulity and pique colored Nick’s voice.

Judy pulled the paper from his grasp and studied it. “You set this spell to track the locations of Tartarus diamonds, so we could find a pattern. How could you foresee them being left in a pattern?”

“That hardly matters.” Nick replied grimly. “Not only are they in a pattern, but they outline a magic circle that covers most of the city the way I would salt on a table top. Not only that, but this is the most complex glyph scribing I’ve ever seen. Between that and the fact that they’re using diamonds…”

“It’s a huge amplifier,” Judy finished. “The diamonds amplify the spell and define its boundaries. That’s incredible!”

He nodded curtly. “And dangerous. Lollipopt and its followers have turned the city into a battery. Trigger this spell and all the fear, panic and negative emotion will funnel directly to Lollipopt as raw mana. There’s plenty of all of those going already with these quakes.”

A cold tingle of dread slid down her spine. “If I’m reading this right, it could also drain the lives straight out of the populace. That’s active life force and souls.”

“Bloody hell.”

Judy pulled out her phone. “I’m calling Ben. If they haven’t started to evacuate the city, I’ll make it
an anonymous tip of a massive seismic event or a terrorist attack. Whenever can get the populace moving away from the circle. While I do that, you work out where the hell we need to be to stop this.”

A rushed phone call later, she wanted to throw her phone in frustration. “Un-fucking-believable!”

“What’s wrong?” Nick started away from his phone in response to her uncharacteristic swearing.

“The politicians! No part of recent events have been serious enough to warrant an evacuation. The police and public have been petitioning to have a state of emergency declared, but City Hall won’t budge. Not until they have an irrefutable reason.”

He scratched his chin consideringly. “I can help with that.”

“How?” She snarled.

“The Divine’s death.”

Judy shook her head at the non sequitur. “Come again?”

“Celestine died in a binding spell created by the Gate of angel’s blood she used. Otherwise, she’d have violated the wager by manifesting.” He smiled expectantly as she processed his words.

The truth tickled the back of her mind. “She—she’s still bound?”

“Not her. She’s dead. Her power and the effects of her death are though.” Nick pulled a tiny copper Coin from his pocket and pricked a finger with his claw. “If I release the binding that was made in my domain…”

“It’ll trigger a massive…. Have I told you how much I love you?” Judy wanted to swallow the words, but they were already out of her mouth.

“Not yet.” Nick chirped, grinning. “Hold onto your tail, Carrots. This is the Devil’s work.”
He snapped the bloodied Coin between his fingers and the world went mad. The earth bucked under their feet. Tremors rocked the ground like a heartbeat, and the city around them shuddered. A colossal roar filled the air and lightening struck the ground from a clear sky. The roar built to a keening wail that wasn’t heard but felt, and a shockwave rolled out from where the warehouse once stood. All that was left now were scattered bits of metal. Lights as far as the eye could see flickered and died, clouds formed from nothing and thunder rolled through them.

Sirens began to sound from every direction, and she laughed. “I guess it worked.”

Nick coughed a bit as he dusted himself off. “Not the most elegant solution, but it’s the best I can do on short notice.”

“How long will this last?”

“The quakes?” He scratched his chin as he considered—rather cutely Judy thought. “Another ten or so minutes, I think. The storm? Eh.” Nick shrugged nervously. “It’ll be sound and fury for a bit, but it won’t rain for a little while yet. When it does…”

“Floods and panic.”

“Call Ben again just to make sure the evacuation is started.” He pulled out his phone, again. “After that, we have to go.”

“Did you find out where Lollipop is holed up?” Judy asked as she placed the call.

“An old sanitarium outside the city called Cliffside.” He showed her the screen he’d been fiddling with. “Finnick is on his way to meet us.”

“Good.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Now could you please put some pants on?”
So, I lied. This isn't the last chapter. The next one is, with an epilogue to follow. You might be wondering, gentle reader, why I have been taking so bloody long. The answers are various—the holidays, a nasty stomach bug, family obligations, severe writer's block... the usual for this time of year. There was one contributing factor to my distraction that was atypical. We discovered that there will soon be an addition to the family and (for once) not of the furry, four-footed variety. My girlfriend/editor, KT, is pregnant. So, yeah. I've been a bit distracted.

In other news, no I am not going to stop writing. I'll have a dry spell or two in a handful of months, but that's a ways off, yet. I have a lot of ideas and planned stories, but I need your help. I have too damn many. I want to know what you want to see next. I'll be taking a small break to get my brain straight and clean up a few of my outstanding projects, but once that's done I'll be starting a new set of pieces. I'll be announcing the candidate stories with the next chapter.

I think that's it, so here we go! I apologize for the end of the chapter in advance. Please, bear with me. It'll be worth it. ;)

Finnick was getting tired of hauling ass. This was supposed to be an easy job—a working vacation, if you will. He’d get in some drinking, do whatever shit jobs Nick needed, maybe find a vixen to
break. The kind of stuff he enjoyed when he wasn’t doing the run-and-hide thing in Hell or working his informants. And, suddenly, reality was on its head. Baphomet was dead. Nick was the Devil. And that had just been the start.

Running weapons across the border was nothing he wasn’t prepared for. Nick needed what he needed on these little missions, and it was Finnick’s job to get it for him. Everything he’d done since then? No. Deranged mortals were amusing, but seeing them outside of Hell was not a pleasant sight. Hell was where insanity lived. That was its place. Elsewhere, it was disruptive. Finnick was still pissed about the beer he’d lost when the riot began. In the last few days, he’d done more than in the previous few centuries, at least. And that was being conservative.

Now, he was shackled with a Cursori, of all things. He’d broken into Hell to raid the Archives with the help of a severed toe, fought off a posse of nutjob cultists, run more errands than he could tolerate, done bodyguard detail, been molested by Nick’s doorkeeper, and helped murder the Divine. At this point, there was nothing to be done except hope for the best.

That, and follow his orders. Finnick knew his contact would be at the café despite the city-wide evacuation currently underway.

“Finnny,” Gazelle simpered. “Why are we here? The city is evacuating. Don’t we have to meet Nick and the Lieutenant?”

“I know. I took their call,” he snapped back. “I got something to do before we meet up.”

Gazelle stopped at the door and crossed her arms. “What could you possibly have to do? Obviously, something unpleasant…”

“It ain’t the job that’s bad. It’s the mammal.”

“Why, Finnick—” a rumbling alto replied from behind the door to the next room—“one would think you weren’t happy to see me.”

Finnick snorted in disgust and led the way into the kitchen behind the sitting area. “Liam.”

“I thought we’d established that.” The wolf didn’t turn to look at them or even glance up from his work.
“You’re reminding me of why I don’t like you.”

“Your appreciation of my company is inconsequential,” the wolf replied easily. “You’re here because you want me for something. What is it?”

Finnick hated dealing with mortals, especially atheists. They had no respect and half of his intimidation was lost on them. This atheist, however, was a special case of unpleasant. The wolf was short and stocky with mottled grey-black and tan fur and unusually long whiskers on his eyebrows. He was one of Nick’s favorites and Finnick’s second-most-loathed mortal in Creation. The one positive the fennec saw in the wolf was his reliability. His word was inviolable, and he’d given it—not that you’d know it as he stood at the café’s kitchen, cooking in a flower-print apron and reading a newspaper.

Gazelle leaned in, whispering, “Finny, who is this?”

“Finny?” Liam snorted before he could answer. “Don’t tell me Finnick Vulpinski’s got himself a girlfriend now.”

“That’s not your business.”

“Everything in my kitchen is my business,” the wolf replied with a dead-eyed stare at the fennec. “You knew that when you brought her here. Or are you trying to play games again?”

Finnick bit his tongue as their host turned his attention to the angel. “Come here, if you please. Miss?”

“Gazelle.” The angel chirped.

The wolf cocked his head and ears mid-step. “Would that be your species, designation, preference, or a statement of the obvious?”

“It’s my name,” she retorted.
A small smile flitted onto the wolf’s features. “Very well, Miss Gazelle. Come here, please.”

Finnick nodded when she glanced at him, and she stepped forward. Her obedience made Liam smile wider, while Finnick suppressed a snarl. With a flick of the wrist, Liam shifted his skillet to a cool burner and stepped into what most canids would consider “intimate proximity”. His nose stopped just off her throat and shoulder, hovering by her collarbone, and she froze. It took everything Finnick had in him not to leap at the lupine in retaliation.

With a long, slow inhalation later Liam leaned back but otherwise didn’t move. “Huh.”

“W-w-what?” Gazelle stuttered.

The wolf ignored her question. “Very interesting, Finny. It seems you aren’t the only one.”

“Only what, wolf?” Finnick grated out.

Liam stepped back from the confused angel just as briskly as he’d stepped in. “She smells just like you. Different, but in the same way. Yet different.”

Gazelle beat Finnick to the punch. “What do you mean?”

“You smell like a medium ungulant. You also smell like something I’ve only ever smelled on Finnick.” For a moment, the wolf’s eyes unfocused and he stared into the space over his stove. “Like the fifth note in a barber’s shop quartet. It doesn’t exist, yet it does.” Then he shook himself and stabbed at his skillet with a long, thin-bladed knife.

Finnick watched, paling under his fur as a morsel of something he couldn’t identify was held out to the Cursori.

“Here.” Liam offered. “By way of apology. I’m aware of my eccentricities.”

Gazelle daintily accepted the bite from the end of the wicked-looking knife and immediately moaned in pleasure. “Oh, Heavens…. This is good.”
“Glad to hear it,” Liam replied unctuously. “It’ll be on the menu next week, if you want more.”

“We aren’t here for an appetizer,” Finnick growled in frustration.

“Then, what is my business with you?”

“Why aren’t you leaving?” The Cursori’s innocent question made Finnick’s paws clench into fists. “The city is evacuating. Aren’t you afraid?”

The wolf turned back to his stovetop. “What would I be afraid of? Storms come and go. And I’m hungry.”

“That’s enough,” Finnick cut in. “Liam, I want what I left with you.”

“Finally. Ready to relieve me of my burden, huh?” The wolf pulled a small pouch from his jacket pocket and set it on the counter in front of Finnick, holding it in place with a claw. “Do you have my pay?”

“I got your money.” The imp growled as he set an envelope on the counter.

“And the rest of it?”

“That’ll be with Nick.”

“Ah.” Liam smirked. “That’s right. You traded on your boss’s name, didn’t you?”

Finnick felt his teeth bare at the wolf. “I gave my word you’d get yours. You need to collect it from him though. I told you that when we made our bargain.”

“You did. What will Mr. Wilde say when he discovers this, I wonder?” A new skillet appeared from a shelf and a new batch of ingredients began making their way into it.
“That’s not your concern,” Finnick snapped.

“Hmm… I suppose not. Either way I’ll get my pay—from you or Mr. Wilde…” Liam looked up from his work and straight at Gazelle, who flinched. “Or your little friend. Remember that Finnick.”

“My word is as good as yours, wolf.”

“If only that were true.” Liam’s gaze sharpened. “I’ve never let down a client or broken my word. Can you claim the same?”

“No.”

“Exactly.” The wolf lifted his claw and turned his attention to stirring the new dish. “Take it. Please, inform Mr. Wilde I want a meeting as soon as he’s done with his current business.”

Finnick snatched the pouch, stuffing it into a pocket. “What makes you think he’s up to anything?”

The wolf laughed quietly. “Mr. Wilde is exactly the sort of mammal to engineer these sorts of events. Or take advantage of them. Did he ever manage that coup he was talking about when last we spoke?”

“Yeah.” Finnick shifted uncomfortably at the memory. “He just did a few days ago.”

“Ah, corporate warfare… I look forward to hearing about it from him first hand.”

“Whatever.” The imp grumbled as he turned to leave.

“A moment!” Liam called, stalling Finnick’s steps. “I never let recipes out my door unfinished, but perhaps this will be useful.” The wolf pulled a loaf of warm bread, a petite wedge of cheese, and a container of something that smelled spicy and sweet together from his larder. He pressed them into Gazelle’s arms saying, “Just in case this is Eschaton, you’ll have a good meal to fortify you on your way to the hereafter.”
Gazelle’s half-nervous giggle grated on Finnick’s ears. “Come on,” he muttered.

“Bye-bye, Finny,” Liam drolled. “My best to the family.”

As soon as they were out of the café, Gazelle rounded on him. “What in heaven’s name was that all about? Who was he?”

Finnick shuddered. “He’s…a mortal.”

“That’s it?” she replied incredulously. “I found him unsettling, and I’m an angel. You’re an imp. Shouldn’t he be inherently awed by me and scared of you?”

The little fox suppressed a shudder. “Liam’s a special case. He’s different from most mortals.”

The Cursori’s curiosity only seemed to sharpen. “How so?”

“You’d have to ask Nick, but I wouldn’t recommend it. You need to know that the wolf in there is bad news,” Finnick muttered. “He’s one of Nick’s ‘protégés’, if that gives you any idea.”

Her expression drew into a mou of distaste. “Protégé? How?”

“Misery knows and I don’t want to.” Finnick shook himself to get rid of the lingering crawling sensation. “Let’s just get moving. We have to get to this Cliffside place. Know anything about it?”

“Sadly, I do.”

Gazelle’s grieving tone stopped Finnick in his tracks. “What’s wrong?”

“Before I became a Cursori, I was a Guardian Angel.” Gazelle hugged herself, but her face was cold and hard. “I was assigned to a troubled cub who ended up in Cliffside. It’s not a place where the ill are healed.”
Finnick paced beside her, liking the situation less and less. “What is it then?”

She swallowed hard with her eyes on the ground. “A prison for the criminally insane.”

~

Judy looked out from her perch above the approach to the hospital and frowned. “There are a lot of mammals down there.”

Nick huffed a quiet laugh next to her. “You sure that ‘mammal’ applies anymore, Carrots?”

The road leading up to the building was saturated with what Judy could only imagine were a mix of patients, hospital staff, and cultists. She could make out several of the wicked knives used in the assault on the ZPD in their paws and occasionally peals of maniacal laughter would reach her ears. As if that wasn’t concerning enough, there were several figures that moved in ways too similar to the way Lollipop had during their meetings. The tentacles didn’t hurt that impression either.

“I never thought I’d see the real thing, even in part.” Nick sounded almost reverent.

Judy side-eyed her fox. “What are you talking about?”

“Those things down there. The ones that aren’t moving right.” He nodded at a grotesque silhouette. “They’re devils.”

She snorted gently. “I thought that was your title.”

“My title, yes.” Nick slid back and rested on his haunches. “But it came from an older myth—the monsters from beyond the Fringe the Host fought when Creation was fresh and new, or so the stories go. I guess we know they weren’t make-believe.”

Judy sighed in frustration. “Now that we have our history lesson for the evening out of the way, what are we going to do?”
“I, for one, want a better look,” he commented. “I also prefer to attack from behind, if I can.”

“How are we supposed to manage that?” She cast her gaze over the tableau again. “There’s one elevated road along the top of the waterfall and nothing else. It’s practically a medieval keep, complete with moat.”

“Good for keeping invaders out and crazies in.” Nick chortled as he held up a paw. “I agree, except for two facts.”

Judy arched an eyebrow. “And those would be?”

“If you read the ambient mana in the area, you’ll notice that the courtyard itself is charged, but nothing else.”

“I caught that. It’s practically a null.” Judy sat back, drumming her fingers. “Your point?”

He smiled thinly. “Lollipop doesn’t care about the building. Just the driveway and courtyard.”

“Well, yes. But how does that help us?”

“We know where the sigil spell is focused,” Nick’s gaze drifted up to the building. “And we have the option of higher ground.”

Judy squinted at her fox as she puzzled out his words, glancing at the destination he implied. “How do we get up there?”

“Magic will be sensed. Flight will be obvious…” Nick scratched his chin. “I could use my spear, but reality is fragile as it is.”

“How are you at rock climbing?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Climbing rock, I’m fine. Climbing water is another matter.”
“I didn’t mean across the cliff face. The water pressure would sweep us away.” Judy preened a bit at
being ahead of him for a change. “I meant the underside of the causeway and up the side of the
building.”

Nick’s eyebrows rose fractionally. “That…is ambitious.”

She grinned cheekily. “Is the devil afraid of a little water spray?”

“The Devil is wondering how you plan to make the trip,” Nick replied with a smirk.

Judy clasped her paws behind her back to hide their nervous fidgeting. “I was thinking that I’d hitch
a ride on my boyfriend.”

His face fell into bemused smile. “You choose now to try out the term?”

“May not get another chance.”

“Fair enough. You can hold onto my chest while I climb, but no bunny business,” he admonished.

“I’ll save it for later, then?” Judy felt her cheeks burn at her own audacity, but she refused to look
away.

“I’m sure your boyfriend will appreciate it.” Nick delivered his statement with a warmly mocking
tone that left Judy confused.

She didn’t have time to think about it. He didn’t sound upset or angry, but there was something he
wasn’t saying.

“Incidentally, honey, who’s the lucky guy?” Nick tossed over his shoulder.

“You of course, you—,” reality snapped—“…what did you call me?”
“I called you ‘honey’. It’s an endearment. You know—” he held up his paw and Judy’s world shrank—“the kind used between mates?”

The Bondmark on his paw had shrunk to a thick band on his ring finger. The whirling lines and stray threads of white-gold were gone, consolidated into one simple, elegant design. She could barely make out the ancient Enochian dancing across the face of it. She glanced at her own paw and saw her own bondmark was the same—a thick band of beautifully twisted barbed wire around her finger with a word in high demonic as plain as day.

“Two words, sweetheart,” Nick continued lightly. “That’s all it would take. Or would your boyfriend object?”

Judy suddenly found breathing difficult. “This is how you do it? Now?”

“May not get another chance.” He shrugged. “I assume it’s still a little early for the next step, so I’ll refrain for now. We’ll save it for an opportune moment.”

“You’re up to something.” She closed the distance to her fox with a purpose. “I know it.”

Nick leaned down until they were eye-to-eye. “It depends on if my girlfriend trusts me or not.”

The urges to kiss and throttle him conflicted sweetly in her mind. “I’m going to murder you.”

His nose brushed her her cheek on its way up to her ear where he whispered, “You can try if you want to.”

~

Nick had never felt more conceited than he did in that moment. Granted, he was hanging by his claws to the underside of a causeway with a rabbit clinging to his chest, but he considered that an extra boost to his ego. To be so buoyant in such adverse circumstances made it success with a handicap—a further reason to crow.
Keeping the fact that he knew her Name a secret until just the right moment had been difficult, but worth the effort. There was no way he could have kept anything from her once the Names were said. He would feel everything his mate felt, and she would feel him in turn. Every twinge of desire she experienced would be his to savor, and he’d get thumped in the ribs for his reciprocating interest. It would be something truly magical, but it would have to wait.

Ignoring the power such an act would create, it’d be an enormous distraction and there were a couple unknowns that he had to sort out. When they were ready, however, two words would reshape reality. He just had to time it right. Misery willing, it could tip the scales in the upcoming conflict. If all went as he planned, they’d get the drop on Lollipop in hilarious fashion.

He didn’t even need to laugh.

Not that he could safely. There was an army waiting for them a few feet of concrete and asphalt above them. Silence was their ally and the roaring water below them muffled any sounds they might have made, but neither were excuses for carelessness.

Handhold by careful handhold, Nick made his way along the length of the road from the riverbank to the glorified rock upon which their destination perched. Things were peachy until about halfway across. Skittering claws and dragging flesh reached their ears from above, and he stopped dead. There was something above them that was listening. Snuffling sounds came moments later. It was all Nick could do to hold them up and not make any noise. Despite his care and being muffled by the water, they’d been detected—or at least raised suspicion—so any noise could give them away. Judy had the good sense to freeze when he did, so she was still when he spoke to her through the Bond.

Do something.

Like what?

If I had an idea, I’d semaphore it to you.

You’re a strange one, honey.

Really? Now?

In response to his annoyed amusement, he received an unrepentant mental shrug from the rabbit.
We just need a distraction.

Something loud?

Loud and confusing, preferably.

Very carefully, she shifted her head to face the latticework of concrete supports under the causeway and did something that surprised him. She took a deep breath and howled. Most of the movement above them ceased and an urgently whispered exchange ensued. Judy belted out another howl into the mess of concrete beams and the sentries on the causeway lost their minds. First one, then two, then dozens of howls tore through the night sky. Moments later, gibbering screams and footfalls joined the cacophony as the devils and cultists went mad. Grinning goofily at the absurdity of the situation, Nick skittered across the rest of the way to the island in silence.

Once they reached land, Nick turned to his bondmate. “You are a cunning little bunny.”

“Why not say that through the Bond?” Judy whispered.

His smile deepened. “Some things are worth saying out loud.”

She tried to suppress her smile. “Extra effort for more meaning?”

“That and I like hearing my own voice.” The punch he got for his arrogance was worth it. “It was especially clever of you to aim your howl into the concrete.”

“Sound refraction is a beautiful thing. They didn’t have a clue where it was coming from.” She led the way around the rocks to a semi-obscured nook, and Nick followed happily. “I used a similar trick a lot on the Fringe.”

“Good to know,” he commented, mostly to himself.

“Now—” Judy continued brightly—“we just need to go up.”
“What are you thinking, Honey Bunny? Up a drain pipe?” he asked sardonically.

“You read my mind,” she cheeked back.

“Uh-huh.” Nick patted his shoulders. “Hop on, Hop-a-long. There’s one about four stories up that’s still out of their sight lines.”

“True…” her reply was accompanied by a smirk he didn’t recognize.

A moment later, he was left slack-jawed as Judy launched herself off the ledge and up to grab a knob of broken concrete. Nick watched as she swung herself up with all the ease and grace of a veteran gymnast and used the momentum to kick herself off towards another ledge further up the wall. He watched, transfixed and bemused, as she ascended the wall, zigzagging chaotically up the derelict façade from handhold to handhold. When she reached the downspout, she sent a cheeky wink his way before vanishing into the pipe. Nick followed a few moments later—much less gracefully—using his claws to grip the rough surface and climb hand over hand.

When he joined her inside the large opening, he couldn’t help but ask, “Where did you learn that?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve infiltrated an enemy stronghold,” she said over her shoulder as she picked her way along. “I picked up that little trick breaking demon fortresses on campaign. It pays dividends to be petite.”

“Clever, a tiny powerhouse, and such diverse talents…”

He could practically feel her blush. “This isn’t the time for flattery, but thank you.”

“I’ll sing your praises more fully later,” he replied in a theatrical whisper.

“I can think of better uses for your tongue. Now knock it off.”

“Yes, dear.”
Judy punched him.

Slipping up the drain pipe wasn’t the most glamorous of routes, but it was no hardship. Nick had been worse places, and he was sure Judy had as well. Emerging into an abandoned surgical theater was less pleasant. Especially with the remains of the previous tenants littering the room.

“Old bones, broken flesh, and dried blood,” Judy commented as she surveyed the room.

Nick snorted in disdain. “I’ll have to get the name of the decorator.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve met them,” her darker tone was not missed by the fox.

Nick hummed absently to himself as he followed the angel out of the surgery and into a hall of horrors. The hallway was lined with cells, the hall-facing walls were a thick transparent glass that must have once allowed medical personnel to observe the inmates. Now, they were a tableau of suffering. Abominations of flesh and bone occupied the little rooms. Some were puddles of living, pain-wracked meat that shivered, wept, and gurgled where they had been left. Others were hiding in corners between the walls and ceiling, while more pooled in the middle of the floor or crouched under the ragged, clinical furniture.

None of them reacted to their passing, either too broken or consumed with their own suffering to perceive the world around them. This was a relief to Nick for two reasons. First, if they did sense them and react, it would raise the alarm on their arrival. Second, he could feel the pain his rabbit was enduring. If they did anything, he was sure she’d hurt more for it. To his relief, she had the presence of mind speak through the Bond instead of aloud.

Poor things.

I really should sue Lollipop for trying to steal my job. Suffering like this is meant for Hell and those that earn it.

How can you be sure these mortals didn’t?

I can’t, but judgement isn’t my area. I’m the punishment, not the Judge.
Leave it to Death, huh?

If you must rely on myths to make you feel better, sure.

Nick felt her displeasure at his dismissive tone, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had no time for myths or faith. His was a practical mind, so both judgement and the mechanism for how souls ended up in Heaven and Hell were beyond his concern. Death, if he or she—or it—existed, was of no account.

Can we at least end their suffering?

We may as well take off your bangles and my Collar, set off some fireworks, and set fire to the place if we do that.

Before she could reply, Nick sent her a wave of reassurance.

When we’re done with Lollipop. I promise.

Judy didn’t respond past a curt nod, but he felt her understanding. Her anger was also very evident. Apparently, his girlfriend was very much an avenging angel when a wrong was done to those she deemed in her care. As the Divine Apparent, that was a pretty wide net to cast. It was encouraging, but dangerous. He would have to be very diplomatic when he finally told her what role he would need her to play in their little endgame with the monster that had been dogging their steps. When they reached the roof, Nick tested the air and moved as close as he dared to the edge of the building.

In the distance, the silhouette of the city stood out in all its blacked-out glory against the chaotically churning skies and lightning. The storm hadn’t reached their perch, but it would and soon. He wasn't sure if the calm they found themselves in was the edge or the eye of the storm, but if he were a betting mammal—and he was—he'd say eye and hope for the best. Looking up, Nick grimaced. He could practically feel the legions of angels behind the clear sky, waiting just across the Veil for the opportunity to pounce. They made a comforting counterpoint the pressure he felt from Hell. He could practically smell the Sulphur.

Judy wasted no time in peeking over the edge and asking, “So, what’s the plan?”
“First, a little back up,” Nick replied as he slipped a bronze Coin out of his pocket.

“What a good idea?”

“We’re close enough that the ambient power and etheric disturbance will hide it.” The Coin vanished and a small portal opened. “Besides, getting here was the important part. Now that we’re here we have the advantage and there’s nothing they can do about it. Even if they attack, our advantage remains.”

Judy’s reply was forestalled as Finnick and Gazelle stepped through the small hole in reality and it snapped shut. She wasn’t happy. Nick was up to something. That fact alone bothered her. He was hiding it from her and they both knew it. That made it worse. The “experiments” they’d passed had stoked that irritation to a low-grade anger. It wasn’t enough to make her irrational, but it was definitely raising her level of impatience.

The anticipation growing in the fox wasn’t helping matters. The thrill of battle was moments away and she felt his eagerness as acutely as her own. With the arrival of the other two members of their little troop, Judy assumed they’d be ready to throw down. Infuriatingly, Nick showed no sign of taking action other than snatching something out of the air.

“Finnick,” Nick looked inquiringly at the pouch and then the imp. “What is this?”

“The last order I received from your father fulfilled.”

Judy blinked at the statement, delivered with none of the fennec’s usual anger. “You knew?”

“I’ve known since the War,” he stated plainly.

Nick found his voice. “You’ve known my lineage and said nothing?”
Gazelle’s hoof came to rest on the imp’s shoulder. “Finny…”

“Part of my orders. I was the last retainer your father saw before he left for Tartarus. He never came back, but he left me with that and instructions to find you, if I could, and protect you.” The small fox looked hard at the ground. “When I finally found you in Luxuria I was already broken and next to useless, but I knew exactly who you were. Since then, I’ve been waiting for the right time to give you that.”

Judy felt confusion and curiosity flow through the bond from the fox, but no anger. “What is it?”

“Lucifer’s touchstone.”

Nick’s surprise matched her own.

“His…. Nick, with this you have his memories and essence.” Judy wasn’t sure if she was happy or scared.


“You’re quibbling.” Judy turned to the weary looking imp. “What does this mean, Finnick?”

The little fox glanced at her before turning to Nick. “Offer that and your touchstone to your armor.”

Nick looked genuinely confused. “Why?”

Finnick smiled weakly. “Suddenly, you don’t trust me?”

“No, Finnick. At this point I trust you implicitly.” With a wave of his paw, Nick summoned his touchstone.

Judy had to ask. “I know you left that in the mortal plane when we were in your Den, but where did you put it?”
“Mixed in with the crown jewels.”

Judy couldn’t believe her ears.

Nick shrugged easily. “Where else would a sapphire the size of a fist blend in?”

She sputtered a laugh along with the imp and Cursori. “You are utterly, utterly insane.”

Nick opened the pouch and an emerald the size of his thumb plopped into his palm. Judy noticed it was the same color as his eyes. His expression was warm and soft as they considered what lay in his paw and Judy’s heart went out to him.

He stood abruptly, saying, “Well, it’s about time, I guess.”

His armor flowed from the torque on his collar bones to cover him. When Judy had met Lefty she’d seen nothing but grotesque demonic patterns, but the armor seemed to react to it bearer. It fitted his form from throat to toes in a medieval modern style—part armored superhero from the movies, part dark-ages knight. Part angelic and part profane. The living metal flowed over the two stones and they reappeared in the tangle of tiles and blades that made up its head.

“Now, you are attuned to Tartarus and Hell through your father’s essence.” Finnick intoned. Then, to everyone’s astonishment, he kneeled. “Hell is yours, my liege. I will serve you as I served your father, willingly. If you will have me.”

“I accept.”

“Good.” The little fox grinned with far too many teeth. “Now give me back my fucking Collar.”

At that moment, another quake rocked the landscape.

“So many questions that will have to wait.” Nick huffed a breath. “Judy, one thing needs to happen before I take this off. Are you ready?”
She settled herself. “What do I need to do?”

“Answer one question.”

Her face fell. “Which is…?”

“Lady Judith Hopps, Divine Apparent and senior ranking angel of the Host. I, Nicolas Wilde, Devil Apparent and senior ranking demon, petition you to suspend the Wager until such time as new terms can be negotiated, including a full ban on all ingress and egress of celestial entities until they are concluded.” Nick stretched out his paw. “Do you agree?”

Judy’s mind screeched to a halt and went into overdrive at the same moment. “I can’t!”

“Who else qualifies?” Nick inquired mildly.

“Will it be reinstated?”

“Once we’ve made calamari out of our annoying friend? Yes.”

She met his eyes. “You swear?”

“Every damn day,” he quipped.

Her paw smacked into her forehead. “You’re impossible.”

“And running short on time. You have my word.”

Judy glared at the fox before grasping the proffered paw and shaking it. “Agreed.”
“Now, that’s out of the way.”

Nick muttered a word that grated on the mind and the Collar came to life. It slithered into his palm and in a smooth movement was flicked around the little fox’s neck.

A wide feral grin stretched across Nick’s features. “This is going to feel good.”
Well, here we are, at last! Hereafter's final chapter. There is an epilogue. It'll be up in a few minutes.

I hope you've enjoyed this little project of mine. I didn't do it alone and I owe so many of my friends and readers for their help and support. Damlone, Blueberry, OnceNever, Weaver, KT, Cimar and... Bloody hells, there are a lot of you. I couldn't have done this without your help. As to you lovely readers of mine... What can I say? Your feedback, support, and comments have been a phenomenal help and hugely encouraging. Thank you.

Now that the sentimental stuff is out of the way, on with the story!
Judy wanted to be afraid, but she knew better. She felt the control he was exerting as the power built—a tidal wave of potency marshalling under the will of her fox in preparation for battle. It was beautiful. She was not prepared when he let it loose.

There was no scale she could compare it to. Reality bent under the pressure. She felt concerned as it washed over her, but her worry was short lived. The lust slammed into her. She fell to her knees holding her belly. She should have seen it coming. He was an incubus, but even that wouldn’t have prepared her. Judy’s head swam and roiled as wave after wave of power billowed out of the fox and into the world.

As her head cleared, Judy noticed the others were faring worse. Finnick was on all-fours, panting and gouging furrows in the concrete of the roof with his claws. Gazelle was standing, but only
thanks to the wall of a stairwell behind her. The ungulant’s thighs were pressed together and quivering as her eyes rolled up in her head and her mouth hung open. The howls and screams from the courtyard below were an anchor for her mind, and Judy pulled herself back to reality in time to see Nick in all his glory.

His presence weighed down the world. His fur danced like flames. Power dripped from his eyes, and he grinned with too many teeth—exultant in his freedom. For just an instant, his six wings flashed into being and were gone, leaving an afterimage in her mind. His Spear appeared, and he stood—regal and terrible—looming over the world as a god looked on ants.

He offered a paw to her and Judy took it. It took everything she had not to climax at his touch. If she did, there’d be no coming back and she knew it, so she gritted her teeth and forced down her desire.

“Impressive, little angel,” the fox crooned.

Judy shuddered. His voice was pure, honeyed lust. “When this is over, I’ll show you impressive.”

She felt his smile turn hungry. “I can hardly wait.”

Judy wobbled to her feet shaking her head to clear it. “What did you do?”

“Alas, nothing to worry about.” He stretched, drawing her eyes. “I pulled everything within ten miles out of time. It’ll keep the damage contained. But if Lollipop wins…well…”

“A stopgap,” Gazelle rasped. “Will it be enough?”

Judy glanced at the Cursori and was surprised at the resilience of her fellow. She was shaky, but steadying.

“Reality will hold,” Nick assured them. “This spell will reinforce it, but we don’t have much time. We have latitude, but need to move quickly.”

Finnick’s pained voice cut in, “Then let me help, sire.”
Before anyone could respond, the tiny fox opened his maw and roared. The mountains echoed and the heavens shook at the fury of what Judy had always assumed was an imp as the tiny vulpine twisted and changed—growing at a terrifying rate. In a matter moments, Finnick was eleven feet high at the shoulder with enormous horns curling around his ears and jutting forward by his jaws. The roof groaned under his weight.

~

Nick could only blink. Judy was staring slackjawed alongside Gazelle. Finnick was enormous. This day just kept getting stranger.

Nick snorted. “You weren’t just employed at the palace, were you?”

Finnick wordlessly shook his huge head.

“What was your position, I wonder?” The flat look Nick got for a response confused him.

Judy breathlessly grabbed his paw. “He can’t speak in that form.”

“Of course,” Nick grumbled. “And the only other person who would know is Lucifer.”

“Who just happens to have left his memories with you,” she commented. “Remember?”

“This is hardly the time,” Nick retorted.

Gazelle cleared her throat. “Call me crazy, but I think it’s a little bit relevant. Don’t you?”

“Down the rabbit hole…” Nick groused. He’d have to be quick.

He closed his eyes and reached for the knot of memories that weren’t his own. It was a peculiar feeling coupled with a burning sensation from the scar on his chest. Surprisingly, the knot shifted and shuffled, pulling the knowledge Nick wanted to the fore.
His eyes snapped open. “He was…my father’s personal bodyguard and… warmount.” Finn lifted his chin, exposing the Collar. “That was his mark of office and allowed me to serve my master at my full strength. Now, it stabilizes him, so he can serve again.” He smirked. “Albeit mutely.”

After a long breath the Devil smiled. “I think I like that collar where it is.” The relief from the fennec was palpable.

~

Judy couldn’t stop herself. “I’m sorry. Finnick, I—I thought you were an imp.”

“We all assumed.” Nick replied in his friend’s stead. “He never corrected us.”

Judy shook her head and sputtered, “Then what in the Nine Hells is he?”

“I’d comment on your vocabulary, Carrots,” Nick commented, annoyed. “But I want to see the look on your face.” Before she could snap at him, he plowed on leaving her speechless, “His momma was a behemoth.” Finnick huffed a laugh. “And daddy was a Thunderbeast.”

Judy wanted to ask, but Gazelle beat her to the punch. “Does that mean, his grandmother is…?”


Judy staggered as though the world was tilting under her feet for a moment. Gazelle seemed awestruck, but moved to place a hoof on the massive demon’s side.

“Don’t worry,” Nick assured them. “He’s the runt of the litter.”

Before the situation got any worse, Judy clapped her hands. “Alright. Topics for later. Right now, we have a battle to win. They’re distracted and confused down there, but that won’t last. We need to move.”
“Indeed.” Nick turned to her. “We do.”

She met his eyes levelly. “Yes. Us. You and me.”


“No.” Judy squared her shoulders, ready to fight. “I am not sitting this one out!”

His face was soft in contrast to his tone. “Judy, you have a job to do.”

“We all do,” she barked. “It’s time to end this!”

“No. You need to understand the Empyrean while we hold them off.” Nick drew himself up, marshalling his powers.

Judy goggled. “What? NO!”

“You power is the one that can end this.” Nick’s paws carved spells into the air as he spoke. “We need you to get a grasp of it, so we can end this fight. And you can’t do that in the middle of a battlefield.”

Frustration boiled in her gut. “But—”

“No ‘but’s.” He sighed. “We need this, Judy. Battle is the oldest form of communication there is. We’ll go get acquainted with our enemies while you figure out our trump card.”

“I sort of hate you right now.” She hated sounding like a pouting brat.

“Needs must when the Devil drives.” Nick shrugged. “Tell me I’m wrong on this one.”

Judy forced her fists open. “Fuck.”
“Later, I promise.”

Judy snorted and punched him.

As much as she hated to admit it, Nick had been right. For a moment Judy had thought he had been getting all protective of his female. But his reasoning had been solid, and he hadn’t been denying her. It was a small consolation.

“What do we do?”

Judy blinked at Gazelle. The Cursori had addressed The Devil plainly and openly, as a soldier would their commander. It was heartening, if a touch disturbing.

“Finnick and I will entertain our friends —” Nick stated—“while you protect Judy.”

“Understood.” So saying, the ungulant angel manifested her armor. It was light and elegant, accompanied by a great longbow and a quiver of arrows. “I’ll also lay in cover fire where I can to support you.”

“Good.” Nick turned to Judy and whispered, “Work quickly. We don’t have much time.”

With that, her fox turned away. His armor flowed over his head and his great wings framed him. Finnick dipped a shoulder allowing Nick to mount up, Gazelle took up a sniping position by the wall, and Judy was left with no other option.

She touched the Bond.

*You better save some of them for me.*
I’ll do what I can. They’re terrified and insane, so we’ll see.

*You’d better.*

In response, all she got was a feeling of amusement from the fox.

Nick leaned down to pat the shoulder of his steed. “Come on, Finn. Let’s go crash an orgy.”

The warmount roared, unleashing lightning over his hackles and horns. Nick screamed a battle cry and the two vanished over the side of the building.

There was a thunderous silence in their wake. It was only a moment, but felt much longer. In that tiny infinity, emotions tore through Judy. Annoyance, amusement, frustration, and anger played through her mind at the speed of thought. She wanted to fight. Then fear sparked through her, and her reasons for fighting were clear. Yes, she wanted battle. She craved it. However, she wanted to fight side by side with her fox—to watch his back and keep him safe.

Skyfire crackled across the sky, illuminating the land. Judy looked up and, in the wake of the skyfire, there was a shadow—a nameless form of hunger and fury painted against the clouds and black. It could have been a figment of her imagination, but the dread in her belly told her otherwise. The building shook and the sound of combat reached her ears. Very quickly, she sat and settled into a comfortable position. With the fear and worry echoing in her mind, she slipped into a trance. The only way to master oneself was from within.

Judy knew something was wrong from the moment her eyes closed. When she had attempted to scry, her mind had been assaulted. That art of looking between was troublesome in that respect. Looking inward to see beyond oneself exploited the strange overlap between internal and external landscapes, but it was a one-way door. She’d been attacked when she left the safety of her internal reality. The outside reality could not intrude on the inside.

Or so she’d thought.

In the blank everything of her mind, a silhouette was waiting for her. It was small and grotesque—only an outline of shadows. It stood patiently. Judy could see from it’s writhing that it was eager to talk to her—fervently so. On the positive side, it took a lot of power to invade a mind, let alone so peaceably. Such attacks were intrusive and violent by nature, but Lollipop’s presence was restrained and Judy felt no violation. The most it could be was an echo of a shadow and that was dangerous
Judy glanced over her mindscape. She knew what she was looking for was nearby. There was a flickering glow in the distance. She couldn’t get to it without provoking the form waiting for her. It was quiescent—if fidgety—but there was no guarantee it would remain that way if ignored. She approached carefully, well on her guard and ready to flee instantly. Whatever happened, she was adept at mental combat and they were on her turf.

“What do you want?” Judy addressed her visitor.

“You called for help.” It tilted what passed for it’s head. “I answered.”

She sneered. “I did no such thing.”

“It was only moments ago.” A table and two chairs appeared, and Lollipop gestured for her to sit with a tentacle. “You’ve been begging for eons.”

She carefully slid into her seat. “Uh-huh.”

“Your futures sing and scream through my mind,” it crooned as it sat as well. “Just as you sing and scream within them.”

Judy idly checked her nails. “Metaphor isn’t doing you any favors.”

The shadow form shivered happily. “It’s no metaphor, Little Light. You are a choir of suffering and ecstasy, begging for death.”

“Futures, plural,” she scoffed. “How can I have more than one?”

“Not all things are set. There is…give to your fate.” It leaned forward entreatingly. “And mine.”

Judy leaned back. “Get to the point.”
“I have come to answer your wish.” The figure wriggled and oozed. “You beg for oblivion and I will grant your request.”

“No thanks,” Judy replied, mildly. “And I haven’t wished for anything.”

Lollipop shook its head. “Not yet.”

“Is it just me—” Judy’s voice dripped sarcasm—“or do you seem saner here?”

Too-long arms spread in a grand, gelatinous gesture. “This place is Between. There is no room for misunderstanding in Between.”

“I spoke too soon.” Judy huffed. “Let’s hear it. What do you want?”

The form dripped in silence before answering, “Free me.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Not happening.”

“I will be free.” The form bubbled, heat coloring it’s words. “Do it now and I will grant your wish.”

“No, you won’t. Not now, not ever.” Judy crossed her arms dismissively.

It growled. “Release me.”

“I said no.”

It turned simpering. “I am not your enemy.”

Judy couldn’t help the eye-roll. “Are you the same entity that’s trying to break into reality?”
“It’s ‘out’ not ‘in’.” Several limbs slithered as the shadow shifted in its seat. “Big difference.”

She fought down the urge to rub her temples. “You’re trying to break reality. Therefore, you are my enemy.”

It leaned forward, entreating. “I am offering you the peace you desire.”

“By going back to your cell in Tartarus? Perfect! I accept.” She clapped her paws in dramatically feigned delight.

“No,” it stated with finality. “I will be free. If it is by your hand so much the better, but that is not what I would spare you from.”

She sighed. “From what then?”

A claw punched into the tabletop. “From your mate.”

Judy grunted in disgust and stood to leave.

“You fate is not yet sealed,” it pressed. “End him and spare yourself.”

“And free you in the process, damning Creation and all my kind?” Judy clicked her tongue and smiled. “I’ll pass.”

The shadow heaved and snarled, “And accept your end as a warden-whore?”

She paused and turned to face the shadow. When Judy looked back, she saw the shadow had shrunk. It was now an image of herself, but quintessentially wrong. The form was scarred and blackened, with hollow eyes and sallow cheeks. The wings were tattered and branded, ichor oozed from old wounds and dripped from her eyes and mouth.
Judy scowled in distaste. “You’re looking tired there, Lollipop. It’s taking a lot out of you to be here. Are you sure you have the strength to spare?”

“You will fall. This—” it snarled and gestured to itself—“will be the conclusion of your journey. In the end, you will be cast adrift. Your children shall be abominations, writhing forever in the depths. They shall rise and destroy all you hold dear.”

“Leave. Now. You’ll see me in the flesh soon enough and you’re almost spent,” Judy sneered as she stood. “Save your threats for when we’re face to face.”

As she turned away again, the thing spoke—this time whining, almost pleading. ”I’ve seen many things and all possible futures, but you...are an anomaly. You have vile silver white wings and black feathers. Birthed monsters and saints. But which are you? Which will you be? Why can I not see you?”

She snorted. “I thought you could see everything.”


“And we’re back to riddles,” Judy groaned.

“Your mate is more a monster than I could ever be. Your love will blind you and his will break you. You will beg for the release of death.” Her withered doppelganger screamed and begged. “Destroy him before he speaks your name, or you will face all of time and more battling the serpent in the sun! Then you will be his Tartarus!”

A trill of unease flitted through her mind and was squashed. “You’re ranting again.”

“Ask your vicious little candle then.” Lollipop spat, gesturing towards the blue glow in the distance with a mangled limb. “If you believe I lie, so be it. But that blessed fire of yours will speak the truth of it. Ask before your broken spirit heralds Creation’s subjugation. No one will be safe. Not you, not the mortals…. Not even your offspring. Ask, little angel, and despair.”

Judy stood for a moment in the silent expanse, unsettled and annoyed. As if the strange threats and warnings hadn’t been enough, now she had to “talk” to the empyrean. That was all she needed. Mastering the power she’d inherited was her goal. She didn’t want to have a conversation with it, let
alone convince it, or negotiate, or—heavens forbid—have to build a relationship with it. Her life was complicated enough with dating the Devil and the apocalypse looming.

Head throbbing, Judy marched in the direction of the blue glow, grumbling with every step.

As she walked, the glow shrank. Instead of an inferno, Judy found a small ball of flame, roughly the size of her palm, floating above a simple pedestal at chest height.

“Huh.” She leaned down to peer at it. “It’s so small.”

“Says the pint-sized juggernaut,” the ball retorted, startling her. “Don’t you know that size and power don’t always match up?”

“Of course I know that. But you’re supposed to be great equalizer against that…thing.” Judy vaguely waved over her shoulder. “I don’t see it, looking at you.”

“I’m a fire, oh my bearer,” the fire commented as it floated to eye-level. “You want me big? Feed me.”

She eyed the little orb skeptically. “Feed you what, exactly?”

“Anything. Well… anything you don’t mind losing,” the fire stated conversationally. “Your predecessor fed her love for her bondmate, her emotions, love, morality. Look how she ended up.”

Judy grimaced. “That’s…a stark truth…”

“I think she assumed those were what sustained me.” The orb pulsed in what Judy understood to be a shrug. “There’s no such thing as getting something for nothing, and I am no exception. Just how naïve can you be?”

At that moment, the orb flared and grew. In the span of a breath, Judy was looking at a mirror image of herself composed of ethereal blue flames. “We need to talk.”
“Awkward turn of phrase,” Judy let slip.

Her blue double regarded her, unamused. “About your predecessor and repeating history.”

“What do you mean?” Judy replied, uncertainly.

The fire paused, seemingly weighing its words. “Corruption is never fully removed. Even if your fox ascends, he will always be an ascendant demon. His wings will never be fully white.”

“I can keep him in check. I matched him already,” Judy retorted, defiant.

“Yes, in that Den of his. You fought with him on equal terms. Well done.” The flat tone conveyed nothing. “How are you at fighting yourself?”

She balked. “Excuse me?”

The fire pulsed. “The Bond you share is a conduit that goes both ways. You share more than just each other’s strengths.”

“I figured that part out already. I’m getting more sarcastic by the minute,” Judy snarked.

“And ruder. But that’s a separate matter.” The fire sighed. “The corruption in him will bleed across the bond to you. I’ve been burning it out of you while I’ve waited for you to get your tail in gear, but that’s going to cost you.”

She blanched. “So you’ve already been feeding on me?”

“On your power, yes. Don’t worry. I only took a nibble here and there, and you have plenty. I only took enough to keep the pestilence on the other side of the Bond,” it assured before turning grim. “If you complete the ceremony, it’ll only be a matter of time. Even if I take power from you and him, you will eventually be infected with it irretrievably.”

Fear trickled into Judy’s mind. “What about him? Will he fall again?”
“What do you think?” It retorted acidly.

She laughed hollowly. “We’re doomed then. There’s no way out in the long term.”

“Now, I didn’t say that, did I?”, the blue-Judy checked its nails.

Irritation blunted the wave of elation. “There’s hope?”

“Of a sort.” The Fire faced Judy squarely. “Listen up and listen well. Your Bond with him isn’t a small thing. It means a soul-bond if you complete it, and that’s eternity whether you like it or not.”

“The hell are you talking about? I love him!” She slapped a paw over her mouth, but the words were out.

“Yes, you do.” It lifted a perfect eyebrow. “But will you still love him in a few million years?”

“Million….”

“Eternity, rabbit.” The Fire lifted a finger. “That’s how long your battle will be—fighting the corruption in him and yourself. That is a dangerous proposition. There is a very real possibility that you will both end up utterly ruined.”

Judy felt herself deflating. “And where in any of this is there hope?”

“You aren’t in this alone.” It let the statement sink in. “Test his resolve. He’ll know what you know as soon as you open your eyes. But understanding it? That will take more. Help him understand.”

Judy raked her paws hard over her ears. “How?”

“You’re warriors.” The Fire retorted. “You have your own language.”
She rubbed the bondmark on her paw. “If I can’t?”

“Then history repeats itself.” The Fire shrank to a small orb again and pulsed a shrug. “You two end up like Aurora and Lucifer. And all that is will be consumed.”

She clenched her paws, staring down the Fire. “And if he’s resolved?”

“You’ll face a future of labor and sacrifice in the name of preserving Creation in all its forms and majesty. There are no happy endings for creations like us.” The orb returned to its pedestal and sat unmoving as Judy digested its words.

~

Nick felt right at home. He felt odd admitting that. It was both true and disturbing. The little slice of the Mortal Plane that he’d sectioned off was closer to a pleasure garden in Hell than a hospital courtyard. Between his sex-soaked power and Finnick’s roar, the population of the courtyard was either panicked or distracted in whatever way their fractured minds could interpret lust. Nick hadn’t seen such a display of misdirected desire since the Arena. That didn’t stop them from mounting resistance, or him from striking them down.

As much as he wanted to simply vaporize the lot of them while his spell held, that wasn’t the point. He was buying time for Judy to get her act together with her new toy. That said, he was enjoying himself, if growing increasingly bored. Finnick was having a blast shredding anything in reach or throwing lightening around, and it was gratifying to see angelic fletching sprout from the head or heart of an enemy. The little Cursori was clearly plying her skills as an archer. However, that was the extent of his pleasure.

The small fry he was eviscerating were no challenge, not even the devils. A spark of pale violet flame or a flick of the wrist would see them vanish from existence or fall to bloody chunks on the ground. In his mind, Nick kept recalling his duels with Judy and the fun they’d been. She’d grown so much in the time since he’d first met her. By comparison, the mob he was facing now was underwhelming.

Nick slipped from Finnick’s back and landed on the ground, leaving the massive beast to dismember a particularly large devil as Finnick pleased. Another devil and a pair of cultists charged him and melted before they even got close. Another three were pinned to the ground by arrows moments afterwards. The angel with the bow must have assumed he was in trouble, because the arrows fell like rain on anything that got close to him. Looking up, Nick tossed a two-finger salute at the rooftop and the barrage stopped.
There were still plenty of enemies for him to pass the time with. Groups were even coalescing. There was a chance he might not be bored to death.

Then Judy hit the ground, and the whole game changed. He felt her awaken, but was instantly shut out. All he perceived from her was a jumble of emotions. There was no time to think about it, however, as the rabbit launched herself from the rooftop and slammed into the battlefield.

Her form was wreathed in light blue flame and a tongue of darker fire danced on her forehead. It was beautiful. Nick felt her strength and tried the Bond, but she held it shut. As she walked towards him, her face wasn’t the determined look of a soldier focused on their task. She looked resigned, pleading—almost afraid.

There was a reason she wasn’t letting him in. All he could do was follow her lead and trust her. They stood back to back as the remains of their enemies collected themselves. This was what she wanted. Then, naturally, they just had to be interrupted.

The ring of lunatics and monsters surrounding them stilled and parted. Nick felt his angel tense next to him and the intensity of the flames around her grow. She was angry.

“Are we all here then?” the latest avatar of Lollipop boomed.

“You’ve never been ‘all here’, buddy,” he quipped back.

Judy didn’t say a thing, which concerned him. At the very least, Nick had thought she’d say something defiant. It was her nature. And yet, all she did was seethe. There must have been something about this particular shape that upset her. Nick amended his assessment to ‘badly upset her’ as her fires continued to grow.

The massive water buffalo was dressed in a ratty cassock and priest’s collar, covered with suppurating flesh, and carrying a grimy book. A festering slash across its arm was festooned with small tentacles. Nick saw the look pass between Judy and the abomination before it smiled. No good would come of this. Lollipop was baiting her and was not being subtle about it.

It opened its mouth and cheerfully proclaimed, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the—”
“Oh, shut up,” Nick barked.

“Impatient for a bridegroom, aren’t we?” the buffalo crooned, smugly. “Not a surprise considering you’ve already tasted the honey pot. Pity the blushing bride can’t wear white.”

“Is that book you’ve got an anthology of clichés?” Nick asked mildly.

Lollipop cocked his head. “How did you know?”

Nick had to blink. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“This place has so many rules…” Lollipop whined.

“I prefer to think they’re guidelines.” Judy growled.

A dagger flared into being and it flew from her paw at the avatar of their misfortunes. Nick had to admire her gall, right up until Lollipop caught it.

“Temper, temper, little angel,” the abomination crooned.

“It’s ‘temperature’, moron.” Judy smirked viciously and snapped her fingers. Blue fire lashed out from the dagger in Lollipop’s hoof, engulfing his hoof and forearm. The monster screamed.

Nick felt a flare of pride. His angel baring her fangs—and so deviously—was a thrill.

“Is that how you want this to go?” Lollipop spat. Tentacles sprouted from the burned stump of his forearm. “As you wish it, angel. Buckwheats! Buckwheats for everybody!”

The water buffalo waved an arm and the ring of his minions around the pair screamed as one and collapsed. Nick watched in mild distaste as the bodies of the cultists and devils surrounding them liquified into a pudding or gelatin-like consistency before meshing together. Within moments, they
were the hundred or so vaguely mammalian forms were reduced to a few dozen masses of flesh and limbs, which were, frankly, far more menacing.

They had room to fight and Nick was sure they’d handle their situation handily. Between the two of them, they certainly had the power to mop up, despite whatever surprises Lollipop had in store. That said, he was astonished when Judy stepped away, turned to face him and came to guard with her short sword and buckler.

“Carrots, what is this?” Nick chuckled weakly.

Her face was set as she leveled her sword at him. “This is necessary.”

Lollipop’s laughter cut through the moment. “Yes! Oh, yes! Necessity! Glorious, convenient necessity!”

“Shut it, puss bag,” Nick snapped. “This isn’t about you.” He ignored the resulting babble and paced back from his angel. “Turning on each other is necessary? I don’t blame you, but you could have waited until we’d beaten that.”

“I’m not turning on you,” Judy stated calmly.

“Uh-huh,” he replied warily. “What is this, then?”

“You need to understand——” she pressed——“and this is the only way I know that you’ll get it.”

Nick’s confusion melded into annoyance as Lollipop laughed and crowed, “Yes! Listen to your wife! Communication is so important in a marriage.”

“Does he ever shut up?” Nick growled.

Her eyes met his. “You have a more important conversation to focus on, Nick.”

His head cocked. Something else was happening—something he wasn’t fully grasping.
Her smile was watery. “The oldest means of communication there is, no?”

She added a wink and Nick felt her press on the Bond. He came to guard with his spear, knowing something was about to happen. He felt the Bond open a crack and a wave of love came to him with a message.

*Don’t hold back.*

~

Judy knew her fox was flying blind. She’d set it up that way. They circled each other cautiously, but she could feel his disbelief. He wasn’t taking this seriously yet. It was too strange a circumstance—too silly a turn of events. She could also feel nothing beyond his disbelief. He was holding the Bond closed, just as much as she had been. She kicked herself mentally, but it was only to be expected. She’d shut him out, at first to set up a moment where they could talk freely, and now, he was hesitant. It made sense. All she had to do was get him to open up. It was up to her to make the first move.

The ring of devils around them tightened up to enclose them, but otherwise kept their distance. Lollipop was apparently buying into her strangeness. For once, Judy was glad their enemy was a raving lunatic—it was working in her favor.

Nick tossed out a jab, which she batted away. There was no force behind it. He was testing her, teasing her to get a reaction. In reply, she danced in close and sliced at his stomach. He quick-stepped back and swatted at her with the butt of his Spear. She caught it with her shield and slid down the haft, hoping to crush his fingers, but he dodged away again. Nick was getting the idea. He was less laconic in his stance, but still not convinced. It was enough, however, and Judy pressed her attack.

She built her offensive slowly, playing to his preferred tactic of drawing her in. She waited for her chance, falling into his pattern and giving him every opportunity to play his hand. Finally, she overstepped into a lunge and he struck, batting her forward from behind.

Judy rolled into the gentle, almost tender shove from her fox and repaid him. She swept through her roll and kicked his foot out from under him. As he fell he struck at her and she dove away from his Spear, but it was only a warding action. She closed the distance again. He slid up to a knee in time to parry and she hammered his guard with her sword.
She strained against his strength. She could see his arms trembling and smiled. Seeing her chance, Judy pressed hard on the Bond and sent a word.

*Please.*

Nick did not understand. His confusion and frustration grew with each pass he and the rabbit made at each other. He’d tried to fight with kit-gloves, but had been disabused of that idea. Judy’s pommel strike to his ribs and follow-up kick to his knee left him sore in more than one way. All she kept repeating was the one word.

*Please.*

Over and over, she’d said it. He didn’t understand at all. To look at it, she was begging him to fight her at full strength, but he didn’t think she was suicidal. That said, she certainly wasn’t pulling her own punches. She’d scored a few hits on him, leaving him irate, bordering on angry. Nick didn’t want to hurt her and didn’t know what she was after, but his patience was running out.

*Please!*

**Please what, rabbit?!!**

In response, Judy did something incomprehensible. She closed her eyes and lunged, swinging at full strength. It was an absurd act—total commitment and blind…

It clicked.

Total commitment and blind faith. In each other. Their lives were on the line and she wanted him to trust her in the absence of their Bond. He wouldn’t know her plans and couldn’t tell if she was being honest. It was his trust she was after, in absolute terms.
Fear boiled in him for an endless instant as her blade flew towards his head and he made his choice. For the first time, he believed. The haft of his Spear flew to meet her blade and guided it to the ground where he planted a foot on it.

As you wish.

With her blade pinned he sent a vicious blow into her stomach, knocking her back. She rolled with it, vanishing her buckler and calling up a curved war dagger and a kukri. Now that he was committed, there was no going back. Nick pressed his advantage and attacked. Judy dished back as good as he dealt out and his preternatural healing put to the test. Whatever his armor couldn’t handle, his flesh absorbed and he exulted in it.

Scythe!

The word hit his mind and his Spear changed on reflex. He swung wide and hard with the wickedly curved blade and felt it come to a jarring stop on her guard. The shaft slipped over her head, guided by dainty paws, and met a punishing kick once it was safely away from her. The gargantuan devil it eviscerated was of little note to Nick as he had to parry her riposte and duck under a flying tomahawk a moment later.

The next devil fell a moment after his rabbit rebounded off its chest. His Spear split what passed for the thing’s chest and he sent a gout of flame after it in frustration. He’d been sure he’d had her that time. Another devil was crippled by a counter attack of hers that he smacked away and one more fell with a pair of daggers in its eyes—one thrown and one used as a hand-hold to stop her momentum after Nick had launched her away with a kick.

Nick had never experienced such fun.

~

Judy had what she wanted. Her demon was fighting like he had in his Den and she was keeping pace with him. She still had her trump card to play and the last test. More than half the devils were dead and the rest were either injured or crippled outright—collateral damage from their duel. Lollipop was shrieking and babbling in delight. Half of the sounds coming from the remains of her chief weren’t meant for mammalian throats.

Judy allowed herself an instant of self-satisfaction that her little plot had worked out so well. The
devils hadn’t seen it coming, Lollipop was too insane to understand her behavior, and Nick had worked out the riddle. More importantly, he’d trusted her. That was the thing that had her fighting down tears. He’d trusted her without question. He’d let her hurt him and hurt her back just as hard. They’d traded beatings and evasions on equal terms, and it was time for the fight to end.

She reached for the Fire within her and it filled her. Reality bent and strained under the force of her attack. Her demon’s weapon was batted away, leaving him open to a brutal kick pomme strike before he could blink.

Lollipop screamed in triumph, “Yes! Yes, broken angel! End your tormentor and free me! I will end your sorrow!”

“Oh, shut it, will you?” Judy mumbled as she held her blade against the fox’s throat.

She was the victor. He was unarmed and pinned under her, hairs from death at her hand.

“You win, rabbit.” Nick sounded resigned.

“I win.” Judy’s legs gave out, dropping her to half-kneel over his chest.

Her arm shook as she tamped down the Fire and lifted her fox’s weary paw. She pressed the grip of her blade into his paw and aimed it at her own throat.

“What?!” Lollipop shrieked. “What are you doing, you stupid feathered rat?!?”

Judy didn’t say a word. She waited.

~

Fatigue-induced hallucinations weren’t new for Nick. He’d had his fair share. That was why he knew this wasn’t one. He wished it were, just because that would be less bewildering.

Why?
Silence.

**Why would you do this? What was the point?**

Silence.

**Listen, Carrots, I’m not going to kill you. So it’s time for you to explain.**

He felt her finally open the Bond, but what she did next was all sorts of uncomfortable. Nick had felt similar things many times, but it was a new one feeling someone reaching into him though that particular route. Nick felt his rabbit reach out through the Bond and touch his power, pulling up his ability to control time. For an instant, there was silence, and then there was a flood.

Everything she’d experienced from his departure on the roof to opening her eyes forced its way into his mind. Meeting Lollipop, her conversation with the Empyrean Fire—her fears, her worries. And her plan. Finally, he understood.

“Sweet Misery, Judy…”

“What?” she huffed.

“What?” Lollipop echoed.

Nick couldn’t help it. He laughed. It was so utterly ridiculous.

She didn’t see it, but he could as clear as day, now. He opened the Bond and showed her. Their duel against each other had ended up a dance—two warriors learning and testing each other, compensating for their failures and weaknesses as much as exploiting them—communication on the level of mind, emotion, and soul regardless of the Bond. Nick saw what she went through with the Empyrean and Lollipop in her meditation. He understood her fear and laughed.

“What’s so damn funny?” she demanded.
He placed the pad of his finger on her lips, stilling them. “You tried for conflict as your means of communication, and we ended up fighting together more than we fought each other.”

She blinked. “We did?”

“Uh-huh. It’s called collaborative problem solving.” Nick shifted up to rest on his elbows. “If you were worried about us working together, I think you have your answer. We were battling flat-out and mopped the floor with our enemies. Nice misdirection, by the way.”

Judy shook her head. “That just means we were in an impasse.”

“And ‘accidentally’ beat the stuffing out of our enemies while we were at it.” Nick lifted an eyebrow. “That is the goal, is it not? The Divine keeping the Devil in check and Creation defended?”

Her eyes goggled as though she couldn’t believe her ears. “Well, yes, but—“

“And we both know you could have killed me back there. If the worst happens, you can save the world from me.” He winked up at her. “I think that’s enough for us to work with.”

“Is that enough though?” Fear and hope warred across her features.

He smiled and saw her calm. “I’ve seen plenty of marriages work with a lot less.”

“No.” Lollipop gurgled.

Nick snorted in irritation. The few devils that weren’t destroyed had fled, leaving the one nuisance to address. Lollipop would be the hardest to kill, despite looking more like a convulsing blob of necrotic pudding than a mammal now. It ranted as it rotted.

“No! Creation must burn! The Heavens must fall! The pillars of Being must crumble! The turtle be made into soup!”
Judy helped Nick to his feet, keeping an eye on their enemy. She fought the urge to back away as Lollipop writhed and grew, sprouting tentacles, limbs and claws as it expanded and absorbed the bodies that littered the ground. A cultist that had been playing dead shrieked and a wounded devil gurgled in distress as they were engulfed. Lollipop spread and expanded until they were hemmed in by a crescent of putrid flesh. Dozens of eyes opened and closed across the expanse—swimming across the surface like fish, bobbing to the surface and disappearing.

From the center of the meat, a blob forced itself forward and it cobbled itself into the shape of a vaguely mammalian face. It looked like it was formed by a mind that had only heard them described third-hand and not understood.

Three mouths split the cheeks. “Last chance, little angel. End the fox and free me. Or suffer for all time.”

Judy felt Nick at her shoulder.

**Judy, this isn’t good.**

*What do you mean?*

**We don’t have a lot of time left. I can feel my spell weakening.**

*How long have we got?*

**A few minutes, maybe. We’re both tired and that…thing…is fresh as a daisy.**

*We have my Fire. That can kill it.*

**This is going to take both of us, sweetheart.**
Judy glanced up at her demon. The look on his face said it all.

*You have something planned, don’t you? You did from the start.*

**Yep! It’s time to play our trump card.**

*What do you mean?*

**It’s the opportune moment, rabbit. Time for the next big step in our relationship.**

“Do you, Verna?” Her heart soared at his words.

Judy could only smile up at her little slice of Hell. “I do, Piberius.”

~

The moment the syllables left her lips, Judy felt the Bond open and deepen in ways she’d never dreamed possible. She felt him. All of him. The long years, the patience and cruelty, the stalwart loyalty and childlike wonder. Layer by tangled layer, her fox opened up to her down to his root, where she finally saw him—a fallen guardian seraph and a raging ocean of power held in check by an equally titanic will.

He was terrifying.

He was beautiful.

He was hers.

Golden light spilled from his hand as he took hers. His bondmark shrank to form a simple, elegant band on his finger. Hers mirrored his, glowing with the light of sunset and dawn.
Their lips meeting hadn’t been part of the plan, but he couldn’t have stopped it if he wanted to. They were grimy, covered in filth and sweat. The only witness was a mad homunculus which was actively melting into a puddle of tortured flesh. Nick was flat on his back and neither of them were the better for wear.

He wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Power flowed between the two. Nick felt his strength and experience mingle with Judy’s flexibility and prowess. It was a heady feeling. The realization that they were equals and stronger together than alone, or even in combination, slowly dawned on him as his strength returned and grew. As a pair, their power far exceeded the sum of the parts.

When he opened his eyes, blue flames danced on his fingertips.

Judy wanted to shout and scream and laugh until she was crying. She didn’t know what to do with what she was feeling. Power flowed higher and harder, filling her and blunting the pain of her injuries. She felt wonderful. Then she saw her fox start to change.

His golden wings lightened to an ashen white and the darkness in his power vanished. As she helped him to his feet, she saw his armor was no longer a twisted mockery of flesh. Instead, the hard, cold, clean lines of the raiment of the Guardians adorned his frame. The only difference was the crest on his chest—the crest of the Throne of Heaven was replaced by a sigil she didn’t recognize, but she didn’t need to. She knew it was his mark, the mark of her husband.

“Honey?”

“Yes, darling?” he replied.

She couldn’t help but grin. “Let’s clean house.”
Nick smiled at her with a small bow. “With pleasure.”

Lollipop erupted with laughter. “I won’t fight you.”

“Sure you won’t,” Nick retorted.

“I don’t have to, but I will if you insist.” The distorted face hitched in a shrug and the features began to drift across its surface. “I’ve already won, even if I am blind to the victory.”

Judy eyed the writhing mass looking for an opening. “You assume an awful lot.”

“Assumption is the blood of fools. You should know that after birthing of so many.” The face’s many eyes fixed on her. “And seeing so many die.”

“Your delusions never cease to impress,” Nick cut in as his Spear manifested in his paw.

“You will call to me, angel.” Lollipop continued, ignoring him. “You will beg for release and I will answer. Eventually.”

“Enough,” Judy spat.

~

Nick felt the daggers fly before he saw them. He was moving before either blade landed. He was inches from impaling Lollipop when the mouths opened and vomited bones, knocking him back.

“What happened to not fighting us?” Nick couldn’t hide his annoyance.

“Where’s the fun in that?”
A tentacle slammed into the ground where Nick had been standing. Judy’s short sword carved a slab off it while Nick slashed another through. They were stronger and bolstered by their second wind, but they were running out of time. No matter how many limbs they shattered, or how much damage they did, it healed to the tune of insane laughter.

We need to create an opportunity.

Easier said…

Use the Fire.

It needs fuel.

What’s I been using so far?

My power. Just bits, but that’s enough.

Then take some of mine. I’ve got plenty.

Nick tapped his power and flooded the bond.

~

Judy winced as her fox’s power hit her. It felt like a tsunami through a garden hose. Instinctively, she directed it to the little corner of her being where the Empyrean Fire sat, awaiting its next meal. It ate greedily, corruption and all. She felt the flame grow and grow until it was a flood to match what she’d received from Nick.

~

He felt Judy summon the flames and send them down the Bond. He let them fill him and guided them into his weapon. Nick drew back his arm and sent his Spear flying, not at the suppurating mass
of flesh, but the rabbit. In a burst of fire, she spun out of the way in sync with his attack. One foot caught the haft of the spear and redirected it, the other she slammed into the butt heel first.

Lollipop only had time to grasp the misdirection before the Spear slammed into its body. It drove through, straight to the concrete and stuck there, pinning the monster and filling it with cold, blue, purifying fire.

As flames engulfed the monster, it shrieked. “Set me free!”

Nick closed his eyes and reached out to his Spear with his will. The work was not done.

The flood of power from his mate flew through him and his Spear into the monster. He opened himself as a conduit and rode it as it chased down the corruption through the ether. Nick sped it on its way. The fox hunted with the flames, scouring every shred of it they could find, all the way back to the source. He recognized the place—a room carved from the obsidian fundament of Hell, encrusted with Tartarus diamonds and carved with layer upon layer of spells—the door to Lollipop’s cell. One of the locks was just a hair out of alignment.

Nick sent the fire to scour the room and was gratified at the shriek of pain he received in return.

~

Judy sat with her mate in the aftermath of the battle, dangling their feet off the bridge from the hospital to the mainland. His spell was long gone and the world had returned to its rightful pace in time. There were bodies littering the ground and an unholy amount of cleaning up would be needed, but that was a worry for another moment. Right then, she needed a quiet moment with her mate.

The fact of that word made her pause. She was married—soulbonded, in fact—to the Devil. She was the first angel since Celestine to complete the bonding ritual and with…him. Judy’s eyes fell to look at Nick’s paw, where the pale golden bondmark rested. Her own mark tingled on her finger and he nudge her.

“You ok?”

She hated to ruin the moment, but she had to ask. “Nick…. Do you really think we can make this work? All joking aside, this isn’t going to be easy.”
He laughed wearily. “Nothing worth having ever is.”

“I’m serious,” she persisted.

Nick eyed her, unconcerned. “How long did I wait to get my revenge on Buffy?”

“Yes, yes…” She prodded his ribs with her elbow. “You’re patience incarnate.”

He swatted at the offending limb. “We’ll get you lessons.”

Judy giggled, leaning into her husband’s arm. The quiet stretched for a moment before Nick’s chuckles broke the silence.

“What’s funny?” she asked.

“You.” He snickered. “‘Happy ever after’… I mean really, rabbit, I thought you knew better.”

She pulled back, looking up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Happiness is transitory. It never lasts. It can’t.” He smiled down at her. “But it can always be found again.”

Judy leaned back skeptically. “That’s kind of a stretch, isn’t it?”

“If you’re willing to work for it, I’m game,” he replied glibly.

She gripped his arm. “You sure?”

His paw landed on hers. “We only have eternity to get it right.”
“But you really think we can?” she pressed.

Nick sighed in fond exasperation. “Judy, it only took a few billion years, two passes through Hell, and a near-apocalypse for me to meet you. We’ve got long odds covered.”

Someone behind them cleared their throat, which pulled their attention from each other. Gazelle approached with Finnick padding along in her wake. No sooner had Judy stood than the Cursori kneeled.

“Really?” Judy groaned. “We have to start with this nonsense already?”

“Of course, Lady Divine,” the ungulant replied.

Judy looked to the fennec. “At least you won’t bother with this nonsense.”

Finnick sneered through his smile. “I bow to no one but my master, toots.”

“I’m right here, buddy,” Nick drolled.

“Talk to me when your tail is on the throne, Devil Apparent,” the imp countered.

Judy laughed. “I don’t have orders for you. I assume you have someplace you want to be?”

“Yes,” Gazelle intoned. “We want to check in with that Clawhauser fellow. Maybe see what help we can be in the aftermath.”

“Sounds good to me,” Nick interjected. “Off you go! We’ll clean up here.”

“Yes, my lord,” Gazelle replied.
Judy looked at her fellow angel in astonishment.

In reply, the Cursori stood and shrugged. “Masters worth serving are hard to find, my lady, and you’ve earned my loyalty. Both of you.”

With that, the Cursori swept her imp into her arms and took to the air on her wings. For the first time in ages, an angel could fly unhindered, thanks to the Wager’s suspension. That was one of many, many things they would have to discuss in the days that followed. The list was enormous and grew with every passing moment. It was overwhelming. Judy’s eyes flicked over her fox as he sat staring over the water and she decided it could wait a few more minutes.

She padded over to her fox and plopped down next to him. “So…. What now?”

Nick chuckled. “First a shower, and after that I think I promised you some praise.”

“Why don’t we have dinner first?” Judy proposed. “I’m starving.”

Nick stretched. “How about dinner and a movie? The Masked Fox is out at the classics theatre on Fern Boulevard.”

“And then The Diner?” Judy suddenly felt invigorated.

Nick clicked his tongue, chewing it over. “I’m not feeling that right now. How about something different?”

“Try everything, right?” She was feeling better by the moment.

A voice cut through the air that was deep and resonant but achingly soft. “A wise choice.”

Both their heads snap up to see a Jackal in a tweed jacket with dark slacks leaning on a peculiar looking cane. His ears were unusually long and sharp looking, his expression mild and composed. A surprising sight, considering they were in the middle of a battlefield.
“And you are…?” Nick inquired cautiously.

“I have more names than I care to recall,” the jackal replied blandly.

“That’s terribly unhelpful,” Nick commented.

“Why are you here?” Judy ventured.

“Official business—” the well-dressed canid stated, quickly amending—“Not with you.”

Judy nodded, glancing at Nick. “Oh, good. And what is your business, exactly?”

“My own.” the thin canid replied. “However, I do feel obliged to thank you for resolving this little issue with Mother.”

“Mother?” Nick asked incredulously.

“It’s a long story. One I do not have time for at present. Suffice it to say that I owe my existence in part to the being you just met.” He set a small box on the ground by his feet. “Here are the tokens of my thanks. I’ll leave it here until your curiosity overwhelms your wariness. I will promise you that it is completely safe.”

He was instantly standing just in front of Nick. “But this I must be close for. Do not move.”

Nick’s paw hovered, ready to summon his Spear, but didn’t move otherwise. The jackal smirked lightly. Very slowly and obviously, he raised his cane and used the end of the peculiarly shaped handle to prick his thumb. Before Nick could react, he reached up with his bleeding thumb and quickly anointed him with his blood.

“There,” the jackal said with a ghost of a smile. “Now, you don’t need that silly brew of yours. I’d suggest you drink it instead.”

Nick remained frozen in pace. “Drink it?”
“That’s what it was made for,” the well-dressed male replied. “If you wish to know more ask my sister.”

Nick squinted in confusion. “Your sister…. I know her?”

“You call her Leviathan.” The jackal stepped back primly. “Incidentally, the seal that was used here…”

“The one Lollipop used to steal souls?” Judy inserted.

“Lollipop…” He snorted in amusement. “Yes. It was your father who designed it, but I would appreciate its discontinuation.”

“It’s not my style.” Nick shrugged. “I have no interest in it.”

“Good.”

Judy couldn’t help herself. “Just out of curiosity, why do you care?”

“Call it professional courtesy. I taught him some of the principles used in it, so I have the right” The poised canid met her eyes and she shivered. “And you are in no position to gainsay me.”

With that, the Jackal turned to leave, but Judy called out. “Are you—”

The ageless mammal with the soft, booming voice turned to her and smiled. He lifted his cane, gripping it by the shaft and it grew. In a moment, he was holding a scythe with a long, gracefully curved blade and intricate scrollwork along the pole. His jacket and slacks were replaced by simple, flowing cotton robes that were at once both completely black and completely white. All the while, he grew to colossal stature, towering over the courtyard. With a wave of the scythe, Nick and Judy saw the ghostly forms of the dead pulled from their bodies. The shades made their way diligently onto the small boat that appeared on the water beside the courtyard. Death silently boarded the boat, setting his scythe to the side and taking up the boatman’s pole and pushing off into the spectral mist that had arisen around them.
He smiled at their astonishment, saying “I will speak with you soon”, and was gone.

Judy felt herself sag in relief. “Well, that’s concerning.”

“Not really,” Nick commented.

“What? How?” She couldn’t help but laugh.

“He said ‘speak’ with us soon. That doesn’t sound like he’s coming to collect us. It also doesn’t pay to worry about it.” He shook himself and turned to her. “Dinner?”

Judy snickered. “Are you serious?”

“After a brush or six with Death? Yes.” Nick padded over to the box Death had left for them and pocketed it. “When better to appreciate the good things in life?”

Judy gathered herself. “Alright, so where to?”

Nick scratched his chin. “I’m thinking creole.”

“Creole?” A smile of anticipation crept across her face. “What’s that? I’ve never had it.”

“It’s delicious and that’s all the more reason, then.” Her mate started jogging backwards towards the road. “Come on, Carrots, catch me if you can!”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

With this, Hereafter is officially concluded. Please, keep an eye out for my next story. With a baby on the way, my time will be getting a touch less free. That said, I intend to finish my current works, get this story revised for formal publishing, start new stories, and work on a sequel. I will never sleep again!
Nick's eyes popped open. He groaned and rubbed his face before levering himself up and out of the bed he shared with his wife. It still felt odd for him to think of her that way, but it brought a smile to his face. It was a comfort in the strangeness they'd been enduring since their binding.

Dreams were not a comfortable place for demons. That was one of the many reasons they seldom slept. For Nick, however, they had been more of a concern. Lacking most of his memories gave him a bit of cushion against the horrors of his subconscious, but in dreams that buffer was gone. Predicting what unpleasantness could wriggle out of the depths of his mind had been a fool's errand—one he happily avoided.

Then the angel had happened.

Now, he had his memories and sleep was bearable. The burden of his mind was less painful as it was no longer his to bear alone. Unfortunately, the same ordeal that had given him his rabbit had provided a further complication. Or two. The periodic intrusions of the Empyrean Fire into his consciousness was not something Nick enjoyed. He already had the remnant of Lucifer rattling around in his head, so another voice was just a nuisance. The interruptions always came at the most inopportune of moments.

Water flowed from an ewer into a stone cup in his paw as he heard the sheets rustle behind him.

"The dreams again?" Judy asked blearily.

Nick grunted the affirmative. "That and Lucifer."

"What was it this time?" He heard her paws on the flagstones accompany the words. "All I got was some kind of blueprints."

"That was his dissertation on the construction of Tartarus. Exactly what we needed at…" He glanced at the clock on the wall. "Two forty-seven in the morning."

"We're lucky, I guess. We each only get one of them full blast. I doubt I could handle two." Judy sighed and filled her own cup. "Mine was a commentary on infrastructure changes we should implement once we've claimed our thrones."

"Riveting." Nick's tone was sardonic, but worry took root in his mind. "Let's try to get a little sleep while they're both distracted."

"Probably wise." She laid a paw on his arm. "I know this was supposed to be our honeymoon, but —"

"But we have too much to do. Still, we had three good days off." Nick shrugged. "Once Heaven and Hell are sorted out, we'll take a vacation. Maybe come back to the Mortal Plane for a breather?"

"I'd like that." Judy held up a finger. "But a working vacation."

"Really?" Nick groaned. "Couldn't we just lounge on a beach?"

"We'd both get bored. I'm not saying we need to do anything huge," Judy assured him. "Just a little light work to keep us sharp."

Nick huffed a laugh and curled around his little angel. "We'll discuss that tomorrow."
"After breakfast." She cooed as she settled in.

He smiled as his paw snaked across her belly. "Might be a late breakfast."

All he got in return was a hum of satisfaction. Moments later, Judy was breathing deep and peacefully. Nick, on the other hand, struggled. They'd each had their evening's discussions—his with Luci's simulacrum and her with the Fire—but Nick had seen something else as well.

Just for a moment, he'd seen a desolate plane with a figure standing over it. As is the way of dreams, nothing felt real or false. Everything looked as though it was under moving water, shimmering and indistinct. As he approached, the figure's details resolved slightly—momentarily solidifying before growing shadowy again.

The wings were huge, featherless and obsidian black. He wore worn, dusty armor and carried himself proudly despite a haggard demeanor and obvious weariness. The staff he leaned on was thick and carved. It felt familiar, but the details remained foggy.

Finally, in that endless moment, Nick saw his apparition's face. He was willing to write it off as a dream until the figure turned to meet his eyes. The rest of his perception bled into murk, leaving the face of his visitor crystal clear for one heartbeat.

Nick felt as though he was looking into a mirror. The other fox was his spitting image. The cheeks and muzzle were the same, as were the brow and ears—practically identical in every way. It was the eyes that unsettled him. They were cold, hard and hollow to the pith, but the part that scared him was the color—they were a brilliant amaranthine.

Just like Judy's.

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