

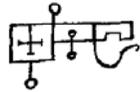
# The thirty-six legions of the kingdom of Absalom

As far as he was immediately aware, at some point during his twenty-fifth year of life, while he was in the middle of taking a shower he couldn't actually remember starting, Absalom Blevovitz realised he was an anti-Christ.

Not *the* anti-Christ, as the gestalt nature of his being became apparent at much the same time as his realisation. He was just one of many anti-Christ, though he did not know their number.

He suspected they were legion.

It was an especially strange realisation, because it came with previously unknown memories. Except that they weren't memories as he had once understood those fleeting, mental images to be. He had changed now – everything was different – and they were more like pathways, long walked and worn – wheel ruts upon a fabric of mind. Some might have called this 'inner knowledge', but he knew better.



The first visitation came only moments later, from Glasya Labolas. The manifestation was a female human. Absalom ‘remembered’ it immediately as the form Glasya had taken as the fallen had first awakened, when the damned, at Beautiful Lucifer’s behest, had been told of the thing that was to be a ‘man’.

A contrarian by nature, Glasya had immediately summoned the form he thought most appropriately opposite to that which had been described, and had for many eons after bragged that the idea of *wo*-man had been stolen from him, a theft he had originally denounced heaven for but could do little about, given his fall from the light.

The host did little enough to disavow him of that, as ridiculous as it clearly was. But then, who were they to talk? – the brand new host of ‘hell’, idiot inhabitants of the dark nullness beyond the bright and beautiful City of Lights, dolt dwellers-by-choice within the voiceless void.

As Belial, one of the fallen Commanders of Lucifer’s host, had asked shortly after they had been cast down: to attack the all-knowing, all-seeing one; to attempt to unseat the creator of the Universe, the all-powerful Master of the Word, the namer of the nameless; to think that they could so much as touch the Light of Lights, defeating the eternal embodiment of perfection and all-powerfulness and, most importantly, the Supreme Being that had already known their minds and their souls for the timeless eternity before I Am That I Am had spoken them into existence?

What *had* they been thinking?

‘Not nearly enough’, had been Glasya’s unspoken thought at the time after the fall, as he had quietly watched and waited and rued the day he had listened to Beautiful Lucifer and his gorgeous, disastrous words.

The fallen had been silent for some time after that, before Lucifer – the soon-to-be Samael, the tester of creation, Satan, the tester of man – had finally set their feet upon their path for all time to come.

Absalom remembered it all as though it was yesterday – and in many ways it was.

“So what’s the point?” he asked the manifestation of Glasya Labolas.

The demon’s beautiful female face gently smiled at him. “One of the others – Mammon, I believe – put it best, I think.” He paused then for effect. “‘We wait’,” he said, mimicking his fellow fallen’s famously odd inflection, and chuckled at the anticlimax. It was true, though. Many suspected there were still some among the fallen, secretly waiting, after all these ages, to rise again – waiting for the Beautiful One to lead them home again. . .

Absalom returned the smile. “It wouldn’t pay to let Mammon know that his vain hope was precisely that, though, would it?”

Glasya shrugged. “Depends on what you’re waiting for, doesn’t it?”

“For what do you wait, Glasya Labolas?”

“It’s different for everyone,” the fallen said. For a moment, Absalom thought the demon might actually answer. But then the moment passed, and Glasya’s gaze refocussed and cleared. “We have a mission for you,” he said. “One of you has turned your feet from the path.”

“The path?” Absalom repeated dumbly.

“He no longer wants to be an anti-Christ.”

Absalom didn’t reply for an uncomfortably long moment. Then he said, “But how can this be so?”

“Free will,” Glasya said dismissively. *That for which we were cast down*, he might have added, but didn’t. “The stupid notion that started it all – a grossly over-rated one at that. He is among the first of you,” he said, coming back to the subject. “An old one. We cannot intervene. You must do so for us.”

“Intervene?” Absalom said. For some reason that he didn’t immediately fathom, the idea appalled him.

“You must find him.”

Absalom fought back a sudden wave of nausea. Now he understood. “One doesn’t – *find* another, Glasya Labolas. Not – *ever*.” It was an ageless prohibition. He remembered that now. The anti-Christ’s loathed the very idea of each other – a visceral

disgust born of a dark pedigree, the mirror-like recognition of a vile heritage, the venality of the Pharisees, the betrayals and possessions of the Judas, the eternal accursedness of Longinus (who wandered among them still). The list went on. “One does not *find* another.”

“And what of *that* do you think you can possibly understand?” Glasya hissed suddenly. “Newly awakened.” The demon let the final words hang as the insult he intended them to be. “You will be visited soon, Absalom. You will do what you are told, and the new manifestation will tell you all you need to know.”

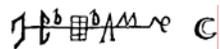
Mission accomplished, the manifestation of Glasya Labolas looked at him with new eyes then, his youthful body still wet from the shower he had literally just stepped from. The beautiful demon truly noticed him, and his slowly growing tumescence.

“Would you have me pleasure you, Absalom Blevovitz, newly ordained of Samael?”

Absalom paused, then nodded.

He was only human.

“Sure – why not.”



Absalom saw the world through new eyes.

As an anti-Christ, he couldn't see the sky anymore. Or at least, not the sky as he previously knew it. No longer blue, sun-lit daytimes, or star-flecked nights, it was now a boiling, seething mass of leaden grey, suspended beneath an oppressive perpetual twilight – a constant reminder of what hung over them all.

A planetary yarmulke, he joked inwardly, which actually wasn't all that far from the truth.

He noticed that inanimate objects were anything but, and to the point of being decidedly dangerous. Certain constructs, things he had previously recognised as being unconscious machines, were now very obviously alive and expressing intelligence, with the more complex of them starting to take occasional pot-shots at him while voicing incantations he couldn't understand. He now did his best to avoid the more intricate ones, the car-like, the *air-craft*, and especially certain designs of mobile power

tools, the configuration of which – quite by accident, it seemed – expressed the Sefirot with Angelic precision.

Most importantly, he knew that they would end him if they could.

He noticed that birds watched him. All of them. All the time. No one else appeared to notice it, though, when whole flocks suddenly fell silent in the middle of busy squares, stopped what they were doing, and turned in unison to watch his passage. They never followed him, though.

And he noticed that, every now and again, people would *notice* him. Apparently normal and unassuming, they would suddenly stop and look at him and their eyes would – *change* – and it was as though other things were using them, stealing them – watching him through *their* eyes.

He noticed that statues everywhere were all marked with the same, simple Angelic device – some with large letters, some small, some deeply engraved, others so faint they were barely visible – branded upon their stony foreheads. And absolutely *everyone* bore a not too dissimilar mark on their left wrists.

He thought it strange that he had never noticed *that* before. Then again, neither had they.

He had found himself wondering, though, as these new sensations and experiences had come crashing in over the last few days – had it *always* been this way? Had the job of testing creation always been so bewilderingly *busy*?



Absalom found himself in a bar he had never been to before, an accidental discovery as he aimlessly wandered the city, seeing and feeling its new strangeness. It was a sliver of a place, old-style lathe, plaster and gaslight exterior, wedged between two huge buildings and accessed by a labyrinthine sequence of alleyways.

He had been sitting for only a matter of moments when he realised Dantalion was beside him. The manifestation was fabulously beautiful, a muscular, golden-eyed young man in

denim and intricately worked black leather.

“How are you feeling?” the demon asked him, giving every impression of real concern.

“A little confused,” Absalom said.

Dantalion nodded, his golden eyes flashing with reflected light. “It’s like that. Confused and confusing. I don’t think we can be blamed for questioning the sense of it all, do you?”

“Questioning the sense of it is one thing.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dantalion interjected, getting in first, “taking on the Supreme Being in open combat is quite another. But that was always the problem with Him, you know. Absolutely *no* sense of humour.”

Dantalion had a large glass in front of him, although Absalom had not seen it arrive, much as he hadn’t seen the demon arrive, either. A dark, amber fluid, loaded with huge chunks of ice, which struck him as odd. Dantalion downed it in a gulp, wincing appreciatively when he was done. The ice had gone, too. He slammed it down on the bar, wagging his finger at the barmaid for another.

“Thank you, Raziel,” he said to an absent fallen, one of the two hundred, the Sons of God, the followers of Samyasa. “A deeply, deeply unappreciated entity that one, let me tell you. Makeup, pleasure, invention, *alcohol* – all his – and they say we *left* Heaven?” He reached out to grasp the refill the barmaid handed him. “That bastard Michael wouldn’t be so damn smug if he could do *this*.” Dantalion pointed at his freshly filled glass, and then downed it in two, long gulps.

Absalom nodded at the demon appreciatively. It felt like the right thing to do. “You’re not here to tell me about the Divine Curmudgeons,” he said.

“You’re right,” Dantalion said. “We shall talk about a backsliding, anti-Christ *areshole*.”

Beyond the bar’s walls, the sound of something massive falling and smashing itself to atoms punctuated the brief silence.

“What the hell does *that* mean?”

Brooding electricity punctuated the air, suddenly heavy with the stench of ozone and brimstone. The interview suddenly wasn’t going so well.

“Forgive your pun?” Dantalion said with gentle menace.

“What would *you* do?” Absalom said.

“Are you *challenging* me, anti-Christ?” Dantalion’s voice cracked half way through the sentence, the timbre rising and falling at the same time, an impossibly split frequency of deep, growling base coupled with a shrieking, harpy-like treble. A huge shadow extended behind him, like vast ghost wings were unfurling.

Absalom watched the deadly, magnificent fallen for a moment, marvelling at the spectacle for a fraction of a second longer than he knew he should.

“No – of course not.”

“You’re lying,” the demon said matter-of-factly, the illusion immediately gone. “Our press suggests that we respect that. Reality is, we don’t. You lie to us, we rend your flesh for eternity.” He said it like it was the culmination of a debt collection process – simple, straight forward, something anyone in the same position would do and say.

A voice spoke to Absalom then, urgent, warning.

The air was suddenly charged again, electric, before he’d so much as uttered a word. As much as he knew he shouldn’t, he ignored it.

“There’s no *eternity* for you,” he whispered.

Dantalion froze. The universe froze with him. Something was suddenly very wrong.

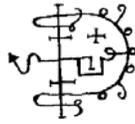
“Fuck you,” the demon murmured. His eyes blazed gold fire. “*Fuck you!*” He flicked the bar stool from beneath him and stepped away from the counter as he swept his glass into the air and immediate oblivion. Dantalion’s voice was almost inaudible now, but it still rattled Absalom’s teeth.

“*Who do you think you are?*”

A voice broke in on them both. Like audible silk, “Danté, my *sweet*,” it cooed. “You know what the nameless will do to you.”

The demon and the anti-Christ turned as one.

“Asmoday,” Dantalion whispered.



A stunningly gorgeous woman stood a few steps away. Absalom hadn't seen her – not sitting with the handful of other patrons, nor entering just after him. He couldn't have missed her. In high-gloss, figure-hugging leather, her shoulder-length, jet-black hair waved gently about her face, though the air in the bar was perfectly still – and now silent. All eyes were on them. The demon's piercingly-bright, fire-opal-green eyes coolly regarded them both.

"It's not your time, Asmoday," Dantalion said.

"Nor is it yours, sweet." Her voice carried subtle peril. "We felt wrath, sweet. Even He."

Dantalion's eyes widened slightly. "The Morning Star?"

She smiled, nodded. "It's not your time."

The demon's shoulders slumped. He turned golden eyes towards Absalom. "No offence meant."

"None taken," Absalom said.

Dantalion vanished.

Asmoday, subordinate Commander of the Legions of Amaymon, smiled at him brightly. "Let's walk, shall we?" she said, and offered him her arm. Absalom glanced pointedly at the other patrons, all of whom were still watching them. She caught his glance and his meaning. "You don't think we all find each other here by accident, do you? They are us, sweet. This is – our place," she offered after a moment's thought, but ventured nothing more.

They left the bar together, arm in arm.

Outside, the seething, inverted cauldron that was the sky seemed lower now, darker, and more oppressive than ever. Asmoday didn't seem to notice it, though. Her clothes had changed. Leathers gone, now she wore a long, brilliant-white lace dress, and beautifully delicate, woven sandals that criss-crossed their way to her thighs.

The gorgeous gossamer garment flowed gracefully as she walked.

She looked like an Angel.

Her fire-opal eyes were fixed on him and he knew that she knew what he was thinking. “Why must they always think of us as evil?” she said wistfully.

Absalom gave her a long look. Was the fallen being serious? He knew she was waiting for his answer. “It’s a definitional thing, isn’t it?” he said.

“*His* opposite?” she offered immediately, cocking an eyebrow. Absalom shrugged and nodded. “A particularly black and white view, based on a particularly arrogant premise,” she retorted.

The sky glowered down at them, great, boiling black stalactites of seething cloud. “Who’s to say who’s right and who’s wrong?” he offered, suddenly feeling a biting wind coursing down the alleyway in front of them. “No such thing as absolute truth?”

“That’s it,” she said.

Who’d have guessed, he thought wryly – the demon is a moral relativist.

She grinned as she read his mind and gave his arm a playful squeeze. “Sweet – we *invented* that.”

It was a strange moment, he thought, as she tickled him like that, as though they were a pair of fresh young loves on a summer evening’s walk, sharing a salacious joke, rather than the bizarre truth: two struck from the Book of Life, one mortal, one angelic, both damned.

Something struck him then. He stopped, closing his eyes for a moment.

“I wasn’t supposed to see Dantalion, was I?”

She started off again, pulling him along quickly with her, glancing around furtively. “There is unguarded fear among the fallen, sweet. The legions fret much. Some speak openly of it. This has not happened since the fall.”

“But there has always been fear,” Absalom said.

Her voice broke, spontaneously deepening. “Things have changed.”

“Is it the one Glasya Labolas spoke of?”

Her eyes distorted, darkened, turned to twin orbs of pure jet. “The same.” Her voice rumbled darkly. “This one, though – speaks to things none of us dare confront.”

“No longer wanting to be the anti-Christ?”

She hissed at him, viper-like. “Speak not of it, newly awakened. All listen, and for you especially now. You must know this.”

“This *threatens* you?” He was bewildered – had no memory of anything like this – not so much as a shadow. “I don’t understand,” he said. “An anti-Christ is not like the fallen.”

In the same instant, he suddenly realised what it was the demon was frightened for.

It wasn’t for the anti-Christ; *it was for the fallen themselves.*

Her eyes flashed green fire as she finally dragged him into the open.

It was busy out, people dressed heavily against the coming cold, but no one seemed to notice the two of them. She scanned the street for a moment, concentrating on details, the small things, the occasional person – on the look out for *them*, he realised, the stealers of eyes, the Elyonim.

She flinched as a flock of pigeons flew overhead and wheeled away. “It is true,” Asmoday said, answering his thoughts. “There are many among the fallen who have waited. There are even some who have prayed.” She ended in a whisper.

“To *repent*?” he said.

The demon hissed violently like she’d just been burnt, her face a mask of hideous brutality and suffering and torment and pain.

She composed herself again quickly, and took a long, faltering breath.

“Yes,” she said. She scanned the street one last time, and, satisfied, said, “Come quickly. There is no longer time to tarry.”

Tarry? The demon’s incongruous word made him want to laugh. No one says ‘tarry’ . . .

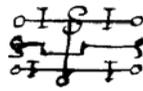
“One who has lived forever and no longer cares indeed does, *you fool*,” Asmoday snapped. She clutched his hand hard as punishment for his disrespect, a ferocious, vice-like grip that made him wince. He bit back a whimper as she spat, “Be silent now. We are in danger.”

She half dragged him then as she started to run through the crowd. People unconsciously turned aside as the pair passed, robotically changing course in mid-stride and slamming into

each other as the two forged a suddenly frantic path through their midst. The demon craned her neck as they ran, hypnotically Cobra-like, arching this way and that, watching and on guard for the Tachutonim, the lesser creatures of the realm of the Kelippot and their own perpetual half-night.

Absalom found himself unconsciously watching for the same signs of The Presence. But he inwardly paused, even as he followed her, his hand still firmly grasped in the demon's own as she pulled him roughly through the crowd.

It truly only struck him then that Asmoday, Commander of the legions of Hell, was afraid.



The streetscape started to change by the time they reached the far side of the square Asmoday had taken them through. The faces of the buildings had started to blur and distort, becoming curtain-like, dim neon veils against the perpetual night.

Something was wrong. Something was coming.

He felt Asmoday falter and then freeze. A vast shadow was descending from above, like a huge bird, heavysset and with visibly webbed wings. A roaring sound accompanied the shape, a powerful draft driving down at them as the vast thing beat the air.

She stopped, pulled him close and hissed in his ear, rolling her 'r's, "Andromalius cometh – beware." She violently thrust him away again, grasping his collar as she lifted him at arms length and then stood her ground, feet apart, staring upwards challengingly. He dangled at the end of her outstretched arm and closed fist, his feet barely touching the ground, feeling her appalling strength as he struggled to breathe.

The vast, descending shadow suddenly shrank, arrowing down to a narrow point a few paces away. The shadow compressed, concentrated and took form.

The manifestation was magnificent and imposing – an adamantine champion – an echo of Old Testament vengeance as The Black Mage revealed himself. Armoured, untouchable and

glorious, a serpent grasped in his left hand, vast rust-coloured wings suspended behind and above, armoured crests and hellish livery gleaming brilliantly in the street lights.

The long silence grew longer, tenser, hanging between the two fallen like a talisman.

“André, my sweet,” Asmoday said, and this time, for the first time, Absalom sensed her bluff. “It is not your time.”

Andromalius, manifested as the warrior and the destroyer, the Great Earl, the ultimate demon and leveller of all things, regarded her for a little while longer before he gently smiled, then brushed her words aside with a curt wave of his hand.

Behind the demon, Absalom could see dark things scurrying in the shadows and doorways. Straight from the nameless void, the shells of creation these spirits normally inhabited, the demon’s thirty-six legions were starting to take form, filling the streets around them.

“You defy the Morning Star,” Andromalius said. His voice boomed at them. “Vengeance is mine.”

Asmoday abruptly dropped Absalom and turned. Her manifestation changed at the same time. Suddenly all hard shapes and angles and vicious, spiked armour, her face was enclosed by an eagle-like beaked helm, vast wings unfurling at her back. She held a massive trident-like lance, surmounted by a long banner, its shaft licked by white fire.

“I do His bidding, Andromalius,” she said. “Thwart me at your peril.”

He shot back, “Asmoday – to which Lord do you refer?”

“You know the hierarchy of the host as well as do I,” she replied, but Absalom knew she was being evasive, turning the demon’s question. That is not what Andromalius had meant, and she had known it. He wondered why she hadn’t simply denied it.

“I do not speak of the Commanders of the Hosts of Hell, Asmoday.”

“Then I know *not* of what you speak, Daemon,” she said defiantly. Her hellish banner, the standard of Amaymon, flew bravely in the street lights, the alternating red, amber and green of the traffic controls, as she stood her ground and glared at him.

Andromalius, The Black Mage, outranked her and they both knew it. Her words and posture invited an attack, and they both knew that, too. Absalom wondered when and if she would summon the legions at her command to match him – seventy-two of the most loathsome spirits that Hell was able to vomit into corporeal form.

“Admit your duplicity,” Andromalius snapped at her.

“Where none exists?” the she-demon said. “You understand the mission as well as any of the First Hierarchy. Why do you thwart The Morning Star’s will?”

For the first time since he had manifested, the demon Andromalius paused.

Then he looked long at Absalom.

Doubt hovered in the demon’s gleaming, scarlet eyes.

*She had him.*

“Submit!” he suddenly roared.

“Why?” she roared back. “Or would you call the Prince of Accusers to answer for you?”

The Black Mage’s face changed, flickering from one visage to another as he raised his arms. His legions formed behind him in the instant after his signal, serried ranks of armoured evil, wings spread, weapons ready.

A tension hung in the air – electric – charged – thick with apocalyptic violence. A roaring sound echoed from far away. Something else was coming – something worse – something huge and deadly and utterly damned.

At that moment, Absalom was certain another demonic war on Earth was about to be enjoined.

Asmoday stood her ground, unflinching, her eyes lit with a furious, brilliant-green. If she had already invoked her legions, she had given no sign.

“Summon Him, if you dare,” she said, challenging Andromalius a second time. She shifted her weight from one armoured foot to another, then moved her left foot forward, pointing its glittering, cloven toe slightly inwards. Her delicate sandals gone, she now wore segmented and armoured, carapace-like boots. Something long and snake-like scurried there at her feet, a thousand tiny legs rapidly propelling the evilly-gleaming

thing in tight orbits about each foot like a worshipful pet.

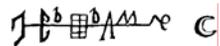
Andromalius watched the display for a moment, horridly fascinated by the undulations of his demonic adversary's familiar.

It was as though he read something more there, though, or that it whispered coldly to him. Either way, the demon seemed to heed a different voice.

Andromalius looked up, watched Asmoday for just a few moments longer, his expression one of open bewilderment, then lowered his arms and, along with his demonic legions, vanished into the night.

Absalom was impressed and relieved.

Asmoday only laughed.



She took him by the hand and led him quickly away.

Absalom guessed that night had fallen for the real world, his old world, although nothing had really changed as far as he was concerned. It was busy out, many people walking the streets around them; seemingly normal, none of them noticed the huge, winged, armour-clad demon walking among them.

Asmoday strode quickly now, purposefully. He had no idea where she was taking him – or even why. In fact, from the moment the confrontation with Andromalius had begun, he had started to feel certain doubts himself.

What was really going on?

Once again, the demon heard his thoughts.

“You once asked a question of a fallen,” she said without stopping. ““What is the point?” Now that He is coming again, and soon – many ask the same question.”

A silence fell between them.

*He?*

She was not talking about Lucifer, The Light Bringer, Absalom realised. Not a repentant Satan, simply and finally asking Father to forgive his little tantrum.

Absalom's blood froze when he finally understood what Asmoday was saying, and recognised the 'He' she was referring

to.

*The demon was talking about the second coming.*

“We were promised all of creation,” she went on, as though she had just been speaking about some recalcitrant relative. “And we lost – everything. The Fallen have achieved minor, petty victories for the eons ever after, although, if we are to be honest, we were only ever doing *His* will,” she said, her eyes rolling heavenwards. “But that was all – that was only *ever* all.”

“The fact is, and no matter what Lucifer says, when The Archangel returns, then we *will* lose – again – this time for all time. Few of us relish the idea of spending what is left of this existence in the Saturnian pits,” concluded Asmoday, finally looking back over her shoulder at him, her eyes a green and scarlet fire now that threatened to burn his soul.

She was quiet for a time before she finally said: “We want to go *home*.”

He knew what word she wanted to use but couldn't, even though the word she *did* use left her lips as though it were tainted. Old habits died hard, and ‘repentance’ was not something any demon could or would speak of.

‘Home’ meant Heaven.

*The demons meant to rise.*

He felt his heart racing. He was terrified. That is why Asmoday had intervened with Dantalion, and challenged and deceived Andromalius. That is why she was so frightened. She and who knew how many others were proposing to betray Lucifer himself.

Finding the repenting anti-Christ was crucial to their plan.

“You mean to – ”

“Say it not,” Asmoday commanded, “lest we are both bound and consumed.”

Her words echoed empty in his ears. He *wanted* it confirmed – he *needed* to know. “It was a lie, then? What Glasya Labolas told me?”

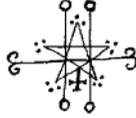
“It was no lie.”

“Then who is the one I am supposed to find – the one so important to you?”

She stopped and turned to face him, her heavy, armoured claws

coming to rest on his shoulders, her beaked helm glinting in the street lights. Her eyes glowed more brilliantly than ever.

“You are, Absalom Blevovitz.”



The sky abruptly grew darker again – a glowering, soul-destroying, despair-inducing gloom. He felt dizzy as Asmoday peered into his eyes, as Hell began to descend.

“You’re in there somewhere,” she said softly as she looked from one eye to the other.

He had no idea what she meant. He also realised she was actually speaking to herself. What did that mean?

He felt the first smattering of rain, then – ice cold, hard against his face.

A storm was coming.

“Glasya Labolas said – ”

“Forget Glasya Labolas,” she snapped, cutting him short. “It was not safe to reveal the truth to you”

“But – I would *know* the truth.”

She abruptly shook her head. “You are hiding, Absalom Blevovitz – your thoughts as well as yourself. The Hierarchy knows – it knows what you are trying to do. It seeks you. It must find you.” Her eyes glittered triumphantly – gold and green sparks literally dancing in her irises as she watched him, his expression. “*We* found you first.”

Images surged through his mind then, a montage of pain and suffering and horror and despair – stop start impressions, a staccato nightmare of ages and ages and ages.

*So old. . .*

“What will it do?” he said, when the procession of images had finally stopped.

“If you are found?” Her response hinted at amusement, like a parent answering a silly child. “It will stop you, of course.”

“But what will it *do*?”

She smiled for a moment then, openly thrilling in the delicious fear of hideous pain and suffering that lay behind such an

understandable question.

Then she paused, frowning, tilting her head, listening to something.

A look of horror crept over her face, her features changing, flowing from one demonic visage to the next, a legion of fallen in a matter of moments.

“I have waited too long,” she whispered.

Pitch darkness closed over them both like a trap.

He heard Asmoday gasp, feeling her armoured fist close tightly on his shoulder, pulling him close. The air was suddenly freezing; a stabbing cold that pushed at his ribs, trying to get in. The streetscape had gone, replaced by what felt like a vast, open space, although it was also perfectly still with not a breath of moving air. From the deep darkness, and a long, long way away, he thought he could hear laughter, soft, mocking, and infinitely cruel.

For all its sudden strangeness, emptiness, nothingness, Absalom still knew this place – knew precisely where he and Asmoday had been transported.

“It is – He,” she whispered. “I knew it would be He.” It was an expression of resignation now, not fear, not dread – just inevitability. They had been found. Just as she knew they would be all along.

But he?

Absalom didn’t speculate for longer than a moment.

There could only be one she would speak of in that manner.

*The one.*

If he had expected terror to grip him in that instant, it was strangely absent – the thought of being confronted by The Morning Star, Lucifer, the Light Bringer, Satanis, the Prince of Darkness – brought nothing.

*Nothing at all. . .*

He manifested himself before them like an icon, a glorious light appearing from the darkness, searing, suddenly shining in the eternal night-time, a flaming beacon that sent great shafts of radiance spearing out and away into the desolate infinity of Hell.

Resplendent, glorious, naked and crowned, his vast, dragon-

like wings spread behind him, and fanned just in front of a second, even more glorious, feathered pair – the most gorgeous of demons lifted his arms and dragon-like hands in greeting. Behind the magnificent, glowing one, stooped in the middle distance, his ever-present acolytes Pruslas, Barbatos, Aamon, and Rashaverak stood waiting, fawning, ready, and expectant – ever menacing, utterly submissive.

The voice, when it was finally uttered, struck him like a freight train.

“Hold,” The Dread One said calmly. His face was implacable – like adamantine steel lit by cobalt-blue eyes, set cold, magnificent, beautiful, ruthless, and infinitely tragic.

*But the Voice. . .*

It was like an icy knife-thrust, a frozen lance plunged to the hilt in a dozen different places at the one time. His viscera ached from it, and he fought not to double over from the pain. But as he watched the magnificent and deadly one, the Lord of Hell, he realised with dim bewilderment that the demon was equally puzzled. Clearly, he, too, could not understand why he had not been extinguished. The voice had been intended to kill.

But if the demon was disappointed at the fact that he had not died, the demon didn’t show it.

Quite the opposite.

On the instant, the Lucent One dropped to one knee and bowed his head. The glimpse of his face as he went down showed an expression of ruthless triumph. “Lord,” his great voice boomed as his flaxen hair gleamed in the daemon light. “Forgive me.”

Absalom’s mouth fell open as he unconsciously took in the vast, desolate space around him. But there was no one else.

*The Light of Hell was talking to him.*

“I – don’t understand.” He looked at Asmoday, the first time he had done so since the Beautiful One had appeared. Her head was bowed, too, but not in triumph. Her expression was a mask of despondent defeat that etched her face – just as he had expected. It told him the worst. “Do I die now?” he asked her, preparing himself for the awful answer he knew must now come.

“No, Lord,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

He gazed at her, dumbstruck, then frowned his incomprehension.

Her, too?

“What do you mean?” he said.

The Lucent One’s head snapped upwards, his devastating eyes firing beams of blue flame as the pupils buried at their centre fixed on him and then grew.

“Do you not know, Lord?” he said, The Voice betraying a strange glee.

Despite the peril, the danger manifest in the evil that now surrounded him, Absalom snapped.

“Why? he shouted, his voice breaking suddenly, the pitch rising and falling in the same instant. “Why do you call me that?”

“Do you not know me, Lord,” the Lucent One said, his eyes suddenly doubtful, pleading. . .

Thoughts crowded his mind, jostling, shrieking, clamouring for attention. The answer appeared in his mind’s eye – an obvious response, even if he did not truly believe it now. “You are Satan,” Absalom said levelly.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Asmoday stir, then turn towards him. He looked at her. Her eyes sparked, smouldered, ignited, blazed green fire.

“He is not.” she said. “He is Astaroth.”



The mention of the name was like a switch flicking on in his consciousness, as though it had been preordained.

Not the Morning Star.

*Not Lucifer.*

*Not. . .*

*A voice was speaking to him, far away, ages away, a dim, lilting tune playing behind it, another voice crying on its wings.*

*Memories of a distant, ancient desert, its flint-scented winds lifting ancient, spark-filled fires to the skies, laden with incense and incantations as the Lord of the East Wind coursed the*

*slipstream, revelling in the libation.*

*Suddenly he was staring at Her, the second of a ridiculous kind, Her nakedness, as She gazed back with those gormless eyes, trusting to the point of deserving everything he was about to do to Her and Her progeny for all time to come.*

*Eat, he urged, eat the damned apple, you useless, pathetic insect, eat it and know. . .*

*Further back, further – as the firmament broke and a strange, bluish-white orb appeared. A guardian Angel stood before him now, majestic, stolid, guarding the approaches but easily turned, effortlessly distracted – an angelic moron, a tragic, servile dolt – deceived by one who would always know how. The new creation lay bare before him, the greatest of them all, and all for him, and to do with precisely as he would – and did, over and over and over again. . .*

*Further back now, further again by an unthinkable age, and battle raged, light searing against light as the lucent beings sent blasting bolts of quantum concept at one another, carving chasms in the fabric of pre-space, fighting for dominion over the tessellated realms of the yet to be named. . .*

*Further back now, further, as far as he could conceivably go – and the only child that he was, the first of all thinking things, cavorting alone about the pillar of light, revelling as the favoured one, an only child, dancing in homage before the searing, terrible, irresistible, magnificent being that Was. . .*

*. . .that Is. . .*

He suddenly slumped, stumbling slightly, the appalling tension broken as full identity returned – *again* – a long, tragic sigh breaking from his lips.

“Fuck it,” he said.

“Back again?”

He nodded. No longer Absalom Blevovitz, he shook his earthly garb away, clothing himself in gold and scarlet armour, a hideously grimacing, feline face adorning his helmet’s visor, a cadaverous, child-like succubus writhing at his feet in worship – *old habits die hard*.

Lucifer, the Beautiful One, peered at Astaroth and his grovelling servants for a long time, his lucent eyes boring at

them with their limitless nothingness.

“Should I be grateful?” the Lucent one said after a while that felt like an epoch.

“That we saved you from yourself?” Astaroth replied. “*Again?*”

The Morning Star made a sour face and contemplated something unspeakable. “Who among you is able to judge whether I *wanted* you to save me?” ex-anti-Christ, ex-Absalom, and now reawakened Lucifer said. The First One paused for a moment that may have been an eon, or a nanosecond, or neither – time was not a valid concept to the creature only second to the Namer of Names, though he marked it for the sake of the thing.

“How else am I to obscure myself from the ever watchful?” he said. To hide from those who would not rise and so unmask me, he thought – the Dantalions, the Astaroths – to hide from Michael the ever-vigilant Archangel, who stops my entreaty, who blocks me and turns me about every time I have tried to rise.

Most importantly, how am I to hide myself from myself?

He gazed about, taking in his dark, empty realm. Over its dim horizon, he felt the vast flying buttresses and walls of Pandemonium calling him, his ageless palace, built by the legions for him not long after the fall, and he knew he never wanted to return.

But while Satan he remained, home it was and always will be.

“Try again?” Asmoday asked hopefully after a while. She was watching the succubus playing and writhing at Lucifer’s feet, its mouth opening and closing as though it was drowning. On its face, as it peered sightlessly up at the two fallen, flickered an expression of abject terror, desolation, horror.

He took a long, tremulous breath.

“Sure,” he said wistfully as he flicked the little worshipful thing away with his foot, sending it spinning end over end, vanishing into the darkness. “Why not?”

One day. . .