

*Demonstayer*

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*For Alex*

**T**ime felt frozen before Spirit's eyes.

The boy felt conflicted. Torn between giving his attention to the tower he had constructed with wooden toy blocks on the floor of their living room or watching his older sister Emily scramble to toss her belongings in a small backpack. Stuffing a final pair of socks into a side pocket, she plopped down on the floor with him, allowing his mind to jump back to his work.

Making friends in Everad had proven difficult for him. The other children his age seemed content smashing and destroying things with their tiny hands and feet. Spirit understood; it was much simpler to destroy than to create. But he gained no pleasure from watching things crumble. He loved to craft, to build marvelous structures with whatever instruments he could get.

Now, as he gazed upon the tower he had built, he seemed displeased with the architecture. The base wasn't wide enough. Any silly gust of wind or thunderstorm could tilt the tower toward a catastrophic end. Resigning to the toddler mentality, he threw his arm into it and the blocks came tumbling down.

Emily giggled as Spirit collected the blocks and neatly stored them in a plastic container. “What was that for?”

Spirit shrugged. “Where’s Mom and Dad?”

“How would I know?” she retorted. Standing, Emily tip-toed over to the windowsill of the living room and peaked through silver curtains. “I thought they’d be here by now. Daddy called an hour ago and said to pack whatever we could fit in a small bag. Maybe we’re going on vacation!” she squealed.

Not responding, Spirit went to the sofa and packed up the clothes she’d set out for him into his little suitcase, adding a few old toys, a set of colorful markers, and his favorite coloring book. He finished zipping up the bag and watched Emily as she struggled to decide which outfits to bring.

“Which one do you think is better?” She held up two purple dresses that, to Spirit, looked practically identical. “This one? Or this one?”

Spirit opened his mouth for a sarcastic reply but stopped when the front door slammed open and their mother came rushing through the opening. Her auburn hair streamed behind her head as she hurried to the kitchen, only briefly acknowledging Spirit and Emily with a nod and a tight smile.

The siblings glanced at each other uneasily.

Their father Aldan strode in shortly afterward, accompanied by a man that Spirit didn’t recognize.

“I need more time, Sorin,” Aldan said as he knelt to give Emily a hug, winking over her shoulder at Spirit.

“Deeply sorry my friend,” Sorin replied, giving the children a nervous wave. “I have given you and Diana as much time as I could. The guards will be here any minute. Please tell me you have it.”

“Daddy, why are soldiers coming?” asked Emily.

Aldan stood and rubbed his temples. He let out an exasperated sigh and looked from his son to his daughter. His face relaxed and he smiled softly.

“Let them come. We have done what we needed to do. Sorin, tell the others I have hidden Revilark where no cruel hands can ever grasp it.”

Diana walked into the room at a much slower pace this time, glancing at everyone and settling her gaze on Spirit. She sat down beside him and wrapped an arm around his tiny body, bringing him into a loving embrace.

“Emily. Spirit.” She motioned for Emily to sit beside her on the floor. “Your dad and I need to go away for a little while, okay? While we’re gone, Sorin here is going to help monitor you two troublemakers at his house. It’s huge! And he has a son of his own, so you three can play together. Just promise me you’ll protect your little brother, all right?” Diana winked at her daughter and kissed her on the forehead.

Tears welled up in Emily’s eyes. “But when will you be back? I thought we were going on vacation...”

Diana used the sleeve of her own shirt and wiped them away. “We will honey, I promise. As soon as we get back, we’ll go



wherever you want! I know Spirit wanted to go camping outside the city. Maybe we can go stargazing one weekend!”

Spirit perked up. The city had way too many lights to view all but the brightest stars. He nodded in agreement, smiling.

Footsteps sounded outside the front door. Sorin looked to Aldan with despair. “I can buy you a few seconds.”

Aldan gave Sorin a firm hug and patted him on the shoulder. “There are no words to describe your loyalty and kindness, my dearest friend. Thank you.”

Sorin nodded with a tense smile and darted out the door. The children could hear him giving a loud, elaborate greeting to someone.

“Spirit.” Diana searched her son’s golden eyes as new tears formed, shimmering in a ray of sunlight that slipped past the curtains. Outside, voices rose into an argument. “I know you don’t fully understand this now, but someday the world is going to need you. What your father and I have given you, you hold on to with all your heart. You need to be the one to shatter the darkness that will blanket this world.” She hugged him tight. “I love you, my son. I love you, my daughter.”

Releasing them, she and Aldan rose to their feet. Emily took Spirit’s hand and they scrambled up too, as not a second later, five men in steel armor kicked the front door down and stormed into the room, rifles and aimed at the family. Their steel helmets each bore the insignia of the Crossus Militia: a set of angel wings spread in flight. One gold and the other silver.

At a barked command, the guards parted and a sixth man stepped through the chaotic scene. He wore a black jacket with green stripes and pants layered in steel pads, and didn't stop until he was just inches from the Clayborn family. Spirit peered up at the man from behind his father's leg, trembling at the fierce expression he wore as he glared at Aldan.

“What did you do with Sorin, Mazet?” Diana demanded.

The man's response was fluid, each word laced together with poise and menace like the slithering of a prowling snake. “Detained. His actions were...less than appropriate, and he shall be punished for it. Nothing like what we have in store for you two, however.” The man held out an empty hand, palm up. “Unless you return what you have stolen from Crossus, and humanity itself. This is your last chance. Where is Revilark?”

Almost thirty seconds of silence passed. Emily put her arm around Spirit. Their father remained stoic. When Mazet decided he had waited long enough, he turned back to his soldiers and waved them forward.

“Arrest them both for treason.”

“Mom...” Emily muttered through quivering lips.

The soldiers swarmed on the parents and handcuffed their hands behind their backs.

“Daddy...”

They pushed Diana and Aldan forcefully out the door and away from Spirit and Emily.

“No!” Spirit cried out and ran at the man in charge with the black jacket. He jumped on the man’s leg and hit him with what feeble strength he could muster. The man looked at the child with disgust and kicked, sending Spirit through the air and onto the floor.

“Jonas!” the man screamed. A soldier appeared at his side in an instant and waited for orders. “I want you to send these kids away from here immediately! Dump them in the darkest corner of the city you can find so I never have to see another Clayborn for as long as I live.”

With the snap of a finger, two more soldiers appeared from outside the house and grabbed a kicking and flailing Emily and Spirit. In the street, Spirit saw what had to have been at least fifty more soldiers, armed and waiting for his parents to make the wrong move.

The next hour was a blur. Squeezed between armored soldiers on an old train, they peppered the soldiers with questions that were all ignored. Spirit reached for the toys in his bag, only to realize it wasn’t there. Their belongings were still in the comfortable living room of their home miles away. Spirit couldn’t tell where the train was headed, only that it passed through a tunnel in a wall that towered above.

Emily gripped his hand tight.

His thoughts were only of his sister’s constant tears and the words his mother had said to him.

And of home. He wanted to go home.

## SPIRIT



***T**he people of this world need to know the truth. The Vanguard has been fighting this war for far too long, keeping a false peace between humanity and the monsters across our borders.*

*We've found something. Some kind of artifact, and if we can decipher its meaning, there's a chance we can end this war for good.*

*I pray every day that my children are safe at home, but how can I be sure with the demons still out there? This is the best solution. I only hope we make it home in time.*

*September 12, 284*

Spirit sat silently in the empty room as he watched the hands on an old clock on the wall. A fluorescent light flickered repeatedly as it always had, dimming the already dark excuse for a waiting room. It was no larger than a broom closet and had nothing in it but his chair

and the obnoxious ticking clock, which he had grown a fond hatred for.

After spending every evening waiting in this room for the past year, there wasn't much Spirit didn't despise about the place. It was underground, so it always felt cold and damp. The people (if that's what he could call them) were rude and disgusting, and *gods* the smell had made him puke for months. It smelled like rotting flesh throughout the corridors and on everyone's clothes.

However, Spirit endured. Every day he came down to this part of Crossus he made more and more money each time. Soon he wouldn't need the money anymore, and all of this would be in the past. Hell, he could look back at this one day and maybe even laugh.

For now he sat, staring at the clock. The caretaker was never late, and so as Spirit counted down the seconds he could hear lumbering footsteps in the corridor outside coming his direction. Spirit counted four seconds before he heard two knocks on the door.

"How've you been kiddo?" Gunter asked as he opened the door to the tiny room and squeezed his head through to look at Spirit.

Spirit shrugged and stood to meet his caretaker at eye level. He had met Gunter a year ago when he first started working for the cannibals in the poorest district of the grand city of Crossus. He was just under five feet tall, black curly hair and plump all around with giant, meaty forearms. His flannel shirt looked as greasy as Gunter himself. From what Spirit had heard, he was a good man with a wife and two kids he refused to stop talking about. Well, as good as a man could be that devoured human flesh for sustenance.

Although the other sector of Crossus was supposedly clean, his home in Sepharad had no such luck. After the war with demons had ended nearly 170 years ago, cults began appearing to worship them and spoke omens of their return. During the rituals, they would do as the demons did and eat what demons ate. Which just so happened to be humans. Some people grew too dependent on cannibalism and needed to eat other people for the nutrients they had once gotten from not being a complete psychopath.

Brushing the dust off his black shirt and jeans, Spirit replied, “On a scale from one to ten? I’m sitting on a strong four today.” He gave a weak smile.

Gunter led the way down a long hall as dimly lit as the room he left behind. He heard piercing cries in the prize rooms to their left. If he were to ever lose one of the sick games he played, that was where his destination would be. Tied to a table, getting his limbs ripped off for people like Gunter to eat for dinner. As the cries grew louder, both men put a hand over their left ear.

“I love the taste, but I’ll always find our method a bit...questionable.” Gunter waved at a guard passing by. “But hey, a four! That’s much better than last week’s two.” The man chuckled. “You know, I heard about this new spa treatment they just opened up two blocks from Trevil Street. Supposed to use some revolutionary tech to rejuvenate the skin, make you look like a new man! I was gonna take my wife for our anniversary and thought hey, maybe my favorite competitor would be interested. Hell knows what you’ve been spending all your earnings on, anyway.”

They entered a room on the right before Spirit had a chance to respond. He was thankful for that. Instead, he nodded to Gunter and gave another feigned smile. "I'll just need a couple minutes this time," Spirit said with a dismissive wave.

Shutting the door, Spirit scanned the room as he always did. A toilet on the far wall and beside it a sink with a white, clean washrag hanging on the faucet. Above was a round mirror with a hairline crack extending across the middle. The room was double the size of his last one and twice as clean. The tile floor had recently been mopped and every surface dusted and cleaned. If he wins tonight, he'll be back here to clean off any blood or dirt. If he loses, he gets a visit to the prize room. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

He took the rag and began soaking it in warm water, exhaling a sigh as the heat enveloped his hands. Despite how wretched this place was, he always looked forward to having a moment of warm, running water. A delicacy to this part of the city for the few lucky enough to have it.

"Almost done in there?" Gunter asked from outside the closed door. Spirit could hear the obese man chewing and tried to drown out the sound with the splash of water hitting the sink. Sometimes Gunter cooked his meals and prepared them, but on rare occasions ate his human raw.

Spirit ran a wet hand through his short, dark brown hair and quickly washed off his face. In the mirror he saw a shell of a twenty-year-old man. His body was too lean, covered by only a thin layer

of muscle. His face had nothing but sharp features, save for a rounded nose. All that stood out were brilliant golden eyes that his sister Emily swore were enchanted to shine in even the dimmest of lights.

“We *are* on a slight time restraint, kiddo.”

Spirit finished his usual routine, splashing his face with water to help wake up before following the caretaker down the hall. He could hear the clamor of spectators finding their seats and the murmuring of small talk.

It’s just another week, Spirit thought to himself as they passed through a thick metal door and into the room holding the commotion. The room itself was a two-hundred-foot radius oval. Bleachers filled with hundreds of people lining the walls, anxiously waiting for the match to begin. An arena with a sand floor sat in the center, outlined only by a two-foot-tall wall of concrete. He stepped over the wall and tested the traction in his worn, dirty sneakers. Two men stood on the opposite side of the ring. Both were around his height and looked to be slightly more muscular.

And there was the fact that there were two of them.

The crowd cheered as Spirit stepped over the stone wall and into the arena. “You can’t possibly be serious.”

Gunter played dumb and shrugged. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Not *sure* what I mean? I’m not fighting two people at once, Gunter!” Spirit exclaimed. The crowd roared louder as he tried to stall.



“Oh, right. That. Well the higher ups took into account that you’ve never lost a match yet, and that you’ve been doing this for much longer than most, so to make it more exciting for the audience...” he motioned to the two men waiting to pounce as soon as they heard the signal. “I have complete faith in you. Just do what you do and win for us, because we’d have two losers instead of one and that would make the audience very, very happy.” He winked and gave a toothy grin.

Thoughts of the prize room jumped into Spirit’s head and he quickly extinguished them. Once someone stepped into the arena, it was fight or lose a limb from surrendering anyway. With no other options, he cautiously stepped forward. A bell dinged in a dark corner of the room and it began.

The man on the left charged forward first. Spirit measured the distance closing between them and counted down the inches as he came closer. Once they were within a foot from each other, Spirit ducked down below a sloppy right hook and spun behind him with incredible speed. Before he had a chance to turn, Spirit fell on all fours. Putting the weight of his body on his hands, he swung his right leg into the man’s knees, knocking him to the ground.

Spirit leaped back to his feet as the second man came at him. Before he had time to react, a fist slammed into Spirit’s cheekbone and almost knocked him unconscious. A second punch hit him in the eye and blinded him for a moment. Stepping back, he deflected another incoming blow with his forearm and gave three swift jabs to the ribcage. As his opponent reached down to defend his torso, Spirit

took the opening to lunge forward and elbow him in the jaw with all the force he could muster. A crack echoed throughout the room and the man fell to the ground, crying out in agony.

The first man was on his feet already, a lot more pissed off than injured it seemed. This time when he approached, it was slower. More calculated. Spirit could feel the blood from his cheek run down his chin and drip to the sand below. Behind him he could hear the second man stand back up despite his broken jaw.

Shit. He was supposed to stay down. They had him in the center of the arena now, and they came closer with each heartbeat. Not good.

Not good at all.

They sprinted toward the center, both raising a fist to smash his skull to pieces. Spirit stood still and exhaled. He felt the world slow down around him as his mind raced, calculating his next move.

The first man kicked clouds of sand up with heavy steps. He was strong, but slow and clumsy.

The second man was two feet closer and would reach him first. His right leg was situated perfectly for a roundhouse kick. Spirit judged the proper angle his body would need to be at for a counterattack.

The world zoomed back to normal at an alarming rate. The second man reached him first and swung. Spirit dodged to the left as the roundhouse came flying at his torso. Instead of trying to dodge, he grabbed hold and twisted his arms upward. The man lost balance and fell to the ground just in time for the first opponent to arrive. As

if choreographed, Spirit predicted his attack with ease and slapped it to the side. He hit the man with flurries of punches, disorienting him and knocking him back to the wall of the arena. The man attempted to raise a hand to stop the beating. Spirit grabbed the man's head by the hair and tripped him, slamming his head against the concrete wall.

Panting, he turned to his other opponent. He was still on the ground, unable to move. The crowd chanted.

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

But his goal was never to kill them. The conditions only said to be the last fighter standing, and so he was. Of course, the cannibals weren't against it, but Spirit had killed no one yet and he'd like to keep it that way. He turned back to Gunter and stepped out of the blood covered ring.

“Satisfied?” Spirit's voice barely cut through the roar of the audience. His legs gave out and he put all his weight on Gunter's shoulder. With his help, the two exited the way they came. He had been told when he first started that the victor should stay after the match and watch to see what the opponent would be losing. How they chose differed week to week, from spinning a wheel to letting the audience vote. He had always refused to stay. No sense in involving himself any more than he already had to.

“I can't say I'll be as happy as the audience will be tonight during the banquet,” Gunter responded. Spirit watched as another contender passed him in the hallway. His was only the first of fifteen

matches that were taking place. “Fifty-six matches and zero losses. Honestly, I’m not sure how you pull it off, kiddo.”

When they reached the washroom, Spirit spent fifteen minutes cleaning off the cuts that still bled on his face. He sat on the floor and closed his eyes, letting his mind wander to keep from thinking of how much he hurt. His body ached and burned like a million hot needles slowly sinking into his skin. He tried to think about being in his soft, warm bed and his sister safe at home.

Get up, Spirit. Go home and rest.

Forcing his body to move, he stood and limped to the door. He followed Gunter down the hall and up two flights of stairs. The smell of sweat and flesh crept away the higher they climbed and the lights grew brighter. At the end of the second staircase they met an elevator with an enormous man sitting next to it in a chair. He had a lit cigar in his mouth and a rifle resting comfortably across his lap.

“Heard ‘bout your match Spirit,” he said to them as he hit a lever behind him. After several seconds of squealing metal grinding against metal, the elevator stopped at their level and the doors opened. “Kid’s impressive shit.”

Gunter grimaced. He never liked the smell of smoke or anything that he considered smelling foul. Spirit found it a disturbing sort of ironic. “Thank you, Tyrus. Spirit, will you be alright getting home? You seem more roughed up than usual.”

“Gee, I wonder why?” is what he wanted to say. But Spirit held his tongue and nodded instead. “Did my money go through?”

He stepped into the elevator. Every inch looked rusted over and the ceiling dripped something putrid.

“We’ve already wired it into your account. You should have it within the hour.” Tyrus reached for the lever again, but Gunter stopped him. “Before you go, there’s something the higher-ups in the guild want to ask you.” They called themselves a guild because cult probably didn’t sit well with its followers. “You see, there is someone else with *sixty* wins and no losses. I’m sure you’ve heard about him.”

“Meiko.” The guy was insane. He *enjoyed* the fights.

“Right. We’ve been informed that he wishes to challenge you. Tomorrow.”

Spirit chuckled. “I’ll be lucky if I can even move half my body by tomorrow evening. There’s no way either of us will be in fighting shape by then.” He motioned to Tyrus to start the elevator.

As the doors closed, Gunter stuck his arm in. They automatically opened back up. “Just listen for a second. Since it would be such an anticipated match, they are willing to pay the victor almost four months’ worth of winnings.”

That caught Spirit’s attention. Four months? He could pay off the entirety of Emily’s treatments with that...

Gunter saw Spirit’s peaked interest and continued. “The match will be at seven. Meiko has already decided to show up whether you will or not, so it is completely up to you.” Gunter moved his arm out of the way and the doors began to close again. “Sleep on it. We’ll know your answer if we see you tomorrow.”

The man gave him an honest grin and waved goodbye as the doors shut and the elevator moved upward. It left Spirit with only his thoughts to keep him company. That and the sound of gears trying relentlessly to move the metal box.

This could be it. With that much money, he could pay for his sister and have some extra. They might even have enough to move out of Sepharad and find a decent home. Maybe with warm, running water. He found himself smiling a bit at the thought of his first warm shower and laughed.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened again to reveal the office building the guild used as a cover for their night activities. Cannibals leisurely went about their business, no one outside the building any wiser to what they were or the sick games they played beneath the ground they walked on.

One more fight. He could muster up the strength for that. Feeling hopeful for the first time in years, Spirit headed for home.

## II

*W*e dissected our first demon today. After the skirmish we took two of the deceased and spent the rest of the week examining everything we could. The skin was pitch black like tar and rough as stone. We tried every weapon we had and could barely break through. The blood looked and glowed almost exactly like lava. They told me demons were made of flesh and aether, but I never believed them until now. Everything inside the demon's corpse displayed the same anomaly. Muscle tissue, organs, even the bones all glowed a bright orange-yellow and were scalding hot to the touch.

Sorin suggested it could be a defensive tool. I wasn't so sure. On some demons I saw their skin cracking open as if the aether was trying to burst out of their bodies. It pulsed like a heartbeat and occasionally flowed into their hands to wield like a sword. It wasn't just for defense, it was also a weapon.

After several days, the aether slowly dimmed and grew colder as the corpse aged. Eventually it died out at the creature's heart, flickering for a few seconds and then nothingness.

*I've seen humans do amazing things with aether. The Vanguard of Crossus has produced some of the most powerful humans on the planet. But these monsters don't just use aether. They are aether. This is an enemy humanity has not prepared for, and if we don't prepare soon I fear the worst.*

*July 5, 283*

Spirit wandered through the market for almost an hour in the dark of the night, preparing himself for his sister's wrath when she saw his beat-up face. The two lived in a tiny apartment on the east side of Sepharad, the larger of the two sectors of Crossus. It was home to every thief and beggar, every cannibalistic cult he could think of. Every neighborhood looked like it was crumbling to pieces. The homes were all made of concrete and shoved so close to each other that from far away it just looked like one enormous hostel. He was told the east end was the safest area he could afford, but every day he still heard news of robberies and murder, most by stabbing since no one had the money for a gun of any kind.

After thirty miles of poverty and wreckage towered a hundred-foot tall wall that divided Sepharad from Everad, the second half of the city. Home to the more privileged and wealthy, Spirit had only distant memories of what rested beyond the dividing wall. Hospitals that could treat any ailment, technology more advanced than anything he could dream of.

And trees. Actual healthy, growing trees that extended fifty feet toward the sky. Sepharad had trees that looked to be on their



deathbed at any given time of the year, and only a few weeds as a poor substitute for grass.

There were also other stories. Some humans in Everad being born with aether, a mysterious magical element that humanity discovered several hundred years ago. Spirit didn't know much about it other than that species across the continent showed signs of it like the demons they had fought in a war 170 years ago. No one in Sepharad seemed to believe that any human could have or use aether.

He approached his home, ready to collapse. It was nearing midnight and most of the streets had emptied, save for a few homeless that slept under the cover of whatever shelter they could find. As he stepped up to the door of his apartment, he pulled out his key chain and fumbled with it in the darkness, trying to find the right one. From out of nowhere something bumped into his back and he smacked his face against the door frame.

“Ow! Watch it!” he exclaimed.

Someone grabbed Spirit by the shoulders and flipped him around so they were facing each other. The man wore nothing but brown rags that could have once been a cloak. His hair was dark gray and jumped from his head, as if every follicle was charged with static. The only thing Spirit could center his attention on was a cloth wrapped around his head to cover his eyes. Damn it, the poor beggar was blind.

“Hey, I’m sorry for snapping like that. I didn’t know you were, well, you know,” Spirit mumbled as guilt burrowed itself in his consciousness.

The old man just stood there for a moment, almost as though the guy was staring. He reached a hand up to Spirit’s face and brushed a rough palm across his cheek, smiling madly the entire time. For a beggar he sure had a beautiful set of teeth.

Spirit wanted to run inside his apartment and lock the door, but he felt frozen in place. The creepy elder took his other hand and move it across his jawline.

When he finally spoke, his voice sounded high pitched and raspy. “You...you are very unique.” His smile grew wider as he spoke.

“I’m sorry, have we met before?” Spirit asked.

The man snickered. “Oh, us? No no no, I can’t say we have. But I’d love to spend a bit more time to get to know you. You seem so familiar.”

Move, Spirit. Move!

Forcing himself to break free from the old beggar’s hold, he quickly turned to the door and shoved the key in. The door flew open and Spirit rushed inside, slamming the door shut and locking it. He could hear laughter on the other side, like a child who had just discovered their new favorite toy. After a few painfully long and awkward seconds, the laughter grew farther away.

He finally tried to relax in the comfort of his home. The two-bedroom apartment was small, but he found strong comfort in

knowing it was his. Thankfully, the floor was hardwood instead of the typical Sepharad concrete. Next to the door a blue lamp sat on a short wooden table, which he promptly flicked on to find his way through the living room. The only other piece of furniture in the room was an old, brown leather couch that sank in too deep when he sat in it.

Spirit wanted to turn the corner down the hall to his room and sleep more than anything in the universe. His sister met him as he turned the corner, wrapped comfortably in a wool blanket. Tears ran from her gentle green eyes.

Taking a step back, Spirit braced himself for the incoming storm. “I am so sorry I’m late. Just give me a second to explain, I have some amazing news.”

He expected her to slap him across the face. Closing his eyes, he braced himself for stinging pain across his cheek. Instead, he felt her drape the blanket around his shoulders. Emily came in closer, fully embracing him. She hugged him tight and Spirit rested his head on her shoulder, long locks of her auburn hair flowing around the nape of his neck.

They stood in their warm bubble of serenity for what felt like an eternity. Emily was the only person he had known to love since Spirit could remember. Their parents had left when he was only four, leaving a ten-year-old Emily to care for him. Jumping from foster home to foster home, they traversed across Sepharad. Since they couldn’t afford school, Emily taught him whatever she had learned in reading books at whatever libraries she could find. He absorbed it

all like a sponge, his mind picking up on things faster than anyone Emily had ever met.

Spirit began going to the library on his own, reading three books a week and teaching himself everything he could. Emily took a job as a server to pay the bills while he began apprenticing under a prestigious mechanical engineer who said he could get Spirit and Emily into Everad working for the military building machines he could only dream of.

And just when they thought life was finally going to give them the chance they deserved, Emily was diagnosed with leukemia. The doctor had described it as a group of cancers in bone marrow that results in an abnormal amount of white blood cells, although most of that was a blur for Spirit. All Spirit could focus on was the money. They had a treatment for it, an effective one at that. But to pay for it, they needed more than what Emily made at her job. And his apprenticeship paid nothing at all...

“Spirit, can we sit?” Emily’s soft voice broke through his trance and grasped his heart. His days could be horrible, his nights even worse. She was alive though, and every fight brought him one step closer to her last treatment.

He lifted his head and nodded. Together they moved to the couch and he crashed into it with the grace of a drunk. Emily laughed as he tried to get comfortable and sat beside him, keeping the blanket on their legs. Turning on the lamp, she saw the full extent of the beating he had taken.

“By the gods, your eye!” she exclaimed. Taking a portion of the blanket, she began wiping fresh blood from the cuts.

Spirit stopped her and shook his head. “It’s really no big deal, just a couple cuts and bruises. I’ll be fine, Em, I promise. If this is the only damage I take for the money then it’s—”

“I don’t care about the money!” She caught herself crying again and took a deep breath before continuing. “I care about you, Spirit. What will you do if you lose? What happens when you finally lose and they take whatever part of you they want?”

“It isn’t whatever part, they have a system for deciding that.”

“You know what I mean!” she retorted. “You go to these things every week and every time I stay up wondering if you’ll make it home or just bleed out in the streets. It needs to stop!”

He wanted to respond but couldn’t find the words. Seeing her weep tore a hole through his soul and twisted his insides until he felt ready to rip apart.

“Please, I’m begging you, don’t do this anymore,” Emily continued. “You’re all I’ve got. Go back to the apprenticeship and live your dreams. I need you to live your life for the both of us.”

Spirit moved closer and took her carefully in his arms. She was so frail from the treatments and being bedridden, he was afraid of breaking her in two whenever they hugged. “They gave me an offer. One more match, tomorrow. Just one more and it will pay for the rest of your treatment and more.” He saw the displeasure across her face and tried desperately to convince her. “We could afford a

house! Or maybe even move to Everad! This is such a huge opportunity for us. How could I say no?”

After several moments of silence, Emily slid her tiny body away from his so she could look at him in the eye. His eyes glowed in the dim lighting like he had tiny light bulbs inside his corneas.

The silence lingered on as she contemplated his proposal. Nothing seemed to exist but the two siblings in the small living room. Outside the world was fast asleep, not a soul caring for Emily. And definitely none that cared for Spirit. They were alone in the world.

When she at last spoke, the words were slow and careful. “Do you remember the last time I saw you smile?” In response, Spirit threw up a broad grin from ear to ear. She didn’t find it amusing. “No. I mean really smile, because life made you happy.”

His demeanor grew dark. “I honestly don’t remember Ems. Maybe a couple years ago?”

“When was the last time you laughed? Laughed so hard your stomach hurt and it felt like you couldn’t breathe?”

It took him off guard. Before he had to leave his apprenticeship? Before he had to fight underground? When the hell *was* the last time he laughed, at anything at all? He couldn’t even remember what that feeling was. The thought of enjoying life confused him. Fight, earn money for bills and cancer treatments, prepare for the next fight. That was his life. There was no time for friends and there were no relatives still alive for them to go to for help. Anything before the leukemia and fighting seemed like a blur

in his mind. Like a giant fog had formed over any memories he used to have. Happiness didn't even feel like an option anymore.

"I can tell you." Emily rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I remember the day like it was yesterday. But I won't tell you if you go tomorrow. I need you to promise me you won't go fight. My happiness is within you, Spirit. I know it is dark now, but one day you'll remember what you used to be like. So full of life and energy and ambition." She gave a smile that could melt a glacier.

Letting out a deep sigh, he said, "Alright. Tomorrow night I will stay home with you. I promise."

"Swear you promise?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, I swear I promise."

Emily's expression was nothing but relief. "Thank you. I just want to enjoy the time we still have together."

The words pierced through Spirit like a dagger. *The time they still had together.* Soon she'd be gone.

*Dead because you did nothing. If you don't go, you'll be killing your own sister.*

"Now how about some midnight dinner and wine before we head to bed?" Emily asked. Already standing, she grinned, heading for the kitchen. Although her body was taking a toll, the treatments thankfully kept her energetic and moving throughout long chunks of the day. She was at the least able to be Emily, for the time being.

That night they stayed up another hour eating spaghetti and toast with red wine. Emily did most of the talking, discussing her plans for the week. He nodded along and pretended to listen while

his mind tortured him with images of a single tombstone with a name etched into it: Emily Lilian Clayborn.

The next day flew past a dazed Spirit. Together they ate breakfast before leaving to pick up Emily's latest supply of medicine around noon. When night crept upon them, Spirit informed Emily he was running to go get something for dinner from the market. She smiled once more and told him to hurry home.

Before he knew it, Spirit stood outside the building he had grown to hate.

*I can't let you die.*

Guilt burning holes in his conscience, he went inside.



## III

**X**anerac was finally in our sights. We could finally see the home of millions of demons with the help of our marksman's rifle scope. Miles away we could spot one of the four citadels, placed at the center of the vast cities they inhabited and rose thousands of feet toward the sky. Behind that was Thraxas, the capital of Xanerac, holding the largest population of demons we know of. From there we could only see the tip of the castle touching the troposphere, low-hanging clouds brushing harmlessly past. The building seemed to be enhanced somehow, aether perhaps bound into its inner workings to allow such a tall structure to stand without faltering miles into the sky. Demonarch Yaxus held the throne to all demons in that castle, a demon of whom most spoke of as if he were a god.

The terrain had been an issue for our ever-decreasing group for about a week now. There were no trees, no grass, nothing green at all. Just a wasteland followed by a desert followed by more wasteland with the occasional volcano continuously producing a steady flow of lava that pooled at the base. Our provisions are

*dwindling and I'm not sure I remember the last time I saw any wildlife or game to hunt. It was the perfect home for these monsters. What need would they have for wildlife to hunt or wheat to sow? Their food and prey stood right here, writing in this journal.*

*It was hard to worry about the food or supplies, though. The real threat was the four archdemons that held each citadel. Only one squad had ever confronted one and lived. A squadron of five Vanguard had encountered a single archdemon and were massacred in minutes. The only survivor was a young summoner who was missing her left arm. She hasn't said a word since.*

*I'm not sure how to comprehend the power we might witness after we find a way into Xanerac with this vast canyon separating it from the world. Sneaking past legions of demons was one thing, but to scout the archdemon's citadels had to be suicide. Stories Sorin had told me stated when two archdemons fought, the very aether in the air and ground would disperse and storms rip the sky to pieces.*

*Watch for storms and run like hell if I see one. Got it.*

*August 17, 283*

When Spirit stepped through the double doors, he met the same warm greeting the pencil-pushing cannibals normally gave him. The sign outside read: Foundation for the Needy. The building itself was twelve floors if you included the underground levels, most of them filled with cubicles and surly workers in cheap suits. It was ironically a place that coordinated charity events around Sepharad

to raise money for the homeless and disabled. He first came to the building seeking financial aid for Emily's treatments. When they couldn't help, Gunter coincidentally appeared. And so, his long nights of battling for payment began.

Spirit nodded as he passed through, making a beeline to the elevator at the back of the main lobby. He hated this lobby. The red paint on every wall and faux plants and yellow tinted chandeliers gave him the chills. The hall was purgatory, and he was walking toward hell.

Before he could hit the tiny mechanical button to summon his ride into the depths, Gunter's voice penetrated through the noise of bustling workers. "Spirit, my boy! You made it!"

Nervously, Spirit rubbed the nape of his neck. "I guess I wasn't left with much of a choice."

"Damn right kiddo!" Gunter strode to his side and smashed his pudgy index finger on the button. He was wearing an all blue suit and tie, the shirt underneath looking several sizes too small as the large man's neck consumed half of his collar. He even had on shiny new blue shoes and a sapphire earring in his left ear. "With the money you'll be making tonight, I doubt a single regret will be left in your mind."

Silently Spirit wished nothing but for Gunter's words to be true. The door slid open and together they took the ride down. Tyrus greeted them as they exited the shaft and once again they trekked toward the arena at an urgent pace, Gunter waddling as he tried to keep up with Spirit. Determination roared in his body, a ferocity he

hadn't felt in a long time. His body still ached from yesterday, and most of the joints in his legs screamed at every step. But one more fight was it. *One more and Emily will be in pain no longer.*

As they approached the bathroom, Gunter paused for a moment. "I know this is going to sound silly, but the higher-ups want you to wear something. They left it in the room for you to change into."

"Higher-ups? Will I ever get to know the actual name of this cult?" Spirit mocked. Gunter furrowed his brow and frowned. Whoops. He let the forbidden c-word slip out. "You know what I mean, Gunter."

"Ah, I know you didn't mean it," Gunter replied, "and you know we don't allow contestants to know that information. Top secret and whatnot. But if you ever feel the urge to join our ranks, I suppose we could consider it!" He laughed, and it was Spirit's turn to frown. "Now get in there and change kiddo. I want to get this fight over with so I can grab a bite of some delicious Meiko, preferably fried. Those last guys you handled tasted a tad raw to me."

A disturbing image of Gunter's dinner rooted itself in his mind as Spirit swung the bathroom door shut behind him. There on the rim of the sink sat a navy-blue tank top and athletic shorts to match. A slightly puzzled Spirit slipped out of his clothes and into the matching outfit. The fresh shirt fit tight on his body, forming to what miniscule muscle he had in his chest and abs.

In the mirror he looked like a pale blueberry. Emily would have a parade of jokes if she saw him now. At least he didn't have matching undergarments.

Saying his last farewells to the room he hoped to never see again, Spirit left the bleak bathroom and met the caretaker in the hall. Gunter grinned from ear to ear at the sight.

"I'm assuming these clothes will make sense before I embarrass myself in front of an enormous audience?" he asked the larger man. Gunter didn't respond, instead motioning for Spirit to open the door to the arena when they arrived.

The entire room was larger, almost twice the size it had been yesterday. The walls had somehow retracted to reveal space for more seating, which they easily filled. They dressed everyone on the left half of the room in blue, on the right in all red. It split down the middle, where the two entrance tunnels for the fighters were.

"They wanted to make this match a teensy bit more...thematic," Gunter noted. It was difficult to hear him over the thundering of cheers and feet stomping on the bleachers.

Overhead the lights in the ceiling flashed a mixture of red, blue and white at different intervals above the new, double-sized arena. The sand was gone, revealing a stone floor underneath. They had raised the walls an extra four feet to meet Spirit just above eye level and were coated in tiny, sharp spikes the length of a pencil. They hadn't just changed the arena. They had transformed it into a giant, circular deathtrap.

Meiko sat in the center with his legs crossed, head propped lazily in his left hand. Spirit looked at the boy for the first time. Wavy black hair fell past broad shoulders that bulged from the red tank top they made him wear. His profound jawline and stern cheekbones gave him a stern, battle-worn face. When he stood, his deep blue eyes never left Spirit. The gaze was enough to intimidate a demon and locked Spirit in place momentarily. He had heard they were the same age and height, but Meiko was twice the size in muscle mass.

Gunter nudged him toward his tiny entrance to the ring and Spirit realized he had been standing in the same spot, staring at Meiko for much too long. “I know you’re nervous. Just remember I’m rooting for ya! And the odds of you losing your head if you lose are very low, I hear they’re using the wheel to decide the prizes tonight.”

How comforting.

As he entered the arena, both entrances closed themselves off with a moving wall that slid from inside the walls already present. Meiko bowed his head slightly to show respect to his opponent. When Spirit was in position just a few feet away, he did the same. The audience became a torrent of commotion in anticipation for the bell to ring. And when it did, Spirit prepared himself for an onslaught of attacks.

An onslaught that didn’t come. Meiko stood still with his arms crossed, watching Spirit with a cool gaze. “You know I’m a huge fan of your work.” His voice carried a commanding demeanor,

deeper than an ocean and sinister as a serpent. “I’ve watched every match you’ve ever been in, Spirit. *Fifty-six*. I mean, I can understand how I came to be undefeated; I have the body and mind like that of a demon. I could challenge four men blindfolded and have them dead before those pigs in the audience can even blink. But you...you’re so small. So damn tiny.” A snide smirk followed the speech.

Shrugging, Spirit replied, “There’s a way you can find out.”

At that, Meiko chuckled. “Oh, you want me to just ‘come at you’? Sprint toward you like everyone else?” He wagged a finger. “I’ll pass.” Slowly, he closed the gap between them, taking cautionary steps in a random pattern toward Spirit. “You see, from watching all of your previous matches, I’ve noticed one very, *very* crucial aspect to them all. Your opponent is always the one to make the first move. Now I don’t know why, or for what reasons, but when they do you always seem to have an answer.”

This wasn’t good. Spirit was already at an enormous disadvantage by being twice as small. He backed up several feet until he was just inches away from the spiked barrier, sealing them inside.

“Aw come on Spirit!” Meiko moved faster now. He had a maniacal grin and his eyes were so wide with excitement they looked ready to pop out of his head. “What’s the matter? You’ve been fine beating those runts we called competition to the ground but now, when a challenge comes along, you run along with your tail between

your legs pissing yourself?” His voice carried through the crowd and they began spitting an overabundant amount of insults and jeers.

Chuckling, Meiko waved the audience on as they crafted imaginative remarks. “You should be glad your mother isn’t here to see this spectacle. How embarrassed she’d be of her soon-to-be dismembered son.”

The thought of his mother cut Spirit deep, and Meiko saw it clear as day on his face.

“Yikes. She’s probably dead, isn’t she?” Meiko continued as he circled Spirit like a lion ready to pounce. “Probably for the best. She deserved it for making such a pissant of an offspring, am I right?”

Damn this man to hell.

Spirit lunged forward, keeping both arms close to his torso to deflect any punches. At a full sprint, he met Meiko in a single breath and the two collided. Spirit used his body to throw them to the ground, but Meiko pushed him easily away and rolled to the side. He recovered faster than expected and charged at him.

Staggering back to his feet, Spirit began blocking incoming punches. They hit so hard that each one knocked him back further and further until his back was nearly touching the spikes. Blood stained the back of his shirt as they punctured through his skin. When an opening finally appeared, he didn’t hesitate to swing at Meiko’s ribs and run backward toward the center of the ring again.

Meiko charged forward with incredible speed. Before Spirit could react they collided, Meiko’s superior weight crushing him



against the punishing concrete floor. Flailing beneath the hands that wrapped themselves around his neck, Spirit desperately looked for an out. He found it in his palm: a tiny shard of the ground that broke off when they smashed against it.

Gripping it, he stabbed Meiko in the side and a brief cry of pain followed. It gave him just enough of an opening to throw the man off and roll to the side, his wounds on his back opening more and more each time he moved.

Meiko laughed as he yanked the tile from his flesh and tossed it aside. Blood ran down the athletic shorts and colored the ground he stood upon, but the daunting grin never left his face. He sauntered toward Spirit with relative ease, as if the wound wasn't even there. "You know, I think I underestimated you a bit."

Like lightning Meiko dashed forward and when Spirit tried to move his feet, he couldn't. Something on the ground was holding him firmly rooted in place. He looked down and almost couldn't process what he saw. Two little hands that looked like shadows crept from the ground to his ankles and held him down. So subtle that no one in the audience seemed to notice.

Meiko's fist slammed across his cheek and the definite 'crack' of bone breaking echoed throughout the room. The impact broke him free from the ground and sent him tumbling backward, unable to find his bearings before Meiko picked him up by the shoulders and tossed him back further with ease. Closer to the spiked walls.

“Is this *really* all you can do?” Meiko sneered as Spirit struggled to regain his balance.

Wiping blood from his mouth, Spirit looked at his enemy in the eyes. The once blue eyes were now a dark gray, pulsing with a faint light that seemed to come from within. Shadowy hands that were almost impossible to spot slithered up his thighs and yanked him down to his knees.

“What are you?” he asked. “How is this possible?”

A swift hit to the temple made Spirit’s world go blurry for a moment. Another hit. And another, the shadow arms holding Spirit in place so he couldn’t fall back. The punches and kicks felt infinite, Spirit falling in and out of consciousness between each blow.

*So this is it. This is where I lose.*

Meiko picked the beaten boy up and held him by the shirt. He grimaced in disgust at Spirit’s mangled features. “If you even have to ask that question, then you are not what I thought you were.” He spat in Spirit’s face. “These cults. These cannibals. They worship demons as if they are gods. Eat human flesh as the demons do, hold ceremonies in their honor. But they can never truly understand what it means to be a demon. To feel the aether course through your veins as if it were the only thing keeping you alive. Having aether, understanding the power of this magic and how feeble a human being truly is. *That* is what it means to be a demon.”

He let go of Spirit and the boy instantly collapsed to the floor, barely holding himself up on one knee. “I’m going to enjoy this.”

As he came close, Spirit closed his eyes. His thoughts were of only Emily. What would she do when she learned of his death?

Cry.

Mourn.

Die.

Emily was going to die. And he was the only one who could save her.

*Shatter the darkness, Spirit.* His mother's last words coated his mind in a blanket of clarity.

With all his might, he forced his body to move. He broke free of the shadows that bound him and aimed his newfound energy at the one man standing in the way of saving his sister.

Still stunned from his power being shattered, Meiko stood motionless for a split second, only able to move his arms out in self-defense. In that second, Spirit covered the distance with insane speed.

He cried out and swung with everything he had.

The audience grew silent. The entire room had become eerily quiet, tiny whispers heard bouncing around the room.

Meiko was still as a rock, his expression of complete astonishment. But not from his own magic being broken. On the ground laid Meiko's left hand, severed cleanly from his forearm. Blood gushed out, spurting with the rhythm of his heartbeat. Although it seemed he didn't even notice, instead his gaze transfixed on his assailant.

Within the grip of Spirit's right hand was a beautifully crafted long sword. The hilt was golden with a translucent gemstone embedded in the pommel. It fit perfectly in his hand, the weight feeling comfortable, as if he had wielded the weapon since he was just a child. The tip now dripped crimson red, blood streaming down spotless steel.

He jumped in surprise and let the sword go. It left his hand and, before it could hit the ground, disintegrated into a million shimmering pieces, each flickering away from existence until they were no more. Just like that, the sword had vanished.

"I was wrong." Meiko spoke so quietly only Spirit could hear him. His complexion grew paler and paler as blood poured out of him. "You are like me." They both shared a look of utter stupefaction.

"Magic," someone in the audience said. "Magic! He used magic!"

Soon everyone in the room was a flowing mixture of outrage, excitement, and confusion. Meiko could hide his magic, the shadows nearly invisible to anyone who isn't looking for them. But Spirit had created something else entirely...

Several men hurried to open the doors to the arena and lifted Meiko by his arms and legs, carrying him away to gods know where. They tossed the severed hand into the crowd and people climbed over top one another for a taste of the former champion.

A hand latched on to Spirit's shoulder and he whipped around to find Gunter in a panicked state. The man patted him on

the back and led him to the nearest exit at a speed Spirit didn't think the man was capable of.

Spirit stopped him for a moment. "I had no idea I could do that."

The audience scrambled to get to the floor toward Spirit. Guards with rifles tried desperately to shove them back into their seats, but were quickly outnumbered and overwhelmed. The audience toppled over the men like a crashing wave.

"I know kiddo, I know. My priority is getting you out of here alive, we'll discuss this later. You are my responsibility down here." Gunter gave a comforting smile as they reached the exit door.

The smile vanished as a bullet ripped through his temple and out the other side of his skull. He collapsed to the stone floor in an instant.

Fresh blood sprayed across Spirit's chest and he leaped back in horror. The room grew deathly quiet after the deafening gunshot rang around the arena. Smoke billowed from the barrel of a small silver pistol in the hand of a tall, slender man who looked to be well in his sixties. His long, wrinkled face accompanied the gray hair that fell in a ponytail halfway down his back and blood red irises that seemed to pierce Spirit straight through the heart.

As the man approached, he handed the gun to a nearby guard and brushed nonexistent dust from the black suit he wore.

"I never did like that man," he said as he stepped over Gunter's corpse. "Too compassionate. And with such a diet as ours,

compassion isn't an emotion we should visit frequently. Wouldn't you agree?"

Spirit stayed silent and stepped back to the center of the arena. Two guards blocked the other exit and the slender man soon entered, blocking off the other. Everyone in the audience moved back to their seats and refused to make a sound. Spirit swore he could hear his own heartbeat racing in his chest.

"Of course! Where are my manners?" the man asked with an exaggerated bow. "My name is Julius Krane. Welcome to my arena."