

Chapter 60:

– Rizevim Lucifer –

Boring... The past thousand years have been so incredibly boring.

Rizevim Livan Lucifer had suffered many indignities in his long existence. Tedious lectures. Failed conspiracies. Overdramatic descendants of old bloodlines pretending their family names mattered. Peace conferences. Rating Games. Devils with smiles polished so smooth they could pass for angels if one squinted and drank enough wine.

But boredom was the worst of them. Boredom was the true torture. Boredom stretched. Boredom lingered. Boredom made immortality feel like a prison built from velvet cushions and polite conversation.

He had not missed his father, of course.

That would have been pathetic and absurd.

Lucifer had been grand, powerful, beautiful in the way only true monsters could be beautiful, and utterly insufferable. He was all about his speeches. All about his destiny. Rizevim had admired him in the vague, distant way one admired their own father.

He had always intended to kill him eventually as well. Lucifer. God. The whole rotten family tree. What child of such legendary blood would not dream of patricide?

But then his father and his so-called grandfather had gone and died before Rizevim could properly enjoy arranging it.

Trihexa had eaten them.

Just like that.

A thousand years of prophecy, hatred, war, theology, pride, rebellion, and cosmic resentment ended between the teeth of a beast that did not even appreciate the drama of the moment.

Rizevim had found that deeply rude.

Then came the aftermath. The great war survivors rebuilding. Runeas Gremory playing matriarch like she had not spent the Great War flirting through corpses and stepping over battlefields with blood on her shoes. Gabriel rising above Heaven with her silver crown and gentle voice, pretending divine mercy was not merely tyranny with better optics. Tiamat vanishing into her cave because her precious little mate had disappeared.

And then the so-called New Satans.

That had almost stirred him. Almost. The Gremory brat taking up the mantle of Lucifer had been hilarious enough to earn a decade or two of attention. Sirzechs Gremory, with his pretty destruction power and earnest eyes, wearing Rizevim's father's title as if titles were costumes to be inherited by whoever looked least offensive at a council meeting.

What a joke.

Rizevim had watched from his castle, listened to reports, accepted visitors, entertained traitors, funded insurgents, withdrew support from them when they became boring, and still found no reason to truly move.

Why bother? The Underworld bent itself into peace.

Then Silas Thorn **returned**. After a thousand years, the hero of the Great War stepped back into the world like a stone thrown through stained glass.

Rizevim had finally had a reason to move.

A reason to smile...

Silas Thorn was worth killing. Better yet, killing him would wound so many people at once.

Runeas would rage. That crimson-haired brat would bare her teeth and remember, briefly, that she had not always been the charming old matriarch of a respected house. Gabriel would grieve. The Allmother of Heaven, serene and kind and worshiped by generations of angels, would feel despair claw open her chest.

And Tiamat—

Ah. Tiamat would be magnificent. The blue dragon's fury alone might be worth the entire performance. To watch the Chaos Karma Dragon arrive too late, to smell the grief on her breath, to see her realize that after nine hundred years of waiting, her mate had returned only to be taken from her again? Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

Perhaps older devils would have been disappointed by that.

Perhaps the dead kings of Hell would have expected grander ambitions from the son of Lucifer. World domination? The restoration of the Old Satans? A new Great War? The destruction of Heaven? The conquest of humanity?

But so what? Let them be disappointed.

Rizevim had never existed to satisfy the expectations of ghosts.

He was Rizevim Lucifer. The Underworld bent to his will. *No. The world bent to his will.*

At least—that was what he was thinking, before Silas Thorn **punched him in the face** again...

The blow struck like a falling mountain. Rizevim's head snapped back, and the wasteland vanished into a blur of violet sky and black stone. His feet left the ground. Wind screamed past his ears. Pain flashed through his jaw, hot and bright and sudden enough to make his thoughts scatter.

He blasted backward across the barren landscape, skipped once off the stone like a thrown doll, then crashed through a jagged pillar of basalt. The pillar exploded.

For several seconds, there was only dust.

Then Rizevim laughed. It bubbled out of him wetly, blood in his mouth, his jaw half-dislocated, cheek split open. His coat was ruined. His hair was a mess. His ribs ached where one of Silas's earlier strikes had cracked something despite his demonic reinforcement.

Wonderful. Truly wonderful.

He pushed himself up from the rubble, one hand braced against broken stone, and spat blood onto the ground.

It steamed faintly where it landed.

The Dragonborn descended in front of him, black wings spread wide, the famous Nightingale Blade in one hand, lightning crawling over his body in violent blue-white arcs.

Rizevim wished, truly and sincerely, that the battle could go on forever.

That was the most tragic part. For the first time in a millennium, he was entertained.

Unfortunately, practical considerations existed. Tiamat would be coming. Runeas would be coming. Gabriel would be coming.

How irritating. Rizevim straightened slowly, one hand dragging across his split cheek as demonic power stitched flesh back together. His jaw popped back into place with a wet click. His nose realigned. Blood still painted his smile red.

He liked the look. "I lament something, Silas Thorn," he called across the broken stone. "I wish this battle could go on forever."

The Dragonborn did not lower his sword. Silas's eyes narrowed.

Rizevim sighed theatrically and spread his arms. "But eventually, someone will come and interfere. Your dragon. Your devil princess. Your precious Allmother. Perhaps even those fascinating daughters I hear so much about." His smile stretched wider. "So why don't we step up our game a bit as we kill each other?" Then he laughed.

Black demonic power rolled off him in waves.

The Underworld shook. The ground beneath his boots cracked outward in jagged rings. Distant stone spires trembled, shedding cascades of black dust. The purple sky above seemed to darken as his aura climbed, pressure spreading across the wasteland like ink through water. Shadows thickened behind him, stretching into clawed shapes that were not quite alive and not quite dead. Silver magic circles bloomed across the air in spiraling layers. Old Satan script crawled over the stone beneath his feet, each rune humming with stored spite.

Across from him, Silas answered. Lightning wrapped around the Dragonborn's armor until the Nightingale black became a cage of blue-white fire. It crawled over his shoulders, down his arms, across the edge of his blade. His wings spread wide, black membranes catching flashes of stormlight that had no sky to come from.

Then the rocks began to rise. The ones rich enough with metal to answer him. Pebbles first. Then fist-sized chunks. Then boulders torn from the ground with grinding shrieks as veins of ore ripped free beneath the surface. Hundreds of stones lifted around Silas, suspended in the air like a broken asteroid field orbiting a dragon.

Rizevim's grin turned feral seeing the display before him. *Magnetism. Such a basic force. So crude in concept, so elegant in application.*

Silas flicked his sword. The rocks launched. Hundreds of chunks of metal-laced stone screamed across the battlefield toward Rizevim.

He laughed and moved. The first boulder missed by inches as he tilted his head aside, silver hair whipping in the wind of its passage. The second he split with his darkness sword, both halves shooting past him and exploding against the ground behind. The third burst apart under a flick of black flame from his fingers. The fourth struck a barrier hard enough to crack the air.

More came. A storm of stone and ore.

Rizevim danced through it. He teleported between impacts, appeared atop one flying boulder for half a heartbeat, kicked off it, and sent it spinning back toward Silas with a flare of demonic force. Silas cut it apart midair without slowing.

Good. Very good. Rizevim thrust one hand forward, and a wave of black fire swallowed a dozen incoming projectiles. The rocks did not simply melt. They screamed as the magic unraveled their structure, stone and metal collapsing into glittering ash.

Another cluster came from his blind side.

Rizevim smiled. A silver portal opened in front of them. The rocks vanished into it and reappeared above Silas, dropping like meteors.

Silas glanced up once. Lightning flashed. The falling stones exploded before touching him.

Rizevim laughed harder. Then he summoned another sword of darkness. One in each hand now. A proper escalation.

He lunged.

Silas met him head-on.

Their blades clashed, and the sound split the wasteland.

Rizevim's twin swords struck from opposite angles, one aiming for Silas's throat, the other cutting low toward his heart. Silas caught the first on the Nightingale Blade and twisted aside from the second, lightning-enhanced reflexes dragging him just out of reach.

A normal swordsman would have died there.

Silas did not. He stepped in, shoulder first, using his stronger body to crash into Rizevim's guard. Lightning snapped from his armor into Rizevim's chest, burning through the elegant fabric and biting at the demonic reinforcement beneath.

Rizevim's muscles spasmed.

Silas's sword came down.

Rizevim crossed both darkness blades above his head and caught the blow. The impact drove him knee-deep into stone. His grin widened despite the pressure bearing down on him.

CLEVER!

Silas was using the lightning to enhance his already powerful and fast half-draconic body. Not merely firing bolts of thunder. Not wasting it on dramatic blasts that could be dodged or dispersed. No, he was running it through himself, through nerves and muscles, pushing reaction speed and explosive force beyond what even his dragon body should allow.

Then there was the magnetism. Rizevim felt it now in the sword strikes. Not every swing. That would be predictable.

Silas used it at the last instant, right before impact. A surge of force using the trace metals in his armor, his blade, the battlefield itself. Each strike hit harder than the motion that preceded it promised. The timing was improving too.

A clever way to use basic powers.

Rizevim was almost proud. How nauseating. "You learn quickly," Rizevim said through their locked blades.

Silas bared his teeth. "You talk too much."

“Yes, but where’s the fun in staying silent as we try to end each other!?”

Silas headbutted him again.

Rizevim saw that one coming. He tilted aside enough that the blow caught his temple instead of his nose. Pain flashed white across his vision, but he used the momentum, spinning into a slash with his left sword.

The blade carved across Silas’s chest. The Nightingale armor held, but barely. Darkness bit through the outer layer, leaving a smoking line across the black plating.

Silas answered with a lightning-charged elbow to Rizevim’s jaw.

Rizevim flew back ten feet, boots carving trenches, and snapped his fingers. One of his old tricks answered.

The ground beneath Silas softened instantly into black mire. A patch of the wasteland transformed into a hungry, tar-like mass of demonic tissue, hundreds of little mouths opening across its surface. It surged upward, trying to swallow his legs and drag him down.

Silas looked disgusted. “What the fuck?”

Rizevim spread his arms. “Alchemy! Fleshcraft! A failed attempt at making self-replicating battlefield terrain. Of course I had to sacrifice a few thousand souls to perfect the art first.”

Silas’s lightning flared. The flesh-mire convulsed. Then his magnetism tore iron-rich particles from the surrounding stone and compressed them into a spinning ring around his body. The ring became a grinder, rotating fast enough to blur. The flesh that lunged for him was shredded into steaming ribbons.

Rizevim clapped once, delighted. “Oh, that was inventive!”

Silas launched out of the dying mire straight at him.

Rizevim crossed his twin swords and caught the Nightingale Blade again. This time, he angled the parry perfectly, sliding Silas’s strike down and away while his second blade stabbed for the gap under the Dragonborn’s ribs.

Silas twisted at the last instant, but the sword still pierced him. Only shallowly.

Blood ran down black armor... No *Twilight Healing* to patch that up.

Rizevim watched his expression, waiting for the flinch of pain.

Instead, Silas grabbed the blade with his bare hand. Lightning surged through the darkness sword. Rizevim hissed as the current crawled up his arm. Silas snapped the weapon in half with

a wrenching motion, then punched him in the chest with enough force to crack a layer of demonic shielding.

Rizevim skidded backward. His broken sword dissolved into smoke. The remaining one lengthened in his grip, reshaping into a spear of shadow. "Allow me to demonstrate something I learned in the sixth century after your disappearance," Rizevim said.

Silas lifted his blade. "Pass..."

Rizevim ignored him. The spear split into seven copies. Each copy split again. Forty-nine shadow spears hovered around him in a perfect circle, their tips pointed at Silas. Then each spear's shadow detached from the weapon itself and became a second, thinner spear offset half a step out of phase.

Ninety-eight attacks. Half physical demonic constructs. Half delayed shadow echoes. He thrust his hand forward.

They fired.

Silas moved like lightning.

No, Rizevim corrected with a grin. *He moves with the lightning.*

Blue-white arcs snapped between his joints as he twisted, ducked, and cut through the first wave. His sword took three spears. A magnetically yanked boulder intercepted four more. His wing folded around his side to deflect one, though the impact tore a bloody groove through the membrane. He rolled beneath another cluster and fired a blast of electricity through the ground, making the metal particles in the stone detonate upward in a spray that knocked several spears off course.

Then the shadow echoes arrived.

Half a beat late.

Silas's eyes widened. One pierced his shoulder. Another cut across his thigh. A third punched through the edge of his wing.

He snarled, not screamed, and slammed his palm into the ground.

The entire battlefield beneath them rippled.

Rizevim's eyes went wide. Metal rose from below in a forest of jagged spikes, each one yanked from deep veins under the wasteland. The spikes erupted around Silas first, shredding the remaining shadow echoes before they could land, then expanded outward toward Rizevim like a blooming iron flower.

Rizevim vanished.

He reappeared above Silas.

That was a mistake.

Silas had expected it. The Dragonborn's free hand snapped upward, and one of the metal spikes tore loose from the ground, accelerating like a railgun shot.

It punched through Rizevim's side before he could fully shift away. Pain burst through him. The spike carried him backward through the air and slammed him into a standing pillar of black rock, pinning him there through the ribs.

For one heartbeat, Rizevim simply stared down at the metal jutting from his body. Then he laughed again.

Silas landed below, breathing hard, blood running from several wounds. His wings twitched. The lightning around him had not dimmed.

Rizevim gripped the spike with both hands. "Do you know," he said, "how many people have managed to surprise me in the last thousand years?" He tore the spike out. Blood spilled down his coat. "One."

Silas lifted his sword. "Must have been a sad thousand years..."

"EXCRUCIATINGLY!" Rizevim's body blurred. Pure demonic reinforcement poured through muscle and bone as he crossed the distance between them faster than sound. His remaining spear became a sword again mid-swing, darkness warping along the edge.

Silas barely caught it. The clash blew dust outward in a ring.

Rizevim followed with a kick to the knee, a slash toward the eyes, a pulse of gravity magic that tried to drag Silas's sword arm down, and a burst of corrosive black vapor aimed at his lungs.

Silas countered badly. Then better.

He took the kick, shifted with it, used the forced drop in his sword arm to spin instead of resist, and let some dragon scales manifest and harden along his throat before the vapor could burn too deep. He coughed black smoke, then drove his shoulder into Rizevim hard enough to send both of them skidding.

Yes. YES, YES, YES. Rizevim's mind exclaimed joyfully.

Silas Thorn adapted with every breath. *This is what I have wanted to fight. This is what I have wanted to kill!* Rizevim showed him a trick, and the second time it appeared, it worked less well. The third time, it became dangerous to use. The half dragon boy's instincts were fast, but his learning was faster.

A hero who grew through battle.

It almost made Rizevim regret that he intended to kill him—*NOT!* He raised his left hand and let another trick surface.

The air around Silas crystallized. Transparent black glass formed in jagged plates, enclosing the Dragonborn from all sides. Compressed demonic boundary magic given shape, designed to lock movement, sound, and teleportation in a localized prison.

“Do not worry,” Rizevim said cheerfully. “This one held a rampaging dragon for almost six minutes once.”

Silas looked at him through the glass.

His expression was flat. Then lightning filled the prison. The glass glowed.

Rizevim blinked.

Silas’s magnetism seized the microscopic impurities in the structure, aligning them violently while lightning superheated the internal lattice. The prison imploded.

Black glass collapsed into powder around him.

Silas stepped through the falling dust. “That all?”

Rizevim stared. Then he burst out laughing so hard he nearly doubled over. “Oh, I like you,” he said. “I truly do. I might actually feel a bit of regret as I stare down at your corpse.”

Silas did not smile at his words.

Rizevim sighed happily and lifted both hands.

The wasteland behind him unfolded.

Dozens upon dozens of hidden magic circles emerged from beneath the stone, ancient arrays buried for centuries, waiting for activation. Each one hummed with a different nasty little surprise. Curses. Gravity wells. Dragon-binding chains. Spatial loops. Blood boiling hexes. Anti-healing sigils that were currently redundant but amusing anyway.

Rizevim had prepared this battlefield long before Silas arrived. Because one did not survive as long as Rizevim by relying only on improvisation. Improvisation was simply more fun.

Silas’s eyes swept across the arrays.

Rizevim gave him a bloody, delighted bow. “Welcome to the second act.”

And then Rizevim was slammed from behind by a titanic force. Blood spewed out of his mouth as his body was pressed into the dirt. His spine was completely shattered...

All of the traps he had prepared winked out of existence.

– Silas Thorn –

Rizevim Lucifer was not the son of the Devil and one of this world's strongest beings for nothing.

That was the annoying part.

He was insane. He was smug. He was a thousand-year-old drama queen with murder hobbies and a face that made my fist feel spiritually fulfilled every time it connected.

But he was also dangerous. Really dangerous. The first magic circles he had used at the start of the fight had been nasty. These were different.

Lightning crawled over my armor in frantic blue-white veins. My wings flexed behind me, torn and bleeding in places, but still strong. The Nightingale Blade rested in my hand, black metal humming beneath the storm I was feeding through it.

I was one second away from going all out. Full dragon transformation with every shout I could safely use. Unrelenting Force. Whirlwind Sprint. Maybe even Become Ethereal if I could make the timing work. *Not Dragonrend*. Tiamat had been very clear on that one, and I was not stupid enough to shatter my own soul just to prove a point to Lucifer's deranged nepo-baby.

But everything else? Everything else was on the table.

Rizevim gave me a bloody, delighted bow. "Welcome to the second act."

And then a beautiful blue dragon dropped out of the sky like divine punishment with scales.

Tiamat hit him. She came down in a literal blur of sapphire scales and fury, faster than anything that large had any right to move. Her claws struck the ground where Rizevim had been standing, and the entire battlefield folded around the impact.

The shockwave hit me hard enough to skid me backward ten feet even with my wings bracing.

Black stone exploded upward. Magic circles shattered like glass. Silver script winked out mid-activation. Gravity wells collapsed. Curse arrays snapped. Dragon-binding chains dissolved before they even formed.

Rizevim vanished beneath Tiamat's claws. Because she had smashed him straight into the ground. For half a second, there was only dust, falling debris, and the low, terrible sound of Tiamat growling.

Then her voice rolled across the wasteland. "HOW DARE YOU TARGET MY MATE, SPAWN OF LUCIFER!" She sounded angry. That was underselling it.

I stared. My brain, which had been fully prepared for a desperate all-out fight against Rizevim's second act, took one look at the massive sapphire dragon pinning the son of Lucifer under one claw and briefly rebooted.

Her enormous head turned toward me. Sapphire eyes, bright with fury a second ago, softened the instant they found me. Her nostrils flared. She smelled the blood, probably. The burns. The pierced shoulder. The sliced thigh. The torn wing. Every injury Rizevim had managed to put on me before she arrived.

Her pupils narrowed. The growl got worse. Beneath her claw, something twitched.

Rizevim, presumably. It was hard to tell. She had driven him so deep into the ground that only one arm, part of one leg, and a section of ruined silver hair were visible through the cratered stone. His body gave another weak twitch.

Honestly, it was a mystery if he was even alive.

Could not have happened to a nicer guy.

Tiamat looked down at him. Then she pressed her claw a little harder. The ground cracked again.

Rizevim stopped twitching.

Her body began to glow. Sapphire light rolled over scales, shrinking, folding, compressing. Claws became hands. The huge draconic shape receded until the beautiful blue-skinned woman stood where the dragon had been.

Completely naked for some reason. No, not for some reason.

Because she was Tiamat. That was the reason.

She stepped off Rizevim's twitching body like he was an inconvenient rug and began sauntering toward me across the broken battlefield. Her long blue hair swayed behind her. Her horns curved elegantly from her head. Her tail flicked once with lingering irritation. Her hips rolled with every step, and her breasts swayed in a way that would have been extremely distracting if I had not just been stabbed, blasted, and nearly trapped in a magical murder arena.

Okay. It was still distracting.

Tiamat's expression shifted as she reached me. The anger did not disappear, but it changed shape. It turned into worry. Into possessive concern. Her hands came up, claws softened back into delicate blue fingers, and she touched my face first. Then my shoulder. Then the wound at my side where Rizevim's sword had gotten through. "You are bleeding," she said.

"I've had worse." That was technically true, but it was also the kind of thing people said right before every woman in their life decided they were too stupid to self-report injuries honestly.

Tiamat's thumb brushed the blood at the corner of my mouth. "He hurt you..."

"I was hurting him back."

"NOT ENOUGH!"

That was also technically true.

Then something inside me clicked back into place. The soft green warmth of **Twilight Healing** returned all at once, flowing back through my body like someone had opened a blocked river. At the same time, the silver-blue presence of **Divine Dividing** snapped back into place, faint but alive, waiting under my skin.

I blinked. Rizevim's **Denial of the Divine** had stopped working.

Which meant Rizevim was probably unconscious for real now.

Gentle green light spilled across my body. My torn shoulder closed. The cut along my thigh sealed. Bruises dissolved. The ache in my ribs vanished. My wing membrane knitted itself back together, black scales smoothing out as if the last ten minutes of getting creatively stabbed had never happened.

Tiamat watched the healing with narrowed eyes.

I rolled my shoulder, then gave her my best reassuring smile. "I'm fine now."

She did not look convinced.

I tried anyway. "You didn't need to be so worried. Rizevim was no match for me." That was not quite true. It was not even mostly true.

Rizevim and I had been annoyingly well matched before she dropped from the sky like the world's most possessive meteor. He had counters to some of my best tools, centuries of tricks, and enough raw power to make the fight ugly. Without Tiamat showing up, I would probably have needed to transform fully and burn half the wasteland down to get through his second act.

But I was absolutely not going to admit that while naked Tiamat was looking at me like she was deciding whether to scold me, kiss me, or go back and stomp Rizevim again.

Tiamat stared at me for a long moment. Her eyes flicked to the wounds that had just healed. Then to Rizevim's crater. Then back to my face. She knew I was lying. Of course she knew.

But after a moment, her lips curved. "As expected of my mate," she said.

I exhaled. Maybe too soon. Because then she stepped closer.

Her hands slid up my chest, over the Nightingale armor, fingers tracing the lines where Rizevim's darkness sword had scored the plating. Her body pressed against mine, warm and bare and impossibly soft compared to the violence she had just brought down from the sky.

"Tiamat—"

She kissed me. Slowly. Happily. Possessively. Her lips were soft. One hand slid up to the back of my neck. Her tail curled around my ankle. She made a low pleased sound in her throat when I kissed her back, and my dragon instincts—already worked up from the fight—rumbled in approval so loud I was honestly surprised the ground didn't shake again.

For a few seconds, I forgot about Rizevim. Forgot about the battlefield. Forgot about the fact that Sophia was still somewhere underground probably turning a dungeon into a Jackson Pollock painting made of stray devil parts.

Then Sophia's name hit my brain like a hammer. I pulled back.

"Tiamat, SOPHIA—"

"She is alive," Tiamat said immediately.

Relief hit so hard my knees almost forgot their job. Before I could say anything else, I sensed magic nearby. Two signatures. One holy. One demonic. Both powerful enough that the air itself seemed to straighten nervously before they arrived.

A gold-white circle of heavenly light and a crimson Gremory teleportation array flared into existence a few yards away. The two spells overlapped without clashing, which was probably some kind of absurd diplomatic miracle all by itself.

Runeas appeared first, red hair wild, expression irritated, one hand planted on her hip. Gabriel stepped through beside her with silver-white wings folded behind her, and her silver crown glowing softly above her golden hair.

And standing next to Runeas was Sophia.

For one second, all I could do was stare. Her costume was completely bathed in demonic blood from head to toe. Her dark armor was slick with black-red gore. Her hair was damp with it in places. There was a streak across one cheek, another down her neck, and her boots left wet prints on the cracked stone as she shifted her weight.

Runeas waved lazily. "Oh, yes. I also found her while searching for you, Silas." Her eyes flicked over Sophia's gore-soaked costume, and her mouth curled. "We might have to hit her with the hose, though. She stinks like hell... Hehehe."

Sophia's head snapped toward her. "Say that again, you redheaded demon slut."

Runeas blinked. Then she burst out laughing. "Oh, she is wonderful. Why can't my descendants have that kind of spunk too!?"

"She is going to shoot you," I warned.

"I am going to shoot her," Sophia confirmed with a nod.

Gabriel, apparently deciding to ignore that threat for the sake of everyone's dignity, stepped toward me instead. Her beautiful face softened when she saw me standing whole and healed. Those bright blue eyes of hers swept over my armor, the healed places where wounds had been, and then to Tiamat pressed naked against my side like that was a completely normal battlefield arrangement.

Gabriel smiled anyway. "I am glad you are safe," she said.

Sophia stomped toward me before the moment could stretch too long. She moved stiffly, not because she was badly hurt, but because she was absolutely furious and trying to pretend concern was not the first thing on her face. I saw it anyway. The way her eyes flicked over me. Checking. Making sure I was all there.

Then her expression hardened like shutters slamming closed. "It looks like you hunted good too," she said.

I glanced at the crater where Rizevim was embedded. His body twitched once.

Sophia followed my gaze. A vicious grin spread across her face. "Good job."

"Thanks."

She looked back at me. "Now can we get the fuck out of this world already?"

Runeas made a strangled noise.

Sophia ignored her. "You said we'd leave tomorrow," she continued, jabbing one blood-covered finger at my chest. "I want to leave now."

I opened my mouth.

Runeas beat me to it. "ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Her whine echoed across the wasteland with enough dramatic force to qualify as a minor sonic attack.

I winced.

Runeas threw both arms out, looking personally betrayed by the universe. "You just got here! Again! You cannot return after a thousand years, meet your daughters, wake Tiamat, fight Rizevim, and then leave before I even get to drag you back to my mansion properly!"

Gabriel looked shocked too, though in her case it was quieter. Her smile faded, and something sad settled behind her eyes. "You were planning to leave so soon?" she asked softly.

Yeah. That hurt. I rubbed the back of my neck and suddenly became extremely interested in a crack in the ground near my boot. "I don't want to," I said. That was the truth. A messy truth, but still. "I would love to stay longer. I'd love to actually talk to everyone without a crisis happening every fifteen minutes. I want to get to know Astoria and Lyra. I want to spend more time with you, with Runeas, with everyone."

Runeas's pout softened a little.

Gabriel's 12 wings shifted behind her.

Sophia crossed her arms, but she did not interrupt.

I exhaled. "But my homeworld is in a very dangerous situation right now. Worse than when I left the first time." I glanced at Tiamat. "It merged with another Earth."

Tiamat blinked. For once, the ancient dragon goddess looked genuinely thrown. "What the fuck?"

Sophia pointed at her. "See? Even the naked dragon gets it."

Tiamat ignored her, eyes narrowing on me. "Was it the strange golden wave that tore me away from killing the Behemoth?"

"Yeah," I said. "That was probably it. Scion fucked everything up, probably when he realized how outclassed he was by you especially melting a chunk of the moon..."

Her tail lashed hard enough to crack stone. Tiamat's expression darkened. "That golden coward..."

"I'll explain everything when I get back. Earth Bet and another Earth fused together.

Runeas groaned loudly and threw her head back. "No, no, no, I refuse. I absolutely refuse. This is unfair!"

"Runeas—"

"I wanted to invite everyone back to my mansion," she said, voice climbing with theatrical despair. "We could have had wine. Food. Baths. A proper reunion. Do you understand how many fantasies I have had about dragging you back into my bathhouse?"

Gabriel went pink.

Runeas stabbed a finger toward her without looking. "And do not let Gabriel's regal innocent act fool you. She has waited a thousand years for your cock again too!"

“RUNEAS!” Gabriel’s blush went from soft rose to bright scarlet in an instant. Then she flicked her finger. A pulse of silver holy power hit Runeas in the chest and launched her backward like she had been fired from a cannon.

Runeas’s delighted cackle faded into the distance as she vanished over a ridge.

I watched her go. Then looked at Gabriel.

The Allmother of Heaven lowered her hand with immense dignity, her cheeks still flaming. “She was being vulgar.”

“She was,” I agreed.

Sophia snorted.

Tiamat looked amused.

Gabriel’s embarrassment faded slowly, and when she looked back at me, the sadness was still there.

That made me feel worse.

She stepped closer. Tiamat allowed it, though her tail remained wrapped possessively around my ankle. Sophia stood on my other side, still covered in enough gore to make a crime scene technician quit, watching Gabriel with narrowed eyes.

Gabriel reached up and touched my cheek. Her hand was warm. “I understand duty,” she said softly. “Better than most. If your world needs you, then you must go.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. The words felt too small. A thousand years too small. “I’m so sorry, Gabriel. I didn’t know. I swear I didn’t know I was leaving all of you for that long.”

“I know.”

“I wouldn’t have done that to you. To Runeas. To Tiamat. To Astoria or Lyra.”

“I know,” she repeated, and this time her smile came back, fragile but real. “That is why none of us hate you for it.”

That almost made it worse.

“I won’t make you wait a thousand years again,” I said. “I promise.”

Gabriel leaned in and kissed my cheek. Her lips brushed my skin, and for a second, I smelled warm sunlight and something floral that reminded me of open fields I had never actually seen. “You had better not,” she whispered. Then her smile turned just a little mischievous. “Perhaps I want to give Lyra a little sister sooner rather than later.”

My brain stalled.

Sophia made a choking sound.

Tiamat's head snapped toward Gabriel. "Me first," Tiamat grumbled immediately. "It is my turn next!"

I gulped and pretended very hard not to hear that. The fact that my dragon instincts absolutely heard it, took notes, and stamped several mental approvals on the concept was nobody's business.

Gabriel's eyes sparkled faintly, as if she knew exactly what she had done. Angels were dangerous. People did not appreciate that enough. "I will tell Astoria and Lyra what happened," Gabriel said, stepping back. "They will be disappointed, but they will understand. Especially once I explain the situation with your homeworld."

"Tell them I'm sorry," I said. "And that I'll come back as soon as I can."

"I will."

A distant crash sounded from the direction Runeas had been launched. Then an offended voice echoed faintly across the wasteland. "I WAS MAKING A PERFECTLY VALID POINT!"

Gabriel closed her eyes for one second. Then opened them. "If you are going to leave," she said, voice calm and graceful again, "you should do it before Runeas flies back and creates another dramatic scene."

I glanced down at Rizevim's crater. "What about him?"

Tiamat's expression went cold.

Gabriel's did too.

Sophia lifted her blood-soaked crossbow. "Oh, I vote we kill him!"

That sounded incredibly tempting.

But Rizevim was still useful, unfortunately. He knew things. About the Old Satan faction. About whatever traps and plans he had built during his thousand-year tantrum. Killing him right now would be satisfying. Letting Gabriel, Runeas, Tiamat, and the current Underworld leadership rip every secret out of him first was smarter.

It was sadly the smart and heroic path.

Gabriel seemed to read my expression. "We will secure him," she said. "He will not escape our punishments..."

Sophia made a disgusted noise. "Great. Wonderful. Very romantic. Can we go before someone else shows up with another thousand-year-old emotional bomb?"

I looked at her.

She was covered in demonic blood, holding a shadow-fire crossbow, glaring at the entire supernatural world like it had personally inconvenienced her.

I loved her. That realization hit me again, softer this time, but no less real. "Yeah," I said. "Let's go home."

The System responded the moment I reached for it. A blue screen flickered into existence in front of me.

[Mission Objective Complete: Reclaim your dragon waifu!]

[Bonus Objective Complete: Survive the world's most dramatic nepo-baby.]

[Companion Sophia Hess has exceeded performance expectations.]

Sophia leaned over to read it. Her mouth twitched. "Damn right I did."

[Return to Home World?]

I selected yes. White light began to gather around us. Sophia and Tiamat both grabbed onto me.

Gabriel lifted one hand in farewell.

And just before the world vanished completely, Runeas came streaking over the ridge, hair wild, clothes dusty, shouting, "WAIT, I STILL HAVEN'T GOTTEN MY ORGY!"

Then the Underworld disappeared.

XXX