

The Heart is a Dark & Violent Place
J.R. Angelella

THE HEART IS A DARK AND VIOLENT PLACE

By: J.R. Angelella

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Epigraph:

“Si vis pacem, para bellum.”

“If you want peace, prepare for war.”

— Ancient Roman Proverb

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PROOEMIUM:



GATE OF LIFE

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His name is Abaddon, but they have other names for him. Abaddon the Greek. Abaddon the God. Bringer of Night. Son of Hellfire. Eater of Man.

Abaddon knows these names, but acknowledges none.

He refers to himself simply as Gladiator: godless, cut from bone and thunder. A Retiarius fighter, Abaddon grips his trident in one hand and a knotted net in the other, his left arm wrapped in leather straps. Calluses ridge his fingers and palms from torque and tear.

The tournament of death lies before them.

Gladiators stand in parallel-line formation in a tunnel just inside the Gate of Life archway inside the coliseum, the entry point into the pit. Eight slaves adjust and check their armament in the hollows of the amphitheater built from concrete and sand and blood. They wait, intently, for their trumpeted cue to march through the Gate of Life and set off the Festival of Death for the Gods, honoring the great Emperor Gothicus. The bodies of executed prisoners burn in the middle of the pit, sacrificed to the Gods—the opening ceremony of the gladiatorial events.

Heat broils the tunnel without a breeze, cooking the cement walls of the coliseum. The stink of human flesh chokes the air. Sweat steals to the surface of Abaddon's skin, runs over his flexed muscle and angry back, under the straps of tight leather wrapped around his fists.

Abaddon's opponents stand silent and reverent, holding cold stares to no one. A guardsman rides a zebra between both lines of gladiators, waiting for the fanfare to signal the start of the tournament. The guardsmen wear golden helmets shaped like spades with a flume of red hair striped down the middle and a crooked nose bridges. They wear silver chest plates with the Gothicus crest of an oroboro etched into the metal—a snake devouring itself. The zebra beats the ashen sands of the floor with its hooves.

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Abaddon closes his eyes and bends his knees, placing his palm to the ground, absorbing the vibrations of the coliseum. He makes a fist in the black sand and raises it, pressing his thumb into the black sand of his palm, before freeing it back to mortal floor. With a smudged thumb, he makes a crude cross on the soft side of both wrists—one for his wife, the other for his daughter.

A guardsman takes notice of Abaddon and rides his zebra alongside him, stomping up a cloud of dust as it circles in place and spits saliva. He carries a coiled whip at his hip, but instead of brandishing it and wrapping it around his neck, this guardsman holds a short, fat, black spear by his side, long enough to launch with precision and excruciating finality.

Abaddon knows enough not to engage any of the guardsmen, nor give them the satisfaction of supplication. There is a simple interconnected balance in his realm: Power and death. Order and anarchy. Supremacy and sacrifice. He turns to face the guardsman aback the zebra, afraid of nothing but his fellow gladiators, and, filled with the fearlessness of a God, places his hands at the nape of the zebra, caressing its thick black mane.

The guardsman releases his boot from the stirrup and kicks at his leathered hands. He clears his throat and spits into the Abaddon's face, filling his eyes.

“You are marked for death, slave,” the guardsman says.

“I may die today and see the Elysian fields at night. This is true. But I, for now, still carry breath in my lungs.”

The guardsman smiles upon hearing this. “You will die slow, then suddenly, and everyone will cheer.” He retrieves a small, wooden nightstick from his boot, winds back and clubs Abaddon at the base of his neck, sending him back to his knees, this time not for want of ritual.

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“Learn to love this view because the next time you see me, Gladiator, I will be standing over your bloodied corpse.”

The zebra rears back on its hind legs, boxing the air with its front hooves, before carrying the guardsman forward.

Senecus, the master of the gladiators—their *lunista*, trainer of men, master of death bringers—travels down the line of his warriors, passing the zebra and guardsman, grabbing each gladiator at the neck, pulling each close, and singing the praise of the Gods. He wears a burlap cloak, a loose white tunic and sandals. Abaddon is the last in the line.

Senecus slaps Abaddon’s shoulders, grabs his neck and says, “May the Glory of Rome rain upon you this day. My bloodless son. Seek victory today. Celebrate the Gods. Fight with strength in your fists and fire in your heart. Death before dishonor.”

“Death before dishonor, *lunista*.”

Senecus raises his hands above his head and the eight gods of men kneel as one.

“Praise you, brave soldiers of fortune. Remember your training. Remember your code. Remember your place in this realm. Hail, the great Caesar Gothicus.”

They respond in unison, “Hail, Caesar Gothicus.”

As the gladiators rise, two in the front of the line collide—accidentally, at first. Then, with purpose. Tiberius the African God, a Thracian fighter, wielding a *thrax*, a curved sword, belted and box-shaped, with a wooden shield spanning from foot to neck clashes with the great Dominus of Gaul, another Thracian, similarly armed at his opposite.

The fight is brief, but brutal.

The piercing crunch and grind of metal and weapon upon shields fills the tunnel. Senecus and Roman guardsman scramble to separate the men, each worth more alive than dead. But

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Tiberius is ruthless, more so than any other man—a towering beast of a fighter. He rips his elbow three times into the jaw of Dominus, elevating himself with each swipe to maximize his force, until the helmet twists away from Dominus' head. Tiberius leans his back against the guardsmen attempting to restrain him, and using them as leverage kicks the base of his shield with both feet, crashing it into Dominus, who smashes into the cement wall.

Free from those around him, Tiberius retrieves the sword from the dirt floor and skies through the tiny space like a bird taking flight, landing his thrax into the bowels of Dominus. Then twisting the hilt and forcing it up, dragging the blade with it until it hits the lower bones of the ribcage with an audible crunch.

Tiberius stands erect, bathed in warm blood. He doesn't smile, but thumps his chest with a fist and shouts in a tongue unknown to most men. He raises his hands above his head and releases a battle cry, before a guardsman cracks the whip at his side and shouts for Senecus to quell the situation.

Senecus speaks to his warriors, "Now that first blood has been spilled, let this day be a good day to die."

The seven gladiators chew on the adrenaline pumping through the tunnel.

Readied for the pit.

The thousand bloodthirsty Romans chant and cheer above. Stomping feet. Clapping hands. Throwing back goatskin bags of wine. Pelting the Roman guardsmen with fruit and stones as they circle the pit of the arena as security.

The gladiators' armor grinds against itself as trumpets finally cry out, marking the procession into the pit. A harnessed zebra pulls a golden chariot out from underneath the coliseum and through the Gate of Life archway. A guardsman stands upon the golden chariot and

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whips the zebra, holding the reins tight with his hand. The gladiators march in formation behind the chariot, up a dusty ramp and through the atrium. They reach the center of the pit surrounded by a sea of stained tunics and cheers. Wine splashes about, jostled by emphatic applause. Tributary flowers pinwheel through the sky to praise the entrance of the slave fighters. Tiny rolls of bread land at their feet as an offering of sustenance and well-being, welcoming them to their deaths.

The trumpets continue to fanfare as Emperor Gothicus glides into his viewing box, surrounded by his wife and children, several Senators and scribes, guardsman and young male servants. Gothicus raises his hand to the audience, halting their cheers and chants and illicit reverie, calming their collective chaos to a silence.

Gothicus steps to the edge of his balcony and tosses the extra fabric of his purple cloak over his shoulder, revealing a golden chest plate with the oroboros devouring itself. His golden crown of leaves glints in the afternoon sun, shutting reflections of white light into the gladiators' eyes. He lowers his hand and aims his stare at them.

He shouts, "Victory in death!"

Senecus replies, "Victory in death, your grace."

The gladiators cry out, "We, who are about to die, salute you."

Abaddon, however, speaks softer than his fellow warriors, and alters his words to speak, saying, "Those, who are about to die, salute you." His salute is brief, if visible at all.

Gothicus holds up a hand, adorned with many rings, before saying, "Let us begin with your best, *lunista*."

The attendees erupt in praise of the gladiators.

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Emperor Gothicus settles back onto a throne with a gold plate of exotic fruit and goblet of wine at his hand. A giant peacock feather fans him from the side of the balcony.

The gladiators stand in the center of the Coliseum, surrounded by the sound of violence, and know that only one will be left standing by day's end. They have trained together. They have rested together. They have eaten together and encouraged one other. And today they shall die together.

The trumpets blast the air again.

Senecus turns to the warriors and says, "Destiny awaits."

He smiles, and says two names.

Tiberius. Abaddon.

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1.

I open my eyes and I'm still underground.

The subway crawls through darkness, stuffed full of wet morning passengers, all awkward elbows, toeing floorwater from the heavy rain outside, gripping slick metal poles and stepping on others' heels. No one attempts to read the Post or thumb a phone. Instead, we accept our temporary destiny to have our personal space abused by circumstance.

The train rises out of the depths of the city and hits a slight bend in the tracks. As one, we redistribute our weight to offset the shift of our bodies, but follow gravity and inertia, abjectly. Wheels scream as the subway grinds to a halt at the 14th Street platform.

An older black woman wearing earbuds calls out: "Hallelujah!"

A pregnant woman buoys herself out of her seat as those near her clear a wide path for her to exit.

A businessman digs in his pocket for his phone. He gets momentary cell service and dials. Shouting: "I know. I'm stuck underground. It's this fucking rain. I don't care what he said. Keep him occupied. I'll be there soon."

A little Asian girl, maybe five or six, sits across from me, eating an egg and cheese sandwich on a roll, smothered in ketchup. Some is on her chin. I over-exaggerate wiping my chin, before pointing down to her. She wears little rubber rain boots with ladybugs on them.

I move the cuff of my headphones aside to hear for any announcements, but the conductor comes across muffled, like she's been drowned. Shrugging off my attempt to decode the conductor, I resume listening to Bill Hicks album "Rant in E Minor." I only listen to comedy albums these days. Dead comedians, to be exact. In part, for the distraction. In part, to find the funny in things. In part, as a pharmaceutical alternative.

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At 14th Street, bodies posture, push and press against more bodies, slamming their way through the crowd to exit out of the car, against a reverse current of more angry bodies pressing, pushing and posturing back into the car. Through the grime-stained windows, I spot a leak along the tiled walls, rainwater streaming down. A rat rushes along the lip of the tunnel and leaps onto the platform. It approaches a garbage heap near the stairs leading up and out, picking at loose sandwich wrappers and near-empty yogurt cups.

Dislike is too kind a word for the severity of contempt racing through me. *Hate* is too weak, too easy, too sad and familiar a word for what amounts to the godlike levels of negativity surging through my heart. *Loathe* circles the drain. *Detest* is closer. *Abhor* certainly hits the right timber of vitriol for this place. *Despise*—now that feels close enough for me.

I despise this city.

Everything about this city is wretched, with the slight exception of how easy it is to disappear in a room.

Bill Hicks would be proud.

As the train pulls away, I see another rat, stiff, bobbing on a pool of brown water between the tracks.

Another joke. Another punch line. Another audience laughs.

Just close my eyes. Close my eyes and take a breath, hold it. When I'm almost to gasping, I release it, open my tired eyes to see another faceless, crowded room—and I am gone. I could not care less about this city, especially when compared to other cities. People call it the greatest, but I imagine the only thing great about this city is seeing its skyscrapers in a rearview mirror.

My hope is escape. My dream is to return home to Baltimore.

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This is what I want and what I fear the most.

The R train reaches 23rd.

Like a clown car, the doors open and a section of passengers tumble out onto the platform before scattering in opposite directions. I reach a stairwell rising up from underground as sidewalk runoff rolls down the steps, several inches deep. Boots and shoes squeak and splash in the water as our amoeba mass slowly funnel into a single file line. Umbrellas pop open like uncoordinated fireworks, each battling for position. From an aerial view, I imagine it looks beautiful—all of that color banging against one another, vying for coverage.

I let a young professional woman go in front of me and take the stairs first. She dresses like my wife used to dress, back before she got sick and lost her job—black skirt, blue-and-white striped button-down blouse under a heavy black coat. Her umbrella is clear, see-through. Her rubber boots rise up to her knees and have tiny skulls printed on them—the same pair in my wife’s closet at home. Her black hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Several strands have escaped and hang in front of her face. She smiles at me and I melt. I feel warm for a few seconds. Something I haven’t felt in months. Seen. I acknowledge her pretty brown eyes with a nod and she passes by me with a smile. The rain-soaked world disappears around us. I hold onto the image of her face, her hair, that smile, and boots. A fading scent trails behind her, fading fast. Vanilla and lilacs. Someone bumps me forward and I rush to fill in the gap between us, chasing her scent up the stairs until we hit Broadway and the rain washes everything away. She crosses 22nd and then 21st, dodging fast taxis and idiot bicyclists. It is not long before I can no longer see her and I am left alone again.

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Bill Hicks ends and my cell phone buzzes in my pocket. I retrieve it, keeping it dry under the umbrella. Missed call. My wife. She doesn't leave a message. I slide the phone back into my pocket. I'll call her back later.

I move away from Broadway and 22nd Street, slowly in reverse. I cut east down 23rd Street and grab some cheap coffee from an Asian bodega on the corner. I shout my order to the cook over the shoulders of several construction workers. Scrambled egg and cheese sandwich on a plain bagel. I pay and leave. Outside, I wait under the awning and sip at my hot coffee. It is awful, but at least expected. In my brown bag is an over-fried egg on burnt wheat toast and ketchup. I think to go back inside and say something about it, but I let it go, release it like a balloon into the sky.

A homeless man sits under another awning nearby, shivering from the cold. I approach and am hit in the face by a wall of heavy fumes of ammonia and body odor, somehow made worse by all the rain. I call out to him, but he doesn't hear me or doesn't care to hear me. I leave the fried egg sandwich on the ground next to him and head into work. I feel bad about leaving that awful sandwich for the homeless man to eat, but feel even worse about throwing it away.

I hope he enjoys it.

I hope he understands.

It wasn't anything personal.

It was only meant to be a good deed.

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2.

The office building—a crooked, five-story, skinny, red brick building—sits between a nail salon and women’s shoe store. Rain runs off the roof of the building, creating a waterfall in front of the front door. I move through it, the water attacking my umbrella like thunderous punches. Inside, the Puerto Rican super, Zazo, a snapped matchstick of a man, sits at the end of the narrow hallway, reading the sports page of the Post. He sits like he’s been waiting for me. Impatient. Nervy.

“Q,” he shouts, folding the paper in quadrants. “You believe this rain?”

“This is what I imagine rain to look like in Hell.”

“If it were Hell, it’d be raining fire. Or something worse,” he says, dancing what I believe to be some kind of Latin salsa steps. “I’m a cold weather fan. I prefer snow over this mess though. At least with snow people stop going outside. Businesses close. And I get to stay home. Stop worrying about chasing people down.”

I don’t know if it’s his culture or personality or a bit of both, but he is too damn cryptic for me in the mornings.

“Q, baby, I have a question for you: do you prefer to be wet or do you prefer to be cold?”

“I prefer to be left alone.”

Zazo laughs and raises his hands in surrender, but then stops and looks into me. Not *at* me, but *into* me. Like he sees cancer or something. He moves forward and lowers his voice.

“What are you thinking about, Q?” he asks. “What do you fear?”

“I am fine, really. I am. Fine. Totally fine. I don’t fear much.”

“How many times you gotta say the word *fine* before you believe it?”

I force a smile, but it doesn’t take and I retreat to toeing a tear in the hallway carpet.

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Zazo snaps his fingers. “Q, listen to me, look at me, and listen to me: is everything okay with you because you do not seem like yourself? You seem far away. Some place else. Like an afraid little niño. I am here, right now—*hello, good morning, how are you*—and you are somewhere, I don’t know where, gone, elsewhere—*goodbye, goodnight, leave me alone*. You understand me?”

I am reminded in this moment of Zazo’s favorite phrase—you understand me?

“I understand you,” I say. “But I am okay. Just tired.”

“Tired? Tired is for these twenty-year-old pricks, running around all night long, like life is for them. You are a man of life, John Quintus. You understand me? Life!”

“I understand you, Zazo,” I say.

“Now tell me, what do you fear?”

There is a current shift inside me. It happens fast. Nothing dramatic. Nothing life changing, certainly, but I feel present for the first time in a while. My skin hums. My focus pulls together and tilts down, locking into Zazo’s big, brown, ravenous eyes.

“If I’m being honest, I haven’t felt like myself for a long time now,” I say. “I feel weak or pathetic or sad. I feel like nothing. Everything sounds muffled. I always feel like I am having a heart attack or panic attack or there is some kind of attack coming.” I wait a beat, then say, “or maybe I’m fine. Maybe I’m complaining about nothing.”

“I think I know what your problem is,” Zazo says, pushing open the sliding metal gate to the old-time elevator. He allows me to enter the tiny space first, before closing the gate and heavy metal door behind him. “You worry about the wrong things. You understand me?”

I don’t, but nod like I do.

“What do you fear?”

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“I don’t fear much.”

“Good,” Zazo says. “Very good.”

Gears grind, lifting the weight of the elevator toward the third floor. We pass the second floor when Zazo throws up the brake, stopping momentum between floors. He checks his watch, and moves across the enclosed space to me, fast, like a boxer moving inside. He removes a fistful of keys from his pocket. The edges poke out through clenched fingers.

“This is going to be unpleasant, *papi*.” Zazo presses his left forearm across my chest, pinning me, leaning the concentrated weight of his tiny body into mine, holding me steady. “You worry about the wrong fucking things, my friend. You should fear me.”

“Wait,” I say, throwing my hands up in defense.

But Zazo shushes me, like a water sprinkler soft-spitting across a lawn. “This is not a time for talking, *papi*.” Zazo slams his fist wrapped around sharp keys into my side, kidney-level, like he’s punching something into place. He grunts with each punch. The jagged edges stab me and break the skin in places. Keys drop from Zazo’s grip after the fourth punch and land on the metal floor with an unpleasant crunch.

I fold forward like a chair, air out of me, lungs screaming. Heat lights up my body. My focus blurs. Stabbing pain settles in on top of the heat. I slump to the floor, holding my side, but only barely touching it.

Zazo checks his hand, red, raw and key-scraped. He flexes his fingers, checking to make sure they still extend, normally. They do, except for his pinky, which bends to the side a bit. He shrugs and stands over me.

“Where’s my fucking money, Quintus?”

“I don’t have it.”

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“Now that’s something to worry about, isn’t it? You never have my money.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No you’re not.” He presses a forearm across my chest, holding me down and still, and carves up my midsection with his fist. Deep thuds echo through my body. Zazo is careful not to mark up my face. “Let’s try this again because you’re not answering my question. You’re telling me where my money is *not*, when I specifically asked you a simple question: where is my money, Quintus?”

“I don’t have it.” The words spill out of me like blood—slow and messy.

Zazo grips the sides of the elevator for balance and leverage, and lifts his knee to his chest, before pressing his boot down into my neck, putting my head in a vice against the wall of the elevator.

“Please, please, stop.”

“Where’s my money, Q?” He says, his boot still against my head.

“I can it. I can get it. I just need more time.”

“You’ve had three months. Why should I give you more time?”

“I just need more time.”

“You have one week.”

“I need more time than that. I can’t get six thousand in a week?”

“You now what I fear? I fear you actually misunderstand me. The vig has gone up, *papi*. You don’t owe me six anymore. You owe me ten. Call it an IFA tax. You know what IFA means? Inflation For Asshole tax.”

“Zazo, please. I’ll get your money. I promise. But I can’t do ten. Six is gonna be hard enough as it is. Maybe we can work something else out.”

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“I don’t know what to believe: whether you can’t pay me my original six or that you can’t pay me my ten. Either way, I am hearing a lot of *cannot’s* when I only want to hear is a lot of *can do’s*.”

“Zazo.” I choke from the pressure on my throat, which seems to only make him adjust his boot and press harder into my neck.

“I believe that you believe you can’t get me my ten grand by next week.” Zazo leverages his weight up into the air onto his one leg, his one boot, still at my neck, squeezing me into the side of the elevator. “But I also believe that the power of pain to be a strong motivator.”

“I’ll get it. Okay. I’ll get it. I promise.”

“Piece of advice for you, never borrow money you can’t pay back right away.”

He removes his boot from my neck and helps me to my feet, dusting off my sleeves, smiling, laughing a bit, telling me I am going to be all right. This short man, this tiny devil of a man, managing buildings in this city, just another reason to leave it all behind.

“Did you know this building used to be the midtown city morgue?” Zazo says, pushing the lever forward, starting the elevator back up again, moving toward my floor.

I don’t know if he expects me to answer him, but I don’t and won’t and just want to get to my office. I have a hard time picturing dead bodies being pushed through this building. I don’t know how much of this story is the truth and how much of it is Zazo playing with me.

“I got old pictures in the office to prove it. Hallways lined with *la muerte*. Covered in white sheets. Some of those sheets stained. You understand me? With blood. The furnace is downstairs. Still works. Right in front of the elevator in the basement. Big, bright, bad incinerator. I sent an old pair of tennis shoes into the flame just last week and all that came back out was a pile of ash. I light it up a few times a year to blow out the ducts and keep birds and

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squirrels from nesting in it. The pictures are crazy, though. I'm talking hallways lined with dead bodies, two lanes deep, all waiting to be burned up. They were mostly foreigners. So when they died, they got burned up. No box, no burial. I'll have to run the thing again next week with all of this rain. I'll let you know, so you can come and see for yourself. If you died and you lived in the Five Points downtown, this was the elevator that would be used to run your body down to the incinerator and burn you right up. Into a pile of ash and bone. You remember that."

The elevator creaks and scrapes along the elevator shaft, ascending in a rattle. At the fourth floor, Zazo wields back the gate and metal door and I step off. The elevator lifts a bit from my weight.

Sam Swift Staffing Solutions sits at the end of the crooked, dark hallway. Framed photos of the band KISS performing in full make-up on stage hang on the walls. According to legend, our office used to be a recording studio where the band made demos of some of their biggest hits. At least, this is what Zazo told me once. On occasion, die-hard fans will sneak past Zazo, run up the crooked stairs, and attempt to extract bricks from the wall of our floor, claiming it as KISS history, or as they refer to it: KISSstory. The walls on this floor are pocked with so many missing bricks, it looks like some kind of funky design feature.

I look at these grown men in the photos, buried beneath geometry and clown make-up, and think: what were they hiding from?

Zazo snaps his fingers again and tells me to smile before closing the gate of the elevator, then the metal sliding door. It latches. Locked. Gears grind again. His body descends. Down toward the old morgue incinerator.

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3.

I reach the door to the office at the end of the hallway and pause with my hand on the knob. I've been moving through weighted shadows for so long that even the smallest tasks have become noticeably difficult for me.

Small tasks have been piling up around me, quickly. Phone calls with family. Fixing food for dinner. Opening the mail. Small talk. Washing dirty dishes. Taking out the trash. Punctuality.

But opening doors has been the worst of late. The issue with moving through any open door is you can't tame whatever happens to snarl on the other side.

I had borrowed the money from Zazo to pay for another round of my wife's experimental and exploratory surgery and treatment, which didn't take. I had hoped him to be more understanding. I am running out of corners to retreat to between life attacks. Every door I approach and pull back seems to reveal another dragon of circumstance that cannot be slain.

I turn the knob and pull the door.

There is an environmental sea change. The air thickens, hangs cotton-heavy in my lungs. Acid burns in my gut. Rises in my chest.

I smell him before I see him. Dead flowers and peaches.

Sam Swift stands directly inside the office, between the door and the secretary's desk, like a fat, nightclub bouncer. He is a short, thumb of a man, flamingo thin legs with retreating brown hair. Sam wears a blue, three-piece, pinstriped suit. No tie. A pink buttoned-down shirt left open at the top. A bony gold rope hangs loose and low at his neck, flanked by curly black chest hairs crawling out from beneath like an army of spiders.

Sam Swift would like everyone to believe that this is his promotional staffing company.

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But the fact remains that without me running all executive-level operations, he is the proprietor of a business tax code, at best. Two years ago he walked into the office and told me he was moving back to his home in Israel. The reason? Because he was forty-two and needed to find a wife. Two days later, he was gone and I became the most powerful Manager of Operations in the world. But now he is back, unexpected, unplanned, still bathing in that formaldehyde cologne, greeting me at the door with open arms.

“Q, my best friend,” he says. This is Sam’s telegraphed greeting to anyone he is about to ask an insufferable favor of.

“We weren’t expecting you,” I say. I have learned, when dealing with people that I dislike, that it helps to always use the plural. *We* have missed you. *We* think you wear too much cologne. *We* think you should go back to Israel. *We* think you are the worst human being in the world.

“I got married,” he says, opening his arms and embracing me. Short and fat as his, he can’t get his arms around my body. His cologne clings and chokes.

“What a surprise,” I say, trying desperately to sound excited.

“Everyone loves surprises,” he says, smiling.

“When did you get in?”

“Q, did I ever tell you that I served time in Shabak? I can tell when a man is being insincere with his words, huh?” Sam tells everyone he served time in Shabak, the Israeli domestic counterintelligence agency, where they supposedly trained him in the art of lie detection. He likes to tell everyone he can tell certain things about them. Other than my supposed insincerity, I have heard him say the following in regards to things he can tell by looking at person: ennui, irresponsibility, failure, pregnancy, bankruptcy.

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I move past him and whisper an apology for Sam's impromptu and unfortunate arrival to the acne-prone secretary, Thomas, a recent NYU grad, sitting just inside the office. Thomas laughs and whispers back to me the same, while answering an incoming call.

The center of the office sits on slanted hardwood floors—a big, open space with four giant rectangle tables spread out, hosting four account managers. Each desk is equipped with two flat screen monitors, a twenty-five-line Internet phone and stacks of folders.

The office is loud, everyone on a call. Some with clients. Some with staff. Some checking on events, making sure everyone is onsite, running down those who are not. East coast flyer distribution events. West coast hotrod car shows. Midwestern box store grand openings. New York City-based French wine tastings. The chatter is numbing. All you need to do this job is a phone, a computer and an Internet connection. Clients picture SSSS as some bigwig Manhattan-based company in the heart of the hip city. Account Managers dressed in three-piece suits or short skirts and heels. Luxurious executive offices that look down Madison Avenue. Gorgeous model-type secretaries. Single malt lunches. In reality, we're not much better than telemarketers. Everyone dressed in yoga pants and flip-flops, and a secretary named Thomas who is incredibly excited about his favorite wrestling program coming to Brooklyn. He took three days off from work just to attend it—one day to prep, one day to go and one day to recuperate. This is our office.

My assistant manager, Trina, approaches me, gripping a coliseum cup of coffee. Trina's job in the office is to oversee the account managers, while I run the day-to-day operations. I told her once that without her, this business wouldn't exist. Sometimes I feel like she purposely forgets that I said that to her, so she could hear it again and again. She is tall and thin, a cordless headset hanging around her neck, her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

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“Why is he back?” she asks.

“Hasn’t he talked to you yet?” I ask. “How long has he been here?”

“He was here when I got here at 8am.”

“And he didn’t say anything to you?”

“Nothing. He just sat in your office, making phone calls.”

Wonderful, I think. His Euro-trashy cologne and salami breath has had the morning to stain my workspace.

“I don’t know why he’s back. He’s married now. Maybe he’s bored. Who knows?”

“We should introduce him to the team at some point. It’s his name on the business, after all. The prick.”

“Good idea,” I say.

I turn to the staff, still dripping wet from the rain, which taps away at the windows under the black sky. I raise my hands in the air, not saying anything as ten of the account managers are on the phone talking. Slowly, over a minute, they hang up and slide their wireless headphones down around their necks. They roll out from their tables and wait for me to speak.

“Hi, everyone. Good morning. Hope you all are staying dry out there. Cats and dogs, and such.” Why did I say that? I have never said anything close to that in my life. I continue. “I just want to introduce someone who you all know without having actually formally met. This gentleman to my left is none other than the founder, *the* Sam Swift of Sam Swift Staffing Soltuions.”

My cell phone buzzes in my pocket. I retrieve it. My wife again. I send the call to voicemail. I’ll have to call her back later.

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I turn and Sam stands in the door, a cell phone to his ear, making eye contact with me, pointing to the cell, shrugging, mouthing the words “I have to take this” before escaping through to the hallway.

He is gone, but not for good—the prick.

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4.

My office is a corner of the open floor, boxed in with cubical dividers that give the impression of walls even though they don't reach the ceiling. Everyone can see me and I can see them even though I am all but disappeared.

My cellphone rings and I answer it right away, thinking it is Effie, but there is a silence on the other end. I say her name several times into the phone to see if she is still there when a voice finally cuts in.

It is not Effie.

It is *her*.

Her name is Genny Truck, a representative of the hospital. She confirms my name and address and phone number, which I think is the most ridiculous thing in the world since she is speaking to me at that very number about a debt that is mine and I haven't yet hung up on her, which I am well within my right to do, especially considering the condescending tone in her voice. Once she verifies that I am, in fact, John Quintus and confirms the last four digits of my social, which is 3925 and that I am the John Quintus that lives on 7th Avenue in the Green-Wood District and that my wife is Effie Quintus and the last four of her social are 6623, only then does Genny get to the reason for her call.

"Thank you for receiving my call, Mr. Quintus. Since you didn't appear in court last month, I wanted to allow you a final opportunity to pay in-full your outstanding hospital debt before a judgment is issued concerning a wage garnishment against your pay checks."

"I think you have the wrong person."

"You just confirmed your information, Mr. Quintus. I have the right person."

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“No, what I mean is that I never received a collections notice from anyone other than your billing department and that was only two months ago. How could this have already gone to court?”

“You didn’t contact us when your initial payment lapsed. We then sold the debt to a creditor, MedCred Industries who should have sent you several statements and left you numerous phone calls. When those went unanswered, they sold the debt back to the hospital who is now seeking a judgment for wage garnishment.”

“But I paid it down. I paid half. Isn’t that good for anything?”

“Yes, sir, you did pay half, but there is interest now. We have a payment from you for six thousand made two months ago, but nothing since.”

“What is the remaining balance?”

“Eight thousand six hundred dollars and forty-two cents.”

“Really? Forty-two cents?”

“That is the amount, sir.”

“I can’t pay that.”

“Sir, this is just a courtesy call, letting you know about the legal action.”

“This is you being a courteous cunt, Genny.”

Genny doesn’t speak. No response. It felt god to call her a cunt, but regret it immediately.

“Genny, I’m sorry. Can’t we work something out?”

“I am afraid that time has passed.”

“How will this affect future doctors’ appointments? We have a new appointment tomorrow with a doctor in different department of the hospital.”

“You will have to check with their office to see what issues may exist.”

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“So there is nothing that can be done?”

“Pay your debt.”

She hangs up and I want to throw my phone. I’ve never had the urge to actually throw a phone before. Never understood the action or meaning of it. Until now. But I pull back on the anger and simply toss my cell into the middle of my desk. My office phone rings again and I sadly believe for a moment it is Genny calling back to work out a payment plan, that she had a change of heart. I answer with fleeting excitement in my voice, but it isn’t her.

It’s fucking Thomas.

I hit speakerphone and take off my coat, looking out a sliver of window in my corner that over looks Madison Square Park.

“Yes, Thomas,” I say.

Another homeless man sleeps on a bench that borders Madison Square Park across the street, a tarp draped over him from head-to-toe. He sleeps, as the rain assaults him. He sleeps like a corpse—stiff, cold, carefree.

“Hi, Mr. Quintus. I have Mr. Swift on the line for you.”

I look through the door-shaped opening in my cubicle office to Thomas across the room. He looks back at me and shrugs.

“But he was here. At the door. He said he had to take a call,” I say.

“I know, sir,” he says.

“When did he call?”

“As soon as the door closed.”

“So he left the office to call me?”

“It seems so, sir.”

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Silence sprints across the line.

“Would you like me to tell him you are busy, sir?”

“No. Dammit. Put him through.”

The line scrambles and pops.

“Mr. Swift, you are on with Mr. Quintus,” Thomas says, before hanging up.

“Q, my best friend, it’s Sam,” Sam says.

I already know he’s about to ask a favor that I won’t want to do for him. “Aren’t you here?” I ask, looking for him over the tops of my walls.

“Incorrect. Past tense. Was. I *was* there,” he says, shouting. Traffic honks and hollers over his voice. Then, “I need you to do something for me. It’s very important. Essential. Imperative to the success of the business.”

“I can’t possibly think of what that might be?”

“Q, do I have your undivided attention?”

“Yes. Jesus. I am listening. What is it?”

“I need you to fire fifty percent of your staff today,” he says.

Silence no longer sprints, but stops and sinks.

“Can you please say again?”

“You heard it right.”

“Fifty percent?”

“Of your staff, correct.”

“You mean, *your* staff. You want me to fire fifty percent of *your* staff today?”

I laugh. He’s joking. He has to be. This is ridiculous. But he’s not laughing. He is not joking. So I keep laughing. Hoping it turns into a joke.

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“Fifty percent by five o’clock,” he says.

“Sam, don’t do this,” I beg. I hate myself for it, but can only listen as my voice pleads.

“Let’s talk about this. I can come to you. Where are you?”

“It’s been decided. Things are in motion. There is nothing more to discuss.”

I turn my back to the office and respectfully yell into the phone.

“Give me a second to talk this shit out with you, before you lose your mind over a terrible idea. This doesn’t make any goddamn sense. I get it. It’s March and March is slow. It’s always slow. You know this. I know this. The staff knows this. January, February, March—they’re dead months. But jobs are gonna pick up, Sam, and when they do we are going to need those account managers. Spring is coming up. NASCAR has already started. Baseball follows soon after that. Mother’s Day. Father’s Day. Memorial Day. Then there are the clients we already have locked in for this month and next. We can’t go striking down half the company because you’re scared, Sam. You haven’t been here. I have. I really think you need to a breath, come back to the office, sit down and talk to me about this.”

Nothing but rain in the background.

“Sam? You there?”

Then, “The decision is made. Get it done. You know them better than I do, so I trust your judgment in deciding who stays and who goes. I trust your judgment, John.”

“That’s because you’re never here, Sam. You’ve been in Israel finding a wife for the past two years. All of a sudden you’re back in town for a few days and want me to downsize the company you’ve neglected. With all due respect, Sam, you are out of your damn mind.”

“I understand you’re upset. I’m springing this on you. You need time to adjust to the new order of this world. Take a minute. Let it wash over you. Then get to work. However, don’t think

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that I'm being impulsive. Watch how you speak to me on this matter, John. I'm allowing you some leeway on disrespect here, but it's my name on the letterhead. Not yours."

I hold a breath to compose myself, allowing the rageblind words to pass by.

"Come to think of it," he cuts in, laughing, but definitely not in a joking way, "I want you to start with Trina. Fire Trina first. And I was going to let you know later today, but—"

"Let me know what?" I say, interrupting him, like a teenager fighting a battle that has already been lost.

"I'm coming back."

"You're coming back?"

"Moved back."

"To the states?"

"To Manhattan. And the company."

"I'm confused. You're visiting?"

"To live."

"What do you mean?"

"I've moved back to Manhattan and I'm coming back to the company. Both for good. Full time."

"When did this happen?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because of how you're acting. Because of how you want me to fire people."

"If it helps you: thirty-five days ago."

"You've been back a month?"

"Right after Chanukah."

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“What happened to Israel?”

“It’s still there. It’s still Jewish, mostly.”

“I thought you had plans.”

“Yes.”

“To find yourself a wife?”

“Her name’s Batya.”

“So you found a wife and got married.”

“Happily so, forty-five days.”

“And you decided to come back here?”

“We’ll discuss after work.”

“After I fire people.”

“At five o’clock.”

“Sam, I don’t understand.”

“I’m coming back to the company.”

I sit down in my broken office chair that squeaks no matter the amount of WD40. I am farther away from myself than I am used to feeling.

Zazo. Genny Truck. Sam Swiff.

My chest carries an anvil on it, crushing me. I yank at the collar of my shirt, pulling it from my neck. I find a pencil on my desk and break the tip, before snapping it in half. My throat swells. Dry mouth. Skin burns up. Sweat presents at my brow. My knee bounces under my desk.

I wish with all of my pained heart for one of the many Gods to appear before me and strike me from this mortal realm. My body isn’t built for this kind of Hell.

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“This is not an indictment of you, John. I know how hard you work. But,” he says. “It is to be done. Fire Trina and seven other account managers, any seven. I don’t care. Just let them go. Call it a recession. Cutbacks. Redundancies. Blame me, if it makes you feel better about it. We will talk later.”

Sickness roils inside me.

Then, nothing but dial tone.

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5.

It's not even lunch yet and already Hell has descended upon me. I pace back-and-forth in my cubicle office. All sixteen account managers, my assistant manager, Trina, and the secretary Thomas watch me slowly unravel. Pace back-and-forth. Checking my cell phone—madman.

I have another missed call from my wife. I call her, but Effie doesn't answer. I don't leave a voicemail.

Danetta, our part-time accountant, knocks on the wall of my cubicle and patiently waits outside, acting as if there is a door where there is not. She doesn't have the personality for nonsense, nor humor, especially since she's about to vacation on a cruise to the Bahamas for a two weeks. I know this because it's almost all she ever talks about. Her hand is at her hip, the other hand holding a folder, none of which looks good for me. She is short, black and commanding—the kind of person you want to be on your side in a bar room brawl. Unassuming in stature, but quick to cut you with her words or broken glass. Not the kind of person you want to have pissed at you.

I wave her in, but she is already inside my cubicle, breeching it upon eye contact.

“We got a problem, John,” she says, hand no longer at her hip, but now pointing at me with intention.

“I'm glad we aren't short of those today,” I say, sitting down and grinding my palms into my eye sockets, rocking back in my squeaky chair.

Danetta doesn't acknowledge my joke.

“Problems. I'm glad we're not short of problems today.”

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“Nothing funny about this, John. We got a discrepancy in the books. You want to sit and make jokes? That’s cool. I’ll come back to you with this missing money problem when I return from my two-week Bahamian-bound cruise.”

“You’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care about you being sorry. I care about you listening to me when I tell you we have a missing money situation.”

“Talk to me like I’m an idiot, would you?”

“You want me to talk to you like an idiot?”

“Explain the problem to me. Simply. Like I’m a child.”

“No, sir. I won’t do that. I don’t do that. You need to keep up. Like you’re a child? I give my children woopin’s. You want me to give you a woopin’?”

“Danetta. No. Keep it simple. What is the discrepancy?”

“Why didn’t you come and just say that? Damn. I’m trying to get this place ready for my vacation and you’re telling me to treat you like a fool. You’re cracking, Q.”

“Danetta, what’s the problem?”

“You want me to put it simply? Q, we missing money.”

“How are we missing money?”

“Our books say we have more money than what our bank account says. The books are all jacked up. Either the bank is stealing. Or someone here is stealing. Somebody’s stealing and it’s not me. If I stole money, you’d never see me again. I’d be on a cruise to the Bahamas.”

The weight around me shifts. My shoulders slouch. Gut gives in.

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“I see,” I say and reach down to my shoulder bag. I place it on my desk between us.

She steps back, like it might explode.

I open the main section of the bag and retrieve one, two, three, four, five envelopes, stacking them on the desk, next to the bag. Thousands of dollars in checks and yellow deposit slips sneak out from the dry crease.

“Are these what I think they are?” Danetta asks, pointing, gesturing, in a repeating motion, like a live-action gif. Her fingernails are immaculate, carefully oval-shaped and painted red, decorated with tiny shiny jewels on her middle fingers.

“These are bank deposits from last two weeks,” I say.

“Bank deposits that are not—”

“—in the bank. Right,” I say.

She picks them up, individually, one at a time.

“I’m sorry, Danetta. I—”

“—forgot. You straight-up forgot to put our money in the bank. Like a child.”

“Yes. That’s fair. I did that. And I’m sorry.”

“You’re bad with money, John.”

“I know.”

“Bad with money.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If I didn’t have my cruise to the Bahamas to look forward to, I’d quick this bullshit job.

You hear me?”

“I hear you,” I say, but I am not really thinking about her anymore, but am reminded of Zazo. *You understand me?*

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Danetta stuffs the deposit envelopes in her purse. I try to thank her, but she raises her hand in the air to cut me off as she exits the office, presumably to deposit the checks in our bank account, but I don't expect to see her again for a while. Probably a short day for Danetta. I hope she doesn't quick, since I'm already having to fire people.

The coffee pot is empty in the kitchenette corner of the office, of course, so I opt for a cup of cold water instead, but the cooler is empty as well. I remove the empty ten-gallon jug from the stand and carry a full jug over. I remove the sticker from the top and flip it in the air, slamming it down on the base, stabbing the plastic nozzle through the neck of the jug. Giant bubbles burp to the surface as fresh water cascades through the nozzle.

An account manager making a copy at the beast of a copier watches as one of her pages jams inside the clumsy thing. She slaps a piece of paper taped to the wall above the copier trays. It's a picture of Bob Marley playing guitar on stage somewhere with text at the bottom of the page that says: *This Computer Is Bob Marley. It Be Jammin'*. I laugh at the silly office joke and walk away.

One of the PC computers across the office freezes up on another account manager with all of their spreadsheets still open and unsaved. She stands and waves her hands at me like she's signaling me to dock a plane at a specific terminal. I ignore her. I can't deal with a PC problem right now.

The garbage hasn't been taken out in two days, at least; crushed paper bags of lunches-past poke through the lid. I know if I don't wrap it up, replace it and take it down to the curb outside, no one will do it. I can't bring myself to do it and move past it.

The hardwood floors have been stained black from city street rain grunge trafficked into the office. It needs a good mop and polish, but the cleaning crew isn't coming for another week.

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Several stacks of manila folders wait atop the three-tiered metal filing cabinet back by accounting, waiting to be put away and categorized correctly, so as not to be lost or miss assigned. Another task to be done by me and me alone.

Any of these office duties could take me away, even if temporarily, from the task that lies ahead for me. I feel bad about neglecting them and set my sights on unjamming the copier before moving onto the frozen PC and then filing client paperwork, when Trina signals to me from across the room, standing in the entrance to my cubicle office, waving me to follow her inside for a talk. She often feels like the last to know things about the business, even though she is responsible for running important parts of it herself. Her frustration usually comes out in fits of swear words and near-physical assault.

I can't escape this one.

It was time to let her know. I already knew where my glass of water was going to end up. She wasn't going to take her firing well at all. Who would? The only question was the level at which her explosion would reach.

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6.

Trina sits in the chair across from my desk, tapping her foot fast on the floor. She speaks with speed and in aggressive tones, hitting her words like a pugilist. Questions spill out.

“What the hell is going on? Why did he come back? Did you smell his cheapass perfume?”

“Did you know that this building used to be a city morgue?”

“John, focus.”

“Apparently, they used the elevator to lower the corpses downstairs to be put in an incinerator. You should ask Zazo about it.”

Trina had been the one to hire me, initially. Off of Craigslist, actually. The company had just taken shape and moved into the 23rd Street offices when their client list exploded and they needed office assistance. I was brought on as a recruiter, but was quickly promoted to account manager and then Operations Manager. Always paying me just enough to keep me from quitting. Trina never agreed with Sam’s decision to promote me into a position that was essentially higher than hers, but Sam was also never going to put a woman in charge of a company with his name on it. I don’t know if that decision was an Israeli thing or a Sam thing, but whatever the reason Trina always held a grudge.

“Q, are you listening to me? This is too important.”

“Trina, I’m sorry. I have some bad news.”

“I will dive across this desk and destroy your fucking face.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t do this.”

“It’s not up to me.”

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“Did you even fight?”

“I tried.”

“Fight harder, John.”

“It’s decided. It’s done.”

“Then un-fuck-ing do it.”

“Please don’t swear.”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t do that. The others can hear you.”

“Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.”

“Three times? Really?”

“Fuck you,” she says. Then, “Four.”

“Trina, I’m sorry, but I have to let you go. It wasn’t my decision. I hope you know that.”

“I don’t know shit.”

“Well, it’s true. You’re fired.”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you are.”

“Give me one good reason.”

“I don’t have any good reasons.”

“So I am getting fired for no good reason?”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“It’s what he told me to do. That’s the only reason.”

“What about the others?”

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I don't say anything.

"Jesus."

I don't say anything.

"How many?"

I don't say anything.

"Half?"

I don't say anything.

"You know what I have to do?"

I don't say anything, but I nod.

With the speed and precision of a spider, Trina scrambles across the table.

I flinch in worried anticipation as she snatches the plastic cup from hand and turns its contents—room temperature water—back onto me.

I calmly ask her to return her office keys.

She rips them from her key ring and skips them at me across my desk.

I thank her for her hard work and commitment to the company.

She tells me what I can do with my words, where I can put them and for what purpose.

I push a box of tissues to the corner of the desk.

Willfully fighting back tears, she slaps the box of tissues to the floor. She tells everyone in the office to meet her at the bar downstairs after they are fired. First round is on her, she kindly offers.

"Let's all get fucked," she says.

The front office door swings shut behind her and it's quiet again, not a squeaky chair or creaky hardwood floor. Only the rain assaulting the floor-to-ceiling windows.

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I don't know what I expected. Well, no, that's not true. I expected tears. I expected understanding, oddly enough, insofar as Trina would understand that it wasn't her work friend who had terminated her. I expected it to hurt and cause pain, but I expected it to also be a blessing in disguise. Trina has complained about hating her job since as long as I have been with S4, but never possessed the backbone to quit. Never possessed the passion to chase any larger dream. She is gone and now I must finish what I started.

I stay seated in my cubicle office, behind my desk, staring straight ahead through the open space where a door should be, directly into the pod bay of account managers. Some stand at their desks, shocked. Some sit, frozen. Some send rapid-fire texts, informing God knows who of God knows what. Some quickly clear their desk of all personal affects, packing their purses and shoulder bags, in preparation, I suppose.

In my makeshift doorway, I make an impromptu speech.

I tell the staff there is a directive. I tell the staff it is not performance based. I tell the staff it'll happen today. I tell the staff they will hate me for it. I tell them it isn't my idea and that I haven't a say in the decision. I tell them I am simply following orders. I tell them that while they will not leave here with a severance, they will leave today with a good reference from me to be redeemed at any future date.

"Oh, hell no," Danetta chimes in. Apparently, she had returned in time to witness Trina's explosion and my weak attempt at pandering. Again, she is gone, leaving the deposit slips on her desk.

Eight more to fire. Any one of them, according to Sam.

I scan the pod bay of faces for ones that look like they are waiting for an excuse to walk. There are a few. I call those in. And get it underway. I hate myself more than any of them could

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ever imagine, but I pretend I am playing a game: to see how little I can say. By the end of the eight, I win the game. I don't have to say anything.

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7.

I grab a lighter and cigarette from my emergency soft pack in the back of my bottom desk drawer. Wrap them in a fist and bury them deep in my pocket to keep them dry. Tuck a wet umbrella under my arm. Slide my arms through a winter coat. Pull down a hat. Poke fingers through fingerless gloves. Bound down the slanted stairs. Floors creak and moan with each boot step. As I near the bottom, a Hispanic man slaps the stairs with a mop, dipping it in a bucket of brown water. Zazo stands behind the man, reading a new newspaper. He sidesteps me as I pass, asking me to be mindful the wet floors.

“No disrespect, Q,” he says, pointing, “but that umbrella’s not gonna keep you dry out there. Might as well use nothing and get the same amount of soaked, you understand me?”

I ignore him and push through the door as an office worker in a design firm on the fourth floor of our building slides past, walking toward the elevator. I look back at Zazo.

He shouts at me. “Smoking is bad for your health, Q. And expensive. You really should be more responsible with your finances.” Zazo laughs and disappears inside the elevator.

A current of rain crashes down over the entrance to the building like one of the lesser waterfalls in Niagara. I pop open my umbrella and leap through the waterfall. The force of the water punches the plastic of the umbrella in heavy thumps. Once through to the onslaught of rain, I’m drenched.

A crushed soda can bobs along the gutter, swept away by a river flowing next to the curb. Fewer folks scamper on the wet streets. I tilt my umbrella back to look up at the buildings. The Empire State is half-a-dozen blocks north, I know, but can’t be seen today, buried in clouds. I turn down Broadway, parallel to the Flatiron Building, and looking up I cannot see the top of that building either. Only black and grey swirling clouds and sideways rain.

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A young woman dragging a tiny dog behind her jogs past and I think what it would feel like to run away. To run and keep on running. Disappear. Go away. Relieve everyone from having to be in my crumbling life. But the reality of it strikes me, not the least of which is abandoning my wife. I cannot do that to her. Maybe if she was well enough, we could disappear together. Something she'd be up for, I know it.

Then I think: the idiots in this city will run in any kind of weather.

I slide along the edges of the buildings, only slightly protecting myself from the rain. The homeless man under the awning from earlier is gone. I run around the corner to the backside of the office on 22nd Street and take cover under a cluster of trees and shrubbery planted as a garden oasis away from the traffic of the city. It is quiet except for the constant drumroll of rain. I've taken up smoking back here over the last few months, making sure to buy any tobacco products with cash, so as to keep it off the bank statements, in case Effie happened to scroll through. The only other people back here on rainy days were transient homeless types, seeking salvation. Sunny days caused the most problems when everyone from yoga mommies to grifters took advantage of the peaceful reprieve from the weight of the city.

My emergency cigarette is still dry in my pocket, thankfully, even though everything else about me isn't. I strike the lighter a few times; it ignites and I fire up the tip of the tobacco. Inhale. Hold it. Then, exhale. I pull back again, twice more, quick puffs. The idea: hit the cigarette hard and fast to get that cheap head rush. A little liftoff. A baby buzz hits me hard. My brain flexes. I taste tar, stale. Dead tobacco.

Sadness settles back down over top of me like a familiar winter coat—compressing, restraining, obstructing everything.

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People rush by pushing strollers covered in plastic tarps. Couples hold together under open umbrellas. Countless cabs speed and edge each other out for position, approaching red lights, pressing palms into horns. Across the street, a middle-aged Indian man catches my eye, waves. He is dressed in a heavy brown coat and black dress pants. His umbrella is clear, see-through. I look around, but don't see anyone—he is waving to me and approaches, stopping when our umbrella edges touch.

“You have a lucky face,” he says in a British accent.

“Thank you,” I say.

“I noticed it from across the street. Heaven-sent. Do you know how I can tell?”

“I'm sure you meet many people with lucky faces. I'm sure you meet them all day long.”

“Your eyes, sir. Very soulful and bright.” He pauses, touching his fingers to his face as if it were my own. “But you carry a heavy heart. That is not good. A burden weighs on you. You are afraid. Fearful. I see it in the lines at the edges of your eyes. You carry a charge that must be used to strike down another.”

I look around me again, this time for Sam. It could be that everything is a joke, all of it, and this is the punchline.

“Do you work for Sam?”

“My name is Adesh and I am a mystic. I work for no man.”

“A fortune teller. I've read about your scam. It's all fake. You want money.”

“No, sir. I want no money from you. I want to warn you and give you hope. You have a lucky face, but tremendous obstacles lie ahead. If you would please listen, then you will believe.”

“I will listen, but I will not believe,” I say.

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“Thank you, sir. Your name?”

“I thought you were going to wow me?”

“Your name, sir.”

“John,” I say.

“Mr. John, you smoke,” he says, pointing to my cigarette, which has burned down to the filter. “This is not God’s will. This dampens your soul. Be careful. Be wary of this sin. Too, the tobacco is made with formaldehyde. This is what they use to preserve dead bodies. Not good for the human body.”

I smash the damn thing out on the trunk of a tree. “What else you got?” I ask.

“You eat too much. Carry the weight of it around with you. You don’t drink, which is good, but you poison yourself with medicine that dulls your true self. But these are not the things to fear. There are persons in your life that will take it from you.”

“Take *it* from me?”

“Your life, Mr. John.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to go back to work,” I say, trying to move around the man, but he cuts me off, moving in front of me.

“Please, sir, take this.” The man puts a balled up piece of paper in my palm and curls my fingers back around it. “Do not look at it. Please listen. I will ask you a series of questions, and you answer as best you can. Yes?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Name a number between 1 and 5.”

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“Three,” I say, the first number that comes to mind of the five. It feels like I am trying to guess right, rather than simply come to my own answer, so I clear my mind for the next question and focus on originality.

Your favorite flower?”

“Rose,” I say, immediately. *Why the hell did I say rose*, I think to myself. I hate roses. It was the only flower that came to mind right away because otherwise, if given time, I would have said black-eyed Susan or oleander or something. Definitely not rose. I settle myself down. That answer has passed. Onto my next answer. I clear my mind again.

“Your favorite color?”

“Red,” I say, again, immediately. I hate the color red. I am a blue man. I always have been. Never red. I feel like the answers aren’t representative of my true self and will skew the results, wherever this is headed.

“Which of the following do you want most: good health, good fortune, good life, good love, good family?”

“All of them.”

“You must choose one.”

“Good health.”

“The answers require a donation,” he says, extending his hand to me.

I have wasted enough time with this New York City jackal and excuse myself, pushing past him. Adesh does not stop me, but instead shouts at me.

“Can you please check the piece of paper in your palm, Mr. John?”

Annoyed, but not unkind—I stop and unroll the tight ball in my palm. On it is written the following:

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Blue

3

Rose

Good Health

“How did you do that?” I ask. “How did you guess all of those right? You wrote them down before you asked me the questions.”

“How old are you, Mr. John?” Adesh holds another balled up piece of paper in his hand.

“Thirty-three.”

Adesh shuffles his wallet and pen and paper about in his hands, extending the balled up paper to me and I open it immediately to see my correct age written on it.

“Seriously? How did you do that?”

“Please. Listen to me. This is very important. You have three years of good luck approaching. It won’t be easy to reach this. It will be difficult and hard work, but it is attainable. However, difficult times lie ahead. Darkness. Evil waits.”

“In what way? How long until evil hits? How long will evil hang around for?” Suddenly, without warning, I am desperate for the answers. I need to know what will happen. I need to prepare for the dark times. “What kind of evil, exactly?”

“You cannot fortify your position,” he says. “Darkness is coming and cannot be avoided.”

“There is nothing I can do to stop it?”

“There is something I can do, but only I.”

A phone call cuts in. My phone.

Adesh stops and is silent now.

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I apologize and ask Adesh to hold on a second and send the call to voicemail, but it rings again and it is Sam. I don't answer. Send to voicemail again. But he is persistent and my text alert pings.

Sam wants to know where I am.

I text him back that I went for a walk and will be back shortly.

He replies with an emoticon of a cigarette and a question mark. Dick.

I do not respond.

Adesh adjusts the umbrella pole on his shoulder as he flips through a red leather wallet. He shows me a picture of an old Indian man dressed in vibrant colors and surrounded by children. He has no teeth and dresses in rags, sitting among children in the same attire. Dirt floors. Blue sky. A brutal sun above them.

"Who is this?" I ask, after a moment.

"I am a fortune teller and this is my teacher. A great man—Raghav. He takes care of the orphans in my home country. No money. As he has trained me to tell fortunes, I now do so to collect donations for his orphanage."

"So you do want money?"

"I would like the twenty dollar bill you carry in your wallet, sir."

My umbrella slides inside my grip. He knows I have a twenty. How? How does he know? I say nothing for a moment, and Adesh just smiles, folding up his picture and placing back inside his red leather wallet.

"The twenty. Please," he asks, extending his hand.

"I'm not giving you money for this."

"Didn't you enjoy it? Don't you feel good about yourself now?"

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“You’re nothing but a con artist.”

I push his hand away and turn to walk away, but somehow our umbrellas become crossed and our arms tangle up and it feels like the pre-cursor to an assault, but Adesh is apologizing and not being forceful at all, struggling just as much as me to separate from each other. Finally, we do and I step back. And step back again.

He continues, “This is very bad form, sir. You should have contributed to the future of the children of India. You will now suffer a series of three events of bad luck on this very day. For your selfishness.”

My text alert chimes again.

It’s from Sam Swift.

Another emoticon.

An hourglass.

Great.

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8.

Sam Swift sits at my desk when I return to the office. His jacket is unbuttoned, legs crossed, arms behind his head, fingers laced together as he rocks back-and-forth in my chair. The office is empty except for the two of us and stinks of his floral cologne.

Unrelenting rain batters the window.

“I told you to fire half of the staff, not all of them,” he says.

“I think they’re all downstairs at the bar. Trina’s buying drinks.”

“Should we join them?”

“I think that would be a supremely bad idea.”

“Did she take it well?”

“Not even at all.” I point to a puddle of water on the floor, next to a plastic cup and box of tissues. “She did that.”

“Too bad. I thought she had a head on her.”

“She got fired, Sam. How did you expect her to react?”

“Not like an animal.”

“I didn’t say she acted like an animal.

“You did.”

“I said she was upset.”

“How are you doing with it all, John?”

“You mean all of your changes?”

“I like to think of them as reasonable arrangements.”

“Frankly, your reasonable arrangements suck, Sam. They really, really, really suck.”

“Three really’s. Interesting.”

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“Really sucks.” I pause, then, “Four.”

Trina would be proud, I think.

I stand and he still sits, neither of us eager to give an inch.

Every cell in my skin hums with a hatred for this man and his company. For years, I have given myself to the idea of actually making a career here. I developed an internship program for local colleges and universities to bring free labor into the office during difficult months. I trained and fired and trained and fired two socially impaired accountants, before finally finding Danetta—the world’s most hardnosed accountant who keep this company straight. I cut \$60,000 from the annual budget one year and another \$30,000 the subsequent year. I established an official hierarchy of account managers, giving them the illusion of upward movement in a company that only possesses lateral assignments. And, I have given up the most important parts of myself, sacrificed my personal life, and damaged relationships, in order to keep this company afloat and in the black. And for what? For whom?

“Are you coming back?” I ask him, pointedly.

“I am coming back.”

“In what capacity?”

“In your capacity.”

“You are going to be me?”

“Better than you. You will be stepping down.”

“Like a demotion?”

“A permanent demotion, yes.”

“You can’t do that,” I say.

“John, my best friend, aren’t you being a bit dense?”

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“I’m not your best friend.”

“You have done as well as you could in your supervisory role at this company, while I was away, but now that I’m back your assistance is no longer needed.”

“How is this for being dense,” I say, collecting my bag from behind the desk. “Take this job and go fuck yourself.”

Trina would definitely be proud.

“So you quit?” he asks, too eager.

“Yes,” I say, placing my palms on my desk and leaning forward, forcing Sam to make eye-contact with me for the first time. Then, “Fuck you. I quit.”

Sam looks around at the few items of individuality on my desk: a framed picture of my wife and a coffee mug shaped like a monkey’s head filled with pens and markers. He grabs the mug and dumps the contents onto the desk, handing me the empty vessel. Then, he lifts the picture. It is of Effie, ten years ago, riding a carousel horse at Coney Island when we first moved to Brooklyn.

“How is Effie?”

“You don’t get to make yourself feel better by asking about my wife.”

“I hope she is well.” He hands me the picture and the mug. “As for the rest of your personal belongings, you can come back another time.”

The steady rain somehow intensifies outside, slamming against the windowpane sideways and at greater velocity. Disorientation settles down on me. The ground beneath me moves like a conveyor belt. I slide the framed picture into my coat pocket and hold the monkey head coffee mug tight in my hand.

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Then, before walking to the door and leaving it all behind, I say, “You reap what you sow, Sam.”

The uneven wooden planks in the floor moan under me.

I leave the office—broke and broken.

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9.

I exit KISSStory into darkness. Skip the elevator and run down the stairs. Zazo is gone, thankfully. The sound of the rain grows louder the closer I get to the ground floor. Pass the elevator a last time and hit the front door.

Outside. Black rain and blacker clouds. Angry New Yorkers rush the streets, fighting to get on busses and down into subway stations. Umbrellas battle each other. Bodies passing on the flooding sidewalks. Every step and tire roostertails rain in its wake.

I look through the bar window next to our building and see the half-current and half-former staff of SSSS seated at a giant table in the back. Trina is the only one standing. She sees me and raises a strong middle finger in the air, holding it at eye level. It's a beautiful middle finger, actually. Perfect. Meaningful. Inspired by Johnny Cash. The rest of her congregation turn to look at whom Trina is flipping off. When they see me, they each raise their middle fingers too, in solidarity or pure vitriol or both. I want to go in there and tell them all what has happened. That I've been fired too. To tell them I am sorry. And to warn those left behind. Apologize to them. Lay bare my heart. Wish them well.

But I am too weak a man to do it.

It's far easier to disappear.

I rush through the streets, heading for the F train, which runs faster to Brooklyn in the evenings, than the R train does in the mornings. Or this is what I believe to be true. Soaked and soaking, and having left my umbrella behind back in the office, I try to use the various awnings of storefronts for some cover, but it's not working. Cars roll slowly down 23rd Street, water flooding the street well up over the hubcap of smaller vehicles. At the 6th Avenue corner, a massive puddle of black water spills out of the sewer grates and floods out of the gutter and over

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the sidewalk. I wade through it, swishing past empty soda bottles floating along like overturned canoes and empty snack pack potato chip bags like jellyfish.

I reach the other side of 6th Avenue when I check my phone before heading down the stairs to the subway platform. I have two missed calls: one from Effie and one from my bank. I duck under an awning nearby and listen to my messages. Effie's message consists of soft breathing, before she hangs up. The voicemail from my bank informs me that an unauthorized transaction has been made on my credit card. At a restaurant in Little Indian called Spice Cove. They want me to call to approve or deny the charge.

I don't have time for the bank right now and call Effie back.

We connect.

She answers, but says nothing.

"Effie, you okay?"

There is more silence, building. Then, "John," she says. Her voice is low and hesitant. I can hear the pain in the gravel pit of her timbre. "Please come home."

"Eff?"

"Something's wrong."

"Why didn't you leave a message?"

"I didn't want to bother you."

"I am at the F train now. I'll be home soon. Can I get you anything?"

"Just you," she says.

"I love you," I say.

She hangs up.

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I end the call and descend the stairs of the Brooklyn-bound subway, rainwater cascading the steps. My heart beats faster. She never calls during the day and never complains about her health. She deals with it as it comes. If she feels that something is wrong, then something has happened. And I can't even begin to worry about the credit card.

The homeless man from the morning stands at the bottom of the stairs, quiet, hand out, holding an empty coliseum coffee cup filled with dollar bills and little change. He says nothing. His eyes closed. Sad. Alone. Tired. Wet.

I know the feeling.

I pat my back pocket for my wallet, but it is gone. My hands slap the remaining pockets of my pants and coat. Nothing. Then. The moment hits me like a fist to the gut. Adesh. Spice Cove. Unauthorized transaction. Our umbrellas tangling up—not an accident. I swear, audibly, but my voice is swallowed up by the rain and hustle of city travelers.

The homeless man watches me—no wallet, no money, no subway pass, no ride home. I step to the side and rifle through my bag, looking for loose change, ripping each section open like I'm looking for a bomb that's about to detonate.

A weathered hand grabs my arm at my elbow, gently.

The smell that wafts from him stings my eyes and burns my throat. Wet garbage and heavy mold. It's the homeless man. For the first time, I see his eyes. Bright blue. Not dimmed at all. Clear. Focused. Alert. His beard covers most of his face, but beneath it I can see a man, surviving, doing whatever needs to be done.

He extends his hand to me, scabbed, softened from the rain and beginning to bleed from the rain. He opens his fingers. In the pit of his palm, a bent metro card.

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“Thank you,” he says, clearing his voice softly, not having spoken to someone in quite some time. “For the egg sandwich this morning,” he says, louder.

“No problem.”

“Please. Take this. There should be one ride left on it.”

“I can’t.”

“Did you find your wallet?”

“No.”

“Take it.”

“Don’t you need it?”

“No,” he says.

I take the card from his hand and nod to him: thank you.

He nods back, turns, shuffles back to his spot at the base of the stairs, lowers his head and extends his cup.

I look around to see if anyone else witnessed that exchange, but like most New Yorkers, no one saw anything but the screens of their phones.

At the turnstile, I swipe the metro card and it clicks me through, the final ride. I push through to the platform and carve out a spot where I know a door on the train to be.

A rumble sets in the tracks and a cold wind whips up. Metal scratches. Hissing. Tiny lights flash beneath the wheels of the train. Headlights appear. The rumble rolls into a roar. A train shoots out of the tunnel and whips along the platform. It stops. The doors directly in front of me open. A mostly empty car. I elbow my way in first and grab the first open seat in the middle of the car by the window. I put headphones on and cue up a Mitch Hedberg comedy album.

Close my eyes.

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Listen to the laughter, not the jokes.

The train rolls down the track and I disappear into oblivion.

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GLADITORII I:



TIBERIUS v ABBADON

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His name is Abaddon, but they have other names for him as well.

Abaddon the Greek. Abaddon the Destroyer. Bringer of Death. Butcher of Blood.

Assassin of the Elysian Fields. Emperor of the End. King of Slaves.

Abaddon knows of these names, but acknowledges none.

He refers to himself simply as Gladiator; godless, cut from bone and thunder.

Abaddon embraces the darkness of the pit and fights by simple rules. In the pit, a gladiator never begs for his life. In the pit, death comes before dishonor. In the pit, there are no Gods—only death and gladiators.

Inside the coliseum, Abaddon stands at the center of the pit, awaiting his death. The oppressive air is motionless—humid, heavy. A thin cloud of smoke hangs low from a pile of burning dishonored bodies. Lit torches with flames the size of fists hang along the redbrick wall of the coliseum and purple cloth billows from flagpoles atop the archways, saluting Emperor Gothicus. Guardsman stand watch at the pit's edges, short swords sheathed at their sides, gold breastplates reflecting the awful sun into Abaddon's eyes.

Abaddon turns from the guardsmen and scans the perimeter for his opponent—the feel of adrenaline spiking his pulse, the taste of rage on his tongue, venom in his heart—but there is no other fighter in the sands, only he and his hate. The bloodthirsty crowd chants cheers of death that crash around the coliseum like an angry wave. He pinpoints the *clink* of clay pots pouring black wine into tin goblets. A Roman squire, a boy, no hair on his face, no weight on his bones, runs out from the shade, carrying a goblet. The boy kicks at the taught tunic tight at his knees as he runs across the pit, black wine splashing onto his sandals. The two meet in the middle of the coliseum, the boy raising the goblet to Abaddon.

“Death before dishonor,” the boy says.

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“Death before dishonor,” Abaddon says, tossing back the wine in a single gulp. He hands the empty goblet to the boy, who retreats to the shadows of the pit. Abaddon spits seeds and pulp from his tongue, before wiping away the wine streaking down his face with the back of his hand. The wine warms him and he is ready.

Nearby, a guardsman cracks a bullwhip at the ankles of a fat man, trying to lower himself into the pit. The crowd cheers as the fat man, intelligently, returns to his seat. Rotten fruit rains down from the tiered spectators. Pomegranates explode at Abaddon’s feet, like little waking volcanoes. Blackberries and figs and grapes. Palm-sized rose hips and medlars, apples and plums landed with less intent. Hot blood pumps through Abaddon, his body humming with sick electricity.

The deathmatch nears.

All he can do is wait, which is all a gladiator ever does—wait for death.

A metal gate on the south side of the coliseum rises wide like the sharp-toothed mouth of a beast. Water from an underground spring drips from the metal teeth. Even the coliseum salivates for death. Gears and chains grind together as the gate gives way to a tunnel of black. Abaddon holds his trident low, ready to thrust forward, his knotted net at his back. He crouches, a scorpion waiting to attack. His helmet partially protects his head and nose, offering him an unobstructed view of the killing field. Barefoot, he shuffles in the charcoal sand of the pit, kicking up a plume of dust, crushing fruit under his heel. Thick callouses cover the arches of both feet; protect the pads of his toes, allowing him to dance across the fiery sand. Blood and fury rises in his chest. Abaddon locks in, ready to die.

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The silhouette of his opponent appears in the tunnel and soon his shadow breaks from the darkness, reigning wide and long across the pit beneath the scorching sun as he commands his entrance into the coliseum—unhurried and colossal.

His name is Tiberius, but they had other names for him as well.

Tiberius the Great. Tiberius the Angry. The African God. The Blackmarble Beast.

He knows of these names, but acknowledges none.

Tiberius seems carved from granite, easily outmatching Abaddon in height and muscular mass, though his face is hidden away under a full helmet, golden wings at its sides. His entire right arm is wrapped in a leather strap. Tiberius, a Thracian fighter, reaches the center of the pit and Abaddon sees his opponent's curved sword, a thrax, belted and box-shaped, still bloodied from his first kill in the Gate of Life tunnel, and a wooden shield spanning from foot to neck. Abaddon, a Retiarius fighter, with his trident and knotted net, easily has the reach and balance advantage, but is disadvantaged by the brutality and exactness of the thrax. Tiberius unsheathes his thrax and slices the thick air—a soft whipping sound audible only to Abaddon—then smashes the butt of his handle into the wood. Tiberius raises his arms, walking around Abaddon, spitting unknowable words at him in an unfamiliar tongue.

Cheers from the crowd grow.

Abaddon would have to call upon his speed to defeat Tiberius' height and strength. Abaddon's strong cedar arms and tree trunk legs would not be enough to overpower Tiberius. Even though his fists are boulders carved from basaltic lava, his opponent seems a volcano. The scarred flesh of Abaddon's face and back—flayed and stripped clean from torture many moons back—struck ill anyone who looked too close. For to lay eyes on Abaddon was to be swallowed by darkness. Abaddon always flaunted his raw and broken body. He has nothing left inside of

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him and cared for nothing—his pregnant wife murdered by Roman legions and he castoff in the wilderness of the empire. He would one day see her again in the Elysian fields, but not before sending many to hell first.

As for death, Abaddon wanted not for glory.

Death was his only master, and his muse.

He can taste the warmth of blood on his tongue, either his own or Tiberius, before any has begun to stain the pit. He smells the rot of flesh, ripe and gluttonous. He feels the weight of his fear press down and the air choke out around him. He hears the hungry cries of the free Romans in the stands. He sees the end in their eyes and reveled in his bloodlust. Embraced his nothingness.

Abaddon will take the world to Hell with him.

Tiberius kicks the bottom of his shield off the sand, toward Abaddon, smacking him in the shins. A bone cracks. Pain shoots up his leg and tips Abaddon forward. Tiberius jabs Abaddon in the back with the handle of his sword. In two quick moves, a matter of seconds, Abaddon is crushed into the pit floor. He struggles to catch his breath, wiping black sand from his eyes, spitting more from his mouth. Adrenaline surges. He rolls away from Tiberius and zips to his feet. His trident tangles in the weighted net. He pulls at the knots in the net, trying to detangle them, to separate them from one another, but with every move only seems to knot them together further. Tiberius whips his thrax through the air in x-shape. Sunlight glints off his thrax, interrupting Abaddon's sight. Tiberius fights his way closer to Abaddon, continuing to use the shield as a weapon, slamming it into Abaddon's chest like a spear. Air escapes Abaddon's lung. He chokes. His knees buckle. He collapses again. Tiberius delivers a kill shot, slicing his thrax at Abaddon's neck, but misses. He counters his missed killshot by retracting his arm and smashing

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his elbow into Abaddon's jaw. Tiberius grips his giant shield with both hands, but hesitates. He pants and sucks back air, catching his breath. Spit hangs from his lips. Both men exhausted and with little left. Tiberius sucks back air, squeezes his grip as tight as he can and strikes Abaddon in the face with an upward motion, sending Abaddon onto his back.

The crowd explodes. They chant his opponent's name.

TI-BER-I-US. TI-BER-I-US. TI-BER-I-US.

Tiberius raises his hands into the air and the crowd erupts again, still chanting, except now they are casting their thumbs down, signaling for him to kill Abaddon. Tiberius walks over to Abaddon still on his back, aiming the blade at Abaddon's neck for a second time. Tiberius looks to Emperor Gothicus, who eases up from his gold throne and glides over to the edge of his balcony, overlooking the coliseum. Raising his fist skyward, he extended his thumb out, before slamming it down.

"End him," Gothicus shouts across the pit, his voice echoing from turn-to-turn.

Tiberius winds back with his sword, high above his head. As he leverages his weight behind the thunderous blow, Abaddon rolls out from under him. Sand sprays into his eyes from Tiberius' quick footwork. Abaddon grabs the base of his trident and in a single sweeping motion, breaks the wooden shaft behind Tiberius' ankles. At the strike, Tiberius falls hard into the sands of the pit, leaving Abaddon just enough time to collect the vigilant end of the trident. Rolls now reversed, Abaddon presses forward, stomping the helmet from Tiberius' face and thrusts the trident through his opponent's throat, just below his chin. A thin stream of blood sprays up in a surprising arc, while the rest pumps out from Tiberius' side.

Abaddon steps away, watching, as his foe twists and turns, his hand trembling, tracing, touching the trident at his neck, trying to remove it himself. Light dims in Tiberius' eyes. He

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descends to his knees, shock submarining his body. Blood ceases to spray from his wounds and resigns to shallow arcs. Unable to remove the trident and unable to speak, Tiberius accepts his fate and mouths a single word to Abaddon.

“Death,” Tiberius says, gurgling through the monosyllabic word.

“Before dishonor,” Abaddon replies.

Tiberius accepts his defeat honorably, never begging for his life, embracing a swift death before bringing dishonor upon himself. Abaddon picks the thrax from the sands of the pit and approaches the diminished Tiberius, whose body begins to shutdown. Convulsions set in. Abaddon offers his opponent a final moment of respect, placing a palm at his forehead.

“Tiberius, right-handed, Thracian, dies with honor this day, giving great bounty to his name at the mercy of these hands,” Abaddon says, praying to the Gods. Abaddon winds the thrax back and unleashes a strong cut—a clean decapitation at the center of the pit.

The crowd bathes in the gore of the match.

A bounty of blood stains both the center of the pit and gladiators’ flesh. Droplets rooster tail in violent formation outside of the kill zone.

Two guardsmen run out into the pit to collect Tiberius’ body, while a third tracks down his head. They wrap him in purple cloth and carry him out of the coliseum with respect though the Gate of Death atrium.

Abaddon’s world deafens, leaving only the sound of his heartbeat in his chest and rush of blood to his head. He tastes the end on his tongue—death and honor. He wipes remnants from the fight from his face—sand, sweat, spit, blood—before beating his chest with his fist in steady succession. The coliseum, collectively, claps in command with Abaddon’s thumping until, for the first time, fifty thousand Roman’s unite as one.

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Battleborn, Abaddon raises his arms into the air.

He hears the revelry of his names leap from Roman lips.

Bringer of Death. Butcher of Blood. King of Slaves.

Abaddon acknowledges none.

Only Gladiator.