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Doctor D

by Bella Dalton-Fenkl

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PART I

Doctor D savored the change in atmosphere. He reveled in the chill air flowing around him. Death's garden was cup-shaped, with a cold lake at its heart, enclosed and shielded by blue slate cliffs. The geography caused the little pocket to be perpetually cool and moist. Death had picked the location carefully, he had explained, to be somewhere tucked away in the sprawling plains below Asgard. Doctor D closed his eyes. Sometimes, on brighter days, the rainbow road that led there was visible as a ribbon of light. He opened his eyes. No rainbows today—a spectral mist hung over everything, as fog would in mountain valleys. He and Death had appeared on the lake's shore as usual, but this time inside a fairy circle that had sprung up since the last time Doctor D had visited. The mushrooms, with their white skirts, were death caps.

Doctor D leaned in closer to Death. "Death caps? You're both an ice and drama queen."

"Yes," said Death. He led the way, cutting across the shore. Although Death's robe obscured his feet, his foot bones made a pleasing, crackling sound as he walked across the smooth stones.

Upon reaching the garden proper, Doctor D smelled petrichor from the cobbles, which had been dusted in water droplets. The path led past a series of planting tables made of aged wood that looked the color of wisteria blossoms in the mist. Butterflies and moths fluttered around the tables, often alighting on the potted plants that were in bloom. When these insects would glide into the distance and

vanish from view in the mortal realms, sometimes they were actually being drawn through the bardo to this four-season garden.

Death paused between the planting tables and pulled his hood back, unveiling his skull. In his eye sockets were bits of old logs and crumbling autumn leaves that Doctor D had almost forgotten he had helped his friend wedge in there. Out of this substrate grew delicate hair-like spindles topped with what looked like magenta gel. “I’d like to place these slime molds by deadwood near the shed,” said Death. That would be the same shed in which his scythe and accompanying whetstone were kept.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Doctor D. “But where did you stow them while you were in owl form?”

“They were sitting where the brain would have been. All was well, because they don’t need light.”

Doctor D nodded. “Now, why don’t you grow little pops of color like these on the outside more often? I could use some more of that, you know.” After millennia, he knew what his old friend would say. Still, he had to ask. Where would the fun be in giving in?

“This is my business attire, and that wouldn’t be practical. The colorful robes are reserved only for special occasions.” Death stepped away from Doctor D, turning to face him fully. “Would you like to place the slime molds in their new homes with me, or would you rather rest?”

“I think I’d rather stay here.” Doctor D looked at the nearest table. On top of it sat a stone pot with iris blossoms like outfits made for theatre dyed in violet, yellow, and icy blue. “I’ll get acquainted with all of these newcomers.”

“Yes, you should show yourself kindness.” Death walked deeper into the mist.

Doctor D wanted to point out that despite such words, his friend

was still working himself, but Death would just cite the tender state of the slime molds—he would claim that took precedence.

Doctor D found a plain marble bench facing the table closest to the lake. From there, he could listen to the water as he observed everything. A green geometer caterpillar with a red stripe was feeling its way around the wood grain. Death had no qualms about creatures eating the plants. As the caterpillar inched along, its movements synchronized with the lapping of the waves against the rocky shore. Even if this was not the fishing trip he had longed for, Doctor D mused, once Death returned, everything would be all right. Doctor D's body went slack, like a snake sunning itself, as he thought back to those last few disasters he and Death had faced together.



Doctor D sent the last document of the stack rippling away with dark magic. He marveled at the sight of his clear desk for a moment before pushing himself up with the lacquered cane his old friend, Death, had given him the last time they had both had a free moment—whenever that had been. The skull-shaped copper knob felt pleasantly cool to Doctor D's aching fingers. He descended the onyx stairs that led from his elevated office to the main hall, which was tiled with decorated marble. The floor tiles formed a mosaic of motifs that seemed to distort when they were looked at, changing from what could be leafy vines, to fluttering flames, to waves, to pointed stars. But despite the intricate design work, the pigment was faded and the marble tiles had long ago lost their luster. They now sat grimy and dull, and Doctor D often found himself cursing the

lack of time for renovations.

His cane clicked against the tile as he walked to the front door. It opened on its own, and hit the adjacent wall with quite some force. Fortunately, the door's delicate, arabesque grille was not damaged in the impact.

Lilith stormed inside. Heat radiated from her black skin, surrounding her with a rippling haze. "*He* sent me yet another 'memo' ordering me to return to my old position!" she shouted. "No matter how many times I explain that what we actually need is a robust training department, he pretends that I am incapable of rational thought, and when Asmodeus explains it, he pretends he merely spins lies!"

For several thousand years, Lilith had been responsible for new staff, but due to Hell's ever-dwindling resources and the increasing number of—many unwilling—deities transferred to work in the Underworld, she had turned to work in the library instead. "First he forces me to begin my new job immediately, and now he pushes me to birth more workers we have no opportunity to raise?"

"That's another for the list of charges," said Dr. D.

Such lamentations from Lilith needed no more affirmation than that plus a slight bowing of his head. The two of them had already commiserated for the length of many a human lifetime. They had an agreement—that if the man upstairs ever tried to squash her like the termite queen he treated her as, Doctor D would step in and take the blows.

Lilith's kinky hair stopped quaking. ". . . At least you finally have time for what you have longed for," she said, her voice level and clinical. She was clearly elated at the thought.

Doctor D grinned. "It does seem like a daydream, doesn't it?"

Lilith's mouth turned up ever-so-slightly.

Doctor D headed for the door—there was the cityscape of Dis through the wide-open doors, and he was, for once, excited to make his rounds and survey the workers’ adobe housing and the caves cut into red sandstone—its striations like the waves of a red tide—because he and his old friend had plans to run through this drudgery together. And as soon as they had finished the task, they would be able to set off on that fishing trip they had been dreaming of for so long.

Unfortunately, yet another document was shoved in his face. Holding it up and blocking the exit was Asteroth, a winged demon with greasy hair and an even greasier mind—the supervisor of succubae, incubi, and other similar tempters and fans of lurid pleasures. Asteroth’s pet snake was always curled around one of his legs, with its head pointed at his vagina.

“Doctor D, please sign this petition to institute rights for all of my fellow sex workers,” said Asteroth. From the dark circles under his eyes—half pooled blood, half melting eyeshadow—they must have fallen into exhaustion and left him to fill in for them once again.

Doctor D had become a wizard of fine print. He scanned the document with the ease of a lava flow engulfing a hillside. “You do realize I can’t do any more than this, don’t you? You’d have to try your luck with the man upstairs. The most I could do is put myself between you and the threat of a smiting.”

Asteroth rolled up the petition. “Yes, obviously, but we like to know you’re looking into it regardless . . . oh, the joy of empty gestures.” The snake flicked its tongue. “Or you could help us with our duties directly,” Asteroth added.

“I last did that millennia ago. You know I’ve not looked back at my promiscuous youth since.”

“Dry bones it will stay for you, I know . . . but it was worth making the proposition,” said Asteroth.

Lilith approached him. “I sympathize with your struggle. At least I am spared a flurry of intercourse. I could not imagine constantly having sex as I simultaneously birth dozens of children.” She held her belly. “Already, I have as many silver stretch marks as there are rivers that reach the sea. I could not imagine the battle scars your kin sustains.”

Sensing an opportunity, Doctor D ducked under Asteroth’s wings and slipped out the door, into the city streets. The ruddy dust of the main road’s surface was kicked up by hordes of workers as their ranks parted to let him stroll by. Doctor D was usually annoyed by their reverent behavior, but this time he was thankful to be spared the bother of weaving through the crowds. He passed the Library of Sand, its crumbling gothic spires and archways characteristic of its head librarian—Lilith’s husband, Asmodeus—who ran the place, and headed for the little pond of boiling blood at Dis’s heart, which Death and he had picked as their rendezvous point. Doctor D sat down on the shore and watched the screaming faces that occasionally rose to the lake’s surface. It was as calming as gazing into a campfire.

The shining Mountain of Knives loomed in the distance. It was odd that Death was late—she was a force of nature, and could show up anywhere, in any form. It was not as if she could be held up by traffic when she needed to be everywhere at once, continuously, and she was never distracted. A crackling warmth in Doctor D’s extremities put an end to his reverie. The warmth was not anticipation. Instead, it felt like the warm glow experienced upon standing, grounded, by a burst of plasma—or a near miss from a lightning bolt.

He leaped to his feet and was not surprised when his pointed ears picked up the sound of distant rumbling to the east, nor was he when Charon the ferryman came rushing toward him.

Charon stopped short, his stumbling footfalls shaking the ground. His long, tattered beard drooped. “Doctor D, the Styx is flooding! There’s a backup of souls!”

“That’s something to report to Hades. That’s his department.”

Charon’s appearance was especially barbaric, heightened by how out-of-breath he was. “I don’t know whether he’s slacking off or mired in one of those moods of his again, but I can’t reach him!”

Doctor D shot one last longing look at the pond before turning back east. His serpentine tail grew as his hands and feet twisted into claws. His body contorted, and scales sprouted to shield his flesh. With an alchemical trick, he transformed his precious cane and his clothes into a snug cap for his tail so they could be easily “reconstituted.”

Now in dragon form, he launched into the air and rolled his body through the wind currents like a sidewinder traversing a dune. It did not take him long after flying over Dis to find the disaster area.

He curled his body into coils as he landed, turning himself and his clothing back into their usual forms in the process. He touched down in tepid, ankle-deep water that felt like leeches sucking his life energy. These were supposed to be the asphodel fields, but the Stygian waters were choking the roots and threatened to rise and engulf the buds and blooms as well. Doctor D plodded closer to the Styx itself, and was greeted by the lovely sight of his old friend digging her skeletal fingers into the robe of Beelzebub, whose teeth were chattering. Whether that was due to Death’s icy hands or the terror of being caught was unclear.

Doctor D looked right past Beelzebub and to the shadowy hood

of Death. “All right, I’ll bite—Beelzebub here is still in his mad scientist phase and has learned nothing from the trials and tribulations of Daedalus, nor the plethora of other horror stories, I take it?” asked Doctor D. “I see he’s still sporting these.” He tapped the kaleidoscopic, compound lenses of the goggles the demon was wearing.

“Yes. He created a storm surge that sent lost souls spilling out of the river, and has held up the others who must cross.” Death’s voice was like a cool breeze coming from every direction at once. It was a salve to Doctor D’s aching head.

“Pull the souls back to the body of the Styx. I’ll cover the flooding.” Doctor D held his hands out toward the river and conjured up memories of bright days with streams of life-giving water and carp swimming in sequestered, ceremonial pools. His turquoise eyes glowed and the Stygian floodwaters churned, slowly receding to their designated place.

Meanwhile, Death dropped Beelzebub into the soaked field. The demon sputtered and his palms got stuck in the black mix of silt and dirt. With one smooth motion Death drew her scythe and it vanished with her, then instantly reappeared where souls were moaning and clawing their way up the bank. Death swung her scythe into the water to hook the souls and drag them back through the current.

Beelzebub had pushed himself up. He looked left and right. His oversized goggles became giant eyes as he shapeshifted into an enormous fly. He buzzed loudly and rubbed his forelegs together, attracting other insect denizens of the Underworld and convincing them to follow his lead. He and this newfound swarm flew into the distance, following the path of the Styx below.

Doctor D grumbled, but he could not abandon his task to send a fireball hurtling the demon’s way. Instead, he continued his cleanup

effort by visualizing hazy memories of rivers past until the flood finally subsided and the Styx was back to its typical self. He watched Death pull a bundle of floundering souls into the deepest part of the river and shake them off of her scythe. She appeared beside Doctor D, and the two of them looked over the area. Limp asphodel surrounded them as their feet sank into the squishy ground. Despite the Styx now taking its usual course, there was still plenty of standing, out-of-place water infiltrating into the dirt, which needed to be removed before it could drain the flora of its will to live.

“The fishing trip was a dying dream,” said Doctor D.

“While I also would have preferred fishing for thoughts swimming beneath the clouded surface of the universal mind, fishing for souls from the flooded riverbank is also rewarding,” said Death.

“Yes, and now I suppose we’ll have to go *fly* fishing, too.” Doctor D’s hands were growing hot, waiting to burst into full flame.

Death pointed upward. “No. Look.”

Beelzebub and his train of bugs had turned around and were using magical wind to carry a load of writhing, burning bodies. Doctor D recognized these smoking, soot-covered beings as sinners who had been doomed to burn continuously on the banks of the Phlegethon. He wanted to yell at Beelzebub and order him to put them back to that river of flame, but it was too late. The demon had already ceased his spell. The bodies fell like stones and hit the muddy fields, causing flowers and their leaves to curl up and blacken. The water that had been slowly seeping into the ground bubbled, then turned to clouds of steam. The scalding mist crept across the river.

Beelzebub’s swarm dispersed and he landed next to Doctor D and Death. “Now it’s steam—that’s even better for my project!”

“Even better?!” Doctor D grabbed Beelzebub’s shoulders and

shook him. “You took those sinners out of their rightful places! Even the steam is judging you.”

Indeed, traumatized-looking snatches of faces rolled through the billowing mist. Doctor D was a master of both fire and water—and steam had elements of both—so the cold force of his anger caused the steam to precipitate and fall back into the Styx as raindrops. However, some had already drifted too high, and had risen into another realm entirely.

“That steam blew over to Yama’s domain because of you!” Doctor D snapped.

“P-Please, I swear I can explain! I only wanted to help!” Beelzebub said in his hissing, buzzy voice.

Doctor D let go of him and simply stared, his eyes sharp with points of fire. “For causing this mishap and ruining my chance at an outing, I’ll be forced to resort to drastic measures,” he said. “It is time for me to call a mandatory board meeting.”

The clammy air surged with the electricity of Beelzebub’s cries.



The crenellated, bastion-like extension of Doctor D’s office cast a heavy shadow over him, Death, and Beelzebub, who was twitching. This unsightly part of the building constructed from stones the shade of nightmares was sometimes referred to as “Pandemonium” by the beings of other realms, though none of Hell’s own workers called it that. They feared litigious action from Pan, whose image had already been aped by demons far too often.

Doctor D gestured to the gunmetal grey gargoyles sitting above the entrance. Their eyes flashed red and the doors creaked open—

even the poor souls assigned hinge-oiling duty wanted to avoid this place. Doctor D could not blame them. He and Death dragged Beelzebub up the spiral staircase. Vermillion light from the tiny windows, which were mere gaps in the stonework, colored every surface. Beelzebub's skin was crackling with bursts of static with each step taken, flickering in fear. After climbing the stairs, the three plodded through hallway that smelled of decomposing leaves and soggy cardboard boxes. A single door opened in the darkness, revealing the boardroom.

Doctor D's fellow executives and supervisors were already milling about. Many had taken humanoid forms, while others opted for animal ones. A few chose a mix of both. The hardwood table was tacky with shallow spills of dark liquid. This was the usual state of affairs, as many of the board members struggled with their tea cups and coffee mugs.

Upon seeing Beelzebub begrudgingly decide to shoulder his fate and look for a place to sit down, the others murmured to each other. A few sounded disappointed at the identity of the malcontent who had been behind the recent workplace issue. Asteroth motioned for Beelzebub to come sit by him, clearly excited to watch the demon who shared his title of Grand Duke of Hell get chewed out yet again. The other beings took this as their cue to be seated as well. Doctor D sat at the head of the table, while Death took his usual seat close by.

"I must admit, I'm impressed that you all arrived before us, and to a formality as tedious as this, no less!" said Doctor D.

"When we heard Amduscias's trumpet call to action—that the sacred Styx had been defiled—we knew it fell upon all of us to bring the culprit to justice," said Ani, who was sitting ramrod straight. Her circular headdress was glossy like a python's ochre scales, as were the pile of necklaces around her neck.

“Hmm, in my case at least, I just figured a trial and punishment would be a lot more entertaining than enduring another ‘strategic plan’ for our ‘project management,’” said Loki. He was sitting with his pointy shoes on the tabletop. “We didn’t know the poor fool we’d be knocking down a peg was just fly boy again.”

“Whatever your personal reason for showing up, I have to admit I’m pleased that I won’t even have to waste our time taking attendance,” said Doctor D. He rose partway and put his hands on the table. “But the rest of your behavior is inexcusable!” He pointed to a hooded crow standing at the other side of the table, who froze in mid-peck. “Morrigan, picking the worms out of Izanami’s face is unprofessional.”

She let out a gritty croak in protest. Izanami just looked away and sighed.

“My mistake, I know you go by *the* Morrigan. But no, you can’t eat Khepri, either.”

The Morrigan hastily turned away from Khepri, whose scarab beetle head flexed its legs in confusion.

Doctor D continued, “And Tezcatlipoca, you can’t eye the Morrigan like you’ll eat her in turn. Nobody in this room will be eating anyone else present, or they’ll be put in Beelzebub’s position!”

Tezcatlipoca, in obsidian jaguar form, put his head against the table, smearing some of his yellow face paint on it in the process.

“And Hecate, you are partly to blame here—we assign seats for a reason. Stop hogging them.”

The three humanoid figures of Hecate, each with a different animal head, fused together into a single-bodied witch with a crown’s worth of spikes sticking out of her skull.

“Let’s see here . . . Khepri’s standing in for Anubis, and Black

and White Impermanence are here representing Yama,” Doctor D said to himself. Black and White Impermanence were still looking for chairs. They saw Hades’s designated seat—which stood empty—but then they hurried back to Yama’s seat and squeezed into it together.

“Hades is absent once again? The Styx falls under his jurisdiction, and he still doesn’t bother to show up?” asked Ereshkigal, who had dutifully attended every board meeting—even the ones Loki had called. Her eyes appeared to bubble, turning the color of storm clouds. “And where is Persephone?”

“I have not even seen Hades or Persephone at the library,” said Lilith. “I attempted to investigate, but the freezing rain of Hades’s territory was falling unbearably hard, and has not lessened. Even my fire magic could not provide enough heat for me to push onward.”

“Maybe they’re having *relationship issues*.” Loki smirked.

“Ridiculous!” Ereshkigal snapped. “Aphrodite ruins any relationship she touches, and yet theirs was never shaken by her interference. Even when she and Persephone were fighting over the same pathetically beautiful human boy, Hades minded not! And when Aphrodite—”

At the sound of the door cracking open, everyone fell silent and looked to the head of the room. Doctor D was hit by a musty smell. He turned in his chair. A figure with bright eyes was peering into the boardroom. “Come right in, we haven’t even begun the trial yet.” Doctor D shot the others a pointed look. “Everyone, this is our new transfer—Hanwi, from the Moon Base. A few of you might already be acquainted with her from there.”

Hanwi soundlessly floated inside. Her body was covered in a deep indigo—nearly black—robe, and she had on an equally dark veil. She lifted it up, revealing her face, which was round and bright

as the moon, much lighter in tone than the rest of her skin. “I’m sorry for my lateness . . . I didn’t realize the gargoyles were a security system, and I tried to blast them to pieces at first,” she said, quietly. “I’m sure I’ll adjust to the aesthetic of this place soon.” She drifted over to Hades’s seat and sat down. Nobody minded.

“You were demoted, too?!” Loki asked. “You’ll love it down here. Getting reassigned to punisher duty was the best thing to ever happen to me. And my wife, Sigyn, is living it up, too. You’ll have to visit the icy hells some time—Sigyn always gets a kick out of stepping on the heads of the sinners entombed in the glaciers down there! Makes her feel like a real ice giant!”

Hanwi looked away from him, as did everybody else. Her gaze fell upon Mara, who had been staring at the stains on the tabletop and smiling as if they formed a galaxy. “Mara, I had no idea I’d see you today!” Another sign she was new, thought Doctor D—speaking as if there were days in the Underworld. “I knew you specialized in crafting temptations, but I didn’t know you worked here,” she said.

Mara kept staring at the subtle reflection of his red face in the wood. “Oh, well, everyone in Hell has been so deeply affected by my creations. It was only natural that I’d take a position.”

Khepri—his “voice” really his projecting of his thoughts and letting them manifest throughout the room—thought, “Hanwi, when I first became Anubis’s understudy, I often made mistakes, but he was very patient with me as I developed the proper skillset. It was also not easy adjusted to the Underworld’s lack of celestial bodies, but now the darkness calms me. I no longer begrudge having been displaced as sun god.”

What little color was present in Hanwi’s face faded. “You . . . are a sun god?” She threw her veil over her face and turned away from him to bow to the wall instead.

Hecate split herself up again, so that one of her bodies could put a hand on Hanwi's shoulder. "There, there. No need to be so rude, don't you agree? Not all sun gods are like your ex-husband."

"Husband? I am not even romantically interested in goddesses," mused Khepri.

Izanami perked up at this turn in the conversation. "Ah, Hanwi, what did your ex-husband do unto you? Mine ran out on me the instant he saw I had lost my youthful beauty, and then he trapped me down here and left me screaming and pounding at the exit he had blocked!" Her thunderous voice sent the table quaking.

Doctor D was about to tell her to simmer down, but was cut off by Hanwi. "My husband . . . ex-husband . . . invited a human woman to a banquet that all my friends were attending, and he turned a blind eye to me the entire time. He even let the human take my place at the table!" She barely held back tears. "It was decided afterward that he had wronged me, but not before my then-friends laughed at me . . . it was ruled that I would remain a creature of the night forever more, never to look upon my husband's face again, but he faced no punishment. I couldn't help but be reminded of these events every day when I was employed on the Moon Base . . . I hope the Underworld serves as a change of scene."

"You came to the right realm!" said Loki. "Hey, Ereshkigal, remember how I dealt with your abusive ex? You actually cracked a smile at that face he made when I stuck him with the poisoned knife." He chuckled, making his fiery beard ripple. "Anyway, Hanwi, I can do the same to yours. If he's even into humans, he'll be easy to seduce and lure into—"

"I have told you a thousand times to refrain from telling that story!" yelled Ereshkigal. Her conical headdress began to shake like a rattlesnake's tail. "And again, I see you neglected to mention that

he simply reappeared in Hell after death, leaving it to Doctor D and me to ultimately put him in his place! You just fled when he wanted to fight!”

“Don’t get in a tizzy just because you weren’t strong enough to beat him yourself. It’s not like I said you’d never see him again, either—just that I’d kill him. Besides, now he’s being constantly crushed into a fine paste by falling boulders, so all’s well that ends well.”

By this point, Beelzebub was leaning over to Asteroth and whispering, asking him if he could leave.

Loki’s confidence waned rapidly as the room darkened, as if night were falling inside. Ereshkigal had risen and was stomping toward him. The room shook. Loki struggled in his seat as he scrambled backward, pulling his legs off the tabletop. He sank into his chair as Ereshkigal’s hands tensed like the claws of a bird of prey. She lunged at him.

Death teleported from his seat to stand between the two deities. He lightly touched their chests, momentarily stunning them both. “Do not create additional work for me here.” Death’s voice filled the room like a cold front.

Ereshkigal took a few deep breaths before bowing to him. “You are right. I should know better than to engage in useless talk.” She gave Loki one pointed look, and returned to her seat.

Doctor D smiled genuinely at this—the first time since he had called the meeting. It was nice to see a show of respect from a goddess who had come to work on Earth at the same time he had, in such far-off days.

Loki just pouted. “Death, why do you even get to take part in these meetings? You don’t officially work in Hell! Why can you rain on my parade?”

“There is no greater joy to me than helping my best friend—”

“Awww!” squealed Black and White Impermanence.

“My friend, who has been patiently waiting for all of you to attend to your duties as supervisors.”

“Thank you!” said Doctor D, much more loudly than he had intended. “We can pillory whoever else later. This meeting concerns our friend Beelzebub’s actions.” Not wanting to speak any more than was necessary, he turned things over to the culprit. “In fact, Beelzebub, why don’t you tell us why you did it.”

Beelzebub breathed in and out shakily, which sounded like fast-beating wings. He stood and addressed the assembled deities. “We are all overworked. All of us!” He cleared his throat before continuing, “I see it. In your eyes and postures. It’s even worse for your workers. So I thought—why not introduce some automation? Give everyone some relief? Imagine control rooms for every level of Hell. Initiating punishments with the push of a button!”

Mara’s smile widened. He looked up, moving only his eyes. “Would that not infringe upon the quaint systems Hell is known for?”

Hanwi nodded. “That’s right . . . don’t make this place a copy of the Moon Base. I wouldn’t want to see you sacrifice the wildlife for convenience’s sake. I saw rusalki swimming through the streams down here. Rusalki! Can you believe it? Compare that with the Moon Base, where our greenhouses are all well-kept, and the rivers that feed the lunar maria are always sparkling, the shores spotless. Nothing is as unruly as it is here.”

“It’s nice and bucolic in Hell. Almost pastoral, if you ask me,” said Hecate. She grinned and leaned back. “You wouldn’t want to industrialize too much, would you, Beelzebub dear? It’d be a real shame if I had to sic my hungry dogs on you.”

Beelzebub shuddered.

Doctor D squeezed his eyes shut in annoyance. Embers fell from his tear ducts and through the stale air. The few concerned looks he received, he waved off. “It’s a little early to be making threats. We need to hear his full statement.”

“I just wanted to ease everyone’s burden,” continued Beelzebub. “We have great, powerful rivers. Why not harness their energy? I used my experience as a storm god to adjust the Styx’s flow, hoping to scope out a location for a hydroelectric dam.”

“And why did you feel it was acceptable to utterly change the river’s flow without consulting Hades or anyone else?” asked Ani.

Flies emerged from Beelzebub’s facial hair to lick the sweat off of his neck. The Morrigan eyed them. “It was only a test!” said Beelzebub. “I didn’t think the flow would stay disturbed! And I didn’t want to trouble anybody.”

“I bet the real reason he didn’t ask was so nobody could tell him ‘no,’” said Loki.

“Speaking from experience, are you not?” asked Izanami.

“Of course.”

“I wanted to see if all the major rivers could be candidates,” said Beelzebub. “I’m sorry.”

The panel members spoke to each other in hushed tones, aiming for an appropriate punishment. Doctor D turned to Black and White Impermanence. “Beelzebub created—in yet another failed attempt to pitch in—a steam cloud that floated up to your lord Yama’s realm. What happened as a result?”

The two officers explained that the souls who made up the steam had formed a thick, low-hanging fog that obscured the vision of all of Yama’s psychopomp emissaries. When it faded, the spirits possessed all the flowers of the domain. “They have overgrown

everything, making it nigh-impossible to bring beings before our lord for judgment,” said Black Impermanence.

Before Doctor D could respond, Beelzebub interjected, “I will call a swarm of locusts! They’ll devour those flowers!”

Tezcatlipoca roared, which everyone knew to mean: “You would do better to turn the vanes of a windmill with a hurricane!”

Doctor D allowed everyone who felt inclined to cackle to do so for a bit before pushing things along. “Judges and stand-ins for our judges, how do you sentence our friend?” He also watched the Morrigan—she could predict an individual’s imminent misfortune—but he was disappointed to see that she just looked bored.

“Beelzebub caused massive inconvenience while intending to do the opposite,” Khepri thought aloud. “His punishment must be to face frustration and inconvenience himself.”

“Yes,” said Ani. “We must inflict a greater workload upon him, to show him what it means to be burdened.”

“We concur. However, please do not let him into our lord’s domain to assist in the cleanup efforts,” said White Impermanence.

Silence fell like a sudden rain. Beelzebub’s flies slowly crept back into his hair as his sweating ceased.

Izanami heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Our resident judges do realize Beelzebub is already working in Hell, do they not? There is no gruntwork more debasing than this. He is the Lord of Flies!”

“I love flies . . .” murmured Beelzebub.

“Then we will revoke his privileges as an executive,” said Ani.

“What? You mean the privilege to be forced to attend these meetings?” asked Loki. “Why, I wouldn’t be shocked if he messed with the Styx on purpose to get demoted and be free of that and other ‘perks!’”

“These issues would cease to be if only we had an HR depart-

ment to handle them,” said Black Impermanence.

“What does the HR stand for?” asked Hanwi.

“I suppose that would be ‘Hell Resources,’” said Lilith. She left her seat and stretched, her head and body hair shaking—she was ready to turn into a puff of smoke and drift away. “A HR department could also punish all of those unruly husbands, and track down any perpetually absent gods as well.”

Other deities followed suit, abandoning the table, ready to put the meeting behind them. Beelzebub transformed into a fly again and tried to do the same, only for Doctor D to catch him by one of his dangling legs as if Beelzebub were a grotesque balloon. “You’re not even going to stay and do anything, even after he spoiled my one shot at taking a break with Death?” Doctor D asked, too drained to shout.

Khepri paused in the doorway. “I apologize, Doctor D, but there is little we can do when we must return to work. You know well the harsh reminders we will face if we do not. Perhaps make him spit his saliva and lick the boardroom table clean.” He turned and left.

Black and White Impermanence, who still lingered, approached Doctor D. “Would wading through the flowers of our Lord Yama’s realm be an adequate substitute? Death’s scythe would be particularly useful,” said White Impermanence.

“Don’t dress up the act of putting more on my plate,” Doctor D grumbled.



Black and White Impermanence took them by the scenic route. Doctor D and Death were traversing Chinvat Bridge with them, over

the roiling River of Judgment. Beings who were deemed worthy would encounter a river clear as white sapphire, with a lavish, structurally-sound bridge for them to cross, whereas sinners would see hulking creatures ready to swallow them up swimming around, and would try to walk across a rickety old thing that would inevitably collapse.

Along the bridge's wooden handrail was a painted, carved inlay. It looked like an artisan had used subtle gradients between the pigment in order to mimic the ephemeral colors of a rainbow, but that being battered by the weather of the Underworld had caused them to fade away. Doctor D did not mind—he preferred that the detailing be more washed-out than garish. With how long the handrail was, a bright rainbow every few steps would jab him in the eyes.

Black and White Impermanence carefully picked up their pace, as if trying to subtly flee Death and Doctor D. While Doctor D knew and loved how many beings would run screaming when they would spot him and his old friend out walking together, these two officers had known them for centuries, and being zombies who were employed by Yama, did not have much to fear.

As the officers ran farther ahead, Death laughed. Her voice was deep enough to hit the bridge foundation's resonant frequency and make it vibrate like it was chortling along with her. "They believe they're bestowing privacy on us, you know. But surely they understand that all things are interdependent and continuously affected by all others, and that in ultimate reality, there are no individuating characteristics!" said Death.

Doctor D let himself pause and look over the handrail. "I know. And if that wasn't enough, all of these carefree sea monsters are an audience." Large shadows and a stray glinting scale or two caught

the light, but the river was too choppy to make out anything more.

Death joined him in his observation. Dozens of red petals, like drops of spilled blood, raced by on the river's surface. Then, entire flower heads—red spider lily blossoms—were carried by the rushing water as well. “The river will be only red if the flowers are not cut back,” said Death. She looked past the river and into the dark hellscape beyond and below it—Yama's realm was connected to the rest of the Underworld by a midair channel tangent to Hell, hence the need for Chinvat Bridge. From the angle of Death's skull, Doctor D could tell she was wistful. “The blooms remind me of my garden,” she said.

“Let's head there after we nip Yama's problem in the bud.”

“Yes.”

The vast, pale, semicircular structure of the bridge was intended to make its reflection resemble a crescent moon, but with the constant waves and everything obscuring his view, Doctor D could not see it whatsoever. He and Death resumed walking.



The combination of the ever-shifting fronds of dark fire that were the sky of Yama's little pocket dimension, and the overgrowth of red spider lilies made Doctor D feel like he had walked into a sheet of red velvet. In the hushed atmosphere, which lacked breeze and birdsong, he could hear the rustling of Yama's yellow-hatted psychopomp emissaries shuffling confusedly through the scores of puffy flowers.

Without a word, Death waded deep into the lilies and drew his scythe. He swung it through the field, cutting swaths out of the army

of flowers. Doctor D resisted the urge to sigh and sought out Yama.

After some wandering, he found him between two trees with lush, violet foliage, two splashes of color that stood out from the scarlet morass that was everything else. Doctor D had burned a path through the lilies—creating a choking smoke—as he had walked, which let Black and White Impermanence quickly return to their lord’s side. The appearance and demeanor of Yama himself hung on the mental formations and past experiences of the individual meeting him. To Doctor D, he was a demonic figure of a state marginally larger than his, and had skin of bronze that was cracked and rusting green around his worn joints. He sat upon a large buffalo, also known as the Heavenly Bull. But aside from a few gold ornaments dangling from him, there was nothing particularly heavenly about him, and Doctor D preferred it that way.

“Thank you for lending a hand even though I couldn’t be at the meeting,” said Yama. “I see that your friend, Death, is already hard at work. Tell me, was the one at the root of our problems appropriately punished?”

“You didn’t miss a thing.” Doctor D filled him in on the supervisors’ actions and lack of action.

“A shame. However, I’m sure Beelzebub will eventually face the consequences he deserves. For even in the depths of Hell, things can always be worse.”

“Don’t I know it.” Doctor D glanced back at Death, who had barely made a ding in the lily procession. “I’ll raze this field for you, Yama, and have these flowers out of here in—”

“You can’t do that!” Yama’s cry startled his steed, and its ornaments shook. “A portion of these blossoms must remain, and we can’t risk the flames spreading to the rest of the plant life.”

Doctor D met the buffalo’s wide-eyed, glassy gaze. His tail was

not flipping around, and his head was down. “All right, all right—why not have this magic steed of yours deal with it? He can’t get sick from the lilies, and an extra meal or two would do him some good. Have him work on your behalf—”

“Having the Heavenly Bull perform labor? That would be blasphemous!”

The mouths of Black and White Impermanence were twitching, as they tried to hold back peals of laughter.

“But you’re riding him right now.”

Yama sputtered. “W-Well, that is—it is different!” His brazen skin took on a redder hue, as if it was reflecting the blossoms. “We have . . . a symbiotic relationship. Yes. And-And of course, ultimately he is not a bull and I’m not his rider—”

Doctor D decided to throw him a lifeline. “Oh, of course! How could I be so ignorant and insensitive? Let me make it up to you. What if you treated the resplendent Heavenly Bull to these flowers—if you made them an offering to him as a reward for all his service? We both know he deserves it.”

“Doctor D, that is only your blasphemous suggestion, presented with a new spin.”

“Of course! Why, I thought you adored spin, Yama, considering how much time you spend working with that wheel of dharma.” Doctor D turned up his cane, gesturing to the heavens. “I’m doing my utmost to honor you—you’re different depending on someone’s karma, and I’m paying homage to that by presenting my idea with an altogether different *intention* than before. You, better than anybody, know how key intention can be, after all.” With this, he drove his cane back into the loamy soil.

Yama’s brows furrowed. “I can read your intention as plainly as the names in my book, Doctor D. You wish to be compassionate, but

you also wish for change to occur quickly so that you may spend more time with Death—doesn't that also involve attachment distracting from duty?"

"You've seen for yourself many a time how wise and dutiful my old friend is. Who's to say that he and I don't plan on teaching each other as spiritual friends? Surely you'd endorse that." Doctor D directed a smile at Black and White Impermanence.

"Certainly, Lord Yama," said Black Impermanence. "We have seen them together and know he speaks the truth."

Yama's shoulders sagged. He held his tongue for a bit, then smiled knowingly at Doctor D. He had an amused glint in his bulging eyes. "Very well, I agree to your suggestion." He drove his steed forward, and the buffalo all but dove into the lilies. The gratitude of the Heavenly Bull fell on Doctor D like a sunbeam, warming up his face. Apparently, the bull had grown tired of Yama's stiff neck.

"Glad I could recommend some TLC." Doctor D turned away. He walked back through the flowers, burning through their petals and causing them to curl up and blacken as he went. He met back up with Death.

"Wait." Yama's voice carried over the quiet field. "Thank you. I'll try to contact my superior and have him arrange more time for you and Death to dwell in each other's presence."

Doctor D just shrugged, not bothering to look back. With how backed-up the system was, he doubted anything would come of it.

"Lord Yama!" Black Impermanence shouted. "We received an urgent missive from Ox-Head and Horse-Face."

Hearing the names of the Yama-appointed Hell guardians made both Doctor D and Death turn to pay close attention. Ox-Head and Horse-Face were stationed at a gate not far from Dis—a gate which

led from the Underworld to a bardo, a sort of intermittent state, or connective tissue between realms. All sorts of beings, including unwanted guests from upstairs, could pass through.

“Has there been an altercation?” asked Yama.

“Yes,” said the officer. “There are two drunken, loitering deities who have entered Hell and refuse to leave. The guards attempted to escort them out, but the deities turned to violence and are too powerful to be defeated.”

Death and Doctor D shared a look—that is, Death’s skull was completely shrouded in the darkness under his hood, but Doctor D nevertheless felt his gaze. “Yama, we know these perpetrators. We’ll assist your guards,” said Death.

“Even though you’ve already done more than enough for us?” asked Yama.

“It’s our duty to deflect any harm that could come to Dis, and the level of Hell in which it stands,” said Death, though this had never been part of his job description. Despite this, Doctor D could not bring himself to protest.

“Who knows? This could be enjoyable.” Doctor D opened his free hand, revealing a palmful of pulsating flame.



Doctor D and Death flew from Yama’s realm, under the bridge, and to the gate of Hell that stood near the mouth of the Phlegethon and faced the city walls of Dis. If he had not been there on menial business, Doctor D would have found the crackling of the fiery river relaxing. He landed outside the city, turning from his dragon form back to his usual. Death came to perch on his right arm, remaining in

the form of a great snowy owl with a black satin bow around her neck. She turned her head around, then froze in order to alert Doctor D to the direction of the interlopers. There—where the adobe wall overlooked the gate—were the “Hero” or Trickster Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, stumbling into the wall before them and ramming it with their headdresses, which were akin to the heads of hammers. On the arid, red dirt beside them writhed Ox-Head and Horse-Face, groaning—or snorting—in pain.

As Doctor D approached, he could see the top of the red and rose-gold painted dome above his office peeking out over the wall. Every time he glanced up at it, he remembered how Aphrodite had nearly stormed the Underworld for daring to use her favorite pigment—fortunately, she had soon decided she preferred a salmon shade, sparing them all. He hoped someday he would not have such an unpleasant association with the dome, but at least it was a reminder of how piddly other interlopers were in comparison. So assured, he closed in on the twins.

Before them lay a shallow, rust-colored bowl—now cracked—that the twins had undoubtedly been passing back and forth. The blazing, nutty aroma of a strong spirit hung in the air. “A drink like that’s a bit much for anyone but oni,” said Doctor D.

The twins stopped bashing the wall and turned to him and Death, but they did not seem to register Doctor D’s words. “Look, brother! It’s the Lords of Death!” said Xbalanque.

“That’s right, brother—One and Seven Death! They should have stayed dead!” said Hunahpu.

“Then let’s fix that, brother—”

Death interrupted. “As we’ve told you, we mimed dying to convince you two to stop making a ruckus,” she said, without moving a single feather. “Why have you come here again, after we sent you

away last time and many times before?”

“We got tired of comparing maize stalks and remembered how much fun it was when we were here last time, One Death,” said Xbalanque. In other words, they had been kicked out of the skies for disturbing the peace, had gone out binge drinking, and then had slept too long on the boat, like always. “A curvy chick covered in stardust gave it to us free of charge!” He kicked at the bowl for emphasis.

“She wanted us to let loose for once. Being this heroic and handsome isn’t easy,” said Hunahpu. “Not that you’d know!”

“You’ve never explained why you call us One Death and Seven Death,” said Doctor D, stalling for time as the Hell guards struggled to get up.

“What do you mean, *why?*” asked Hunahpu. “This is Xibalba we’re in right now—you guys must be Death. That makes sense, right, brother?”

“Definitely. And that bird on your arm is obviously the one and only Death, and your name is Doctor D.”

“And ‘Doctor D’ has seven letters, and that makes you Seven Death. Seven letters, I can prove it—”

“That’s more than enough of that,” said Doctor D.

“—and the ‘D’ stands for Death.” Xbalanque puffed out his chest. Something caught his eye—Ox-Head and Horse-Face were standing. “Hey, stop right there!” Xbalanque reached out and grabbed Ox-Head by the horns, lifting him off the ground.

Horse-Face tried to pry his hands off, but was slapped away by Hunahpu. Horse-Face shot backward and skidded to a halt, narrowly avoiding a plunge into the Phlegethon.

Ox-Head tried to buck Xbalanque in the groin, but was being held too far away from him to reach. Hunahpu took his horns as well. “These would make great decorations for my belt, brother. Let

me break them off!”

Death launched at the twins. She beat her wings against their faces and slashed with her sickle-like talons. It caused nary a scratch, but the twins did drop Ox-Head to swat at her instead.

Doctor D motioned to the Hell guards, and they hastily cantered over to hide behind him, though their giant ungulate heads were not even remotely obscured by him. He gave them a glare pointier than Horse-Head’s pitiful halberd.

Death continued circling the twins, making their heads snap one way, then the other. Xbalanque swayed on his feet, but his brother laughed raucously. “I see fresh game for the best poultry hunter in the heavens!”

“Who . . . is that, brother?” asked Xbalanque, slowly. He hung his head as if raring to vomit.

Hunahpu drew his blowgun, which was painted in primary colors. He put it to his lips and shot Death in the heart as she was coming back around. The flapping of her wings became progressively weaker before she theatrically tumbled to the ground. She lifted one wing in a flourish, then collapsed.

Hunahpu hooted and jumped up and down like a happy click beetle. The city walls trembled with every bounce. “I killed Death again!”

Xbalanque turned greener and greener as everything quaked.

Death pulled the dart from her chest using her beak. She shuffled behind the twins and flew back to Doctor D, landing on his right shoulder.

“One Death? More like *none* Death!” Hunahpu shouted, not seeing her. “I can’t wait to stuff him and put him on display!”

Xbalanque coughed. “Brother, birds are for flaying, not displaying”

“But all must see that I bested—”

Doctor D lifted his free hand. He flicked his wrist as if shooing away a swarm of gnats. Tongues of flame rose out of the Phlegethon, loomed over the twins, then crashed over them like a tidal wave. When the fire subsided, two piles of ash were all that was left of them.

But with a puff of colorful smoke, they returned to normal. They had simply appeared back in Hell.

Doctor D scowled.

“See? I bested Death, and now we’re invincible!” said Hunahpu.

“And I’m not hung over anymore!” said Xbalanque.

Doctor D blinked back embers and pressed his cane too hard into the dirt. Death brushed his cheek with one wing, getting his attention, then used the other to gesture to Ox-Head and Horse-Face.

“Excellent idea.” Doctor D whispered the plan to the two Hell guards. They readied their weapons and prepared to dash at the twins when given the signal. Doctor D raised his hand again and called the flames once more, but this time, as the wave rolled back into the river to reveal the twins’ ashen remains, the Hell guards rushed over. When the twins popped up, Horse-Head swung his halberd and Ox-Head did the same with his club. Hunahpu’s head was lopped off, and his brother’s was knocked off. Their bodies still stood while their heads rolled toward the gate of Hell.

Doctor D called to Ox-Head and Horse-Face. “Kick their heads out of the Underworld so their bodies have to go on a hunting expedition. Then lock the gate behind them.” The guards complied, using the twins’ heads as kick balls that protested each kick. By the time the bodies realized they had to follow, the guards had a sizable head start.

Doctor D listened closely as the cries grew fainter until the only

sound was the crackling of the river. He turned to Dis, and could not detect any commotion from where he stood. He nodded to Death. Doctor D changed shape and the two of them flew up to the dome, then descended through its oculus—Doctor D had always wanted to call this feature a skylight, but considering the realm’s lack of both sky and light from up above, he never could.

They landed behind his desk, and both changed back. Death was once again tall, dark, and skeletal. Although Death’s robe could be perceived as white or black or both, as either way it would encompass all light, Doctor D had always seen it as black. He had not known it the first time he met his old friend, but black was very dapper.

No more quips. If Doctor D broke the silence, yet another deity would come running to him, either begging for his help or breaking things. So quietly, he put his hand to the arch-shaped grille embedded in the wall behind his desk. The grille consisted of intricate metal flowers, and most thought it to be decorative. But with a touch of Doctor D’s life energy, it swung open as a door, giving way to a bardo that led to Death’s garden. A cool breeze beckoned him from this portal. He linked arms with Death, and they crossed the threshold together.



Doctor D smiled. The incidents being less-than-pleasant did not matter if they were all leading up to what he wanted. A splash of color in his peripheral vision brought him back to the present. He noticed, on the planting tables before him, that one potted plant stood out from the rest. While Death usually chose undecorated stone or

terracotta, one was painted with a geometric calico pattern. Sparkling particles were suspended in the pigment, so when viewed from different angles, it sent little points of light playing over the surface of the pot. Growing out of the bone meal fertilizer held inside was a fragile flower, not even the size of Doctor D's palm. Its stem was pitch black with purple specks throughout as if dry brushed on. Its bloom was two tiny petals adjacent to each other that were the color of a potassium-fed fire—pale, lightning-purple and hot blue. The entire flower smelled of charcoal.

This plant was his own creation. After Death had given him the cane, Doctor D had decided to engineer a special flower for him in return. He had been sitting alone in his office, in the middle of reciting an incantation with the aim of bringing an eight-petaled, velvety bloom the creamy color of Death's bones into being. When Death had come through the door and startled him, the ritual had been cut short, turning the plant into this monstrosity. But Death had loved it all the more for the spontaneity. Even so, Doctor D had never expected his old friend to decorate a pot in its honor.

Death's shadow fell over him. "Enki?" asked Death. This was the name Doctor D had gone by in his youth, and Death was the only one he let use it.

Doctor D started. "I've told you not to teleport right next to me without warning!"

"I didn't teleport, I walked here. You didn't hear me?"

"Ah, I must have been distracted, remembering good times . . . and that inchworm is hypnotic."

"You could turn into a vine snake and hang inside my ribcage, sleeping there as I process around the lake."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Death! I just got out of work—I want to take a long walk with you, not just hang in there. Besides,

we have something important to get around to.”

“But you’re still sitting.”

Doctor D pushed himself up with his cane, ignoring a dull pain in his legs. He did not even have a cloven hoof in this form—there was no excuse for this weariness. He was about to say something to the effect of caring for his friend’s company even at the cost of a little fatigue, when something shot past the two of them. It struck a cobblestone and shattered with a sharp note into slivers of glass. Two more flew through the air. Death intercepted one with the blade of his scythe and destroyed it before any insects could be skewered. When it shattered, the impact sent butterflies and moths changing direction and flying away in shock.

The second dart hit a table leg and was embedded in the wood. Death and Doctor D went to investigate. Doctor D pulled the object from the table and turned it over in his hands—it was an arrow of twisted, blown glass with a hot pink tinge. A cloying, saccharine scent emanated from the tip. He and Death immediately recognized it.

“If these flew into the garden from the direction of the lake . . .” Death trailed off.

“ . . . then they shot through the opening in the heart of that fairy circle, meaning . . . ” Doctor D did not finish the thought. He and Death ran back to the portal.



They emerged from behind the grille to the sounds of sickly moaning and bodies hitting the tile. Doctor D ran past his desk to grip the black handrail and peer down at the scene below—sprawled

in the hall were scores of Dis's demons, nature spirits, and magical beings of all kinds, including Doctor D's fellow supervisors Hanwi, Beelzebub, Asteroth, Ereshkigal, Lilith, Asmodeus, and Loki. All were lying decadently and keening as if fevered. Each had a glass arrow buried in their flesh.

Doctor D spun around at the sound of flapping wings behind him.

Eros swooped down from the dome overhead, his pigeon-like wings probably spreading mites all over the office. "Satan and Death!" he said. "Finally, you've joined the celebration! Unfortunately, Death won't be partaking in much action with a fleshless body like that, but I'm sure you'll have lots of fun, Lucifer. Your underlings were all dazedly asking where you were, after all, and—"

"Don't call me 'Lucifer,' Eros. Even a fresh-faced brat like yourself should know that's just the name of some Babylonian king," said Doctor D. "What do you think you'll gain by attacking my office and drugging my coworkers?"

"You wouldn't understand, Lucifer, I know, but being waited on in the heavenly land that is my mother's can become quite a bore. I thought I'd visit some place a little less perfect. That being said, I couldn't help but notice your interior decorating is rather primitive." Eros's smile pushed apart his plump cheeks. "Why not give it a new coat of crystal juices?" In a flash, he nocked two arrows and shot Doctor D and Death, neither of whom moved to dodge. One arrow pierced Death's robe, only to fly through her and shatter against the wall, sending glass shards all over Doctor D's workspace.

The arrow intended for Doctor D hit its mark and stabbed him in the chest. He winced, but firmly grasped the arrow, pulled it out, and heated it with anger until it glowed orange and slinked down to the tile as a creeping, molten mass. He had not wanted to make such a

mess, but he hoped it made a point. “Your tricks don’t work on us. Undo your charm or we’ll treat you worse than those two arrows.”

“Now I must patch these holes,” Death muttered.

“Don’t fret, Lucifer,” said Eros, “You’re still invited to partake in the orgy of your own accord—”

He was cut off by the voice of Asteroth, calling from down below. “Are you by any chance forcing others to have sex for your own amusement because you still aren’t over Psyche’s decision to fly far, far away from you? I know I can spy the lamp oil burns on you still,” he said, sleepily. “Really, she was always out of your league.”

“What?!” Eros’s wings flared out.

Doctor D looked down once more. Asteroth, whose years of hands-on seduction experience had dulled him to love spells, was not the only deity who had recovered. Ereshkigal stood beside him, her eyes lit by dark fire. Behind them both lay Loki, curled up in a ball and shaking, begging them to save him from drug-induced rape. Asteroth glanced at him, then took the love arrow from his own back. He twirled it between his fingers. “It’s rude to impose, Eros. Give us a way to opt out—even I’m spent.” The arrow’s pink tinge faded under his scrutiny. “No need to worry, Loki . . . now the spell should take its victim’s character into account. Only those of us with the predilection to swap excretions will be doing so, though affection of other kinds are still an inevitability, I’m afraid.”

Ereshkigal took a fighting stance. Short black wings burst out of her back. “That is not enough, Asteroth!” She glared up at Eros and yelled at him as she leapt past the stairs. “How dare you strip us of our will?! Your aunt will punish you—”

Eros’s eyes glowed pink. “Aunt? Hm, you don’t ring any bells.”

Ereshkigal sank to the floor as a pool of darkness and crept into Eros's shadow, then grabbed his ankle. But Eros kicked her away like a graceful dancer, then flew up to sit lightly on the dome's edge. He looked down at all the beings in the hall. "No aunt of mine would be that hideous. Your headdress looks like a pile of excrement. Anyway, that's enough dallying." He clapped his hands, hard. The sound reverberated throughout the office and every deity and creature who had been shot by a dart stood to attention, their eyes turning glassy. Doctor D, who remained untouched by the hands of Eros's magic, decided to take dragon form to grab the pest before he did any more damage. But mid-transformation, Ereshkigal wrapped her arms around his neck in a crushing embrace.

She murmured into his pointed ear. "I am so grateful to you, Doctor D. I think I've fallen in love with you." She nuzzled into the crook of his neck.

Eros frowned. "Cuddling? I know Asteroth meddled in my gift to you, but you're all demons! Every last one of you should be in the midst of an orgy! I thought you would be more lustful than the Olympians!" His wings beat wildly, like the flailing arms of a child.

Death, also unaffected, took the heft of her scythe and pried Ereshkigal off Doctor D, only for a great clawed hand, taller than either of them, to reach over the railing and snatch him. As he was being pulled away, he called out, "Focus on seizing Eros! He has to be the one to end the spell!"

Doctor D was placed on the floor, and the fingers enclosing his body did not cease squeezing. He took the opportunity to see if Death had any hope of ending the madness. She had turned her skull up to Eros, ready to teleport and grab him.

Eros showed Death his palm. "Oh, no, don't you dare teleport! While you were distracted, look what I just picked up. A baby

selkie!” In his arms, he held a snow-colored selkie pup with glistening eyes. “You wouldn’t risk my jabbing an arrow through its head, now, would you?”

The selkie murmured to Death.

“Listen, it loves you!” Eros sneered. “What poor taste it has.”

Doctor D’s skin grew red hot, forcing the hand around him to loosen. From every direction came the sounds of sweet nothings and pleasure-induced moans. He crawled out and landed, coming face-to-face with Asmodeus—the hand belonged to him. Asmodeus knelt down to gaze at Doctor D on his level. Each of his three heads were making sheep’s eyes, and not just his sheep’s head. “Doctor D,” he said wistfully, “ever since my wife and I had that *ménage à trois* with you, I’ve been in love with you”

“That was thousands of years ago,” said Doctor D. He felt yet another set of arms embrace him from behind—arms black as coal. He knew what was coming.

“Doctor D,” said Lilith, in an uncharacteristically soft tone, “ever since my husband and I had that *ménage à trois* with you, I have been in love with you.”

Both Lilith’s and Asmodeus’s heads snapped up. They stood stock still as their eyes widened in realization. The glassy sheen dissipated. Lilith let go of Doctor D and held out a hand to her husband. Asmodeus pulled her into a hug, and she smiled slightly and petted his cow’s head between its horns as he sighed with joy.

Doctor D crept away from the couple, back toward the staircases. Every few steps, he came upon writhing piles of bodies—he passed Hanwi and Loki, who were transfixed and chastely kissing the corners of each other’s mouths, and then various demons of temptation curled up together, topped by their leader, Asteroth, who was lying on them languorously, as if they formed a bed. But while

the entire hall had not erupted into an orgy, smaller ones had still broken out. The air was scratchy and thick from clouds of dusty pollen released by nature spirits, and the room resounded with the grunts, squeals, and wet smacking of those copulating in the mammalian fashion. When Doctor D reached the bottom of the stairs, they were sticky, but not with ejaculate. The fluid was spilled ichor and blood from the damage the arrows had done. He transformed into a water snake the same shade as the onyx steps and carefully slithered up. He lifted his head, looking at the destruction of his workstation.

Death, now grasped by Ereshkigal—who had a second arrow jutting from her back—took owl shape and flew from her captors, only for Eros to shoot her down. He sent an arrow through each of her wings, pinning her to the floor long enough for Ereshkigal to bend down to stroke the satin of Death's bow. Death would not dare to stab her in with her talons when it was not her time. Instead, Death squawked loudly, loud enough for it to ring through Doctor D's scales, but Ereshkigal remained transfixed.

Doctor D finally touched down on the last stair. He drew his head back, savoring the thought of burying his fangs into Eros's flesh. But Eros was gone, and only stray oversized pigeon feathers fell from the oculus. Doctor D unthinkingly transformed back to his usual shape. He had no time to wonder where else in the city Eros might have intruded because the foundation of the hall quaked. Flecks of paint and stucco fell from the vaults of the ceiling to the enraptured beings below like snow. The tremor worsened, and Doctor D struggled to stand, even with his cane pressed tight into the small gaps in the railing, and the sound, as if the tapestry of the universe was being ripped, was all he could hear. He spied Eros slip back through the hole in the dome, a grin on his face.

The nearest wall exploded. Mosaic tile shards and chunks of adobe crashed to the floor and hit the beings below, making them pause in their lust and scream. Doctor D was flung backward and hit covered bone. As the dust cleared, he found himself entangled with Ereshkigal, and Death—back to her skeletal form. Before them was the acid-drooling, fiery-scaled face of a serpent. It was bearded, the webbing blocking Doctor D’s view like a giant parasol, though he could still see Dis through the decimated wall in the outskirts of his vision. This gigantic serpentine being was Falak, an ancient creature who dwelled in the depths of the Phlegethon.

“I thought you might appreciate a fellow snake, Satan!” Eros’s voice rang out. The unmistakable sound of arrows slicing through the air punctuated his words. “There, now he’ll be particularly full of love for you all.”

Falak’s body shifted and it turned its head away, but Doctor D was not naïve enough to imagine it was leaving them be. It slithered around them to encircle them in its coils, which continuously tightened. Doctor D would have used his cane to pry himself out, but his arms were being constricted, and burning with a pain distinct from his own fire. He could hear Death’s dry ribs creaking under the pressure as she and Ereshkigal, whose wings were beginning to give way as well, tried to shield them. The selkie in Eros’s arms barked incessantly.

“Is this how it ends, my love? Will we fade together?” asked Ereshkigal. Black, oily tears bubbled in her eyes.

“No. In fact, it is none of our times,” said Death.

With Falak’s change in position, Doctor D could see Eros above them. He was struggling to fly as he doubled over cackling mid-air. Doctor D gave his compatriots a meaningful look, letting them know he had a plan. “Eros, you make me sore, but you’re never going to

reign down here!” he snapped. He wheezed afterward due to the weight on his abdomen.

Eros swooped down to face him. “Oh? But I am! All I have left to do is charm a few others and make them my personal servants, but the stock is terrible here . . . it’s hard to find anyone up to the task.” He noticed Doctor D’s staring at the rubble littering the half-demolished hall. “There’s no need to worry about that, I’ll be sure to put you and yours to work on renovating this entire place to suit me as soon as possible.”

“Y-You haven’t shot . . . the rest of the supervisors. They will halt your siege,” Doctor D struggled to say.

Eros reached down, intending to patronizingly pat Doctor D’s face, but Death, with surprising strength given her lack of leverage, punched Eros’s outstretched arm. It went slack as Eros recoiled. “Hey, why are you being possessive?! You made a big show of being immune to the love magic!” he said. He turned back to Doctor D. “Who are these other supervisors? Disregard Hades and Persephone. I’ll visit them when everybody else is under my power.”

“I’d never give them up,” said Doctor D. He spat a shower of embers into Eros’s face.

Eros bared his teeth. “Insolent idiot! I’ll inject you with enough of my special honeysuckle blend to make anyone my submissive subject!” He nocked four arrows at once and shot him point-blank. Ichor dribbled from the puncture wounds.

Doctor D took a deep breath and swallowed his pride. “I never realized how beautiful you are. How could I have been blind all these years?” he said. “I’ll tell you everything—Izanami is a key overseer, and she’s not present!”

Eros ran a hand through his rosy hair, beaming. “That wasn’t hard, was it? You could be a proper manservant. But first, to find

this Izanami.” He left.

Ereshkigal plucked the arrows from Doctor D’s chest as he groaned. The mixture of the noxious pollen hanging in the air and the sweet toxin coating the darts was nauseating.

Eros soon dove back inside. His face was screwed up, and he looked as sick as Doctor D felt. The front door flew open, and Izanami entered. She was riding a giant levitating braid of rice straw rope as a steed while her kimono of the purest white whipped around in a magic wind, as did streamers dangling from her seat. Her hair rose up around her.

Eros ducked behind Doctor D’s desk. He choked back vomit. “She’s too hideous! I can’t see her . . . in love! I can’t even look!” As he covered his eyes, he released the selkie. Ereshkigal dove in and caught it before it could hit the floor.

Izanami’s exposed, rotting facial muscles tensed. She pointed at Eros, and her voice rolled like thunder, “You’d dare disrespect me, the mother of countless gods?! Spirits of this office, I call to you—defend my honor!”

The office supplies and furniture shook—not from another tremor, but like they were living creatures awakening from hibernation. First to wake was Doctor D’s antique desk chair. The geometric, nacre inlay below the seat became square eyes with star-shaped pupils, and the legs grew clawed feet.

Eros stopped cowering. He stood up. “What? Am I supposed to be afraid of a chair?” He laughed. “I’m terrified. What if it forces me to sit on it?”

Izanami called out once more, “He has toyed with the red string of love. Give him his rightful punishment!”

The red, silk upholstery of the chair unraveled and struck out at Eros like a snake. The red thread wrapped around the base of his

wings and pulled him forward, forcing him to bend down. He cried out in alarm when his face hit the desk. “This is ridiculous,” he said.

He flapped his wings to break the silk, only for the objects around him to spring into action. The inkwell’s neck elongated and splattered Eros across the face like a miniature geyser. Now blind, he did not see the documents detailing punishments rise and fold themselves into paper cranes and other birds and swarm him like a murmuration of starlings, cutting into his exposed skin and giving him a bevy of paper cuts. Used ink ribbons swirled around his body before wrapping him tightly like a mummy, holding him in place. Finally, the grille—the portal to Death’s garden—swung open, hard, smacking him and sending him falling off the desk to hit the floor. From a distance, Eros looked like he had been tarred-and-feathered.

Doctor D grinned. “Break the spell, Eros!”

Eros gritted his teeth at Doctor D, but when Izanami’s shadow fell over him, he hung his head.

There was an abrupt change in the air—clouds of pollen ceased billowing into the hall, and the wet noises stopped. Exclamations of shock, confusion, and disappointment rang out. Doctor D felt Falak tense, then unwind. The coils loosened and released for him, Death, and Ereshkigal, the selkie in her arms. Falak flicked its tongue out apologetically. With no efficient route back to the Phlegethon, it turned, shaking the hall and sending yet more crumbling materials to the floor. It left through the gaping hole that had once been the wall. As it struggled to slither around the smaller beings, it accidentally whipped the rubble and sent it flying into the unbroken walls, cracking them. The ensuing aftershock snapped anyone still dazed into attentiveness.

The denizens of Dis looked to Doctor D upon surveying the destruction. With a grimace, he waved them away. “Resume your

designated duties,” he ordered. “Except you, Beelzebub. You ought to stay.”

As the crowd began to thin, Doctor D’s metallic, coppery skin grew jet black scales, and his nails lengthened, becoming thick, yellowed claws. Instead of turning into a water snake, his body became that of a massive komodo dragon-gila monster hybrid with vermilion banding down his back. He stomped up the stairs, his tail rigid and trembling with suppressed rage. He closed in on Eros, Death and Ereshkigal soon following.

Doctor D dug his front claws into Eros’s back, putting all the weight on Eros’s disheveled wings. Doctor D made sure to tear out as many feathers as he could in the process. He hissed into Eros’s ear, sending scalding saliva dripping onto his earlobe. “Now, Eros, let me make a proposition. I’ll even let you make your own decision, because I’m being the bigger deity.” Doctor D looked to Death, who nodded and brought a scroll that was buried in paper birds—it was the type of scroll charged with punishments Doctor D would hand out.

“I don’t belong in Hell, I’m not dead!” said Eros. “You have no authority over me and you know it, fool!”

“If you make a pact with me, I certainly will.”

“And why would I ever—” Eros shut up. He had obviously realized he did not want his question answered.

Doctor D flicked his tongue. “One bite from me and you’ll think the ichor in your veins is lava for as long as it would take to pick each piece of straw from Izanami’s seat, if you took only one each week.”

Eros shivered. He tried to flap his wings. Doctor D tore out another clawful of feathers. Eventually, Eros let out a whine and stilled. “And if I make this pact, you’ll set me free without a bite, I

imagine? I know you're obsessed with fine print—just tell me what you're after already!”

“Yes.” With a burst of dark magic, glowing words appeared on the previously-blank scroll. It decreed that Eros must never fire upon a being employed in the Underworld again, or he would face his appointed “reparative therapy” sentence early. Doctor D would have also stated that Eros must never drug any being for the rest of his days, but he knew his jurisdiction was not so accepted in other domains.

“Fine! After all, why would I ever want to grace such a disgusting lot with my magic again?” said Eros.

Death handed Eros one of the feathers Doctor D had torn out, while Ereshkigal pointed to Eros's face. The message was clear, even to a malcontent like him. He frowned, but used the feather as a quill along with the ink staining his face and signed the scroll. As soon as he lifted pen from page, Doctor D lunged and drove his fangs into Eros's neck—a full-force bite. Eros screamed incomprehensibly as Doctor D rolled, tearing into him like a starved crocodile. Unfortunately, Eros's ichor was as repulsive as his wings, and Doctor D had to let go before he could close his jaw completely, snapping Eros's neck. But Doctor D refused to move from Eros's back—he wanted to sit and enjoy the reaction that ensued.

Eros's body twitched as he turned to look back at Doctor D. He was in the eye of the storm, as it were, before the venom's full effect had taken hold. “Y-You said you wouldn't, that you'd let me go,” he said, his voice hush and weak.

“Do you even know who I am?”

Tears streamed from Eros's eyes. He wailed, but used ink ribbons twirled around his face and sealed his mouth shut.

After dragging his claws down Eros's back in a fashion sure to

be excruciating Doctor D strode away, his head held high. He took his usual form again. He stretched, still aching from having been squeezed. He ran his hands down his cane—fortunately, it was made from the same wood as Death’s scythe and was nigh-invulnerable in the face of wear. “Well,” Doctor D said to Death and Ereshkigal, “I’d say that’s a job finished. Now to find a nice little freezing cell for Eros to recover in.”

Ereshkigal nodded, but she looked down mournfully at the now-asleep selkie she held. Her mouth quavered. “Doctor D, Death . . . I deeply apologize. And not only because of what I did while drugged.” She knelt down, prostrating herself. “First I couldn’t kill a human man, and now I can’t even best my own nephew! I thought I’d gained strength after my thousands of years of training, but still I’m—”

“The ability to beat up your nephew isn’t a required skill for a supervisor. Besides, Eros even gave me trouble, as we can all see . . . just do me a favor and bring that selkie back to the Cocytus where it belongs,” said Doctor D.

She stood and nodded. Death removed the arrows from between her wings. Ereshkigal gave the cityscape a look before using her wings to boost her jump, letting her fly through the oculus. Whether she was hesitant to face the crowd or simply too melodramatic to walk away—or both—was unclear.

Doctor D determined that Eros’s bonds were appropriately secure and tight, though Eros’s screams, while muffled, were still grating. Doctor D left him to his torment and descended the stairs with Death close by, the damp mix of fluids clinging to Death’s feet and Doctor D’s shoes. Now, only the supervisors and the pile of other beings Asteroth was still sleeping on remained—apparently the experts in the art of sex had felt the tide of the spell subside, but had

ignored that to continue their nap. Doctor D felt a flicker of jealousy.

Hanwi and Loki had separated. “I can’t apologize enough!” said Hanwi. Her face was entirely shrouded by her veil. “I could see how you felt before it happened . . . I hope I didn’t cause you more pain.”

Loki shook his head. “Asteroth nipped all that in the bud. You know, I’d never known what it’s like to be kissed by the moon. It was quite the enjoyable experience. You should be proud! Call me. Sigyn won’t mind!” He nudged her with his elbow.

Hanwi lifted her veil but kept looking down. Her eyes flew open and bright moonbeams shot from them, blasting Loki across the hall. To Doctor D’s annoyance, Loki slammed into one of the cracks in the wall and exacerbated it.

Hanwi took her robe by the hem to prevent it from being soaked by the bodily fluids on the floor as she ran to Izanami. “Your actions were amazing!” Hanwi exclaimed. “How did you command your children to come to your defense? I’m usually the one watching over mine.”

“Tell me how to keep Loki in-check and I’ll explain.” Izanami took Hanwi by the hand and helped her take a seat by her side. The two rode away together.

Scanning the room, Doctor D picked up on the sound of buzzing fly wings low to the floor, and approached the mass of seductresses and seducers as he tracked the noise. From beneath the mass of beings came a clap of thunder. All awakened, and at the sight of Doctor D, scattered to resume their work. When the Deer Woman at the bottom of the pile rose, Doctor D saw that one of her hooves had been stuffed inside the mouth of Beelzebub. He was lying belly-down, in a half-man, half-fly form, his translucent wings now crushed only by Asteroth’s own batlike pair. Beelzebub beat his wings against the tile fruitlessly.

“We know you’re just feigning sleep,” said Doctor D. Asteroth was breathing far too evenly for such a stressed demon. Doctor D touched Asteroth’s thigh to let the pet snake climb the sleeve of his suit. “Either Beelzebub’s going to call down a bunch of lightning and fry you, or the man upstairs will do worse.”

Asteroth perked up. “. . . This is the thanks I receive after saving all of you? I deserve rest.”

“Well, *thank you* so much, Asteroth.” Doctor D tapped Asteroth’s legs with the cane. “There, you’ve been properly thanked! Now, get a move on—even your snakey’s impatient.”

“How rude. I don’t think you even grasp how sore my kind becomes.” Asteroth rolled onto his side.

“Please, you know he’s only saying this for your own good!” said Beelzebub.

“‘Only?’ I don’t think so You know well what we all do—inside, Doctor D’s festering with jealousy because everyone has had their moments together and he hasn’t.”

Doctor D and Beelzebub glared at him. Even the snake on Doctor D’s shoulder looked unamused. Death brought the heft of his scythe down and whacked Asteroth on the head.

“But Death, you know far better than anyone that he—”

Death whacked him again.

Asteroth’s wings hitched. “Fine, fine . . . that’s isn’t a particularly hospitable bed, is it?” He held out his arm and his snake leapt to from Doctor D’s shoulder to it. Asteroth fluttered away into Dis, drifting in the hot, dusty currents of air.

Beelzebub pushed himself up and straightened his robe. Rivulets of sweat dripped down his forehead as his compound eyes were oriented toward Doctor D.

Doctor D could not avert his eyes from the sticky sea of blood in

various colors, ichor—iridescent gold, like butter melting in brass—and ejaculate, with flakes and little packets of pollen embedded in it. “As it happens, a prime opportunity to punish you came around without any intervention on the part of yours truly. Funny.” He noticed that Beelzebub was glancing over to the rubble. “No, I only want you cleaning up the liquids. Don’t try to build me another wall. We’ve all seen how your projects turn out.”

“Yes, Doctor D!” he said, voice reverberating with a buzz. He transformed fully into a giant fruit fly and landed in the middle of the pool, making sure all six of his legs touched down in it. He regurgitated saliva onto the floor and sucked it up.

“You know, I intended for you to use your storm-summoning skills to wash the hall, but this does seem safer. But what makes you think you deserve a free, tasty meal? That isn’t much of a punishment!”

Beelzebub groomed his forelegs nervously.

Doctor D let it be. He turned, intending to go back up the stairs and remove Eros from the premises, but he paused when he faced Death. Doctor D’s grip on his cane relaxed and he smiled slightly—it was as if he had been endlessly hiking in the morning sun on a humid, scalding day, when a cool breeze from beyond a distant hill had floated down to touch him. He was also very aware that the way Death’s skeletal fingers were positioned on his scythe mirrored Doctor D’s hold on his cane.

Doctor D decided to set free the words that were welling up within his heart. “I love that you punched him, Death!”

Death rotated his scythe like a wand and it vanished. “Punching someone is sometimes the right course of action. Eros put himself in a position in which I could give him what he deserved.”

“If only he had put his face in that position as well as his arm,”

said Doctor D. “Anyway, you’re saying it was a calculated decision on your part, based on causes and conditions, I’m guessing?”

“You understand.”

Doctor D reached out and gingerly smoothed out the many wrinkles in his friend’s robe that had formed during the fray. “Tell me more about some of these causes and conditions, if you will.”

“I know the causes and conditions you’re interested in are my care and regard for you, as well as the blistering anger I felt at Eros due to his mistreatment of you.” Death leaned into his touch.

Doctor D’s only response was his deepening smile. He rested his head on Death’s collarbone, and Death combed through Doctor D’s dark hair in return. Doctor D closed his eyes, and it felt like a velvet curtain was falling over him as he relished the coolness of Death’s bones.

Death jerked his skull to the side, jostling Doctor D and shattering his reverie. He followed Death’s stare and saw Loki exaggeratedly creeping out the front door, carrying a stack of cracked tiles lifted from the wrecked mosaic on Doctor D’s floor. When Loki noticed they had spotted him, he frantically tried to squeeze through the doorway but could not fit with the tiles in his arms. This gave Doctor D and Death plenty of time to cut across the hall.

Doctor D grabbed Loki’s shoulder. “What do you think you’re doing? I know your tastes aren’t sophisticated enough to appreciate this aesthetic!”

Loki spun around. “It’s not for me, I swear! It’s for my Doctor D Museum, for the public’s enjoyment!”

“What,” said Doctor D and Death.

“They’ll flock to it in droves to view a genuine tile from Doctor D’s hall. Think of how much they’ll pay me for—uh, I mean—”

Loki stopped waffling and tried to flee, only to collide with

Death, who had appeared behind him. “That’s unfair and you know it—have it your way!” Loki threw the stack at Death, whose bony fingers fumbled with the tiles. Loki pushed past him and snatched one before running off into the main street crowd.

“I’m sorry,” said Death. “Would you like me to throw my scythe like a boomerang and knock Loki off his feet?”

Doctor D shook his head. “This ‘museum’ idea is pathetic enough to be interesting. I’ll have to take a look at it.” He had Death pass him the tiles, making sure their fingers brushed. “At least you saved the most intricately-decorated one of the bunch.” The tile had a richly-colored representation of a star cluster, or perhaps a flower head of many blooms, or an exploding firework—it was made to fluctuate between the three as you looked at it. The surface was marred by cracks and scrapes. “It’s beaten-up, but I suppose with some resin and a colorful inlay for all the cracks, it could make a nice bit of wall art” The damaged tile’s surface resembled a yellow, crumbling leaf of an illustrated manuscript. He put it down in the corner, away from the rubble.

Death put a hand on Doctor D’s shoulder and they shared one more quiet moment. Then they climbed back up the stairs, passing the view of Dis’s cityscape with its bustling activity lit by the Phlegethon’s cinnabar glow, and approached Eros. Eros’s body occasionally spasmed, but he was too limp to struggle and too weak to scream. His eyes were unfocused as he stared into the distance. Doctor D considered which spell to use to carry Eros to a dungeon—he did not want to put his hands on Eros’s disgusting form again. But as he mulled this over, a delicate, hot pink rose petal sat curling on the floor. More petals floated down from above to join it as a cloying sweet smell diffused in the air, followed by high-pitched giggling like the ringing of a tinkle bell. Doctor D and Death looked up to the

oculus. Plump, pink humanoid babies with pigeon wings of their own were doing acrobatic maneuvers while carrying sheer scarves. Doctor D tensed. Punishing Eros was not as severe a risk as shooting down an amoretto would be, for even Aphrodite resented her son for his menacing behavior when it was directed at her, whereas she would see an affront to her personal train as a declaration of war.

The amoretti tossed the scarves over Eros and cradled him with them. The scarves sparkled, and, like stage magic, when they were lifted, Eros was gone. Doctor D put his hands out as if waiting to be handcuffed, ready to accept his fate—though he pointed his sharp nails at the amoretti in warning. As hot as his rage burned, he suppressed the urge to fight, visualizing the consequences as the amoretti circled around, wrapping him in the scarves. At least, Doctor D knew, Death would accompany him.



An overpowering mix of sea air and the smell of beach roses assaulted Doctor D even before the scarves were lifted. His eyes had to adjust to the daylight. The grass, which covered a seaside cliff, felt too even and soft to be natural. From below came the sound of waves battering rock. He took a few steps forward, making it impossible for anyone to throw him over the edge on a whim.

Aphrodite was a short distance away, kneeling by Eros's bedside—he was bedridden, confined to an immaculate white fainting couch—as her servants fluttered overhead like swarming mayflies. Her hair was a coral waterfall undulating in the wind, framing her pale face and neck. She wore a string of iridescent, pink pearls. As she stroked Eros's forehead while he twitched, she had a

sad, motherly smile on her face—an act. She was inwardly laughing at her son’s pain.

Doctor D considered taking a different form, perhaps playing old and doddering, becoming female, or swapping his clothes for his especially feminine set, but he knew it would be no use. No matter how he looked, his appearance would spark jealousy, attachment, or judgment. And any variation from his usual might alert her to the fact that he was walking on eggshells. Doctor D waited for Death to appear by his side before pushing forward.

Aphrodite stood up to her full height. Her dress flowed and her blue eyes shone. “Hello, Satan. And I see you brought it with you, as well.”

“. . . Yes, I do take my cane everywhere.” Doctor D schooled his expression. “It’s lovely, isn’t it.”

Aphrodite’s eyes narrowed, but her smile remained.

“But you didn’t bring me here just to discuss my accessorizing, I presume. And what a flamboyant means of transportation you arranged—your flair for the dramatic even exceeds your sister’s.”

“My sister’s?”

“Ereshkigal’s, that is.”

Aphrodite laughed sonorously. “If you think she’s my sister, then Epimetheus is your brother, *Prometheus*.” She wanted him to fear being put right back on that rock to be disemboweled by birds of prey, but he was unfazed. He was too important a cog in the afterlife machine to be shunted.

“He’s my brother, all right. In fact, when he and his wife ended up in Hell, I gave them a hearty welcome by shouting at them for their recklessness,” said Doctor D. “I was even kind enough to walk them through their punishments in detail to help them get their bearings down there. If that’s not brotherly love, what is?”

“And do you feel such love for your other brother, Enlil?” she asked. “Not that I don’t know the answer—I can read your feelings like an open book.”

“Ouch,” said Doctor D.

The wispy cirrus clouds on the horizon twisted and frayed as Aphrodite approached. The smell of roses was not coming from any bush, but instead from a strong perfume she was exuding. Doctor D gave Death an exasperated look, hoping he would have better luck making her get to the heart of the matter.

“Why did you remove Eros from Hell and take my friend here?” asked Death.

Aphrodite looked at him if he were a pull-string doll. She turned back to Doctor D. “I don’t think you showed my son much hospitality. You and yours are demons and must have enjoyed his own take on Bacchanalia, and yet you poisoned him in return?”

“You like his anguish,” said Death.

Again, she kept her eyes fixed on Doctor D. “Yes, because he deserved it and worse for the times he’s shot me, but that doesn’t excuse ingratitude of the highest degree.”

“I’m getting the impression that you and Eros have forgotten what ‘demon’ actually means,” said Doctor D. “Do you think Ded Moroz, for example, a demon whose homestead’s in the icy hells—an old man who spends his free time handing out gifts to kids and hanging out with his granddaughter the Snow Maiden—is as lascivious as you’re imagining? Why, a demon is simply any—”

“It doesn’t matter what it originally meant. All that matters is that it now refers to those who associate with you, Satan.” Aphrodite crept closer, her hair like the dangling tentacles of the box jellyfish. “. . . Which means they have terrible taste.”

Doctor D took a step back while Death took a step forward,

putting himself between Doctor D and Aphrodite. “Personal space, Aphrodite!” snapped Doctor D. “What sort of message are you trying to send, anyway? Trying to get all touchy-feely with me while being too formal to call me anything but my title? I go by Doctor D—you and your son should know that!”

Aphrodite paused. “I doubt you have a degree.”

“I have many degrees,” said Doctor D. “The ‘Doctor’ in my name refers specifically to my degree in ADV—Adversity, that is.”

“That is ridiculous. I’ll call you by your real name.” Aphrodite’s sky blue eyes darkened to ultramarine. For a split second Doctor D thought she would shove Death out of the way, but she stayed put. “Anyway, I couldn’t help but notice that you don’t show any of the telltale signs of having engaged in orgiastic fun. I wouldn’t expect anything from it, of course—” She gestured to Death. “But I’d think you’d be a little more disheveled, Satan.” An amoretto dipped down and whispered in her ear. “How interesting! My servant told me that not only are you, and of course it, resistant, but that many of the other demons also managed to refrain from sex as well! Almost as if somebody altered Eros’s magic. Could it be?”

“Aphrodite, there are plenty of appropriate pronouns you could use—quit using the wrong one. My old friend here is no ‘it!’” Doctor D’s tail was buzzing.

Death put a hand on the small of Doctor D’s back and held the fabric of his frock coat, preventing him from lunging.

Aphrodite scoffed. “Well, I don’t care about that. I only want to know who interfered in the charm.”

Death leaned toward Doctor D, while still carefully blocking Aphrodite’s path. “Now is an improper time for this meeting. Don’t be like a general who knows the terrain but ignores the weather.” His hold on Doctor D’s clothing tightened.

“How philosophical!” exclaimed Aphrodite. “Did you teach it how to speak that way, Satan?”

Doctor D’s tail buzzed faster. Death glanced from him to Aphrodite. He released Doctor D and stepped back.

Doctor D’s rage infiltrated into the ocean below like the rushing water of monsoon rain. The sea surged and a tidal wave rose over the cliffside, then halted, hanging in the sky—a curtain blocking out the sunlight. In its shadow, the blue-green fire crackling from Doctor D’s eyes looked like twin comets at night. “It wasn’t enough, was it? You couldn’t stop yourself once in your sorry, immortal existence, could you, Aphrodite?!” His voice echoed, tumultuous as the turning sea. “Death has been going above and beyond to support me in the face of the parade of self-absorbed idiots including you and your good-for-nothing son constantly interfering in our busy schedules—but I suppose you wouldn’t understand, now, would you? The only ‘support’ you’ve ever given anyone was to Zeus when you helped him rape the goddess Nemesis!” The flames bursting from his eyes burned brighter. “When I remember how furious you were that time a human assaulted you in your sleep, and you asked for my help in tracking him down to kill him. You’re the epitome of hypocrisy!”

Water droplets from the looming wave fell upon Aphrodite’s head and slid down her hair. “As if I ever would have needed help killing a human. Really, the nerve of you—”

“Not to mention your place in the ceaseless stream of fools ruining our plans for our fishing trip!” said Doctor D. “There’s a conversation of the utmost importance we’ve been forced to put a rain check on dozens of times already—you don’t get to drag me out here and insult my old friend on top of every other indignity!”

Aphrodite’s expression hovered between one of twisted amusement and offense. “Well, if you’re going to insist on speaking to me

in this manner, refusing to show me the respect that's rightfully mine, I'll be forced to do this—seize him, amoretti!”

Her servants swarmed at Doctor D like locusts. Doctor D's tail grew and he used it as a whip, smacking them out of the air. Aphrodite gasped. She opened her hands and readied orbs of compressed starlight in her palms. She was ready to throw them, but he cut her off by letting the tidal wave drop. Death vanished and Aphrodite shrieked as the water crashed over the cliff and overtook it.

Doctor D stood unaffected—the wave had parted around him as easily as a canopy, letting him watch his handiwork and smile. The whitewater swirled and bubbled as it turned the grass into a floodplain, and sprayed as it ricocheted off the bodies of the unconscious amoretti. But Doctor D's smile fell at the sight of Aphrodite, who had turned her starlight orbs into a sparkling shield that resembled one of the pearls on her necklace. The water simply ran down the forcefield—not a hair on Aphrodite's head was out of place.

The shield popped like a bubble. Aphrodite's eyes were now lit by their own inner fire, sharp and radial with the asterisms of star sapphires. Her hair undulated more rapidly—like the flagellum of an aquatic bacterium. “Oh, of course when you see anything of beauty, you tarnish it! It's worse than pearls before swine with you, Satan!” She spat his title as a curse before launching herself at him, flying without wings. She grabbed at the exposed skin of his hands and pulled him down, throwing him face-first into the mud. But his body writhed and his hands disappeared, leaving her with nothing to hold as he took his dragon form. He arched back and wrapped his tail around her neck, holding her in place with his cane as he strangled her. As she clawed at him and dug her long fingernails between his scales, Doctor D stretched out. He flung her away—he did not want

her hands on him, even during combat—he wanted to give her a wide berth. Aphrodite lighted on the precipice and scrambled to avoid plunging into the ocean, which gave Doctor D time to return to his usual shape. When he did so, he winced—shooting pain ran up his back where she had stabbed him with her nails. Underpinning it all was a dull ache. He staggered back and hit something hard, one of the legs of the fainting couch.

The couch had toppled over and its cushions were soaked. Eros was sprawled out on the wet grass.

Aphrodite's hair was tousled, yet her white dress was magically spotless. She smiled. "Your beloved pillar of support has abandoned you in your time of need, I see."

Doctor D shrugged. "Death must not have wanted to see this." Without looking away from her, he reached over the couch and tore a handful of feathers from Eros's wings. With the fire spilling from his eyes he lit them. He threw them at Aphrodite as darts.

She made no effort to dodge. She deflected each projectile with sprinkles of stardust. When Doctor D went to grab more feathers without looking away from his target, her smile grew soft and sweet. "I'm glad you're back in this form." Her eyes opened fully. Shining beams like hot pink searchlights shot from them and illuminated Doctor D. He tried to escape the light, but his body would not respond, as if he had been put under failed anesthesia—he was helpless, yet utterly aware. His cane slipped out of his hand and fell over. He could make out whispers in the back of his mind urging him to go to Aphrodite and just be with her, while the rest of him fought to reject these feelings she had implanted in him. As this battle was waged he felt like pins were being jabbed into his flesh.

Aphrodite's eyes had stopped glowing. She approached him, her steps delicately airy—taking her time. Doctor D tried again to move,

but he felt as if his feet were sinking, being pulled into the mud. Normally he could break free of brainwashing spells, but he was too drained. It was taking the last dregs of his willpower to keep his mind his own.

Aphrodite's gaze was fixed on the buttons of his frock coat.

Before she could touch him, Death appeared, blocking her. "Your actions show your insecurity, Aphrodite," said Death.

She ignored him and tried to circle around Doctor D, but no matter the angle from which she approached him, Death was there. She stopped. "What an absurd thing to say. I'm the most beautiful, powerful, and all-loving goddess."

". . . Only if you're insecure in your beauty does it make sense that you'd force my best friend into this," said Death, "as opposed to letting him come to love you of his own free will."

Aphrodite laughed. "That's not it at all! He was just stubborn. He has actually been in love with me all along and simply didn't want to reveal it. He knew that he didn't deserve me, so he acted like he loved you instead for all this time. Fortunately for him, I'm feeling charitable and giving him his true heart's desire." She directed one of her prizewinning smiles at Doctor D. "Isn't that right, Satan?"

Doctor D felt like there were parasites wriggling behind his eyes, telling him to agree, but he managed to keep his jaw locked tight.

The asterism returned to Aphrodite's eyes, blazing with suppressed fury. "Why, he must be shy! I know you only want to ruin my—I mean, our—fun, Death!"

Death pointed to her heart. She flinched, his chilling presence finally getting to her. "Aphrodite, he finds me to be the most beautiful of all beings," declared Death.

"Th-Then he's wrong," Aphrodite stammered.

“If you think yourself the most beautiful of all, shouldn’t you be the pinnacle of beauty by any standard, including that of my best friend?”

Aphrodite shot a beam of starlight at him. He reflected it back to her with his scythe’s blade. Doctor D would have smiled, if he could have.

Aphrodite glared at the blade glinting in the now-golden light—the sun was falling to the horizon. Doctor D wondered how long it had been since he had seen a sunset.

“And what gender are you, anyway?” Aphrodite asked Death. “Are you man, woman, or hermaphrodite? Don’t pretend to be androgyne—I don’t believe in that.”

“I’m the gender of all things that die.” Death’s voice carried far, like moonlight on a clear winter’s night. “And I’m also genderless—both are true, and—”

“Too mystical,” said Aphrodite, in a clipped tone. “No more nonsense—take what you think is a beautiful shape.”

Death did nothing.

“Then I automatically win!” The stars faded from her eyes, turning them a deep ultramarine once again. “Now, leave. I don’t share my men.”

“Aphrodite, my best friend doesn’t judge beauty as you do.” Death put his free hand on Doctor D’s shoulder, the cool touch easing the pain. “You must prove your supremacy in a unique fashion. You can—”

“I don’t need to prove anything to a grotesque thing like you.”

“You prove yourself a coward, fleeing from the challenge of death.”

Doctor D could see Aphrodite’s neck muscles tensing behind her pearls. “I am immortal and all-powerful, and thus have nothing to

fear from Death's weak, withered hand!"

Death pointed to a clam shell the wave had washed into the grass. "If you are all-powerful, you can step inside this shell without changing its size or yours, as I can." Without shrinking, and without enlarging the clam, Death walked in and out of it as easily as entering and leaving a house.

"Of course I can do that!" shouted Aphrodite. "I ride shells!" She went inside. Death quickly picked up the clam and snapped it shut. He hurled it over the cliff's edge, far out to sea.

As the shell plummeted, the spell that kept Doctor D paralyzed faded. He clapped his hands and grinned, then picked up his cane. But Death only stared at the water, as if to confirm that Aphrodite was gone for the time being. Without a word, he teleported to Doctor D's side and gripped him by the arm, then took off running. Doctor D was too tired to do more than let out a sound of surprise as Death pulled him along. They ran away from the cliff and out into other verdant places. Doctor D watched, dazed, as they blew past an apple orchard with nymphs and naiads asleep in the trees' shade, next a lush field of purple poppies with upright blooms and drooping buds, where Flora danced with her friends through the jagged poppy leaves, and then a festival being held in the shadow of Mount Olympus. He barely registered the sight of deities lounging around, or the sound of music, or the smells of smoked meat and wine as Death took him past it all.

When they emerged from the mountain's shadow they reached a hilltop where dozens of rainbows touched the ground. Death stopped short and Doctor D collided with the side of her skull that was covered by her hood.

From the gilt clouds overhead came another rainbow being pulled along as flowing drapery by Iris, a messenger and occasional

psychopomp who sometimes visited the Underworld. Her dark hair was like crow feathers—black, yet also rainbow-colored. “Death! How may I serve you?” she asked. Doctor D’s fatigue made it sound like they were speaking through a sheet of water.

“Summon a rainbow path to my garden,” said Death.

Iris nodded. She held her arms up to the peach sunset, and soon Death and Doctor D were embraced by a bouquet of colors and whisked away.



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