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## The Conversation

The cold sea air hits my nose first. I squint as my burning nose acclimates to the salty air. It's not cold, but the air has a definite bite to it. If it were possible, it's the kind of cold that chills your bones. But the hallowed fire within me keeps that from happening. It wells up inside me, stopping anything worldly that might harm me. It's a comforting feeling, but one I've been running from lately.

Below me, the waves crash against the cliff. The rhythmic, hypnotic sound slows my heart, but my mind continues at lightning speed. Time outside of time cascades through my mind. More memories than a being has a right to possess plays inside my head. I put my hands on my temples in the vain hope it will slow my brain. It doesn't work, it never has.

I went to war for my Lord when my brothers rebelled. I cast my brothers into the abyss on behalf of my Lord and never thought twice about it. My Choir of angels stood in defense of his people during the first Passover. I looked death in the eye until he blinked and moved beyond me. I've stood on the Lord's left since my existence began. But here on this plane, for such a long time, so fruitless in my labors, I feel the deepening sadness of futility.

They let darkness overtake them. This world of Man watched it happen and cheered it on. There was no great religious victory. One ideology was not proven better than the rest. They all faded, they all withered away like the men that started them. Men lost hope and that's when darkness filled that void. The Arcane Wars were decided before they even started. Yet here I am, fighting for something, for someone I cannot remember.

"Why must I do this?"

I scream to the heavens, but there's no answer. There never is. Nor should there be. If I wanted to go before the Throne, I could. These are just empty words, the ramblings of a vessel that feels empty.

The voice of Elohim was lost and I journeyed below the Firmament to find it. But I can't. I can't sense anything besides the creeping darkness this world has become. Beings that I judged now walk in open defiance of those Elohim made caretakers of the world. Sinister forces control this place because Man lacks knowledge. Man rejects knowledge because it is much easier to live with convenience.

I have seen Paradise. I have lived with the Most High. I have sung his praises and fulfilled his wishes. I have felt the smile and unconditional love that goes beyond words. Yet, as I stand here marveling at the work of my Lord, those memories get more and more distant. The longer under the Firmament, the more that life fades from my memory. I feel them dissolve before my eyes. I would be free of this existence before I forget where I came from and what I am.

I throw myself off the cliff.

The wind rushes around me and the sea rushes up to meet me. The jagged rocks waved me closer and the waves applaud my coming. My shoulder blades feel like they're on fire. My skin pulls and rips apart. Dark, almost black wings sprout from my back. They glisten like obsidian in the dying light. They rip from behind my shoulder blades and beat at the wind. They bring me to a graceful stop, just above the water.

I hover there for a minute, watching the waves crash on the shore before retreating to the sea. Something about the water is symphonic, calming. The hallowed

fire wells inside me again. It knows as well as I do, the being I have to see is not like the Rockstars I met the other night. This man is the Sire; he is all they wish to be. He is ancient, he is terrible and he is the person I know best in this world. He will drain me of my rage, my pain, anything he can consume to add to his own power.

I steel myself, place a hand over my heart and shoot into the clouds. I don't know when they formed above me, but dark clouds, fat with rain collide overhead. Thunder and lightning wrestle for a position within the meteorological phenomenon. I soar through it all until I feel an unmistakable pull in the back of my head. I drop into a dive and pierce the clouds again, back-winging just in time to land with graceful flair.

I feel the cold spray of the fountain as I land in the circular courtyard. The wind forces my wings to bristle, but I can't help but think it's not just the wind. The depth of malice permeates the air here. I've only been here once before and that was more than enough. Alas, justice must be done.

The gothic monstrosity that stands before me is every bit a tribute to its master as it is a warning to the foolish. The windows are like a thousand eyes watching for prey. Gargoyles dot the structure like flies over a feasting animal. It reaches towards the heavens like a mocking fist towards the power of our Lord. A flash of lightning beneath the clouds reveals the main doors, open like the mouth of a dragon. I tuck my wings in before I step toward the mansion. My host knows why I am here, no need to flaunt who and what I am.

The dark, nearly metallic black wings fold and retreat behind my shoulder blades. I adjust my vest and tie, while I roll my shoulders. My elbow brushes the double shoulder holster and I look down at the Civil War revolvers at my ribs. Doctors and architects have their tools and I have mine.

I step toward the mansion and a gargoyle leaps down the stairs to meet me. He lands in front of me with a sickening stone on stone crunch. His need for theatrics outweighs my own. He stands and I crane my neck to match his gaze. He's a brute, looks like one and even smells like one. I wonder how a smell like that permeates stone, as I carefully examine his etched canine features. He was powerful in his day, that's obvious. Something made him bend the knee to my host, I should care far more than I do.

My mind returns to the present when he lifts his arm to indicate the mansion. Se he's big but dumb. I've met my share of those walking across the sand of time. I give him a curt nod but never take my eyes away from his. I can't read his eyes, but this stone wolf is more than he seems.

"I am Marius, my master awaits you in his sitting room," Marius says in a voice that's like grinding tow stones together.

"Lead the way, Marius," I reply with enough a sneer.

"I don't do well, dealing with your kind. My master requested my civility."

"You should thank your master," I answer and fall into step behind Marius.

He leads us into the mansion and the doors without anyone touching them. The halls light as we walk along them. Walls bearing torches come to life before we pass and extinguish soon after. Each step feels like a long journey down a beast's gullet. Arcane symbols and ancient talismans line the halls. The hallowed fire within me bristles, the further we walk. It's like a living energy; there for me to summon when I need it and bolstering my intuition when idle.

Marius walks me to a large set of closed double doors. He doesn't open them and they don't open by themselves. Marius is stooped in the hallway, compacting his figure so he can fit comfortably. If his stone exterior could shift, I could see the evil intent that he breathing is hardly hiding.

"My master is inside," Marius indicates the double doors.

If this were a movie, it would be the time for me to walk away. Something is waiting for me behind these doors and I'm not certain I want to confront it. I take a step forward regardless. Marius' stone arm comes up to block my path. He dares not touch me, but I realize now that he was never stooping. He was flexing what his stone muscles would let him.

"I told you, I don't do well with your kind," Marius reminds me.

"But your master requested your civility."

"What my master wants, he gets. Usually, but not always," Marius continues.

Neither of us has moved, but we seem to be drawing closer. My Lord sent me for a purpose; this mansion, the gargoyle, and his master are all affronts to that purpose. I want to let loose, unleash the fire that's now burning white hot within me. Giving into the darker impulses of my power would put me on par with what I stand against. So I make certain that I know Marius' eyes are locked on mine. I growl so that I know I have his attention.

"Who are you, little man?" Marius wonders.

"My name is none of your concern," my voice echoes off the walls.

I am not yelling, but I speak with the power and authority of He who sent me. A bit of the hallowed fire forms an aura around me. My hair wafts in its power and my eyes glow from its intensity.

"Know this, twice cursed Son of Cain. I know what you were before the stone took you to heel. Long before that, I shut the gates of Eden and your creator begged me for mercy. I am the Lion of Elohim, and you would do well to never question me again."

"My friend, come, come and join me," Judas' voice comes from behind Marius.

The doors to the sitting room blow open and Marius' frame continues to block them. Neither of us moves until Marius drops his arm. He watches me as a stride past him and I can feel his eyes on me as the sitting room doors close. Judas seems genuinely happy in the Art Deco room. He's covered in white; it makes his chalky skin appear all the more ghostly. His medium length jet-black hair is slicked back and hangs just above his collar. Judas licks his blood red lips, like a starving predator and motions for me to sit across from him.

"I took the liberty of pouring some wine," Judas smiles and pushes a glass towards me.

"Friends, is that what you'd call us?" I ask Judas, as I sniff the wine.

It's a nice red. It's fruity, but also has a woody undertone. I swish the glass and Judas watches me over the top of his. He doesn't wait for my approval. He tastes his wine and his eyes roll back into his head. He always makes a show of enjoying earthly delights. I think about releasing a little power and probing the drink before I sample. But that would be an insult to Judas. If nothing else, we've always played it straight with each other.

"I can think of no better term for those in our position," Judas replies.

"Fair enough," I say as I take a drink.

Judas continues watching me over his glass. There's an almost brotherly gleam in his eyes. There's something different and I can't place it. Judas puts his glass down and folds his hands on his lap. His long black fingernails click together as he closes his hands.

"Twice cursed Son of Cain," Judas says and tips his head to my earlier comment. "That had some real flair to it," Judas smiles.

"I can spot the Gorgon's kiss from miles away. How did he come into your employ?" I ask.

"Marius is not important. His master owed me a debt. Marius is payment. The Sons of Cain are nothing if not honorable about their commitments," Judas says.

"If the same could have been said about Cain, we would not have this problem."

"My friend, I imagine you would still find a problem. It's what you do," Judas continues.

"You're not wrong, Judas. But I wish it weren't so," I admit.

"I can tell. You look tired, drained," Judas says with a furrowed brow.

He's right, but I won't admit to him, how much so. Even before I came here, walking throughout this world of men had become a strain. When I landed I felt it even stronger. The moment my feet touched the ground and my wings retreated into my back, the gravity of this plane crashed upon me. Each step further into this mansion has heightened my awareness of the feeling. It's like there's a buzzing in the back of my head. Like an itch in the center of my back, I can't reach.

"I have been doing this for so long, with no end in sight. There are so many, they are like grains of sand," I tell him.

"We are like grains of sand," Judas reminds me. "Let's not forget why you are here. But there are no more now than have always been."

"You would be surprised. Since the Dark Wars, they are bolder and more plentiful," I reply.

"Why doesn't your Lord remake this world? Start again, like he did before the promise made of the rainbow. If the darkness that now strangles this place is such a burden, why not act? Why is he content to sit on the throne above the firmament as his creation drowns?" Judas asks.

"Watch your mouth, he is your Lord too," I put bite behind my words, but something doesn't ring true. I hear it in my tone; it's not the Lion of Elohim.

"He was, before he turned his back on me," Judas answers.

"My Lord has promised to only destroy this world once more. That's the death in flame. None of us want that, not even you, Judas."

"In this time of chaos, it would be something," Judas said.

"You helped bring about his time of darkness, Judas. You don't get to lament it now," I remind him.

"Just as you don't get to lament your calling, yet here we are. At long last, being the Righteous Hand of God has lost its luster," Judas says.

"It's not that."

"What is it then?" Judas asks.

"I sit across tables, rooms and even chase down men just like you. Some want to bargain, some want to fight, some beg and plead. Ultimately I consign them to their fates. I welcome them into oblivion. I don't always want to," I admit.

“Then why do it?” Judas asks.

“It’s what I’m meant to do.”

“Do something else, decide to be something else. Others would take up your calling,” Judas says.

“There is no other Lion of Elohim.”

“Then do nothing, leave them be. Leave us be,” Judas pleads.

“Like you did during the Dark Wars? You stayed in your solitude while the children of your blood and every evil thing preyed upon this world,” I remind him.

“Don’t change the subject,” Judas snaps.

“I haven’t. You talk of leaving my calling idle. Why would I do that and let another evil fester in this world? I serve out of choice. Would you have me be like you?” I ask him.

“Would that be so bad?”

“I don’t know... What I want to do and what is just are not always the same,” the words stammer from my throat.

There’s truth in his words. There’s an underlying of sadness that’s almost palpable. How easy would it be to give up my weapons and my wings? How freeing would it be to live for me? How unburdened would I feel, not having to see the last look of a judged man? How can I feel this and not betray the chaos in my heart to Judas? I don’t have to wait for an answer. That predatory look twists his face into a nearly wholesome smile.

“You allowed arcane forces to use your curse to taint this world,” I tell him.

“I didn’t ask for my curse,” Judas protests.

“No one ever does.”

“Was I supposed to take to the streets and battle? Walk in the day where others couldn’t?” Judas asks as moves from the couch with an incredulous turn.

“Yes you were, I did. I continue to. I will fight, until humanity itself gives up. I will fight after that, until my Lord releases me,” I answer.

“To what point and purpose?” Judas asks and turns back to me with fire in his eyes.

“Perhaps to none. But I would rather be counted among those that tried, than those that did nothing. I have seen my brothers fall,” I remind him.

“You act out of fear, not choice.”

I can feel Judas baiting me, but I don’t want to resist the pull of his words. The buzzing in the back of my head is stronger. The haze clouding around my eyes is deeper.

“Your Lord turned his back on me long ago. What else do I have to fear?” Judas asks.

“He turned his back on you for good reason, we all did,” I answer.

“It wasn’t my fault, the Child of Peace had to die. How else would he fulfill his purpose?” Judas asks.

“You were the one that said others could take my place. The same goes for you. You didn’t have to betray him. He was your brother.”

“I made a mistake. But all things work together for good. Your Lord said that. Isn’t that what happened to me?” Judas asked.

“If that were the case, you were paid for your service,” I sneer a little as I say it.

“That silver wasn’t enough. I could feel your Lord turn from me,” Judas says.

“So you thought to force him to meet you, by hastening your own death?” I ask.  
“You were a fool then and you are a fool now!”

Judas breaks from his civility. His hair blows in a wind that didn’t exist a second ago. His claws grow and he hovers off the ground. From deep below us, I feel his power gathering. The mansion shutters as Judas summons unearthly power.

I’m off the couch and on my feet. I pull my twin revolvers from their holsters and aim them at my old friend. The room goes dark, but the lights are still on. This darkness has form and power. I muster my strength to keep the darkness away from me. My wings beat at my back and I struggle to find Judas in the darkness.

The windows to the sitting room shatter and the interior wall explodes. Sons of Cain pour in from every hole and every door. They howl as they enter, tearing their clothes and changing from their once human facades. Some run on all fours, others stand upright. They stay within the darkness. The power of my wings and the power within me keep the darkness at bay. They surround me, like animals hunting for sport.

I fire into the darkness. Hallowed blue flame eats away at the dense black of the evil in this mansion. The Sons of Cain come in a rush, like the pack of scavengers they are. I turn and spin, a ballet of holy power against evil fury. I can hear Judas at the edge of the room laughing. I can feel the darkness closing in on me. There are so many Sons of Cain, so much darkness and I’m so tired.

“Imagine the hypocrisy, if you will,” Judas begins and his voice echoes throughout the room. It’s almost like he’s talking right into my head. “In order to fulfill a prophecy, a man has to die. I help fulfill that prophecy and I am shunned. For helping your Lord fulfill his own words, I was cast out. I helped the Child of Peace defeat the enemy that had power over death. But when I died, I wasn’t welcomed into the afterlife. You remember. You were there when I awoke earth.

“No refuge among your Lord’s great enemy either. To be cast out by heaven and refused by hell. Doomed to walk this wretched Earth. The Enemy won’t accept me because it will upset the balance. He doesn’t realize there is no balance if he is afraid to upset the other side. He only has the power he’s been allowed to have. Laughable. Then the Lord won’t forgive me because I killed his son. It was and always is, His will damn it.”

Judas talks while the darkness engulfs me. I continue firing and I hear the Sons of Cain drop, but it’s less frequent. The darkness is right before my eyes and so are they. I can feel clawed hands grip my wings until they bleed. It forces me to stumble forward and I inhale the darkness. It tightens around my lungs and it’s hard to breathe. It’s hard to see, it’s hard to think, but I can still hear Judas.

“Isn’t insane to think an omniscient being would get mad at you for doing what they KNEW you would do? Tell me, Lion of Elohim, where is the justice in that?” Judas asks me.

A wolf grabs hold of my neck and wrenches my head to the side. He howls at me before he strikes. He sinks his teeth into the flesh of my neck and my world spins. I’m falling in and out of consciousness. I’ve waged war for so many lifetimes that my body reacts without my prompting. Blue flame shoots from the hole the wolf bit into my skin. It incinerates half his face and spirals out to lick across the face of another.

“Still full of tricks, my friend,” Judas says with a laugh. “Marius, get your wolves to bind his arms.”

No sooner does Judas say it, than I feel their paws on me. They can't touch my hallowed weapons or pierce my skin, but I can't move either. The Sons of Cain hold me in a vice-like grip. I can still feel the blood trailing down my wings as I strain to move.

"Imagine living your life, afraid of silver, afraid of religious iconography. Imagine being hunted by every short-lived human that read, Bram Stoker. Imagine the insult of becoming a tale and no one knowing who you really are," Judas says.

I struggle to move away from his wolves and feel a fist slam into my jaw. Another and another followed it; the wolves liberally paint my body with blows. Their growls and howls let me know they are taking revenge for their fallen brothers. I feel the cold stone of a forearm around my neck and know that Marius is behind me; choking what life I have left out of me.

The darkness parts and Judas walks forward. He grabs me by the chin and forces me to lock eyes with him. I don't see madness. I see clarity. Judas is surer than when he betrayed the Child of Peace, or when he sought out the Enemy.

"I have another thought," Judas says as he drops my chin. "I believe they are afraid of me, both of them. The light and the dark. Heaven and Hell. Both fear what I've become.

"I have proof. In the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis, just before you barred Adam and Eve from the Garden. They had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. That sin has carried onto men, even until this day. That sin runs through my veins, it runs through all human veins.

"Before they were exiled, your Lord said they had to be removed so they could not eat from the Tree of Life. If they did, that sin would be eternal. And 'they would be like unto us.' Adam and Eve and their sin would become like the Lord because they were eternal.

"Take a nice look at me, Lion of Elohim, Judas Iscariot cannot die. Shunned by Heaven and refused by Hell, I am that which they feared. I am the Lord below the firmament."

"You are..." I struggle but Marius tightens his grip and stops me.

"I am benevolent. I give you a chance. Bow to me. Serve me as you have served your Lord and I shall reward you. You've had as much choice in this as I have. But we are beings of power. I can use another being of power. Come to me and I will release you from the burden of your weariness.

The darkness surrounds us all again. Judas remains close, but the darkness is closer. It travels through my lungs, infects my blood. The fatigue and haze in my head grows. The wolves feel stronger. I can't escape them. I can't escape Judas. He's right; he's been made eternal. Here I am, the Lord's justice, at his feet.

One revolver slips from my grasp and I let it crash to the floor. The other, I fling across the room. The wolves release my wings and they react into my back. Judas stares at me with dark anticipation. He waves his hands and the wolves release my arms.

I sink to my knees. I look up at Judas through the dark haze. I put my head in my hands and place both on the floor. In supplication, I lay in the middle of the darkness and the wolves. Judas hovers over me, I can hear him breathing.

"Lord please forgive me," I say and my voice comes out like a whisper.

But as I whisper, seven thunders utter their voices and my voice is like a lion's roar.



“Kill him now!” Judas says to the wolves.

It is too late for any of them; Judas realizes this as he backs away. Pure white light shoots from my body and envelopes the room. The death throws and howls of the Sons of Cain are drowned out by the purity of the hallowed light.

When I stand, only Marius remains. The smoking ashes of his pack litter the sitting room and the fear on his canine face almost make me pity him. I grab him by the throat and fling him from the sitting room. He crashes through the mansion and lands near the fountain outside. The last wisps of darkness cling to Judas tightly. My hallowed light slowly eats away at the living haze that once suffocated the room.

“How did you... what did you...?” Judas fumbles his words.

“It’s never been about symbols or silver. It’s always been about faith and choice. You never wanted forgiveness because you never truly had faith. You wanted a pardon,” I say.

I turn away from him, still glowing with white light. I step to the door of the sitting room and hit the wall. The mansion shutters and power flows through it. The Art Decoy structures of the mansion remain, but the arcane and occult symbol burn off the walls. I walk towards the entrance of the mansion as it transforms around me. Judas follows behind me at a fearfully safe distance.

“Some theologians say that Hell is the true absence of the Lord from your life. This mansion will remain forever unchanged. It will remain without the presence of the Lord, for eternity,” I explain, as I reach the mansion’s entrance.

I step down the stairs and shake my head at Judas. I lift my arm and a bold of energy hits Marius. Marius writhes on the ground as he body changes. The white fire burns through what he used to be and creates something new.

“Outside of this mansion, you will know what it feels like to have the Lord’s eyes on you every second. He will look at the man who betrayed his only begotten son, the Child of Peace,” I continue.

I bring Marius to all fours. He still resembles a wolf, but he is no longer made of stone. He has a brilliant coat of silver fur and blood red eyes. His three heads nip at each other as he stalks around the fountain.

“It is said that the doors of Hell are closed from the inside. The choice is yours, Judas. The now thrice-cursed Marius shall guard entry to your home. Whether or out in, you will not leave these lands. The torment in which you spend your days is up to you. Let the Lord’s Justice be done.”

I shoot into the air as Judas closes the doors to his mansion. I want nothing more than to be far away. I reach higher into the sky, but I still hear Judas’ soul ripping scream pierce the night.