

Custom will reconcile people to any atrocity; and fashion will drive them to acquire any custom.

George Bernard Shaw

Author's Note

Hell, like other places, has its own history. Similarly it also possesses an immensely rich and varied culture, partly owing to the fact that the vast majority of people from all regions of the Earth end up there. Yet despite this, very little has been written about the normal everyday existence of the daemons and humans who inhabit it. A glaring omission certainly but not an altogether surprising one. As with other far off exotic locales, the mythology of Hell has such a grip on the public imagination that it eclipses all the more mundane realities. That said, my goal here is to write a fictional story which nevertheless maintains a realistic and balanced portrayal of its setting. In doing so I have primarily relied on first-hand accounts and, wherever I've encountered disagreements in matters of substance, I've always been careful to take them into consideration. How successful I've been in this enterprise I leave for my readers to judge – soon enough they'll probably be able to assess my accuracy with personal experience.

Chapter One

He liked torture as much as the next daemon. Well, almost. He did find the screaming quite irritating. Most daemons thought this was one of the best parts but he was odd that way. He didn't care for pleading either. Interfered with his concentration. He preferred a nice meditative silence. The solution though was easy enough – he gagged his assignments. And if he didn't have any rope handy he could always pull a few feet of intestine out of them and use that. He was wonderfully ingenious when it came to these sorts of things.

Asmodeus Lucifer Cambioni was a torturer by profession. Yes, his middle name was really Lucifer, but in Hell that's like having the name Alexander or David. Daemon spawn are named after famous individuals all the time, and for the same reasons. Mr. Cambioni furthermore went by the less formal and magisterial sounding Asmoe in all aspects of his daily life – except when he was paying his taxes. In Hell naturally the taxes are rather high but payment tends to be prompt. This is ensured by a very sensible incentivization program – individuals who don't pay in a timely manner are punished with unspeakable torments. Asmoe Cambioni in fact was now often the one devising and implementing said torments; a civil service he took great pride in. He wasn't a government employee though. Rather, Mr. Cambioni was a torturer third-class who worked for Tsuji Giri Enterprises, a subsidiary of Omnicide. It just so happened that they'd recently begun taking a lot of public contracts and that's why Asmoe suddenly found himself inflicting meritorious cruelties on tax delinquents and litterers and serial jaywalkers instead of on the underperforming data-entry clerks and

incompetent managerial staff who were typically assigned to him by his corporate clientele. Not that Asmoe had any complaints about this. While daemons came in even greater shapes and sizes than human beings, still they all suffered more or less alike. Bodily speaking that is. There were of course noticeable mental differences but these only became relevant with respect to psychiatric tortures, and Asmoe wasn't authorized for that. A daemon had to have a doctorate in agonology before they could apply for the certification necessary to engage in the more sophisticated science of mentally inflicted distress. The danger of accidentally cultivating a lasting hope or resilience in the will of one's assignments was simply too enormous for daemons without adequate training. In any case, Asmoe didn't mess around with that sort of stuff. Nope, his business was just good old-fashioned physical excruciation.

Before going further into the remarkable events that were about to unfold for Asmoe Cambioni, a few things will first have to be explained about Hell. Geographical and economic details mainly, without which much of the story won't make any sense. Hell, as most people when they arrive there are surprised to find, is nearly identical to Earth in terms of terrain. This is because Hell is actually a parallel Earth simultaneously existing in another dimension. There are notable differences admittedly. In Hell there's no vegetation. No trees, no grass, no flowers. Nothing. There's no rain either. There is water I guess but you wouldn't want to drink it. Imagine the most repulsive liquid you can conceive of and you'll probably come up with something close to what passes for water in Hell. About a sixth of Earth's ocean mass remains there – a dark briny sludge that's so loaded with corrosive pollutants it's regularly used for industrial disposal. If that wasn't bad enough, in Hell the sun has turned into a massive red giant large enough to swallow Mercury. Because of this, terrible solar storms frequently ravage Hell and bring suffering to those who dwell there. But still damnation goes on and this is where humans come into the picture. You see, if you die on Earth and you don't satisfy whatever mysterious criterion the saints have for admission into Heaven – and as yet no one's figured it out exactly – then you materialize in Hell at the same coordinates. For example, if you die in Los Angeles you'd reappear in Los Angeles. As unfortunate as that may be.

Regarding infrastructure and artificial things in general, these are all very different, but in terms of geography, Hell exists at a level of reality which in most ways conforms to Earth – the shapes and locations of its continents are nearly

identical, likewise its mountain ranges and other aspects of its landmasses. It's a world that shadows Earth with respect to its more robust natural features but the correspondence ends there. For example, the architecture in Hell is uniquely its own and the layout of its cities and towns aren't constrained by Earthly principles. Daemons are nevertheless concentrated in those areas which overlap major population centers on Earth for the simple fact that these are the places where most humans die. You see, humans provide the basis for daemonic society. Humans are far and away the preeminent commodity acquired and exchanged by daemons, for two reasons. The second most important of these reasons is that humans are incredibly versatile slaves. They can do nearly everything that daemons can do and unlike the subhuman classes, imps and goblins and what not, they aren't irredeemably stupid and unreliable. The most important reason though, and the much more important reason, is that humans are delicious.

Obviously you can't die in Hell – it would defeat the point of being in Hell. Given that, it's impossible to starve to death there. You can however experience all the effects of starvation without the final release of death. So naturally everyone still wants to eat. This begs the question though – what's there to eat? Sadly, not a whole lot. Because vegetation can't grow in Hell, there's no crop-based agriculture. Which only leaves carnage. Now local fauna do exist – among these maybe the most edible are basilisks, which should tell you all you need to know. Yes, things are pretty bad in Hell and they'd be unbearably bad if it wasn't for the steady stream of new humans materializing. It should also be mentioned that human flesh spoils the longer they've been in Hell so fresh arrivals are especially welcome. From what's just been outlined though a certain hesitation may have sprung to mind. After all, if people can't die in Hell, what are the permanent consequences of eating them? In short, there are none. In Hell, flesh regenerates. Hack off a limb and it'll grow anew. Cut out a portion of someone's brain and they'll get it back, in time. The psychological trauma of course is more lasting. Now, nearly everyone who first hears about this asks the same question – if you saw someone in half horizontally, will both of the two halves regenerate their counterparts? No. Medical experiments conducted by the best daemonic minds have shown that regeneration is centered somewhere in the medulla oblongata, the portion of the brain which connects it to the spinal cord, and any flesh severed from this is dead. Regeneration takes exponentially longer the closer one gets to the medulla oblongata too so harvesting humans has to be carefully orchestrated in order to get the best results. Some humans are set aside

for having their fingers cut off, others their eyes plucked out. Until they lose their taste and start getting ground into pet food.

Humans are also raw materials in many industries. A lot of high quality furniture for instance is made from their bones. In fact they have such a marvelous range of uses that trying to list them all would be futile. Suffice it to say, humans pervade every crevice of daemonic industry. Despite all that's been said, one shouldn't get the wrong impression that daemons feel no affection for human beings. Attitudes vary here. Some daemons regard humans as the most amusing of the lesser rational species, others regard humans as vermin. The majority of daemons however have a keen appreciation of the fact that individual humans all have individual merits. Skills and talents among humans are carefully measured and recorded using a variety of well-established metrics. The utility of a slave of course is the most important thing in determining their value. As a result of this, while all humans in Hell lack the legal privileges of daemon kin, there's a natural hierarchy among them that both daemons and humans more or less agree on. Technological genius for example is highly prized and humans with solid scientific expertise will rarely go to waste in the mutilation factories – a mind after all can hardly survive such an ordeal intact and daemons aren't the sort to squander something scarcer and more precious for something cheaper and more plentiful. Naturally such positions are still contingent on good behavior but humans that experiment with misbehaving almost never do so more than once.

Then there are also the less easily quantifiable contributions that humans make – in terms of their physical appearance for example, their own artistic abilities, and other factors like this. Regarding the first, good looking humans can fetch a premium but, unlike practical talents, this won't necessarily protect them from being used as outlets for sadistic appetites. Since humans remain whatever age they die at in Hell though, youth and beauty are sufficiently rare that only wealthier daemons can afford human slaves with these qualities. Extremely young humans for example can cost astonishing sums of money – twelve years old being about the lowest. To own the youngest human at any given time in Hell is moreover a social distinction that many in the daemon aristocracy covet. Likewise, daemons are generous patrons of the human arts. All the great artists who end up in Hell, and most of them do, can be sure of finding fans of their work among the more cosmopolitan daemons. Many human poets and writers who were never adequately recognized in their own lifetimes find that posthumously

they have much more successful careers in Hell. The demons of Hell were shocked and greatly disappointed however the day William Blake died and he didn't show up in their domain. He's literally idolized in Hell to this day and there's a lingering suspicion that Heaven deliberately interfered in the matter. In any case, plenty of famous people do make it down to Hell and there they find that the right kind of fame has its own currency. Naturally, impressive achievements in the field of evil are also highly admired. Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot for example have all done quite well for themselves. Meanwhile, as on Earth, ugly illiterate and undistinguished people fare the worst. Such are the laws of supply and demand.

Asmoe Cambioni himself hardly ever tortured humans in the course of his duties. Third-class torturers and above were generally assigned to fellow demons since only they were legally qualified to do so. Any demon could do whatever they wanted to any human, provided that said human was their property or they had the owner's consent, but what one demon was allowed to do to another was strictly regulated by the authorities. Largely it depended on status. The archfiends for example sat at the top of the pyramid and were the only ones really above the law. Because they made the laws. Asmoe meanwhile was a member of one of the lower categories of demons owing to some distant human ancestry. Fortunately it didn't show in his appearance but his surname gave it away so it wasn't exactly a secret either. In any case, Asmoe had to earn everything he got in his damnation. He was a generally ambitious and confident demon however and he'd put himself through school and rolled up his sleeves plenty of times in order to get what he wanted. His determination endured even despite the fact that lately he'd run into whole minefields of bad luck. The most unhappy of which concerned the new boss that'd been transferred to his division, one Mr. Bellicoso. What was so bad about Mr. Bellicoso you ask? For one, he was a hideous troll. Not a metaphorical troll either but an actual, nine foot tall, green and putrid troll of yore. Asmoe didn't have any specific prejudice against trolls mind you but Mr. Bellicoso certainly lived up to the worst stereotypes. For instance, he salivated a lot which, whenever he yelled (also a thing of great frequency) he succeeded in flinging in every possible direction. Additionally, he left heaps of unfinished bones in the break room which he'd point blank lie about being responsible for. And he didn't seem to know the first thing about torture. In fact, it amazed Asmoe that anyone could believe his boss was qualified to run anything – let alone a whole division of Tsuji Giri Enterprises. Perhaps the least

forgivable of the litany of unforgivable things though was the fact that Mr. Bellicoso the troll insisted on holding daily staff meetings where he'd inevitably snarl on and on about whatever random obsession that'd recently lodged itself in the catacombs of his tediously trollish mind.

Asmoe Cambioni was shuffling some paperwork on his desk when he got the dreaded summons. An imp gave him a note saying that Mr. Bellicoso wanted to see him immediately. Asmoe couldn't imagine the reason why but by now he was firmly convinced that reason wasn't even an understudy for any of the parts that played a role in Mr. Bellicoso's decisions. Taking a deep breath, he pushed himself up from his chair and left his cubicle. It was about 10:45 in the morning so most of the daemons in the office were busy. No one he knew looked up as he passed by, which was too bad since he wasn't in any particular hurry to get where he was going. Then, seizing on the excuse that he was feeling a bit thirsty, Asmoe took the opportunity to put off the inevitable for just a little while longer as he made a detour to the nearest bleeder-cooler for a drink. He'd barely finished pouring his refreshment from the gulping canister when suddenly Abyssphagus from accounting saw him standing there and came over to say hello. Taking one of the nautilus ghoul's tentacles in a firm handshake, Asmoe smiled and tilted his horned head by way of greeting. "How's the spawn?" he asked, by which he meant Abyssphagus' newly hatched clutch of a couple dozen eggs. "Coating the walls in slime as usual," replied the nautilus ghoul with a mixture of pride and exasperation before imparting an unsolicited rumor. "I hear they're bringing in a horde of subhumans to replace some of us." Asmoe choked a little on the blood he was having. "Where'd you hear that? Actually, I don't even want to know. Stories like this fly around all the time. Don't let it get its claws in you." Abyssphagus wasn't so sure. "Easy for you to say. Torture's a controlled occupation. Me though? All I do is move numbers around." Asmoe patted his colleague on the shell. "Come on, you're fine. What are they going to do? Trust their financial records to a bunch of kobolds and gremlins? I'd be surprised if any of them can count without using their fingers, and they only have three on each hand." Abyssphagus did his best not to look too glum. "Sure, I've got nothing to worry about from kobolds and gremlins, but gnomes? Most gnomes can do ledgers," said the ghoul. "I'm sure you'll be okay," protested Asmoe. At last, Abyssphagus cracked a smile. "I wish I could be as relaxed as you. Anyways, I've got to get back to my desk but it's good running into you. And watch out for gnomes. They may look like shrunken little dwarves but their devious like you

wouldn't believe." Words of wisdom. "Gnomes," murmured Asmoe as he nodded conspiratorially. "Gnomes," Abyssphagus echoed back in earnest.

Having delayed it long enough, Asmoe now finished making his way to Bellicoso's office where he knocked politely on the door. After a few seconds of cryptic violence, a guttural voice inside shouted a garbled "In!" and Asmoe did as it commanded. Surveying the room he'd entered, torturer third-class Asmodeus Cambioni was unsurprised by the disarray he found there. Torn up reports and file folders covered the place and huge claw marks gashed the desk and walls. About the only thing there in good condition was a trophy case situated across from the door and perpendicular to the far end of the room. Here an assembly of gaudy trinkets suited to the mediocre achievements of an adolescent troll had all been arranged in clumsy earnest. On them phrases like "Whomp Nummer Three Basher" and "Whomp Eat Mosed Eels" were scrawled in crudely formed capital letters that served as hallmarks of cave-dwelling monstrosities everywhere who'd been unfairly burdened with literacy against their own better inclinations. Whomp of course was Mr. Bellicoso's first name and he was excessively proud of his awards. Asmoe was sure that they'd be mentioned at some point in the lecture that was about to follow. In the meantime, Bellicoso himself was standing in the middle of the room wheezing and towering over Asmoe who himself was about six feet tall, not including his horns. "You late As Moo," reprimanded the troll, rows of crooked serrated teeth jutting from his crocodile sized mouth. Asmoe shrugged. The less he said the better things usually went. Interpreting silence as submission, the troll continued. "Project deadline not fine. Dumb brainy daemons say things need go faster. You torture more. Or less. Just get job done. Have all 'signments cleared next quarter. No more napping like fancy time. Be like Whomp. See trophies? Whomp delivers. Whomp gives all the percent. Plus extra." By now Asmoe was barely listening – instead he was picturing himself grabbing his own horns and ripping them from his skull. He was a little frustrated and he didn't have any hair to pull out. The next quarter was the end of the year, just over a month away, and he had more than eighty assignments on his docket. It would be useless though to try and explain this to Bellicoso. In lieu of that, he slowly pulled himself together and waited for the troll to dismiss him without offering a reply. This came soon enough. "Ready? Go chop chop now. Whomp want stack of heads," demanded the troll, seeming not to understand the irrelevance of decapitation in this particular case. Asmoe didn't care though, Asmoe just left.

Without really thinking about it, he drifted towards the cafeteria. It wasn't lunch yet but he needed somewhere to clear his head and the cafeteria was as good a place as any. Since there wouldn't be many demons there yet, Asmoe could expect to have the opportunity to contemplate his situation for a while in relative peace – however this was denied him. As it turned out, she was there. She being Malice Necrobias, the head of Subhuman Resources and incidentally the target of Asmoe's infatuation. That she'd become, out of all the female demons at Tsuji Giri's head offices, the vortex devouring his unspoken affections was... a rather predictable thing. Malice collected the hearts of male demons with merciless glee. Although only a few centuries old, she already had so many that she had to rent a storage space just to keep them all. It wasn't like she had to try that hard either. The daughter of a naiad and a phantom of chaos, Malice possessed a dark infernal beauty overwhelming to humans and demons alike. Not just those of the male persuasion either – she could seduce females just as easily, and did. Her spectral form was as sultry and enveloping as the flames wrapping themselves around a heretic tied to a stake, only they had the aspect of shadows. Her lips meanwhile were as red as a scarlet wound. Meanwhile the aspiring suitor in this instance was decidedly less grand in his own sexual magnetism. Asmoe was a decent enough looking demon but he was no Casanova – and having seen the actual Casanova dragged around by a choke collar at a demon soiree, it wouldn't have helped him much if he was. On top of this, his last serious relationship had been with a banshee over four months ago and he was still only barely recovered. Of course anyone who's been shrieked at for hours on end in murdered Gaelic every time they came home would be able to sympathize with him here. Nevertheless, he couldn't pass up the chance that fate had just provided.

Malice was sitting alone, a rare thing. She also appeared to be intently reading a book and she gave no indication that she noticed Asmoe approaching. That worked in his favor. Asmoe was reasonably composed by the time he was standing next to her and, after hesitating for a bit before glancing at her book, he succeeded in making an anxiously off-hand comment without immediately embarrassing himself. "That's some pretty dry stuff," he said, feigning casualness, but Malice didn't turn to meet his hopeful gaze. Oh no. Did she think he was criticizing her reading material? Before he could fall all over himself in trying to explain what he meant however, Malice looked up. "This?" she replied

innocently. "Yeah. Not the sort of thing that really carries you off now is it? But it does make the interesting point that World War 2 wasn't nearly the economic boom it's usually made out to be. Many of the humans who were killing each other were so brainwashed that they really didn't have the evil motivations necessary to earn them a stay here. So even daemon economists exaggerate? What else is new? Still, I try to read books like this from time to time, you know, for self-improvement." Asmoe realized now that Malice was smiling. At him. "There can't be much room for that in you," he blurted out before blushing. Malice laughed. "Well, aren't you a wicked he-devil," she cooed, stroking him on the sacrificial altar of her own predatory desires. He was perfectly fine with being slaughtered though. Knowing she could have whatever she wanted, Malice nevertheless decided to savor the unspoken power she was wielding over her new toy. "What's up with you Asmodeus?" she asked playfully. Asmoe happily melted into a puddle of aw-shucks. "Call me Asmoe," he said. With a deftness then shared by only the most seductive of divas, Malice gently softened the allure she was radiating so that Asmoe's brain could function again. "Uh... not too much," Asmoe finally continued after a brief pause, searching his memory for something interesting to mention. "Had to flay a whole ogre the other day. Turns out they're pink on the inside." Malice's eyes twinkled with amusement. "And how's life in the den of Whomp?" she asked, rolling her eyes with the partisan intimacy of a fellow guerilla even though she was actually above Bellicoso in the Tsuji Giri hierarchy and didn't have to deal with him much. This loosened Asmoe up. "He's a gob of maggots isn't he? Not a day passes where I don't think about garroting him with his own tie. And I'm sure I'd be doing the company a favor. I don't know if you'd even believe what he just told me in his office. I mean, of course you would. You probably have to deal with trolls all the time. Still, it's incredible. He actually thinks I can churn through almost a hundred torture sessions in a month and still hit the despair parameters on every one. Of course I'm generously assuming that he even knows what a despair parameter is." Malice nodded sympathetically but her thoughts quickly turned to how she could use this to her own advantage.

"You know Asmoe, your problems might just be the solution to one of my problems," Malice suggested pleasantly. "How so? I'd be glad to help," Asmoe replied. "As you may or may not have heard," Malice continued, "We somehow wound up with an extra pallet of subhumans last week. It seems that one of the VPs couldn't read a spreadsheet and decided we were running low on lackeys.

Anyways, now I've got all this additional inventory that needs work placements and it sounds like you could use some assistance." Asmoe squirmed a little inside. Subhumans? He needed them like he needed a ball and chain shackled to his legs. Sensing his reluctance, Malice brandished her charm. "I know you torture fiends are very independent and the rules stipulate that subhumans can't do any of the actual punishing but, they could help with the prep work and administrative details. You'd be astonished at how much you can come to depend on them over time. Plus I'd really owe you." She'd didn't need to add that last part to persuade him but the thought of her being in his debt was convincing enough on its own. "Okay, you sold me Malice," he said, feeling magnanimous and profitable at the same time. At some unrecalled point in their conversation, Asmoe had sat down next to Malice and now they were sitting very close together indeed. Her legs were so near to brushing against his own that the lower half of his body had ceased to move entirely. For Asmoe, the air was full of electricity and perfume. For Malice, the waters smelled like blood. The professional torturer now smiled at the superior virtuoso in his own art. "How many do you need me to harbor?" he asked with mock resignation. She laughed at this. "Oh, just take one of the goblins off my hands."

Asmoe returned to his cubicle quite pleased with himself. Their conversation hadn't lasted much beyond the part where he surrendered to her proposal but it was by far been the longest he'd ever talked with her and that was something. Things seemed to end well too – she even winked at him as she left. Subsequently, it took a while for the bad news from Bellicoso to worm its way back into his mind. Feeling a bit pluckier however, Asmoe thought about it and realized that the next month would be arduous but it wasn't catastrophic. He'd have to pour in a lot of overtime but at least he'd be getting paid for it. No matter what that troll Bellicoso insinuated, he knew he was the highest performing torturer in his class. Only Gehenna-Lich the Ravenous and that idiot Swineshrill had better numbers than him but they were both first-classers. Plus, he knew that Swineshrill had a special arrangement where he got to preselect all his assignments – ensuring that he always loaded his docket with the easiest ones. So Swineshrill didn't even count. If only the head of his division wasn't a complete moron. Asmoe didn't mind having to earn his way up the ladder but it was hard to get anywhere with a giant troll squatting on the steps. Perhaps he needed to look at his situation more like an opportunity though. After he pulled off his next impressive series of torturing jobs, he could do an end-run around Bellicoso and

get himself noticed by one of the higher ups couldn't he? Hell! Malice could even put in a good word for him and she'd do that now right? Brimming with thoughts of all the success that soon awaited him, Asmoe leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. Stretching his hands in the air, Asmoe then cricked his neck with a supreme satisfaction and finally rose to stand again. Today was not going to be a good day to be tortured by Asmodeus Cambioni. Time to get to work.

Plowing straight through lunch by only snacking on a few ears here and there, Asmoe had cleared two assignments from his docket by mid-afternoon. If he kept this pace up he'd torture his way through his quota with ample time to spare. Then as he was humming to himself in the cleanup room and scrubbing smatterings of gore from his apron, he felt something tugging at his pants. Gazing downward he found a tiny goblin staring up at him with wide red eyes. The little guy was only about a foot and a half tall but the majority of that was a giant round head with large fanning ears and a long hooked nose. "You're my new adjunct?" asked Asmoe. The goblin grinned, revealing most of his sharp ivory teeth, and he even seemed to be quivering with what Asmoe could only assume was excitement. In response to the question though the goblin merely laughed, something that sounded more or less like Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh – three sharp maniacal syllables which, by themselves, were still enough to hint at the vast depth of derangement behind them. "So what's your name?" continued Asmoe, already a little irritated. "I'm Sneer," replied the goblin and he rubbed his hands together gleefully as if this were some wonderful and insidious secret. Asmoe returned his attention to his apron again while he considered his predicament. This was going to be worse than he thought. What was he going to do? He was now wedged between a troll and a goblin, with a mountain of work that needed to be pulverized in a very short time. Sanctify it all! He'd fob the little cretin to a bunch of office supply tasks. That at least would keep the goblin off his scales for a while. So that settled that. Looking down again he found Sneer peering around the empty room as if trying to conjure any opportunity for mischief. "Okay," said Asmoe calmly, "Here's what I'm going to have you do."

Once more at his desk, Asmoe got busy filling out the reports on the two assignments he'd finished that day. A lot of statistical data that seemed thoroughly superfluous but was mandated by company policies. Number of screams during session, estimated time spent sobbing – those sorts of things. He

was getting through it at a decent pace however so that was good. Abyssphagus even passed by briefly and Asmoe could tell from the look he gave him that he'd heard about Sneer. Glad to have someone he could vent to, even for just a moment, Asmoe mimed putting a pistol to his head and blowing his brains out. Too bad in Hell suicide wasn't a permanent solution to anything. Still, something to dream about. The days he might get off sick would even be worth it if it wasn't for the burden he'd recently acquired. Or burdens rather. Speaking of which, one of them had returned from the first errand he'd given it. "Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. I tortured those pencils you ordered me to master," boasted Sneer as he held out two claws full of mangled bone styluses. Asmoe angrily threw the folder he was holding in his hands down on his desk. "I wanted you to sharpen them!" he yelled, "These are snapped in half and chewed on!" Sneer raised his profusely studded fists in triumph. "They won't be disobeying you any time soon will they? Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh. Sneer is an excellent torturer. Maybe one day he'll be the chief of them all! The chief! The chief!!!" As the goblin's voice trailed off with the advent of tyrannical fantasies, Asmoe could only shake his head in defeat. "Damn it Sneer," he muttered loudly to himself and the goblin seemed to take no notice. "Hyinh-hyinh-hyinh," laughed Sneer. Asmoe sighed and decided he'd just focus on his work and leave the goblin to its own devices the rest of the day. Swiveling in his chair, he turned back to the folder in front of him and wearily opened it. Sneer meanwhile took a seat on the floor behind Asmoe and started to build booby-traps with the broken pencils.

After putting Sneer in a cage for the night, Asmoe left the offices sometime past seven. Not an unusual thing for him by any means but not exactly something he was looking forward to for a whole month. It was twilight outside as he departed, the world bathed in a pervasive crimson light. The sun had started to descend below the horizon but a huge crescent of it still took up a large portion of the western sky. Passing through the company parking lot where a few demons were getting into their various macabre vehicles, Asmoe began walking to where he usually caught a ride home. As he often did, he used that time to think about things in his life and to observe the scenery around him. For Asmoe it was just an ordinary part of his commute home but, to a human who hadn't spent much time in Hell, the city he lived in would be alien and mesmerizing. The buildings for example were a labyrinth of surreal constructions. In the urban areas one could find facilities of white crystalline glass in an array of geometric shapes, pulsating tenements of carnal post-modernism, and terraced synthetic gardens that

imitated tropical jungles in the minutest of details. There were ziggurats and coliseums, pyramids and obelisks – most set aside in deliberate decay. There were brutalist skyscrapers that swarms of locust roosted on and then there were buildings, if you can call them that, suspended in collapsing hyperbolic shapes which had parallels only in the vague allusions of H.P. Lovecraft. There were gothic plazas and grim baroque houses and razor-wire parks and free public guillotines and art instillations of grotesque towering Goldberg machines and canals of festering ichor and power facilities where humans in giant hamster wheels ran forever in tiers stacked on tiers. What else would you expect – it was Hell. A place as anarchical in its styles as it was totalitarian in its laws. But these weren't two unrelated things – both were expressions of the same appetite for draconian violence.

Asmoe enjoyed the volcanic air rushing over him as he rode a rickshaw he'd caught to the condo where he rented. The centaur who was pulling him must have fallen on hard times to end up in that line of work. Aside from humans and subhumans who made up most of the labor force, difficult physical jobs were generally left to monsters. While centaurs were actually great rickshaws, they were hybrids like Asmoe himself (although lower than cambions) and so normally managed to find work in higher positions. Maybe this centaur had dropped out of school? Maybe they'd suffered ambrosia addiction? Who knows? Asmoe wasn't about to ask – the daemon was in the middle of pulling him home and to pester them with questions would be really inconsiderate. Besides, starting conversations with strangers was something Asmoe was never really good at. Instead he kept his thoughts to himself and decided to check his phone. Tsuji Giri company policy was vicious when it came to engaging in personal calls during work hours, so Asmoe and most of his colleagues played it safe by keeping their phones off. The offices after all were filled with surveillance eyes in every corner. Powering on his phone, an icon quickly appeared notifying him of the fact that he had two new messages. Asmoe wondered who they could be but he'd left his headphones at home that morning and, with the noise in the rickshaw carriage at the moment, now was not the best time to listen to them. As such he fiddled with a cruel little pay-to-play puzzle game he'd downloaded recently until his centaur taxi finally stopped. Reaching into his wallet, Asmoe pulled out enough to cover his fare and handed the money over to his pilot. The centaur checked this, nodded his acceptance, and then indicated with his head for Asmoe to get out. Doing that, Asmoe stepped down from the rickshaw carriage and watched as the

centaur stamped one of his hooves a couple times before departing at a gallop. Some young daemon spawn who were playing on the street meanwhile had an old man tied to a sign post and were sticking him with small knives for amusement.

Entering his building by way of the front doors, Asmoe walked straight to the elevator and pressed the button to go up. He waited, tapping his foot for a minute or so, and then stepped inside the sliding doors that opened into a box inlaid with a bronze mosaic of screaming human faces. It was empty except for him. After jabbing another button for the eleventh floor, Asmoe now decided to play his messages. He lazily made the wrong selection though and ended up listening to his own answering recording first. "Hey, you've reached Asmoe but I can't answer my phone right now. Leave me a voice-mail at the end of the scream though and I'll get back to you." After the murderous recording of a woman's screeching played for three seconds, Asmoe navigated back to where he was trying to get and his messages started. "Asmoe? This is your Ma. You there sulphy? Pick up if you are." Ma Cambioni wasn't especially knowledgeable when it came to contemporary technology so she thought cell phone voice-mails were like the old answering machines and that maybe Asmoe was listening to her message as she was recording it. Asmoe smiled to himself as he heard her Brooklyn accent unfurl. "Listen, your Pa and I were just talking and we think you should come by for dinner next weekend. We know you're busy Asmoe but it's been too long. We really miss you and we want to catch up. I got a deal on a thirty-something girl from Tokyo at the market the other day too so we'll be having Japanese when you come. I know they're your favorite! Anyways sulphy, let me know ahead of time when you'll be coming so I can place the roast in earlier. Oh! Before I forget, I saw Cobra's mother at the spa last week. Had to put her in her place. Don't worry about it though. Gashes from Pa and me. Bye." Cobra was the banshee he'd dated. Unfortunately there was nothing Asmoe could do about his Ma's devotion to meddling in his social life but at least she hadn't passed any messages along this time.

Asmoe had left the elevator and was walking down the hall to his door when the second message started to play. "It's Thoth. Wish you could've made it out last night. Things got crazy. A sphinx at the club had her tail stepped on and she went berserk. Burnt the whole place to the ground. I mean, she was spewing torrents of fire at everyone and anyone. It was awe-some! I got a little cinged

myself. Smashed my snout into a door as I was running out of there too. Ha! I'm alright though. Hey! You should come by the library tomorrow when my shift ends. I'm going to be giving a reading at the cabaret and it'd be nice if my best pal was there." Eucharist! He was going to go. Him and Thoth were fiends since way back and Asmoe wasn't about to let Tsuji Giri Enterprises get in the way of that. Now he was at his front door and, putting his phone away, he grabbed his keys and opened it. Almost immediately a hissing sound started, followed by clicky scuttling noises across his kitchen floor. Then a three foot long millipede appeared from around the corner and hurriedly weaved its way towards him. Wrapping itself around Asmoe's leg and up his torso, the creature paused when it reached his chest, fluttering its forelegs at him and staring with its shiny black eyes. "Chitters!" exclaimed Asmoe, "How's my boy? How's he doin'?" The millipede responded with affectionate insectile behavior and Asmoe picked him up and cuddled him in his arms. Then he carried Chitters into the kitchen where he fed him and refreshed his bowl of drinking bile. After some more time spent petting Chitters, Asmoe now shuffled into the living room to watch the news. Nothing of particular interest had happened that day it seemed. The Auxiliary War Administration had begun a new series of mortar attacks on the outlying principality of Sanguindis but to what end? Even if The Hive managed to topple whatever daemon generalissimo ruled that place, another one would just rise up to take the throne in due course. The borderlands were a mess. Asmoe didn't understand why the Archons didn't just decree that a wall be built to surround the whole federation. They must have their reasons, thought Asmoe as he changed the channel. He was circumspect enough to know that he wasn't an expert in plutonic politics. While flipping through a few more shows he soon realized he just wanted to go to sleep and so he ended up turning the monitor off after only a few minutes of actually watching anything.

Gazing out his bedroom window a short time later, Asmoe admired the sprawl of the New York Nether. He'd lived in Hell's shadow of New York for ten years now, almost all of his adult life, and still the sight of it lit up in the darkness left him with an uncanny feeling. The immensity of it – all those daemons just going on with their damnations, encompassed all at once in that very moment and at the same time utterly reachless. What did it all mean? Why did Hell exist? The mystery of it haunted him. Yet, most of his life was spent in arbitrary tasks delegated by apathetic overlords. Maybe one day he'd figure it all out. Not today. Not tonight. He wanted to relax, to let the world go and fall into the quiet void of

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