

It really did feel like the end of the world.

There was a disgusting feeling to the air; like when they pour fresh manure while you're walking by, or when you drive by newly placed asphalt with your car windows down. That nauseating, nasty little stench that makes you want to keel over and vomit.

The harsh unforgiving daylight stabbed at my eyes, interrupting my thoughts. *Why did the sun have to be so mean?* I raised my arm, blocking the sunshine with my hand. *What am I doing out here anyway?*

Chicago is known as the Windy City, yep, but there was no wind today. Not even a snuffle. *Weird.*

I absentmindedly scratched at my spiky dirty-blond hair.

Oh, and Hi. I'm Alex. Nice to meet you. I'm a novice Magimaster... low-tier *Player*. More on that later.

Anyways, I was wandering after my pretty little girlfriend down the street, completely oblivious as to where we were actually going.

We came to a stop in the middle of a crowd. It took a while, but I eventually popped out of my trance. "What's happening here?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" She responded.

I sighed. "You know what I mean, dolt. Who are all these people? Why are they gathering here? *What's going on?*"

Harah laughed the kind of laugh someone used when making fun of someone else's stupidity; however, her usually joyful laugh quickly turned out to be a raving fit of coughs. She could feel the state the air was in as well. The state of the world.

Something big happened... somewhere. Something *huge*. Even a novice like myself could feel the massive shift in the leylines — the veins of this world.

Before I came here, I was at my house, snoozing alongside Harah.

On the television, the *Surface's* media news networks were even reporting on it.

Not the usual "Global Warming!", or some recent political upheaval, etc. Instead, they told people to stay in their homes, that there was something wrong with the air and that people should not venture outside. As your typical law abiding residents of Lower Town, of course we ignored the surface media and went outside despite them... and found ourselves in this nice horde of people, waiting.

I also heard that earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other freak weather anomalies had begun to ravage the world... and then disappeared just as fast as they had come. *Banished*. Something that freaky could only come from one of the Major Players. I'll give you more on those badasses later on.

You see... on this little planet we call Earth... there are essentially *two* worlds, existing side by side. One designated as the “Surface” world, and one designated as the underworld, or “Lower Town.” The Surface is what everyday mortals see and believe. Life as usual. Lower Town is a place for anyone and *anything* (emphasis on *thing*) that has rejected reality, *or has been rejected by it*, to call home.

Lower Town is not “below” Surface World, as the name implies, and neither is it “above” it. It’s not some “other dimension,” or some “second planet,” or whatever else the mortals come up with now days.

It’s a layer. A piece of the world. Like the North and South side of a city. Lower Town exists adjacent to the Surface world, like two halves. Side by side.

Certain parts of a world just *belong* to Lower Town and some just *belong* to Surface world.

All of humanity’s hopes... fears... dreams... *nightmares*... are all here. All in Lower Town. Watching. Waiting. *Playing*.

I’m sure you’ve seen Lower Town before, even if *you* aren’t. It’s that part of town where you know you shouldn’t go, even in broad daylight. That neighborhood that’s desolate and seemingly abandoned, like a wasteland, yet no one ever attempts to fix it up. That part of town where you walk all the way around just to avoid *looking at*.

This is Lower Town. The place where dreams come alive. Every city in every state in every country has one. Best part is: *they’re all connected*. And we were all gathering. Here. In Chicago’s very own Lower Town, one of the biggest and baddest in the world.

She made a face, dropping into a British-style drawl. “Do you dare play dumb with me, Alex? Ha!”

She utterly destroyed my train of thought. I sighed. “I think I might just... go home... before this little gathering goes from bad to worse. It just doesn’t feel right to be here anymore, *Har’*.”

She dropped the act. “Don’t call me ‘*Har*’ ya two stepp’n madcap. Besides, I’m 18, so I have the correct license to fly myself out of this dump. You, on the other hand, are only at a lowly 17. That means you *suck*.” She said sarcastically, flipping her hair in his face.

She loved to rub that in as much as she could. When a child is born here in Lower Town, he or she receives a limiter on whatever powers they may come to possess — placed by one of the Major Players themselves — that wears off when said child turns 18. You are then “deemed responsible enough to run wild with as much power as you can muster.” How *unfair*.

“This is *the* most important gathering in a long time.” She continued without pause. “The Major Players are talking of angels and demons! Of going to *war*! How could you *not* know what this is? How could you want to *go home*? Do you have any sense of the word ‘*fun*’?” She punched me lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t kid around with me, buddy.”

“Yeah...” I muttered. “Kidding...”

Shit.

“Meh,” she finished, without skipping a beat, “you can walk back for all I care, but I’m not air-lifting anyone until I catch a glimpse of... *him*.”

I ignored that one, continuing my internal monologue. I really had no idea the Major Players were gathering, but it had to be for a *pretty* damn good reason. And I’m almost positive the weather and that smell in the air are in some way related to this gathering, too.

Assembled before us were people from all around the world. From Asia, Africa, Europe, North and South America, Australia, and even the more remote regions like Antarctica and the Northern Pole. Everyone who was anyone in Lower Town wanted to be a witness to this historic event. What Harah explained as: the day the Major Players met each other face to face on “peaceful terms.”

Don’t be fooled though. The audience wasn’t here for the free food.

Okay, so some of them were.

Still.

I’m not gonna lie; Lower Town is an extreme destination. Fighting and fucking is about all we do down here.

Of course, competition arises. Even the occasional “Emperor” or “Conqueror” passes through and claims the Lower Towns every now and then before getting defeated by (or joining) the Major Players.

Born from this perpetual fighting are four *classes* of people. The Surface world’s “mortals,” who know next to nothing of Lower Town. The “pacifists,” who refuse to fight whilst still living in Lower Town. And then we have the “Players,” who are the main “players” in this little “game” of ours. There’re low-tier Players, who’re generally regarded as trash, and their opposites, the high-tier Players, who battle it out for control over Lower Town.

Each *Player* is a *Master* at something. I’m an up and coming *Magimaster*, or one of those people that can use their will to bend matter to my liking.

Let’s just say: if you need a massive willpower-victory-asspull, I’m your guy.

But it doesn’t stop there. There are also *Soulmasters*, *Elemasters*, *Demonmasters*, *Threadmasters*, *Hackermasters*, *Strikemasters*... the list goes on and on. Although I’ve never even met a *Threadmaster* before, I know plenty of tech gurus who fall under that *Hackermaster* phylum.

Then there are those who we here in Lower Town refer to as the “*Major Players*,” or *masters so powerful that they border on the level of minor gods*. There are currently seven Major Players to date, all vying for control over Lower Town *and* the Surface world. Amidst their perpetual struggle for supremacy, they have charged themselves with protecting the sanctity of Lower Town from all threats

public and private. Lower Town has been in existence since *The Beginning*, and has *survived* thanks to the might of the Major Players.

The latest batch of Major Players does just that, protecting Lower Town from itself, and the Surface — even if they do remind me of a group of juveniles fighting over a bag of skittles.

Seriously though — the Major Players *hate* each other. I mean *real* Hate. With a capital “H.” Well... that isn’t exactly true, I guess. Some of them have formed bonds — like Glacis and Wynter or Aurora and Talus — but they’re not what you’d call *stable*. Besides, with each one being a demigod in his or her own right, how can ever hope for any semblance of constancy?!

Anyhow, the only reason they’d be meeting up like this would be for either one of two reasons — and each one scared the hell out of me. One: they wanted to fight each other again... and... let’s just say that didn’t turn out too well the last time they tried it. The *Surface* barely made it in one piece, not to mention us guys down in Lower Town. Or Two: Something has... *emerged* that’ll take their cooperation to put down again. Perhaps the surfacing of another Major Player (they’re a pretty selective bunch) or worse, maybe some high-level being has awakened.

While I pondered all the possible doomsday scenarios that were about to play out, the Players made their appearances. They had obviously arranged the whole shebang.

Demonmaster Talus, South America’s very own Major Player and The Lord of Seven different devils, fell from the sky in a fiery ball of fierce claws and massive wings, causing the Earth itself to tremble as he landed. Debris and rubble flew in all directions, even striking some poor pedestrians that had strayed too close to the stage. The Lord of Seven *was* (and that’s a BIG *was*) a human, who had gained control over seven of the most powerful demons in the mortal world. Some say he even dominated a Dark Angel; one of the *Fallen* themselves — the demon prince of Death, Saminga ... a former superior of Hell. Talus was usually asleep somewhere on the Surface, less his mere presence destroy the intricate fabric of all things, but he was awake and kicking today. The sun itself seemed to dim in his presence.

I struggled for breath, avoiding a piece of rock flying in my general direction. *The first of the Major Players has arrived.*

The Lord of Seven was quite the piece of work... in a Hunchback-of-Notre-Dame kind of way. He resembled a mummy, with tan-white colored bandages providing the wrapping for his whole body. On top of his mummy bandages he wore an Arabic-style head-wrap around his skull, which fell down at both sides, giving him an added “desert storm sniper” appearance. For a uniform he’d donned a jet black trench coat with white highlights and matching black and white baggy pants. The ends of his sleeves and the bottom of his pants legs had a ragged *burned* look to them, as if they’d been eaten away by moths, or singed away in a fire.

On the left sleeve, near the wrist, was the design of a demon’s claw whereas the right sleeve held the markings of a demon’s head. The designs were glowing slightly.

He retracted his huge, black demon wings, which began to disintegrate into mist and blow away in the wind. The worst part about Talus *by far* was his *eyes*. They were small, scarlet, controlled, and undeniably *evil*.

I shivered.

The crowd that gathered in the courtyard dispersed, swiftly retreating to a safer distance. You didn't want to be around when the Lord of Seven was awake.

Before I had a chance to recover from The Lord of Seven's earth-shattering (see what I did there?) entrance, there was a massive detonation in the sky. My ear drums popped, and I fell to my knees. Quite a few others joined me on the ground, covering their various bleeding orifices. Those Players strong enough to stay standing were shouting in utter defiance, some not even bothering to cover their ears.

The thunder signaled the coming of Aurora, Lightningmaster and Major Player of Africa. She hadn't been a major presence in *the game* for a while, but she showed up for this. I shuddered as I searched for the strength to stand.

Oh, but it was worth it. To see the Major Players in action was worth the physical and mental beat down. It's what we crave here in Lower Town.

A massive pillar of lightning struck the stage, creating a crater at least three or four feet deep. In between my hands (which were in the process of shielding my eyes) I saw her walk out from the ditch, as if taking a nice morning stroll.

People sighed in relief when the lightning dissipated and could safely open their eyes. Harah's hair was on edge, as if she touched one of those static electricity balls. I got in a few chuckles before she slapped me senseless.

We stood, dusting ourselves off (coolly, of course). One guy did it in one move, as if he were in his own action movie or something. *Showoff*. I rolled my eyes, turning to catch a look at Aurora.

*By the Gods!* Aurora was a stunning and very *attractive* sight. I almost caught myself staring before Harah slapped me upside my head again.

The Lightning Empress, Aurora — all the Major Players have their various publicly bestowed *titles* — was in her most stunning blue gown, with white and grey embroidery along the bust and waist. As a fashion statement, she wore a dark gold and black chain belt, with a long cloth of same-color fabric hanging from the middle. On top of that, she had a spectacular dark auburn light-weight fur robe, complete with dark golden trim along the zipper-line and sleeves that dropped just below her finger tips — accompanied by huge golden parts around her wrists, of course. There were rune symbols and mystic writings etched all over that thing.

My fingers twitched. *I'd love to get my hands on a shield cloth like that.*

Still... how could these people wear all these clothes in such hot weather?

Around her neck she wore her typical billion-carat only-rich-people-are-allowed-to-even-glance-at-this super diamond, which blinded me with its price tag, let alone its beauty.

Her stringy hair had a very dark, brutal cherry-crimson color to it that hung down over her shoulders, accompanied by murky black highlights here and there. There was a single small silvery strand of hair that drooped partway over her left eye, which was giving off a soft milky-white glow. Her eyes were the place suns came to die, God came to party, and men would give up their souls to get a single glimpse of. Their beauty was... *beyond human words*, to say the least. The eyeliner did give her the whole “Egyptian” look, but if anyone could pull it off, it’d be her.

Her light milk-chocolaty skin and beautiful model-worthy figure gave me a few... *bad* ideas. I could feel Harah’s gaze on the back of my neck and sighed contently.

Aurora nodded once in greeting towards Talus before taking her position onstage.

Next came Elisabeth “Lady” Sorrow, Major Player of Asia and one of the only true Soulmasters left in existence today. Whatever she... *it...* was, it wasn’t human — which is actually pretty normal in Lower Town. She had a tattered cloth strapped around her eyes like a blindfold, the trailing ends blowing in the wind.

Most know her by the title of “Lady Sorrow: The Unbeliever,” or “The Annihilator of reality.”

Something traumatic happened to her in one of her lifetimes. Some say she made a deal with the demon king. Others say she’s an ex-Archangel who was slapped down by the Almighty himself, breaking her sanity.

Bah. Her origins aren’t the important thing about her. It’s her *power*. Were she to open her eyes, whatever she gazed upon would *cease to exist*. *Poof*. Gone. Not to heaven or hell, not broken up into separate atoms and dispersed back into space, but *gone*. *Actually gone*. *Obliterated*.

How can she do this? It’s simple. *She believes in nothing*. “Everything is false.” She believes so strongly that nothing around her exists, that everything in this world is false, that — if she were to gaze upon it — it would *cease to exist*.

In theory, *everyone* who has the ability to *exist* in Lower Town has the ability to “unbelieve” something. Unfortunately, even the non-human residents of Lower Town have too deep a foothold in reality. One may “say” or “think” that something or someone doesn’t exist, and try to ignore it, but, deep down, *they know it’s still there*, still affecting them.

That’s what makes Lady Sorrow so... *intimidating*. She has not only rejected Surface world reality, but almost *all* of it. *All reality*. She can believe what she wants to believe, and what she doesn’t believe in *stops existing*. Period.

Still... she was pretty cute, *I guess* — nowhere near Aurora though.

Harah turned towards me, eyes full of contempt. I could feel my face go red. *Damnit... can she read my mind too?!*

I turned back towards Ms. Sorrow. *Alright.* She was more than cute. She was *gorgeous...* I coughed twice. Harah was giving me the eagle eye. I returned my attention to Lady Sorrow once more. For a neigh-blind lady, she had some serious style...

I stopped right there, before Harah went berserk.

Oh wait. No. I kept going.

Her most noticeable feature was her *long* purple hair. I don't use the word *long* lightly here, folks. That hair was approaching her lower thighs, maybe even the backs of her knees. *Good gawd...*

She had two long and very purple locks of hair on either side of her head that hung in front of her shoulders, resting on her chest and extending all the way down to her waist. *Hair... so... long...*

On her forehead rested an archaic-looking cross, the universal symbol of the Soulmasters, tattooed forever in dark-red blood. Over her eyes was, of course, that tattered silk-cloth blindfold, but it did nothing to take away from the rest of her features. Her face was like a million sculptures of flawless skin the color of sand, complete with a plump, perfect nose and faultless curvy lips. The area around her eyes, however, was horrible scarred, as if she'd been caught in a fire battling some face eating lion.

She had on an ordinary outfit, dripping with *purple*. Even her nail polish and lipstick were purple. She had on amethyst-style heels of which I could not identify, but they didn't look half bad for an older-than-me woman.

"Close your mouth lover boy, you're *drooling.*" Harah muttered.

I threw her my best smile.

Lady Sorrow seemed to straighten and turn towards the audience. When she did that, I could feel everyone who had any sense at all take a long, deep *gulp*. I was gulping along with them. A stare from her meant destruction. Literally.

That was when Glacis, Major Player of Australia, surrounded by fan girls as usual, made his casual appearance on the stage. He had two twin floozies standing next to him, and a few trailing behind him. They didn't look too happy for the two girls in Glacis' arms.

Wynter, Major Player of Antarctica, was floating on silent wings a few yards above him, descending slowly. She had on an unblemished blinding white and silver trench coat and hoodie, which, oddly, reminded me of *Assassins' Creed*. Besides the unusually evil grin she had going today, the rest of her body and face was hidden behind the impeccable marble-white hooded outfit.

Unlike the other Major Players, Glacis didn't look all that impressive at all. He wore some dark-blue jeans, a baggy grey T-shirt, a backwards baseball cap, some Nike's, and his ride.

Glacis had on his biggest smile, hands around the girl's waists, blabbering on about things they pretended to care about. Before he got onto the stage, he looked towards one of the twin girls.

"There's something about *you*—" he gazed down at her longingly, smiling fondly "—that reminds me—" he turned his head, now gazing at the other girl, using his arms to bring them both closer to him "—of *you*." She melted like butter in the sun. The other girl made a distraught noise, stamping her foot.

But when he got in range of the stage, he dismissed them all with the snap of his fingers. With an audible sigh — and some *awwwws* — the girls joined the crowd of gaping onlookers.

The Strikemastery is a "catch-all" for all the powers that're too weak or rare to be given official titles. No one in their right mind would call Strikemaster Glacis and his trusty motorcycle *weak*. Not only did the tag team attract babes from far and wide, but they kicked people's asses as a side job. Glacis, the latest addition to the Major Players, used a motorcycle to fight people. It was a Suzuki *Blade*, to be exact. Black with some silver and red streaks.

I mean really.

His was a style of utter eloquence. You'd have to see it to believe it. I saw his fight with Wynter not two years ago. He was parrying her sword strokes and dodging her bullets *using the motorcycle*. Yes, he was riding it, but he was also using it as an extension of his body, ramming, striking, and generally mauling his enemies with a piece of transport equipment.

The tires never broke, the engine never locked up, and, barring the occasional refill on the Surface, Glacis and his bike were quite the deadly pair to oppose.

*Ingenious.*

Anyways, the Dark (ex-)Angel — "No, I did not *fall* damnit. I'm just *Dark*, not one of the Fallen!!" — Wynter AKA *the woman who owes Lucifer a favor*; Elite Magimaster and ex-general of Heaven's Cereus Immortals, was the kickass Magimaster that fought Glacis. She didn't lose (her, lose? Yeah. Right.) but she didn't win, either. Her dual scimitars "Azrael" and "Astrael" couldn't even scratch Glacis. They kept stalemating, each one parrying the other, until, finally, Wynter pulled out her Casters, a pair of Desert Eagles — an effective mortal weapon from the Surface world enchanted with antimagic capabilities.

I'll save the rest of the fight for a later time, but let's just say: She might have finished him off had the Skyking, Mius, another of the Major Players, not stepped in and ended the conflict.

I froze. So did Harah. So did just about every other person who had gathered for this historic meeting down in lower town. So did a few of the Major Players.

We were all waiting.

Waiting...

Two Major Players were missing.

I licked my lips.

After fifteen minutes, when neither Skyking Mius, “Airmaster of North America,” nor The Musician, “Soundmaster of Europe” — the two most powerful Elemental Masters in existence — made an appearance on stage, people began hurriedly muttering to themselves. I wasn’t above gossiping either. Neither was Harah.

“No one even knows the Musician’s real name!” One guy behind me was saying. “I’ve never even seen that Elemaster guy. Does he even exist?”

“He doos! I seen it wit’ me own eyes, man!” Another responded in a heavy accent.

The absence of Airmaster and Soundmaster were not to be taken so lightly.

Skyking Mius is rumored to be the most powerful of the Major Players, followed by The Musician and Lady Sorrow, and then Talus and Aurora not far behind, finishing with Wynter and Glacis. At least that’s how I understand it... I’m not so sure anymore.

“Airmaster hasn’t had a chance to use his powers in *ages*,” Harah whispered over to me. “I bet someone finally took him out.” She gasped sarcastically, as if realizing some important information. “Maybe,” her voice increased in volume with every word, until she was unconsciously shouting at me, “The Musician *killed* the Skyking!”

Of course she was kidding, but people from all parts of the crowd turned towards us before exploding into a babbling mass of “OMG the Musician killed the Airmaster!” They pulled out their cell phones and they whipped out their laptops. Some began running while others jumped into the air, taking flight. There was this one idiot that even started a fight at the mention of Airmaster’s death.

I scratched at my limiter tattoo. I couldn’t wait to get it off and properly defend myself from idiots like these.

Even some of the Major Players eyed each other nervously — barring the blinded *Lady Sorrow*, of course.

The whole meet spiraled in that general direction, with the delicate stability of Lower Town right on its heels.

And then... *Silence*. *Everybody* shut up in the same moment.

A droplet of rain splashed against my hand. I spared it a glance before wiping it off on my pants. But then another followed. And another. And another, until it was drizzling steadily.

No one moved or talked or fought. Even the Major Players stopped their battle preparations.

If one listened closely, they’d hear a sound. A little ring in the air.

More and more people began to hear it. Some started panicking. I didn't blame them. Harah, on the other hand, smirked viciously. *Her childhood infatuation with The Musician was beyond belief!*

The sound grew into a soft lullaby, which grew and grew in momentum, until it rang throughout the courtyard as clear as a bell.

The song was indescribable in its beauty... I felt like dancing and crying at the same time. Laughing and frowning. Smiling and... and... the song... it... *it made me want to fight!*

I itched at my limiter again.

Harah gasped.

The musician made his show-stopping entrance, riding a wave of... of... *music?*

"So cool!" she sighed, swooning, her hands over her heart. I groaned. *I could do that if I wanted to. I really could.*

He was wearing all black. Black shoes, black dress pants, white shirt with black tie and black dress jacket, complete with a black hat and flaming cigarette. *Dressed for Success* I thought to myself. I snickered. He looked like he was rushing off to play at some piano recital or something. *What's Harah see in that guy that I ain't got?!*

One hand was held out in front of him, like a quarterback preparing for an epic throw. The other was carrying a bundle of silver cloth, cradled close to his side. His dress suit was blowing in the wind. I had to admit, he *was* pretty cool.

When he landed — in the middle the Major Players — the music hit a high, deafening tone. Like a bunch of violins hitting the wrong chords in some chaotic inharmonic symphony. The blast not only hit us all mentally, but it pushed all backwards. Some people fell over themselves, screaming and crying, ears bleeding. Poor guys.

Thankfully, however, the Major Players, who The Musician landed in the middle of, got the brunt of the attack.

The Lord of Seven was pushed right off his feet, getting thrown backwards straight through a building's wall. Glacis' bike's tires *exploded* whilst both him and said vehicle were pushed backwards several yards, toppling and tumbling over each other.

Then there I was, watching as Lady Sorrow evaporated her blindfold into thin air.

Before the sound waves hit her, she slowly and steadily opened her eyes. They were cat-like eyes with blood-red pupils. I shouted a warning... and *everyone* in the crowd, even the high-tier Players, went to the ground in pure terror. *She opened her eyes! She opened her eyes!* The wall of sound split as it hit Lady Sorrow, as if the sound waves themselves *ceased to exist*. Her hair didn't even move. Her clothes didn't twitch in the slightest.

I doubt any of the sounds even reached her ears.

I put my hands over my head, a pathetic attempt to shield myself from her gaze. If she even glanced in my general direction, I'd be destroyed in an instant. I knew Harah and a few others were doing the same. The stupider of us were attempting to stand, acting all tough. They were Players, true, but nowhere near the league of the *Major Players*.

Wynter spawned her most powerful defense against sound-based attacks... the most potent guard a Magimaster could muster... *especially* against sound based attacks: a magic-antimagic shield. Although said shield can be created with an infinite amount of pentacle "magic/antimagic layers," ex-Angel Wynter decided to cast a three pentacle-deep version. three pentacles trapped in three respective circles of pure power, laid over each other in a perfect delicate harmony.

I'm a pretty confident Magimaster myself... which is why the destruction of that *ultimate* defense scared me so much. The sheer *power* required to create even a *shard* of the first circle of a magic-antimagic shield would *kill me*.

Moreover, it was the mere *force* of the sound that shattered the first circle, pieced the second one, and cracked the third one. *Three* whole magic-antimagic shields almost fell to the power of The Musician. *Wynter*, the ex-Angel, was giving it her all just to *survive*.

*Maybe it was a bad idea to show up here after all...*

But I knew deep in my heart that I loved this. We all loved this. I'm from Lower Town for God sakes. The Major Players were what we all aspired to become. I wanted to be in the fight as well, to join them, the Major Players, we all did.

*None of us were anywhere near good enough.*

It was Aurora who protected us in the crowd. If it weren't for her wall of lightning, the force of the sound alone would have shredded us all to bits. The move took a lot out of her, causing her to fall to her knees.

The sound dissipated almost as fast as it had come.

For a while, nobody said anything. We all just stared at the crouching figure of The Musician.

The sky was pouring rain steadily. A good summer rain. Everyone — besides Lady Sorrow, of course — was getting drenched. No one really noticed.

"He did it." Harah whispered to me, breaking the silence. I turned my head slightly to look at her. She was dirty and muddy, tears staining her cheeks, rain matting her hair to her face. I doubt I looked any better, down here on the ground. "He really did do it. The Musician... just now he attacked all the Major Players..." She coughed. *Was she crying?* "He really did kill Airmaster... didn't he, Alex? Didn't... he..."

Tears descended her cheeks silently.

I turned away from her. I didn't want to see her in such a weak moment, and vice-versa. Harah looked up to The Musician, the one who claims the title of Soundmaster. It was Harah's gift as well — control over sounds. If The Musician really did betray us, betray the Major Players, betray the Skyking...

The state of Lower Town... of the whole *world*... was at stake. A *third* world war. Not a war fought with weapons born of plastic or steel... but between all the Players in Lower Town *AND* the Surface. This would trigger a huge fall out, awakening long dead powers sleeping all over Lower Town and on the Surface. All the Players, retired or active, would join in the fight again as well, backing the different Major Players. We'd have a full blown world war that could tear us all apart... *again*. The only reason the last world war ended was the emergence of the *Skyking*. But if he's gone... we're so *fucked*.

I growled.

As Aurora's lightning shield faded, the Major Players gathered into what loosely resembled a line, each facing The Musician, who stood up dramatically, still clutching the silver-wrapped sack to his chest. The Lord of Seven and Aurora, who materialized one of her Landlords: Erasmus, the wicked looking lightning staff, took up positions behind him. The Musician didn't look worried in the slightest.

He had surrounded himself in a shroud of sound, which Lady Sorrow's stare was slowly evaporating away.

"Oh *please*, Lady Sorrow." The Musician spoke in a soft yet authoritative voice, full of contempt. "Enough. Cease your gaze, less I grow weary of you and decide to end it *myself*."

She gasped at the threat, taken aback. "H... Hold your tongue! Your lullabies and piano rhymes do not scare me!" She did, however, bind a blindfold around her eyes once more, allowing The Musician to drop his wall of sound.

Everyone was silent, watching the Musician.

The Lord of Seven was the first to break the mood. "Are you really The Musician?"

The Musician turned to face him with a mighty scowl. "And what do you mean by that, oh Lord of Seven?"

Talus chuckled softly, speaking in that big, scratchy voice of his — shaking the ground once more. "That sound blast you threw at us... it seemed a whole lot *weaker* than I remember it."

A look of surprise mixed with fear and utter *hate* flashed across The Musician's face for only a second. You'd have had to know the guy pretty well to catch it.

A second hadn't even passed before Talus, Lord of Seven, summoned his favorite of the Seven Demons. *The Shadow*. With its deadly claws of utter *darkness* he reached out towards The Musician.

With a fling of his free hand, The Musician put up a hypersonic wall of sound, shredding the shadow to bits.

The Musician was breathing heavily, almost wheezing.

Talus laughed heartily. “You see. He isn’t on the level of a Major Player anymore. It took him that much just to block my weakest attack. He’s barely even a *Player*. When you killed the Skyking, did his *death curse* tear your power right out of you? I mean, that’s the way he reincarnates himself, right? That’s what he told us all, *right*... Musician?”

I cringed. A death curse was like a prequalification for becoming a Major Player. It’s the only reason they didn’t crush The Musician right here and now. He *never told them* what his death curse was, or how it worked.

When you become powerful to the point of a Major Player, you can’t just *die*. That’s just *boring*. When a Major Player dies, they usually have some sort of “vengeance” attack that burns up all their remaining life energy to deliver a crushing blow, quite possibly dragging their enemy to hell with them.

The Lord of Seven claims his death curse “drains all his demons of their power and sends it in a 360 degree blast, which has the potential to take out a whole *continent*”... or so he claims. The Musician, Lady Sorrow, and Wynter never revealed their death curses, but I’m sure they have them hidden along there somewhere.

Glacis has claimed that he has multiple death curses, ranging from stealing his enemies powers to leveling the whole tri-county area. No one really takes his claims seriously anymore.

Aurora stated her death curse in the simplest of terms: “The sky will open, and *everybody dies*.”

Airmaster had claimed a very special death curse. “If I were to die against an enemy, my curse would tear the root of their power clean out, which I would use as fuel to reincarnate myself. Like a phoenix from the flames. Ha! You can’t kill me so easily.”

The Musician composed himself, slowing his breathing and smiling dangerously. “Yes. That’s exactly what he told us. And let me be the first to tell you, he wasn’t lying.”

We all in the audience gasped. The Lord of Seven was stupefied. The other Major Players prepared to crush The Musician and defend themselves from his death curse.

“So he’s not dead.” Aurora whispered. The Skyking was Aurora’s *younger brother*. “He couldn’t have died.”

The Musician smirked.

“Where... is... my... BROTHER?!” Aurora was powering up. She was obviously pissed. We all in the audience scrambled backwards for cover.

And then The Musician coughed up blood and fell to his knees. Blood stains left by wounds on his hands and along his arms and back, previously unnoticed, now began to flow again. Blood trickled down various folds of his clothing.

No one made a move. The Musician had the wounds before he met with the Major Players. He was suppressing them... suppressing the pain... but his attempts failed.

Aurora stopped in her tracks. "What the hell? Did you receive those wounds as a parting gift, after you sent my brother into the afterlife?" She spoke with the clarity and seriousness of a woman about to *snap*. That scared me. A lot.

"I didn't kill Airmaster. I couldn't, *even if I tried*. Not yet. *Not yet*." The Musician croaked. "I didn't receive these wounds from him..."

Glacis laughed. "Liar!" With a shooping hand gesture, Wynter silenced him.

They waited for The Musician to continue.

"The King of Demons." He muttered. "I received these wounds just from *existing* too close to the presence of its *fucking arm*."

I didn't think I heard him right, so I saved my huff of disbelief. Others in the audience weren't so respectful.

"W...what?" Lady Sorrow stammered.

"Someone tried to summon the Demon King. Lucifer himself. Here. In Lower Town." He muttered.

"LIAR!" Glacis shouted. "LIAR! YOU KILLED AIRMASTER! DO YOU THINK WE'D FALL FOR THA—" Wynter punched him in the mouth. "WHAT THE F—"

The Musician interrupted him. "You can sense it, can't you? All of you." He coughed up more blood. "The smell of asphalt and ozone in the air. The feeling in the ground. The atmosphere in every Lower Town around the *world*. You know the signs. Someone tried to summon *the fucking Lucifer in the flesh!*"

Lady Sorrow frowned. "That doesn't explain why—"

"Skyking Mius came to me of his own free will," he continued, ignoring her, "to ask of my assistance in breaking the summoning ritual and sending Lucifer back to hell where he belongs."

Aurora gasped, understanding. "But... if he wanted to fight the actual king of demons... why wouldn't he ask us *all* to assist him?"

"Simple," The Musician responded, making eye contact with each and every one of them, "because one of you *assholes* was the one that attempted the summon."

There was one collective gasp at that one. Some shouts of outrage. Even people from the audience didn't like what they were hearing.

When one tries to summon a being like the demon king Lucifer into the normal world... it means they want to *end* it. End us. End *everything*. The sheer idea that one of the Major Players, beings that *exist* for

the sole purpose of protecting Lower Town, would try and destroy both Lower Town *and* the Surface world is... scary. Damn scary. *Shit your pants* scary.

The Musician carried on, despite the growing voices of protest from both the Major Players *and* the crowd that had gathered, now *twenty times* as big as before.

“Airmaster gave his life to banish Lucifer. He died *thanks to one of you bastards.*” He grimaced. “When his death curse went into effect... there was no *enemy* to steal the life of. The demon king Lucifer had been banished and the ritual broken.”

Soundless tears streamed down Aurora’s face.

Lady Sorrow bit her lower lip.

The Lord of Seven gasped, surprised. “The Skyking... couldn’t reincarnate himself? He’s dead? For good?” He was whispering, as if saying it too loudly would make it a fact.

“That still doesn’t *really* explain your wounds, Musician.” Wynter countered. “Or why you lost the bulk of your powers.”

The Musician wiped the blood from his chin with his sleeve, snorting. “Heh. Simple. *I gave him my power.*”

“WHAT?!” I wasn’t sure who said it first; they all said it at nearly the same time.

“The Skyking,” he continued, “is the only thing holding Lower Town together. If he were to disappear, we’d be at each other’s throats and you all know it. I gave the Skyking my powers so he could reincarnate himself. He is *not* dead. But whichever one of you wants him lifeless will certainly be after him, and after me too. You tricky bastards.”

No one said anything. Silence reined once more, each of the Major Players eyeing each other suspiciously.

A weird sound interrupted their stare-down. It was the sound of a baby, crying.

Aurora was the first to locate the source of the noise. “Musician. What do you carry in that silver cloth you hold in your right hand?”

For the first time since he arrived, The Musician brought the bundle out from under the protective presence of his body. He was careful not to bring it too close to the suspicious Major Players, less the demon summoner try and finish of the kid right here and now.

With his left hand, The Musician carefully unwrapped the cloth that surrounded the bundle in his hand. It was a baby. Light coffee-tan skin and murky black, stringy hair with crimson highlights. One strand of the child’s hair, the one draped over his left eye, was tinted a light silver and glowing softly.

“Is that... is that... little... *thing...*” Wynter stammered.

Glacis' gasp was one of utter surprise... and of annoyance, too.

"Yes," The Musician confirmed, "This is Airmaster. This is the Skyking. This is Mius, reincarnated."

The baby began to cry again.

Glacis was the first to speak. He spoke in calm, even tones. "If he truly is Mius reincarnated, then wouldn't he have all of Mius's memories?"

The Musician smirked again. "I bet he does, somewhere in there." He poked the baby's nose gently, almost playfully. It stopped crying, looking up towards the sky instead and smiling. "But the trauma caused by banishing the demon king and then his death curse finding no target to drain did have its effects. For one... he didn't even reincarnate correctly. *He's a friggen baby*. Completely and utterly useless. I don't know what could possibly have happened to him internally, let alone mentally. He might be paralyzed... might not be able to move, or walk, or talk, or hear, or see, or whatever. Or worse yet.... he might have *lost his powers*."

Again with the gasping.

It was Aurora who had the serious expression. The thunder crackled in the skies, shaking the earth itself.

"Give him to me. Now." She muttered.

"Wha?"

She slammed her staff to the ground. I flinched. "Give him to me. Give me my *brother*. NOW!" She shouted, the thunder exploding at every period, making her point.

The Musician shook his head. "And if you're the one trying to kill him, I'd be handing him right into your hands, wouldn't I, my dear Aurora?"

She raised her Erasmus above her head. "Then I shall end your life here and now."

The Musician never stopped smirking. He wrapped the baby back up and assumed a low battle stance, blood splashing to the floor.

"You're just going to sit around and let her attack me?" He cooed, eyeing the other Major Players. He returned his focus to Aurora, who was preparing a final strike.

He sighed. All of us in the audience tensed up. This is what we came for. Death. Blood. Fun.

"I never told you my death curse, did I, Aurora?" He chuckled cheekily. She hesitated. "*Mius actually got the idea from me one day*. I'll reincarnate myself. But, unlike our precious Skyking here, I don't require my enemy to be alive for me to gather enough energy for reincarnation. Sure, it's not as clean or effective as Airmaster's method, and it's much more dangerous, but it's also much more reliable than his. *You, however, can't kill me*. Not in a million years, *bitch*." Besides that last line, he spoke as quickly as he could.

And then something unexpected happened.

A long shard of ice pierced The Musician's body, narrowly missing the baby. His smirk evaporated. Time seemed to stop for a moment, before he screamed — more in surprise than in pain. His scream had a mysteriously beautiful tone to it, like a painful melody played on a great piano.

The Major Players gasped, and made a quick swivel, surrounding The Musician.

They created a tight circle, facing outwards, a defensive knot to protect The Musician and Airmaster Mius.

“Who dares attack one of the Major Players?” The Lord of Seven shouted, which was further amplified by his demonic powers.

Us in the Audience froze. None of us moved. If we moved even a single inch, I'm sure we would have been destroyed without a second glance.

On top of the building behind us, a silhouetted figure was inching ever so slightly towards the edge of the rooftop.

Lady Sorrow was the first to recognize his presence, and silently pointed to him. Talus was the first to respond, holding out his left hand towards the figure, of whom was in the process of leaping off the building.

“My great left hand, *Envy!*”

The air swirled, as a deep and terrible wailing filled our ears. From Talus' hand burst forth a huge, shadowy image of the claw that was embedded into his sleeve. It traveled, screaming and wailing towards the roof. We all cried for our lives. The perp barely escaped the attack — by the hairs of his neck — as the building he stood on exploded in a mushroom cloud of bricks, wooden planks, and other pieces of rubble.

“Holy crap!” Some random guy shouted, pointing with a shaky finger.

The figure disappeared into the city.

The panic didn't last long, however. There was a huge blast of sound, like fifty bazillion nails on a huge ass chalkboard. The Major Players turned in on their circle, raising magic-antimagic defenses and drawing weapons, but nothing but smoke greeted them.

When it cleared, the fatally wounded Musician and the kid Airmaster were nowhere to be found.

“Well... *shit.*” The Lord of Seven exhaled noisily.

The rain continued to fall...

Everyone knew the fatal fact: This was just the beginning.