You're Anon: Head of Hotel Security! Once you were a vagabond, a vagrant from the streets, keen to steal and pick the pockets of every demon in Pentagram City. And you did. And it cost you. But after all that, after all the trials and tribulations, you've found new meaning in the most unexpected ways: your companionship with Angel Dust.

Can the sultry spider keep you steady? Can you beat back the sins of your past? Is love truly enough to save you? Once again, your path begins anew.

The direct and official sequel to The Thief, The Spider, and The Hotel.
Welcome back, reader.

This is your story.

First, I’d like to thank you for joining me on another long, perilous adventure. What you’re reading is a direct sequel to *The Thief, The Spider, and The Hotel*. If you haven’t read it, I caution, what lies ahead are total and complete spoilers for the former. Though I invite anyone to start enjoying this work, things might not make sense or click without understanding the events of TSH.

If you’d rather dive right in, let’s briefly summarize things.

You’re Anon, a name short for “anonymous.” You are a silhouette, formed but formless. At most you are a shape, a shadow, but you – as the reader – may imagine yourself however you desire (so long as it makes sense). In your mortal life, you were a thief, pulled from the ugly veins of an 80’s New York City, tossed into a world of crime, overseen by vagrants, mobsters, and eventually, fellow heisters.

In death, you were much the same. Your desire for bigger and larger scores drove you into the arms – quite literally – of Angel Dust. What started as a casual friendship with some monetarily motivated sex on the side evolved in a deep, yearning relationship. Angel Dust is everything to you.

At its root, this is a love story.

But even love can’t save you from greed. You broke vaults, you unleashed dangerous, terrifying things and as an indirect consequence of your actions, and you put The Hotel at risk. It could’ve cost you everything. Lucky as you are, it didn’t.

We can’t fall in love and live happily ever after, though. The days still come. The sins of your old life are eager to return. You have – so you hope – abandoned the way of a petty thief in favor of a more pressing role: Head of Hotel Security. You must protect yourself, protect the people who took you in, Charlie, her vision, her friends, and most importantly, Angel Dust. But is it you? Is this your way? Can you find meaning in a role you’ve never taken? Can you truly abandon your path of greed, your need to be known, the only things you’ve ever understood?

Things are different now. You have Angel Dust. In a way, you have family, and family is important. Protect them all, Anon.

**Timeline of Events**

*The Thief, The Spider, and The Hotel*

As Anon: Master Thief, your actions pushed you into the company of Angel Dust and the Hotel. You used the building as clever cover as you pursued greater heists, eventually knocking over one of Pentagram City’s biggest casinos – the Sugary Chigurh (much to Angel’s lament).

This unleashed a very hidden *Abaddon*, the Icon of Annihilation, and you were forced to act, eventually stealing *Eden’s Apple* to thwart the Destroyers plans. You returned, but not without carrying a vicious new weight.
Sabbatical

Sometime after TSH, you’re back to some familiar habits. You and Angel pursue some more illicit activities, happening upon one of the Spider’s old friends. The strange, mysterious outlaw helps you pursue another target of greed, as Sabbath owes a favor to his old arachnid friend. What’s discovered there, though, may have bigger repercussions than anyone realized.

Party Girls Don’t Get Hurt

You’re realizing the path of a criminal is no longer a valid option. Promoted to “Head of Hotel Security,” suddenly, there’s more at stake now. Angel, too, is starting to shift away from his old life, but not before sampling the “ways” one more time.

The Obsessor

Many love Angel Dust, maybe as much as you. But some express it in dangerous ways. The Obsessor threatens your home, the sanctity of your world, but most importantly Angel.

With a little help from everyone’s favorite Radio Demon and Deputy Fat Nuggets, you find a way to keep things safe, but not before confronting the returning horrors of your old mortal life.

And so, we go on. . .

Well, all caught up? Good.

Nice to have you back, Anon. If you could check in post haste, please.
The Hotel is officially opening! You and the Happy Family decide to celebrate with alcohol! Lots and lots of alcohol.

Laz Briar Presents. . .
A cork launches into the warm evening city air followed by a stream of cathartic Chardonnay, quickly accompanied by jubilant cheers. There’s whistling, there’s applause, there are cries of approval. Charlie beams, her snowy, alabaster features stretched with a heartfelt smile, her wide, innocent eyes watery from joyful tears as she looks at the timid crowd in front of her, seconds away
from bursting into a song-and-dance no-holds-barred musical.

The Happy Hotel stands proud, its scarlet brick a monolith of promise in the otherwise bleak, unforgiving chaos of Pentagram City. Its masonry has been refashioned, windows fixed, woodwork repaired, and entrance cleaned. The pink, neon sign adorns the monolith like a proud crown, a siren, a beacon in the dark, calling all the sinners and damned to a better place. It promises hope, safety, happiness. Redemption. It’s your home.

She looks to everyone, wearing a regal suit attire for tonight. And why not? This is it! This is the official Hotel Grand Opening! This is her vision, her dream, finally coming to fruition. No, there isn’t a sea of demons lining up quite yet, there isn’t a stadium full of hopefuls roaring with encouragement. But there are others. There’s a crowd, a little family, a group of demons and sinners who believe in her, believe in themselves. She wipes her wet face as said crowd rains the hellfire of applause down on her.

“I’m so…” she starts, a bit choked up. “I’m so happy you’re all here!”

Glasses are filled. Niffty, the twitchy, erratic maid, flings herself in flight from person to person, making sure their refreshment is filled just right.

No one can hide their smile. Vaggie, of course, is over the moon to see her special girl finally hit a checkpoint of success. She stands next to Charlie, gray cheeks flushed rose, wearing a satin, black dress for the occasion. She was the first and, for a long time, only one to believe in Charlie’s cause.

“We’ve been through so much,” continued Charlie. “All of us.”

More wine is poured. Husk’s feline features warp into a scowl as he eyes the substance with scrutiny, likely unimpressed by its safer alcohol content. Alastor takes his with all the expected posh refinement everyone has come to expect, wearing his typical crescent grin. The Goat Bois giggle and bleat together, sniffing at their drinks, curious, quite unfamiliar with it.

“It fills me with so much hope, so much joy to know you’re with me. This will not be easy. Everyone doubts us, even laughs. . . but, you’ve all shown me that you’re willing to be better!”

Baxter’s wide, twitching eyes just stare at the alcohol, like it’s a toxic chemical. He holds it far away from his body, likely seconds from tossing it. He probably would, were it not for Charlie’s big night.

Charlie’s eyes spring from person to person, as though silently acknowledging them, her hands clasped together.

“I look at you all and I see. . . I see more than sinners seeking redemption. I see. . . family.”

And so Niffty comes to you, wearing a manic grin, and you hold out your glass, happily accepting the pour. This is a good night. A really good night.

Next to you are the people you’ve been living with for, oh, what, a few months? And you never got to know them well. Yet, for the first time in so, so long, you feel like you belong to something. Despite Alastor’s subdued malice, or the surly grumbles of Husk, or the playful ‘bah’s of Razzle and Dazzle, the concerned caution of Vaggie, the jumpiness of Baxter, Niffty’s erratic personality, and Charlie’s almost nauseating optimism, despite all that, you belong with them. This little crowd, this timid forest of demons. . . can you call them your friends? You want to.

Or do you feel that way because of him?

Next to you, feeding you the gravity of his presence, inspiring warmth and yearning just by goddamn
proximity. . . is Angel Dust. In typical indulgent fashion, he’s got two wine glasses, one for each spare hand, the other gloved palms smacking together in cheery support of Charlie’s words. The gentle, distant pink lights of the Hotel’s sign wash over his normally white, fluffy features, catching the splash of pink freckles just right, accenting his mismatched eyes. A subtle scent of perfume clings to his body, and tonight he’s put on a nice suit, form fitting and black, in support of the building’s opening.

This demon, this spider, he has your heart. He’s beautiful out here, and you love him so much it hurts.

Vaggie leans over to grab Charlie’s hand, squeezing it. The motion creates a new wave of resolve in the Princess’ voice.

“You’re all the key to this,” she added. “You’re my friends, and I love all of you. No matter what anyone says, we’re together, and nothing will change that.”

Husk makes a sort of wretching sound. “Aww, c’mon Miss! Teeth are gonna’ rot out if you keep this up!”

The Bois bleat and fly over to Charlie, kissing both her cheeks.

“Bah!” chimes Razzle.

“Bah!” bleats Dazzle.

“Eyyy! Atta’ fuckin’ girl, Chuck!” hollers Angel, whistling with fingers. “Look atcha! Ah, tell them palookas to suck a fat one, hyahah!”

“An inspiration, madame!” said Alastor, raising his glass. “Why, you’re a showstopper!”

Satisfied everyone’s gotten a suitable amount of wine, Niffty pours herself one too, gulping it down a little too fast.

“Wah! Yeah! Hah! To a clean Hotel!” she buzzed, wobbling in the air.

Baxter shivers. “GEH. Yes, yes, FINE. Congratulations.”

You smile. You, unfortunately, are lacking in inspirational quotes for the evening, though, you remember a ritual from your time alive. Retrieving a lighter from suit pocket, your promptly light the surface of the wine, creating thin spirt of flame atop it. You hold up your glass, and nod.

“Here’s to you, Charlie,” you say, before swigging the literal burning liquid down. Surprise, it burns. You cough and sputter, but get the searing alcohol down. Consume thy foe spirits, the saying went. Drink the soul of your enemy, whoever that was.

You see Angel offer a small sidelong and sneering chuckle, but he says nothing, instead steps a little closer to your side. There will be time for “words” later. Right now, this is about Charlie and the Hotel’s opening.

Once again, Charlie wipes her eye. “Everyone, let’s do our best!”

She glances to Vaggie, who offers a proud nod and genuine smile. In her free hand is a little switch, and she raises it to flick a button. There’s a loud, shrill whistle and a missile of sparkling lights ascends the Hotel, careening into the reddish night. It bursts in a colorful orgasm of spectacular colors, blossoms of violent colors bursting in sequence. Everyone cheers again, gulping down their
drafts of Chardonnay, gazing faces splashed with the vibrant multicolored shades of fireworks.

Vaggie takes the opportunity to embrace her lover as she and Charlie press lips, tangled in a moment of loving, prideful joy.

You feel something sneak around your hand, gentle fingers curling with your own. Angel Dust’s hand grips yours, though his mismatched eyes are locked to the sky, wearing a bedazzled grin. A warmth consumes your chest. Devil, this is good.

The Happy Hotel has officially opened.

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“A’ight! No more of this lubby dubby shit, let’s get fucking DESTROYED!”

Naturally, the end result to any celebration is alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol. Angel stretched his arms, popping another pair of wine bottles, a Blood Sauvignon and Black Chardonnay as he poured them upon a tree of empty wine glasses. Inside the Hotel main room streamers and decor were set to lend to a cheery ambiance. A small stage was fitted with mic and speakers for karaoke, and though there was only the group to speak of, it felt like a crowd. Every other second, somebody had a full glass. Combined with music? Oh, certainly this would go well.

Usually, Charlie would caution against any sort of temptation, especially with the spider. But seeing as how everyone had gone through so much – Abaddon, hotel repairs, the scorn of media – even Lucifer’s Daughter permitted letting loose for a night, to remind everyone it wasn’t all therapy sessions and water.

Everyone indulged. Everyone. You were sitting with “the boys” at one of the green circular tables, having slugged back about a glass or two of alcohol. Equivalent to what, four beers? Five? It was starting to work its lucid magic, sending your mind into a pleasant, swimming buzz. Nothing extreme, but everything looked and felt. . . rosier. A blossoming warmth formed in your chest, where everything and everyone seemed so nice.

Husk looked you over, chuckling. “S’matter prom queen? Looking a little out of it.”

A challenger, eh? You sneered. “I could drink you under the table anytime, grandpa.”

The Goat Bois, seated next to each other, were giggling and hiding their faces with hooves, blushing, looking between you and the “amiable” cat with drunken intrigue.

“OhohOHO! That fuckin’ so, princess?” said Husk, leaning in, his normally growly frown tugged by a smirk. He slapped the table, beckoning for Niffty.

“Fine, fine, let’s see how you handle a man’s brew.”

Hah! He didn’t know what he was getting into, did he? You used to drink with goddamn mobsters. You either held your own or got cast out like a joke. Unless, of course, Husk had done the same thing, in which case, ah shit, you were going on a ride.

Niffty buzzed over, albeit couldn’t keep herself straight, her normally expressive, plucky grin now a sloppy, alcohol laced smile.

“W-w-whaaaaat Husky, n’bussyyyy!”

Husk ignored her. “Gimme some of my Kentucky Reserve, ‘Nif. Bout to knock this little shit on his
You snickered. “Reserve? You got bad taste too, old man.” Nothing like bonding over vicious alcoholism to really top off the night!

He snarled, cracking his fingers, while Niffty blinked, slowly, before flying off to acquire said bourbon. Insulting a man’s drink, oh you went over the line! But that was part of the fun.

Baxter regarded all this with utter disgust. “Last time I TOUCHED this FILthy alcohol, an entire ship sank.”

Alastor bat the aquatic scientist on the shoulder, his eyes dizzy and watery, his grin softened to a drunken smirk.

“Oh, come on mishter Bax, you, youuuuu, you should live a bit! Y’know, chum? You know?”

This was hard not to laugh at. Alastor was maybe a wine glass or four in, and the stuff took its toll. This was, you think, the first time you’d ever seen Al out of his wits.

You nodded. “Yeah, Bax. I mean, we just met, but cut loose. When’s the last time you got skunked?”

Baxter’s eyes twitched. “NEVER! I can assure you deplorable cretins I’ve kept my mind a sacred, untarnished sanctuary!”

Alastor shook his head, wobbling. “Noooo, good man, nooo. Listen to the young buck! Ish quite nice, yesh!”

The Radio Demon leaned, pointing at the group, losing track of his subject. “And you know what! You know, what I love, ish those little gut gushers! How, how... how do they get the blood in there so perfectly? How?”

You rumble with intoxicated chuckles. Oh damn, he’s losing it, isn’t he? Even someone so malicious as Al, turns out, can afford to lose himself thanks to sweet lady wine. Not that you’re complaining, it’s comforting to see, and not just because he’s dropped the dark, unknown plans angle.

His arm swings around your shoulder. “Youuuuu fine chumsh, I, I don’t think I’ll eat any of you, noooo...”

Well, that’s good. “Glad to hear, Al,” you mumble back, a bit slurred

The Bois bleat and giggle, falling over each other. “BaAaAh?” gurgles Dazzle.

Razzle pushes his companion, nodding. “Baaaaah!”

Yeah, they’re not drinkers. It’s maybe been a single glass for both of them and they look like first timers. It’s cute, and you guess you can see why Hox took a shining to them.

Niffty returns not long after, shoving the dark liquid between you and Husk along with some shot glasses.

Husk adjusts his hat, determined. “Knuckle up, sweetheart.”

You pour one for yourself. Imitating your ritual from before, you retrieve your lighter and set fire to the already searing liquid. This is quite possibly one of the dumbest ideas you’ve had in a while, but if Husk wants to throw down, goddamn, you’ll throw down! You raise the glass, wiggling it at him.
“Drink thy foe,” you say. Husk stares at the lit bourbon like you’ve sprouted a few more eyes. Not to be outdone, he does the same.

“Hmph.”

Well, bottoms up. It goes about as well as it would, drinking a scorching drink that’s literally on fire. Coughs and sputters erupt between you two. Game on.

This isn’t the only scene of debauchery though. The girls, left to the ploys of Angel Dust, are already loosening faster than lace in a brothel. Charlie’s buzzed, her tie loosely thrown around her neck, typically rosy cheeks far, far rosier, her normally white flesh a gentle hint of pink as she nurses her wine. She’s in it pretty far, and her features are stretched with the widest smile.

Vaggie’s right there with her but is blushing for different reasons.

“Wowowow,” mews Charlie, “I caaaaan’t believe we did it!”

She leaned into Vag, and by proxy, her perky cleavage sort of... shoved into her silver-haired companion’s view. A nervous chuckle.

“It’s amazing,” Vag offered back, voice slurred, trying to ignore her girl’s teasing front. “We all believed in you!”

“Ffffuckin’ right, chuck!” interjected Angel, wearing a crescent grin, gold tooth glinting. Experienced as he was, the spider was oh, five, six, nine glasses of wine in? His movements were slow and exaggerated, but he was still together. He was Angel fucking Dust, after all.

“Gave em’ the ol one-two-fuck-you! Yeah! Tell Killjoy to shove it up her snatch, eh? Give er’ a real inside scoop, ehehehe!”

Charlie blinked, scowling at first, but then features twisted like she considered the idea in earnest. “Do... do you think I shoouuuld? Oooh, she was so rotten!”

Niffty hopped in her seat, stabbing the table with fork. “Poke her eyes out! Poke, stab, poke!”

Charlie waved, giggling. “Nononono, that’s too violent!”

Her eyes went to Vag. “Vaaagggie, what do you think? Should we stab misshes Killjoy?”

Vag blinked, maybe the only one here who wasn’t totally out of their mind. “Uh, let’s put that one in the idea pile.”

Charlie slapped the table, as though victorious. “Yeah! The idea pile!”

Angel snickered. “I gotta’ knife picked out just for ‘er!”

The spider looked around, mismatched eyes blinking out of sync. “Hey! This dive is a fuckin’ silent film! We doin’ this karaoke shit or what!”

Charlie beamed. “Ooh oh oh! I wanna, I wanna!”

Her smiled transformed into a grin. “Nnnoooo, wait, better! Vaggie, dance with me! Ooh, Angel, Niffty, find us a song!”

Vaggie went scarlet. “W-what?”
Angel buckled with cackles, knocking back another swig of wine. “Kahah! Atta’ girl, Chuck! Get ya’ somma’ dat gash!”

Well, that was plenty enough for the spider, who leapt to his feet (albeit zig-zagging), sauntering to the stage to fiddle with the karaoke machine and its list of songs. Niffty was right behind him, fussing over the long list of (mostly) safe, royalty free tunes.

“How bout’ dis one?” he’d say, licking his lips.

“Dance music!” shrieked Niffty. “We’re not shooting a porn!”

“How bout’ dis one?” he’d say, licking his lips.

While they fiddled, Charlie grabbed her number one and yanked her to the floor, embracing her lover in an intimate embrace. There was no song, not yet, but they were already lost in the cadence of each other. Sometimes it’s all you needed.

The silence didn’t last long though. Angel jabbed his finger at the karaoke screen, satisfied.

“Nyehe! Thisonethisone!”

A pleasant groove filled the Hotel room, kickstart drums intermixed with the gentle rhythm of a classic tune.

Angel shoved the mic into his face and started to sing with Niffty. Uh, badly. But, it was different, this one. He tapped his kinky boots on the stage as a few drunken gazes came his way. His eyes though, they were set on one person, set on one particular individual, the silhouette getting wasted off his ass because reasons with the boys.

You.

“He’ll only come out at night!”

A grin.

“The lean and hungry type!”

(Those aren’t the lyrics, idiot!)

(Shaddup, I’m doin somethin’!)

“Nothing is new, I’ve seen him here beeeefooore! Watchin’ and waitin’, he’s sittin with you, but his eyes are on the doooor!”

He snaps his fingers. The music helps hide his missed keys and pitch shifts. But his eyes, they don’t leave you, they stay, and even in all this drunken stupor . . . you feel it. Niffty sings along, trying to correct him, but Angel’s having none of it.

“So many have paid to seeeee! What’cha now gettin’ for free!”

(You’re screwing it up!)

(I told ya’ I’m DOIN’ A THING!)

“The man is wild, a hell-cat tamed by da’ purr of a Jag-u-arrrr!”
He leans forward, like he’s singing to one person. He is.

“Money’s no matta! If ya’ in it for looove, ya’ gonna’ get pretty faaaaar!”

Niffty made an angry sound, defeated. Angel was basically singing his own cover.

“Whoa oh, oh, here he comes! Watch out boy, he’ll chew ya’ up! He’s a maneeeaaatlah!”

Despite Angel’s liberties with the music, it’s enough to put Charlie and Vaggie in a trance of dancing, though proximity to your lover will do that. Their foreheads pressed together, moving with the beats, like they were the only things in the room. Only natural. After all the struggles and tribulations, Charlie had finally made her first step, and her closest companion, her best friend – Vaggie – had always been there to see it through. When their lips pressed together, it was only a natural conclusion.

Angel continued to fizzle through his ‘creative’ spin on the song, where Niffty eventually caved in and sun in unison, although their voices were... interesting.

Even in the haze of your drunken mind, even through the watery haze of bourbon shots, you felt him reach out, in his own way. To you. If there wasn’t a crowd, and you weren’t getting so fucking blasted, you’d walk right up to him and kiss him till you both collapsed. Unfortunately, one surly Husk wasn’t about to let you off the hook so easily...

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Oh, fuck. What time was it?

The hours swam by. You and Husk were scuzzed. One whole fat body of Reserve later, it was a wonder you two were even coherent. Same went for everybody else. The Bois had taken to stumbling around the foyer, wearing lampshades and scrawling drawings of donuts on whatever they could find. Charlie and Vag bumbled about, but their hands were getting a little... frisky. Baxter, quite fed up with the sour stench of alcohol stained breath, vacated to his underground lab. Angel was quick to fish around for the finer booze, usually locked and hidden behind Husk’s desk. But since no one was looking, why not?

Niffty was out, head buried, upside down in some couch cushions. Alastor was content to continue chattering about his old days and broadcasts, along with how hilarious mortal tragedies really were. You and Husk were... uh.

“Nsshsh bshhs,” Husk said, woozy, hardly able to sit. You were about the same opinion.

“Ynnah?”

Didn’t look like there was a winner, here. Oh fuck this was gonna’ hurt in the morning. Not only that, all the reserved switches in your brain were off. Sense or reason was quickly abandoning you. You almost collapsed, face first, into the table.

“Hhyyy gyyyssh,” you say, the world spinning. “Ysshshsh thnk Ishshs shshsl d prpssss toooo Ansshs Dshs. . .?”

Husk raised his glass, eyes blotchy, raising cheers to somebody. “Hrruf!”

You don’t know what he said. In fact, you don’t even know what you just asked. Something about... something... Angel...
Speak o’ the devil, he shall appear. A familiar set of hands comes upon your shoulders, silhouette of lean frame looming over you. Even his perfume cuts through the stain of alcohol in the air. Angel’s face swerves into view, and he’s essentially one of the only coherent people left. When he swims into view, you feel your heart explode. It’s like it’s been an eternity.

He holds up an expensive bottle of something something, tugging at you.

“Heeeey pockeeetsss . . .”

You lean to try and hug him but you uh, almost fall out of your seat. Almost, because he keeps you steady.

“Wahaha, holy shiiiit, Anon, ya’ fuckin’ drownin eh?”


He licks his lips, prodding you with the bottle. “Wanna’ do booody shots?”

Your addled mind process this in due time. You heard body and the still functioning parts of your body rumble to life. Anything with Angel and ‘body’ is good. Oh. Shots. Body shots? Well don’t mind if you fucking do, never mind your bloodstream was maybe eighty-five percent alcohol right now. Eh, demon physiology would take care of the rest, right?

You somehow manage to force yourself standing, but it’s like your legs are wet noodles. You shake, about to topple over, caught but the fast-acting arms of your lover. Ugh. Lover. That thought feels good. It’s so raw, the feeling, pulled open by the tendrils of liquor, peeling away all the control and reservations you try to hide behind.

“Shhuuuuuure,” you blurt back, surprised you even got the words out. Angel leans into you, purring into your neck, offering a dark chuckle.

“Atta’ boy . . .”

You both leave the ‘party’ to what it is: a drunken, stupefied mess. If there were any bad guys about, now was the time to strike, because even Charlie was hardly coherent. Still, you wobble up the stairs with the spider, chuckling and muttering along the way. The steps are like individual mountains – thank goodness the foul-mouthed arachnid has you in his grasp. The presence of him is all but overwhelming – his nearness, his words, his laughter. The rawness of drink has exposed you, and you feel like you’re about to pour out your soul at any given second.

“How many ya’ toss back, shtallion?” Angel slurs, getting you to his door. It takes you a few seconds to even understand what he asked.

How . . . many?

“I losht count,” you say. Yeah, you did. There better be a miracle cure for this because the hangover you’ll inevitably get is going to be unreal.

Angel cackles, fiddling with the knob and kicking open the door. Sensing his master is on one of “those” benders, little Fat Nuggets oinks and sprints away. Better that way.

You don’t remember moving. You do remember the door closing again, locking, sealing you both away in Angel Dust’s private parlor. You remember how he yanks you to the bed, falling to his back, pulling open his Valentino as his slim tummy and fluff cleavage expose themselves to you. You remember faceplanting in the generous fluff, the perky softness engulfing your visage. Huh.
He’s surprisingly ‘firm’ here.

He snickers, rubbing your head. “What’cha doin’ in there, pocketsh?”


You hear something ‘pop,’ and Angel lifts your head. He’s brandishing one of the “acquired” bottles, grinning again.

“I told ya’, body shotsh.”

Some very tiny part of you screams from the whirlpool of ALCOHOL that uh, maybe you’ve had enough? Unfortunately, when your boyfriend offers to be the vessel of a drink, well, there’s no resisting that. You blink, stupidly, smirking, managing to push yourself up while Angel traces an extra digit around his stomach. Oh god, does he have a belly piercing? Christ among the dead. There’s an animal in you, a stupid, lumbering beast lurking inside, the kind that has about as much intelligence as an amoeba with one thing in mind: FUCK. The drooling, lust-bound beast needs its fix, and there’s a tender spider oh-so happy to oblige.

You watch Angel expertly dab a dash of drink in his belly button, while he watches you, expectant. You shudder and take the hint. Your mouth finds him there, slurping up the burning draft, tongue rolling against his soft, warm fluff skin. You kiss there too, you manage that, at least. Agh, fuck, your loins went from soft to rock in about three seconds. You want to rip his panties off and put him in your mouth. You’ll have to save that when you can actually use words.

You grit, determined. “Sssomethin’ else isssabout to pop,” you hint, pulling off your suit.

Here’s the thing. The mind tends to go bonkers in the presence of we’re-about-to-bang. Reservations are cast aside. The mask of formality falls, very quickly. One says things they only say in their darkest, most private moments, because the rawness and closeness of, well, sex, just turns all the knobs. At least when foreplay is out the window. Couple this with wine and bourbon? Unga bunga, it’s time to make babies.

You see Angel pour another ‘shot’ on his belly. “Issat right?” he teases.

“Ya’ wanna’ fuck me with that fat dick, pockets? Ya’ gonna make me beg for it?”

Do you even have the ability for that? Doesn’t matter, the words are like drugs and it makes your loins twitch.

“Gggh,” you grunt back, obliging his belly with another ‘swig.’

“Mnnhf,” he purrs, “I waaaant it. I wanna’ whine like a little bitch slut twink for my big Anon!”

He’s slapping all the words together, true or no, but whatever, it’s lighter to pitch. Hot, black adrenalin runs through your body, jolting you to coherence, and right now you need to be inside this goddamn spider.

He shifts, hand reaching for his drawer, snapping out a little golden bottle. Lubricant. As you pull off your tethers, he helps you out of the rest, squirting a thin trail of clear, viscous liquid in his palm. He shoves you to your bare back and lets the wet digits slide around your shivering inches. Ah sweet merciful devil, he squeezes and pulls and strokes in the best ways, supplying warm, radiating bliss throughout your pole.

“Ahahah,” he chitters, face flushed, “Been thinkin’ about ridin ya’ all fuckin day. . .”
Is he being serious? You have no idea. You accept the compliment, though, embrace it. It’s the best kind of poison – the idea that you are desired and desirable to someone like him. Obviously you think about Angel most of the time – how can you make him happier, how is he doing, what’s he wearing. To hear him say this, though.

“Nnggggood, Angel,” you slur.

He props himself up a moment, spare arms snagging the thin line of lace and pulling them down his curvy hips. You’re quick to react, sucking your fingers and sending a pair of wet digits into his warm pucker, prodding him, pressing a suggestive inch into his ring. He shivers, coos with approval, bucking into you. He’s pretty hot when he’s partially dressed.

“Ghm,” he grumbles, “Was hopin’ you’d come on stage and get me on all fours. . .”

His own cock hardens and springs to life while he adjusts his soft, supple rump, grabbing your inches so he ‘aims’ himself appropriate. The other spare hand? Well, it’s dancing with your fingers, holding your hand, digits all tangled together.

“Fuckkinspiiider,” you shoot back. Poetic, a real Shakespearean moment. They’ll write love stories about that one, Anon.

Well, wait no more. Angel sinks on your prick, and the lube makes it nice and slick. At once you both give off approving, caught moans, a trade of breaths. Angel whimpers, rotating his hips, dancing with your hilted blade, letting it throb and pulse inside him. It’s a perfect, snug fit. Neither too large or small, stretched just right, nuzzling his prostate. Excited presex dribbles from his tip, an indicator of his arousal. Your spare hand clasps his side and you hold on for dear life.

You know how it goes. Angel rides his stallion, hopping his rump in swift, but controlled tosses. Each little clap of flesh creates an applause echoing around the room, intermixed with the supporting chorus of your grunts and moans. He leans into you, his fluff chest pressed into yours, trembling, quivering cock nested on your abdomen. His other arms grasp and crumple the sheets, another swinging around your shoulder, pulling you close. So fucking close. The advantage of multiple limbs, something you’ve come to appreciate.

Your lips meet, thrown together between moans. They’re hungry, lustful smacks, where tongues fight together, touch, embrace, a little dance in their own theater.

“Thatsitbaby. . .” Angel whispers, hot and heady, his visage so close you can practically taste him. In your drowning idiocy, you think you manage to hump back, pushing up where he falls, creating a delightful momentum. But, if you’re being honest, he’s on top here, literally and figuratively.

God damn. The things this boy has done to you. You’re a little too far in uncle bourbon to reflect on it, but. Shit. You love him. This asshole, this sardonic, quippy brat, this loving, tender person buried behind a veil of sarcasm. You want him. He wants you. That’s enough. You wouldn’t trade this feeling, this moment, for all the money in Hell.

His tosses hasten, and he rides you like it’s a matter of life or death. Maybe it is. The hastening throws of his bouncing bottom choke your cock, coaxing it close to a searing peak, ever nearing. This, alas, is the downside of a drunken state – it’s all about sating the dumb, horny beast inside you; stamina isn’t the name of the game. There’s not a lot of room for control here, you just want to get to that feeling.

“Oh fuckfuckfuck!” Angel whines, his voice caught with quicker, tighter whimpers. You’re about to go over the edge.
Nnff. And then you feel it. You feel his spare hands dig into your back, nails clenching hard. **HARD.** They claw, they scratch, raking your flesh, creating hot, delicious streaks of red in your skin.

Oh FUCK that’s the goddamn good shit. You don’t know what it is now, but a little bit of pain gets you all riled up. The sting, the intense black rush accents the choke of his anal ring, putting you in a state of strange bliss.

“GAGH!”

It’s like somebody drove life back into your dumb, animal brain. You grab him now, ripping away his panties, taking the precious spider in arms and shifting positions in one, energetic sweep. He’s on his back now, eyes widening with shocked, though aroused surprise.

“Bite,” you say. More of a plead. Because that’s the other thing. You want this. You want to show him you can be what he needs. If he bites and scratches, he owns you. That’s his brand, his mark, to tell the world “This one belongs to Angel Dust.”

You fuck like the world was about to collapse outside. You slam yourself into his little ring, battering the innocent, soaked tunnel in harsh thrusts, his body curling around you, Angel moaning with hot, blissful shudders.

“Ah-aha!”

And so come the teeth. His legs wrap around your thighs, his arms embracing you while his fanged canines jam into your shoulder. But this time, there’s no uncertainty. This time, he obliges with his spider bite and another pang of strangely pleasurable pain erupts from the pressure as he gnashes hard. A spring of crimson pools from the ‘wound,’ snaking down your flesh as you hump helplessly into his spider pussy.

It might seem rough, but you trust him. And you want to show him this trust by offering yourself, offering your vulnerability. He can do whatever he wants to you, as far as you’re concerned. Or, maybe that’s just the drunk-ass part of your brain obliging a little kink.

“Ohffuck!” you blurt out.

It’s enough to send you right over the goddamn moon. You feel Angel’s cock twitch and bristle on your stomach, and a warm, hot wetness soon accompanies it. His head arches, neck thrown back, hitting his peak, sweet spider seed popping like a geyser between your sticky bodies.

“Nnnh! A-Anon!”

Well, not like you needed any more encouragement. You’re not far off, and your own loins seethe with orgasm, ropes of issue bursting from your tip, flooding his tender little hole. Your body twitches and buckles, humping through orgasm, like all the energy is pulled from you and focused into this one, exact spot. Might as well be.

Both of you clench. His shivering, timid tunnel is punished by the deluge of you, filling him to the brim while you heave into his neck, his form tightened around you like a vice. Ah. Fuck. Fuck.

He rubs your back, caressing where he scratched, kissing his “mark.” Hng.

“Angel,” you rumble, still swimming through the delirium of drunk, post-orgasm glow. “Iuffyou.”
He pants into your mouth, kissing again. “Nnn. Fuckin boozehound, ya’ drunk. . .” he offers, weak. He grabs your hand. Ugh, god, no, have mercy. His fingers play with yours and you’re all stuck together from the ichor of each other.

“Lushyoutooo. . .”

Devil. It’s all you need to hear. You’re happy the Hotel is finally opening its doors. You’re glad for Charlie, even, really you are. A lot of the old, distrustful tendencies are slipping away. You think you have allies. But honestly?

It’s just Angel Dust you need. He’s your best friend, your guidance, a sanctuary. He’s your better half.

Exhaustion and post coitus drunken stupor finally take their toll, and you remember blacking out, clasped with the spider. . .

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The Leviathan class ADT vehicles were on the highest list of “do not fuck with” when it came to transporting inventory through Pentagram City. Contracted by the elite and the aloof of the underworld’s finest, if you needed shit moved, get a Leviathan. Their rumbling, angry motors deafened the usual chaotic sounds of the city and their multi-tire treads were big enough to turn even the largest demon into bloody pulp. Cannons sporting automatic armor-piercing rounds the size of a man’s ribcage were primed to fire on the slightest hint of danger, and good luck breaking through its reinforced metal exterior and glass. They carried the rarest inventory and were only suitable for the best. Why, Leviathans were good enough for Lucifer (or that was the pitch line, anyway)!

Too bad it meant fuck all now.

The road ahead was choked with fire and a tower of metal, burning corpses, destroyed vehicles stacked on each other to make a blockade. The air was thick with a viscous, blurring smoke. Nobody could get eyes on the problem. Nobody even realized there was a problem! Until it was too late.

The caravan of transports had come to an abrupt stop – the three tank-like machines stuttering as their path ahead was cut off. The dispatch guard phoned in for sky support, but their coms were blocked. That was bad. That meant someone knew the radio frequency, which was impossible unless you had inside information.

Savage-1, the rear guard, was first to stall their engines and dismount, a small pack of armed demons primed to fire. They too were armored to the neck, sporting weaponry prepared to vaporize anyone caught in their targeting array. They might as well have been Exterminators.

But the second they got out, a loud whistle pierced the air, canisters dropping from above, engulfing the guards in thick, cloudy vapor. They primed their weapons, kept chatter clear and concise, but it didn’t matter. Something came from above. Something big. Something large enough it splintered the asphalt the moment it landed.

Zoa, one of Savage-1’s guards, turned to see his allies vanish in a blossom of scarlet. A massive silhouette buzzed through the fog, peeling and pulling his comrades like they were paper. One of them was hit so hard his body separated from the impact, and before Zoa could alert Beast-2 and Horn-3, his head had left his body. A thing swam up to his vision, a claw appeared, and then. . .

The other guards dispersed, attempting to set a perimeter, but their assailant was too quick, moving through the fog like a wraith. One after one, they were maimed, thrown about like weightless
children.

The last one standing, Koa, kept his rifle trained in front of him, in disbelief. He heard the screams of his comrades through com, the electronic distortion of their bloody gurgles creating a nightmarish sound. Fuck! If he could just SEE them!

. . . There! Through the fog. It was huge! Devil below! Twice his size, eyes as big as his skull, and coming right for him! Just pull the trigger! Pul-

A tap on his shoulder.

“Nice gun, toots.”

What?

Something sharp and cold slipped through his throat, a perfect cut across his neck. It didn’t matter how much armor he had, he was already dead. A geyser of scarlet burst from the wound, until darkness consumed him. In his last, failing sight, he saw boots. Kinky boots.

With a satisfied chuckle, a lean, effeminate frame stepped past the dying guard, running a finger over one of the Leviathan transports. They scoffed at the sight of ruined bodies, an utter and disastrous sight.

“Ya’ know, ya’ don’t need to throw em’ around, it’s a fuckin’ mess. Lucky I didn’t get anyone on my suit.”

Something stepped through the vapor. Massive. Skeletal. Insectoid. Its mandibles clicked in a hiss of frustrated noises, coming to the center Leviathan vehicle, giving it a once over, glancing at the smaller individual.

“Don’t question my methods. This is old-school.”

The “bug” smirked, leaning on the vehicle, polishing their gloved fingers on black suit fabric.

“Old Testament bullshit, more like it.”

The fiendish creature stepped into view, coming to the back of the armored transport. Tiny pupils scanned the armored locks, flexing its clawed digits.

“We didn’t have these fancy guns back then, bug. Clubs and spears and claws. And hate. Lotsa that.”

The “bug” waved their companion off, pulling out a black flip mirror. “Yeah, yeah. I’m sure your stories are a real gut-buster. Can ya’ get on with it?”

The massive insect scowled. “And what the hell are you doing?”

A smirk. “Lookin’ pretty.”

A long, irritated groan.

“I really don’t know what he sees in you.”

Terrible, horrible sounds cracked the air. Metal – of which was meant to resist the strongest of blows – buckled and warped as the insect tore the back doors asunder like flesh. With immense strength, it flung the doors to the wayside, the heavy frames landing with a distinct THUD, kicking up geysers
of asphalt and rock from the impact.

Sarakk peered into the dark transport, antennae wiggling. Huh. He didn’t see what was so special about this one.

The “bug” regarded this with disinterest.

“See anythin’?”

Something looked back.

“Oh. H-hello?”

Sarakk blinked, rubbing his head. No way.

“You’re kidding. This can’t be it.”

Legna Tsud was perfectly content to rest on the side of the vehicle, but seeing as how the damn oaf couldn’t figure his dick for his finger, guess he had to do ALL the work.

He sighed, gracefully stepping to the back, arms behind them, twiddling a knife in fingers. His mismatched eyes gazed through the pale truck interior, smirk transforming into a smile as, indeed, this was their target.

“Weeelll, lookie who it is! Ya’ ain’t so pretty in chains, huh girl?”

Silence. Two bulbous, red eyes blinked in utter and absolute confusion, tall ears alert, alarmed.

“Phencyclidine!?”

Legna laughed, clapping their head. “I ain’t even tryin’ to say that one backward.”

He wiggled a finger at the small, bonded entity. “Well? Don’t stand around like a dope! Get em’ out of there!”

Sarakk grumbled. “I’m taking orders from you now?”

Legna puffed their chest. “Second in command, bitch.”

The locust crackled with irritation but shrugged it off. He leaned in, tearing apart the tight metal chains and fixtures affixed around the. . . weapon, was it? This had to be a joke. She flinched when he approached, but steadied as he removed the locks and buckles. He held out his hand.

“Well? Come on then.”

She hesitated, glancing at the massive claw that was apparently the hand of her salvation. Still, slowly, she reached out, paw clasped by the talons. And. . . it didn’t melt away!?

She hopped to the ground, hands pressed together, staring around in amazement. Bewilderment. This. . . this didn’t make sense!

Before she could utter a question, however, a sound perked her ears. Footsteps. Heavy, thudding, commanding. Someone was coming. A shadow, a silhouette, an eye. A grin. A familiar face. A familiar voice.
Sarin stared.

“You!?”

A chorus of laughter erupted from the fog as the figure stepped through. A horrible, fanged grin accompanied his face, dark, bleak features surrounded by shadow.

“Not quite!”

At once, Legna perked, prancing over to the silhouette, wrapping an arm around their shoulder.

“This whatcha’ were lookin’ for?” he said, gesturing to the small, white-furred rabbit.

The form sneered, kissing the mirror-spider.

“Oh yes, lamb, yes, you did us proud.”

Legna beamed, kissing them on the cheek like it was a matter of life and death.

Sarakk gurgled. “Ugh. Get a room.”

The fiend poked their head, tapping their missing left eye. “So sorry about that knife business, Sarin. We had to preserve ourselves, you understand. Forgive us?”

Sarin blinked again, nose wiggling with uncertainty. “I…”

The shadow stretched his arms, jubilant. “Fantastic!”

Sarakk raised a claw. “Look, I’m so happy we’re having a reunion and I love being out of the loop, but how the hell is this little morsel a weapon?”

A sneer. “In time, chum, in time.”

Sarin shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand. It’s you? But how?”

Again, the malignant presence laughed. A laugh so cold it frosted the air, fangs dripping with deadly intent.

“No, no. We’re the Better Half.”

Sarakk rolled his eyes. “Said the same goddamn thing to me. Believe this guy?”

“Help em’ out, babe,” chimed Legna, amused.

Better Half raised his hand, the grin never fading.

“You’re going to help us, Sarin. You’re going to help us fix all of it.”

“F-fix?”

Better Half beamed. “Yes! Yes. And the only way to fix the question that hasn’t been asked is through one way…”

He took a long, pleased breath. The first piece was set, the first item collected, the first step taken.

“Annihilation.”
Strangers At The Door

Chapter Summary

New job, new role, new life. The first day of the Happy Hotel's grand opening brings you more surprises than you expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sky stings with ravenous scarlet. Snakes of lighting batter the desolate landscape and a howling wind chokes the air with ash and dust. Broken skeletons and fingers of tall skyscraper silhouettes twist in the distance, hollow and wounded with cavernous holes. It is quiet. The chaos is gone.

There are no voices, no screams, no words. There is only desolation. The sky is shattered, a once-uniform pentagram now broken into unrecognizable pieces. Hell is lost. Hell is gone.

The end. It’s the end. It’s the absolute end.

You feel something burn in your arm.

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Your eyelid peels open as a fresh agony erupts in your left hand like splinters of fire have pierced your flesh. You clench your teeth, hissing in pain, flexing your fingers, and immediately checking for an injury. But there’s none. As the haze of exhaustion slowly dissipates, you trace digits on the flank of your muscle and forearm. Nothing. Though it’s like someone’s jammed a welder into your limb, your skin is intact. No broken bones, no grievous gashes.

You breathe. A dream. Another dream.

Instead of oblivion, it’s pink you see. Lots and lots of pink. Silk sheets caress your back and a timid scent of perfume lingers in the air. The muffled sounds of a running faucet and scrubbing are audible through bathroom door, and as senses return, the pain fades. There is an ache, but it doesn’t last long.

It’s morning. It’s Angel’s room. Relief washes over you. You sit up in bed, the little haven you share with your boyfriend, and it’s enough to grant you respite. Again, you flex your left digits, rub against the now useless left eye like it might procure a reaction. Nothing happens.

They’ve come and gone, these dreams. You didn’t think much of them at first, figuring them previous traumas resurfacing as harrowing events are wont to do. But the same scene always comes back to you, the same vision: a dead city, a roaring wind, a graveyard of buildings, not a soul among them. And every time the nightmare returns, the pain in your arm blossoms. Familiar yet distant, timid yet overwhelming. Ever since the memories returned, ever since the weight of your mortal life came to pass, the dreams have risen in frequency.

Is it . . .

You shake your head. This is no time for melodrama, especially not on a day like this. Grunting, you rub exhaustion from your face and stretch. It’s morning, and there’s a lot to do. The Hotel has
officially opened.

Well, a day later, at least. After the “celebration,” everyone had a hangover that felt like a pair of cement bricks smashed into their skulls. Not even Charlie could sing her way out of that one. But as the regret and alcohol induced shame faded, things were back to schedule, and it meant you were officially starting as Head of Security.

Angel’s head pops through the bathroom door, mouth clenched around a toothbrush.

“Nmm, yfff upf nwf?” he mumbles, gesturing your way.

“Good morning yourself,” you say, shaking off the tingles in your left arm. His head disappears, returning to the sink, gargling and spitting.

“Pushin’ it,” he calls through the sliver. “Got shit to do today, Anon.”

Don’t you know it. Angel does as well, from what you understand, and it’s interesting to see him adhere to a schedule.

“I set somethin’ out for ya’. Hung it on the dresser.”

You glance around. Indeed, hanging on the knob of one of his massive, ornate blackwood dressers is – what you think – a clean, fresh pressed suit. It’s not like your old one, and certainly not the one stained with the stench of cheap alcohol and cigarettes. Refined, black, form fitting with a long overcoat to accent the whole thing. Plenty of “pockets” to stow away an armory of devices, if need be.

Well, the dream has faded completely now, replaced by warmth. It’s the little things, the thoughtfulness that really gets you. He did this for you? Angel, love.

“Where’d this come from?” you call, standing.

Angel Dust emerges from the bathroom again, pausing briefly to kiss your cheek before going to his mirror with brush in hand.

“Tailored it,” he says, doting over his hair tuft with careful brushes. “Measured it from that fuckin’ nightmare you were wearin’ from before. Burned that shit. You’re welcome.”

That’s. . . painfully sweet (and alarming). To know he put the time and effort into something like that? Or maybe he really hated your previous garments – you didn’t think he’d actually go Agent Orange on them. Either way. Dammit, Angel. It’s too early for this. You’re tempted to embrace him, hold him, but, he’s in the throes of his “personal management,” and he will not tolerate disturbances.

He looks at you from the mirror reflection. “Stop oglin’ me and go clean up,” he commands.

You chuckle. “Yes sir.”

As instructed, you bathe and shave. In his subtle, sweet way, Angel’s started setting out a body wash specifically for you – even a scrubber. Or again, maybe he doesn’t like someone messing up his perfectly arranged arsenal of cleansers, washers, soaps, scents, and sponges. Still, you come out as fresh as flowers, timid cologne accenting you.

By this time, Angel’s already adorned his familiar look. White Valentino, scarlet gloves, black bowtie, kinky boots. He’s checking his eyeliner while a spare hand gestures to the suit.
“Well? C’mon, snap that bitch on, I wanna’ seeeee.”

Another chuckle. You can’t blame him, he picked this out for you, after all. You dry and put on the attire and it’s. . . fantastic. It hugs your frame enough but leaves ample room to breathe. There’s nothing too showy about it, quite professional, a dark black suit fabric, a shadow given shape. The long overcoat provides a layer of mystique, something that might come in handy with your new role.

Angel is quick to fuss over you as you get it on, buttoning and straightening it out, nibbling his tongue as he smoothens the creases, making sure your tie is adjusted right. He pats you down, and you let him work. He’s so cute when he’s focused.

He steps back to give you a once over, scrutinizing gaze shifting to a pleased grin.

“Well?” you say, holding out arms for judgment.

He kisses his fingers. “Oh! Awh! Mwah! Di bell'aspetto! Ya’ make a Don blush with that, pockets! Look at ya’!”

You try not to smile too wide. “Thanks, Angel.”

He winks. “Yeah, that’s fuckin’ right. Got you outta’ them rags, now you don’t look like a hobo, aha! Can I pick em’ or what?”

Ghg. You can’t help it. His casual let’s-make-sure-you-don’t-look-like-garbage attention puts you in a trance; having this gorgeous boy so concerned about your damn attire feels. . . good. You embrace him and plant a kiss on his forehead. The momentary warmth is enough to give you energy, strengthen you, silence troubled thoughts and prepare you for the day.

“You’re too good to me, sometimes,” you say.

He takes a long, deep breath, pressing into you. It’s another one of those moments, and neither of you really want to break it. Ugh, can the day just fuck off? This is much better.

“Ain’t I, though?” he says, patting your cheek, fluff frame pressed into your chest.

After a moment, he breaks away, giving a long, tired sigh. He adjusts his own attire, fiddling with bowtie, offering himself a once-over.

“How’s it lookin’?” he says, gesturing over his frame, tossing his ‘cleavage.’

“Girls look alright? Gotta’ be aces today. Time for therapy, ugh,” he adds with a pout, fingers scratching the air with quotations.

You hide a shiver. It’s interesting how his fluff ‘bounces’ and though you’re attracted to Angel as he is – a sweet spider boy – something about those curves. . .

“Don’t do that again or we won’t get out the door.”

His head wobbles with chuckles. “Fuckin’ horndog.”

You answer him. “As for how you look? Asking the wrong person, beautiful. You’re perfect to me.”

He flushes, glancing away, grinning. “Oh, wonderful, Anon. ‘Preesh. Real helpful.”

You shrug. “I’m a simple man. I see spider, I want spider.”
“Ya’ know how fuckin’ weird that sounds right now?”

“I think we’re well past weird, Angie.”

A little more banter. Again, it’s the small things, the gentle back and forth of your talks you’ve come to adore. Angel, as he explains, is officially starting a more regimented therapy, which involves various activities or group subjects Charlie has in store. Seems miss sunshine is revving things up. Obviously, Angel looks like he’s taking to it like bleach in water, but, despite his annoyance with an earlier wakeup time and more scrutinized inspection of who he is. . . he’s committed. He’s really serious about this, and fuck, you’re proud. You can only hope to be just as good, just as worthy in his eyes.

As for you? Time to do your job. Charlie thinks the discipline will keep you straightened out, the purpose drive you towards something more constructive than another heist or robbery. You hope she’s right.

All the prep work has come to this. Cameras are organized in various sections of the Hotel, primarily on the first floor, done in such a way to check for threats but also respect the privacy of the arrivals. Your office has synced with everything and Baxter’s helmet is the last piece to “complete” your new look. You just have to escape the spider’s web, though you find it exceedingly difficult.

Eventually, you trade sweet nothings and depart for your office. Like a 9 to 5. Like a day job. Is this the feeling? Huh. Guess it’s not . . . so bad. Granted you’re not ripping open vaults or picking locks, but, you do have someone special at the end of it, so, all worth it right?

Well, time was wasting. If you’re going to try to be professional, better act it. You get to your office and flick on the mechanisms and monitors. It all – thank goodness – hums warmly, nice and smooth-like. Screens shudder to life and depict fuzzy images of the Hotel interior. The control yolk is working, and you’ve got a new phone, even! Just need the last piece.

Like a strange crown, resting on your desk is the helmet. Baxter fit it to the precise dimensions of your skull, a featureless thing shining like black glass with sections and seams running along its sides. According to the scientist, it’s synced with all the camera frequencies and, in theory, allow you to access the Hotel’s newfound database of current residents and incoming hopefuls. You go to it, holding it in hands, glancing over it. You see your one-eyed reflection in it, the deep trail of scars sprawling along your left side, a reminder of you and the memories.

Brr. You ignore this, pressing the device so it hisses open, expanding. It folds and clicks, like a metal jaw ready to envelop you, and for a moment you hesitate. Baxter. . . safety tested this, didn’t he?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained you guess. You pull it on, and it clicks again, entombing you in its buzzing embrace. For a brief second, you panic, thinking it might shock you, but after nothing explodes you sigh in relief – you’re not dead, so that’s a good start.

For a moment, there’s blackness, but a muffled whir accompanies the rhythm of a device powering to life, and soon, a video feed fills your sight. The mask allows for full vision, though its laced with hints of visual static. There are HUD feeds for various itinerary, indicating camera frequencies, enough to give you a complete data load of everything you’ll need. It works! Oddly high-tech considering Baxter’s usual cadence for hardware, but, it’ll do just fine.

At once, you get a proximity warning. A tiny beep grabs your attention, alerting you to a presence in the room. Oh? Curious, you look along the indicators, drawn to a tiny, scrambling shape.

“Deputy Nuggets?”
The shape springs out from the shadows, oinking, running around in circles. It’s him all right, your old hat still adorned on his head. Ahh, your little partner in crime, determined as ever! Not even the horrible happenings of the In Between could stifle him!

“You’re early,” you say, crouching, holding out a hand. He immediately hops to it, and you oblige him with loving pats.

“Oink!”

You nod. “Good work ethic,” you say, voice tinted with distortion from the mask. You tap the device as he looks at you, curious.

“What do you think?”

His corkscrew tail wiggles, head tilted. He leans, sniffing at his reflection. Hopefully, you have his approval. He hasn’t run away, so that’s a good sign.

Standing, you pause to glance around your office, now filled with the subtle ambiance of the rumbling devices, machines, and screens. Desks are coated with pale CRT light and a fan spins lazily above you. Hmm. So, this is it eh? First day on the job? Meticulous, controlled, planned. You go and sit, pulling out a sheet of tasks for the day, preparing to go through them as new protocol. You tap your fingers.

It’s not the same.

The lights are bright. The screens are cold. The wars are old and give you bad dreams. You feel the scar, you feel your impulse like bad genetics, and you can already see Angel looking down at you, as if in pity.

It’s. . . new, this way. But the meaning isn’t there. And a part of you can’t help but hunt for that old feeling.

This is who you are now, huh?

")-

“Part of moving forward is taking all those impulses and feelings and turning them into something productive!”

Charlie swung her arm, gleeful, a blank canvas behind her. Angel regarded her with crossed arms, brow quirked.

“That’s why. . .” she said, stepping to the side, gesturing to the blank space. “Today is painting!”

Angel glanced around. “Chuck, who ya’ talkin’ to? It’s just me!”

Her positivity would NOT be stifled!

“Oh, I know!” she said with a hand wave, picking up a pallet and brush. “But this is good practice for future sessions! Besides, painting can reveal sides of ourselves we didn’t know existed! Sensitive, deep ideas!”

Angel flicked his mismatched eyes to his own canvas, poking it like something might appear. “Uh huh.”

“Oh come on!” chimed Charlie. “Can’t you just feel the inspiration?”
Angel stared at his not yet born “masterpiece,” squinting. He picked up one of the provided brushes, a brush head too large for anything delicate, wiggling it between digits. Charlie watched with enthuse, eyes sparkling.

“I’mma need... a lot of red. And pink. AND WHITE!” he said, sporting a wild grin.

She beamed. “That’s the spirit!”

Well, a few “spirited” slaps of the brush on his canvas later, and Angel twirled it for Charlie’s inspection.

“Ta-da!”

Her grin vanished, boggling. “O-oh.”

His gold tooth glinted. “I call dis one ‘Typical Friday’!”

Charlie laughed, offering a weak thumbs up. “Y-yes, haha. S-so, um, let’s try another one!”

“Can we hang mine on the fridge?”

“NO!”

Strangers. You weren’t used to this.

As your shift dragged on, it seemed like nothing would end the tedium until a call from the lobby snared you back to life. Husks gruff tone crackled through the phone, surly as ever.

“Hey sunshine, we got some newbies down here.”

Oh thank fuck. You could only recheck the Hotel schematics so many times before it lost its appeal. Yes, you were supposed to remain vigilant, monitoring each screen for potential intrusions or problems, but, well, those weren’t really in force, were they? How’d those sec guards do it, day in and out?

Come on, man up. This is for Angel. For both of you.

Yeah. That. If he was trying, you would too.

At least, new arrivals would give you something to focus on. Of course, instincts flared back up, and a wellspring of distrust took over you. Who were these people? What did they want? Where they threatening your home? You were about to find out.

You stood, Fat Nuggets at your side as you both went downstairs to the foyer. Husk, behind the desk, scribbled something down and regarded your presence with disinterest – until he saw the glassy visage, doing a double take.

“The hell is that?” he spat, pointing at your head. “Look like a goddamn ghost.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” you say, joining him at the front.

He grunted. “Whatever. Well, get this new one checked in, Head of Security.”

Your gaze wandered. There, indignant, cross armed, wearing a scowl most annoyed, was apparently
the newest guest. A young girl, by the looks of it, a form much like a canine, a doggish anthropoid in rough attire – a street punk. A spiked collar complimented mismatched shirt, a massive crop of fluff hair, white fur, black spots, long tail and irritated red eyes. She frowned, huffing. She looked like the living embodiment of a middle finger.

Appearances aside, you approached her with some caution.

Well, time to act your “role.” When you near, you can see her hackles raise and features shift with uncertain tension.

“Hello,” you greet. “Welcome to the Happy Hotel.” Was that how the line went?

You clear your throat. “Where... sinners are redeemed and happiness is a song away.” That one wasn’t your idea.

She snorts. “Wow. Sick tagline.”

You adjust. “Yes, well. All sinners are welcome. If you’re here for redemption, there’s just a few security things we need to clear through and sign you in.”

She growled. “Don’t try and get frisky with me, you TSA fuck.”

The HUD in your helmet clicked, scanning the dog girl over. A currently useless endeavor that yielded no information, since profiles weren’t built yet. So, all you had to go on was “looks like a bad day at Hot Topic and equally as mean.”

“Yes, well,” you say, navigating away from the subject. “Check in with mister Husk and any belongings you might have.”

She gawked at you, arms spreading. “Do I LOOK like I’m carrying anything?”

You took a breath. You had to ask. “Are you?”

She snickered. “Wow, where’d they get you anyway? Smart.”


She rolled her eyes, scoffed, and muttered a ‘whatever.’ Charming. Real charming. This was going to be a new resident? Oh joy – because what you really needed was some angsty kid filling the place up with shitty versions of My Chemical Romance and moody, ceaseless complaints. Kids: not something you were too keen on.

Well, that looked to be it, at any rate. You turned, ready to meet Husk again to get the new girl settled in – and unfortunately that task would also fall to you. You had to assign keys, after all. You took a step and-

The Hotel door swung open with a loud crash, like it was kicked open. It was.

“Hoooneeeey, I’m HOME!”

You freeze.

Oh.

 Fucking.
Hell.

No.

There are a lot of terrible sounds out there, things you never want to hear again. Some so terrible they defy imagination, too horrible for words. Not even a poet could properly capture the terror and essence of such screeching utterance. Oh god, it couldn’t be. Oh god, it was a nightmare. Oh GOD.

You don’t budge. You know that voice. You don’t want to. You want to think you’re just imagining things, that it’s a figment of your imagination. Hell, you’ll take another dream or twelve over this. But no. It’s real.

“Annie!” says the voice. “Turn around! I recognize yah even in that getup!”

Vaggie, rushing in, no doubt alarmed by the noise, snaps her gaze around from you, to Husk, to the dog, to the newcomer. She blinks, confused, pointing at the stranger.

“Who’s this?”

“Me?” they say. They laugh. She laughs.

She comes to your side, smacking you on the chest, grinning, looking ever so proud.

“Awh, Annie! You never mentioned me? You shit! I’m hurt, ohhhh, so hurt!”

Husk looks amused, gesturing to you. “Annie!? Wahahaha. You uh, know this broad?”

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

“O’ course he does!” she barks in her accented tone. “I’m his ex-wife!”

Vaggie’s eye spreads so wide it looks like it might fall out of her head, and Husk blinks. Then chokes with laughs, sputtering, slapping his knee.

You are utterly and completely incapable of words. Your ex saunters past you, waltzing right up to the desk, throwing out her hand, ignoring the other new girl.

“I’m Annie! Nice to meet ya’!”

Vaggie looks between you and her, uncertain. Husk, though, he’s loving every second of it, happily accepting the hand like he’s found a whole stash of Kentucky Reserve made just for him.

“Annie? Some kinda’ name game you got?”

The woman pops her collar, sleeve of tattoos caught in the light. “Yup! Anners and Annie, causin’ mayhem til’ the cocks came to roost.”

She swerves around, looking at you, grinning, wearing that look. That mean, icy, dark look. That look that promises to hurt you.

“And boooooooy do I got SUCH stories to tell!”

Husk grins too. “Do fuckin’ tell.”

The dog girl barks up. “HEY! Don’t you assholes have a job to do?”
Vaggie, remembering herself, nods, coming to the girl. “Er, oh, yes. Anon, could you uhm, see miss. . .”

“Crymni.”

“Miss Crymni to her room?”

You’ve kind of forgotten how words work. You don’t even nod. You just . . move, impassive, Crymni coming with you (reluctantly). As you head up the stairs, you can already hear Husk laugh and the familiar, horrible sound of “Annie” as she immediately finds favor in your home. A seed of anxiety forms in your chest. Your hands clench. Your breathing hastens. You need a smoke and a drink and for this to all be a bad dream.

None of them understand. This isn’t good news. This isn’t funny, or fear of gossip, or some awkward sitcom scenario. Annie is – quite literally – a demon from your past.

News of “the ex-wife” spreads like a fucking wildfire, mostly thanks to Husk. Charlie, swift to operate as the mother hen, happily welcomes her two newest arrivals, showering them with all the nauseating pleasantness you’ve grown accustomed to. Crymni takes to it like oil in water, but Annie? Oh, she feeds from it, embraces it, starts working her “magic” immediately, reciprocating the welcome with tart affection. It overjoys Charlie, seeing as how this validates the presence of her Hotel. She wasn’t expecting crowds – but two in one day? That’s a new record! And one of them was such a charmer.

Except it’s all wrong. It couldn’t have been worse. The In Between was just a place of shadows and bad dreams, but this? It was worse, it was reality. Every second Annie remained in the Hotel, every word she said filled you with that same tense, growing fear. You were trying to get better, to move on, and now this, this reminder.

You had to play the part, had to be professional – you couldn’t very well tell her to fuck off, now could you?

And how did Angel Dust find all this? He fucking loved it. Because of course he did, he didn’t understand. None of them did. He took to her like a bird to a branch, ready to snack on all the sordid gossip of your past, probably expecting a bible of embarrassing secrets even you hadn’t brought up.

You spent the evening in your office, hoping you could hide there, or something. But that was a no-no and quite unprofessional, wasn’t it? Once Charlie called everyone down for dinner, you were a leaf in the wind. This was a big night for her – a big night for everyone. Angel had a successful day of therapy. New guests. New positions. You moping like a child was poor form.

With a pained sigh, you unfasten the helmet and set it aside for tomorrow – assuming you survive until then. Haha. Hah.

You’re afraid.

The walk to the dining hall doesn’t feel right, because now everything is unfamiliar. You hear laughter and pleasant conversation and satisfied voices, the setting of kitchenware and utensils. You can smell an array of freshly cooked dishes (thanks to the Bois) and the buzzing of Niffty’s wings as she sets things right. There’s nice chatter, shuffling of footsteps, the groan of chairs on wood as people take their places. You’re the last one to arrive, and you don’t want to face any of them.

Maybe you can just turn around.
“Oh Anon! There you are!”

Charlie’s voice erupts behind you, a hand prodding your back, forcing you along.

“Come on, slowpoke! Take a seat! We almost didn’t have enough chairs!”

You offer a weak, pained thanks. Charlie is too proud to notice your grim, strained features. Not that you blame her.

You’re swept into the maelstrom of company, and then there’s a sound that’s actually worse than your ex’s voice: her voice mixed with Angels tone.

They don’t notice you as you sit at the far table end, away from your boyfriend. All seats are occupied, dishes set. You see him, your precious spider, looking utterly tickled. He’s wearing a wicked grin and he’s hanging off of every motherfucking word coming out of Annie’s mouth. She’ll smirk, she’ll gesture, he’ll lean in, eyes widen, then head throws back in cackling laughs. Your heart turns to ice. She’s toying, she’s playing. Angel doesn’t even find her threatening - which you wish you could take some pride in, to know that he feels secure in all this. But he’s unaware, like they all are.

She has your secrets. She knows you too well. And there are things you’ve tried to put away, but with her here? It’s like the wound’s been torn open.

Briefly, Annie’s eyes glance to you, and you look away, pretending to not have noticed. But you see. You see her point, then Angel’s head turn. He offers you a cute little wave, but also a dark, knowing sneer coupled with a wink. A we’ll-talk-later wink, like he’s gotten the juiciest info. But he doesn’t know.

You can make out some of their words over the chatter.

“Did he tell ya’ he cries like a little girl at the end of Heat?”

Angel Dust hisses with snickers. “Awwhahah, what a softie!”

You’re distracted by a touch. It’s Vaggie. She is the only one amidst the group who actually looks concerned.

“Hey,” she offers, kind. “Are you okay?”

You just stare.

Words are drowned out by more chatter. Everyone’s seated and looking quite positive tonight. Alastor, even, is sitting with the group, and has decided on a presentable dish of meat – though it’s all rare. A vegetable spread for the Bois, a kebob for Nifty, a hard bourbon and demonic swordfish for Husk, a festive guacamole salad for Vaggie, a honey-garlic chicken serving for Charlie, arancini for Angel, and ribs for Crymni. Baxter is the only one absent. Someone even fancied you up a New York steak. You don’t give a fuck what Annie’s eating.

As everyone settles in, Charlie’s happy to take her leaderly role once more.

“We’re thrilled to add two new members to our family!” she practically sings. “I think it’s important we eat together, share together!”

Charlie, no.
Her sweet eyes go to Annie. “I must admit, I think we’re all a little... curious! Could you tell us a little more about yourself, miss Annie?”

Charlie, no.

Everyone quiets down. Annie looks proud, wearing her smirk, cracking her fingers.

“Oh, I’d be d’lighted to!”

Angel simpers. “Tell us, ya’ fuckin hellcat!”

Her eyes go straight to you. You want to say something, anything, but what can you do now? You’re at her mercy.

She starts out real slow, real easy-like. You and she ran together in the same crew, she explains. She makes it sound so romantic, even. Once bad job in New Mexico forced you into a team with a couple of other fellas. You ran afoul of a drug deal, split the profits, then high tailed it across the States, always running, always hunting the next big score. She makes it sound like you and she were in perfect sync.

Part of you flinches. You look at Angel. Does this bother him, at all? His features don’t change, and he seems entertained by all of it, resting chin in hand. He’s not threatened. You’d be happy about that, but...

“Guess ol’ mister big shot over there forgot all about me!” chuckles Annie. “I understand, I got so many embarrassing stories!”

Angel gives a knowing laugh.

“Oh, come on lass, you gotta tell us! I need more material to give this uppity brat more shit, hahhah!” howls Husk.

Charlie giggles, curiosity getting the best of her. “Oh, goodness. Anon, you don’t mind, do you?”

You say nothing. No one notices your rising discomfort or the panic in your eyes.

“Heavens! Are we really learning about the young buck’s colorful past?” adds Alastor. “It’s like primetime television!”

Your fingers clench and your breathing starts to hasten again. Chest hammers. Foot taps.

Annie shrugs at you. “Sorry love! They wanna’ know.”

Only Vaggie seems to notice your growing discomfort. “Hey, maybe we shouldn’t. . .”

“Aww, I ‘member that time you got them pigs to drop? Shits just wouldn’t take a hint, yeah?” starts Annie, winding up, setting the stage.

“Shoulda’ seen him!” she continues. “Ruthless! Shot one in the knee to make a point! Saved a whole crew, those two fuckas woulda’ triggered an alarm! What a hero!”

Angel whistles. “That’s my man!”

Annie tosses Angel an intrigued glance. “Yeah! That has me curious too, Annie! Didn’t think you bugged bugs! I mean, after what you told me ‘bout the Genovese. Guess I was just a beard!”
Angel puts a hand to lips, feigning surprise. “Scandalous!”

The Bois stuff their cheeks, bleating with interest. Even Alastor is attentive.

“Eh, well anyway. Yeah! After a good night o’ robbin we’d all get wasted, hahaha. This one, he got toasted! Quite a character when he was drunk!”

Your chest tightens. Fuck, Annie. No, please.

There’s laughter, innocent and unaware.

“Hey Anon!” she continues. “’Member the fuckin’ shiners you’d give me?”

It takes a moment to process, but she lets the statement hang, letting it cut into you, deep and resentful.

There’s a brief, uncertain pause. Annie rolls a finger in the air, eager to continue.

“Haha, what?” Angel blinks.

“Oh fuck, he’d cuff me right on the face, I tell ya! Said I didn’t know when to shut up, haha. A real piss-and-vinegar drunk, him! Had to take a bottle to his head once! Fun times.”

Your teeth grit.

“Eh, then again, maybe it wasn’t the booze. Anon, didja’ tell your friends you were a fuckin’ tweeker! Oh, I swear, every other job he was shootin’ up! Probably spent half his earnins’ on the needle. Till the day you got clocked, eh sweetheart?”

Things are quieter now. A nervous, growing tension starts to fill the air. Annie’s tone gets sharper and harder.

“Guess he needed it though. Sometimes a little kick helps with a job. Oh, like…” she snaps her fingers.

“The Berkley job! You GOTTA know that one, Anon! Ol Paulie had us on a leash, heh, said to ice a hostage every ten minutes we didn’t have our demands met.”

Angel’s smile has faltered, and his eyes briefly flick between you and your ex.

Annie leans, looking over everyone, pointing at you. “So, this cold fuck, I tell you. Killer pulls aside our ‘leverage’ without a blink! Fuckin’ blows their head clean off, hahahaha! No mercy!”

She smirks. “Tell em’ that one, Annie?”

You don’t say anything.

“No? Huh. Could’ve at least told em’ about the bank job that got us all fucked sky high. You planned it, ‘member? Wesley and Paulie died cause of you! Hahahaha. I mean I got away, o’ course. Uriah though? Nope, spent the rest o’ his days in lockup.”

She chuckles. “Of course, I am skippin’ ahead. Sometimes we’d roll dealers and sell shit dope to addicts to pay the food bill, haha.”

You’re still silent, and Annie adopts a quizzical expression. “No? None of it’s ringin’ a bell? Aww, c’mon! Don’t tell me you never said anything about this! I mean, you all knew, right?”
She glances to everyone but no one answers. Alastor continues munching on his food, intrigued. Charlie wipes her mouth, clearing throat. The Bois look at each other, uncertain if things have shifted from amusing jokes to hurtful musings.

“Really? You didn’t know Annie here was a drug usin’, woman beatin’, murdering fuck? Huh.”

You don’t even remember moving, you just remember the stairs, the office, the desk, the cheap brandy, and the cigarettes.

Drown it. Drown all of it. Drown it all and forget. It’s what you had to do, time and time again – put all the problems down with a substance or a drink. But when you did... what you became...

Annie was your reminder, painful and instant. You hoped you’d never see her again, hoped that at the time of your passing, that was all of it. When the memories started to return, she was back in the deepest corners of your mind, a shadow drawing ever closer, a mocking reminder of you. What you were. A bad person. A fiend and a vagrant. For a long time, you embraced it. For the years you wandered around in Pentagram City, who cared? Why did it matter?

But now you’re trying to be better. Aren’t you?

Or.

Is it you’re afraid she’ll pull you back in, like she always did? Always brought out the worst in you. Found ways to hurt you and anger you and push you into the next mark, the next fit of abuse. Fuck. Oh fuck. She’s here now? Why!? Is she trying to get better too? You don’t believe that – you refuse to. You don’t even know how she found you, and now... now she’s living here. How are you going to get through this? Everything was finally falling into place. You felt like you were on the right track.

And then this. But this time, it’s not the In Between. It’s real.

You’re the wrong man in the right place.

You must’ve been focusing hard on knocking back that shit brandy, because you never heard the door creak open, nor the click of boots, or the clearing of throat.

“If ya’ gonna get blitzed, at least drink somethin’ that ain’t piss and fire.”


He notes your silence. “Sooo... ex-wife?”

You set the glass down.

“Eh. Kinda’ trashy. I like the inks, though. Dyed hair is a bit overdone, and them fingerless gloves? Real original.”

He steps closer, and you flinch. Here it comes...

A gentle gloved hand appears at your mouth, softly pulling free the cig and stamping it out in your glass ash tray. Another shifts the brandy away from you.
"She’s got stories, huh? Didn’t know ya’ had a pet fish. What’cha name him?"

His words are. . . kind. And gentle. And caring. They lack any judgment, fury, anger, all of the things you expected. There’s no tension, just his smooth, lulling tone.

You blink, croaking. “Scarface.”

Now he appears at your side, propping his rear against the desk edge, laughing. “Ahaha! Of course ya’ did.”

You can’t manage a smile. “Why are you here, Angel?”

His eyes narrow and features sharpen. Oops. “Uh, ‘cause you’re my boyfriend you fucking asshole and I’m worried about ya’.”

You look down. “I’m sorry.”

He nudges you on the shoulder with a fist. “Ya’ should be. The hell’d ya’ run off for?”

Now you want to laugh. Was that not obvious?

“Because I’m a piece of shit, and now you know,” you say, flat. “It’s all true. All of it.”

You turn to him. “And now you know too. And. . . I’m afraid, because. . . because of how you’ll see me.”

He blinks. His features soften, then warp into a smile, and he starts cackling and laughing.

“Anon, you’re so fuckin’ stupid, holy shit.” He says it in one of the kindest, sweetest, most loving tones, utterly dripping with affection and concern.

Huh?

“Soos whaaaat,” he continues, rolling his eyes, extra hands waving. “Ooo, big scary Anon! Did the dope and was an ice-cold sonofabitch! I’m shakin’!”

“But. . .”

He covers your mouth with hand. “Nnshoosh.”

“Not to brag, toots, but I been ‘round for a few fuckin’ decades and I’m pretty sure my headcount is higher. And ya’ seen me, at my worst. Like a fuckin’ junkie.”

He pauses, thinking.

“And. . . somethin’ tells me ol’ ball-and-chain down there ain’t the innocent princess type either. M’sorry you two had rows, Anon. But. . . that ain’t you.”

He gets closer, playing with your tie, taking your face and tugging it up, forcing you to look at him. His eyes are wide, accepting. Loving.

“Ya’ never hurt me. Never raised a hand. I seen ya’ so wasted it’s a wonder ya’ woke up the mornin’ next and that Anon? Just a happy, horny drunk, nyeh. You’re good to me. You’re tryin’, baby, I know ya’ are.”

How. . .
How is he doing this? How is he able to find the good in you, when you’re so certain it’s not there? How can he look past this? How can he be so accepting!?

He makes a face. “Blegh. How’d I get wrapped up playin’ therapist!?"

God dammit Angel Dust. Always your sanctuary, your savior.

You blink. “I don’t know what to do, Angel.” You really don’t.

“I don’t know how I’m gonna’ live with this.”

Angel grumbles, hopping to sit on your desk, legs crossed. There’s silence for a while, and really, you can’t expect him to have all the answers.

But after a spell, he finally speaks again.

“Know what? We need to get outta’ dis bullshit.”

You blink, uncertain. “What?”

“M’not kiddin’. When’s the last time it was just you n’me? Honestly? Really you and me? It’s always been with. . .”

He gestures around the Hotel walls, wiggling hands. “This. This place n’ the background.”

“Curfews, schedules. Always been like, we’re on fuckin’ shift or some shit. What if we just go. . . forget about all of it for a few days? No Hotel, no weird therapy, no ex.”

You’d be lying if the idea wasn’t immediately palpable. But, you had responsibilities now and. . . Angel was just starting therapy!

He snaps his fingers. “Awh! There’s this banger joint in the West Side! Real fuckin’ ritzy like, oh it’s the best! Treat ya’ like royalty there, real primo stuff. Paradise! Yeah dat’s the name! High class. Damn good food, better drinks. The shows! Anon! I love em’! Got rooms for the night and. . .”

It’s clearly getting him excited and you don’t want to stifle him. But what about the Hotel?

“I don’t want to. . . cause problems for your treatment, Angel.”

He waves you off. “Yeahyeahyeah. We got a whole fuckin’ eternity for this shit. ‘Sides! I mean, wouldn’t it be nice if I had a strong, handsome chaperone to keep little Angie-wangie outta’ trouble?”

You finally smile, and he beams. “Yeaaaah, ya’ want to.”

Yes. Yes, you do. Nothing would make you happier than just having some time with Angel Dust. But, what about everything else?

“Still. What about. . . her?” you say, looking at the floor.

He frowns, considering.

“. . .lemme’ take care of it.”

-#-
Annie got herself nice and settled in, reclining on the living room couch with legs crossed like she owned the place. Maybe she did. After all, didn’t take long to schmooze her way into the fancy joint. Certainly, made that pissant ex of hers fuck off! Hah!

Husk and Vaggie eyed her from a distance, the feline rubbing down the bar while Vag kept her arms crossed, scrutinizing. Something about this one felt like trouble. Their attention, though, was snagged by the distinct click of kinky boots as a familiar figure appeared into view. Husk boggled, nudging his compatriot and gesturing towards the spider who was making a B-line for the harlot.

“Uh oh,” he grumbled, amused. “Catfight.”

Vaggie tensed. Oh, Angel... don’t...

“Eyyyyy Annnieee! Peachie! Sweetheart! Doll! Lambchop!” he hollered, arms outstretched, wearing a big, crescent grin, looking as happy as ever.

Annie twirled, returning his grin with her own, waving. “Legs! There ya’ are! You scuttled off and I was getting bored!”

He sauntered to her as she stood. Misunderstanding.

“Yeah, had to tuck m’other half in. Sleepy!”

Annie laughed in her arm. “Really? What a whiner!”

The spider was swift to meet her ‘embrace’ with his own. He threw an arm around her shoulder and yanked her into him, hard. Rough.

“Just gives us more time to catch up!” he said, teeth clenched.

Annie grunted, chuckling, trying to give herself some space, but Angel kept her locked like a vice-grip.

“Ya’ know, it’ll be nice to have another lady ‘round here. We can dish about all the fun, fancy shit. She don’t count!” said Angel, pointing to Vaggie, who watched with concern.

“Er, haha, yeah! Right!”

“Hell yeah m’right! What’s your fix? Shoppin? Cute boys? Perfume? Me personally...”

Angel yanked something from his fluff cleavage, a thin sliver, a black handle, twirling it in digits. “I like knives.”

He tapped it and an angry, sharp needle of metal clicked to life, several inches long, so precise you’d cut yourself on the air around it. Annie eyed it, uncertain.

She cleared her throat. “More of a gun gal legs! Hard to rob with knives.”

He chuckled. “Oh, I disagree! Ya’ can steal a man’s heart with one of these.”

Angel’s glare went to Husk and Vaggie, who looked at each other, features pulled with uncertainty.

“Heeeey Husky! Whip up a drink for my new pal!” he called. Then, he leaned into Annie, close. Uncomfortably close.

“What’s your poison, sweetheart?”
Again, Annie tries to make space for herself, but Angel has none of it. “Er, gin and tonic!”

“A what now? Didn’t hear ya.”

She blinked as Angel leaned closer, face next to hers.

“Gin an—”

He flipped the knife towards her face, a centimeter from her nose, wearing a manic, malicious grin. His voice is quiet, but threatening, tone laced with a controlled but unmistakable rage.

“If ya’ ever do that to my man again I’ll fuckin’ carve a tic-tac-toe game in your face, babe. Capire?”

Annie blinked, confusion swimming over her features. When she realized he wasn’t joking around, her brow narrowed.

“Who do you—”

“HEY!” Angel interrupted, straightening, yanking Annie over to the bar as he bellowed at Husk.

“Y’got wax in your ears, kitty? Gin and tonic for the lady!”

He clapped her back, hard, forcing her to grunt. Husk watched, a bit alarmed but also amused.

“Er, don’t think the miss would approve, bug,” he said, starting to gather the bottles for the brew despite his caution.

Angel slammed the knife into the hard wood bar, the blade sinking through it like soft butter.

“No worries, sourpuss! It’s on her tab! Ain’t that right, lambchop?”

Vaggie had to look away, hiding a chuckle.


Again, he whapped her on the back before spinning his knife, retracting the point.

“Good! Ya’ smarter than ya’ look, Annie-wannie. I think we all have a real understandin’, huh?”

He glanced around, Husk prepping the drink while Vaggie whistled, innocently.

“Funny,” growled Annie. “Thought weapons weren’t allowed around here.”

Husk made the drink and pushed it towards Annie, dawning a smile. “Huh? What weapon? Vaggie?”

The silver-haired assistant shrugged, helpless. “I didn’t see anything.”

Angel clicked his tongue. “Sheesh, Annie! What’cha talkin’ about? We’re all sweet, nice people here! None of us got knives! Or bats, or brass knuckles, or chains.”

He leaned into her, leering, winking. “None of us.”

Annie took her drink and downed it, smirking, "understanding."

“I was always more familiar with fists, anyway.”
The spider simpered, but wouldn't be outdone. Angel shifted and bumped her, knocking the drink from her hand. “Oopsie! Shit, sorry toots! Kinda’ clumsy.”

“Husk!” Angel barked. “Get er’ another. Her treat!”

Husk gave a deep, rumbling laugh. “Yes sir, mister Dust.”

Annie winced, seething, the liquid spilling on her shirt and pants.

“So!” Angel said, relaxing on the bar frame. “Got any more *fascinatin’* stories to tell me?”


His voice dropped, dark and threatening. “Let’s keep it like that.”

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He ain’t in his office when I go to check on him. Hum. I’m hopeful – so I go to my room, and lo and behold, there’s my Anon, lying in the pink sheets. Fat Nuggets too! My sweet baby is curled next to him! Awwh! Fuck, feel my face go hot. My man is trouble and troubled but, sometimes? I think he’d be a good dad. He’s takin’ a shine to my Nugsy, and he’s always sweet on the piggy. Hghg. I could grow ovaries this shit’s so cute.

I rub my hands, satisfied, lockin’ the door.

“Hey, I took care. . .” I trail off.

Oh. He really did doze off! Damn. Tuckered out! Well, okay, rest is better anyway.

I strip out of my dallies and head for the shower, feelin’ pretty good. I think I delivered the message nice n’ clear.

I don’t ever. EVER. Wanna’ see this bitch pull that shit again. Nobody fucks with my boys. Nobody.

When I finish cleanin’, I toss on some casuals and wrestle into bed, flick on the telly, keepin’ it nice and quiet. All I can think about though is *Paradise*. Er, "Paradise Found," technically - fuckin' pretentious ass name but whatever.

I’m callin’ in my favor with Chuck. Hell, we paid for this shacks repairs! Sabby’s earnings got everything spiff-like, so, Charlie owes me a solid!

First thing this weekend, me and the sir are blowin’ this shitstack for a while.

I can’t wait.

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Fuckin’ spider will protect yo’ ass. That last bit is a first-person perspective with Angel, if it wasn't obvious already.
Paradise Found

Chapter Summary

You and Angel Dust head out to your first night in the grand entertainment complex Paradise Found.

Chapter Notes

Hey! This will probably end up being a whole other part! I thought it'd be shorter but NOPE.

Caution, contains very explicit, strong adult material like hand-holding and kissing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Excited hops. Uncertain expression. Checking, checking, and rechecking. Dash of the finest perfume, some of that White Widow. Bands of silver and gold on the wrists, dazzling metal around the neck. Long, fancy coat with fluff collar, shirt and skirt accenting lithe but curved frame. A touch of glitter on the cheeks, pink, bringing it all together. Glaze on the lips, then some violet mascara – the pricey, long lasting kind, not the “cheap hotel” stuff.

Huffing, fussing. Glances.

“Well? What’cha think?”

Arms outstretched. Vaggie groaned, shaking her head, expression tugged with an amused smirk.

“Angel, that’s the third time you’ve asked me.”

The effeminate arachnid scowled. “I wouldn’t have to if ya’ gave me a fuckin’ straight answer!”

“I did!”

He grumbled. “Ya’ look fine? C’mon, gimme’ some grease. I know bein’ fancy is new to ya’, smiles, but I’m tryin’ to look good here!”

Vaggie leered. Okay, she’ll ignore that. He was just excited – really excited. He came to her room after all to ask for opinions on his look and he never did that.

Angel Dust rolled his mismatched eyes over his reflection, scanning, fiddling with his coat buttons, tilting his head, fluffing his hair tuft, clicking tongue when he found some minor, imperceptible imperfection. Damn, he was over the moon, huh? Wouldn’t settle down. Normally, he never worried too much about his look, something that always impressed Vaggie. His nuance for appearances, his ability to dress himself precisely as desired. But now? It was cute – he just didn’t know what to do!

“Angel,” she shot back, defeated. “I said it’s fine because it’s fine. You look good. You do.”
This was him all in a titter. From what Vaggie understood, he and Anon were out for a serious night on the town. She didn’t like the idea one bit, but, her better half agreed to it after a solid week of therapy. If Charlie gave the A-okay, well, guess all Vag could do was prep the detox room and hope for the best. It was, at least, nice to see Angel look so… happy. Really happy, not just the *I-found-a-new-plug* happy or *drunk-as-shit* happy.

This was important to him. Maybe that was enough to keep him out of trouble. She just hoped Anon could keep him ‘straight,’ but then again, the spook tended to cause problems too, eh?

He clenched his teeth. “Yeah, but…”

A huff. Vaggie strode up to him, patting the tall spider’s shoulder.

“He’ll love it. I promise.”

For once, Angel didn’t look so sure. “B’whatif…”

Vaggie chuckled. How could she not? The drag queen, the mobster, the powerhouse… uncertain. About his *appearance.*

“Angel, I’ll let you shave my head if Anon says something.”

He stopped, looking down at her. Expression morphed to a sneer.

“. . .fuckin’ bet!”

She nodded. “Now, please, just, *don’t set anything on fire,* okay?”

-.-

“Oink!”

“Are you sure?”

A curious head tilt. Fat Nuggets sniffed at you, perhaps expecting a pat or some food, sitting on your room floor.

Anon, the hell are you doing? You’re asking a pig for opinions. A smart pig, no doubt, but oink? How far could you get on that?

“Oink.”

“Okay.”

Very far, as it turns out.

Well, ‘oink’ was as good as it got. You’ve dawned the form fitting suit Angel made for you, along with the overcoat. A scent of cologne gently ties it all together. There’s a single, shapely patch on your left eye to hide the blackened sclera. You’ve opted to not wear a hat – that was your old look. This is a new you, right?

It’s good. You think. *You hope.*

This is the big night, after all. Angel’s woven his magic and convinced Charlie to let you two to strike out in the heart of ritzy Pentagram City, down to the glamorous playground known as *Paradise Found.* Admittedly, you were getting excited, and it made the week drag on far longer,
though you got through your security routines okay. Annie, at least, hadn’t caused any more trouble – not to you anyway. Sure, she had taken to ignoring Charlie’s therapy sessions, spray painted the walls to her room and mainly grabbed free eats but, the attempts to cause you issues were stifled. For now. Damn, Angel, what did you do? Whatever it was, it worked. At some point, you and Annie were going to have to... talk again, but at least things quieted down.

Crymini settled in nicely as well, or as nice as an agitated young-something could when they weren’t writing dark poetry and maintaining a perfect scowl all the time. Vaggie could take lessons from her. Still, aside from the single hiccup, things could’ve been much, much worse. There was also a letter for Alastor, oddly enough, a gal going by “Mimzy” flaunted she’d planned to stop by soon, but hardly anything to concern you as security manager.

Deep breath.

Well, there was nothing else to it but the evening, then? Angel Dust did well with his therapy for the week, you heard, so Charlie was feeling lenient. You just had to keep him out of trouble. Fuck, both of you out of trouble. You didn’t want a repeat of his overdose episode.

You look to Nuggets, then your mirror, then back to him. The pig sits, waiting, squeaking.

Is this good enough? Is this good enough for Angel? Shit, are you even ready? This is different, this is real, this is a fucking bonafide date. Not like the last time with Charlie and Vaggie, it’s just you and him now, nothing about the Hotel in the background. You’re about to find out what this all is, what it really means.

You’re thrilled, and... a little scared. What if you find out he doesn’t like you, the person in-between the drama and romantic fucking? Gah, no, come on. That’s pity talk. You’re his best friend, the sheer presence of his company is entertainment enough. You just hope he feels the same way.

—

Taptaptaptap. Damn! I can’t keep m’legs still. Hurry up Anon, hurry! It feels like forever I’ve been waitin’ down here. Husk keeps givin’ me these wise-ass looks, little barfly probably thinks it’s funny. Oh yeah!? I’ll show you funny, sourpuss!

I fluff m’coat again. Hoohoo. Shit, I’m jumpy. I can’t wait. My heart’s doin’ that thum-thump thing again. I finally get ya’ all to myself. For once. For real. All this drama, all this hotel biz, the plans, the problems, all of it... ain’t even gonna’ be on the radar. Just you n’me.

Chuck can’t say nothin’ either! This is a redeemin’ quality! Goin’ out with pals. My best pal! My Anon!

If he would just GET HIS ASS DOWN HERE.

—

You appear from the stairs and, oh shit. There he is. That gorgeous boy, that demonic spider. Angel Dust.

You meet him at the foyer and his whole outfit has put a wildfire in your heart. It’s beautiful, elegant, like him. The coat stops at his hips, teases at his generous thighs, accented by long boots. Dammit. He smells amazing, some sweet, alluring perfume on him. Dammit. He smiles, gold tooth glinting. DAMMIT.

“Holy shit, peppermint, you look amazing.”
Peppermint. That’s a new one now. Because he’s sweet like one, yeah?

His cheeks flush as you both embrace briefly. “Thanks, stallion. Ya’ lookin’ sharp too! Aww that suit, just kills me how good it is on ya.”

His face is bright, cheery, sweet. When he speaks, the genuine mirth behind his words is enough to make you fall head over heels for him, again.

He tosses a thumb, gesturing behind him. “Ride’s here.”

Before you move, Charlie’s voice cuts in. “Be good you two!” she says, sing-song.

“Did you need anything before you go? A snack?”

You turn to wave but Angel grabs you, kicks open the door, and shoves you out.

“Byeeyadon’tcallwe’llbebackinfewdaysuntilatersuckershahahahahbyyyeeeee!”
The warm evening air of the city falls over you. By the Hotel entrance, there’s a long black car waiting, engine rumbling. The driver is a massive eye surrounded by tendrils, gurgling as you both approach. Hey! It’s the same one from your first uh, “meeting,” with Angel.

“Specks? Nice to see you,” you say, coming to the car with Angel.
The dull hum of the moving vehicle lulls you into a deep comfort – not to mention the generous pink interior with lavish seats help too. Angel is practically dancing around the car, sliding hither and dither, arms snaking under cushions and corners, sitting around.

“Damn, these things never have any booze. . .”

It’s cute, forcing you to smile. “I’m sure there’s plenty at this. . . what was it called?”

He pulls out something that looks like a living ball of lint, shivers, then flicks it away.

“Paradise Lost!” he says, bent over the seat, leaning over a bit too much. You try to ignore the curve of his rump. “Aw it’s the fuckin’ best! Used to hang around there with a boytoy or two when I was doin’ the fancy date in drag schtick.”

Sighing, his quest for vehicular alcohol at an end, he reclines on a seat opposite of you, thoughtful.

“Dis guy!” he says, fingers snapping. “Zander Kohen! Babe! You’ll love em’! Worked with him a bit, song and comedy skits, that kinda’ thing. He’s a swell sonofabitch!”

Angel’s extensive list of “who’s who” in Pentagram City seemed boundless. You weren’t familiar with Zander, but then again, you never did get too far in the wealthiest parts of the West Side.

“Should I be concerned?” you joke. Honestly, you’re not worried about ‘other guys’ these days, if at all. Something about you and Angel Dust is. . . sticking. You have confidence in your relationship.

“Yeahaha, ya’ should!” he says, wobbling with chuckles. “Guy’s so smooth he could get ya’ to suck his dick!”

“Well goddamn. Tell me he’s good looking, at least.”

Angel wiggles a ‘so-so’ hand. “Naw, just fancy. You’ll see!”

See you shall, and you’re curious. About all of it, really. The lights of Pentagram City tickle the windows, rolling over Angel in radiant pink waves, accenting him so wonderfully, like he’s pulsing with alluring light. As the cab drones on, you and he just. . . talk. No drama, no existential crisis, just chat. The sweet, endearing things, the mundane subjects pulling you closer to him. He’s fun. And he’s funny. He really has a way of controlling a situation, either escalating it or causing it, and it shines through his euphemisms and opinion on various subjects.

It was anything, really. For instance:

“So ya’ had fishies?” he’d ask.

You’d nod. “I did. Briefly. Wanted more, wanted to do aquascaping.”

“Aquawhatnow?”

“Like. . . gardening with aquariums. Took a lot of precision and planning. I guess I liked the plotting.
You had to do it right too. pH balance, water acidity, even bacteria levels.”

“Wha! I just thought ya’ poured salt in the water!”

And then other things:

“Hmm, no, Capone was overrated.”

Angel gawked at you. “The fuck? Anon! He was public fuckin’ enemy number ONE!”

“Yes, and he got nailed for tax evasion. He was just a glorified delivery man.”

Mismatched eyes boggled. “Wowowow. Don’t let em’ hear that. He’s down here, ya’ know.”

“Well, he can punch me after I tell him Dillinger was better. That guy robbed twenty-four banks, Angel. And he got out of prison, twice! He was the whole reason the FBI was a thing!”

Angel shook his head. “That’s cause’ security back then was shit. Ain’t no vaults! Just smash and run.”

And then yet more things.

“. . .and tell ya’ the truth? Eh, I’d prefer the box mags. Drummies is nice and all, but, heavy. Clunky too.”

You’d nod. “True. Simple is nice. No disrespect to the classics, I mean.”

He’d wave a hand. “’Course not! But our boys didn’t take the Normandy shores with them typewriter fatties, did they? S’always been a style thing, in my ‘pinion. I just like it cause, hey, two hundred rounds babe! Ya’ aim, you shoot, poof! Problems solved. But, well, nothin’ beats a clean reload either.”

You agreed. Also: “Never struck me as the patriotic type.”

He feigned a salute. Then, he remembered something, cackling. “Oh jee-zus fuck Anon, ya’ should see the退役军人 bar fights down here. Shit gets fuckin’ apocalyptic! Throw that Normandy line in the Wermacht joint and it’s like somebody set off a fuckin’ grenade.”

This banter, this trade of words went on for a good bit. And it was incredible. You soaked up every single syllable. You were delighted to find something to talk about with him, and the fluidity of your conversations was encouraging. This was good. This was what elevated your feelings for him. It’s easy to be attracted to a sexually available person – of course. But about the in-between events? The moments before the romance? The talks at breakfast? The fussing over dinner ideas? Angel was sarcastic, an ass, flippant. But he was also engaging, magnetic, and quite intelligent about the things he found interest in.

You were talking to your lover, yes. But also your companion. Someone. . . someone you could build a life with.

Holy shit. For once in your miserable existence you felt something. A glimmer of hope. A future. Time seems to disappear as the cab plunges further into the veins of the neon-lit city.

Eventually, Angel grabs your attention, tapping window glass. “Lookit!”

You glance to see. Though it’s hard to view from your angle, your jaw practically falls off.
There, like a monolith dressed in the blitz of glamour and lights, is *Paradise Lost*. It’s massive, a pillar overshadowing most of the city like a defiant middle finger, draped in layers of neon, spotlights, and regal architecture. It dwarfs the Sugary Chigurh and essentially any building you’ve seen in the city thus far. Surrounding are other towers of similar height, and it’s clear in this gold-laced nightmare of debauchery, you’re in the “wealthy” part of Hell – or one of them, anyway.

Angel glances between the building and your face, seeking approval, delighted.

“Holy fuck,” you mutter.

“Yeah!?” he chimes. “Didn’t I tell ya’! Look at dat’ shit! Look at it!”

The cab slowly swerves into position, parking at the ‘rim’ of the building where other vagrants and guests are flooding in and out, demons of all variants and shapes stopping in. Excited, Angel throws a splash of money at the driver before yanking you outside, and the utter chaos and ambiance drown you.

At once, he’s at your side, and he points. You have to crane your neck because the building is so goddamn huge. The exterior noises are overwhelming, a mix of chatter, musical ambiance, and the roar of a living city. This isn’t the heart of Hell, but it might as well be. If Angel hadn’t gripped your arm, holding to it like a bird on a branch, you might have fallen over. You’re speechless.

“Fuckin’ right?” he beams. Warmth spills into your chest. His frame, the way his side touches yours. This is gonna’ be a good night.

“S’beautiful, ain’t it?”

You look at him, and he’s happy. He’s wearing a smile, genuine and dazzled, mismatched eyes dancing, enamored with the building.

“Yes,” you say. “Yes it is.”

He huffs, and you both stride through the exterior crowds, past fountains (of rather questionable concept), maneuvering past sinners of every variety. This place, Angel explained, was somewhere the demonic elite liked to crowd around, those who established decades of reputation in Hell, maybe longer. As such the bizarre gatherings preferred a touch of refinement as opposed to the unbridled hedonism Pentagram City was known for. Which, well, it meant if you wanted an orgy there were forms, or drugs were served on gold plates, and food was actually edible. Classy, not the usual nightclub pulse.

Because of said reputation, guards were eager to keep the chaff out. As it happens, your spider carried plenty to spare. At the massive entry, patrols recognize him instantly, allowing you to slip past VIP lines without so much as a scoff. Just a nod of recognition and that was that. As far as they’re concerned, you’re his arm candy. You’re okay with that.

The interior is no less impressive. It’s massive, to put it lightly.

A foyer opens up like a grand hall, a throat laced with ritzy fineries – everything from scarlet carpets to dazzling signs are here. This entrance leads off down various halls, where other large sections are held for entertainment purposes. Burlesque shows, restaurants, comedy bits, ballrooms, it goes on and on and on. You could get lost in here. Maybe you will.

Sinners of the wealthiest variety consume your vision. These aren’t street vagrants or typical vagabonds, these are high class. Their attire, their presence, it all exudes power and status. Some glance your way, or more specifically, Angel, and it’s enough to cause them pause. He’s wearing a
prideful smirk as he leads you along – disregarding them, leaning into you. He knows what he’s doing.

“So, I was thinkin’,” he says, guiding you along. “Ol’ Zandy likes to do a show in the ballroom. Real fuckin’ spiff that place, classy shindig! ‘Course they got shit for every occasion if ya’ wanna try something else. What’cha wanna’ do Anon?”

You laugh, a little nervous. Uh, wow, this is hitting you like a train. There’s so much to do and so much going on. Not to mention, goddamn, the gold dripping off these people. They flaunt it so brazenly. You could swipe stuff, real, real easily. Hell, with Angel catching eyes you could take a stroll through a hall and pick pockets clean.

. . . but, you know what? Why? Why bother? Before you did it to satisfy an urge, a craving. To impress. To terrify, even. To show Angel you were worth something. But now, well? Shit, you were a lucky sonofabitch. Luckier than anyone, you think. You don’t need to steal anymore. That impulse is leaving you.

“They’ve got drinks at this ballroom?” you say. Yeah, you were going to need the buzz, settle you down. You were used to skulking in the shadows, this was all quite upfront.

He sneers. “So much poison ya’ won’t even remember who ya’ are!”

A nod. “Lead the way.”

-*_-

Atta’ boy, atta’ boy! Oh I see my man gettin’ excited. I’m over the hills to show him this, I tells ya’. This place has lotsa’ memories, back when I was buildin’ rep. Good ones. Great ones. Met some pretty keen fellas too, old friends. Even met Sabbath once down here!

But now? Now . . . I get to share it with my boy. My Anon. Heart’s still goin’ thum-thump. Agh, this feelin’, it’s so different now, it’s growin’, I can’t stop it, and I don’t wanna. I’m gonna’ show him things I love tonight, and I hope he likes it too.

-*_-

Down a sprawl of hallways, you and Angel make it to one of the entertainment plazas, a large showroom doubling as a ballroom fitted with a classy bar, seats, and a stage for a performance. Angel’s been chirping about this Kohen fellow, so you’re quite interested to see what he’s all about. In the meantime, the ambiance is laced with warm, comforting music, light stench of cigars touching the air overcast with a variety of demonic alcohol. Chandeliers fill the room with gold lights and the crowds here almost seem . . . pleasant. They’re still horrors, mind, with ghoulish smiles, masks, and bodies. But they look like they prefer stability over chaos.

“Take your coat, sirs?”

A supplicating creature approaches you, bowing. Angel agrees, handing over his fancy wearings, and you do the same.

Oogh. This doesn’t help. Angel’s body is ever more enticing. A slim, form fitting black dress hugs his svelte body. His fluff cleavage prods out, puffy and full. You can see his midriff and goddammit Angel that isn’t helping. You try not to stare, steal a glance, but you’re a damn fool, he knows, you’re looking.

He snickers, leaning into your ear. “Girls look nice tonight, don’t they?”
You rasp with chuckles. “Don’t you start riling me up.”

A fool’s errand. “We’ll get there,” he suggests, tone laced with mischief.

In the meantime, you both sneak to the bar, where a gaunt, pale-faced creature minds the reservoir. He recognizes Angel, of course, staring in a stoic, manic kind of way.

“Evening mister Dust,” he says.

Angel pats the table, clicking his tongue and winking. “Sup’ Lloyd ya’ old bozo! Still hauntin’ this dive?”

Lloyd doesn’t move. “Of course. Drinks for you and your friend?”

Angel nods, then glances to you, nudging. “Bleed em’ dry, toots!”

Bourbon for you, easily. Nothing fancy, you’ve got to settle your nerves, because half of you is overwhelmed and the other half wants to shove Angel into a wall and fuck him something awful. Hold him, kiss him, make him feel like he’s the only thing that matters.

Easy stallion.

Satisfied, Angel slaps the table. “Slide me a Manhattan, wrinkles!”

With stoic indifference, Lloyd nods and crafts your orders. When Angel manifests a bill, the creature shakes his head.

“Your money’s no good here.”

Angel rolls his eyes and scoffs. “Oh fuckin’ take the tip ya’ goddamn spook.”

He sets the bill down and tugs you away. With drinks in hand, you start to settle into a feeling more comfortable. You can breathe now, you think. Get your bearings. And alcohol, that doesn’t hurt at all.

In the crowds, you drink, the ambiance taking hold. Edges of your mind soften, and the rush of, well, everything, has slowly faded, letting you just enjoy the presence of your boyfriend. Eventually, you find some cushioned seats to recline in, good spots for the show.

Boyfriend? Fuck, that’s a new one. In the haze of everything, all that’s happened, the whole concept is still new to you. You’ve never thought about people or genders or anything, really; if something interested you enough, you took it. But even still, a relationship like this is well out of the realm of your typical experience. It’s no longer a hot, drug laced rush with the background heist looming on the horizon. It’s you two.

Angel Dust... how do you even define him? You don’t think you can. All you know is that he doesn’t judge you, or look down on you. Like everyone always has, with both of you. Waiting for you two to fuck up or get in danger or something, like you’re a deranged animal that doesn’t know any better. You suppose with your track record they’re right, but Angel? All he sees is you. That belief makes you stronger, heals you, and makes you fall for him harder.

You knock your drinks back with ease, getting a pleasant buzz. Angel has his legs crossed. Ah, shit, his shapely thighs beckon, accented by his boots and skirt. You’re only distracted when a familiar tone breaks your concentration.
“...I thought I was going insane. I’m not! I-is that really you? The Angel Dust!?"

You both see a lean figure approach, voice agitated by a filter, sweep of blond hair accenting his mask and suit. Well hot damn, it’s Tom Trench.

Angel Dust wears his usual amiable *I’ve-been-recognized* expression, simpering and waving a hand.

“Ya’ got it, toots. And unless I’m scuzzed, you’re Tom Trenchie, ain’tcha?”

Is it possible for gas masks to blush? Because you’re pretty sure Tom did.

“O-o-oh! Yeah! H-hah, you recognize me? I’m, wow! Oh, uh, mister Dust, I’m such a huge fan!”

He starts adjusting his tie. In his hand is a glass of whiskey with a little sippy straw, and he takes a ‘draft,’ calming his nerves.

Angel chuckles. “D’aww! I love meetin’ fans. Nice to see ya nuts ain’t roastin’, Trench. Ol Killjoy take it easy on you?”

Hah. You stifle a chuckle. From what you understand, Killjoy’s nearly dismembered Tom on multiple occasions during a newscast.

He rubs his blonde sweep. “Aha. Lucky me. But queen bee would put me on a spit again if I didn’t get an exclusive scoop like this! I, er, well, rumor is you’re shacking up with the Magne girl! Patient zero, right?”

Your smile falters. Uh oh. Angel’s one for reputation and loves his persona. In fact, as far as you know, most of the city – if any of it – doesn’t know he’s wandering the cleaner path. Hell, they don’t even know he’s got a boyfriend. You look to him, uncertain.

He’s just wearing a big, toothy grin. “Ya’ fuckin’ bet. Keepin’ my nose dry like a good widdle boy!”

You hear Tom shudder from Angel’s euphemism.

“Oh, hot damn. . . I can’t believe it. You mean we won’t see you anymore at the skinhouse?”

A shrug. “Sorry babe. Tied down.”

Blinking, Tom’s filtered gaze comes to you, eyes widening. Well you say “eyes” but you mean goggles.

“Tied. . . you mean? Who’s this?”

You act natural, prepared to dawn the “sugar daddy” routine. Going clean is one thing, talking about a relationship is another, and you’re pretty sure Angel still likes his wild nights of freedom so he prob-

“Who? This handsome fuck? S’my boyfriend.”

Tom lurches with coughs and sputters, alcohol dripping from his filter.

“I’m sorry, what?”

You stare at the spider. He’s not backing down, and he holds your hand, fingers curling with your digits, reassuring.
“Yep! My steady! Trench, this is Anon!” He pats your chest, leaning to press a warm, wet kiss on your cheek.

“Mwah!”

Tom boggles. “This is... wow...”

The anchor leans to nudge your shoulder with a fist. “You lucky dog! How’d you manage that!? Oh, Katie will lock me in the Maiden for a week if I don’t get this scoop!”

You clear your throat. “Uh...”

Angel cackles. “Aww, real romantic shit, Tom! I gave em’ a blowie in the back of a cab! Hwaha!”

He’s in disbelief. Angel, however, is keener on the company of you.

“Sorry Trenchie! That’s all for now! Maybe we’ll get an exclusive some other time, eh?”

Tom, the gentleman he is, takes the hint, raising a hand. “Say no more! Hah, wow. Could I uh, at least get an autograph?”

Again, the spider simpers, nodding. He retrieves a pen from his cleavage (!?) and scribbles his name on Tom’s mask, marking a little heart. Again, Tom blushes.

“Never taking it off!”

When he scoots away, you stare at Angel, in disbelief. That was... the first time he’s said that so proudly in the company of others. Your chest hurts in all the right ways. Was this okay? God dammit Angel.

“And you sure about that?” you say. He looks at you. Smiles. He leans and presses a wanting, endearing kiss against your lips.

“’Course I am ya’ dumbass. Gonna’ show ya’ off.”

Fuck.

There’s a bit more chatter for a while until the stage highlights the arrival of the infamous Zander Kohen. At once, Angel Dust tugs at your arm, pointing, enamored. On the stage a band of – what appear to be skeletons – form a group behind a figure, and said figure is nothing short of dazzling. A suede, silver-tongued panther demon swaggers onto stage, dressed in white suit glimmering with diamonds and jewels he’s practically his own constellation. In one hand a martini, the other a microphone, and his eyes sweep across the audience, speaking with command, voice like warm oil.

“Swingin,” he says, “Look at all you beautiful sinners tonight.”

He blows a kiss. “I hope you’re enjoying the drinks. You crazy cats dive into the bad stuff, you dig? But tonight’s a special night, like always, baby, ‘cause you’re with the king of swing.”

He snaps his fingers, and a piano slides into view, gleaming like a shining pearl. “Let’s start us off easy.”

Zander goes to sit and strikes a few notes, engaging the crowd. You’re watching, interested. Angel looks like he’s walked into a drug store and everything is free.

Once he props a tune, the band plays, and Zander’s smooth, coaxing voice consumes the ballroom.
“Come ooooooon,” he sings, “Here we go again, moth-er-fucker, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

You blink. This is not what you expected.

The tune is jazzy, upbeat, and lively. Some start dancing, and Angel wiggles his legs to the tune. The lyrics though, uh.

“She’s motherfucker, everybody has to die!”

Excuse you?

“People equals shit!”

What!?

“Peepeople equals shit!”

Oh my god.

“Puh-puh-puh-peepeople equals shit!”

He finishes it off with all the swagger, snazz, and class of a gent who’s likely visited every fancy club in Hell, striking the piano chords with perfect precision. The band keeps up, joining in with a chorus. The closer they get to the end of the song though, Angel leans. He’s fucking tickled and you find it cute, but uh, why’s he getting so excited?

He yanks at your arm. “Looklooklooklook!”

Once Zander finishes his final set of notes.

He explodes. Erupts into a pregnant, flaming pillar. He morphs into an entity of fire, basically, as does his entire piano. The stage is a wildfire, rumbling the ground with an explosion, cracking the air. You jump back, horrified, but he stands like nothing’s happened, body ablaze He takes a bow and his motions are met with applause and cheers, sparks flinging off his shimmering suit, Angel throwing his head back with manic laughter. The spider stands, smacking his four hands together, whistling.

You’re a bit too busy being stunned to do much else. But, when you see Angel like this, it’s wonderful. Look at him! He’s so fucking happy, and that makes you happy.

Eventually, stagehands rush out and put out the blaze while Zander looks none too bothered, taking a sip of his drink.

“Thought I’d start the night with a bang, you swingin’ devils.”

Well, shit. You see why Angel Dust was a fan.

- -

Zander goes through his routine of songs, though not all of them end with a fiery blaze. They’re enigmatic though, and he wins the crowd with ease. When it’s done, you and Angel pass the bar one more time, scoring some drinks – tipping Lloyd (much to his agitation). You figure there are other things to see, but the spider has one more trick up his sleeve (sleeves?). The show finishes and the ballroom guests start to vacate, seeking other atriums of entertainment. Angel, though.

When you retrieve your coats, he pulls you to a backstage hallway.
“Anon,” he says, voice soft and wanting. “I got somethin’ to show ya’.”

You’re intrigued. He takes you by the hand and your fingers weave together. That alone is worth more than all the wealth in this rot infested city.

You reach a door – specifically Zander’s door. Angel knocks, expectant, a pair of eyes meeting him once it opens. They widen, and it swings open.

Inside is a large, well. You guess you’d call it a prep room. It’s got everything a star needs to get ready for a show, but like *Paradise Found*, it’s huge. You’re welcomed by what you figure is one of Kohen’s assistants, while the panther is seated, doting on himself by a mirror. He stands when he sees the reflection of you both.

“Ahh, well if it isn’t my favorite demonic deviant. How’s kicks, you foul-mouthed fiend?”

Angel stretches his arms, offering an embrace. “Zanny! Baby! S’been a while you damn stiff!”

They kiss cheeks and hug.

“Too long, too long,” the panther drawls. “When I heard you were calling in, I thought it was a mistake. What brings you back to this den of debauchery?”

Zander’s striking eyes come to you. Then he throws his head back, understanding. “Oh! Right. I see now. The request.”

Angel comes back to you, clapping your chest. “That’s right.”

Zander chuckles, throwing out his hand. “So, you’re the square? Good looking fellow. Strong jaw. I like the patch.”

You’re not sure what’s going on, but you’ll take the compliment, shaking hand (paw?). “Oh. Thanks, mister Kohen. Great show.”

He laughs again. “Zanny does just fine, baby.”

You process the previous words. “Sure, uh, Zanny.” A glance to Angel.

“Request?”

The spider’s cheeks flush, and he gives a weak smile, holding your arm close. Real close. Zander, in the meantime, swaggers to the center of the room while his stage assistant makes an exit. What the panther goes to, however, is another piano. He sits at it, flexing his fingers.

You watch, curious. He’s not going to blow up again, is he!?

“Now, Angel, you’ll forgive an old bag of bones, but it’s been a while. Might be off a chord, might mix the words. Only a few practice rounds - you know, shows and all. Now…”

He gestures to both of you. “I do believe this is for couples.”

A slow, excited, heat builds in your chest. “What’s he talking about?” you say.

Angel just lets his head rest on your neck. Soft fluff body tickles your skin like hot silk.

Zander clears his throat, playing a few notes, getting himself set up. Familiar notes. The song.
The song Angel used to sing.

Zander starts to roll out the words, and they hit you with memory. It’s the music that belongs to both of you, from the night Angel Dust exposed himself, showing you a piece of his old life, playing you a sonnet from his days alive. He remembered.

"Win-ter claims, the river. . ."

You snag Angel’s side and pull him into you. God DAMMIT.

He curls into you, and you both just listen. This feeling, this love, this want. You’re about to burst.

_-.^

You cannot take this any fucking longer. There are rooms in Paradise Found, and Angel – flaunting reputation and wealth – scores one of the suites at the very top, promising an amazing view, among things.

But the moment you two step out of the elevator, after having experienced Zander’s private show, you’re done. You’ve snapped. You can’t hold back any longer. You need him. Every bit of your flesh is screaming for him, from the moment he dawned on that beautiful getup to the sheer, passionate tenderness he’s shown you tonight. Your body is quivering with hot, sweet adrenalin and every goddamn second you aren’t inside him, with him, holding him, is a moment in pure agony.

You barely make it out the elevator and into the hall before you take his wrist, press his back into the wall, and shove your frame into him. Kissing, mouthing, pleading. Pinning him. "Fuck, I love you."

“Mwwff!!?”

His face goes hot and flushes scarlet, meeting your lips with his own tender smacks. You’re so close you can taste each other, loins shoved into the other, hardness forming.

“F-f-fuck babe,” he shudders, “Now!? We got a room!”

No. The room is for later. You have the whole weekend to enjoy that. Right now? You need to love your spider.

You breathe. “Now.”

His pinned arms go limp, but the others wrap around you, pulling you in. You don’t give a FUCK if someone sees, you can’t keep yourself under control any longer. Your hand slips under his skirt, yanking down the thin strip of panties guarding his crotch, his hard cock already sprung forward from the attention. You can feel it twitch against your stomach, and that just gets you hungrier.

You’re an animal right now, but a loving one. You can’t stop kissing him and your fingers wrap around his shaft, stroking, tugging. You want him to feel good, to know that he’s loved. That you’ll protect him, hold him, overpower him if need be.

Shit. His perfume is delicious. It fills your nose with an alluring scent and his “tits” are quite enticing too. God, there’s a hundred things you want to do but, the lusty creature inside desires release first.

Time for ideas later.

One more kiss, and you stare into his beautiful mismatched yes. “You make me so fucking happy,” you utter.
He strikes back with his own smooch. “Shuddup and fuck me.”

You growl. Your digits nuzzle and press into his ring, stretching the pucker. One of his hands reaches into your pants, fondling and stroking the growing shaft, pulling you out of suit pants. It’s hot and uncontrolled, there’s no thought to anything right now, just a need for release, a need for each other.

The panties drop to his ankles and he swings his legs around your hips. You let go of his wrists now, supporting him by grabbing his supple, generous rump. Your tip is slippery and it’s enough, seeking out his tunnel, pressing into the hole. He mewls as you slowly shove yourself inside, expanding him, a snug fit.

The rest, of course, is barbaric thrusting and fucking.

---

I’ve always been wired to take that subby role. Dunno why, just how it is, eh? I get off on it. I get off on bein’ part of someone’s fuck sesh. Part of their ‘feel-good.’ Now, it don’t mean I like to do all the work, and a lot of times, in my professional world, that’s kinda what it was. But this? Different. Different with my Anon.

It’s that masculinity that really gets me fuckin’ goin. And I don’t mean the guy that’s jacked, or some shit. Naw. Dominance and power n’all that shit is more than a body, it’s willpower. It’s a feelin’.

Gah, gagh. The way you’re fuckin’ me right now. . .

Ya’ couldn’t help it? And that drives me wild. Ya’ just needed me so bad you had to shove me into a wall and FUCK. That feels good. To be. . . wanted. Needed. Demanded. Loved. And yeah, sometimes I’d want to make ya’ jealous, because it was cute. So cute. To see ya’ getting so fuckin’ flustered about that, the idea of somebody messin’ with your spider! I mean that much to you? Nmmf.

I know I do. And even though you’re basically splittin’ me in half with that fuckin’ dick, ya’ still gentle with me. Still sweet. The way ya’ hold me, keep me. . . I feel like I matter, for once! No more empty mornings or cold ‘thank yous.’ Warmth. Ya’ given me warmth. Someone I can talk to, listen to. Be with.

I want ya’ to feel so good Anon. Heh. My Anon. That ain’t easy to get used to, thinking that.

You’re my best pal. I love you, ya’ stupid fuck.

---

It’s a rush when you spill yourself inside Angel, like it always is. Hot issue coats his tight tunnel and his peak makes a mess out of your suit. Heh. Oops.

You’re both sweating and panting, caught in the arms of a blissful afterglow. You don’t want to move, but, someone might see you. Oh no, the horror.

Eventually, you do make it to the suite, a sloppy mess of sex dripping from you both. You both laugh, a little tipsy, kind of falling into the room, hanging off the other.

“We just made a janitor really mad,” you laugh. Angel chuckles back.

“Gonna’ need deep cleanin’ bleach for that, nayaha!”
You’re lost in the throes of laughter you barely process how massive the suite is too. Like everything. Damn! This is all too much.

Angel tosses his purse while you stumble upon a couch, collapsing. You stare at the ceiling, overwhelmed. This is it. You’re really alone with your boy now, huh? And it feels fucking incredible.

The spider laughs, looking his abdomen and skirt over. There’s a sticky trail of him mashed into his belly and shirt.

“Well shit!” he simpers. “We gotta’ order clothes now!”

You look at your suit. Hope it doesn’t stain!

At once, Angel strips out of his attire, kinky boots and all until he’s down to his panties, coming to you at the couch and flinging himself into it, casual. His legs fall on your waist, flexing his toe claws, neck on armrest.

“Hoshhhiit, pockets.”

Brrr. He looks good, especially messy.

“M’hungry,” he mutters. “Pizza?”

You blink, surprised. “Pizza? That’s not fancy at all.”

“Fuck fancy! I want somethin’ greasy!”

Well, whatever your spider wants. For now, you need to collect yourself, again. You’ve sated your hunger but, the night is young, and so are the days ahead. You feel like you can explore anything with your partner, and it’s thrilling.

He snags a phone, chuckling wickedly. “Neyehehe. Those delivery shits gonna’ have a long trip upstairs!”

Cute little bastard.

You close your eye a moment, embracing this atmosphere. Fucking hell, you love him so much. You’re gonna treat him like fucking royalty. You are. Nothing can mess this up.

Nothing.

Sarakk stared from a distant tower, leaning on the building’s edge as his bulbous, deep eyes scoured over the monolithic Paradise Found. He pointed.

“So, we need to mess that up. Apparently, one of the Fragments is in there.”

At his side, sitting on edge, swinging her legs, was Sarin.

“Oh dear. It’s a big place.”

The massive locust made a cold noise simulating laughter.

“You’d think the boss would give us more to go on then ‘it’s hidden in Kohen’s suit,’ but, here we
“Oh!” chittered the albino rabbit. “He’s lovely! Have you heard his singles?”

“Nope. Have a feeling I’m not gonna, though.”

She raised a paw. “Oh, no, no! You must! Besides, I think we better blend in or he’ll try to run!”

A scoff. “Could just burn the whole thing down. . .”

“Ak-Ak!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

An approving laugh, then a long, long pause. Sarakk glanced down at his cohort.

“I don’t need a bowtie, do I?”

Chapter End Notes

Aww, how romantic!

The ship you never expected! SarSar!
Paradise Lost

Chapter Summary

Angel and You continue to enjoy your time at Paradise Found. Sarakk and Sarin show up at the scene too - how romantic.

Chapter Notes

Paradise Lost!? Good god, move over Shakespeare, I'm a master. Hohoho.

Also, this chapter hints at explicit bondage so you know, be aware.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paradise Lost

You didn’t appreciate things until you saw it. All of it.

The glimmer of a searing pentagram hangs like an ominous monitor in the sky, stretching onwards into a blank, dull-red horizon, a color that never fades or changes. Night is strange – there’s an evening sky spattered with scarlet stars, but are they real? Clouds? They’re around too, but a greasy, charcoal black, pregnant with acid or blood or worse. The city, though...

Devil below. You’ve never seen it like this. From the suite balcony, a temperate warmth hits your face, accented by the cacophonous ambiance of a chaotic, angry dystopia. Pentagram City goes on and on and on, an infinite stretch of pulsing, veiny rocks and buildings. Like fingers they protrude from a floor of black and neon, a hodgepodge of bizarre architecture. There are tiny buildings and big buildings, clumped together with messy indifference. But they never end – the horizon is fuzzy with their silhouettes. Christ among the dead! You feel so small now.

To think – your heist in the Chigurh was probably a blip in this ocean of ceaseless indulgence.

Hmm. When you look out at it all, it seems familiar too, like you’ve seen it. Where...

“Oh jack-fuckin-POT!”

Your attention is snared by the spider. Angel Dust saunters to your side, leaning on the balcony, in casual attire. After your little “romp” in the hall, you both needed some emergency clothes. Thank goodness for airborne delivery! But that’s not all he has.

“Lookit.”

His hand claps your chest, offering a cigar. An expensive cigar, mind. His Lordship’s Reserve, probably whipped up with demonic tobacco. Not that you were complaining.

His sweet features rush into your vision, crescent grin and all, pink light catching his gold tooth.

“Ain’t got a mini fridge in there, it’s like a mini vault!”

A black cigar wiggles through his digits. He huffs. “Loottaaa good shit in there.”

“Like?”

He pauses. “Drugs. The quality stuff.”

Oh. You can see him consider, see the hunger flash through his eyes – not that you blame him.

“You gonna’ be all right?” you ask.

He wiggles a little closer so your sides touch, cutting and lighting his cigar. “Yep.”

He means it. Good for him. That can’t be easy – it’s like if you opened a door and there were rows of diamonds and gold and bills to take, no guards or security. Devil knew you’d be tempted. Resisting that impulse. . . so difficult to do when it’s been a natural part of your identity for years. Him and drugs? Decades.

Not that you want to bring it up, but, you’d hate to see him “lose it” again.

You sip the fine cigar and hot damn it’s a smooth taste. “Is it getting easier?” you ask as you both nurse the blunts.

He takes a long drag, puffing out a smoky heart. “Wha? The ‘dictions?”

“Yeah.”

He cackles. “Nope! Still had to Irish m’coffee this week. Eh. Take half a molly in the mornin’. Keeps the edge off. Um. No needles though.”

It’s not like you’re judging him, nor is it your place to leash-and-collar him with this sort of thing. His body was, what, fifty percent drugs on a daily basis for years? Frankly, you’re impressed.

He paused, considering.

“N’how bout you?”

You? Why, everything’s fine! You’ve got the most beautiful creature in Hell at your side! Really, what else could you need? Heists, plotting, mediating, thinking, who needed that? Who needed the rush and the violence and the thrill of a successful robbery?

Hah. Yeah.

You look at the city again and realize what a confusing mess it all is. Or, the idea of “getting better.” Of trying to be good or kind in, well, the underworld. That’s not how it’s supposed to be, is it? When you’re here, it was the world saying, “you’re bad, now spend the rest of your days suffering for it.” None of it clicks or feels right, but here you were, caught up in. . . you don’t know. You’re not sure what you’re doing or who you are sometimes anymore.

Then you look at Angel Dust, and everything’s okay.

“It’s. . . something.”
“That’s *real* illuminatin’, pockets.”

You shrug. “Guess I didn’t expect a nine-to-five. Not used to it. Few months ago, I was just another sinner in Hell. Now I’m trying to pretend I’m a good person? It’s weird, Angel. Not sure what to make of it.”

Another puff.

“Ain’t it though?”

He twirls, back pressed on the balcony fixture, jabbing a finger in your chest. “Hey! Waitasec! Ya’ callin’ me weird, smartass!?”

He takes a feigned indignant pull of the cigar.

“Well, you are a four-armed spider mobster. In drag.”

He blows a plume of smoke at you, forcing you to flinch and smirk.

“Six arms, genius.”

You wave off the smoke, coughing. “Unless you put something in this cigar, I only count four, peppermint.”

“I make em’ pop out when I want! ‘Sides, easier on the clothin’.”

You concede. “Okay, okay, so a *six*-armed mobster spider, *in drag*. Yes. I’d say it’s weird. But then again, so am I.”

He snickers, sliding closer, resonating with magnetic warmth. “Oh, I’d say you’re more on the dumbass spectrum, babe.”

“Hey!”

He laughs again, taking one last pull of the cigar and flicking it off the towering balcony.

“I call em’ like I sees it!” he continues. “Cute’n stupid.”

Sassy bastard. But you know he’s playing, like usual.

“Well, you may be right then. Can’t seem to figure this Hotel business out. Dunno, Angel. You make sense to me. Everything else? Feels off.”

He leans back a bit. The slope of his “tits” sort of puff out underneath his shirt, showing off white cleavage. Brr. You’re *still* not used to how enticing that is.

“I make sense to ya’? Whuh. You’re in trouble then!”


He slaps the railing. “Hah! The fuck I do!”

A small head shake. ‘I’unno *shit* pockets. Just playin’ the hand every day. Chuck and everybody else seem to got somethin’ goin on, lookin’ before they jump. Heh. Even you think ahead more’n me!”
“Oh?” You chuckle. “Thought I was stupid.”

He adjusts, pressing into you, hand going around your waist. You do the same. A pleasant warmth forms between you two.

“Oh ya’ are. Very. But’cha also think ahead. Or plan, or somethin’. Even if they don’t go uh, y’know, over all easy-like.”

You caress him. “I suppose. Not so much these says. I feel uh. Empty. With you? Everything’s good, but the rest? If I said it was the same as the old ways, I’d be lying.”

Angel nods. “Mm. Ya’ wake up and it’s like, huh, the fuck? This really what I’m doin?’”

“Yes.”

“Am I really tryin’ to be normal now? That kinda shit.”

“Yes! Yes, exactly.”

His extra hands grip the balcony fixture, tapping digits. “Don’t I fuckin’ know it, toots. Ain’t like I get up every day and it’s all sunshine n’smiles.”

He laughs again. “We’re a couple of fuckin degenerates, ain’t we? But. . .”

“But?”

He squeezes you. “We stick togedda’ like crime on a Don. Spit on a dick! Jizz in hair! Lace and a sl-”

“Angel.”

He stops. “Eh, yeh. Y’get the idea.”

You finish your cigar, snuffing it and tossing it aside.

“We stick. Best pals stick.”

You chuckle again. “Just best pals?”

His grin widens and he adorns that wicked, mischievous look. “With alllll the dirty benefits.”

His soft hand ruffles your hair. “M’just kiddin’, pockets. Ti amo tanto.”

Ahh, spider, he liked to hide his affection in euphemisms and words and, well, a language you didn’t know. But that was okay – hell, saying I love you out loud still took getting used to. When you were with Annie, it was an infrequent thing, said only in darker, private moments.

Now it so raw, and his love made you swell with something you could only describe as overwhelming. You look at Angel and you know, as long as you’ve got him, as long as he’s with you, it’ll always be okay. No matter what.

He seems to sense the sentiment. “So, y’know. As long as we stick, Anon. As long as we got this thing between us, I promise ya’. We’ll figure it out. We ain’t alone anymore.”

You kiss his head and smell the gentle perfume tickling his fluff hair. “I know. Sometimes though, I still want the old stuff back. What happens if we fuck up? Well, what happens I dunno, pull another
me?"

He snorts. "Eh? Well, then I’ll fuck you up. Give ya’ a four-armed-beatdown. Ya got it?"

He winks and grins.

You think about it for a moment, blinking. “That’s kinda’ hot.”

Angel stares. “. . .y’fucking with me?”

You’re very clearly not, and Angel rubs his eyes with more laughter. “Aw goddamn, Anon, we got some shit to work out, huh?”

So you do. And as you start to contemplate things again, you realize you may not have many chances like this again for a while. You turn to him, holding his sides, earnest and vulnerable.

“Angel. Look. This has all been. . . so amazing. With you, I mean. You really are my best friend. You make me feel like I can be more than, well, a thief. And I need you to know. . . I love you for it. I don’t want you to feel like you’re just a convenient fuck, or something. You’re more to me than that. And you’re telling people about us? I really hope I’m worth it.”

You briefly think back on who you were, before Angel, before the Hotel, reminded of how rotten it all was.

“I’m still a bad person, Angel,” you admit. “But somehow you see someone else.”

When you finish, he tilts his head, smirking. “Ya’ done?”

A laugh. “I guess so.”

His four arms play with your shirt. “Ya’ know, Anon, you can be pretttttyy dense. I feel like I ain’t gettin through to ya, cutie.”

You feign a frown. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Honestly? Shit, y’really think I ain’t sure about this. ‘Bout us?”

You consider again. “I guess once she came back, I got spooked. I know you don’t judge me Angel, but if you had seen me at my worst, well. . .”

He clicks his tongue, shaking his head. “Like a broken record with ya’!”

Then, his expression shifts, morphing into a sneer. A knowing face, like he’s just remembered the most delectably evil thing.

“Guess I gotta’ explain a different way, huh?”

He pulls from your grasp, sauntering inside. You catch the subtle curve of his perky rump, and it’s really not fair how enticing and curvy he is. Your chest burns in all the right ways, watching him go back into the suite center room. He turns, gesturing with a finger.

“Well get your ass in here!” he calls. So you do.

As you follow, he goes to the entertainment center, a layered set of screens and shelves complete with whatever a sinner might need to pass the time. Television, HellNet stream, even games, of course you have no bloody idea how any of that works. Ahead of your time. It’s not what Angel’s
after though as he leans and bends, flicking his fingers over a large black box. It has a little LED screen and he appears to be hunting for something – a song, you wager.

When you enter, he points at the couch with his toe claws. “Sit!”

Okay, what’s he up to? You land on the couch. The table in front is covered with a couple of pizza boxes and beer. Very romantic.

“Ya’ knooooow, Annie did tell me somethin’ reaaaal fascinatin’ about ya’, pockets,” he says, his tone layered with sneaky mischief. Also, what? You’re not keen on remembering the cold-hearted banshee – why was he bringing it up?

“Guess it fits,” he continues, pressing a button. His eyes widen when he finds the selection, hitting play. He turns, grinning. Grinning so evil. The hell?

“Maybe you’ll finally get it now.”

Huh? You’re not sure-

A cheery guitar note strums, hitting the air, mixed with an upbeat tune. Far, far too upbeat.

Angel Dust crosses his arms, proud knowledge spilling out of him. You boggle. You recognize this.

. . . Oh no. OH NO.

“Hey, hang on, wait!” you say, protesting. Begging. Not this!

“Look, I dunno’ what she told you but it’s a lie!”

The spider’s about to fall over with manic cackles.

“Anon!” he chides. “YA’ BIG DOOF!”

There, mixed with the chords, a chorus of young voices start to sing together:

As long as you loooove me!

**OH GOD NO!**

He’s discovered your darkest secret, perhaps the most wicked thing you’ve stowed away and vowed never to tell anyone ever again, not even your boyfriend. As the song plays, you bury your face in your hands. It’s a song all right, something you unironically enjoyed, since, you know, it spoke to you.

. . .

It’s a pop song. One of the most known, in fact, from your days of youth and it’s disgustingly sweet. WHY?

Angel nearly topples, lurching over, tears in his eyes.

“Ya’ HUGE DORK! M’big scary Anon, mister big time thief! You fuckin’ SOFTIE! Eheheheheheh! THIS WAS YOUR FAVORITE SONG!!?”

Yes. Yes, it was, unfortunately. And as the chorus continues, the youthful voices in perfect harmony, Angel comes to you, sitting in your lap, hands on shoulders.
“Now listen to it ya’ dumb shit!”

Those ever-familiar words ring in your ears. Yep. To your horror, you still love it:

*I don’t care who you are, where you’re from, what you did, as long as you love me!*

It’s disgusting in how happy it is. In fact, it’s a miracle it’s even here in Hell – how’d they let this get by their censors!? Didn’t they have someone checking for stuff like this?

Shit, goddammit. Shit damn shit. It’s true though, and now, the words hold even more meaning than ever before. Angel pulls your hands away from your face, staring. Amused. But . . . earnest and tender and loving.

“Get it?” he says. How can you argue with his beautiful face? *Or* the sultry words of a famous boyband singing sensation?

It’s your turn to grin. “Fuck youuuuuuu.”

He kisses you, and you hold each other for a while.

-*=*

What time was it? You were losing track. Not that you cared – everything felt great so long as you were with your spider. *Paradise Found* too had seemingly limitless venues to explore, and it was clear one could *live* in it they decided. Made sense. If you were a powerful demon with wealth and reputation to spare, why bother with the commonwealth of Hell? The entertainment complex, so far as you could tell, was all about forgetting where you were.

You spent time with him again down by the atriums. There were all sorts of things to see and, frankly, it was impossible to get through all of them. So whatever caught Angel’s eye you were happy to oblige him with.

There was, for example, a place for makeup and fancy perfumes, that sort of thing. Angel took to it like a beast to fresh meat, mismatched eyes wandering over the various selections as the attendant simpered and pitched.

“*You see our seasonal shade? It’s mixed with orphan tears and virgin blood!*”

Angel made a face when inspecting the vial. “*Didja’ say orphan tears? Pass.*”

Not to be outdone, she offered others. “*How about this eye shadow? The base was made from crushed flowers next to a suicidal poet’s grave.*”

“*Ooooo. . .*”

Angel would turn to you, wobbling the box in hand. “*Pockets look! Whatcha think? It’s darker!*”

The attendant beamed. “*Yes! We even have it as a foundation too.*”

You blinked. “*I don’t know what’s happening.*”

The knife venue, that you could at least get a better feel for. Again, what fascinated you about Angel were his interests. He maintained an expected and thorough library of knowledge when it came to his appearance. At cursory glance, the passerby might figure him for just some eye candy, but then he’d turn right around and scrutinize his experiences on the effectiveness of ACP rounds versus bodies. Then there were things like this. . .
An old doddering sinner, something like a fiendish owl, watched the spider fiddle with a variety of fancy stabbers in what was, basically, a knife store. The slogan read “Two Knives – pretty terrific!”

“Dis one has a ivory handle!” Angel would exclaim, twirling it in fingers. He’d make a few flicking motions, the air whistling as he did.

“A popular theme,” wheezed the creature, “for couples.”

Angel quirked a brow, not understanding. Then he looked to you, stared a bit, then nodded.

“Ohhh, I gettit!”

A pause.

“Anon, I don’t get it.”

“I think he means ebony and ivory,” you commented, examining a fearsome, polished meat cleaver.

The spider gasped. “Awh! How romaaantic!”

Romantic?

“Nothin’ better than stabbing palookas togedda, eh babe?”

You mulled the idea over. Was it bad the concept of Angel Dust going on a killing spree was... arousing to you? And cute?

“It’s a date,” you chuckled, joking.

Angel wasn’t joking.

It went on like that for a while, exploring the gargantuan building, talking, chatting. Learning. Every word endeared Angel more and more to you, demonstrating how much a dynamic, interesting person he was. Despite the flaws, the sins, the drug abuse, he was so fascinating to you. Fun. Still fun. And now that you had a taste of these concentrated moments, these focused conversations and experiences, you were realizing... holy shit. This was working. This was a relationship. Even in Hell, you felt a connection, understood it, wanted it.

The wildfire of your initial experiences faded. All that raw, lusty passion from the day you literally collided into him, those days were gone. But now, in its place? A tempered, controlled fire, a healthy burning pillar of your love. The more time you spent together, the more each of you added to it, and the fire kept you both warm, lit the path of your future.

You feel safe with him. You trust him.

Again, you both return to the suite room, tipsy, adorned with new non sex-stained attires. You estimated it wouldn’t be that way for long, though.

There’s something else you want for Angel, you want him to know he’s loved and yearned for. All of him in all his ways. Not just what he can do for you sexually, but everything. His conversation, his company, all of it. It’s what separates – you think – this from a fling or money-laced bender. It’s real to you both and that’s all that matters.

You’re on the couch for a while. His legs are resting over your thighs while you caress him. Bowl of popcorn on his belly where he proceeds to jam kernels in his mouth, television flicking between channels.
“Tffhff bullshffh,” he’d say, munching loudly. You stared.

“Angel. Swallow your food.”

He sticks his tongue out at you, gulping.

“Thank you. Now, what?”

He grumbles, pointing at the screen. It’s a commercial about x-ray glasses.

“I says, that’s bullshit. Those don’t work. Ordered em’ and everything! I even cut the cereal tops for em’!”

“Oh huh. And why would you need those?”

“Free wang to ogle!”

Again, he buries his mouth with an avalanche of popcorn, chomping loudly.

Cute.

You see his little paw-claws flex, toes wiggling with those talons glistening in the light. You chance a touch, just an endearing little squeeze. He doesn’t look at you but you see him blush. In fact, his features go so hot his chest turns a shade of pink too.

It’s late. Or later. You don’t know, you’re not keeping track. You only assume it’s dark because this is around the time you and the spider tend to get frisky. But, you need to show him things – show him that you’re willing to be vulnerable for him. Supplicate, submit. Yes, he seems to prefer playing the bottom role, but that doesn’t mean his needs should go unattended. He’s your Angel, you want him to feel good.

“Will ya’ kiss me?”

That’s his request. Quite timid, if one could believe it. Angel’s always the confident one, the spider taking the sexual lead, but this? It’s quiet when he says it, his face goes red, like he’s asking too much.

Oh peppermint.

You’re so eager to oblige, so kiss you do. You pull up his shirt and press your mouth into his soft tummy, applying little pecks. An arm swings around his waist. He’s standing, you’re on knees, breathing and raining kisses upon him. You breathe and you pull in his scent. Not his perfume, something else. Indistinct – you really can’t describe it. It’s there, but it’s not, like a deeper aroma that’s uniquely him. A wet breeze perhaps, damp silk. He has supple, soft skin but it’s underneath a coat of his hot, soft fluff. Fur, but not.

“More?” you hear him say. You look up.

“If that’s what my spider wants.”

Oh you’re happy to do more. Bed. You get to the suite bed. He’s on his back, mewling as you tug his pants and panties down. You find him, his soft root, and you kiss him there too. Tip, length, and all. Now, you’re not a professional here – this is what, your second genuine attempt at giving Angel some loving? Hell, you’ve never even considered yourself submissive for this kind of thing. But
when you hear Angel offer a soft moan, feel his digits ruffle through your hair, note his thighs clenching around you . . . brr. That’s nice.

You suckle him, and he makes a mess out of you.

He snickers. “Eheh, n-not bad Anon, you could be a pro.”

You grope his knees. “Sure. If I’m exclusively on your payroll.”

Further and further you both dive into the night. Exploring, learning, touching. But there’s something else, something you’ve thought about for a long, long time.

Exposure, vulnerability? The Genovese family and your adoptive captain – he taught you these were unacceptable traits. Weak, cowardly even, unmanly. So naturally, fuck them and fuck that. You trust Angel with everything – your secrets and especially your body.

“You can hurt me, you know.”

Guess it’s why you’re in this ‘predicament.’

Angel’s sitting on your stomach, but, you’re immobile. You’re bound, you see, held and snared by bands of tight web binding your wrists and ankles. Oh no, you’re so helpless, what a tragedy. Quite literally caught in the spider’s web.

Angel’s looking down at you, all sorts of amused. Curious, if even a little concerned, but amused.

“N’kay, easy stallion, easy, let’s take it slow.”

“I dunno,” you chime back. “Might need to tame your bronco, he’s getting rowdy.”

Damn. You’re trying to temper yourself, but it’s getting a lot harder (hah). You’re not sure when these desires started to form – it’s not even that you were really into concepts like bondage. But dammit. For Angel? Anything. A dangerous mentality, but, he could give you a wallop for all you care. You want to be everything he needs, even if it means a few broken bones. Not a healthy way of thinking, is it? Damn, you’re fucked.

But it’s like he said: couple of fucking degenerates.

“M’gonna start by stuffin’ his mouth if he makes bad metaphors again,” grins Angel. “Anon, for fuck’s sake, don’t neigh.”

You laugh. “I won’t. This time.”

“Oh my god no.”

In the meantime, Angel wiggles a bit. You can feel your length held by the split of his white rump. Grghg. It makes you shiver.

Then, he retrieves the knife, the one from earlier, the ivory handle, and oh boy it gets you excited. Why? You don’t know.

“N’allright, we need a safe word.”

Angel’s playing the tutor and that gets you all sorts of worked up.

“Peppermint?” you offer. He nods.
“Good enough.”

He leans, smooching your forehead, very loving, very caring. Tender and sweet.

“If it’s too much, ya’ say that, n’we stop, got it?” he says, flipping the blade around with skilled twists.

Of course. That’s what this is really about – to you. Trust. You want to show him this trust. Because you know, at the core of your rotten, fetid soul, he’s not ever going to hurt you. He’ll get playful, you know that, but he’s not malicious, and you want to demonstrate how much it means to you. Your body, his pleasure. If it also means can use you like a personal dildo, well, by all means.

He torments you with teases first, slipping from your stomach. Stroking your length, lips nearing it. Threatening to kiss it, but not touching. Licking his finger, slowly, while you flex and tense. Ghghg.

“Woooow,” he’d say, cackling. “Bet’d it be nice if I was suckin’ ya dick, eh?”

You squint. “Hey!”

He nudges your length. “Awww, m’sooooo cloooose. I really could just choke on ya’, eh?”

He kisses his palm, but not you. Agh! “Mwah!”

You now regret letting him tie you down.

“Don’t fuck with me,” you grunt. Naturally, Angel fucks with you.

He opens his mouth, letting tongue hang out. “Guess I could put it in, but eh. Maybe later.”

You give a pained laugh. “You actual bitch.”

He feigns anger. “Now that’s mean, Anon. Guess m’gonna need to discipline ya.”

Oh? Hehehe.

Well, this translates to biting. Lots of biting. Hard, jagged gnashes. He’s got fangs and they *sink* into your skin, everywhere. Shoulder, chest, stomach, tiny rivers of scarlet dripping from the wounds. He licks his teeth, and holy *shit* that’s hot to you. Maybe it’s the danger you find so attractive? The dark pain sends spikes of aroused bliss through you, as does the fact you can’t really move.

Yet. Even though he hurts you, he *doesn’t*. He’s careful when he bites, chancing a glance at you to see if you’re still okay, then letting those teeth cut.

Finally, though, he lets up. He returns to your tip and pushes his fluffy “tits” into the flank, embracing them with silky plumpness. His spare hands squeeze and choke your prick by bouncing the cleavage along your inches, and it’s impressive how firm he is there. How does he do it? Questions for later. Right now, your head tosses back in bliss, relieved to finally have *something* attend to your twitching loins.

Like a merciful creature, his lips wrap around your bellend, and you almost scream it’s so good. All that tension and playfulness. His skinned tongue works its usual magic, because he *knows* you like a blueprint. He knows precisely where you’re sensitive, how you like it when he squeezes just above your knee when he takes suckling drags, how you *love* kisses, how you’re extra sensitive between the knuckles and a little finger touch just tickles you. Can’t do it now, obviously, but he’s learned you. It’s wonderful.
He pops you free, a bridge of saliva and precum dribbling from his lips. “Mmff.”

Now, the spider adjusts, coming to sit atop you once more. “Time to ride m’stallion again.”

Agh, fuck. That term is for you. You don’t have delusions, you doubt you’re some kind of sexual Adonis, but to him? It doesn’t matter – he says it so you feel good. Wonderful, sweet bastard.

He takes some lubricant, slathers it on you, and sinks, pucker and hole spread apart while it forms a snug, clenching fit. But, the knife? That comes to your neck, the point right there. Holeee shit that’s getting you bothered in all the right ways.

“Be a good little saddle for me, n’kay Anon? Don’tcha mooooove.”

His face is wild, almost manic. That’s hot.

You’re almost tempted to move to see what he does, but, give him what he wants. He’s got the authority here, and you want that for him. So he rides, hips tossing in controlled, self-indulgent motions, and that’s precisely what you want right now. Not for you to get off, but him. For him to use you, so he, for once, can focus on himself. Be selfish, Angel, it’s okay.

His cock hardens again, springing to life, while your form tenses. He’s milking you dry, hot, huffing moans drifting from his body, so much that his grip on the knife loosens.

Eventually, he spills, stream of searing white erupting from him, once again making a total mess of you. At this point, you’re coated with sweat, blood, and ejaculate. Works for you.

“Heh,” he pants. “Here.”

He presses the end to your lips, letting you drink. “Easy t’get dehydrated doin’ that,” he adds. You nod, grateful.

“That was fucking incredible,” you say after you get a sip. He chuckles.

“Ya’ pretty fucked up, y’know Anon?” Angel says, winking. Here, he takes the knife and slides it between the webbed bindings.

“Let’s keep it like that,” he adds.

Ahh, Angel. He’s teaching you so much.

The bindings are cut and he massages your wrists. “Stretch, but be slow. Easy to cramp. Ya’ don’t want a Charlie horse, fuckers hurt.”

As instructed, you bring your wrists down slowly while he frees you at the ankles. There’s some strain but nothing too serious. Angel procures a rag and wipes your face, cleaning you up.

“You were right,” you say, flexing fingers. “Knives are romantic.”

He snorts, falling back into bed, cradling his neck with arms. “I told ya’. Course, let’s save the stabbin’ for a ginny or two, I ain’t goin’ all snuff film, kay?”
The buzz of the afterglow settles over you both, and you nod. “Fair enough.”

Of course... you’ve got one more thing in mind. Something so foul, vile, and filthy it’s an unspeakable thing amongst the sinners, even in Hell. Something so disgusting it might make even ol’ Lucifer wretch.

When your flesh hungers again, you embrace Angel one more time, slowly pressing over him. Your lips meet. Your hands tangle together, holding and curled. Downright repugnant, this.

Missionary position. With hand holding. And kissing.

You’re locked together and you push into him once more, and there isn’t a second your lips aren’t touching.

_-*_

Sarakk strolled through the crowds with an indifferent stride, carapace joints cracking and clicking as he did, overshadowing most with his stature. In a set of arms, he carried an enormous metal box. At his side, the skipping, hopping Sarin, her ever-pleasant expression stoic and frozen. She was dressed for the occasion – a little black dress accompanying her usual unblinking features. Sarakk was too, sort of? He had a tie, though it hung off his wrist.

They approached the entrance where an entourage of guarding demons gave the duo a glance and decided no, absolutely not. One of them, a suited fiend equal to Sarakk’s height, put himself between the bug and the entrance.

“Oh, ’scuse me,” said Sarakk, proceeding to clap his palms against the agent’s head and splatter it like a mushy fruit.

Gasps and yelps ensued.

“Ak-Ak!” Sarin chastised.

“What? Was I not supposed to do that?”

She shook her head. “Inside, remember?”

Sarakk blinked, looking around, much to the shock and alarm of onlookers. He waved his gore-dripping palms, mandibles clicking into a “smile.”

“Oh. Uh. Sorry folks! Just a magic act. I made him, uhhh. Vanish.”

One of the other guards screamed, dashing into the locust. Sarakk grumbled, grabbing the beast and pulling him apart.

“It’s all part of the act!” he bellowed.

One crowd of soupy entrails later, and the two swaggered in, the locust splattered with viscous, bloody smears.

“You’ve ruined your tie,” she commented, ignoring the boggling, frightened gazes of other demons. He shrugged. “I’ll get another.”

He snared a suited imp, promptly yanking a polka-dot tie from the neck, “accidentally” cracking the head in the process.
“See?”

Sarin stared, grimacing. “That’s. . . terrible.”

They weren’t here for good times and laughs, though, as romantic as it is to maim and butcher all dynamic-duo style. No, there was something critical here, something Better Half was obsessed with acquiring. A Fragment. A tiny piece of Lucifer’s ancient halo, one of dozens, maybe hundreds. But such a Fragment – like others – contained unimaginable power. Collected together, who knows what was possible?

Sarakk knew his type. Well, technically the Half was still his old boss, just, wearing someone else’s skin and personality. But even then, the Half wasn’t just chasing total destruction. No, there was something else going on. Something he wasn’t so sure he liked. But, what he could do? Orders were orders and his Nephilic soul was still bound to the Icon, whatever that meant.

Apparently, it hadn’t caught on there was a problem in Paradise Found, so, the two navigated through various halls and atriums until they reached their destination, unmolested (mostly). Given the circumstance, onlookers probably thought they were just a grotesque pair of party goers going to a blood orgy or returning from one.

“Here!”

Sarin looked excited, pointing at a sign. Sarakk blinked – he couldn’t read most of it. This new-fangled language, all messy and curvy.

“Sure about that?” remarked Sarakk, setting the heavy metal case down. She nodded.

“Oh I’d recognize mister Kohen’s sweet sultry tones anywhere!”

Sarakk huffed. He could sing too!

The case hissed open, and Sarin started to peruse through it, pulling free a variety of “tools.” A claw-like apparatus with injector needles. A bandolier of canisters. A gas mask. A gas mask?

“Thought you didn’t need that?” said the bug, tapping her head.

“I don’t! But it’s for show. I should look nice, after all.”

Fancy dress and get ups? These demons of today sure did put on airs for this sort of thing. Sarakk couldn’t help but muse on the old days – a loincloth and a hot poking iron, that’s about all you needed in holy Gehenna.

As she strapped on her various armaments, the lofty tunes of music echoed down the hall from a ballroom entrance. It caused Sarin’s ears to wiggle as she hummed along with it. Sarakk didn’t get what the big deal was! Bet this Zander fella’ couldn’t even lift a car! Still, he was important. So important the boss demanded he remain alive, at least until the information was extracted.

Once Sarin ‘dressed’ herself, there was one last critical tool to use.

“Hmm. Hope this fella’ works like he’s supposed to.”

Sarakk pulled from the case a large, glass tube. Large enough to preserve something, hold it in place. Say, a head.

The Obsessors’ head.
Inside the glass fixture, a cranium with a variety of wires and cords jammed themselves into the
various bits of Obs’ dome, forcing it to live, driving life where life should not exist. His wide, saucer-
like eyes stared from the glass prison, unblinking, but aware. Aware of his plight, his silent cage, but
unable to feel or move or even scream. The wires fed pulses of demonic electricity into parts of his
mind, while simultaneously thoughts from it.

His tormenters eyed him over, indifferent.

“All he does is look and we get the details?” mused Sarakk. Sarin nodded with affirming, unmoving
smile.

“Good.”

Sarakk flicked the glass. “You awake in there?”

“Oh, he always is. He’ll never sleep again. He can understand everything, he just can’t do anything
about it.”

Sarakk grunted. “Even I don’t play with my food that much.”

Speaking of food, he was getting hungry!

There were a few things Tom Trench prided himself on: being a sharply dressed news anchor,
spotting a hottie with a body (for purely professional reasons of course), and sensing danger. Years
of working with a power-hungry media mogul will do that to you. It's why he hung around
ballrooms and fancy digs like Paradise so much.

So when he spotted a couple of figures enter the ballroom, his mind rang all sorts of alarms. They
screamed oh fuck no. A massive bug covered in gooey blood accompanied by the bunny equivalent
of mustard gas? No. No thank you. You learn a lot running reports for Pentagram City, and you see
a lot of things too. Killers, especially. These two? Bad. Bad fucking news. Death was written all
over them.

He couldn’t die now! He had to jackoff later!

He dove behind the bar counter much to the silent fury of Lloyd, hiding. Hoping. No one else
noticed, too enchanted by the swinging songs of Zander and his band. Poor suckers.

For a moment, all sounded well. The general ambiance hung in the air like nothing changed. Then, a
strange metal thing cut through the chatter, like an object was thrown. Hissing, afterward. The air
shifted, obscured, filled with a white, cloudy vapor.

Soon, cheers turned to screams. Plumes of poison choked the ballroom. The music stopped and there
were gagging sounds, coughing sounds, melting sounds.

Oh god. If Tom died here, Katie would crucify him.

He curled himself into a tiny ball. If he was lucky, these two weren’t thirsty in the conventional
sense.

Your eyelid flutters open. Exhaustion clutches your form, but so does something else: Angel.
The sweet fluff spider is curled into you, your arm around his back. It’s nice. Quiet and peaceful. This is all you need, isn’t it? This moment, and moments like them.

A distant rumble of thunder rattles the horizon. That’s nice too. Something about rainfall and a couple cuddling together. **A perfect end to a perfect day.**

There’s another rumble. Wow, must be a hard storm out there. It rained in Hell, didn’t it? Not often, but you could swear.

You turn to look out the suite window. The night is clear, and there are no flashes of light in the sky, save for the towers of neon. Wait, what?

One more. Wait. That isn’t thunder. That’s coming from somewhere else, somewhere below. Below? In the building? Your eye widens. It’s not thunder. **It's an explosion.**

You pull yourself up, glancing around. Something’s not right. Well, things are never right down in Hell, but this feeling, you know it. Your body crawls with goosebumps and you wait, listening. You think you can hear the distant, muffled chorus of screams. Unless your imagination is fucking with you.

Your breathing hastens.

Your left arm feels like it’s burning.

“Angel!” you hiss. “Angel!”

The spider groans, offering a long, annoyed growl. “Nnnnn.”

“Wake up!”

His eyelids open and he gives you an exhausted death stare. “Whaaaaaat!?” he croaks.

“The fuck pockets, what? Whatwhatwhat?”

There’s some dreadful and familiar in the air. Something you recognize – the scent of poison.

“We need to leave.”

Chapter End Notes

Knives, bloody biting, murder, horrible existential mind prisons! If that ain't an ideal couple getaway then I don't know what is.
The Duet

Chapter Summary

Sarakk and Sarin make their move, while You and Angel Dust try to escape Paradise Found.

Chapter Notes

One couple's romantic evening is another's terror and dread.

You know, every chapter I say to myself "okay, this will be about 5k words," and then it just keeps going dammit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Duet

“I guess I missed the party.”

In his time, Zander was privy to all sorts of wretches, horrors, and abominations. Creatures from every corner of Pentagram City stopped by to see his shows, all carrying their own aura of dread malignance. He was used to it. It was Hell, baby, everyone was a devil in their own way. But these two...

A lot of words out there, a lot of fancy ways to describe things. He didn’t have any, save for one. Evil.

His trembling hands planted a cig in mouth, nursing it with hasty drags. Around him lied the bodies of wealthy ball-goers, or, what remained of them. Most were reduced to deformed, bloated corpses or puddles of bloody stew. The air stung with the odor of death and the stinging aroma of poison. That was no way to go, no way to go at all.

“I loved your cover of Blue Velvet! It was magical! I’m so thrilled to finally meet you!”

The panther demon forced a weak smile. Staring up at him was a creature. She may have dressed nice, but once that horrid gas mask came off and she leered at him with those unblinking, bulbous scarlet eyes, well. A horror hiding in the body of a rabbit. He’d sooner meet a stalker. And then there was the other one. Looming over him, taller than most vagabonds he’d seen. Skulking, insectoid, a set of cutting mandibles accenting its greenish carapace (coated with thick splashes of blood, mind). These two? A match made in Hell.

“What ever got you into show business, anyway?” chimed the rabbit, her head tilting at an angle most unnatural.

Zander glanced around. No way to make a break for it. Ballroom entrance was too far off – but hey, he was popular, someone was bound to come for him, right?
"HEY."

His attention was snapped to the gargantuan fiend.

"The lady asked you a question," it said, tone coated with acidic resentment.

Zander took one more drag of his cig. "Oh. Haha, sorry baby. Just trying to catch my yarn, it’s such an old story."

The locust wasn’t amused. “You think you’ve got somewhere to be?”

*Just play it cool, baby, just play it cool. They’re only hecklers.*

“Well. . .”

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Every word out of this smooth talker made Sarakk want to throw him into a wall. So he’s a feline in a shiny suit. *Big deal.* Why was Sarry so het up about him anyway? All Zander could do was sing. Could he punch a boulder in half? Probably not. How about juggle a few dozen demons with four arms? Hah! No. What a joke. Yet for some reason, his compatriot in carnage was over-the-hills for this mewling wretch. Bah!

When Sarin made a noise that sounded like a girlish coo, he had enough.

“Enough muttering,” spat the locust. “We’ve got a job to do.”

Sarin’s happy expression faded. Briefly.

“Aww! But Ak-Ak!”

In fact, Sarakk wasn’t so eager to get the boss here anyway, but, he’d rather deal with that grinning psychopath than hear Sarin fawn over this dime-store demon one more second.

“Sorry, Sarry, work is work.”

He stomped over to the bar, wide eyes flicking over the selection of bottles. All of them sounded so overly verbose and haughty it was a wonder this city could function at all. Alcohol was alcohol! No wonder this place was purged so much! Men in shiny suits, pretentious wine names! Back in his day, it was fermented blood-grapes and meat on a spit.

He hooked his claw over the counter, grabbing a colored bottle, bashing it open and swigging the liquid down. He didn’t notice the cowering figure behind it.

“Want something?” he called over. Sarin waved him off.

“Not yet. What about you, Mr. Kohen?”

“*He doesn’t get a drink,*” Sarakk hissed, turning. “He won’t need it anyway.”

Zander looked between them, increasingly nervous. Good. Once Sarakk returned, he procured the glass tube holding the Obsessor’s head, promptly knocking his wrist into the panther’s stomach. Zander coughed, wincing in pain, going to his knees.

“Oh! Ak-Ak! Be nice.”
Sarin, though, was delighted to have the illustrious panther at her height. She flexed her paws, tempted to touch his rather handsome, chiseled face. She had so many questions! And his cologne was rather enchanting. And then . . .

Wait. Wait. There wasn’t just cologne, it was different. Light and gentle mixed in with Zander’s aroma - faint but still present.

Her nose wiggled. She blinked. Then gasped.

“. . .oh my GOODNESS!”

Sarakk’s antennae flagged. “What? What?!”

Sarin’s expression warped into something bordering on orgasmic glee. All at once, recognition and memory hit her. A scent lingered on Zander’s frame, timid, subtle, a day old, but there. She knew it. SHE KNEW IT. Him! Himhimhimhim. Him and them! THEM!

She started chewing on her digits. “They’re both here.”

“Hwah? Who?”

Her unblinking eyes went to the locust. “I never thought I’d see them again!”

Sarakk was positively flabbergasted.

“Sarry, you’re doing that thing again. The cryptic talk?”

The rabbit wasn’t listening. She was lost in the domain of the past. Oh, how long was it, really? Since her business at the casino? Things didn’t go so well, did they? No, not at all. But maybe this time . . .

Her senses whipped to life. Her soul was like a nerve-poison given conscious thought, and she could always pick apart the subtle, buried ingredients and scents found in the makeup of just about anything, really! And what was it these senses of hers had found? Perfume. A rare and exquisite kind made for one individual. Someone quite elegant, specific. Someone in the company of another.

Like a path, the scent trailed somewhere else, into the hall. . . all Sarin had to do was track it.

“I can’t wait.”

Sarin giggled, then hopped. Hopped and skipped. The scent was drawing her somewhere else, to an elevator. Up.

“Wha!? Hey, where you going!?” Sarakk hollered, watching the miniature killing-machine go on her merry way. He was tempted to follow, but the Half was very specific about finding this Fragment, and probably would get all kill-y if there were delays. Or, more than expected.

Dammit. Well, at least she wasn’t ogling this stupid shiny cat anymore. He’d catch up with her in a moment.

He turned back to the wheezing Zander. Sarakk crouched, mandibles clicking together.

“You know, I’m supposed to use this fella’ to get the info out of you, but between you and me, I like doing things the old fashioned way,” said Sarakk, tapping the tube.

“So, KO-HEN. Tell me, where’s the Fragment? Where’d you get it?”
Zander’s eyes widened. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about, baby.”

If it were possible for mandibles to form a sneer, Sarakk was doing it. He rotated his arms, cracking them, prepping them.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Tremors of panic were sweeping through you. Like a switch, an instinct, your guts twisted and your mind raced, all screaming the same thing: danger. Was it the pit in your stomach or the strange burning in your left arm, distant yet familiar? Well, didn’t matter now. The air changed. The miasma of death was apparent. A tinge of caustic vapor stung your nostrils.

You were ready, suit and all. Unprepared though armament wise – you felt naked without a weapon. The ebony knife was a lovely gift from your significant other, but, you liked to keep things at a distance. Considering what you’ve faced down, range was better.

It didn’t help Angel was slow on the draw. Just a little.

You peeked out the door again, single eye peering through the crack. “Angel, please, hurry,” you called behind you.

Your spider was none too happy to be yanked out of his beauty rest and offered you another exhausted death stare.

“The fuck is your problem?” he rasped. He pulled on some of his finer clothes, going for the fancy jacket. Neither of you had time for this!

“Leave it!” you barked. He froze, gawking at you.

“Ain’t leavin’ that!”

You were getting angry. This wasn’t a game. There was something bad coming, you could feel it. You wouldn’t forgive yourself if anything happened to Angel, much less yourself.

“Fine!” you grimaced. “Just hurry!”

He frowned, soured, muttering.

“Don’t tell me how to hurry you muddafucker waking me up plate oughtas slapped you sideways...”

When he pulled on the rest of his attire, you were relieved, only to see him flick open a flip-mirror and start preening his face, applying mascara.

“Goddammit!”

You grabbed his hand and yanked him out of the room, much to his fury.

“Hey! Relax ya’ stupid sonofabitch!”

You’ll get chewed out by him later, but right now you had to get the fuck out of this place. You didn’t know why, exactly. You weren’t sure why your every sense roared fear and run, but that was enough to get moving. After all the things you’ve seen and encountered, you didn’t need a second hint.
You tugged Angel along towards the elevator, the stubborn spider still applying his ‘appearance’ as he stumbled along with you.

“Can you please do that later?” you pleaded.

Angel Dust scowled. “How ‘bout ya’ sit on a dick!”

Whatever, whatever! As long as he was with you, that’s all that mattered. Just get to the elevator. Get to the floor. Get out. Simple. You rushed toward your beacon of safety, the gold-trimmed metal doors seated at the end of the hall. An awful silence lingered in the air – not the good kind. The kind indicating something was wrong. The sound of death.

You reached the end, your spider flicking close the flip-mirror, head tilting to the side. His typical wide, bright eyes fluttered open and shut, form wobbling, tipsy from lack of sleep. You were no better – your flesh ached for rest, and the only thing keeping you up was the sheer adrenaline kick of fight or flight.

“Why’d ya’ wake me uuuuuuuuup!” Angel whined. “Stupid asshole!”

You ignored him. You came to the elevator dial, hitting the bu-

Ding.

Every part of you screamed to get the fuck back. To your horror, the door shifted open, and pouring through was a white, phosphoric vapor, a cloud drifting from the slowly opening metal frames.

No.

No.

This wasn’t happening.

Angel blinked, not understanding. “Da’ fuck. . .”

Through that cloud of miasmatic poison, two wide scarlet eyes peered through, obscured by the fog. The small shape of a thing beamed, wearing a smile that never faded.

NO!

“HI!”

There was a hissing pop and something ejected from the cloud, a small metal canister colliding into your head. You grunted in pain, stumbling back as it started to blossom in a geyser of toxic vapor. Angel’s eyes flicked between you and the assailant, weariness dropping like a stone.

“Wha. . . HEY!”

You felt the hot rush of blood stream down your face, snaring Angel by the wrist and tearing him away in the opposite direction. You didn’t need to look back to hear the familiar, terrifying giggle of that thing. She was alive. It was alive. The demon from the casino heist. How!? How was she still breathing!? You jammed a knife straight into her stupid fucking head!

You heard the distant noise of additional metal capsules hissing to life, choking the halls with neurotoxin. Familiar terror exploded in your chest. Last time you saw her, you lost an arm, an eye, and almost your life. But it was worse now. Angel was with you. In a panic, you flung yourself and he back into the suite room, slamming the door shut. Where!? Where else would you go!? There
were no other rooms or exits, you were both trapped! Fuck. FUCK! This was bad, very bad. Once the haze started to seep in, you'd both start choking and gagging and . . .

Desperation stabbed at you. Oh devil no, not this. You weren’t afraid to die, but Angel!? Images, terrible images ran through your head. Flashes of his limp body, his oxygen-deprived face staring into you as the last traces of life left him. The notion of failure, the concept of losing something you loved.

You were not letting that happen.

You grabbed a chair and jammed it in front of the door for all the good it would do.

“Hey, smartass!”

You started pacing. You needed to think. You needed to plan. You could . . . distract her, you think. Pull Sarin’s attention away, somewhere else, give Angel some time to hide or find a safer way out. That worked, didn’t it? It’s all you had. Your heart battered your chest. This was it, huh? Fucking hell. Fine then. Whatever it took, what-

Angel snagged you by the shoulders, about to shake you. “Don’t fuckin’ ignore me! The hell is yer’ deal!?”

You stared at him. What are you supposed to say, really?

“. . .we can’t open that door.”

Angel looked you over, realizing how genuinely frightened you were. His mismatched eyes narrowed.

“Why?”

You flinched. You wish this wasn’t real. But the sins of your past were returning, and they were eager to collect.

“Angel you need to hide,” you said. Your voice was flat and deathly serious. “You hide, and you don’t come out, understand?”

Angel’s face twisted like you’d slapped him. “I understand ya’ bein fuckin’ stupid again! What’s this shit!? I don’t hide! And I sure as shit ain’t runnin’ from no. . .”

He clicked his tongue as a thin river of blood ran down your face. Helicked his thumb, rubbing it clean.

“Is someone after you?” he returned, just as serious.

There wasn’t much time left. “Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then I’mma turn em’ into goddamn sos. The hell, ya’ think I’m gonna’ let some spook whack ya?”

You glanced at the door. You think you can hear footsteps.

“It isn’t like that!” you protest. “This isn’t . . . this isn’t some thug, Angel! They almost killed me! It’s her, from the casino! And she’ll kill you too!”

Your tone shakes, frightened. “Please. I’m begging you. I can’t lose you. Not because of me.”
Angel’s features softened. He doesn’t say anything though. Instead, he presses his lips into yours, soft and warm, comforting.

“Angel...”

“Shhhh. Ya’ so stupid sometimes.”

This wasn’t a game! You’re about to scream at him!

His hand, though, it covers your mouth. He glances at the door, then behind him, around the suite. His eyes squint, looking past the window room, to the balcony. Footsteps are audible now, and there’s a strange, soft hissing noise. The doorknob jostles, and terror fills you again.

He drops his hand.

“Angel, god fucking dammit,” you say through grit teeth, “Hide!”

He waves a hand, not even looking at you, but keeps his focus on the balcony. “Yeahyeahyeah...”

Is he ignoring you!? Does he not care!?

That strange noise from outside the door shifts. A loud *pop* stings the air, and the lock mechanism bursts from its holding. The keyhole flies from the door like a bullet, an eye peering through.

“Hellloooo! Remember me? It’s nice to see you again!”

Angel Dust frowns. “Fuck off ya’ raggedy whore-skank or I’ll staple ya’ to the fucking wall!”

Well, now the damn rabbit knew he was there too. You’ve never been directly angry with Angel before, but now he was being foolish!

Naturally, Angel Dust doesn’t care.

He looks at you again, tone shifting, temperate and sweet. “Do ya’ trust me?”

Of course you do. With everything. But this isn’t the time for some scheme or hairbrained idea, this was a literal matter of life and death.

“Yes, but...”

He nods. “N’good. Figure ol’ mini mustard gas out there ain’t the ‘stand around and get shot type,’ so...”

This time, Angel grabs you and leads you away, to the balcony, outside. The warm air of Pentagram City falls over you, along with the ambiance of its endless chaos. Why were you out here? Every second you stuck around was another second Sarin could get to both of you.

“What are we doing?” you say, voice strained.

Your spider smirks. He fishes in his coat pocket and pulls out a fat stack of bundled, pink dynamite, summoning it from, well, wherever he gets this shit from. He flicks out a lighter, promptly igniting the long twine at the end of it, giving you a dark grin, before chucking it in the middle of the suite room. Was he fucking crazy!?

You’re dumbfounded. This was suicidal! You’d both be caught in the explosion!
Before you can protest, his arms sweep around you, all four clutching and tight, a steely embrace. You can feel him bind you up with web, securing you. You panic.

“What are you doing!??

If you’re bound, you can’t run or fight or anything. What. . . why were you on the balcony!? Your spider is. . . alarmingly strong. He shuffles back until his haunches are on the balcony edge and oh fucking Christ among the dead the entirety of the city is below you. You’re high, really goddamn high. The distance between the suite and the street is nauseating. Horrifying.

“Eheheheh.”

Angel’s grinning, positively tickled. “Always wanted to fly!” He glances down, then back to you, a positively delighted sneer stretching his features.

Huhwhat? What!? Oh no. Nonononononono!

“ANGEL!”

He kisses your cheek. “I gotcha’, babe.”

Holding you like a precious jewel, Angel Dust flings himself off the edge with you in his grasp, and you both fall.

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Sarin wasn’t the strongest of creatures, so breaking down the door required some patience. But, with the proper acidic agent, her toxins ate away at the demonic wood and allowed her to push through. As she did, the suite was thick with phosphoric vapor. How lovely! Surely, mister thief and Phencyclidine would be here and she could finally talk to them both in person! Last time things weren’t so good, but this time. . .

Sarin blinked. Oh. What?

Instead of two gasping figures holding on for dear life, instead was a flicking spark attached to a piece of wire, travelling to. . .

Dynamite. A whole family of them! On the pink sticks a little of words was visible:

FUCK U

“Oh.”

Sarin threw herself into cover before the explosives burst into a swell of pregnant fire, promptly engulfing the room with flame and force.

---

THUNK.

The lithe panther frame hit the floor with another inelegant thud, body crumpling, pained wheezes leaving Zander’s body. Hah! Sarakk was taking it easy. The singer’s visage blossomed with bruises and blood, some of his bones cracked. The locust kicked him aside, forcing him on his back, amused.
“Please, do keep this up,” said the towering fiend. “I’d rather you keep all the answers to yourself for a while.”

Zander hacked up blood. “You’re a right proper bastard,” he choked out. “I reckon only the devil wants your company.”

A clawed foot came to rest on the panther’s head.

“Ugh, you have no idea how much I want to squish you.”

Sarakk paused, musing it over. “Hmm. In a manner of speaking.”

He leaned, taking Zander by the fancy suit and holding him by the throat. “So, what’s it going to be? Ready to spill? Because this is pretty fun.”

Zander wheezed, spitting. “They’d do worse to me.”

The locust blinked. “Oh, there’s a they? That’s interesting. And by interesting, I mean, thank you for resisting.”

He didn’t need to do this, no. The head of that Obs thing was plenty sufficient to yank information out of anybody, so long as the living head could see its target. But this smooth talking smart ass got Sarakk all buzzed up, he did. Nobody got sweet on little Sarry except him!

Sarakk tore a metal pole from the bar with one of his spare arms, before promptly jamming it through Zander’s shoulder and nailing him to the wall. Naturally, the panther demon wailed in agony, grasping the spear of metal, struggling to support his weight.

“There! Sing about that you sultry bastard!”

At this point, Sarakk didn’t rightly care if he lived or not. Only had to keep him alive long enough for the tube-head to work his magic. He grabbed said preserved cranium, turning the saucer-eyes towards the flailing Zander, amused.

“What do you think?” he asked the head. “That’s a real good look for him, isn’t it?”

Of course, there was no response.

Hmph.

Well. Much as he loved the sight of this struggling smart ass, there was still a job to do. And In-In wasn’t back yet! Guess he needed to fetch her.

Before he did though, there was still one last thing to take care of. The Obsessors’ head, the Half explained, wasn’t only for stealing memories from souls. Oh, no, the little bug was all sorts of useful, he simply didn’t know it. Like an improvised key, they could force Obs to project openings of the In Between in any location, provided the bug was there. As it turned out, made a handy little transport mechanism.

The locust leaned, checking the tube over. What a weird thing, it was. All these fancy doodads and wires and whatssits. He didn’t understand, not that he needed to. There was a button on the apparatus, and once pressed, it would drive agonizing energy into the Obsessor’s head, forcing a projection of the In Between and creating a door. Nice and easy.

A clawed digit did precisely that, tapping the button as the tube’s “neck” whirred with pulsing
electricity, feeding devil knew what into the arachnid’s mind.

“Hah!” Sarakk chortled. “You thought I was bad?”

He glanced to the hanging panther demon. Obviously, Zander couldn’t hear him over his own screams.

Sarakk waited as the projection started to form wa-

The ground roared and shook.

Antennae flagged. A loud, cacophonous explosion broke over Zander’s pained groans. Sarakk froze. That came from above! His pupils swung to the ceiling, watching the chandeliers sputter and wobble. But . . . wait, wasn’t Sarin up there? Why was there an explosion!?

Sarakk felt something he hadn’t for thousands of years, something that stabbed at his ancient Nephilim heart (or one of them). Fear.

“SARRY!” he screeched.

Well, fuck this, fuck the demon, and fuck the job!

Immediately, the titanic thing bolted, wings tearing the air as he flew through the ceiling. Now, Paradise Found was made with stern, resilient underworld steel, the same stuff making up some of Lucifer’s own playgrounds. Sarakk slammed his way through every floor like it was butter, crashing and ripping his way skyward, cavernous holes left behind him as he tore through the building like a beast’s claw to flesh.

There was some sort of heavy box in his way when he got to the top – an elevator, it was called? Didn’t matter. He ripped into it, pulled upon the walls of metal blocking his path, emerging on the top floor. The stench of poison, powder, and fire consumed his senses.

“Gah! What!?” This didn’t look good.

Skeletons of fragmented wood layered the floor, the locust glancing around. “IN-IN!” he screamed.

“In here.”

Her voice was weak but audible. At once, Sarakk followed the noise. She’d been sent backward into another room, debris, atop her. She was almost crushed!

. . .but she was still smiling.

Sarakk was quick to pull off the smoldering wood and wreckage. “What happened!?”

He didn’t even let her respond, clutching the tiny rabbit in his clawed grasp, protective and doting. She didn’t look injured. Singed fur, certainly, but nothing was broken, at least not this time. She got lucky.

“Don’t. Go. Alone.”

Her ears flattened, looking up at him, uninterested in her current ‘predicament.’

“They got away.”

Sarakk didn’t understand. He followed her eyes, looking behind him, where a gaping hole fractured
the suite room wall (or what was left of it). Nothing remained but fire and ash and destruction.

Who? Who got away? Who could possess Sarin to run off by her lonesome and risk herself like that?

Sarakk pondered. Who would he go after?

. . .

Oh.

Them.

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Was it Tom’s lucky day or what!?

He peeked over the bar, gazing over the corpse-strewn ballroom floor, a white vapor filling the room. Well, his ol’ gas mask wasn’t just a killer, turns out it was a functioning one too! For breathing, at least. His skin tickled from the caustic vapor – probably wasn’t best to stick around. Thank goodness the bun and bug took off! He hopped over the edge, wiping back his suede shock of blonde hair and adjusting blue suit. His gaze went up, noting the enormous wound the insect thing had inflicted upon the ceiling. Er, multiple ceilings. Sparks and debris trickled from the impacted floors – holy shit! Remind him to never take hands with that thing.

This whole thing was a huge scoop waiting to happen. Not that Trench cared, but, if he missed a story like this being survivor one and didn’t get it to Katie, well, she’d have a much worse fate in store for him than ol’ Zandy. And speaking of, ouch!

“Hang in there tough guy!” Tom called as he started to make his way towards the room exit. Oops. Maybe not the best turn-of-phrase. Call it a Freudian slip.

He’d help, but, well, living.

He was almost through the exit when a sound halted his victorious stride. In true cowardly fashion, Tom Trench dove behind something once again, peeking around a wall corner. What now? The disturbance he heard wasn’t ‘normal’ either, it was rather. . . gooey.

He boggled, chancing a peek.

In the room, something was happening. And “something” was kind of the only way to put it. How do you find words for this? Some sort of black, fleshy mass coalesced into existence, a rectangle of shadows, attached to nothing and appearing from nothing. Slowly, it writhed and wriggled and formed until it looked no different from a door – if said door was some bizarre, viscous mass of ebony ichor.

It shifted, opened. Creatures stepped out. Wait, no, hang on. Someone. Two someones!

“What the diddly dad fucker?” Tom muttered, lenses widening.

It wasn’t the eldritch-esque portal of shadows giving Tom a deep fright, it was the persons plus two really sending him through the what-the-fuck zone.

One dressed in white, the other in black. But it couldn’t be. Could it?

Angel Dust? That Anon fella?
No. No way. Tom knew peeps. His life was based on knowing shit so he could report on said shit. These were not the same pair – these two carried a presence that was downright wrong. Unless those kiddos were playing villain on the side? Well, ‘villain’ for the standards of Hell anyway.

He squinted. No. A voice in his porn-hungry soul told him this wasn’t the friendly spider and stand-up chap he met last night.

The “Anon” duplicate held the same stature, but was off. A pale, fancy white suit with matching overcoat hugged his form, and he wore some kind of plated mask, molded into a face, covering a hideous contraption of shadows. The “Angel?” Also, too prudent. A tight black suit complimented his curvy features, but those eyes? Not only in reverse – they were vicious, mean. Trouble. More red where red shouldn’t be.

As the kids say these days: nope!

Tom ducked out, making a dash for the entrance of Paradise Found.

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The Better Half cast his single-eyed gaze over the carnage-laden floor, hands behind him, strolling through, checking the dead. A decent start. Not bad for a first-time performance.

“Ooh, free drinks.”

Legna was quick to oblige himself with the open bar. No tips needed for Lloyd, he was a fleshy puddle at this point.

While the spider indulged themselves on the armory of alcohol, Better Half took a nice, long, steady walk towards the hanging Zander, whose sparkling suit was now stained with dark patches of scarlet. His movements were slowing now, exhausted by the loss of blood and fatigued from supporting himself.

“How having trouble?”

Better Half forced the words out. It was difficult for a thing like him to simulate conversation. The white, molded mask imitated a patterned skull – all but sewn directly into the mass of darkness he called his skin. He was told it was comforting to others instead of the snarling, fanged grin he typically wore.

With a quick, merciless pull, the Half yanked out the long pillar of metal, Zander shrieking and collapsing to the floor, panting and clutching his wound. The Half glanced over the metal before tossing it aside, swaggering back to Legna, who was preoccupied knocking back a shot or four.

“We’re short,” Legna noted, licking his lips. “Those two piss off to fuck or something?”

Better Half didn’t respond, not yet. He was more interested in the tube holding Obs’ head, placing a possessive hand atop it.

“I suppose….” Half fought back a laugh. “I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?”

A cough broke over them, along with Zander’s pleading voice. Both glanced over to see the injured, struggling Zander.

“Angel?” he said, weak and hoarse. “Angel, baby, help a poor sinner up, won’t you? This cats lost his stride.”
Better Half nearly fell over with laughter, fist clenched. It never stopped amusing him how wrong they always were.

Legna Tsud smiled too, but not the kind one wanted to see.

“Aww, I’d be d’lighted to!” Legna called over, swinging back another drink and throwing the glass against the wall.

He sauntered over to the weakened performer, creating an ax from the void of his ‘soul’. Half, in the meantime, poured himself a drink and found a nice comfortable seat, like he was about to watch a performance. He was.

This, like so many other things, wasn’t necessary of course. Obs had already fed Half the information he needed. Sifting through Zander’s soul revealed the location of the Fragment, and as predicted, it was hiding in one of his suits – in plain sight, like a trinket. As for where he got it? Well now, the crime families of Pentagram City were up to all sorts of things, weren’t they? One with rather interesting family ties. Suppose he’d pay them a visit too.

The soul shared other secrets too, recent secrets. Seems Zander found himself in company ever so interesting.

He pulled off his mask, revealing a face appearing to fracture and break, as though the sheer malignance behind it cracked the visage. All that remained was the long, stretched maw of grinning teeth and single, merciless eye.

In the meantime, Legna kicked Zander back to the floor, who looked up with terrified confusion.

“Try singin’ a hit song now you dumb muddafucka!”

Better Half took a sip, leaning back as the spider butchered the demon with aggressive, unrepentant swings.

By the time he was finished, not much remained of Kohen, only separated bits, while Legna’s frame was splashed with scarlet, hair tuft mussed and frayed.

“Oh, encore, encore!” laughed the Better Half. Eager for praise, Legna smirked, proud, returning to Half to sit in his lap.

“You’re a . . .” Half struggled, pausing. “You’re a spectacle, lamb.”

Legna grinned. “Betcha’ I can make it better.”

Better Half cast his eye upward, towards the hole in the ceiling, knowing.

“Oh. It already is.”

The vista of Pentagram City flew past you in a nauseating blur, strobes of light and black shapes running together in a muddy mass of velocity. Holy shit you were gonna die! You were gonna hit the ground and splatter like an egg! Angel! Angel WHY!?

Your eye was shut, and all you could feel was the sense of, well, nothing. Your hearing was consumed with the muffled screech of billowing wind, obscuring the cacophony of the underworld. You were weightless, powerless, waiting for your demise. A terrifying reminder of how fragile one
really was, how simple it felt to be a leaf caught in a torrent. The only thing keeping your sanity intact was a quartet of warm arms holding you close. Shit, Angel. It didn’t have to be like this! You could’ve saved him!

You had to make peace with your end. You didn’t know what would happen, either. Would you come back? This wasn’t true death, was it? Well, guess you were about to find out.

Which is what would’ve happened if the velocity hadn’t slowed. A rather abrupt snaring sensation overcame you, like a soft force yanked you both out of the sky and held you in place. It was a smooth motion, almost rubbery, holding you both like a bungee cord. Soon, your fall into demise wasn’t so certain. In fact, it started to feel like you weren’t moving at all.

Huh?

Your heart was beating so hard you thought it might explode. You opened your eye. An inverted city met your gaze, swaying like a pendulum. Oh. You were upside down. Upside down and not falling. Then Angel Dust obscured your sight, happy excited features wearing a pleased grin.

“Wahahaha! Dat was fun!” he chimed.

What the fuck was going on?

“What. . . what happened?” you uttered between breaths.

Angel blinked. “I’mma spider, dumbass!”

Indeed. At some point, Angel formed a stream of silky web from his boot ankles to what was probably the balcony. You say probably, because you’d fallen so far you couldn’t see it anymore, save for the faintest trail of smoke snaking from the building’s top.

Holy actual fuck. You were dumbfounded in the best possible way. Who needed drugs with a rush like this!? An unbelievable sense of relief overcame you, along with a cocktail of adrenalin and, well, a measure of excitement. Maybe that was the blood rushing to your head.

“Hah. . . hahah! Hahahah! Angel! Angel you fucking did it!”

He beamed. “Y’see!? What’d I tell ya’?”

Agh! You were still bound by his webs but you shoved your face into his, kissing. That beautiful bastard! That gorgeous spider! Fuck! He was incredible! You were so happy you completely ignored the burning in your left arm. Who cared! You were both alive!

Angel Dust met your lips with his, pulling you close for a hungry embrace. The we-almost-died arousal was setting in again. Hell, you didn’t care, you’d go right now!

Plink.

There was a little ‘snap’ and the webbing broke, sending you both down a short distance. You collided into the hard ground with an unrepentant thud.

“HFF!”

A spring of pain erupted through your back while Angel bounced off you. But, all things considered, could’ve been worse, much worse. You were dangling maybe a few dozen feet in the air, a miracle
all things considered, so the descent wasn’t so bad.

In fact, you could only laugh. Devil. You were still alive. So was Angel. You narrowly escaped death – for now.

Goddamn, your spider really is something incredible.

Angel Dust winced, standing, promptly yanking you to your feet, brushing you off. He cut you free from the web bindings and you exploded with affection, throwing your arms around him and assaulting Angel with kisses.

“You fucking amazing bastard,” you said in between smooches. “You’re unbelievable.”

He blushed, flinching from the pecks, smirking. “All right, all right! Easy, stallion!”

You held him by the shoulders grinning like the biggest idiot. Your forehead sank into his chest fluff, at ease, at peace.

Angel chuckled. “Ya’ gonna be all right there?”


He shrugged, uncaring from the rather perilous 300-meter drop. Or more? “Think I singed m’fancy coat, but all’s peachy.”

He looked past you, pointing. “They ain’t, though.”

You followed his finger. Around you, in front of the building’s entrance were bodies, some torn into literal bits and tossed aside like ragdolls. No crowd remained, they promptly scattered. There were, you think, some distant onlookers no doubt obliging the two strangers who fell from the structure – and lived. Not to mention the wisp of greasy smoke trailing from the suite balcony. What a mess.

Looking around, you sighed. Well, guess it was damn impossible to go anywhere without some kind of catastrophe happening. Not really how you wanted the night to end. But. . . you were still thankful for it, the precious moments you had alone with your spider. A prideful, loving warmth formed in your chest. He did exactly what he said he would, too: he protected you.

You grunted. “Hmm. Guess we should leave.”

Angel pouted. “Awwww, do we hafta?” He made puppy – er, spider eyes at you.

You gave a resigned nod. “Much as I enjoy almost getting killed, I think we’re playing with fire enough as it is. We’ll be safe at home.”

You can’t believe you were thinking this, but you were eager to see Charlie again. Nobody, not even Sarin, was stupid enough to make a go at the Princess of Hell, and if meant keeping Angel Dust safe, you were fine with cutting your improvised vacation off early.

Angel Dust huffed then offered a long, wide yawn. “N’okay, if ya’ say so.”

You laughed. “Are you actually agreeing with me?”

Gone was the post-flight adrenaline, fatigue setting back in. Angel leaned into you, chin resting on your shoulder, making a semi-tired retort.

“Yeh. Too tired. Bitch at ya’ later.”
For once, you were glad he wasn’t his usual snarky self. Now you just needed a lift out of here.

“Holy shit!”

You snapped your eyes to a familiar, filtered voice. The figure of a well-dressed suit jogged towards you. Tom Trench!

“Nnh?” Angel cast his sleepy eyes towards the news-host too.

“Where the hell did you two come from!?”

He swept his blonde hair, adjusting tie. “Nevermind, not important. Hey uh, everyone inside is dying. You two lovebirds sticking around for an afterparty, or . . . ?”

You dawn an expression of fuck no.

“Actually,” you say, “We’re trying to get the fuck outta Dodge.”

The masked figured nodded, understanding. “Don’t have to tell me twice! Need a lift?”

Really? That was generous. You brightened to hear the offer. “Uh. Yeah, actually. If it’s not too much trouble?”

“Pretty sure Killjoy would roast me on a spit for three days if I didn’t get the one-on-one with a power couple. Survivors of Paradise Lost! I can see the headline now.”

He made a mock sweeping motion in the air.

Huh. What a swell, horny dude.

Angel grumbled, still tired. “Nnthanks, Tomsie, you’ze a real dime.”

Tom guffawed, rubbing his hair. “Ohgosh hahahah it’s nothing hahahaha no problem ahahahah!”

“Tom, really,” you added. “Thanks. This means a lot. I owe you one.”

He raised his hands. “Hey! No problem! Just send me the sex-tape first, would ya’?”

“Uhhh . . .”

Tom tilted his head. “No? Amateur porn, maybe?”

Angel laughed in your suit. “Nhmhmhmhmhm.”

You said nothing.

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The Better Half took a nice, long, slow stroll down the backstage hall, admiring all the lovely painting of sinful stars performing at Paradise Found. What a repulsive legacy! A waste! A lie.

He pushed past Zander’s door, conveniently absent of any stagehands. Funny, for a place normally filled with music and laughter, it was deathly silent now. The good kind. The kind he wanted to inflict on this entire city, among things. But he could only do it with the Fragments - the alternative would take far too long and he was an impatient thing.

And where was the piece oh-so-necessary to his plans? Right there. In one of the panther’s hanging
suits. You’d miss it without knowing what it looked like. It was transparent, small, similar to glass, erratically shaped. But there, ever still, woven into the fabric like a dazzling gem. Even as he approached, he could sense the power of the Exile drifting from it. With a greedy hand and self-satisfied chuckle, he reached out and plucked it from its place.

Normally, the ancient power would disassemble any fiend, rendering them asunder. Erase them – and their soul – from this existence. But the Better Half wasn’t the usual sinner, now was he?

He brought it up to his eye and stared through it. Seeing. Seeing something he shouldn’t, that wasn’t supposed to be, something reaching through the domain of reality.

His visage, cracking and ripping, morphed into a repulsive, ugly fanged grin. “Hello.”

He saw the other side.

“We seeeee youuuuu.”

Manic laughter overtook him.

---

The ride back was surprisingly peaceful, all things considered. Tom’s vehicle rumbled through the endless streets of the city while he adjusted his car’s radio, keeping an ear out for competitive broadcasts.

“Hey, this is Miles Marauder,” crackled a voice, “And I’m here with the 616 News special report!”

Tom cursed. “Dammit! Marauder!”

Beyond that, Angel had drifted right back to sleep. He was curled on your shoulder, sawing logs. You envied him. After what happened, well, you’d be lucky if you got a decent snooze in. The events were too big to ignore, and its implications. Sarin was alive, and that was terrifying enough. Guess she didn’t experience true-death, and kept enough of her memory to go straight for you. But . . . how? How did she KNOW where you were? How did she get there? And why then?

Things were quiet for a while, until Tom broke the silence, glancing to you in the back seat.

“Hey uh, what was the name again?”

You looked up. “Anon.”

“Anon! So. Um. Question. You don’t uh . . .”

He tapped his steering wheel, pausing for traffic. “You don’t have like, a twin or something, do you? Or, Angel?”

Your eye widened. “What?”

Again, Tom raised his arms. “Hey, hey! Maybe I was hitting the sauce too hard, but, I swear. . . there was a dead ringer for you and mister Dust in the ballroom. Hard to see through all the poison. Thank the devil for the mask, right? Hahahah.”

You blinked. What was he talking about?

A seed of fear blossomed in your chest. “What do you mean, Tom? You saw someone that looked like me?”
He could hear the concern in your voice. “Ahhh, maybe! I’m sure it was nothing. I was pretty blasted, you know? Probably seeing things.”

Part of you wanted to press him for more, part of you was afraid to ask. Duplicates? Mirrors? Like what you saw in the In Between? But how? Ugh. None of it made sense.

God, your head hurt. It was likely nothing. Or, that’s the lie you told yourself. You put an arm around Angel Dust and closed your eye, waiting to get home, hoping to forget the events of tonight. The bad part, anyway.

-#-

“You sure you don’t want to come in?”

It took about an hour before you were finally back at the Hotel. Tom leaned on his car, boggling at the building. He also did his best not to make a terrible sexual joke.

He waved a palm. “Not me! The last time I saw the Magne girl, I uh. Well. We laughed her out of the studio, h-hah. Probably for the best she doesn’t see me again.”

Once again, Angel was next to you, hanging to you like a stripper to a pole, ready to collapse from fatigue.

“Thaaaanks Trenchie!” he said with a tired grin. He pushed forward, hugging the anchor, shoving him in his fluff cleavage, granting a doting smooch on his gas mask.

“Mwaah! Yer’ a real peach!”

You’re pretty sure Tom just jizzed himself.

“HahhAHAHAHhahahah.”

Angel pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, shuffling it into Tom’s hair. “You should call Cherri sometime, she’d like ya.”

With that, the spider gave one more massive yawn, stretching, sauntering passed you. “M’goin to bed.”

A kiss on your cheek and he was off.

Tom was practically fanning himself. “I, hoh, uh. Haha. Hoh. I’m gonna’ need to bleach these pants.”

You offer a weary chuckle. “You’re okay for the night, then?”

The anchor retrieved the paper from his hair, staring at it longingly. “Waaaaaay better than okay now, Anon.”

You nod, offering your hand. “Thanks again, Tom. Really. I’ll buy you a drink some time.”

He might’ve been wearing a gas mask, but you’re pretty sure he was smiling.

“Hey! Life would suck if my favorite pornstar was out of the picture! You be careful with that one, kiddo. And I’ll hold you to it.”

He took your hand and you both shook, until he returned to his car.
“You know, I hear Cherri ends the night with a bang. Wish me luck!” he said, hopping in the driver’s seat.

Yeah, you thought, you’re probably going to need it.

He drove off, leaving you alone for the night. Your left arm wasn’t burning anymore, but, your thoughts were still troubled.

You stared back at the city. For some reason, you felt like someone was looking at you.

Chapter End Notes

And that caps off the appetizer! Death, danger, the hint of looming threats! Oh, it's only going to get wilder from here, dear readers.
The Red Line

Chapter Summary

After recuperating from the events at Paradise Found, Annie’s got something to tell You.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A dream.

You see the vista of Pentagram City, high above. You’re in a tower, but you don’t know where. Beyond, Hell is a barren land of roaring winds and cracking red lightning. All souls are gone, all are lost.

You turn around. There’s a man there, standing, dressed in white. He holds out his hand, smiling, beckoning for you. When you don’t approach, he walks towards you, and you’re afraid.

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You jolt awake, that strange reactionary impulse one sometimes gets during rest, like they’re falling. You dozed off then? Must have. During work too? How professional! Yes, the dull ambiance of buzzing security monitors and whirring clicks fills your ears, familiarity of your quarters taking hold. Your helmet was set aside, on the desk, married to an emptied bottle of awful whiskey – guess you had one too many. What time was it?

You stand, stretching, glancing out the blinds of your office. Pentagram City is out there, still chaotic as ever. It’s afternoon, you think. What are you looking for, anyway? That perhaps the dream you had came to fruition? Of course, it didn’t.

Still. . . their frequency bothered you. Ever since the events of Paradise Found, a nagging worry has taken root in your mind. All right, that’s not entirely true, when are you ever not worried? The outing was just another brick piece in an evolving tower of exhausting problems. You were having dreams well before them. Then again, there was something else. Mr. Trench’s words concerned you, about the notion of doppelgangers. Maybe he was just really scuzzed – and besides, this was Hell. There’s bound to be others out there similar looking to you, right?

Similar to Angel Dust, though?

Well, why not? Spider demons were around.

He’s pretty unmistakable.

Hmm.

Questions for later. The real problem was Sarin. How she found you and what she was even doing at the building were only a few puzzles to solve. There was another concern too: you had no way to protect yourself, or Angel. In that moment, those seconds before confrontation, you expected to die. Just like with the Obsessor, you realized, this wasn’t good enough, you weren’t good enough. You were playing it too careless, too easy. A clean suit and a knife could only do so much – and in the
context of Hell? Might as well have been nothing.

What if, then, Sarin decided to attack you again? What if, by some chance, she got to the Hotel? What would you do? You had to consider every angle, every odd and end. You needed to be two steps ahead. You needed an arsenal.

Shrugging off the haze of your nap, you returned to your desk, pulling out a clean sheet of paper, something to prep schematics on. Ideas, you needed ideas. You had to consider your opposition, small and large. See, didn’t matter if you could hold yourself in a brawl – the supernatural entities lingering around Hell were all sorts of monstrous-like. How would you deal with them? Something twice your size? Something could maybe move through walls, or spit fire, or was made of literal nerve-toxins? Guess you’d have to pay Baxter another visit soon.

Well, no time like the present. You decided to at least toss him ideas – devil knew Bax’s lab was loaded with inventions that could probably discombobulate a soul just by looking at them. Standing, you went for the door-

Knocking.

Before you could respond, it crashed open. Bursting in with arms crossed and a bag strapped around her shoulder . . . was Annie. A sick rage immediately blossomed in your chest; you think you’d prefer seeing Sarin again over her.

She slammed the door shut and gave you a look. A different kind of look. Not sneering or mocking, more . . . set. Defeated, even.

She glanced around your office, gesturing at it. “Still playin’ pretend.”

You’re not interested in whatever bullshit she’s cooked up. “Get out.”

She rolled her eyes. “Still an asshole, too. Ya’ know you’ve got everyone here fooled, but damn, Annie, still the same temperamental dipshit you’ve always been.”

Already trying to get a rise out of you, is she. “Very astute observation, Annie,” you shoot back. “Now get out.”

“Or what?”

You see what she’s trying to do. “I have work to do. Some of us have responsibilities, instead of stealing food and, what the fuck is it you did? Spray painted your room?”

Annie forced a hard laugh. “You’re gettin’ all high-horsed with me? Awh, fuckin’ hell. Ya’ really do think you’re better than us, huh?”

You’re exhausted by this conversation. You go for the door, but she plants herself in front of it.

You grit your teeth. “Move.”

This hellcat bares her fangs. “No. Why? What ya’ gonna do? Another sucker punch for old times’ sake?”

You feel yourself bristle. “God dammit, is this what you’re here to do? You just want to fight, again? You know, the way I hear it, you and Angel almost had a row. Maybe go look for him if you want a scrap.”
Indeed, a few days after you and Angel returned, Vaggie mentioned the two had... difficulties. Angel said something, but Vaggie wasn’t specific. If your ex was out to cause him trouble, she was crossing a whole new line.

Her features softened, only just so. “Ain’t that like you, to get someone else to do your work for ya’. And with a twinky boy bitch too. Explains a lot, Annie.”

There’s a spark of something building in your chest, the same feeling you had when you confronted the intruder. You steel yourself.


You notice the bag swung around her shoulder. Did she steal something?

A cold scoff. “Fuckin’ unbelievable. Even after all this time... fucking unbelievable.”

“Cut the shit and get on with it.”

She looks at you, and for the first time, she flinches. In fact, her expression looks... hurt.

“So glad you got to live in paradise, you fuck.”

She gestured around you again. “Must’ve been nice pretendin’ you was a good guy and runnin’ off. And forgetting about me, forgetting about us.”

You squinted. Us? Your old crew?

“They knew they were getting into,” you say flatly. “Don’t bring that shit on me. All of you did.”

She winced. “You fucker.”

You’re getting real tired of this.

“Is that it then? You came to tell me about Paulie? Uriah? You want me to feel bad? Tough shit. I don’t. But you come here, to my home, and insult me and my family. You...”

She glares at you. “You’re family!?”

Her eyes... tear up. She doesn’t say anything, spins, and rips the door open, stomping out. Strangely the anger in you recedes. This isn’t what you wanted. This is never what you wanted.

She was, a long time ago, your girl. You weren’t good people. You did bad things, you did drugs, you killed and you stole, but in all that you were still a pair that understood each other. She didn’t judge you, she accepted you. Unlike around here, where everyone judged you in some way. But goddammit, all the love turned to spite somewhere, and you both started to hurt more than loved. Even then, though, even then, she followed you to the end. How many were willing to do the same?

Dammit. You had to fix it.

“Annie,” you say, softer, going after her. You stop her in the hall. You see her a little differently. She’s still pretty. Tattoos cover her frame and little horns spike her forehead. In a way, you think, you still love her. Not in that way anymore, but, you care for her. You want to.

“Goddammit. What? What is it? Why did you come here? You’re really just here to pick fights?”

She snarls at you. “It doesn’t matter. I’m done with this shitshack.”
“You don’t need to do that.”

She spits. “Why? Why? Ya’ know, I thought you would at least remember us, but. . . fucking hell. You actual piece of shit. You forgot us, you abandoned us!”

You don’t know why she can’t understand this. “I was dead. We’re both fucking dead, Annie! What, you want me to come back to life and save Paulie too?”

She stares at you for a while. Her hand reaches into pocket, yanking out a folded sliver of white paper. She shoves it into your chest, sniffing, wiping her eyes.

“I wasn’t talking about them you dumb fucking asshole.”

You don’t know what this is supposed to be.

“You died,” she said, voice cracking, “And you left us all alone! And I thought. . . and I thought you wouldn’t forget. . .”

She wipes her face and shoves past you, heading to the stairs.

“Annie!” you call. “Stay! Goddammit. Just stay!”

You realize now what the bag is. She’s leaving. And you also realize that this is something you can’t fix. Perhaps it’s for the best, because you’re both poison for each other. You’re the worst habits, and her staying would only cause more problems. It’s not your place to make her do one thing or the other. She was never looking for redemption.

You rub your temples and feel a heat in your throat, swearing. Fuck. You open the sheet of white paper, studying it. You blink. What is this? You don’t make it out at first with only one eye to glance it over, but something about is strange and, oddly familiar. There’s an address on it, so you think. And a picture.

A picture of. .

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Niffty buzzed past the foyer and thought she saw someone leave through the entrance – with a loud bang at that! Wow, rude, wow! People were trying to work, work, work! The Miss was having a meeting in the living quarters and needed peace! Harumph. Well, time to get Anon! He needed to be here for this too, or so Miss Magne declared.

So, with an excited flight she zipped up the stairs and through one of the halls. Down it, she spied something interesting. Oh! When did the Hotel get a statue? It was interesting – perfectly still, like a shadow! Strange, strange, strange! It kinda’ looked like Anon! She sped towards it, only to realize, oh! It was Anon! He was kinda’ just standing there, frozen, something in his hand. As she approached, yeppy yep! The Security Head was staring into some paper, his expression a mix of. . . well, shock! Terrible shock! She knew that look! One time, Angel lit a firecracker of glitter in the foyer and mussed things up! That was terrible!

“Heya Anon! What’s that?”

She poked him a dozen times, but he didn’t budge. Was he under some kind of weird spell? Maybe it was the paper. With an interested motion, she snagged the paper away. Again, Anon didn’t really move, though he sorta slumped to the wall, rubbing his head. Hmm! What was the big deal, anyway?
Niffty looked at the paper, rearranging it in her tiny hands a few times. Hmm. Hmm! Hmm? What was it? She squinted. There was an address, she thought. Some numbers. And a picture. A picture that was weirdly familiar, like. REALLY familiar! She looked at it. Then Anon. Then back at it.

Oh. Oh. OH. OH.

Niffty gasped like she was sucking in a whirlwind. She screeched. “MIIIIIIISSSSS!”

She speared down the hall and back to the living quarters, twirling about in the air. “Missmissmissmissmissmiss!”

Charlie stood in front of the group, hands gesturing as the Hotel goers listened (mostly) to her newest therapy plan. Alastor was attentive, Raz and Daz munched a bag of cookies, Husk tried not to drink, Vaggie eyed the incoming Niffty bullet with some concern, Crymini thumbed through her phone with earbuds in her ears, Baxter kept a distance between everyone, and Angel sipped a cup of OJ with a straw (spiked).

“. . .and so um, I think after the uh, incident with the clay molding class, we’re going to put that back in the maybe pile!”

Angel rolled his eyes.

“I told ya’, it was just a model of the Hotel, I swear!”

Niffy sped in.

“MIIIIIIIIIIIIIISSSSSS!”

She collided into Charlie, waving the paper around. The Princess grunted with a small oof, confused. Niffy zipped around her, overwhelmed with energy, flailing the paper around.

“Niffty!” Charlie shouted.

“Hey, hey! Relax!” cut in Vaggie, standing.

“Jeez-us fuck, t’hell? She just do a fat line or somethin’?” Angel said with a smirk.

“Niffty! Please!” said Charlie again, while the maid settled down, bouncing in the air, panting. She shoved the paper into Charlie’s hands, who took it, perplexed.

“Looklooklooklooklook!”

Charlie raised a hand. “In a moment! In a moment. We’re in a meeting.”

“Nononononono!” buzzed Niffty. “Nownownownow!”

Charlie glanced to Vaggie who offered a bewildered shrug. The rest looked on, curious.

“Give it a gander!” commented Alastor. “Maybe she’s just come up with the next hit musical to put the Hotel back on the radar!”

Charlie gave a long sigh, clearing her throat. She gave Niffty an annoyed glance, gazing at the paper. Her eyes traced over it, blinking, not processing it. What was the big deal, it was just a. . . and a. . .

Her eyes widened, slapping the paper in half. “Oh! Ahahahaha.”
She waved the paper to Vaggie. “This isn’t something we should talk about, ahahaha, Vaggie, ahahah! Take this please, ahahaha!”

Angel snorted. “Wha? Oh yuh’ can’t do that! What’s the big deal!? C’mon, spill it!”

Husk growled. “Nif’ just gave me a headache, so now I’m goddamn curious.”

Charlie gave a nervous grin. “No, no! No! this is private, this, UHH, VAGGIE!”

Of course, her best girl came to retrieve the paper, but Niffty snagged it back.

“No!” challenged the maid.

Her single, manic eye looked over everyone. Charlie shook her head. “Niffty, don’t!”

So, of course, Niffty did. She took a loooong breath.

“ANON’S GOT A SON!”

A pregnant paused choked the room. Charlie groaned, pushing a hand into her face.

...“PFFAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Husk guffawed in cackling, dark laughter, falling out of his seat and onto the ground. Angel spit up his drink, coughing and hacking, choking on the liquid as he slapped his chest with a fist. Crymini, annoyed, popped an earbud loose, looking around.

“What?”

Baxter made a face. “DISGUSTING.”

The Goat Bois stopped mid-chew, mouth full of cookie. Alastor folded his hands into lap, blinking. “Oh.”

The canid girl grunted. “What?”

Niffty repeated herself, to which the punk shrugged. “Ew. Whatever.”

Angel buckled over in his seat, still coughing, holding up a finger. “W-wait... wait justa’... goddamn... second!”

He made a grabby-hand motion at the fluttering maid. “Lemme’ see that!”

Niffy clutched it to her chest, shaking head feverishly. “Nowaynowaynoway!”

Angel Dust wiped his mouth, spitting, glaring. “GET OVER HERE YA’ LITTLE SHIT!”

The spider made a diver for her, promptly colliding into one of the tables before giving chase around the room, trying to catch the zipping maid. All the while, Charlie rubbed her forehead, sighing. Vaggie went to her, perplexed and skeptical as ever.

“Charlie,” she said, voice calm and controlled. “Is... that true?”

The Magne girl blinked, looking at her beau with a weak smile. “Haha. Yep.”
Vaggie muttered something in her native tongue. “Can you be absolutely sure?” she asked as the chaos of Angel chasing after Niffty continued in the background.

She nodded, snapping her fingers. At once, Niffty and Angel stopped, glancing to Lucy’s Daughter, while the maid quieted herself and handed over the paper. Once Charlie took it back, she looked it over again.

A blurry, but unmistakable photo was plastered on it. A child, no less, a boy. Though he was hooded, the dimensions, features, and silhouette, he was, without a doubt, the spawn of Anon. Under his name was a scrawl of numbers and an address, and it was said address causing Charlie concern.

“Where did he get this?” Charlie asked, looking to Niffty. The maid shrugged.

“Annie?” Vaggie offered.

Of course, of course. Who else? So. . . the child was. . . their child.

Charlie folded it again, tapping it in hand.

“Everyone,” she said, slow and considerate. “This is a personal matter. I trust you’ll respect that.”

Some nodded, though Husk continued to laugh. Angel Dust, though, wasn’t to be deterred.

“Chuck,” he said, coming to her. “I wanna’ see it. Please?”

Husk continued to laugh. “Bet that throws a fuckin’ wrench in your paradise! Bwahahahah!”

Angel ignored the comment, though Charlie gave him an uncertain, cautious look. Slowly, she handed it to the spider, who snatched it fast, glancing it over, eyes boggling. He stared for a long while, in disbelief, until finally returning it to Charlie.

He forced a chuckle. “H-hah, what a dweeb.” With a nonchalant spin, he marched back to the couch and fell in it, crossing legs.

“Betcha it ain’t even his kid,“ he went on. “Looks like a real palooka if ya’ ask me!”

Two arms crossed, fingers tapping, kinky boot clicking on the floor.

Charlie offered a long hum. “Er. Well. Shall we um, continue?”

“YEAH!” Angel blurted, throwing his arms. “Make like a canary and sing, Chuck! Stupid about dat’ other shit. Who cares, really, h-hah!”

Vaggie didn’t look convinced. Alastor, though, ushered things along.

“I believe you were mentioning a different therapy session, Charlie!”

Angel coughed. “NOT ME!” he bellowed. “Nnnope! Don’t care at all.”

---

You were in you room, chewing on the edges of your thumb, experiencing a sense of total disbelief. You stared at your wall, lost. Everything went blank. Nothing mattered – not the events from the previous week, not the Hotel, nothing Because a surge of something entirely new swelled within you, a knowledge profound knowledge that brought with it one thing: instinct. This information, this revelation, it devoured you. Anon. . .
Anon. You have a son.

There was no mistaking it, the photo. Though the child was difficult to see, his features were as yours, shaped in such a way that only his father could recognize him. Devil. Devil below, that word. Father. You’re a father.

Or, are you? There’s a difference between progenitor and caretaker. Anyone can knock up a woman – but a father protects his brood, provides for them, looks after them. You had done none of these. Granted, you weren’t even aware you had a child. That too was stunning knowledge. How? Oh, Christ among the dead, Annie must’ve been pregnant after your death. That was what she meant then – leaving them alone. She didn’t keep him then, she clearly orphaned him – long enough that he died at an early age.

Died? That hurt you. You bit your thumb harder, a tight anxiety filling you. He really was your son – a stray pup, a castaway, a lost dog with no knowledge of his parents, thrown to the world without a chance. How did he go? Why was he in Hell!? What justice was there for that to happen!? He was just a fucking boy! And he was out there, right now! Right out in this god-forgotten underworld!

No. No that wasn’t going to happen.

Something surged inside you, a feeling you’ve never experienced. A desire to protect your own, your family, your blood. Be damned this place! Be damned it all! You weren’t standing idle another fucking second knowing your boy was out there, alone, without anyone. He didn’t deserve that, this you knew. If – through all the drugs and violence and paranoia – your Genovese family taught you anything, it was just that: family.

Shit, shit! What would you do? What would you even say? What!? It didn’t matter, not right now. This had to change, this was going to change. You were going to find him. Devil below you’d burn this city to the ground to find him. You didn’t know him, this child. Hell, he may not even want to know you. But he was yours, and you will break this city in half if it means you can get him to safety. If it means you have someone you can call your own.

You paced around your room.

What about everyone else!? What about Angel?

Angel. . .

No. You weren’t putting Angel in harm’s way anymore. This you had to do alone. You had to!

You slowed. All right, think. Consider. The address was quite specific – it mentioned something called an Exterminator Zone, and the title was harrowing. You think you’ve heard of it before, a shanty area sectioning off a portion of the East Side. An area where the lower caste was sent, the low tier demons closed for their status in Hell. Or worse. And your son was out there. In a building named The Lost.

It’s been a while since you scavenged the streets of Hell – but you recall before coming to the Hotel such an area was accessible by train. A train to a place no demon wanted to go – but if that was your destination, so be it.

Damned your rotten soul, were you really doing this? Yes. Yes, you’ve never been so compelled to act before. The moment you discovered you had a son, it was like a switch went off inside you.

A little family with Angel Dust.

Compelled to act, you wasted no more time. You went to your closet and pulled out an attire appropriate. A suit of shadowy black and a hat. The mask, too, that would come in handy, you think, offer you some measure of disguise – and the HUD was uniquely articulate for pointing out proximity danger. The rest? Arming yourself with what you had, suppressed weapons and all.

Your mind spun into action – invisible blueprints running through your thoughts, considering angles and alleys and places to hide. You knew little about where you were going, but with a name like *Exterminator Zone*, you didn’t need much reason to note it as *dangerous*. Therefore, keeping yourself as a shadow was the name of the game – as it usually was. The zone was a vault, the son the prize within. You just needed to make the key.

You pulled on your attire. Not the suit belonging to Anon: Head of Hotel Security. But Anon: Master Thief. A strange comfort took hold of you, the familiar cling of your trust fabric.

You looked at your room window - you couldn’t very well go through the door. Time to go.

Before you did, you took one last thing: the ebony knife, looking it over, smiling.

You’ll be back soon.

---

Angel had all four arms crossed, eyes canted to the side, distracted, watching the floor. His legs wobbled and he sighed at every other word coming from Charlie, huffing, impatient.

“So!” she said, clapping her hands, “I think we’re in agreement for next week’s therapy!”

Charlie was gracious enough to leave Anon to his ‘devices’ after the revelation, but that didn’t mean she let anyone else leave. Rehabilitation was important, after all.

“Monday we’ll start with some classical film and go around the group – get everyone’s thoughts. Tuesday...”

She trailed off. Or, at least, the spider thought she did, he wasn’t even paying attention. His mind was numb.

She finished. “Sound good?”

Husk glanced at Angel, dawning a sadistic sneer. “Dunno’ Miss. Think you oughta’ go through it one more time, you know, make sure we all hear it right. Slooooowly.”

Angel didn’t look towards the feline but shot Husk a middle finger.

Charlie cleared her throat. “No. No. So long as everyone was listening. Crymini?”

Crymini kept her scowl, head leaning, ears still plugged with buds. When she realized she was being stared at, she growled, pulling out the earpieces.

“What the...”

Vaggie scowled. “Did you get any of that?”

Silence.
Alastor clicked his tongue. “Ahh! Those troublesome little things! Back in my day, a good ol’ fireside chat was how we did it! These youngins today!”

Charlie sighed, rubbing her temple. “Okay. Okay. One more time.”

Angel boggled, impatient. “Uh.”

He flipped, throwing himself onto feet. “Just ‘membered! Gotta’ take a wicked piss!”

He didn’t even wait for a reaction before he marched upstairs. His mind was . . . well what the fuck was it!? His boyfriend had a son. Did he know!? Was that what that uppity bitch was doing here? To start trouble about all this? Or did she actually think she was gonna’ run off with his man cause of some punk brat? What the fuck. He needed answers, and his Anon always had answers.

He also needed to stop his man from doing something incredibly fucking stupid.

Intuition told Angel to check Anon’s room first, so he did. The door wasn’t locked – and he didn’t bother knocking, entering. He expected to see Anon sitting around, probably getting drunk on shit whiskey, having another one of his usual existential moments. Just had to straighten all this out. Just had to talk. They always fixed it with talk. No big deal, right?

. . .

Anon wasn’t there.

Angel Dust stared, boggling, mismatched eyes flicking hither-and-dither. His room window was slightly parted, warm air seeping in, ruffling curtains. In a panic, Angel rushed over to the glass frame, flinging it open, staring out to the evening. His boy was nowhere in sight.

“Anon!?”

A pang of fear took him. Son of a FUCK. HE WENT AND DID SOMETHING STUPID.

Fear switched to anger. Concerned, loving anger.

“Anon ya’ stupid cock suckin’ dizzyheaded dopey head fuckshit moron! YA’ FUCK! YA’ STUPID FUCK!”

Ah shit shit shit.

He rubbed his temples, trying to remember. What was that idiot doing!? Going off all by his lonesome! Agh! No time!

He rushed to his room, trying to remember the paper. Kay, what was it? Something, something, zone. Train. Get to the station, to the thing, the what zone? The EXTERMINATOR ZONE!? Anon you palooka! You doof!

His man was gonna’ get his ass killed!

He practically broke his door barging in. In his room (much to an alarmed Deputy Fat Nuggets), Angel snagged his purse, applied a quick foundation of All Night Strength mascara and eyeliner, and got his goddamn spider ass moving.

He was so goddamn mad.

And. . . he was sort of proud too. His thief, his Anon, getting all gung-ho over a kid. His kid. Shit.
He was so cute when he was fucking stupid.

_*_*

The mob crowds forming outside the train were all sorts of horror and monstrosity – the usual. Off and on they boarded the *Red Line*, a straight shot down a track to parts of the East Side like a shoot of drugs in a vein. This vessel would take a traveler to parts of Pentagram City, until finally making one more “sanity stop,” and then . . . to the Zone. That’s where you were headed.

Tense familiarity consumed you – the sensation of distrust. Paranoia. Everyone was a threat. Every steely-eyed goat demon was a guy with a shank, every dual-headed medusa keeping a gun behind her. Push them in the wrong direction and they were liable to snap. So, even among them, you kept to yourself, quiet as death, a nobody, a form in the background. Sometimes, all you had to do was hide in plain sight.

A train slid up, a blinking bullet of black steel, hissing against the rail – covered in eyes (of course) and looking more living than machine. As its fleshy doors slipped open, demons poured out and sinners getting on. Politeness was tossed to the side so crowds fought for space as they tried to wiggle through the cramped doors. You were content to let them have it out while you waited. In your visor, reticules poured over every figure and frame, trying to supply you with readouts and information not yet available. At least the thing let you zoom in on potential threats, though for now, it was a sheet of black keeping your face hidden. Probably for the better – you’d rather not be recognized.

Signs flicked above you, chaotic neon scrolling over the various stops ahead. In charming display, one read *ALL ROADS LEAD TO HELL*. You tried to shake the anxiety that your son was out in this, places like the station, engulfed by unruly murderous mobs, or worse. How old was that image Annie had, you wondered? How was he even surviving? You hoped he was all right.

Hmm. But if he was anything like you, he was a scrapper, a fighter. Nobody did by you as a kid, maybe the boy was the same. He had fended for himself all this time, hadn’t he?

As the crowds started to dissipate, there was finally enough room to enter the train. You adjusted your suit, heading towards it. *Plink.*

You growled. Somebody tossed something at your head! Something small and metal. Grunting, you swerved to see who it was. You had no time for this – you were every bit prepared to turn someone’s skull into a canoe. If there was *anybody* causing you delays with finding your son, you-

“Hey, chucklefuck!”

Holy Hell was marching right up to you and it was Angel Dust.

“Wha-“

He glared, fangs bared, looking all *sorts* of bothered.

"How did you find me?" you say, hoping to settle some of the rage headed towards you. Not much a question - Niffty grabbed the paper and probably showed it to everyone. Shit.

He ignored the question. “Take that fuckin’ thing off so I can wallop ya’ proper!” he hissed, spare fist clenched, twitching. He jabbed a finger in your chest.

“Ya’ got SOME FUCKIN’ NERVE YOU TWIPPY HEADED DIPSHIT!”
Some demons glanced over, part because he was so loud and part because it was Angel fucking Dust causing a scene, throwing his arms in the air. You raised a hand, trying to calm him.

“Angel. . .”

“Shaddup!”

He raised one of his threatened fists. “I oughta’ turn ya’ into a fuckin’ smear! T’hell are ya’ DOING!? Pazzo!”

Holy shit he was angry. Even his shadow appeared rightly pissed, wobbling around with six arms, all glaring and looking ready to jab you with a knife or eight.

He muttered a long series of incoherent, foul, foul curses, grabbing your suit.

“Yer’ comin’ home, RIGHT. FUCKIN’. NOW.,”

At this, you stood your ground.

“No.”

You might as well have slapped him.

“No!? No!?"

You weren’t getting through to him. You needed to make him understand. You flicked off the helmet apparatus, the visor clicking and whirring as it folded open. Once you had it off in hand, Angel eagerly took the opportunity to belt you across the face. You grunted, ears ringing, eye going white for a moment. Some other demons gawked, laughing.

“Tell me no again,” he threatened. “I dare ya.”

You rubbed your face, staring. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m getting on that train, and I’m finding him.”

Angel bristled. “IF YA’ THINK THIS IS CUTE-“

“Angel, listen,” you said.

His fury would not be tempered.

“NO! YOU LISTEN. Who’da FUCK gave ya’ the right to go off by y’self, HUH!? ‘Specially with all this. . . this. . .”

He rubbed his head. “How LONG were ya’ gonna’ keep that one from me, huh? Havin’ a fucking KID!?”

You could hear the train announce its destination. You glanced to it.

“I didn’t know,” you tried to say, quickly. “Angel, I didn’t know. But what I do know is where he is, and I NEED to find him. I have to. I have to do this.”

Angel Dust forced a chuckle, shrugging, spare arms splayed out with a wide gesture. “Ohhhhh, of course. Ya’ have to. Ya just have to. On ya’ own, not even tellin’ anyone, not even tellin’ ME!?”

He frowned, features wincing. “Why’d ya run off!? Why’d ya’ run off without me!?”
Goddammit Angel. You were losing time, and you didn’t have all the words to make this right. You grabbed his shoulders.

“Because I can’t fucking risk you again,” you say. “Because I’m not strong enough for that.”

He stares at you, unconvinced.

“This is my problem. This is my mess. I’m responsible for this, Angel! This. . . this. My son. Angel, my son!”

Again, the train blared its warning. It would leave soon.

“Angel, please. I can’t have people bail me out every time something happens. I have to do this, I have to do something right.”

His features softened. Slightly.

“I’m not putting you in danger again. Not because of me! So please, Angel, god. Just let me. Please.”

He snorted, brushing your hands off his shoulder.

“Don’t fuckin’ tell me what to do.”

He sighed. A tired, annoyed, exasperated sigh.

“Stupid tryhard wannabe machismo fuck.” The spider glanced to the train too.

“I’m comin’ with ya.”

He saw your expression shift in protest and he raised a finger.

“Nnshoosh. Don’t even. ‘Sides, I’d love to see ya’ try and stop me.”

You stared at him. What were you going to say, really? You should’ve told him, you realize that. But goddammit, this would’ve happened anyway. You didn’t want that – you didn’t want to keep putting people in danger on behalf of you, certainly not your spider.

He gave an annoyed gesture to the train. “Well come on, ya’ were gettin’ all dick hard about it. We’z doin’ this or what!?”

Guess there’s no escaping the companionship of your boyfriend; could be worse. Secretly. . . you’re glad he’s with you.

You nod, putting the visor back on as you both head to the train.

“Ya’ know,” he says, tone softening. “Always figured you’d be a good dad.”

You both slip onto the train, the doors hissing shut. Angel tosses himself in a seat, his rage settling, giving a long sigh. You sit next to him, ignoring the crowds of aberrant demons. Well, guess your stealthy approach is gone, ain’t nothing conspicuous about Angel Dust. Eventually the great beast-on-rails rumbles to life and tugs you and the passengers down to corners of the city where many don’t want to go. All the while, a thought stirs in your head:

Huh. A good dad.

Angel tosses aside his (justified) fury and leans in your shoulder, closing eyes. “Long ride,” he says.
“Not th’good kind either. Wake me when we get there.”

Soft warmth fills you. Beyond the windows, you see the train movie, shift towards a place you’ve never known.

Down the Red Line.

Chapter End Notes

Good GOD this really is a soap opera, ain't it?
Lost

Chapter Summary

You and Angel explore the Exterminator Zone, hoping to find "the boy."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The crowds start to thin.

Through the train windows, you see black pillars doused in reddish lights roll past you, shadowy puppets dancing along in the theater of Pentagram City. The farther you go, the less familiar you are with all of it. You knew a fair chunk of the West Side before your “residence” at the Hotel, got to know the ins-and-outs like a glamorous hooker’s legs. It was necessary for your work. But the buildings you saw now? The spires painting shadows upon the hissing train? They were strangers. There was something vacant about them, empty, almost.

More off, less on. The crowds trickled out. You kept yourself on guard, of course, monitoring them through your HUD, expecting hostility, though none came. Just vagabonds and sinners, going their own way, to what end you didn’t know. Angel’s form wobbled next to you, head on your shoulder, snoring loudly. Couldn’t blame him – you’d been on the Red Line for a while. And, even in Hell, the train was oddly relaxing, a mechanical hum under your legs matched by engine roars. Were it not for the strange eyes blinking on the ceiling you’d think you were on a New York subway.

Plenty of time to think on a train ride. Think about your son.

This idea still hadn’t cemented itself in your mind. It didn’t seem real, but yet, he was out there. Sure as you stole money from a bank, it was your boy all right. You weren’t certain if you were elated or horrified. If he was here, it begged the question: how? Hell was no place for a child. He couldn’t have been more than a teenager, if that, not by what you saw in the image. Thirteen? Fourteen? A pup, a kid, a stray. Was this some trick of theocracy, some technicality? Or was it worse? Did he do something? If so, what? Or was he killed? The idea filled you with icy, nauseating waves – the very notion of your unprotected flesh making you sick.

The Genovese rambled on about family and its importance, how necessary it was to maintain strength by kin. Honor through blood. You did right by your peers, your brothers, so the code was. But that meant little to you, because after all, you were never one of them. You could never be made, and worse, you didn’t know your real family, your parents a mystery. So this, this child, he was yours, really yours, and Devil as your witness you would be the thing he needed.

A father.

This urge, this instinct, it overwhelmed you. You’ve never felt so strongly about anything since your unending love for Angel. You were never a good person, but you could at least be a good dad. You hoped. Fuck! How did that even work? How do you raise a child Down Below!? Questions, so many questions, which you’d have to address later.

The train shifted on for a while longer until finally coming to another stop. The last one, the one
before the *Extermination Zone*. When the train rolled to a halt, it hissed, and the final passengers got off. No one came on. You took a breath, nudging Angel Dust awake. He grumbled, pushing into your arm, clinging to it.

“Nnf, later. Not hungry,” he mumbled.

“Angel,” you said again.

“Mmm . . . mnah!? W-what!?”

His mismatched eyes blinked to life, fluttering about. He yawned, rubbing eyelids, stretching extra arms.

“Oh. Oh yeah. *This shit.*”

You nodded. “This shit.”

One more stop. Angel checked himself with a flip mirror before he stood, stretching. You both got off to a place utterly unfamiliar. This station was the edge, the point between Pentagram City and something else. Something worse. Ahead of you, one more train lead down a set of rails, down to a shanty town barred off from the rest of the city. What was down there? The name didn’t inspire confidence.

“Come on,” you say, pointing. “Getting on that one.”

Angel waved a hand. “Yeahyeahyeah, I know.”

As you approached, something caught your eye. Multiple carts were available, but not all sectioned equally. There were demons, wide eyed and vacant being pushed along into what looked like steel cages, minded by . . . things. Haunting and ghost-like, bipedal creatures draped in white attires and gas-masks marched sinners along, single file, into what looked like prison cars. Even from here, you heard their chatter, a muddled, electronic garble cloaked in code phrases you couldn’t recognize. And the sinners? Something about them was off. Their gazes were lost, confused, and they were shoved along like pack animals; if any of them so much as looked at the sentries they received a swift blow to the face from a baton.

When you approached one of the cars, a guard kept its goggled stare locked to you. It said nothing, a floating, mechanical apparatus next to it, like an eye. The eye whirred and buzzed, observing you and Angel Dust. You didn’t stick around.

Angel promptly flipped it off before you both entered the train. Like before, it groaned to life and shuffled into the slums. There were no other passengers, save for one, a small demon with timid blue flesh and long horns. He rocked in his seat, muttering.

“They’re always coming,” he said. “But then they leave and then, they come back but leave when they come back, but you can’t leave, but if you stay you leave again, but if you come back you always leave, but you stay and you leave again . . .”

He didn’t even glance your way when you and Angel sat.

“Sheesh, thing’s a fuckin’ dump,” chided Angel, making a face. “Hope ya’ know pockets, this really ain’t my style.”

“I’d have never guessed,” you manage. Angel snaps his fingers.
“Ey! Don’t get snippy wit’ me. I’m still mad at ya’.”

Yeah. You figured.

“We gonna’ have a nice long talk at home,” he continues. “Ya’ got it?”

Ah shit, you’re really in the doghouse. You’ve never known Angel to ‘put things to the side,’ he’s always been up front about his feelings. You’re at the ‘we need to talk’ phase. You want to apologize, but that’s not going to help.

“All right,” you concede, voice distorted by the visor.

Angel casts you a leer. “How’s yer dumb face?”

You manage a chuckle. “You smacked me pretty hard.”

Angel grunts. “Yeah? Well stop bein’ such an idiot! Who gave ya’ the right to run off like this!?”

You don’t want to exhaust him by repeating yourself. “You know me.”

“Pff. Unfortunately. Tue-moi.”

He taps your head, nudging your side. “Lemme’ see.”

You pause, not understanding, until you realize he means he wants to see your face. Slowly, then, you pull the mask off once more, holding it in lap. He squints, taking your chin in gloved palm, giving you a long once over.

He sucks his teeth, tracing a thumb over your cheek. “Fuckin’ shit,” he mutters. “Didn’t mean to knock ya’ one so hard.”

You smirk. “Angel Dust. Is that you feeling bad over there?”

Now he wags a finger. “Ooooh don’t you even get cute wit’ me, ya’ shit. You’re still in big trouble. Ain’t gonna’ fast talk ya’ way outta this one.”

You make a face at him. “Aww. Not even if I kiss your pretty little toes?”

He blinks, a soft flush touching his cheeks, before angering again. “Hey! I’m fuckin’ serious! Ya’ don’t get to act all, fuckin’, you. Ya’ get it?”

Damn, he’s cross. Guess you can’t blame him at all. You did sort of run off without a word – a bit thoughtless. But this was the first time you’ve ever encountered a feeling so intense. If it were different, if you thought Angel was in trouble, you would’ve done the same and not wasted a single second going for him. You would’ve burned down the whole goddamn city if you thought Angel was in danger. Now it’s your son – though it seems instinct caused you to act rashly.

“All right, all right,” you concede. “We’ll talk then. I’ll explain everything, peppermint. I promise.”

The spider huffs. “Ya’ better.”

The train started to move, cold and empty, droning further into a forgotten part of the city. You affix the helmet back to your head, adjusting hat, waiting. Angel crosses his arms, kinky boots tapping the ground, staring out at the passing buildings.

Eventually, you speak again.
“I’m glad you’re with me,” you say. He huffs, rolling his eyes, nudging you.

“Yeahyeahyeah,” he chides. “S’what a boyfriend does.”

A loud, screeching horn snaps you back to attention, the train slowing as it squeals to its final destination. You glance up from you lap, gazing through the windows. You have no idea where this is, or this stop. Angel, previously flicking and fidgeting with his fingers, looks too, glancing about, making a face.

“Blugh,” he mutters. “Looks like the ass end of New York.”

He’s not too far off. Once the train heaves to a stop and the doors slide open, what lingers outside is... alien. Pentagram City is a vast, expansive place of neon and glitz and glamour. This stop? This area? The entire opposite. The train stop is entirely devoid of sinners, save for the floating mechanical eyes you observed before. Packs of ghoulish guards watch behind fences as they mark off approaching demons, corralling them to... somewhere. The masonry and metal is all worn down, rusted, like it’s been neglected for centuries. Slums.

“Just needs a few bums and a barrel fire,” you comment, exiting with Angel. He taps your shoulder, pointing somewhere. Oh. Yep. Lost, vacant-eyed sinners huddled around barrels of fire.

“What the fuck,” you say. What is all this?

Where do you even start? There’s an exit point you see, fenced into several rows. In one, sparse lines of sinners are prodded along, minded by the guards. They’re being taken somewhere, and with a name like *Extermination Zone*, you can only image.

“Think I overdressed for this dump,” Angel muses, patting himself off. “Shit, ya’ see that?”

He points again, this time to the crowds. “Deadheads.”

Deadheads? You’ve heard him say that before.

“They goin’ Feral,” Angel adds. “Fuckin’ hell. . .”

Here, his tone shifts. “Hey uh, pockets. . . let’s not stick around long, yeah?”

His anger has receded, replaced by a pocket of anxiety. Fear, even. You don’t disagree – you don’t know what these guards are all about, but they’re uniformity is troubling. Its ordered, controlled, methodic.

You don’t waste any more time, heading for a checkpoint. There’s only one direction to go, minded by guards and their mechanical eyes. When you approach, one taps its head, muttering.

“*Benign. Non-64S.*”

Then they watch you, staring. You’re not sure – should you move? Should you ask it a question? When you stand for too long, it brandishes an ugly looking club hewn with sparks of blue.

“Move,” it threatens.

Angel flips it off with two hands. “Fuck you too, pal.”

“Angel. . .” you caution. You grab him and tug him along before push comes to shove, literally.
The rest of the building is vacant, though large. There are wandering sinners here and there, all of whom seem as lost as one from the train. When you pass one, it boggles, its trifecta of green eyes wide and absent.

“Don’t drink the water,” it said. “Never drink the water.”

“Ain’t no water, smartass,” Angel says, pushing you away from it.

You keep moving. “The hell is going on here?” you ask the spider.

Angel presses himself close to you, cautious, as alert and paranoid as you. “They’ze losin’ it. Goin’ all dumb in the head. Got whacked one too many times and, ya know, that’s it. Kaput. Ain’t gonna’ be long before they go loonie.”

A pang of deep fear took your chest. “So they’re unstable.”

“Like fuckin’ acid and bath salts.”

Not what you wanted to hear knowing your son was out in a place like this. Worse... was it happening to him?

You exit the building and come to a vista of ruin. Ahead of you is a shanty town stretching along several streets, with worn, disheveled wood and the raucous of distant voices. There’s no dazzle here, no streaks of light or promises of satisfying sin. You can make out, in the far horizon, the glistening towers of the West Side, the hope of a more hedonistic lifestyle looming over this place. But this town is no paradise. Guards march along on corners. Some mind immense vehicles and section off parts of the town with barriers. There are immense cages holding demons, but they’re ravenous, hostile, snarling, absent of any thought except kill.

Your HUD pings off, zooming and flicking off over every possible threat and angle, ringing in your ear with angry alarms.

Where do you even start?

“Any ideas?” you say aloud.

“Blow this shitstack and ferget it even exists,” Angel offers. He shrugs, extra arms spreading out. “The hell if I know, pockets. Dis was your fancy plan.”

So it was. Normally you liked to contemplate things, consider all aspects to a plan before executing, but this time you went at it like a bull in a china shop. Well, how hard could a building called “The Lost” be to find, anyway?

-*-   

Very hard, as it turned out.

Your only option was to do things the old-fashioned way: walk down every corner and visible street and check the exteriors of broken down buildings. Hard to imagine anyone living here. This, truly, was Hell. Where Pentagram City was an orgy of pleasure and indulgence, this place was a ruinous hive of misery and despair. Guards kept an eye on everything that moved. Some stood near piles of bodies, spraying them down with a horrifying substance – like a poison. Others held sinners in small crowds, checking them over, all exchanging phrases and numbers. “Code White,” “Code Grey,” number sequences, phrases, mutterings. But why? You weren’t sure you wanted to know.

What the actual hell were they? Not Exterminators, no. The Angelic entities you were sparsely familiar with looked far more advanced. These things were phantoms, ghosts in rags, holding strange
authority here, dispensing it with cruel efficiency.

Passing by one alley, you saw one demon splayed on the ground, rivers of dark blood leaking from a cavernous wound. Another was alive, barely. Barely, because it was being bludgeoned to death by a group of the ghouls – a display of their unrepentant malice. Even that caused you to wince. Angel stared, but you pulled him along – he didn’t need to see that.

The deeper you went, the worse it seemed to get; more patrols ran through with observing eyes, followed by small, skeletal machines clicking and hissing in tandem with their masters. There were small groups of demons looking past corners, watching the robed entities, chatting between themselves. While it wasn’t in your nature to break stealth, you needed _some_ sort of lead, so you approached them, Angel close behind.

“They’re comin’ for this one,” one demon said, a short frogish creature with red flesh. His companion, a thin vulture-like thing, shook his head.

“Not our block. We ain’t feral!”

Well, they sounded sane, at least.

“Oh, excuse me fellas,” you say. They don’t even look your way.

“Comin’ for us,” repeated the smaller sinner. “I can tell! They just cleaned out the place! They comin’ for us!”

“We ain’t feral! We ain’t feral!” the other shrieked back.

“Hey,” you say, firm. The vulture looks at you, eyes pale and lost.

“I’m not feral!” he says. “They got the others! But the others was feral!”

You ignore this. “I’m looking for. . .”

The smaller demon shook its body, running. “They’re gonna’ clean us!”

“They only kill ferals!” squawked the other, still peeking over the building corner.

Angel Dust groaned, hissing. “MotherFUCKER!” He snapped his fingers.

“Ya’ listenin’ dipshit or ya’ just another drippy-headed deadhead!? Ya’ bein’ asked a question!”

The vulture blinked, over and over, his gaze drifting between you and Angel. “I’m not feral.”

Angel threw his arms up. “AGH!”

“Thanks,” you say, flat, moving on.

You huffed, stopping at a corner. Angel grumbled, throwing his head back, leaning on a broken lamppost, pulling out a cig and promptly lighting it.

“This place fuckin’ SUCKS,” he whined, blowing out a wisp of smoke. “Can we go home!?"

You’re firm. “No.” You don’t care if this earns you a chew-out session lasting a week. You’ve come this far, you’re not about to give up now, and not in a place like _this_. The sight of these entities and what they’re doing. . . it frightens you. What if they got a hold of your boy? What if they were clubbing him, right now!?"
Angel grumbles, making a face, looking to the side. He blinks, then he squints. Someone’s watching him.

“Hey . . .”

You follow his gaze, to building a corner, spying a tiny silhouette. Instincts flare and you reach for your 1911, unsure. The figure shuffles back, whimpering, watching Angel with wide, frightened eyes.

It’s . . . a kid.

Your heart flips. Your kid?

Angel seems to realize it too. “Hey, hey now,” he says, crouching. “What’cha doin’ over there?”

His voice changes. It’s soft, kind, and gentle. “Don’t hide,” he coos. “I won’t hurt ya’.”

The spider flicks away his cig, head tilting. The little figure peers from their spot, dressed in rags, face dirtied, flesh tinted a light scarlet. No, not yours. But it’s still a child, and she looks no older than eight. Christ among the dead, what was she doing down here?

Seeing as how the child didn’t budge, Angel pauses, considering. He taps his chin, before digging into his purse and pulling out a little candy: a peppermint.

“Somethin’ a little sweet, yeah?”

You watch this, careful. Child it may be, but she’s a demon too, unpredictable. Fortunately, the impish lass did nothing dangerous, stepping closer to Angel before taking the little offering.

Angel Dust smiled. “There. See? S’all peachy sweetheart. Ain’t this a dangerous place to be for ya’? Ya’ got someone with you?”

The girl quickly munches on the candy, looking at Angel, not understanding. She says nothing. Angel licks his gloved thumb and rubs her cheek with it, cleaning a smudge. She winces but doesn’t run away while the spider fusses over her a moment.

“Guess not.”

You remain quiet, keeping your eye on the streets. This wasn’t the area to dawdle in too long, and this wasn’t getting you closer to finding your son. All the same, this was a side you hadn’t seen with Angel before.

“Wanna’ stick with us?” he offered. “Get ya’ somewhere safe?”

You hesitated. Was that a good idea?

The child answered for you, shaking her head. Angel’s features saddened. “No? Trust me, sweetie, ain’t nobody gonna’ mess with ya’ if I’m around.”

The child drew back despite Angel’s efforts. He frowned, a little crestfallen, arms curling around his knees.

“Hmm.”

He tossed a thumb your way.
“Think ya’ can help us, then? That doof over there is lookin’ fer somebody. Some punk kid. At a place called *The Lost* er whatever. That sound familiar, darlin’?”

The girl’s wide eyes bounced from Angel to you, drawing back. You, being the looming shadow you were, didn’t exactly inspire safety.

“Hey, heeey,” Angel soothed. “S’okay, s’okay. We just tryin’ to find somebody. Don’t be scared. He won’t hurt ya.”

You think maybe you should say something, but considering the girl’s delicate state, you decide not to.

“Could really use help, we been wanderin’ around all night!” Angel says, smiling. He reaches into his purse again, fishing out another mint.

“One more?”

The girl eyes it, then takes another candy. “Atta girl,” dotes Angel in approval.

While she munches, her wide eyes glance down a street. She looks down it, nervous, pointing. Angel follows her gesture, squinting.

“That’s the way?” he asks. “Fancy buildin’ down there?”

She nods.

Angel brushes her hair to the side. “Aww, thanks. Ya’ been a big help.”

He stands, but the moment he does she scurries off, back into the dark. He watches her go, wearing a pained expression, as though seeing a child so worn down and defenseless hurt him.

“I don’t like this place,” he mutters.

“Are you okay?” you ask, though it’s clear he’s not. Angel sniffs, turning.

“M’fine.”

He gestures down the indicated street. “Yer *welcome*, by the way.”

You nod, grateful. “You’re really good with kids. It’s cute.”

He scoffs, a gentle flush touching his cheeks, eyes rolling. “Shaddup. Les’ get goin’, tired of this dump.”

It’s not exactly cozy for you either. It’s a wonder the guarding bodies haven’t pulled you aside, but perhaps they’re only after demons “going feral.” In the meantime, you and Angel walk down the indicated street, which is *slightly* more kept together than other parts of the Zone. Slightly, because some of the buildings at least appear inhabited, and more demons are gathered together, watching you from broken windows or unhinged doors. Eventually, you come to a structure that’s taller than the others, a square monolith of black bricks. There are lights shining from its windows, in fact, and the dull hum of chatter is audible through its entrance.

A broken, angry red neon sign crowns its front, one of the lights flickering, the other dark, reading a single word: *LOST*.

“Very subtle,” Angel says with a sarcastic clap. “*Finally*, jee-zus.”
You stop, staring up at it. All at once, the reality of what’s ahead hits you. Your son might be in there, your boy. Holy shit. What were you going to say!? What could you say? Oh fucking hell – how were you supposed to do this? Just waltz up, announce who you were, and then what? He comes along? You want him to, you want him back at the Hotel where it’s safe and you can figure things out from there. But what if he isn’t like you think? Hang on, what do you think? Your head swims, your mind races. You need to breathe. You pull off the visor as it flattens into an portable shape, stowing it away. You take a long breath and rub your head, attempting to focus on what lies ahead.

“Hey!” Angel cuts in. He’s at the entrance. “Ya’ comin in or what!?"

You don’t move.

The spider groans. “Anon, fuck, come on. Are you tellin’ me after all this yer gettin’ cold feet? Les’go!”

You’ve done a lot of things – in this life and the one before. Stolen from people, broken banks, made your bones with the Genovese, some real awful shit you’d rather not repeat. Sins like that a person like you should shrug at danger. But this? How are you supposed to do this? How are you supposed to be a father?

Angel snaps his fingers, coming to you. “Ya’ listenin’?”

You shake. “Yeah, sorry, sorry. Just uh.. .”

The spider senses the hesitation in your voice, and briefly, he softens. “Relax, relax. It’ll be fine. I’m right here with ya.”

He pats your cheek. “Kay, tough guy?”

So he is. You breathe, finding solace in your spider. Well, here you fucking go.

You enter The Lost and it’s a strange thing. It is, in fact, quite like the Happy Hotel, save its entirely run down, lacking all fancy theater, and there’s no bright smiling Princess to greet you. Okay, so nothing like the Hotel. No one is around either, and beyond the dull ambience of buzzing, droning lights, it’s relatively quiet.

There is a foyer though, and behind it is a bloated sinner, some sort of breathing apparatus affixed to his neck. His multiple eyes blink as you two approach, coughing, perhaps in disbelief.

“You aren’t lost,” it rasps, head quivering like jelly. “Not lost. What are you doing here?”

Angel’s head jumps from left to right, kicking aside debris from the ground, moving away from a dripping ceiling stain.

“Uh, no,” you say, coming to the blob. “Not exactly. We’re just looking for someone.”

The eyes come to glance over you, squinting. The creature rubs them, leaning over the desk.

“You’re familiar. . .” it gurgles.

Familiar? You perk. If you’re familiar that means he knows your son.

“I should be,” you assert. “I’m looking for a kid. Wears a hood.”

Angel kicks a vending machine, but when no substance appears, he groans, coming to your side. He
ruffles through his cleavage and yanks out a picture, the photo.

“Might help to show him *this*, smart guy,” he chides. “Take a gander, gramps. Ya’ seen this brat?”

The attendant takes the picture, boggling at it, going from the photo to you. He licks his lips.

“You’re not one of them,” he mutters. “Are you?”

A mix of excitement, dread, and anticipation are boiling within you. You don’t have time for this.

“Tell me where he is.”

Angel rolls his finger in the air. “Yeah! Make like a canary and sing, palooka!”

“Yes. . . yes. . .” the creature nods, lost in thought.

“You’re not lost, but he is lost,” the attendant adds. “Then. . . you must take him. Take him! Take him! Take him from this place!”

The attendant pants, wheezing. “The fifth floor! The fifth floor! The last room! The fifth room on the fifth floor!”

You blink. The creature sounds desperate, panicked. You have your answer then.

Angel snaps the picture back, ‘thanking’ him, before tugging you along. Fuck. This was it, this is what you needed. Fifth room on the fifth floor. . .

As you both head to an elevator (hopefully working), thoughts run through your head. You hear the attendant bellow after you, repeating the same thing: *take him from this place*. You fully intend to. You reach the elevator, jamming the button, and it winces to life, steel doors creaking open with a loud, sharp rumble.

You step in.

Inside that tiny box, you've got one more chance to think things over, but you feel numb, a sensation you don't normally get unless it's a heist. Once you arrive, there's no going back.

*Ding.*

The fifth floor is nothing impressive, save its as torn and lifeless as most of the town. There are lights, but they're weak, flickering. Muffled noises are heard behind doors, and you walk with Angel down the hall. Things feel slow, like time is turning to molasses. Every step you take brings you closer and closer to a reality you’ve never known. If you go down this hall, if you indeed find your son, things will change. For the better? For the worse? A part of you is frightened of that. What does it mean for you and Angel?

You. . . want this.

You want a family.

You want a family with Angel Dust. Something to call your own.

Are you ready for that?

Room 5 swims into your vision. It's been painted black and it looks like there are names carved into it, ones you don’t recognize.
Angel’s behind you, expectant. “Well?”

Goddamn. Here you go. You beat your fist on the door a few times.

Silence. Silence for a long time. Angel, the impatient spider he is, clicks his tongue.

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Let’s get this shitshow rollin’!” He slams his fists on the door, rattling the wood.

“Ey! Smartass! Open up, would ya’!”

Before you have a chance to stop the spider, the frame swings open. What appears is the shimmer of metal and the barrel of a gun, pointed at your face. Okay, pointed in that it’s tilted to the side, the way you don’t hold a gun.

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU!??”

You gawk.

There. There he is. Dressed in an angry young voice, coming to your chest in height, dressed in a black, skull pattern hoodie with black pants and black gloves and black shoes and black. . . wow, that’s a lot of black. Chains hang off his side, there’s a strap of knives on his legs, for some reason he has multiple belts wrapped around one of his calves, and he’s wearing a skull necklace. You’re at a loss. Were it not for the dimensions of his face, the contours of his shape, you wouldn’t believe this was your son.

This was your son?

You stare a while, and you can see the angry fear in his eyes. Unfortunately, said emotions have made him careless. Swinging the door wide open? Improper handling of a weapon? How was he still alive?

“ANSWER ME FUCKFACE!” he challenges, shaking the weapon.

“You’re holding the gun the wrong way,” you say, flat. Before the kid can muster a response, you push forward and snap the gun sideways with one hand, other coming to his wrist. He grunts, fumbling back and falling on his ass. He yelps, trying to stand, going for one of his knives.

“Hey, hey, it’s fine, it’s fine,” you say, raising your hands. You hand the weapon to Angel who watches you with renewed amusement.

Angel, taking the gun, looks it over and makes a disgusted face, holding it away from him like its poison.

“Ugh, gross.”

He glances to the kid who starts to get up, knife brandished. Angel laughs, spare arms crossing, hiding his mouth behind a snicker.

“The fuck are you laughing at!? the boy roils. “Come on you fucks, I’ve been waitin’ for this! Think you’re gonna fuck me!? HUH? I’M NOT GOING TO YOUR CAGES, FUCK YOU!”

This wasn’t how you saw your first meeting going.

The boy charges, but again, his pose is so wide it’s easy to catch him. Blade aside, you snag his wrist, spin him around, and lock his arm, forcing the weapon out of his grip.
“Easy!” you command. “Easy! I’m not here to hurt you. Take a breath.”

“LET GO YOU SHITFUCK! LEGGO!”

“Knock it off!” you say, pressing him into the wall. The wall which is plastered with posters of you don’t know what. Stripper demons, metal bands, a bunch of bullshit. His whole room is cloaked in dim light and there’s a little desk with a shitty laptop hiding in the corner, dozens of tabs opened with porn, chatboards, and more porn. Mostly porn.

Angel saunters in, looking around. “Wwoooooowwww . . .”

The spider rubs his head. “Oh no. Anon, no, please don’t tell me this little snot is yers.”

His tone shakes, fighting back laughter. “Heeheehaha. Look at em’! Look at em’! He looks like a punk rock reject, ahhahahaha!”

You ignore Angel, trying to control the situation. “Are you listening?” you tell the squirming boy. “RELAX!”

For a moment, the boy pauses, though he’s still full of bile and anger.

“I’m gonna’ let you go,” you say. “And when I do, just hear us out. All right? I’m here to help. And don’t get fancy with me, I see those other knives. I know where they are.”

If this kid is in fact your boy, then you reckon he’s put razors and pointy things wherever he can fit them. You used to do the same thing - like claws on a puppy. Shoes, pants, even parts of the hood. Hidden pockets, gloves, anywhere. You weren’t interested in getting shanked right now.

He doesn’t say anything, but you let him go. Slowly, he pushes away from you, staring between you and Angel. The spider, meanwhile, unloads the gun’s mag, popping the round from the barrel before tossing it aside like garbage.

“A Deagle? Very original blood-on-the-dance floor. Anon, ya’ kid’s an edgy twerp!”

The boy bristles. “Hey fuck you! Why don’t you shove it up your ass you faggy bitch!”

Now you bristle. You grab his face and swing it towards you, clenching his jaw hard. “Hee.”

You leer. “You don’t talk to him like that.”

Sure, he’s your boy. You see it now, the anger, the scrapper mentality, the deflection and distrust of strangers. But even if he is your blood, you will not tolerate those words with your spider.

The boy spits in your face. “Fuck off.”

“Nice kid,” mocks Angel. “Good one, sweetie! Did ya’ spend all night workin’ on that one? Ooh, ooh, lemme guess, ya’ gonna call me a cuck next? Or maybe you’ll really mix it up and try somethin’ different, like fag. Gah, except ya’ already used that one.”

Angel sneers, and he’s not helping, like at all. You wipe your face, trying to collect yourself.

“Both of you, stop.” you say.

“Suck my dick!” the boy challenges.

“I don’t touch angry little boys. ‘Sides, if yer packin a Deag, somethin’ tells me you aren’t so big
downstairs, eh?” Angel scoffs.

“Stop.”

The boy flips Angel off. “Eat jizz, slut.”

“Twippy little dipshit!”

“Faggy dragshow!”

“Edgy tryhard dumpster trash!”

You growl.

“STOP.”

You are, for once, angry with Angel. You gaze at him, gesturing at the door – you need to defuse this and Angel’s sardonic nature isn’t going to help right now.

“Wait outside,” you say, quiet fury choking your tone. You don’t need this situation more elevated than it is, and already things are off to a bad, bad start.

Angel looks at you, perplexed. He points at himself, as if innocent. “Me!?”

You don’t say anything, only stare at him with disapproval. When it’s clear you mean yes, him, he spins, cursing, before waiting out in the hall.

Damn it. Now you’ve got an angry boyfriend and an angry son. Your boy’s eyes are full of distrust, contempt, and fright. He doesn’t know you, doesn’t know the stalking shadow that literally shoved his door in. What can you say? How are you going to fix this?

“I’m sorry,” you say, trying again. “We don’t mean it. Long day, you know?”

The boy stares at you.

“We’re here to help, I promise. I’m going to get you out of here, all right? Out of this shit. I saw all of it out there kid, all of it. What they’re doing. And you don’t belong here, at all.”

Naturally, the boy doesn’t just believe you.

You step back a bit, giving him some space. “What’s your name?”

The child looks around, uncertain. After a while though he finally answers.

“Black Wolf.”

...

Okay, no.

“No,” you say aloud. “No, it is not. No.”

You think you hear Angel snicker.

“Yes it is, asshole.”

You close your eye while a wave of frustration washes over you.
“Fine, whatever,” you say. “You need to come with me.”

He raises his hands. “Hell fucking NO.”

Literally every part of you is uninterested in this debate. You are not leaving him in this place, not in this Zone, not one more goddamn second. He’s got a mouth, he’s got an attitude, he’s angry, he’s scared, and he lacks any sense of respect. But he’s also a goddamn fighter. A survivor. He’s down in the bowels of hell, just a kid, just a boy, and living, existing. If you weren’t so dizzy with annoyance, you’d feel a sense of immense pride. That doesn’t mean, though, you’re going to argue about his situation.

He’s a stray, like you, lost in a world he doesn’t understand, trying to fight through it, alone.

Except, no. He’s not alone. He’s got you – only he doesn’t know it yet.

“Kid, listen to me, please. I can get you to a better home. Can feed you. Get you out of this shit. I saw what was happening out there, and...”

You stop. I can’t lose you to that, you think.

The boy makes a face. “Dude, you sound like a creepy pedo fuck. Who the hell are you?”

You... What do you say?

“I’m...”

Before you finish your sentence, an ugly sound cuts through the building. A loud, blaring alarm, nauseating in its weight, coming from the outside. The boy screams, jumping with terror. He dashes to his window, looking down to the streets below.

“Oh fuck, OH FUCK!” he cries, utterly consumed with fright, completely forgetting about the conversation he was just having.

“What!?” you say, alarmed. You look out the window with him. Below, across the street, those ghoulish figures are running up in squads to the building parallel. Angry electronic speech erupts from their discourse as they break into the building, the thunder of gunfire splitting the air.

“NO, NO, NO!”

The boy scrambles passed you. “I gotta’ leave! I gotta leave! They’re gonna kill us! They’re cleaning this block!”

Cleaning? What? Shit, was that what they called it?

“Hey, whoa! Stop!” you call after him. He looks like he’s packing his things, but you’re not letting him run off.

“Stop!” you repeat. “Stop. Come with me! If you’re in danger, just come with me!”

A loud, booming voice echoes outside, hollow and electronic.

“Attention: Local block marked for cauterization. Please cooperate with your Extermination teams. Please assume the sterilized position.”
Every word throws the kid into a wailing, almost sobbing fear. “Nonononononono! No!”

He’s not even listening.

Time to act. There’s no reasoning with him, not right now, and you need to get him the *fuck* out of here. You sight, retrieving the blunt end of your ebony knife. The blade hidden, you come behind him and sock him hard in the back of the neck, forcing him to wiggle. He goes limp, slurs, and falls over. You’ll apologize later.

“Angel!” you call. “We need to move!”

The spider grunts, peaking in, before his eyes go wide at the fallen kid.

“Hey!” he yells, angry. “What’ja’ do!? Did ya’ fucking HIT HIM!?”

You blink, surprised, all things considered. “I just knocked him out,” you say, picking the boy up.

Angel hisses, getting in your face again, jamming a finger into your chest, his teeth bared so much you see the gold one glint. “Don’t. Fucking. *Hit. Kids.*”

A cold shiver of fear goes through you – that is one furious spider.

“You can lay into me when we get home,” you say, apologetic. “But we have to *go.*”

Angel huffs. “Fine, fine, alright!”


“*Attention: Refusal to cooperate with Extermination teams will result in permanent off-city assignment.*”

The spider grabs your hand. “Come on!”

Thankfully, your son is light, and you both bolt down back to the foyer and outside, sticking to the shadowy corners. Outside is chaos. More teams of guards run through the street section, accompanied by floating eyes and the skeletal machines. They bang down doors, setting interiors ablaze with caustic, phosphoric haze, screaming in codes and garble you don’t understand. You only know one thing: it means death.

You’re not sure who their intended target is, but you’re not sticking around to find out. You and Angel dash back the way you came while the town behind you chokes with violence and cries. Sinners are rounded up, caged, and marched off. Those who run are promptly caught and beaten to a pulp.

Past one corner, Angel glances to see someone. The tiny silhouette of the girl he helped previous, her eyes wide and afraid. She sees him before running into a building, while more of the guards head for it. Angel freezes, eyes strewn with panic.

“Angel!” you call over, getting ahead of him. “Angel let’s go!”

He starts to walk towards the structure before it’s consumed in a blaze. You grab him, pulling him away, the structure consumed in a bright pillar of phosphoric flame. He looks back as you both rush back to the main plaza, to the station, the reality of the *Zone* crashing down on him.

By the time you reach the station again, alarms are blaring over the entire town. Whatever’s happening, it’s a full-on cleansing. You got here just in time, but you aren’t out of dodge yet. Before,
no one was stopping you, but with junior over your shoulder. . .

Indeed, one of the ghoulish sentries spies you as you and Angel head for one of the trains, tapping its head, radioing others.

“Possible Code Grey, couple of benigns carrying tumor, responding. ”

Fuck no.

The moment it tries to stalk toward you, you yank out your 1911 and brain it through its face. It grunts, crumpling to the ground.

Angel gawks. “Well fuck! If we was gonna’ do that from the start! Shoulda said so!”

You pant, heave, pointing at one of the outgoing trains. “Go, GO.”

You dash into the car, boy over your shoulder, eager to escape this nightmare. The doors slam shut, the machine hissing to life. There’s no one onboard, because no one’s expected to come back. Through the window, you see the shadows of more figures approaching while the train rumbles to life, pulling away. They point your way, unleashing a torrent of gunfire. You throw the boy to the floor and grab Angel, covering them both on the ground while bullets and shattered glass explode through the interior. Roaring, electronic rage is audible over the train’s noise as it gets moving, pulling you away from the Zone, away from this pocket of Hell. Sparks of white bore holes in the car, and each shot makes you flinch.

You don’t move. You don’t move until you’re absolutely certain no one is shooting at you, Angel and your son held tight under your arms. You squeeze them for dear life, like a shield made of shadows, only moving when you can hear the slick howl of a train skidding along tracks, when gunfire is absent.

Slowly, you push off Angel, who blinks, curled up.

“Are you okay?” you ask, checking him for injury.

“M’fine, fine.” he grumbles, sitting up. “You?”

You nod. “Got lucky.”

Now you both look to the child, who groans, still out cold. The reality of it finally settles in, what you have here, what it means.

“Wow,” Angel Dust utters. “You uh. Ya’ have a kid.”

You stare at the boy for a long, long time.

Oddly. . . you smile.


“The hell’s so funny?”

Strange, bizarre pride blossoms in your chest. You grab Angel, hugging him, kissing him.

“Angel!” you say, excited. “I have a son!”

He pushes you back. “Heyheyhey! Knock it off! Still pissed at ya’!”
You don’t care.

“ANGEL!” you say again.

“Whaaaaaat!?”

You have him by the shoulders, overwhelmed. “We have a son.”

At once, Angel’s features soften, blinking.

“Aw *fuck.*”

Chapter End Notes

That boy ain't right!
You and Angel make it back to the Hotel with the kid, trying to figure things out. Charlie isn't happy.

You set aside the fourth shank, a crude piece of sharpened wood wrapped with string and rubber. There were more.

You were... impressed. Next to you, crumpled in the seat, still out-cold, was a young boy, a figure of hood and shadow. His frame was covered in an attire meant to intimidate, though it only made him look the young fool. It didn’t mean the stray had no claws, though. Inside his hoodie was a family of shivs, shanks, and makeshift knives, all crafted with random junk he’d clearly found during his time in the Exterminator Zone. They occupied every spot he could hide them, and it was strangely familiar to you. In the murky depths of your soul’s memory, you feel you did the same. When a child has no choice but to fend for themselves, they use everything they can – or at least the kid did.

Damn. Not bad at all.

A street bump wiggled him in seat, pale pinkish lights of Pentagram City rolling over his features. Opposite of you was Angel Dust, legs crossed, gazing at the kid with an uncertain expression. He watched you pull out more sharp objects, counting them out. When you pulled the last one (you hoped) free, Angel wiggled his digits.

“Fuckin’ hell,” he chimed. “Twelve of em’.”

“It’s a wonder he could move at all,” you commented. Huh. This was alien. Strange. This sense of... pride. You set the shanks aside in a pile next to you, arms crossed, watching the limp kid.

Angel squinted. “He gonna’ be all right?”

“He’ll come to in a bit,” you reassure. Something tells you he’s a tough little fucker. Angel grunted.

“Can’t hear us?”

You glance to Angel. “Don’t think so.”

Now, your spider’s eyes narrowed. Uh oh. All four arms crossed and he gave you the we-need-to-talk look. The last time you saw that was... well shit, it hadn’t been a while. You were in trouble.

“I know you’re mad.”

Angel snarled. “MotherFUCKER.”

All right, so he’s really mad. ‘Ya’ stupid sonafabitch! The fuck is yer problem!? Huh!? Ya’ have
any idea how fuckin’ bad ya scared me!?”

You blink. Scared?

“The hell!? When ya’ saw the word ‘Xterminator did ya’ think, ‘well gee that sounds like a real dandy-ass place I’d like to visit!’ Ever occur to ya’ that MAYBE ya’ oughta get me first?”

The core of his fury comes from a place of concern. You’re both flattered but hurt. Not because his words hurt you, but because it puts him in distress.

But, in the same vein, you left on your own for a reason. “This isn’t your responsibility, Angel,” you say, flat. “This is mine.”

Angel gawks. “What kinda’ DUMBASS macho-headed bullshit is dat? I hear some stupid shit, but that!? ”

You look at the boy again. This boy. Your son. “I’m not putting you in danger because of me. Not again. Not because of my mistakes.”

Angel groans, burying fingers in forehead while a free hand waves in the air. “I’m runnin’ outta’ ways to call ya’ a stupid fucker. Anon ya’ gotta be the biggest shithead I’ve ever known. Ya think I give a flibbity fuck about, what, ‘danger?’ Bitch!”

He jams his hands into fluff cleavage. “Did’ja forget who I am? Half dis’ dumbass city either wants to be me or kill me! Fuckin’ danger, what am I, some kinda’ limp-wristed princess!? I am danger, bitch! I’m Angel FUCKIN’ Dust!”

He points at you. “WHAT did I tell ya’? WHAT!? We’ze best pals, we stick. Ain’t no fuckin’ place I’m scared to go. I don’t give A SHIT!”

You want to make him understand. You wish you could. Something inside you has snapped, some instinctual desire to protect. Maybe it’s because the boy is truly yours. Or maybe you feel the need to compensate for a lack of good family in your mortal life? But you knew you had to act, and getting bailed out by people you love, especially Angel, isn’t what you wanted.

“I thought ya’ trusted me!” he accused. You stare at him.

“I do!”

“Then WHY’D YA’ RUN OFF!?”

He’s asked you many times. You shake your head. “He’s. . . my son. I don’t know. I had to do something.”

“For once, Angel,” you continue, looking out the window, “For once I didn’t want to drag you down with me.”

At once, the spider makes a gagging sound, flipping you off. “Ugh. UGH. Is dat what ya’ thinkin’? Gugh! Jee-zus, when did ya’ get all dick hard about this righteous shit! I don’t care! I don’t care about dat’! I don’t care where it is or what it is! I’m s’posed to be with ya! Always! And yer s’posed to be with me!”

He breathes, sitting back in his seat. He shakes his head. “No. Nuh uh. No. No more.”

Your eye goes to him.
“Dis’ bullshit stops right here. Don’t ya EVER run off without me, EVER. Never ever! Never ever again! Or so help me I’ll fuckin’ beat ya dizzy you won’t even remember you’ze had a head!”

His expression sags, and he gazes at the cab floor. “Ya’ scared me bad. M’tired of that. How would you feel, huh, if I did that! Huh!? If I went all cock-crazy and did somethin’ stupid!”

You blink. You. . .

Fuck. You know what it’s like because that’s happened. He went off by his lonesome once, with Cherri, and overdosed, and the terror it filled you with was something you never wanted to experience, ever again. Shit.

You sigh, conceding. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

Some of Angel’s fury starts to recede. Some of it.

“Ya’ got a kid,” he says, tempered. “Maybe I don’t get it. I’unno what that’s like. But hol-ee fuckin’ fuck, pockets. Don’t ever do that to me again.”

He leans on the door, looking out the car window too, tall spirals of Pentagram City buildings drifting by. You’re both back in the main city now, far away from the train station, the Red Line, and the Zone. Though its dangers feel so close still.

“What’ja say to me? ‘Ya can’t lose me’ or some shit? No. I can’t lose you.”

A sharp heat grabs your chest, a mix of adoration but anguish. Damn, you didn’t mean for him to feel that way.

“Look at me,” he commands. So you do. He leers at you.

“That’s it. No more. Ya’ promise me, right now. Ya’ don’t ever go flyin’ off on your own. Ever again. I don’t care if ya’ goin off to fight world war four or some bullshit! You STAY. WITH. ME.”

Part of you is admittedly frightened, the other. . . infatuated. At the root of all this, you just want to be together. So you nod like a guilty man, quietly agreeing.

“Promise!”

“I promise, Angel. I do.”

He offers a long, exasperated sigh, legs wiggling together. He cares. He cares and it hurts how much he does. He’s furious, but not because of the boy, because you went without him.

“I ain’t Chuck. Kay? I ain’t one of them Hotel fuddies. What, ya’ thought if ya’ told me this I woulda’ stopped ya?”

You shake your head. “Guess I wasn’t thinking at all. I just knew I had a son.”

The spider muses over your words. “Ya don’t even know him.”

“No. But. . . I want to.”

Angel grunts again, indignant. “Humph. Ain’t seen you all cock-fuckin-sure since ya’ wanted to roll the big sugar.”

A huff. “Think you and me got a good understandin’. Feh. Drop the uppity morals shit, pockets, it
You offer a tired, dry chuckle. “All right. No more running off. In fact, starting tomorrow, I’m taping myself to you.”

“Ya’ think this is fuckin’ funny, smartass?”

Your unconscious son grumbles. He’ll be waking up pretty soon. “In a very strange way. . . yes.”

You’ll have to make this up to Angel Dust, you really will. Your head is swimming with so many new realities now – not just the boy, but the events at Paradise Found, of seeing Sarin again, of your ex’s appearance. You know what? You think you’re good on the ‘risking your life on some half-baked scheme’ for a long, long while. Your fetid soul is exhausted – and you just want to go home with your spider and, now, your kid.

“Well, that’s a really funny joke ya’ got there,” says Angel, pointing at the kid. “Gah, what a twerp. Fuck. FUCK. Pockets. What are we s’posed to do?”

Hearing him say ‘we’ is quite comforting. You want him to think of this situation as you and him with a boy. A little family.

You glance at him, earnest. “You’re not mad about the kid?” Even if you didn’t know about the child, it’s still technically a revelation rivaling sleazy afternoon TV dramas, and that’s enough.

Angel snorts. “Anon if I was mad ya’ wouldn’t even be conscious.”

What? Well what the hell was all that from before? Hot damn, you shudder to think how pissed off your spider could get it.

“I just. . .”

He rests his chin in hand, wiggling a digit at the boy. “Dunno if I’m ready for. . . um.”

A pregnant pause forms in the cab, until he makes a face, sticking out tongue. “Blegh! T’fuck was that? Black Wolf?”

You grimace too. “Yeah, no. Big no to that one.”

Both of you almost chuckle. Almost.

Angel Dust shakes his head, adjusting hair tuft. “Eh, whatever. Whatever! Hmph! I’m still cross wit ya’.”

“Fair enough,” you concede.

“Oh yeh? Well how’s dis for fair. Ya’ sleepin’ on the couch tonight.”

You blink. That’s a terrible wound to suffer! But, also, you do have your own bed.

“You know I do have a room.”

“SLEEP ON THE COUCH!”

Hands come up like a gun is pointed your way. “All right, all right.”

That could’ve been far, far worse all things considered. If making things up to Angel meant a night
on the furniture, you’d take it. Hell, you had to figure this out too, some time to yourself wasn’t a bad idea.

The rest of the way back was mostly quiet. Angel cools down, but only because he’s had a chance to tear you a new asshole with his words. Still simmering, but you get it. Really, if he had gone off with someone or by his lonesome to a dangerous area, yeah, you’d be mad too. Probably furious. It’s a bad feeling and the only reason you’re getting off easy is because it’s for a boy. Your boy.

Fucking hell that’s gonna’ take some getting used to. And what about Annie? Was she really gone too? Well. Probably for the better – it was hard enough trying to get around the Hotel with your ex sauntering about, and you didn’t want any more “incidents.” Maybe this was all for the better, anyway. A son would force you to stay put, keep you at the Hotel, because every time you stepped out it was like the city wanted you dead. Well, no, it did, it was Hell.

The familiar silhouette of the Hotel swims into view, the strange night sky littered with crimson stars and a deformed moon. It’s late. How long were you two gone, anyway? Hours, easily, enough that you’ve returned at an abysmal time. Like clockwork, too, you hear the boy grumble to life, slow, pained mutters escaping him as he starts to shift. You take the shivs and stuff them in your long coat pocket to avoid “problems.” Angel, meanwhile, stretches with a loud, exaggerated yawn.

“Fuckin’ finally,” he mutters. “Can feel m’foundation meltin’ off. . .”

He kicks the door open, stepping out. The boy, finally, shakes awake, and at once his head snaps around, panicked yelps leaving him.

“Hnn. . . huh. . . w-wha. . .what? WHAT!? WHAT THE FUCK!?”

You hear Angel too. “Ey! Hurry up! We gettin’ charged for sittin here!”

The kid flings himself as far back as he can, staring at you. “FUCK OFF!” A hand reaches into his hoodie, seeking weapons that aren’t there.

“Hey, easy now,” you say, raising a hand. “Just relax. You’re all right.”

“I’LLFUCKINGKILLYOU!”

You sigh. “Nobody’s gonna’ hurt you.”

The kid breathes like a stray caught in a cage, and you figure the best thing is to give him a sense of control. So, you step out of the cab, holding door open for him, expectant. He just stares.

You glance to Angel. “This is gonna’ take a second.”

The spider rolls his mismatched eyes. “Great. M’goin’ inside.” He fishes into his purse for a roll of bills and throws them at the driver.

He swerves, starting towards the door, kinky boots clicking. Then, he stops. “Uhh. . .”

“What?” you say, still watching the boy.

You think you hear Angel’s voice genuinely snared by fear. “. . .mom’s mad.”

“Huh?”

You turn to see and. . . oh shit. There, at the front of the door, is Charlie. Her arms are crossed, her eyes creased, narrowed and focused, and a set, hard look holds her features in an expression one
could only describe as quiet, parental fury. Oh shit. There’s no rainbows over there, no happy smiles and piano solos, just a very cross, very angry Charlie. She gazes at you both like a mother catching her kids back from sneaking out. You see her sigh then vanish back into the Hotel interior.

Angel spins, wearing a nervous grin. “Kay, soooo uhhh if we start runnin’ now maybe we can get to the West Side border by midnight!”

This is a bit different. You’ve seen the Princess cross but now? Urgh.

“It’s okay,” you reassure. “I’ll take the blame. It’s my problem.”

Angel just boggles. “Ain’t enough blame in this whole fuckin’ city gonna’ save us from dat! Fuuuuuuck. This suuuuuuuucks.”

The spider rubs his head. “Pfleh. S’way it is I guess. Crime togedda, time togedda.”

“What the fuck is going on!?”

The shrieking sound of your son pulls you back to focus.

Where to even begin? “You mind getting out of the car? Tab’s running.”

“Fuck you old man!”

You blink. “Old man?”

Angel, caught between impatience and the imminent doom of a Charlie scorn session, strides to the other cab side, pulls open the door, and yanks out the kid. Like a pup he grabs him by the hoodie and shoves him to the sidewalk, dusting off his spare hands.

“There! Fuck sake!”

The kid sputters, rolling on the ground, stumbling to his feet, dizzied. He pants, looking between you two like you’re about to knife him through the guts.

“Where am I!?”

You want to so badly say home. That he’s home, that he’s safe, that so long as he’s here and you’re around, he’ll never have to worry about anything ever again, that just like the people in this building, you’ll protect him, because he’s your boy.

But you can’t – it wouldn’t make sense to him. Hell, you’re not even ready to tell him who you are.

“Somewhere better than that deathtrap you lived in.”

“You won’t take me alive you shitheads!”

Angel crosses his arms, spare ones on his hips. “We kinda’ just did ya’ dumb little twerp.”

The boy glares at Angel, remembering the previous verbal bout. “You wanna’ fucking go!?”

Angel looks at you and gives an exhausted, exasperated will-you-fucking-fix-this-already look.

You step between them. “Look, kid, just take a deep breath. You’re all right. If we wanted to hurt you, think we would’ve already, yeah?”
This appears to settle him down a little, but he’s still breathing like a wild animal. “What did you fucking sickos do to me!? I know who you are! I know that’s that dragshow weirdo!”

Angel blinks. “Dragshow... ey! Ya’ could at least remember my name ya’ fuckin’ punk! Angel goddamn Dust! ‘Member it!”

You raise a hand. This needs to keep cool. There is one thing you can think of that works – like it would with anybody who has to fend for themselves. Kid looks like he rummages around garbage cans for sustenance and Devil only knew the kind of trash he had to pilfer just to eat.

“Why don’t you scream at us over some food?” you offer. “They make some damn fine stuff in there. Ever had a New York steak?”

This works. It settles him down, enough that he’s not screaming and brandishing his fists. He softens, because the prospect of good food is hard to resist. Even Angel notices.

“Yeh. C’mon ya’ little shit. Ya’ really wanna’ do this all night? This place is fuckin’ easy. Ya’ even get a free room. Betcha could, I dunno’, jack off or whatever kids do.”

The kid grimaces. “I don’t trust you,” he states.

A very small part of you smiles. “I wouldn’t either,” you say.

There’s a gurgle from the cab driver. The large, tendril-coated eye who seems to take you everywhere starts to drive off. You shrug.

“Guess you don’t have a choice now, huh?”

The kid tenses. “Fuck...”

You gesture at the young boy. “Come on. Easier to threaten someone when you’ve eaten.”

It’s dead late and the foyer is mostly empty. Not even Husk is around to give you his typical amused snarky attitude. However, a very bothered Vaggie is waiting, cross armed, in chair. Nifty’s there too, flipping through some magazine, likely reading about cleaning tips for bleaching blood stains. When you, Angel, and the kid come inside, you receive a perplexing array of glances.

Angel tries to veer for the stairs, tip-toing away from Vaggie, but is swiftly stopped by her expectant, narrow eye. It’s a little different though, this reserved look of hers. She looks between you two, like someone is angry on behalf of her. Uh oh.

“She’s not happy.”

She meaning Charlie. Oh fuck.

Angel can’t even manage his usual sarcastic-asshole routine. “Ya’ never saw me.”

Vaggie sighs. “She’s waiting for both of you.” This meaning there’s no escape, and that you’ll both have to see her in a few moments.

In the meantime, the boy is behind you, and like a ravenous dog he’s looking at everything and everyone like it’s going to kill him. You stay in front of him, protective – you can’t really help yourself.
“He had nothing to do with it, Vaggie,” you say in regard to Angel. “If Charlie’s mad, I’ll take the brick.”

She shakes her head, an implication of how futile such an effort would be. “Hah.”

Okay, now you’re actually afraid. “Oh fuck me, she’s pissed isn’t she?”

Vaggie folded her hands together. “Um, let me put it this way. I’m afraid to talk to her myself right now.”

. . . holy shit, were you gonna’ die tonight?

Niffty, in the meanwhile, upon seeing the trio, buzzes towards you. “I think she’s gonna stabstabstab you both!”

“Niffty!”

The maid shrugged. “I’m only saying!”

Finally, they see the boy. Vaggie’s eye widens, boggling, and Niffty starts to bounce in the air, excited.

“OH MY GOD, IS THI-“

At once, Angel’s hands come flinging from the side and clamp around Niffty’s mouth, muffling.

“Is dis some annoyin’ punk brat!? YEAH, IT IS! Hah, hah, HAH.”

The spider glares at Niffty with a threatening look, while Vaggie seems to understand. You nod at her, a silent acknowledgment.

“He’s a, uh, hungry kid. Needs some help. Vaggie, you think you can get him something for the night?”

You so desperately want to do this yourself, talk with him, start to get to know him, but it’s late. That, and an angry Daughter of the Devil is waiting for you.

“Sure,” she says, looking to the boy. She waves, forcing a small smile. “Hi there. Welcome to the Happy Hotel. We’ve got some leftovers, if you’re hungry.”

The boy’s been quiet, watching Angel wrestle with a jumpy, screaming Niffty. He’s nervous, but food is luring him in.

“Hey,” you say, “Why don’t you tell her about the knives? She’s got a spear. Bet she has a knife too.” You’re very deliberate not to use the word Exterminator and you hope a mutual interest will help him feel more at ease.

Vaggie takes the hint. “Oh. Um. Yeah! Why not?”

He finally speaks. “Really?”

Vaggie nods, then looks over at the fighting Niffty and Angel. “Hey!”

They both stop. “Niffty! Quit fooling around with Angel! We have a hungry guest.”

The maid whines, escaping the quartet of hands while the spider shakes a fist at her. “Fiiiiiiine!” she
buzzes.

You come close to Vaggie and lean. “Holy shit, Vag, thank you. I owe you big time.”

She shrugs. “Hah. If you survive.”

You have no idea how serious she’s being.

You turn around to face your son once more before the night’s end. He’s here now, finally, safe. You don’t know what to make of him or what to do yet, but, goddamn, you’re happy about it, arguments and all. The strange empty sensation you’ve had since taking the role as Hotel security is fading away. You feel driven by purpose, instinct, and the desire to build a life. To build a little family with your spider – words you don’t think you’d ever say in your mind.

“They’re going to get you some good eats,” you reassure. He gazes back up at you, expression softened a little.

“Just stick around til’ at least the morning. All right?”

He doesn’t understand. “Why?”

Uh. Shit. You struggle for a convincing answer. “So. . . I can give you back the knives, of course.”

He blinks. “I. . . guess.”

Good enough for you. You gesture to Vaggie while you mentally start to prepare for whatever the hell lies ahead.

“Go with her then. Mind your manners.”

The boy tenses. “Fuck you, I do what I want.”

At once, Vaggie marches over, offers a glare, eye narrowing. “I’m sorry?”

He shrinks. “Er. . .”

You’re amazed. How’d she do that!? Well, you don’t have time to stand in awe of Vaggie’s authority, there’s an unfortunate fate awaiting you and Angel Dust.

Vaggie gestures to the kitchen, wiggling a hand at Nifty. The maid flutters over it, sticking her tongue out at Angel who flips her off with all four arms.

“We’ll get you something to eat and find you a room for the night,” says Vaggie as the boy reluctantly starts to follow. You watch him go, like you’re observing some sort of Lovecraftian puzzle, swimming in a sea of pride and confusion and uncertainty.

Well. Time for that later. Mom is angry.

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Charlie’s features are often stretched with optimistic grins and hopeful expressions, accented by her rosy cheeks and nauseatingly pleasant demeanor. Despite her occupation, bloodline, and station as steward of the underworld, she’s always been amiable, friendly, and well, just sweet as southern tea.
She’s not smiling.

At her desk, her hands are folded in front of her. There’s a tired, angered resignation in her eyes. While she’s not scowling, per say, nothing about her stature is ‘happy.’ She keeps her eyes locked to you, sometimes flicking to Angel Dust, who conveniently keeps his mismatched gaze elsewhere, finding a clock on the wall just fascinating. Her office is kept together, regal and furnished with all the pleasantries of her family, and there’s a strange array of encouraging posters on her wall, contrasting with the sheer disappointment dripping from her.

You stand, waiting, arms behind you. You’ve been chewed out by a capo plenty of times to recognize this feeling. You’re the lamb in the slaughterhouse, now you’re waiting for the deathblow.

Charlie sucks in a long breath, exhales, having considered her next words for no doubt a long, long time. She’s like a parent ready to scold her kids.

“I think I’ve been more than lenient,” she starts, watching you. “Very lenient. I understand you’re both in therapy. I understand it’s hard. But you’ve broken the Hotel curfew and rules how many times now?”

Well, you’ve never seen an exact copy of these “rules” but you kind of know them anyway. Unspoken authority, really. Don’t relapse with substances, don’t break curfew, don’t, you know, do you.

You wait. It’s a rhetorical question.

“Anon. I’ve turned a blind eye to your impulse decisions before. But this time you’ve crossed a line. Wandering into . . . that place, by yourself, without permission! Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? Not to mention a complete abdication of your duties as Head of Security!”

Angel has his arms crossed, legs wiggling.

“And Angel,” continues Charlie, taking her verbal rod to the spider. “You should know better! You should have come directly to me!”

Angel doesn’t meet her gaze, just grumbles.

You step in though. “He had nothing to do with this, Charlie. This is my fault, not his.”

Charlie glares. “I’m not interested in your excuses!”

You feel yourself bristle. “It’s not an excuse,” you say, firm. “This was my decision.”

Charlie stands up in that don’t-you-dare-argue-with-me kind of way. “Yes, and it was his decision to follow you. You’re both adults, you both make choices as adults. You, Anon, decided to brashly run off and put yourself in danger, and you, Angel Dust, decided to follow along without so much as a note!”


You see Charlie’s eyes flicker with a shade of red. She raises a finger. “Do not make light of this situation! Either of you! I’ve given you both space! A place to live! Safety! Made sure you eat well! And what do you two do!?”

Angel shrinks, looking down, and you grimace.
“Carelessly put yourselves in danger! Selfish, thoughtless, and impulsive!”

Charlie closes her eyes, rubbing her temple.

“It wasn’t thoughtless,” you say in protest. “Charlie, I have a son.”

It doesn’t temper her. “I’m well aware of your situation, Anon.”

“Then you know why I left, Charlie! You can’t ask me to sit on my ass knowing what I did! Do you know how he was living!? Do you?”

Angel gawks at you, eyes as wide as saucers, because maybe raising your voice at the furious mother is on the low end of “good ideas.” He laughs, raising his hands.

“A-hahha, h-he ain’t thinkin’ right Chuck! Long night! H-hah, RIGHT ANON?”

You narrow your eye. “No. No. I will not apologize for trying to save my son. I would’ve done the same for any of you. If there was even the slightest hint any of you were in-da—”

Charlie raises a hand. “Be quiet.”

In that split moment, you feel a fraction of her family’s strength radiate from her, and it’s enough to put the absolute fear of total obliteration in you. It doesn’t matter if you’re right or wrong, you’re basically talking back, and she’s not having it.

“. . .your son is another matter entirely, Anon. And we could’ve helped. I could’ve gone through the proper channels!”

Fear is replaced by confusion. Proper channels?

She shakes her head. “I’m trying to help both of you, but clearly, my therapy methods aren’t effective as they are. Things will change.”

There’s an anxious pause in the air, that cold spike of uncertainty rising in your chest arriving from the unknown. Dread anticipation.

“Both of you. . .” she said, leaning, hands going to table.

“Are grounded.”

The word hangs in the air like a knife in the chest. You blink. Is she serious? Angel blubbers, sputtering disagreements.

“Wuh! What!? Nwha? WHAT!? GROUNDED!?”

You’re at a loss for words.

Charlie hisses. “Grounded! Until further notice, both of you are forbidden from leaving the Hotel! If you so much as step a foot outside the building premises I’ll have you committed to your rooms for a whole year!”

Yes. She’s being serious. But she’s not done yet. Her fury returns to you, wrath and all.

“Anon. Until further notice, you are stripped of your role as security head! And you will be attending mandatory therapy sessions, just like everyone else!”
She crosses her arms, righteous scorn oozing from her. “You want to be responsible?”

You’re a bit dumbstruck, uncertain if you should be concerned or bothered. You’re a thief, and you’ve been jailed like a kid without his supper. But you’ve lost your role too, something you were struggling with already.

Charlie doesn’t wait for a response. “Then both of you will mind this. . . child. Consequences and all. If he slips up, both of you will be held accountable for it. Do it I make myself clear?”

Angel’s beside himself, leaping to his feet. “Ey! That ain’t fair! Ya’ can’t do that!”

Charlie shuts him down with a terrifying gaze. “Then you’re free to find a home somewhere else. Understand?”

You’re both quiet, but that doesn’t please Charlie. “Do you both understand!?”

You lower your head. “Yes ma’am,” you say. Angel crosses his arms, glancing away, pouting, grumbling.

“Fine,” he spits, indignant. Charlie huffs, satisfied, adjusting her suit collar before returning to sit.

“Very well then,” she says, tone softened. “That is all. Both of you get some sleep. I expect to see you both at breakfast.”

You almost don’t want to leave because questions are buzzing through your head. What did she mean by proper channels? Did she know what the Zone was and what was going on there? And how long was “proper channels” going to take? You didn’t like that one bit, but, you had a responsibility now to your son – more so than ever. Guess you’re unofficially retired as Security for now. Back to being Anon. . . well, master of nothing.

Angel stamps the hall floor when you exit the office, a slurry of curses escaping him.

“Fuckinstupidassgroundedbullshitbunchadumbassfuckin’.”

You take off your hat, equally as defeated.

“SPAZZATURA!” Angel yells, throwing his arms up. “FUCKIN’ STOOPID!”

You didn’t mean for him to get in trouble, either, not at all. You wanted to take the heat for all of it, but, Charlie’s wrath wouldn’t be tempered. You’d crossed her line too many times.

“Fuckin GROUNDED!” he continues. “Ground me!? I’ll ground you! Groundin’ me, fuckin’ fuckity fuck!”

Everyone’s pissed tonight. “Sorry, Angel. You can sock me one if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Feh,” he chides. “Already did.”

“Am I still forbidden to the couch, then?”

Here, the spider stops, arms crossed, head tossed up as he shows his back to you. “Hmph. Sure as fuck ya’ are! Dumbass! Gettin’ us in trouble!”

He sighs. “M’goin to bed. See yer dumbass at breakfast or some shit. Fah! Grounded!”

Angel marches off, muttering and rambling, kicking at anything he sees, petulant and whining. Well,
hard to blame him. Grounded wasn’t the punishment you were expecting but it’s still quite
undignified – to think a thief and a spider are now committed to a building like a pair of children.
Guess you took the hospitality for granted.

Still. You have no regrets. Your son is with you, and that’s all you needed. Besides, it just means
you have to spend some quality time with your little family, and the thought of that makes the
“punishment” feel like a reward. You hurry back downstairs, but all’s quiet. The Hotel is mostly
shrouded in dark save for a few remaining lights – the boy must’ve gotten a room. Well, guess it’s
breakfast then, assuming he didn’t try to break out. That’s the real test then – he’ll be exposed to
everything the Hotel has to offer, and how well that goes you aren’t sure.

You find the couch, sit in it, removing coat and set it aside. The shivs are there too of which you
examine carefully. They’re all crude but creative. One even looks like it was made with the pieces of
Hell’s cola brand. You wonder if he ever had to use them, fend for himself against one of those
things. So long as you were breathing, he’d never have to worry about that ever again.

You lean back in the couch, piecing things together. It’s been a long night. Long week, really. With
time to think, you start to wonder about the events at Paradise. Safety is no longer just about Angel,
you’ve got a kid to look after. You wonder, then, how the fuck Sarin found you again, and what
Tom meant about doppelgangers. You want to think it was a mistake, but your mind hurries back to
the dreams, the strange vistas of a desolate Hell, and the shadows you saw inhabiting the In Between.
But how did that work together? Why would two replicas – assuming they were even real – relate to
Sarin? Maybe she only reformed and continued her work of hunting you down, that was still
possible.

The Exterminator Zone too, that plagued you with questions. Why was it sectioned off? Who were
the ghoulish enforcers? Charlie knew about it apparently. And if she knew about it, that means she
was aware of what was happening.

Devil, what a headache. You were going to need answers soon.

One goddamn thing at a time though. You lean back into the embrace of the sofa, arms crossed. You
set your hat aside and wait for sleep, although rest never comes. You end up staring at the darkness
of the walls for a long while.

“Cover your ears, darlin’.”

The clatter of distant dice rolls and grumbles fills the tavern ambiance, littered with the tremble of
forlorn piano while hazy smoke chokes the air, accented by the scent of foul whiskey.

A row of cards slaps the table, an impossibly perfect Ace three-of-a-kind, much to the lament of one
other player.

“Goddammit,” a demon says, a ragged, horned jackrabbit with a skull head. “The hell did you get
that from, your ass?”

He was talking to a figure, an insectoid draped in brown carapace, long, dusty wings, and a wide
brim hat covering his fluff antennae. Bulbous, angry orange eyes peered over, mandibles pulled into
what looked like a smirk.

“Devil’s luck, I suppose.” The speaker’s accent carried a southern, but refined drawl, an insult to
injury to be purloined at poker by a self-described gent.
“Devil’s luck my dick,” the opponent grumbles. “Cleaned me out!”

The other fellow, a demon draped in the form of a Deathshead Moth, sipped from his cigarillo. “I duly apologize, I’ve found I have that effect on people.”

The jackalope shook his head, creaking. “Whatever Sabbath. I’m outta’ here.”

Sabbath mused over his earnings, taking a poker chip and rolling it through digits. “Now, now, musn’t be cross. What’s the harm in one more hand?”

“One more. . . with what!? I’m broke as stones ya’ jackoff! I’ll fuck you up next game. Same time, same place.”

The moth held up a shot glass, tipping his hat with dignified amusement. “I look forward to your continued ruination.”

The demon grumbled. In other cases, he might’ve taken a knife to a mouthy foe, but considering who it was. . . maybe some other time. Sab, in the meantime, sluged his shot back and flicked over his earnings with some interest. Nothing extravagant for late evening grabs, but that was to be expected for the crowd at this hour. Vagabonds these days were sparse on pocket money.

That, by his calculation, was all this outfit had to offer, so Sabbath took one more celebratory drink. He was all but ready to leave until something caught the corner of his eye.

Normally, he wasn’t a beast for “modern” innovations. Television was a strange thing to him. He watched it grow over the century and found it as distracting as a whorehouse drowning in bad scotch and opium. He never paid it mind, especially the yellow journalism passing itself off as “news.” Background noise, that was all. But even in the corner, his orange eyes saw something. No, someone, someone he recognized.

Over the tavern noise he couldn’t make out the voices, but there – framed in an image next to the two ghoulsh reports Mr. Trench and Ms. Killjoy. . .

Was Mr. Kohen.

He knew Kohen. Not intimately, but enough he was familiar with his performances and had a speaking basis with him from time to time. A classy man with the swagger of a cat, a welcome break in the dreary noise of this noisy city. But the image he saw was nothing short of ghastly. At once, Sabbath stood, enough that he even ignored his earnings, coming closer to the screen. As he did, the voices were audible.

“. . .and that’s the end of ol’ Zander Kohen. And this is real folks, not a performance!”

What?

“That’s right Tom!” added Killjoy, grinning. “Zander was butchered like a pig in the slaughterhouse! No one knows why, but the bloodbath was spectacular!”

Tom nodded. There was a hint of discomfort in his tone.

“Mystery motives indeed! Guess someone really didn’t like his style! Or his suit! In fact, after he was chopped up like yesterday’s lunch, they stole one of his suits!”

Sabbath removed his hat out of respect. His antennae stood at attention though, concern filling his mind. The man was dead and put down like a beast – that was no way for a classy fellow to pass.
But something else concerned him, something far, far worse. He reached into his duster, pulling free a glass container, minding the translucent piece within it, as if to make sure it was still there.

A Fragment.

Zander knew, but he what he knew better was the location of the other Fragment – along with dozens more. He preferred it that way, separated. Someone took Mr. Kohen’s suit. And that meant they knew about it.

The question was. . . who?

As if sensing the question, Tom Trench continued. “Nobody knows the killer! Cameras were obscured by clouds, dust, and poison!”

“Some of your hometown brew, Tom?”

Tom laughed, nervous. “You bet, h-hah! The only image revered was this! If you recognize them, give em’ a round of applause! They sure were thorough! You gotta’ appreciate that kind of hate!”

Said image appeared, a blurry visual of a figure, a silhouette, obscured by toxic vapor. They were hard to see, wearing a white suit, but. . . they were unmistakably familiar.

Sabbath blinked. Certainly, he wasn’t drunk, not at all. He wasn’t seeing things. No. He was sure of it. They could obscure their head behind a mask all they wanted – but that shape, that height, those physical dimensions. . . he knew that man.

Where his mandibles once held a smile, now, only a grimace.

“You’re no daisy,” he muttered, vacating the tavern at once, resolve coursing through him. “You’re no daisy at all.”

-§-

It’s late, though you haven’t slept, and you don’t think you can. You haven’t even bothered trying to lie down, for all the good it might do you.

Maybe Angel was of the same opinion. You hear something to your side – the light shuffle of footsteps, pulling your attention. Indeed, the silhouette of your spider swims into view, though he’s wearing a long shirt coming to his hips and nothing else. He saunters up to you, wearing a tired expression. He looks at you, gesturing with his head.

“C’mon,” he mumbles. “Come to bed.”

You don’t say anything. You don’t need to, you understand. He forgives you.

You’re back in his room and in the covers shortly after, and god you missed him and how he feels, even if it was for a short while. He rests his head on your shoulder, yawning.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he added. “This kid shit’s got me all fucked up, Anon.”

You blink. “I’m sorry peppermint.”
He shakes his head. “I don’t mean it like that. Just... shit.”

“Will he like me? I dunno’! Can he make a malotov!? Can he even shoot a gun!? Can he even fight!? How we s’posed to get along!? What am I gonna’ say to em’! Pockets, what do I do!?”

He’s all het up because he doesn’t know how to be a parent. It’s adorable. But if you’re honest, you have no goddam idea what you’re doing either.

“Anon!” he shouts. “We GOT A KID!”

You’re elated. You grab him and hold him.

“Yea,” you say. “Yea we do. He’s our boy.”

Angel is a mix of happiness and terror; the prospect of having a kid filling him with a sense of newfound joy and fearful concern, just like you. But one thing won’t change, one constant that, as long as you both remember it, will guide you.

“He is our boy.”

Chapter End Notes

*cue teary parental moments*

So, if you're confused about Sabbath, this is a western-themed spook first appearing in a commissioned story (Sabbatical by WriteAnon). If you want more details I'd recommend reading that. But, if you want the spark notes, here's a few things he's about for the story:

* An old friend of Angel's obsessed with the spider's redemption and will go to great lengths to make sure that happens.
* Respected, not a person most lesser demons want to get on the bad side of.
* Happens to know about the Fragments. Also, he's got a vigilante streak going.

See you next time!
In the Middle of Hell

Chapter Summary

Charlie has a new therapy project for everyone, while you finally have a talk with the boy.

Chapter Notes

Great googly moogly! Apologies for the wait. If you were sitting around during this series’ chronological release, it's been thirteen days since the last! Not how slow I like to be!

Anyway, enjoy the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Now, everyone, I know this isn’t how I normally conduct therapy, but as you can see, things have changed a little!”

A few knowing, chiding snickers fill the living room, mostly from Husk who – impressively enough – holds back a sneer, though he certainly struggles not to explode in a raucous of laughter. Hard to blame him. Hard to blame anyone, since they’re all part of what seems like a massive inside joke. It, of course, leaves the kid confused, flustered, and annoyed.

Your kid, specifically. Charlie has a commanding arm around his shoulder, though his features are still hidden behind underneath black hoodie. You can tell he’s wearing a scowl and he’s none too pleased about his ‘predicament.’ The only reason he hasn’t run off, you figure, is because of the free food. Charlie’s pancakes can sit even the hardest sinners down, and you caught your boy asking for seconds at the table. But, with breakfast aside, now came the meet and greet, and with Mother Hen having the whole nest under her wing, she was more than delighted to rev up her therapeutic endeavors.

This, of course, meant gathering all the Hotel guests for a meet-and-greet. Didn’t matter you all knew each other (mostly). It was important (to her). Considering your situation, you had no room to disagree, and even behind Charlie’s whimsical, optimistic smile, there was the ever-present threat of authority just oozing out of her. Crossing her was no longer an option.

You, like the other Hotel denizens, are sitting in a makeshift circle on couch furnishings while Charlie beams about the clinic’s latest “addition.”

“Our young friend here arrived like many of you: lost, hungry, and scared! So it’s our duty to make him feel welcome and loved!”

You hear the boy growl. “H-huh? Hey, I wasn’t scared!”

Charlie, too, is very specific about her wording. The kid doesn’t know he’s, well, your kid. Everyone
else does of course and there’s an air of tickled amusement hanging over them. Not to mention, news of you and Angel’s grounding got out fast and the way the others carried on it was just the funniest goddamn thing they’d ever heard. Big scary Anon and his mobster boyfriend scolded like a pair of kids. Yeah. Funny. So, every other word, there’s a grin here, a smirk there, a nudge and a wink. Even Vaggie can’t hold back a smile.

“It’s okay!” says Charlie, looking to the sprout. “You’re in a safe place now. In fact, the safest! We just want you to know that!”

In typical teenage grumbles, he bites back. “I don’t even know you fucking weirdos.”

Charlie’s cheek twitches but she keeps smiling. “Now, now! Language! Let’s be kind. You’ll get to know everyone!”

She gestures to the gathering.

How about we all go through the room? If we’re all going to get better, we need to know each other more, and frankly, we haven’t done that at all!”

“Pff, what’s there to know?” the boy challenges. Uh oh. You recognize that tone. He has no sense of respect, because he’s been fending for himself for god only knows how long. To him, this all must seem so... strange.

He points to Husk. “Why do you have a homeless drunk as your desk guy?”

The cat’s smirk vanished, replaced by a frown. “What?!”

Your eye widens. Next to you is Angel, arms crossed. He boggles too, coughing into his gloved fist.

“And these weird fucking stuffed animals...” the boy continues, referring to Raz and Daz. “Why are they even here? Who would make those?”

Raz blinked. “B-baaa?”

Daz frowned, genuinely hurt. “Baa...”

Charlie cleared her throat. “Okay, now...”

“This fucking guy,” continues the kid, pointing at Alastor, who was standing, hands folded behind him, “Jee-zus FUCK MAN, Colgate and body wash! Try it!”

Alastor blinked. His grin widened, his head threw back, and he cackled. “Ohohoho! I hate him! May I eat him now?”

You cover your face. Angel’s mouth trembles, trying so, so hard to not grin and wheeze in a spray of amused laughter.

“You!” the kid keeps up, pointing at Niffty who buzzed and fluttered. “Try Ritalin you high-strung midget!”

Niffty gasped. “Whatwhatwhat!? That is RUDE!”

Charlie’s smile faded, and she leered at the boy. “Young man, that’s enough.”

“Bad enough I get kidnapped by this fucking discount Dillinger and his slutty whorefriend!”
He wouldn’t be stopped. You’re not really insulted, just amazed at his lack of self-preservation. Angel looks away, caught between *holy-fuck-kid* and *holy-fuck-kid-you’re-about-to-get-slapped*.

“And you . . .”

The boy leers at Crymini who offers him a disinterested, expected gaze. He stops. He stammers, in fact, all but receding from his moment of hormone-addled fury.

“Uh, you . . . look . . . like . . . go back to Hot Topic . . .” he mutters. Wait, hang on, you recognize that tone of voice. Was that little punk blushing?

Crymini snorts. “Really kid? God you’re such a tryhard. Bet you can’t wait to tell all your online friends how ‘epic’ you were, right?”

“Shut up!” the kid shoots back, voice notably weaker. The punk dog rolls her eyes.

“What a dweeb.”

Charlie steps in. “All right, *enough!* Young man, you will show the guests here courtesy! You should apologize!”

The kid crosses his arms, muttering curses. Angel has done everything he can to fight back laughter, body shaking from muffled guffaws.

“The little shit’s as rotten as his old man!” Husk yowled, glaring at you. You shoot him a threatening glance, while Charlie realizes things are getting out of hand.

“Enough!” she repeats. There’s enough strength in her voice to silence everyone – even the boy. She rubs her temples, sighing.

“I realize we’re all a little on edge, and that’s okay. We’ll . . . try again later.”

She gestures widely. “Remember, we have group activities for *everyone* today. We’ll reconvene in an hour.”

There are some mutters and grumbles but it’s not like anyone’s going to challenge her, least of all you. For now, then, you have a moment between this and whatever therapy Lucifer’s little monster has cooked up. You see her pull the boy aside, likely sparing some whimsical but *dangerous* words for him. You have to get away though. You have to get away from this crowd and these guests and everything because there’s too much pressure. Too much!

Because you are fucking DYING. You barely get up the stairs before coughing a hurricane of laughs. You feel your lungs explode from violent chuckles and Angel isn’t far behind, coming up the steps too. You see him through your tearing eye and he shoves you, just as tickled.

You’re both out of it. “WAHAHAHA! WHAT A FUCKIN’ PUNK!” Angel howls.

“Jesus,” you say in between hard laughs, “I t-thought Alastor was g-gonna kill em!”

“He didn’t give a SHIT,” Angel adds, hanging off your shoulder. “Ahaha! This dippy little fuck! Ahaha!”

You both keep at it for a good while, head’s hurting from so much laughter. What a prick, this kid, absolutely no respect even when he was taken in. You can’t help but admire how much of a shit he’s being. Though, of course, you know this can’t be a thing. He has to learn to respect everyone here,
especially Angel. You’re getting in your hyucks now, because if he keeps it up you’re sure Charlie might obliterate his soul into nothingness. Might as well get in a laugh before he has to straighten up. . . if he ever does.

Angel’s laughter finally settles, the spider wiping his mismatched eyes, sniffing. “N’oshit. Shit. Aha. Anon, how we gonna’ fuckin do this?”

You stand up straight, managing one last chuckle. “Hah. I don’t know. I uh. We gotta’ talk to him. I have to talk to him. He won’t respect anyone until he has a reason to.”

“Talk to em? ’Bout what?”

You look at your spider, offering an innocent shrug. “Ehrm. Knives?”

Everyone had about an hour before Charlie called them back for her revised ‘therapy session.’ According to her, constructive, positive habits were a group effort, not only for those needing help like Angel or you. Of course, Charlie – in her own way – placed a great deal of emphasis on making and teamwork, not “taking.” Acting as a unit, a team, a family. The thing you haven’t been doing. You know she’s not one for being passive aggressive, but you can feel the scorn coming from her plan.

What plan would that be? Something related to theatrics, of course.

“There’s nothing more concentrated and team based than a play!”

Charlie pranced towards a worn down, disheveled stage, past a sea of auditorium seats overtaken by wear-and-tear and what appeared to be a form of demonic mold. Surrounding her was tattered remains of a once bedazzling auditorium, all life and vigor torn from it. Curtains covered with thick films of dust were thrown over ancient set pieces, lights were broken, and a smell of damp something stung the air. It didn’t bother her. In fact, as she spun to face everyone, it only strengthened her resolve, as did anything attempting to challenge her vision of grand redemption.

“Do you know what I see?” she said, glancing around, pointing at the dimly lit, ruinous stage.

Your kid was in the group, arms crossed, and you could tell he was just aching to say something, anything, but whatever Charlie had delegated from before held his tongue. For now.

Angel wasn’t gonna be stopped though. “A fuckin’ dump!” he hollered. “Chuck, I been t’some shitty dives but dis?”

Vaggie, in the crowd, shooshed him. “Let her finish!”

Charlie adjusted her bowtie. “Yes, well. Potential! I see potential! Musicals! Plays! An audience! Happy faces! Oh, isn’t it so wonderful?”

She twirled and some kind of sparkling rainbow appeared over her. Husk gagged.

“No,” Baxter cut in, huddled and distant from the others. “No! More faces means more filth and eyes, staring, staring eyes.”

“That’s the point of a play, dude,” Crymini challenged, her arms crossed, muzzle still tugged with a never-ending scowl.
“Yes!” agreed Charlie with a vigorous nod. “A show for newcomers! A spectacle for sceptics!”

You rubbed your chin, uncertain.

“You can’t go wrong with a bangarang of a show!” added Alastor, swinging his arm. “Why, miss, we already experienced success with our first performance! It’s a fine idea! A fine one!”

“Yer just sayin’ that cause you get to do all the singin’, chuckles,” said Angel.

“Is that a problem?”

“I wanna’ sing too!” buzzed Niffty, fluttering above the gathering. “So many songs! So many! So many to sing!”

Charlie engorged herself on the enthusiasm. “Yes! Of course! Everyone could have a role! A talent show, even!”

“Ugh, NO,” Crymini groaned. “Stop giving her ideas!”

Husk – who had taken to sitting in one of the chairs – snickered with delight. “Sounds like a mighty fine idea to me, Miss. Hell, I’d give em’ a show, a little card trick or two. Right after we skin em’ on ticket prices.”

Charlie shook her head, arms waving. “No, no! No prices! This is a purely altruistic concept! We want to show Hell we’re generous! We aren’t here to indulge bad habits.”

Angel frowned. “Awwww! But bad habits is fun! And what’s the point if ya’ ain’t makin’ any dough? Chuck, that’s crazy!”

Even Vaggie had her concerns. “I can’t believe I’m saying this. . . but he might be right, Charlie. I mean, wouldn’t this uh, project, cost us?”

Charlie’s enthusiasm wouldn’t be deterred. “The expenses are covered.”

You think you hear your boy say something along the lines of ‘fucking dumb,’ but it’s a whisper at best.

As for you, despite your probation as security head, you can’t help but feel a prickle of anxiety over letting in strangers to see a show. Not to mention the concept. Talent show? Oh please, Lucifer, no.

“We’re kind of exposing our chest here, Charlie,” you offer. “Could be dangerous.”

She tosses you an impartial glance. “We’ll deal with that later.”

Her eyes return to everyone. “But I hope you understand. This is our project. This is what we’ll do together, as a family. Everyone will have a role, along with all the responsibilities associated with it.”

She snapped her fingers. At once, Razzle and Dazzle appeared at her side, setting up a table and glass bowl. Within said bowl were snippets of paper. She pat the object, beaming.

“Now, I’ve written down something for everyone. You’ll come up, one by one, and have a task assigned!”

Angel blinked. “Whattya’ nuts!? What if we get somethin’ we ain’t good at!?”

Charlie smiled. “That’s part of the fun, silly!”
Side glances and uncertain grumbles echoed from the gathering. Charlie’s brow narrowed.

“It’s fun.”

With her plan in motion, everyone was instructed to form a line as they were called to the stage. Raz wheeled out a whiteboard while Charlie wrote the names of the guests down, along with their new ‘theater’ jobs.

Baxter was first, grimacing as he eyed the bowl with an expression of utter loathing and disgust. “When was the last time this object was cleaned?”

Charlie ignored him. “Pick a job!”

With a grumble, he reached in, gripping the paper in betwixt digits, almost gagging as he held it before him.

“Set piece construction!?” he boggled.

“Oh, lovely! You’ll make the set pieces!” Charlie giggled, writing it down on the whiteboard. Baxter shuffled away, his aquatic scales turning a shade paler.

One by one, each resident received their new position with apprehension. Some were duplicate options, requiring at least two to work together. Not a hopeful prospect.

Some, however...

“Oh, I see!” Alastor said, eye twitching, holding paper in hand. “Fashion and costume design! Lovely!”

Angel’s face sagged. “Awwwww! Dat’s BULLSHIT!”

The spider pouted, taking his paper after Alastor swaggered off stage, blowing a raspberry at the Radio Demon. As he unraveled his new job, his saddened features morphed into something like unparalleled rage.

“THEATER REPAIR!? WHAT KINDA’ BULLSHIT IS DIS!?”

Charlie hushed him. “Now, now, Angel. This is good for you! Something out of your comfort zone! And constructive!”

There was a rather mocking chuckle from Husk as Angel left the stage, muttering a rather nasty stream of Italian swears. As the cat took his role, his smirk vanished.

“. . .theater cleaning.”

Charlie looked happy. “Oh, wonderful! A clean theater is a happy one.”

He stared. “Theater cleaning.”

You think you hear your boy choke back laughter. In the meantime, next are Niffty and Crymini. To the canine’s delight – and perhaps the only one who won out – she’s in charge of musical choices. Niffty, fluttering upside down, takes responsibility for stage lighting and wiring. You feel your heart sink at that one.

You’re next. At this point, you’ll take whatever you can get, and you have no hangups. As you unravel the paper, you blink.
“Uh.”

Charlie looks at the raffle and writes down your role, delighted. “Oh! There’s our clean team! The other half of theater cleaning!”

Husk coughs, hacking a hairball. “WHAT!? You kiddin’ me!?”

You take a long breath. Well, it could be worse, you suppose. Husk and you aren’t exactly friends, nor enemies, though you both get stuck in the other’s teeth most of the time. He’s an old pout with a drinking problem and you’re an asshole with a stealing issue. And now you have to clean the auditorium, together. Lovely.

“I can’t wait,” you say, flat.

You sigh, resigned to your fate. The only one left is the boy, who stands idle for a while. It’s clear he doesn’t want to move, resistant to everything, until Vaggie flashes him a commanding look. He groans, defeated, pulled by mechanisms he’s clearly not interested in. The other day he was probably jacking off most of the time and now he’s in some strange place, doing things he doesn’t care about. You know you need to explain this to him, because right now the only thing keeping him around is non-shitty food.

“Well, there’s really only one left!” Charlie says, handing the paper to the hooded kid. He grabs it, rolling his eyes.

There’s a pause, until he opens it. “Hmph."

“Theater repair!” chimes Charlie, scribbling it down. Theater repair.

You gawk. Angel gawks. The reality of the choice settles in, a pause filling the room. You glance to your spider, whose mismatched eyes go wide, his stare meeting yours.

“Well, Angel,” Vaggie says, wearing a smirk and crossing her arms. “That’s just perfect for you, isn’t it?”

“Fuckin great. . .” the kid mumbles, scoffing as he hops off the stage.

Angel blinks, shaking his head and flicking back to normal. “Uh. Uh. Y-yeah. Yeah, whatever. Psh. Got stuck with the punk! Chuck, whatcha’ tryin’ to do!? Can’t ya put him somewhere else, like uh. . .”

The spider doesn’t finish his sentence. Not because he can’t but, because he doesn’t want to. He crosses his arms, looking away. “Feh.”

Charlie ignores him. “Oh, nonsense Angel! This is all part of working together! And besides, what a perfect way to help our newest Hotel addition, right?” she says, casting him an eager smile, a knowing smile. You have to wonder if she was planning this.

“What!”?

The kid’s voice cuts through again, sharp and bothered. “What the fuck are you talking about!?"

Gazes return to him, and the abrupt tension of angsty teenage rebel fills the air. This time though, there’s more conviction to it, resilience. “I don’t even know who you fucking weirdos are! You psychopaths abduct my ass and what I’m just part of this. . . fucking I don’t even know!”
Sensing more problems, you try to speak up. “Hey, easy.”

He glares at you. “Hey, FUCK YOU in particular you creep! Fuck all of this! I didn’t ask for this shit! Fuck it! Fuck all of it!”

He scowls before spinning and rushing off in true typical hormone induced rage. Even in Hell, he’s still layered with angst and frustration.

Charlie frowns, moving to go after him, but you step in instead. “Let me.”

This has to be strange for the boy. One day he’s fighting for survival in a location set aside from demonic refuse, then, out of nowhere, he’s essentially kidnapped by two strangers – one of which is Pentagram City’s biggest adult star. He doesn’t trust Angel or you, and why should he? All you did was knock him out and drag him to a strange place. Fed him, yes, but that was only a small piece of a larger puzzle. Hell, the orphanage you grew up in fed you, and it was a miserable place. Why would a kid, your own demonic flesh and blood, think any different? He was a stray surviving in the worst place imaginable. You still didn’t know how he got down here, and you almost didn’t want to know.

Charlie cleared her throat. “Yes. Ahm. Well. Everyone, you have your roles! This is a big deal for all of us, and you’ll need to organize how you plan. . .”

Her voice faded as you chased after your son, Angel watching with hopeful eyes as you did.

He was out in the wall, hands stuffed in pockets. Your chest started to swell. Fuck. Shit. He needed to understand. He was surrounded by strangers, people he didn’t trust, nor could he. You were the same – you kept your guard up in your mortal life, and even down here, it took months before you remotely put faith in anyone at the Hotel besides Angel.

“Kid,” you say, calling to him. He doesn’t turn, just keeps walking.

“Fuck off.”

You catch up, gripping his shoulder. “Hey.”

He flips around, taking a swing, but you catch his wrist. “Knock it off,” you warn, holding him with a firm grip.

“Getting real tired of your shit, boy.”

The pup bares his fangs. “Seriously, fuck you.”

“You need new material.”

You let him go, and he yanks his wrist back with indignant force. For a while, you stare. He waits, like a child scorned, waiting for something – for you to yell, strike, anything.

“You want to know why you’re here?” you say. “Come with me.”

There’s a moment, another pause between you. He’s uncertain, of course. He doesn’t know you aside from being the shadow that yanked him out of his old home. You walk past him, intending to head to the rooftop, where it’s easier to think. When the boy doesn’t move, you look back to him.

“Well? I still have your knives, you know. You want those back, right?”

You see him shift a little as you continue on. You hear his footsteps behind.
On the Hotel roof, the air is warm as it usually is. The endless scape of Pentagram City stretches out before you, beyond it the unknowns of Hell. It’s loud, a raucous, a cacophony of obscene buildings draped in neon, violence and sex and impulse, whereas the Hotel remains a beacon of safety. This is where you want the kid, where you want your son. But... he needs to know who you are.

The roof door whines and slams shut as the petulant figure that is the kid walks through. He keeps his distance, annoyed, while you look out to the city, foot on the balcony edge. Well... nothing ventured, you guess.

“I liked the one with the rubber band grip,” you say. “Pretty clever. Probably took a while to shape that metal too. What was it, aluminum cans?”

You’re referring to one of his shivs. The boy doesn’t say anything.

“Hah, my first one, if I remember correctly, was the handle of a plastic fork. Took me three days but I got it to a nice point. Nuns found it first of course and I got put on solitary for a week, had to clean the bathrooms for a month.”

You reach inside your pocket and pull out another weapon, a different knife, one draped in flair with a polished ebon blade.

“And then I stole a ruler, got really creative with that one. Broke the edge, got some tape, made a mean little sonofabitch.”

You glance to your kid, who remains quiet, but has slightly perked, at least paying attention to your words.

“Me and that knife? Best friends. Kept off those packs and cliques. They had fists, so I got rocks. They threw rocks, so I made knives. Had to survive, no matter what. Learned that the hard way in lockup too.”

You start twirling the ebon blade between your fingers. “And you made what, twelve? That’s not bad kid, not bad at all. Considering where you are.”

He doesn’t say anything while the roar of distant cars fills the space between you two.

“How’d you get down here?” you say, blunt.

Finally, he speaks. “Huh?”

“Down here, kid. We’re in Hell. We’re here for reasons. I stole, I killed, I cheated. You?”

You say it calm, collected, but you feel your heart go cold and your guts tense. You’re worried, concerned for the reason. What did he do? Or what was done to him?

He just shrugs. “I told you, it’s Black Wolf.”

Ignoring you. “First off, no it’s not, kid. I know for a fact that’s not your name.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck me, good one. Now answer my goddamn question.”

He scoffs and rolls his eyes. “I don’t know.”

You blink. “You don’t know?”
“That’s what I just said, asshole! I closed my eyes, I was in front of some gates, some weirdo looked at me and then I was here. That’s it.”

Either he’s lying or he doesn’t really remember. You figure it’s the former – no reason to trust you yet.

“I see. And you’ve been down here, what, a few years?”

“A couple.”

You pause. A couple? So, he passed away young, doing . . . something. Hmm. Annie must have given him away before you ever knew. When you were alive? Shit, you don’t know. Not that it matters anymore – he’s with you.

“Why do you care, man?” the kid cuts in, blunt. “Like, what is your deal? Seriously? You sound like a pedo fuck. I don’t know you, but I know that weird spider, Angel something. His friend is hotter, anyway. . . .”

Now he’s looking at you. “But what the actual fuck? What is this place? I’m supposed to just play nice all of a sudden? What are you getting at?”

You stop, ceasing your motions with the weapon.

“Maybe if you tell me your name, first, I’ll let you know.”

He grunts. “I told you what my name is!”

You laugh a little. “Kid, I know for a fact Black Wolf isn’t it. And I’m not calling you that. You couldn’t pay me enough to.”

The kid spits, swearing. “Asshole.”

“Well?”

Another defeated shrug. “I don’t know. I don’t fucking know, okay? I don’t know what my name is! I don’t even know who you are!”

A nameless stray. Damn.

You give him your attention, standing, adjusting your suit, taking in a deep breath. This is the hardest thing you’ve had to do in a long time. Harder than admitting your feelings for Angel or busting down vaults. Harder than surviving a gunfight.

Another chuckle. “Sometimes, kid, neither do I.”

You go to him, looking down with your single eye, and it’s strange how it focuses you. The dark side of your left vision cancels out Pentagram City, leaving only him.

“You know . . . as far as I remember, my dad was an alcoholic and my mother a crack whore. Or that’s how the story goes. Never knew em’. Dunno’ if I’d want to. And sometimes, I wonder, are they down here? What the fuck would I say or do to the people who tossed me aside?”

The kid’s silent, face screwed into a perplexed expression.

“How do you deal with that? That knowledge you weren’t wanted? Hah, I guess I’m answering my own question. I’m here, aren’t I? But, kid. Do you know that’s not true for you? Do you know
you’re wanted?”

The boy is obviously confused. “What are you talking about?!”

You manage a weak smile. “When I learned where you were, when she showed me that picture, I didn’t feel anything else but... fear. Terror, the idea you weren’t protected, that you were alone. Like me. That my own...”


He blinks. “Huh?"

You put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m... so proud of you.”

The boy tenses. “If you fucking try something, I’ll cut your face!”

He doesn’t understand yet.

“You...”

Okay. Here you go.

You part your mouth to say the words, the finalized, cemented phrase which will change everything. There’s no going back. So..."

A loud BANG cuts the air and the Hotel roof door slams open, whining with a shrieking metal creak as a kinky boot kicks it ajar. Out dashes your spider, his expression frantic and wild. He glances around until he spots you both, his puffy cleavage heaving as he spies you.

Your eye goes to him. “Angel?”

“WELL!?” he screams. “DID YA’ FUCKIN TELL HIM!? DID YA’!? YA’ BOTH RAN OFF!”

The kid, understandably, tenses and steps back, looking between you two with a frightened face. As for you, you think you understand.

“It’s okay,” you try to say. “I...”

Angel growls. “YA’ MEAN YA’ HAVEN’T!? AAGGGGGH!”

His teeth clench, his mismatched eyes are watery, and he runs to the boy. He bolts, grabs the child, and snares him in what is essentially a death-grip spiderhug.

“You’RE OUR BOY!” he yells. “YOU’RE OUR FUCKIN’ BABY BOY! YOU’RE OURS! YOU’RE OUR LITTLE FUCKIN’ PUNK YA’ DUMB EDGY SHIT KID!”

The kid rasps and wheezes, wiggling. “Gghghghgh! L-let go! AHAGH!”

“No, no!” Angel shrieks. “I ain’t! I ain’t ever! Do ya’ understand ya’ stupid fucking twerp!?”

Angel holds him, staring at the kid, abruptly assaulting him with smooches on his forehead and cheek, gaze all teary.

The kid winces, trying to push away, but the words, the words start to hit him. Slowly, like a thawing river, they flood him with realization. “W-what?”
“Angel, Angel!” you say, concerned. “Easy!”

Angel Dust glares at you. “NO! You fuckin’ easy! He needs to KNOW!”

Two of Angel’s spare hands hold the boy’s face, the others keeping him in a hug. “Ya’ need to know! That’cha got two fuckin’ people who care about ya, stupid kid! Stupid fuckin’ kid! YOU’RE OUR SON! YOU’RE OUR SON!”

The boy goes blank. He stares at Angel, the strength of the spider’s words pulverizing him. “W-what are you talking about?” he manages, weak, looking at you.

Well, he’s helpless against the doting, hugging grasp of Angel who will not let him go. So this time, you shrug, offering a nod.

“Yeah,” you concede. “You’re my son, kid. You’re my boy.”

You look at Angel, correcting yourself. “Sorry. Our boy.’


He sniffs. “Y-yeah, funny, FUNNY. I get it, make fun of the orphan, like they always d-do. Bet it’s some s-sick fetish or some bullshit.”

You don’t say anything as he continues to ramble in disbelief. You step close, kneeling, before embracing him, your suit coming around him. He tenses at first, trying to laugh, but stops resisting.

“F-f-fucking weirdos,” he says, voice getting hard and hot, catching in his throat. You laugh a bit.

“You’re home,” you say. “You’re home, son.”

Angel fidgets before outright tackling into you both, swinging his four arms around you. You are, in this moment, a silhouette of three people clung together, a little family in the middle of Hell. You feel your boy shake and quiver, sniffing. Not exactly weeping, but certainly fighting back something.

“S-shitheads,” he argues, “I h-hate you both.”

Though he says it, he doesn’t move. Angel sways with you, a smile stretching his features, eyes closed like he’s lost in a dream. In a way, it kind of is.

You don’t know what this means, or what tomorrow will bring. You don’t know what the future could hold, but, there is something you know. You have a son. You have a boyfriend. You have a family. The desire for anything else has receded.

You are not Anon: Master Thief.

You are not Anon: Head of Hotel security.

You’re Anon. A father.

The best part? Angel Dust is with you.

Chapter End Notes
Sweet, sticky, gooey joy. I know it's not my longest chapter but the "family" is together. You're a father, Anon, congrats! And surely, mamadad Angel will be something to behold, I swear.
Family

Chapter Summary

The Commission greets an uninvited guest while the Better Half expands his plans. You and Husk have some words.

Chapter Notes

Heyo! Sorry for another brief one, but sometimes setting up takes a little bit of time! Hope you enjoy though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Family

From its grand window, magenta hues poured in the wide, circular meeting room, catching the trail of cigar smoke as the various attendants took long, pensive drags. Pricey alcohol – by Hell’s standards – rested at the center table where a wheel of chairs resided, inhabited by vagrants of varying size. There were six in total, each members of their own family, their own criminal enterprise, all here for the same reason: to meet.

The Commission still thrived Down Below, passing on its legacy to new members as they extorted the levers of power to their favor. Or, they used to. Though the reclining demons wore lavish clothing and fine gold, they were but shadows of their former selves. Ever since the hit, the events of the Sugary Chigurh, each had suffered a tremendous blow to their wealth and power. Without capital to influence smaller families, Capos turned on each other, territories were carved out, blood was spilled, leaving only vultures and scavengers. They were clinging to scraps, hoping to reclaim their thrones of “Hell’s Surrogate Rulers.”

“. . .and he tells me you’ve been sticking your thumbs in his turf, right on the yard. That right, Maug?”

It didn’t help The Commission were ready to tear each other to pieces at a moment’s notice. The Splinters and the Gadzooks held tentative loyalty, since they were newer additions to the Commission. But the rest, the old names with ancient ties to their mortal counterparts? They knew only treachery and backstabbing as a way to get ahead, and with so much of the old guard gone, there was rife opportunity to advance. Even if all that remained were the collapsing ashes of an empire, it was their empire.

Maug, an oafish frog-like creature, shrugged. “I keep my boys in line. We’ve stuck to our streets on the West. Maybe you need to check with your own, eh Skalzi?”

Skalzi, a lean demon with a head like a raven, squinted, setting down his acrid drink. “What t’fuck are you gettin’ at?"”

Maug chortled. “Well, loyalty’s never been your strong suit.”
Skalzi bristled before a hand rose. The “arbiter” of this affair, a massive arachnid demon, quieted them. “Gentleman, gentleman. No trouble. We’re not here to start wars. All Skalzi is sayin’, is some of his weapon shipments been lookin’ a little skinny. And it’s mighty close to your end, Maug.”

Maug laughed. “You implying I had something to do with it? Please. Got better things to front then some shit that don’t even work.”

Skalzi’s feathers flared. “Every fuckin’ piece I sell works fine. You oughta’ know, we brained some of your boys a few weeks ago with my weapons, yeah?”

Maug growled, making a jerkish movement. His guards went for their guns, so did Skalzi’s boys, so did everyone else.

“Hey!” the arachnid interrupted. “Enough! Enough! What, you all gonna’ turn each other into a buncha’ stains? Since when!? You gonna’ end it all here, smart guys? That the big plan?”

One of the bosses opposite of the speaker cast an accusing gesture. “Big talk comin’ outta’ your end. Who fuckin’ put you in charge? Where da’ fuck is Arackniss?”

The spider frowned. Hmm. True, the heir wasn’t here, had other business to settle. That’s how thin they were stretched, the family name. Typically, Arackniss or The Don would handle affairs like this, but maintaining authority was hard enough as is. Myga pulled at his hairy, beard like mandibles, searching for the right words.

“He’s got better things to do than rodeo a bunch o’ lunatics ready to burn everything we worked for to the ground. I ask you, again, all of ya’, this really what you want? Lose it all over a territorial dispute?”

There was a pregnant pause. Tensions started to recede, demons putting away their weapons, while Myga glanced back to Maug. “You do right and pay reparations back to Skalzi, stay outta’ his turf.”

Maug dawned an expression of surprised betrayal. “You takin’ this fuckin’ bird’s side?”

“No, I’m takin’ the side of peace. Everybody knows you Maug. Stop stealin’ the crumbs, we got enough shit to deal with as is.”

There was an exasperated sigh. “Oh, not this shit again,” said Lucese. Lucese was pail and thin, strange root-like appendages sprawling from his torso, beady red eyes narrowed.

“What?” Myga challenged. “You don’t like hearin’ about it? Tough shit. I’ve seen him knock over at least a dozen of our shipments, stealing equipment, making us look like goddamn fools.”

Others grumbled. They knew what Myga referred to. The head of the Splinters, Androsi, tilted his head, resting face in bluish, scaled fist. “We really worried about this spook in a suit?”

“Hmph,” Maug spat. “And you accuse me of stealing.”

Myga’s clawed grip tightened on his chair. “Listen t’me, you fucks. Arackniss is off handling business cause of him and his cronies. They been hittin’ us, hittin you, and every time it gets worse. We keep ignoring it and we’ll pay for it.”

“You’re just saying this cause you’ve been hit the worst,” interjected Skalzi. He sipped his drink, shrugging.

“Maybe we oughta’ let it happen,” added Gorrud, head of the Gadzooks. “Sort out da’ weak.”
Myga’s temper flared. “You ungrateful fucks. You new bloods have no goddamn respect. My family’s been watching your money for eons, keeping it safe. Dis’ is how you repay us?”

“Yeah?” chimed Lucese, high pitched voice like a nail in a board. “And you did fuck all when the joint got knocked over.”

“You know,” Maug started again, puffing his cigar. “I came here, got accused. But now, what, the rest of us have to listen to this man and his boogeyman fairytales? So, what, some asshole in a suit yanks a few of your toys, Myga, and we s’posed to get all bent out of shape for it? The hell do you expect? I ain’t puttin’ any of my boys out for you, no sir.”

“I agree with the fat fuck,” chirped Skalzi. “You ain’t telling us nothin’ important. If you sink, so be it.”

“Yeah,” Lucese grinned. “Out with the weak.”

“Only strong survive,” grumbled Gorrud.

“We need more to go on, Myga,” finalized Androsi. “You sound paranoid.”

Despite his size... Myga shrank. The eyes of the Commission fell upon him, and they were predatory, hungry. It was clear they wanted his line to fail, these damn new bloods. Their previous leaders were long gone, knocked over by some other upstart months ago. Self-proclaimed princes lacking all the discipline and respect of their forebears.

“So that’s it, eh? You’re all against me?”

“Oh, don’t take it the wrong way,” said Androsi with a cool smirk. “This is how it is, you know that. Besides, Arackniss isn’t even here.”

Maug narrowed his froggish eyes. “Damn right. Punk doesn’t even pay the others Families respect! We get his fuckin’ dog? To hell with your goddamn web spinners, you been on top long enough.”

Myga tensed, as did his small entourage of guards behind him. “You lot are makin’ a big mistake. You don’t know the connections we have!”

“Damn right we don’t,” Skalzi challenged, leaning on table. “Where were dem connections when our money was gettin’ cooked?”

An agreement of mutters erupted from the group. Damn, this was bad. Myga was running out of cards to play – that he knew. Worse yet, they were right. The spider family was capped at the knees, holding on to its remaining fragments of power. One bad push, one more deathblow to their already limited resources, and it wasn’t likely they’d survive as a respectable gang. But what was he going to do? The Family didn’t have the manpower to go on a turf war with everyone in The Commission.

“You knew the risks,” Myga said, defiant. “We all put in together. We got hit just as hard as you!”

... 

“Hit? Well, don’t dat just sound like a fuckin’ great idea!”

Every eye and frame shifted, snapping to attention. Expressions shifted from smug amusement to abrupt alarm and every demon guard grabbed their weapons and aimed them. Aimed them, because there was an intruder.
None of them even heard him approach or the door slide open. None of them caught the bitter stench of blood or clap of bat against the ground. Striding in – kinky boots clicking – was a face familiar... and not. He wore a grin, his black suit spattered with clusters of crimson, chunks of *someone* on his weapon, one arm twirling a knife, the others behind back.

Maug started to stand, but the figure raised a hand. “Oh no, no, darlin’, don’t get up fer me. Ya ain’t gonna have t’worry about that reaaaal soon.”

Skalzi jumped up. “What the FUCK!? Who the fuck are you!??”

As the stalking figure crept forward, magenta lights splashed over his body. Myga boggled. It couldn’t be. It wasn’t possible!

“**You!?**” roared the arachnid.

Legna Tsud chuckled. “Now, didn’t ya hear what I just said?”

Maug set his cigar down, in disbelief. “The fuck are you goons doing? Ice this fuck.”

Legna’s grin vanished. Two extra arms sprouted from his sides, raising them as if in surrender. “I give up!” he exclaimed, hiding a cackle.

Except, as he raised them, two pink spheres dropped from palms, landing on the floor with a harrowing clatter. Gasps and screams erupted as the eyes realized they were *grenades*. At once, they burst in a cloud of smoke... but not fire. Rather, a pinkish fog filled the room, filled with glitter and sparkles.

“**Gotcha!**” Legna cackled, dashing to the side as he fashioned an opening for himself. Coughs erupted from the gang lords as they scrambled to their feet, guards taking random shots. They couldn’t find the mirror-spider, though, until a silhouette appeared from the playful mist. One guard screamed as a heavy, blunt swing connected with his head, sending bone and fleshy matter in the air with a wet *crunch*.

From the yell, gunshots trained in Legna’s direction, who held the body in front of him as a literal meatshield.

“I told ya’ fucks to SIT DOWN!”

From the dark matter of *himself*, a family of Thompson submachineguns coalesced to life, trained at essentially everything that moved. Save for one. Legna’ glanced towards Myga who had found himself cover behind a chair.

“Stay on ya’ ass, gramps, be witcha’ in a sec.”

An ugly, thunderous roar of gunfire belched from the weapons as Legna filled the room with a volcanic spread of hot lead. Those who were in the way were *separated* from themselves, cut into literal halves as the angry rounds found purchase in their welcoming bodies. Legna tossed aside the body shield when it was nothing but pulp, seeking out new victims.

One of the guards, injured, raised a shotgun, nearly catching Legna’s side. It grazed his shoulder – and suit – forcing him to yelp in annoyance.

“**AGGH! M’suit! YOU FUCK!**”

Legna bounded for the guard, tackling him, forming a stiletto knife and smashing it into the
offender’s face, over and over.

“DAT WAS A ONE OF A KIND CUSTOM SILK YA’ FUCKIN’ GOONIE!”

Discolored blood spewed from the injury, mussing Legna’s face while the bosses either went for their own armaments or tried to get away. Maug, oafish toad he was, huffed for the door, only to find a hot, searing chain fly across the room and pelt him over the head, opening his skull like an egg. Legna twirled the summoned weapon with a satisfied sneer, retracting it in haste, eyeing his next victims.

“How ya’ like MY webs, muddafucka!”

Legna hopped to his feet, reloading the cumbersome drum mags and unleashing another torrent of fire upon the remaining bosses. Furniture was shredded, flesh turned to confetti, glass shattered. Legna kept the triggers squeezed until the mags clicked, metal stomachs emptied, a thin wisp of hot smoke trailing from the barrels.

Aside from the bubbling groans of dying bodyguards and gang lords, it was quiet. Maug, not realizing his fate, hobbled towards the room door, unaware that his entrails were spilling from him. He glanced down, croaking in disbelief, before toppling over.


The rest were the same, piles of shredded bodies clinging to their last seconds of life. Legna, amused, polished his fingers on suit, striding past them, kicking aside limbs.

“How ya’ like them fancy ‘sterminator rounds? Ain’t no comin’ back after dis one, wahaha!”

He whistled, waving at the last remaining figure, one hidden. “Yoo hoo! Ey, ya’ can come out now toots! Sa’ll over.”

Myga blinked, his chest racing. His mind tried to sort through the situation, process what had happened. It was a flash. One moment, he was confronted by The Commission, reeling, and now... nothing. He chanced a peak from the table, looking out to the carnage before him. The other leaders were fragments, scraps, along with their armed goons. Skalzi hung over his chair, most of his upper body missing. Maug spilled onto the ground, Lucese had a cavernous wound in his chest, Gorrud was split and half and the rest, well. The rest Myga couldn’t even recognize.

Legna perched himself on the center table, legs crossed. “Ain’t this nice?”

The larger spider straightened, cautious, staring at the assailant. His mind raced. “You.”

There was a pause. Legna tilted his head. “Yep, me. Real fuckin’ genius assessment dere, smart guy.”

Myga was confused. “The traitor... you... what is this? What are you doing?”

“What’cha mean?” Legna shot back, grinning. “Savin’ yer ass? Yeah, doin’ that. I mean, why ain’t ya’ on yer knees thankin’ me? I did just put ya’ back on top, didn’t I?”

“What are you talking about?”

Legna sighed, leaning backwards, calling out. “Uggggghhh. He ain’t listenin’!”

A dreary pause settled over the pair, silence filing the air aside form the muffled chaos of Pentagram
City. But as the moments continued, something caught the air. Footsteps. Another approaching figure.

Myga gazed as someone else entered the room, a man draped in a form fitting white suit, his visage hidden behind a white faceplate shaped like a smiling skull. All that was visible was a single, leering eye, one filled with contempt.

“It’s all right, lamb,” the figure said, voice like boiling oil. “A lot happened. Things are looking up, he just doesn’t know it.”

Myga glanced to his sides – his guards were gone. Shit. Was this it then? Was he about to be put down by the traitorous Angel Dust and this . . . wait.

Realization consumed him. “It’s YOU!” he roared. It was him. The one responsible for stealing from The Commission, the foundation to all his family’s problems. He was here to finish the job!

“Look at em’!” Legna chimed. “He’s fuckin’ daffy. Can we just kill em’ too and talk with ‘racky?”

The suited figure raised a hand. “Now, now, lamb, we’re not here to make things worse.” He approached Myga, holding out a hand.

“We’re just here to make a deal.”

Myga stared. “Are you fuckin’ with me? Is this a joke!?”

The Better Half held back a laugh. “Jokes are normally funny.” His hand fell, sighing.

“Look around you! The enemies of your empire are dead. The Commission is gone, just like that. The squabbling families left without a head.”

Better Half tossed his arms behind him, striding among the corpses, kicking them aside, while Legna wiggled his legs, attentive.

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

Myga’s hair mandibles twitched. “What the hell are you getting at?”

“Hmm. . . getting at. Your boss, for one. How’s Arakniss these days? He holding up? How’s his jaw?”

Myga bristled. “If you don’t kill me now, I swear by the Devil we’ll cut you through like a fuckin’ stuck pig! We’ll fuckin feed you the traitor through your goddamn mouth!”

Better Half stopped, turning head to meet the bulging eyes of the larger spider. “Now, now, friend, that is no way to talk to your savior. After all, you just have something we want.”

Myga hesitated. He had only threats. Even if the Families were indeed gone, it didn’t mean his line was any stronger. It only left power vacuums, and was he willing to bet on his boss’ behalf?

“And what’s that?”

Though Better Half’s face was hidden, Myga could feel the smile.

“Information.”
Angel Dust gave the decrepit stage an exhausted once over, flicking against a wooden beam limp on its side. There were families of holes in some of the boards and splintering cracks assaulted much of the foundation – to say nothing of the residue caking its wooden construction. A shoddy collection of tools lay at the foot of the stage, most unused.

“Feh.”

The spider frowned. This was stupid! This whole stage was stupid! Half of it looked like it was about to fall over and the other infested with rats and roaches!

“This is dumb.”

Arms crossed, tone laced with angst, was Junior, still in his getup. Angel had tossed aside any notion of calling the punk Black Wolf, though naming him outright felt odd. So he settled on Junior, and plenty apt it was.

“Will ya’ stop mopin’ and get yer ass up here?”

Angel glanced at the kid, who was all-too-eager to abdicate his position as “theater repair.” Angel wouldn’t have it though. The boy was part his responsibility now, and a strange, screaming part of the spider desired nothing else than to nurture and protect the little fuck. But all the same, despite Junior learning of his paternal figure, and despite having Angel as a surrogate mamadaddy, he didn’t shirk his ‘moody teen’ personal quite yet.

“Why?” Junior shot back. “It’s gonna’ fall apart!”

Angel grumbled, raising a hand. “Bup! I don’t wanna’ hear it! C’mon!”

A long, anguished sigh escaped the kid, but he obeyed. Slowly, of course, dragging his feet, but he did. News of his heritage hadn’t quite changed him, though any sense he might run off certainly vanished. As well, Angel noticed he was more respectful – to him, at least.

When the kid got on stage with Angel, the spider stared for a moment, arms crossed. He did his best to look the stern mother, but goddammit half of him wanted to ruffle the shit’s hair. Stupid fucking kid. Cute and dumb, just like his papa.

“We’ze got a job to do, and we’re gonna do it!” Angel said, head nodding. Even though he really, really didn’t want to. Even though, internally, he was roiling over the idea that stupid grinning asshole Alastor was having fun picking out costumes! Agh!

Junior threw his head, sighing. “It’s impossible! Blowing it up would be easier!”

Angel blinked. He swung his mismatched eyes around, giving the ruined stage another gaze. Huh.

“Huh. Hmm.” Angel tapped his chin, considering.

Junior, in the meantime, looked at the floor, then a whole. A family of eyes looked back, and he yelped.

“Gah! Fucking hell! Even my fucking room was better than. . .”

He trailed off, distracted by a noise. There was a tiny hiss, as Angel lit a match, holding a stick of pink dynamite in his hand, preparing to ignite it.

“HOLY SHIT WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”
Angel shot him an expected glance. “Wha? M’gonna blow this fucker up. Start over. Easy, right?”

Junior bat the dynamite away. “I WASN’T BEING SERIOUS, STOP, STOP!”

Angel watched the dynamite roll away, annoyed. “Ey! What da’ fuck!”

“Are you insane!?”

Angel rolled his mismatched eyes. “Oh fuckin’ relax, I know what I’m doin’. Just a little controlled kaboom, ya’ know?”

Junior shook his head. “No, no I don’t. Just, shit. Let’s just get a hammer! God!”

The spider huffed. Setting the place ablaze in a cathartic boom was more appealing, but if the runt wanted to do it the long and hard way, fine. At least he was acting responsible.

“Feh. Whateva’. Why don’tcha make a malotov so I can scorch these pests, eh?”

Junior paused, going quiet. “Uh.”


Junior looked away. “I’ve. . . never. . . made one.”

Angel’s eyes went so wide they looked ready to fall out his head. “What!?”

Junior shrugged, helpless. “Nothing to make them with!”

At once, Angel snagged him by the arm and yanked him off stage, dragging him out of the theater. “NO FUCKIN’ BOY O’ MINE IS GONNA’ WALK AROUND NOT KNOWIN’ DIS! WE’RE FIXIN THIS SHIT RIGHT NOW!”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Husk groused, leaning on the wall as he cast an indifferent glare towards a small army of utility equipment used for cleaning. You, in the meantime, were looking over the entire theater with a studious gaze, thinking it out in your head, picturing an efficient approach. There were several columns of seats, multiple rows, and at least five seats per row. The aisles were laden with dust, debris, and pest waste, while a throbbing demonic mold stuck to the walls. You swear, some of it blinked at you.

“Thinking this out,” you said to Husk without looking at him. “Need to do it right or we’ll be here all week.”

The cat demon snorted. “Got a better idea. How ‘bout we just burn it?”

You glance at him. “You sound like Angel, now.” Apparently, he and the boy were in here before, but were busy with something else now. Something productive, you hoped.

Husk rolled his eyes. “Naw, if I wanted to sound like that pipe-smoker I’d make a shit remark and yammer about downin’ dick.”

For a moment, you’re distracted. “Take it easy, Husk,” you say, a touch of threat to your voice.
“Don’t tell me what to do, ya’ scrawny punk. Bad enough you’re all tied at the waist with that goddamn floozy, but now ya’ got a kid? Devil help me.”

You take a deep breath. “Husk, for once, can you drop the whole ‘angry alcoholic’ act? We’ve got a job to do.”

Husk made a face, arms raised. “Ohhhh. A job! Scuse’ me princess. Didn’t realize we were getting all serious now!”

You ignore this. “Yeah. One of us is, at least. For both our sakes you could at least pretend to be useful.”

Husk rumbled again, flaws flexing. “Listen to you, uppity punk! What, you think you got a boy you’re hot shit? Actin’ all business-like? Pah!”

You weren’t sure if Husk was extra drunk or if something was bothering him. Probably both. But it didn’t matter, you did have a job to do, and his ramblings weren’t going to move things along.

“How about a deal?”

“How about fuck you.”

You shrug. “Fair enough. But, you help me and then you can yell at me all you want. Later.”

“I don’t take marchin’ orders from you, kiddo.”

Goddamn, the old man was as sharp as barbed wire. You couldn’t pin down why, but, that was him, or the front he put on, at least. Lately though he seemed extra nasty, like something else was eating at him, but what, you didn’t know. Didn’t figure he’d tell you, anyway.

You tried a compromise. “Well. All right. Then what do you want to do?”

Husk paused before pushing off the wall, leering. “Well ain’t that something. Somebody finally asked! Somebody finally bothered!”

You blink. “What?”

Husk spat. “Yeah, I figured. Ya’ got any idea how irritatin’ this place is becomin’? What with that smilin’ loony getting all twisted up with the Miss and her idea! Having to take orders from that grinnin’ ghoul. And now I’m gettin’ bossed around by you? Pah!”

Apparently, there were deeper issues at hand. “. . . all right, so, no orders. How about you tell me what to do? What’s your brilliant scheme?”

Again, he spat. “Blackin’ out and telling you to fuck off, is what.”

“Come on, old man. You can be more original than that.”

Husk’s wings flicked. “Oh I sure can. But I ain’t wastin’ my breath.”

You chuckle, in disbelief. “God, you old fuck, is there a nail jammed in your ass today?”

“Yeah! It’s you!”

You offer an apologetic gaze. “All right, sure. You can hate me all you want, Husk, but we still have work to do.”
Was it possible for Husk to frown harder? He did. “Bah! Do it yerself!”

Wordlessly, he marched off, feathers falling from his wings as he fanned them with jerked swings, grumbling. Well damn. He was pissed in a whole different way, huh? It struck you as different though, a strange kind of fury, not one you knew him for. He seemed resentful. Of course, you could understand, unless you were Angel or Charlie, you were pretty sure most people just tolerated you. But, a job was a job, and like a bank heist you couldn’t pull it off without the rest of the team.

You went after him, tailing him down to the Hotel’s bar where he was already chasing a bottle of something, stinking of hard alcohol. When he saw you, he flipped you off.

“You know, most people tell me what the problem is before they tell me to fuck myself. Hell, even Angel does, and he punches pretty hard. What’s your deal, grandpa?”

Husk set the bottle down and glared. “You self-important sonofabitch! You really don’t know, huh?”

You come to the bar, arms crossed. “Not a mind reader, Husk.”

The cat demon snarls. “Would I be so lucky!”

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

Husk stopped. He pushed his bottle aside, wiped his mouth, and leaned. He was sneering in a malicious sort of way, like he’d been holding something in for a good while now.

“I hope yer happy with that whore, I really do. Must be all sunshine on your end, huh? Fuckin’ paradise running around and puttin’ this Hotel at risk cause of your stupid shit!”

You tilt your head. “. . . okay. Fair enough.”

“No!” Husk challenged. “No it ain’t! Cause I sure as shit don’t get it, Annie. I don’t see why an asshole like you gets to be happy! What the fuck does that dick strangler see in you, anyway!? Huh!? Oh you must be all over the hill now, what with a shit kid! You’re a regular 50’s sitcom!”

You blink. This was. . . not like Husk, not like him at all. Or at least, so you thought. “What the hell are you talking about Husk? You’re pissed at me because I’m with Angel?”

Husk scoffed. “Ptsh. With. If you didn’t have money you’d be nothin’ to him. And to make matters worse, you go all cock-crazy getting into shit and putting us all at risk like some lunatic! And I gotta’ pretend we’re supposed to be pals now!? You almost fucked this place up, Anon! You coulda’ got the Miss hurt!”

He made a face. “And now here we are! Somehow that silk-spittin’ slut thinks you’re the goddamn best! Because why? Fuckin’ hell. I don’t get why people like you get it all! Ya’ little shit!”

The words hang in the air for a while, and you mull them over. What the hell was all this? Was being in proximity with you really setting his temper over the edge? Why was he so furious? Aside from the obvious – he was right. You had definitely put the Hotel at risk, and you accepted that. But the rest. . .

“You. . .”

You don’t laugh or chuckle or smile. You just blink. “You had feelings for him, didn’t you?”

Husk’s cheeks went the faintest hint of red. “Fuck you.” He grabbed his bottle and shoved passed
you, body language clear with the *don’t-fucking-follow-me* sentiment. Well. Shit.

That wasn’t how you expected things to go, not at all. Part of you is tempted to keep after him but, he looked ready to shatter the bottle on your head. Best to let him cool down. Still, it did surprise you. Angel and he were often giving each other shit, but you figured that was just them. But, now that it was out there, you could see why this caused him distress, or filled him with revulsion. What did he and Angel even do? For how long? You were more curious than anything.

Well. So much for teamwork.

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A monolithic pillar stood above the towers of Pentagram City, a solid shape of rectangular black which inspired a sense of order and authority. Those that looked up knew it as the base of The Commission, a gathering of gang families operating for decades, collecting and fostering power for themselves, just as they did in their mortal life. Few ever saw the leaders of The Commission but felt their influence by action. Black market weapons, drugs, Seraphic artifacts, and more were only a handful of the resources at their disposal. They were strength and power.

Until now.

In front of the building, hung upon pillars, their limbs sown about ugly metallic spikes were bodies. Special bodies. The remains of the leaders. Six in total, spears run through their guts in a display of barbarism, a clear and decisive message to any who might look, a silent warning, a quiet declaration. There was a new force now, a new hand guiding the mobs of Pentagram City.

High, high above, a figure stood. He stood in the meeting room where hands once shook, where deals were once made. Effigies and banners of The Commission were removed. In front of the tall stained window was not furniture, but instead a ziggurat of monitors, screens flicking here and there, some displaying static, others images of specific locations or people. The figure watched, hands behind back.

But this figure was different. His long white overcoat was set aside, flesh exposed. His faceplace which typically hid his visage from others rest on table, revealing a large, toothy maw. But this time, it wasn’t smiling.

The Better Half’s frame hissed and crackled, tendrils of hot red flowing through his shadowy exterior like burning worms. The air around him seemed to shudder and quiver while an unpleasant heat radiated from his frame. Flecks of ebon flicked and rose from him like a fire, a soundless immolation.

It was almost time.

He’d meet with Arakniss very soon, but until then, he engorged himself on the resources the arachnid family afforded themselves. They were a web of dark information, a cabal possessing data on a rich variety of things. Things he needed. Locations – and specifically – locations of the remaining Fragments. And when he found the rest, when he found the necessary pieces to Lucifer’s frozen halo. . .

“You rang, big guy?”

Stalking in the room was an immense figure, carapace cracking like bones as he stalked to his master.

Better Half turned, though his expression bore nothing pleasant. The knife-like grin was instead pulled into a malicious snarl, as though every small thing was an affront to the Half’s presence.
Sarakk boggled. “Whoha, uh. You look . . . hmm. Uh, great! Really love what you’ve done with your face. The repulsive skin-cracks are top notch, really.”

Humor aside, Sarakk felt his body flinch, strange, tingling pain touching his exterior.

“You have work to do,” Better Half intoned. He gestured to the monitors. “The remaining Fragments are within our grasp. Bring them to us.”

Sarakk glanced at the monitors too. “Just like that, huh?”

Better Half didn’t respond. Ah, the good old humorless aspect of Abaddon was shining through. “What happens then?” asked Sarakk.

A strange, growling sound left the Half. “The beginning of the end.”

The locust scratched his head, antennae wiggling. “Oh. Very original, big guy.”

The Half turned again, staring at the monitors, lost in thought. Perhaps it was a mistake, but Sarakk’s curiosity was getting the better of him.

“I feel asking is the worst possible idea, but, something eating at you, o’ master of masters?”

Slowly, the Half raised a hand, snapping. All at once, every monitor flickered and shifted, changing to a single, unified image.

“We found something very interesting.”

The webway of information the arachnid family possessed was deep indeed. Knowledge between demons, the location of wealth, even access to networks, recordings, monitors. Cameras. Sarakk blinked, watching the screens change, until they flicked to something he recognized. Two figures, one of which he really didn’t like.

And then there was a third. Small. A boy. A shadow. A stranger. An Angel.

The trio was leaving a train station, but Better Half had an eye for only one thing.

“Is . . . that . . . ?” Sarakk started.

At once, Better Half’s frame bristled, and the pulsing, reddish cracks flared, glowing like searing magma. The room surged with heat and profane energy, forcing even Sarakk to flinch.

“We will not let them interfere.”

Chapter End Notes

Uh oh.
You and Vaggie have a chat. Arackniss meets the Better Half.

**Chapter Notes**

Time once again for another slow-burn chapter. We're getting set up, ladies and gents, there's no going back. Dominos are getting stacked, cards shuffled, bets made!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Pieces**

Vaggie marched down to the Hotel theater with a clipboard in hand, preparing to make a studious account of its progress. She expected something – after all, everyone was working together as a team, so there had to be some improvement, right? That’s what she told herself. *Believe in them, cause’ Charlie believes in them, and I’m trying to work on the whole pessimistic thing.* She nurtured this thought, embraced it to the point she forced a smile on her face – or an attempt at one.

Once she reached the theater interior though, it melted away.

Above her, a fluttering, flying Niffty threw herself to-and-fro with families of cables in hands, attaching them every which way like a perverse spider web. The cabling made no sense. It was erratic, and doubly so, dangerous.

“Niffty!” Vaggie shrieked, hand clasping forehead. The flying mite swung upside down, wobbling in the air as she waved to Vag, a slew of cables falling from her grasp.

“Hihiih!” shouted Niffty. “Just doing some wiiring!”

Vaggie wanted to interject, but was cut off by the shrill of a metal whine and revving engine. Her eye slipped towards the stage, only to see Angel yanking at a chainsaw. She gawked, throat catching, before rushing over.

“Angel! ANGEL!”

The svelte spider ceased his motions, shooting her an annoyed glance. “Whaaaaat” He flicked up his safety goggles, a free hand tapping fingers on hip.

“What are you doing!?”

Angel wore an expression of offense. “Tch! What’s it look like m’doin’!? Fixin’ dis dump!”

Vaggie wanted to tear out her hair. “With a CHAINSAW!?”

The tall spider rolled his mismatched eyes. A tiny, rather revealing “safety” vest adorned his frame,
in bright pink, with a smiley-face button. “Yeh, with a chainsaw! Can’t make an omelet without breakin’ a few eggs or some shit.”

Vaggie trembled, her frown threatening to crinkle her face permanently. Then, to her horror, she realized the kid wasn’t there.

“Where’s the runt?” she said, suddenly concerned. Angel’s interest in the conversation was quickly depleting.

“I’unno. Told em’ to take care of the pests in da’ back. Probably settin’ em’ on fire like a good boy.”

“…what?”

Her query was met with the sound of shattering glass and exclamations of joy. Somewhere, behind the old stage sets, the smell of burning wood and paper filled the room.

Vaggie’s fist clenched, pen snapping between her fingers. Before she could chew out Angel proper, though, a finger tapped her shoulder. She spun, scowling.

“What is it now!?”


Vaggie’s features softened, if only for a moment, Angel revving the chainsaw in the background. Baxter paid it no mind, gesturing behind him.

“You’ll be pleased to know that I’VE constructed an INCREDIBLE array of devices for a theatrical performance. Look! LOOK AND BEHOLD!”

Alarmed, Vaggie looked past him to see a violent combination of strange machines, all spewing and sparking with coils of bright-blue energy, hissing like mechanical animals. They appeared less like set designs and more death rays and doomsday devices. Vaggie rubbed her temple, muttering swears in foreign tongue before heaving a long, exasperated sigh.

“Well?” grinned Baxter, “You love them, of course? Brilliant, really! I’ve outdone myself this time!”

“I think they look great!” chimed Niffty, who hovered next to Baxter.

“GAH!”

Vaggie stared, the whine of saw cutting into wood filling the theater as Angel haphazardly made cuts to various, random parts of the stage. This was a disaster, and it was waiting to become a cataclysmic event.


“Up in the sound booth thingy.”

_Devil help me_, thought Vaggie, _maybe she did something right at least._

Instead of losing her temper now, she hauled off to the booth, which seated itself above the stage, a small room littered with old machines connected to older speakers. Crymini was there, lounging in chair, legs reclining on audio system, chewing gum. She barely moved as Vaggie entered, one ear preoccupied by an earplug.

“Oh. Hey.”
Vaggie attempted a smile, but none came. “Please,” said Vaggie, “Please tell me you have something good.”

Crymini shot her a look. “For what? Music?”

Vaggie sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose. “Yes, Crymini, the music.”

For once, Crymini dawned a tiny smile, one rife with mischief. “Hell yeah,” she said. “Found all sorts of shit on the HelNet. Classics.”

Vaggie brightened. Classics? That sounded promising. She waited as Crymini stood, the punkish girl going to a small tower of vinyl records. Her fingers travelled down the citadel of music, selecting one and pulling it from its case.

“These guys are great!” Crymini added with a wide grin, retrieving the vinyl and setting it in the respective player.

When she hit play, there was silence. Then . . .

“DEATH TO ALL HUMANITY!”

A horrifying chorus of growling vocals intermixed with the crunch of angry bass and violent guitar filled the room, coupled with harrowing lyrics. Crymini bobbed her head with the rhythm of each bass strum, feet tapping, while Vaggie clapped her ears.

“Are you kidding me?!” Vaggie yelled, the vibrations rattling her skull. Crymini barely heard her, forming a pair of horns with her hand.

“Fucking awesome right?” Crymini shouted over the vocals. Vaggie growled, coming to the player and shutting it off, in disbelief.

“You’re kidding,” said Vaggie. “This is a joke, right?”

Crymini’s ears flattened. “. . .what? No, of course it isn’t. This is music dude, real music.”

Vaggie didn’t know where to begin with how many wrongs were in that statement. This was a catastrophe – all of it. Between Angel ready to turn the theater stage into a pile of ruinous wood and Baxter’s metal abominations, this whole thing was turning to chaos. Agh. Charlie! This was why handing out random roles didn’t work!

“Hohoho, what an abysmal sound!”

The static-laced tones of Alastor fell over the pair, his head peeping through the doorway. “Why, miss Vaggie! I dearly hope I’m not intruding!”

Vag looked over, wearing a grimace. Great. This guy. He could wear that friendly grin all he wanted, but she never fully trusted him. His reputation only meant trouble, and one day, she knew he’d deliver on his persona of mayhem.

“No, Alastor,” Vaggie said, eager to escape the noisy horrors Crymini selected. “What is it?”

Alastor threw his arm in an amiable gesture. “Oh, why, I just thought I’d get your wise input on my entourage! I’ve selected a dandy row of clothes for everyone, you see!”

Vaggie blinked. Okay, that sounded promising. She nodded, going to him, tapping clipboard. “Yes? Show me.”
Alastor chuckled. “At once!” From his side, he swung forward a selection of scarlet suits. And. . . that was all. They were all matching rows of pinstripe crimson, but they had no real difference aside from size.

“I’ve fit them myself!” Alastor chimed, almost too prideful. “Angel was tricky, you see, I had to compensate for the extra limbs, and the troublesome little sprout doesn’t strike me as one who enjoys suits, but. . .”

Vaggie gawked. “They’re. . . all the same.”

“Exactly!”

This was a nightmare. “Alastor. . . the point of costumes is usually to be different.”

Alastor waved a hand. “Tosh! A Broadway spectacle loves uniformity! Why, imagine everyone on stage looking as dapper as a Saturday night!”

He tilted his head, eyes flashing, amused. Vaggie scowled. She shoved past him, and Crymini.

“Miss Vaggie?” called Alastor, keeping an obscenely cheery tone.

She didn’t respond, only grumbled. She strut through the Hotel hallways, looking at the clipboard and the accompanying list. It was a series of boxes to check off everyone’s “progress” with their particular tasks, but thus far, it was turning out precisely like she predicted. Agh, Charlie! Sometimes taking chances didn’t pay off! And then she remembered – where the Hell were Anon and Husk!? The theater was still filthy. Were they slacking off? Probably. Probably getting drunk, or gambling, or both!

Well, where to check for a barfly? His honeypot. She went towards the Hotel bar, only to find Anon standing outside, back to the wall. His arms were crossed and he looked. . . well. Like he always looked. A shadow in the distance with something on his mind.

“Anon?”

Your eye snapped up to see a rather perturbed Vaggie coming towards you. As she did, you straightened, offering a nod.

“Vaggie.”

She came to you, arms crossing, foot tapping. “Aren’t you supposed to be doing something?”

You cleared your throat. Yes, she was right. You were way behind schedule, if one defined this schedule as absolutely no progress. Husk had taken to drinking. A lot of drinking. Each time you tried to wrestle him from his angels in brown glass, he shrugged you off and went into a grumbling stupor. You couldn’t force him, and you weren’t interested in getting into a fistfight with the old curmudgeon. You were in enough trouble as is.

“Well uh,” you started. “Thing about that is. . .”

You explained how you and Husk had a disagreement. Well, more like Husk ingested booze, tossed you a hurricane of foul slurs, and abdicated from his task.

Here, you hesitated. Was it appropriate of you to talk about Husk’s personal life with someone else? Then again, this was Vaggie. She was, as far as you could tell, the most responsible one here. In fact, she was probably the realest one out of the guests. She did fix your arm, after all. You could trust her.

“Hmm. Vaggie.”

“...yes?”

You tossed your head, gesturing to the opposite room. “He’s in here, fucking scuzzed. I think I did that.”

She grumbled. “Agh, dammit Anon, what this time?”

You raised your hands, innocent. “I didn’t do anything to him, I swear. He just sort of gave it to me. He, er. He told me something about him and Angel. I didn’t realize.”

Upon hearing this, Vaggie’s face shifted. She gave a knowing sigh, nodding head. “Oh. It’s this, huh?”

“Depends. What do you think it is?”

Vaggie clicked her tongue. “Him and Angel. I remember.”

So she knew something. “They were a thing? I didn’t realize. I didn’t know Husk felt that way.”

Vaggie wiggled her free hand in a so-so gesture. “It’s complicated.”

You’re damn curious, you have to admit. “I’ve got time.”

Vaggie glanced at her clipboard, and realizing the unfortunate mess that was the ‘project,’ she decided this was a better use of her time. “Hmm.”

She pointed to the bar. “He’s in there?”

“Making a family of empty bottles.”

Another nod. “All right. Let’s grab him before he blacks out for another three days.”

While you’re apprehensive to mess with Husk, it’s probably for the better. He’s usually intoxicated, but this? Man could make a cocktail out of his own blood he was drinking so much. With Vaggie’s help, you both approached cautiously towards a wobbling Husk, who resided – face first – at the bar, a crowd of bottles around him.

“Husk,” said Vaggie, voice stern. “That’s enough for tonight.”

The feline moved – or imitated something that had motor skills. He looked towards you both and spit.

“You two fuck off!” he blurted. He took a swing at the air before falling over.

“God, Husk!” shouted Vaggie before rushing over. “Old idiot. C’mon. Anon?” She looked over to you while helping Husk up. You were quick to assist, the stench of bitter beer overwhelming you as you guided Husk along.

Carefully, you two manoeuvred him to the living quarters, setting him on couch where he slumped
over in a muttering mass of angry, intoxicated demon. A part of you felt guilty, looking at him like that. Did you do this? Were you the cause?

Vaggie set down the clipboard on table, sighing. “Well. There goes the day, I suppose.”

You sat in chair opposite of her, watching Husk, who faded into a beer-induced slumber. “That bad, huh?”

Vaggie glanced to you. “If Angel destroys the stage, Anon, you’re paying for it. Literally.”

You blink. What the hell was Angel doing? You were part concerned, part amused. “Speaking of,” you say, returning to the subject. “You were saying something about him and Husk?”

Vaggie leaned back, crossing legs, huffing. “Was I?”

“Hah, giving me the run around now?”

She shrugged. “Alright, alright. If you’re that curious.”

Husk toppled over, a loud, roaring snore leaving him. “Charlie’s been good to him, you know?” She pointed to Husk.

You tilt your head. “She’s been good to all of us,” you agree.

“Hmm. Well. Husk takes it personally. You’ll be shocked to know, Anon, but he’s not very optimistic. But you know, he believes in Charlie, at least.”

“Right. But what does this have to do with him and Angel?”

Vaggie raised a finger. “Getting to that. Husk trusts Charlie and the Hotel. Doesn’t like strangers. It is Hell after all, and sometimes Charlie forgets the kind of people that live Down Here. I certainly didn’t, and neither did Husk.”

She let the words hang in the air, reflecting on them. Vaggie wasn’t wrong – the demons you encountered thus far were relatively tame, and Lucifer only knew what terrible creeps wandered around in the darkest parts of Pentagram City.

“And then, one day, out of nowhere, this guy just shows up. Tall fella in suit and hat, fresh off the streets. Angel drags him in, somebody we don’t know.”

She looks at you.

“And that somebody has a knack for getting into trouble, lots of it. Brings it with him, you know? And, like clockwork, who else but the Radio Demon appears at our doorstep not long after? Well, Anon, you can imagine Husk is probably a little bothered by two dangerous weirdos living in his home now.”

You manage a chuckle. “I’m a dangerous weirdo? I’m flattered, Vag.”

She gives a dry smirk. “Well, anyway. Yeah. He and Angel had a thing. A very, very brief thing. I’d say they were an item for, oh, about one night.”

You blink. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Husk confided in me about it. Told me he and Angel really opened up to each other. Didn’t even do anything crazy, really. I’m sure it felt pretty nice. But, you know, after that, Husk’s bitter
hhabits and Angel being, well, Angel, it didn’t get very far. Them as a couple, I mean.”

She sighed. “I’m sure he’s still upset about it, with himself even. And then, of course, you come along and well, ‘take’ Angel. You were . . . dangerous, Anon, and I think to someone like Husk, seeing a perilous person get so lucky probably eats at him.”

“I don’t mean jealous,” Vaggie clarified. “He’s never been that type. But no doubt this thing with you and Angel stirs him up. Reminds him of things. Reminds him of his luck.”

Vaggie watched Husk’s snoring, drunken frame. “He’s got a lot of demons he doesn’t talk about.”

You tap your fingers. “Ahh, I can’t blame him. He’s right. I was dangerous.”

“You know I wouldn’t do anything to put you at risk. Or anyone here. You’re uh, you know. Family.”

Vaggie chuckled. “‘The last few weeks beg to differ.”

“Well that was different.”

“Even still. After that whole debacle with him, Husk probably felt vindicated. I guess I shouldn’t speak for Husk, but maybe he wonders why Angel sticks with you after all that?”

By him, you figured Vaggie meant Abaddon.

“Not realizing. . . that’s probably why Angel sticks with you. The danger, the chaos.”

Damn. You feel remiss you never got to know Husk more. “I wish he’d told me.”

Vaggie chuckled. “Hah! This is Husk we’re talking about.”

You concede. “Fair enough.”

You remember these are very personal things Vaggie is telling you, and you don’t think there’s enough alcohol in Hell to pull this out of Husk. How he and Angel got so close – if briefly – was a miracle in itself. “I’ll keep it between us.”

Vaggie chuckled. “Thanks, but it’s not like anyone would believe you anyway.”

She was probably right. Any accusations about this would just have Husk throwing out a hurricane of insults and Angel brushing it off in his usual way. Hell, you weren’t sure if you should even bring it up with your spider, not that you wanted.

“Is he gonna’ be okay?” you ask, watching a trail of drool escape him.

“Him? Pfft, Anon, this is nothing. I’m pretty sure he is, at least, partly drunk all the time.”

“No kidding.”

This doesn’t solve the predicament of working together as a team though. “So, what, he just drinks himself into a stupor? We do have a job. Can’t work without a crew.”

Again, Vaggie sighed. “My advice? Earn his respect. He’s an old bitter drunk. Talking with him is . . . not how he handles things.”
“I noticed.”

Vaggie glanced at the time. “He’ll come around. He probably wanted to bare his fangs, for once. I mean, he’ll keep doing that, you know he will. Giving you shit and making remarks, that’s all he knows. But right now, he probably looks at you like a wildcard, and Alastor certainly doesn’t help.”

Well, you don’t blame the old grump. You’ve viewed strangers and others with a level of distrust before, and considering what your actions caused in the past, Husk is in the right to be a little angry. Just a bit.

A pregnant pause filled the air for a while, interrupted only by Husk’s heavy, slurred snoring. Then, Vaggie spoke again.

“We don’t talk much. It’s. . . nice.”

You chuckle. “Well, I’m not much a talker. It’s only with. . . you know.” Meaning Angel.

Vaggie glanced your way. In the distance, there was a muffled noise, something like an explosion or a falling heavy object. Or both. Vaggie grumbled.

“So it is,” she said, ignoring the disturbances. “Anon, if I’m honest, I never expected it.”

“Meaning?”

She waved her hand. “You know exactly what I mean. This thing with you and Angel. I didn’t think it would stick, given Angel’s reputation and yours.”

You’re almost flattered. “My reputation, huh?”

A slow nod. “Yes, your reputation. Don’t get me wrong, but, I didn’t trust you the moment you walked through the door.”

“Don’t blame you.”

“Well, guess you proved me wrong. Er, well, you proved me right too, but the point is, of all the people Angel would be loyal to, never saw this coming. And, same with you. You two stick, despite all the shit. It’s kind of astonishing.”

Now you laugh, leaning back in the chair. “Kind of? I’d say it’s a miracle. I’m lucky Vaggie, very lucky. Angel is everything to me.”

She offered her own soft laugh. “So I’ve heard.”

Husk shifted around, making a sort of gagging noise before promptly rolling to his side and snoring again. Vaggie stopped, watching him, as if waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she continued.

“May I ask how?” she said.

You looked at her. How indeed? After all this time, all the things you’d seen and done, all the chaos you’d been through. . . Angel was still with you. Ups and downs, highs and lows, anger, sadness, and happiness. Yet there he was, always smiling, always listening.

“I suppose for the same reasons you and Charlie are together,” you say. You notice Vaggie’s grey cheeks go the slightest hue of red.
“Oh please. That’s not an answer!”

You muse over your thoughts. “Hmm. You said it yourself. Danger and chaos. I guess that’s what Angel liked at first and, well, he was the only person I could trust, even when I didn’t.”

You paused. Vaggie leaned, making a *continue* gesture. “Aaaand?”

You hesitate. When was the last time you told anybody about this? This feeling you had for the spider? Did you ever? Well, Vaggie told you about Husk, least you could do was return the favor.

“We just trust each other, Vaggie. There’s no judgment between us. Angel looks through all the horrible shit I’ve done and sees someone. He makes me forget I was a bad person, hah. I guess we’re technically still dating. . .”

You pause again. Dating? Wow, what the hell – that isn’t a phrase you’re used to saying. Dating. Huh. When you put out there, in words, it’s strange in all the best ways.

“He’s funny, and damn smart. And vulnerable. He gave up *everything* to be a better person, even when I wasn’t. All I know Vaggie, is I give him everything. My loyalty and my . . .”

It dawns on you this is the first time you’ve said *love* about Angel Dust with anyone. When you don’t finish, Vaggie finishes for you.

“Love, huh? Still surprises me,” she said. Her eye went back to Husk, sighing.

“Would’ve been nice to see the old codger soften up,” she continued. “But I think he wasn’t ready for that. Can’t love others if you don’t love yourself.”

You rub your head. “Damn, Vag, that’s dramatic.”

She shrugs. “Like I said, he’s got demons. His own little Hell.”

“Hmm,” you add. “Guess it explains why they really go at it sometimes.”

You continue to chat with Vaggie for a while, and it’s pleasant. She is – you find – quite even tempered despite her scowls. You ask her about the theater progress and learn it’s . . . well, a nightmare, and she’ll likely need to reassign tasks despite Charlie’s pleasantness. And as for Chuck? The two do well, for the most part. Vaggie tells you her ray of blonde, singing sunshine is an ocean of sweetness, though is often naïve, and she worries constantly about the Hotel’s safety. Though Charlie sees light in everyone, Vaggie is of a different opinion. Some souls are Down Here for a reason. Some can’t be saved.

You navigate to the subject of your kid again. When you do, it reminds you of something.

“Vaggie. . . when I found him, he was in this place. . .”

You notice Vaggie starts to tense and her gaze goes somewhere else. “Hmm.”

“Charlie said something about proper channels. Like she knew. Vaggie, I have to know. I have to know because the things I saw. Why is my kid down here? There were children too, did you know that? And they’re what, shuffled off somewhere to die?”

Vaggie says nothing.

“I can’t believe it,” you go on. “I don’t see him that way, Vag. Junior doesn’t belong down here. He’s just a punk, out on his own. How’d he come to Hell? Am I missing something? What the hell
was all that?"

‘All that’ meaning the Exterminator Zone.

Vaggie chewed her lip, arms crossed, digit tapping.

“He told me,” you say, “Someone locked a gate and he got down here. That sound like anything to you?”

Vaggie shrugged. “Gates huh? Hah. Didn’t click for you yet?”

You blink. “Am I missing something?”

She sighed. “Gates of Heaven aren’t as merciful as you might think, Anon. I’m sorry, I don’t really know much about the ‘Zone.’ But I do know this, and... I don’t say it to Charlie. Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth getting redeemed at all.”

That takes you off guard. “What?”

Vaggie chuckles, shaking her head. “Ah, listen to me. What do I know, right? Look, don’t worry about it okay? It’s just one of these things with Hell. Politics.”

Vaggie’s deflecting, you think, but you doubt you can press any further. She stands, retrieving her clipboard.

“Thanks for the help with Husk. He’ll come around. Until then, you might be flying solo for a while.”

You know there’s something more to this debacle with the Exterminator Zone, but perhaps it’s better you didn’t know. Either way, it’s clear Vaggie’s ending this particular line of discussion.

“That’s fine,” you say, conceding. She nods.

“We should take more,” adds Vaggie. “Could, I dunno... talk about, um. Eyepatches?”

You laugh. “So, we could. Alright, I’ll hold you to that, Vag.”

You point to Husk. “What about him?”

Vag studied the ball of grumpy, gurgling drunk. “He should be all right, just needs to sleep it off. Let him have his peace.”

No arguments there, you’re none too eager to be on the business end of Husk’s claws. You him to rest then as Vaggie heads to Charlie’s office, no doubt preparing to deliver news about the theater’s “progress.” When she’s gone, you find a moment to think.

It’s interesting. Ever since Junior came about – angsty teen and all – a part of you has changed. The desire to take and steal are, well, nonexistent. That unusual sensation of emptiness, the notion you weren’t fulfilled, has evaporated. This thing you have with Angel, this little family you’re building... is this it? Is this all you really needed? All the other problems – the return of Sarin, the dreams – they don’t bother you as much. You could get used to this.

-*=-

It’s late by the time you get back to Angel’s room. You decided something needed to be accomplished today, so you went after patches of mold hanging off the auditorium walls. To your
horror, you discovered the mold could move, had eyes, and was – frankly – everywhere. Perhaps burning everything down wasn’t a bad idea after all.

Still, it kept you busy, long enough you were preoccupied for the day. You didn’t even have time to catch up with the kid, but you planned to soon. You had something planned, something special, a rite of passage. But that was for later.

Angel’s door was partly ajar when you came to it. It was a subtle, though welcoming, touch, a quiet invitation for you. Before, you usually had to knock. You entered, shutting it close, while a familiar set of oinks arrived after. Deputy Nuggets came prancing toward you, running about in circles. You nod at him, offering little pats.

“Deputy.”

Inside, muffled noises came from the bathroom, sounds of vigorous scrubbing and spitting intermixed with a running faucet. You set aside your overcoat in the meantime, preoccupied with thoughts, musing over the Hotel, as you were wont to do. Shortly after, a casually dressed Angel emerged, a long, oversized pink tee-shirt adorning his frame, down to his hips, though, nothing else covered his legs. At once, his features brightened at your arrival, coming to you to plant a peck on your forehead.

“Eyyy cutie.”

The touch of his soft lips is enough to send a tropical storm of warmth through you. You sit on the edge of his very, very pink bed, pulling off shoes.

“Peppermint. Missed you.” You hadn’t seen him most of the past several days, wrestling with Husk’s. . . well, Husk-isms. Now that you do again, it’s like bliss all over again.

He quirks a brow. “Ya’ did? I’m in the theater, ya’ know. Aint’cha hear me working?”

He swaggers past you, hips tossing a bit, going to a table adorned with golden plate and a family of expensive alcohols. You can’t help but steal a glance, putting your hat to the side.

“No, but I’m hearing rumor of your ‘techniques.’ Chainsaws, was it?”

He pours himself a shot of something, turning and wearing a sneer. “Ya’ fuckin’ bet. Place is a dump. Needed the ol’ Angel touch.”

He wiggled the full glass at you. “Want one?”

Now, usually you weren’t one to continue encouraging Angel’s old habits. You hadn’t seen him getting into his usual substances for a while, surprisingly enough, and you didn't want to get something started again. Angel Dust notes your hesitation.

“Aww c’mon, take the edge off. That’s what happens when ya’ workin’ hard!”

Hmm. When was the last time the spider got you a drink? Or made one, for that matter? You’re curious.


His sneer vanishes. “Wha! Da’ fuck ya’ askin’ for somethin’ all fancy for? Ya dippy fuck!”

You make eyes him. “Aww, please?”
Angel rolls his eyes and chuckles. “Fuckin’ jee-zus. Fiiiiine.”

He sips his own drink and saunters towards a globe marked with a pentagram. Within it is a tiny bar with all the things needed to make your request. Despite his appearance of aggravation, though, his light of foot when he tends to the mix, a gentle hum escaping him while he does. You don’t think you’ve seen him do this before, and it’s . . . fascinating. He’s quite good. You also can’t help but notice he bends in an exaggerated fashion, where the sleek shape of his thighs and rump are visible. He’s . . . only in panties.

He comes back to you when he’s done, extra hand shoving the drink in yours. “There. Ya’ happy?”

“Very.”

You take a few grateful swigs while Angel swaggered into bed, stretching. His room lights catch him, dim for the evening, city lights visible through blinds, washing his white fluff form in an array of gentle colors. As he nestles the back of his head, Fat Nuggets makes a small yawn and goes to his little pig bed, curling up for the evening.

You down the rest of the Old Fashioned in the meantime, leaning over to plant a kiss on Angel’s cheek. “Thanks, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart, hah. Another word that’s entered your vocabulary.

He winks. “Yeah, yeah. Ya’ lucky I’m feelin’ generous.”

“So you are. Any reason?”

His frame wiggles with laughter while he swigs the rest of his drink, setting it aside. “Destroyin’ old shitty theaters is uh, what’s da word. . . . thera. . .”

“Therapeutic?”

He snaps his fingers. “Yeah! Dat. It's great! Fuckin’ torchin’ it! And ya’ know I hear ya’ can get paid for blowin’ shit up? Bwehehe, I’m in the wrong line of work!”

You blink, mildly concerned. “You didn’t actually. . . blow something up, did you?”

He grins, gold tooth glinting. “Maybe.”

He’s joking. Right? He’s joking. . .

“Oh god.”

“Pfft, what? Ya’ know ya’ love it when I do that.”

You pause. “You’re not wrong.” You also remember he’s been with Junior this whole time.

“How’s our boy been?”

Now there's a phrase. Just like Angel’s kisses, this simple sentence sends another tingle of comforting warmth through you, and so it does for Angel. His features change, and he gives a small smile, one that’s filled with pride.

“He’s a little dipshit, but he ain’t so bad.”

That’s relieving. “No? Been on his best behavior?”
Angel cackles. “Wahahaha! Of fuckin’ course not! Caught em’ spray paintin’ some shit after lunch and makin’ googly eyes at the mutt!”

“Wait, what?” The mutt? “What. . . what do you mean?”

You have a feeling but. . .

Angel huffs. “What’cha think? Anon, I ain’t old enough fer granpups! Ya’ gonna’ have to knock sense inna that kid. Fuckin’ runt can’t even focus, watchin’ that angsty Hot Topic reject like he’s at a strip joint!”

There are too many things wrong with that sentence and you don’t know where to begin. Angel though taps his chin, struck by inspiration then snaps his fingers once more.

“Oh! Yeah, dat’s it. Take em’ to a club! Buy em’ his first blowie, wehehe! Should straighten’ em out.”

You shudder. “Angel, Angel, easy now. He’s a kid still. That’s a little uh. . . intense, don’t you think?”

The spider crosses his arms, shrugging. “Ya’ kiddin’ me? Well, either ya’ talk to em’ or I’ll fuckin’ take care of it. Boy ain’t right! Anon! He don’t even have a knuckle duster! Couldn’t even make a molotov!”

It dawns on you that adopting a moral code in the middle of Hell is all sorts or ironic. Just as well, Angel’s not wrong. If he’s been making a pass at Crymini. . . Devil, that’ll be trouble if becomes anything.

“Okay, fine, fine. I’ll take care of it. I’ve been thinking of something for him, anyway.”

Angel looks at you, expectant. “Uh huh? What, poker’n strippers?”

You leer at him. “I’ll. . . get to that.” You’re lying. Probably.

The spider grumbles, shoving you. “Well whaaaaaat? Stop bein’ all mums-the-word! Tell me, asshole!”

You don’t answer, just lie back in the bed next to him, relaxing. “You’ll see.”

“Gugh! Fine!”

You’ll tell him soon, what you’re thinking. For now, it’s an incomplete thought, and one the boy has to be ready for. He needs to know, and needs to understand your values, the few remaining ones you have: family and honor.

A gentle quiet fills the room for a while, and it’s nice. It doesn’t last long, however, as you feel one of Angel’s hands creep up your leg.

“Ya knooooooow,” he says, voice dark and sultry. “Occurred t’me. With a kid hangin’ around, you’ze a daddy. For real.”

His touch sends a raw spark of oh boy right through you. “Aha,” you mutter. “So I am.”

He snickers, the kind of hot-and-bothered snicker he makes when he’s feeling predator. In one smooth motion, Angel rolls atop you, sitting on your waist, extra hands fussing with your shirt, wearing a hungry grin, those mismatched eyes all too familiar.
“That’s kinda’ fuckin’ hot, ya know?”

You get the idea. Your own palm slips to his thigh, squeezing, before travelling to the soft curve of his rump.

“Speak for yourself,” you challenge. “Wish I could’ve seen you taking it to the stage with a saw.”

Angel leans. “Oh, ya’ like it when I get violent, huh?”

“. . . yes.”

He cackles. “Fuckin’ pervert!”

His head darts to yours, smooth, warm lips touching your own, assaulting with a series of hungry smacks. The rest of you stands at attention, quite literally, a tightness forming in your pants. Angel, meanwhile, goes to your ear, and offers a lusty prayer.

“I want ya’ to put a fuckin’ baby in me!” he purrs. Okay, that catches you off guard.

“W-what?”

He chuckles. “You heard me!”

“Angel, that’s not how that works, at all!”

You’re cut off as one of his hands unfastens your pants, squeezing the excited hardness within, stroking at it.

“Shut da’ fuck up and breed me!”

Okay, okay, holy fuck. While Angel’s suggestion is essentially impossible, it’s like a primal switch has clicked in your demonic brain. A wildfire erupts in your blood and your heart hammers. It’s not long before you embrace him, keep him close. The rest is the usual rhythm, where you find yourself pressed into his tight hole, the room clouded with moans and rough grunts. It doesn’t help when Angel goes to all fours.

You don’t remember much afterward, save for getting caught in the sticky embrace of your spider. For a while, you forget about everything else – Husk and the Hotel and the problems beyond you. Things would be okay, as long as you had this.

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Arackniss didn’t believe his consigliere when word came through the web about what had happened. How could he? The Commission, gone? Killed by his brother’s hand? None of it made sense, none of it. His boys had eyes on every turf and territory the Family kept their legs on, and not a single one said anything about Angel Dust making a move. It didn’t fit. His sibling was. . . a whore, a floozy, a disgrace to the namesake, not someone who made power moves.

And yet. . . even his own eyes couldn’t lie to him. Where once a gathering of elite demons took place, now resembled something more like a maniac’s headquarters. The refined furnishings of each of the family names was nowhere to found, instead replaced by a network of wires and a mountain of monitors stacked atop each other. Some had images, others just static. To Arackniss, they meant nothing, but to the other, it was the bargaining chip, the currency used in this exchange.

Exchange for what? Arackniss was about to find out. The only reason he bothered was because this
meant everything. The Commission was gone and his fragile name was allowed to once again reclaim their throne, their old power. Assuming the lunatic responsible for all the deaths wasn’t setting another trap.

As Arackniss marched along, heading towards the meeting room, an entourage of enormous guards were at his side, fearsome tarantula like beings wielding weapons with piercing rounds tipped with seraphic points. He wasn’t going to get trapped, not like the others.

Once they were in the room, there was nothing, save for the strange devices and machines littering the floor. They were unusual, these machines, some familiar, some not. In fact, Arackniss recognized some of the devices as Pentious’ tech.

No guards came to greet them. No massive mafia, no army of lunatics. No one.

Except...

“Well, we’re so happy you finally...” A voice erupted, familiar and grim, pausing, as if struggling to form the words.

“Finally arrived.”

Arackniss swung his multi-eyed gaze ahead. There, against the framework of monitors, was a silhouette. He wore a white suit vest and white suit pants. His breathing was heavy, ragged, and there was something wrong about him. Arackniss’ flesh tingled, as though it were bitten at by an unseen aura.

And then, at once, recognition hit the spider. The body, the height, the shape. Him. IT WAS HIM!

“You! YOU!”

The figure turned, laughing. “You’ve no idea how much that keeps happening to us.”

He raised his hands. “Now, now, let’s not start throwing out accusations willy-nilly. We’re not armed, and it’s only us...”

Recognizing the absurdity of the statement, he laughed. “Haha.”

Arackniss stood, teeth clenching. This had to be some horrible joke, some disgusting twist of face. He knew that man. The man his whore of a brother stuck on. This was him? This was the one who put the Commission out?

“This is an interesting suicide note,” Arackniss said, keeping himself tempered. “Though I appreciate the friendly gesture.”

This man was a fool. Arrogant. To assume he could invite Arackniss over, unarmed, and think the spider wouldn’t take advantage? Idiot.

The suited creature wasn’t deterred, and rather, walked towards the group. Each guard, in response, swung out their submachineguns and trained them on the approaching figure.

“When I give the word, you’ll be a memory,” threatened Arackniss.

Yet... the closer he approached, the worse the sensation. Arackniss flinched, like his flesh was scraped by some unseen matter, recoiling at its gravity.

“Ah, but don’t you want to hear what we have to say?”
The figure sat, propping elbows on table. He reached behind him and unfasted the white plate shaped like a skull, setting it aside.

No.

Arackniss was wrong. It wasn’t him.

What stared back was wrong. It wore a face, it wore a sneer, but the features were ridden with volcanic cracks and hissing shadows. Every breathe scaping its frame filled the air with a vile toxin while a singular, hate infested eye kept itself locked on Arackniss.

“We’re sorry. We’ll keep this short – not healthy to be around us for a long time, you see.”

The Better Half glanced between the guards, noting the guns with a gesture. “Or, well, you’re free to try all that, we suppose.”

Arackniss stared. What was this? Did he take a chance then, put this one down for good? Then again, it clearly didn’t care.

In the back of his mind, something lingered. The harrowing gaze of his father, the harsh accompanying words. He was always the runt, the disappointment, forced to watch his family fall apart and slowly lose power as other empires in Hell grew. Watch as his brother – an heir to their power – shirked his duties and sold himself off for drugs and revolting degeneracy. And yet, Arackniss knew, it was Angel his father wanted back the most.

Here he was, the eldest, forced to hold together the crumbling remains of his family with their fading resources. This strange thing, bearing grin and power, seemed to promise a different fate, a return to form. But for what.


A dark, inhuman sound escaped the Better Half, an imitation of a laugh. He reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a small glass container. Within it, a piece of the frozen halo.

“What do you know about Fragments?”

Chapter End Notes

At this point, I’m wondering if I’ll even get finished before the pilot drops!

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