

Slivered Mirror

Von MeltingPenguins

Kapitel 1: Eleven Years Ago

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It wasn't a dark and stormy night. It was a sodding foggy one instead, proving that sometimes the weather overdoes the dramatics one way or the other.

It was the perfect weather for the forces of evil to be around.

Not that they would have minded any other kinds of weather to be around, unless said other weather would have been a muddy mess of snow and rain. No one likes to be around in that sort of weather.

One of those currently out and about made use of the climatic phenomenon in a ruined graveyard. A tall, gangly and shadowy figure, lurking amidst the fog and the gravestones. If you didn't know it was there you would not have noticed it until it was too late. The figure was a natural born lurker.

As the shadowy frame moved suddenly to lean back against a gnarled tree, something bright and fiery flickered for a moment.

"C'mon, you little bastard, hurry up", said the demon, nervously blowing out smoke from a freshly lit cigarette.

His name was Hastur. He was a Duke of Hell, and in all of his existence he had never felt more uncomfortable in his skin than he did right now.

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Phelan was currently doing about 80 mph down a well-trodden dirt road somewhere West of Bracknell. Nothing about him looked particular demonic, at least by classical standard. No wings, no horns. In fact, he looked a little more like an angel than anything else.

He was short, with curly blond hair tied back into a ponytail, and pretty much on the chubby side. By all means, he met more of modern definitions of a cherub than anything from Downstairs.

No particular demonic thoughts were going through his head. That is, if you, again, look for their definition by classical human standards. By Hell's standards, going near mad in fear of being too late to an appointment with one's superiors is a very demonic thought. He reached into the pocket of his jacket with one hand, cranking up the volume on his walkman to distract himself.

He knew the cassette read 'The Hearinga Suite' and he would have loved to hear it now, but he had kept it in the player for more than about a fortnight by now. So what he was now listening to now was a Best Of Queen tape, as all cassettes suffering that treatment curiously turn into Best Of Queen Albums. And 'Another One Bites The

Dust' really wasn't what you'd call a soothing song in this situation.

With a mild frown he he slowed down the motorcycle he was driving.

It was a 1939 black Matchless G3L, which he had dubbed 'Molly', one owner from new, and that owner had been Phelan. He'd look after it, even if a bunch of wars made that a hard thing to do.

Phelan currently hated himself for being too late, even if it wasn't by more than a quarter of an hour.

He just enjoyed this half of the twentieth century far too much, that was why he was too late. The latest World War -the third one by humans' counting, and about the 76th by Phelan's- was over and for once in several centuries things were looking up for once. He had the right to enjoy it, hadn't he? For a moment he mused that he should not be surprised that Hell contacted him a few hours ago, telling him to go there and there and meet with his superiors. Those meager two decades of remote peace apparently were enough and Hell wanted things to get shaken up a little.

He frowned and turned a muddy corner, his motorbike coming to a halt at the cemetery gate.

"There you are", Hastur called out the moment Phelan got off his machine.

The smaller demon hurried over, immediately taking on a more submissive posture.

"Forgive me, Sir, I'm late. I..."

"Now you are here" said Hastur, if a little uneasy, looking around. "Won't tell Downstairs 'bout this. Not after yer good work with that General, kid."

Phelan looked up and nodded.

"This is a one-time-only thing, though", Hastur reminded him, finger raised. "You want another such favour, you do another bad job well."

Again Phelan nodded and followed the Duke's hunted gaze.

"Why have I been summoned here, Sir?"

Hastur took a deep breath and reached down behind a tombstone.

"Because of this", he said.

Phelan stared at the basket.

"Oh", he said. "No."

"Yes." said Hastur, face unmoving.

"Already?"

"Yes."

"And, er, it's up to me to -?"

"Yes." Hastur wasn't enjoying this.

"Why me?" said Phelan desperately. "You know me, Hastur, I..."

"I don't like it either." barked the Duke, slapping a hand over his mouth the very next moment, grasping the basket with the other.

Phelan twitched together as well.

For a moment they both stood deadly still, eyeing the fog around. Some twigs broke in the nearby woods.

"I don't like it either." repeated Hastur, voice much lower now. "But someone has to do this."

"Why *me*?"

"You're least likely to get spotted should Up There be looking for us doing things out of the ordinary. And baptise me if this is within the ordinary. Believe me, kid, there are others who'd do anything for a *chance* like this."

"Ligur?" asked Phelan, causing the other demon to press his lips together.

"Yes, for example" said Hastur after a moment. "In fact, be careful. He wasn't too

happy about this when I left."

Phelan only nodded and carefully took the basket as Hastur stopped him.

"Oh, before I forget it," he said and produced a clipboard and a pen from the recesses of his highcollared coat. "Sign here"

They looked at each other for a moment before Phelan took the pen and drew a wiggly sigil onto the paper.

"Dunno why they actually bother with that," he said as it glowed red for a moment and then vanished. "Hardly anyone takes care of the paperwork anyway."

Hastur only shrugged.

"Off you go then. They'll be givin' you your instructions" he said and watched Phelan leave.

He stared at the retreating taillight of the motorbike for a moment before reaching into his pocket for another cigarette. He'd miss those bloody things when this all was over.

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It was somewhere around Reading that the fog made way for rain, and Phelan had given up on cassettes, now listening to the radio. The basket was clamped between himself and the handlebar, making the demon feel even less well than he already felt. "Buggerbuggerbugger!" he mumbled as he took a swing from the dirt road he'd been riding so far onto a proper road. "Whywhy? Why is this happening?"

ARE THE REASONS NOT OBVIOUS TO YOU?

Phelan very nearly crashed his bike as the newsanchor suddenly spoke to him directly. He blessed under his breath and held on to the basket as if for dear life. Which, in fact, he was, seeing what would happen would he drop it.

He would have loved to stop his bike to talk to Hell if he already had to, but that would have been just as bad. He vaguely remembered that using electronics as means of communication had been his idea. He should have known Hell would not restrain itself to electronics meant for communication.

"They are clear to me, Lord," he answered, eyes fixed on the road.

WE EXPECT YOU TO SUCCEED IN THE TASK GIVEN UNTO YOU.

"I shall, Lord."

GOOD. DO NOT DISAPPOINT US, PHELAN. YOU KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES.

"Yes, Lord. Of Course, Lord." Phelan twitched briefly.

DO NOT DISAPPOINT US.

"Certainly won't, Lord."

HERE ARE YOUR INSTRUCTIONS.

And suddenly he knew. Another thing he hated about Hell. They could have just told him. Instead they dropped chilly knowledge straight into his brain. As the walkman's radio switched back to music again Phelan frowned, tightened his hand on the basket and sped up his motorbike again. There was still a bit to go till he'd reach the hospital he had to deliver the basket and its occupant to, and the weather was getting worse. Oh, he himself and the being in the basket were safe from the rain, but Molly had to retain a certain grip on the road.

A grip pretty well lost when suddenly a car sped out from behind him, cutting Phelan off and sending him into the ditch.

Humans are a curious thing.

Take for example this situation.

It is night, it is raining heavily and you've been racing your car down a country road.

You have been to a friend's party in another town with your pregnant wife, who tagged along despite her current state. She suddenly went into labour and as no one had a clue how to deliver a baby, you saw that you can get her to the only hospital, a small one near your hometown several miles away run by a curious order of nuns, in the closer area as quick as possible as every ambulance would have taken too long. Your wife is screaming in the passenger's seat and you just cut off a motorcyclist.

What would you do?

Good. We won't judge you for that.

Mr William Young had decided to stop the car and see if the biker was alright.

His heart sank as he heard an infant wail and, in the light of his torch, saw the basket lying near the fallen down bike.

"Mother Mary in your Mercy", he mumbled and clambered down into the ditch as the other man sat up groaning.

"Are you alright?" he asked and shone the light straight into Phelan's face, who raised his arm to shield his eyes.

"Yes, yes." he said and then panic crept up his spine. "The baby, what...?"

"He seems alright", Mr Young said after picking up wailing child and basket. "It's a miracle."

Phelan huffed.

Not really. More of a pity, he thought and got up, dusting off his clothes and pushing his dark glasses up his nose.

"Why are you driving around with a newborn?" Mr Young asked.

Phelan cringed. Bloody curious humans. Did they always have to ask? Didn't they know he couldn't mess with their minds right now? Not today, not out here in the open? Bugger!

"I...err... I found it. His mother must have abandoned him right after birth. Horrible, innit?"

The shocked and disgusted look on the man's face told Phelan that he bought it.

"Been on my way to the hospital some miles from here. Need to get him checked, right?"

At that moment a terrible scream cleaved the night and all attention was drawn towards the car.

"Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Deirdre!"

The man -child and basket still in his hands- rushed back to his car, Phelan following close behind.

The question 'What's wrong' became redundant once Phelan saw the woman in the passenger's seat.

"We've been heading for the same hospital" Mr Young started to explain without anyone actually having asked.

Phelan knew they wouldn't arrive there on time. He cringed inwardly. He knew he should have just taken basket and child and hurried to the hospital, leaving the two humans to their own problems.

But Phelan didn't just look more like an angel than a demon, he also had a major flaw: he had compassion for things that weren't considered demonic.

He pushed Mr Young aside.

"Help me get her to the back seat. We'll have to do this now."

"What?"

"The birth," Phelan said as he took off his jacket. "You won't make it to the hospital, so we have to do this right here, right now."

"You don't look like a doctor. Have you ever been at a birth?"

"Yes," Phelan answered truthfully and rolled up his sleeves.

He didn't get into trouble for unknowingly helping deliver a certain virgin-birth for nothing.

Let us skip the details of the birth and go forward to when a vintage motorbike comes to a halt behind an almost as vintage car in the graveled courtyard of a small hospital. When last we saw Mrs Young she was about to give birth, which resulted in a golden-haired male baby we shall call Baby A.

Up in Delivery Room No. 4, the wife of the American Cultural Attaché, Mrs Harriet Dowling, is giving birth to a golden-haired male baby we will call Baby B.

Mrs Young is currently passed out on the back seat of the car with two babies resting with her.

One is Baby A.

The other is a golden-haired male Baby we will call the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan and Lord of Darkness.

Look closely now.

It didn't take long till a pair of nuns came rushing out to the car to take care of the babies and the mother. One of them was Sister Mary Loquacious.

Now, the order that ran the hospital was one of the satanic kind. It wouldn't make much sense to try getting the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan and Lord of Darkness swapped with a human child in a regular hospital (too many angels around if one knew how to identify them) or in one run by regular nuns (some angels at best, but too many humans believing that there must be more angels around).

We won't get into details about the Chattering Order of St Beryl, as that'd be pointless babbling.

Let us concentrate on the fact that Sister Mary is now standing next to the open car, looking at the two newborns, the passed out mother, the nervous father and a rather exhausted-looking demon.

She blinked a few times at the two babies and actually guessed correctly about what had happened, sending Phelan a slightly disapproving look.

Phelan looked at Baby A.

Sister Mary nodded questioningly at him and then at the other baby.

Phelan nodded back meaningfully.

Sister Mary nodded back understandingly.

"Well, I shall be on my way, then," said Phelan. "Best of luck to you and your family, Sir."

He and Mr Young shook hands and Phelan left.

A bit after Mr Young left the scene, too, to have a smoke on the porch.

In that time Sister Mary handed one of the babies over to another nun, who swapped it with Baby B, using the cunning manoeuvre of wheeling one child out and wheeling another in a while later.

Things had went according to plan.

If we overlook one tiny detail.

Let us go back a few minutes.

Phelan looked at Baby A.

Sister Mary nodded questioningly at him and the other Baby.

Phelan nodded meaningfully.

Sister Mary nodded back understandingly.

When Sister Mary nodded she had meant

'This child you are looking at is the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan and Lord of Darkness. And this other one is Baby A. And you can't speak right now because of the present outsiders and any mind-wiping now would attract Heaven's attention.'

Phelan, too fussed to read her mind, misinterpreted her nodding as

'You are looking at that child like this because of our Master's child, this one, being so close to it, right? So that child you are looking at must be Baby A and you old mollycoddle are concerned for it.'

So his nod had meant

'Yes, that is Baby A. And yes, I am concerned for it. Even the Master agrees small children are off-limit, so there.'

Which Sister Mary understood as

'Yes, that is the Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Angel of the Bottomless Pit, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Prince of This World, Father of Lies, Spawn of Satan and Lord of Darkness. Be careful what you do with Baby A, because everything out of the ordinary would get the attention of Up There.'

Therefore, the baby Sister Mary had handed over to the other nurse after Mr Young had left and which was then cunningly proceeded to be swapped with Baby B had been, in fact, Baby A.

All of this went unnoticed by everyone, especially by Phelan who by now only desired to get back home.

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The rain had stopped only a few minutes before he had arrived at his home in Soho. With Molly parked and secured in the basement he had climbed the stairs to his apartment and unlocked the door.

He could have really done with a drink then, but first things came first. He had picked up the phone and called a number he knew by heart.

You weren't supposed to have free will as a demon. But you couldn't spend 6000 years on the surface without learning a trick or two from humans.

He had called Keruvael, asking him to come over as they needed to talk.

When he had replaced the receiver again he had felt a plump hand on his shoulder.

He hadn't had the time to wonder if he had forgotten to lock his door as an unwelcome well-known voice had whispered to him.

It had just been a simple 'Hello', but spoken in a tone that promised nothing good and certainly nothing painless in Phelan's imminent future.

Phelan had gulped and carefully turned his head to look at Ligur, a Great Duke of Hell and possibly the worst sight he could see now.

What happened then didn't go unnoticed by the neighbours.

But humans nowadays don't care for agonised screams anymore.

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If you ask most human nowadays they will claim that books are one of the greatest invention of mankind and one of its most valuable goods. Certain names would pop up over and over again would you ask them which book is the most important one in history. None of these names would be the one of the book Anathema Device, eight years old, was currently reading under her bedcover, a torch in her hand.

Even if 'The Nice And Accurate Prophecies Of Agnes Nutter, Witch' was indeed the most important book in the world.

It was the only book in the world that contained exactly what it said on the tin. It had been handed down in the Device-family from generation to generation since the 17th century (It might have gotten lost in the great book-burning crazes of the last few decades, if it weren't for the pretty clear-worded prophecy 1533).

Anathema had just finished reading a prophecy concerning herself. She liked those. Even if she was sometimes upset that there were none of those covering more than the next eleven years. But at such age it might have been better that she wasn't questioning the exact *Why*.

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Newton Pulsifer's father had been in the army. But as nearly every 12-year-olds' father in the neighbourhood had been in the army, this was nothing special. Newt was too young to remember the last years of World War Three, but his father would never tire talking about it. This can really get into a boy's head. Whether or not Mr Pulsifer actually believed that their side had been the Good Guys, his son did so with all of his heart. Newt was certain he'd join the army one day.

If he had known Anathema at that time he might have learned some surprising details about this.

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Phelan woke in his bed, naked, laying on his front, with the blanket tugged up to his waist.

He groaned and tried to stretch, a jolt of pain bringing back the pictures from hours ago. With a whimper he peeked up at what was left of his wings.

Turns out, what was left of them wasn't very much at all. If you didn't know what they were supposed to be, you would even hesitate to call them wings. For starters, the left one was not supposed to bend that way at all.

His wings were black and blue all over, with cuts and torn skin everywhere. The few feathers that remained were shredded or covered with dried blood, and from a dull throbbing (not actual pain, though, not when what he saw was so utterly numbing) he guessed that not just the left but both wings were broken in places.

Someone seemed to have done their best trying to patch things up temporarily, wiping off the blood (there was too little of it compared to what should have been there considering the state of his wings), but just moving had opened a few wounds, and it was starting to slowly drip down bare skin again.

Phelan whimpered and bit down on the pillow, pressing his eyes shut. He knew all kinds of pain; physical and psychological, amongst others. And of all these, damage to one's wings hurt the most. His nail dug into the bedsheet beneath as a shiver running down his spine made the wings twitch again.

"You're awake?" someone in the doorway asked. "I was hoping you'd still be asleep."

Those are some horrible wounds..."

Phelan didn't need to turn his head to know who was speaking. He knew the voice and the suppressed aura (you had to suppress what came naturally with beings of angelic stock if you wanted to survive on Earth) by heart.

"Keru...", he mumbled into the pillow.

The dark-haired man nodded, walking to the bed and settling next to Phelan on it, putting various supplies on the bedside table - a tub of water and a washcloth, bandages, ointment, some supplies that humans wouldn't understand but would be useful for their purposes. "How are you feeling?"

"You may take an inspired guess."

"...right. Stupid question," Keruvael muttered. He reached for the washcloth, wringing it out, and gently started cleaning the fresh blood from when some of the wounds burst open again. "What happened? Or should I ask *who*?"

"A Great Duke of Hell" Phelan winced, stirring under the touch. "You remember Ligur? Think you ran into him once in... when was it again?"

"Ancient Egypt, I think," the angel replied, wincing in sympathy when Phelan's wing tried to twitch away, gently holding on to the tip to hold it still. "What did he decide you'd done to earn *this*, though?"

Phelan made a sound made to replace a shrug. "Jealousy. Plain old jealousy. 'S gotten a lot worse since you met him."

"I can tell." The angel glanced at Phelan's left wing, shivering, before focussing on the wing he was tending to at the moment.

"Keruvael?"

"Yes?"

Phelan gulped. Very carefully. "We have a bigger problem than this"

"A bigger problem than having to work out how much of your wings we can save?" Keruvael asked, reaching for the ointment and bandages.

"Would the Apocalypse fall into that category?"

Keruvael dropped everything in his hands, staring at the demon wide-eyed. "The Apocalypse?" he asked. "*Now*? Of course we knew something was going on, but..."

Finally Phelan turned his head to grin askew at the angel, red eyes with slit pupils, normally neatly concealed behind a pair of dark, purple-tinted glasses, flashing.

"That's what Ligur's been jealous of. Couldn't accept that they sent me to get the Antichrist to his human family."

The angel grimaced, picking up the things he dropped and unscrewing the cap of the ointment, gently applying it to Phelan's right wing. "So soon... I can't believe it..."

"It's a shame. Things were starting to look up."

The angel nodded mutely, starting to bandage the maimed wing. After he got about halfway, he spoke again. "Seems hard to believe. Eternal heaven. Or eternal hell, I suppose." The words were carefully measured - exactly the truth, phrased so they could be taken either way depending on who was listening.

Phelan wasn't one for such finesse when he was annoyed and in pain.

"Can't tell which'd be worse."

Keruvael was about to reply when he seemed to think better of it, biting his lip. Finishing off bandaging the wing, he fixed the end and moved to sit at Phelan's left, movements even more gentle, mindful of the terrible angle the wing was bent at. It took a while before he spoke again, voice carefully flat, eyes fixed on getting the blood off of the wing. "My people are all for it, of course. One last fight, us versus them, the Four Horsemen, seas of blood. And then Game Over, Insert Coin, I suppose."

"Lovely phrasing there, I taught you well." Phelan grinned up at him. "If you want to hear an honest opinion from a demon that's in enough trouble: It's a bloody stupid idea." He huffed. "It's a blessed shame there's nothing one can do."

"It is. I can't interfere with divine plans..." The angel sighed.

"Wouldn't really call this one a *divine* plan, Cherry."

Keruvael waved a hand. "Part of the overall divine plan, though. At least, that's what I *should* be thinking."

Phelan suddenly smirked. "This one in itself is quite a diabolical plan, wouldn't you agree?"

The angel glanced at him suspiciously. "What are you thinking, Phelan?"

"You're an angel. I'd say it's your bloody job to interfere with the rotten plans of Hell, innit?"

"You want me to thwart the *Apocalypse*?" he asked, sounding like he wasn't entirely sure Ligur hadn't hit him on the head as well.

"Well, not directly thwart that one. Just," Phelan pondered, "alter the odds a little."

Keruvael hesitated, tempted by the idea. "...I must be insane for asking, but how do you propose we do that?"

"My people will see about his upbringing. Making sure he gets the right satanic influences," Phelan explained, hissing briefly as the angel touched a particularly nasty piece of torn flesh.

"...and I'm supposed to thwart them while they do that?" Keruvael asked, moving away from that particular area to avoid hurting the demon more.

"Indirectly, I suggest. Make sure there are opposed satanic influences."

"And then what? What happens when the Antichrist never learns to use his powers properly?"

Phelan shrugged again.

"Hell would have to try again and we get at least another 11 years."

"It would at least buy us some time..." the angel murmured, hands stilling as he thought.

"Yes. Oh, you'll laugh. Guess just where the blessed thing might yet happen."

"Well? Where do you think?"

"America." Phelan told him about who the Antichrists human family was.

"They always did go in for that sort of thing in America..."

Phelan just nodded, looking as if he really could have done with rolling over and staring at the ceiling for a while now. Or a smoke. Or something to drink. Or smoking and drinking while staring at the ceiling.

Keruvael put the tub of water down, throwing the washcloth into it, and got up off the bed, fingers trailing along the mangled wing. "Do you want my help straightening it out?" he asked. "I'll warn you, it's going to hurt."

With another nod Phelan braced himself. "They'll take years to heal, better that they do that neatly. And Cherry?" He smiled sadly. "You know I am used to pain. Demon, remember?"

The angel grimaced and nodded. "Alright, then. I'll be right back." He got up off the bed, briefly leaving the room. There were sounds of movement, something that sounded like a chair being moved, and the sound of fabric dropping onto the floor. When Keruvael returned, he was carrying the curtain rod with him. He placed it against the wall next to the bed before gripping Phelan's wing tightly, holding it in both hands. After giving the demon a second to brace himself, he pulled at the wing, righting it.

Phelan's eyes widened for a moment, before he plunged his head down, biting into the pillow. When he came back up his gasping slowly faded into a string of enraged blessings in several languages scholars might not even know about, ending with "You owe me a curtain rod."

"If you'd rather end up with a mangled wing, feel free," Keruvael replied peevishly. He reached for the roll of bandages again, then picked up the curtain rod and held it against Phelan's wing, spreading it over his lap for ease of access. "It was the only thing I knew to find that would be long enough to use for a splint," he apologised. "I'll pay for another one. Now hold still."

"Yes, yes," Phelan murmured, shifting slightly under the blanket, "So... we have a deal about the child?"

"That we do," the angel said. "You keep up appearances to your superiors on its upbringing, I do my best to work against that."

Phelan chuckled. "No wonder we've come to our little Arrangement. Could only work with someone like you, you know? You're an angel to my liking."

He was, the angel reflected on that, really no shining example of heavenly virtues. Just as Phelan was not really what you'd expect of a demon. They both had their moments of outright good and evil respectively - he had gotten a commendation for Belgian chocolate, Phelan one for inventing French - but on the whole, they generally did as well as they could and called it a day. Thoughts like this always made him wonder how it could have been that they didn't come to their Arrangement earlier.

By humans' standards, The Arrangement was nothing special. It was the same kind of agreement agents of opposing factions stationed somewhere far, far from home tend to come to when they realise they have more in common with their opposite number than with their respective superiors somewhere entirely else. The kind of agreement that leads to no side really winning and none really losing, but both sides doing enough to shine in the eyes of their bosses, especially for doing such good work against a cunning and well-informed adversary. But he and Phelan were field agents of Heaven and Hell, so, as unnecessary as saying this might be, such an agreement between them was something very special. That's the reason it got its capitals.

The Arrangement was not even two hundred years old. Phelan had had a rather rough time in the centuries before and when he needed a shoulder to lean on Keruvael had been there.

"Think you can speed things up a little?" Phelan dragged the angel from his thoughts.

"The general healing I mean. So I can winch them back in?"

"Ah - of course, sorry," he said, nodding. He reached for a few of the nondescript-to-humans items, wrapping them between the bandages with practiced movements, careful not to touch them more than he had to, before fastening the end of the bandages. "Should be alright now even if you winch them in," he said rather more cheerfully than he felt, smiling at the demon.

Phelan took a deep breath and carefully did winch his wings in, shuddering at the sensation. "You know how much I'd thank you if I weren't a demon," he said and sat up looking at the regular bruises along his body with a huff. "I should get dressed."

"I'll leave you to it," the angel said, grabbing the supplies he'd brought with him. "Do you want me to wait for you? We could do the Ritz tonight."

The demon smiled. "With greatest pleasure."

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Even Evil has its standards. Hell was all for violence and showing domination over others. But small children were indeed off-limit. Some basic principle some self-announced Satanists just couldn't wrap their heads around. Which often led to beings like Hastur wrapping their heads around something else entirely. That was something he enjoyed. What he didn't enjoy so much was having to go to a small hospital somewhere south of Oxford a few days after the night on the graveyard and being handed a basket with a child the nun announced to be the surplus baby. Baby B. Of course *she* didn't think of it as Baby B. Nor did she actually announce it as such. To her this was Baby A as to her there had been only two babies, so there was no need for a 'Baby B'.

So there was no reason for Hastur to think of it as 'Baby B' either. He had other things to worry about. Like what to do with the child. You mustn't harm small children, but doing good should also be out of the question.

Let us imagine Hastur got the child adopted discretely. Let us imagine that this went unnoticed by Hell and that he didn't get into trouble.

It's nice to think that even a Duke of Hell can do something good every now and then, isn't it?

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By some human understandings it took about a week to create the universe, earth, life and whathaveyou. This is not entirely correct.

The first thing that was created was Heaven, as it can be a right bugger to make blueprints for anything when you have nothing to draw on. It was a pretty busy time. Then the universe and Earth came to be, with all the stars and plants and rocks and seaweed.

Then came the animals.

This one took quite a while, as things sometimes got a little awry. Thus God created Australia.

And then things came to a halt. You have heard of the War in Heaven. You have heard how Lucifer rebelled against God. You have heard that he and the angels that followed him Fell and how Hell was created.

Maybe, just maybe, if someone would have told him afterwards to calm down and regain his strength before attacking Heaven again, things would have gone different. No one did, however, leaving the decision to a furious Fallen Archangel. Two more great battles followed, before man was even created. Hell lost all of them, but more angels Fell. Lucifer finally stopped with the attacks, retreated to the lowest circles of Hell and Heaven drew its own consequences from what had happened.

And as life on Earth began and with it the counting of years, life in Heaven and Hell got a lot different.

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Phelan and Keruvael hadn't seen each other for a good two months after the angel had left after tending to Phelan's injuries.

Things had gone rather smoothly as far as Phelan could tell. Hell was sending agents incognito to oversee the Antichrist's proper satanic upbringing. On a personal level Phelan didn't like them, but then again it would be an odd old world if demons went around liking or even trusting each other.

Officially his involvement with the Antichrist should have ended when he left the hospital's courtyard, but Phelan was Hell's most experienced fieldagent, so it didn't take much effort to convince Hell that it would be best if he'd continue to hang around and nudge them should they display pretty inhuman behaviour. Keeping up the masquerade was important. One wouldn't want Up There to get curious, right?

Up There *did* get curious, though, and no one had an explanation why one day agents from Heaven started to show up at the home of the American Cultural Attaché. Two days later the current nanny died in a freak accident. If Phelan wouldn't have been a demon, that would have been the point where he would have started praying that Hell never found out that he knew exactly what the reason for Heaven's interference was.

The only thing that had bugged him was that Keruvael hadn't returned to Earth after the angel had left briefly for Heaven to set things in motion.

So, that was the first thing Phelan would ask when he'd see the angel now.

Keruvael owned a flowershop. He would have very much preferred to own a little greenhouse where no one would bother him and request to buy one of his plants, but a cover had to be kept up. Occasionally, when he had no other choice, he would sell a potted plant or a nice little bouquet and patiently listen to the unavoidable customer telling him how much his shop looked like a jungle. Sometimes there was, however, a customer that recognised the shop as what it was: a cleverly disguised apothecary.

You couldn't live for six thousand years without picking up one thing or the other, and knowing just what plants help with wounds, sickness, etc. had proven somewhat helpful in the past. Humans weren't the only ones who seemed delighted to mess up their fellows' wellbeing.

Keruvael was currently preparing an ointment to help burns to heal, when the shop's bell rang.

"We're closed," he called out automatically.

"Don't wanna buy anything," Phelan responded.

Keruvael let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Hello, Phelan."

The demon grinned and snaked closer after having the door lock itself behind him.

"You've been gone for a while. Care to share what kept you?"

"I'd rather not," the angel mumbled without thinking, slicing through a leaf of aloe with practiced ease to get at the gel inside. There was a mortar just to the left of him filled with red oil.

"Oh." That was Phelan's only response. He knew what the angel meant. He knew it just too well. Humans believe Heaven to be a fountain of mercy, forgiveness and general good, just as they believe Hell to be the exact opposite. If only they'd know.

"Exactly." The aloe gel was scooped into the bowl and, after adding a few drops from a bottle that proclaimed itself to be vitamin E, he started mixing it. "So how is the child?"

"Pretty well, I'd say. Granted, we already lost an agent." Phelan leaned onto the counter and watched the angel.

He seemingly ignored the comment about the agent, though you could see his hands shake for a moment. "Anything out of the ordinary so far?"

"Not yet. Much too early for that." Phelan drummed his fingers onto the wood. "Ask again in about a year or such." He huffed, "Wanna hear a joke?"

"Well?"

"Guess how many of my people went to say that the whole undercover upbringing is

useless 'cause of genetics." That was Hell for you. They were all for new concepts, but not for the understanding of them.

Keruvael snorted. "Gregor would be so upset if he heard that." He'd been quite an agreeable sort, the angel had always thought. They got along well. It was a terrible shame no one else seemed to see the proof in Mendel's pet project. "Did you manage to convince them to let you near the child?"

"No. They said that's better left to people with a clue. You know, the high ranks. You know, Earls and Dukes and Princes and stuff. I'm not even a local councillor." Phelan sighed deeply. "I am just there to tell them what not to do when posing as a regular human being. Dunno who's telling your people the same, though."

"No one," Keruvael said grimly. "The reason I didn't get back sooner was because they wanted to make it very, very clear that no one on my side was to meddle with him at first. It took awhile to convince them to let me at least try to get through to the boy." Phelan's face fell. "Is that why you..." he nodded towards the mortar.

"...yes," he admitted, hands stilling for a moment. He put it down gently and walked towards the cabinets (movements awkward and strained if you looked), opening one. It had quite a diverse range of medical supplies, but he only grabbed a roll of bandages and some gauze, closing it and walking back towards the table. "Apparently too much incentive is frowned upon."

"Still, they sent people. Let's hope that it at least works out." Phelan eyed the angel for a moment. "Want me to lend you a hand there?"

"I'd appreciate it," the angel replied, trying not to let him know how relieved he was at the offer. Some of his wounds were at quite awkward places. "You might want to wear some gloves, though, there's St. John's wort oil mixed into this..."

Phelan smiled askew. "Not the first time I do this, remember. Come, let's go upstairs." Nodding, Keruvael gathered up the bandages and the mortar, walking up the stairs cautiously and moving towards the small bedroom at the far end of the hallway. He put the supplies on the hardwood desk in the corner and sat down on his bed, gingerly pulling off his sweater, hissing in pain when the fabric brushed against his burns.

After getting some surgical rubber gloves from the kitchenette, Phelan joined him in the bedroom, wincing in sympathy at the sight. "They entirely overdid things there."

"I suspect Michael had an off day and needed to vent," Keruvael muttered, folding his legs underneath him. "Would you mind terribly...?"

"Mhn? Oh. Yes." Phelan pulled on the gloves and picked up everything from the desk, sitting down behind the angel. Again he winced, and started tending to Keruvael's wounds. "My wings are a little better already," he said after a while.

The angel smiled at that. "That's good to hear. I could help change the bandaging once you're done. I've got a lot of things here that might help heal faster."

"Very much appreciated. Oh, and did you hear what they named the kid?"

"I don't think so. What was it?"

"They seriously named him *Warlock*."

Keruvael laughed, though it turned into a wince when he accidentally upset his injuries. "What, really? They didn't think it was anything out of the ordinary?"

"You know how our people are."

"Whose people?"

Phelan frowned. "My people." Quietly he continued tending to the wounds.

"Ah. I'm sorry... Well, I'm surprised the parents went along with it. You know how they get in America nowadays..."

"It's rather ridiculous, if you ask me. You know, if I were to name the Antichrist, I'd give

him an unsuspecting name. Like John or Matthew."

"You don't know what they were like," Keruvael muttered darkly. "Sometimes I suspect Judas took the first chance he got to get away from the other Apostles..." He stiffened, biting his tongue. After a moment, he spoke again. "But then that wouldn't be starting off his 'education' right, would it?" he continued, as if he'd never spoken the first two sentences.

"Probably." Phelan reached for the gauze. "But still, they should have went with something less showy. Like..." He pondered for a moment. "Like Adam."

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And time went on. Sometimes, Keruvael and Phelan would meet near the home of the child and watch him from afar, always careful not to get spotted themselves.

When Warlock was six, his nanny and the gardener left, two private teachers taking their places. When Warlock was eight Phelan started getting a little paranoid whenever he was near the house. He credited that on the child's infernal powers likely starting to show around now.

It was curious, however, that the demons working with the kid seemed more and more haunted, as if they expected Hell to end their existence any time now.

When Warlock was ten he liked to play with his toy soldiers, ride his BMX-bike and chew banana-flavoured bubblegum. Now Phelan started to understand just why the higher ranks had gotten so worried. And this made him worry too.

Over the past decade it had gotten remotely safer for him and Keruvael to meet at little cafés, in art galleries or simply in the park. Right now they were sitting at a little café in the city, Phelan in an understandably bad mood.

"He's too bloody normal", the demon frowned and moved the cup in front of him around. The tea in it had by now gone cold.

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Keruvael offered, sipping his tea. "It means that maybe it'll all work out in our favour."

"No, I mean it. *Too* normal." Phelan wrung his hands nervously. "He should be warping reality around him by now. Even without knowing it. Have you noticed anything like that?"

"...can't say I have," he admitted. "Do you think that's a problem? That something... went wrong?"

"Well, Hell's agents have been recalled, so I can hardly ask if they noticed anything. Not to mention doing that would be a really stupid idea." He frowned again and waved a hand over his tea, heating it up. "Well, we'll see tomorrow. Really wonder how he'll react to the hound."

"What hound?" the angel asked, alarmed.

"Hellhound. Biggest one they have. It's all part of the whole mess. I really hope he'll send it away. Or be scared of it. If he names it, we've lost. You know why."

Keruvael winced and sipped his tea again. "When will it get here?"

"At three o'clock in the afternoon."

"Are you going to be there?" the angel asked, aiming for nonchalantly and missing it by a hair's breadth.

"Wouldn't want to miss it."

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Not too far away, in a small, gloomy apartment a tall figure, a man of around forty at a glimpse, sat on an old bed in the corner. His legs were drawn to his chest, his head resting on his knees.

In the little kitchenette another figure rummaged through the shelves, grabbed a bottle, pulled out the cork with its teeth and spat it at the man on the bed.

"Always this time o' year, eh? But never where one would expect you. What's yer bloody secret?"

The man on the bed winced.

"Oh, c'mon, out with it.", the other one cooed, stepping closer and combing plump fingers through the shaggy hair of the taller being, causing that one to twitch. The cowering man then coughed briefly, wiping blood from his mouth.

"I said *out with it*", the smaller one snarled, the grip in the other's hair tightening before it yanked the taller man's head back violently.

The figure on the bed cried out in pain.

"Oh, 'ave it your way then," the other one snarled, taking a hasty gulp from the bottle and forcing the taller figure down onto the mattress. The taller one just pressed his eyes shut.

Tomorrow he'd have time to get his mind off the things that would happen now.

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