

“To challenge The Devil”

With a shaky exhale Aidan put their palm on the chains binding the gates towering over everyone, and with only slight resistance they fell apart. The Devil's realm stood open, at last. Warmth radiated from behind the entrance. Giving an encouraging smile, Aidan crossed onto the crimson sands. Julian followed right after, reassuringly placing one hand on the magician's shoulder.

“So, uh, this is it, right?” he started, yet was quickly cut off.

“Don't jinx it again, Ilya” his sister entered, the rest following suit. “C'mon, there's no way he'll just let us stroll our way to him like that, right?”

“I'm afraid not, dear Portia, though we cannot stay here forever. I presume he is already aware of our presence” the countess backed her up, gazing into the faraway horizon.

“He is” Aidan said numbly, closing their eyes for a moment to focus on the energy of their surroundings. It was thick, oppressive, and stained by the overwhelming aura of the Devil himself, seemingly welcoming, was it not for the circumstances. “And he's awaiting us”

“Rather ominous, isn't it?” she answered wearily. Nazali stood right by her side, folding their arms.

“Nah, I'd say it's a perfect spot for a vacation” they tried lightening up the mood.

“I've seen better, Prakra is said to have beaches with less gravelly sands” Asra joined the conversation, winking playfully at the group. “Though, Nadia is right. We shouldn't waste more time here. Don't wanna give him a headstart, do we?”

“Alright crew, stop blabbering and get walkin', won't ya?” the short, sturdy woman shouted impatiently, catching everyone off-guard.

“Sorry Mazelinka, we're going. But, aren't you at least a little nervous, too?” Aidan wondered, slowly beginning their journey towards the hill.

“Ha! It takes more than an unruly goat to frighten me” She laughed, spinning her wooden spoon, forcing two people to step away not to get hit.

“Yeah! He is the one who should be scared” Portia seconded her, punching the air “We're outnumbered and more powerful, nothing he can do will stop us!”

As if on cue, the ground began shaking. After sending his sister a scolding look, Julian ordered everyone to stay close. The terrain around them began cracking, revealing a dark-red river flowing now all around them. Cautiously, the magician crouched by its side to take a closer look. The current was strong, and the water had a foul, metallic odor. Could that be..?

“Blood? Woah, now this is, like, super freaky” Portia leaned in closer, right by Aidan's side. “But it is kinda cool” She grinned with excitement.

Suddenly, the surface of the liquid began sizzling and boiling, sending thick fumes at their faces. Aidan quickly ducked and took a couple steps back, Portia on the other had was dragged away by the collar of her shirt.

“Ouch! Hey, stop that!” she turned to her brother, visibly offended.

“You could've fallen in, Pasha! You can't put yourself in danger like that!”

“Oh you're the one to talk. Besides, I was fine, really”

"Dumb kids. Knock it off, both of you" Mazelinka yelled, nearly hitting Nazali with her spoon, causing them to shove her away. The quarrel consumed everyone, soon not a single voice was distinguishable from another in the cacophony of screams and curses.

"Why are they, exactly, fighting?" the so far reserved from the conflict magician spoke up, looking at everyone with contempt.

At first Asra's snarky comment only aggravated Aidan, nearly causing them to enter the argument, then realization hit them. They did have a point. The fight was meaningless. Unnatural, even. Even the anger building up in their own chest began to feel off. As if just now remembering where they all were, Aidan looked around at the bloody fog surrounding them. As they casted their magic senses, everything became clear. It was the realm's energy causing all the hustle. Of course The Devil wouldn't let them come close easily. The thick steam seemed to be a visual manifestation of the power, hence there seemed to be a simple way out. Aidan started tugging at Asra's sleeve to get their attention

"What do you want now?" their at first furious gaze softened as they met their apprentice's face. "Aidan, I'm sorry, I don't-"

"It's the Devil, trying to turn us against each other. Please, help me clear the air before it gets physical"

The magician nodded slowly. Without further ado, Asra offered their one hand, already putting the other into the air. Mirroring their position, Aidan focused on the sensation of the wind, shaping their magic to resemble it. Although normally the spell would cause no trouble at all, this fog nearly seemed to have a consciousness of its own, fighting back, yet eventually giving in, thanks to their combined strength. The second the air was cleared out everyone went quiet, some even stopping mid-sentence.

"Everyone got everything out of their systems?" Aidan asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"What on earth possessed us?"

"The Devil's trying to ensure we won't fight him by making us battle each other instead" Asra explained calmly. "He's gotta try harder than that, though"

With these words everyone began apologizing and even cracking jokes, soon there was no trace of the tension from before. Sadly, not for long. The ground began cracking once more, so much faster than before. Chaos ensued, everyone escaping the danger in panic. Soon all that was left from the floor was but a few floating pieces, carrying the now separated group. Seeing theirs was sinking, Aidan quickly jumped to the closest one. They barely made it, was it not for Portia's help, they would've slipped. It did give them an idea, though.

"Everyone! I need you to hop on that one!" They pointed at the largest, empty piece.

No opposition, everyone made their way there, though there were a few close calls. Then, once again asking for their friends' assistance, Aidan created a flow with their magic, sending them gently sliding across the surface. With the fumes still in the air a few small conflicts broke out, now though understanding their nature, they didn't last long. Luckily, it didn't take long for them to wash ashore. As they made a few steps on the island, stone obelisks shot out from the ground, forming a sort of gateway. There was no more obstacles before them, they passed the tests. Now it was just the fight with The Devil himself looming above their fates. No backing down, no regrets, nothing. They had gone far and it was the time to finish what had been started, once and for all.

Everyone entered quickly, and soon they were in the middle of a giant, never ending throne room. As everything in the magical realms it didn't need to follow the laws of nature. Not a single wall could be seen, just an infinite labyrinth of pillars stretching far beyond the horizon, with a simple elevation in the center. Every time they blinked it seemed as if the whole room was twisting, barely enough to have the change be noticeable. All attention was quickly drawn to the black, somewhat gothic in style throne, and the white creature sitting proudly on it. The Devil smirked, watching the adventurers try and comprehend their surroundings. All, but Aidan. Their gaze was firmly fixated on the Arcana since the moment they got in. They had a single goal in mind and nothing would be able to stand in the way.

"So, you finally arrived" the Devil's booming voice echoed. "I must admit, I underestimated you. I expected you to cave in under the pressure at the very first problem, yet here we are. Nothing like a good surprise, am I right?" he seemed genuinely intrigued, though annoyance began to show as he continued. "What a shame it will be all for nothing. I am giving you the last chance to return where you came from, and watch as my reign begins"

"No" Aidan replied with all their fury, others nodded in agreement.

"No? Too bad, then" the goat stood up from his throne, and within a second was standing before Aidan. He grabbed their chin with his clawed hand, forcing them to meet his gaze. For a moment they remained like that, his bloody red eyes meeting their cold and purple irises. The staring contest continued until the Devil chuckled.

"Ah, the mighty power of friendship, such a sacred bond" with a snap of his fingers, fetters appeared out of thin air, binding everyone around to the ground. Screams of pain and frustration could be heard, yet Aidan stood intact, not a chain on their body. "Look at them, so pathetic and weak. And it's all thanks to you, great Fool. We're more alike than you would wish to think. Both binding others to ourselves, you and I. Although, at least my subjects know who is holding the chains" Aidan could only shake their head as a form of silent protest, as if they were frozen. Just forced to watch their friends suffering in horror, with the Devil toying with them. They felt burning hatred deep inside their soul, and with all their strength they forced a reply.

"Don't you ever dare compare me to a coward like yourself-" They didn't get to finish, as more chains sprouted from the ground and now wrapped around their body as well. It wasn't the initial shock or pain as the hot metal touched their skin that tore a scream out of their mouth, yet the overwhelming wave of feelings, each coming from somebody else. Their lover's pain, Portia's insecurity, all the suffering their teacher always kept to themselves, in one second it all coursed through their body, nearly knocking them out. They let out a last cry before another chain wrapped around their mouth, silencing them entirely.

"Tsk, ts, ts. Humans, so fragile and naïve. We could've been on the same side, and yet you always choose the short-term and meaningless virtues. Look at yourselves, all that you ever do is hurt one another, is that the very power you wished to use against me? Pathetic, truly I expected more from someone who came this far. But, after all, you are just human, I suppose"

The Devil turned his back and began slowly pacing back towards his throne, as if he already considered them defeated. As if they really were no danger to him. Aidan fought for their breath, battling all the contradictory feelings still plaguing his mind. Then, something snapped. One emotion grew stronger than the others, silencing everything around them. A burning hatred, rage, directed at the one, white figure towering above them all. They got themselves up, struggling against the crushing force of the chains, and grabbed a looser one. Pouring all their strength into that one link they pulled, snapping it in two. Their entire body shrieked with pain, yet they stood strong.

"It's not just the pain that we share, Devil. But our strengths, our love and compassion too, and that's what makes it worth it" words burned their throat and yet they didn't stop. Their monologue was accompanied by clattering of the chains, one by one freeing their friends. "But you wouldn't understand. You're just an Arcana, I suppose"

"Enough!" The Devil roared, sending another wave of chains towards his opponents. This time, however, Aidan was ready. Pouring all their magic into their fingertips they grasped the closest one. It began glowing under the touch, melting into a golden rope right in their hands. Their vision became blurry, breathing seemed impossible. It was too much, too much power for such a frail soul and body. They felt their legs giving in underneath them.

"Did you really think you could harness my strength? I've obliterated empires! Strongest mages couldn't stand a chance, even my fellow Arcana wouldn't best me, and here you really thought you would make it?! You truly are The Fool" All the Devil's previous collected facade had evaporated, leaving the howling with mockery and laughter monster.

Just as Aidan was about to accept their defeat, he felt a strong grip on their shoulder, and the pain lessened ever so slightly.

"I'm.. not leaving you alone here, darling" Julian swallowed a cry of pain, not letting go.

"No, no! Why won't you just give up! This is my realm, you cannot win!"

The ground set aflame, yet the others kept crawling to lend Aidan their power. Despite the pain, the struggle, they were ready to risk it all now. With six hands placed on their back Aidan got up yet again, breathing heavily. As they shared their power, they also shared their pains. They hardened their grip on the ropes, turning more of the Devil's chains into them. Pointing their arm into his direction Aidan set the ropes flying, wrapping around the Arcana's body. As he screamed and twisted, trying to break free, anger yet again consumed the magicians mind. All that suffering, dangers, countless lives lost because of that one creature. Was he really worth sparing, should he not be punished for all the evil he had caused? With these thoughts Aidan tightened the ropes more around the Devil's neck. Just one move, that's all it would take...

They couldn't hear the protests coming from behind them. They gathered all the power, all the hatred they had inside and poured it into the ropes. With a cry of strain they pulled even harder, then were suddenly blinded by a flash of light, and a wave of impact force sent them flying back. Everything went black once they hit the floor.

The room looked much more finite and tattered than before. Aidan cautiously cracked his other eye open, feeling as if their entire body had been set on fire. With a loud groan they got up to a sitting position, still completely confused. What had just happened...? Then everything came back within a second, when their gaze landed upon a familiar figure in a black tuxedo, lying unconscious on the floor.

"Julian!" They cried as they quickly crawled towards him "Julian, please wake up" but he wouldn't react. Aidan placed his hand on his beloved's cheek, then took it back quickly, in horror realizing that Julian was crumbling underneath the touch. As if made of sand, slowly breaking apart. Though disconnected from his body, so much power could've broken the spirit itself. Of course it would. Tears welled up in their eyes, obscuring their vision. As they began weeping, a harsh chuckle broke the silence. They turned to face the source of it, however nothing could prepare them for what they were met with.

On the floor, though significantly smaller, and with his form smudging around the edges, was The Devil. Very much alive.

"Such a heroic performance, and yet" he took a sharp breath. "And yet you still failed. Though, I must give credit when it's due, you took more out of me than I ever anticipated"

He slowly got to his feet, and made his way to Aidan, who didn't even try to leave his lover's side. As the echo of hooves clacking on the tiles filled the silence, they just numbly looked around, at all their friends scattered across the floor. Because they trusted me, they thought. Aidan was the one responsible for their demise.

"What pity, to meet such a fate, and have it not matter in the slightest, isn't it?" the Devil stood mere inches from them, yet Aidan only placed themselves more in between him and Julian. "Oh, spare that. There is nothing left to protect, anyways."

Was that really it? They did all of it just to fail in the end. And, what's worse, it was at the cost of Julian's life, many more to come. It wasn't worth it, none of it was. More tears rolled down Aidan's face. They weren't worth it. They weren't worth their friends' sacrifice. They had to undo it.

"Can you bring them back?" their voice cracked.

"Oh? Not so feisty anymore? That's closer to my liking" He grinned, leaning in closer "Normally I wouldn't have much problem with such a request, though you must understand now I am rather... weakened, so to say. It might be tricky"

"What do you want?"

"You"

They looked around, one last time. Though still thinking of their options, they had already decided. They were just searching for the right words, to make sure this time they won't fail again.

"...You will bring their lives back, and grant them safety in the future"

"And in exchange I will get your curious little body and soul, deal" he offered his hand. As Aidan shook it, they heard a scream of protest from behind, but it was too late. The deed was done. Everything began spinning and went dark once more.

The sun was burning their skin, though they got used to the sensation. There was no way of keeping track of time, the day never ended in here. Aidan knelt on the sands, chained to the floor and unable to move. There would be no need for that anyways, everything there was to see was an unforgiving desert spreading as far as they could see. And there, in the middle, a small pond. A small portal, like a window letting Aidan see the consequences of their actions. They couldn't look away, they couldn't close their eyes. Forever condemned to staring at their home being torn apart by monsters, people frantically attempting to adjust to the new conditions, praying for a figment of normality. And at the Mighty Devil, ruler of the New World, every now and then gazing at Aidan through the water, maliciously thanking for all their 'help'. They clung onto the thought of at least their friends being somewhere safe. A single thought keeping them from insanity. As long as their friends were intact, it would've been worth it. They deserved it more than anyone.