

## 1373

--Mia--

"It happened long before the great fountain of Ravid birthed me," Yosepha said. "The council and the records say Lucifer disagreed with the great plan. They did not agree with the purpose of Heaven and Hell."

"Which is...?"

Yosepha glared at her. Okay, still not going to get an answer on the purpose of the Great Tower then. But considering how stingy the council apparently was with information, she probably didn't know.

"God cast Lucifer down to Hell and stripped them of their wings."

"Lucifer had wings?"

"Metaphorically, I assume. The archangels were the first, and beyond beings of simple limbs. God did not want Lucifer to have the freedom to traverse the three realms as the archangels did. Punishment, for their betrayal."

"Oh. So Hell was always a nasty place?"*Ŵŵŵ.ŵ.ŵOv&LwOzM.(c)óm*

"Yes. Hell and its hellbeasts is unwelcoming territory for everyone. Back then, there were no demons, though. Lucifer used their power to create the nine spires, bastard versions of the Heavenly Islands. From them, Lucifer created the Old Ones, the original demons."

A cold shiver worked through Mia's body. It happened a lot, talking with Yosepha about this stuff.

"I know their names," Mia said. "The book put them there. Malphas, Molech, Beelzebub, Astaroth, Apollyon, Asmodeus, Belial, Azazel, and Abaddon."

It was Yosepha's turn to shiver. "Indeed."

"I've heard some of those names. I mean, when I was alive, I did. How did those names reach the surface? And Lucifer's name, for that matter?"*Ŵŵŵ.N(o)v(e)l 463m.c0m*

"That is... not a secret, but not something I should discuss. Angels have affected the surface at various points in the history of the world, and sometimes the names of entities were left to be found. Of course, names changed over the course of millennia, and across languages, but the seeds remained."

"So much for being atheist." She summoned her best smile. It was enough to earn one from Yosepha, too. Success.

"The religions of the surface are... misguided. But I am hardly one to judge them. I am not God." Sighing, her wings drooped until they borderline flattened to the stone floor. Talking about God depressed her. Pretty much the opposite of what you'd expect.

"So, um, what'd Lucifer do?"

"Lucifer and the Old Ones concocted a great plan. With the power of sacrifice, they killed untold souls in Hell, and cast their hearts into the fires of False Gate. Lucifer used one of the tools they had created, the anvil, and tore a hole into Heaven. Lucifer would not need an archangel's ability to travel the realms, if they could simply enter Heaven directly. The result was the vortex."

"Scary."

"Quite so. Anyone who touches it would be destroyed, except for an archangel."

"But I thought angels went back to Heaven using it?" Mia asked.

"We do, but it is dangerous. We must be careful about how we navigate the edge of the vortex."

"Oh. So... what happened next?"

"It is painful to admit, but we angels are not entirely sure. Perhaps the council know, but it would not surprise me if they do not know the details, either. We do know a few things, though."

"Yeah?"

"Lucifer and the Old Ones defeated Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael."

"Fuuuuck."

"Yes. But something happened to Lucifer at the Frozen Heart. Perhaps Lucifer's kin defeated them. Perhaps God intervened. What I know is Lucifer is gone, as are the Old Ones, and the corpses of the other archangels litter the hellscape."

"They--oh! Angel's Spine!"

"Indeed."

Mia gulped and hugged her knees to her chest. They had to get through Angel's Spine, once they got past the Black Valley. No wonder it used to be called Heaven's Tears.

"Their bodies are still there?"

"Their bodies are Angel's Spine."

Mia tilted her head. "Uh... what?"

"The corpses of Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael are the province Angel's Spine."

"But that's hundreds of kilometers long, and wide!"

"Indeed."

"Holy shit. I'm struggling to picture that. What did the archangels look like?"*Ŵŵŵ.fv(c)el@orm.c(c)em*

Yosepha's wings drooped even more. Damn it, Mia.

"The art we have of them is... abstract, and beautiful. If you reach the province, you will know."

"Like, I know back on the surface there's some weird art about what 'biblically accurate' angels looked like. Like that?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps." With a heavy sigh, Yosepha stood up, stretched out her wings, and spent some time picking at them with her fingers. "I must depart."

"Wait, what? You have to go?" Mia hopped up and straightened out her dress. The potram rune held strong, even through sleep, taking as much effort to maintain as breathing. No reason to not keep using it, at least while with an angel and the Damall*Ŵŵŵ.zovel@orM.c0m*

"Yes. Heaven does not realize I am... betraying them yet. I must return and explain my absence, and..." The angel's eyes drifted off to stare at nothing as she picked a few tiny bits of rock from her feathers. "I must lie to them."

"Aw, come on! You're not betraying Heaven. You just... know something's up, something bad, and you're convinced the council is making a huge mistake."

"What is betrayal if not abandoning faith and obedience in your superiors?"

"According to Hell, becoming a betrayer means drinking the blood of a willing demon, so, uh, there's that?" Grasping at straws for a shit argument, Mia. "Come on, you're doing what you're doing because you think it'll help Heaven, and everyone. That's important!" She put herself between the angel the alcove exit. "Why did you decide to help the Damall in the first place? Why did you decide to save me?"

It would have been child's play for Yosepha to push Mia out of the way. She could have brushed her aside with a wing like sweeping dust with a broom, no hands required. But she stood there, and folded her arms across her chest as she met eyes with her. Those were definitely the eyes of a sad, torn woman.

"I was... friends... with Romakus, before I betrayed Heaven."

"Being 'friends'--air quotes warranted--with a demon isn't against the rules?"

"No. And angels can come and go from Hell as we see fit, as long as a war proclamation has not been made. We are not slaves. Other angels in the past have been known to fraternize with demons, as even the council recognizes that demons are not truly our enemies. Usually." Out came another heavy sigh, along with another wing droop, but she picked herself up and set her wings snug on her back. "I had been interacting with the Damall for some time before the unmarked arrived. When I asked the council about the unmarked, they insisted they were to be killed, and did not provide a true explanation. But there were signs before that. Hell herself has been... strange, for several years now. The hellbeasts have behaved oddly, and remnants have roamed free of their binds."

"Remnants roaming free? Fuck."

"The council refused to acknowledge it. When the unmarked arrived, Galon and I investigated at the request of the Damall. We found your brother. If he was not as obviously innocent and kind as you are, this conversation would not be happening. You would be dead. And so would he."

"Double fuck. Does anyone know you're close with Romakus specifically?" Azreal and them had seen Romakus and Yosepha have the stand-off before they left with Galon. If they found out about their relationship, it'd put a hole in Yosepha's lies.

"Only my close friends."

"And if you told the council what you know and what you've done, what would they do?"

"I... do not know. It has been ages since an angel has betrayed Heaven."

"It's happened before?"

Yosepha shook her head. "A story for another time. But, please, step aside. I must get back to Heaven and report my escape to my commanding officer. It will take several days of flying to reach the vortex. I will have time to think up a convincing lie."

"That... sounds awful. Lying to other angels, I mean."

"Yes, it is." Yosepha reached forward with a wing, and gently nudged Mia aside. "I will return in a week or so."

"A week or so!? But, I have to get going as soon as Vin's healed! I can't wait that long."

The angel frowned down at her, and then at the ground as she hardened her dark eyes.

"Galon was right."

"He was?"