

Chapter 2

I was playing dice with Aek, and Tin, and Yul and the rest of the scattered war-mongers and honest warriors, in a dusty stop-over inn. The red torchlight filled the room with warmth, and the chattering of demons who entered and exited the inn randomly filled the air with noise, as much music as there would ever be in this place. Aside from it being in the middle of nowhere, just a few cactus marking the hole in the middle of Dante's Plains, the inn keeper made his money renting out dice to the tables, full of travelers who had gotten sick of walking. And it seems like I'm the only demon in Hell who wants to hear a little music when I'm playing dice.

Caw held the dice in a crooked claw. One of their eyes was wandering off again, and the greenish scales on their face and shoulders were muddied by dust. The rest of Caw was covered in feathers, except for the large tan scars where he had been forcibly healed by the devil himself. It was Caw who was the oldest, who had fought the Boatman, fought the Dinos, fought every war from now to the beginning of conflict. And it was Caw who was the oldest, so it was Caw who held the dice.

"I see a six," Caw chirped in a raw voice.

"Just one, you old beast?" Aek jabbed.

"I won't be telling you, you foul youth," Caw retorted, "you're just a war-monger anyway, all scream and no scratch. Too young to know any of the great conflicts, so you go around with your fancy knives, and your leather armor, act the tough guy like I'm not even sitting here." Caw seemed a little unwieldy on his chair, and almost tipped over in a sideways sweep of the hand, but caught themselves from falling as he jabbed a talon at Aek, and finished, "But you know, it's always I who holds the dice."

The rest of them snickered at this, and I did too. Caw grinned three layers of teeth, and his gills puffed out a chuckle. Aek knew he was beat and threw a half stick of salt on the table.

"Three sixes, then, ragdoll. Blue, green, and yellow. No other dice."

Pat, my old den-minder, raised an eyebrow. "Bold," they said. I trusted the demon who raised me from an ignorant thing into the walking, talking, hunting, fighting thing that I am today. Any of the brains I've got came straight from Pat. So I figured Aek was going to lose that half stick.

But I still couldn't quite see the dice. Faint shapes came to me, I could predict, maybe, two dice? Or was that two sixes, now that I focused. By the Devil, I'd give twenty salt sticks for a nice melody in the back of all this chattering.

Pat cast in their bet, "Three dice, one six on a black die."

Yul picked their teeth with an overextended back claw and yawned. They always put on such a tough act.

"Four dice. Two sixes. Black and yellow."

Tin looked at Caw's twisted hand, still holding the dice above their head. Tin was a furry little stripped thing, real slick looking, with a few sets of eyes and ears on their face. They

dressed nice too, finest in light armor and more blades than could be counted. A real classic war-monger type. But, smart.

Tin concentraighted. Closing their eyes, Tin massaged their temples and quietly muttered out their prediction for the dice.

“It looks like... four. Four dice. Two sixes...black-wait, no, not on black, that feels more like a four...green. Green and blue. Four dice, sixes on green and blue.”

Tin looked up, sharp and bright, with a glint in several eyes. They couldn't resist a brag, and another half-stick of salt hit the table.

Up to me now. The trouble is, I'm shit at dice.

I got out my salt pouch reluctantly.

“Hey, Ral,” Yul teased, “bet carefully, ‘cause anything you put on this table is going to me.”

“Like I'm not going to win it? You don't think I'm capable of predicting a little dice throw?”

Tin glanced over at me. I clicked my beak. They rolled their eyes, and said, “Look, Ral, we all know that you have many talents.”

Pat couched and filled in, “But you are *shit* at dice.”

What could I say? I can't get these little predictions down. I'm a creature of the big picture.

“Just take my half stick, then. One six, yellow, and, um, three dice?”

Caw held up the dice even higher, somehow. They paused, rattled their hand, then threw the dice at the table like it was some kind of challenge.

They rolled and showed, three dice, green and blue on six, and the final black rolled to four.

“Aw!” Pat exclaimed as the table burst into chatter. Tin had the jackpot, as usual, and amid the bantering, Caw dived up the salt sticks. I could feel my salt pouch getting lighter every moment I was in this place.

And that's where I was when I heard the proclamation.

A scarcely messenger stepped into the place, wearing cloth bands of red and gold, colors that showed that the Devil himself was calling something. The messenger looked around at the dice tables longingly, then moved towards the only open space, a small stage at the front of the room.

“All of you demons seated here, listen!”

It was a formality. Everyone was silent, all dice had been dropped, and the whole room faced the messenger.

Now the messenger continued, “Something has changed. We, as the people of Hell, are on a precipice. There will soon be war, and a war like no one has ever seen.”

A murmur spun through the room. The war-mongers hissed in excitement, but Caw chattered carefully.

“Now!” the messenger continued, “Our world will change. Something has happened, up there, in the human world, that will put our way of life here in Hell at risk. The very thing that Hell is may very well change.”

The room still chattered and hissed. We liked change, loved conflict. Anything as different as this was worth getting excited for.

“Oh, you don’t get it.” The messenger said, quietly, almost to himself. “The salt mines will run dry!”

And again, silence.

“The mortals will crumble! Whole cities, abandoned! And things will slow to a stop. The wind will blow mountains flat and we will have nothing!”

The messenger’s wide, black eyes were wet with emotion. Their breath was raspy with the dust of Dante’s plains. They stood strong on many legs, their sides heaving after yeling such dire proclamations.

“But the Devil has a plan. Everyone of you who is able, come to the palace. We need your hands, your hooves. There will be room enough. If you can see the future clearly enough, tell others. Bring those you know. Everything will change, but no matter what, we will change with it.”

And with that, the messenger left us to chatter among ourselves.

~ ~ ~