

THE  
DEVIL'S  
BANSHEE

The Devil's Intern Series

**BOOK III**

Donna Hosie

Holiday House / New York

*For Kathleen Welch*

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THE DEVIL'S INTERN SERIES

by Donna Hosie

**BOOK I** The Devil's Intern

**BOOK II** The Devil's Dreamcatcher

**BOOK III** The Devil's Banshee



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I've always wanted to incorporate elements of the imaginative *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri into a manuscript. With *The Devil's Ban-shee*, I finally have my chance.

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*From a little spark  
may burst a flame.*

—Dante Alighieri



# Ein

*Alfarin and Elinor*



“How did ye die?”

It was the way she asked the question that caught my attention. As if she already knew me. The strange girl was like a floating, ghostly goddess, dressed in a long white gown with cotton slippers on her feet. Her red hair flamed, as if Lord Loki himself had chosen her to be his angel of fire in Hell. Her almond-shaped eyes were dark pink. A maiden who had been dead for at least a century, I surmised.

And the expression on her beautiful face as she looked at me was so glorious; it was as if she had been waiting her entire existence to find me.

My stomach felt strange. Had I accidentally eaten some of Cousin Loof’s nut roast? That always disagreed with my manly constitution. My insides felt as if a den of snakes were slithering where my intestines should be.

I had seen intestines before, spilling from the gut of a wolfhound. It was one of the last earthly images I remembered, before the great Odin claimed me for Valhalla. . . .

But no. This was not the time to think upon my death—and captivating as this lovely maiden was, I had more important matters to attend to than impressing her with the details of my demise. “Out of my way, wench!” I cried. “I do not have time to dally with women. I have Saxon skulls to pulverize. Go find a kitchen and make yourself useful.”

Saxons were my quarry this day. In Hell, fighting was glorious sport, and Saxons' dead blood was especially thick and lumpy. When we Vikings fought them, we sprayed the halls of Valhalla crimson with it.

But the beautiful-yet-troublesome wench refused to move, and at my words, her demeanor quickly changed from delight to annoyance.

"I *will* go find a kitchen—then a mallet to hit you over the head with!" retorted the red-haired goddess. "Ye big oaf."

She glanced disparagingly at the two Saxons I held by the scruff of their necks. I clunked their heads together and they dropped to the ground. My Viking kin and I had been ambushed by their clan in the corridors of Hell as we were on our way to my cousin's watering hole. Normally, Saxons were no contest for strong Vikings with eager fists and a thirst for ale, but if I wasn't careful, this ghostly girl was going to throw me off my game.

"What do you want with me, woman?" I roared. "Can you not see I am in the midst of battle?"

"This is not a battle, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin," she replied. "This is five ugly brutes against five even uglier ones. And my name is Elinor Powell, so ye can stop calling me *woman* right this instant."

She knew my name. This pleased me. My reputation was spreading across the abyss of Hell.

"Alfarin has got himself a wench," sang my father brother Magnus. He had a Saxon held high above his head and was twirling him around and around. "About time. And she's a beauty for sure. Although not much of a rump on her to slap."

"Ye slap my rump and I will play marbles with yer balls," replied the maiden called Elinor Powell. My kin laughed. This woman was not of the Valkyries, but she had a fire in her soul that matched the color of her hair.

A wily Saxon had procured a length of wood whilst I was distracted. My legs gave way as he smacked it against my calves.

“Leave me be, woman!” I cried, embarrassed to have fallen in front of my kin. “Go and plague another.” I punched the wily Saxon in the nose. The pain in my knuckles was magnificent, and I immediately felt better.

Elinor Powell sighed. She seemed disappointed.

“I have been searching for ye for a hundred years. So when ye are ready to be the devil I know ye will one day become, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin, ye come and find me,” she said. And without so much as a backward glance, Elinor Powell disappeared into the shadows.

My intestines were still squirming.

---

It took me a further three hundred years to realize just how special a day that had been. For Elinor Powell would become my closest woman companion, in heart and mind and soul.

But then she was taken from me. Ripped from the heart of Team DEVIL by the Overlord of Hell himself. He took her to be his Dreamcatcher. To stand at his bedside and filter his most ghastly thoughts as he slept. It was a torturous ordeal, and I do not know if my princess will ever fully recover.

The Devil eventually allowed her release, on the condition that Team DEVIL complete a near-impossible task.

As I sit here now, I know that by Thor’s fury, The Devil will not be getting her back.

But I also know that I may meet my true and final end in ensuring that.

So that is why I am writing down our story in this diary. To make certain that whatever happens to me, wherever I am cast by The Devil when this is all over, there will be a record, somewhere, of my love for Elinor Powell, who has made my dead heart feel more alive than it ever did in life.

# 1. Bót

My name is Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin. I have been dead for over one thousand years, and Hell is the domain where I have dwelled during that time. Up There and Hell are not the places the living imagine. The living foolishly believe that their eternal existence is determined by the way they choose to live their lives while their hearts still beat. The living are so very wrong. The eternal domains are governed, and a person's final destination is determined by a simple checkmark in a box on a piece of paper—and the whim of the Grim Reaper who wields the pen like a weapon.

This is but one thing that *most* of the newly dead will find unfair in the Afterlife.

Not me. I always knew Valhalla was my final destination, and I found it in the dark, hot, crowded confines of Hell.

Here, I am many things to many people. A Viking. A man. A devil. The possessor of great hair. A friend.

And of all those parts of my identity, I now value being a friend above all else.

Elinor was my first true friend in the Afterlife. Mitchell Johnson and Medusa Pallister are my other best friends, though I met them much later. Mitchell has been dead for less than a decade. It was Elinor who found him. She said we needed another companion. At first, her choice made me jealous. Was I not man enough for my



princess? Yet Elinor treated Mitchell like a brother and nothing else. I quickly came to respect his friendship, his honesty and work ethic. It is because of Mitchell that Elinor found me in Hell, and I will never forget the sacrifice he made to bring us together.

If Mitchell is a brother-in-arms to me, then Medusa is like a sister to Elinor. She came to us only recently, rounding out the group as if she had always been there. At times, when I am on the cusp of slipping into the dreams of the mighty Norse god Hoth, I see Medusa in memories that I know were accidentally erased when we played with time. She's with us now—and then. A shadow in thoughts past.

The four of us, Elinor, Mitchell, Medusa and I, are Team DEVIL.

---

Lately, Team DEVIL has been pushed to its limits. We have traveled through the fabric of time itself. We have been ripped apart physically and mentally, and still we endure.

Now we have a new test. We must venture into the darkest pits of Hell. The Nine Circles. The dwelling of the Skin-Walkers. For there, hidden among the very worst of the Underworld, hides the original Dreamcatcher of The Devil, a Banshee by the name of Beatrice Morrigan. She is The Devil's wife. Returning her to him is the only way to save our Elinor from a permanent horror that even my learned mind cannot fully understand.

---

We do not have long before we must leave for our perilous journey. While Elinor rests after her ordeal of filtering the dreams of The Devil, and Mitchell and Medusa make preparations for the test to come, it is to Hell's library that I have retreated. Recently I have spent every waking moment—and even those moments of half-sleep, when I'm not quite aware of who or what I am—here, in this mausoleum where everything but learning is dead.

I'm relying on this place to help me in my quest to find out anything and everything I can about The Devil's Banshee. So today I

am reading in the bowels of the library, away from the hive of activity by the main entrance. The air in these dark, dank aisles swirls with decay and dust. Very few of the librarians come down this far. It scares them. They say there are creatures here, watching in the impenetrable darkness. I understand their fear, for I have seen the most fearsome of these beings. She is Fabulara, the Higher who controls Hell. Her head sits on an elongated neck that stems from the shoulders of a grotesque statue. Six other heads sit beside hers, but they are dormant, for Hell is Fabulara's domain. Her yellow eyes blink as she watches over the realm from behind the shelves of cracked spines and aging parchment. She reeks of death, and her shadow alone would cause most devils to quail in their boots.

But not I. I am afraid of nothing—except losing Team DEVIL to those whose nefarious ways are beyond the comprehension of most of the dead.

They should be thankful for that ignorance.

---

The only devil I have seen down this way is the buxom wench Patricia Lloyd. I dare not say it aloud, but I have been grateful for her company—though it is sometimes distracting. Patricia likes walking up and down the aisles, moving in a manner I am unaccustomed to. Is she hurt? It is as if her hips have dislocated from her spine. Her strange stride makes her rear end protrude and swish from left to right to left, like a pair of melons wrapped in a muslin hammock, rocking to and fro in the breeze. I try not to observe, but my eyes are drawn to her in the same manner that they are drawn to my second cousin Odd whenever he leans down to speak to his wife. The sight is grotesque, yet amusing—and therefore, impossible to avoid watching.

Odd is married to a banana. We do not talk of it.

---

Patricia is doing that walk now. It looks painful. Often, when we encounter each other, Patricia will ask me if her bottom looks big in

whatever cloth she is wearing. I say no, because it is the truth, and because I sense this is the answer that will satisfy her. But the question perplexes me. It seems that some women, like Patricia Lloyd, prefer having a small rump. Yet other women want their rears to be big enough to place a tankard on. Viking women certainly do. So Mitchell and I get very confused. We wish to compliment the fairer sex, but we always say the wrong words. My father has no such problems with women. He would spank any rear within a longship's distance, but I know better. Women no longer expect their rears to be slapped as a sign of courtship. I learned that from Elinor Powell, and had that knowledge reinforced in the great city of New York not long ago when Team DEVIL ventured back to the land of the living.

"Alfarin, I've found another book on Banshee countermeasures," calls Patricia. I snap out of my reverie of rump-slapping and behold her wardrobe selection of the day. She is wearing tight red pants that Medusa calls *skinny jeans*, and a piece of elastic cloth over her upper body that is no bigger than the dish towel I use to wipe the glasses in Thomason's, my kin's watering hole.

How can Patricia move in such constricting garments? It's just as well she doesn't need to breathe in Hell. In the land of the living, she would not be able to do so.

"I am thankful for your help, Patricia Lloyd," I reply. "But I do not need to know how to scare Banshees away. I wish to know how to get one to accompany me. You need not trouble yourself looking through the books here. I still haven't found what I am looking for, but I will know it when I do."

"That's the title of a song, you know," replies Patricia. "Or close to it. Speaking of, I can't wait for Bono to get down here. You know they're creating a special suite for him? It'll play 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' on a loop twenty-four seven for the rest of eternity." At this, Patricia smirks, but my eyebrows knit, betraying my confusion. Patricia looks frustrated. "You know...he recorded it with a bunch of other musicians a million years ago? They used to play it on

the radio nonstop?” She searches my eyes for a hint of recognition. When she finds none, she leans over and starts twirling a wisp of my beard around her finger. “So I’m thinking I should wear my sexy Santa costume when I meet him. The pants are kind of like the ones I’m wearing now, except—”

“I am a Viking prince,” I interrupt, shutting a heavy tome titled *The Origins of Hell*. “We do not understand Santa.”

Now it is Patricia who is confused. I remove her finger from my beard and explain.

“If a fat stranger with a long white beard were to enter earthly dwellings, uninvited, on any day other than the twenty-fourth of December, people would call the law enforcers. If such a man came to my hearth, I would run him through with my axe.”

My axe. My beloved blade has been with me since my tenth winter. It lies here now, on the gritty rock floor. The blade glints red in the firelight, a reminder of the blood of foes—and friends—it has spilled.

“Do you have a name for your axe?” asks Patricia, bending down to pick up the books I have already discarded. “I once dated a Saxon who worked in the furnaces. He was so hot. He had a javelin that he called *Irwin*. Something to do with a boar or whatever—I wasn’t that interested. I didn’t even like the way he talked, but man, he kissed like he was licking chocolate off my lips.”

Why would Patricia have chocolate *on* her lips? Don’t girls like to *eat* chocolate? Do they now use it as lipstick, too? No wonder my friend Mitchell gets pains of the stomach when it comes to women. They are as complex as they are beautiful.

“My axe has no name,” I reply. “Other than *axe*.”

Blades are named for the great battles they have fought in. I did not live long enough to name mine. It was never a concern after that. Yet now it has a purpose, and when I have found The Devil’s Banshee and returned her to the embrace of the master of Hell, thus saving my Elinor for eternity, my axe will have a name.

*Bót.*

In the language of my kin, it means “atonement.”

Only then will it—and I—be truly worthy.

---

Patricia has left me; I did not notice when. I have set aside two books that may be useful on our quest, but otherwise, I have found no further information to help me snare or entice a Banshee. I stand up and stretch. It takes a while to work out the kinks, and I revel in each crackle of my spine. I am not built like Mitchell, with the girth of an eight-year-old, nor am I bendy like a drinking straw. There must be times when it is helpful not to possess bulging muscles and a powerful gait...and one day I may think of such an occasion, but not today.

For today, Team DEVIL is gathering back in the office of the great Lord Septimus. He will see us to the entrance where the Nine Circles await us.

Limbo.

Lust.

Gluttony.

Greed.

Anger.

Heresy.

Violence.

Fraud.

Treachery.

One Skin-Walker is responsible for maintaining order within each circle, or so it is written. *Maintaining order*...that phrase is a bad joke. The Skin-Walkers thrive on disorder and hatred and pain.

In one of these Circles of Hell, we will find Beatrice Morigan, The Devil's Banshee. If we are lucky, we will find her in the First Circle and quickly put this whole affair behind us.

But judging from past adventures, Team DEVIL does not appear to have much luck on its side.

---

As I leave the darkness of the inner corridors of the library, I hear shuffling behind me. A rotten smell, worse than one of Cousin Thomason's bodily emissions, washes over me. I know that stench.

"What do you want, Fabulara?" I call. My words echo with many voices, not one of them mine.

"So you are determined to go through with this, Viking?" The voice is cold and harsh, like the scraping of a blade on ice.

"If I must enter the Nine Circles of Hell to save my princess, then that is what I will do," I reply. "And every second of every minute of every hour of every day in that putrid landscape, I will have a smile on my face. For I will find The Devil's Banshee, and I will bring her back with me."

"Or die trying?" sneers Fabulara.

"I am already dead."

"There are worse things than death, as you will discover if you and your friends enter the domain of the Skin-Walkers. They were the first evil, as you well know, and are therefore the purest form. You believe you are learned, that you know what to expect. But the horror that awaits you cannot be gleaned from books. You and your friends will not return."

"You created Hell, Fabulara, but I am not afraid of you or your words. Unlike you, I do not skulk about in the darkness. I must embrace my task. And if it leads to my doom, then so be it. I will face it head-on, like a Viking. A man. A devil."

I stand in the flickering light of a flaming torch, waiting for Fabulara's response, but there is nothing. I want to believe that her desire to frighten me has been sated, but as I reach the express elevators, her words echo in my mind.

*You and your friends will not return.*

# Tveir

*Alfarin and Elinor*



It was weeks before I saw Elinor Powell again. I did not seek her out. Vikings do not go looking for women—women flock to us.

It was a mere coincidence that I stumbled across her in the library in the section reserved for hair care.

My mane was like that of a lion steeped in honey. It needed attention.

“Are ye following me, Alfarin?” she asked as I turned into the aisle.

“I do not follow, woman,” I replied. “I am a Viking prince. I *lead*.”

Elinor Powell shook her head and sighed. Since she did not have to breathe, I suspected this was for my benefit, not hers.

“I have told ye my name, and it is not *woman*,” she said.

“I have forgotten your name,” I lied. “I have many important things to remember. I do not retain inconsequential details that mean nothing to me.”

“That’s a big word,” replied Elinor sarcastically, her eyes narrowing. “Almost as big as yer stomach.”

I instinctively rested my beloved axe against my shoulder and jiggled my belly with my spare hand.

“A real Viking should have meat on his bones,” I said.

“Well, ye certainly have that,” replied Elinor. “Why, the kitchens could roast ye on a spit and ye could feed Hell for a month.”

“When you have quite finished mocking my person, wench,” I

said, slowly and quite deliberately, “kindly remove your worthless, interfering carcass from this aisle. I am busy, and time is of the essence.”

“We have nothing but time, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin,” replied Elinor Powell. “And I am not going anywhere until ye have remembered my name.”

“Vikings do not play games.”

“Ye have to remember my name. It is important.”

Beautiful and troublesome. Those were the adjectives I associated with women, dead or alive. I had passed over into Valhalla in my sixteenth winter—too early to have taken on a mate to bear my sons. But after watching the Viking pairs square off in the halls of my fathers during my lifetime, I was grateful to have been spared a wife. I had witnessed womenfolk kicking, slapping and even head-butting their menfolk. The truly tormented males even had their dinner fed to the dogs.

In death, womenfolk were just as bewildering, and Elinor Powell was turning out to be the most confounding of all. I had met her only the once before, and she was already getting under my skin.

Which was difficult because, as she had pointed out, there was a lot of it.

“I do not remember your name,” I lied again. “Now begone and let me have some infernal peace.”

“As ye wish,” replied Elinor Powell, pulling a book from the shelf. A thin plume of dust cascaded to the ground as the sleeve of her white dress dragged back along the shelf. Her shoulders slumped slightly.

She was displaying the same sense of disappointment she had when I first met her. I did not like this. I wanted devils to be overawed by my impressive stature.

She slipped past me, leaving me and my unruly mane to the dust and the books on hair care in Hell. It was a popular section, as the heat of the Underworld was not a friend or ally to anyone’s follicles, but today the aisle was deserted.

I was glad to be alone. For I knew what I wanted, but it would be difficult to find—and I needed peace and quiet.



---

A librarian had written the words down, so I laboriously traced the outline of each letter on the paper against the letters on the spines of the books. It was dull and repetitive work, and it was not long before my arms were aching from being held in the same position.

“Alfarin,” called a soft voice. I jumped back, scrunching the paper into a tight ball.

It was Elinor Powell again, already come to return her book. Curse this woman and her glorious red hair and silent feet.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

But her face softened. She looked at me like my father, King Hlif, looked at his hunting dogs.

“Can ye not read?” she whispered.

“I am a warrior,” I replied. “I fight and bathe in the cooked brains of my enemies. I do not need to read in order to send Vikings into battle.”

Elinor held out her hand.

“I couldn’t read, either, when I arrived in Hell, but I am slowly learning,” she said. “I know my letters and many words now. I can help ye find what it is ye are looking for. And then ye can be on yer way to fight some Saxons even quicker.”

I scratched my beard. Elinor Powell’s proposition had merit. She was cunning and strategic. These were not the traits of most peasants. I handed her the piece of paper with the title of the book I was hoping to find.

“Ye see this letter here,” she said, pointing to a symbol that had two upright lines and one across the middle. “This is the letter *H*. I imagine it to look like a house without a roof. That is how I remember it. And this is the letter *S*. It looks like a snake, don’t ye think?”

I knew all about snakes. They were wriggling around in my stomach again.

---

I was a quick learner, which was no surprise, for I was born into greatness and died that way, too. Everything came naturally to those

gifted by the Allfather Odin. Satisfied that I had learned enough of the alphabet for one day, Elinor guided me back to the shelves, and together we found the book I required.

It was a picture book with no words. I felt ashamed that my options were so limited because I could not yet read.

“If ye want to take it with ye, don’t forget to check it out at the front counter,” said Elinor. “It is the year 1771 and we must act civilized and proper and follow the rules.”

Elinor and I walked through the library. I had my axe in one hand and the book in the other. I checked the book out and passed a librarian whipping someone who had been late returning a tome.

“Well, it was nice seeing ye again, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin,” said Elinor Powell sweetly. “Good-bye.”

She did not wait for me to return the gesture. She just turned and left. Perhaps she did not want to hear me call her wench or woman again.

“Perhaps we could meet here again?” I called.

“Perhaps,” she replied without looking back.

“Thank you!” I shouted as devils started to swarm into the space between us. “Thank you . . . Elinor Powell.”

She did not turn around or reply. Elinor Powell had been swallowed by the dead.

## 2. Into Battle

Lord Septimus is a great man. Few in Hell are as revered and respected as he. A Roman general in life, Lord Septimus is now in charge of the finances of Hell, an undertaking that is fraught with more danger than leading any Roman legion. He is a man of many titles: his Roman acquaintances call him General; the Vikings call him Lord; my sweet Elinor uses the title Mr. Septimus when speaking to him; while the woman who serves up fries in the burger bar calls him Sex-on-Legs.

He used to smile at this last description.

Used to.

I am not the only devil who sees a change in The Devil's accountant, but I am one of the very few who know the reason for it. Recently, Lord Septimus was betrayed, right along with Team DEVIL, by the master of Hell. An Unspeakable was let loose from the bowels of the Underworld with The Devil's stolen Dreamcatcher in tow. In the wrong hands, the Dreamcatcher could unleash unspeakable horrors.

At first it seemed as if the Unspeakable had pulled off an impossible theft and escape. But in fact, his heist and liberation were instigated by The Devil himself, in complete secret. He never even consulted his number one ally about the wisdom of his hotheaded plan.

So Lord Septimus was as stunned as the rest of us when The

Devil's grand scheme was painfully revealed: *he* had freed the Unspeakable, and through him, had used the Dreamcatcher to test the effects of a Hell-made virus on a small group of angels.

The virus worked, and not just on the heavenly ones. I still have the scars to prove it. So do my friends on Team DEVIL. We were caught in the crossfire when it happened. We will not soon forget it.

---

Since then, I have been thinking that the Devil's betrayal could prove to be the greatest mistake of his existence, for I sense a storm brewing in Lord Septimus's heart. His waking hours are now filled with secret messages and flimsy lies to explain sudden absences. Sealed memos and communiqués are delivered at all hours. My good friend Mitchell has witnessed all this as he works alongside Septimus in the accounting chamber, and he has told me everything.

I pass one of Lord Septimus's former servants on my way to level 1. Aegidius is a strange fellow. He wears a toga and walks everywhere barefoot. His feet are hairier than my father mother's back, and she has been mistaken for an escaped gorilla. Aegidius's toga is smoking. To anyone not in the know, this would not be suspicious—many a devil has tried to set himself on fire in Hell before—but I know better. Aegidius is carrying another mysterious smoking message for Lord Septimus; these messages burst into flame the moment they're read. Lord Septimus and Aegidius are working together, and according to Mitchell, there are many others, too, who are in near-constant consultation with the former Roman general.

I am a warrior. A fighter. I was readying for battle from the age of seven, so I know the signs.

Lord Septimus is preparing for war.

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I take the elevator to level 1. There are several devils rocketing along in the metal compartment with me, including Aegidius. I also recognize Sir Richard Baumwither, former head of the HBI. He is a bulbous fellow with red cheeks and a white beard. His head wobbles,

like the small toy that my friend Mitchell has on his desk. The movement is hypnotic. I long to tap him on the cheek to make him wobble more, but instead I stay as far away from him as possible, because Sir Richard does not like devil-to-devil contact anymore. He has avoided it ever since he was ripped apart by the Skin-Walkers and scattered amongst the levels of the central business district of Hell. He has healed well, for someone whose head was found floating in a toilet.

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Only Aegidius and I are left in the elevator by the time we reach level 1. The doors open and Aegidius departs first. His hairy feet squelch along the rock floor. The sound reminds me of my cousin Thomason eating soup. A strange sickness invades my stomach. I did not say good-bye to my kin, but I will think of them on this journey into the unknown.

Except for Second Cousin Odd. He should not be thought of by anyone who does not wish to regurgitate his last meal.

Mitchell and Medusa were charged with making all of the supply preparations, so I have only brought with me my faithful axe and two tomes: *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri and *The Origins of Hell* by an unknown author, which I checked out of the library. Both books are first editions and falling to pieces. I do not expect them to survive the entire journey through the Nine Circles of Hell, but they may be useful as long as they last.

Ahead of me, I see Aegidius disappear into the accounting chamber, but my eyes are drawn to the door next to it: the main entrance to The Devil's Oval Office. I can sense the fire and anger building up inside me. I will not be able to immolate in Hell—no devil can—but if I could. . . . Oh, for just one, glorious instant I wish I could. I know exactly where I would erupt with the force of Mount Vesuvius, and I know who would be cindered to a crisp with my hatred.

If Lord Septimus is starting a war, I hope it is a mutiny. When our quest in the Nine Circles is over, I will gladly stand shoulder to shoulder with one of the greatest generals I have ever known

to—as Mitchell would say—slam-dunk The Devil’s sorry ass. I wonder what The Devil’s head would look like floating in a toilet. . . .

I never had these kinds of thoughts before Elinor was taken. Love is a terrifying emotion. That is why Vikings do not display it. We fight, we make merry, and we fight some more. My father says love makes men weak.

Team DEVIL is about to prove him very wrong.

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“May I enter?” I ask, peering around the entrance to the accounting chamber. Mitchell and Medusa are in there, speaking to Aegidius. Lord Septimus is not, and neither is Elinor.

“Hey, Alfarin,” calls Mitchell. “Look, four backpacks. And there’s actually useful stuff in them. For once, we’re gonna be prepared. Go Team DEVIL.” He pumps his fist.

“As long as we don’t leave any of the bags behind,” says Medusa. “And as long as we don’t erase ourselves in a paradox. Or fall into one of the Circles of Hell. Or—”

“Yeah, yeah, we get the point,” says Mitchell. “Vortex of doom and all that. I was trying to cheer Alfarin up. Make it look like this adventure won’t actually go wrong.”

“Where is Elinor?” I ask.

“She went to see Johnny,” replies Medusa.

“Has she told him what we plan to do?” I ask.

“No—she’s going to tell him that devil resources needs her for a special project,” says Mitchell. “But she wanted to say good-bye, without actually saying it.”

Elinor’s brother Johnny is not a devil. He is one of four angels who have been exiled from Up There. The other three are Private Owen Jones, who was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme; Miss Angela Jackson, a pretty female from the beautiful land of Aotearoa; and an angel who is more fearsome than any devil I have ever met: Jeanne d’Arc—better known to English speakers as Joan of Arc. I have known the French maiden for just a short while,

and already she stands behind only Elinor and Medusa in my estimation of greatness. I do not tell her this, of course. She would almost certainly want to cause me pain for placing her third and not first. Yet a more capable female warrior I have never known. The great goddess Freya would find her match in Jeanne.

I certainly did.

The four angels have been exiled because they were the unwitting victims of the Hell-made virus unleashed by The Devil's Dream-catcher. Jeanne is so angry with the fate that has been forced upon her that she has almost managed immolation here in Hell.

Not for the first time, I wish I could take the French warrior with us into the realm of the Skin-Walkers and the Unspeakables.

But it cannot be. She is not a devil; she is a misplaced angel. It will be dangerous enough, entering the Circles of Hell. To add to our burden with an untested Jeanne, however brave, could be a disaster. I must lead this quest with a strong heart and a strategic mind.

And a full stomach. Is that pizza I smell?

"Food's up," calls the sweetest voice of all, and Elinor tiptoes into the accounting chamber, balancing four pizza boxes in her hands.

"Elinor, you are an angel!" cries Mitchell. "I tried to get Medusa to go down to the kitchens for food, but she refused."

"I've got better things to do than be a slave to your stomach, Mitchell Johnson," replies Medusa, flicking an elastic band at his head.

"Ow!"

"Bull's-eye!" crows Medusa triumphantly.

"I got ye a quadruple meat feast, Alfarin," says Elinor, handing me a cardboard box that is dripping with glorious grease.

"My princess," I reply, although my fervent rapture is drowned out by my intestinal tract, which is making the noise of a goat bleating in pain.

"Hello, Aegidius," says Elinor. "I am very sorry. I did not know ye would be here, or I would have brought ye pizza, too."

“I am here for General Septimus, not to eat food that falsely proclaims to be from my homeland,” replies the Roman.

“Huh?” asks Mitchell, a slice of pepperoni pizza hovering inches from his open mouth.

“I think Aegidius is saying our pizza isn’t really Italian,” replies Medusa thickly. She has just placed an entire slice of Hawaiian pizza in her mouth. I do not know whether to be impressed or appalled.

Who am I fooling? I am impressed.

Another devil enters the accounting chamber. Five becomes six, but Lord Septimus has the aura of ten devils. One day, I hope my magnificence will press people against the walls of Hell, instead of just my stomach.

“I’m glad to see that there are some things about Team DEVIL that do not change,” says Lord Septimus, in a drawling voice that is akin to those who arrive from the American state of Texas. “I thought I could smell pizza.”

“Can’t think on an empty stomach, boss,” says Mitchell. “And this might be my last meal.” He takes a swig of Coke from a can and burps loudly.

I know my friend is trying to keep the intense atmosphere jovial for Elinor’s sake, and I silently thank him for it. Intentional humor has never been my forte, although I seem to make other devils laugh. Intimidation and an impressive beard are my personal strengths.

“I take it you have something for me, Aegidius?” asks Lord Septimus. “Unless you have decided to join my interns and their two friends, of course?”

“Another letter arrived this past hour, General,” replies Aegidius, taking the smoking letter out from the folds of his toga. “And I have personally ensured that another has taken up the position vacated by the deserter.”

“Do not call him that,” replies Lord Septimus sharply, opening the letter. “Sometimes it takes a braver man to flee.”



Mitchell and Medusa are watching Lord Septimus with open mouths. It is rare to hear him speak with such an edge to his voice.

“Who deserted, boss?” asks Mitchell. “Don’t tell me another Unspeakable’s escaped Hell!”

“No...no,” says Lord Septimus. “It’s...it’s nothing, Mitchell. My apologies, Aegidius. I did not mean to speak harshly. I just feel responsible for the fate of...our informer.”

“Your men understand fate, General,” says Aegidius. “And your men embrace war. We are ready.”

“That is good news, Aegidius, for our time is coming,” replies Septimus. “But let us speak no more of it now. I will be out of commission for the rest of the afternoon, for I must see Team DEVIL to their destination.”

Four gulps echo around the accounting chamber. The quadruple meat feast pizza that I just finished devouring is suddenly sitting uncomfortably in my stomach. I want to start this journey so badly, and yet I feel a sense of prickling cold invading my skin. I am ashamed to know that it is fear. I have felt it before, just seconds before a peasant’s rusty hatchet blade was swung through snow and blood to end me.

Aegidius bows and leaves the accounting chamber without a word to us. Lord Septimus closes the door behind him.

“Does Aegidius know what we’re doing, Septimus?” asks Mitchell.

“No, he does not,” replies Lord Septimus. “But he will not question me. My soldiers were—*are*—accustomed to sending and receiving only the information that is relevant to them. And he is very loyal.”

As Lord Septimus speaks, I do not imagine the quick curl of the lip and penetrating glare he gives the door that connects the accounting chamber with the Oval Office. If looks could kill, then Lord Septimus would be a weapon to rival the Dreamcatcher.

Hell hath no fury like a devil scorned.

“When did ye wish to leave, Mr. Septimus, sir?” asks Elinor. She rubs her neck twice, but stops when she realizes we are all watching her.

“We will depart for the Nine Circles only when all four of you are ready,” replies Lord Septimus, and the softness in his voice is the antithesis to the hatred that flamed in his red eyes just seconds ago. “And Prince Alfarin, I will need to debrief you once you are ready.”

“I am your servant, Lord Septimus.”

“And in you I am placing my greatest trust,” he replies. “I know you will not let us down.”

“Medusa, how are the provisions?” I ask, wiping my greasy fingers on my tunic, keen to show Lord Septimus that I am worthy of his trust.

“I’ve packed food, water, clothes for everyone, and several changes of underwear. . . .”

“You and clean underwear, Medusa!” exclaims Mitchell. “I’ve told you before, me and Alfarin can just turn ours inside out.”

“No you haven’t,” she replies. “And that’s disgusting.”

A frown crosses Mitchell’s face. “Was that paradox Medusa, then? I can’t remember.”

Medusa digs Mitchell in the ribs with her elbow. Her aim is lethal.

“It doesn’t matter if that *was* paradox me who said it. Turning your underwear inside out to get out of washing it is disgusting in any timeline.”

I cross the floor to Elinor. She is watching their bickering with a faint smile.

“I will be ready when you are, Elinor,” I say.

She slips her hand into mine and squeezes. “I am ready, Alfarin, because I have my friends with me.”

Suddenly an electric-blue flash zaps across the ceiling of the chamber. Medusa squeals and ducks down with her hands pressed against her snakelike hair.

The connecting door opens.

And in walks The Devil.

# Pric

*Alfarin and Elinor*



A companionship had been forged in the heat and fire and written words of Hell. It was not an effortless friendship. It required much thinking on my part. This I found exhausting, and as a result I often drifted off during my work at Thomason's, and just as often, was awoken with a bucket of cold water to the face. My kin believed I was being tired out from *other* activities, and I did not correct them. I did not wish to be mocked. I was a proud prince.

Elinor Powell and I would meet in the library every day. She would teach me how to read, and I would impress her with my rapid understanding. Elinor Powell did not know that after we said our good-byes, I would go back to the labyrinth of books and continue by myself. The words she had spoken when she first encountered me often repeated in my head.

*"I have been searching for ye for a hundred years. So when ye are ready to be the devil I know ye will one day become, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin, ye come and find me."*

What did Elinor Powell know about me? I wanted to ask her, but my arrogance kept me aloof.

That did not change the fact, however, that I was developing an aching desire to make her proud of me.

Elinor Powell was accepted by my kin. She held her own and did not swoon in the company of such male magnificence. Indeed, she

did not seem to be very impressed by bulging muscles and sweaty armpits at all. So, after reading a tome on the female of the species, I wondered if I should impress her with my nurturing side.

It did not go according to my plan.

“Will ye stop yer fussing, Alfarin!” exclaimed Elinor. “If I tell ye nothing is the matter, then ye just have to trust me.”

“If you will not allow me, then at least permit one of my kin to have a look, Elinor,” I replied.

Why was this proving to be so difficult? Had the book lied to me? Did women not want men to take an interest in their grooming habits?

“I am telling ye, there is nothing to see,” said Elinor. “And yer kin are not going foraging through my hair like monkeys on the hunt for lice, either.”

“But if it is lice . . .”

“Will ye keep yer voice down!” cried Elinor. “And for the fiftieth time, I do not have head lice.”

I had chosen the anniversary of Elinor’s death to show my nurturing side. Most devils took their death anniversary in one of two ways: they gloried in the majesty of their passing, or they sank into the blackest of depressions and attempted to kill themselves. The latter was an exercise in futility, as they were already dead. The former was the way of the Vikings. We did not need a reason to celebrate; we just needed a location.

Elinor Powell was unlike other devils. She had accepted her passing with stoicism and grace. It was a quality I much admired in any devil. Elinor had told me she was meant to pass on at that moment in time. Elinor spoke of fate as if it was of comfort to her.

But as the fourth of September had drawn closer, I noticed that Elinor had started to rub and scratch at the back of her neck more and more. Even my kin had noticed. My father brother, Magnus, believed Elinor to be infected with the bubonic plague—but then

Magnus believed every devil was infected with some kind of pustular affliction.

“It is not lice. I do not have the plague, the pox or scabies, Alfarin,” chided Elinor. “We have only known each other a few months. One day...one day...I will be able...” Then her red eyes filled with tears, and I felt a strange sensation in my chest. It was the same sensation I felt when I was served only ten dumplings at dinner instead of fifteen.

It was a feeling of being bereft.

But I had not meant to make Elinor Powell cry. I had only wanted her to like me. I had wanted to show her I cared.

I needed a different book.

“I am sorry, Elinor,” I said remorsefully. “Forgive my inquisitive nature. What can I do to make it up to you? Would you like my serving of beef stew at dinner tonight? Or would you like to braid my hair? Shall I score my skin with one thousand strokes of penitence?”

“Oh, shush now, ye big oaf,” replied Elinor, sniffing. “It is just me being silly.”

But Elinor did not strike me as silly or foolish, and later that night, when I found her brushing her long red hair before we left the library, I saw her silently weeping over the usual congratulatory deathday message from The Devil.

I said nothing.

And I did not tell her I saw the long pink scar on the back of her neck.

### 3. The Devil's Farewell

As The Devil walks into the accounting chamber, Elinor and Medusa fall back against the stone wall. Both of Elinor's hands are on the back of her neck. It is the position she takes when she is frightened or worried, and it pains me, for I know now that I am the cause of her obsessive behavior.

I place myself in front of Elinor and Medusa with my axe raised. Let them come, I think to myself, expecting an army of ghouls to bleed out of the walls once more. Let The Devil's guards come. He is in *our* domain now, and I will strike my blade through anyone who tries to take our girls away from us again.

At the same time as I take a stance to protect Elinor and Medusa, Lord Septimus strides across the room and places a warning hand on Mitchell's arm. They could not be more different, in appearance and history, and yet I am often reminded of a father and son when they are together. The anger on my friend's face is majestic to behold. It is hatred and a burning desire to see a face with a black goatee floating in a toilet on level 666.

Mitchell's hatred of The Devil matches my own. We are brothers joined by death and love and loyalty.

"Team DEVIL!" exclaims The Devil in his high-pitched voice. Some would say he sounds like a girl, but I believe that is insulting to the female of the species.

“Sir,” says Lord Septimus calmly. “I thought you had a meeting with Florence Nightingale. Aren’t you due for your shots?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” replies The Devil, twisting his black goatee around his index finger. “Septimus is a worrier, isn’t he, Mitchell? Always looking out for those he cares about.”

The Devil smiles. Behind me I hear Elinor make a noise. I cannot tell if she is sobbing or gagging. Neither sound is one I welcome. I can feel the heat starting to burn inside my chest; my hands are shaking. The flaming torches around the accounting chamber are reflecting off the silver blade I sharpened with loving care this morning. It is a color that is permanently tattooed on many of my earthly memories—and the moment of my passing—because the fire in this room is also the color of blood.

What color does The Devil bleed, I wonder? If it’s as black as his mind and heart, it will be darker than the shadows that are now swarming across the walls. Watching. Waiting.

“Don’t look at him, El,” whispers Medusa. “Look at me. Hold my hand. That’s it, look at me.”

“Medusa Pallister always knows what to say,” says The Devil, leaning to his right to peer around my body. “Such a smart young lady.”

“You stay away—” Mitchell starts.

“Mitchell, be quiet,” says Lord Septimus; his voice is so low I can feel the vibrations of it against my own chest. It’s like a heartbeat. How strange it is to feel that after one thousand years of death.

“And Mitchell Johnson, or should I call you M.J.?” The Devil’s top lip curls. He is enjoying this. “The one who would give everything up for a brother he’s never even known.”

“Sir, with the greatest of respect, is there a point to this visit?” asks Lord Septimus. “I would be happy to call back Aegidius to assist you if you are in need of something to calm you before your shots.”

“I just wanted to wish Team DEVIL bon voyage,” replies The Devil. “That is the tradition in the land of the living, is it not? Then

again, you are about to embark into the Circles of Hell and not Disney World, so perhaps *bon voyage* was the wrong phrase. Such a frightful place. *It's a Small World* is my idea of Hell on earth."

The master of Hell starts laughing at his own joke. I can feel Elinor trembling behind me.

"I'm certain Team DEVIL is thankful for your kind words, sir," says Lord Septimus; his bloodred eyes flash a warning to all of us to maintain our silence. Mitchell is not struggling in Lord Septimus's arms, but I can see him shaking with rage. My friend was the first of us all to immolate. I know that, like me, if he could complete such a transition now, together we would blow level 1 of the central business district apart.

"So, who is to lead this adventure?" says The Devil. He sweeps a pile of papers from one of the desks onto the floor and perches on the edge. "All expeditions need a leader. Someone brave. Someone prepared to sacrifice themselves when the going gets tough."

"I will be leading," I say. "I am not afraid of the Circles of Hell."

"Why, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin," says The Devil. "I approve. You're going to have lots of fun, especially if you make it to the Seventh Circle. I would imagine a Viking will have lots to think about in there. I believe that's Visolentiae's domain, is it not, Septimus? You've already met that particular Skin-Walker. And I know Cupidore is looking forward to seeing Medusa once more. He liked the smell of you, girl."

"Maybe he likes the smell of Beatrice Morrigan more," says Medusa sharply.

The Devil's black eyes narrow at the mention of his wife's name. "You had better hope for the lovely Elinor's sake that he does not," he replies. "And remember what I told you in *my* domain, Medusa Pallister." He flashes me a look with his ink-black eyes, and for a moment I wonder if The Devil can read my mind. "I don't cope well without sleep, and the longer I am made to wait for a Dreamcatcher, the worse it will be. For everyone."



The flaming torches on the wall are starting to lower and dim, as if the fires of Hell are cowering in the presence of such despotic evil. Then with a sudden clap of his hands, The Devil jumps to his feet.

“I feel the need to break into song!” he cries. “What about ‘So Long, Farewell’? I do love *The Sound of Music*.”

“I will ensure that the film is streamed to you once you have recovered from your shots, sir,” says Lord Septimus. His voice is so calm, so steady. “But you should head down to the medical center. Miss Nightingale’s needles get larger the longer she waits.”

“They do, don’t they! Why, last time I swear that woman stuck a needle the size of a Toblerone bar into my backside. I couldn’t sit down for a week. Oh, Septimus, what would I do without you?” asks The Devil, sighing dramatically. “Well, bon voyage it is, then, Team DEVIL. And to you, Alfarin, son of Hlif, son of Dobin, do not forget what is at stake here if you fail.”

“We will not fail,” I reply. I know my irises are red after one thousand years in Hell, but they are now infused with so much anger I feel as if I could burn holes in The Devil’s face just by looking at him.

“That’s the spirit,” replies The Devil. As he reaches the inter-connecting door, he turns and addresses the one devil he has not yet spoken to.

“Sleep tight, pretty Elinor.”

Mitchell and I react at the same time. Medusa is not far behind, but The Devil is gone before we reach the door. Our three hands grab the handle, and our flesh sizzles upon contact.

“Fall back, Team DEVIL,” booms Lord Septimus. “You are filled with anger, but you will face far worse than the master’s baiting once you have entered the Nine Circles. You must learn to control yourselves. This is not New York or New Zealand. This is far more dangerous, and you will fail in the very First Circle if you do not get a grip on your emotions, however hard that may be.”

“H-how can you . . . I don’t know . . .,” stammers Mitchell, his face screwed up with rage. “How can you stand it, Septimus? The Devil

doesn't even have to speak and I want to rip him apart. He's worse than the Skin-Walkers. How can you be so . . . so . . . *civil* toward him?"

"Mitchell, I will not warn you again," says Lord Septimus. "For your own preservation, never, ever speak ill of The Devil, especially in this office."

"But he's a monster!" cries Medusa. "He deserves every word!"

"He is The Devil," says a voice behind me. "And he enjoys the game. Mr. Septimus is right. Ye should not speak ill of him. I have seen The Devil's dreams, and he's just itching for an excuse to wreak havoc."

"Listen to Miss Powell," says Septimus, his gaze softening. "Your emotions are about to be pulled apart. Do not lose control before you have started."

"Sorry, Septimus," mumbles Medusa.

"Yeah, sorry, boss," adds Mitchell. "Sorry, Elinor. And you, too, Alfarin. You two kept your heads—"

"Mitchell," I growl.

"It's just an expression, Alfarin!" says Mitchell, throwing his hands in the air. "I can't keep checking myself every time I mention heads."

"Try."

"It is all right, Alfarin," says my princess. She steps out from my shadow. "When I was in there, with The Devil, I never lost hope. I knew ye would all come for me, even if it took a thousand years. Ye are all the greatest friends a devil could have, and I love each and every one of ye, jokes and all. I do not need protecting, from words or deeds. Not anymore."

"The Devil is not reclaiming you, Elinor," I say, going down on one knee. "For you were never his to take in the first place. And I swear it now, in front of those who mean the most to me, that by my blood, I will not fail. I will lead us all into the Circles of Hell, and moreover, I will lead us all out again once we have found our quarry."

The sound of my blade slicing across my forearm is glorious. A quick yet tuneful whistle. Steel on skin.

“Do it to me,” says Mitchell, striding forward, pulling up the long sleeve of his green shirt. “I want to do a blood oath, too, Alfarin. Quick, before I change my mind.”

I do not wait to be asked again. Mitchell’s blood mixes with mine on the blade of my axe as I score his forearm with a single cut.

“Argh! Oh, *shit* that hurts!” Mitchell pales at the sight of his arm.

“Perhaps you ought to lie down, my friend,” I say.

“What? No!” Mitchell glares at me and then closes his eyes. “Okay. Okay, here goes. I swear by this Viking blood oath that this quest—ow, holy shit—hang on, no, that’s a swear, but that’s not my real swear. I mean, my real oath. Okay. I swear that we’re going to get The Devil’s wife back and Elinor will be safe—ow, ow, ow. Septimus, I need a Band-Aid.”

While Lord Septimus pulls out a red first-aid kit and tends to a swooning Mitchell, Medusa steps forward and silently offers me her arm. Scars from our time in New Zealand, where The Devil’s awful virus was unleashed upon us, have pockmarked her body, but the one I am about to inflict is one she will not shudder from.

She flinches slightly, but I know brave Medusa has suffered worse, and she absorbs the pain like a true Viking goddess.

“I swear a blood oath that Team DEVIL will not fail. We will not leave the Circles of Hell without Beatrice Morrigan, and the Overlord of Hell will not take Elinor from her best friends again,” she says quietly.

“And now me, Alfarin,” says Elinor, stepping forward. Her pale arms are freckled like her face, but the remnants of the virus unleashed from the Devil’s Dreamcatcher are worse on her skin than on Medusa’s. Pink swellings, like small coins, have scarred her body.

But I will slight Elinor’s honor if the mark I make on her now is smaller than those I scored onto Mitchell and Medusa. So with a quick sleight of hand, I draw my blade across Elinor’s arm.

“And I swear, as an honorary Viking, that no harm will come to those I love,” says Elinor.

“Gather your belongings, Team DEVIL,” says Lord Septimus. “It is time to leave. Prince Alfarin, I take it you have formulated a plan?”

“I am a Viking warrior, Lord Septimus,” I reply. “I have been preparing for this moment my entire death, whether I knew it or not.”

“Excellent. We will discuss this further as we walk. But first, I have a gift for you.” From his inside pocket, Lord Septimus draws a small bundle wrapped in a purple silk handkerchief. He places it gently in my enormous palm. I do not need to open it to know what it is.

“For the journey home,” says Lord Septimus. “Make a note of the date and time right now. The quest you are about to embark on will be your most dangerous yet. I hope you have been listening to my advice over the years, Prince Alfarin, for my words are never in vain, and I do not waste them.” He looks at me steadily. “I will expect to find you back here waiting for me.”

He winks, and I bow. Elinor rubs her neck. Mitchell and Medusa look at each other with confused expressions, but now is not the time for explanations.

“Mr. Septimus, sir,” says Elinor as Medusa starts handing out the backpacks. “May I add one last statement to the oath I just swore?”

“It was your oath, Miss Powell,” replies Lord Septimus. “You may add and subtract as you see fit.”

“It’s just... it involves ye,” says Elinor. “I have seen his dreams, ye see, and I wish to swear, as an honorary Viking, that when this is over, I will help ye.”

“Help me with what, Miss Powell?”

“I wish to help ye unleash Hell.”

# Fjórir

*Alfarin and Elinor*



War. For the Vikings, in our era, it was a glorious state. Yet as the centuries passed in the land of the living, conflicts between men became larger and bloodier and longer.

The Great War was to be the war that ended all wars, and for four brutal years, mankind fought for territory and rights. As a result, by 1916, the war's midpoint, the Deceased Dominion—the landmass where the HalfWay House stood—was rumored to be on the verge of anarchy. Soldiers, obliterated by bullets and shrapnel, were arriving by the tens of thousands. They were healed before the Grim Reapers sorted them to Hell or Up There, but the stench of their blood made its way to the Underworld anyway. After a time, the overworked Grim Reapers could not cope with so many, so they started sending the dead to Hell without assessing them.

By this time, thanks to Elinor, I was the most learned amongst my kin, but I remained a warrior first and foremost. So Lord Septimus had taken to calling on me to assist with the processing of newcomers, and the quick disarming of anyone who caused trouble in the reception area.

It was there that I learned that Up There had reneged on its promise to take its share of the glorious dead from the war, and that broken vow became more apparent than ever on the first of July, when the Somme in France became a river of blood as sixty thousand British men fell.

The dead, with wounds still dripping, came in droves. The long, rocky tunnels from the HalfWay House to Hell's reception room were filled to capacity. The reception room itself bulged with the sheer volume of new devils.

Elinor was enlisted to assist with the processing, too. The two of us worked until we could not move for exhaustion. Her shining hair ran even redder with the blood of the new arrivals. Carnage was everywhere.

Even so, we were efficient. We became a team. Lord Septimus said I was the brawn, Elinor was the brains. As we worked in tandem—processing more of the dead than any other devils, Grim Reaper or otherwise—we were called into a side chamber to assist with “special cases”—those devils that were to be taken away for “projects.”

I knew from their paperwork that these devils were deserters: soldiers who had fled the field of battle in fear, or refused to advance when ordered.

I wanted to call them cowards. It was a man's birthright and duty to protect his people. Yet these young men before me did not look like witless chickens. And I knew enough now from my own reading and experience that there was more to bravery than facing death with a roar.

These devils had answered a call to serve while living. They had left family and hearth and faced the most horrendous terror like men. My heart may not have been beating, but it was still touched by these boys wilting with fear before us.

“You two get to assign this sorry lot for the special jobs,” said the Grim Reaper on duty. “Feel free to make it as gruesome as you can for them.”

The Grim Reaper left Elinor and me in the anteroom with fifteen of the young men. All but one were still shaking. Their eyes had already started to change to the color of foamy milk, but several pairs were so white, they were clearly still rolling in their sockets.

“They are all younger than me, Alfarin,” whispered Elinor as she

flicked through the processing forms. “I will not do this. I will not make death harder for them.”

“We have our orders, Elinor,” I said.

“Alfarin,” said Elinor, and she touched my hand. I could not remember her doing so before. “Can ye honestly tell me ye have no compassion in yer heart for these boys? Not all orders are the right ones. Sometimes ye need to do what is right, not that which was told to ye.”

I was truly conflicted. I had been brought up to listen to authority. My death came about because I did not. I had gone on alone into the village, believing I was invincible.

I took a step toward the soldiers, and all but one brave soul took a step back. I remember he wore a brown uniform, though his face was quickly lost to me.

“We will find you safe jobs and warm beds. You will never escape death, but you can make a safe existence for yourselves here,” I said to the new devils.

Elinor was still touching my hand, and she gave it a quick squeeze before she started to give them their assignments.

I had made her proud. It was a good feeling to earn respect instead of demanding it.

But defying orders did not come easily, and I did not sleep well for many nights.

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By the end, Elinor and I had seen so many of the glorious dead that they all became one in our minds. There were too many names to remember. Too many bloodied faces to recall. We found jobs for everyone who came our way to be processed. Jobs of importance. Even the great Lord Septimus took one of the soldiers, the one in the brown uniform who had not quailed at the sight of my axe.

But the living did not learn. The Great War became just another war. And twenty years later, it happened again.

And again...and again...and again...