LETTERS FROM DEMON LAND

A welcome gift for new subscribers

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The first chapter of The Struggle
and three poems from Dream of the Ash

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Welcome to Demon Land

You joined the Letters, so here is the gift I promised: the opening chapter of The Struggle, my first Demon Land novel, and three poems from Dream of the Ash: “Fade,” “What the Devil Said,” and “Poe.”

One letter a month from here on: what I am writing, what I am reading, and first word of Book 4 as it comes. No noise beyond that.

Read well.

Daniel Sokoloff

Chapter 1: The Hierophant's Pledge

"I didn't realize I had earned the right to meet your mother," the demon said, and Faustina blew him a kiss.

"Don't say anything besides for 'Hello' to her," she said. "And don't let her touch you, whatever you do."

"Is she a fledgling like you?" Splinter asked as the train came to a stop.

"Yes, but that isn't why. She's a practicing seer, and the last thing I need is her getting a glimpse of what we're up to," Faustina said, letting go of her grab-handle as Splinter ran off the train.

Faustina's house was a small two-story house wedged between two larger row homes, with a small front yard that was overgrown with grass and weeds. A lone tree stood in the midst of the overgrowth, one of its branches dangerously close to one of the second-story windows.

"It isn't your dad's penthouse, but it's where I grew up," Faustina said as she unlocked the gate and went through the yard, being careful to step on the path that was marked by round, foot-sized stones sunken into the soil. Though the grass was nearly up to Splinter's chest, the path was clear, though it wasn't clear to the eye.

"My mother's magic is pretty subtle," Faustina said, and Splinter noticed a branch from the tree gently curving away from her head. He could see the door was covered by moss and ivy, but as they neared it, being careful to only step on the round stones, he saw the ivy and moss begin to move off the door, sliding into the wooden lintel.

"What would have happened if we stepped off the path?" Splinter asked as they walked up the three steps to the front door.

"You may have found yourself getting tangled up in grass and shoots, before getting dragged down into the ground for my mother to find later. She isn't too keen on unexpected visitors," Faustina said as she pulled her keys out of her purse.

"Well, I sure am glad you're bringing me in unannounced," Splinter said as she opened the door.

“Shut your furry face, and put those damned gloves on, I don’t want my mother finding out what we’re up to,” Faustina said, punching the demon in the shoulder.

“But if she’s a seer, shouldn’t she know anyway?” Splinter asked as Faustina punched him again.

Splinter hadn’t dated enough to have met many parents, but he was nervous about meeting Faustina’s mother. The house was as small as it looked on the outside. The hallway was lit by a small lamp on a simple wooden table, and Splinter saw a painting of an angel surrounded by thick, fiery crimson and yellow brushstrokes. A thin, purple curtain hung along with strands of beads, separating the hall from the kitchen, and Splinter saw that it was actually most of the first floor, with a gargantuan brown couch with squashed cushions against the wall behind the table. There was no living room, and no television, just a record player that sat beside the couch.

And there was also Faustina’s mother, seated at one of the three chairs at the kitchen table. She wore a white floral dress, and around her neck were several necklaces, with beads made from precious stones strung on many of their strands, and amulets Splinter had never seen before in all his years learning sorcery. One he did recognize however was the Hanged Girl, and this one was the largest, dangling above the other amulets. Faustina’s mother wore glasses set in a pink plastic frame, and had her hair bound up in a white kerchief that was the same print as her dress. She smiled pleasantly as Splinter and Faustina entered.

“Hello Fow, you’re late,” she said, her pink lipstick making her coquettish smile shine in the dim light.

“Mom, I never gave you a time,” Faustina replied indignantly as Splinter took a seat at the small round table. It and its chairs were all painted white, and Splinter noticed that despite the fact that the paint looked fresh, it was chipped in several places, revealing the wood grain below.

“Oh no, Fow-Fow, the tea leaves were pretty explicit, you were meant to arrive two hours ago,” Faustina’s mother said.

“Mom, doesn’t that just mean your prediction was wrong, seeing as how you failed to predict when I would arrive?” Faustina pressed, taking her seat beside Splinter.

“If you want to be clever and try to outsmart my tea leaves you could argue that, but it still doesn’t change the fact that you’re late!” Faustina’s mother sang, and poured Splinter a cup of steaming hot tea from her blue-stamped china tea pot.

“Hello Mrs.---” Splinter tried to say, but Faustina’s mother put a hand up.

“Please, call me Marella,” she said sweetly, indicating the cream and sugar dishes that were laid out. Splinter tried to answer her, but Marella continued speaking.

“I’m so happy that my little Fow-Fow brought you to see me, I’ve been wanting to read your fortune for so long,” she said, and reached for Splinter’s claw. “Oh, I see you’re wearing gloves, would you please remove them?”

“Splinter has a germ thing,” Faustina said, and Splinter smiled awkwardly. Marella squinted at Splinter, but said nothing further. She poured Faustina a cup of hot tea, and reached for a silver box that lay near to her right hand.

“Are you comfortable with your fortune being read?” Marella asked, her green eyes twinkling.

“I am. It isn’t as if I have it done too often,” Splinter said.

“Well, I don’t know how your kind does things, but I have several methods I employ. I usually default to the Tarot, as it will communicate directly between the seer and the querent, addressing you directly with its archetypes and arcana,” Marella said, and then arose. She set the needle

down on the record player, and the brass and sorrow of an opera flooded the small house, a woman’s aria floating through the air. Marella went to her cupboard, and Splinter saw with some alarm that there were bunches of sage stored there, but she did not get these. Instead she brought out a handful of purple powder, which she placed into a censor that was sitting on the counter.

“Need a light?” Splinter asked, breathing deeply.

“Not when we have the magic of technology,” Marella said, setting the censor down and producing a box of matches.

“What is that?” Splinter asked as Marella took her place at the table, opening the silver box. The powder she had ignited was sending wisps of grey smoke into the air, and Splinter felt his body relax as he sniffed it.

“Lavender incense,” Marella said, pulling a battered deck of cards from the box. She slid the deck across to Splinter, motioning to him with a chopping motion, and

Splinter dutifully cut the deck and returned it. Marella went on to shuffle it, before breaking it in two again and riffling them together loudly. Her fingers were practiced, focused. There was magic in the way she moved the cards, not even looking as she aggressively shuffled with a practiced theatricality.

“Faustina doesn’t bring too many boys home, so I thank you for obliging her to meet me like this,” Marella said as she set the deck down.

“I haven’t had my fortune read, ever,” Splinter said, eyeing the ornate back of the cards curiously. They were printed in faded black, but were overlaid with a gold design that shone like daylight breaking through the feeble wall of darkness on the back of the cards.

“What is that?” Splinter asked, unable to make sense of the criss-crossing lines and orbs.

“The planets and celestial spheres of the universe, as drawn by the appini nearly two millennia ago,” Marella said, and Splinter felt a tiny pang of guilt at her answer.

“This deck has been in our family for generations, and it is a good friend to me, even if it can be a little cranky at times,” Marella said as she flipped the first card over. Splinter wondered how a deck could be cranky or any kind of friend, but he wasn’t given too much time to think.

“This first card is the Significator. It represents you in your current incarnation. We change throughout our lives, depending on whom we meet and the actions we are ultimately forced to take, and this card-” Marella tapped her finger on Splinter’s card, which depicted a man clothed in red, kneeling in prayer within a church - “The Hierophant, is meant to depict you as you are today. Deep in thought are we? Thinking along the lines your daddy and local news stations are telling us to, hmmm? Perhaps reconsidering things as you look for guidance? Who do demons pray to?” Marella asked, and before Splinter could respond, his attention on the closed eyes and clasped hands of the Hierophant, Marella had already pulled a second card.

“The Page of Swords,” she said, laying the second card horizontally across the Hierophant. This new card depicted a young lad with wild, young hair, and loose-fitting clothing, befitting a peasant. He stood atop a hill against a clear blue sky, a plain broadsword held high.

“The Page is not the master of his blade. This second card is the one that crosses your Significator. It is the change that you are faced with, the conflict with which you must wrestle. Tell me, Splinter, is it not simple sword-play you struggle with, but with the feelings you must wrestle as you settle into your place? You can go anywhere, be anything. The hill the Page stands upon is your excessive privilege; oh that we were born demons, eh Fow-Fow?” Marella asked, and Faustina rolled her eyes.

Splinter frowned, wanting to blurt out that he desperately wanted to change things, but Faustina hadn’t told him to wear gloves in order to reveal what they were doing with Witheron to her mother. He wondered what Marella would think of the old wizard; would she distrust him as Splinter was starting to?

Marella set another card down, this one above the Hierophant. This one showed a magician in a blue, star-speckled robe with spectacles and a pointy hat on his head standing in what could only be abject misery. He had four chalices at his feet that were all on their sides, their light purple contents spilled out, staining the hem of his robe. A fifth cup was held in the hands of a small, chubby demonic creature with little black wings on

the back of its red body. The creature was in the process of throwing this last cup to the ground as well, against the wishes of the magician.

“The Five of Cups! Dejection and despair is in your future, a loss of love. Cups are the suit of love and emotion, are we looking at a dramatic failure of our current struggles, or something simple and harmless like...a break-up?” Marella asked to Splinter’s chagrin.

“Mom!” Faustina shouted.

“Oh be quiet, there’s still seven cards for us to get through, and context is everything,” Marella said with a chuckle. Splinter did not meet her gaze as he studied the sad wizard. Was this card foretelling the downfall of Witheron? Splinter felt certain that he would have to battle the wizard directly, and after his last conflict with the old man, the prospect filled him with terror.

Marella turned over a fourth card, and this one she placed to the right of the Hierophant. This one depicted a small, naked demon huddled in a gutter. His red eyes were fixated on five Pentagrams that were glittering up in the stars, as if they were a portent of a change in fortune for the wretched creature.

“Another five, the Five of Pentacles,” declared Marella. “Here is a card of desperation, of longing. It certainly pertains to who you were in the past, but more directly refers to those who are helping you today.”

Splinter thought of Void, rejected in favor of Shatter and himself by their father. Had the little fiend in the gutter been him? Faustina’s wing nubs occurred to him, and he knew of their shared dream of flying, denied them by forces outside their control.

“Is it all sadness that surrounds our little Hierophant? Or something more? We’ll have to flip over another card to find out!” Marella said, revealing a fifth card. This one nearly made Splinter fall out of his chair. It depicted Lucretia-Layla, her massive sword held against her beautiful, pale face. Her six wings were held aggressively at her sides, and her eyes depicted on the card seemed to glare challengingly at the demon.

“This card is in your near future, the majestic Ace of Swords. You look as though you’ve seen a ghost, demon. Are you familiar with this card?” Marella asked, squinting at Splinter. Her rings clicked together, and he

noticed that one of them was a silver baby spoon, twisted around her index finger.

“No ma’am, it’s just that I think that angel is one I read about in a...a...book,” he said lamely.

“The last queen of the appini and Chrysthalia! Yes, I do believe this is meant to evoke her indominate spirit. There is some irony that she appears in this deck, which is still being used in the very city that was built atop her land. Still, this card tells me there is a great heroic battle in your future, the chance to master the sword your Page showed you struggling with,” Marella said, lightly tapping the Page of Swords that was still crossing the Hierophant. “Aces are the seed and potential for their suits. The Ace of Swords can become any Sword. What will become of yours?” Marella pulled a sixth card, laying this below the Hierophant. “Now this is an odd reading,” the seer said, revealing another Ace. This one showed a thin, skeletal angel holding aloft a great silver key, with several teeth and a long red ribbon hanging from its eye, which blazed with dark fire.

“Lord Apollyon,” Splinter breathed, and Marella nodded gently.

“Yes, the Revealer of the World, the one who opened the door of change and gave us the modern age. This is a second Ace, the Ace of Wands. I was beginning to wonder if we would see the fourth suit. This is the card that is holding you back. The way I see it-” Marella said, touching both the Ace of Swords and the Ace of Wands, “these are two warring ideas in your mind. I know well that you are a sorcerer in training, learning along with my Faustina, but you are also a demonic prince. You feel like you can do anything, but the world will make of you what it will, won’t it?” Marella said, and stopped to sip her tea.

Splinter studied the spread, his eyes flicking from the frightened face of the Hierophant, to the haunting, forlorn offering of Apollyon’s Ace of Wands, to the terrifying challenge of Lucretia-Layla’s Ace of Swords. They all seemed irrelevant beside the Five of Cups, with its depiction of utter loss and failure.

“Are you telling me that no matter what I accomplish, I’m going to end up in the Five of Cups, broken and alone?” Splinter asked.

“Have some tea, Splinter. Learn to relax, kiddo. There are still four more cards, but hey, note the Five of Pentacles. I’m sure it means something to you. Want to avoid that nasty future? Maybe that’s the key,” she said, and pulled another card.

Splinter put a hand on Faustina’s leg, and watched as Marella set the card to the far right of the cross of cards she had already laid out.

“This card is your heart and soul. It reflects who you are, deep down below,” she said, pursing her lips as Splinter recoiled from the card. It showed the exterior of a hut, with a purple night hugging the edges of the card. Through the door a lone man could be seen, a book on his table beside a loaf of bread, a knife sticking out of it. Blood was spilling from the loaf, and the man had his face in his hands, as if he were crying. A lantern was set down beside the door, its light spilling outwards from the hut.

“The Hermit,” Marella said, picking up the card to study it more closely as if she had never seen it before. “You have a rich inner life, and hide yourself from others, probably because you’re afraid to see your own vulnerability, let alone show it to anyone else. I wonder, will you escape from this hut?” she asked, and replaced the card.

Faustina was used to her mother's style of reading, but regretted not warning Splinter about her. She put her hand on top of his, and gave him a soft smile.

Marella wasn't quite done yet though. She pulled two more cards, placing them in a line above the Hermit. She pointed to the first card, which showed a proud woman wearing a crown of holly and flowers woven together, seated atop a throne fashioned from a giant tree stump. She held a wand that had a shining star at its point, and despite the simple style in which she was drawn, Splinter could tell that her jaw was clenched adamantly.

"The Queen of Wands. This card is my daughter. She's bullheaded and strong, and you would be a fool to oppose her. That is all the Queen would say to you," Marella said, and moved to the ninth card. "Another five!" she said merrily. It showed a man picking up swords from a battlefield, laughing to himself. "The Five of Swords, how unfortunate to see so many fives," she said.

"What does that mean?" Splinter asked fearfully.

"Fives all represent a low point. This card is meant to reflect your mental influences, but it's impossible to view it in a vacuum. Before I say more, your final card," she said, and pulled Splinter's tenth card. It showed a craftsman chiseling a pentagram design into a stone. At his side was a stack of similar stones, all with perfectly formed pentagrams chiseled into their faces. Splinter noticed Faustina give a relieved sigh beside him.

"The Eight of Pentacles, a card of accomplishment through hard work," Marella said, and glanced at the Five of Cups. "It seems you stand to lose much in the coming days, but will have the chance to make up for it. Will it be enough? I fear only you will be able to answer that," the seer said.

"Wait, you said that getting all those fives was bad too!" Splinter said.

"Mom, I think you've scared my boyfriend enough," Faustina said.

"Nonsense, I'm merely reading the cards," Marella said. "Yes Splinter, notice how you have three fives here. What's missing?"

The demon studied his spread. There were three fives represented: the Five of Cups, with its despondent wizard; the Five of Swords with its Pyrrhic victory; and finally the Five of Pentacles, with its sad, homeless demon. Splinter noted the cards again. There were four suits, Swords, Cups, Pentacles and…

“There’s no Five of Wands!” Splinter cried, and his eyes flickered to the deck, which Marella had her hand resting on.

“Exactly. Wands are concerned with your spirit, your inspiration, with fire.” Marella shrugged. “Guess whatever you’re meant to be, you’re certainly living up to it.”

Splinter was speechless, his eyes roving over the cards.

“I think I need to get out of here,” he said, and pushed his chair out.

Faustina walked Splinter through the front yard, trying to catch his eye as he hurried to the street.

“Hey,” she said as he reached the gate. “I’m sorry about that. My mother is sometimes a little too crazy for her own good.”

“It’s okay I guess,” Splinter replied, and would have said more, but Faustina leaned forward and kissed him.

“So where do little demons come from?” Faustina asked.

“I actually have no idea,” Splinter replied.

The two sat on top of a large building now, the chaotic sprawl of the city exposed before them like the underbelly of some murderous creature that hadn’t noticed them yet. The wingless bat demon and the human girl, passing the time before the trajectory of their choices delivered another round of ruin to a ruined world.

“Of course you know where baby demons come from, Hierophant,” the girl pressed, her hazel eyes mirrored in Splinter’s massive demonic orbs. Splinter averted his gaze from her, watching some spotlights play across the glossy face of a different building that shimmered blackly like an otherworldly monolith in the night.

“You really don’t want to know,” the demon said with a sad smile, showing his sharp, needle-like teeth.

“I’ll tell you where human babies come from. Might even show you, perhaps,” Faustina said, pouting.

“Fuck off,” Splinter said.

“I’m just messing with you,” Faustina said. “It’s not like I really care anyway.”

They watched the lines of traffic winding through the streets down below, the individual vehicles imperceptible on their own.

“Do you think that all this would have come about if your people had won the war?” Splinter asked.

“What do you mean? The skyscrapers that blot out the sunlight? The state of fear that keeps everyone restrained and down?” Faustina asked.

“No, I meant like, cars, electricity, soulcraft, you know, society, tech, that kind of thing?” Splinter replied.

“You’re so stupid,” Faustina snapped, and shoved Splinter rudely. Splinter tried to say something, but his eyes roved on to the low cut of her dress, and the words stuck in his throat.

“The angels were good to everyone! They gave animals like you sentience, they taught us how to write and gave us the civilization that your kind freaking stole from us, and were so gracious they even let your kind out of the black pit they should have left you in, and what was your

response? You massacred them all and enslaved everyone else,” Faustina shouted, her cheeks red with rage. Her black hair blew in the wind, and Splinter recoiled.

“I’m not an animal...” Splinter muttered, and Faustina pounded her leg in fury.

“That bat that you’re wearing is descended from a sentient bat! Where did it get the sentience from?” Faustina demanded.

“But that sentience isn’t me,” Splinter protested, but Faustina cut him off.

“Yeah, because you replaced it. Your parents made your little demon soul incarnate in the body of a bat who would have lived a perfectly normal, healthy life,” she seethed.

“What would you have me do? Should I be sad that my father didn’t let my soul dissipate into nothingness?” he asked plaintively. “Besides, isn’t that why we’re working with Witheron to fix the world?”

“I think that you should consider sending newborn demon souls back to the void. You can’t enslave bodies, Splinter.”

“You would deny corporeality for sentient beings though? I mean, we’ve talked about this before. How would you like to give up your body to just be an untethered mind, drifting aimlessly in darkness, with no concept of sunlight or sensation ever

again? No sense of self or potential to feel joy ever again?" Splinter replied, and Faustin shook her head.

"To answer your question, no, I don't think we would have gas-powered vehicles or advanced sorcery if the Starborn Kingdoms had not been eradicated by the Rapture Wars. I think we would have continued to live in harmony with nature and peace with each other. It was the emergence of demonkind that brought strife and sectarianism into the world. That is what we will have to struggle with once we've overthrown the empire. That's why it'll be the two of us, ruling over everyone," Faustina smiled warmly, and Splinter tittered nervously.

"So you do know where demon babies come from, then?" he asked.

"Of course I do. After the parents spawn a new demon soul, someone from the government helps it to incarnate in a comatose clone body that

matches the lineage of its parents. Everyone knows that, moron," Faustina said, and flicked one of Splinter's long, furry bat ears.

"I guess we should probably finish putting up the fliers for Void's show," Splinter said, and handed a sheaf of paper to Faustina.

"My wing stubs itch," she complained as they moved towards the fire escape.

"Will anything change?" the demon asked, holding the fliers tightly as a bitter wind rippled through the street, causing the papers to ruffle violently in his claws.

"What do you mean?" the girl asked back, stapling one to a tree. She glanced at the demon as he kept a healthy distance from her, fidgeting with the papers in his claws.

"After we've done it all, stolen the skeletons and armor, claimed the sword from the lake, disrupted the Hexehedron, killed the emperor, you know," the demon asked anxiously.

"What?" the girl asked, walking over to the demon to take another flier from him. He glanced at one of them. It read, in highly stylized, puke-green letters Parasitic Cesspool! This weekend, get the new EP 'Bad Belletrix Blues' at Daedey's Place! and featured a tentacled, red-eyed beast glaring behind the words.

"Well, y'know, we rule them all," the girl said, the papers in her hands crinkling as she spoke. "Together. The humans and the demons. We will purge this regime of its cruelty and usher in a new world where everyone wins, for once, and maybe we

can put a stop to the endless wars," the girl told the demon, and she smiled as he shrank back, at a loss for words. He watched her walk away, and after a moment followed her as she stapled the next flier to another tree.

"But Faustina, that's not what I'm asking, and you know it," the demon pressed, drawing as close as he could to her.

"Oh? And what's that, Splinter?" the girl asked.

"Will anything change? Between us?"

"Why should it? I trust you with my life. Don't you trust me?" she said, standing in the neon light emanating from a skyscraper like the

portrait of some demonic saint hanging in a temple. Splinter's breathing slowed as he considered his response. Her coat was now buttoned up to her neck, and like any dress she wore, it accentuated her figure.

"I do trust you, it's just that, well...you're human, and I'm not. So I worry a lot that you don't think I'm capable of understanding you. I just want you to know that I do understand you, that I relate to you, and that you can trust me with anything," Splinter said, silently cursing himself for his lack of eloquence.

"Splinter, you don't make any sense," Faustina said. "We've been plotting sedition and regicide for over a year now, I spend almost all my free time with you, and you're worried that when all the forgelings awaken and the heads have finished rolling, I won't wanna cuddle with anymore? Especially after you travel back in time for me?" the girl punched the demon's shoulder, knocking him backwards. "We're gonna be benevolent dictators together, and that's the end of the story, as far as I'm concerned. That's always been how this is gonna go down." She walked away, changing her stapler for a roll of tape so she could affix a flier to the skyscraper.

"Why the paranoia?" Faustina asked, and to her surprise, Splinter had crept to her side.

"Sorry, I forgot, I've got to get to sword-training," he said.

"What about your brother's show? We were supposed to put these fliers up," Faustina asked, and then saw that Splinter's claws were empty. "Oh, okay, Hierophant," she said, making Splinter scowl as he strode briskly away.

"Stop calling me that! I can't risk Master Vex being upset with me, you know how retired knights can be!" he said as he ran off.

The girl sighed, watching what was left of the fliers hurtle up and away, carried far and wide by the capricious winds. On a night like this, many would be out to see them after they fell, provided they bothered to look down. Faustina's wing stubs really did itch, and she breathed a sigh of relief to have the rest of the night to herself.

The night was young, and Duskrim was alive as it only was when its demonic population was awake. Vehicles cruised through the streets or hummed far above, and storefronts and high-end restaurants glittered with

flashy lights and loud music that filled the air with delicious commotion. Noise and light pollution to accompany the belching smokestacks of the demonic temples and factories that brought life to the wider empire, pollution that turned the sky red at night and hid the stars in a veil of smog. When Splinter looked upwards, past the metal frames of tall buildings with dark windows despite all the electric lights and criss-crossing train tracks that honeycombed the sky, he saw the mark of his home on their planet, the true seal of their victory over those forces that had kept demonkind down millenia in the past; a dark sky, dressed in a layer of atmosphere that made it difficult for the weak to survive.

The weak! When politicians spoke of the weak among them, dragging society down, they always meant the human population. This insight Splinter had not learned from Faustina, but rather from Master Vex, knight errant, since retired from official service to the Cracked Throne, and Splinter's sword-master. Not content to have his youngest son simply trained to be a sorcerer in service to the state, the demon's father had seen fit to also have him trained to use a sword. Little did he know, Master Vex was a rare sort of demon.

His studio, situated in the Frilled Quarter, the vast human-dominated portion of the city, a super-sized slum, was closed up, which meant he wasn't home. Splinter considered waiting around for his master. There was a kettle of tea sitting on the stove that he could smell, after all, but he knew that his master might be away for a while anyway. Drawing his hood over his head, the demon set off into the night in search of his master.

He wasn't hard to find. Splinter soon picked up the aroma of vegetables cooking in chicken broth, and followed it, through dirty alleyways where rats scampered

away in terror at his bootfalls, beneath clotheslines blowing in the merciless wind. And there he found his master, standing in a churchyard, the gates wide open as humans came to him for a cup of the soup he was cooking, a small bottle of the mead he had brewed, and for some of the coats he had made himself in his studio. He was a tall demon, with the large, glossy black eyes that were characteristic of all demons, regardless of their host body. Unlike Splinter, who was a chiropteran demon, Vex was a fiend, whose host body had once been

human. Also, unlike most demons, his eyes had a matching red spark that spun in slow, concentric circles, burning bright like comets in his mad eyes. He had a long goatee that curled cartoonishly, and was dressed in a simple habit, the hood thrown back. There was a joyous, insane smile on his wide mouth as he served his human patrons, and when Splinter approached, he bowed deeply to an elderly woman, his ladle brandished elegantly like a sword.

“It is my pleasure to be there for you and the rest of my neighbors,” the demon said happily.

“You don’t know what it does for me, to have a new coat gifted to me by someone like you,” she said, grasping her parcel tightly as Vex filled a large paper cup with soup for her.

“Wear it in good health, and pass on your thankfulness. I’m but one person, and this entire city could explode in kindness, but for one person to show the rest how to open their hearts!” Vex cried, and then noticed Splinter, standing apart from the waiting humans, many of whom stepped around him to take of Vex’s charity. Not everyone accepted a cup of soup, or took a coat. There were many who sat among the tombstones, patiently watching and waiting for the knight to finish his work for a chance to speak with him.

“Young Splinter!” Vex said, handing a cup of soup to a thin man who smiled gravely at the demon before settling down in the grass. “What brings you to our little cookout?”

“Sir, I’m at a crossroads, and I don’t know where to turn.”

“My young one, why don’t you grab a bottle of mead and meet my friends? There are many here who have so much to share, though they have little material to offer,” Vex said.

Though he was dutifully serving soup to the hungry, he did not break eye contact with Splinter, who glanced around at the waiting bodies who were witnessing their interaction.

Someday soon I shall have to address these fucking people, I'll have to show them all compassion, and I can't even bring myself to sit and talk to them. What in Satan's name is wrong with me?Why do I act like I care so much? What have I gotten myself into?

"I can't, Master. It's sensitive stuff," he said.

"Very well then, young one," Vex said. "I see that you can't or won't stay tonight, but remember this, whatever your trouble: it is always the duty of the strong to oppose those who threaten the weak," the swordmaster said, and nodded to Splinter.

On his long walk to his apartment, Master Vex's words rang in his ears, and he thought of the bloody history of his homeland. A fight for existence, the struggle of demonkind had been compelled merely by the desire to take on a physical form and share in the beauty of the world, to swim in the oceans, to fly through the glorious skies of Erde, to roll and play in the grass as the wind and sunlight played against their flesh; it had ended in genocide and bloody conquest. The blood of angels, humans, beastials, and the appini had stained the land, and would never wash out, no matter how the flames of modernity scorched the world. Splinter thought of Faustina, beautiful, kind, dreamy Faustina. Human Faustina, who was also one of the secret descendents of the extinct angels, and was subject to death if ever found out. Faustina, who was as wingless as Splinter, the only one of his chiropteran family born without the leathery black bat-wings that their father took such pride in. As Splinter went into his apartment, wishing he had spoken to Master Vex any time before his move tomorrow, his master's words echoed in his head relentlessly, haunted his dreams.

"It is the duty of the strong to oppose those who would threaten the weak." It was an essential truth that his noble master lived by, but Splinter was helpless to decide how to apply such wisdom to the violence that had been planned by his and Faustina's sorcery mentor, the wizard Witheron. Now suddenly, on the eve of the first move of their planned rebellion, he found himself wrestling with doubt over what had previously seemed so clear before.

“Yo man,” the demon sitting on the coffee table in front of the couch said, tuning the black bass in his claws. His black wings were hanging loosely behind him, and the hair around his sensitive, high bat-ears wild and unkempt.

“Hi Void,” Splinter said, and crumpled on the couch before his older brother.

“You look like you’ve been told you got a parasite from drinking the wrong ichors,” Void said, giving his bass a strum. He frowned, and adjusted the dials again.

Splinter was quiet for a long moment, and looked away from his brother.

“What, did you hear from the Senator?” Void asked.

“No, it wasn’t dad,” Splinter mumbled.

“Is it that little human thing? Frosty? Flouty?”

“Well, it concerns Faustina,” Splinter said, feeling his heart increase in tempo, his own long bat-ears deepening in color.

“Look man, your training with the wizard is almost over, and then you can go back to the Academy for a season, and then you’ll be ready for an imperial commission, right? Unless you really like working as a thug for the Scourge, which isn’t much better. You better seal the deal with her, before you guys are all graduated into army sorcerers or knights or whatever and you go off to subjugate innocents on different continents. You think it’s hard to confess your feelings now?” Void said, strumming the bass again. It sounded a bit better, and he continued playing it casually, waving one of his bare feet lazily.

“It’s not that, dude. It’s that, oh Great Satan,” Splinter said, realizing that he was about to panic. “Witheron wants to kill the emperor, and like, I didn’t report him. I sort of...well, Master Vex is always talking about honor and doing the right thing," Splinter said, but Void cut him off, his strumming abruptly at an end.

“What did you do?” he asked fearfully.

“Nothing, yet. But I’m supposed to do something really crazy and dangerous, and things are only going to escalate after that. I’m going to rob the Chunker-Bloating Museum, steal their angel skeletons and two suits of paladin armor, and then travel back in time to grab some angelic power, and then we’re going to take over everything,” Splinter stammered, and Void leapt to his feet.

“You can’t be part of this! I’m calling Father,” Void yelled, and ran for his telecaster.

“Void, wait, you can’t,” Splinter said, and grabbed his brother by the wrist.

“Give me a single reason why I shouldn’t save you from this shit,” his brother said gruffly.

“Faustina is a fledgling. They’ll fucking kill her, or worse, incarnate her if Witheron outs her, which he will if we betray him.”

Void stopped, staring unbelievably into Splinter’s eyes.

“What did you get yourself into?" Void asked.

“Void, things are really bad,” Splinter said, trying to convince himself more than his brother. “Haven’t you seen how the humans live? Like, we’ve discussed this stuff before. About society. Things need to change, right?”

“I mean, forget the humans, look how I live,” Void shrugged, letting his eyes rove to his bass. "After you graduate and get your commission, who knows what’ll become of me, all because our father the Senator disapproves of fucking everything."

“I’m scared, but I think this is the best thing I can be doing,” Splinter said. "I need to be more. Like, I can’t handle becoming like Shatter," and Void flinched at the sound of their older brother’s name. There was a brief silence in the apartment, and Void sighed as he reclaimed his perch on the coffee table and drew his wings tightly around his body.

“You’re doing this over a girl, Splinter. Don’t get yourself killed, you little idiot.”

FROM DREAM OF THE ASH

Three Poems

Fade

There is no uncertainty
every choice I ever made
brought me here;
I lean against the rotted railing,
and listen to the birds sing,
clearing my mind.
When I was a little boy,
we used to throw bread to the ducks
hoping God would understand
we were throwing our sins away.
I was scared back then.
Quiet here,
naught but the bridge, the river,
and myself.
I was a patriot once,
now my valor is my own.
The heartbreak and resentments,
once I wore them so proudly,
black nail polish, thick red boots,
greasy hair, scarred arms,
these can no longer drag me down.
I tie the rope,
secure in my faith
that the rail will hold.
Last night I drank
and when I slept,
I dreamt of a moonlit balcony;
Idris Elba was singing Die Walkyrie,
his voice a deep, mournful bass,
a kingly monody that haunted me even when I awoke.

I think of it now as my throat constricts.
The birds strut and sing to one another,
the bridge isn't terribly high
and I won't dangle too low.
I climb down,
knowing that when I let go
my toes will stay dry,
just high enough.
I close my eyes and recall last night's vision
and swallow hard, my fingers slipping.
Father,
I'm ready to begin.

. . .

What the Devil Said

Waking up, I'm waking up,
falling through stale air and cobwebs,
too fast to see
spider-mommies clutching hairy babies,
and the Fallen One is shrinking, his form changing
from the burning giant
to one more suited to his purpose.
Mist breaks

we're sitting in a café like a pair of yuppies,
an obscure Bowie song playing over the speakers,
and a druggie's desperation in his eyes.
"Hell of a day," I say, pulling a moth out of my mustache.
He drinks deep, revealing teeth like ill-placed dominos
and a smile like a butcher's knife
all under his twisted beard,

we plummet, and I wonder

when it'll all stop, and what we'll find when
we hit the bottom.
"Just so's you know, it doesn't have to be this way, kid,"
the devil says, his wings folded at his sides.
I scream, grabbing for the bones jutting out of the walls we fall past

but all the cards he's got laid out in the dirt
are telling me things that can't be true.
Crouched over them, his hoary, horn'd head
wobbles like a grey forested planet as he
tuts, tuts, tuts, and then he's facing me,
gesturing for me to come down to his level
the better to read me:
"See here, it seems you're the Page of Swords, inquisitive and strong,
but here's the Three of Swords, piercing your poor, bleeding heart.
Swords, so many cruel, piercing swords,
you poor, pitiful chicken,"
and he's tutting again, that sharp smile never leaving the sanctity of his coal-black beard.
"Look, there's the Four of Swords, you slept in the dirt, suffocated by sorrow and myopia.
Tell me, in your evil hours, what did the Hanged Man here say to you?
Did he attempt to fill the pit in your soul with cold lightning?
Is that why we see the Nine of Cups, with its lying djinni?"
And then he's tutting again

holding his clawed hands out to me,
heedless of the speed we're falling at.
There seems no end to the frightful abyss,
and though I've stopped screaming,
my echoes are catching up to me.
I'm not sure taking those scaly hands is right;
under my own echoing voice,
I hear someone up above, calling me gently
back to the surface. I look up,

we're back in the coffeehouse in the
hollow heart of Hell,
and I can see that he's getting worried.
"I've seen your paintings,
Joan of Arc's black sword,
Dante crowned Emperor of the Infernal,
and that mess with the laughing Guy Fawkes,
don't you know all them are Catholics?
I thought you were from a more interesting set,"
he asks, but I'm looking up at the ceiling.
"Do you hear that? Up above, someone is calling for me,"
I say.

We're back in freefall,
he's already meditating on his next manifestation.
The fury of despair is in his lustrous eyes.
His power is weak, fading fast.
Whatever sparked his enthusiasm has run low,

we're back in the mud, and he's holding the
Six of Swords up, nodding hypnotically in the firelight.
"Here you are, flying in a balloon fashioned from the agony of your life,
where you go, who can know? And hark, look here, my poor, innocent one,
here's the Devil card; He's waving with his right hand,
and before him, two nudes to please you in every imaginable way. Think about it kid,
if you can't enjoy your afterlife, what's the point?"
I try to answer, but the bonfire's dying down,

we're back to the café,
"Those lamb-worshippers call Hell a place of suffering, but
I think we do alright down here, don't you?"
He steeples his hands like an Aztec pyramid,
and when I don't answer him, he presses on.

“Do you want your poet’s flame to burn out for nothing?
I’ll be your father, and you can have what you long for most:
a place in the dust, and time to finally
sleep.”
“But I can’t just stay down here,
I need to get back; I was flying somewhere, flying,
now I’m down here in the underworld, this can’t be right-”
and he cuts me off with a laugh.
“Isn’t that just the tragedy of existence? Those earthbound
long for the skies, and those tied to the cruelty of wings
dream of trading them for earthly delights,”
he says,

and I can feel the itch of burning as we near the base of the pit,
the smoke of burning dreams scorching my nostrils like incense.
Still falling like a stone, he holds aloft the last three cards of my spread,
the Seven of Cups, The Sun, and The World,
but I never hear the rest of his reading. I seize him by his poker-thin throat
and tear his lying tongue from his mouth,
screaming as the flames, proven false,

vanish.

. . .

Poe

He greets me without a smile,
with nothing of despair in his aspect or brow.
“Might I walk with you a little while?
Your distance is great, and my specter
has no desire to spend its last few moments in loneliness.”
So we walk, and the hollow earth urges us on,
our every footstep a clarion call to the hapless things
that keep quiet amidst their nests of bones and stones.

“So back there,” I ask, “Was any of it real?”
Mr. Poe smiles, an exertion that shatters his box-like face.
“His shadow is never absent for too long, I fear.
Still, it was nice, if only for a brief moment,
to have been more than a wisp of spirit
resentfully pawing at the corporeality in crumbs of dirt.”
Wordless we stride, hoping to reach the
voice that calls to me so sweetly; I feel joy to have
such company, but to my sorrow, he
soon dissolves into nothing at my side.

The Books

The Demon Land novels: The Struggle · The Cannons of Merryland · The Devil's Computer. Book 4 is being written.

Poetry: Dream of the Ash · That Motley Drama! · Low Culture, coming soon.

All of them live at demonlandbooks.com.

More letters and poems: King Loke's Kreep Show, kinglokeskreepshow.substack.com.