

THE STORY OF HELEL

TABLE OF CONTENTS...

Prologue.....	3
1. A Meadow of Willows.....	5
2. The First Judgment.....	16
3. To Be Forgiven.....	25
4. A City of Idols.....	31
5. Torn Apart.....	38
6. A Step in the Wrong Direction.....	46
7. Abandoning Eternity.....	55
8. Death of a Guardian.....	72
9. Where Past Meets Present.....	77
10. The End isn't always the End, Right?.....	90

PROLOGUE

In the beginning, the world was spoken into existence. From the Creator's words sprung light, darkness, and life. Of His many living creations, Man was the most distinguished, created from the image of the Life-Giver.

Man was given the right to work and govern the land as his own, while keeping in mind that none belonged to him. All that was his was the Provider's. But soon, Man felt the agonizing sensation of loneliness. So, the Woman was brought to the earth. And together, they populated the lands.

However, they grew greedy, and began rebelling against the one who gave them their very breath and blood. Their greed sowed a seed of evil within their hearts, which eventually began to take root and blossom into a jungle of briars.

“My Creation has been tainted.” The Heavenly cried with dismay. The ones He saw as His own brethren, His very children, were falling to unreachable depths and committing unforgivable acts. To combat this turn, He decided to form a being more powerful than any that walked the earth. They would be molded from His very own elements and called Guardians. These beings would protect His Word from crumbling into darkness.

Into the shapes of Man and Woman, the Almighty twisted the elemental sources: *Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Light, Shadow, and Space*. Once the molds were complete, the Lord breathed Life into their lungs. These Creations perfectly embodied the sanctity of the Creator's elements: the Majesty

of the Earth, the Purity of Water, the Righteousness of Fire, the Freedom of Air, the Holiness of Light, the Secrecy of Shadow, and the Eternity of Space, all to glorify the Heavenly One.

“They are ready.” He declared, and placed them in a meadow that had yet to be tainted by the unfaithful creations. In this world, seven continents existed, and on those continents, few civilizations thrived. Many of the land still lay undiscovered, unreached by the hungry fingers of humankind. In the corner of those lands, where none had dared to venture, was the birthplace of the Guardians.

Before the Guardians awoke, He spoke into their very souls a command, “Protect those who love and fear your Lord, and vanquish all awakening sprouts of Evil.”

1. A MEADOW OF WILLOWS

There was nothing, and then there was everything. An intelligent being, born not as an infant nor as one wise with age, opened his eyes for the first time. His senses tingled with curiosity as the world introduced itself. The new sounds graced him in passing. The sensations were absolutely glorious; a stimulating, enthralling rush.

The sun's rays stretched over the scene, the wind yawned at its awakening. Willow trees dominated the grounds, and a lake shone bluer than the dome above. The emerald grass beneath his feet bent as though it were bowing to royalty.

Good morning, My child. A voice of pure and fearsome power filled his mind.

Immediately, the freshly bloomed man fell to his knee, his head befallen. "This servant is humbled by Thy presence, my Lord, the One who is Unparalleled." Despite having been birthed by nothing but words only a few seconds before, he was knowledgeable to who was speaking. The Creator of all things, his master.

You are aware of the importance of your position. Execute it well, child.

"This servant swears to Thee, he will do his duties with all due diligence to glorify Thee."

I hope for nothing less. Your name, as rightfully bestowed, is Helel. The shining one.

"This servant thanks Thee with his whole being."

The overwhelming presence departed, leaving the newly-named one trembling like a newborn fawn. It was from fear of His omnipotence and also from the excitement of conversing with the most Holy One.

Helel stood, studying the green panorama. The sun was rising to the east, bathing him in its light. Not long ago, this world was spoken into existence, left with Man to dominate it. But lately, the people had grown to be so short of mind that they blatantly disobeyed the Father's commands. "It isn't that difficult, honestly." He frowned with disapproval. Why would one sacrifice eternity for a fleeting moment's impulse?

He was a curious individual. This world was now his oyster, and he was its pearl. It would not escape his search for understanding. *Why would Man commit such atrocities? What pushed them to such an extent?* He wanted to know.

"My brother." A welcoming voice crept up from behind.

Helel spun and smiled, "Vlam." He wasn't told of his name, he just instinctively knew. It was as though all information on this man he's only met for the first time was perfectly organized within his mind. They embraced each other; this was his fellow warrior, another Guardian of the Elements.

Vlam's eyes radiated the warmth of a flame; his dark skin melted in the sunlight. His figure was strong, and his powers pulsed through his veins. Helel was of taller and thinner stature, as could be derived from his positioning above Vlam's eye-level.

“Vlam, Helel.” A fair-headed woman who walked with prestige greeted them, appearing from behind a willow tree.

“Genesis,” he smiled, “how fare thee?”

She returned his smile, “Well, and my fellows?”

“Splendidly.” He bowed his head.

The three of them clasped hands and waited. They were not the only Guardians gracing the earth. A sunray bent away from its determined path; from it emerged the next. Valgus, a man with chocolate hair and honey eyes, smiled and joined the chain. Before them, the lake fell away from Neró as he surfaced, beaming as he met eyes with his companions. Skuggi stepped out of a willow tree’s reaching shadow, and joined them along with the Water Guardian. Then finally, Angelique descended from the heavens, completing the circle.

The assemblage was complete. The seven Guardians of the Elements were united for the first time in history. The presence of raw power within that circle was overwhelming. To think that the Life-Giver had bestowed such marvelous abilities upon them boggled his mind. “I’m thrilled to have everyone here,” Helel trembled with excitement. He couldn’t contain his smile.

“I am as well, my dear friend. We have an important task ahead of us. Although the influence and prestige of the Great Shepherd will not change whether we succeed or fail, as He is Eternity, we mustn’t disappoint.” Genesis uttered, her countenance as graceful as an angel.

“Yes,” the rest rang out in unison. From this day on, they were to rely on each other and work together for a better future. Despite the solitude of the meadow of willows they stood in, the world was raging with the seedlings of evil.

Helel, Guardian of Space, was to act as a medium for those seeds, and eliminate them before they take root.

“Let us depart, for Evil is near. Now we must meet it before the opportunity to vanquish is lost.” Neró broke the circle to gesture towards the opposite way of the rising sun.

“Yes, we shall.” Genesis followed.

The Guardians journeyed west, leaving the meadow of willows behind. Helel’s senses vibrated as he reached out to feel his domain. Everything was available to his eyes, it was intriguing. Of course, his jurisdiction wasn’t much compared to the Father, but it was still a vast amount. *Perhaps, one day, it will be more.* He strongly believed that if he proved his indispensable worth, then the Provider will bestow even greater powers upon him.

The extensive land proved nearly impossible to travel over on foot. It was simpler to journey using the elements. Helel zipped through his realm of Space. The sensation was energizing. He was still in the world, but wasn’t. The surroundings looked the same, but he didn’t exist within them.

The other Guardians traveled within their own elements; Genesis through the heart of the earth, Neró had evaporated into a cloud and was being whisked along by Angelique, who soared through the air as though she were a freed bird. Valgus was using the light paths as his means of transportation, and Skuggi used whatever shadows he could find while Vlam rocketed himself using his fire as a propeller.

The nearly barren land they were traveling over soon turned into hills of rolling trees; soon after, the ground soared upwards, reaching heights above the clouds. Helel moved his body to the mountain’s summit, opening the door back into

Physicality. Angelique and Neró were already halfway through building a snowman. They spun in surprise as he appeared out of nowhere.

“I didn’t even sense you!” Angelique gasped with awe.

Helel chuckled, “It’s just how my powers work.”

“How?”

“Well. . . I stop existing,” he shrugged. It wasn’t much to be amazed of. His powers were but a drop in the ocean when compared to the Complete One.

Helel heard Valgus before he saw him, “Interesting.” The Light Guardian unzipped the sunbeam and stepped down into the snow.

“Hurry up and build the snowman, there are few shadows up here and I don’t want to climb.” Skuggi pleaded from within the shadow channels.

“We’re working on it.” Neró promised, placing the second compact ball of snow atop the first with vigor.

“I’m making the head.” Angelique announced, pushing around a pathetic sphere in the packed snow.

“Can’t you two just make snow?” Genesis’ head sprouted from the ground like a daisy. The rest of her body was ejected from the earth; she brushed loose dirt from her sleeves.

“Sure we can, but this is more fun.” Angelique stated.

Genesis shrugged. A pillar of earth rose from below their feet, providing a shadow large enough for Skuggi to escape out of. “Thank you, Genesis.” He sighed, staring with contempt at the two dawdling Guardians, playing in the snow like children.

From here, they were supposed to find the Walkway of Ether, as was ingrained in their mission. Their entire path was laid before them; all they had to do in order to succeed was follow it accordingly. After crossing the Walkway, they would come across the first civilization, entirely comprised of sinners who worship pagan gods. They were to show no mercy to those who were lost to Evil. It was a tough stone to swallow, as Helel was also created with the reluctance to take a life, but he would do as instructed. This command was essential for the future of the world. It would be a deciding factor in whether the peoples of the time ahead would live in bliss or gore.

It wasn't unheard of for a tribe of pagans to tempt those who followed the Creator's Book of Law into partaking in their own rites and rituals. Those temptations have unapologetically doomed the lives of countless, both in the mortal world and in Eternity. *Why?* He couldn't help but wonder. It was such that he couldn't comprehend. His foot turned and the rest of his body followed. Out over the world his eyes gazed, appreciating all that was built off of nothing more than a word from his Lord. *Why abandon their principle to follow that which does not reign that of Creation? Why toss away your inheritance within the heavenly realm to spend a life of meanderless meaning and an eternity of suffering and regret?* Helel truly couldn't fathom it.

The Walkway of Ether was a long and narrow bridge stretching between two mountain cliffs, thousands of feet in the air. Helel wasn't affected by the vertigo he received when staring down at the foggy crevice, but Genesis wobbled like a

duck with a lame leg. She gripped the ropes on both sides, her face almost as green as her emerald eyes.

“Gen, keep that up and you’ll start growing moss,” Neró joked.

“At least moss wouldn’t poke fun at me.” She spat at the giggling Guardian.

Angelique took to the air and waited for Genesis, promising that if anything were to happen, she would catch her.

“Thank you, Angelique, for understanding my torment, unlike *someone*.”

Neró pressed his lips together, but they curled up into a smile, making his mouth look like the grin they had traced onto the snowman before. Helel was amused by the interaction; he shook his head, smiling to himself.

Similar exchanges occurred during the long haul over the sturdy bridge. How Man had crafted such a durable and stable path over the air eluded him. Helel might be powerful, but he couldn’t use his Space to implement such brilliancy. *Man truly is made in the image of the Almighty*. He realized. The Guardians were built in the form of man and woman, but they were not as such. Their powers and minds were of a different kind.

“I think I see the end,” Valgus squinted.

Genesis released a long, drawn-out sigh of release, “Thank the Lord.”

“Thank Him indeed. My feet are *killing* me.” Neró groaned.

“I’ll go and scout.” Angelique offered, allowing the strong winds to lift her away. Further up ahead, she drifted to the ground.

“I’m going to join her.” Helel announced, opening a gap in Space and stepping through. In his domain, anything was possible. He could jump from one end of the bridge to the other if he so pleased. The only crutch was that upon staying too long within his Space, the way to leave slowly left his memory reserves. If he remained in the other realm for too long, he would never be able to leave. *‘Tis the reprimander of power.*

Once he was next to Angelique, the door to the Physical Realm opened. The Air Guardian didn’t seem shocked in the least when Helel appeared out of thin air. “That power of yours has really desensitized me to random things popping out of nowhere,” said Angelique, poking at a mountain berry bush. “I think we can eat these.”

Helel’s stomach rumbled like a volcano threatening to erupt. The unfortunate thing of being in the Middle World was the desires and needs of the flesh. It would’ve been a much simpler journey had they no need to satiate their bodies. He groaned, craving some type of nourishment.

“Try this.” Angelique tossed some berries into the air which floated neatly into his palms.

Helel tossed them into the back of his throat, swallowing them whole. The berries hit his stomach like rocks, leaving an uncomfortable feeling. “I don’t think I did that right,” he scrunched his nose.

“Try it again.”

He took the second round of berries and placed them all on his tongue, then slowly began to chew. The tart flavor encompassed each of his taste buds, sending shivers up his spine. “I don’t like them,” he shuddered.

“Well, beggars can’t be choosers.” Angelique shrugged, eating some berries herself. “It seems safe enough, right?” She turned in all directions, scoping everything out.

“Yeah, I didn’t see anything on my way over.” Helel nodded. “I wonder why humans decided to settle down so high up. What was their thought process in doing so?”

“I’m not sure. There are many things that we haven’t experienced, and therefore don’t understand. Perhaps they wanted to stake out a place that offered advantageous territory in the off-chance that an attack were to occur, or maybe they just liked the breeze. We won’t know unless they either tell us, or we are put in the same situation.” Angelique explained.

“I see. So, if we were put in the same situation as them, we would jump to do the same, is what you’re saying?”

“Not at all. Our minds work differently, don’t they? I’m sure the humans’ minds are different as well. To think that they are anything less would be to discredit the Creator.” She said.

“It seems I misjudged you, Angelique. I had assumed that you were a carefree individual. You and Neró both.”

“Yes, misjudged entirely,” she chuckled. “We are all very nuanced, aren’t we? Considering we were born recently, our depth of wisdom and knowledge surpasses our days. We have been imbued with the information necessary to carry out our mission. Even I, despite my demeanor, know when to take things seriously. Our moods differ from one moment to the next. Our needs do the same. We truly are complex.”

“Complex indeed. . .”

“Heyyy!” Neró called, bouncing up and down while waving both arms. The other Guardians looked perturbed as their fellow shook the bridge with his excitement.

The village looked like a tree topper from far off, as it was built directly on the top of the mountain's snow-capped peak. The homes looked about ready to slide off the edge with the slightest gust of wind, but they remained sturdy despite their appearance. People could be seen trekking along ridges and hauling small wagons up the sides; further down, where less snow reached, there were irrigation systems and farms built into the mountain. Helel marveled at the instruments used to water the crops; pipes of reed were woven along the plant beds, directing water into the soil.

The residents wore thick pelts of various animals. Helel knew that it was a way to preserve warmth, though his own garments didn't provide such comfort in this region. His thin linen was graciously provided as he awoke, but it was only convenient in that specific territory, where the sun warmed even the ants' nest, deep underground. Here, it did absolutely nothing against the biting cold wind.

The only way they kept warm was by clustering against Vlam, who radiated a warmth akin to that of the sun. Angelique and Valgus were likewise unaffected by the cold, but the remaining four were turning blue. Vlam didn't show any mind to their clinging; in fact, he seemed to quite like it. Helel was personally unfond of being in such close vicinity with multiple people, but it was necessary for his survival.

"Should we go confront them?" Genesis' teeth chattered.

"We should just wipe them out." Helel sniffed, his nose running.

"Let's confront them first. If they reject the Word, then we can wipe them out." Skuggi suggested.

“Okay, but remember, one bad apple can ruin the entire basket. I’d be surprised if there are any apples left untouched.” Helel pointed out. He was especially uncomfortable by an ominous feeling which hung over the village; one of unnatural nature.

“That may be so, but we don’t want to be shedding any unnecessary blood.” Vlam rumbled.

They approached the village but were met by a quartet of men before they could reach it.

“Halt,” one commanded, speaking in a different tongue; however, the Guardians could understand him perfectly. “Why do you come?”

“We are here to inquire about where you place your faith. For whom do you live?” Valgus demanded.

“Leave. We will not reveal our practices to outsiders.”

“Please, does anyone within your village follow the Sovereign?” Genesis pleaded, desperation in her voice.

“Any who followed the false god were sacrificed to Huitzilinti.” Another answered.

The Guardians were horrified; this was beyond their inclinations. “How could you—,” Neró started, but was stopped by Genesis, “Let’s go.”

They all turned and walked away. Vlam was no longer needed to keep warm, they were all fuming with rage’s inner fire. Immediately, discussions about wiping that village off of the planet were in motion.

“Let’s ask the Lord how He wishes for them to go.” Valgus suggested. They all agreed; if anyone knew how to punish such actions, it would be Him.

2. THE FIRST JUDGMENT

After spending a full cycle of the sun in avid prayer, the Guardians gathered and compiled their solutions:

“I’ll call a gale to blow their houses from the peak.”
Angelique said.

“I’ll split the mountain into two,” Genesis declared.

“Then I will call upon the boiling blood of the earth.”
Vlam grunted, intending to burn all remains.

“I can solidify it with water, so that nothing may ever be recovered.” Neró added.

“I’ll shine down on them, that they may see and know what befell them.” Valgus chewed his fingernail.

“I’ll obscure their surroundings, so they may not see so much as their feet. Their escapes will be thwarted.”
Skuggi sighed.

“And I shall take my sickle and reap the Evil from their hearts to store within my Space, that it may never influence this world ever again.” Helel said, unease gripping him. This will be their first conquest; the Lord’s sorrow was transmitted upon the Guardians, but what they felt strongest was the Holy One’s white-hot anger. The holiest of anger burned against these peoples. Their seeds of sin have too deeply taken root to be forgiven, and their hearts have been completely closed to the goodness of the Merciful One. A decision was made that they must exist no more, that their influence may not affect the remainder of His followers.

They strode over to the village, a mix of emotions whirling within. Anger, sorrow, pity, and so many more fueled them to use their God-given powers to smite the evil-doers. Small fires burned within the homes, the residents in unawares of their fates.

“Spare none.” Neró concluded, a snarl in his voice.

It was a fearsome power, the anger of the Complete One. It burned so greatly that even Helel wished for nothing more than to erase the life of each individual living within this village of pagans. To be on the receiving end of such fury from an ever-patient Creator, he would never wish such a thing upon anyone.

Valgus spun and took to the sky, brighter than any star. His light shone upon the entire village. Startled residents poked their heads outside of their doors, some ran out and began to bow down to the Light Guardian, worshiping him as though he were one of their gods. Helel could see the discontent on Valgus’ face, his mouth lifted into a snarl.

Skuggi disappeared and his body encompassed even the mountain, leaving the village as a floating spectacle. Now, the people were growing increasingly skeptical. Some men were already adorned in tough leather gear, wielding axes and spears. They pointed them towards the new source of light, screaming profanities and threats.

A gale ripped the weapons from their hands, and the ground beneath trembled. Helel marched directly into the center of town and was attacked by an onslaught of arrows, spears, and axes being thrown. Nothing touched him; they all disappeared into a gap, leaving the realm entirely.

From what could be seen within the mayhem, a temple rested in the center of the village, with morgues filled

of skeletons on either side. Villagers were congregating there, brandishing long, skinning knives and yanking their young towards the sacrificial table. A grotesque, guttural rage churned within his stomach. *They must exist no more.*

Helel closed his eyes, allowing himself to feel rather than see. This was not a sight which he wanted branded into his memories. He already knew that the lives of these humans would not be on their hands, for the Reigning One had spoken to each of the Guardians. *Destroy the dwellings, and I shall turn the sinners to dust.*

Helel would have no hand in any destruction; he would only whisk away the evil souls before they could manifest elsewhere. Around him the wind grew, tugging at his hairs and threatening to rip his adornments away. He heard creaks and groans, and finally crashes as houses were torn from their foundations and thrown off the cliffside. The trembling ground deafened him as it split, sending statues of crumbling figures and their creations into a great chasm. He felt the heat of the hottest fire as lava was called from the very mantle of the earth, burning the mountain itself. As Neró's tidal of water touched the molten rock, the steam singed Helel's hair and burned his skin to a tender red. Finally, it was his turn.

Helel stepped into his own realm and opened his eyes. Around him floated the blackened souls, darker than the void the world wandered in. The souls had been so tainted that there would be no way to return them to their former glory. No robes or wings would be granted to such specters.

He constructed a long and curved scythe from his thoughts, and dragged it through the hundreds of souls, collecting them one by one. He then threw these into a cage

of his Father's holiness; it burned with bars of the purest light. The screeches of the souls split his mind, as though it were his sanity rather than the mountain that was broken in two.

Physicality called for him, and the door opened. He swiftly left the tormented spirits to their imprisonment, and returned to the world where his fellows existed. His breath was haggard, and his muscles sore. Never before had he felt this meek.

Genesis approached him just in time to lend her assistance. She was one of two Guardians still standing on their feet. Vlam was carrying Angelique in one of his arms, while supporting Skuggi with his other. This was their first taste of the power they each held.

"It is done." Valgus huffed, leaning his head on the boulder of hardened lava which he sat against.

Helel finally gathered the strength to lift his head and study the work they had done. No trace of the village was left; all buildings had been taken into oblivion, and the people who lived there were no more. A film of dust was moving over the mountain as river water ran over stones. The unnerving feeling he had initially received upon resting his eyes on the village which was now without existence had dissolved and existed not.

The smoky smell wafting from the fire-cooked fish inspired a greedy growl from his stomach. The Guardians had been stationed next to the river which traveled from north to south. The river has many names: Rio de Viva, Life's Current, Potámi tis Zoís, and many more which were already residing within his knowledge. This particular river was an

important source of water for many, as it never stopped flowing and brought fresh water throughout the land.

This was now providing use for the Guardians, as it brought both water and food with it. Helel bit into the juicy meat of the fish, savoring the bite. It was far better than the berries he had eaten before, though there was far less flavor. He quickly polished off the fish's skeleton, then roasted another. The cycle repeated until he had consumed seven fish. By then, he concluded that he could eat no more. His strength was replenished and his stomach threatened to burst.

"Let's go south." Angelique said, resting her head on a mossy log.

"Okay." Genesis shrugged. No one asked any questions, it just seemed obvious that they go south. They didn't know why they needed to, it was just necessary. But before they began their travels again, it was decided they rest for the night, as the auburn sky was darkening to a deep plum purple, and the stars were beginning to glimmer down upon them.

Helel waited until the others were settled, all huddled together to fight against the cold. Then, he broke away and wandered into the dark, creature-filled woods. Proud oaks stood around him, twisting away and around each other. Their leaves blotted out the dark canvas beyond them, and their scent filled his nose with musk.

Ever since he had entrapped the damned souls within his Space, he'd been itching to check on them. Not as a wellness visit, or even to see if they were still within the bars of Holiness, but because he was compelled to touch them. It terrified him; for days, he'd been suppressing the urge to fly

straight through the gap between realms and lock himself in the cage as well, and he finally was succumbing.

He took a shaky step, and recognized the feeling of passing through dimensions. The night of Physicality didn't cross over, and everything around him was washed with a sourceless light. It was nowhere near the high-definition, pure light that came from the Light in the Darkness, the Creator. It was a dull, gray, foggy ambience that illuminated his surroundings.

Silence ensued, contrary to the screeches he had been subjected to upon the souls' imprisonment. The only sound was that of his trembling breaths. *Where are they?* His brows dipped as confusion tilted him. *It must be where I left it.* He remembered, thinking back to the mountain. *Come to me.* He ordered, and immediately the bars of power appeared, caging the raging souls, blacker than the abyss.

Helel shook with rage when he laid eyes upon the ones seeking freedom. "After everything you did, you still hope to escape?"

What have we done wrong? The voice sounded like thousands of men were speaking at once.

"What have you done wrong?" He scoffed, "How could you still not see what atrocities you have erected?"

Then tell us. How have we done any more wrong than you?

"What wrong have I done, then? Compared to your idolatry and human sacrifice, what wrong have I done?"

You allowed us to be demolished.

"Yes, I did. And I would do it again, as it upholds the glory of the Father." Helel snarled, backstepping out of Space and back into the physical realm. He burned with a ferocious

fire, he was sure that not even Vlam's element could compare to the boiling blood which rushed through his veins. He shouldn't have seen them; they knew exactly what they did, yet feigned ignorance, and prodded him with mocking questions.

It was already deep into the night hours; the moon was nearly blanketed by black, revealing only a sliver of its silver shine. The woods were almost silent, pardoning the creaks of oaks being pulled by drafts. It wasn't impossible to see, but it proved difficult to find the rest of the Guardians. He had yet to find them when his wrist was grabbed by a quick hand.

Helel jumped out of his skin and nearly flung himself into another realm when Skuggi whispered, "I found you."

A breath of relief pushed its way out of his lips, and the tension left him. "Skuggi, it's only you."

"What were you doing?" The Shadow Guardian asked, still holding onto his wrist.

"Walking. It's quite peaceful, isn't it?" Despite not being able to see the man's features clearly, his startling violet eyes were undoubtedly shining. He might not have been able to see Skuggi, but the man could see him.

"Come with me."

They walked even deeper into the woods, further than Helel had gone. Skuggi stopped and then turned, sitting in front of him. "Sit."

He did so, shifting uncomfortably. He hadn't a clue as of why Skuggi brought him here. "Did I do something?"

"No, but I'm afraid you might," he responded, not bothering to hide his doubts.

“What makes you say so?”

“I can see it in your eyes, Helel. It’s been clear for a while. They’re nearly crazed with hunger, curiosity even. It’s been several days already, we must move on and leave those memories in the past.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“I brought you here because I want you to tell me everything. Hide nothing, because doing so could jeopardize our mission. What has been pulling you away from the Father’s beckonings? And why, *why*, are you wandering around alone when no one is awake and aware of it? Clearly, you aren’t enjoying the tranquility of the quiet woods. You can’t hide it when your entire presence vanishes. You underestimate the sensitivity we each hold towards each other.”

Helel couldn’t bring himself to respond. His fellow was right; he was being strung away by a dangerous curiosity towards the darkened spirits. “I—” he choked, “wanted to see the souls.”

Skuggi nodded, like it was what he had expected to hear. “Heed my warning, Helel, for I speak on behalf of the Guardians and our Heavenly Father, do not become enamored by fleeting fantasies and empty promises. You know full well what can happen if you grow too close to Evil and begin identifying yourself as such. You were there when we wreaked havoc upon those who turned away from the Merciful One, you witnessed His power, do not stray.”

His shoulders dropped as realization gripped his consciousness; he wasn’t following his clear path, his feet were reaching for the right and left of it, and eventually if this

continued, he would be facing the completely opposite direction.

“Control your desires, friend, for they will bring about your own destruction in the end.” Skuggi added, reaching forward and squeezing his shoulder. Helel grimaced; not from physical pain, but from the scolding he received.

“Yes. . .”

3. TO BE FORGIVEN

The glen was covered in a vibrant green, sprinkled with the buds of spring. Through it flowed the Rio de Vida, as appropriately termed in this southern region. Along the banks were pitched tents; fires blazed in stone pits, and around each flame sat five to six people, hacking away at stones or stripping tree limbs with long, wicked knives.

“Do we go say hi?” Angelique asked, fidgeting as if nervous at the prospect of meeting new people.

“I don’t see why not. The Father should’ve sent word about us by now.” Valgus shrugged, starting down the hill.

This tribe followed the doctrine of the Lord, and adhered to the Book of Law. Unlike the village in the mountains, these people were not indicted by Evil. It was a relief to be able to meet humans as such. After the previous instance of meeting the fruit of Man, Helel had grown nervous that there would be none different from them.

“My brothers, my sisters!” Valgus called with his arms spread, a smile plastered on his face. He spoke in the tribe’s language. One blessing they had received when knighted as Guardians was the gift of Tongue. Any and all languages were available to them at any waking moment.

The tribesmen looked up with alarm, but soon their faces softened and they jumped up in celebration. Hoots and whistles resounded from within the hoard of a few hundred men and women. Helel was unsure of how to react; this was his first friendly encounter with Man, and it surely exceeded his expectations.

“Welcome, Guardians.” A gruff and hearty voice sounded above the shouts. The jumping tribesmen settled, and they made way for a man adorned with a tall headpiece made of tanned hide and fanned out feathers. He wore robes of wolfskin and buffalo. Ringlets jangled from his wrists and long beaded necklaces hung to his waist. “Word of your feats has reached even this humble tribe. We are honored to receive you as our guests. How go you?”

“We go well, thank you. It is our honor to be welcomed with open arms.” Genesis replied, taking the hand of the tribe’s chief. The chief bowed his head low, for although he stood over the people of the tribe, no Man stood above a Guardian.

As it should be. . . no man can compare to your strength. A fleeting whisper tickled his ear. Helel frowned; that voice did not come from himself, nor was it something akin to what the Lord would say. *What was that?* He wondered, uncomfortable. The sensation left prickles at the nape of his neck.

The Guardians were led through the tribe’s territory, fleeting around the banks of the Rio de Vida, and ending towards the edge of the glen, where it rolled out into wooded hills. They were taken into the largest tent Helel had ever laid eyes on. It was larger than any he was aware existed; standing above him at exactly seventeen feet and flaring out at ten feet on each side, as he could sense clearly with his Space. Inside, hides were strewn out over the ground and smoke was curling from a fireless pit in the center, rising towards the hole where the poles met.

“Sit, let us talk. Tell me of your journey.” The chief said, sitting across the pit.

The Guardians explained everything from the moment their eyes opened until present, including the desecration of the mountain village and their insinuations to travel further south in order to fell yet another group of idol-worshippers. Helel didn't speak during that time; he instead sat and listened. It didn't feel right to say anything here, not while the others were covering everything.

Once they finished their recollections, Skuggi said, "So we would appreciate some accomodation while we are passing through. We are still new to this world and have yet to learn skills that your tribe has been taught since infancy. Our survival is obvious since we are guarded by the Holy One, but it would make things simpler if we could fend for ourselves."

"Yes, we open our door to the mighty Guardians. Indeed, the Lord has graced us with His presence; we would be honored to teach you our ways of life." The chief rumbled.

"You're doing that wrong."

Helel spun around, nearly sending the knife in his palm flying. A boy of maybe thirteen years stood over him, staring at him with blank, black eyes.

"Is that so?" He hunkered back over the stick he was stripping. It was going to be used as a spear shaft once he finished.

"You're supposed to start from the bottom and go up, not start from the top and go down. You can hurt yourself."

"I see. . ." Helel corrected his hand, digging the knife into the wood and pushing up. It was more difficult this way, but it did pose less danger. The boy settled on the ground next

to him, tossing a log into the fire and watching as sparks lifted high into the air, overseeing every activity on the ground.

“What a dream. . . to be like a spark. Free of worries or responsibility. It leaves its nest and flies away without a second thought, taking hold of the breeze and finding itself in a place it has never seen before. Wouldn’t that be nice?” The boy stared at the waning moon; low, moonlit clouds floated by, obscuring the night’s light and unveiling it over and over.

“Yes, I suppose so.” Helel set down his knife and leaned back, staring at the stars through the clouds.

“My name is Quickfoot. My mother is Pureheart and my father is dead. How can I be free to roam when caring for my sickly mother? Guardian, what should I do?”

Helel’s throat constricted, “If you’re hoping to find counsel with me, then I must disappoint you. I am still new to this world, newer than you are, and have no familial ties on this planet. The only bonds I have walking the ground are those of my fellows; so I cannot give you the proper advice.”

“Do you not have unyielding wisdom and power?”

The boy innocently asked.

“No, only the Wise Ruler has such.”

“I see.”

Silence fell, but it wasn’t heavy. In fact, he quite liked being in the company of Quickfoot. This boy had a responsibility that he intended to keep, despite how it shackled him. *I am the same, am I not? I hold a great responsibility to demolish the cities who built their walls against the Heavenly One, but does it not shackle me? Am I not a slave?*

You can be free. . . The familiar sensation of the voice from before lifted the hairs on his arms and legs. It was not

the feeling of absolute power and authority, it had a sickening feeling, like a snake dragging itself across his back.

Freedom. . . Can I really find it?

“Helel!” A sharp voice shouted from behind. He was grabbed by the shoulder, lifted and spun around to face a red-faced, fuming Skuggi. His violet eyes flared with anger beyond means.

“Where is this unfounded fury coming from?” He frowned, unsure of what he did to incur such wrath from the Shadow Guardian.

“Where is your mind going? Why can you not hear the Lord’s cries? Why must I be told by the Heavenly One that you cannot hear him? Have you shut your senses, your mind, your heart to the one who breathed us to life? Wake up!”

Helel was so shaken that he didn’t know how to respond. How did Skuggi know? He trembled with fear as he realized what was happening to him. How could he possibly twist his mind to believe that his mission shackled him? This was an honorable position, and he was the only one who could fill it.

“Go, *GO!* Go and beg for His forgiveness. Explain yourself to the Father, Helel, for he yearns to hear you so.”

Quickfoot watched them with wide eyes, for Helel was not being scolded in the tribe’s language. He hung his head low and stalked away, upriver towards the outskirts of camp. The water trickled solemnly in the night. The light from the campfires would not reach where he was.

Helel waded out towards a protruding stone in the middle of the river. He dragged himself up and sat on it, shaking from the chill that clung to him. Above him, the

clouds broke and the stars gleamed down at him. The moon smiled as it watched him bow his head and close his eyes, opening his heart to the calls of the Lord.

“I am here,” he whimpered.

Are you afraid? The feeling of complete dominance overwhelmed him, and tears wrung themselves around his eyes.

“Yes, I am afraid.”

Why are you afraid?

“Because I have been negligent, and allowed my mind to be swayed by the temptations of this world. I have been tainted time and time again, stained as a sinner would be.”

Helel, when you doubt, then ask Me. Ask Me who you are, and how much I love you. And I will answer. I will forgive.

“Yes, Father. . . thank you.”

Do not lose sight of who I made you to be. For if you lose sight of yourself, you lose sight of Me. You are not alone in this world; you are not the only one who holds such gruesome tasks. The Guardians are not one, but seven. Do not neglect your bond with them, for it is true and you are aware of it.

“Yes, Father.”

Now, go to the territory of the Gebusites, to the city of Mai, and see what they have become. They have lost sight of me completely, and have lost the sense of their humanity, as did the people of the mountain. Destroy the city of Mai, but bring out one person, Alvin, for he has remained faithful all his days.

“I will follow your command.”

4. A CITY OF IDOLS

The Guardians stalked around the edge of the fortified city. The walls were tall and thick, but far too weak to defend against the winds of judgment. After receiving his instruction to destroy the city of Mai, he had informed his fellows of their task. They immediately left the tribe of believers to travel south.

Mai was nestled along the coastline, walled from both land and sea. Through the gates streamed a steady flow of people, traveling both to and from the city. Helel knew that tonight all residents of Mai, all idol-worshippers, would be home, as it is the start of one of their many festivals celebrating a false god. He was to find Alvin before nightfall and lead him away from the destruction waiting to happen.

While Helel searched for Alvin, the other Guardians were to remain outside of the walls, for this was his task and his task only. He was met with no opposition when he mentioned this to them, and it made him realize just how much trust was placed in him. Not even Skuggi let on a shred of doubt for the Space Guardian. He smiled at the thought.

The glowing sun teetered on the edge of morning and noon, high above their heads. He had half a day to find this man and bring him out of the city, but where to find him was beyond Helel. The only information that had been given to him was a name, and that he was the only one within the city of thousands who had remained faithful all his days. This brought him into the Lord's favor, which is a powerful, powerful thing.

At the gate stood several javelin-wielding guards. They wore chests and helms of gold and sleeves of mail. On their breast was the branding of a bull's head; the symbol of their false god. Helel almost spun around to drag their souls into Space out of rage, but contained himself despite his impulses.

Upon stepping foot past the gate and into the city, he felt sick. Just plain awful. All around him wafted the scents of Evil. His senses were overwhelmed by the city's bright colors and gold statues. He imagined that those statues were the idols which they worshiped. An idol was stationed at every corner. Around those statues were people of all ages bowing and praying, worshiping those who did not exist. He snarled at the sight.

He continued deeper into the bustling port city, blindly searching for the man he was to find. "Excuse me, do you know a man named Alvin?" he asked a woman passing by. She brushed him off and scurried past, seemingly in a rush. "Okay. . ."

He wandered for several hours, still coming up with nothing. The sun was setting and towards the center of the city a big chime sounded. The festivities were about to start, and Helel had to be out of there with Alvin long before the event commenced.

He started sprinting around bends and seeking in alleys. He even peeked into the well, with hopeless hopes that Alvin would for some reason be inside. By the time the bell chimed a second time and the moon was rising, he'd already overturned every stone within that city, but still had not found the man. Asking did him nothing, as no one would give him the light of day.

“ALVIN!” He finally screamed at the top of his lungs in the center of the central square. Hundreds of eyes turned to him, a series of differing emotions held in each pair. Disbelief, offense, curiosity, and more were directed towards the shouting man.

“Me?” A boy of about fifteen stepped forward, clutching his chest. His hair was mousy and curled into a mop; his clothes were torn like rags and the color of sand. His old, deteriorating belt was fastened tightly at his waist and was adorned with a wooden sword; a knight in training; or an apprentice, rather. How Helel knew this, he could only explain it as a God-given wisdom.

Feast your eyes upon the makings of a great ruler. He shall be a king, and rule over this land in years to come.

Alvin, son of Harold. The Lord’s voice sent shivers down his spine. Helel regarded Alvin, studying the runty boy and judging how he must grow to become nothing short of a king. Despite the questioning thoughts he was having, he nodded and approached him, placing his hand upon the small shoulder, “You are to come with me, if you follow the Lord so.”

“Yes, I will come.” Alvin responded without hesitation; sheer determination flooded his eyes.

“All is well, then.” The Lord works in many, interesting ways. This was one among countless. Alvin already seemed aware of what was to come, or at least had an inkling of the role he is to one day fulfill.

The newly paired duo left behind the central square and skirted around the outskirts of the city, avoiding the forming mobs in the streets as best they could, until they finally escaped through the gates.

They left just in time because right as they were out of eyesight behind a hill, the gates slammed shut, and the final chime rang. A rush of wickedness pulsed from the city, riling up Helel's elemental. It wanted to fight.

They ducked behind a line of trees to find the other Guardians waiting. Genesis was up on her feet first, embracing the boy and welcoming him to the group. Introductions went around, and their plans were discussed.

"I'll wait with Alvin until it's my turn." Helel offered, not wanting to leave him alone.

"Yes, that's a good idea." Genesis nodded. Her hands were noticeably trembling, and he soon noticed that the other Guardians were shaking as well. He glanced down at his own long, pale fingers, which were quivering alike. Was it from fear, or anticipation? He couldn't differentiate the two.

They sat in silence until the moon rose to its full peak. The sound of beating drums floated from the city and torches were lit upon the town's walls. The pounds grew louder until it was all they could hear. It was time.

Genesis left first, followed by the Guardians in elemental order; first earth, then water, fire, air, light, shadow and the final would be space. Helel remained behind, waiting in his own thoughts. *Will we succeed? Of course we will, there's no way we wouldn't. I have the boy too, so what needed to be done has been done. Now we just need to complete it.*

He watched as Genesis laid waste to the city's walls. The towers crumbled to dust one by one, and the walls came crashing to the ground. The sound of drums quickened; Helel's heart beat in unison. His body erupted in goosebumps and he trembled from the cold sweat which clung to his body.

Chaos was beginning, it was pulling at him, begging him away from his post.

A gap in space opened before him, but it looked different. It whirled like a vortex of void, darker than the night sky itself. *Come to us.* . . The words were chanted repeatedly, crying out for him, coaxing Helel to escape into his own realm, far away from where anyone's voice could reach him.

“Hey.”

Helel blinked. Realization crept in as he saw his hand reaching towards the portal. “What am I doing?” He gasped, clutching back the limb which nearly betrayed him.

Alvin was holding on to Helel's tunic, a grave expression donned his subtle facial features. “It's your turn. Don't run away from your obligations,” he ordered. In a normal circumstance, Helel would've taken offense at the condescending tone that was being thrown towards him, but it saved him from taking a path which would trap him in darkness forever.

“Right,” he stood, brushing away leaves and dirt which refused to release themselves from his garments. The Guardian stalked towards the burning city, his feet dragging. The heat from Vlam's flames could be felt even from where he stood, a mile off from the billowing smoke and hissing steam.

This time a gap opened before him on his own command, and he stepped inside. The screaming of tortured souls exploded in his mind. He wanted to claw out his ears so he could avoid the overbearing sound, but he gritted his teeth instead and gripped his scythe with white knuckles. Around him floated the thousands of released souls, trying to flee

from their fate. With one swipe of the blade, half were imprisoned within another cage of holy power. One more sweep and the rest were locked away, never to be released from their shackles.

The sheer amount of screams that reverberated within his mind would normally be enough to drive a person mad. But Helel wouldn't let that happen; he quickly retreated through the gap. As soon as his foot touched solid ground, he collapsed. His body was shaking so badly that he was basically vibrating.

"Helel, are you all right?" Genesis was on her knees, hovering her hands over his shoulders.

He couldn't muster an answer because his teeth were chattering too much. The other Guardians were swarming him now, offering questions of concern or words of encouragement. Alvin stood aside, looking at him with a blank stare from a distance.

"I'm," he swallowed, his mouth and throat drier than a desert, "fine."

"I don't think you are." Vlam frowned, crossing his bulging arms.

"No, I am." Helel made a pathetic attempt at standing. He could summon only a meager drop of strength. His arms gave out from underneath and his body crashed down, but he didn't feel anything. No pain ached him, he wasn't even scared or cold or anything that called the body to react in cowardice. No, he wasn't any of that. Instead, a battle was raging within him; one between the battling forces of good and evil. His mind was in shambles as different waves of emotions and thoughts plagued him. He was drowning within himself, and couldn't think of a way to save his soul.

Turn to me. The Lord's voice called out, pulling Helel away from inner destruction. *Turn to me and be safe.* His breathing slowed and his quivers decreased. For several long, waking moments, he just laid there, still as a stone. Peace was churning through him. The battle was put to rest, and his straying imaginations were forced back into line.

He let out a drawn out, heavy breath that had been caught in his lungs, "Yeah, I'm okay now. . . I'm okay." His head rested on the ground and his eyelids dropped, heavy with exhaustion. Before he could help himself, his consciousness drifted away and his world turned dark.

5. TORN APART

The Guardians were hot on their conquest, laying waste to city after city and wiping out every single entity of corruption, who had been tainted, stained, and closed their hearts to the ways of the Heavenly Arrow. Alvin walked alongside the Guardians, providing excellent information on the whereabouts of certain civilizations, and the sort of deeds they committed.

“Geban, city of unbelievers. They strip and shackle any who even have an interest in the Way-Maker and stone them in the town square. They burn the Lord’s prophets as witches and desecrate any who mentions His name. They sacrifice to other gods, and worship material items.”

“Yes, the Everlasting burns with fury against them. I can feel His sorrow well within me.” Angelique wiped a tear from her silver eye, “Why must they do this? I can’t understand them, and I never wish to.”

“They will find that their reasons were useless when face to face with the Lord. Their filth will remain behind, but they will meet Him in due time. And they will realize that they cannot escape punishment, even after death.” Valgus said firmly, creasing his forehead.

“Yes. I will lead and raise the waters from their wells to destroy any idol they worship, and erode away any altar that dirty blood was shed upon.” Neró grunted. Shadows crossed his face, giving him a stern appearance, much unlike his usual demeanor.

“I will wait with Alvin once more.” Helel declared. ‘Twas his usual post when they exacted judgment; without fail, he’d been the rearguard in every single siege. That was the nature of his power, he was the janitor. The one to clean things up. It didn’t upset him or anything. In fact, he was thankful that he didn’t have to take part in flattening out civilizations with thousands of homes. Those sorts of roles more suited the other Guardians, who have hardened themselves to such missions. It was imperative that every city and town of those who shuck away the Lord’s Law be sent into oblivion, so that a new age of peace can take place with the Heavenly’s faithful followers.

“One day, this will all come to an end. We must trust in the Promise Keeper that he may bring about the peace He vows.” Helel said.

“Yes, but in order for that to happen, we must keep our own oaths and commitments to Him.” Alvin responded, holding a fair point.

“Yes. You are quite wise for a young man.”

“Well, only with good reason. I have been through many terrible things, all of which the Arrow guided me through. It was like being in a tunnel with Him as the light on the other end.”

Genesis interjected, “I am glad He has brought us together, Alvin. Your future is bright, but so is your responsibility. We are pleased you chose to come with us.”

“I was instructed directly by the Lord of what I am to do. He promised me land flowing of milk and honey, and descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. I am not the only king who will live, but I will be sure to fulfill my role to the utmost diligence. For I follow the Eternity of good will.

He will be mocked no longer by those who rebel against Him.”

“All is well, then.” Skuggi nodded. He glanced upwards at the dome of blue above, only interrupted by several long, pink clouds. “It is sunset. Now is the time to act.”

“Then, let us go.” Neró stood, brushing back his blond hair and rolling up his brown sleeves. The Guardians disappeared into their own elements, leaving Helel and Alvin alone.

“Their power is beyond great.” Alvin observed.

“That is so, but it does not come without a price; a simple reminder that the powers we have are not ours, nor do they come from us. Every act is supposed to reflect the Lord’s Will, and any step that is taken out of line will affect us as deeply as our souls. I have experienced this personally, though I am ashamed to admit to my roaming fantasies.”

“As long as you are aware of your actions, then all is well.” Alvin replied, patting Helel’s shoulder. The boy’s hand was small compared to his own. To think that humans came in such wide ranges of age, size, and color. He hadn’t experienced what was here called Youth: the prime time of learning and making mistakes. The Guardians were placed into this world fully formed, powerful enough to change even the earth’s rotation. But they did not abuse this power, because their Master placed enough common sense within them to realize that such an act without instruction would count as treason against the Heavenly.

He gazed absent-mindedly at the falls of water spilling over the tops of the city’s high walls. From above, stars were sent showering the ground, landing holes in

countless buildings and breaching the walls. That power came from no Guardian, but directly from the Lord Himself. The waters receded as the towers came toppling to the ground. One might think that the Guardians were attacking peaceful cities who had done no wrong. In fact, there were several rumors floating about of such instances. However, 'twas not the case whatsoever. Each civilization that crashed and burned at their hands was one of war, bloodshed, sacrifices, and layers upon layers of sins. The king of Geban alone has used his army to annihilate children of the Lord, leaving carnage in its wake. The Guardians themselves have passed through countless towns left with piles of bodies and cowering survivors; the Chaos having been a result of the siege laid upon them by Geban and other cities. No, none of this judgment was without reason or purpose. The fact is justified by the very presence of the Lord, who is merciful and forgiving, but not one to allow Evil to run rampant through the lands He created.

The greatest power to exist is Choice. We all live by it, as the Lord wants us to live and learn and grow to appreciate His influence. However, Choice can also kick you like a stubborn mule, and send you spiraling into a darkness you were never aware existed. Even blacker than the darkest night, it will consume you until you feel as though you are no more; 'tis the nature of Evil. The Ruler governs us by Choice, He has every means to smite this world with how many rats have infested and populated it, but instead chooses to allow countless opportunities to find Him. I know how furious He is with the brandishing of spears and the clashing of swords because I feel it within myself, burning with passion. But I feel His sorrow as well, it brings me to tears when I think of

how lost these Children have become. But without His favor, you are without a name in the Book of Life. 'Tis but the truth of it all.

“It’s your turn.” Alvin announced, bringing Helel out of his thoughts.

“Yes.” He stood and stepped forward through the gap between realms. From where he stood, several leagues away from the fallen walls, he could see the tens of thousands of souls frantically floating above the fallen Geban. He brandished his scythe and started his conquest of darkened souls. Their blackened selves smoked and burned as he got closer, making it feel as though his skin was bubbling with burn boils. Their faces were something of absolute horror, like they were extracted from the worst of worst nightmares. Their screaming mouths were simply black holes stabbed into their heads and their faces shifted until they had no definite form. Helel mercilessly stabbed them each with his blade and thrust them into a cage of electricity. This was a routine he was now accustomed to, but the screams and whispers never failed to intrude his mind, and make him question his actions and purpose.

“I am of the Lord. I am His servant. You cannot touch me.” He declared, gulping at a knot of iron which had formed within his throat. “I need to get out of here,” he whispered to himself, searching his mind for how to leave. It presented itself to him after several minutes of panic, and the gap opened. Before he could step out, his arm flung itself back, as though someone had grabbed his wrist. The gap wavered, threatening to lock him within his realm forever. “No, let me go,” he demanded, struggling against the invisible force. “You cannot have me,” he cried desperately, throwing

himself towards the shrinking portal but remaining locked in place. The screams grew louder until he could no longer hear his own voice.

Then, a whisper that reminded him of a snake flicking its tongue between its fangs breached his thoughts, *You want me. You crave me, don't you? The taste of power is sweet, isn't it? I can give it to you. I can give you what the One Above decidedly keeps away from you. Come to me, and I will give you the power to be greater than even the Heavenly.*

“Blasphemy! Impudence! How dare you try and coax a Guardian into following your ways? I am more than a soft-minded human who turns to you whenever it lusts after something! Begone from me!” Helel boiled with anger. How brazen and arrogant of Evil to wish for him.

You will beg to me before long. You cannot resist me. The clinging sensation of the voice slowly left him, like water trickling down his back. The grasp on his wrist was released, and Helel collapsed through the closing gap. His toe exited the portal just as it completely disappeared. Alvin leaned over him, concern etched into each crease in his forehead. The other Guardians were just returning as well, claiming victory over the walled city of Geban.

“Thank you Helel, this would never cease if you were not here.” Genesis smiled, referring to the task of imprisoning evil within his Space.

“Yeah, no problem.” He replied, feeling uncomfortable in his own skin. He rolled around as a chill clung to his sweat, and he felt like tearing out his own throat. Hives began to overtake his limbs and his mind was whirling around like a tornado. Helel turned to the side and hurled whatever might've been in his stomach.

“Are you okay?” Neró stood over him, frowning with worry. Valgus knelt beside him and grabbed his wrist, which Helel instinctively snatched away from him.

Skuggi joined them, reaching for Helel’s forehead, but the Space Guardian hid his face in his hands, trembling.

“Helel, what’s the matter?” Genesis asked, dropping to her knees and placing her palm upon his ear.

He shook his head. This feeling was unbearable. It was like every force of nature was pummeling against his mind, tearing through it, throwing insults and whispering his hidden desires. “My wall’s been broken, just like Geban’s.” He sobbed.

“No, no, no Helel, don’t say that, please.” Angelique cried, pulling him into an embrace and rocking the hysteric Guardian as though he were a newborn baby.

“Have you been troubled as of late?” Skuggi asked, keeping his hand tight on the Guardian’s ankle.

“Greatly.”

“Then we must punish the demons who dare to try and manipulate a Guardian of the Elements.” Vlam rumbled, revealing his forgotten presence.

“But I’ve locked them all away! This one is not like them. It’s different. . . more powerful and cynical than any I’ve smote with my scythe. And it has a grasp on me. . . I don’t know what to do!” He exasperated, desperate for an answer.

“Helel, have you closed the door to your heart again?” Skuggi asked gently, tilting his head so his black tresses fell out of his face.

“I—I don’t know.” He said, finally realizing his mistake. Once again, he’d shut out the voice of the Father,

severing himself from any solution. “Yes, I have,” he admitted disdainfully, upset with himself for doing something so regretful.

“Then open it again, and call for help. We are not the ones to turn to, as much as we can try and help you, only He can save you. You know this well and true, my friend.” Skuggi advised, relief playing on his words. However, Helel wasn’t out of the hot seat yet. This was just one among many headaches he had gotten, and one among countless he will have. The feeling rips at his innards as though he were a deer being gutted by its hunter. It was unpleasant and itchy.

“I will do so,” he promised, unsure of himself and those around him.

“Please, for our sake and the sake of the Lord, be sure to.” Genesis stressed. He looked into her eyes; a beautiful, mysterious green that reflected in every angle of the sun. They were clouded with concern and shone with love for a friend. Everyone’s eyes showed sincerity. But were they real?

Of course they are. He told himself. It was greatly uncharacteristic of him to have such doubts. Why was he harboring them now, after many months together with these fellows? They’d shed blood together, both their own and others, and grown so close that they knew each other’s habits. Was he trying to sever these bonds? Why?

He released a long, heavy string of air, letting all of his pent up emotions flow out. What needed to be done here has been done. The city of Geban has been torn down, but the territory of the Gebusites has yet to be completely cleansed. Their mission is far from over.

6. A STEP IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

The campfire sent puffs of smoke into the air, obscuring stars behind its opaque billows. A warm red glow rested on the faces of each person present. Laughter was echoing in the small gully they rested in, as jokes and stories were being recounted.

“So, what did the ocean say to the beach?” Neró asked, a smile playing on his lips.

“Only you would know.” Valgus said pointedly.

“Do you feel the need to ruin every one of my jokes?”

“Why would I need to ruin them when they’re already garbage?”

“Well it didn’t say anything, it *waved*.”

They stared at the Water Guardian as though he smelled of rotting meat. He looked around desperately, searching for a positive response.

Angelique coughed, “Well, it’s kind of funny. . . I guess.” She forced a smile through her grimacing expression.

“Thank you!” Neró fell to his knees, throwing his arms in the air. “I spent so long on that one. Do you know how hard it is to come up with witty fronts? It’s nothing to underestimate.”

Genesis chuckled, “Well then we’ll leave the humoring to you.”

“You should. Only I am capable, no? The only other two here with senses of humor are Vlam and Angelique. The rest of you must’ve been born without funny bones, because your comedy is like a stone’s.”

Vlam shrugged, “I won’t disagree with that. I am an entertaining individual.”

“I won’t either,” Genesis agreed, “I wasn’t given your adeptness when it comes to comedy. Besides, I am the Earth Guardian, so obviously I’d be like a stone.”

“Huh. . . how unironic.” Neró clicked his tongue.

The fire crackled and Helel’s eyes settled on it. Sparks flew into the air and he remembered Quickfoot’s dreamy tell, how he wished to be like a spark and fly far away. Perhaps, it wouldn’t be so bad if he could live such an ideal for the boy. Though, he had no home here to flee from. His feet ached from wandering through the land, but he had yet to grow weary, and food presented itself at every corner. The Lord was providing for them despite Helel’s meanderings and wandering thoughts. The Guardian still felt as loyal to his Master as the day he was placed in the Meadow of Willows, but parts of his consciousness flitted away, adventuring places that he, as a Guardian, would never dare step foot in. What a contradiction he was in. How was he going to solve it? The best answer would be to turn to his Creator for guidance, but regardless of his many promises, he had yet to do so. His ears had not been graced with the voice of the Lord since the day he brought Alvin out of the idol-worshipping city of Mai. Every moment that passed by without the presence of the Father was more agonizing than if he were to be boiled in oil or tossed into a chamber of magma. How was he to survive if he couldn’t bear the pain of being without Him?

The whispers of the darkened spirits still haunted him, even though he had not so much as opened a portal into his Space. Temptations and empty promises plagued his mind. *I can’t escape them.* He told himself, resigning himself to his

self-decided fate, though he knew there was another way; a better, founded path in life.

“I’m going to sleep,” he announced, standing and brushing off the collected dirt from the backs of his legs. He walked up the hill to the stone pyramid which Genesis had erected for them. It was nothing fancy, but she took inspiration from the tents of the tribe which had been home to them for only a night. Inside were several beds of flowers that served as sleeping areas. He fell on top of his flower bed and stretched out, feeling the softness of petals and leaves beneath him. Thoughts tore through him, taking him on several different trains of thought. One involved how he felt more distant from his group as of late, another he found himself entertaining the thought of abandoning everything, and the other provided sense and reason that he was a Guardian, and could not forsake the Almighty One. If he did so, then his punishment would be severe indeed.

Would it be worth it? He wondered, staring at the place where the stones met, the peak of the pyramid. *The very top. It would be nice to be there, I’d assume. To have absolute power.* The Father had absolute power, the peak was His place. Yet, he gave only a limited amount of that power to Helel, instead of unleashing him with unlimited abilities. What was the reason? Was Helel not worthy enough to have even just an ounce more? A spark of doubt roused within him. *No, no, stop that. You know exactly why you can’t have more than now. It would be treacherous if He had made another being equal to Him, right?* He scowled in the dark. He was happy that no one could hear his thoughts. *Except for the Lord.* He remembered. What did He think of him now?

I'm probably seen as a disappointment. Whatever, I'm tired.
He closed his heavy eyes.

I'm tired of this. He thought as he swiped more souls with his scythe. This was the third city they had destroyed since Geban, not including the small towns and tribes that were massacred as well. None of these people had wronged him personally, so why should he be the one to expend his own energy in cleaning up their evil deeds? *It's a waste of time, if you ask me. Just send them into eternal damnation when they die on their own.*

Is that what you wish for us? One of the darkened spirits hissed.

“Well it’s not like you can just walk free after what you’ve done. You know very well now what you got yourself into, now it’s time to face the consequences.” He snarled.

Let us be free, and we shall serve you as our king.
The soul promised, a sinister energy overpowering Helel’s senses.

“A king? Me?” He placed a hand over his chest, almost flattered. “I’ll have to consider that one. I mean, why couldn’t I have been placed as a king as well? It’s in my Mission that I don’t rule or govern a land, so I can’t be a king of the earth. But why not? I’m capable, am I not? I can rule. He chose that boy to be a ruler when he has absolutely nothing to his name. No money, no castle, no family, how could he expect to be followed by the masses when he doesn’t even have any power? I would be more fit for the role, I say.”

Fitter than a spout to a kettle. The spirit probed, inflating Helel’s desires.

He stored away the last of the darkened souls and stepped back through the gap, a new string of thoughts dangling before his inner eye. *A king! How fitting for someone of such great power. And to rule over that of the unphysical? Why, I could become a power that could even rival God Himself!*

“Hey brother!” Neró ran up to him, his dirty blond hair being pulled back by the wind, making his deep blue eyes appear to swim in the sunlight. “How did it go?”

“Successfully, as always.” Helel clapped hands with the man. “How was your conquest? I assume it went well?”

“Indeed it did. No individual who so much as scorned the name of the Father was left unpunished. We still have much ahead of us, but if we continue as we are now, I predict we finish this mission before the next decade.”

“That sounds promising.”

“It does,” he smiled, “Everyone’s waiting on us,” he said, starting towards the rest of the group, “Let’s go.”

They walked through a stream and up the banks to where the other five and Alvin sat chatting in a circle. When they saw them approaching they scooted out to make room. Helel sat in between Genesis and Valgus, who both welcomed him back with smiles and claps on the back.

Genesis spoke, “We are to free the slaves of the Kilnites’ territory and escort them to new lands. From there, they will be left to find their way to the land promised to Alvin, who will be their king. He will return to the Gebusites’ territory to claim as his own, and build his kingdom from there. Are you prepared, Alvin?”

The boy nodded his russet brown crowned head, blinking his moss green eyes, and said, “I am prepared to

serve the Lord's people for the entirety of my life. I am honored and humbled to be given such an important position."

The Guardians nodded with satisfaction. This was a good selection; in fact, maybe even a perfect choice. Though, it will all depend on how Alvin conducts himself from here on out; for no one, not even the Guardians, lives without free will, and your decisions will directly and indirectly affect your life as well as others.

A king. . . he thought. The idea was pushed out of his head. His own imaginings were beginning to sound akin to those of the darkened spirits. *But. . . what if? No, no. Blast it; I need some quiet.* He was having to think over the exchanges of the others. Helel stood and stepped away, wandering with no destination in mind. His resolve was crumbling against the constant attacks of evil beings; his fortress had already been burnt to the ground and his palace was being assaulted. How would he be able to fulfill his role as Guardian if he couldn't control himself?

"Ahoy there, lad!" A call echoed.

He glanced up to find himself on the crest of a withering hill, dried by the sun's furious and consistent gaze. Amid the tall grass was a group of travelers, guiding several wagon-pulling horses. They wore turbans upon their heads and their noses were long and hooked.

"Hello." He said shortly, not aggressively but not particularly welcoming either.

"Where go you, white man?" They asked. Their own skin was the color of tanned hide and their eyes the color of charcoal.

"The city of Kil. Where go you?"

“Geban, farther south than where you travel alone. Have you no party?”

“No, I have none.” Helel lied.

“We go to make trades. Will you be interested in a doll of pure gold to worship our god Ba'al?”

“Let me see.”

They brought out the head of a calf molded in the color of sunshine. There were few impurities: an indenture, a scratch, and a long cut made the image imperfect. This was the definition of blasphemy, staring him straight in the face with dead eyes. The Guardian part of him was repulsed by what he saw, yet he didn't strike the men nor did he destroy the idol. Instead, he declined their offer and sent them on their way with few words.

“What have I done?” Realization creeped in as the last of the wagons blinked out of view as it disappeared over the crown of a hill.

“Something's wrong.” Angelique frowned as they trekked through the long stretch of land before them, with nothing to hint of a civilization in the territory.

“What makes you say that, Angie?” Valgus asked.

“The winds have changed. They no longer bring news of our victories over corruption, they bring word of a new Chaos to arise.”

Helel ducked his head, hoping no one would notice. However, his hopes were diminished as Skuggi asked, “Helel, do you know something?”

“No, I don't,” the Space Guardian assured, lying through his teeth.

“I think you do.” The man’s piercing eyes bore through him, as though they could read the very inscription upon his soul.

“No, I don’t.” He snarled and pressed forward, walking ahead of everyone else.

“Please, Helel, if this is something we can fix then you must tell us!” Genesis caught up to him, grabbing his elbow. “The only way we can fix it is if we know what has been tampered with. Has the flow of our victories been halted by a mistake?” She asked.

He stayed silent, fighting the urge to let everything out so that they all were aware of his struggles, that they knew of what he had done. How he had let idol-worshippers slip through his grasp due to his own disobedience, and how now they would have to back-track in order to catch them. They had already been traveling for several months, and the nights were turning cold with the whisper of a new season. Throughout those travels they’d been thorough in their judgment, completely cleansing the now-fallen cities of all evil deeds and purifying it for the Lord’s people to inhabit. But now it was ruined, all because he decided to let some merchants go. The very people who spread falsities and tempted people into discordance. How ashamed would they be?

“I swear, I don’t know a thing.” He said, the oath heavy on his shoulders. It was a lie, and a false covenant. Now how would he be affected? Every wrongdoing was piling itself upon the other, until it was a burden he didn’t dare let go of.

“Very well. You know the price of sin, so I’ll believe you.” She said, a somber glint in her emerald eyes. Genesis

didn't fully believe him, and she did well not to, but she was going to put her trust in him because of their bond as Guardians. This knowledge made the lie even more oppressive for Helel.

“Thank you, Genny.” His own dark eyes reflected in hers, like portals into a night sky, filled with misery and solemnity. *What will become of me? I've officially gone past the point of no return.*

7. ABANDONING ETERNITY

Helel sat in his Space, listening to the tumult of malicious voices which promised him pretty jewels, a castle in the hills, and their loyal devotion. Slowly, his hands lifted themselves to his ears and his eyelids fell. He didn't want to hear any of it. They were too loud, both here and in the physical realm. *Let me go.* Tears climbed into his eyes, but didn't fall. What right did he have to cry? To shout out his frustrations and turn back to how he was? *I have none.*

In front of him, the spirits of his friends flickered, blindingly white with speckles of gray. Truly, no being is entirely good, save for the Heavenly Father. But when he looked down at himself, all he saw was a spiral of darkness, with barely even a speck of light. Complete sorrow overwhelmed the lost Guardian.

The spirit of Genesis flared, drawing nearer. "*Helel,*" she called, her voice quiet, but strong enough to transcend the barrier between the Middle World and his Space. She was searching for him, well knowing that she wouldn't be able to find the man.

It struck his very core, *Genny, I'm sorry.*

"We're here for you. Please, come back to us."

Genesis, strong and kind-hearted, was breaking down in tears. Her spirit shrunk and pulsed, showing the ache that succumbed her. The souls of his fellows shone with a passionate determination, like they were certain Helel would return. Alvin remained steadfast, but his panic peeked through every now and then.

I can't go back. . . Not anymore. They won't accept me, not with the things I've done.

The darkened spirits grabbed a hold of his ear and spouted terrible things into it, filling his heart with terror and humiliation. "I have to go," he stood and without even a glance backwards to his mourning fellows, left.

Helel spent a year wandering the earth, hungry and haggard. His favor with the Lord had been tossed away by his own hands, and the provisions he had previously received had ceased. There was no one in this world who would accept him. His own Space tried to keep him locked away, imprisoning its own mandator. "I have no one nor nothing." He declared, forcing himself to face his self-inflicted realities. "So, I shall become someone, and make something. I will grow my power, and fight even the Lord if I must. As I am, I will surely lose and be punished into oblivion, but maybe, just maybe I can build a power so strong that it will shake even the heavens."

So, he traveled east, to where the Guardians had yet to reach. There were traces of their works scattered around the land; burnt down towns and villages sunk deep into the ground, stuck in a crevice which stabbed deep into the earth. *They have grown.* He concluded upon seeing the scenes.

Towards the central region, there was a forest of trees which felt of Genesis. Her power radiated off of every stem, leaf, and seed for miles around. It was overwhelming to feel so close to his old friend, yet know she was nowhere near him.

"I can't stay here." He decided, "I must leave this land and venture for a new one; a place where they have no hope of reaching before me."

And he did so, using his Space to travel overseas, faster than even Valgus could hope to traverse by light. In merely a second, he was on the other side of the globe, observing a land untouched by the influence of the Way-Maker. This was the perfect place to build his own army.

It was a beautiful land of green grasses, exotic animals of all shapes and sizes, diverse regions, and waging wars. He could spot three different battles from his point of view, spread apart by only several leagues. The ground was stained red and the creek flowing through the wood-surrounded fields had taken on the color of blood. Far below were hordes of darkened spirits clashing, with scattered rare souls of dominantly white, most likely forced to partake in the efforts of brutality and manslaughter.

Helel transported himself to the ground and stepped through the portal into the middle of clashing spears and spikes and raining arrows. Any weapon that pointed his way was pulled into his Space, saving his body from any impalement. When witnessing his powers, both sides of the fighting ceased and stared at him as though he were an attraction, like an idol.

He spread his hands and nodded, strutting through lines of corpses and gawking, battle-worn warriors. “Yes, I am strange,” he said in a raspy, guttural language, “but I am powerful. I am like a god who has descended from the heavens, here to lead you. Give me your service and I shall grow your territory and your tribes.”

“Why should we follow a man from another world? What have you to give us that we not already have?” A man

garbed in silver plates and a leather thong stepped forward, brandishing his javelin.

“I have power beyond your small imagination. Not only will you dominate this land, but you will dominate the world!”

“We, tribe of Gammasah, will not follow one with empty promises. Prove to us that you can do what you say.”

“We, tribe of Leshhimdagh, will follow you, but only if you defeat our enemy before us.” A man from the opposite side stepped forward. He wore a boar hide and wielded a club, adorned with sharp stones which were hammered into the end.

“Very well. I will not take hesitators for myself,” he turned to the one with the javelin, “this is the place you die. You, who follow a false god and choose not to follow me, will not find a happy place after this life.” He stepped through the gap into his Space and called upon his scythe, with a rod of strength and a blade of holy spirit. The scythe was taken through the souls of the hesitant, and their lives in the physical realm were thus ended. *The blood is on my hands.* He thought as he gazed down at his dripping fingertips. It wasn’t the blood of the body, but the blood of the spirit that dirtied him. This was the marker of the time he abused his power. Helel was squeamish when the blood dripped to his feet, but hardened his heart so his mind would not be changed. This was the path he had chosen, and he could only go deeper. There was no escape now.

The job was not done yet. There were still stragglers hoping to flee with their lives, but that would not be allowed. The scythe elongated to reach those who ran, and the blade was stained a deep crimson. In his Space, the sky turned red

and the ground became a wilted brown. The stream no longer flowed and the clouds turned to smoke. This was a small part of the price he was to pay for his disobedience. The gap was opened, now a swirling black portal, and he exited into the other realm. On his right, gaping fighters began to take to their knees and press their foreheads upon the ground, and to his left were the remains of the slain warriors. Above, birds of prey called and he could sense the animals of the wild prowling in the woods around the field.

“Let us go.” He commanded, his voice booming. However, it was still not enough to strike the sense of fear and awe that the Lord held over Helel. It was small and puny compared to Him. *I will get stronger, and overcome you.* He growled within.

For months the pattern continued; he killed and gained underlings, killed and gained underlings, until he finally became satisfied enough to build his own kingdom to where followers can flock like sheep on their own. *For I am their shepherd*, he smiled, looking out from his palanquin. His people kept behind him like dogs, following their master blindly. It was a great feeling: to have such power. But deep inside there was a small twang of panic, a trace of the Guardian he once was.

He suppressed the guilt that threatened to creep up, plastering his mind with thoughts of what he possessed, and what was to be his in the near future. *A castle with the tallest walls, horses bred to be the ultimate war-jockeys, and enough jewels to fill my treasury to the brim and cover the streets. I will be the most feared king in all the land, and everyone will bow at my feet. As they should, such insignificant, lowly*

beings. He stared at one of his shufflers through the corner of his eye. The man's once strong back was beginning to hunch from carrying the palanquin every place they went. *How pathetic.*

The palanquin came to an abrupt halt. Helel lifted his eyes to behold the terrain before him; a smile crawled up his cheeks. "Yes, this is it. This is where we shall build my throne." Down the hill was a river of molten lava, flowing into the ocean to their right where steam billowed in black clouds from the lava's contact with sea water. A mountain of fire rose to the sky, painting a black picture against the gray sky.

"But sire, where will we build?" One of his guards dared to ask.

He shot the man a glare but decided not to demolish his soul, "Trust me, filth, anything is possible when done through me."

"Yes, Your Excellency," he bowed and retreated a step, returning to his rightful position.

Helel turned around and took in the sight of over forty thousand men and women following behind him, "Yes. . . excellent indeed."

The castle was built quickly using the tens of thousands of people under his command. They followed his every order like a loyal sheepdog. If he told them to sit and bark, faithfully they would do so. Their loyalty wasn't out of awe or love; no, it was out of fear for what he could accomplish. And he reveled in the knowledge that he struck such terror into a man, who was created in the image of his once upon a time Master. Maybe, with this sort of authority

and dictatorship, he would be able to dethrone the Heavenly King.

Only you can overcome the one who sits Above. . .

The whispers echoed in his ears, reverberating within his brain. It thrilled him that he could become so much on his own. All of the eyes that peered up at him while he looked down on the world. . . it was glorious.

“Oh, if only Genesis could see this.” He breathed out, then bit his tongue when he thought about the words that had just been uttered. “She would sneer at me and turn the other way.” In their time apart, Genesis had become that of a prize in his eyes. Her beauty was immeasurable and her strength only outmatched by his own. “But if I could have her by my side, we would be unstoppable.” It was a love that wasn’t love. It was a lusting desire to possess one who shouldn’t be possessed. She, a Guardian and faithful to her Master, would never come with Helel. “But I turned away, who’s to say she can’t too?” He pursed his lips, peering out over the ridging of his grand balcony. From high above the ground, the warriors who had become a sort of slave looked like ants, and the ocean a meer pond. “Yes. . . this might be enough to convert her loyalties.”

A horrid, aching cry wailed from one of his caves in the hill opposite his castle’s right side, on the other side of the bridge that had been built over the lava stream. It was one of his creations. A failure, maybe, but it would still be kept for reference when he made his *perfect* slave. A weapon he would use against the Guardians, as he knew their strengths and weaknesses. Inside and out, he had read their souls and was familiar with the ways they used their bodies in battle. Their previous bonds would become their downfall. “But it

still isn't good enough. . ." He confided in himself, "I need more power in order to execute it perfectly."

I can give you that power. . . if you just give me your body. The voice whispered, like a fleeting wind caressing his ear.

"That is one thing I cannot sacrifice for power. My body is my own and will continue to be so."

The temptations of Evil have been trying to convince him for months to converge with it, to become an "ultimate" being. But Helel, as deeply rooted in Evil as he was, did not believe it could be done. "You will have to kill me before you take over this body."

If the body dies, then so will the possibility. We need your body and soul intact.

"No. I am the king, you promised your devotion; why are you defying my judgment?"

We just want you to think about what—could—be, rather than all that is. You could be so much more. . .

"How much more can I be? I already have immense power; my Guardianship has yet to be revoked, and the fear of my followers fuels me. What more can you give me?"

Victory. The sweet taste of tearing down the thrones of those who stood above you, and trampling over their honor. We can give you even more than what you have, all that we need in return is your body. Give it to us, and your strength will be multiplied over a thousand times.

Helel considered this for a few long moments, "I will consider it."

The wretched screeches vibrated the hill, amplified by the dozens of caves dug deep into the side. Inside were his

beautiful, horrid creations. Every now and then, he made time to visit these abominations.

“Hello, dearies.” He hissed, smiling at the mutated monsters behind bars of steel. The cages were nowhere near as powerful as the prisons within his Space, but he hadn’t stepped foot in there for months, afraid of what would become of him. Although the power was his, it first came from the One Above.

Writhing in the shadows were hideous things. Crows with the tail of a snake, blue jays with the enlarged head of a mosquito, and more stitched-together animals. His favorite so far was the one with the body of a donkey, head of a bear, and tail of a bee. It made for a dangerous beast, already having slain three of the caves’ guards who had gone against Helel’s orders and ventured into the caverns.

“One day. . . one day I will perfect you,” he leaned towards the bars. The bear-donkey-bee leaped and rattled the steel. “Because you’re still far too disobedient. Just wait, before long you will be more docile than a lamb.” He straightened and continued down the line, greeting his pets one by one.

They could be so much more than mutations. . . real, powerful monstrosities. Just give us your body. . .

“If you would kindly back off; I already told you to give me some time. Who are you to pressure the king?”

We are but your lowly servants, hoping to help our king rise.

“Hmm,” he hummed thoughtfully, “you are quite eloquent.”

We’ve had many years to practice.

“Yes, experience does come with age. . . Very well then. Answer me this: if I give you my body, what do you plan to do with it?”

We plan only to strengthen your powers. Your body will still be your own, we will just be within, amplifying your strength.

“That doesn’t sound too bad.” He shrugged, “I will give it more consideration.”

“Sire,” the newly appointed general kneeled, his fist over his heart, “There is word from another land.”

“Speak.”

“Beings of power, different from you, are conquering the land and eradicating all but a few civilizations. We do not know what brings them to such extremity, however we have reason to believe that they will soon cross the sea and congregate within your land. They have beasts the sizes of mountains and multiple kings under their command.”

Helel leaned back in his golden plated throne, sinking into the red cushion. He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“What do you plan, Your Greatness?” He asked.

“I will bide my time. They will not be here any time soon, I am sure. There is no need for futile panic, it will only become an uproar. Train your soldiers until their bodies are harder than steel and can deflect even the blade of the sharpest sword. I will make my own preparations.”

“What should we do for food rations? The supply is running short.”

“Cut back the rations and raid some of the villages in the eastern region.”

“Right away, Sire,” he left the room, leaving only Helel.

The throne room was large and empty, having only a rug and throne, but it was covered in gold plates and crimson curtains, attesting to his immense wealth. His miners had recently struck gold only a few leagues north of the castle, and his treasury was eventually filled to the brim. However, that did not solve the issue of food. He now led approximately fifty thousand insignificants, and couldn't feed them all with the resources he had. Not to mention that the region wasn't the most suitable for growing crops or raising livestock. The farms would have to be several miles away, and they would need to gather animals for transportation. He had already deployed three troops of a thousand to find mountain sheep and boars to breed for food and material.

“This is more annoying than I thought it would be,” he huffed, leaning back and kicking his leg over his arm rest. “I guess building a civilization isn't all that easy.” Luckily, he had already usurped multiple leaders whose tribes had come under his reign. They were left in charge of the bare necessities like housing, farming, and law enforcement. Several scuffles had already broken out and been dealt with, occasionally resulting in execution. It was Helel's favorite punishment, but he wasn't blood-obsessive enough to use such an extreme sentence with every discrepancy. Only when the case ended with a death or hinted towards any ounce of disloyalty towards Helel did he enact it. The favor of his followers had to be kept, because as powerful as he was, he realized that as soon as they turned either away from or against him, it would all be over. Especially with the knowledge that the Guardians were building their own

empire. With the Heavenly Power backing them, there was no way their troops would be any weaker than his own.

“Your Highness!” The general exploded through the doors of the throne room. Helel still hadn’t wasted the time to familiarize himself with the names of his subjects, but he could differentiate the general due to his uniform: a deep red tunic with mail over the top, adorned with a golden breastplate. His helmet was tucked between his arm and waist, and his hand was gripped on the hilt of his sheathed steel sword.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“A pigeon flew in just this morning with news that the people supported by the earth are preparing to set across the waters within the month.”

Helel flew to the edge of his seat, grasping his armrests. “No, they can’t be!”

“Yes, Sire! They have beasts of the sky to bring them and their armies as well. Forgive my impertinence, but I believe we should prepare to go to battle.”

“Gather the generals, we shall have a meeting in the conference room.” He ordered, standing from his throne and marching out the doors, turning to the left and hiking down the hall. To his right were windows which held the timeless picture of a storm raging at sea. The chandeliers hung perfectly still, their candles the only movement other than Helel in the long corridor. Under his feet was polished obsidian, taken from where the sea met the river of molten rocks. He turned the corner and a maid carrying a plate of sandwiches scurried out of the way, her eyes trained on the floor. He grabbed a sandwich while keeping pace, as they

were meant for him anyways. “Bring them to the conference room,” he demanded, taking a bite out of the ham and cheese delicacy.

“Yes, Your Majesty. . .” she replied quietly, her head still low.

The guards stationed outside the conference room pushed open the door upon a wave of his hand. Inside, the table was set with the world map. It was only a rough sketch since not all land has been explored. In fact, there were only blobs placed randomly on the paper, and a few detailed regions. Helel already knew what the majority of the lands looked like since he’d already had a bird’s eye view of them, but didn’t have the necessary skills to conjure up an accurate map.

He skirted around the table and took his place at the head. “Light the lamps,” he ordered.

A maid came in and set the plate of sandwiches before him, then left only to return with a carton of oil which she poured into the bowls on top of seven columns spaced around the room. A guard came in with a lit torch to set the oil aflame. The red room lit up enough to look like churning flames. It reminded him of his old friend Vlam, whose blaze was the most mesmerizing thing.

Time trickled by like raindrops falling from leaves. Half of the plate of sandwiches was already eaten by the time the first general was announced.

“General Frrghagen is entering.” The guard announced. The general saluted and Helel nodded in acknowledgement, gesturing to the seats. Frrghagen analyzed the chair before settling in it.

“It must be difficult adjusting to a civilized life when you used to be such a savage.” Helel sipped some wine from the goblet that was set before him.

“It is only different, not difficult,” he replied, placing his helmet on the table along with the leather cap.

“I see.”

Silence fell until the next three generals came, “General Hrrq, General Boonh, General Krios are entering.”

“Welcome. When will the other two be arriving?”

“They are on their way.” The general who had stormed into the throne room with doom upon his lips before notified; General Krios his name was.

“Very well. We shall wait.”

After another four minutes or so, the guard announced, “General Jzant, General Yuuwonug are entering.”

“Finally,” he huffed, “Take your seats and let this dreadful meeting commence.”

After hours of discussing possible routes and battlefield strategies, Helel and the generals were satisfied with what had been accomplished. “Boonh will take his troops around to the eastern shore, Hrrq’s will take to the tunnels and lay in waiting, Jzant will remain in the castle as the last line of defense, Krios, Frrghagen, Yuuwonug, and myself will meet the enemies in the Field of Blood, where I first stepped foot on the continent of darkened souls.” Helel’s finger traced the map, circling the areas he mentioned. The generals nodded in acceptance. “Then, I call this meeting to a close. You may be excused.”

The room was finally empty after a few minutes. Leaning back, a long sigh of mixed emotions escaped. This

was not a situation he expected to be in so soon. “How quickly did they overturn the continent?” He wondered. It would’ve taken over a decade with Helel to completely cleanse it of the evil which had festered within. Were they stronger now that they were without him? Or had he spurred their anger and desperation to hasten the process? He hadn’t stepped foot in his Space since the day he landed in the Dark Continent, as he penned it.

“I suppose I should visit.” He was worried about what it would look like after a year of the Guardians desecrating civilizations. “If they really have completely cleansed it, then that means I should have an arsenal of darkened spirits to command.”

He stepped away from the table and turned to face the burning red wall. Ahead of him was the gap between realms. He breathed in deeply and exhaled all at once, walking straight into the wall and crossing the border of dimensions. It was darker than he remembered. The red hue had only become deeper, and the light that had once lit up his surroundings had been dimmed. Around him were spirits floating freely, taking jabs at the souls of the living. They pulled at the white specks within those souls, the parts which did not follow Helel, and they feasted on them. The vast amount of darkened specters was enough to blot out the fires which burned in his lamps, and the colors on the walls. Even the chandeliers were hidden behind the overwhelming numbers of phantoms. He almost giggled with excitement; this would be enough to beat an entire legion of angels, he would think. There were so many that no one would stand a chance if he were to multiply their powers and gather their

oaths of undying loyalty, which would be ironic considering they were already dead.

“Hear me, O’ spirits of the dark.” He spread his arms, scythe in hand. “Give me your covenants, tell me you will follow me until your destruction. I will lead you into battle against those who broke your connection to the Middle World, and we will prevail. If you did not know the taste of victory before, you will know it now.”

A synchronized hum filled his ears as the specters gathered, surrounding him and peering through the holes in place of their eyes. A truly hideous, terrifying being they were to exist.

We swear to follow the King of Chaos until our last shred of existence is washed away by the Blood of the Holy One. It was like one person speaking a million times at once.

“Prison of the Electric Intensity of His Holy Power, come forth.” He demanded. The crackling and sizzling filled the air with such ardent electricity. It felt like the air would explode if another source of holy power were to appear. He approached the cage of pure white lightning, which cracked like whips at him as his feet drew nearer. His scythe began rattling, and the bars of the prison shook with anticipation, then leaped out to grab the blade. The connection lasted no more than three seconds, but it was enough to send his whole body in shock, despite having no physical figure.

That was but a warning of what is to come. You have incurred My anger, and you shall be punished for your crimes. The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. *You will be reduced to one who is and isn’t, and live in agony until the day you perish.*

Helel fell to his knees, his face pressed to the floor and his entire being quivered in the overwhelming presence of Him: the One who commands Creation.

Go and try with your futile plays; but know, victory will never be yours until you are with Me, for Victory is Mine.

“Yes, Lord. . .” His voice shook and the air turned cold. Normally, there wouldn’t be a temperature within his realm, but as the presence of the Almighty One departed, so did any sense of warmth. What was left was merely an impression of what once was. But he wasn’t going to give up here. What would be the point of everything he’d committed himself to doing if he couldn’t complete it in its entirety? All of the things he had done that went against his very being, the conflict he had to go through every day in order to continue his conquest. . . what was the point of it all if he couldn’t win? *No, I have to win.*

His jaw clenched, he pushed himself to his feet and shouted, “He is our opponent! Though His strength goes unrivaled, it will not be so for long. . . we will rise, and overthrow the Throne in Heaven!”

AYE! The shout was resounding, shaking the very core of his soul.

“Beings of Evil, take my body, and we shall become one.”

8. DEATH OF A GUARDIAN

Your wish is my command. The slithery voice hissed, becoming instead one entity rather than millions. Immediately, the light completely disappeared, as though the specters had completely filled the Space. Before him, eyes that were larger than boulders and redder than the burning crimson of blood peered at him. In that instant, fear grasped him, and he more than anything wanted to escape.

“No, this is a trap. You,” he faltered, “you can’t have me!”

You have already given yourself to us. There is no use in trying to abandon your commitment.

“NO, I withdraw my consent! Back away, evil things!”

But they didn’t do so. Instead, a mouth opened and devoured him whole, obscuring the darkness in a blanket of a greater, older evil. In that moment, he learned everything about what was being dealt with. This being was a master of deceit and manipulation, it was the one that had entered the earth in order to distort the Creator’s perfect creation. “You’re the reason I exist.” He realized, horrified. Had this being not slipped into the world and turned humanity toward the path of disobedience and hardship, the Guardians would not have been needed, and the people would live peacefully in harmony with the Holy One above. “No. . .” he gasped as he felt his mind succumbing to the feeling of oppressiveness. It suffocated him to the point of hanging on a thread between life and death, in which he could no longer tell which was

which. *Fight it.* . . . He demanded himself, but it was fruitless. The Guardian of Space ceased to exist, his dwindling flame of light squandered.

Throw away your name. You shall become Natou, ruler of the realm of tortured souls: Hell.

“My king, what is the meaning of this?” Frrghagen demanded, offense written on his brusque face as he stared at the horrific mutants locked in caverns sealed away by steel bars.

“They are to be slaughtered by morning. Vacancy is needed for my plans.” He had a new agenda now that his mind was completely in line with that of the ancient evil being, as they were now one. The feeling of immense power flowed throughout his black veins, and he savored the taste of absoluteness. With this power, surely he could overcome the Kingdom of Heaven, and then a new kingdom shall be brought to the surface of the lands. “Hell. . . a mere remembrance of who I once was. Helel is no more, for my Guardianship has been torn from me, and replaced by a new power. I will rule this world, and every human and animal shall be underneath my feet.” He spoke to himself while leaving the caves. Hell was the new name of his Space; a place where damned souls were to go after death, for they could not go into Heaven without dirtying the streets and corrupting the air. There, they will do his bidding.

The sunlight burned his eyes after having been in the dark tunnels. The acrid smell of toxicity rose from the lava stream. He crossed the bone white bridge and entered the castle through the servants’ entrance. Passing through the kitchens, laundry room, servants’ dining room, and turning

into the corridor that held the storage rooms, cellar, and entrance into one of the many towers, he opened the large door and hopped down the twisting stairs leading into the cellar. It was easiest to think in places void of light or sound, where people rarely go.

Bottles of alcohol were lined up against the walls, and crates of food were stacked in the corner. He took a seat on one of these crates and laid out his thoughts. In order to beat the Guardians, a weapon was needed. It would be best if the weapons had thoughts of their own, but were chained by oaths of loyalty. People were too unpredictable to use, so he would have to manipulate another life form. The idea was similar to that of using mutated animals, except these would not be torn apart and sewn together with different breeds. "I'll infuse Chaos into the atoms making up their existence. They will be my loyal attendants, and be aware of every weakness those blasted Guardians have that I know of. Spending all of that time together will not have been for naught." He smiled, nodding to himself with satisfaction. It was a beautiful, nearly seamless plan. The animals could be kept on chains and leashes, and must bend to his every will. "Oh, how invigorating! To have so much power and be able to use it! I'm sure the Lord is rolling in his throne with nightmares of what is to come. Just wait, I will be usurping that seat from under you! This wouldn't have happened had you given me the power I deserved."

"We have brought what you ordered." The knights presented the six cages of panicking animals. They fell silent as Natou inspected the creatures, holding their eyes with his own unwavering gaze.

“They will do,” he reached into the largest cage and held the black panther by its chin. “You will be the nemesis of he who fears what he can accomplish. The one who tried to correct my path fervently; the Guardian of the Shadows, Skuggi.” He allowed the power to rush through him and bury itself in the panther. It fell and writhed with pain as its body grew. It became so large that the cage could no longer contain it, and the bars were bent and ripped apart. “You are to be called Bast, the Fear of Oneself.”

“You, your purpose is to thwart she who has a fear of her own inner flame, the anger which burns uncontrollably within; the Guardian of Air, Angelique.” He placed his hand in between the bull’s eyes, and he grew into a humanoid form, but kept his cow appearance. “Makainos, the Fear of Wrath.”

“The fear of knowledge of which is used as a weapon, the fear of knowing too much; the one you are to hinder is the Guardian of Light, Valgus.” The goat expanded and a knowing look graced its slitted eyes. “Capricorn, the Fear of Distorted Knowledge.”

“The darkness which you reside will be the fear you are to produce for the Guardian of Water, Neró. He who fears the peace of night, for things lurk unbeknownst to him. You are to be the Fear of Darkness, Akhlys.” He spat on the scorpion, which became a thing out of a nightmare.

“And you, my pretty, will be Nahash, the Fear of Deceit, saved for the one and only Guardian of Earth, the apple of my eye, the beautiful Genesis.” He stroked the animal on its scaly head, and it constricted before enlarging, sweeping away the remains of the cages.

He stepped back to admire his new servants, “Yes. . . with these we have an advantage. Now, swear your fealty to your master. I, who has made you into what you are.”

Their answers came from the other realm, but he heard them clearly, *We swear to serve our Master until our day of death.*

“Good. Now, go and touch every corner of this land. Spread your influence; incite fear in those who live under the reign of the Complete One. Spread my domain, so they are brought into my empire. We will build an army that even the Guardians cannot hope to triumph over.”

Your wish is our command.

9. WHERE PAST MEETS PRESENT

Days turned into weeks and the month soon ended. Three months ensued, and the seasons began changing. Natou had been venturing the land more often using his Space, where he also communicated instructions and repeated war strategies to the darkened spirits under his command. The Guardians had yet to appear even after all of this time. He would've punished the messenger for spouting lies and inspiring distress with the dooming imagination that his old fellows were on their way to strike him with Judgment, but *oh*, if only he could *remember* who had done so. The only thing he could properly remember of the man was that he held a position within his ranks. The servants feigned ignorance about the offender, so unless he slaughtered his whole castle's residents, the man would walk free.

However, this didn't mean that the Guardians wouldn't come. He knew they would, most definitely. There was no possible way they would allow him to walk without punishment for his crimes against the Life-Giver. "I will be waiting." He swore, staring out at the sea from the eastern shore. His castle was on the opposite side of the continent, standing proudly above the western ocean. He was expanding his territory to reach all corners of this landmass. It wasn't easy work, but it was being done quickly and efficiently with the Fears' service.

More towns and tribes have subjected themselves to Natou's rule, growing his congregation to over a hundred thousand people. It was easier to circulate food with the reach

he had over the land, covering a large portion of the farm lands. Transportation was still in the works, but it had improved since before, as oxen had been found to be domesticated by one of the tribes under his kingship. Now, wagons filled with goods were being carted from villages to the castle, and then were redistributed to those living within the castle walls. Financial aid was then paid to the villages in return.

“Not too shabby.” He stated, approving of his own hand’s work. The pressure of an impending battle against the Guardians had spurred him to accomplish many things in little time. This did mean, however, that there were holes in plans and knots in operations. Not everything had been properly thought out and considered. So, while scouting the land, he was going over everything and organizing his mind. It was a necessary excursion for him to take.

He gazed up for the first time in what felt like years. The sky shone a brilliant, pristine blue, and in the distance clouds hung over the waves. It was peaceful here. . .

Don’t be too amazed by such trivial things. It wastes precious time. The evil within advised.

“Yes, you’re right. I should return.” He was about to open a gap into Space, but his eye was drawn to something emerging from the far-off clouds. It looked like a speck from where he stood, but it increasingly grew in size. More specks burst through the white covers, and soon the clouds were completely blown away. The specks all began to converge, until they were one huge distorted image. He frowned, “What. . . what *is* that?”

You must return, now. The voice was urgent, prodding him to do so with all haste. A portal was opened

before him, a swirling black vortex, and he leapt inside. Within a second, his castle was below him. He entered his throne room and returned to the physical realm, then threw open his doors and stormed down the hallway barking orders at any passing servant or guard, “Call the generals to the conference room, and tell them to be there within five minutes or else I’m revoking their position and replacing them with one of the Fears!”

Word spread quicker than flames because within two minutes all six generals were in their seats at the meeting table. Natou stood and pointed at the eastern side of the map, “There is an attack coming from the eastern front. We must move swifter than they are if we are to defend ourselves. We will put our previous meeting’s strategy in action. Do you remember your positions?” He waited as all six heads bobbed. “Good, take what you need from the weaponry, I will be on the front lines. I have a family reunion to attend.” The last few words hung in the air gravely. He dismissed the generals, who immediately left to station themselves properly. ‘Twas a race against time at this point. If he had known sooner that they were on their way, the situation would not be as it was.

Natou had called upon the Fears while in Space, so they were already on their way back to his side. Those abominations were really the only advantages in this fight, as they could feed upon the Guardians’ deepest and most engrained fears, hence their name. The time for battle was rearing upon them, approaching on the winds of the sky.

It took but a moment for Natou to equip himself and travel through Space to reach the Field of Blood where he sat on a stone and waited. A scythe, a poor replica of the one he

held in Space, was what he wielded, for it was the tool that was welded within his veins. It was all he knew, and nothing else felt quite like the scythe did. His Fears stood at his either side, waiting for the word to attack. It would take another few days for the troops to reach the fields, in which he would hopefully not be met with any opponents. But those hopes were looking grim as storm clouds built overhead, rolling continuously but not moving from their location. The Storm-Bringer was amongst him, keeping a stern eye trained on the warrior who once served His purpose.

For three days he stayed in that one spot, without food or water. What sustained him then was the power of the evil being residing within his body. *Give me control.* It had demanded, wanting to use his body as its means to walk the land. “Not yet.”

Only when the time was dire would he allow his being to be overwhelmed by Chaos. Now was not the time. A dull, bland drizzle fell from the heavens; a chill hung in the air. Desperation rose and fell in his chest. *Where are they?* Neither side had joined him at the Field of Blood, not from his troops nor from the Guardians.

The third day came and passed. The fourth day was when he began craving nourishment. His throat was parched and his stomach rumbled like thunder. “A small bite wouldn’t hurt.” He convinced himself. Along with armor and a weapon, he had brought along a pack of food and a wineskin. He ate a lump of cheese with a slice of dry bread, then swigged his wineskin. The sweet liquor burned pleasantly, arousing an awareness he had lost before.

Master. . . Capricorn resonated, looking upwards.
“What?” Natou snapped.

I feel the connection between myself and the Light Guardian strengthening.

“Okay? And what does that mean?”

They are near.

Natou clamped his mouth shut. His hands were clammy with anxiety, and his chest whispered promises of combustion. “Where are those buffoons? They should at least be close by now.” He growled, referring to the generals: Krios, Frrhagen, and Yuuwonug. “Akhlys, go and find them. Tell them that if they are not here by midnight tonight, you will eat any children with an affiliation to the soldiers.”

Yesssss. . . Akhlys will go and eat children. . .

“Only if they are not here by the start of tomorrow.”

The scorpion leaped up and then dived into the ground, pinchers thrashing as a mound of dirt flew upwards. Within moments, she was gone. He released a shaky breath, mostly from distress but also from anger. They knew their positions, and they had the means to reach him quickly, so why are they taking so long?

Master. . . Bast clicked her teeth.

“What is it now?”

I am worried. Within the Realm of Tortured Souls, your Space, and newly founded as Hell, an anguish has arisen, as I'm sure you already are aware. The spirits are frenzied and frightful.

“Yes. . . I can feel it.” He didn’t want to admit it, because the last thing he needed was to calm down a legion of darkened spirits whose screams made those of banshees seem like a sweet melody. His racing pulse signified the spirits’ agitation, irritating the king all the more. “I will go into my Space and see what causes their agony.”

The black portal opened its wide mouth and swallowed him whole. Within the dark, red realm, the specters dashed in all random directions, and a cacophony of screeches split his mind in two. “What is the meaning of this?”

Our death approaches once more on wings of greater eagles. The smell of our blood draws near, close. . . very close! Release us so that we may shackle those who defeated us once with chains of suffering and pain! Let us go and bring about misery and affliction!

“You will listen to me. When the time is right, you will be relied upon to drag their warriors to the ground.”

Yes. . . rely on us to do your bidding. But remember, the deaths of these spirits will be on your blood-stained hands.

He glanced down at his fingertips, with blood running down and puddling around his feet. “Yes, I know.”

Go back, for your army approaches. Your enemies are biding their time, but they are ready to wring your neck for the crimes you have committed.

He nodded gravely. It was the least to be expected. They were probably prepared to shred him to pieces once their fingers were wrapped around his throat. He stepped back into Physicality, an anchor of dread keeping his feet glued to the ground. Every time he moved, a line would appear behind his dragging feet.

“We don’t have much time left before they attack, and my army is running late! The only ones I have here are you guys, myself, and the blasted specters.”

Makainos is more than enough to bludgeon those ground-sniffing insects. Look at them, they're no bigger than larvae.

“What do you mean?”

What I'm saying, Master, is that they wouldn't stand a chance against the great Makainos! I can squeeze them in between my fingertips and their eyes will bulge out of their skulls. Just watch!

“No, you can see them?” His breath caught in his lungs. They were closer than he had thought. The feeling of doom loomed over him, rolling in as dark as the clouds overhead.

Master, Akhlyss has returned. The scorpion appeared from the hole she had dug previously. The generals are only a few hours away. . . no children for Akhlyss. . . She said disheartenedly.

“If we win this, I'll let you eat as many children as you want.” He promised, wanting her to be at her utmost potential. If that meant sacrificing a few small humans, then it was a small price to pay. “Then, let us wait.”

After three long hours, he heard the shouts of his generals. They emerged from the woods to his back, the thundering hooves of horses, mules, donkeys, and mutated animals shaking the ground. Some of his creations had been saved in order to be used as steeds.

“It's about time, Frrghagen, Krios, Yuuwonug.”

“I beg of you, don't feed my children to your beast.”

Krios kneeled.

“You made it on time, so there’s no need for concern. The enemies lie near, waiting to attack. Prepare your men and get them into formation as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, my king.”

Everything moved fast. Around him, soldiers scrambled to their places, animals were fed and watered, food was distributed, men were puking at the thought of war, and the sun dipped into the sky.

Natou stood away from the commotion, his eyes trained on the distant horizon of trees and skyline. What was going to be the result of this battle? The answer was obvious, but he tried to deny it with everything he was. He knew the strength of the One who molded him, it was undeniable and had no rivals. As confident as he was in his victory, he already knew that it was going to be his loss.

“Helel.” A familiar voice spoke the name which was once his.

Emotions gripped his tongue, shackling it so that it would not move. Neró stood before him, his top half as man, but his bottom half a swirling whirlpool of water.

“Neró.” He replied, grinding his teeth. “Why are you here?” The Guardian’s eyes had deepened with wisdom. He was no longer the sarcastic, goofy man he once traveled with. This was a different Guardian.

“Come back to us. We are not complete without you.”

“It’s too late for me. Leave, go back to your legions before I take away your head with my scythe.”

“It isn’t too late, and you know that well. Why do you insist on turning away from Him?”

“I have strayed too far. Leave me.”

“We weep for you, brother. Please, reconsider yourself. I feel a deep evil is hugging onto your shoulders. The Healer will cleanse you of such burden. Remember Him.” And he was gone, his top half joining the whirlpool and dropping to the ground.

Natou fell to his knees, fighting the surging sorrow within himself. “I can’t go back. It’s impossible for me.”

You cannot return. You belong to us now, Natou. You are our body and our pawn, you mustn’t forget. The voice grabbed his ear and spoke into it.

“Yes. . .”

He didn’t keep track of the time. It could’ve been a few minutes or several hours since Neró had confronted him. But then another voice which made him tremble spoke, “Helel.”

He looked up to see the odd-eyed girl staring down at him, hovering in the air. “Angelique.”

“Come back to us. We miss you.”

“No, you can’t make me. I won’t go back!”

“Why not, Helel?”

“Because I’m too far gone! I’ve bloodied my hands with souls I was not supposed to take. The voice of Evil stirs within me. He and I, we are one.”

“Are you? I don’t think so. Even now, you yearn to reject him, but can’t find the strength to do so. I can hear the voice of your deepest cries, Helel. Come back, for it is not too late.”

“No, Angie, I can’t. Leave me.”

“Very well.” And she ascended into the stormclouds.

The feeling of dread was leaking from him, coating his body with chills. *What next?* He asked. Once again, time

passed with no disturbances. That was until the moon peaked and the night turned to mid. A voice reached out to him, “Helel.”

“Skuggi?”

“Yes, I am here.” He stepped out of the darkest shadow, his violet eyes startlingly bright against the curtain of night.

“Skuggi. . .” It was the man who had tried so earnestly to turn Natou back onto the right path. Seeing him formed a lump in his throat.

“Come back, Helel. You are needed.”

“Needed?” He asked hesitantly.

“Yes, we *need* you. We are incomplete without you.”

“No, I can’t. And you all seem to be doing perfectly fine without me.”

“Helel, listen to me. We *need* you. The mission will never be complete if you continue to walk this path.”

Their mission will be incomplete, but ours will flourish. The voice whispered, hardening Natou’s heart to the idea of being the missing piece of a puzzle. “No, I can’t go back,” he finally said.

“It hurts my heart to see you walk a path of sorrow and misery.” Skuggi genuinely sounded as though he were in pain, but that might’ve just been to deceive Natou into joining them again.

“Leave me.”

“Very well. But please, consider my words.” And he disappeared back into his element.

Sweat dripped down his back and soaked his shirt as his mind deteriorated into a nervous torrent. How long he was

in such a state for, he didn't know. But the thing that snapped him out of it was a voice rumbling, "Helel."

It was Vlam. His yellow eyes danced like the sparks of a fire.

"I can't do it. I can't go back. Leave me alone, please!" He shook his head, trembling. His teeth gnashed and tears threatened to spill.

"Why can you not come back to us?"

"I've done too much. How can I return when my fingers spill blood?"

"You know your wrongs, you can repent and forgiveness will be given. Do you not remember the nature of our Master? The Merciful One?"

"No, just go. Leave me."

"Very well. I miss you, brother."

"Just go." He hid his face in the nooks of his elbows.

Evil immediately entered his mind, *They are trying to turn you.*

"You think I don't realize that? It's taking all I am to reject them, you know."

Harden your heart, my dear king. You are worth more than the six of them combined. Don't fall to their tricks of pity and guilt, for they only want to lower your walls. They don't want you nor do they need you. And you do not need them.

"Yes, you're right. Why now, of all times? They should've come after me sooner if they so desperately wanted me by their side."

The night dragged on, and exhaustion lulled him into a dreamlike state. He only did wake when the first ray of

sunlight appeared before him, and opened to reveal yet another jab from his past. “Helel.”

“I’m sick of this. Begone!”

“Return with me, Helel. Please.” Valgus’ eyes were filled to the brim with agony. “You’ve gone to skin and bones. What hardships have you faced all on your lonesomeness?”

“None. I have a castle now and eat as the king I am every day. My bedchambers are lavish and covered with gold, silver, and jewels. What hardships have I faced? None.”

“I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Bah! Believe what you want to believe, but know that I am not returning. Not now, not ever. I don’t need you lot, and you sure as day do not need me. Begone! Lest I smite you here and now.”

“Your words pain me. But as you plead, I shall leave. But realize this, Guardian of Space, you are not only being deceived by the voice of temptation, but also deceiving yourself. I hope you can see this before it is too late, my friend.”

“Go.”

The Guardian of Light stepped back into the ray of light with one last fleeting glance of longing and anguish. The light disappeared from the day, and a flash of lightning streaked the sky. What time it was, he couldn’t tell. It wasn’t dawn yet, for the light he had spun was weak. If Natou were to guess, it would be nearing the time of dawn.

Time passed slowly and his resolution only grew. How dare they try and come to him now? What was the purpose of such futile efforts? Maybe they were only trying

to arouse his emotions, so that he would be less capable in battle.

Another streak of lightning lit the sky and the drum of thunder followed directly after. He raised his eyes and saw far on the other side of the field a majestic creature emerge from the woods. It was a large horse of the purest color with a wicked horn spiraling from its skull. On its back sat the most beautiful woman ever to grace this earth. The gem of his heart, the apple of his eye, the Earth Guardian. *Genesis*.

She donned armor of gold, of whose color paled in comparison to the sheen of her tresses. From across the land she said, "Helel." How he could hear her, that he did not know. Nor did he care to know for her voice sounded like honey to him, sending a shiver down his spine.

"Genesis." Did she hear him? He hoped so.

"We give you one last chance. Come back to us, please."

"I cannot. But Gen, you can come to me." He said, a little too much desperation coming from his words.

"You know very well that I will never do so. The spirits of the dark come to tempt me at every waking moment into ordeals that are not of the King. But I have conquered those voices, and they try me no longer. Have you not overcome your voices, Helel?"

"I have so conquered them, but in a way different to you. I hold their unwavering devotion and loyalty. For that reason among others, I cannot return."

"Then, that is your choice. Remember this moment well, my dear Helel, for this is what will bring about your days of true darkness."

And the shofars sounded.

10. THE END ISN'T ALWAYS THE END, RIGHT?

It was a resonating sound, that of the shofar. It terrified him. A rush of power ripped back his hair, but it wasn't just the power which did so. High above, a ship twice the size of his castle was descending, being hefted up by several massive flying lizards on either side. It sank gracefully and came to rest on the yellow grass behind Genesis and her horned steed. The lizards broke away and hovered in the air. More flying creatures joined them; some with the heads of eagles with the bodies of monstrous felines, and others tiny specks of light. On the boat's deck, thousands of armed soldiers peered down.

Unease ruptured within him; something was happening within his Space. He opened a portal and peered through it towards the army of the Guardians and was met with a bone-chilling sight: before him, angels filled the sky so that they were all he could see, wielding weapons of holy power. The winged creatures existed within Space as well, without having to pass through any sort of portal. His darkened spirits were cowering behind him, crying with anguish and throwing idle threats. The spirits of the Guardians glowed brilliantly, but Genesis shone with a different power. Something had been granted to her that he was unaware of.

"I can't win."

You can.

"How?"

Surrender yourself to me, and we shall prevail.

“Okay.”

He let his consciousness fade as the power of Chaos seeped to a deeper part within himself. Every thought and memory became jumbled with those of the being. He finally learned the name of the one he was dealing with, and what he would become should the process be complete. A devil.

Give me your soul. He demanded.

“It is yours.” He opened the doors barricading away his sense of self, and he could feel the cold grip of greedy fingers wrap around his heart. Pain seized him as his heart was squeezed, and then it popped. Silence was the only sound that followed, and darkness was all to be seen.

Then he spoke, *Now, you and I are truly one. Your body is one that shall not perish in the midst of battle. For this, your price is to grant me the feet and hands of your body, that I may use them as I please.*

“I have no other choice.”

His eyes opened. Except, they were no longer his eyes. From here on out, he was merely to be a spectator, and watch from the sidelines. His hands reached out and grabbed the scythe, whose blade had turned black, and he brought it into the realm of Physicality.

“YOU AND ME, GENESIS!” He bellowed, challenging the Guardian to a duel.

“You and me.” She grit her teeth and spurred her steed into a long stride. She held her own weapon now; a long, wicked sword which shone with the beauty of Heaven. “Taste my Spirit!” She shouted as their respective weapons crashed. Around them, both armies charged without having been given the command to do so. But it mattered not, for the only thing worth any attention was the fight with Genesis.

He jabbed at the horse, but the woman jumped off of it and brought down her sword with the force of the world. The blow was heavy, but not enough to knock him down. Even if she was a Guardian, her body was physically weaker than his. He maneuvered his scythe to reach around her head, but she used the opportunity to stab at him. The blade buried itself in between his ribs, but no pain ensued. No blood flowed from his wound.

“What,” she spat, “have you become?”

“Something akin to a god.” He smiled ruefully.

“Blasphemy!”

“I only speak the truth.”

“No, your words are that of lies and deceit. You hold no truth within your mind, body, soul, nor spirit.”

He made a grab for her wrist, but she pulled the sword from his body and rolled underneath his scythe’s blade to avoid death. “I will win this battle, Genesis.”

“Is that another lie that you’ve been promised?”

He didn’t respond. Instead, he barked an order, “Fears! Go and find your Guardians, but this one is mine.”

“Helel, no matter what you did, no matter how far you turned, I still considered you a friend, a companion. My *family*! Why did you betray us?” She spoke ferociously, but tears were glazing over her bloodshot eyes.

“I did what I had to do. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re right, I don’t understand!” She cried.

Sparks flew as their weapons came together. It was an even match. At times, he would be the one pushing her back, but then the roles would switch. He didn’t know what was happening around them, all he could tell was that his side was being mauled by the other side’s forces. Bodies were

piling around them, but he couldn't tell whose soldiers they were.

After more clashes, they both stepped back to catch their breaths. He smiled at her, "You've become proficient in the sword."

"I was blessed with the talent to wield one."

"Yes. . . Then, shall we return to our dance?"

Masssssster, his creation hissed, *I can desssstroy her, if you give me the opportunity.*

"Not yet." He responded under his breath, but Genesis noticed.

"Who are you communicating with? An agent of evil?" She asked in a mocking tone.

"Yes, indeed I am."

"As expected. It would be someone hoping to wring my neck instead of you, I assume."

"Oh, can you hear it too?" he smirked; there was no point in hiding anything now. She was too keen to not recognize when something was amiss.

"Let's hope I slice yours before you can take mine."

She grunted. Any sense of kinship had been buried under the punishment he was to receive. His bond with the Guardians had gone deeper than what any could receive with any amount of years. That was how they were formed, as many but one. And now, it was like tearing off one's own limb to fight another Guardian. Genesis hoisted her sword and pointed her toe, then lunged. The point of the blade was parried away by the curve of the scythe, then it was swung back to strike her in the head. She staggered, but swiftly regained footing and lunged again, slashing like a mad dog.

Throughout the fight, his strength was being ebbed away. Eaten as defeat plagued his minions in the other realm. The shofar rang out once more, then again, and then finally a third time. Naatou froze, overwhelmed by the sound. It only meant one thing. He tore his eyes away from Genesis and turned. Behind him were only bodies and carcasses of his men and animals. An entire army laid at waste, staining the fields with the blood of savages once more. And then he realized that every single fallen man was one of his. Not one of the other side had fallen.

Master, I advise we retreat. Capricorn insisted, speaking from Hell.

“But—” he faltered, “but how?”

“Did you really expect any different when we are supported by the Everlasting?” Genesis scoffed, disbelief etched into every line next to her green eyes.

“I was powerful enough to win. . . no, I *am* strong enough!” He whined, shaking his head with dissatisfaction, “They’re just weak! I can take you all myself.”

“You know that you can’t do that.” Skuggi approached them from the side, crimson dripping from his sickles.

“How far have you fallen, Helel?” Valgus appeared.

“Enough with that. . . NAME!” Natou roared. “I don’t need a lecture from the likes of you! Just go and die in a hole, then rot like the vile thing you are!” He spouted.

“Helel, we are cut from the same mold. The one who has turned foul would be you.” Genesis said, anguish emanating from her disappointed expression.

“If you are going to kill me, then get it over with. But I won’t go down without a fight.”

“You don’t have to die, Helel. This is your final chance. . . come back with us. Come and do the Wise King’s work with your fellows. We love you, and have never stopped. . . Just shun who you’ve become, and form a new self.” Genesis pleaded, stretching out her fingers towards him.

“I quite like my new self, so no, I won’t be doing that.” He spat at her feet.

Genesis retracted her hand, and her expression stiffened. “Then, this is your execution.” She said gravely.

Skuggi and Valgus made swift moves for both of his arms, but he jumped back and leapt into his Space. The portal closed before they could reach him, and he breathed a shaky breath. “That was too close.” He muttered.

Contrary to the expected chaos and fighting, the Space was calm and quiet. He frowned, searching for his specters, but none were to be seen. “Where is everyone?”

“Defeated.”

His eyes went wide as his head turned. Behind him, a seraphim angel stood, towering over him like a person would an ant. “Why. . . why would you be here?” He squeaked.

“My brothers and sisters who have no wings are in need of our assistance. So we have come.”

“We?” And just as he said that, more angels appeared, completely filling the Space and beyond into infinity. Natou felt so small, like a speck of dust all alone on a neatly polished bookcase. They stared at him as though he were a sore sight, a missed particle that had escaped the fibers of a rag. He was insignificant.

“This is where you meet the face of your maker. Be prepared to atone for all you have done, traitor Guardian.” The seraphim rumbled, his voice like thunder.

“No, please, have mercy.” Natou fell to his knees. “I was forced into this, he deceived me, and tempted me. It wasn’t my fault!”

“The judges await your arrival.”

“*NO!* I’d rather meet my death to the Guardians and have my spirit ripped to pieces than be taken there and subjected to my own realm as a tortured soul.” He opened a gap and moved to jump through it, but was held back by an invisible hand and his scythe clattered to the ground, released from his grip. It wasn’t the same force which had led him down this corrupted path, but the burning sensation of the Heavenly Realm.

Not only that, but six figures entered through his own portal, emerging in his Space. Their eyes held both pity and disdain. Each Guardian stood before him magnificently, a dazzling sight. But he was there, frozen in place with terror in every ounce of his being. “No, no I won’t let you take me!” He cried, trying to wriggle out of the iron clasp shackling him in place.

“You can’t escape your punishment, Helel.”

Angelique said quietly. A silver band wrapped around her head, and a sky blue gem protruded from the crown. It radiated immense power, adding to her penetrating gaze. The smile he used to know was nowhere to be seen. A solemn frown was what graced her lips.

“I said *NO!*” He roared, Chaos welling within his chest. He grabbed at the Air Guardian, but his free wrist was caught and pulled back, so both hands were held out to the side like prison cuffs. The force drove his hands down, and he was knocked to his knees. He pressed his forehead to the ground and screamed like he had never screamed before, both

anguish and anger echoing throughout his realm. The Chaos within his body seeped through his voice, and the entire Space trembled, yearning to answer its master. “Come to me, O’ agents of Evil. Heed my declaration; they are our enemies. Fight for me, that I may not perish.” Around him, the Space groaned, receiving its command.

The blood red ground turned into whirlpools around him, and the crimson sky closed in. No longer was he the surrounded one. Hell was not just a realm, it was an entity which responded to Natou. It would devour all outsiders, including the most powerful angels.

His head spun as the battle frenzied around him. The darkened spirits which had seemingly been defeated reappeared, attacking with a new vigor. Natou had the advantage in this fight, for they were in his realm. His scythe flew into his hand, but it could not be used due to the unbudging shackles keeping him in place.

His Fears came and stood behind him, having a mental stand-off with the Guardians, all of whom hadn’t moved a muscle. They remained in place, stoically glaring down the Fears. *Do they have no trepidations? Why do they not flinch in the face of their fears?* He stared at them with weary eyes. They removed their gazes from the monstrosities behind him and turned them towards their fallen companion. He clenched his jaw and shouted, “Why do you not go? Leave! You stand there, mocking me with your piteous eyes. This is where I walked with my own two feet, do not hold sympathy for me.” He spat at their feet, heaving with fury.

While the battle raged around them, no one flinched or made any acknowledgement to it. Their time was separate from the violence, the bubble which surrounded them unseen

and undetected, but clearly there. “Just. . . leave.” He said, his voice broken and his heart of pride shattered. “I am no more than a demon. I am possessed and bloodied. Don’t hold any love for me, don’t hold any kinship towards me, and by the Lord do not think of me as your friend and family.”

“Helel,” Vlam’s voice cracked, “don’t ask for the impossible.” His veins of fire flared as his emotions leaked through his exterior.

The screams of his specters died, and the blow of the shofar sounded. Not the ram’s horn from the Physical Realm, but the instrument of the angels. The battle was over. He had lost. “Just kill me.”

“As you wish.” Genesis stepped forward, raising her sword of the purest metal. Angels of all statuses appeared over her, holding her hand with their own. The Guardians each placed a palm upon her trembling shoulders, and she swung down with all of the force of Heaven.

And his world went dark.

A little thing about Natou. . .

He did not die this day, but was put in a slumber which resembles that of death. With enough evil to restore his powers, the day of his arising is imminent. Remember, there is a little bit of Helel within each of us, for no one currently walking our Earth is truly good and pure. Not even a Guardian could contain himself when faced with his own desires and temptations. In order to ensure he does not rise again, we must keep ourselves in check. Do not let your evils restore Chaos, for it affects not just one, but all.