

Chapter 3

The outlying regions of Hell, the darklands, were a forbidding place. The Father had turned His back on them, as He had on all of Hell, and Satan, nominal lord, ignored them, except to squeeze tribute and to spy out and destroy potential usurpers. The absence of a god was reflected in the stark numbing cold that was the inescapable driving force of life. All life was fixed around the struggle to escape it.

It was a land of hunger and thirst, of cold and snow, of ice-bound rivers and sudden and violent ice slides. It was rolling snow fields ribbed with craggy mountains and wind sculpted spires rising out of glacial dunes. There were strewn snow boulders and impenetrable thickets, and along the borders of the fields and rivers, clumps of scrubby trees with scaly gray bark and icicle leaves that rattled in the wind. Along the tops of some of the mountains were crude castles and around those castles where the power of the local wizard was sufficient to turn aside the cold and the snow, there were stunted orchards and frail crops.

But at the center of Hell, the heart of Satan's domain, it was lush and green, an oasis beyond the wildest imaginings of the darklanders. There was soft rain instead of snow, gentle breezes instead of harsh winds and warmth instead of icy stillness. There were crops and orchards, the trees laden with fruit, and domesticated ungulates grazed in verdant pastures.

It might have been Paradise except for the files of chained wretches who worked the fields and orchards and who were forbidden to taste anything other than the gruel that was dished to them at the end of the long workday. Crucified laborers, those who had succumbed to the temptation of the fruit, died slowly, scarecrows in the fields. Dominating the oasis was the Apex of Hell, the Ice Mountain, the towering white dome hollowed into a labyrinthine palace, Satan's Abode. Storm clouds ringed the peak.

Lucifer trotted his steed along a dusty road. It was late afternoon and the sun was setting. The steed pranced sideways a bit and Lucifer made no motion to restrain it. The demon felt gay too, despite himself. True, this was Satan's world but it was sunny and warm, gloriously warm, and Lucifer had gorged himself with fruit and he was actually curious, after so many long years, to once again confront his brother. Lucifer knew why he had been summoned. Hell was rife with rumors, the darklands, anyway. Someone was plotting to topple Satan from his throne. Someone coveted the Bounteous Land. The rumors had no doubt reached Satan and the king probably suspected Lucifer to be the instigator.

Lucifer smiled. Satan would learn nothing from him.

Lucifer arrived at an entrance to the Ice Mountain. It was guarded by armored longjaws with swords and shields. The longjaws hailed Lucifer. Ordinarily contemptuous, they were obsequious before the fabled warrior. They groveled and bid him well. Lucifer ignored the flattery and waited without expression as one of the longjaws took a whip from his pocket and lashed the back of a brawny slave who was harnessed to a capstan. The slave walked, shoulder deep in the circular rut grubbed by an eternity of his own footsteps. The chain coiled about the capstan and the wooden door, a fiercely-painted predator monster, yawned, its mouth opening until the bottom of its maw was flush with the ground. Lucifer rode up a short ramp, into the mouth, the slave reversed himself, and the door closed.

Lucifer rode through chambers and tunnels, to the spacious throne cavern.

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Impossibly tall snow columns rose from the floor to the ceiling and the cavern was riddled with entranceways, most well up on the walls and barred by lowered portcullises. Ministers and soldiers, on foot and in chariots and in chairs carried by slaves, and all made insignificant by the immensity of the cavern, glanced furtively at Lucifer or gawked unabashed.

Lucifer approached the throne, a high-backed wooden chair set on a mound of packed snow. The throne was empty and guarded. The officer of the guards smiled at Lucifer and motioned to a door cut into the base of the snow mound. Lucifer went through the door and immediately understood he might be in trouble. He was in a room so small, he couldn't turn around or even pull his sword from his scabbard, and he tried to back out and the door slammed shut behind him. To either side of Lucifer and in front of him were brick walls and there was a hole cut into the ceiling and another hole in the floor and a chain passed through both holes. Lucifer heard sounds, winches cranking, air hissing, and the chain rattled and Lucifer thought he was in a deathbox.

Deathboxes were devices combining frontier justice with entertainment and were found primarily in the buffer regions between the kingdoms at the center of Hell and the darklands. The boxes traveled in wagons with magistrates and with charlatans posing as magistrates. They showed up at villages and fairs, to dispose of criminals and the insane, mostly the latter, since most crimes weren't punishable and the insane were especially despised by the not yet insane. The deathboxes could also be used, with a bribe, to exact petty revenge.

Victims were deposited into the boxes and the walls and ceiling and floor came slowly together and the crowds laughed at the plight of the doomed, many of whom had gone into the box asleep or too drunk to protest and who awoke too late to their predicament. Vulgar was the crowd that was still laughing when the screams stopped and the pulp and juices of the newly deceased flowed out through the slits at the bottom of the box.

It didn't make sense, though, to Lucifer. Why would Satan bring him from the darklands to the Ice Mountain, a journey measured in years, just to put him into a deathbox, a death that Satan, presumably, wouldn't be able to witness? Unless Satan had some way of peering into the box. Satan had bragged once to Lucifer about a tub of magic water, on the surface of which Satan could see into the past and into the future and see too into all the parts of the kingdom. On some of Lucifer's previous visits to the Ice Mountain, Satan had made snide reference to things that had happened to Lucifer, things not even Satan's spies could have known. But if Satan could see the darklands in a tub of water, why not dispatch Lucifer out there, instead of bringing him all the way to the Ice Mountain?

The mechanical sounds intensified and Lucifer was jolted and only the floor moved and it went down instead of up and it wasn't a deathbox. Lucifer proceeded through a chimney-like structure and into a smaller cavern, the domed ceiling of this lower, subterranean place a panorama of Satan's glory - Satan soliciting the loyalty of angels in torch-lit gardens; Satan leading the charge into battle; Satan bringing into existence the world called Hell. Lucifer noted that he himself was entirely absent from the chiseled history, and while Lucifer couldn't have argued for a place in the fashioning of the rebel army or the world building, his was the mightiest sword in The Great War and it was generally conceded, in most parts of Hell, that one more Lucifer in the ranks would have assured the rebels of victory.

The ceiling art was the work of a single artisan who had labored a full century, flat on his back, his eyes inches from the ceiling, and whose only reward was snow blindness. Unlike those denizens into whose eyes Satan enjoyed poking burning faggots and who went about with running, hollow

sockets, this fellow's eyes were wide and shining, his vision locked forever on the magnificence of his own creation.

Gripping the chain with one hand and leaning over the edge of the platform and looking down as he descended, Lucifer saw that this lower cavern contained all the wealth Satan had managed to steal as he fled from The Heavens and the tribute he'd collected from the outlying regions of Hell, the royal trove. Lucifer saw slaves in leather aprons and supervised by stern longjaws, stuffing the treasure into chests and loading the chests onto wagons. A ten-story high statue, solid pure gold, dominated the cavern, and passing by the statue and remembering the story that had gone around the darklands, Lucifer laughed.

The statue was a too-fat Satan struggling to rise out of an ash heap, a ridiculously adorned bird, all feathers and headdress and fluff. According to the story, the statue was a gift from a vassal king who had rebelled against Satan and been defeated and who had inexplicably presented the statue in the hope a mollified Satan would spare his life. Nobody could figure out why the doomed king thought he could save himself by presenting Satan with such an unflattering likeness. After the vassal king was tortured and executed, Satan put his wizards and smiths to the task of recasting the statue but some peculiar magic was on it and Satan finally gave up trying to smelt it and instead discarded it, three times, twice into holes excavated in the Dismal Swamps and once into the deepest part of the River of Lost Memories, and each time, Satan's avarice brought it back again. The spirit of the vassal king, entombed in the statue, laughed sometimes at Satan.

An ancient and familiar stench, Satan's stench, assailed Lucifer's nostrils, and he saw Satan, hands on his hips, a corpulent goat. Satan had a small diamond head like Lucifer, and Satan's horns were filed down to nubs. He wore a slew of gaudy necklaces and rings, his fingernails were manicured claws. He was dressed in a blue cape and gown, his stomach bloated, enormous beneath the gown. He had the same hairy midsection and tail as Lucifer, Satan's tail extending out through a hole cut into the back of his gown.

Lucifer was startled by Satan's height. At the time of The Great War, Satan and Lucifer had been at eye level with one another and the last time Lucifer had come to the Ice Mountain, he'd thought Satan was a bit shorter and now Satan was clearly shorter, a full head shorter. Was it a disease? Lucifer wondered. A curse? Or was it the work of a king more powerful than Satan?

The platform hit the floor hard, intentionally hard, and Lucifer stepped down.

"Aha!" Satan said. "Finally, you are arrived."

"It has been a long time," Lucifer said, "and time treats you poorly. Where is the vaunted warrior who once led me into battle?" He raised his arm toward the bird statue, towering over them, enfolding them in the shadow of its wings. "I see instead a bird grown too bloated to fly from the gluttony of its own creation."

Satan glanced at the statue, sniffed, and turning back to Lucifer, Satan saw in Lucifer's eyes the quizzical, appraising look that was in the eyes of all who looked upon Satan for the first time in a long time.

"Yes, damn you," Satan said. "I am shrinking."

"And I," Lucifer said, pounding a clenched fist against his chest. "I am still the mighty warrior of old."

"Warrior? Faugh!" Satan sneered. "You are an outcast, a darklander. Lucifer, King of the Darklanders!"

Satan laughed loudly.

“I am at least fit to be a king,” Lucifer shouted over Satan’s laughter. “More fit and deserving than you!”

“Silence!” Satan said. “I am king! I rule and I do not intend to tolerate your impertinent tongue!”

Lucifer smoldered, silenced. It was true. Satan was king and he did rule, and he was, in his own way, much more powerful than Lucifer.

“Sit,” Satan said and he motioned to a small table upon which was the crown of Hell, all gold and glittering jewels.

They sat and with about the same amount of cushions beneath them, Lucifer’s feet were firmly planted on the floor while Satan’s chubby legs dangled. Two trembling slaves approached the table. One slave set goblets in front of the demons, the second slave poured wine into the goblets and they hurried away.

“It pleases me,” Satan said, “to see you have survived all of your encounters with the aspiring warriors who would establish their reputations by slaying you.”

Lucifer stared over the king’s shoulder, to the bustling slaves.

“A shrinking king,” Satan said, “and a treasure place soon to be emptied. What does it mean?”

“The shrinking I cannot explain,” Lucifer said, “but the treasure?” He shrugged. “Perhaps you fear something and are removing it to a more secure place.”

“The rebellion?”

“I know nothing of a rebellion.”

“Oh, please,” Satan said. “Everyone is talking about it.”

“Believe what you want,” Lucifer said. “I have no interest in this decadence. See what it has done to you.”

“No interest in the kingdom?” Satan said. “A pity, for I have summoned you here for the very purpose of presenting it to you.”

“Presenting it to me? The kingdom?”

“Absent the wealth, of course,” Satan said. “But this...” He lifted the crown. “Ah, this. I would set it on your head myself.”

“It seems,” Lucifer said, “I have made the long journey to this place simply to amuse you. You could never give the kingdom to me, since to do so would be to put yourself into a position subservient to my own.”

“Unless I was to depart the kingdom,” Satan said. “Never to return.”

“Speak plainly,” Lucifer said.

“Give me what I ask of you,” Satan said, “and in return, I shall give the kingdom to you and with it, the promise not to interfere, ever.”

Lucifer turned his head sideways and was cautious.

“What do I have,” he said, “that you would pay such a price?”

“Once, you fought beneath my banner,” Satan said, “and now I have need of your services again. Your fighting skills.”

“Fight for you?” Lucifer smiled. “Yes, it is true. I did fight for you once and see what it has gained me.” His eyes narrowed. “Who would be the foe? Who frightens you to the extent you feel compelled to call upon me once again?”

Satan paused, sniffed. He had visualized this moment over and over and now he would savor it. He lifted his cup from the table and drank. Lucifer waited. Satan set down the cup, belched.

“Brother,” he said, “if you sat on my throne and there were rumors of a rebellion, what would

you do?"

"I would gather up the conspirators," Lucifer said, wary, his hand moving to his sword, "and execute them."

"Of course," Satan said. "That would be you, and your throne and your crown would be secure until the next time. No. Simply eliminating the conspirators is not sufficient, although I suppose I shall have to get around to it eventually." He fixed Lucifer with a steely gaze. "What I am going to do...oh, Lucifer! This is so bold, so audacious, so unspeakable..." Satan's fat body shook with excitement. He stood and paced rapidly, his cape swirling behind him, the slaves and guards jumping out of his way. "This goes beyond your wildest imaginings. I am going to do what not even you, who profess to be the greatest warrior in all Creation, could ever hope to do."

"The foe!" Lucifer said, pounding his fist on the table. "Who is the foe!"

"The Father Himself," Satan said.

Lucifer laughed, loud and bursting, not quite the reaction Satan had anticipated.

"In the darklands," Lucifer said finally and between guffaws, "they say you are addled, that the power has become too heavy a burden, that you wander the halls of the palace babbling in a tongue that none can understand. It seems they are right. You have indeed surrendered all vestiges of reason if you think I would join you in another war against The Father."

"Hear me and hear me well," Satan said, "for soon, very soon, The Father shall lie at my feet. I shall slay The Father and give His head to the mobs. Then every denizen shall know I am king. Every tongue shall sing my praise. Every knee shall bend. I shall conquer The Father and sit upon the throne of The Almighty."

"The Supreme Being," Lucifer said, all trace of his laughter having vanished. He felt suddenly unsteady and it wasn't the heat or the stench of the room. The king was insane. He had to be insane but his voice held now the same conviction as it had so long ago, when no one had thought a rebellion was possible. But was it possible? The Father was the Creator of all things. All things, Satan included, were made by His hand. Even the Kingdom of Hell was believed by many to be under the ultimate control of The Father.

"Is something wrong, brother?" Satan was mocking. He saw the uncertainty roiling Lucifer.

"I just need to know," Lucifer said, "how this can come to be."

"My cunning," Satan said, tapping his forehead with a ringed finger, "has enabled me to fashion a plan that shall give me dominion over all Creation. I actually owe a debt to you and those like you, those who would steal my kingdom. It was the desire to be rid of you that prompted the formulation of my plan. It has since developed, has gone beyond simply eliminating usurpers and has shown me at last how I might realize my ambition to gain a triumph in the final battle."

"Armageddon," Lucifer said, his voice catching.

"Armageddon," Satan said.

"Liar!" Lucifer banged his fist again on the table, more forcefully this time, the crown and the cups jumping. "You cannot triumph in such an adventure!"

"With you or without you," Satan said, "I shall triumph. It is only because you are my brother that I offer you this opportunity."

"And all I have to do," Lucifer said, "is lead your troops into Armageddon."

"Lead?" Satan said. "Did I say lead? No. Beelzebub shall lead my troops. I need you to stand beside him, to fight at his side."

"To ensure he is not harmed," Lucifer said.

“He shall sit at my right hand,” Satan said, “when I am crowned in the Palace of The Father.”

“While I remain behind,” Lucifer said. “Festering in Hell.”

“King of Hell,” Satan amended, “and without Beelzebub or I to torment you.”

“Your triumph at Armageddon,” Lucifer said, “and Beelzebub the hero. How that must please you.”

“That magnificent Beelzebub,” Satan said. “He is the glory of my kingdom.”

“The Bounding Boy,” Lucifer said. “So dissolute and impetuous...and entirely lacking in the skills of war.”

“You were not summoned here,” Satan said, his voice a snarl, “to disparage the prince.”

He checked his anger, put his hands on Lucifer’s wrists and was conciliatory. It irked Satan, to have to be conciliatory. He would have preferred to smite and smash Lucifer but Satan needed Lucifer in the coming battle and Satan, for all his power, couldn’t touch the part of Lucifer that could induce him to put himself fully into Armageddon. That was the last shard of Lucifer’s independence and he guarded it ferociously and had to be brought along to a willing acquiescence.

Lucifer glanced down at Satan’s hands, locked on his wrists, and at the crown. Lucifer raised his eyes to meet Satan’s gaze.

“I shall weigh your offer,” Lucifer said.

“There is no time,” Satan said. “You must decide at once.”

“The Kingdom of Hell,” Lucifer said. “An interesting prize but if I must decide at once, I decline.”

“Decline!” Satan sputtered. “How can you!”

“Only a fool,” Lucifer said, “would inaugurate a war he cannot hope to win. If you truly intend to once again challenge The Father, then we are all doomed and I prefer a return to the darklands, there to await the fires or the floods or whatever is to consume us at the end of time.”

He stood and wasn’t sure how to go - should he go up the way he’d come down? Could he manage the chains? Did he dare risk trusting the platform? Would it collapse beneath him as he neared the ceiling? And that chimney at the top, would it prove to be a deathbox after all? Lucifer decided it would be cowardice to look for another way and he mounted the platform and began the slow ascent.

“Before you go,” Satan said, “look behind that door.” He indicated a door to the side, back behind where the slaves were loading the treasure onto wagons. Lucifer looked at the door. The platform halted, swayed.

“Behind that door,” Satan said, “is absolute proof of all I have spoken. Behind that door is a sight more astounding than anything you have ever witnessed. When you go through the door and see what awaits you, you shall fall on your knees and beg to serve me.”

Lucifer jumped down from the platform, walked to the door and put his hands against it.

“Do it,” Satan said. “Or are you a coward?”

Lucifer pushed open the door and stepped through it, his sword in his hand.

There was a silence.

Satan strummed his fingers on the table.

Lucifer broke the silence with a shriek and a torrent of loud, denying oaths. Satan clapped his hands and laughed uproariously, his head bobbing in acknowledgement, his yellow fangs exposed, the rolls of fat bunching beneath his eyes.