



DANTE'S INFERNO

CHARLOTTE ST. JAMES

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Dante's Inferno
Charlotte St. James
CSG Publishing House

Praise For Dante's Inferno

Charlotte St. James carves out a fantastic pastiche of Dante Alighieri's classic tale.

—**Nancy Kilpatrick,**

THRONES OF BLOOD series

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The retelling we didn't know we needed, but Charlotte St. James did.

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author of award winning THE RISE OF VARDYA

To all the thirsty lit majors out there. This one is for you.

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Content Warning

Please be advised that Dante's Inferno features certain sex scenes of dubious and non-consensual sex. There are also instances of blood play, sexual violence, BDSM, and the mention of suicide.

Your mental health matters. It's okay not to be okay.

If you or someone you know is struggling, please reach out for help.

United States of America : Emergency 911 or 988 Mental Health Emergency Hotline

Canada : Emergency 911 or Hotline 1-888-353-2273

UK & Republic of Ireland : Emergency: 112 or 999

Limbo

Canto I

A strong gale caught in Dante's wings as she floundered on the precipice of Hell. The woodland around her inhaled and hesitated as she tipped inside the barrel of the Earth, dragging a plume of down to trail her descent. Her halo flickered in the darkened throat that swallowed her, and she watched the light bounce from off the sawtoothed stones and splintered plates of shale. The sky above shrunk to a blue iris, and scrambling upright, Dante Mikha'el allowed the cool thermals expelled from Hell's heart to guide her to the first of the nine circles.

There was no turning back now, she'd made her choice and He knew.

Her bare feet settled upon the cold, iron surface of Limbo and Dante was still. Her breathing was labored as she gazed around the dim chamber, taking in the desolate shadows that clung to the hollow den. Her wings dusted the barren stone. She was sure the denizens of this circle saw them as a sepulcher to their hopes of Heaven and God.

"The Lord watches and He sees, but He shall never reach down to uplift the damned to Heaven." She clenched her jaws and hoped the fouled souls that heard her words would heed them and be still. Her blackened robes draped from her shoulders and were ragged and torn. She pulled at her hood to cover her brow, hoping to conceal the crown of celestial light that was already waning within the realms of the fallen. The protection of Heaven was eclipsed by the presence of Hell, and Dante shuddered, her resolution faltering in kind.

She stood upon a flat-topped goblet of stone, whose stem reached far below the first circle. Cool wind and the smell of brimstone made her want for her lance, but as she took her first steps towards a narrow path, sudden grief gave her pause.

"Hell hath no place for angels," a voice whispered in the dark.

"I am in search of someone," she replied, her wings folding in around her as formless shades in her periphery moaned like

hungry boars. The dusky figures of men and women took shape on the island of barren rock, akin to bodies beneath a clouded mire. Dante's eyes adjusted. An archipelago of stony platforms was in the distance, disks of rock held up on thin pedestals and pillars.

"We all seek someone," the voice replied, its deep dirge a bridge that was joined by the chorus of angered whispers and moans of the dead. "What we seek is what you've abandoned. Why come here, Seraph, to the den of the damned?"

The acquisitive touch of foreign fingers brushed through her wingtips. Dante straightened, calling her lance from the ether as rage knotted her brows. It was a rod of steel in her hand, shining like a pillar of lightning. Her stance widened. The skid of dirt beneath her feet hissed as she pivoted to face the intruder who dared touch her without consent.

"I seek the throne of Treachery," Dante cried, her eyes scanning the vacant landscape to watch the shifting phantoms writhe within the inky blackness out of reach. She winced at the pain of her feathers being plucked, and turned to confront the molester. Long serpentine limbs crawled over the lip of the island like swollen ropes, tipped with worm-gray hands and clammy fingertips.

"You seek the pit of the abyss?" The voices screamed in cacophony. "*Why?*"

Dante didn't answer, though the words were ghosts haunting her mind. She had come after centuries of prayer and reflection. To utter *the why* aloud—to admit to the damned of her will and volition—she hadn't the heart. Not because the words were mournful or mad, but because the words were treason.

Dante had battled the forces of darkness, waving the banner of God's holy land. Yet, since the fall of the Morning Star, she had missed the dawn...

Dante descended from Heaven to find him.

She stepped away from the snaking boughs that touched the tips of her feet and brushed her ankles. Fisting her

lance within her palm, Dante forced the tip into the ground, muttering a prayer that was drowned in the whispers of the dead.

Waves of holy light rippled outward. The formless shrieked and the limbs curled back from her lance like burning locks of hair. The iris above winked like a blue moon, and akin to a dying gasp of air, her light was swallowed as Heaven looked away.

Dante fell back like a marionette whose strings had snapped, her eyes wide, white medallions, framed in fear. In the horizon of her vision, the shapeless apparitions muttered and something seized her from behind.

“He is omnipotent. He sees your search for Treachery, Seraph.”

Dante pressed her lips together, a sudden, monstrous pride stiffening her anatomy as a body pushed against her back and flattened her wings until their tips skirted the floor. A hand coiled within her alabaster hair and wrenched her throat back, baring it to the formless as something scuttled between her legs.

“Many here loathe you, Dante. Even in Limbo where the virtuous reside, where babes, robbed of their mother’s embrace, must live beneath the eye of God and yearn for a Heaven they’ve only heard about from the mouths of the damned. Ye who abandoned hope and Heaven to seek the treacherous, forgive them, Seraphim...”

Dante gasped, the words of the dead buried beneath the persistence of steady trespass. Something crawled along her back, skulked along her spine. Their talons dug wells within the muscles of her shoulder blades.

Dante screamed. She was a child awash in a sea of regret, drowning beneath the stygian surface that sought to engulf her, “What are you *doing?*” yet her voice was anomalous and thick with conceit.

She wrenched her head up to stare into the sable eyes of Virgil. The ash-faced man pressed his lips thin, and above

sullen cheeks his eyes were burdened with knowledge.

“Protecting you from those who seek Heaven.”

Ophidian arms grasped at her ankles, and forced the lance from her hand. Even more, birthed from darkness, wriggled forth to grapple her waist and rope about her wrists and neck. Virgil retreated, the limbs took his place, spinning about her wings until nothing remained but wormy knots. Her lance clattered upon the floor, the formless in droves invaded through her parted lips. In one grimy breath they extinguished her halo, and carried it away to the shadows and sulphurous stone to inhale with greed and hopeless expectation.

“Take the everlasting gifts of God, but abandon hope, all who dwell here!” Virgil roared.

Give us the seraphim! The voices hissed.

Dante collapsed, caught within the living web that squeezed and pulled upon her wings. She wanted to scream, to cry for help and mercy, and grace, but she was a shell, a husk of wheat ready to fall and die alone.

More limbs came from above. They stretched her arms taut and dug at her wrists with cracked and jagged fingernails. Despite her despair, Dante screamed as her muscles tore and her wings were ripped from her body.

Virgil’s voice was a ghost in the background. “You’ve taken enough! Stop this madness. Do you not know who it is that you bind?”

Dante’s vision blurred as the painful scour of mortality grinned wickedly upon her. Virgil spoke, but she heard instead the shush of her wings being drug over the precipice, and the giggling mirth of hapless children as they fingered her halo and gnawed at the light it produced. She was powerless in the face of the agonized thieves, without the light from Heaven and God. She was Dante Mikha’el, who had come to Limbo of her own accord, and yet the fall was breaking her.

We shall render the seraphim to pieces and devour the Heaven within!

“A seraphim no more!” The pagan philosopher shrieked at the dead “Your feeble spoils are all you shall see of God’s Paradise! Leave her to the treachery she seeks.”

The eyes of Hell descended upon her and Dante shivered. Though the pain in her back was shocking, the temptation of vengeance was growling beneath the bed of dejection, fostering the infant pride that sat in her belly. It made her mouth dry. A foreign taste that caused her body to tense and petrify. If she could call her lance, escape her bonds, she’d wet her tongue with the blood of the damned.

But something caused her to scream anew.

Virgil whirled to regard her as the zephyrs from the second circle emerged in geysers from around the suspended islets. White hair snapping around her, Dante gripped her lance, flexing her hold upon the helm. It gleamed like frozen lightning, called through the darkness to again sit in the hand of its master. The shaft spun between deft fingers as the snaking limbs fought to contain her.

Virgil shouted as the hem of his robes unravelled in the torrential hurricanes of the second circle. “Seraphim Mik—”

“I am Dante!” she roared, spearing the point of her lance through the wrists of the limbs that bound her. Ropey tendons ripped as she forced herself free, and many writhed back towards the precipice as she tore the rest asunder. Dark inky spots dribbled from the gashes upon her back, and feathers spun in cyclones. Above, the cerulean iris turned black, and below, a demon chuckled.

“Dante!” Virgil screamed, shielding his sable eyes from the fierce gales erupting from the chasms. “Fill Limbo no more with the false promise of salvation. It draws Hell’s generals!”

I can’t return, she thought, stooping on her knees and pressing her hands flat against the pewter surface. She could feel the vice of the lower circles emanating from the stone, cackling and humming with promise. They were toying with her, fingering her emotions like an instrument of fancy.

Forcing her head up, she regarded the sky through the sphere of Hell's entry. Quiet rain pebbled on her brow, and fell in her eyes from the firmament.

"No," she mouthed. "I must find him. I shall find the throne in which he sits." Her legs shook, but were sturdy as she stood straight and still against the winds that licked up her robes. It fondled the skin that prickled along her inner thigh. Turning to Virgil, a warm exhale blew across her sex. Dante's lips parted, almost undone by a breath.

"Take me to the realm of Asmodeus," she said, hearing the general's voice in the thunderous gales simmering below the craggy steps of Limbo.

Yes, the voice hissed, mirth dripping with idle assurance as the presence of Lust fell back through the floor to the second circle. Pay me a visit, Dante. Sweet, lost, lonely Dante...

Virgil stood, and as the winds parted Limbo, so too did the formless go silent.

"Why, Seraphim?" he asked, his sable eyes a mirror of concern. "Without your light and wings of God, Hell's mortal temptations will be fierce. The first of Hell's generals is often the easiest to succumb to."

The temptations of Hell were upon her already, and unbridled they fostered disgrace. "My reasons are mine and God's alone," she replied. It was the only way. The Lord of Lust was already a searing brand between her legs. Asmodeus' crimson taint roamed wild across her features, coloring her cheeks... but she couldn't go back. Not when will had overwhelmed faith.

It is the only way, the Lust Lord chuckled in her mind. To face the Throne of Treachery, first you must be filled with the wisdom of the seven circles. And now, disarmed of your celestial favours... fill you we shall!

Canto II

The path was slight, and nary a road but a thin vein that meandered downwards into the eye of a cyclone. Buttressed with pock-marked stalactites that hung so far down they disappeared into the whirling tornado, as Dante walked with one heel touching the toe of her foot, she mourned the balance her wings afforded.

A seraphim no more. She eyed the precarious ledge of the ridged path. She had been made by God, to serve Him and man. But within the Inferno she walked for herself, and her feet were sore from the burden already. I walk to the throne. I walk with lament. I can not walk with regret.

Motes of light teetered like cypsela in the space around her. Dante neared the shelf where the path collapsed into serrated steps, all around her was the murmur of virtuous souls. Those betrayed to damnation by false, foetal gods.

“I will go myself from here,” she said as she faced the eye of the storms. Her heart filled with a sudden desire to confront the circle of lust alone. Behind her, Virgil, with his long staff, stopped, sable eyes wide.

“You do not wish for me to guide you?”

Dante paused before the saw-toothed stairs, her soft features flushed from the emanating sensations of the realm below her. “No, Virgil. I don’t.”

“But—”

“Limbo stole my wings and supped on the celestial light that once decorated my brow. I will not rob it of you. Even without those gifts, I am not a wanderer. I will face the circles alone.”

Her feet continued over the slope of the stairwell. Barbed stones, loosened at her descent, threatened to cut into the soft flesh of her feet and ruin the poise needed to venture downward, but as she sunk into the suddenly warm, pliant surface of the third stair, she was lurched skyward, pebbly

cobbles transforming into a slick, scaly carpet—smooth and nimble.

Dante fell, wincing as the pain in her back collided with the velvety mass of flesh that snaked into the cyclone of the circle. Virgil called her name, and the motes of light departed as the stairs, turned tongue, meandered back towards a monstrous throat. Dante summoned her lance from oblivion as the organ arced upward into a steep hill to quicken her descent.

“I can taste your sins and I know, Dante, that Hell welcomes you.” The voice of Minos quaked, large swollen bumps at the back of his throat engorging to keep her from being swallowed by his gaping maw. Rows of dull, clay-colored molars were filled with foul paste as she struggled to stand upon the creature’s tongue and not inhale the putrid stench of its breath.

“Your feet tread upon a path of sin, and it stains you. Already the gifts of God have been taken, but will you enter Hell and the realm of the dead?”

His eyes were mountainous peaks erupting with ants that crawled deep into his cavernous mouth to pick at the waste within his teeth. His ears were that of a donkey, and sat below a diadem of bone. Despite his terrible visage staring like the face of the scorching sun before her, Dante was still.

“I will enter the domain of Treachery,” she said, quelling her body’s pain with purpose.

Minos frowned from within the gusting cyclone, and reached forward with one large hand. He grasped Dante within his palm as his tongue withered back into his throat.

“I have licked your feet and judged you not to be dead. Only one angel treads the realm of the betrayer.”

“I know him well.” She could not disguise the hint of sadness in her voice. “But Minos, judge of death’s doors, allow me to enter the realm I seek.”

The sandy mounds filling his eyes vented a thousand ants, and the vermin sprawled upon his face as something else

writhed within the wind.

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

She watched the former King of Crete look away. “Because I have seen you, Dante. And to find the throne of Treachery you must first greet the generals. To be in Hell is to be with them, and they all desire your presence.” He extended his other arm, holding out a palm as though a beggar awaiting a coin.

“Give me your lance, Dante,” Minos said.

The Judge King’s long serpent tail wiggled up his body, twining about his thighs and between his naked legs as she reeled back from the demand.

“Why?” she asked again, fear capturing her voice.

“Because I have judged you. And to find Treachery, first you must consent to the others.”

Fill you we shall...

The words echoed in her mind. Dante was still. The trespass of Limbo, of her wings and her halo, was ushered to the forefront of reason. *Consent*. It was a farce. She recalled a time in which she battled the sins of the fallen, the dragon, *him*. What would the hellish *demand*?

“Everything,” Minos replied, reading her thoughts. “But you needn’t continue. Even now, Virgil sits upon the threshold of Limbo to take you back.”

And crawl up the chasm to the winking eye of God? To drown beneath its cerulean surface?

“No.” Dante clenched her fist to reveal the shaft of frozen lightning. Divine venom whirled at its tip. She spun it in her hands, and let it settle in both palms before proffering it to the Judge of Hell on bended knee. He took it between thumb and pointer, and betwixt his fingers it looked like a fragile blade of grass.

“There is no greater sorrow than to recall our times of joy in wretchedness.” Minos nodded. “Welcome Dante,” he said, his tail wrapping about her middle before he tossed her into his mouth, “to the Second Circle of Lust.”

Lust

Canto I

Welcome to my domain, sweet Seraphim...

As the furtive voice of the welcoming Hell Lord slipped into Dante's ear to coax her eyes open, the room wavered from oblivion. Her body rose and fell to the soft exhale from the cushioned surface that ballooned beneath her. It was warm and soft, like rose petals expunged from weight and gravity. Her eyes adjusted, and her body found the strength to move. Red translucent curtains hung like beams of scarlet from an overhanging canopy. They draped around the silky organ that inflated from the floor. Not a mattress or a paillasse, instead her bed was a human heart, embroidered in purple veins and embedded in the floor of the room's cavity. Its atrium chambers, which siphoned into the piping in the floor, were her pillow, and they undulated as though alive.

“Where am I?” she asked, sitting up to run long fingers back along her porcelain hair. The heady smell of coriander, sweat and semen was fragrant in the air. It commingled with the taste of honey that sat on the tip of her tongue. From beyond the lofting pillars of tulle—mirrors, like vacant eyes, stared in a mosaic around her.

You are in the realm of Lust, Dante. Can't you feel it? See it all around you?

The spider's silk of a gossamer gown was alive upon her skin. Beneath the snowy, transparent fabric, her nubile body was a silhouette of the first woman. A slim waist, rounding into large hips and a soft stomach, was a pedestal to her bosom and the plump arms that defied her mastery of the lance.

Dante slipped her bare legs along the pulsating tissue of the throbbing heart, shocked by the pleasing sensations this realm was already impressing upon her body. Pushing aside the red phantom tongues of the scarlet drapes, the mirrors across the room shifted, and distorted their reflections.

Oh, the possibilities... the voice mused with a chuckle.

Her cautious curiosity was trapped beneath vexing captivation as her likeness in the glass splayed their legs upon the bed. Dante watched as its gossamer gown was pulled along the woman's stomach and long, spindly limbs gathered about her. They crawled along its skin, fawning over every caress that drew out a sigh or a twitch of ardor. How it must have felt, how such pigmented joy could cast an arrow through one's heart and mind and reason, was baffling.

Dante shuddered, and fisted a hand at the heat that bloomed in the middle of her chest. No longer were the limbs the worm-gray ropes they had been in Limbo, but supple arms that wrapped about her likeness' middle, along its thighs and fingered at its mouth that parted to suck the delicate and loving tips.

"What is this?" Dante whispered. A passionate wave rushed to her core, and her loins tensed and her thighs quivered. She closed her eyes, certain that she could feel the touch of the hands upon her skin even though she was alone in the room.

You are feeling Lust for the first time, Seraphim. How does it taste? How does it feel?

It was fire to one who had only experienced frost. It was obsessive agony and maddest joy and chaos in a box.

She opened her mouth to respond, was taken aback when something lithe slipped along her tongue and pressed upon her teeth in a silent command. She moaned, revelling in the trespass and the foreign sensations that blossomed on her cheeks. Like a fish hooked, she could squirm, bite down and free herself, but the idea of being captured, of losing control and blame, was tempting and delicious.

"No!" Dante stepped back, alert and alarmed, even despite the warmth between her legs and the betrayal of her body.

"Lust is a sin!" She let the words echo like a hymn within her mind, hoping it would topple the grubby fingers of lust that were anchoring against her skin.

‘Tis. the voice replied, indifferent. But it is considered the least serious sin... in Hell and in life.

The mirrors quivered, and the ground began to vibrate until her knees shook.

Everyone experiences lust. Even God desired man. He created them in His image then left them to roam the earth and overpopulate our nine realms.

“You distort the truth, Asmodeus.”

“Do I?”

Her heart beat between her legs, but as the room stilled and the sounds grew quiet, Dante stared at her image in the mirrors and the man who appeared behind it. Crowning his head was four curved horns, tipped in quicksilver and glinting like starlight. Two hooked about his brow, like the low hanging brim of a hat, while the others reared proud and wicked above his head. Asmodeus, appearing in the glass, was fair and young but tall, with pointed ears and Hell in his grin.

Her eyes lingered upon his body, roamed the hardened trenches where muscles met and tensed beneath carnal-kissed skin. Her breath hitched at the perfection of his nudity, at its magnetism and the force it asserted. It was unlike anybody she’d seen before. It dripped in sin and brought her shame, and knowing it did so, Asmodeus laughed.

“Do I resemble someone you know?” he asked, long black hair falling across his chest as he cocked his head to one side. Dante said nothing, too abashed to respond. “With your wings gone and halo extinguished, you are free to experience the amenities of sin.”

His fingers brushed her back, and settled amidst the puckered grooves where her wings once were. She didn’t react, but straightened in his presence to show that she was unafraid of him. “*You* removed my wings. You and your...” she glanced sideways, but there were no signs of the limbs now, “abominations.”

“The virtuous in Limbo desired them, Dante. I answered their calls before you could be swarmed, before they

could submit to their lust and tear them from you yourselves. It is but a little death. You wouldn't have been able to enter Hell, to see the throne of Treachery with your wings intact."

She exhaled, watching in the mirror as her doppelganger moved of its own accord. No longer behind her, Asmodeus sat before her reflection as it stooped to its knees to lay supine on the floor. In the mirrors, the woman's face was flushed, and her legs were parted as wide as they'd go. The Hell Lord faced her sex, both large hands bracing her thighs to ensure they were splayed open before him.

Dante swallowed, watching her wicked mirror self paw at the crown of horns upon his head. It was begging for him to proceed, urging him closer in hopes that he would taste the nectar dripping from her pulsating womanhood. Dante's stomach tensed as her likeness sat forward to watch the first flick of his forked tongue straddle her clitoris. The woman groaned as he pleased her, and stared at him between the globes of her naked breasts with adoration.

"Asmodeus..." Dante didn't realize she had moaned his name until his fingers trailed along her spine. She whirled on her heel, away from the mirrors that had spawned lewdness in her mouth, but despite her resolve, he was no longer there.

"What are you doing to me?" she called, pivoting back in her search for him.

He was a voice in her ear once more. *I've done nothing, sweet Dante, but show you the possibilities. As I've said, you are experiencing Lust. Welcome. Enjoy.*

She stepped back, her eyes avoiding the mirrors' alternate reality as she glanced at the heart thrumming in the center of the bedchamber. Folding her arms inward below her chest, Dante's thumb brushed her nipple through the thin fabric of her nightgown. Fire ignited from the touch, and she sucked in air from the reaction of her heart and the sweat that percolated on her brow and from between her legs. She had never known these feelings before. They were awkward, but addictive.

You are lucky, Dante, that you should know me first. You will understand the other circles more for it. You will enjoy them more because of it.

“Show yourself.” Her resolve shook as the voice faded.

I shall. In due time. A door, as large as the bed and in the shape of a disk, appeared against the far wall. The mirrors its presence devoured became stony knots in its wooden facade.

Explore my house of Lust, first. Phantom fingers brushed her jaw, drawing out an exhale that parted her mouth. A wash of heat splashed through her, down her body and between her legs. *I am certain you will enjoy it.*

Canto II

Asmodeus withdrew like a lover gone to disrobe. At his departure, Dante closed her eyes, attempting to soothe the foreign sensations that invaded her body and lit her mind afire. Though her flesh was new—a vessel to her once pure spirit—without the lofty grace of her wings and celestial light, it came alive within the Lust King’s room of exotic desires. She was stimulated, excited, daring to the point of damnation. Afraid at the reality those feelings foreshadowed.

She kept her eyes shut, and moved towards the door with her hands outstretched, pulled to her destination by a current of heat and moisture. Though its surface was plain acacia wood, a pattern emerged in the textured grain, kindled from her fingertips like a long burning wick.

Dante opened her eyes. A feminine effigy, superimposed in two separate positions with arms and legs apart, was inscribed within a square in the annular door. Nude, with her breasts and sex exposed, the figure was etched within an inverted pentagram and the size of a full grown woman. Its eyes gazed straight ahead, but a strange connection reached between the empty space to pull the seraph closer.

She wanted to touch it, to rub her fingers in the grooves of the wood and feel the lines that made up the depiction. Upon the door there was no handle, no other mechanism to allow it to open. Dante stared transfixed at the feminine idol, she let her subconscious guide her hands until they pressed upon its points of pleasure.

Electric shock roped through her. Spawned from her curious tour of the Vitruvian woman, Dante gasped as a phantom caress pawed between her legs. She stared ahead, wanton darkness crowding her periphery as onanistic curiosity caused her to press her fingers to the valley of the idol’s vagina. The sensations in her loins escalated with the touches she made on the door, and wandered about her skin when Dante dared to move her fingers elsewhere. How she was connected with it, she wasn’t sure, but the sensations reigned

in her thoughts, and Dante allowed her mouth to part. She watched with obsessive interest as her fingers splayed upon the sweet breast of the Vitruvian woman, and her own body reacted in kind.

She moaned, then peppered the surface of the idol's stomach with an inquisitive touch, her fingernails leaving behind nothing of their trespass but the gooseflesh that prickled beneath her gossamer gown. Over her shoulders, along the column of her neck, and around the slope of each generous breast did Dante tour, wondering if the act was wicked by virtue of the surrogate.

“This is you...” She turned her head to look, and saw that she was alone. Asmodeus' name appeared in her mind, and bidden he came with wicked mirth.

Can I help you, Dante?

“Y-you're doing this.” She closed her eyes, shivering, knowing as she spoke that her fingers were tracing downward of their own accord, along the engraving's womanhood.

You're smarter than that. Why don't you accept how good lust feels? No one else will know.

“God sees all.” Rivers of rich, splendid pain spilled along her thighs. Her doubts, her need, her shame and passion... delivered from out the tips of each disquisitive stroke she made upon the inanimate gateway.

Then He already knows, Sweet. I do, He does... the only one in doubt is you.

Her finger slipped inside a hidden chink in the wood, and as it expanded to accomadate her probe, her sex inhaled the unfamiliar kiss brought on by her knowing exam. Her brain ignited as the doorway split—the width of a reed—down the middle, but her body's needs outweighed her doubts and she found herself exploring the depths of her entrance through the yawning exit.

It was like nothing she ever experienced before. It was shameful but shameless. She wanted to part her thighs wider,

open herself to be filled entirely to bursting, and yet it wasn't enough.

The-e-e-re you go... Asmodeus purred. How can you find or know anything, when you don't even know yourself?

"I-I know who I am," Dante hissed, grasping her breast and closing her eyes. It was like a hand was upon the back of her head, pushing her towards the mouth of the image. Unable to ignore the call of the graven woman, Dante leaned forward, pressing her tongue to its unmoving lips.

Tell me your name then, Seraphim.

"Dante," she breathed.

Asmodeus laughed, and the bedroom shuddered. Dante stirred, snapping out of her passionate trance to stand back. Disengaged from the lure of the door, the effigy shook and divided in twain as the heated seraph looked on shamefaced in the wake of the glass-eyed audience.

The door stood ajar, and from beyond the room of mirrors and the pulsating bed, the moans of men and women in coitus. She stood on the threshold, holding herself about the middle, aware of her body on display beneath the sheerness of her gown. She had never known herself to be nude or aroused before, had never known the shame from being seen. Had the light of Heaven cloaked her ignominy?

Shame is good, Seraphim. It spawns our desires and makes them all the more tantalizing.

Dante was quiet, but stepped through the door.

A corridor stretched beyond, bordered by quarreled windows on each side. Long crawling pipes hissed from above and hot steam jettisoned from loose segments where the plumbing sat uneven against its rusted washers. Even the floor, which was warm and slick from the heat, was framed in long copper cylinders that ran along the tiles.

The rage of the winds from outside was fierce, even despite the lamenting fizzle of escaping vapour. Though the plains beyond the windows were blackened and stony like a

charred tongue, windmills churned in the unending gales that swept along the plains of the second circle.

Even the squalls are imprisoned here, Asmodeus whispered inside her mind. Funneled through the mills, they power Hell, reaching down to the eighth circle and the emerald realm of Fraud.

“There are souls outside these windows.” Dante watched a phantom spirit, transparent like her gown, catch between the windmill’s sawblades and torn asunder.

They are the souls of the damned, my sweet. Subjects of the throne of Treachery. That is why you’ve come, correct?

Dante moved away from the window and nodded, regarding another door at the end of the hall. She had lost sight of her goal, and was muddled from the riddles of sin. She marvelled at the strength of one’s passion. How had humans endured?

Careful of the condensation collecting along the floor, Dante ignored the windows of tortured souls, clenching her fist and missing her lance. She ducked beneath the whistling pipes as the demon chuckled in her ear.

He knows you’re here, Dante. He could come to you, you know, but wants you to find us first.

“Who?”

Who do you think, Darling?

“Lucifer...”

The demon laughed and her mouth ran dry. Did he sense her worry?

“I *shall* find him!”

Easier said than done, he said, his throaty voice dripping with threats.

“So far, Asmodeus, you have done *nothing*.”

She stood at the summit of her dissent, issuing a challenge to a hellbent voice despite the loss of her wings, halo and lance. But Dante lurched as gravity pulled her

downward. The hallway vanished, and the floor fell away into darkness, hauling her into the belly of an unnerving void. The hiss and windy tumult of the corridor disappeared, and the wounds on her back reopened as the torn muscles spasmed instinctively in a vain effort to keep her afloat. Warm rivers of blood ran along her spine, but as her fall decelerated, something pressed against her back, and cradled her beneath her chest.

“I didn’t realize you were so eager,” Asmodeus purred in her ear as the gentle gust of his wings lowered them both to a cold, cobbled floor. His erection pressed hard between her thighs, and the warmth of his body stunned her, sending shivers down her spine. The panels of his black wings wrapped about them and the tips of his flight feathers touched her legs and whispered like secrets along her bare arms. Dante breathed a breathy sigh and closed her eyes.

“I’m not eager,” she said, her voice giving her away. He pressed his lips along her back, her wounds sealing at his touch. His wet tongue trailed her neck, but as he lowered his head to lap at the golden blood dribbling along her flanks and spine, his talons ran along the front of her gown, pulling it apart like it were cobwebs.

“Stop,” she whispered. For the second time in her existence she *knew* she was nude. Dante wrapped her arms about her midsection as Asmodeus pulled back, inviting the cold to fill his place.

“Do you mean that, Dante?” He chuckled, and leant forward to regard her from over her shoulder.

She wasn’t sure. Her body, bold from her arousal, was in conflict with her mind, but even then, her thoughts were quarreling with the concept of lust she’d been privy to.

Dante opened her eyes and stared. A mirror stood in front of her, rimmed in quicksilver. Her reflection stared back at her, standing against a pane of black and nothingness. Asmodeus was a man. Naked, with long jutting horns crowning his face as the hardened lines of his body exemplified taut muscles that twitched beneath flawless skin.

Behind him, hovering at the fringe, the long ropey limbs writhed in the darkness he emitted. They fingered at his face, at the hollows of his collarbone, and at the slight grooves above his hips.

She wished to touch him like they did, to explore the dunes of his body and slake her thirst in the valleys of clay that had hardened to make him perfect.

“I know what you want, Seraphim.” Asmodeus growled as his fingers pressed trenches into her jaw. He forced her eyes to meet his, and Dante fell thrall by the rubies that ignited within his irises. “We may stop if you wish,” he said with the scent of fire on his breath, “but as you are now, filled with lust, what a waste it would be to torture you so.”

Dante shuddered, and as she swallowed, her tongue slid along the inside of her mouth and over her lip, drawing it inwards. She nodded, unable to resist any longer. Asmodeus turned her back towards the mirror.

“A virgin seraphim... look how she waters!”

The limbs moved, and with a start, Dante was lifted and perched upon a vine-like throne that emerged from the abyss beneath her. The limbs cupped at her buttocks and separated her thighs as her knees bent and the heels of her feet were cushioned in the palms of the lust limbs. Gasping at the sudden chill that blew across her center, Dante’s face burned as Asmodeus moaned from the sight of her. He rested his hands upon her shoulders.

“What are you doing?” She shivered as his palms ran along her biceps and fingered at her wrists to pull them away from her body.

“Showing you,” he said, his touch like a breeze. With her sex exposed in the mirror, Dante licked her bottom lip, transfixed at the swollen petals that pulsed like a heartbeat between her legs. Her inner thighs were wet and pearlescent and dripped upon the fingers of the lust limbs that hovered at its periphery.

Heat beaded on her brow, but as his hands puppeteered hers, her heart pounded against her ribcage.

“We’ve only just begun, Dante,” Asmodeus teased as he guided her fingers between the folds of her core. She was already gasping, her womanhood dripping with a needful ache that wound around her thighs. Her legs shook in the fleshy stirrups that contained them, but as his hands explored the dewy insides of her entrance, the limbs tickled at her backside, and wrapped about her throat.

“What are they doing?” she managed between a groan, tipping her head back to admire the severe slope of the Hell Lord’s jaw.

“My limbs of lust follow your desires, Seraphim. Shall they stop?” His face nuzzled hers, and again she smelled the scent of fire on his breath. “Shall I leave you to your own ministrations?”

Her chest jerked and her fingers slipped between her legs to cup and fondle her labia. “No,” she breathed, her hair curtaining her face as she watched her reflection and the pert buds atop each breast redden like the hue about her cheeks.

“Shall *I* stop, Dante?”

She closed her eyes, and marvelled at the warmth of his palm as he cupped her chest and squeezed at the tip of her nipple. Nothing in Heaven compared to the touch of the Lust King. She was caged within the bounds of desire and foreign temptation, made vulnerable to the physical influence he exerted.

“No.” She breathed. His lips against her ear perforated her thoughts, and as her legs spread wider to accommodate each long, drawn out stroke, something else prodded at her bottom and coaxed its puckered opening.

“Mmm.” Asmodeus growled in her ear, his bottom lip suckling at her earlobe. “My realm fills you already, Dante.” The tip of his finger pushed inside her as she stroked her swollen clit. He leaned into her touch and dipped his tongue into her ear. Dante’s eyes drifted closed.

“No, no, no,” he said, pinching at her breast until she peered back into the glass. “You must watch, dearest Dante. Your fall from grace must be witnessed.”

“But I—” He was gone when she looked back, her legs still splayed wide by the limbs of lust. Dante stared as he appeared in the space between her thighs, his eyes ablaze.

“How does the fall of an angel taste?” Asmodeus mused as his long forked tongue darted out to lap at her fingers. The sensation made her shudder anew, even as her flesh moaned for more. He suckled upon her fingertips, savoring her taste as the heat of her loins cooled from his absence. But as the Hell Lord withdrew them from between his lips, he smiled, and said, “Savor it,” before his mouth pressed hard upon her mound.

Dante inhaled like a drowning man breaching the surface of the sea. Looking to where the deep blue sky should have been, she froze from the stunning stimulations of his tongue. It was like a serpent, and it split the confines of her virgin body in twain. Never before had she loved like this, and Dante knew it was love, to humans at least. The sensations enlivened her, even as they blackened her heart and told her she’d do anything to feel them.

“Oh God,” she moaned, unsure of how better to vocalize the excitement Asmodeus was eliciting from her rupturing maidenhead. His lips formed a seal around her opening, and Dante pulled her head back from lightheaded glee. He suckled at the bud between her legs and moaned inside her center until the vibrations caused her muscles to twitch.

“W-wait,” she began, a plume of fear burrowing in her chest as the long sinuous hands of Hell again prodded at her backside. Her body tightened from the wanton invasion, and her mind raced to rationalize the debauchery. But as the limbs of the second circle—of her desire—held her down, they entered her while the Hell Lord’s fingers pumped inside her sex, until she was a monument to the general that paid worship to her.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, lips glossy and pearlescent. The chair of vines in which she sat had reclined, and tied upon it, it now resembled a lounge. Her legs were opened as wide as they could go. Her knuckles grazed the floor. Though the ropey tendrils about her neck were taut enough to depress the skin, Dante panted, eyes wide and submissive.

“I wish I knew your beauty, Dante,” Asmodeus said, standing as he brushed his hand along her flawless skin. “I wish I knew what it was to feel lust for the first time.”

“Please...”

Asmodeus chuckled. “Are you begging me to take you? To fill you with the seed of my sin?”

Dante’s eyes closed. The Hell General’s fingers crept along the curve of her breast, but for all the sensation it garnered, he could have been flaying her alive.

“Why do you want to see the throne?”

She was quiet and unanswering. The Lust King grinned, and the limbs entered deeper from behind until she gasped. “I knew him once,” she breathed, feeling the subtle pump of the limbs as they moved inside and out of her.

“You no longer know him.”

The hiss of steam funnelling through the perspiring pipes was a phantom in the distance. Asmodeus climbed on top of her, his weight comforting, if only because it promised to satiate her body.

“I’ll know him through you,” she said, angelic features framed in desire. It gave him pause, and for that she was glad, because she knew she was falling without purchase to climb again. For Lucifer...

The Lord of Lust bent to breathe in the scent of her breath and the sweat on her brow. The tip of his cock lined up with her wet and welcoming center, and pushed through her folds until his erection was deep inside of her. Dante shuddered at the pressure of his girth filling and stretching her to make way for every inch of him, and revelled in the pain that drove into her hips.

“Yes... through me and the others, you will know him.”

Her vision blackened, and as her lips parted in sudden exclaim, he thrust his tongue inside her mouth and his hips pulled back, leaving her empty. Before she could protest, Asmodeus lurched forward to slam inside her again, his thighs slapping against hers in fervent melody. It was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Different from the warmth of her celestial light. Demanding! The Hell Lord pierced her up the middle, and Dante's abdomen squeezed him in return as she looked between their inundating bodies to see where the length of him skewered her.

“Oh God...” she moaned as his teeth found her jaw and his cock slid deeper.

“My little angel, filled with sin. Pray to me,” he growled. His hand knotted in her hair, and wrenched her head back as far as it would go. Kissing her throat, her collarbones, his face drew up to claim her mouth and her body spasmed.

“Say it! Beg me...”

“I can't... Asmodeus, I can't!”

“Say it!”

She opened her eyes, startled at the transformation of his face. His horns blackened, and twisted out from either side of his head like a coronet. Black hair, tipped with alabaster, framed his wicked grin with sharpened canines. Four ebony wings unfurled behind him, quills quivering as he continued to lunge inside her.

“Tell me to fill you, Mikha'el.”

She couldn't say no. His beauty was smothering, and the harder he took her the more her frenzy intensified. “Fill me...” she said as his face drew close to hers. She could do nothing else but look into his eyes and see her own damnation. “Please... Lord Asmodeus, please, fill me with lust! Please...”

Her legs, suddenly free from the limbs, wrapped around his hips, gripping him and pulling him closer. The muscles in her abdomen tensed, and Dante lurched upwards to

grind herself against his pelvis. His forked tongue lapped at hers, but as the intensity of his thrusting grew, something inside her transformed.

“Harder! Yes!” she begged, her mind a slave to her body’s desires.

Born from the insanity of overpowering lust, Dante screamed as he filled her to climax. Throwing her head back, and feeling her breath catch as he clapped his mouth over hers, her body spasmed as his seed shot out from the tip of his cock and coated her sex. Her eyes dilated as she gazed into the abyss, but as Asmodeus came, body slick with sweat, Dante had changed, her seraphim features forever transformed from the onslaught of the second circle...

Canto III

Though the Hell Lord had since withdrawn from her, Dante wasn't cold. The limbs had gone and the throne of vines had succumbed back into the stony grave from whence it came. She lay with legs askew, and examined her womanhood as it beat in tandem to her heartbeat.

You still feel it, don't you? The voice of the Lust King whispered. The wind of his breath was a ghost in her ear. Dante shivered. She could still feel him inside her.

"I feel different," she admitted, lips parted as she fingered her inner thigh and watched as the dewy lips of her sex gasped from its penetration.

It's only the beginning. Your treachery has begun but the path has many crossroads yet.

What trials would they bring? Would she lie like this with Lucifer, and enjoy him physically in ways she'd never fathomed before? "Is this what mortals feel when they love?"

There was a pause, and as she looked up into the sky of Hell, sickened with darkness and shadows, Dante could sense him considering.

It's what they feel when they lust. All the circles are tainted by my realm. Anger, greed, gluttony, wrath... Whereas they don't hold sway over me. Love and lust can dance as well as violence and lust, dear Dante. That is why I sit below Limbo, the second closest circle out of Hell.

"To entice mortals from below?" she mused.

The room was warping, and as she stood, the darkness yawned until once again she was within the hall with quarrelled windows that looked out towards the gusting plains.

Mortals contain it all. Asmodeus whispered, his voice carried by the shushing steam that hissed from out the copper pipes. Dante stared at the new gateway at the far end of the corridor. Shaped like a woman's center, a large pearl bead sat at the top of its frame. *Women, men... they are that which binds all*

things together. They are chaos, forged by God with all the ingredients of Heaven and Hell.

“Yet told only to abide by Heaven’s rules. To be good.”

Asmodeus scoffed. *What is good? Lust feels good.* A body pressed against her from behind and invisible hands gripped her hips. “You felt good when I fucked you, didn’t you, Seraphim?”

Her breath hitched. His fingers weaved in her hair, and ran down her neck and caused her loins to quake. “Yes,” she said, his hands brushing her belly and dipping below her pelvis. She couldn’t deny it did feel good, and if she had tried to, the words would be fables. “It was more than good.”

“My gift to you, then.”

She leaned back into his shoulder, and shuddered under his hand as it clasped the long column of her throat. Standing in the wake of his body, Dante didn’t wish to move. She wanted to be claimed by him again, feel his lust and limbs entwine about her. Though she had known love in Heaven, or thought she had, it hadn’t been like this, and the seraphim whined in her throat at the thought of knowing Asmodeus once more.

“My realm and I will never leave you,” he said, reading her thoughts. “You, sweet Dante, once white as snow, will forever be tainted by my gift of lust.” He grasped her nipple and she moaned as he twisted it to reveal the sweetest pain. He kissed her jaw, long clawed fingers digging ditches in her skin. “You will need to remember such gifts once you reach the fourth and fifth circles.”

Her brow furrowed. What awaited her there? She looked at her feet as if the floor were glass and could catch a glimpse of what was to come. “Why?”

“Because,” he crooned, “it will make it easier to endure and enjoy.”

She was still as he laughed, transfixed and lost in the fire of his eyes. All these Lords served under Lucifer, and yet, who were they? What terrors did their realms detain?

“Asmodeus. What brought you here to Hell? What doomed you to sit on the throne of Lust, and never see the skies again?”

The Hell Lord smiled, his iniquitous joy sobered by the care within her question. He stooped to kiss her neck and pet her ivory locks. He inhaled her scent, grasping her body to press into his own, like a lover who was set to leave forever—or was cast into the earth to bide.

“Doomed at birth, my sweet. The root of lust is, and always will be, emptiness.”

He pushed her away. Dante stumbled against the floor still slick with steam and condensation. The hot haze of desire parted from her features as she fell to the ground before the feminine gate, and looking back at him with anger, she was surprised to see another reflection.

It was her own. But unlike before when she had watched herself in lascivious acts of debauchery, her reflection lay prone on the warm floor, naked, with long ivory hair trailing down her back. The glass echoed her appearance for what it was, but for one small detail that caused the pit of her stomach to twist. No longer were her eyes the pigment of spirit and virtue. The cosmic constellations had turned black, and fumed in a sooty vapour that haloed her face.

The windows to the soul, now shuttered.

You thought Hell wouldn't change you?

She fell to her knees, and struggled to keep her hands from clawing lines upon her face. In the aftermath of loving Asmodeus, she balked at her transformation, and panicked at the inevitable advent of the seven other layers of Hell. Would she be completely transformed when she looked upon Hell's heart? Would she still be Dante Mikha'el? Would she remember Heaven and God, and why she had come to the abyss beneath the Earth in the first place? It was too early to question herself, and yet on the roof of Gehenna she sat and disputed the very task she had deliberated since Lucifer's fall.

The hiss of pipes and the tumult of the wind pummelling the window panes, were hushed in the wake of her burdens. From the warm, wet floor on the pads of her feet, Dante rose. Was the reflection real?

You know it is, Dante.

She did. And yet, crippled beneath another wave of desire that lapped between her legs, Dante walked to the end of the hall, through the apparition as Asmodeus watched from the opposite end—his erection a pillar between them. “Be well, Seraphim,” he said as he pleased himself. “Beware the Hound of Hell and Beelzebub. Beware the Glutton.”

Dante walked across the threshold of the gate, her lips pressed so thin they resembled a scar upon her face. Asmodeus laughed...

And far below the eighth circle, amidst the river Cocytus, and the walls of eternal hoarfrost, the souls of the treacherous screamed, and averted their eyes from the devil.

Gluttony

Canto I

Lust did not end at the gate. It prickled her skin and fingered her insides with perverted life. Beyond the corridor of serpent steam was an enormous pit, bordered in a ledge of gold. Glyphs of Hell laid emboldened along the floor, obscured by the bodies that twisted and writhed upon its gleaming surface. Dante watched as they tangled about each other, absorbed in profane acts, some at risk of plummeting into the yawning chasm at the heart of the room.

Gluttony beckoned from the borehole. Dante couldn't help but stare. She walked upon the balls of her feet, scared to tread on those licking and sucking and fucking. They were neither men nor women, but creatures of lust. Their moans filled the room even though their mouths were occupied. On the far wall, opposite the door, a likeness of Asmodeus was set in stone betwixt phallic pillars. He sat upon a throne, legs splayed and back straight and menacing. A woman was tied around his neck, hoisted by her arms bound in chains. Her legs folded behind him. Her breasts poised outwards towards the room as her head lazed back against his chest. Emblazoned in gold like a medallion, she sat upon his erection like an ornament—a cherished prize haloed in divinity.

Dante recognized herself in the auric model that glinted atop him, and was nonplussed at the gall of the Lust King. As the lips of Gluttony tasted her presence at its pit, she was sure she saw the statue smile.

“I can taste you...” A voice from below muttered with mirth.

It drew her from the idol of sex. Dante stooped. She gazed into the hole, and swore she stared into an open mouth—velvet darkness wavering in hunger.

“Do you seek to swallow me?” she asked, squinting her eyes at the abyss. Her palm itched for her lance. She was on her own. From deep within her, her belly growled, twisting in knots, anxious to what awaited her inside the mouth of darkness.

“Maybe...” another voice whispered beyond the first. It faded into the background, and tittering laughter rose unfettered from the throat of the third circle.

“Let’s have you for dinner first!”

Its maw glistened with slaver as a great beast breached the rim of the circle’s pit. Black gums and rows of yellowed canines snapped at her midsection, pulling her inside as two other grinning mouths glinted wickedly with ragged teeth. Its large paws, perched on the lip of the pit, were tipped with obsidian claws that anchored its weight as Dante was thrown into the hole’s black oesophagus. The fear in her chest was smothering, and though she scrambled for purchase amidst the tangle of gnarled roots that poked out along the pit’s insides, her efforts were useless.

Dante succumbed to the darkness of the third circle and it gobbled her whole.

Canto II

Can angels die in Hell? Dante's head pounded from the fall. She lay upon a crag, a fetid smell rising from the valley below. She propped herself upon her elbows and allowed her vision to clear. Dante looked upon a winding river that twisted around the jagged and thorny crags that crowned the landscape of Gluttony. Frozen hail littered the ground around her like diamonds, while the sky twisted into a rounded snarl. The once blue iris she recalled from Limbo, was now worm-gray, bruised and swollen.

"The farther I go, the worse it becomes. And yet..." standing on naked feet, she stood on the precipice and sighed. "What will Treachery bring?"

She didn't have long to think. The ground rumbled to life beneath her. Dante stepped back from the ledge, splaying her legs to keep her balance even. She cursed those above who'd taken her wings. If she could only fly, embrace the sooty dome of Hell, she wouldn't have to traverse the trials of the damned. No wonder mortals fell so easily. Their feet were doomed to cling to loam, and the sky pushed around their shoulders.

Dante turned as stones toppled over and down into the valley at her feet. Cerberus, with its massive heads and three rows of teeth foaming with hunger and glut, pawed downwards from the cliffs above. It was silhouetted by the steely, gray sky behind it, and as Dante's skin prickled with fear, her empty hand—barren of resolve, and anything with which to defend herself—prompted her descent down the slopes.

Stones and shale cut into her feet as her hair whipped like mad ropes from the nape of her neck. The heady stench of the river was vivid in her nostrils, but despite the odour of the third circle, the pain of her thudding heart drove her forward. She somersaulted over a deep recess, almost toppled within a chasm, but the monster behind her followed like a secret, snapping at her heels beyond its grasp.

She rounded a bend, slate grey pillars of stone hedging her into a path with only one way to run. In her ear she was certain

a voice called, but as her heartbeat thundered against her chest, it was hard to hear anything but the words of escape.

A fork... take the left fork...

Was it a demon? Some hellish imp whispering doom in her ear? Dante neared a divide in the road and the dread in her heart intensified. The left path was but a fissure downward where the roots of the mountain parted and slumped in defiance of another. The other road was cobbled bone.

Trust me. The left path.

“Who are you?” she cried, glancing back and seeing Cerberus still at her heels.

A friend, Dante. Take the left path!

The wingless seraphim was full of woe. What friends had she in Hell? Even the virtuous had stolen her wings, her light! But even so, as the path diverged Dante ran. Her feet, cut and bloody, left its own path along the left fork, and stirred up the dust of centuries. Bones of men littered the wall, crunching underfoot as the bluffs narrowed to either side and left her shoulder to shoulder with the mountain split asunder.

Again she looked back. Cerebus, with its three heads, thrashed against the walls as they narrowed against its broad, black haunches. The beast howled, and its blood-curdling screams urged her forward, around a sharp turn and down steps smoothed by the passage of endless gluttons.

Dante ran for hours, stopping only when the cliffs were steep enough that she feared falling into the abyss or the stinking river that continued to pervade the air around her. Bloody and nude from falling stones, and sharp, serrated rocks that stuck like thorns from out the tapered walls of the mountain, Dante ran until she collapsed. Even the gray sky above was shrouded by the cliffs of Gluttony, but as she fell and succumbed to exhaustion, the blackness behind her eyes was a welcome color in comparison to the deep abyss of Hell.

You've bathed too long in the light of the Heavens. Here in the dark, the light is fearsome, because in Hell, the fires rage forever.

She had yet to see the flames, but as Dante opened her eyes, she was certain she could feel them. Somewhere below they scorched and raged, like wells within the earth that warmed the stone and caused her skin to perspire.

Dante's limbs ached as she stood, but she was glad to see that Cerberus had been unable to follow within the trench. In the cleft in the mountain, all she could see were the shadows that dwelt within the hoary rock, but as her feet crept along the path, a light glow began to add color to the gloom and obscurities. A fire licked at the walls of the narrow trench, set within a glade of glowing crystal. A chair of wood sat welcoming before the fire. Laid across the seat was a robe woven with red-stained wool.

"Hello?" Dante called, eyes sharp as they scanned the makeshift campsite.

I told you to go the left path.

The voice in her head echoed in tandem to the spoken words of a man before the fire, though Dante was certain a moment before no man or beast had been present.

"Virgil..." she whispered, as though uttering his name may cause the specter to vanish. The old man raised his head, and the staff in his left hand braced his aged body as he took to his feet and looked at her with a flicker of sadness in his eyes.

"The circles have already transformed you, Seraphim. I am sorry for that."

Dante stepped forward, her trepidation weighing down her steps until her heels drug upon the ground.

"Dress yourself. The body should be clothed."

He gestured to the robe, and Dante watched as Virgil looked away. Was it lust that burned like an emerald spark beneath his eyes?

"Angels have no shame." And yet, even as she said those words she recalled her shame in the presence of Asmodeus.

Virgil turned to regard the flame. "I fear you are no longer an angel, Dante. And this mortal flesh of the damned is host to a virtuous soul who shan't kneel to vice but sees it all the same."

His shadow splayed upon the wall. It was speckled with translucent motes of light, and though he appeared before her now, it was apparent that he was not wholly there.

"How is it that you arrived here, Virgil?" she asked, donning the red robe and finding it cool and heavy as it draped upon her shoulders. It fit snug against her body, but flared below the waist to hide her legs and allow her limbs to move to her advantage.

"I have come at the behest of him, the one who reigns on the icy throne of treachery."

Dante stilled. "You've come at the behest of Lucifer?" she asked, feeling the robe caress her skin. Lucifer, the first fallen seraphim. He had sent this poet to find her? To guide her?

"Why does he not come to me himself?" she spat. "Surely the Lord of Hell and night can find me without the help of a poet?"

Virgil's gaze did not meet hers, but his sable eyes reflected the fire as he watched it dance in its stony hearth. "I did not ask." The man admitted. "I only obeyed, and hoped to see you again."

"Is that lust I smell?"

A voice pierced the campsite. Dante turned, and her eyes widened at the sight of three young women emerging from the cloven trench. Dressed in blackened cloaks that revealed their bruise-pink skin, all three were nude but for midnight hair that curved around segmented horns and around full breasts that heaved at their march.

They were uniform, and walked in tandem with each other. Full lips, winking with sin and saliva, were decorated with sharpened canines. All three wore a collar, and stared at the fallen seraphim with glowing, violet eyes.

"Who are you?" Dante fumed, stepping back to grab Virgil's staff and sweep it in an arc before them. The three demons

chuckled, and moved about the stony glade with purpose.

“I *do* smell lust...” one woman said to the other. “Its fragrance is stifling. How good it must taste.”

“Asmodeus has filled her,” another laughed, appearing behind the aged Virgil and wrapping long arms about his neck. “And sisters! Look who has appeared in our realm.”

“Who?” the others called, curling smoke filling their place as they disappeared and returned again to either side of the old man. Dante spun, incredulous to their machinations as the three demons pawed at Virgil’s clothes and pressed themselves against him. One, so arduous, stuck out her tongue, and lapped at his cheek as the poet stood.

“Mmm,” they all moaned at once. “You must come with *us*, Virgil,” they giggled, “when our master enjoys his guest.”

Dante swatted with the staff, and the three shirked backward, grabbing the poet about his shoulders until he looked like he may fall. “Get away from him!” she yelled, but despite the outburst the demons grinned, and together stepped around to approach her.

“You shouldn’t have run from us, Dante.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

“It’s not like you can, anyway.”

“What do you want?” The three women pressed together, and as their hips met, their arms reached out to caress and hold themselves close. It was strange, their movements. They swayed as though they were but one entity, yet when they spoke, three distinct voices echoed one another.

“Beelzebub wishes to make your acquaintance.”

“He has asked you for dinner.”

“We are to take you to him.”

Dante straightened. It was Cerberus. “The Glut Lord Beelzebub sent Cerberus herself to guide me to his dining table? Why?”

The three laughed, as though pleased to be discovered. They fingered the collars at their necks, and stirred from foot to foot as though the ground were hot like coals.

“He’s a *glutton* for punishment.” They all said at once, turning towards Virgil to drape themselves upon him. “Lord Beelzebub has never had a seraphim for dinner.”

“Especially one stuffed with lust!”

“He wishes to taste you and the glaze of Hell that has already devoured your halo.”

Virgil was still under their scrutiny. They fawned over him, nuzzled at his neck and pawed at his chest.

Dante’s sympathy for the poet grew.

“Enough,” she said. “Take me to him.”

The demons chittered, and lapped at Virgil’s cheek with their long tongues. The three of them transformed. Legs and arms were swallowed by the thick torso of the dog-beast. Arms engorged and blackened into muscled legs and haunches, and the wickedly smooth features of each woman’s face contorted into an angry snarl dripping with ichor and glinting clear slaver.

“Get on our back and we shall take you to the Hall of the Glutton.”

Dante glanced at Virgil, who looked less forlorn than she imagined after garnering the attention of Cerberus. “Will you come?” she asked, hoping he might. The great dog seemed to laugh, and the rumble from its chest sent the wood burning in the fire to topple and spark.

“I shall.” He nodded, stepping forward to take back his staff.

Guilt riddled her to ask such things of him, but she needed his support. She helped the poet sit and sat behind him, trying to squash the urge to tell Virgil she could do it on her own. What fate awaited the lonely soul of Limbo in the chasms of the nine circles? Would he be able to return to the summit of damnation, so close to Heaven and Earth that they

could see the blue sky? Or would Virgil become a prisoner, tainted by the landscape and its generals?

Beneath her, the muscles of the dog beast flexed as it climbed the trench into darkness. Rocks skidded underneath its massive paws as they travelled farther into the chasm, and alighted upon a ledge. Hailstones and diamonds fell from the sky, and the river—smelling of foul carnage—was close enough now to see those souls damned to the third circle wallowing within it.

“What *is* gluttony?” Dante asked as Cerberus leapt to the riverside. Flies buzzed in the air like sparks, while the perfume of the water’s slush coalesced inside her nostrils until she no longer could breathe but through her mouth.

Virgil did not look back towards her, though his voice was clear in her ear. “Gluttony is the endless need to be sated. It is all consuming. It does not discriminate. Though these souls wallow in the river of putrid mud and freezing cold, they still imbibe it and feel hungry for more.”

Dante watched those within the river consume the filth that drowned them. “I have never felt hunger...” she admitted.

“Humans must eat. If not, they will die.” Virgil looked out along the hail-filled ridge of Gluttony. “It is better for humans to starve and die than eat in excess and end up here. But Gluttony is not just eating, Seraphim.”

“I don’t understand.”

Virgil sighed. “I fear Lord Beelzebub will show you.”

To face Treachery, first you must be filled with the wisdom of the seven circles. Asmodeus’ voice occupied her mind, and even so, despite the realm and its terrors, Dante shivered as lust filled her loins and a hollow in her belly opened to consume her.

“Who is Beelzebub? A lord of Hell, but Asmodeus claimed he was damned at creation.”

Virgil replied, though the cadence of his words implied he was displeased by the interrogation. “Beezlebub was a man one time, who dined upon his sons. His pain equipped with loathing brought him here to oversee the foul-filled gutters of

the Inferno.” He paused. “His self serving whims, related to lust, shall never be sated.”

“I do not fear Lord Beelzebub,” Dante said, smoking eyes as dark as pitch.

“So you say, and I shall not dispute that claim, but know this, Dante... The hole is darkest at the bottom, and you have yet to fall halfway.”

Canto III

The hall was nothing but a long tunnel in the root of the mountain. Closed off at either end with a great round door, it was illuminated by torchlight that flickered from within the gaping mouths of inert, mounted heads. Staring into the middle of the long table that bisected the hall, the human lanterns looked on at the decadent feast steaming upon the laden tablecloth, while marbled gargoyles, veined in emerald, lofted from the rafters.

Both Dante and Virgil entered the hall in the wake of Cerberus' massive shadow. Though the foul scent of the river pervaded the third circle from outside the hall, once the door closed behind them, the smell of cooked meat, steaming apples, dumplings and baked pie was overwhelming.

"Master Beelzebub," Cerberus said, bowing its great head before the foot of the table. The guard dog transformed and its three heads split back upon the bodies of the demons. Dante leaned forward to peer to the end of the narrow table, but was unable to see who sat at its head.

"We've brought you Dante."

"Like you ordered."

"So you could taste her," the women said, their tails whipping from the base of their spines. The scrape of a chair was their reply, followed by a pause and the sputter of torchlight.

"Will you not have a seat at my table?" a voice beckoned from the end of the hall, the glee of its tone tangible in the dimly lit space.

Dante frowned, a contrast to the mirth in the Glut King's question. She opened her mouth when Cerberus interrupted.

"May we take the other one, Master?"

"He calls himself Virgil."

"It's not often we get to play with those from other circles..."

Dante turned and eyed the old man who had been staring down the length of the table with all the nonchalance of the dead. Taking notice of her glare, Virgil offered a smile that was interrupted as the three demons hauled on him from behind.

“I care not,” the Hell Lord replied. The women skittered, pulling and laughing before Dante moved to intervene. She was stopped by the poet’s hand on her arm.

“I will be fine, Seraphim.” His look was long and considering, but before the pause could fowl, Virgil went on. “You cannot sate the gluttonous,” he said, “but you may sate yourself and leave them prisoner to consumption.” Again Cerberus pulled at his robes, and as a triangle of skin on his left shoulder was exposed, Virgil left the chamber through another door, dragged away by the hungers of the hellhound.

“Mistress...” Beelzebub cooed, the sound of pouring wine pervading the unnatural silence of the room. “I hope we shall have a good night together.” He swallowed until the chalice was dry, then refilled it once more. “Won’t you sit with me? Please?”

It seemed odd that he should ask, but despite her trepidation for Virgil, Dante turned to face the darkness, and the banquet of food that stirred pains in her belly and caused her to hunger.

She sat in the chair, and the room was pulled taut by some hellish force. The table was no longer the lingering tongue of cuisine, but an intimate setting for two suspended over three feet of cobbled stone. Before her, no more ensconced by the depth of the hall, was Beelzebub. His boyish features, illuminated by the dusky glow of three mounted lanterns.

Dante gawked, blinking back her surprise as her eyes searched the calm, fair features of the young man before her.

“What is this?” she asked, looking at the bottle of wine and the plate of bread set out before her.

Beelzebub had the mien of a gravestone as he appraised her from beneath a crop of short, raven hair. Transparent wings with veins of jet fluttered at his back as he deliberated, and looked like that of a fly. Despite his slight build, he was

hunched as he reclined upon the palm of his hand. He was clothed in attire that resembled whirling shadows but for his head, which was bare.

“Is it not to your liking? I thought you may like to regard me as such. Many have distasteful thoughts of my appearance. Are you so displeased?”

“I care not for appearances, only for finding the throne of Treachery.” The wine was tempting. Saliva filled her mouth and the welcoming scent of the food entered her nose. Already a gnawing beast was clawing at the lining of her stomach, and hunger that she’d never experienced before, sent her mind reeling at the thought of bread and wine—the symbols of God’s own flesh and blood, and how they may taste if she’d the chance to devour them.

Beelzebub sighed. “You would care if you saw me. Easy for an angel, who’s only seen beauty and grace, to scoff at ugliness she’s not been privy to.” He reached out and grabbed a loaf of bread, peeling back the crust to reveal the cloudy middle.

Dante’s frown deepened. “Then show me.”

“Would it please you?”

“What?” Confused, Dante glanced around the chamber. She noticed a soft hum, and the darkness roiling from within the four corners.

Beelzebub paused. “Will you not eat?”

Dante picked up the bread: a dusty loaf with golden brown crust and white slashes that grazed its surface. It was warm, a globe with a hard shell that promised a steaming white center. It made her mouth water, and her teeth keen to pierce it. Biting down, it tasted like ash, with no texture or flavour, just smoke made whole.

Beelzebub sighed. “It *is* Hell, my Mistress. I’d say eat your fill, but we’d be here until the realm froze over.” He shivered. “If you’d like however, I’d allow you to dine upon me.”

The spoiled bread made her angry, or at least, it must have been the bread, because the ire that rose from her loins was

unprecedented. “What makes you think I’d like to do *anything* with you?” she asked.

Her anger seemed to please him. “I can tell you are hungry. Everyone is hungry here. The more we eat, the hungrier we get and yet the realm of Gluttony is filled with food!” He fell on his knees to the floor, gazing at her healthy skin as his tongue darted out to lap at her bare feet. Dante kicked, and leapt atop him like a lion as he fell, holding him by the throat as he wriggled beneath her. A smear of blood haloed his forehead, but as she crouched, Beelzebub’s arousal beneath her thrust like a spear between her heavy, red robe.

I can feel you calling me, Milady...

Abaddon? Wait your turn. Asmodeus’ voice whispered in reply from the second circle.

Why? The voice chuckled. *We are kin, her and I.*

“Tell me how to find the throne!” Dante screamed, the whirling voices inside her deafened by the violence stirring in her belly. The torchlight beamed from the eyes of the statues and focused on their king as he struggled to reply.

“But we haven’t finished dining yet, Mistress.”

Don’t worry, Milady. The Glutton revels in violence. Let me in!

You usurp Beezlebub’s realm, Abaddon. No wonder Violence is at war.

Violence lusts for war, Asmodeus, and the Glut King lusts for me.

Dante reached up, grabbing the glass of wine teetering on the tabletop. Watching as a thin vein of liquor poured upon the Hell Lord’s face, she frowned as he gasped, gargling as his wicked eyes shone.

“We’re done,” she said. Dante could feel the long arms of Lust squeeze her about the middle as the voice of Violence slipped his long tongue in the crevice of her ear.

The Glutton’s hands clasped her wrists like manacles, and coughing through the poured libations, Beelzebub leaned in,

his body quivering beneath her. “Sweet Mistress... I’m hungry. I know you are too.”

She was. Filled with lust, her stomach heaving to be filled, Dante stood, hauling him up until his feet grazed the stony floor. Through the darkened garments that clothed him, she could see his erection, and knew that lust possessed him as well. *A glutton for punishment?* she recalled, her behaviour taken by appetite and desire. She wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to hurt him. Not only because he begged so well, but because she knew he deserved it.

She tightened her grip upon his throat.

I will show him punishment! Her own voice roared, obscured by the sins of the circle. The Glut King dangled and his chest shuddered in his attempt to draw breath. Cutlery scattered from the table as he was slammed upon it, glass and silver scurrying upon the cobbled floor as the fallen seraphim climbed atop him. Her robe gathered at her thighs, and his wings pressed flat against the furniture as she straddled his hips, and pressed at his erection until he hissed in pain and flushed from arousal.

“You think you can sate me?” Dante teased in his ear, her hand like a vice at his collarbone. She clawed at her robe, pulling it over her breasts until it pooled about her waist. The heady scent of desire blossomed down her neck, and the drawn out, phantom limbs of Asmodeus ran trenches along her skin. She rocked against Beelzebub’s long erection as Violence chuckled in her ear.

He’s hungry, Milady. Make him suffer for it...

Abaddon, the vile violence king of the seventh circle, pressed his fingers into her throat and wrenched it back to whisper. Asmodeus fingered her thighs. Beneath her, Beelzebub whimpered, ready to obey.

“I’ll do what I can to sate you, Mistress.”

Dante bent and ran her tongue across his lips. She smiled at the gloss left behind, and spat at him as he turned his face in stunned silence.

“You’ll do what you can? You ugly worm. Do you think that’s enough?” She grabbed him by the neck and mimicked the vice Abaddon had constricting around her own throat. “You’re a disgusting pile of dung, Glut King. Tortured by hunger,” she mocked, watching as his tongue darted out to taste the spittle already running down his cheek.

“Should I feed you? Give you a taste of Heaven?”

Beezlebub’s eyes were anxious and eager. “Yes, Mistress!”

“Will you sate me as well?” Her grip tightened. The Hell Lord trembled, hips arching into her as he struggled to reply.

“I will, Mistress.”

Dante laughed, wiggling her hips against his and finding her mirth heightened at his discomfort. Leaning down to hold his arms to either side of the tabletop, her breasts brushed against his face as she unlaced the cord at her waist and moved to tie his hands together. More cutlery was sent to spin upon the floor as she slipped her robe open and onto the cobbles. Crawling overtop of him until she straddled his face, his eyes peered at her from between her legs.

Mmm. Asmodeus purred as he guided her hands to her breasts and Abaddon coaxed her mouth open in a victorious groan. Violence becomes you, sweet Seraphim.

Dante rocked her hips, feeling the Glut King’s hungry mouth devour and explore the folds of her core.

“Eat your fill, Worm,” she moaned, arching her back so that he was enveloped by her mound. The feeling was intoxicating, and the thrilling scent of her own desire caused her to settle in the haze of euphoria. Beelzebub speared her with his tongue, and the unseen Lord of Lust kissed along her skin and slipped his lust limbs along each breast and down her calves.

Dante bucked forward, mouth agape as an impulse prompted her fingers towards the small of her back. Slipping along the curve of her rear, as the Hell Lord sucked at her

swollen bud, Dante fingered the puckered opening of her backside, driving one heavenly digit deep inside herself as the ferocity of her lust caused her to quiver.

“Oh God,” she moaned, closing her eyes as she pressed upon his face in a desperate attempt to keep his tongue inside her. Beezlebub sputtered, gasping when she sat up to look at him between her thighs. His face was pearlescent, ruddy and wanting. “Did I say you could breathe?” she asked, tightening her knees to either side of his face as she covered him and sighed.

He whined, muscles tensing in the wake of the firelight. She howled his name, grinding her hips against his mouth, letting him breathe only when it pleased her to do so. As he gasped for air, she cursed him again, and fed the lord her loins that hungered for his agony and rapture.

When her well of lust began to brim, Dante leaned forward, both hands covering his wrists as something forced her mouth open.

Long canines, each tipped in a sharpened point, bisected her bottom lip as the first wave of pleasure pulsed from the swell of her hips. Hot breath muttered his name as the Glut King continued to lap at the sweetness between her thighs, but before she could finish, Dante released him, smiling at his attempt to lean towards her clit for another taste.

Her eyes were aflame in the shadows of Hell. They haloed about her temples and wafted from blackened pupils. The Cheshire grin that tugged at the corners of her mouth was framed in the long fangs of hunger.

Beezlebub mirrored her wicked expression with his own hilarity, arms still tied above his head.

“To look upon you, Mistress, is a pleasure in and of itself.” Dante was picking at the fabric of his clothes, and slipped her hand beneath his black trousers to grasp his cock.

“Are you still hungry?” she asked, fondling him as the other hand beckoned him up to face her.

Beezlebub obeyed and shivered as she wiped at the bead of precum that had already begun flowing from the tip of his shaft.

“Always hungry. Always wanting more, Mistress.”

She removed his shirt, pinched at his skin and the prickled buds of his nipples as she situated herself atop his prick and let him savor the sensation of her body as it devoured his.

“You don’t deserve me,” she spat, biting at his ear as his cock twitched inside of her.

“N-no I don’t, Mistress.”

“Say it.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

Small pinpricks of crimson ichor ran down his throat as she nipped at the flesh with glut-gifted teeth. She was aroused by his fear, his wanting. The hunger for him was maddening despite his engorged length impaling her up the middle. Dante gyrated against his cock, her nails ran down his back, between the large insect-like wings that fluttered from the sensation.

“Open your mouth.”

He did so, and seeing the long forked tongue within, Dante grinned, coaxing it out with her own until she was able to taste it.

“You make me hungry,” she said, sucking at the long appendage until threads of saliva poured down his chin.

“Do you accept me, Mistress?” he asked, voice shaky as the rhythmic pounding of her flesh against his shaft caused him to lose control.

So soon? Asmodeus purred in her mind.

So easily? Abaddon growled.

Dante frowned, the sins of Hell whirling in a tornado around her. Removing herself from the table, Beezlebub heaved in the wake of her absence, desperate eyes agape as his prick threatened to come and ooze unsated over the table.

Before he had a chance to adapt, the fallen seraphim seized him by neck again, and threw him to the floor to sprawl among the cutlery, food and unused dishware.

“Why would I accept *you*? All you do is take! Take, take, *take!*”

Beezlebub winced, wilting under her stare as she approached him, kicked at him and forced her foot on his engorged genitals.

“I’m sorry, Mis—!”

“Call in your three headed bitch.”

The Glut King was silent. Dante shifted her weight. Beezlebub shrieked out their name.

“Cerberus! Come!” The echo of his pained demand caused a cavernous rumble in the third circle. The roots that contained the hall constricted, sending stone to feed the putrid river and its hapless denizens. From the worming cavities that burrowed deep into the mountain, Cerberus stood alert, and the three women sighed in the wake of the interruption.

“Must we leave?”

“We are having so much fun!”

“So seldom do we get a treat from Master.”

Virgil, in his quaint robes thrown open, sighed. “Obey the Glut King.”

The women whined, but turned and transformed, galloping down the darkened halls and yawning caverns of Gluttony. Virgil was quiet, and in the darkness he adjusted his clothes and redonned them, thinking of the seraphim and how she was already awash in sin.

“Be careful, Dante. If you cannot rule the circles they shall consume you.”

In the distance Beelzebub howled.

Canto IV

The hounds entered through the same passage that Dante had, but as the three demon's cocked their heads in abject curiosity, Beezlebub sighed, eyes rolling into the back of his head as his Mistress lifted him from the floor by the throat.

"Do as she says," he breathed in quivering delight as the seraph watched his expression waver from pained to sinful glee. He dangled from the floor, naked but for the trousers that hung about his ankles. Moving in slight, measured movements around the length of his shaft, Dante gripped him, squeezing until he writhed in her hands and stuttered with pleas of mercy.

"Please, Mistress... I did as you asked," he begged in the presence of his pets, face slick with sweat and slaver.

"What is this?" One pondered, an amused canine poking out from her bottom lip. Another answered, edging in closer to her sister as her tail wrapped around the bruise-colored leg of the third. The table was askew, food and drink spoilt on the floor as knives shone with wicked promise.

"Master is begging."

"What should we do?"

"Do as he says and come." Dante demanded. Her eyes shone in the fireglow, the smooth lines of her naked body made flawless by the dim and darkness that pervaded the Glut King's domain. Lifting him to hang from one of the many mounted heads yawning in the open hall, Dante Mikha'el left the Hell Lord to sag alone as she turned away, leaving trenches along his neck and chest from her fingernails.

"The angel is possessed."

"Hell is too much for her."

"Or maybe Hell delights in Dante?"

The women squirmed in their gaiety, moving on command as Lord Beezlebub had instructed. They fingered at

their collars, eyes ablaze and skin shining as they licked at their teeth and knotted their tails.

“Remove him from the wall,” Dante began, picking up a toppled chair from the floor. “Bring him to me on his knees and make sure he regards me. *Don't* be gentle with him.”

The women tittered, watching as their Mistress sat and opened her legs to expose her sex. “I hear Lord Abaddon,” they whispered.

“Tricky lord, leaving his realm.”

“Master allows it, and look how Dante revels.”

They obeyed their instruction, moving towards the Hell Lord and removing him from his sojourn on the wall. They watched as their master stared at the seraphim as they picked him up with hellish strength and set him on the floor. Dante didn't meet Beezlebub's glance. Instead, she watched the lanterns, seeing Asmodeus like a plume of smoke around her.

You're already changing, Pet.

She considered, flicking at her canine with a thumb as the hounds of Hell forced their Hell Lord to his knees. She knew Abaddon, risen from the seventh circle, was possessing her, bending her to his whims. She could feel his touch at her shoulders, less tangible than Asmodeus but influence dark and deep and inviting.

“I am in control,” she said to the Lord of Lust as the demons wrenched the Glut King's head forward to face her. There was solace in knowing that she wasn't herself, that another was puppetting her desire and acts, but Dante knew too that she was enjoying the show. Abaddon gave her excuse.

Asmodeus chuckled, wafting about, concealed to all but her.

Fraud, he accused. Be careful, else you'll summon her too...

Dante shuddered.

“Glutton!” she yelled, looking through her open thighs to regard him. Beezlebub was a prisoner to Cerberus, and the

women grinned until their mouths bisected their face and their fangs dripped in spittle. Licking at their lips, one held him by the hair, while the other stood sentry behind him, her long tail wrapped about his neck like a leash. The third approached, and hung over Dante's shoulders, suckled at her neck and played with Dante's breasts. All four regarded their prey like he was garbage.

"Mistress?"

"Tell me how to reach Treachery."

Beezlebub watched as Dante turned her head to enjoy the mouth of his demon. She rubbed at her own pale thigh until her flesh yawned open before him.

"Will Mistress leave me?"

"Yes!" she yelled, kicking him until he sprawled upon the floor, legs tangled in his clothes and choking from the tail still wrapped about his throat. The demons tittered, and picked him up to resume his position before her.

"Do you think I want to stay here with *you*?" Dante spat, leaning forward. "This realm can't sate me. What does the Glutton know of filling an angel?"

His cock twitched and beaded with cum. Reaching between his legs, Dante fingered his swollen head, and collected its seed upon her fingers. "Tell me how to find it, Worm," she said again, voice steady and calm as she sat back to taste it.

"Tell her, Master."

"Obey..."

The third woman lapped again along the seraphim's cheek. A long lengthy lick that savoured the taste. "She'll come back and visit, right?"

"Perhaps," Dante answered, raising her hand.

Beezlebub cowed. "Within the river, Mistress. Through the unfed and hungry lies Leviathan's realm of Greed and the fourth circle."

Dante frowned, and proffered her fingers to Cerberus. The woman at her shoulder parted her lips to worship them.

“I have to brave that cesspool?” Dante bared her teeth, black eyes frothing with shadows.

“I’m sorry, Mistress. Please!” Beezlebub shrunk in her presence, head bowing to the floor until it was wrenched back up. Dante reclined in her chair and looked away, wondering about Lord Leviathan and the vile river of hunger before him.

“How am I—”

“I shall guide you, Dante Mikha’el.”

Virgil’s voice in the hall gave her pause, and for a moment Dante’s disposition changed as her eyes unclouded and she looked upon him to witness his judgement and understanding.

“Virgil,” she whispered, Abaddon’s hate dripping out her mouth. Turning away from the old man, Dante leant forward, spreading her thighs as wide as she was able before setting the Glut King to rest his face between them. His tongue hung from his mouth as she beckoned, and Beezlebub panted from wanton starvation as he lapped at her sex. His demons purred, one holding his head by the hair as he feasted and drank from his Mistress with the fervor of a dying man. The other stooped to rub at his cock and the third lay the sweet seraphim back to kiss at her mouth and rub at her breasts until she moaned.

Dante cried, watching as Virgil approached with a staff tipped in wrought iron. “Lick at it. Push him deeper!” She screamed, nibbling at the demon woman’s tongue until her body convulsed.

Dante roared. Pushing the girl away, she grabbed the slurping Hell Lord by his head and forced his ministrations deeper into her quivering depths. Masturbatory, his forked tongue slipped along her folds as he grunted to devour her. His entire face was awash in her sex as Dante pistoned like a dying beast. The other two demons of Cerberus, enthralled by the

sight and scent of their Master, bent to hold the angel's thighs until she was split before him, and howled in debased lust.

“Yes! *Ye-s-s-s!*” Dante shrieked as she came, the dew of her loins spilling over him as she shuddered, wrenching her legs from Cerberus and jerking forward with possessed barbarity. Beezlebub gasped, faced unsated as Dante clamoured atop him.

“*Foolish Glutton! I'll end your hunger here!*” she yelled in the voice of Violence, gripping the Hell Lord about the throat as her face contorted.

“Be gone from my realm, Abaddon,” the Glut King groaned, full with ardor.

Virgil frowned, and tapped his staff. “Yes,” he mimicked, walking to her side. “Return to your war.”

Dante collapsed. Asmodeus laughed.

Abaddon was quiet.

“My Mistress—”

“Is leaving,” Virgil replied, bending to remove her, and gather her robe.

“But I hunger for her still...” he whispered, fingering his new home, deep within her mind and belly.

So does he who sits on the throne, Asmodeus chuckled as Virgil left with Dante in his arms.

Greed

Canto I

Dante woke upon the banks of the river, though as she inhaled, the scent of the water had vanished. Her body was clothed in crimson, the robe redonned and pooling about her as she fought to sit amongst the craggy slopes that kept the hungry from climbing from the briney pools of foul refuse. Diamond hail and sparkling stone clattered like beetles as she sat up, falling from the oily sky.

She rubbed at her temples and her tongue darted over her teeth along the points of the new canines that had burst from her gums. Another sin had branded her, and along with the transformation, her mind was muddled and afraid of falling further. Gone were her wings and her halo, but beyond the crust of humankind she was descending into something more—or less—with a caliber akin to beasts. The violent grip of Abaddon had left Dante, but his residue remained and was an echo of what was to come in the underbelly of Hell.

“I don’t understand,” she muttered, watching the tepid waters overflow with bodies alive and hungry. Virgil stood before her, his staff set in the river and stirring away the bobbing blobs of trash and flesh.

“Hell is catching, Dante. And it is eager.”

The seraphim was silent. Her thighs ached, and her mind was hollow without the sundry voices of Glut and Lust. She missed them, if only because without their cries her fears remained alone. “Am I doomed?” she asked, fingering her belly, pregnant with a hunger that coated her gums in drool.

Virgil turned, sable eyes full of pity. Without her wings, her halo, her lance, Dante looked more human than angel or Hellion. “Doomed as any being, Dante. But I told you before that Hell is eager. It accepts everything and all, no matter creed or volition. Hell is a paradise for autonomy, though the self is seldom good or evil.”

“You speak in riddles, Poet.”

“I speak with truth,” Virgil said, sitting beside her to watch her eyes exhale with shadows. He folded a strand of hair behind her ear, and his knotted knuckle ran down her face towards the Glut King’s fangs. She shivered, her body a slave to the sins that had anchored in her soul. Virgil chuckled and stood, righting his robes to return to the riverbank. “But also in riddles,” he said.

Dante followed. “Are these the sins of humans? Do they also hear the Hell Lords in their ear?”

“They do at times, though some are louder than most.” He faced her again, lips hardened and troubled. “You are pure. They crave to fill you. Every sin will scream in your ear before you find the final circle. You *can* return.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

Dante paused, “Wasn’t it you that said God watches and He sees, but He shall never reach down to uplift the damned to Heaven?”

The lines on Virgil’s face deepened, and he drummed his fingers on his staff. “God will forgive if forgiveness is sought,” he said, the ire in his face telling.

Dante looked up. Beyond the darkness was that blue iris sky watching her?

“I have no wish to return, Poet. I have lost my faith in Heaven.”

It was strange to utter the words, but as they departed through the sullen slope of her mouth, Dante dropped her head, hoping that if God was watching, she would not have to see the ire or disappointment pierce her through the inferno. She knew He knew already, but to give her thoughts substance, to echo the words aloud along the corridors of open space, was to own herself. It was a spectrum of feeling. Sadness, fear, strength, conviction... all making homes in her heart, and yet, the worst was knowing that God *knew* eventually she’d lose faith in Him.

Virgil was stone, unmoving in the wake of her confession. From above, as the hailstones hammered the icy bluffs that lent scant shelter to the duo beneath, the sky rumbled and roiled with storms. Dante winced at Virgil's silence, expecting a riposte that was biting and cruel and justified. Her fists shook at her side as she stared at her feet and the frozen ground, waiting for admonishment.

"How—" Virgil's voice was gentle, and barely a whisper. "How does a seraphim lose their faith?"

She inhaled through her nose, and found the river's scent inviting. "We've been made to be sinless. Vessels of virtue. But how can perfect creatures ask of humans: flawed and full of sin, to obey their laws or be sent to Hell?" She paused. "Perfection is flawed. Love is flawed..."

Sundry regrets made pools of her eyes.

"There is no love in Heaven for me, Poet. Love left when Hell was made."

The river surged, and from its depths a geyser rose, sputtering slush along the bank. Whirling and gargling as the bodies drank, a cyclone formed, and narrowed into the soil of mud and slime. Dante watched, and heard a voice of steel. It muttered out from the noise of gears grinding and sawing with rust.

"Dante!" Virgil roared above the whisper that crept in her mind. "Are you to tell me you left the Heaven's for—"

"For Lucifer." Because I loved him long ago. She knew the Heavens knew it.

"*Why?*"

But the realm of Greed exhaled from the water, and before them a bridge of solid gold arched into the whirling rivers of waste. Winking with gems and precious metal, veins of ivory marbled the bridge's surface, and snaked in designs along the bannister.

Dante stood taller, the stirrings of sin draping around her shoulders as she marched towards the briny storm. "Because there is no Heaven without him," she said.

Dante stood atop the bridge, upon the apex that arched in a golden halfmoon above the swampy pools of the third circle. She turned as Virgil beckoned and ran across to meet her, his robes snapping in the wind that rippled throughout the realm. “Wait! I must guide you.”

Dante smiled, standing tall. “I told you before that I don’t need you to follow me. You should return to Limbo, and live amongst those virtuous that go unnoticed by God.”

“You know not of Greed, Dante. Leviathan is harrowing, the most vile of Hell’s generals. He will trap you if he can.”

“I told you that I would find the throne of Treachery, Virgil.”

The old man paused, and looked towards the churning waters. He could see the machinations below: clogged gears the size of lakes spinning in the ooze surrounding them. The bridge ended over the cyclone, a single step the prelude to a sudden leap into the chasm of avarice and prodigality.

A leap of faith into the realm of the faithless...

“I will walk alongside you,” he said at last. The angel smiled, and turned her head as she stepped out into the depths and was snatched from below.

A squid-like tentacle as wide as an oak, and as long as the largest mast upon a ship, sprung from the heart of the raging river. Pulsing with writhing cups filled with sludge, dirt and gold doubloons, the slick, angry hide was a wounded purple, flecked with bullion. It raged in the air, and wrapped about the seraphim’s waist as it punctuated the third circle in a spinning mass.

Another soul for my collection? A voice ruptured like thunder. *How quaint.* Dante choked from the length of the tentacle, squeezing and suckling at her skin as it thrust her high above the river and Virgil’s sentinel.

“Unhand me!”

No. I shan’t. To enter my realm is to be mine. Another great arm reached from the hole, and wrapped about her legs,

trapping her in a tunnel of bruised flesh that constricted and suctioned every inch of her.

“Dante!” Virgil hollered upon the golden bridge of Hell. “You don’t have to go. Turn back... Repent!”

The limbs barred any attempt at movement. The tip of the first slipped against her cheek, against the corner of her mouth. The other rubbed against her thighs. Asmodeus laughed. Beezlebub begged for more! Despite her fear, Dante shook her head no.

“I won’t go back,” she coughed as a demon voice harrumphed and pulled her downwards past the river and the gears.

You think you had a choice, little soul?

The machinery compressed against the sponge-like flesh of the Hell Lord as she was forced to descend. The tumultuous boom of steel and iron, grinding between the layers of the third and fourth circles, was muffled by the slippery muscles that contracted in an attempt to squeeze through the jigsaw of working factories.

A hoard of molten wealth greeted Dante as the Hell Lord’s tentacles pulled her towards a mound of coins. Faces of kings and emperors imprisoned within the yellowed disks balked as Leviathan flicked her away and sent her tumbling over the several hundred generations of hapless sovereigns.

The pain from his blow emptied her lungs. She struggled to inhale and inflate them. Tentacles slipped beneath a mountain of gold and Dante collapsed, rolling inside a cauldron of crystal flushed with diamond dust. The air was thick with heat, and coins stuck to her skin as she stumbled inside the pot and braced herself against its slippery surface.

In the distance, great metal gears grinded together. Uniform teeth bit into one another with a groan. Dante opened her eyes and rubbed at the reddened spots left upon her skin. She stared out at the falls of Greed that coalesced in a bubbling lake.

“Virgil?” she called, transfixed by the sight. Below the mountainous mass of riches there were neither walls, nor stony cliffs. Darkness contained by curtains of gold, flowed from the sky. They poured from nowhere, innumerable, and rope-like, filling the basin of a lake, banked in wealth and infelicitous souls who floundered in coins. The hapless dead, divided on the brink, jostled on the lake’s rim while a demon monger cried betwixt them: *Pape Mammon, pape Mammon aleppe!* and something akin to the bestial arms that had drug her down, swam covered within the depths of molten gold.

Virgil was gone, the voices of Asmodeus and Beezlebub: silent. Stuck alone in consequence of her decision to continue, Dante paused, steeling her purpose and the splintering faith of her journey.

Dante climbed the lip of the large crystal pot that glittered overturned in the hoard. She paused on the threshold and contemplated the sights of the fourth circle. The appetites of lust and gluttony combined into something vile here. Selfish indulgence, borne by covetous behaviour adopted through knowing the appetites of others, declined into the need of wealth, even in a place where wealth was useless. Sins of the self merged with community and the desire to rise and loom over others.

Dante was certain that those were the reasons why the Greed Lord sat below the other two, farther from the warmth of God. But as her scrutiny grew, and she watched with niggling alarm as Leviathan’s long, puckered limbs swam beneath the molten lake—unobstructed by its weight or heat—why hadn’t *he* come?

This was Hell, the execrated palace of the damned. Each circle was but a ring on Lucifer’s finger, so why hadn’t he clasped his fist and ushered her to him? Why must she tread the circles? Accept the generals and their *gifts*? Did the devil sit upon his throne and chortle at her efforts?

Dante frowned, and walked out from the cauldron where ruby slivers slashed at her feet. She cursed under her breath. Every wound was a mark on her heart and the trust in her love for the devil.

“Wrath sits below us,” she said, picking up the gem to throw. It was but a chink of sparkling stone that winked in her hand. A vermillion spearhead. The ruby spawned notions in her mind. She had nothing, no one. She was alone, the beauty of Heaven and Earth submerged beneath the darkness of Hell. She wanted it, this little stone that would buy her nothing, if only because it gave her *more*.

Tentacles emerged as she clasped it in her palm, the whisper of gold travelling in swells to alert its Hell Lord. Worried for her treasure, Dante held it to her chest, standing on the cusp of the cauldron to confront them. She shouted as they whipped towards her. Fleshy cups brimming with coin, throbbed upon the underside of the sickly-colored limb, but as they latched like leeches to her ankles, Dante fell back, and scrambled for purchase as she was drug under the auric mountains.

Everywhere was chaos. Gems and wealth and items of incalculable value whispered in a deafening hush, penetrating skin and cloth and collecting in a mass around her. She covered her face, tucking her arms against her chest to keep them from being pulled upwards from the dragging coin. Something nicked her foot, another tore a gash up her thigh. A crown of thorns caught in her robe and lanced her belly with a shallow rake.

The pain was severe, her cries lost in the clink of wealth that sought to bury her alive. Her heart thudded. The fear in her chest bloomed at the thought of being entombed. As the hoard parted, and the weight atop her changed, Dante’s eyes shot open as she was hoisted aloft before a dias and squeezed on all sides by the obsessive embrace of Leviathan’s living cloak.

Tentacles sprawled behind his lounging form like fleshy ropes from upon his shoulders. Tangled amidst the hoards of bodies, wealth and coin, they undulated along his ivory throne, and circled the many denizens of his court. Grasped and fondled amid the wound-colored labyrinth of flesh, dozens of fair women, decorated with jewels, sprawled along his shimmering hoard as his appendages copulated with

them. He held them by their limbs, around their middle, or carried them aloft, treating them like playthings with no boundaries for his ardor. The Hell Lord's face was a semblance of stone, unmoving and hard despite the vehement ministrations enacted by the rest of his body.

Leviathan stood from his throne with only the barest of movements that unfurled his form like a slip of parchment. His motions were fluid like water. His smooth face, beaked in a sharp nose and hard, gray eyes, looked upon Dante entangled within his tentacles, and gave only the slightest hint of irritation. Long white hair that matched the pallor of his face, was warmed only by the flush of gold that sat upon his brow, around his neck and about every long, graceful finger.

“Who are *you* to steal from me?” the Hell Lord said, striding forward as the scales about his temples glimmered in hues of blue and green. Like the Lord of Lust, the Greed Lord was beautiful, like an idol... or a gargoyle. He grasped her by the chin, his long train rolling out endlessly behind him as his fingers left marks upon her skin.

“You are not of the damned that usually enter my realm,” he continued, releasing the appendages that constricted her. Dante gasped, and fought to drag air into her lungs as the limbs reoriented, latching around her wrists as two others slipped out from the hoard to her ankles. Spread eagle, her eyes smouldered as she took him in, and saw a reflection of fear in the gold adorning his wardrobe.

“A seraphim...” he purred, his stony visage crumbling with interest as he drew her closer. Her robes were ragged and torn. Leviathan withdrew a dagger to cut them away. Dante grit her teeth at the invasion, rage peppering her skin in gooseflesh as the Greed Lord assumed his preeminence over her.

“What brings a seraphim *here*?” he mused, gold clinking at his feet as her nudity was revealed before the court.

Dante shivered, knees trembling in their effort to push themselves together. If she had met him before, with her wings and her light, she would have struck him with her lance and

felled him to beg at her feet for mercy! But now she was tainted, an immortal whore whose favors had guttered in the face of her whims. Had her might been derived from God alone? Who was she now? A host for the wants of Hell's generals?

"I will find the throne of Treachery," she whispered, firm in her resolve as she fought past her fear to regard him. She cleared her throat and stuck her chin up, the Glut King's teeth perforating her bottom lip. "You *will* let me pass."

He was beautiful. His face a portrait of nobility framed in sylphan features that tipped his ears and pointed his chin.

Leviathan sneered. "*Will* I?" he asked, turning as a moan gave cause to gag some *trinket* he was toying with from behind his throne. "None of the other lords come here. This circle is mine, and I share it with no other." He grasped her again, this time drawing her face close enough he could peer into her eyes and inhale the shadows that spilled out from her corneas.

"Unlike you, Seraphim. I can see you have shared much of yourself already..."

Dante winced, stifled by the Hell Lord's presence. Abaddon, who had instilled within her violence, was gone. The Glut King and the Lord of Lust quelled by the avarice of the Greed Lord.

"I must—"

"I could *let* you pass," he interrupted, nose in her porcelain hair as he gulped in its scent and buried his body into her own. "I've not yet enjoyed *owning* an angel," he said, his limbs controlling her arms until they wrapped about his neck. "All these fools, adorned in gold—" he gestured, wealth appearing from somewhere to decorate her neck in an obsidian torc, "are worthless in comparison to *a seraphim*."

His fingers traced the outline of her ribs. Dante gasped from the shower of delight that danced along her torso. He ducked his head into her neck to breathe in once more, before slipping a delicate belt of chain about her middle. Pearls,

diamonds and glittering sapphires were plucked from his hoard as he layered them about her. When he pushed Dante back to regard her again, Leviathan slid rings so heavy they weighed down her fingers on each digit before dressing her ankles in pewter and gold.

“A hoard worth fucking...” he said, more of his tentacles rising from the piles of gold to entwine her.

“Levia—”

“*Lord* Leviathan,” he corrected at once, his stony presence snapping taut about his features.

She frowned, the barge of infant pride, swelling in her belly, clashing against the waves of the Hell Lord’s presence. Like lust and glut, the pangs of greed needled in her mind. She wanted him. To have his attention, and be a treasure he doted on, unlike the trinkets he idly fucked behind his throne.

“Lord Leviathan,” the name breached her lips with a plume of ire that welled inside her chest. “Please,” she begged, a hint of venom adorning her pleas, “Allow me to pass and I shall let you—”

“Let me?” He chuckled. Dante grit her teeth. What contract could she offer when he had her already? The Lord who took without consent, laid claim to her and she was willing... internally, because his realm alone commanded her to want him.

He resumed his obsession as he stooped, a needle in hand to pierce a bar through her breast. She screamed as the pain lanced straight to her brain, collided in her loins and ushered the ire from her heart. It left behind a silver shield in the wake of blinding torment.

Her arms were pulled tight overhead as he lanced the other. Dante hissed, shocks of pain stealing her breath as a bead of golden blood swelled from the wound, and wound in a river over her belly. She was a husk of regret, but also relief, because she’d garnered his eye and attention.

“I don’t need you to *let me*, girl. I have you already.” He pursed his lips, appraising her like a portrait as his limbs

moved to splay her in the air. Dante whined, her heart pounding like a frightened bird in a cage as tremors ebbed from the pierced silver on her nipples. Her face flushed, not from the pain alone, but from his scrutiny and the pleasure he derived from regarding her.

He turned away, and held her aloft. As he walked back to his throne, she spoke his name, greedy and afraid she had lost his scrutiny.

“What are you doing?” she asked, watching him sit and fold one long leg over the other. His skin was perfect, like satin. His clothing light as he drummed his fingers over his ankle. The porous mounds of gold shifted when a few of his tentacles disengaged from her body to drape back over his shoulders. He didn’t appear like he wished to respond, until she opened her mouth to speak again.

“I’m playing with my toys,” he said, leaning to the side as his tentacles slithered along her legs. Dante paled despite the fever on her brow, her knees shaking as his living cloak gathered about her shoulders and wrapped about her neck like a noose.

“Leviatha—”

“*Lord,*” he corrected.

She blinked and tried to swallow. Perhaps if the pride had always been there, she would have had the strength to fight him. But lost in the sea of Leviathan’s realm, Dante could only want, and she wanted *him*... if only because she knew she could have nothing else.

A heady sweat collected on her brow at the severity of his tone. The suckling nubs inundated against her skin, and widened atop her nipples and thighs to devour them as her restraints were pulled taut.

“Lord Leviathan—”

“Don’t you want to see the throne, girl? Go past my realm to the ninth circle?” He paused, considering. “You can not pass without my knowledge, correct?”

Dante nodded, then gasped at the intrusion to her sex. His form upon the throne was static, but the tentacles he governed executed his whims: greedy and possessive. “Then quiet,” he said, “and be pleasing.”

She tried to protest and gagged as he slipped inside her mouth. Eyes wide open as the puckered cups massaged at her tongue, Dante closed her eyes, surprised to find her body responding to the wild intrusions. The tentacles pulled at her arms, constricted about her throat and thighs, spiralling about her legs in demanding avidity. As he watched with impassive abandon, Dante inhaled, jaw quivering as he coaxed the milky nectar from her womanhood.

“Asmodeus has infected you well,” he said, withdrawing the writhing rope of flesh to regard the dew her sex had left behind. Dante tried to speak past the invading shaft within her mouth, and he drew it out to hear her pant.

“Lord Leviathan...”

His eyes narrowed at her pause, until a quick conclusion drew out a smile on his face. “You want more,” he accused, uncrossing his legs. “You’re *greedy* for it, aren’t you?”

Dante winced at the unerring conclusion he’d drawn from her body’s response. She closed her eyes as he drew her forward towards his throne.

“Open your eyes, girl.”

She did. Glory filled his cold eyes, and was mocking.

“I do,” she whined, defeated and wanting for nothing more than a reward for her submission. “I want more.”

Leviathan chuckled, and his cloak of limbs moved. Snapping about him like the legs of a spider, six lithe ropes writhed in ridged brambles at each flank as he stood and forced her around to kneel upon her knees.

“Arch your back,” he demanded with a push as her spine bent and her backside rose. Through the whims of his cloak, her face pressed to the ground and her arms were held flat in supplication. The cold ground, burnished gold, and the

gems he'd decorated her with, clinked against the hardened surface and indented in her skin.

“An angel whore...” he mused, reaching between her legs to rub at her wetness and coax a moan. Lips parting, her mouth again filled with the soft nubbed shaft of Leviathan's cloak. Dante sucked, and bucked her hips against his fingers.

“You want it so badly?” he asked with a grin, cupping his palm against her sex, watching her hips grind back against him. She nodded yes, loving the force he held upon her that gave her no other option but to obey. He rubbed at her clit, held her steady as she whined against the flesh of his tentacles. “I wonder how an angel whore worships?” he said, moving in front of her, his white robes undone at the waist. His hulking cock, tipped in a diamond pin, glimmered with iridescent scales at the base, and already secreted cum.

“Go on, girl. Worship your lord,” he said as he withdrew his limb from her mouth and threads of slaver arced from her chin.

Dante swallowed, and gulped at his shaft, feeling the hunger of the Glut King possess her. As the Leviathan groaned, Dante did too, her appetite for his notice and consideration heightened in the wake of her lust. Greedily sucking, she moaned in tandem to each hungry stroke of her tongue as she attempted to bring him deeper. Leviathan sighed, leaving her to her loving avarice before he grasped her head and pressed her hard against his pelvis.

“Cock-hungry whore,” he said with ease, unconcerned as she sputtered and gagged and struggled against him. “Choke on your Greed Lord and know there are consequences to combining lust and hunger with my realm of wealth.” He relished in her discomfort and she rejoiced, even as she was strangled from the girth of his cock. Letting go only when she couldn't bear it, Dante fell back and inhaled, thankful and thrilled for his mercy.

Her chin was awash with spittle and cum as he moved around her. She watched like a peasant, enthralled by the favor of Kings. Coins stuck to her skin, and tinked as they fell back

into the hoard. She wiped at her face, startled as he ran his hands through her hair again. Leviathan gripped at the back of her neck and forced her up, walking her to his throne before coercing her down across the armrests. To lay supine upon his royal seat, Dante heaved with self-indulging pride at the rapacity of the Hell Lord's favor.

He slipped his hand along her chest as she lay recumbent before him, and tweaked the silver shields upon her nipples. "Beautiful," he said, raking his hands through the coins around her and letting the kings fall over her belly. Picking up her thighs, he positioned himself between them, and watched her sigh as he pushed himself inside.

"Tell me," he demanded, grabbing her by the chin as he rhythmically pounded into her core.

Dante heaved, and lapped at his finger as it lay over her mouth. Tell him what? She'd tell him anything, if only he'd continue. "L-lord Leviathan...?"

"Tell me how you're mine, Whore." His face contorted and his pupils expanded until he was regarding her with the split black irises of a serpent. His tentacles, shooting out from the piles of gold, abandoning his moaning properties, wrapped about her torso, along the entire length of her calves and forearms as he continued to fuck her. He lifted her in the air, and his ropey limbs invaded her mouth, and squeezed about each breast as another wriggled inside her ass and pumped in tandem to his erection.

"Tell me!" He insisted, even though she could not speak.

Dante spasmed as every niche of her body was filled. Her triumph, defined by his avid obsession with her alone, was a brief respite from the avarice that consumed her. Lust and hunger and greed devoured her, and begged for more as she writhed on his cock and revelled in the trespass of his limbs. She *wanted* to be his, to be a prize amongst his collection and be fucked before all the other women of his court as his dearest. She wanted his hoard splayed upon her body, to suck on his shaft as he rained down gold through his fingers.

Leviathan laughed, and seized her mind as he filled her with cum. Hot molten gold ran out from her thighs, but as she rocked from release, he grabbed her again and began anew, teasing her with the slow, drawn out rocking of his hips.

You are mine, Whore. And I aim to keep you.

Keep her? No. Dante tried to shake her head, to fight away the fog of greed he was enveloping her with. The temptation to stay was stifling, but as she looked across the golden landscape filled with those he'd taken, Dante remembered that despite her delight, he only pleased himself.

No! I can't, I—

His chuckle was low, and rumbled at the back of his throat. *I told you before, Whore. I don't need you to let me...*

Yes, you do!

“But look how you beg,” he said, his cloak withdrawing from her mouth to tip her head forward. He had paused, but watched as her hips continued to sway, grinding against his pelvis and ushering his cock deeper.

Look how the seraphim waters! Asmodeus' voice echoed in her ear despite his absence. As Leviathan withdrew, his member dripped in the moisture of her panting folds. Dante whined, objecting to his will and greed as she was distangled from his limbs and propelled from the throne to its base.

He sat, and his many tentacles buried themselves back into the hoard surrounding him as he leant forward to regard her quivering at his feet. “Do you feel sated, little whore? Filled with greed?” Leviathan chuckled, and sparing one, wriggling rope, he wrapped it about her midsection and drew her back against his throne. It was enough to fade her worries, and push her ambition behind the curtain of his loving control and possessive need for her.

“I think I'll keep you,” he said, plucking small trinkets from his treasure piles to decorate her brow. Dante huffed in ill-sated agony, and forgot herself as she watched him from her perch at his feet and caught his eyes. His stony features splintered with admiration as Leviathan bent to lift her chin.

He kissed her, drinking from her mouth with the loving caress of his tongue before he pulled away.

Mine. He looked down at her hands, and the glittering gold chains he'd placed around her body. She liked his eyes upon her. *Mine and no one else's. No one will come and no one will leave. Never again. Your greed for me will swallow you whole.*

Dante hung her head and nodded, replete as her need for the Greed Lord consumed her.

Canto II

The voices in her head were gone, and yet as Dante slept she saw their bodies moving. The Lord of Lust, the Glut King, Lord Leviathan hunched upon their knees before Lucifer's throne, surrounded by the subjects of the other four circles. Though the Prince of Darkness was present, he was haloed in the holy light of Heaven, a spectre of his former self: the angel who had fallen.

Dante lay outside the periphery of his worshiping Hell Lords and balked in Lucifer's presence. Her eyes smoked with the evil soot of lust. Her teeth pierced her bottom lip, leaving trails of blood dribbling down her chin. Her arms, darkened past the elbows and glittering with the embedded rings of the Greed Lord, were ensorcelled, and tipped with the possessive talons of avarice.

Before him Dante stood transformed, a portrait of treachery in Lucifer's presence.

What have you become? He said, looking past his generals to regard her. Dante didn't know. She wanted to find him, to see him, to *join* him in this prison of vice if necessary. But already the circles had destroyed her mettle, and poisoned her mind with sin.

A stain is most obvious on a sheet of fresh snow...

"I've fought them before."

With God on your side. Go back to Him, Dante.

"No..." She couldn't. She'd come too far, witnessed too much to rest in the Heavens with the angels again. She wanted to find him.

Are you sure?

"Yes!"

He was quiet, considering, and though she could not see his face, she somehow knew it'd be full of pity. *Then do not doubt yourself and come. But to face sin is to know it. Love*

yourself, betray who you are, and then come into my embrace. His generals stood, and turning towards her they all laughed until their mouths bisected their faces and Lucifer was gone, his beauty extinguished in their shadow.

“Don’t go!” she screamed. “Help me!”

I can’t.

“Why?”

His voice faded until he was gone, and all around her his generals crowded until they formed a circle. “It’s a long way to Treachery,” Asmodeus said, licking his lips as Beezlebub begged her to stay.

“She is mine!” Leviathan cursed.

“She’s a fraud.” Another spoke, body hidden in darkness.

“By the gods, *you* would know, Lilith.” The voices cut through black like blades. Some, indistinguishable from the others.

“What can an angel know, but what God *allows* it to know?” A woman asked.

“I know I’d like to fight one again...”

Dante stood, and when she did the seven generals paused in the wake of Virgil who screamed until he ruptured the sky.

“Who are you?” Leviathan sneered as Dante woke to a light in the darkness.

Canto III

“Dante?” he whispered at the precipice of Leviathan’s court, bare feet reluctant to touch the shimmering hoard winking in the Greed Lord’s presence. Dante opened her heavy eyes and found them blurry. Had she heard his voice or dreamt it?

“Virgil?” she asked, trying to lean forward and realizing she couldn’t.

Leviathan stood from the throne upon the dias, his cloak wild in the air behind him. He stepped away to confront the old man. Dante eyed the manacles restraining her wrists and ankles. She pulled at the restraints, and finding no release, stared into the sable eyes of Virgil.

“Who are you?”

“Lord of Greed, unchain the angel and save yourself from added torment.”

Leviathan snickered, but did not look back at her. “You mean my whore?” He paused, inhaling through his nose as the scales upon his neck shimmered. “No. I think I won’t. In fact, I think I shall keep her here and take of her as I wish, for as long as I wish.”

Dante lurched. Virgil’s green eyes hardened.

Leviathan continued, fingering the cuff of his vambrace as he shook his white hair to fall behind him. “You don’t smell like greed. Perhaps you’d like to stay, old man?”

“Virgil! Stop. Go back!” Dante yelled, her terror quelled by the strange calm in the old man’s eyes. They pierced her heart, rendered the haze of the Greed Lord’s control over her mind, asunder. What was he doing? Didn’t he know? How could a man face Greed? Face lust and gluttony, wrath, fraud and treachery?

But they did all the time. Were punished and expected to thwart them ‘til death.

“Dearest Dante,” Virgil said, robes hushing in the wake of Leviathan’s ire. “Why can’t you follow your own advice?”

“What?”

“Why can’t you just go back?”

Blinding light forced her eyes shut, but as Leviathan roared, and the staff of Virgil winked with holy abandon, her manacles fell open and turned to dust.

“I can’t,” she said, tears streaking down her cheeks. She was ashamed to have fallen to the whims of her greed, to have submitted to the Hellion of avarice. “I’ve come so far.” Dante stood to watch Virgil within the storm of light and darkness. She quivered at the sight of him. He was no longer an old man, but a young being, with eyes of bright and brilliant light and wings upon his ankles.

He split apart the Greed Lord’s tentacles, and usurped his crown and hoard. The fourth circle spun, and Dante palled in the sight of His wrath. “We never thought we’d lose you, Dante, like we lost Lucifer.”

Leviathan screamed, and as his hoard whirled in sunny circles above him, his realm divided. Falls of bullion smeared in the void beyond the fourth circle as the Lord of Avarice was pushed to its core, and buried beneath to burn alive. He clawed for purchase, snarling with eyes agape as the gems and jewels and debauched denizens who cried out to him, were laid atop his spheric crypt like tombs.

Dante watched in the space beyond as a door split the darkness and wavered. She looked at God, whose sable eyes burned in all consuming fire, and cried at the thought of abandoning Him. “I’m sorry,” she said as He transformed, and stood as Virgil before her again.

“May I join you?”

“Where?” she asked and fell to her knees, her hands pushed flat against the hardened darkness.

His robes flared, inflated by the infernal gales that spat from out the fourth circle. Behind Him, as the door opened and

loomed black like a grave, the ethereal cloth stilled like a funeral pall and was pulled back against His form.

“Wherever it is you seek to go. You shouldn’t go alone, Mikha’el.”

Wrath

Canto I

Dante looked at her hands and paled at the sight of burnished gold rings left behind by the Greed Lord. Her arms were the color of pitch, and her fingers of jet, pointed in talons, were decorated with the emerald, sapphire and diamond-cut gems Leviathan had adorned her with. At her side, Virgil marched—a host of God, though if they were one or two separate beings, Dante did not know. He was silent despite her introspection, his face a library of thoughts in a language she didn't understand.

“Who are you?” she asked as they descended to the fifth circle. Upon steps chiseled into the vertical surface of a tower that reached up between the two realms, she followed after him, careful of her footfalls against the smooth, tracked surface. How many people had descended these steps? There was no word for such a number. But below, the river Styx rumbled in angry abandon, pregnant with the souls of the sullen.

“I am but a poet named Virgil,” her companion replied, staring ahead as they went.

“No,” He wasn't. “No poet could do what you did to the Greed King.”

“And yet, I did. So how can that be?”

Dante stood taller, scared by the shadows of doubt crowding her mind. She knew this was God, but why would He come? Had it been Him in Limbo who watched as the damned ravished her halo and wrenched off her wings? Had it been God left behind when she'd been swallowed by Minos? Or Him on the banks of Glut King's river, who had offered her robes in the canyon where Cerberus stalked?

Hearing her thoughts, He answered. “I reside in my children, and speak through them when necessary.”

“So you're God, *and* Virgil.” Of course, she thought. God came through the host of a virtuous poet to walk side-by-side her in the hallways of Hell. “But why are you here?”

“Do you not wish for me to guide you, Dante?” Virgil’s voice was light, carried on warm thermals that buffeted downwards from the sky. Small fissures with pipes within blew out the torrents from Lust, and lined the walls in iron veins.

She didn’t answer Him, if only because Dante didn’t know how.

No. She was afraid to think. I’d rather hide and judge myself than have a guide witness my fall.

“You said as Virgil, in the midst of the third circle, that you were sent by Lucifer. How can that be that true?”

Virgil paused, and in her mind, the Hell Lords she carried with her muttered questions.

“I know his thoughts, as I knew yours when you left to tread upon the surface of Hell. To know what will come does not lend a pause to heartache. I knew you’d leave and yet, I hoped you would not.”

Dante found her words misplaced, slammed behind the shame of having saddened Him. And yet, she paused, her heart pleading to know more about the devil’s words He’d witnessed.

“What *were* Lucifer’s thoughts?” she asked, shouting to keep her voice above the boisterous tumult that banked the river Styx.

Virgil turned, and answered. He touched her face and traced a finger over her cheek, and in His eyes the cosmos spun. “His thoughts were of you. Of how you were when you both held place in Heaven.” Sadness crept inside the lines of Virgil’s face and deepened the age of the poet. “Lucifer did not wish for you to suffer—”

“Then why has he not come?” Her hair was snapping, and like white fire it crested her brow and flailed like serpents along her face.

If Lucifer had loved her, thought of her, then why did he not meet her at the precipice of Hell? God knew his

thoughts, and yet He was silent and satisfied to let Dante walk alone to face the inferno?

“You doubt me.”

She trembled, and even behind His woeful eyes, God’s wrath shined. He turned and continued down the glossy plane of the mountainside. Wraiths of yowling soot filled the air, and sang in angry chorus as men and women below fought along the riverbanks to cross the river Styx. Underground pipes, frothing with hardened, blue calcium, stuck up from the surface of the water and blew steam in whirling patterns. Though the river’s surface bubbled as if from heat, faces passed along the currents and were pinioned beneath the waves.

“I’m sorry, Lord.” Dante wept, her guilt a heavy weight upon her shoulders. Virgil nodded, and with hands crossed behind His back, His fingers twitched. “But though I apologize for my wrath, I can’t apologize for doubting you, for how I feel. Anything I say, you know already, and yet,” she sniffed, “I can’t describe how ashamed I am to have succumbed so easily to the Hell Lords. How terrible I feel at the possibility that Lucifer has abandoned me and... how I can’t stand to have saddened you.”

Upon the stairs she prayed for mercy, and yet knew she would find none. God as Virgil was quiet, and Dante sobbed, a victim of will and consequence.

“I wish to witness for myself your journey,” God said at last, the sound of the river and wrathful denizens turning into a dirge. “I’ve failed you. And though I know where the route of the journey leads, I would see it in propria persona so that I may *know again* and mourn my knowledge.” He trailed off, and when God turned to regard her, it was not with the face of Virgil but a child with curling hair and soft, plump, cherubian features.

The tears in Dante’s eyes caught in the zephyrs of soot that billowed out from her darkened pupils. They left tracks upon her cheeks. Standing at the root of the mountain, Dante leant down and searched God’s face. It was beautiful, young, ancient, and hard; androgynous yet masculine and feminine.

Her lips trembled, but she fought her fears, and smiled despite her woes.

“You haven’t failed me,” Dante said. “I failed you because you are perfect and I am not.” She held Him by His hands, and despite the Greed Lord’s gems, His warmth squeezed back.

God smiled, but sadness filled His sable eyes. “Knowing everything sometimes means knowing nothing at all,” He said, pointing to her chest. “I’ll be here, Mikha’el. Beside you,” and as He burst into divine light He whispered, “Go. Find Lucifer. And tell the devil that even *I* couldn’t bring you back.”

Dante watched Virgil disappear and leave her on the plains of Wrath.

He still loved her, and with the strength of knowing that, she thought she could go on. God was near, watching, and yet He hadn’t brought her to Treachery. He hadn’t saved her from the circle kings and queens. She would go on regardless, however, ferried by her will.

Angry roars and shouts of pain joined the wraiths within the sky. Dante watched the river swell against the banks. An ache in her mind clawed open a rift and left her gasping.

Silence, but for a man who stood before her and inhaled through his nose at the sight of Dante’s being. The plains of wrath stilled in his presence, halted in time as he folded his arms and fingered a scalpel that was dripping in blood. His brows furrowed beneath short cropped hair streaked in white on one side. Dante stepped back from his measured gaze. He wore a collared shirt and vest, a doublet with the insignia of Hell emblazoned in a five point star on a golden pin. A three ringed, silver syringe stuck up from his breast pocket.

He righted his spectacles until they sat high on the bridge of his pointed nose, and with a voice as steady as stone said, “Good evening, Seraph. My name is Belial. I am the Professor of Wrath.”

The realm was quiet, caught in the shocking inhale drawn from the sudden appearance of its master. As Dante stood at the bottom of the stairs at the foot of the tower that speared the sky, she stalled her surprise, and arched her back to lengthen her height.

“My name is Dante—”

“So you say,” he interrupted, waving a hand adorned with gloves. “I can hear the others echo your name. They chatter so loudly they obstruct my work.” Did he speak of the generals that invaded her mind? Speckles of blood trailed up from his sleeves, and dotted his collar and the severe crag of his jawline. Fixing her with a leveled stare, the Professor frowned, and studied her face as the voices of Hell muttered replies.

Professor Wrath... I'd be mindful of that one, Whore.

He's two-faced!

A slave to his work. Unlike you, Beezlebub: a slave only to your appetite.

The Glut King whined, and grimacing from the unwillful banter, Dante closed her eyes, and pressed a thumb into her temple.

“You wish to pass my realm?” Belial said, lips thinning as he turned his gaze towards the time-stopped plane of the river. Caught in the jeopardy of battle, the frozen figures adorning the embankments roared in silent rage as the pipes whispered shrieks of the sullen.

“I shall escort you, then,” he continued, turning on his heel to leave. Dante stumbled after him before he paused and narrowed his eyes. “That *is* what you want, correct? To pass my circle?”

All work and no play, Professor... Asmodeus chuckled.

Belial huffed, and continued his march across the cracked, desolate clay that shrivelled beneath the scarlet sky. “I have no time for idle frivolities,” he said.

“You’re just going to lead me to the next circle?” Dante asked, watching the beings of Wrath shift, resuming

each movement that had seconds before been frozen in time. The roar was louder than her voice, and as the figures clashed, Dante spun, attempting to avoid them as the Professor led them through the heart of the battlements.

He cut through the throng of bodies like they didn't exist, and Dante saw that they avoided *him*. "The sooner I am rid of you, the sooner I can resume my work," he said, eyes focused on the gargling river Styx. Dante was quiet, wondering what it was the Hell Lord of Wrath busied himself with in the bowels of the fifth circle. From within her own mind Asmodeus, Beezlebub and Lord Leviathan muttered, but their words were lost in the thrum of war surrounding them.

They were almost upon the banks of the river. The black boat of Charon bobbed upon the waters like a withered corpse when Belial stumbled. The body of a man, adorned in centurion armour, tumbled from his stance before an opponent. His sword, sodden in blood that spackled the cracked, muddied earth when it fell, clanged into the crowd as the parched surface drank greedily of the wetted gore.

Belial turned, and looked out at the man from the mess of hair that had fallen in the Hell Lord's face. Steel rage transformed the Professor's features as the centurion skidded back, scrambling amid the fighters still engaged around them. Belial retrieved the syringe from his pocket, and threw himself on the frightened soldier who screamed and raked his nails along the hardened mud.

"Fools! Idiots! Everywhere, cretins who cause interruptions!" The Professor roared, spearing the man in the shoulder and drawing back the plunger. Dante's eyes widened at the sight of the centurion who screamed as his body turned to ash. His extremities raveled inwards, then his head caved and silenced his shrieks, until his torso disappeared and Belial stood like a phoenix restored and demeanor diminished.

"What did you do?" Dante began, stepping forward with horror in her eyes.

The Professor frowned, and flicked at the glass barrel of the syringe. Within, a smoky haze coagulated, and looked the

same as the surface of the Styx.

“I harvested its worthless soul,” he replied, regarding the glass before placing it into his waistcoat pocket. Staring at her from over the rim of his spectacles, Belial paused. His gaze lingered towards her feet then up, assessing her like a puzzle whose riddle was bland. Dante shrank beneath his scrutiny, surprised at the anxiety that pulled at her insides. Why did he want that soul?

“You are in the realm of Wrath,” he said, marshalling himself towards the river and the boat. “Not accounting for Limbo, the first three circles of Hell are all of a wanting nature. The lust for money, food, and sexual intercourse all stem from some particular *need* that is greater than even one’s loyalty to God.” He paused, and turned to face her as she followed. “The last few circles, starting here, are different. No one desires to be wrathful, to commit heresy, violence or fraud. These particular sins are all a part of nature.”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me. You think God created sin?”

Belial smiled, and turned away. “I *know* He created sin. The wrathful God, arbiter of man, who knew man would sin and created them in His image, had designed sin as soon as He created the Heavens and the Earth. Before!” He tsked. “Omniscience is telling. If you *know*, it exists. But that is not what I am saying, Seraph.” They approached the wharf to Charon. “I am saying that unlike the circles that have already tainted you, these last few will do more.”

“More?”

Asmodeus laughed. Belial scanned the water, his eyes following the waves as if predicting their direction. “A hole is darkest at the bottom.”

She wished to respond but they arrived at the wharf. It bobbed in the waters, held aloft by tied bones. Charon, whose form sprawled over the punt, looked over her shoulder as forms moaned in her cloak. Held back behind threads that were dark and foreboding, the sullen were prisoners, ferried in her attire that pooled in the Styx.

Belial paused at the end of the wharf, having marched through the lines of phantom prisoners wishing to cross. They parted like smoke, and reformed as Dante followed to regard her with anger and lust, and violence and pride.

“Wrath Lord, Belial,” Charon welcomed, her long hood pulled back to reveal her face. Her skin was the night, speckled in stars, and four bright quasars were her eyes: set above a long angled mouth filled with teeth. The pole that the psychopomp held was a palette of intricate designs carved into the wood hull. It was a map of the cosmos, comprising twenty five circles. At the bow of the boat, a cast iron pot overflowed with coins. It sat in the cobwebs that pervaded the cracks between the boards.

“I wish to pass,” Belial said, taking a step as he boarded the punt. The waters wavered as Charon cocked her head and ran fingers across the trenches of her paddle.

“Of course you may, but why? My toll is the same for mortals and Hellions, equal to everyone, Hell Lords included.”

“I’m escorting a guest,” he said with a roll of his eyes, glancing at a timepiece he had tucked in his waistcoat. Dante guessed the Wrath Professor rarely travelled his realm by boat.

“Can she pay?”

“I-I cannot.” Dante replied, looking out over the river and wishing for her wings. Belial frowned, and sat at the stern, staring out at the angel who stood on the wharf. Dante looked down at herself, her platinum hair brushing across bare skin and shoulders. She had nothing but the rings of Greed upon her fingers. They were affixed to her skin, but she’d rip them off—if she could—if it meant she could pay the ferryman.

Charon continued. “Hell begins here, Seraphim Mikha’el. Without your wings you cannot fly the river, and my boat isn’t free.”

“Here.” Belial interrupted, tossing a coin and then another before turning to examine the waters. The boatman caught it, bright eyes shining. “I’ll pay for us both. Hurry up. I’ve wasted enough time here already.”

“Really?” the psychopomp mused, letting the coins flit about her knuckles before she pivoted to toss them in the pot. The spectres of the damned ebbed within the flow of Charon’s robes and moaned beneath the roar of war that continued on the riverbanks. “I would think Professor Wrath more prone to *accept* the disruption of an angel, even if it’s one so tainted.”

His frown deepened as Dante stepped forth. She boarded the boat and wavered at the displacement of water that crowded the wharf. She took a seat opposite him, watching Belial’s gaze flit away, and the hard lines about his face fill with contemplation. Why was he so keen to be rid of her?

Unlike the previous lords of Hell, who doted on the seraph with terrible obsession, Professor Wrath was devoted to his *work*. What that entailed, Dante could only guess, but she couldn’t shake the heavy discontent that rattled in her heart, or understand what it was that caused it.

“So what brings an angel to Hell?” Charon continued as she skewered the waters rife with souls, and launched the punt. The river was viscous. It drug at her cloak that lay like a net across its surface.

“I must find Lucifer.”

“The Prince of Darkness?” Charon mused, looking out along the Styx, guiding her boat between the long flutes of steaming vapour that stuck up from the surface and frothed with blue calcium. “Everyone here knows his name, but curious that he hasn’t found you, Mikha’el.”

Dante bit her lip and stared at her feet. Charon continued with a grin on her face. “If God wanted, couldn’t He spirit you away? Deliver you to the throne you seek? The Prince you covet?” She chuckled, “and yet here you are, a guest of Professor Wrath who pays your fee to Hell.”

“A boon,” he said, eyeing her from behind the glare of his spectacles, “to allow me to work, finally uninterrupted.”

Dante looked at her hands tipped in black talons. *Filled with sin*, Asmodeus had said. Could she pass the fifth circle in

only Wrath's presence? How could she accept Wrath, when the professor's only wish was to be rid of her? Dante was burdened with questions, secure in the prison of her doubts. Virgil said he would guide her through Hell, but why not transport her? Why test her, and let her succumb to the sins of the circles?

I chose this.

She watched the sullen writhe in the waters and grope within muck on the shore. Luminescent with light that shone from below, the Styx ebbed on the horizon in a phosphorescent sapphire. More stacks of smoke rose in the air from a city in the distance. The City of Dis, and great beasts like motes of black, flitted in the skyline amongst the smog that poured from above.

Dante knew of the city, of the heretics, the gods and the idols of old. Contained in walls of wrought iron, demons and imps and winged fae creatures stood sentinel, snarling and vicious.

"How do we get inside?" she asked, watching as Belial stood premature to their arrival. The city was but a plane of tall buildings in the distance, but as he looked at the dismal skyline and stepped out from the boat, the professor floated upon the grim scowls of the damned imprisoned beneath the filmy surface of the Styx.

"I will show you," he said, reaching back to take her hand. Charon paused and her pole bobbed. Her four eyes shone, the quasars within her nighttime body narrowing as she looked at Dante and pulled up her hood.

"The City of Dis is a dangerous place, and a home to anything *but* your kind. I know of it well... but your fare was paid by Wrath. Come or go as you please," she said.

Should she stay? What of the shores of the hellish city and the stars that winked in the oarsman's face?

Dante stood at the prow of the boat, bare feet positioned on the bench. The Wrath Lord had paid her way, and yet Dante was drawn to follow after him.

The river was like stone beneath his feet. He extended his arms in the air between them, poised to heft her against his chest. As her long arms wrapped around the Wrath Lord's shoulders, he leaned in to cradle her close to his body. There was blood upon his collar, and the three-pronged syringe in his pocket swirled with the soul of the centurion.

“Don't let go,” Belial spat, eyes hard and focused on the ruddy shores that bled from the glow of the river. “The fluid of the Styx is heavy. If you fall, it will weigh you down to drown beneath until time has perished and naught else remains.”

The sullen moaned louder as Belial turned from the punt. Charon steered back towards the wharf: now unseen from their passage as the echoes of her cackles reverberated. Though gloves adorned Belial's hands, his hard calloused fingers pressed into her skin. Why she had deigned to follow him, Dante didn't know, but as she readied herself to leave the shelter his arms afforded, they passed the bank. He continued to hold her as he walked beyond and into a copse of trees that looked more akin to gray, dried mud, veined in cracks.

“Where are we going?” Dante asked, cautious as the city waned behind them. If she struggled, she could break free from him, but interest and exhaustion anchored her in his arms, and hunger in her belly left her legs feeling weak.

“We are going to Hermes,” was his simple reply as bone-like limbs, fallen from dead trees, snapped beneath his footfalls. The roar of battle was still overhead, and hissing from the cracks between the caked Earth—brought the scent of brimstone.

“If The City of Dis is the entrance to the sixth circle, then does Violence lie below us?”

The Professor's chin wrinkled, and he pressed his lips to a thin line as he avoided the larger fissures that scattered along the ground. “Yes,” he said, before clearing his throat.

“Tell me about it.”

He surveyed the desolate plane as the trees became sparse and the ground sunk to form a plateau. Walking until he stood on the brink of the tableland, he looked into the gorge and sighed at her question, bothered, and annoyed.

“Abaddon is at war,” he said as she gazed into the base and flames licked along the edge like a fiery sun ready to burst. The heat pressed at her skin, though they were miles above, and roiled in a heady inferno that threw the bottom into oblivion.

“War?” Dante asked, watching the smoke rise up in ribbons. “War with who?”

“With themselves,” he answered as though expecting the query. Belial turned on his heel, sending debris to cascade off the edge of the high plain as he walked alongside the lip. It was a handspan away and a small set of stairs jutted out from the wall, constructed from the remains of a spinal cord. Arching down from the mummified carcass of some great unearthed beast buried in the plateau, the flat roots of its vertebrae were dusted with soot, and so small that Belial walked on the balls of his feet when he descended. The Wrath Lord proceeded with the Seraph in tow, until they stopped at a nook in the wall that led back in the darkness.

Why were they here?

“The fifth circle of Wrath is less a war than an outpour of rage,” he began, stepping from the precarious ledge of the twelfth rib into the precipice and stalling. She could hear the crackle of fire from below, and the familiar whistle of steam.

“Let me down,” she said. Her legs stiffened and found their purchase. The hole was black and disorienting, the scent of sulphur cloying in her nose. This was not the City, and yet she chose to ignore the threat eking from the crevasse. “Is this where Hermes resides?” she asked, tensing from the dark as she turned and saw the Wrath Lord’s silhouette in the circle of light that led outside.

His silence was telling. Dante tensed, splaying her legs as she hunched at the ready.

“I think perhaps you may have been a welcome interruption,” he said, his form moving forward, filling the space as he drove her back and her feet slid. The ground gave away. Dante screamed, the clatter of hollow metal in her ears as her body crashed between the confined throat of the vertical passage. Her head bounced and her hair caught in soldered joints and ripped free from her scalp.

She landed in a heap, crumpled and sore behind a curtain of bars. The taste of copper flooded her mouth and a blue light across the room winked like an iridescent will-o'-the-wisp. Somewhere the heavy churn of machinery sounded. In another corner, the shadows of furnishings and idle chattels drew shapes across the room.

Footsteps resounded. Dante sighed and closed her eyes. The pain of her fall was punctuated by a tide of darkness that struck bolts at her temples. Unconsciousness hammered at the front of her skull like a battering ram. The sensation of a loving caress meandered down the crown of her aching head, and as though hewn apart, Dante succumbed to torpor, relieved and assured by his inevitable betrayal.

Canto II

Dante awoke to the sound of a throat clearing. The cold, hard stone she had been laying on was unyielding as Dante stirred from her deleterious landing. Bits of debris, kicked up from the floor, skidded away in cracked shards as she reached towards an iron barred door. The space was confined, no more than a corner in the room. The ceiling was perhaps seven feet in height and expanded into a narrow chimney chute. Indentations and a slight discoloration on the floor made it appear that some kind of mechanism had once sat where she lay imprisoned, but the space was now empty.

“The specimen should eat,” Belial said, stooping at the foot of the bars to set a plate of food on the opposite side. Some kind of meat glistened under a brown sauce, and round tubers that looked to be boiled with the skin on, steamed atop the platter. A chair had been set in front of her cell, and upon depositing the food, Belial stepped back to resume his observations as he sat upon it.

Her belly rumbled, and deep inside her mind, Beelzebub moaned at the inadequacy of the portion. Dante groaned as she sat back, her limbs feeling taut with pain. “Why?” she asked, thinking her question was foolish. Something akin to relief pulled at her thoughts. Of course the Wrath Lord betrayed her. Of course...

Belial frowned, and he crossed his arms in front of his chest as he leaned back into the chair and tilted his chin upward. Behind him, long bottles winked, and resembled the flutes of a pipe organ off the far wall. Inside, creatures withered, caught in the stasis of a beryl liquid.

“Why should the specimen eat?” he asked, his face a portrait of cross concern. “Because you are hungry, despite your divinity, and because if you don’t, you shall never abide —”

“I thought you were escorting me,” Dante said. “I thought you hadn’t time for frivolities.”

Belial sat forward, eyes sharp behind the gleaming glass of his spectacles. Caught in his sudden interest, his feet arched upwards to allow his arms to recline upon his knees. Hanging between his legs, his hands clutched a roll of parchment.

He stared into the cage.

“I have realized you are not a frivolity. You are very important, a seraphim caught in the maelstrom of Hell delivered not by God, but on the wings of your own whims and desires.” He drew closer. “You have given up your celestial creed to meet with Lucifer, and yet the Prince of Darkness does not harken to your presence.” The professor sneered and leaned back, his polished leather shoes skidding over the hardened concrete. “All knowledge is worth having. So, you’re not a frivolity, but a highly intriguing specimen. One I would like to explore.”

He threw the scroll between the bars, and Dante watched as it yawned open and unfurled like a parched tongue. Black script scrawled in intricate letters over the sandy parchment, and though it looked torn and brittle, as she picked it up she knew it was anything but.

A boon, she read. A deal to be signed and worth the passage to Dis. In return, the Wrath Lord wished for time. Time to experiment and gain the knowledge of her transformation. He wanted access to the ichor of her soul, as bequeathed by God, and for her to accept her place as his specimen for the amount of time as was required.

But time was subjective. How long had she been a slave to Leviathan? A toy, chained and bursting with greed for his affections? Would she have stayed there in the fourth circle had God not come to free her?

Dante hung her head, saddened that she’d succumbed so easily to the Greed Lord. Would Wrath be different? Would time span to eternity? Would her sorrow collapse beneath the heady foam of ire that Belial personified?

Dante’s eyes flitted between the unnatural scrawl of Belial’s words.

Accept us all. Asmodeus had said.

But for how long?

As long as it takes, Whore. But He won't save you again. Accept Wrath's promise and you will be his until his work has concluded.

A pen of soft ivory down appeared, dripping in a bulb of shimmering blood. Dante fingered the hollow quill.

If she signed, perhaps she'd be a prisoner forever. Mayhap someday she would see Lucifer again. If she didn't, would she be kept here anyway? Would the Prince of Darkness come up through the pit to find her?

She watched as the ink bled on the cold, stone floor. The pen looked like a relic of her wings, though how Belial acquired it, she was unsure.

Fill me with wrath... Her mind was a melancholic broth bubbling behind her eyes... because at the moment, all I feel is misery.

Dante pressed the tip to the parchment and wrote her full name, as was given at the time of her making.

When the pen left the paper, a shackle appeared. One glinting, slender ring laid upon the swell of her hips and extended backwards in a chain of copper. Thin, like a cord of yarn, the chain was piled in a heap in one corner, long enough to permit movement, but tangled as well, to prevent her from flouting privilege and autonomy.

Belial frowned, the expression settling like a familiar stroke upon his features. Dante looked up, and held out the parchment. He took it and the quill, and stared at her like she had confronted him.

"I didn't expect—" He nodded to the scroll as it decayed into a wisp of soot. Her name—as she had signed it on the line in blood—was aglow in his hand. "You accepted so readily?" he asked. "Without reading? Without *change*?"

Dante nodded, taking the food he had set on the floor to imbibe it.

“I owe you a boon for the gold you gave Charon,” she said, “And for that you must also abide. If I don’t ever make the passage from out of your realm, you will have broken the contract.” Her stomach heaved. She tasted the food and Beezlebub sighed. “Time is subjective to us immortals, but it shall still pass. My time will end, because time is endless.” And if she spent eternity here, so be it. The devil didn’t want her...nor cared, and she’d have forever to mourn the loss of him.

A small twitch of Belial’s mouth indicated a smile, though she was unsure of its sincerity. He opened his palm to receive her name, and her signature adorned his skin in blackened lines and winking eyes set upon interlocking wheels that formed a sphere. He considered it at length as she ate from her plate to sate her appetite.

“Time may be endless,” he began, making a fist as he turned towards a table, “but so too is knowledge. To pursue knowledge is to dedicate time and you’ll find the dedication to both *quite* unrequited.” He sneered, and picked up the syringe from his pocket. “If you think you’ve outsmarted me, you’ve not.”

Dante looked from the platter and watched as he rolled his sleeve along his arm to tie a band around his bicep. Moving towards a chair and sitting before her, Belial’s glasses slid down the bridge of his nose as he flexed until a vein popped beneath the skin.

“What are you doing?” she asked, leaving her plate to grasp the bars. The soul of the centurion—like marbled vapour—whirled within the glass. Belial pressed the needle into the swollen seam that throbbed from the crook of his elbow, his hair masking his eyes as his body shook from the sudden stream of the spirit.

He didn’t answer her. The plunger fell and he withdrew the needle and Belial growled as he loosened the tourniquet. His teeth grew into obsidian stiletto’s, and protruded from his mouth like a carnivorous flytrap. His skin blackened and charred, whilst his face contorted and his nose bloated into a long, angled snout. Both eyes turned to hollow, dark pits

pricked in fiery pupils and his body shook from the transformation.

Dante tensed, and called out from her prison behind the iron bars.

“Professor!” she said, her shackle and chain settling within the small of her back as she stood. Belial paused, his inhalation a deep gale from within the chasmous barrel of his chest cavity. He exhaled and closed his eyes. His body deflated, pickling into the human form she first met upon the plains of wrath.

“Why?” she asked, her eyes filled not with worry but shock at his trueform transformation. The Wrath Lord Belial, often the largest and most volatile of Hell’s generals, was a nova of sin. Erupting with angry abandon to then dissipate into sullen obsolescence.

“To control it,” he hissed, raking his fingers back along his hair. His face regained its human features and settled into pallid skin and taut muscles beneath spectacles and his curved beak of a nose.

“You consume souls...” it was less a question than an accusation filled with pity, “to control your wrath?”

Belial straightened, looking away towards the winking bottles off the far wall. “Wrath is blinding. I can go without it, but it impedes my work.”

“And what is your work?”

He turned back to her, searching her eyes with willful scorn until her gaze drew him close enough to the bars to allow him to reach forward and grasp her chin with his right hand. “You remind me of her,” he spat, slipping his scalpel from his shirt cuff to rest against the pad of his left pointer finger.

Who would anger him so?

Belial fingered the stout, shining blade. His arm went rigid against his thigh and she watched him cut a trench deep enough to sleeve the edge within his fingertip. His grasp upon her chin pressed valleys into her skin as blood fell on the floor.

“Who, Professor, do I remind you of?” Her black eyes were a transparent veil between them.

He let her go, snapping his palm into a rounded ball at his hip. “Give me your arm,” he said. His eyes twitched when she complied and reached through the bars to offer her wrist. His manic lingered beneath the surface of his twitching skin, broiling within the muscle and fat of his assumed appearance. Her despondency muted her fear, but as the scalpel slid along the length of her radial artery, Dante whined in pain as a liquid spurt forth, and dribbled like a spring from the cut towards the floor.

It was gold veined in wine-red blood, and like oil and water they were separated.

“I shall need to collect a sample,” the Wrath Lord mused, withdrawing his syringe to extract a specimen. Dante winced, watching as the glass barrel—uncleaned from the remnants of the centurion soul—filled into even halves that bisected at the center. When he was done, the Wrath Lord stepped away towards a table, and retrieved several more vials, and tubes to attach upon her arm. Flasks of every shape funneled into pipettes and drained from beakers. Some were set upon the floor in front of her cage, while other apparatus’ were connected via long glass wires to transfer fluid from across the room into bowls and jars

“You will need to sit down,” he instructed, tying a band around her arm as she watched her lifeblood flow from out her body into a labyrinth of glass corridors and decanters.

Black planets flared in her eyes, and her legs wobbled to hold herself upright. “How much will you take?” Dante asked. The cool surface of the bars kissed her skin as she slumped towards the floor.

Professor Wrath shrugged, splicing the incision on her arm to another on her wrist. “Not as much as has already been taken,” he said, looking at her with sullen remorse as her heavy lids closed upon her cheeks.

Canto III

Dante stirred, her time unconscious immeasurable by the aimless darkness that pervaded her torpor. As her muscles spasmed back to life, her vision wavered into being and settled on a platter of food. Upon her naked body, a blanket had been tossed, and she'd been resituated into a position more defined by comfort rather than the proximity of her collapse.

“You should eat.” His voice came from a corner in the room. Sat before a desk, the sound of his hasty scrawl upon the pages of a book indicated an eager mind. Dante sat up and watched as the duvet fell over her breasts to settle in her lap. Her nudity no longer bothered her.

“I don't need it,” she said, her body defying her as it moaned in malady from the hollow of her stomach. Beezlebug was a trickle of saliva in the corner of her mouth at the scent of the stewed meat and steaming bread upon the plate.

“It's not about need, Dante. It's about want. You must learn to live with your sins.” Belial stopped writing, and glanced towards her from the corner of the room. It was lit with lanterns filled with fat. He wore a long coat, of a color similar to bleached bone. Blood splatter decorated the hem in laced, foamy patterns, while dribbles of black matter spackled the cuffs and pocket trim.

“Your blood has already changed. Your *being* is being redefined,” he said, picking up a glass tube from a rack upon his desk. He shook it around, and watched the swirl of gold and wine-red blood. “In fact, soon you may *need* food.”

Dante shivered, and drew the blanket to cover herself from his studious gaze. The presence of the Hell Lords whispered in her mind, in her belly, in her loins. Belial's chair scraped along the floor as he turned back to his ledger and continued to write. She picked up the bowl of stew and sipped.

“The noise of your stomach's disrupting me.”

It moaned again in defiance, but was obedient as she drank of the broth and swallowed the meat to sate it. How had

he acquired such food and bread? Did he cook it himself, or had he conjured it from the surface from some other poor soul's dinner table? How many more meals would she take in her cage, and how many more experiments would he subject her to?

How long had she already been here?

Dante finished. The Wrath Lord collected the empty bowl. He removed the long tube from the crook of her arm and wrist, and bundled the alchemical apparatus upon a steel table sat in the center of the room. Vials bubbled from beneath gaslit burners. Compounds separated and were collected in glistening vats. She considered him from her cage, following his steps as Belial stooped, and removed a key from the same pocket that he kept his syringe.

"Do you want me to come out?" Dante asked. The cage clicked open and he swung the door aside. He held out his coat to her, and draped it across her shoulders when she didn't move to take it.

"I would ask that you sit in that chair," he said, pointing to a leather seat. Hide straps with iron buckles hung from the armrests, and the legs of the chair. A large band across the headrest indicated that a person's entire body could be constrained without much effort.

Dante stood, and slipped outside the cage. She pulled at the copper chain gathered in the corner until enough of it was loose to allow her to move. She didn't object, or move in defiance, and her obedience must have addled him, because the professor looked taken aback when she moved immediately to obey his commands.

"Professor?" she asked, letting the coat he proffered slip to the floor as she sat and draped the chain to the side. The leather was a band of hoarfrost against her skin, but despite herself, Dante made sure to align her limbs against the loosened cuffs, expecting him to bind her.

But Belial didn't. Instead, he walked towards the other seat that had been set in front of her cell, and positioned it

before her. He glanced at her eyes, and never lingered his gaze upon her naked body.

“What?” he said, withdrawing his syringe.

Dante frowned, and watched the light catch in the glass as he ravelled up his sleeve.

“Why do they call you that?”

“What?”

“The Professor of Wrath.”

His pause was expected, but as Belial looked from underneath the severe slope of his brow, she caught the glint of the gold pin upon his doublet and winced. It may have seemed obvious, considering his realm and the intricate collection of instruments he hoarded beneath its surface, but the stoic, and calm Wrath Lord seemed to betray the countenance of his trueform and indeed, his circle.

He glared, his expression grave and cold like a tomb. Had she offended him? Only when he inserted the shining needle into the crook of his arm, did he look away, careful to examine the filling barrel.

“I am the apple,” he said, gritting his teeth as the blackened veins of his arm rushed to settle within the oblong, glass vial.

“What?”

“*I* created the knowledge that Lilith gave to humans.”

Lilith. The Serpent. Bride of Sin. Dante shuddered. From the circle above treachery, Lilith was the Mother of Fraud and that in which brought about the fall of man. But...

Belial withdrew the needle, and set it on his lap with a sullen sigh. Hatred fueled a burning fire in his eyes. It whirled in squalls of quiet fury that made her wonder if he would lash out in wild outrage. Distracted from his tasks, he again sought her eyes, thin lips parted as he exhaled in a ghost of clarity.

“The tree. The apple. I am it. And I *poured* the interminable knowledge of the cosmos into every bit of

pearlescent flesh that Adam and Eve dared to imbibe.” He hung his head, shame settling like darkness over his features. “I did it for her, for Lilith, because she said she—” he stopped. Looked up. Fought his own countenance to keep the emotions he was battling in check. Climbing to his feet as the chair fell back along the floor, he turned, strode to retrieve it, and sent it careening towards her cage to shatter into splinters.

“Sour, manipulative bitch!” he cried, his hair a tangle in front of his face. “She used me for her own gain, *allowed* me to believe that she valued my work!” He reeled to regard her. “Your *God*,” he spat, “is even worse. *He* knew. He *allowed it!* He wished for humans to remain ignorant but *knew* the tree was there—*created me*—and *knew* that they’d eat of the apple’s flesh.”

Belial fumed, fists curled into hammers at his side. His nostrils flared, but closing his eyes he inhaled a second of calm that seemed to stitch the seams of his composure back together. He straightened his hair and stooped to retrieve the needle, pricking his finger before clenching it within a calloused hand.

“I am the professor, and I am Wrath, because I was *used* to oblige a great design that I knew nothing about.” He stood before her, an obelisk of rage defined by the timeless knowledge and spite that glimmered upon the crest of his brow. “Never again,” he said, taking her by the arm to set it flat against the armrest. He banded her wrists, her ankles, and secured her head against the hard leather back of the chair until she whimpered and her eyes welled with tears.

Dante didn’t quarrel. Instead, she withered beneath him, like a doomed sprout growing in the shadow of its father. The seeds sown at Belial’s creation were pitiable. The Tree of Knowledge, matured in the garden of paradise, betrayed and sent to Hell for letting the serpent use it for its own devices. It brought to mind the cherubian child who had walked in the guise of a poet.

Why? But there was no answer. Not from *Him*, though the Hell Lords cackled.

Is the seraphim losing faith? Asmodeus purred, sliding a caress down her thigh.

When doubt distances you, won't you draw Him nearer, Whore?

The questions will not sate you, Mistress, because the questions have no answers...

The wrath professor stuck the needle filled with his blood into her arm and depressed the plunger.

Dante paled. "I'm sorry," she managed before her body convulsed. Her muddied blood clashed with his, and boiled in her veins. His rage embodied her, and her understanding was a knife that cut to the bone and opened her eyes so wide she thought they would burst. Wrath stepped away, Dante spasmed, the awareness of sin polluting her mind and expanding the domain of her own comprehension until she floundered in the knowledge of herself apart from God.

"Why?" she screamed, not at the Wrath Lord but to God in the sky that was unseen beneath the black dome of Hell. A white hot blaze ripped through her veins. She fought to banish the rage, but it was too much. Belial stood stunned, watching as the seraph thrashed like a manic storm against her bonds.

"How could you?" she yelled, pulling against the leather restraints, using the pain of the material slitting her wrists to fuel her ire. How could He create and then doom them to Hell? She wanted to hurt someone, rip them to shreds and eat of their insides until all was left was the skin that stretched taut over muscle. She growled and bit and snapped, her mouth contorting as profane curses filled the room.

"What did you *do*?" she snarled and Belial, collapsing at her feet, wept.

Canto IV

Water poured in cool rivulets over the slant of her brow and stirred her awake. Her eyelids were heavy, but the scent of mint and steaming white tulips settled in her nostrils. Dante fingered the slight recess beneath her temples as she opened her eyes. Her hair had been pulled up from her face, and lay in a mane above her head, and the cushion beneath it was damp from perspiration.

“You should lie still,” Belial muttered.

Something warm and soft lay beneath her, while the cloudy embrace of a thick duvet enveloped her nakedness. She had been in the chair, her blood a temple of rage, but now she was on a bed of bleached down. The bars of her cage were at her feet, and his body, next to hers, weighed down the mattress and pulled her inwards towards him like a hooked moon around the form of an onyx.

The once sharp, idle crags of his jaw toppled into slopes of muddied misgivings. Dante’s eyes focused, and he pressed a sponge upon her forehead, as though to prevent her from peering too deeply.

“I am an idol of regret, and I must apologize. It was wrong of me to induce your wrath without warning. I trespassed, and I forgot that you are a vessel that has yet to be opened to the vices of the fifth circle.”

He is apologizing?

The corners of her mouth furrowed, and she moved from the sponge to watch him and gauge his sincerity. The kindness that came from the Wrath Lord shocked her to stone, but to know the detached, numb and sullen lord of the fifth circle could care was a great comfort as well.

Belial shifted, turning away until her thighs brushed against his back and her knees were against his hip. The professor gazed between his legs as the water dripped from the proffered sponge into a basin, and though she could only see one side of his face, the bead of water that fell, echoed...

It was the loudest sound in Wrath.

“How did I anger you?” she asked.

“You reminded me of Lilith, if only because you are a woman.”

“And Lilith betrayed you.”

He clenched his jaw, surfing on the ebb of rage that threatened to flood his senses. “Lilith wanted revenge, I think. She wanted man to suffer for demanding she lay beneath him. She told me that my work, the wealth of the consciousness I had managed to conjure in my library, was a gift. She expressed admiration for my devotion to cognizance. She wanted to be a part of it.”

He paused, letting the sponge drop with a wet splash as he straightened his back and looked towards the chute in the ceiling.

“She asked if I would share my knowledge with her. She wanted to be with me, to be of an equal standing with me, and so I let her take of my apple, of my tree. But she took it and gave it to humans and they were cast out from paradise in consequence.”

“For revenge?” Dante looked along the cloudy dunes of the duvet. Lilith, the first wife of Adam, who refused to lay beneath him, to obey him, now the queen of the eighth circle that lay above the Throne of Treachery. “Professor,” she said, sitting up to grasp his shoulders, “I’m sorry if she made you this way.”

But he stood, withdrawing from her touch. “She didn’t, Dante. God made me this way.”

“God is without sin.”

“Yet we suffer from God’s wrath, His jealousy over idols and other gods before Him. He has done violence, been deceptive—a glutton for complete obedience. These circles, Dante, the nine realms of Hell, embody God Himself. *We* suffer for *His* sins.”

Belial moved from out of the cell, leaving the door ajar. As she watched him go, the words on her tongue spoiled from his departure. What of wrath? Of all the sins of all the Hell Lords...? What stories brought them to their thrones?

What had Asmodeus done to be the Lord of Lust? Was it just his insatiable desires for flesh? Or *had* he been created to rule the second circle? Could the same be said of Beezlebub and his undying hunger? Leviathan was cruel, yes, but his want of gold and precious things were comparable to the other two.

The sins of ingratitude. She watched as Belial donned his white coat.

What's wrong with wanting more, sweet Seraphim? Asmodeus moaned. *Isn't that why you are here? Searching for Treachery? Was Heaven not enough for you?*

Her hands—charred black and tipped in talons from the rings of the Greed Lord, reached out. Dante grasped the duvet and ripped it aside, feeling Belial's irate seed sprout within her. She neared the bars of the opened cage, and his attention snapped taut. His gaze fixated in her direction, pulling any semblance of rage from her as crazed passion took its place.

“You have been infected, Dante,” he said with an unsettling calm. “As per our agreement, I wish to explore that infection.”

He slipped towards the table, and picked from the alchemical equipment that had continued to brew, a flask of bubbling blood and gold. For once, she wished to object, to melt the frost of his composure and make him answer for his trespass. Infected? No. Unless sin, unless *humanity* was a contaminate for ignorance.

“Would you be so kind as to lay upon the slab?” he asked as a slate of stone emerged from the floor and rose to hover in the air. Four rock tablets, unfolding from the indentation formed by the plate of rock, stood erect underneath to brace the slab. Two in the back were taller, uneven from the front supports by an inch to two for a slight incline.

“Are you afraid, Dante?” he asked, confusing her ire with trepidation as she stalled to obey his command. The Wrath Lord closed the distance between them, tipping his long pointed nose at her as he inhaled through his nostrils and feigned a smile.

“I merely wish to conduct a test,” he said, proffering his hand for her to take. “I shall guide you through the process, if you wish, and if it becomes too much for you,” her warm fingers thawed the stiffness of his touch as she grasped them, “we will stop.”

Dante nodded, sated by his placation. The bite of the cold stone prickled her flesh as she sat upon it. The only respite from the frigid surface was her hair that cloaked her back, and settled over her shoulders to frame her breasts.

“Professor Wrath?” she asked, her knees pressing together as they arched to conceal her sex and preserve her body heat. He stared at her. “What do you plan to do to me?”

Belial smiled. This time the expression was genuine. Setting the flask upon the slab, just right to her gaze, he motioned to the ichor within. “Seraphim like yourself, do not usually bleed, and if they do, their vitae is gold. Yours has been tainted, marbled with sin.” He swirled the flask, and though the gold had floated to the top, it beaded within the gory crimson. “I wish to explore the extent of your taint. Lust, Gluttony, Greed...” he continued, setting the vial down to run his fingertips along the length of her arm. “I can see their marks upon you, but an angel of your rank,” he muttered, watching as gooseflesh ignited her thighs, “I would be interested to know its effect. Pick up your knees.”

He was at the foot of the slab now, looking at something sat upon the shelves amidst the glowing jars of beryl wisps. Dante quivered, watching as he fingered his jaw with studious abandon to her discomfort, despite his earlier care. He plucked instruments from their perch for inspection, and mumbled words she couldn't understand. A shock of anger fingered her brain, like a splinter embedded too deep to extract, but she ignored it, or tried to as he continued to muse over tools and ingredients.

What he intended to use them for, she wasn't sure, but pressing the heels of her feet together, Dante's stomach tensed. She lifted her legs until her calves were settled in the air and her hands splayed on the backs of her thighs to keep them in place. Asmodeus chortled as she tried in vain to keep her sex from being too exposed, but as Belial turned back and drew up along the side of the slab, his hands braced her knees, and ushered them apart until her core was uncovered.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

The flush on her cheeks betrayed the winter chill that whispered inside of her. Her ire shattered like glass, the frame of her passion jutting with shards of wanton need that distorted the face of his trespass. She couldn't talk, for fear of her voice exposing her lust that forgave and craved and panicked at the Hell Lord that had splayed her wide open. He caressed her cheek, and Dante perspired. He smoothed his thumb over her brow, and gazed at her with an expert's sobriety, and his nonchalance was intoxicating.

“Look at you,” he mused, “I can feel your shame but also your excitement. You feel discomfort, but you aren't willing to tell me to stop.” His fingers brushed her jaw, along the length of her throat then the swell and curve of both breast and hip.

She wanted more. Even if it wasn't for research, she wanted him to explore her. Dante opened her eyes and peered at the Wrath Professor through the valley of her outstretched thighs. She drank in his stoicism, captivated by his detachment.

She gasped when his thumb pressed on her sex, and his eyes commanded her to gaze back at him through the shockwaves of impending ardor. Did he enjoy it too? Was there a secret part of him that saw her reactions and thrilled at the power he had over her? She moaned. Her body trembled beneath his assessing touch as the grave slope of Belial's forehead furrowed with incubating interest.

“Your reaction is immediate,” he said, swirling his thumb over the bud of her womanhood. “It is enough to void

the shame of your degraded position.”

He spoke to himself, leaning forward across her body, peering at her parted mouth and examining the budding peaks of her erect nipples.

Dante glanced away, and revelled at the adept caress of his fingers as they subverted her dignities. She spread her legs wider. He paused his ministrations, nodding when her head snapped back with a gaze of dismay and betrayal.

“Do you want me to continue?” he asked, his voice free of derision or judgement.

Her bottom lip trembled. The black mist that poured from the corners of her eyes whirled in looping patterns. His pause, and the slight inflection of his voice suggested she should answer, not with some vague gesture, but verbally, honestly, so that he could gauge her voice and measure her response against the appeal of her body.

“Y-yes, Professor.” Not just continue, she wanted him to want her. She wanted to feel his wrath inside her body as it obliterated the shame of being the only one exposed.

“Why?”

She swallowed, trying to find the words. His thumb moved to stroke at the walls of her core with deliberate pace. She jerked her hips, attempted to move her body faster around his touch, but he stopped, asserting control so that she had to answer without the sensations of his succor overwhelming a response.

“It feels good,” she stammered with a moan, her back arching as he continued the simple revolution of his thumb. It was manic fury, it was infant consequence smothered by maternal trauma and devotion.

Mad pockets of air, captured inside her chest, jerked in pained heaves that left her mouth gasping. “Mmm... r-right there is—”

Her eyes glazed. Her talons drew ruts in her lissom thighs. Looking at her sex, Belial muttered, pausing again,

despite her immediate objection, to inspect the nectar that left a thread between his thumb and pointer.

“Asmodeus...” he murmured, moving around the slab and alongside her body. “Keep your legs up, Dante,” he instructed. She held on, but couldn’t help the quivering that rattled her bones and weighed upon her limbs. The Wrath Lord turned from her, picking up a quill from the table to jot something on a scrap of parchment.

Did she not excite him? Thrill him? The Wrath Lord was unlike the other three generals she had experienced and yet, he excited her as much as his realm was terrifying.

“Shame was the first symptom, but I can see you are far past that.” Belial was more stone than the slab she quivered on, but as he walked back to her, Dante sighed in relief. He prodded the corner of her mouth in an effort to part her lips. She opened wide, her tongue lolling to wrap around his finger in an effort to rouse his ardor. Pressing the pad of his thumb upon her canine, Belial paused as she turned her head, and lapped at the length of it with her tongue.

Did he like it? Did it stir within him visions of lust and desire? Another moan escaped her as she tried to excite him. Dante closed her eyes and bit in an effort to draw him deeper inside. She could taste her sex, enjoyed the sensation of something in her mouth as her lips closed around his thumb and sucked.

“Is this the hunger of Lord Beezlebub...?” the Wrath Professor asked, cupping her cheek as she drew the entire length of him into her mouth. Hooking her bottom teeth, he forced her jaw agape, examining the sharp teeth the Glut King had gifted her.

“Interesting...” he said, moving away again and abandoning her on the slab. “Hunger and Lust are obvious contributors, but,” he frowned. Upon the table of stone, Dante inhaled, each breath labored as she writhed beneath her own desires. As he left his work, Dante’s eyes filled with lewd petition.

“Additional apparatus is required,” he said, meeting her gaze with sober eyes before acquiescing to her body’s demand and reaching between her legs. Her elated cry left him frowning.

“Your want is noted,” he said, impassive to the motion of her hips as she stirred around the press of his fingers and beckoned him inside her body. “But you will have to wait,” he continued, slipping in deeper to appease her moans. “You will have to sate yourself.”

Again, he was gone, and feeling open and empty, Dante whimpered, watching his back as the Wrath Lord left to work at his table. What did she wait for? Why did he leave? What *else* did he want?

“Please...” she begged, feeling the long tongue of the Lust Lord lick at her thighs and tease at the periphery of her mound until it quivered.

Beg him, Dante! Make him come back... Beezlebug urged.

Dante splayed her fingers, feeling the cool air of Hell sweep along her moistness as her labia parted from the pull of her grasp.

No, Sweet... prolong it, Asmodeus purred. It will feel better...

She watched the professor go, murmured weak objections at his back as he slipped out from the room by the only door off the far wall. Though she was unbound—save for the copper chain and link around her middle—Dante stayed upon the table of stone and watched the glow of the jars as her body wavered beneath her desires. She was cold, but for the incredible warmth between her legs, and with her hands pulling trenches at her thighs, she ignored the demand to stimulate herself despite the Wrath Lord’s permit.

Don’t worry, the Lord of Lust was a frigid tongue on her sex, held there to prolong her torture, and keep her from recovering. Professor Wrath is a slave to his work...

“Am I work?” she whispered in the darkness, black eyes glazed and searching. Work was arduous, work was taxing. Was she so loathed by the Wrath Lord?

You're not listening, Sweet...

He returned after a time, though how long it was, Dante could only measure in the quick sensations of her body and the rhythmic pounding of her heartbeat. Startled from her own maltreatment, her eyes claimed his as the Wrath Lord entered. His lab coat was stuffed with instruments: metal knives, tubes, scissors and wire glistened like silver. The same, three pronged syringe he had used to drain the soul of the centurion protruded from his breast pocket. A liquid wavered in its barrel, its hue transformed in the lazuli light.

“We shall be moving,” he said, nodding when he reached the table to deposit some tools on its surface. There was a jolt from beneath her, and as Dante lowered her legs, the slab moved.

“Where—”

“To my lab,” he replied, walking to the rear and impelling the stone until the surface moved and began to glide airborne across the room.

Dante sat up, legs pressed together as the door yawned to reveal a narrow hall. Like a gurney through a hospital ward, Belial directed the tablet of rock through a warren of tangled corridors and rooms. Embedded into the ceiling, mechanisms hissed, knit together by pipes that funneled the winds down from the second circle. Gears, soiled with oil and grease, churned in artificial symphony behind glass walls. Blue souls, filtered through pistons, fueled the innermost workings of the fifth circle.

His lab beyond her cell was a tomb of sterility. The double doors, thrust open by the heavy board of rock, closed with naught a whisper despite being made from steel. Vats of blue liquid, large enough to house a man, clustered against the wall like insectual hives. Thick tubes of aluminum, polished and gleaming, snaked along the floor and into vents, while

lights of every hue hung from an endless ceiling, captured in orbs and coils.

In the center of the room and orbited by a diadem of draping leather restraints and chains, a hollow metal globe hung from an insulated column, crackling with electric energy. The floating gurney stuck in place as he hauled her beneath it. Dante stared at the sphere's underbelly and saw ethereal faces from within staring back at her.

"Lust, gluttony, greed. Lust, gluttony, greed," the Professor muttered in manic litany.

Around her ankles he strapped thick leather bands connected to a pulley that extended from the ceiling. Then, separating her legs, he wrapped a band at the crook of each knee to keep them arched and her bottom elevated. He bound her arms above her head, with each hand on an elbow, and the forearms crossed and tied lengthwise.

"Professor," she said as he bent to secure her arms to the table, his stoic demeanor puzzling despite his whispers. Her body still hummed with his touch. "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer. Instead, moving towards a bar embedded in the thick, stone floor, he cranked it backwards. The leather bindings cinched in the wake of grinding gears. Dante gasped as her hips were forced up, and her legs parted, opening her lower half to the complete scrutiny of the Wrath Lord.

"I know it doesn't feel comfortable yet," Belial mused as Dante watched the faces in the orb fill with perverse glee at her position beneath them, "but it will..."

The unknown exhilarated her. His care and control to ensure her comfort peppered her mind with wild possibilities. Would it feel good? *How* good?

The rasp of unoiled wheels mirrored her own whimpers as he pulled a trolley from its sojourn near the far wall. Laden with apparatus veined in electric currents, Dante tried to peer between the valley of her legs to see what he was doing. With her arms secured to the table above her head, she

had no choice but to stare into the iris: bobbing in the darkened ceiling cavity and plagued with snickering witnesses.

Something cool ran across her thigh. Dante gasped at the vibration of something wet and unyielding prodding at her clit. Like a sudden tsunami sweeping through her core, her eyes glazed over, and the globe: heavy with judgement, blurred.

She moaned, and watched as he stepped to the side. Professor Wrath was still as stone as he slipped the instrument deep inside her.

The fullness hummed and brought forth a wave of pleasure that swept her mind clean of all but the addict sensations. She gasped and arched her back, her agency obliterated by her desires for more.

“Lust,” he said, the whirling of machinery emanating from her hips and causing her stomach to contract as he extracted it before reinserting again.

Mmm! Asmodeus moaned.

Slaver dribbled from the corners of her mouth as she rocked her hips and the mechanical whirl grew engorged inside her. Belial walked to her side, appraising her as she groaned and as sweat collected in the hollow of her throat.

He touched her face. “I shall milk the lust from you,” and as if it were a command, his words sent a river flowing from between her legs.

He reached for another device. It was a mask. A blindfold of sorts, with something phallic that went into the mouth and connected via wires to another machine.

“If it’s too much for you, you can tell me,” he said, seeing the trepidation mount within her eyes. He took out a small remote, and placed it between two fingers. “There is only one button. Push it if you wish to stop.” Belial slipped the blindfold around her head and pulled Dante’s hair free to sprawl like a halo.

“Now open,” he instructed.

She obeyed with a keen curiosity. She gasped for air, and as the thrust of the machine plowed deeper, it vibrated at her clitoris and the tight opening at her rear.

The sensation of her mouth being filled disoriented her, if only because the object was so big that it forced her lips to open as wide as they could. Panting through her nose and feeling something pinch on the pert bud of each nipple, Dante's body bucked in tandem to the sensations of coitus.

She wanted to cry out, to say the Wrath Lord's name despite knowing that he did nothing himself. His voice pierced her ear and the first quivering signs of orgasm licked at her inner thighs. Dante's lust grew as she suckled at the gag within her mouth and tasted the sweet seed of nourishment.

"Hunger," Belial named. "You may sate both your lust and your hunger for as long as you may wish, Dante, and that length shall expose your greed."

Leviathan sneered, but inside her mind, the Glut King shuddered. She nursed at the intrusive muzzle again. Saccharine nectar poured down her throat, and coated her belly as another sweet, small death, brought her to come.

The Wrath Lord caressed her jaw and withdrew.

Dante was alone, hearing the hiss of Hell's generals in her ear as she writhed beneath their oppressive sin, and revelled.

Canto V

Dante's mind was prisoner to sins run amok. The machinery whirled in a torrent around her, fed by the hurricane channels born by the lust of the second circle. Dante's body had transformed. No longer a vessel of flesh and blood alone, it was a conductor of hellish vice that spasmed with every generous current of pleasure that was welcomed inside.

She thrashed against the restraints until her wrists were raw and needed treatment. Her belly distended from the amount of sustenance she drank from the tumescent phallus that gagged her, but despite all this she couldn't stop. It felt too good, too *satisfying*.

Yet it wasn't at all.

Dante writhed in darkness, blinded by the scrap of cloth Belial had fastened around her head. With every mounting orgasm, she fell from avid heights to climb the valley again. Her thighs were wet from the constant pumping of the machine, drenched from the fluids of her sex. She couldn't close her legs, but she knew the Wrath Lord had replaced the stirrups that held her knees aloft more than once.

Every now and then, through the fog of her ardor, he tended to her wounds left behind by the cuffs. He cared for her with hands practiced and aloof, though sometimes, as she sat within the gully of her lust, waiting to climb again, Dante swore his sullen stare was trained upon her body with angered promise.

He bathed her upon the slab. Wiped at the dew that perspired on her brow—the spittle that dribbled from the corners of her mouth and opening. When she bucked and wiggled from climax, and dropped the small button that would end it all, he always retrieved it, and set it back within her palm “in case,” he said, she had had enough.

But she hadn't, because despite the tortuous pleasure Dante derived from his debauched laboratory, she always wanted more. She wanted him.

Dante didn't know how long she had been hooked up to his machines, but when they stopped she whimpered, wondering if the button had depressed when she'd last dropped it.

She coughed when he removed the gag, and licked at her lips to savor the taste of its nectar.

"I've miscalculated," the Wrath Lord said, unhitching the stirrups to lower her knees to the slab. He kept the blindfold in place, but untied her arms.

Her voice was hoarse. A stranger to her own ears. "Professor?" Dante called, sitting up. Her legs shook and her chest trembled.

"I cannot measure your greed exactly with this method. Your lust and glut propel you past reason already, without the added factor of avarice. It's impossible to tell where greed begins and the others stop."

Dante squeezed herself together, removing the cloth about her eyes and letting her vision adjust and distort the darkness into oblong shapes.

"How long..."

"Far past the time expected," he answered before she could finish. "If your body were human, made from the clay that fashioned man, you would have destroyed it. As it was, I tended to you to keep you from ruin."

Without the machines, her pain awakened, rushing to the fore to pulse from the wounds around her wrists, her legs and from the ache between her thighs and jaw. She was weary, sapped, a withered husk replete and yet not.

"I'm tired," Dante said, her vision blurry, her mouth a parched desert. As much as lust rumbled within her, she wasn't sure she could bear it any longer.

He was before her, and held a flask to her lips. "Return to your bed, and you may sleep till you're able. I've made it up, and will set food for when you stir."

"I don't think—" Dante shifted, finding the cold compress of the stone beneath her biting and cruel against her

skin. “I don’t know if I can move.”

He peered at her and was quiet before a sigh prompted him to bend and pick her up within his arms. Cradled like an infant, Dante wound about his limbs and listened to the thrum of his heart inflate within his ribcage. She pressed her ear to the slight ravine that ran between his pectorals, and remembered the beast he had hidden away inside himself. She recalled his sharp teeth, angular snout and sunken eyes, and yet, reclined in the embrace of the fearsome Hell Lord, Dante closed her eyes and was replete.

He set her in the bed of down, and covered her, and for a while he stared. His presence was comforting as her body fell dormant. The press of something cold against her brow, the column of her throat and over the length of her body was but a whisper in the wake of her debility.

The experiments went on, and yet time stood still when they were together.

She consented to every prod and every poke that warranted pain. Even when the experiments grew grisly and the professor unsure, Dante urged him to sate his thirst for knowledge. Pain was fleeting, but her desire to be hooked to his lab and toyed with was paramount to everything but the clasp of his arms around her when it was over. His stoicism remained unchanged in the wake of his academic professionalism, until one day—or night, or moment in time—it was not.

Dante sat in a chair and watched as Belial extracted the gold yet bloodied ichor that meandered in her veins. Her face was a serene canvas with smouldering black eyes as he stooped on one knee before her with a knotted brow. The lines about his face were grave.

“You seem distracted today, Professor.” Dante’s porcelain hair was trailing down the back of the chair, past the seat towards the floor. He swatted it aside, frowning.

“We will have to cut this.” The ire in his voice careened against the laboratory walls until it was reflected back in angry cacophony.

Dante was quiet. Belial looked up, and seeing her turn her face aside, he paused to examine the few torn threads of hair caught between his fingers.

He sighed, and standing with the syringe filled with lifeblood, he placed it in his breast pocket. "I'm sorry, Dante."

"It's alright." She smiled as the tendrils fell to drift upon the floor. Was he ill? It had been awhile since she'd seen his wrath, but the outbursts were becoming more frequent.

"Shall we stop for today?"

"No, Professor."

"I suppose," he said, turning to find the gag, "that after all this time you are still eager to find the Throne of Treachery."

The Throne of Treachery?

She couldn't answer, but if she had, Dante wouldn't have known what to say. She hadn't thought about it a lot. She considered herself abandoned by Lucifer, left to fulfill the purpose the Wrath King had placed upon himself. It was painful to contemplate the future awaiting her at the conclusion of their contract, and what she might say if she ever saw the devil in his realm.

The inert member entered her mouth as Belial beckoned her to stand so that he could take her place upon the chair. He donned a pair of gloves, and from his waistcoat he withdrew the device with a single button that beckoned him to stop the experiments. Dante never used it. Would he ever be so angry that she would feel the need to depress it?

He slid the device into her hand and guided her to his lap. She couldn't help but shiver.

He had never before invited her to him in such a way that seemed intimate.

"Have you been counting the days, Dante? The hours? The amount of times my machines have fucked you?"

Her eyes widened at his use of profanity, and her breathing became shallow at the instinctual urge to still her

heart and quiet her pulse to keep herself from trembling. Belial, with his hands spread along her hips, paused. With care, he lifted a hand to pull her hair to the side as he sat back and guided her legs apart until they hung open on either side of his thighs. Commination laden his voice.

“I suppose you can’t wait to be rid of me,” he continued, pressing a finger inside the soft folds of her womanhood as she whimpered. Dante tried to shake her head, but as he cupped at her mound and swirled his palm against her clitoris, her muscles contracted as the sensations of his care left her dazed.

“You must be *thrilled* to know that my experiments have yielded results, that I am on the cusp of *knowing* you and your infection.”

No... She whined and shook her head. Was time already ending?

“Lies.” Honeyed nectar glistened on the petals of her labia as Dante suckled upon the gag. It yielded within her mouth. She ground her hips upon his pelvis, arching her back as her rump gyrated against him and ushered the Wrath Lord to seek gratification within the eager solace of her body. The stirring of his loins was encouraging. Belial sighed, and pulled the syringe from his pocket. Sinking his fingers deeper inside her, he pumped them in and out as the seraphim leaned back and cupped his face, dropping the stop button to clatter on the floor as she craned her neck to kiss him.

She stopped as the flushed banks encompassing his mouth were pulled taut and Belial leaned away. Looking at her face, the sullen clouds that often filled his eyes returned.

“I’m sorry, Dante,” he said, removing his fingers and grasping her chin. His face transformed, lengthening his jaw and teeth as wrath threatened to burst from those clouds in a torrent.

He rolled his sleeve to expose the crook of his elbow, and forced the needle into her hand. The marbled red and gold swirled in patterns within the glass cylinder as he extended his arm for her to prick. “You once said to me that time was

infinite, and yet it shall end. You must be *happy*, Dante, to almost be rid of me.”

Dante hesitated as his face changed, and his cock grew large and tight against his trousers. His hand clapped around her throat and his grip flexed against her windpipe. Dante froze, needle in hand as he thrust against her. His body enlarged until his clothes frayed and tore and the syringe broke through the skin as the muscles beneath grew swollen.

She depressed the plunger, and as the liquid drained, his hold grew tenuous and his eyes widened. Before, with the centurion, she’d seen him transform, but now, as her own lifeblood filled his veins, something crept into his features, haunting the lines about his eyes and filling the sullen trenches of his brow with dread.

Belial sank back into the chair as his former form returned, but he looked less like a man—a Hell Lord—and more a marionette whose strings had been severed. Sitting on his knee, Dante was disquieted. She removed her gag, dropped it to the floor and cupped his cheeks, now gaunt with hollow bags that drooped beneath his eyes.

“Professor,” she called, her ardor gone, replaced with worry as he reached up to pat her knuckles and kiss at her palm.

“I’m sorry to worry you.”

“Why do you deny your wrath, Professor?”

A spark of a smile ignited his features, but was soon doused beneath the concern that brimmed within her gaze. “Because you don’t deserve my wrath, Dante. All you deserve is Heaven.”

Dante sat back and floundered in the gentle breeze of words that was meant to soothe. She supposed Heaven *was* all she deserved. Every wretched soul in Hell who wanted for more than torment... she understood why they wished to know her. Who was this angel, the seraph that fled the skies for Hell? What more could she want besides paradise? How *dare* she want more...

The Wrath Lord frowned in the wake of her despair, and reaching between them he cupped at her cheek and fingered the tears that spilled from the corner of her eyes. “Dante?” he called, troubled by her sudden change in psychology. “What did I say?”

“Nothing that wasn’t true.”

The pause between them calcified until the Wrath Lord’s vice-like fingers poised her chin to regard him. “You told Charon you sought Lucifer. You left Heaven and God and came here and *infected* yourself with sin because...?” he let go, and crumbled beneath the weight of his realization. She couldn’t deny it. *Wouldn’t* deny it. Because as foolish as it seemed, she did love the devil.

“If only Lilith had loved *me* so...” he said, halting her advance when she moved to comfort him. Standing, and slipping a hand beneath her as he rose, the Wrath Lord left his seat and went to the cage, bowing as he entered to lay her on the bed.

She was frozen in place by the harrowed understanding that made a tomb of his features. He festered before her eyes, his melancholy a pestilence that was catching.

“Professor, I—”

He shook his head, and with tight lips, caressed her forehead, curling her pearly hair behind her ears. “Not even God deserves such devotion,” he mused, turning to leave when she was tucked beneath the blanket. “Sleep, Dante, and let me wallow in my torment alone for a while.”

Canto VI

Dante woke to the sound of glass breaking. Not that her dreams were fragile, delicate things disturbed like an eggshell on a blustery day. In fact they were heart wrenching. A communion of thoughts pregnant with doubt.

If God loves all, does He love me? Does He love Lucifer? Does He love sin?

If God didn't love you, then you wouldn't exist!

Only a just God would say that He loves you, then watch as you wallow in preordained torment...

Preordained...

The voices laughed.

But as the lambasting meditations of the Hell Lords fell back beneath the veil of consciousness, Dante's muddled thoughts collected in the wake of shattering glass and foul roars of anger.

"Professor?" she called, pressing a palm to her forehead as she rose from the bed and gazed off towards the wall of jarred beings that wilted in pools of formaldehyde and blue colored ichor. Most of them had been upended, and their contents lay in a slush on the floor. The door to her cell had been closed, but in the tumult of Belial's ire it had creaked ajar and through the space he raged, bisected by the bars.

His doublet was askew, torn open at the throat. Its golden pin with the five point star of Hell was stuck in his collarbone, pulling his shirt awry as it pinioned it aside and exposed his chest. As he upended a table, and his arm swept over the surface of another, compounds and blood speckled his face, and left stains to hiss on his clothes.

"Professor!" Dante cried, the chain about her torso constricting its length as she attempted to reach the door.

"Useless! Your efforts are useless!" Belial roared, "Nothing is worthy of you, because nothing can possibly show

you the deference you'd offer *them*."

She tugged at the shackle that bound her, and stared out from her cage, tears blurring her vision as she paid respects to his outburst. Her presence ignored, the Wrath Lord raged. He broke instruments, tables, pulled the legs from metal fixtures and ripped apart his books until he reeled to regard her.

His hair screened his features, but amidst the ruin of his laboratory he wept, and she was stunned to see that her attention startled him.

"Professor..." the chain fell slack against the back of her calf, and with mouth agape, Dante left her cage to approach him. She stopped as he spoke, and his jaw tensed as though in effort to contain his bite.

"Your descent is cursed by a scorned sovereign. He could usher you to your throne, but won't, because you left Him for the devil..." Belial turned his head aside, and his nostrils flared as he withdrew his syringe from his pocket. "You *love* Lucifer." He spat the declaration like it was a curse, and looking up, his eyes were hard and vicious.

"*Don't* you, Dante?"

Dante's hands were a writhing knot of nervous fingers. "I love him."

"You left Heaven for him?"

She nodded. Belial chuckled, though the sound was void of mirth. "You *sought* Heaven... in Hell," he said, his conclusion incredulous. His shoulders slumped, and with an exhaustion that bordered upon defeat, the Wrath Lord let the syringe clatter to the floor as he righted a chair and sank into it.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," he said as he bent to watch the floor and cradle his head.

What did the Wrath Lord think of her? Was it folly to think that a fallen seraph could find her Heaven in Hell with the devil? Or was it folly to think that God would let her?

Her footfalls whispered between the debris, and her copper chain lengthened to fill the space between herself and the cage. She stooped on her knees and looked between the angled roof of his palms. Belial frowned, his face a ruin of wrath entombed within his own sullenness.

“I should have known the circle would tighten about my throat the moment I dared to hope,” he said. The ire was pulled from his features as he lowered his hands and cupped them to either side of her face, “but how can such a lovely thing be sepulcher to my dreams? How do I let you go on, knowing my lasting torment shall only grow with the distance you put between us?”

She reached between them to caress his hand. He drew away and looked askance towards the cage, then over the destruction he had wrought upon his lab. “There is no Heaven in Hell, Dante, and we who rule the eight circles know this greater than anything. Though we may govern the realm, we eight are perhaps the most bound by its torments.”

“You’re angry that I have to leave.”

Belial paused, but did not move when she reached between them to stroke a thumb across his cheek. Instead, he placed his hand atop her own, and closed his eyes, searching for a way to keep the sting from his words.

“I’m angry that you’ll leave for *him*, and that you may not find his throne because in Hell there is only suffering.” He inhaled, and looked back at her, and Dante was surprised to see the hurt in Belial’s eyes. “You deserve greater than the inferno, Dante, but every step you take will draw you further into Hell’s squalor and away from me.”

She pursed her lips, and finding the voices within her silent, Dante stood. Her name was etched upon his hand, the looping black patterns a sign of their contract. She knew he contemplated the completion of their covenant, as the Hell Lord traced the many-eyed circles of her epithet with care. The seraph would leave, and here he would dwell. Alone. Because why else would God have let His greatest angel leave Heaven but to torture him so?

“Feed me your wrath,” she said, leaning to settle each nubile thigh on either side of his lap. Belial veered back, his arms stiffening as they framed her form and refused to touch her.

“Dante—!”

“Give me your woe, and all your ire of Lilith.” She pressed herself down, feeling his loins between her legs as her chest heaved and closed the gap between them. “Let all of it be mine, Professor, for I’d rather you hate me, than to know that I harrowed you.”

The Wrath Lord loved her. Somehow. And though Dante knew when she left, he’d remain, she was troubled to think that her departure would kill what little humanity was left of him to love.

She kissed him, and tethered to the chair by her body, the Professor received the kiss with stiff revelation. Her bottom lip was soft against the chapped plane of his own, and Dante clutched at his lapels and wrenched free the Hell pin from his collarbone. Belial’s arms twisted about her waist as their mouths parted and her forehead pressed against his.

“I don’t wish to hate you, Dante,” the Wrath Lord said, sliding his fingers along the groove of her back and against the soft swell of her hips. Her skin prickled with tumultuous desire and her long, white hair fell from bare shoulders into the V of his open shirt. With every short exhalation released from out her trembling chest, Belial inhaled. With every breath he took, did he remember a time outside the inferno?

She groaned, and as her legs wrapped about his middle, Dante reached between them to rub a hand over the rigid fabric of his pants. Grazing her clit with her thumb as she released him from the confines of his clothing, Belial sighed, the sound concluding with a feral moan that caused his body to lurch.

“Dante...” it was a quiet threat, one signed in red trenches as his fingers sunk into her pliant hips, and stopped them from rocking against his building erection.

“Feed it to me,” she whispered. His cock twitched as her voice snaked into his ear. Already she could feel the pearl of precum budding atop the tip of his shaft, and licking her lips and letting her tongue linger on the edge of his earlobe, his grip lessened. “Fill me with your wrath, Professor.”

His body jerked as she lowered herself atop him and pushed him against the chair, “Hate me... love me, *use* me,” she whispered as her hands found her breasts and her hips undulated. She stared into his eyes, watching him with enrapt fascination as her black corneas whispered ashen trails at her temples. The teeth of the Glut King protruded past her bottom lip as Dante held back a fervid moan, and as the blackened talons—bequeathed by Greed—played at her nipples, a sensation at the base of her spine pulsed with the sway of her hips.

Belial tipped his head back and stared into the blackened abyss that was the ceiling of his laboratory. The soft glow from his imprisoned specimens was no more, yet light meandered from sconces upon the wall, throwing shadows to dance in the corner.

“I *already* love you. I’ve a-already *used* you.” His voice broke, and his mouth parted in parched desire. He pressed his fingers upon her thighs and Dante sat back and gripped the chair’s armrests. Her body was a landscape, the valley of her sex filled to bursting as the plane of her belly and rolling breasts gave way to the column of her throat.

Dante watched as his eyes roved over every inch of her plump, willing body with not the gaze of a scholar, but a Hell Lord drunk with sin. His brow furrowed.

“Wrath is dangerous, Dante,” he growled as his hands left her thighs and roamed the lissome swell of her stomach. His thumbs grazed her pubis, and as she slowed her ministrations atop his shaft, Belial splayed the delicate petals of her core, and pinched at the bud of her womanhood.

Dante moaned. It was enough to draw his eyes back to hers.

“Wrath isn’t like the others before it,” he confessed, milking the pleasure from her swollen clit as the fallen seraph tightened her muscles to swallow him whole. “It is a response, provoked when one feels wronged. Gluttony, greed, lust...” he continued, “are cravings.” Belial paused and licked his lips as his expression drew inwards and became perilous.

“Are you certain you wish to accept this Hell into your body, Dante? For *him*?”

She cried out, feeling his fingers tighten about her sex. She clenched herself around him in sweet expectation and her mouth was so wet with longing that she had to swallow to keep it from spilling out the corners of her lips.

“Y-yes,” her voice rasped, her expression bordering on angry reproach.

He pitched forward, locking his grip around her throat as he forced her body back towards him. His spectacles lay askew on his nose, but as Dante watched the professor’s eyes change, his pupils shrank into pits aflame in wrath.

He thrust into her, forcing her tight against his pelvis as his teeth grew sharp like spades. “So be it, then,” he growled, his mouth catching hers like a vice.

She could feel his worming tongue coax her lips apart and suckle at the ardent moisture of her mouth as he grunted. His clothes tore from his body, and hung in shreds as his torso thickened. Standing to force her against the wall, the Wrath Lord lapped at her jawline as she gasped and locked her ankles at the small of his back.

Though his form had grown, he held back. His face was a mad portrait, but it was still the mask of a man, and as her body ached to oblige his size, she kissed him, angry that he would refuse her.

“Give it to me. All of it!” she wailed, bracing herself on his shoulders as she pistoned against his cock. Her nails raked his back, encouraging his ire and ushering his prick deeper with every slam of his hips. He bit at her collarbone

and her flesh pinched between sabered fangs. Another spasm of pain stung at the small of her back.

She had no time to consider it as the Wrath Lord launched backward, whirling to ram her face down upon a table. The cool surface licked at her breasts as her core gasped from his abrupt exit, but as he buried his head between her legs, Dante howled as a small rivulet of gold-scarlet lifeblood ran down to bisect the long pillar of her throat.

He isn't doing it right, she thought, baring her teeth as he suckled at the opening of her sex and drew the thick folds of her labia into his mouth. It felt good, it felt... *iniquitous*, but he was still holding back, and buffeted by sin, Dante thought to remedy that.

She reached behind, fisting a handful of his hair as her back formed a slope between them. With strength born from the second, third and fourth circles, Dante forced him to slow, drawing him along the bud of her clit to the puckered opening of her ass.

She held him there. Shaking beneath the ministrations of his tongue as she wriggled her hips and bent until her belly touched the table and her rear was on display. "All the knowledge in the world," she hissed, "and you can't figure out how to satisfy me?"

Belial snarled, his eyes glinting with menace as he continued to pierce her crevasse. "Be careful, Dante," he warned, taloned fingers grasping her middle as he lowered his head to dip into the sodden basin of her thighs.

"Why?" she spat, her mind crazed by hellish authority. She hadn't noticed the long fleshy stem sprout from the small of her back until it whiplashed in wild abandon above his head. But as he paused to talk, the blackened tail, tipped in a cleft diamond, wrapped about her inner thigh to pump its barbed head into her body.

The Wrath Lord slammed her down again, standing to full height before bending over the table to ease himself inside her. With one hand clamped around the nape of her neck, Belial's body continued to grow, his face elongating into a

toothy snout lined with tines. His cock lengthened and pushed at the walls of her ass. She could feel him as she pleased herself.

“A muddy blend of sin, and fouled for what? A mourning star sat in ice...”

Dante whined, the high pitched sound descending to a guttural rumble as he spoke. His movements were slow, and allowed her body to adjust to his size, but as his sullen fury began to reinvigorate his loins, she jerked forward.

“I never asked for your love,” she said, forcing him from her body as her knees slipped over the fogged surface of the table to face him. His skin blackened. Veins of hellfire that glowed like live embers settled in the grooves of his chest, between his pectorals and abdominals. They spiraled in patterns over the taut hills of his shoulders, and wound about his face and the quartet of horns that crowned his head. But as she placed both hands upon his torso and lunged from the table, he fell back, collapsing atop the refuse that littered the floor.

“Lilith used you. Maybe even *God* used you—” she began, her legs struggling to straddle him and force the length of his cock deep inside of her, “but what we had was a *contract!* Give me your fucking wrath!”

Glass crunched. Flesh opened. Howls of rage filled the laboratory as Dante bucked with tantrum fury in the wake of the Wrath Lord’s lust. A war of sex, witnessed not only by the three circles of excess but by the familiar eye of Violence, echoed from the realm and fed the raging centurions, soldiers and souls caught in the gales of battle on the shores of the Styx.

Dante came in the heart of it all. Not in the confines of his darkened lab, but back on the plains of wrath. Mad ghosts skewered each other at the base of the mountain she had descended with God, while Dante heaved amongst them, skewered by Belial, his shaft pumping warm cum inside her sex. Wraiths shrieked from the dome above that served as a barrier from Greed, but they were drowned by the pair’s roars

of lust that quelled even those sullen souls that floundered beneath the boiling river Styx. Rage, lust, greed and gluttony was a dissonance in Dante's mind, but as her eyes grew dark and her voice was buried beneath the howls of the Hell Lords, Dante collapsed. Darkness fell. She slept as wrath coursed out her loins and cooled upon the turf.

The City of Dis

Canto I

The realm hummed with silence. The battles of Wrath were a distant hush in the wake of the lapping water. Gargling with the choked pleas of those who drowned beneath, it was the accursed's cries that woke her.

She lay amidst the burnished gold that tumbled haphazard from the cast iron pot of Charon. The psychopomp, adorned with the woeful robe of the sullen, churned her cosmic oar in the swill of the river as she watched over the Styx and its calcified chimneys as they glugged with smog.

“Welcome back, Mikha’el.” Her face, freckled in stars, shifted beneath the luminescence of her four bright eyes and formed a constellation of rare curiosity.

Dante inhaled, wincing at her body’s objection, picking herself up from the hull of the punt. A shroud of cobwebs draped over her, spun by hellish fingers to hide her nudity. They tore as she rose to her haunches.

“Where’s Belial?” she asked, spinning her new-grown tail about her torso, if only to keep its feral movements tamed.

Charon smiled, though the eddy of her expression didn’t affect the brightness of her eyes.

“Professor Wrath is gone, back on the banks of his realm.” Her quasars winked. “And here I carry you to Dis, completing your fare.”

Dante stood to look over the quaint stern of the vessel out along the wavering back of the Styx. Anger, conceived in the seraph’s belly, underdeveloped and foreign, rose like bile in her throat.

“He left?” she said, her face mottled.

“The contract concluded. You must go on. He cannot. The lord of the fifth circle shall dwell here in sin as you search for your throne, Mikha’el. He paid for your voyage long ago, did he not?”

Dante paled, her emotions spinning until she bent double and clutched at her stomach. Tears welled in the corners of her blackened eyes.

I didn't ask for your love.

And yet...

You're glad to have it, aren't you, Whore?

She looked at her hands. The fetters of gold, left by Lord Leviathan, bound each long, charred talon. Her teeth, settled on the wounded surface of her lip, pinched, while streams of tar marred her cheeks as she sobbed for the fate of the Wrath Lord.

What was she *becoming*?

The City of Dis hung on the horizon and with it came a new Hell Lord, a new challenge. How much more could she take? There was so much unknown in the Nether Hells below. Where was Lucifer? Where was God? Why was her shame punctuated with such ire and appetite that she wished to stay?

“Charon... Does he suffer?” she asked.

The figure said nothing, fingering the grooves of her paddle as she pushed at the viscid waters.

“We all suffer in Hell. The farther you descend the more you will understand. But—” The iron walls of Dis, grooved at its base by the clawing marks of woeful souls, cleft the waters edge. “You've given the Wrath Lord solace for a time.”

“I don't understand.”

“He believes he loves you. Before that, he only hated Lilith.”

She didn't understand, but as the boat banked the pulpit to Dis, Charon turned. “The fare has been paid.”

“But—”

“Take care, Mikha'el. May your virtue sustain in paradise.”

Dante stepped away and stumbled atop the platform as she turned to watch the waters churn beneath the ferryman's boat. The winking stars in the oarsman's face were veiled behind her cloak, but as the punt became a shape of darkness in the distance, Dante balked at the figure of a man: stood upon the Styx.

“Professor?”

Adorned in a collared suit and vest, the insignia of Hell flashed in the wake of the water's cerulean glow. He held out his hand, and the many eyed wheels of her name moved in tandem to the stroke of a pen.

Time is endless, Dante. And for a time I loved you, knew you, became part of you.

A copper ring appeared around the tip of her tail. But on the belly of the waters, Belial vanished.

I shall give you the knowledge of Wrath.

Canto II

Heresy, the voices hissed.

The Gates of Dis: a ruinous, iron basin that resembled the aged crown of a skull bashed asunder. Bordered by the river Styx, the crumbling behemoth veined in steel was cleft down the center, ending in a road of polished obsidian that sloped from the pulpit that was Charon's dock. Leading into a crevasse that was the inner gate to Dis, the multi layered city rose high into the orange dome of the sixth circle, capped with dilapidated ramparts and rusted flues filled with fire.

Beneath the obsidian road: the flash of spirits lost, and above, as she walked, the Furies shrieked, haunting the lithe corridors and stockades haphazardly tucked into any available space. The stone was warm beneath her feet, and for a while she continued to turn, staring out towards the dock to where the Wrath Lord had once stood atop the mucilaginous waters of the Styx.

The City of Dis! The City of Dis! the Glut King buzzed in her ear.

Beings of old, who wallow in ancient rites...

An apt place for a whore...

Fire licked at the borders of the polished black path between the outer and inner gate, but as the vaulted spires, wreathed in flame bowed their heads over the gates filled with shrieking Eumenides, the ground that framed the hellish bridge gave way to a steep ember shelf of glowing hot, pulsing coals.

“Are you certain, Dante, that you wish to enter the City of Dis, a district of woe in the temples of Hell?”

The angel looked up, the sable eyes of Virgil stark in the darkness that surrounded Him.

“You—”

“This is the end of the passionate sins, and the start of the sins of the mind. Knowledge is a burden Dante. A hole

where gravity pulls all evil, is darkest and most terrible at its base.”

Dante stumbled, her sorrow displayed in the tears in her eyes. Her knees hit the sheer surface of the dark path. Her taloned fingers raked its back, marring her reflection.

“Why? Why come now, Lord? Why come here, *to me*? When there are so many others that seek your understanding.”

He looked away, over her head towards the outer gate of Dis, and sighed. His cloak and robes of gray and white were still, and mirrored in the path’s reflection like a light that drew in darkness.

“You said—When you were Virgil, you said you came at the behest of Lucifer. Why doesn’t he come? Why won’t you bring me to him?”

The poet smiled. His eyes of sadness winked in the wake of the hellish Furies that meandered the sky in reckless abandon. The distance closed between them. He placed His hand upon her shoulder and sat and embraced her. His cheek pressed against hers as His locks of hair soaked up her tears and spun a robe of yellow to adorn her form.

“True knowledge and understanding isn’t something that can be gifted. It isn’t *good* but neither is it evil. There are repercussions to *knowing*, Dante.”

Yes, there was, and like an arrow through her heart she let her feelings burst from out her mouth, clawing to retrieve them even as they left her lips. “I’ve lost my faith, Lord.”

He said nothing, but from His breast, a comforting warmth invited her into His house for solace.

“If the present world should go astray, the cause is in you. In you, it is to be sought.”

He pulled back, and like a child ushered from their mother’s womb, Dante wept for the loss of her house. “Go into Dis. Know if you wish. Understand yourself, then perhaps you will understand me.”

His body faded into celestial light that drew in the darkness and became motes upon the surface of Hell's obsidian bridge. Like minute water particles, they hissed into oblivion, and His sable eyes closed behind the phantom mist they produced until she was alone once more, adorned in yellow.

Dante stood, and wiped her cheeks: sodden with ash and soot. She was certain that Virgil—that *God*—had not been summoned to guide her by the devil, but that He had come to hold her fear and let her eyes see unclouded by hate. But the question stood. Where was Lucifer? And if he *had* asked God to guide her... why?

“He works in mysterious ways.”

Drawn by the honeyed tenor of the creature before her, Dante watched as a lone, lithe man considered the icy stone where God's inverted shroud had cast its celestial light. Clothed in black trousers and a jacket bisected with two, pointed tails, his eyes were a mirror of the obsidian bridge, pricked with a single star in the center that fanned out from his temples to the curtain of black hair that framed his face.

He smiled at her with a mouth too wide, and barbed eyes. His nose was thin and tapered like a dirk, which mimicked the stature of his slight frame disguised beneath the bulk of his servants uniform.

“Who are you? Are you here to hinder me?”

The demon laughed. He was not standing but afloat, perched upon the gales of Hell from blackened wings affixed to each ankle.

“On the contrary, my dear. I've been sent to fetch you by Dis.” He bowed, and crossed his ankles as he gestured with gloves upon each hand. “My name is Hermes.”

Hermes? It was the name that had spilled from the mouth of the Wrath Lord, and it stirred a recall in her mind. “A dead god, slain by your people and buried here in the cemetery of the sixth circle.”

“Not slain, but content to wallow here in the heresies of our religion. We’ve kept a few of our people... they serve us, still.”

Dante stilled, and clutched at the neck of her God-gifted robe. The inner gates of Dis yawned like a mouth split sideways, waiting to swallow her. She stalled. What would the heretics of the sixth circle demand? Centuries? Servitude?

“A walk,” the god replied, already bent on his heel towards the forward path to Dis. “And to bear witness, perhaps, to our existence.”

Canto III

Hermes floated like a pillar of flame held aloft by a wick of gaseous wings. They proceeded through the inner gate, and Dante watched the roads of teeth, set into the mortar of the port, sweat in the wake of the inferno. Insect creatures slithered, and gnashed between the grooves of the gaping entryway. As her footfalls rushed to gain permit to the wicked city, inside, great towers, squat adobes, and colonnades were bridged with a ribbon of fire.

The ground was a patchwork of carbuncles that seeped with hot slag. Contained within a path of wrought copper and stone buildings that crested the sky, they inflated with sighs issuing from the circles beneath it. A skeletal dome lofted above steepled towers, glistening as though covered with glass. As one hapless Fury soared inside, Dante sucked in through her teeth. Huddling spiders, knit together, not by glass but webbing, tore the creature apart. It screamed, and the echo of its pain was rattling.

“Is that—”

“Anansi is his name.” Hermes clasped his hands behind him, tugging at his cuffs as he continued passed. He paid little mind to the hulking arachnid that crawled out from the body of the dome. Dante’s stomach lurched as it wove a silken casket about the shrieking Eumenide. How had people worshipped beings such as this?

“He likes to fish for prey when he’s bored, but weaves a great story if you dare to climb his temple.”

Dante paled while Hermes grinned. His face, flecked in stardust, pulsed in frame about the eclipse of his eyes. The creature Anansi, who was neither spider nor man, spun his eight limbs about his catch until it fell silent from the silk that filled its throat.

“Demons...” she uttered, afraid for the souls who claimed homage to such beasts.

“Not gods?” he tsked, “What a long way to fall.” Hermes snickered.

They came to a groove in the floor that resembled a tunnel that had lost its roof. Along its belly, granite steps, worn with time, slipped downward.

His back was an ebony plane as they descended, save for Hermes’ gloves which were stainless pearl. They bisected his suit as he crossed his hands at the base of his spine, right at the stitch that parted his coattails.

“The presence of you and your kin obfuscated the path to God from man,” Dante continued, outstretching her arms to grasp the walls for purchase. They were filthy with grime, and as her nails raked the surface, trenches appeared in the muck and ordure. “If not for you, humanity might have known Him sooner.”

Hermes laughed, his voice like a jester. “Then we can’t be *all* bad, then? Hmm?”

She frowned, and stumbled as her robe caught her foot. The steps, laden by the trod of the damned, were smooth like ice, but as Dante fell forward—her head aimed to bounce against the stones—Hermes caught her, afloat on his wings.

“You’re not dead gods, but demons...” she said, her sadness a mote in her smoking, black eyes.

Her tail had entwined up his arm as he had bent almost double to catch her. With his hand on her back, he looked like a dancer juxtaposed to catch his partner with dramatic pomp. She was pinned as he lifted her leg and left the other dangling slack at the knee, but as she grasped his doublet for purchase, his black currant eyes grew foul with mischief.

“With all due respect, my dear, *I’m* not the one who resembles a demon...” His tongue licked his teeth, and dropping her leg he fingered her jaw as she was bent back in the shape of a crescent. “But what big teeth *you* have!”

Dante scowled, her wrath a sudden wave that enveloped all intention. As he pressed the pad of his finger

upon her incisor in an effort to keep her mouth agape, she wrenched him forward by the tie around his throat.

She bared her teeth, her talons sharp at the ready, and tail wound about him, constricted until his arm was snared and his bicep throbbed. “If you don’t unhand me, I’ll sink them into your skull...”

The dead god paused, his face a portrait of alarm that alchemized to a stone veneer, rife with interest. The generals whispered in her ears, laughing and chattering, calling her whore, but at the forefront of them was the Wrath Lord, who stared out from her eyes as a safeguard and shield.

“Apologies,” his tenor whispered and he stepped away, letting her fall to the balls of her feet. “I overstepped, perhaps? It’s a simple thing to do when one hovers from the ground.” He wheeled to continue down the stairs, and from his palm his Caduceus formed. Its twisted, wingéd snakes were plated with lead and brass. It was the length of a man, and speared at one end. At its crown was an orb of pale opal. It whirled in his hand as he paused on the lip of a canyon to regard the flaxen fumes of sulphur in the distance.

Dante balked, stunned at her outburst as she swallowed back the lump of shame that sat heavy in her chest. Not only shame, but lust, and want for the staff that he held at his side.

Are we becoming too much to handle, Sweet?

Do you think he would taste good, Mistress? Like dove or quail or squab?

“Hermes!” she called, scuttling down the stairwell, her phantom veil of hair flaring around her shoulders. How had such wicked words forced their way through parted lips? She needed to control herself, control the knowledge of the generals she gained in her journey. She feared she would lose herself, succumb to Hell if not. “I’m sorry—”

“As am I, my dear. For your flight to Dis will alight on my shoulders.” He inhaled, the elfin cask of his chest distending as he looked out over the ledge of the festering wasteland. Charred buildings were alive with fire. Men burnt

with hands in the air and filled the avenues between structures like lamplights, while ossuaries, unearthed and displayed proudly, fumed yellow with brimstone and spectres.

“What *is* Dis? Is it the city or the name of the Lord of this circle?” Dante stared into the gully of heat and smog, watching as the heretic denizens crept along the paths and loitered like dust.

Hermes giggled, a response that seemed common to him. “Circle six has many Lords. Dis is the city, but also the Lord. They were here first, so we pay homage to them, however...” Once again he looked over the plain. The scent of death whispered across her face. “You will find that deep in the broth of Heresy, we all dwell and rule and flounder.” He smiled, and offered a hand to her. “But whether you call us dead gods or demons matters not, because despite it all we’ve developed a taste for deity... I can show you, my dear, if you wish.”

She didn’t have a choice, and from the glint in his eyes he knew that too. To descend the crater that was the realm of Heresy she would need wings, and without them, Dante was stuck, watching as the mouth of Hell yawned breathless and dark.

Dante took his hand and they jumped from the cliff, his Caduceus piloting their descent as the pinions on his feet rustled at his heels like dead fronds. He smelled of incense and honey, but also stale, like a breath exhaled from buried lungs that had long since filled with air.

The city drew inward as they dove, and funnelled down into steep crags rooted in place by the gigantic spires and platforms of the damned. Deep in its cavities, labyrinthine passages squirmed back from the central valve in which they descended, ending in a honeycomb of chambers barely lit with rivulets of molten rock. Hermes danced along the thermals and leapt towards the center of the vacant column that burrowed deep into the nether hells. Dante watched as the anatomy of the sixth circle frothed in smoke and expelled hot earth in fiery streams.

The fumes of the smog became dense, but as they capered downwards, unfettered by roads that meandered back into strange complexities, a disk that settled in the heart of the pit lay over the yawning expanse like an emblem. It was anchored in place by four stone boughs: a cypress tree, petrified with time. The seething exhaust from below continued to waft through the space that ringed the fastened platform.

Hermes alighted on its lip, and gestured for her to leave his arms before Dante stepped down to feel the cool surface beneath her feet. It was made of pale ivory, and etched into every available space were diagrams of gore and splendor. In the center of the disk, a temple stood, white and gleaming, with eaves of ivory dragons whose mane licked the sky. It had three stacked roofs, and tusks that jutted out from a path that spanned around the temple's frame. Ivory hands, holding pots and hollowed skulls in hope for alms, lawned the temple's perimeter, while a thin bridge, lithe like a serpent's tongue, was guarded on both sides by sentinels.

"This was once called the Nekromanteion by mortals, but now we dead gods—or demons—" he grinned, "call it the Temple of Bones."

"It's beautiful," Dante murmured. Beautiful as much as it was haunting. There was a macabre ambiance to the stark white ivory that sat in the pit of the city. Like a milky film over a blind man's eye.

What lay beneath it, deep in the brain of Hell where Lucifer dwelt?

"Are you not coming?" Hermes turned around at the lip of the bridge and stood mesial of the two sentinels. Rhadamanthus and Anubis, dual judges of the dead, roamed their eyes across her figure like her presence was a pestilence. The latter growled, hooked teeth bared beneath black gums as he clenched a fist around golden scales. A pool of blood lay drying on one pan, while in the other plate, a feather'd been placed.

“This one isn’t dead. And only the undergods may enter here.”

Hermes sighed, and rolled his eyes as his winged limbs spun him round. Dante watched as the spangled god floated up, above the dog-headed being bedecked in gold, and gestured back towards her.

“Dante Mikha’el may enter,” he said, moving past and along the back of the ivory bridge.

Anubis snarled, while Rhadamanthus stared. “To whom does she worship?” he asked.

The other guard looked like a man. A diadem of bone adorned his brow and grasped in his hand was a flogger.

“The brother of Minos knows well who she is,” Hermes cackled, clicking his Caduceus upon the rail. “Dante is a servant of He who has placed us here, but before she can pass, those of this realm would like... words.”

Dante was quiet, and met the gaze of Anubis who broke from his stance to approach her.

“Mikha’el,” he snorted, spittle foaming at the corners of his snout. “You look like no angel to me. Shall I weigh your heart, see with my own eyes what you truly are?” He stooped to look her in the eye, and held out his scales as the blood from the pan sloshed on the ground.

“There was a time I carried scales such as these,” Dante said, reaching out to touch them, pausing before her fingers dared to grace the gilt surface of its plate. “But now I’d be afraid of judgement, for if I have a heart it will be heavy. Burden is what I bear now.”

“Burden!” Anubis growled, “It’s sin I see. It manifests in your eyes, your mouth, your hands, your body. A poison that pumps from the heart *and* brain!” He snapped forward. His scales chimed from the sudden jerk. Reaching inside her, Anubis’ blackened claws closed around a lump of flesh and tore it free from out her chest.

Bones snapped, golden gore veined in scarlet plopped upon the argent floor. Dante reeled, and may have fallen back,

but as the demon dog opened his fist and plunged it again through the hole in her chest, she was speared in place, eyes as wide as harvest moons.

Hermes bore witness, while Rhadamanthus gaped with novel panic run amok on his face. As Anubis dove deeper, leaning his search within the cavity of her torso, his forthright demeanor quit, and reshaped into worry.

“What *is* this?” he said, his voice heavy and hoarse. Anubis pulled back. Dante retched, the sound drowned out by the clatter of scales. A paste of pale cream had adhered to his arm, but as Anubis lurched, and tried to draw back his limb with the other, he fell, letting go with a snap as the substance inside her withdrew.

“Idiot!” Hermes shrieked from the bridge, the scent of honey and incense in her nose.

“It’s leaven.”

It’s sin...

“She hasn’t a heart. She’s a seraph!”

The voices whirled in a fervent tornado, but as she sat, the eye of the storm, Dante grasped the mouth of the well that Anubis wrestled from her body. Where a heart should have beat there was leaven, viscous and wet. She paled at the sight of it, but as Hermes insisted she stand, the wound had already begun to knit, and the substance dried into powder.

“Why—”

“See? She has nothing to weigh.” Nothing. Heartless. Filled yet empty.

Hermes dusted her off, and examined the tear in her robe with a tsk before turning.

“She can pass,” Rhadamanthus stated, moving aside from the path as Anubis stood and gathered his scales. The once dog-faced god of death inclined his head, and as Hermes led the way, Dante followed.

What type of substance had perforated her form? Her body of a woman, created in the likeness of Eve, was without

a heart. The absence of humanity's nucleus was concerning, yet the abundance of matter housed in her body was grave. Angels, the Seraph, were spirits envisioned in flesh. They often lacked the vitals that humans carried to function. Yet... developing sin, incubating inside of her, was turning her gold blood red.

Are you surprised, my sweet? Asmodeus whispered. You've already transformed. The moment your feet graced the surface of Limbo, you were a heavenly spirit no more.

You're ours now.

The price of knowledge, Mistress. Does it satisfy?

She licked at her fingers. They tasted like bread. Good. Warm...

Don't forget why you came, Dante. Why you left.

"To find him," she whispered, as Hermes reeled back. The stygian doors of the Nekromanteion rose like a monolith, its matte surface resembling an absence of space in the bone yellowed plane of the temple. The dead god Hermes, afloat on his wings, was framed in the gates as they opened. His coattails fluttered. His Caduceus shone.

"Are you ready?" he said.

Dante looked back, and watched as the fear of the sentinels caused them to stand stiff like stone effigies. She imagined in Heaven, if she encountered herself at the portal to paradise, what her judgement may be. Would she send herself away, to plummet to Hell? What would Mikha'el think of Dante?

"I am," she replied. Though she wasn't at all.

And through the gate she entered the theatre of Dis...

Canto IV

A phantom in the dark. Dante waved her hand in front of her face. A faint outline was all she could discern. Even the golden rings that adorned her fingers were dulled past the obsidian door of the Nekromanteion. The occasional clap of footsteps resounded in her ears, but they were not her own, and even when Dante called out to Hermes he did not answer.

The room smelled musty, if a room was what it could be called. The only sounds that were born from her trek travelled far into the vaulted rafters to shoot back at her like cannonfire. The feeling of being the only known person in the world, despite the sounds, invaded the forefront of her mind like a tsunami; but as Dante crept forward, over the chilled, glass-like floor of the temple, the tide of anxious imagination ebbed in the wake of a vermillion glow.

“Where is this?” Dante asked, expecting no reply. The darkness yawned like a curtain, withdrawing into the dimly lit background of the colonnades. Clustered together beneath a laced mezzanine, each column was bordered in gold fashioned like saw-toothed stalactites. They stood side by side in the rounded pantheon, with ruby sconces aglow from above and setting the room ablaze in red. Marble statues stared out at the center of the room, their stoic faces made angry from the carmine hue.

“Who are these beings?” Dante asked, stepping out onto the polished floor as her reflection danced beneath her. There were open books at the foot of each statue. They were large and browned with age, with gilt borders and nicks along the spine.

“These are the undergods... Hades and Hela, Ereshkigal and Nergal.” Hermes pointed his Caduceus to a few, appearing from the floor in a twist of smoke. “Any god that once ruled over the underworld resides here, and at their feet lie the ledgers of the dead. Each one documents every loyal follower that the god presided over—presides over still,” he corrected.

Dante walked deeper inside the temple's cavernous belly. An idol of a woman, chiseled from jet, flailed her four hands filled with gore. Her skirt was made from severed arms, pulled from the elbow of men, and around her neck a hoop of heads festered, tethered by flesh and ribbons. Like a grave marker, her name was written upon the floor, but the title above it read: R. I. P.

"Do you have a statue here?"

"No," he said. "But I am their messenger, so they allow me to enter..." Hermes walked towards her, looming like a cliff about to fall. "No doubt you are unfamiliar with them. How could you possibly know any god but Him?" He chuckled. "But they do exist, *have* existed... in a time where He was not."

"*He* always was. Unlike you."

"And now we always will be." Hermes turned to regard her. "All humans, all *beings with souls*, whether punished or not, have immortal life after death. We may be younger than He, but we have all the time in the world to *learn*."

"Learn what?"

Hermes turned away, stifling a laugh with a pinch of his lip. "You couldn't be old enough to know, if you don't," he mocked. "But regardless, *these* are the rulers of Dis," he spread his arms wide, "They *are* Dis."

Tombs: blasphemous shrines dedicated to the memory of preserving ignorance and apostasy. "There are only idols here."

"Then look deeper, Dante." Hermes grinned and the expression lingered as his body was swallowed by the Tartarean background.

Dante stood alone in the gutted temple of the undergods. With a frown, she stooped to hug her knees and bury her head in her arms.

What was to come next? What other trials was she to endure before she could find the heart of Hell?

Dante inhaled. Faith alone was not enough anymore. She had lost it. She was imperfect, filled with sin and carnal demands birthed from the loss of a loved one. What did these dead gods—who harboured the devotion of men and women, know that she did not? What did they glean from humanity?

Let's find out, Mikha'el!

Dante stared at her reflection alive in the floor. Adorned in a violet robe, the face of the woman echoed her own, but was serene, her eyes dense with fog. She held out a hand through the barrier between them, and the fleshy tone of her fingertips wobbled at the surface from its trespass. Not blackened with greed, nor adorned with gold founded by sin, her hands were pure. Dante grasped them, and feeling the gentle tug of strength pull from the other side, her eyes widened as the floor opened to consume her.

Debris from her robe dispersed throughout the colloidal substance, forming pockets that withdrew as she was pulled downward. Parting like flesh, the liquid became aqueous the further she descended, but as the cardinal tint diffused and began to glimmer like a sapphire, Dante descried a trembling surface, marbled with foam like the surface of a sea.

It broke with a surge, the sound of her sudden inhale deafening all other noises in the chamber. Dante rushed to fill her lungs, her clambering feet finding purchase in the heart of a shallow pool. Her robes were heavy as she pulled the curtain of wet hair from her face, but as she watched the water ripple out to lap at the sides of a large bath, the floor turned marble. The viscous crimson of the prior room had vanished. The hand, and her reflection had also vanished.

No longer in the audience of the undergod graveyard, Dante stood, waist high in a basin of steaming water the size of eight men in circumference. Women and men, nude or adorned in a white linen gown, lounged along the water's edge and amidst the cage of colonnades that bordered the room. They stared at her, soulful eyes brimming with wonder as she walked to the lip of the pool.

Souls. Though far from hellish their environment seemed.

Viridescent jade walls, lit by torches and the cerulean crest of the wading pool, were crowned in a glass ceiling that looked above into an empty chamber. A broad set of stone steps hooked to the water's edge by a long granite path and led up to the second floor. On the bottom step was Hermes, his Caduceus gone, his Cheshire grin eternal.

"Are you ready to meet them?" he asked, his canines flashing from the corners of his mouth.

Her robes dragged as she stepped from the water to the polished plank of stone. "Who are these people?"

"Playthings," his voice was demeaning. "Names in the book who serve their masters. There are many more upstairs and scattered about circle six, but even dressed as you are, there are none so enchanting as you, my dear."

She scanned her robes, soiled and heavy with water that trailed from her stride. Hermes left to climb the stairs. The weight of the yellow fabric hung like an anchor as she followed.

"I don't understand," she said.

Hermes chuckled, though he did not turn. His body dispersed in a ribbon of smoke, his voice echoed in the space around him. "There are few of us here who would turn away at the opportunity to possess a seraphim. How delightfully snide it would be if one of God's own had written their name in our books, let alone *you*, who was His greatest."

Hermes' words punctured her mind with guilt, and feeling its effects, she hung her head.

His greatest no more, but not so foolish as to put my faith in anyone but Him. Dante balled her hands into knots, letting Wrath in. Hermes was gone however, nothing but a scent of honey in the air.

She climbed the steps, ignoring her pitiable image displayed on the jade walls of the chamber. She looked out over the throng of pious acolytes. Devoted to demons

masquerading as the divine, she saw them with tragic despair. Like the babes in Limbo who were hardly born with sin, what did these souls do to deserve damnation?

Most Heretics here knew of God's light, Dante. They knew and refuted Him because they thought they knew more than to know God.

“Professor Wrath?”

These so-called gods, Dante, who were born from Him, went into the world and cultivated man's mistrust by driving them away from the truth of God. So they were sent here, where they have forgotten their purpose and have run amok with their own wicked desires.

She reached the top of the stairs and faced a door glossed in a surface of satin black. Words of caution waved an alarm in her mind.

“What are they?” she asked, finding the handle and twisting it ajar.

They are Abel.

Canto V

The room was a body of sensations adorned in red curtains, sentient to the beings that made its anatomy a den of ancient practices. Dante stepped inside, and the environment conveyed her to its pudenda.

The lady Hades, splayed upon a cushioned church pew, screamed with sublime ardor as her lover Persephone drank at her loins with parched ferocity. The underlord's hair was a blossom of arctic flame, and burned lucent from the crest of her brow as she grasped her heaving chest and tipped her long neck back. Her ebony robe fell below her breasts and to either side of her hips, and although her legs were parted to either side of the swallowing dread queen, the thick column of Persephone's back obscured the sight of the lady's core.

Dante gasped, and listened as their names slithered from the tongues of the Hell Lords residing within. She stared at the Grecian underlords in abject fascination until the warmth in Dante's loins culminated in the desire to touch herself. She watched as Hades opened her eyes and smiled at her with pointed teeth. Persephone's long hair—that resembled a garden of wild flowers—entwined the Hell Goddess's feet and calves, but as Lady Hades drew her wife's face deeper into her lascivious cavern, a bead of saliva formed at the corner of Hades' mouth and fell along her jaw to settle in the hollow at her collarbone.

“Mmm,” she moaned as Persephone suckled at the nectar of her wetness, “Oh, Percie... yes-s, feed from me...”

Dante inhaled and looked away, moving to terminate her thoughts. She could feel the weight of her robes against her skin, and the coolness of the water invigorate her breasts until the erect buds of her nipples were visible beneath the canary cloth. Fighting to steel herself against her own lust and hunger and greed, Dante ripped at the neckline of her robe as she wandered the area for an exit.

The room snaked around, bordering the level below in a circlet of sin. The chamber was blocked to the right by the

boughs of a pomegranate tree. To the left it continued, its space obscured by the curve of the bower. Dante went, aligning her shoulder with the surface of the inner wall as she passed the lovers in coitus. The chamber ballooned like the throat of a serpent who'd swallowed a vulture.

The next room was wreathed in curling smoke that wound like a writhing worm from the tip of a man's cigarette. Seated on a human chair bound in place by leather restraints, he watched her from atop the rump of a bound man with sundry regard. His face was a canvass of permanent ink that lent the appearance of a human skull. His warm skin danced beneath the pattern of bones that had been etched upon his muscled physique, while a torc of bells jangled from his neck.

There were other men and women around him. Names engraved in his book. Two women were affixed to the wall, shackled by their wrists and ankles and each made to hold a light. Another knelt suppliant on the floor, her hands and knees splayed with her back arched beneath a plate of glass. She sat in the center of the room, adorned with sweetmeats and truffles while men tied with ropes were made to hold treasures and gems in their teeth.

"Here at last," the dead god said, inhaling his smoke and letting the vapor play about his parted mouth. Again the generals said his name, the Glut King crying out above the rest in ardent delirium. Dante was silent, keeping her pace as Ah Puch incited challenge from his eyes, but as the dead god stood and flicked his smoke, she watched another man stoop to catch it in his mouth and sigh when the deathlord stubbed it on its tongue.

"This place is..."

Fun... We could get so much enjoyment from this circle, Mistress...

Next was Osiris, his crook and flail at odds with the myriad of souls that bowed to receive its kiss. A white atef adorned his brow while the pharaoh's beard sat rigid against his square chin. He leered at a man bent double, drawing his crook over the curve of the human's spine as another god—*Erlík*,

Leviathan hissed—claimed the poor soul’s mouth with his cock.

Men and women around them coupled without restraint, some bound or attired in costume. Though Erlik was older, with a winding black beard that swayed below his knees, he had a chin like a hammer. His horns, which bucked with every thrust he made into the enrapt slave, were the roots of trees, while Osiris’ skin was the youth and color of vibrant green papyrus.

They paid Dante no mind as she crept by and stepped over limbs that moved with avid thirst upon the floor of clay and iron. But as Osiris leaned atop the man he shared with Erlik Khan, his cheeks were flushed as their deific tongues combined and his flail of beads sought flesh for pain and pleasure. An orgy of thrills, Dante’s heart knocked with vehement desire as she hurried by and her feet left prints that were drug asunder by her robe.

Nergal and Ereshkigal, Hela, Mot, Baal, Anath. These names whispered as Dante sought the room’s end. Her robe by now was a heavy burden, ripped at the neck and choking as the woolen threads rubbed an angry trench upon her throat. Hermes stood in front of a door, right from a briar of boughs. Dante paused, her face in bloom from all the scenes she witnessed.

“Ready, Dante?” he asked with poise, his grin a traitor to the grace he maintained. The seraphim frowned, shamefaced despite her ire of the ceremonies in Dis.

“For what? To be a slave to these god pretenders? To stay in perpetuity in the realm of heretics and charlatans?”

Hermes laughed. The sound carried past the carnal moans of the temple denizens. “I thought you sought the devil, Dante? No charlatans take shelter *here*, but as I said, bear witness to us. A walk inside,” he gestured to the door, “a chance for them to persuade you...”

“To what?”

“To stay,” he said. “To sign their books. To become their clergy.”

“No.” She’d given too much of herself already, and though lust hummed inside of her, she prayed she would stay strong.

He twitched his brow, then nodded. “Your face says otherwise, however... No will suffice, though if you seek Treachery, you should know the realms that sit at its base.” Hermes turned, his coattails inhaling as he opened the door. Dante stood affixed to the floor, the scent of his honeyed words commingling with the sounds inside the Nekromanteion.

She couldn’t deny the race of her heart, nor the keen sensitivity to her enveloping robe that hugged at her body and moistened her thighs. The allure of the undergods was cloying in tandem to the entreating murmurs of the Hell Lords...

Or was it them who beseeched her entry?

Her fragile certainty was being chipped away by her own unsteady legs that carried her over the threshold. She entered the room, her reflection copied her movements upon the floor. Light, emanating from the mirrored surface, derived from the room below. The rest of the walls were polished black, embossed in gold pattern. There was nothing else but cushions and a few tables with hookahs and food. Everything was scattered on the floor where the mark of her footsteps had been stamped on the glass.

“All those who wish not to attend will bear witness from below. The gods will be pleased, Dante, that you’ve agreed to pay worship to them.”

“I have not!”

Hermes chuckled, pinching his mouth. “A turn of phrase, my dear. You bring solace to the City of Dis, but your wardrobe...” he tsked, “must go.”

She gasped as the threads of her wet gown unravelled and pooled in a heap. They vanished, burnt away like a dry wick as the door opened. Marshalling around her in a cage of

bodies, the undergods stood. Hades with her hair of flame, Persephone with vines beneath her skin, Osiris and Erlik of youth and age. Ah Puch and Hela, Nergal, Ereshkigal...

“Welcome esteemed Kings of Dis,” Hermes addressed, bowing his head with a hand upon his heart. For once, he stood upon the floor, the wings at his ankles idle. “As promised, here is Mikha’el. She has agreed—”

“She would make a good toilet.” The sudden smoke in her face was smothering, but as Ah Puch grasped her by the throat and hoisted her to meet his gaze, Dante grimaced and bared her teeth, the vapour from her eyes haloing her ire.

“Which is why you will never have her,” Ereshkigal dismissed, the sweep of her long, blackened wings fanning away the gaseous fog of Ah Puch’s cigarette. The inked demon scoffed, releasing his grip, but before the floor could kiss her, the woman caught Dante, extending her telekinetic powers across the space between them until the seraph’s feet alighted back upon the mirrored surface.

Ereshkigal’s golden eyes poured out from her stoic visage like charcoal aroused in flame. Her chest bare, thick dreads of her raven hair fell in heavy ropes about her torso and along the tight folds of her hip wrap. An auric headpiece graced the crown of her head and haloed the space between her draconic wings. The column of her long neck was mounted on a torc of gold so pure it looked molten.

Behind her Nergal stood, his shoulders draped in a snowy cloak rimmed in sapphire gems the size of a man’s fist. Golden ribs lined his torso, framing taut muscles that bulged beneath olive skin. Where his wife seemed grave and firm, Nergal was sly and puerile.

“You give yourself away too early, Ah Puch. If you demean her at the very start, she won’t want to stay.”

“Why demean her at all?” Hades whispered, her robe pulled together and pinned above her right breast by a sprig of mint. Dante’s breath hitched. The lady’s lips shone like moistened gore, and as she came to drape her arms over the seraph’s bare shoulders, Dante fought the need to suckle them.

“Let’s give her what she wants...”

“Together? Or separate?” Osiris asked, already fondling the length of Erlik’s shaft as he drug the beads of his flail along the older man’s chest.

“Together,” Persephone said, biting her lower lip as she sauntered through the crowd to stand next to Hades. The subtle stems that meandered beneath the goddess’ skin, crawled atop the slopes of her breasts and twisted to the nape of her neck to bloom as roses in her hair. The lady of spring was plump, like soft clay, and her simple gown of gossamer strained over her full hips and rounded belly as she leant against Hades to lick at her wife’s earlobe. “Then she can see what we all offer at once...”

“Is she even willing?” Ah Puch growled, moving to the door and opening it as though ready to leave.

Dante was silent as she caught the gaze of the undergods. Though she had expected Hermes to answer on her behalf, as she scanned the room in unsettled trepidation, he’d disappeared once again. She had yet to trek the path of Violence or Fraud, but watching the eerie purpose in the eyes of the undergods, she found her words missing.

Hela, who until now had stayed farthest from the crowd, made herself known. She stepped to the fore, the bones sewn upon her gown clinking in malignant cacophony. Her features were cleft in twain, one half of her face seamed in blue rivers sourced from a sclera of crimson. The other was fair, and blue. Flawless... While atop her head were horns that curled, and matched the colors of her bisected black and white mane.

Hela leaned in and pressed her lips to Dante’s. She froze, allowing the woman to grasp her chin and bid her mouth to part. As the dead god’s tongue swept her mouth, the taste was fresh like water.

Dante’s mind sang as her body eased and her heartbeat slowed. What wicked purpose these Hell Lords had, meant nothing to the lust and hunger and greed to know them. Would she bow to their shrines and be their slave? No. But she would

see them, be *touched* by them, and submit to their sermons as she had yielded to His.

“She is willing,” Hela spoke up, breaking the kiss. Her voice was as deep as the layers of Hell, but as she withdrew, the ghost of her presence lingered on her lips. “You cannot let the voices within give excuse to your sin, Mikha’el. They know you, as you know them. Their whispers are the sounds of your heart beating.” Hela turned away and the furor of the room engulfed her.

“You are not a cat, Mikha’el. You cannot die. Therefore, allow your curiosities to get the better of you...”

It started with Hades...

Canto VI

Hela crept behind the crowd as Ah Puch disappeared through the exit to extinguish his wrath on hapless slaves. Hades paused, her face a picture of inquisitive mayhem. All the other gods marshalled towards the back of the room and laid upon the myriad of scattered pillows as the lady Hades whispered her lips over the eager slope of Dante's mouth. As her forked tongue explored the boundaries of Dante's kiss, Persephone moaned, and stepped up to reach between the valley of her wife's supple thighs.

"You can't have her all to yourself," Persephone chided, her docile fingers eliciting a whine that carried past Hades' diaphragm into the barrel of Dante's chest. The brush of wings ushered the aroused seraphim backwards, and as Hades left the cavern of her mouth to kiss at her wife's corpulent bosom, Dante fell into the lap of Ereshkigal, who drug her taloned hand across the angel's stomach.

"You may not be a curious cat, Mikha'el," Nergal said, stepping over his wife and her lover as he undid the belt of his hip wrap, "but you certainly *look* like a creature in need of petting."

Dante gasped as the point of Ereshkigal's nails trailed along her inner thigh. Gooseflesh ignited on Dante's skin as her legs parted, but as she inhaled and flicked her tongue at the lips of the winged woman, Ereshkigal tsked, and whispered into her ear.

"A greedy little angel... but to get a god's favor, first you must worship them."

Nergal snickered, looking down the bridge of his aquiline nose to pierce the seraph with his golden eyes. The length of his shaft was not yet erect, but as he watched Dante expose her center with wanton lust a whore'd find lewd, a bead of cum glistened at its tip, and spilled like spider's silk upon the floor.

“Won’t you take him in your mouth, Mikha’el?” Hades purred. She was a shadow strewn across Nergal’s shoulder. Persephone appeared from the other side, her gown pulled below her breasts as she dragged her tongue along his jawline.

“Show us what a *glut* you are...”

Dante whined as the tip of Ereshkigal’s finger grazed over her clit. Jerking like an ambushed animal, her abdomen tensed as she leant forward and was propped in place. With her thighs still splayed and shaking to be touched, Dante took Nergal in her mouth and moaned from the ambrosia that dissolved upon her tongue.

She swallowed him deep, her eyes wide yet far away in a vision of glee. Ereshkigal’s wings formed a barrier around them, but as Nergal turned to devour the spring queen’s mouth, Dante watched Osiris grip Erlik’s neck with so much force the man collapsed.

She could only just see them through the space where Ereshkigal’s wings failed to meet, but as Nergal thrust his hips and Hades unclipped the brooch at her collar, Dante groaned at the sight of Osiris mounting the other man who swore in ecstasy.

“Do you wish to be mounted, Mikha’el?” Ereshkigal whispered into her ear. Her fingers played at Dante’s willing folds, but as the seraphim whimpered, her cries were stifled by the length of Nergal’s fattening prick.

She wanted it. *Needed* it. Greed settled in her belly and twisted until her insides threatened to rupture.

“Soon enough, my dear,” the goddess chuckled, her hand at her neck to mirror the sight of the male lovers.

Threads of saliva dribbled at the corners of Dante’s lips as Ereshkigal’s grip kept the rhythm of Nergal’s demanding thrusts. Closing her eyes as the briny taste of cum filled her mouth, Dante quivered as the goddess fingered her clit and forced her to swallow every bit of Nergal’s seed.

She wanted more, and watched with avid desire as Persephone slid her tongue away from Nergal’s mouth and

Hades took her place. The spring queen sneered, and picked up her skirts. “I wonder what an angel’s mouth feels like?”

Behind her, Hades’ clothes were shed by the avid death god. She climbed atop Nergal’s willing hips as he pierced her with his shaft. Her moans surged through Dante, intoxicating and vile. Dante slid down horizontal to the cool, glass floor. She opened her mouth to Persephone’s gasping lips as the goddess silenced her with her moistened core .

Dante held her legs apart as she supped at the folds of the spring queen, knowing that beyond her sight, the gods enjoyed the taste of each other, licking and fucking. Ereshkigal, nonplussed at the sight of her husband enjoying the pleasures of another woman, explored Persephone’s kiss, reaching back to rim the taut opening of the woman’s ass as Dante suckled on her mound. The cool air that raked the seraph’s sex, contrasted to the heat of Persephone’s hips, but as Dante gripped the goddess’ ample thighs and thrust her tongue inside her, the giddy ache in her loins pulsed in rhythm to their lovemaking.

“Move aside,” a voice demanded, “I wish to taste an angel.”

She couldn’t see, but as another mouth devoured her, Dante’s eyes bulged as she stared at the rounded belly of the spring goddess who orbited her tongue. So many sensations, she didn’t know where to focus, but the moans of Persephone urged her on as she wantonly shared the pleasure she received.

Erlík Han’s soft beard caressed her legs, but when his hands splayed beneath the small of her back to tilt her hips into the air, Dante’s rear contracted at his invasion.

It was a forbidden place. A part of her was being exposed against her will, but as Erlík’s mouth traced the puckered opening, Dante arched her back to oblige him, giving in to the new arousal.

“How does one taste, Erlík?” Osiris said from behind, reinserting his slickened member into the cavity of the death god. Osiris’ thrusts were subtle as Erlík groaned out a reply,

but when the snap of beads fell over her quim, a shock of pain caused her to pause her ministrations on the spring goddess.

“I bet she tastes divine,” Persephone chuckled as she slid herself off the angel’s face. Dante gasped for air, savoring the sweet taste she already missed upon her mouth. The goddess’ engorged womanhood was a puffy, pink, pulsating quiver of flesh. Ereshkigal laughed, gazing at her husband as he licked at petals of a panting Hades. He held her in his arms, upside down with her thighs curled around his shoulders. Hades consumed him like a starved woman, pistoning her hips against his face to tease and tantalize him.

Dante inhaled in gulps, watching Osiris drag the ropes of his flail between the moistened lips of her womanhood. His crook wiggled between her gasping center, and spanked at her clit. Shockwaves exploded along the slight curve of her pelvis. Dante moaned, arching her hips in a demand for more.

“Hela, aren’t you joining us?” Persephone asked, fingering herself in slow, steady circles, moving Ereshkigal’s hip wrap to the side to pleasure her as well.

Hela hadn’t stirred from the edge of the room. Instead she sat on a chair of glass she had conjured herself. Her stygian robe, spackled in bonemeal, hung from her limbs in long sinuous tatters. Her eyes were fixed on the face of the seraph, and Dante shivered from what promises they whispered.

“If she should worship us all, the gifts we bestow will be many.”

Osiris laughed, his atef rigid on his brow as he exited Erlik and left his lover to dine on the loins of their quarry. “Hear that, Nergal? Hades? Lokidottir has spoken!” he teased, his eyes flickering to Hela who had begun to stroke her thigh and pull the robe aside.

Nergal chuckled, his lips savoring the sweet taste of Hades’ sex as he pulled his face away. “Fine,” he said with another flick of his tongue, “but your Erlik better have prepared my pedestal.”

Dante paused as the dead gods shifted, adjourning their exploits to rearrange themselves. Ereshkigal wings expanded like a shroud over Dante's head and her center glistened from Persephone's fingers as each long, lithe limb parted to climb over the reclining angel. No longer supported by the Hell Lady's thighs, Ereshkigal's teeth grazed Dante's breast as she settled beside her. Dante sighed, and her eyes rolled shut.

How could something forbidden by God feel so good? Had He not deviled into his own creations? No, of course. But He must have *known*. God knew *everything*.

"You'll never want to leave after this," Persephone laughed, propping her fingers, slick with cum, onto Dante's willing tongue. She lapped up her wetness as her own spilled between her legs.

Nergal smiled with wicked promise as Persephone knelt to the other breast to suckle with a fervor that matched Ereshkigal's.

"She'll be begging for us," Hades agreed, watching her wife reach beneath her soft, pliant belly to finger at her swollen clit. Erlik Han and Osiris grinned, their cocks erect as they stared at the swell of the women's arched hips. Both goddesses pleased themselves as they lapped at Dante's pert, rounded breasts, but as the two men moved to either side and beckoned Dante to gasp their erections, Nergal stooped at Dante's head and slid beneath her until his shaft was poised at the warm cavern of the seraph's opening between her thighs.

"Almost," he said, jerking his cock between the valley of her ass and grasping Dante's face for Hades' perch. The gods were a cage around her, all consuming, but as the flame-haired, Greek goddess hesitated, and delighted in the sight of Osiris and Erlik thrusting into Dante's palm, Hela emerged from her chair of glass.

Her robe fell away. Her lissom form was tinged in blue veins. Her petite breasts were garnished with taut, hard nipples of a fair violet. Nergal slid deep inside Dante's ass. She cried at the sight of Hela's erect phallus.

It was the length of a man's arm, marbled in arteries with a distended, violaceous helmet.

Dante's every orifice was filled with the heretic gods as Hela impaled her. Her body stretched taut as Nergal pounded into the tight void of her ass and Hela filled her canal and rubbed at her clit in tandem to the groans of Osiris and Erlik. Dante moaned at the sensation of the twin cocks inside her, revelled in her lust, but as Hades sat and bounced upon her face, and tore at her own fiery scalp, Dante's cries were swallowed by the Hellion's demanding thrusts.

She gripped at the shafts of the dead gods who came in her hands. Her heart was a beast as her body convulsed, the sensations of pleasure falling in crescendo to bury her body beneath a manic torrent. Dante *didn't* want to leave. She wanted to stay. To be fucked by the gods with her every hole tamed.

They were one writhing mass on the cold, mirrored floor, and as they came and the nectar of their lovemaking spilled over the seraphim's body, Dante's reason was lost to the aftershock of rapture that made her its slave.

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here...

Dante wanted to stay.

She moaned.

She *would* stay.

Then screamed, her ecstasy mad.

Forever...

But as the tumult of her orgasm descended and sleep made a casualty of them all, beneath the floor, soaking in the bath, another voice spoke with ichor on his tongue.

“You *will* stay here forever, Dante. And you *will* become my slave...”

Canto VII

Deep inside the bowels of Hell, Dante curled in the embrace of the ancient gods. Fed from the prayers of their hapless followers, they existed like a shard of glass chipped from a hellish mosaic. The inferno was wild within her. Her lust and glut were crammed and throbbing, but as the Greed Lord siphoned from their reprieve, Dante awoke with not the venerating pledge of worship the gods so desired—and in fact she'd all but promised—but with inquiry.

What *if* I were to stay? Would Lucifer come? Would he be wrathful? Her own ire bubbled beneath her skin, and she enjoyed the idea of her lover jealous, before the longing in her heart settled her sin.

Dante unravelled her limbs from the rest and watched as they shifted to fill the void her absence created. Hades and Persephone reclined on the black leather wings of Ereshkigal, while the winged goddess stirred on her husband's lap as he lay between Osiris and Erlik. Hela relaxed on her chair, lidless eyes open, her robe redone.

“An angel no more,” the death goddess said, her voice like a hush of rain. The room was quiet, though Dante was certain the others paid heed. “The voice in your heart speaks a truth God won't forgive, as forgiveness is not your heart.”

“I wish for Him to forgive me,” Dante said, her black eyes earnest as her taloned hands ringed with gold knotted in consternation, “but I can not regret what I've done. I must believe in myself, and that my actions will bear the fruit I desire.”

Hela's eyes were aglow. “Stay with us, everlasting Mikha'el, and ye shall be as gods.”

Dante inhaled and closed her eyes. She listened to the deafening silence of the room and knew that the others were waiting. There was something telling in the way Hela spoke, but even as her inner voice cried out yes, another cried out no.

“I—”

“Bathe first, Mikha’el,” Hades said from the pile of nubile gods. “Wash away your inhibitions and clear your mind in the waters downstairs.” Persephone beside her nodded, and with eyes closed kissed at Hades’ neck. Dante watched, and her loins stirred as the gods again loved each other. As she turned away, Hela stood and unlatched the door.

“Return soon, or be baptized in fire,” she said.

The rooms were empty now, the servants away or gone to carry out the idle orders of their masters. Dante left the second floor and found the stairs to the jade baths beneath. Where had Hermes gone?

The water was like a sentient crystal, wavering in the basin below the upper landing. The souls from before, naked or clothed in wet linen, gazed at the glass ceiling and watched as the gods commingled with fervid appetite and coupled like beasts, rabid and foul.

Did they watch her too?

Her body snapped tight as Ah Puch emerged from the baths. The ink on his skin: bold and angry.

“Take her,” he said, wiping at his biceps as the men and women around her shot forward like cut bowstrings. Dante reeled, and was dragged to her knees as his servants pulled her down. Bodies hung about her shoulders, clutched at her limbs and bit at her thighs as a collar of steel clamped around her neck. She bared her teeth, and snapped at them, her strength faltering beneath the weight of the dead as she rolled to her back and kicked with the fury of the Wrath Lord. A few souls scattered, but others took their place as Dante swung and brought her hands up to strike. Something hauled her from behind, and the roar of the death god filled her ears. Dante snarled as she was foisted away and shoved beneath the cerulean pool.

The souls scattered.

“Bitch!” Ah Puch spat, his face a mask of fury. His eyes were endless boreholes, the ink upon his skin transforming until he looked void of flesh and was but bone

above his collar. “You’ve seen naught of Hell but the surface! I will show you what lies beneath, what pus is found beneath the wound.”

Dante gasped in water through her lungs. The frantic beat of her heart tore at her rational. He yanked her from the pool, and she retched as he forced her back in, struggling against the massive weight of Ah Puch as he straddled her waist to keep her from standing.

“You think I will share you with those infidels? Those *sub*-humans? You will be *mine!* A bitch I will fuck, a corpse I’ll carve up, a hole I will piss in, if I deem it fitting.” He laughed, pressing a thumb at the groove along her spine. “This is what it means to be in Hell, Bitch, to reside with *all* of God’s rejects.”

A light flashed in Dante’s eyes as her mind battled to keep her awake. Her lungs inflated with water and her chest grew heavy. The strength in her limbs waned. She had to keep fighting. Lucifer awaited her below the circles.

Gray fingers reached out from her periphery, wriggling like parasites in her field of vision. Her body went slack and he shifted to part her legs. Her vigor dissolved as a vision condensed in the water.

Are you satisfied with bloating, Dante?

She saw an image of herself on the floor of the bath, conjured by death or despair. Her chiseled teeth pointed out beyond her lower lip, and horns curled at the crown of her head.

How disappointing... I wanted to ride the dragon...

Dragon? Her mind flared.

You’re not going to let some dead god best you, right Dante?

Ah Puch... He stood behind her. The echo of his muffled voice pierced the water as he leant back, gripping her hips in an effort to arch them in hideous preparation. She’d been duped, a fool to have forgotten the vile soldiers that

dwelt in Hell's caverns. Pitiably souls, some. But others: foul, and worthy of torment.

Take my wings, Dante. Make him cow to you.

And transform further. Another step away from God, from His grace and love. But she knew she had to, and *knowing* that, Dante inclined her head, because she also *knew* she had to continue, that there was no turning back.

The room blew asunder.

Ah Puch's screams were stifled as he was impelled against the granite stairs. With his hips poised to thrust deep into the cavity of the fallen angel, wings sprouted from her back and unfurled. The keen barbs struck at his chest and branched out to drag unplumbed gouges that hung like broad tongues across his abdomen. His tattoos marred, his servants daunted and bovine, the death god collapsed as leather, bat-like wings loosened from either side of her spinal cord.

Thick muscles flexed beneath the skin as they formed and grew to wind about its supple frame. Spiny plates calloused the bones that had sprouted from her back, while veins meandered down the membrane of thickened flesh that webbed between the spurs. Dante sat up from the bath. Rivulets of water caressed her skin and fell into the hollow of her back to encircle her tail and run down her thighs.

"I belong to no one," she hissed, her charred fists clenching as she turned to glare at him with exhaling eyes.

The force of her transformation had sent him colliding back, but as the death god lurched to regain his feet, Dante pulled the collar from her throat, feeling the whispers of the Hell Lords in her ear.

Dispense of him quickly, Milady. Violence awaits you...

Ah Puch sputtered, growling as he shouldered off the debris from the stairs. His body was wet from perspiration, his face contorted in a hateful scowl that was augmented by the visage of death etched on its surface. As he charged at her, hollering barbs and curses, Dante smiled, impervious to his ire as Lord Violence lent her his viciousness.

“Worthless demon of death,” she said, her wrath igniting with the sadistic spark of the seventh circle below. “I’m not a simple human you wish to cow. I am Mikha’el the Everlasting!” She met his bullrush head on, the propulsion of her new-found wings enough to shock him from his launch. Her hand grasped him about the throat, throwing him off balance. Dante stooped upon her haunches and leapt up as another massive beat of her wings sent them both skyward towards the glass ceiling.

“You think the other’s will save you?” Ah Puch shrieked, spittle flying in ribbons from his mouth as she held him ahead of her like a shield. His deriding laugh was infectious, but as she mimicked his levity, his mirth disappeared as her wings folded in and they somersaulted on the cusp of careening into the glass. Dante dove towards the pool.

The surface of the bath broke from the collision of Ah Puch’s spine. Dante continued down with the weight of them both funnelling through to the cemetery of ancient gods. The seraphim beat her wings again, using the death lord’s body as buttress against the stone ceiling of the Nekromanteion.

The building erupted. Fragments of bone-like material rained down like hail to clatter upon the aureole platform that surrounded the temple. The sudden uproar bounced off the cavern walls as Dante shot through the haze of rising smoke like an arrow shaft, thoughtless of the stalactite that had impaled through the death god’s torso.

Ah Puch struggled. His fingers left bruised pits upon her forearms. Dante climbed out of the interminable cone that she had descended with Hermes shortly before. The buildings of Dis, lit with fire and brimstone, stood like silent monuments, but as Dante flew towards a dome of web and screaming furies clawing for freedom, Anansi with his gleaming mandibles winked with clever recognition as Dante paused and Ah Puch roared.

“What are you doing?” the god said, his eyes bright, wide coins that eclipsed the sockets of his markings.

Dante scowled, her nubile form soaking in the ruddy hues that veined the streets of Dis.

“Showing you what it means to be in Hell,” she said, deafened to his pleas as she pitched Ah Puch forward with the might of her repulsion. The undergod wailed, his arrogance stifled beneath the gossamer net of Anansi’s execrated walls. As the long limbed spider of old turned away, and began to sup upon the bowels of the anathemas god of death, so too did Dante spin and by chance glimpse the Olympian herald of Hell’s heretics.

She ignored him as his Cheshire grin bisected his face and his Caduceus flickered in the wake of the fiery carbuncles that grew on the roads of Dis.

“I assume you will not be staying then, Dante?”

Dante’s wings guided her to the ground as Ah Puch’s wild cries joined the chorus of anguished souls. The touch of Violence was ebbing from her heart, but as she looked at Hermes and his star pierced glare, she turned away.

“Abaddon is calling you, isn’t he?” Hermes asked, his glib tongue twisting his words to sound grim and sardonic. “The war in Hell begs for blood. What chance do the Nephilim have of beseeching you to stay?” His feet swayed, and as his steps gained purchase on the empty space above the ground, Hermes let his wings guide him towards the lip that led back towards the temple.

Dante followed. “The Nephilim?” she asked.

“Indeed, my dear. The offspring of the sons of God and daughters of men. They have lived a long time and have known a great deal.” He sighed. “They could have been much, much more, but... alas, they succumbed to their prison and forgot they were gods.”

“*You* were a god once,” she spat, her wings guiding her towards the worming thermals of the pit. “You introduced yourself—*them*, all as such. It doesn’t seem that you or they have forgotten anything of the sort.”

He trekked the air as though it were a staircase, his hands folded behind his back. The darts of his tailcoat framed his pace. “We were defeated; succumbed to the pressure of His presence, and with our tails between our legs, we let ourselves be ushered here, to live and dwell with what trinkets we managed to scrounge.”

The pockets of the crags grew dense as they descended past the cypress boughs that anchored the temple to the narrowed larynx of the chasm. More graves graced the alpine ledges of the abyss, but the tombs left here were unmarked, steaming from the slag that filled them.

“You speak in circles,” Dante said, paying little heed to the false teachers locked in stone cemeteries.

“But isn’t it fitting?” Hermes laughed, pausing with a flourish. “Perhaps at the bottom you will understand and *wish* that you had signed our tomes.”

Violence

Canto I

Beneath the graves of Dis where old gods lay macerating in their former glories, the bones of Violence with gaping maws yowled their bodies over the dunes of Hell. Hermes was gone, flown back to his realm of heretic pleasures. Dante descended the column to the seventh circle, and paused in wake of her addled amazement at the hills of the bodies slain.

Tormented mountains of dried basalt were the skulls of giants, their mouths filled with slag. As their molten innards coursed through eyes, nose and teeth, the liquid pooled in a valley at the center of the field. From on high at the cusp where sixth met the seventh circle, Violence looked like the carcass of twins calcified over time. Dante drew nearer, beneath the clouds that rolled like the waves of a black deluge. In the space between the bones, armies fought and roared, their screams a hush that bordered on silence. Like maggots they crept through the hills of the dead, killing, and maiming and flaying.

Beasts—meandering through Violence like parasites. Like bot flies they buzzed, crude weapons raised while beneath their feet the blood ran in boiling rivers and was heated from the igneous rock. Creatures that towered above the rest, their long snouts framed in tusks, trumpeted as birds with wings fashioned from twitching hands fought for the carrion left behind.

A war in Hell whose field was Violence. Bolides fell from the necropolis above. The hook of bloodlust caught at Dante's heart and drew her downwards. Its bait was wrath, and with angry cause she took wing above the mass of bodies that fought to stand on the corpse of their brethren to keep themselves from sinking deeper into the river Phlegethon.

“Abaddon!” she cried, her body whirling between the colliding arms of the damned. Great blimps anchored to the ground by umbilical nerves, bobbed to regard her—large, veined iris' poised behind a yellow film. There were hundreds of them, a small amount compared to the thousands of souls

that battled on basalt plains. The ground split open, and armies were swallowed by the fracture of its surface. Dante stopped, and floundered as a great horned beast rose from out the rift.

Its bovine skull punctured a grim dirigible, its lesion seeping until the optic craft sank to weep among the damned who fought beneath it. The creature stirred, its chest uncovered, its shoulders slumped as it bowed to regard her. Dante frowned at the simple light aglow in the creature's eye sockets.

“Who are you who invades this realm of death and woe? Speak or I shall smash you on the ornery brow of the mountains.”

“If I'd a lance I'd cut you in twain! Where is Abaddon, your Lord of Violence?”

The great beast stirred, its digitigrade legs treading the molten rock beneath the ground that framed him. He was large, like a tremendous mound that sat at the foot of the spewing mountains.

“He commands the war. His fiery breath stokes the flames of the seventh circle and ensures it's never extinguished.”

Dante let her wings carry her higher, and peering past his sloping horns, saw a bone-like wood whose branches swept the sky like anguished limbs, far in the distance behind him.

“Since circle three, has Abaddon whispered corruption in my ear, and yet now that I've come, he is missing?”

The minotaur bucked his head, snorting out char from his muzzle. “Your violence calls him, surely. But that violence within you was there at your creation. The dragon remembers. The wound you gave him oozes still, and paints the scales around his neck like ribbons.”

Dante sneered, and looking towards the armies of Hell, she remembered being at the head of God's infantry, and how she pierced the dragon with her lance. Flanked by her sisters and the trumpeting squadrons of the divine, at the onslaught of

Lucifer's perfidy, Dante had raked Heaven's treacherous felons and sent them to Hell where there, the devil fell the deepest, with the dragon at the foot of his throne, and the Lady on his lap.

"I will not pity violence to the damned!"

"Why should you, Dante?" the bull replied. "Hell is but a playground for the righteous to come and satisfy their harbouring sin on those who too early pleased themselves in life."

"Anyone righteous would avoid this place."

"And yet *you* are here."

She bared her teeth, her wrath a thorn in the base of her skull whose venom endeavored to infect her mind. "I know of you, Minotaur. You, who supped on the flesh of his own kin and were outsmarted and killed by a man who had but bare hands to dispense you." The bull grunted and tossed his head, his large fists crunching as his bones popped and he ground his teeth.

Dante continued. "Don't seek to lure me, monster. My hands are greater than those who extinguished you. Righteous or not, I am nobler than you who wallow on the spit of Hell!"

The great cow bellowed, and with char expelling from every fissure in his bovine skull, he charged, tossing his head as his torso bent and his fists smashed the blackened rock in an effort to pull his inverted legs up from the magma beneath.

"We shall see who wallows on a spit, Seraphim, when I gore you through the middle and parade you through the wastes of fire and blood!"

The ground yielded as bulging veins popped like highways from beneath the beast's skin. The scent of meat soured the air, but as the minotaur lifted his haunches to step up from the canyon of molten rock, a galvanic shock of energy pierced the space behind him. Dante whirled in the wake of the prodigious tremor that followed, but as the massive beast fell to crash on the pock-marked stone in which he had

emerged, a great gleaming bident was left, sticking up from between the naked disks at the nape of its neck.

“Finally!” A man hollered, his V shaped brow pronounced by a wide eyed smile that eclipsed his eyes. His head was haloed by a thick mane of brown hair that drifted from the base of his skull like an earthy flame. His beard, like a heavy block of wood, sat above his collarbone. Across his nude chest that was chiseled like stone, a smattering of markings that resembled dragon scales glistened. They adorned his arms, and trailed into the waistline of his plain, roughspun trousers.

“I have been waiting since I felt your feet on the precipice of Hell, Milady,” he said.

An army of locusts orbited him, their buzz enough to deafen the cries from the hapless souls boiling in the bloody river of Phlegethon. Floating high above the inert corpse of the fallen minotaur, Abaddon the Destroyer, Lord of the seventh circle, assessed her with unfettered excitement.

“Waiting for what?” Dante floated to perch on the swollen hump where the bident had pierced. Her wings were outstretched, but curled around her as sparks and globs of liquid rock were spat from the ragged fissures caused by the minotaur’s hooves.

“For you!” he shouted. The muscles in his abdomen twitched from delight. “Together, we can punish those who were sent here to feel pain—to feel the discipline of violence! Some indeed, Mikha’el, were even sent here to me by you, when once you deigned yourself worthy to deliver judgement.”

Dante paused, and regarding the bident, she forced away the shame that leapt unbidden to the fore of her mind. “Once, my lance pierced your scales, and bleeding, you ran harrowed to the pits of your circle.” His presence confused her. His *excitement* confused her. “I don’t understand your demeanor.”

Dante reclined her head, but as she tipped it up in anticipation of his response, Abaddon was before her, a mere

handspan's length away from her face as he seized her throat in one meaty paw and drew her mouth to his. His kiss captured her, reinvigorated her wrath and resolve, and punctuated her bewilderment to leave a space great enough for vengeance.

“I am no demon of wrath. Show me, Milady—the great captain of God,” he mocked with a boyish grin. “Show me what *violence* the divine are capable of!”

She grabbed at the haft of the bident, but as Abaddon leapt backward with unerring prediction, a cloud of locusts formed at his feet, buzzing in discordant harmony as he ran across the dismal skyline like it were solid ground.

His hair was a blur behind him. His calves swelled from the strength it took to walk upon nothing. Dante followed, the ridge of her brow severe above blackened eyes, but as her wings beat the air and pulled the distance between them, Abaddon dove deep inside a hollow crevasse that cleft the ground rife with errant souls.

“Don't pity the violence of the damned, Milady!” he yelled, pulling at buried bodies that stuck out the canyon walls like roots. They snapped and a trail of blood and severed limbs shadowed his descent as she gave chase. Those he left behind were moaning, but with addled purpose, they stuck out their arms to grasp her.

“I won't!” she yelled, biting back with the teeth of the bident those wretched few that dared to impede her. The cliffs of the crevasse were pliant with muck: a womb of endless birth that brought more foes to the fore as she fought to keep pace with the Hell Lord. Abaddon gamboled and laughed and made fun. Dante allowed her wrath to turn wild, and paired with the violence that was milked from her rage, went berserk.

Bodies that clung to the canyon walls fell from out the bottom like boggled debris. A cavern below, lit by the waving back of hot magma, yawned open as she dropped to skid the surface and evade the clawing hands of those torn apart and lay burning.

Ahead of her the locusts buzzed, and though his form was obfuscated by the miasma of furious bugs, Abaddon's

gleeful laugh filled her ears as he kept the space between them greater than the length of the bident.

“Wrath and violence are ever the lovely pair. I see it in you, Milady.” He dashed ahead. The thermals kicking from his heels smelled like sulphur and earth.

The canyon narrowed to a lean corridor and her wings skimmed the edges. It was dark, the roiling sea of igneous rock far behind her. Even the constant hum of Abaddon’s pests were quiet in the din of the eerie silence. As she continued, her eyes desperate to pierce the darkness, a snag caught at her wings like a hook. Dante screamed as they tore, the terrible sound of ripping leather reverberating in her ears as she fell.

“What?” Dante yelled, scrambling to find her bident as lithe roots stretched from out the packed earth to bind her. Tipped in venomous needles that prodded at her skin, they curled around her limbs and wings, tugging her upward into the porous loam.

Her mouth filled with dirt. Her body weighed down between the crushing walls of silt and clay. More and more prehensile roots wound about her form, until the skein of knotted whorls were blinding.

Careful Dante... the voice of reason begged in her ear.

Dante ignored it, so consumed with bloodlust was she, that the fallen seraphim bit at the gnarled tangles, drawing blood and whispers that caused them to loose and unravel. Free from her shackles, Dante tore out the roots with greed given claws until they retreated and wormed back in the soil.

“Forgive us! Forgive us, demon of violence and wrath!”

Dante’s fists were filled with a bleeding bouquet of sticks, white as bone, as she surfaced. Slick from the sap of the forest before her, she rose to her full height and inhaled.

Trees of white bark stood like hefty flames, frozen in time. Knotted and veined with great roots at its base, faces stared out from massive burls that protruded from ivory trunks and branches. In some cases, a man’s torso was betwixt the

bark, or an arm reached out to grasp the air. In others, the trees were but bodies stretched out and contorted, painfully so.

Dante breathed, her ire deflating. In the copse of the forest, she was surrounded by blood and the agonized faces of the woodland. Fat birds that weighed at the highest branches, scowled and pecked, but paid her no heed.

“Where am I? What are you?”

The trees shook, and though barren of leaves, the sound was a clatter.

“We are many in this forest of self-murder. Our violence against our own bodies has left us to weep in the bark that’s torn by the harpies each night. Please, demon of wrath and violence, do not destroy us lest you destroy us completely—a task we tried to wrought on ourselves with failure!”

Dante stared, a wreath of blood dashed on her temples. Dropping the sticks to squelch in the sanguine mud, her lips pressed hard together.

“I am not a demon,” she said, her own words uncertain, her body a rebuttal of the admission she spoke. She fought past the doubt that was rending her mind asunder, and looked to see the trees that bowed in her presence.

“Self-murder? Suicide?” Dante was quiet. “Is that what brought you to this circle of Hell?”

Again the trees answered, though trapped like dryads in coffins of wood, their mouths neither moved nor did they sway with naught but the press of the wind. “Many here, overburdened with the torments of life, committed the act of violence on themselves. Their sin was choosing to die, rather than face the storms that God accorded.”

“Life is a gift from God.”

“A gift is given without repayment. For many of us here, we were not willing to accept the burden that came with such gifts... burdens that were divined by an omniscient benefactor.”

Dante's heart sank beneath the flow of shameful thoughts.

The trees continued. "Now we pay for our refusal. The *gift*—the curse!—has led to our damnation. Forgive us, creature, for binding you. Take pity on us, for we only did so to quell the violence in our hearts. Sit here we must, a witness to more horrid deeds. Apology a thousand times for pity and for your mercy."

Her voice was weak, but she had to *know*. "What things can cause a being to end their life? What? Tell me..."

The trees obeyed, and ichor seeped from out the burls like teardrops.

"Yonder there a mother lies, forced away from child. While further still a man whose village spurned him for a crime he did not commit. Another was a sickened being, whose time was close at hand, but he cut the string too soon and now he cries within our wood. A child... a child who sought to leave her horrid house and found help in nothing but a cliff. She rests now not in peace, but as a quartered bough, her fingers stiff and rife with pain."

Tears streamed down her cheeks and a sob escaped her. Her words of wrath a hammer in her ears.

I will not pity violence to the damned!

Cloaked in the blood of those too weak to tame the trials of life, Dante hung her head, and let her fury pool beneath her feet to soak the roots of the Hell wood. Had she herself condemned these souls? Sent them spiraling into one of Hell's deepest circles? Perhaps if she were here before, when her celestial light adorned her brow, she could have helped them! But now...

Or perhaps before, you would have had the faith in God to keep your eyes from seeing... from knowing what it was...

"I'm sorry," Dante said, her voice a whisper. "If I could help you, know that I would. You, more than anyone I've seen, do not deserve such woes."

The harpies shrieked. The woodland trembled. Far above, the skies were swirling. A corkscrew of promised cyclones that threatened rain was moving north, and Dante paused to watch a locust land upon her shoulder.

“My bident!” she said, her outburst sending the pest away in fear. “Do you know where it is?”

The trees responded with but a shift of their roots, and like a solemn stem, the bident rose prongs first from out the darkened loam. Dante frowned, and grasped its haft, and like a beast she took flight amidst the copse, careful not to let her wings shatter the brittle branches of the Hell woods.

“If violence be the only way, so be it,” she said, her mettle tempered. “I will sully the soil with the blood of those who seek to harm you, and inspire fear in those who in the future may trifle with such thoughts.”

Her bident flashed, and one by one the harpies fell to ruin beneath its bite. The woods were silent, and for a time they were content within their forms: no longer tampered with by demons.

“A gift,” the seraph said, alighting in the air to find the Violence Lord. “One without *any* strings attached...”

Canto II

The rain fell in sheets and stung the eyes. The snag-toothed mountain cliffs beyond the forest steamed from the venomous storm, and were seldom blown apart by scorching meteorites. Dante flew upwards from the Hell woods. A large copper-toned moon hung low over the crags. A great crater sat in the middle like a wound, and others appeared when a falling star broke its surface but disappeared after a while.

Dante forced her wings to carry her upwards in an attempt to find Abaddon. The violent perfume of the seventh circle wafted away with the beat of her wings. Had he led her to the forest of suicides on purpose? Had it been his aim to expose the truth of his circle, or did the Violence King even care? Other beings amidst the slopes of the mountains, moaned and writhed and fought. Some threw others down to be dashed apart by serrated cliffs, while a few hid and some were chased by angry hounds.

Dante ignored them all, focused instead on the warm patina of the moon. Her ascent levelled and the surface of the seventh circle turned to great cracking plateaus. The great sphere was sitting—not in the sky— but above a basin that dipped from the peak of the escarpment.

It was like a brilliant bead above arid mudflats that—despite the toxic rain—were fractured like clay. She was drawn to it, and overcome with a hum of noise that reminded her of the locust swarm.

Dante flew towards the reddened eye that marred the moon's metallic surface. At the base of the orb, where it hovered above the ground, there was a patch of desert. Sand kicked up from debris falling from the bottom half of the planet-like surface. Dante neared closer.

It wasn't debris, but human bodies cascading in hordes to be consumed by a mound of dry quicksand.

“What?” she whispered, her eyes straining to focus past the pelting rain. It wasn't a moon at all, but a granfalloon

of bodies collected into something resembling a sphere. The sheer volume of it stole her breath, but as Dante drew close enough that she could pick out forms on its surface, she was horrified to see that the eye was in fact a tunnel that bored into the core of the copper globe.

The war of men and women who made up the atoms of the granfalloon pulled and clawed and kicked in their attempt to gain the surface. The planet's shell was miles thick, but a voice in her head beckoned her inside. The dark, earthy tones of Abaddon wormed in her ear and left behind addled trepidations, but as she let her wings tread the air, Dante fought her fears with wordless mettle gained by her journeys through Hell.

Pity us denizens of Hell too much, Milady, and you shall forget those that have committed terrible sin. Someday, God will realize that His kingdom is only shrinking, that Hell contains an army of fierce, merciless beings without laws.

“Beings that care only for themselves.”

The voice laughed, and as it reverberated from the heart of the fleshy globe, more bodies fell into the swallowing quicksand beneath it.

Beings that would do anything for relief from their suffering, Milady. See for yourself, how many suffer. Enter my lair and see my war den and I shall show you what spoils I've collected.

She was remiss to obey. What lay within? What dwelt in the yoke of the violent moon? The people crawled like mites atop one another, but how did they compare to the ferocity of their brethren? How deep was its skin? And not least of it all, what would Abaddon want as a toll to cross his borders to Fraud?

She paused enough to inhale through her nose, and glance at the needled fangs of her bident. Then, emptying her lungs, Dante flew through the winding mouth of souls who vied to keep themselves afloat. The roar deafened her as she passed through the threshold, the dim light from outside, a pall that barely illuminated the writhing bodies. A living corridor

filled with pained moans and the sounds of flesh colliding, was soon a tomb as Dante flew and tried to keep out of reach. Some hapless beings reached to grab her, to pull themselves away from the gravesite that entombed them. Others were crushed—hopeless husks too weak to fight.

“Help us!” Some cried as the darkness encroached and settled around her in sheets. She could feel their fingertips brush her wings, their nails attempting to snag anything in a vain hope for purchase. As the tenebrosity of the tunnel thickened, Dante clasped the bident two handed, ushering out threats as the walls became desperate.

“Free us! Save us!”

“Give us your wings-s-s...”

“How dare you flaunt your freedoms to me!”

Dante floundered as one of the many bodies fell from above and clasped her neck like a vice. As her wings buckled and her tail whipped to haul them off, Dante screamed, feeling teeth at her throat attempting to rip away the flesh.

“No one may enter but the dragon! No one can *leave* but the dragon!” it said.

More from above fell, and others below grabbed at her legs as her wings struggled to bear the weight. In the darkness of the spheric crypt, the damned hauled her under, her bident swallowed between the turbulent mass of flesh that wavered around her. Buried therein, her limbs ached. The press of millions who harboured for the surface, fighting as one, were hindered by miles of abject humans who were ignorant of the blazing quicksand waiting to swallow them.

As she drowned, her emotions were stiff with budding defeat. Dante let the endless horde push her back. She cried for them. The souls of Hell who clamored for freedom and were met with ruin when their aims were fulfilled. What lay in the center that made them so panic-stricken that they fought their kin to escape it? What was it that caused the granfalloon to form?

The war den...

Her jaw grew tight, her muscles tensed, and with unyielding conviction Dante gripped the bident as she struggled down, against the flow to find the core. The further she went the more dense it became, yet the bowels within were fraught with conquered bodies resolved to spoil and petrify. So beset with woeful abandon were they, that even when Dante called out to them the souls did not respond. They lay as stone burdens, and she was forced to use her weapon against them until the center of the copper moon cracked, like bone whose marrow was on the outside.

Fossils splintered as Dante emerged from out the inner dermis of the planet's core. Though tenebrous, a quiet lustre jounced from the walls, borne from the great, vaulting doors of a cathedral sat on a dais of floating stone. Tall peaks speared the hollow center in which it sat, while the gorey light emanated from the structure's interior.

Dante neared, alight on her wings. Abaddon was waiting on the stairs, at the foot of his den, clothed in black, his hair loose around his shoulders. Poised and graceful, he looked nothing like a King of Violence but a bureaucrat: proud and deceitful. He smiled as she landed, and held out a hand. Locusts were embroidered on the cuffs of both sleeves.

“Welcome Milady,” he said, “No doubt your journey was vexing. Mayhap you'd favor a rest?”

Dante sneered, her nudity exacerbated by the layers of fabric that adorned him. She tried to hide her discomfort and straighten to full height as she would have had she been clothed. Abaddon took no notice.

“What foul machinations house you?” She glanced around, her eyes scanning the dismal skyline contrived with worm-gray bodies. “This is your den? A hive of violent souls?”

The Hell Lord followed her gaze, his hand held out between them like a bridge. “Violence draws these beings to me, which is why they are as they are. They are my hoard. I've learned to cherish them. But as I said before, Milady, Hell is

beset with the wicked. Many of the worst reside here, where I'm not always loath to punish them.”

“*You* punish them?” she asked with a furrowed brow.

Abaddon snickered, though the laugh lacked mirth. “God has little concern for those He’s sent away. We generals of Hell embody His failure, yet we scorn the wicked even if we are wicked ourselves. To keep our thrones, we torment the fallen, though tormented most are we.”

Dante curled her lip, standing aside to show him her profile as she pulled the bident towards her. The words of the Wrath Lord echoed in her ears, yet as she considered Abaddon she snorted.

“How are *you* bound by torment? You chortle and prance at the hint of a fight.”

Abaddon laughed, though he covered his mouth to muffle his cheer. The bridge between them lost, the Violence King turned around, and bade for her to follow. “For a time, before I fell, my place in Heaven was holy. I did God’s bidding, his works of destruction, before I was tempted with freedom.”

Dante followed. “Freedom?” she said.

“Lucifer wished to live free from the laws of God, and so did I after a time. It’s hard to be hated, to be what is *good* when your existence is nothing but. *I* did that in which God refused, but at His bidding. I was a weapon for He who cursed violence.”

Abaddon paused at the arches that led into the cathedral, and basked in the scarlet lights within. “Remember when you speared me with your lance, Milady?” he asked, inclining his head. “I wear the scar as a medal, because it’s proof that violence resides in us all. The good, the bad, the holy. It is my only evidence that I was ever exalted for the destruction I did, and that violence was not what sent me to Hell.”

He had been about to step inside when Dante cried, “Enough! You are to tell me that you are fallen? A seraphim

sent to Hell for refusing God's orders of *destruction*?"

Abaddon chuckled. "Perhaps you would find it relieving to know that God was incapable of the foulness wrought in His name. Then again, perhaps not. A foul general begets foul fighters..." He shrugged. "Whether I am telling truths or spinning lies is up to you, Milady. I've already warned against your pity. Not all of us here are worthy of it."

"Are *you*?"

Abaddon turned, his face a mask of curious mischief. "Do you know why the Glut King was damned, Dante?" he asked, flicking at his nose as he looked towards the foot of the plateau. "A long time ago, he and his three sons were locked away in a tower, forced to starve until they died. Seeing their father gnawing on his hands, his sons begged him to eat their bodies to survive, and when they died, the Lord now known as Beezlebub, imbibed them, because his hunger was stronger than his sadness for his sons."

Dante balked, her resolve wiped clean as she stepped away. Abaddon nodded, and turned to enter the cathedral. "I pity his sons who art in Heaven. How must it feel to know that their father was cursed by a thing they permitted?" He clicked his tongue, and again reached out his hand to her. "Pity is yours to give, not mine to assign, Milady. But for what it's worth, I pity you."

Dante frowned. "Why?"

"Because it's too late. If my words are true, your existence is built on a foundation of blind faith and an unjust God. If I am lying..." he stared into the crimson doorway, "It is too late for you to return to Heaven... even if you wanted to."

Canto III

“It is hubris to think any sin is greater than God’s forgiveness,” Dante said, her words hollow despite the reflexive response. She pressed her jaw taut to keep her trembling lips at bay from the Hell Lord’s watchful eyes. Her claws dug crescent wounds into her palms. Her body shook from his words, and uncertainty racked her brain.

Abaddon smiled, though this time compassion danced in his eyes. “But would you want His forgiveness, Dante, with such doubt in your heart?”

He looked back towards the door. The subtle embroidery on his cuffs danced in the hues that meandered from the doorway, but as he turned his body to face her, Dante was captured in the solace of his features. It was easy to believe that he had been an angel, that he had once flown the heavenly tiers of paradise on wings of down.

Dante took his hand, though her reluctance was evident in the stiffness of her limbs. She knew inside herself that to find Lucifer she would have to cross all nine realms. This was but another path, but the farther she descended the more conflicted she was, like a box stuffed full with manic reason defiled with doubt.

He brought her inside, and her thoughts were bound by the beauty and life of the cathedral before her. Ferdent stalks of ivy grew from the base of the cobblestone walls, and splayed in patterns upwards toward the vaulting ceilings. Pools of turquoise, framed by a bed of violet lilacs, stood centerpiece beneath a column of water that jettisoned from a copper chandelier. In every corner, boughs of oak, and hanging ferns and roses the hue of rainbows, stood in a lush bouquet.

The crimson hues of fire were left outside as Dante entered, with no attestation that they have ever been. Even the windows displayed a sky of cerulean blue with flocculent clouds. However, as she wandered inwards, lured by a splendor Dante thought she’d abandoned, Abaddon stood back upon the threshold.

“How can such a place exist in Hell?” Dante asked, stooping to inhale the scent of the gladiolus’. This was a jewel within a mountain of dirt, a lush oasis in a wasteland of horrors. Dante let her fingers skim the satin surface of the petals. A locust settled on the stem, and with serrated mandibles sawed it in twain.

A burst of pestilence burgeoned from the door, erupting en masse from the stitching on Abaddon’s jacket. As the Hell Lord entered, his face displeased, the locusts swarmed in an ebony arc around the cathedral’s nave. The flora withered, putrefying into limp, brown tendrils that hung like corpse hair from the cathedral walls. The trees bloated and collapsed, the flower’s petals hardened into chips that became dust in the wake of the ruinous bugs.

Dante watched as the once lush chamber became a tomb in the presence of the Hell Lord. Abaddon marched inside, his shoulders now bare from the embroidered coat. He looked out among the walls that brought a feast to his pestilence.

“Apologies, Milady,” he shrugged, taking her by the hand, “but in my presence a place like this can not exist.”

She squeezed at the haft of her bident. He continued, despite her silence. “When I leave, the flowers and the garden will return, but whilst I am here...” His eyes swept the chamber to emphasize his point.

“Perhaps you can describe it to me,” he said, a wistful lilt in the tone of his voice. “The scent of a flower. The taste of clean water. The feeling of grass beneath your feet?” Abaddon ran a hand through her hair, and despite the harsh dissonance of the locusts who fed, warmth spilled into her loins.

“Has it been so long that you have forgotten?”

A flash of his teeth told her yes. “These circles of Hell are condensed. My realm of destruction can be only that. Even before I was sent here, violence was all I knew. Forgive me a moment away from simple cruelty, Milady, and rest here awhile, until the scent of brimstone leaves you.” He let go of her hair. “You are the only thing of beauty that I can not

destroy, and yet despite the Eden within you, there also lies apocalypse.”

Abaddon smiled, and unbidden, ran a hand along her jaw. Dante was amazed by the tenderness of his touch, and though her heart beat in a frantic rhythm of its own accord, her mind was pregnant with unease. Could violence be moral? She never thought it so, and yet, as he spoke and patted her face, she found herself wondering...

He left not long after, and as the bugs crawled away in the shadow of their Hell Lord, the wilted garden began to bloom, fed by the rot of its progenitor. Without him it was stunning; a garden of kings, and even beyond the nave that she'd entered, more beauty was ardent along the cloisters and halls. She found a gown to adorn and made slits for her wings. She walked with her bident and glanced through the windows she passed. The bright blue sky looked vast and unmarred.

“It is a lie,” she whispered to herself. “You must not forget that.” She was in Hell, in the stone of a fruit that was eternally spoiling. It gave her pause. How could such a place exist? Was it a curse? Made for a fallen angel of violence? She wanted to know, and needed to ask, but until he returned she did what he requested, and savored the illusory haven, not knowing if ever she would chance upon something so beautiful again.

Abaddon returned, after a day or a week, she could only surmise. The room expiring around her was a prologue to his presence in the doorway. Despite himself however, the Hell Lord smiled. Could Violence hold a semblance of morality?

In the war between good and evil, violence was necessary. She had speared the dragon long ago in an effort to stifle those in Hell from overwhelming those that were good.

Or so she thought.

But wasn't it the case that most violence was motivated by personal morality? Why was it that God could excuse His own penchant for cruelty, but not that which was enacted by His lessers?

He can, Dante thought, closing the distance between herself and the Hell Lord, but only if one repents and regrets...

But what of the mother? The ill old man close to death? What of all the souls in the Hell wood? Would they regret it, if they were not being tortured in Hell? Or does Hell itself force repentance in souls that would otherwise exercise free will?

“How was it?” Abaddon asked, his fingers in her hair, his nose inhaling the scent of the flowers that lingered on her skin. The locusts devoured in a plague around them, but despite their company, Dante was lured into the gentle glow of Abaddon’s face.

“Were you really an angel of destruction?” she asked, cupping his cheek as he turned his head to kiss at her palm. His beard was soft, and with his coat of pests gone off to eat the garden, she examined the markings upon his chest, etched in the pattern of dragon scales.

“Who else would give you a weapon of Hell?” he replied, his sardonic smile revealing a canine. “If you’d prefer your lance, I could give it to you... but I think the bident more fitting.”

“My lance?” Dante looked up, drawn to his sabered teeth that poked along his bottom lip. His head dipped low and his mouth brushed the tip of her nose. She could smell his breath and the scent of its smoke was intoxicating.

“I took it from Minos.”

His hands rested on her neck, and with the gentle brush of his thumb, Abaddon tipped her head to let their lips meet in a moment of fleeting curiosity. His tongue was tender, inviting and yet yielded to her reluctance as her body tensed. He was a man made from marble, and yet became malleable clay in her uncertain hands.

Letting the bident fall, Dante pressed her fingers into the grooves of his stomach. She traced each trench like a blind woman. His pectorals swelled with every breath he took, but as Abaddon exhaled, and she sat her palms flat on his chest,

his breathing stopped until she moved, and her hands cupped the column of his throat.

“I don’t think,” she began, breathing in hard as she broke the kiss, “that even if I wanted my lance, that I could wield it anymore.”

“What *do* you want then, Milady?” he asked.

The words came without thought, and yet she knew they were—for the moment—true. “I want you,” she said, her subtle push enough to bring him down atop her.

They fell in the slaughtered grove, where the plants were brown and the ferns were coiled, and the flowers were but withered husks that wavered to dust in the slightest breeze. Even the windows, filled with blue skies when the Hell Lord was away, were tarnished and yellowed, spots of black making them a vignette against coal-colored walls.

Her gown was sprawled beneath her like a linen cloth, but as Dante rocked her hips and he kissed at her breasts, she much preferred the coarse grass that stuck up through the clothing’s gaps to abrade her skin. Everything about him defied his nature. His touch was warm and soft, his strength quiet in the wake of their lovemaking. When he’d taken her, he’d done so only at her behest, and when she reached between them. The feeling of his engorged shaft between her fingers drove her mad, and yet as Dante poised him at the pliant opening of her womanhood, it was only when she’d reached behind him and grasped his buttocks that he pushed inside, and rocked in avid desire.

“You smell like the flowers,” he said, his lips in her hair.

“Is that why you’re being so gentle? Are you afraid of breaking me?”

His face was calm. His kiss, full of love. Yet as Dante panted and moaned, he kept his pace and his heartbeat stilled to beat in a regular pulse.

“No,” he said, cupping her breast and flicking his tongue over her nipple to draw it in his mouth. Dante gasped,

her fingers tangling in his hair as she pressed him deeper into her bosom.

“Then bite me,” she said, her legs raising to straddle his hips and press him deeper inside her. He growled, and the sound made her shiver as his teeth slid over her breast.

“Be careful what you ask for, Milady.”

“I didn’t ask.”

He chuckled, the barrel of his chest inflating as he pressed his hips down to keep himself buried to the hilt. He was almost too big for her, but as her body began to adjust, his hand splayed along the base of her throat like a torc. “A flower with thorns,” Abaddon mused. “Have the other circles corrupted you so much that a simple fuck will no longer suffice?”

He twitched, and as the bloated swarms wrecked havoc around them, Dante paused, feeling the machinations of the seventh circle spin their gears within her mind.

“Is that all the King of Violence is?” she asked, wondering if she would catch him in a ruse.

His eyes were dark, swirling patterns brimming with promise. The Hell Lord smiled, revealing his teeth. Smoke wafted from the corners of his mouth—thick as vipers. “From missionary to harlot, Dante?”

She nipped back, her nails raking down his back to emphasize the bite in her retort. “I was unaware that I laid upon a bed of lavender while you were away, Hell Lord. Has its spikenard sedated you?”

Abaddon moaned, his hand binding around her neck as he bent to savor her lips. “I *knew* you were full of violence, Milady...” he mused, lapping at her tongue as she opened her mouth to receive him. “God’s champion whore...” he spat through a smile, “let’s see how well you fight.”

Her head split the cathedral window into glittering shards. With bruising force that left marks on her collarbone, Abaddon’s clemency was spent as he wrenched her from his body. Her wings ballooned to catch her mid air, but as Dante’s

mind raced to overtake his sudden initiative, the Hell Lord was already closing the gap, a lather of deranged bugs hoisting his pursuit through the broken glass.

He held her bident in his right hand, but clenched in his left was her lance, shimmering in captured light. Her eyes were drawn to its scintillating shaft, but as he drew closer and she parted her legs to receive him, the feeling of their loins colliding caused her to climax.

She screamed as they both crashed into the sentient crust of the granfalloon. The souls around them clamoured and fought. Dante moaned and bit into Abaddon's shoulder as the Hell Lord bucked his hips. Cursed men and women fell beneath the spear of her lance, but as its lighting crackled and spun, Dante took the bident from him, and speared those that came at his back.

"Is this more to your liking?" Abaddon hollered, panting as his cock fought to skewer her in twain. Blood on his face ran down his chest, smearing between their bodies as he drove the lance into the crowd to part it. Commingling with the cum that had been milked from her sex, Dante wrapped both legs tighter about him to rub her swollen clit against the grooves of his pelvis, feeling another wave of lust grip like a vice around her hips.

"Yes!" she screamed again, her black eyes swelling with the fumes of bloodlust as she pushed the forked prongs of the bident into another hapless soul. By now the swarm had funnelled away from them, clawing amidst each other to avoid the duo's black-hearted assault. As the two continued to thrust their bodies in tandem to their infernal attack, the locusts dispersed, feeding off the damned as the frame of the granfalloon deteriorated.

"Yes!" Dante hissed, the gold-red hue of her lifeblood streaming down her shoulder as his teeth found her flesh and the slap of their bodies drowned out the anguished wails of the dead.

Is this alright? Have we gone too far? She didn't care. She was in Hell already.

Grasping the haft of her bident one-handed, Dante flicked the blood from her other and reached between them.

This isn't the Hell wood, Dante. This is a knot of vice, stewing in a domain of hate and savagery.

She fingered at the petals of her folds. The motion drew from out her mouth a whimper, and her cries were stifled by the insistence of Abaddon's tongue. The warmth from his body was inebriating, but as their flight cooled the blood upon her skin, Dante wrestled with the morality of her oppressive desires. These souls were abominable, yet was it just to use their bodies to feed her passions and sate her bloodlust?

Hell is but a playground for the righteous to come...

The minotaur's words echoed in her ears, but as another wave of pleasure caused shockwaves to reverberate through her hips and up her spine, Dante found her wings freed as Abaddon's warm seed spilled into her and his pelvis jerked from their shared climax.

The pair careened out the outer banks of the hellish moon, bodies falling from its surface like rock matter into the open desert that yawned to meet them. The two arched upward, soaring on the thermals that kicked up from beneath Dante's outstretched wings, their mouths locked together. His kiss became gentle again, and as she opened her eyes in consequence to the swift change in airflow that directed them downward, before they were hurled into the cracked expanse of the circle's wasteland, she saw him glance at her, his tender eyes full of veneration.

Life isn't about finding yourself, Milady. It's about creating yourself. If you must, find God in the garden. When everything ends, amongst the graves you can dig for Him there...

Fraud

Canto I

For a time they laid together, their bodies sunken into the heart of the vale that their descent had produced. Amidst the parched wasteland, the silence was interrupted only by their faint inhalations as they lay tangled together like ropes. Abaddon's woolen mane fell down his back and blanketed them, while Dante's wings had folded in to cocoon them both as she lay beneath. The Hell Lord's breath warmed her bosom, and the pestilence that was otherwise drawn to his figure roamed elsewhere to find nourishment outside the barren moor.

"Where to now, Milady?" Abaddon asked with eyes closed as he lay between the valley of her breasts. She was idly toying with the curls above his brow, and depressed her thumb to run a trench through his umber locks.

"Malebolge..." Her voice disturbed not a hair upon his head by its volume, but as her finger traced an invisible wheel upon his skin, Abaddon moved to look at her.

"Over the great divide to Fraud." He looked askance, and studied the cracked canyons that veined the dried, dead mud. "You shouldn't go alone. The chasm that shepherds to the ditches of Fraud is steep and vast, and pockets in the ridged slope swallow anyone who draws near to them."

Dante couldn't keep the chuckle from bursting out her chest. "Do you know to whom you're speaking, great King of Violence?" she asked, laying prone as he stood and offered a hand for her to rise. She noted his disquiet, its presence ushering back the thoughts of moral violence. Before she could contemplate the split that seemed to frame his conflicting persona, he stood her to her feet, and the bident he had gifted her appeared within his palm.

"I do, Dante. But at the mouth of Phlegethon where killers boil in the blood they spilled in life, the crevasse weeps with evil and darkness. So dark is it, that without infernal flame you would be blinded, and creatures that dwell in the

pock-marked crags of the valley would be advantaged, disguised in the gloom and accustomed to blind eyes.”

He handed her the weapon, and though it was not her lance, Dante did not miss it.

“Let me take you as far as I can, to the Lady of Fraud’s domain.” His smile cut the gravitas, and as he stepped back, mud crackling like eggshells, Abaddon parted his legs, stretching as she stared between them. “Don’t you *want* to ride the dragon, Dante?”

“I already have,” she said, glancing up, swatting a bug as it circled her face. The Hell Lord snickered, eyes like coal alit with fire.

“But not like this,” and bursting free from a coffin of flesh, Abaddon metamorphosed.

The bones of his ribcage found their way outwards, and elongated his torso as his spine protruded out his back in serrated tines. Forming around the bits of flesh that remained, the bloody carapace lengthened, drawing his legs back and up in the semblance of a locust. Tattered wings sprouted from his back, and draped across a second set of arms that were armoured in an ebony shell, while his fists melded into jointed forelegs tipped in horn.

Abaddon shrieked across the realm, his face—replete of boyish charm—now a maw of needled teeth, barbed by scythe-like mandibles that drew down along his jaw from a low-plated brow. A luminescent flame burrowed at the back of his throat, but as his roar concluded, a jet of fire blew out in a column to pierce the sky and singe the locusts that spun in the air.

Dante clutched her bident, drawn to the callused wound that still festered on the creature’s outstretched neck. She recognized him: the dragon, General of Hell and leader of the locust armies. His form resembled them.

The fire died, swallowed back into the pit of its belly. Abaddon leaned his great head forward, teeth bared in something that reminded her of a grin. Locusts crawled along

the bony protrusions of his armoured husk, but as she flew to sit behind the helmet of his skull, between the the bones that extended out his spine, the insects parted to let her pass.

The Hell Lord didn't speak. His wings expanded and his hind legs bounded from the chapped moor.

It won't be long. Those that live in the crust of Malebolge will avoid me or be obliterated. After the river Phlegethon, we will start to descend.

From the height that he gained after a moment's departure, Dante saw the river marbled with waves and those who struggled within it. Centaurs with spears on the gorey banks, pushed back any woeful souls that managed to escape, with pitchforks.

"I don't quite understand Abaddon, why those that murder are above the circle of Fraud. Can you tell me?"

The dragon growled and shot out a small pillar of fire.

You have never questioned Him and it shows, Milady. But the question is good, and worthy of an answer.

His great wings flailed until they sat higher upon the heated thermals. A chasm stretched beneath them like a great black wound in the earth.

Fraud is a sin isolated to human beings. It involves reason, logic, planning, and is harmful not only to those who would commit Fraud, but to entire populations. It uses the knowledge they gained in the garden for evil. Where murder, and violence is subject to one, a single act of Fraud can condemn many, for time immeasurable.

Dante nodded, thinking of Lilith, the garden and the Wrath Lord.

"Then Treachery sits the lowest, because it is sin towards loved ones, a betrayal of heart. Perfidy is hardest to forgive because when committed by an ally, it is greater than when perpetrated by an enemy."

She sat in silence, contemplating her own words, and what they meant for her and God. Even knowing that Lucifer

would betray Him, could it be that such a wound was sewn even at the start of time? Was God's love contained in knowing that those He created would seek His destruction? Was His pain at being betrayed eternal, beyond the time of creation? What was the meaning of it, then? Why create if the knowledge that they would betray and wound Him was absolute?

Dante didn't know. The dragon soared above the deep abyss that led inside the last corridors of Hell. Would the lesson she'd learn from her descent destroy her? All she had wanted was Lucifer, to see him again as she remembered him in Heaven, but her journey had changed her, and if it had transformed her, what had it done to *him*?

Like a calloused hand, the darkness covered her eyes as Abaddon dove into the pit. The river Phlegethon hushed to a whisper as it fell down in one great ribbon, but as Abaddon let his wings fall, the sound of the water was engulfed.

As they went, the Hell Lord exhaled, his flame enough to cast shape to the unending darkness. Great pockets, resembling hollowed out, black boils, clustered along the precipice. Creatures that hissed and hid within, reached out with translucent skin, but cowered back at the sight of the dragon. Some had mouths stained red, a consequence from slaking their thirst in the leftover rivulets that dribbled from the Phlegethon, but others were caked in filth, and their empty eyes, full of darkness, stared with hatred at her trespass.

Dante gripped him tighter, glad for the Hell Lord's presence. Although his fearsome form and vicious teeth challenged the notion of morality. Was he anything more than an embodiment of his realm and purpose at the onset of creation? Were the other Hell Lords?

But she hadn't heard their voices for a time now. Asmodeus, Beezlebub, Lord Leviathan, Belial... While Dante was sure she could feel them inside of her, their discourse was gone, their mockery extinguished.

Perhaps it's because I am too far from them now.

The confident aggression possessing her within the seventh circle lulled. Snarled in the root of Hell's impregnable darkness, her blindness compounded her insecurities. Her persona was warped with the invasion of vice that she had never experienced before, and yet the sounds of the damned gave her pause. Was she to be as they were? Floundering in the darkness?

A light exploded before her. Dante raised her arm to shield her eyes from the startling glare. From the bony crest of Abaddon's crown, she watched as a creature slunk, aloft in the air like a snake wading through water. Its bust was that of a man, serene and warm with eyes that carried the promise of aid, but beyond the graceful column of its throat, it was monstrous: a smorgasbord of terrible beasts quashed into one rope-shaped body.

Its translucent scales were colored only by the blue-blooded veins of the creature's insides, and the myriad of crimson bodies it had last ingested. Its wings opened like an arc from out its spine. Matted hair, heavy with grease, flopped atop its back, while arms—long and feline—waved in the air ahead of its serpentine body.

The plates of Abaddon's hide shifted as his muscles tensed. Shooting out a gust of firebreath, the Hell Lord paused, pacing the stale thermals that gasped from out the eighth circle.

“Geryon! How dare you disrupt my path. Speak your purpose before I deign to tear you asunder!” The Hell Lord's voice was disparate to the one he had as a man. Deep like a drum, it echoed around the chasm in a palpable wave.

The creature cowed, its strange head weaving through its body until it was knotted inside a barrier of scales. “You have entered the lady's domain! She has sent me to fetch the s-s-seraphim, to guide the s-s-seraphim to the first rung of Malebolge.”

“The Lady Lilith?” Dante asked, an untapped wellspring of ire simmering at the back of her throat.

Abaddon hissed, doubling back to crane his giant head towards her.

What will you do, Milady? Lilith's realm is vast and deep. A labyrinth that houses the well of the treacherous.

“I will go,” Dante replied, “but Geryon, how will I see when I am left on the lip of the Malebolge?”

The creature unwound. Though its sinuous weavings looked tactile, its face was a mirror of prudence. “S-s-she has brought you a gift to see with eyes unclouded,” it said, holding out a hairy paw. There was a sliver of something withered and dried upon it, wrinkled like a torn piece of flesh. Dante stared. An apple piece, its seeds intact and shining in the center.

She gasped, lunging back as though she had been struck. “Is that—?”

Geryon nodded. “To s-s-see is to know, Seraphim. Unless-s-s... you'd rather your *faith* lead you?”

Canto II

Dante clutched the dried fruit in her palm and watched as Abaddon climbed the abyss to rejoin the war in the seventh circle. His light faded, and the hum of his wings dissipated the farther away he climbed. At his departure the darkness crept in, molesting her thoughts until she shivered atop Geryon's back, terrified—despite her wings—of what lay waiting in the blind space beneath.

Lilith, First Lady of Hell. Would she know the whereabouts of Lucifer? Why he hadn't come at the onset of her arrival? Though Dante knew of Lilith, she had never met her beyond the stories she had become acquainted with.

“Geryon, is there any other way to see past the darkness of Fraud?” she asked, gripping the hair about his head for fear of being lost and alone in the obsidian pit.

The creature laughed, the sound squeezing out the gaps of its teeth in a hiss. “If your faith was s-s-strong, you would not fear the darkness, S-S-Seraphim.”

Dante frowned to quell the mad quiver of her bottom lip. Geryon descended, and the sounds of Malebolge reverberated from within its own walls. Her body jerked as they landed on a terrace of rock that must have been wide enough to support them both.

“Here I s-s-shall unload you, Angel. May your divine light lead your way in the darkness-s-s!” It laughed, and the sound was unmatched by the docile face that elicited it.

“Leave me then, monster of Fraud,” she said, her words a farce in the wake of the fear that pooled in her belly. Geryon did not idle, but Dante listened to the sounds of its body comb back through the zephyrs of Hell. She hung on to the noise it made until it was gone, and alone she sat: amidst the lungs of sin.

“What do I do now?” she begged, falling to her knees. The sliver of fruit within her hand was a dagger poised at her

heart. Was she to consume it, like the first man and woman? Could she go no further without it?

Dante wept. Her faith was blind, and she *knew* that she could not see through the darkness of Hell.

Is this where she would sit? Until the time came that she finally found the rational to eat of the forbidden fruit and continue onward, knowing that she had committed the most terrible sin? What did it matter, considering the steps she'd tread? Could eating it really be so terrible, if she had already consummated with the generals of Hell?

Dante shook her head, and attempting to stand, leant upon her bident. Her feet were wobbly and unsure, but as she walked, she kept the fruit within her palm until the flesh was moistened from perspiration.

The cries of the damned crept closer in the dark. Dante kept her limbs tucked tight, anxious of a person's touch, or of some demon's compelling demand. Finding the first of the ten ditches by virtue of her tenuous step, she clutched at the ledge and let her tears fall.

Men and women cried within, and the hiss of an angry demon tore along the crest of the basin. Cloven footsteps cracked the shale-like surface with its harsh approach. She was immobile, caught in the net of her blindness. Could it see her?

The demon paused, and the electric clap of its whip caused the seraph to tense as a wide-eyed girl appeared before her.

Wavelengths rippled, gusting back Dante's hair and wings as a boom thundered over the darkness. The pain of the blow was stifled, absorbed by the girl with honeyed eyes that were trapped within a well of shadows.

Her hair was a nest of reeds, caught in the crease of her draping mouth, and though she was wearing a robe of sackcloth, the seams were unsplit from the lash of the leather. Around her, the space was revealed from the light of her presence, and though she was on the verge of womanhood, the depth of her eyes whispered of an age eternal.

“Welcome, Dante,” the small girl said, reaching forward to take her hand. The demon growled, but did nothing else to disturb them. Instead it turned, and began to brandish its weapon upon the forlorn souls that walked the path within the ditch.

“Who are you?” Dante whispered. Was it Lilith who could turn the fiends away and withstand their punishing blows?

The girl was quiet, pensive as her honeyed eyes looked upon the seraph from head to heel. Though she was as tall as Dante’s waist, her stature was sure, and assertive. “I am here to guide you.”

“Who were you sent by?”

Dante watched the child’s gaze settle upon the seraph’s fist as though she were aware of the gift within. Dante opened her hand to look upon the forbidden fruit and closed her eyes, tempted by the apple’s flesh despite the luster of the child’s gaze.

“I came when I heard you weeping. It is a sound I seldom hear,” she said, yanking a reedy hair from out her head to twist into a rope.

Dante glanced at the darkness of Malebolge, and the anguished cries of the fallen filled her ears. “How can that be so? If you dwell here in the realm of Fraud?” she asked.

The child leant forward, and offered the rope. It wove itself around her neck, and wrapped the fruit within its cords to settle at the hollow of her once holy throat. It was a collar of knots, but away from her palm, it was more unlikely she would consume the fruit from temptation.

“These children of Hell cry for themselves... for the pain that is wrought upon them. But the pain is theirs to bear, delivered because they were wretched in life. Their sins lay heavy on their brethren. *You* weep for God, for the journey you are on, and you weep for knowing now the obstacles humans faced after they ate of the Tree of Knowledge.”

The girl grasped her hand, and her small fingers locked between the blackened digits of Dante's claws. Indifferent to the claspings rings that shackled the seraph's once delicate hands, the two marched together, towards the bridge that joined the first to second ditch of Hell. Dante faced the sight of Malebolge: illuminated now by the amber tint of the young girl's eyes.

"How can I see now, when before I could see nothing?"

"Because I am your guide, Dante."

The banks of Fraud spun downward like a cone, though from above it looked looped like a snake. Linear bridges laid above each ditch like the spoke upon a spinning wheel. Though the darkness had crept back to coddle in the corners of the chasms, it skulked in the periphery of her vision, whispering taunts to perforate her courage.

She could not fly, was forced to walk hand in hand with the girl who brought the only light to the eighth realm of Hell. The first ditch where sinners walked, at odds with the whipping from fervent demons, was succeeded by the scent of the second. So foul was it, that when they passed, her insides clenched for fear of retching.

The remains of man sat below, in a dike of filth encumbered by offal and excrement. So besmirched by ordure, and so long had those hapless souls dwelt in the bowels of their torment, that their bodies grew mould like hair. It covered their limbs and was matted with grime, weighing them down with no hope of escape.

"It shall get worse, Dante," the child said, her hand an anchor that propelled her forward. "In many ways this is the true Hell, and the burden of their sins lays upon the lady. Lilith."

"Lilith is a fraud as well."

The girl looked out along the plain of muck and sighed, lamenting the sight of the wretched. "Yes. Her trickery was the catalyst of everything that was to come after, but..."

“But?”

She bit her lip, and her cheeks looked gaunt and worried. Who was this child that had wronged God, yet appeared a victim of circumstance? The girl appeared faultless, and yet here she was in the heart of darkness, amongst the heinous crimes of Fraud.

“It’s fine,” Dante said, squeezing her hand as the girl’s grasp loosened. “I can tell that it’s complex.”

“It is. It’s hard to understand, but what occurred then was for the best of humanity.” A ghost of a smile touched her lips, and for a moment her appearance changed and her eyes were warm and vivid. “But Lilith hurt many in the process, and so perhaps her place is justified.”

They continued on until the pitted banks of the inferno leaned toward a crumbling bridge. The pair made their way over the lip of the third ditch, past the buried forms whose feet stuck up like lanced pustules. Another bridge crossed to the fourth, and upon it they went, watching with passing pity, the misshapen heads of the soothsayers.

“Who are you?” Dante asked again, pausing at a great cliff that overlooked a bubbling cauldron of tar. The heat was thick and invasive, the acrid smell pungent as it climbed the bluffs.

The girl crouched, and with gentle insistence pulled Dante beside her. “I am the third of the sixth,” she whispered, staring into the valley to watch as a motley of beasts convened around the massive boiler. It was as large as a river was long, and deeper than the four clawed feet at its base would suggest.

Dante opened her mouth to protest, but a being emerged howling from the simmering muck, and the monsters ushered it down with hooks and spears.

“We should not disturb these demons. They are the Malebranche, servants of Malacoda,” the girl said, looking askance as though in search of something.

Dante frowned, her mind a prattle of conscious thought that writhed in her ear like a worm. “We are in the realm of

Fraud,” she said, her whisper sharp like a blade in the dark, “where evil dwells and corrupts and lies. If you are no deceiver, then tell me who you are!”

The girl stood, her attention drawn from the pit as her honeyed eyes stared. She looked towards the pebbled stone, until her reed-like mane fell over her face, and the darkness grew and she chewed at her hair like a scolded child.

“I am the second and the third of the sixth of the Alpha and Omega. The first is with the second—or the first of the eighth—but I am in the nine because the nine is the end for my children.”

Beyond the shrieks that bellowed from the simmering pot below, Dante paused to dwell within the pall of her muddlement. Her bident rose to point upwards.

“The nine? The *end*?”

“Where they suffer the most,” the girl replied, wringing her hands as the space grew dark and she closed her eyes and wept. “Those with God are cared for. Those without are—”

“Tortured.”

The voice was thunder that rang from below and shook the stones that sat on the lip of the ditches. As they fell, clattering among the demons who danced about the simmering cauldron, the tar inside, like molten glass, lifted from out the rim. In a curve it grew, with spines like long pinnacles of weathered rock protruding from its back.

Dante stood and watched it lengthen above the ledge before them. Two long arms spilled like wax to dangle in the ditch, and a head—like a human skull—formed upon a twiggy neck to stare level with her smouldering eyes.

Its round eye-sockets were void of matter, and but a hair’s breadth from Dante’s face. It had no mouth, but tar dribbled from the spot it should have been. The souls of the grafters, damned in the fifth ditch of Fraud, twisted in pain inside the heat of its body. Like larva entrapped in a fiery

corpse, they pressed their face to the film of its black skin and cried like smothered babes from inside its membrane.

“Those who make the Mother weep shall idle in their pain and punishment. You,” it said, its hollow eyes adjusting as Dante stepped away, “more than most should know to whom you speak. In pain she birthed them. In pain she sees them wallow. In pain they will be until they repent.”

It’s voice was as slow as a dying man’s heartbeat. Dante’s eyes eclipsed, and glaring behind clouds of smoke, she stepped away from the tar that splattered the ground before her. “The Mother?” Dante said, her breath thick in her throat. “Eve?”

Malacoda nodded, thick threads of tar spinning like slaver down along its chin. “The second wife of Adam. The third human made on the sixth day. The Mother.”

Dante let her bident fall, and moving past the wraith of tar she stooped to hold the young girl’s hands. “You are *Eve*?”

The demons of Malebranche, tethered to the oily form of their master, rose upon the lip. Their wings were filled with the fumes that slivered from the heated pitch. Helmets obscured their faces, but wide mouthed grins severed their features in twain.

“Lilith is calling you, Mother.” They said in unison, their hooks and pitchforks winking in gore.

“I must go,” Eve replied, her hair a curtain that swayed as she removed her hand from Dante’s palm. The light retreated with her and the darkness crouched beneath Dante’s feet, ready to pounce as Eve turned her honeyed eyes away towards the bluffs. “She wants you to eat the apple...” she said, her body transforming, her limbs elongating until the sackcloth sat at the back of her thighs. “But that is a choice that should be left to you.”

“How will I see in the darkness without it?” The fear of the dark was climbing her spine, but as Dante spoke, all the eyes of Hell focused upon her, as though ready to strike.

Eve hung her head, and Dante gasped as rivers of blood ran between the now-woman's legs. Her belly was distended, but as Eve placed a hand upon it, Dante stepped away, her wings unfurling to brace for escape.

"The apple is within me and all of my children," Eve groaned, collapsing on her knees and staring at the rocks that trembled on the stony floor. "They can see as I can see."

The ground rose and the Malebranche left to huddle in their pit as Malacoda sank below the walls to wallow in its cauldron. The floor coiled around the pregnant woman in a sinuous, serpentine hill. Dante scrambled for her spear, shocked still as a toothy mouth opened from the end of the long, lithesome mound.

Its springy jowls opened wide and clamped around the woman's head. In six large bites, Eve disappeared, unmoving within the walls of its tensile jaws as the serpent rock swallowed. Dante screamed, and tried to wrench the woman free as the devouring worm drew down within the burrow of its own body, but its scales were impervious to the tines of the bident.

"Lilith! If you've any love for her, then stop this at once!"

A sibilant voice sighed within her mind.

Love for the Mother is strong here, Mikha'el. What she feels is from the divine. Eat of my gift and you will know of what I speak. Or wander in darkness amongst the arteries of Fraud.

Eve was gone. The serpent, a flat plane of stone smeared with scarlet. Dante took wing upon the zephyrs that meandered out the well of the eighth circle. She let her body guide her downward, over the ditches of Hell.

"I will not consume a thing you helped to make with hate, with lies and duplicity against a man you said you loved!"

Is that what he told you? The poor little Wrath Lord... always looking for an excuse to brood and rage... Let me tell

you something, Mikha'el. Before I even knew my name, I knew Adam, the man to whom I was to be subservient. Laughter shook the winds and trembled throughout the realm, but as the turbulence was caught beneath her wings, Dante plummeted, watching with dread as the ground shot up to strike her.

She was caught before she could be dashed to pieces, by something in the dark. It wrapped about her midsection, thick and soft, yet pliant. A serpent's body, afloat in the air, invisible but for its texture.

If you won't partake of my gift, then let me show you my ministry of woe, Fraud, and Eve's children who suffer within it.

“You ate her!”

I returned to her my heart, is all. If you can find it, I shall bear it to you.

The wind inflated her wings, and the press of lips touched her mouth. Dante tensed as cool palms cupped her face.

Let ignorance be your bliss a little while longer... Treachery still remains.

Dante settled on the ground like she had been delivered unto it, and though the darkness persisted, the remains of the dead whimpered from their torment.

Canto III

“Who are you, Unwounded? Have you come to bear the sword?”

Willing the blackness to part so that she could see the face that spoke in the dark, Dante peered. Something rustled around her, and the scent of blood and defecation was a poison in her nostrils. Her footsteps splashed upon the yielding ground, and eyes alit stared back at her like glowing bugs.

A man who held his own head like a lantern stood upon a gibber. Though his flesh was pallid and taut against his bones, the reddened stump that was his neck was a runnel of blood that lined his body. Beneath him, clustered together in a mound of agony and gore, were bodies alive and in pain. All were wounded, and though some ripped at their wounds and howled from missing limbs, others were decapitated or disemboweled.

“Where am I now?” Dante trembled, the sight of the Malebolge captivating her mind with fright. Stepping forward to entreat the man, he blinked, and the light was extinguished.

“You are where the sowers of scandal reside. Are you not a demon, Mistress? Have you not been sent to torture us?”

Dante shook her head. The light regained when he opened his eyes. “I am looking for Eve, for Lilith. Where is it that the Lady of Fraud resides? Where may I find her?”

The man was quiet, his lips thinning to a line beneath his ragged growth of beard. “The Lady is here. Always. Her body encompasses the circle, the tiers, the ditches.” He moved to let his eyes illuminate the walls, and shine their brilliance on the stony veneer flecked in metal. “Though her tail is tipped in the well of Cocytus, her body coils around the realm. Every stage is the Fraudster.”

Dante—hesitant in the wake of the living dead who wailed their woes upon the ninth shelf—walked to the walls to inspect the shards of ore that winked in the light. They

resembled scales up close, though were jagged like barbs, and formed hollow barnacles.

“What of her head? Her heart?” she asked.

“I know only that it does not reside here.”

Dante turned and watched as a font of blood oozed from out the man’s severed neck. “Who were you in life?” she asked. “What was your name?”

He cast his eyes down, and the light grew dull around them. Beyond the moaning sounded an anguished cry of another. “I was known for many things in life. Poetry, revolution,” the soul explained. “Know only that I am punished now for being a sower of schism. For naught else would I wish to be recognized.”

Dante nodded and glanced at her claws. “I understand. Though I am not a demon, I doubt you’d recognize *me* even if I said my name.” She looked away, and saw from afar the shine of a broadsword. The man’s eyes followed and shed light as a demon cleaved a man in two. It was ugly and vile, with cloven hoofs and a crown of horns, and flesh that looked well fed.

“Will you aid me, Spirit?” Dante asked, her knuckles white upon the haft of her bident. She looked at her feet, then back towards the beam in the dead man’s eyes. “I am lost in the darkness without a guide.”

“You can not see?” He furrowed his brow, and idling on her unwound wings he then looked away and tucked his severed head back against his torso. “We all have burdens to bear. Why must yours be mine? You want my head to light your way whilst my body festers here?”

The weight of the fruit drug her down. Was she to rely on the sins of another? She inhaled through her nose and chewed at her tongue to stifle a frown.

To burden another for fear of committing my own sin, despite all I have already done.

“I’m sorry, Spirit. You are right. If I can’t face the darkness, I should have never stepped into it. To use your

faults as an advantage to myself, makes me guilty of exploitation.” She turned on her heel and her tail curled around her thigh. “I will take my leave of you.”

But the body called back, and scrambling down the gibber, it almost tripped upon the snarl of bodies that lay at its foot in a tangle. “Wait!” he said, his mouth agape. “I take it back.” His feet were cut from the harsh stones that laid at the base of the ditch, but as he came within an arms breadth away from her, he thrust his head towards her bosom, hoping that she’d take it.

“You aren’t a demon. And if you aren’t, then you are good and worthy of help. In life, I turned a father against a son, and my head was cut in consequence. But, even if I am forever divided, I may find some solace in knowing I helped a soul in need, a *good* soul.”

Dante raised her hand but paused half way and took his gift. Her doubts were lesser than his will for consolation, and knotting his black, shoddy locks between her fingers, she forced a smile despite her qualms. “You have my thanks. If I had anything to give you, it would be yours.”

“Your thanks is enough.” His body leant towards the floor, and on hands and knees he knelt until his head would have touched the stone. “But beware of what you see,” he said. “The gaps between her body are rife with terrors.”

Dante nodded, and bid him to stand before her wings took flight and she was again upon the thermals of Hell. His eyes were bright like moons, but Dante flew low to see within the hellish corridors that lay like labyrinths between the sinuous curve of Lilith’s body. That the Lady of Fraud *was* the eighth circle, her form so grand that its coiled length divided the ditches into ten separate segments, was baffling. How had Lucifer’s form been changed beneath the firmament?

She soared over the landscape of the eighth circle, and flew downwards to the last rung where Lilith’s tail dipped in the wells of treachery.

Plagues hounded the dead. In every corner the lamentations of phantom beings were punctured only by the

illness they'd inherited from their sins. Men and women alive with boils, cysts, bloodied carbuncles and decay, clawed at their bodies for a moment of ease.

"The falsifiers," her lantern said, pity in his anguished eyes. Afraid to drink a moment more from the sight of those who suffered within, Dante headed higher, to peer upon the many layers she hadn't seen before. There were spirits clad in golden robes whose weight lay heavy on their shoulders. Others burned in fires so bright a sentient sun would be belittled.

In the seventh ditch, Dante rested in the house of fraudulent thieves. Serpents aplenty slithered on their bellies to bite sinful men and turn them to ash. As some transformed, born from their torment into ophidian fiends, Dante stared at the venomous maw that yawned like a portal before her.

It rose from the stone like a wyrm. Framed in fangs, its lower jaw opened, and it shook its massive jowls from the ashen debris left over from the pickpockets. Dust sparkled in the light of the lantern. Snake eyes followed Dante's march. The serpent's forked tongue quivered like a carpet eager to feel the seraph's footsteps.

"Welcome Mikha'el. It has been a long time since I have met someone worthy of conversation."

"Where is Eve?"

"Inside," the viper said, lowering its head to stare level at the angel. Venom slid from the hollow flutes of its fangs to drip upon its tongue, but as Dante stood straight to meet its threat, the serpent stilled and returned to stone.

Leave your light at the mouth of my temple, Mikha'el, a voice echoed from out the effigy.

Dante glanced at the winking fangs that hung like argent daggers above her head. Opening her mouth to reply, she gasped instead and clambered back against its teeth as the stone mouth clapped closed. The air was forced from her lungs as Dante collapsed upon the velvet tongue. Like a creature of the sea submerging beneath briny depths, the serpent burrowed

its head in the splintering shale that encompassed its form. Dante grasped the walls for purchase, inflated her wings to keep her upright, but as she slid against the sticky film of the creature's mouth, webs of spit formed threads that adhered them to her back.

I will not abide an uninvited man inside me.

“I can't just leave him here to be devoured!”

The severed head burst. A spray of blood, bone and meat peppered the front of Dante's torso, her arms, and legs, and left freckles of cruor upon her face. The hair in which she'd held the lamp aloft, disintegrated as its remains splattered on the hoary throat of the passage. Dante gaped at the macabre remains of the spirit, her tenacity shaken as a low chuckle filled the chamber.

If he was worthy of your pity, Mikha'el, he would not be in the bowels of Hell. Now come... we have much to discuss, you and I.

“How could you—”

The world has seen worse, and so have you. So has Eve... If you wish to find her.

The column of the serpent's throat was long and claustrophobic. Spurred by her ire, Dante's footsteps were harried by her own disgust as she trampled down the living corridor with her bident poised for battle.

Vertebrae undulated from the upper ridge of the passage, held in place by the flexing red muscles that glistened along the walls. Dante stepped down the petrified tongue that led deeper into the long sinuous halls of the eighth circle. She had to keep her wings tucked to prevent them from brushing against the veined insides. The darkness was infinite. The deeper she climbed the more impenetrable it became.

“Belial trusted you. He loved you,” she said, closing her eyes to escape the shapes in the darkness.

The Wrath Lord loves too easily.

“You used him!”

Lilith chuckled, and the sound was so tangible it wrapped about the barrel of Dante's chest until it grew tight. *You accuse Lady Fraud of deceit, Mikha'el? But what if I told you it was all for the greater good?*

"Your place in Hell is proof enough of your treachery."

Can't goodness be subjective? Lilith hummed, as if in contemplation. *I suppose not for an almighty, objective God, but—*

Dante stumbled downward through the unending passage and sensed the woman's malice in the bloating walls of the corridor. *Adam should be so grateful that despite him, despite everything, I gave his children that knowledge. That I sided with the devil...*

An olive light severed the darkness, illuminating the meandering tunnel in an gangrenous glow that was born from a room at the side of the steps. Ballooning outward from the uniform walls like a cancerous growth, Dante stepped upon the threshold where the contracting vertebrae split into a vast dome. Emerald torchlight filled her eyes.

The room was made of black pearl that wound in sinuous patterns. A recess in the floor's center, filled with an iridescent green pool, reflected the scintillating pyres hung in a chandelier from the peak of the chamber. Rose petals, like plucked, red scales, bobbed on the surface of the water, while beyond, against the opposite wall, an empty throne sat.

The ophidian corridor continued downward, but Dante stepped into the room, the floral bouquet, sat upon the water's surface, trembling as something emerged from its depths. Gargling bubbles crowned a head of black hair that draped like oil from off a woman's scalp. Lilith was nude as she rose from the water, save for a collar that bisected her throat and dangled with pearls down the rounded slope of her shoulders. As she smiled, her violet lips turned up the corners of her obsidian eyes, pricked with glowing white pupils.

There was Hell in her smile as her body wandered over the lip of the emerald well. Rivulets of water ran over the rounded curve of her belly, between her breasts and hips. On

the cusp of her labia, a brilliant smattering of pearlescent jade scales and silver plates wandered up her torso in a beautiful spectrum of fluctuating colors.

Her appearance was hypnotic, and yet as Lilith meandered over the basin, Dante was sickened as the Lady of Fraud drew on a chain to usher another to follow her to the surface.

“Mikha’el...” Her movements were mesmerizing. A trail of water left by her tail elongated her body in an endless rope along the floor. Circling her as Dante stared, Lilith let the long column of her supple body obstruct the way as she leant over to tilt the seraph’s chin upwards. “What a magnificent creature you’ve become. Something to be proud of...”

But Dante’s distraction was beyond the Lady’s gaze as she watched the man at the end of the chain crawl on all fours after his mistress. Nude but for an iron gorget, his eyes were hidden behind a scarlet cloth.

“Has my husband caught your eye?” Lilith asked, long canines pointing over the voluptuous pout of her bottom lip. Again she tugged on the chain, and ordered the man to stand before them. “He is quite obedient...”

Dante let out the breath she had been holding to utter, in disbelief, the man’s name.

“Adam?”

“How smart you are, Mikha’el!” Lilith answered, slithering around to grasp him about the shoulders. She pinched at his cheeks, lounging on his right shoulder as her hands began to splay over the taut muscles of his chest. Though Adam was tall, Lilith, with the height of her tail, was taller.

“Why is the first man *here*? Why is Eve here?”

Lilith chuckled. “Two similar questions that require dissimilar answers,” she mused, leaving Adam’s side to draw closer to her. “My husband is here because he ate the fruit of knowledge. Because he blamed his second wife Eve. Because

after hearing the commands of God, he yielded to temptation. Eve is here because she chooses to be.”

“Why?”

Lilith shrugged. “Her womb which bore the first children in pain and torment still aches for the fall of her family. The guilt she feels for every soul that abides in Hell, forces her to stay. I keep her here to protect her, and because I pity her. If not for me, she would not have been forced to be obedient.”

“I—” Dante frowned, and would have stepped back if not for the broad length of Lilith’s tail behind her. “I don’t understand.”

The Hell Lord swayed like a stream of smoke. A look of sympathy swept across her features. Ducking until her eyes were level with the smoking chasms that whispered about Dante’s temples, Lilith passed her Adam’s chain.

“Innocence... God’s children. If it were up to Him they would remain as such. Mikha’el,” she began, turning away towards the pool. “When I was created as the first wife of Adam, I was created as he was. Equal.” Adam said nothing, but as the green waters parted, and the flowers bobbed on the surface in the wake of Lilith’s ingress, he turned to follow, dragging the chain and Dante who held it, along with him.

“Adam and I were created together. In the same way by God. Yet when my husband bid me lay beneath him, I refused. And why shouldn’t I?” she asked, “We were equal. Yet as soon as Adam was born, he wished to rule over me, so much so, that when I was cast out, Eve was created *from* him... to be subservient.” Lilith scoffed. “Now...”

Adam walked over the edge of the pool and stood before his first wife as the water lapped at his hips. Dante kept to the rim, the thin chain barely grasped between her fingers as she watched Lilith caress his face.

“He bows to me... *and* to her.”

Eve emerged from the water. A grown woman now, her hair was a ribbon of silken locks, her breasts slight globes

topped with pert cherries. The honey of her eyes were filled with devotion as she looked upon her husband and at the water that dripped from the shallow gutters along his chest. Her approach, a wordless command that he seemed to recognize, caused him to turn away and face the hall in which Dante had come. He bent double, his face a passive display of deference as Eve paused and Lilith wrapped something about the young woman's hips.

“What—” Her question cut short by her incredulity, Dante watched as Eve approached Adam. A phallic device of hardened bread was attached to her hips, secured with leather. Adam winced, and moaned with desire as he arched his spine to adjust to its entry. Eve raked her nails along his back, letting the shaft poised above her pubis enter him from behind until it was wholly inside him.

Lilith giggled, watching with glee and biting her lip to draw blood to the surface. As the Hell Lord slinked back, Dante dropped the chain attached to Adam's gorget and watched as Eve leant over him to draw it into her own hands.

“You don't need to worry, Mikha'el,” Lilith explained as she touched the nape of Eve's neck and she swam about the basin. “Adam is willing. Before, he didn't *know* what he was missing, but now, filled with the seed of the forbidden fruit, he revels.”

Adam groaned, words of praise for his second wife grunting from his mouth as his blindfold fell away to hang about his neck. His hands gripped the poolside, and Dante was certain that if he so desired, Adam could have stepped out, away from the woman who loved him. Eve continued to thrust, her eyes closed, her face filled with rapture and thirst. Adam joined her, asking for more as she leaned down to grip and pump at his shaft.

“Aren't you coming?”

After the carnage and pain Dante had seen in the eighth circle, she feared for the lust that enlivened her loins. She wanted to flee, to run and hide and dissect her mind until she knew for what she wanted, but what she came for was at the

bottom of the well, where the tip of Lilith's tail entered into Treachery and wavered in the realm of Lucifer.

Dante's spear clattered to the floor. Lilith smiled and drew her into the pool to join her. "Is all knowledge worth having, Mikha'el?" Lilith asked as she brushed Dante's long, alabaster hair back away from the seraph's shoulders.

Dante shivered. "I don't know." She was an insignificant speck of dust in a library.

"How do you feel, Mikha'el?" Lilith kissed along her shoulder and her tongue dipped into the hollow at Dante's collarbone. Dante sighed, the physical sensations muddling the complexities of her thoughts.

"Lost, and sympathetic."

"Sympathetic to whom?"

"To them." Dante watched as the couple became lost in the throes of their passions. "They are like tomes. The deeper meaning of their existence is obscured by their stories and the desire to know how they end. Yet, even at the conclusion of their life, most will never know their purpose. Human beings aren't born with faith, yet must find it amidst everything else and keep it."

Dante grasped the woman's waist. She liked the feel of Lilith's yielding flesh beneath her palms, even though the Hell Lord was a diversion. "I was created with faith in God, yet now my mind is awash with lust, gluttony, greed and wrath."

The Hell Lord chuckled. Her teeth lined a trench along the seraph's throat as rose petals stuck to her squamous skin and Dante was lured on a bench in the water. "Ways to cope, Mikha'el. The mind, the body, the spirit—" Lilith's teeth sunk deep. Dante's blood poured and she hissed in a pained breath. "These are all gifts from God. Yet how do we satisfy all three?"

Lilith's hands pulled at the taut buds of Dante's nipples. She supped upon the lifeblood that poured from out the angel's throat. The feeling was tremendous. The Lady of Fraud lapped at the wounds festering in Dante's mind with the

healing flick of her tongue. Dante squeezed her thighs together, and tried not to glance at Adam and Eve whose fucking had caused the waters to flood. She tipped her head back to loll against the lip of the pool.

“I can’t trust you,” Dante said, watching as Lilith’s red and golden mouth lifted from her neck. The seraph looked at her, and despite her inhibitions, as the Lady’s hand pressed at her thighs, they parted, accepting her caress with a moan that carried through the corridors.

“You can’t,” the lady agreed. “We children who oppose Heaven’s Sovereign are rife with sin, just like the children of Eve who dwell in these infernal halls.” Lilith’s face was dark with desire, and as her lips parted and her fingers stroked the folds of Dante’s trembling core, the angel opened her mouth. “But unlike Adam and I,” she continued, glancing towards the first man whose cock beaded with cum, “Not all sin is created equal.”

The lady’s wet tongue was demanding as Dante received the Hell Lord’s kiss with the eagerness of a whore. The taste of blood in Lilith’s mouth seared her loins, and suckling at the woman’s tongue, Dante rocked her hips in tandem to Eve’s salacious thrusts into her husband.

The water was heavy, and Lilith’s body, meandering the depths of the hellish well, constricted around her torso as Dante sobbed with pleasure.

“Beautiful seraphim,” the Hell Lord whispered, ending the kiss to insert her fingers inside Dante’s willing mouth. “You are magnificent...”

The water’s applause was silenced as Lilith sunk her fangs back inside the seraph’s neck. Drawing blood and watching as it ran in ribbons down Dante’s chest, the Mother of Fraud’s eyes met hers as she ran her tongue along her skin to catch it. The seraph cried, her body pumping through the water to piston against the lady’s fingers. The spheric structure of the pool allowed for Dante to watch as Eve made love to her husband. She studied Adam’s tongue as lolled from out his

mouth, and his pelvis as it rocked to force the phallus deeper inside him.

“What do you want, Lovely?” Lilith asked, her tail looping around the room as torchlight flickered off the nacreous walls. Dante’s limbs had loosened with the unravelling of her tangled thoughts. Spurred by lust and greed and wrath, the angel leaned to grasp the Lady of Fraud by the neck. Dante lurched towards the opposite edge and straddled the woman’s lithe, serpentine body with supple thighs.

“My name is Dante,” she said, her strength igniting through her fingertips as the cords of Lilith’s throat contracted from their pressure. The Hell Lord laughed, her red mouth panting as Dante descended and bit at the skin below her jaw. The greedy teeth of the Glut King savored the saline taste of copper and citrus that poured from Lilith’s neck. Dante sucked and rubbed her clit against the subtle texture of Lilith’s scales, delighted when the lady’s body parted.

The agile column of emerald scales became soft, plump thighs wrapped in a silken, jade hip cloth. It floated upon the water’s surface like a banner, but as her privates blossomed and Dante grasped the woman’s breasts, Lilith groaned with pleasure.

“Dante,” she said. “Beautiful, terrible, *frightening* Dante.” Lilith’s hands were in her hair, and pressed at the back of the seraph’s skull with nails that raked through porcelain locks to drive the glutton’s teeth in deeper. The Lady of Fraud tasted like a perfervid ambrosia. It coagulated in Dante’s belly like a heavy stone, and bloomed within her loins. It pulsed within her temples like a loosened iron bolt.

When she pulled away and gasped with her teeth bared and mouth open, Lilith was staring. Not at her fangs, winking in the Hell Lord’s gore, but at a crown of horns that had sprouted from Dante’s temples. Lilith fingered the dark, bony protrusions that curved to a point at the top of the seraph’s head and smiled.

“You, who bears our sins upon your body, are *becoming* sin for the sake of he who sits upon the Throne of

Treachery...” Lilith closed her eyes, tugging at Dante’s horns to return her lover’s face to her lips. “May you enter his gates with praise and thanksgiving.”

Lilith slipped a thigh over Dante’s until both women were straddling the other. She consumed the seraph’s mouth. The sensation of the lady’s supple thigh between Dante’s legs caused the angel to grasp the woman’s breasts until Lilith whined and wriggled from the pain. Dante rocked back and forth, sucking on the Hell Lord’s tongue as Lilith squirmed and pressed her clit against the seraph’s thigh.

The water splashed. Red and black and golden blood clouded its sage depths as it ran between the women to pollute it’s emerald hue.

“Mmm.” Lilith moaned as she wrapped her arms around Dante’s torso and settled her fingers in the groove between her Hell-gifted wings. As their bodies collided, Dante gasped, breathing heavy if only to feel the press of her inflated chest against the Hell Lord’s body. Lust addled Dante’s mind and drove her mad as she tipped her head to drink from Lilith’s throat. But as Dante moaned and the Lady of Fraud mirrored the seraph’s esurient behaviour and impaled her own teeth into the angel’s skin, the two women revelled, and rocked back and forth against each other in mad chorus as they supped upon the other’s blood.

It was euphoric, and when Dante drew back and blood splattered across her chin and collarbones, she swooned.

“Not yet, my love,” Lilith chided as she moved her leg to reposition. Dante turned, watching as the couple beside them bucked like ravenous bulls. As Adam came, pumping at his own shaft with reckless abandon, his pearlescent seed shot into the water and along the basin’s edge in thick, ropey tendrils. He moaned like a man split in twain, and behind him, grasping at her breasts as she forced him to take in every inch of her, Eve screamed.

The sight of the first man coming from the ministrations of his second wife caused a flush to spear across Dante’s cheeks, but as Lilith’s body changed, and her long

serpentine tail parted Dante's legs, Dante tipped her head back into the curve of Lilith's neck.

"Let's see how hard we can make you come, Dearest," she said, entrapping Dante's legs as the lady's fingers wriggled between the seraph's swollen folds.

"Oh! God—"

"Careful Dante. He sees all." Lilith kissed at her temple, her fingers massaging in slow, sweet circles to enliven the immoral identity that adored capturing Dante's mind.

"Push harder," Dante hissed, her toes curling as the first waves of palpable lust pulsed from out her skewered mound.

"How far you've come from the start of your journey..." Lilith's forked tongue was in her ear as she grasped Dante's throat and her fingers punctured the bleeding wounds upon her neck. Dante struggled against her, if only to feel the pressure of the Fraud Queen's hand against her windpipe.

"Asmodeus would be so proud of you..."

"Oh God, yes..." Dante whispered, her eyes rolling to the back of her head as Lilith pinched at the bud of her quim and rolled it against her thumb. She couldn't move. The lady's strength was absolute, but as Dante's orgasm ploughed past her thighs to ripple her insides, deep in the water, between her legs, a cloud of rust formed, its aurelian tint now gone.

"I can see it, Mikha'el..." Lilith purred beside her ear, petting at her inflamed folds. Dante was delirious, possessed by pleasure.

"See w-what?"

"The weeping eye of God, my love."

Treachery

Canto I

Lulled to sleep by infernal bliss, Dante huddled deep in the embrace of the Hadean darkness. Her eyes danced beneath her fastened lids, gazing at the circular waves that rippled from a drop of illusory water. Laced with crimson, the droplet fell to burrow deep amid the limpid pool, but as it settled and spread its copper wings, up shot a bead of perfect glass, whose spheric eye hovered above the surface and was separate from the polluted waste that birthed it.

“Are you still asleep, my Mikha’el?” Fingers brushed across her eyes like down, trailing in descent across Dante’s jaw until her skin prickled in gooseflesh and her mouth parted in a sharp inhale.

Lilith cradled her, her serpent’s body swaddled around her limbs as Dante’s head lay upon her breast. Adam and Eve were gone, the emerald pool empty but for the olive sparks that reflected from the sconces on the wall, and the tip of Lilith’s tail. The pair reclined together upon the massive throne that had once sat empty at the back of the chamber. The black, pearl-like walls oscillated from the light source, but as Dante woke to the memory of a rippling pool, she had to pause to realize where she was.

“What happened?” she asked, looking to stare at Lilith. Her head weighed heavy, and she smiled to have the Fraud Queen’s bosom to keep her upright.

“You fainted, my dear. Not for long, but time enough that I carried you here to watch you sleep...” Lilith fingered at Dante’s horns. Dante had forgotten they were there. “Are you alright, my dear? Your sleep was restless.”

Though her wings hung limp, they folded inwards as she responded. Her body tensed. “I’m... afraid. I’m scared of what I will find, but also of what I have lost.” She gripped Lilith’s arm, staring at the pool of jade and at the Hell Lord’s tail that dipped within it. “I know I am close to him now, but I am no longer sure I wish to see what lies within. If I don’t go, everything will be for naught, and yet,” Dante paused, hit by a

notion as she turned to stare into the Lady's eyes. "Lucifer. Tell me of him? Surely you know something."

Lilith smiled, though the mirth that framed her mouth did not reside in her eyes. Twisting a lock of hair that had tangled in the seraph's horns, the Hell Lord pushed it behind one ear, her hesitation brief, and maternal.

"I have not seen Lucifer for a long time, Mikha'el." She looked at the pool, and her tail sloshed at the water's edge, though its tip stayed buried within. "Though I reside partially in the ninth circle, my realm is the eighth... of Fraud."

"*Why* do you reside in both?"

The Fraudster sighed, her violet lips pursed. "Because it is fitting that I do." Lilith's arms enveloped her, and embraced as such, Dante shivered as the lady's mouth drew to her ear. "Despite what the Wrath Lord may have told you, be warned of knowledge. Not all of it is worth having. Sometimes it *is* necessary. Betraying Belial was necessary, because humanity deserved to be more than kine. You finding Lucifer... I believe that is also necessary, not for him, perhaps, but for you."

"You betrayed Belial for the sake of humans?"

"I did."

Dante paused, certain her doubt was evident on her features.

Lilith continued. "It was a plan arranged by the devil. Yet despite being born from spite, it was necessary. I was the first woman, and though humanity was not birthed from my womb, I cared for them regardless." She smoothed her thumb across Dante's brow. "You can believe me or not, Mikha'el. That is up to you."

Dante wasn't sure, and though the words tumbled from her mouth, they were empty of conviction: "If it wasn't for you, humans would be in paradise. Eve would not be here, weeping for her children who are tortured in Hell."

"There are many here who committed sin and *knew* what sin was. Though all sins are not equal, some are

abhorrent. Perhaps you will understand more when you meet him.”

“Why hasn’t he come?” Dante looked at the water, wondering what he looked like after his own journey to Treachery. It hurt her to think that he’d know of her trials, and yet did nothing to aid her. The generals had told her she’d have to accept Hell to know him, and yet... what had he done to deserve such devotion?

“I can’t say why,” Lilith replied, “for I do not know. But I can open the gate to the ninth circle, and you can ask him yourself, Mikha’el.”

She would. She’d demand to know. Because everything had changed, and yet she hoped it hadn’t...

Lilith was warm, her embrace welcome, and yet sat within her arms, Dante considered the lady’s words. Could any of the denizens of Hell be trusted? It was folly to heed their words, and yet some of what she’d heard rang true. Was it a consequence of the sin she’d allowed into her body? Was it a result of *knowing*?

Dante frowned. The husk of the fruit she’d been given, settled within the valley of her breasts. She took it between her thumb and pointer to regard it.

“Mikha’el?” Lilith’s voice was a chime of concern.

Dante shook her head, and let the apple fall. “I told you before, my name is—”

“Dante!”

The two women jumped, their gaze arrested to the man in the heart of the room. With an iron tipped staff and sable eyes, Dante couldn’t help but smile, her sadness exposed in a futile expression that was full of expected design.

Lilith hissed, the pearls about her shoulders rattling as she stood to set the seraphim down beside her throne. Her muscles were tense. Her olive scales shimmered as she raised herself up from the lissom stump of her body to tower above Him. Her white pupils split, like the blade of a sabre had been thrust through her eyes.

“To know that you’re omnipresent and yet for all these years have only come here now is... predictable.”

“You carry the wrath of many, Lilith, but I am forgiveness. I am not hurt by your words.”

“Nonsense! If you were forgiveness, you would have come sooner!”

He took a step forward, His footsteps as quiet as a shadow splayed across the floor. He looked up, adorned in a robe of white. His eyes were intense, made more so as they stared out from the visage of an old man whose prime had long since passed.

“Do you wish to be forgiven, daughter?” He asked. Dante glanced towards her, and watched as Lilith shrank beneath the divine flames of His sable eyes. Like a cornered beast, she looked ready to risk it all for a chance of life, but after a moment her body relaxed, and with a smile fed with spite Lilith spat, “No.”

She said it again with greater impetus, her lower body winding in the emerald pool to raise waves along the lip as she closed the distance between them. “Not by you, whose design saw my path and willed it down to Hell anyway. I will not seek forgiveness for having a purpose.”

Lilith turned, the hush of her body upon the pearlescent floor an epilogue to Dante’s departure. Taking her by the chin to lift the seraph’s face up to gaze into her own, Lilith pressed her mouth upon the soft expanse of Dante’s lips. A chaste goodbye that echoed of deep affection. Dante’s cheeks grew hot as the Hell Lord pulled away to whisper a farewell.

“The icy heart of Hell awaits. It is the coldest place, farthest from His love,” she said, glancing back to stare at the man in the back of the room. “In a world without God, you’ve only yourself to believe in. Good luck, Dante Mikha’el.”

The torches flared, and stirred to life by Lilith’s form, the room twisted in an olive sequence that framed the verdant pool. Her body slithered into its depths until it vanished and the well became a cyclone. Virgil with His sable eyes stared,

not at the torrent that spun in the floor, but at the arcangel before Him.

“The Throne of Treachery awaits,” He said, reaching out a hand. His face transformed, a grave image of a pagan philosopher becoming a portrait of sweet serenity. “May I join you, Dante?”

“Why?”

His smile was sad, but as He glanced around the chamber with His wrought iron staff, He looked unsure: an expression that gave her pause, and caused her to wonder of all the words that had been spoken to her in Hell.

“Because I am in need of a guide. Will you oblige me?”

She nodded, and looking into the chasm of swirling mass, Dante spread her bat-like wings and leapt from off the precipice into the frozen heart of Treachery.

On her heels, God followed.

Canto II

At the base of the spitting tornado the waters froze. Small pickled veins from the pool above whirled beneath a shell of ice and spines that jutted towards the middle like a lamprey's teeth. The only guardian against the pronged shaft of frost was Lilith's scintillating tail, which lowered the fallen seraph and broke the spear-like barbs like spires of salt.

The bottom of Hell, confined in ice, winked with deadly promise. Dante winced as her feet settled on the pellucid plane and the sharp bite pained past her ankles. Virgil stood beside her, and the column of frost split to let them see the expanse of Treachery. From His feet, He slipped His sandals, and gave them to her to use.

“Are you certain this is what you want, Dante?”

“No. But even if I could return, I would not find my Heaven. All I have is the journey now, and a bleak hope that maybe I can find him.” She slipped her feet into His shoes, and though the cold abated, her feet were numb and pained.

“Then go. I will follow.”

And don't forget your bident, Dante. If not for use as a weapon, then as a crutch...

Lilith's voice curled down the frozen well and brought with it her spear. The bident floated between the spines of the icy corridor, polished and clean. Dante nodded, though doubts hatched in her mind.

She slumped. A shattered husk, once defined by the good and just, was now a remnant of possible lies. She took the bident and spread her wings to fly above the frozen wastes. She wished to see on high what traitors lay to grieve in ice and sleet and snow, but as she left Virgil behind, He vanished, and Dante knew His presence dwelt inside her mind amongst the suspect trust.

Barren trees, dressed in hoarfrost, dead above the frozen lake of Cocytus, spread their roots to expand in vain

beneath the crystal sea. Within the banks of ice, idle creatures dwelt. The roots entwined around the limbs of traitors, whose heads alone were free to wallow above the surface and feel the breath of Hell's harsh chill. Some whose necks lay bare, could tuck their faces from the wind, but others weren't so fortunate.

The frost was beautiful, despite its horror. A graveyard of souls who had committed the sin that God Himself deemed to be the highest offence to His Kingdom and Heaven. Dante flew, and glaciers sat like sleeping giants atop the mirrored back of Cocytus. Submerged within their saw-toothed slopes, supine souls with frozen eyes were denied the right to weep. Their gaping eyeballs, coated in a crust of rime, sparkled, and though they saw her fly above them, what did they think? Did her presence bring them fear, or hope? Or did she bring them nothing at all, because they had long lost the ability to feel?

“How can I not pity these souls when their pain is so great that they can think of nothing else?”

That man you see below invited guests to his house and had them slaughtered. Cut and quartered. Men, women, children...

A flash of screaming. A scene of brutal gore splashed amongst a wooden table set for ten. Dante let the silence linger as she passed above the sight of the entombed man, her heart aflame with loathing at the sight that'd been delivered to her brain.

“So will he live in Hell forever?”

On no day will the gates be shut. Resurrection will come to those who wash their robes, but just as people are destined to die once and face judgement, only if they can find the grace within themselves can they be ushered from their pain.

“Aren't souls saved by *your* grace? Through faith?” Her wings began to dust with ice, despite the scarce moments she kept them idle. “Faith is forfeit in the belly of Hell where your existence is proven through pain and punishment.”

A wall approached that spanned the crags and towered far past what her eyes could see. Dante slowed, even as the words of God whispered from within her.

It is something most will never find. But for those with strong free will, mayhap someday they will find themselves carried from the flames of the inferno.

Dante scoffed, and though she kept the words within her mouth, she knew He heard them just the same. Free will carried many souls to Hell. When had it ever delivered anyone to Heaven?

God did not answer, though whether it was due to despondency or out of respect for her privacy, Dante did not know.

When was it that she started feeling sympathy for the toils of humanity, to the point that she'd dare to venture out from the gates of Heaven to find Lucifer?

She loved Lucifer, yes, and perhaps his expulsion had been the catalyst of her descent, but it was the lack of cohesion that had lit the flames of apostasy in her. God was perfection, but how could He demand faultless good from feeble humans whose struggles within were greater than a blind faith?

Lucifer had been banished for his treachery, for wanting to be a god. And yet God made man flawed, then ordered them to be likened to Him or face damnation.

The ice wall glittered in infinitesimal patterns that paralleled the multiplicity of Hell's doomed souls. It was like cathedral glass, unpigmented and dissimilar to the bold colors of God's house. Up close, it was easy to see the pictures it portrayed. God's necrosis from humanity's bane, torn open by the plummeting morning star. The forbidden fruit, sown by Wrath, delivered by Fraud and consumed by Lust, Glut, Greed and Heresy. Violence, born from all that came before it.

Dante flew beside the wall with frozen tears upon her cheeks. She paused, a grand display of Lucifer guiding into view. She knew it was him by the six majestic wings that

fanned out from behind his back, but it was by that trait alone that she could recognize him.

His portrait in the frost was of a beast. Crowned in six horns that rose like a tongue of flame from out the crest of his three faced skull, each maw, framed with frothy tears, chewed upon himself—or as he was when he was holy. A depiction of matted hair upon his shoulders, betwixt his claws and falling from the slope of his brow, was made clear by hoarfrost. His form was bisected at the mid-point of his torso and ended at the surface of the circle.

“You said before you knew his thoughts, that he asked you to come and get me. Does he even know I’m here?”

There was no answer, but His silence was confession enough when she pressed her palms against the ice and stared out at the other side.

On a crystal throne he slumped in slumber. His pendulous wings that winked with snow, spread behind him in a raven cloak of down. He sparkled from the shell of frost, his beauty beneath preserved in idyllic detail. Hair of jet fell upon his brow, tousled around a laurel of curling horns that angled upwards. Aureate epaulets, splayed upon a sable suit adorned in crimson and gold, held in place a cape, whose underside was the color of bloodshed. His face, serene like moonlight, was barren of life, and in a spheric room enclosed in ice, Lucifer looked like a lonely idol. A corpse preserved in monument stone.

“Lucifer!” she said, striking at the glass, feeling the heat of her palm melt its surface to refreeze as the droplets fell. Her fist was inept against the panes of ice, but her will enlivened at the sight of him.

The haft of her bident was cold in her hands. Her wings spread wide and swallowed the space in a feverish gulp. Dante swung back like a battering ram and rushed the ice with the strength of six beasts. The wall cracked beneath the point of the bident’s tines. Each segment shattered as the pulse of her blow vibrated like an echo from the tips of her spear.

She entered, the splintering sounds of diamond-like glass nothing but a hiss behind her. Lucifer's throne sat on a dais in the center of a frozen blister whose walls had burst. Dante flew to perch upon the stage, and silver coins littered its surface.

"Lucifer?" Her heart was alive within her chest. The culmination of all her woes, her desires, her trials within the warrens of Hell, was before her... unmoving. She gazed upon him and ignored her own reflection in the frost. He was perfection made in flesh, and as she walked towards his perch upon the throne, he looked exactly as the angel he was before his fall.

But he did not answer her.

"Lucifer..." Her tears froze within her eyes before they could fall and cut her face.

Had she been betrayed? Lied to? Made to feel guilty for believing Lucifer had abandoned her? How long had her beloved sat in tombs of ice?

Dante stepped over broken glass to the foot of Lucifer's throne. She held her head and beat at it before turning on her heel, facing Virgil—even though a moment before he had not been there.

"You knew," she said, her voice a deception in the face of her ire. "You *knew!* And yet you told me he sent you to me."

"He did. When you first arrived. When you were a seraphim, fallen from Heaven." He looked aside, His face graven from sorrow. "Dante, please. Knowledge isn't a sin, but the knowledge that sin exists made humanity unfit for paradise. Unless by freewill they refuse sin, they will never return to the garden. It wasn't the fruit, but the loss of innocence that banished mankind—the knowledge of oneself, and the creation of freewill derived from Adam and Eve who chose to eat the apple."

"But all this you *knew!* There is nothing you don't know. You created humans knowing they'd sin! You knew of

sin before man was created.” Dante turned, looked at the Throne of Treachery and the devil who sat upon it. Stooping to her knees, she grasped Lucifer’s frozen hand and wept, the words of the Wrath Lord lingering in her ear. “You knew of me, of him... how he’d betray you. How he’d strive to be you.”

“No.” His voice had changed. “I knew of what you’d do, but I did not understand at first. Now I do. As for Lucifer,” He took a step, appearing to the right of the Hell King. “He wanted to be as God, which is not to say he wished to *be* God but to be an equal. When I bid him to kneel before humans, he refused, and in consequence I pushed him from the walls of Heaven to the bowels of the Earth. In revenge, Lucifer dedicated his Helldom in ensuring that mankind would rival their creator... that one day I would kneel to them.”

Dante stared, and wiped wet hands across her cheeks. Standing before Him, her gray eyes wafting in the space between them, she left her bident upon the throne as her hellish tail wrapped about her leg and her wings sagged around her form.

“But if you knew all this, then why create him? Why allow him to—” The chasm of His sable eyes swallowed her in dismal silence. The words of the Hell Lords loitered in her ear. Memories that made no sense rushed to the fore like a sudden flood, ushering with it debris that bound itself into gospel.

“Ye shall be as gods,” she whispered.

The truth was in His eyes, and even from afar she knew she’d read it properly. “You created him *because* you knew. It was your plan... You knew humanity would surpass you.”

God inclined His head, and His wrought-iron staff dipped from the weight that was lifted from His shoulders. “It is what every parent wants for their children, and eventually mine too will grow apart from me. Someday. They will surpass me, and I will fade into obscurity. And I will be happy for Them. But to know great power, great love, and great

providence, one must know great pain.” God reached forward, and as His hand caressed her face, Dante’s heart went still.

“Today is not Their day, but yours. I thought you’d wait in Heaven, Mikha’el, but instead you’ve chosen Hell. Maybe it’s for the best that here is where you await the end.” His lips brushed hers, but as His body began to ascend and their mouths parted, Dante grasped at His limbs and her talons raked trenches across His forearms.

“But what of Lucifer? How can I help *him*?” she cried, watching as her God departed. She’d traveled through the circles of hell for her beloved, and God watched her struggle... all the while knowing her love was lost.

His celestial light burned in her eyes, but as He left, ascending through Hell in a column of righteous might, Dante saw the stars, drawn together in that bright blue iris that had watched her come forth to flounder on the lips of Hell.

Morning comes, Dante.

The ice cracked. The silver coins danced upon the dais as Hell devoured the beacon of light that had funnelled up from out its core. The fissures cracked over Lucifer’s hand, where the heat of her palms had thawed the frost. They grew like black barren trees and spread across his sleeping form. Dante watched shards fall free, and turned to snow upon the floor.

She exhaled, and the phantom breath was swallowed as Lucifer filled his lungs. His wings inflated, and the furious red of his eyes grew sharp as he stood to look around the room.

He stumbled at first, his golden chains and epaulets ringing as he hit the floor upon one knee. His face was an incarnate beauty: a legacy to his birth, and though Dante watched with wistful admiration, there was a voice inside herself.

A litany. A choir composed of lust and glut and greed and wrath. The voice of violence, the cacophony of one’s own personal sexual ménage bequeathed from the gods. It was a

song of loving and hateful deception built on a tenor of pride...

It was the voice of Dante, whispering of love that was long-suffering.

But as she ran to Lucifer's side, and grasped him around the waist to keep him from falling, Dante didn't understand, not until he looked at her with eyes abound with wicked charm, interest and with ignorance.

He touched her face and Dante shivered, warmed by his caress.

"And who might you be, sweet demoness, that wakes me from my torpor?"

He stumbled again, and she caught him as diamonds fell from her eyes to cut her cheeks.

"Everlasting Dante," she replied, *knowing* that Heaven in Hell was impossible. *Knowing*, somehow... that as she was, he'd never recognize her again. "I've come to ease your pain, by taking it unto myself. I've come to know you, and hope you'll know me."

"Dante..." he whispered with a smile. "I was waiting for an angel..."

"Perhaps you were," she replied, unfurling her wings as she helped him to stand. "But I slew her, and buried her in a grave at the center of the Earth."

"I hoped that she would come."

"Abandon hope—"

"I won't. I shant. I'll never."

The fruit upon her bosom heaved, and high in Heaven, all alone but for those blissful few who worshiped Him, God watched as Dante kissed the devil... and he embraced her back

—

With all the Love which moved the sun and the other stars...

Thank you for reading!

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About The Author

Charlotte St. James



A life-long lover of horror, Charlotte wrote her first story when she was in grade five. It was entitled Mutilated and warranted a trip to the school guidance counsellor.

Since then she has become enthralled with the vast and untamable world of literotica. With over a dozen publications under her belt, Charlotte won second place in the David Adams Richards Prize for her book Dante's Inferno last year, to the chagrin of all the faith-abiding attendees that were made to hear her read at the summertime gala.