

Sacred Demon: Superior

DM
By: David Mendoza

Opening: 4

Act I: Demon

1914: 9 1915: 41 1916: 47 1917: 53 1918: 58 1919: 65

Act II: Tobenala

1911: 95 1912: 102 1913: 106 1914: 113 1915: 116 1916: 120

1917: 123 1918: 131 1919: 137

Act III: Nolan

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1916: 200 1917: 205 1918: 211 1919: 222

Closing: 241

Sc: Scene

DM

I'm sorry. I should have known better.

I Never intended for this but Since I coULDn't see all I hAd left I can't think. I can't breathe.

Forgive me, please. Help me Please. I'm sorry, PLEASE.

Don't let them blind me again. I don't want to be alone again.

I should have known bette... Bett...

Here. here. HERE. Take It. TAKE IT. please.

“This was not the plan. By manipulating their dreams, without doubt, I should have been able to achieve my own. Clearly, I was wrong. Clearly, there are limits. I baited the tempest to claim the treasure in the eye of the storm, but I found nothing. Still, the winds and darkness came. I wanted power, but I betrayed my intentions. I wanted a crown, but I received a broken throne. Among ruin, did I then become king.”

DM

“I failed.

They welcomed me, and I abandoned them. They loved me, and I couldn't save them. I wanted to protect them, as they once shielded me. I wanted to cherish her, dedicating to her my time, affection, and support in exchange for the strength she gave me. With these goals in mind, and passion in my heart, I stood against the world.

I tried.”

What would you do if you could hold the world in your hands?

Ti: End

1911

Cast List:

T: Tobenala G: Guard

C: Cal Do: Dolm

K: Kim V1: Villager 1

Sc: I Ti: XIX

The carriage rolls to a stop before a large stone and wooden wall, the leading horses searching the forest for movement. A guard appears above and hurries to open the gate into the village. The carriage drags along until it is stopped by an armed group. The gate shudders shut as a tall guard approaches the carriage. Tobenala, aided by a cane, and Cal disembark. T: “Good evening.” The guard frowns. He studies the eyes of the visitors and their animals. Slowly, the guard and his group bow. G: “Welcome, Sir.” Tobenala directs them to stand while Cal draws his attention further within the village. T: “What happened there?” The lead guard glances at the meeting. G: “They decide the boy’s fate. They...” Tobenala walks in the direction of the gathering. When the guards begin to whisper, Tobenala turns back to them. T: “Is there an issue?” Suspicion outweighing respect, the leader glares at him. G: “They’re... attacking in new ways, Sir. We’ve had a recent incident...” Tobenala points at the man’s weapon. T: “Then, stay vigilant. If we would become a threat, you are welcome to shoot.” The guards nod, and Tobenala and Cal resume their relaxed pace. C: “What an inopportune time. Still, it isn’t much, is it?” Cal frowns at the simple buildings arranged on dirt streets. There is the stench of burned flesh. T: “And we will give what we can.” They pass the variety of shops and services active. T: “They remain remarkably self-sufficient.” They can now hear the gathering, the small plot of land converging on a clearing. V1: “He used us. Any further and those here would have burned

away.” V2: “We have no guarantee his spirit has been freed. There could be more monsters dwelling inside of him.” V3: “Then what? Can we so easily rid of him? He’s still a child.” An older villager shouts. Do: “He saved us in the end! He was controlled from the beginning! We must be reasonable!” The other villagers, thin and disheveled, stare at him. V4: “Who knows what else may exist alongside his soul? If the first ‘terror’ hid itself so well, there is potential for more unwelcome surprises with the child. We can’t take that risk.” V5: “No one has ever recovered from their possession. If what is left of the boy is human, he may be beyond saving.” V1: “Dolm, we must do what is best for the village.” Dolm growls, prepares to fight with all he has, when Tobenala chuckles. Stunned into silence, the villagers stare at him. Tobenala watches them with a taunting grin until one stammers out. V6: “Wel... welcome, Sir.” Tobenala waves away their greeting. T: “Where is he?” V1: “But... Sir...” Tobenala glares at them, and they again go silent. Dolm sighs and points down the street. Do: “The girl is standing in front.” Tobenala nods. T: “Thank you.” Leaving behind the quiet group, he sets off with Cal. C:” You didn’t have to tease them.” Tobenala smirks. T: “They have too much paranoia. Silence will serve them well.” Past the village center, Cal takes notice of a girl, with harsh eyes and arms outstretched, guarding a front door. Tobenala nods. T: “The path forward is most treacherous.” Cal shakes his head. C: “To an extent.” They stand before the angry child. K: “Leave him alone.” Tobenala rests a hand on his chin. T: “Cal, handle this. We are on a schedule.” Cal draws a sword from the scabbard at his hip. The girl does not react. Smiling, Cal stabs the blade into the dirt and kneels. C: “Noble sentry, we humbly ask that you allow us passage. We only wish to speak to the boy.” The girl allows worry to creep into her voice. K: “You won’t harm him?” Cal and Tobenala bow. The girl sighs with less aggression. K: “I’ll hold you to your word.” The three of them enter a dimly-lit home. A boy is resting on the couch. Aware of visitors, he opens his eyes,

his facial expression strained. As he reaches out a hand, the girl grabs a hold of him. He stares at Tobenala, and his eyes display a fierce intelligence. Tobenala smiles at him. T: "Hello."

Sc: II Ti: XXI

Returning to the villagers, Tobenala studies the clouds spread across the vibrant sky overhead. T: "That boy is now under my claim. Those close to him are likewise to be treated with utmost care and respect." Murmurs break out within the group, but Dolm exhales joyful and exhausted. Do: "Did he tell you his name?" Tobenala lowers his gaze. T: "I came to this village to hear your stories. As the one who provides, I am obliged to be the one who protects. I wanted to see the might of your courage, to appreciate that which will stand against the pain, and the strength of your despair, to understand where we must progress. The boy has no name. He is incapable of remembering, fails to recall anything concerning his parents other than their brutal death." Tragedy binding them together, the villagers appear apologetic. Dolm sighs. Do: "Thank you. At least, he will no longer be alone." Tobenala looks at Cal. T: "That boy is still a mystery. You are right to be cautious, however, the difference between those who endure and those who are lost to time is how we react to uncertainty. If you welcome the fear, you will be consumed. If you choose to see as I do, to the infinite possibilities beneath the surface, then your spirit, your story, will never die." The crowd nod once in unison, gaze broken and downcast, ever in pursuit of the next promise of hope. Tobenala turns away, sees Dolm rushing away from the crowd. T: "I have seen everything I needed to." Before they can leave, a mumbling reaches Tobenala's ear. V1: "The matter is settled then." The villagers fail to hide their disgust. V7: "What will we be calling the child?" V8: "Child? That boy is not a child. He killed a 'terror,' two of them." V2: "To be so calm before a monster, the boy must be a 'terror' himself, no possession needed." V9: "Terror... Terror, the boy numb to fear." V3: "Could we be so cruel?" V1: "The name suits

him.” Tobenala shouts without turning back. T: “The beasts of the night that hunt you so earnestly are not ‘terrors!’ They have a name that has been etched into the divide of history and myth! The boy is not a ‘terror!’ ‘Terrors’ do not exist besides as a term used by the ignorant!”

Tobenala looks over his shoulder, a cruel smile twisting his face. T: “The boy is a demon.” **AE**

Sc: III Ti: XXII

Seated in the carriage interior, Cal scowls. C: “You have quite a flair for drama, Sir.” Tobenala yawns. T: “Often, I doubt the sincerity of your comments, Cal.” Cal smirks. C: “I know the boy is in a frail state, but that is more of a reason to take him with us. Why leave him here?” Tobenala sets his cane aside. T: “The boy needs to develop himself further in a manner we cannot offer. His heart must first be mended here.” Tobenala’s mind moves past Cal to the days to come. T: “He will prove his value. When he is ready, he will find his way to me.” Cal places his hand on his forehead. C: “Very well. You have, after all, always proved yourself to be most wise.” A harsh edge is present in Cal’s words. Letting the conversation die, Tobenala closes his eyes as the carriage draws closer to a castle in the distance. At the village, the residents choose to name the boy, Demon. **AE**

Opening End

Act I: Demon

D: “What does it mean to be human? Is it something defined by experience, but what of those of decayed mind who have lost their grip on all they’ve endured? Is it something defined by family, but what of those of numb heart who have fallen out of the reach of love? If our memories crumble, our connection to the past, if our bonds disappear, our connection to the present, what’s left of our future? What’s left of us? To be human is to suffer and evolve. To be human is to have a home, but, in a world where both progress and security lie at mercy to the darkness, I don’t know who I am. I do know I will find my answer in the company of those I must protect. One must never stop searching for their own response. When you don’t know your own name, you live as others label you.”

Cast List:

D: Demon K: Kim Do: Dolm
V1: Villager 1 To: Tobi G1: Guard 1
M: Medic T: Tobenala E: Evelynn
N: Nolan P1: Professor 1 S1: Student 1
O: Ophelia S: Sirius

Sc: I Ti: XXXIII

The logs roll out from under Demon's arms as he sinks down into the mud, a hand on his temple. A rock lays by his side on the village road, glistening red. The crowd watches Demon. Their anger turns to surprise when he picks up the logs and continues on his way. He drops them in a pile by a back porch, and a man appears from within the house. He raises his voice at the children trailing Demon. V1: "Mind your business! If this boy falls, we do too!" Seeing them scatter, Demon turns to the man. D: "Thank y..." The door is shut in his face. Demon sighs. D: "Thank you." He prepares to walk back home, his fingers stained with drying blood. Behind him, through the door, Demon hears the man mutter to himself. V1: "But we're still going to fall anyway."

Sc: II Ti: XXXIV

K: "Are you lightheaded? I understand we can be idiots, but this is too much." Kim gently cleans Demon's wound. D: "They are still afraid. I'm trying not to prove them right." Kim puts away her supplies. K: "But, we should be past throwing rocks at each other. In the big picture, it's no one's fault. The moment we understand that is..." Do: "The moment we find our peace again." Dolm sets down two bowls on the table. Do: "Someone is about to drop by for a formal visit." Knocks echo from the door. Do: "Would you open that, please..." Dolm glances at Kim. Do: "Darren." Demon nods, his movement remaining steady. Opening the door, there is a child with their parent behind him. The father presses on his son's shoulder. V2: "I... I'm sorry. The guards... they didn't see." The boy's lip quivers, and Demon closes his eyes. V2: "You won't tell, right?" The father stares inside towards Dolm. Kim opens her mouth to speak, but Dolm places her spoon on her tongue. Kim bites down and strums her fingers on the table.

Demon smiles and raises his eyes. D: "I won't tell." They exhale, but Demon closes the door on them. Kim removes her spoon. K: "How impolite of you." Dolm sighs. Do: "How would you have handled it?" She begins eating. K: "I would have shut the door harder." Demon hears the retreating footsteps. D: "Is there truly no end to their fear? Tobenala protects us, and though he can undo that, why is it we're so distrustful? Why are we ready for everything to fall apart? Bad times shouldn't make bad people, but they throw stones and then cower." Demon sits at the table. Do: "You think too much. Even old men like me become lost to our own judgement, and we're the ones who are supposed to have life figured out by now." Demon lifts his spoon and turns his wrist, the stew pouring into the bowl. D: "What can I do beside wonder and worry?" Dolm rests his hand on Demon's shoulder. Do: "Did you finish your job, or did you stay beaten with your head down?" Demon stares at his reflection in the bowl. D: "I did what I had to do." Dolm pats them both, mindful of Demon's injury, while ruining Kim's hair. Do: "You have your answer. If you don't surrender your right to serve others, no matter what tries to tear you apart, there might be a way out of this for all of us. They don't see that yet. Move forward with your mind and your heart, Darren, and the world will take notice. That is how people like us, without violence, without status, without destroying ourselves, make a difference." Demon nods and lets himself relax. Do: "As for Tobenala, we'll stay grateful to him. He's doing what he can." Kim mumbles with a full mouth. K: "Is he truly?" Dolm shrugs. Do: "I don't know everything. I can say that his intentions are pure, that people can't stand any secrets but their own, and that we humans have our limits." Sighing, Dolm creaks his way to a walking position. Do: "Excuse me. My natural course at this age, with exceptions, is eating, complaining, and sleeping. I've done one, am pursuing the second, and need peace for the third." Dolm moves to his worn recliner. Do: "Remember. If you're going to smile, mean it." Giving an example, he begins to drift into

sleep. Do: “Also, Darren, eat. Otherwise, she might finish your bowl too.” Kim scrunches her nose. K: “What if I do?” Finding Dolm snoring, Kim frowns. Demon smiles at her. K: “What?” D: “Simply doing as I was told.” **AE**

Sc: III Ti: XXXV

Kim leads, drags, Demon down the central road. K: “Huuuurrriyy!!” Demon shakes his head. D: “We have time.” Kim tightens her grip on his wrist. K: “Not if you keep slowing down to study every object you see.” The two turn a corner, and Demon shows a curious face. D: “It’s only those that catch my interest.” Kim walks backwards. She matches his curious face. K: “So, almost every object you see.” Watching their path, Demon scowls. D: “Is it?” He grabs Kim’s shoulders, and they stop, staring at each other. K: “I saw that puddle.” Her eyes turn serious. D: “How many steps?” He matches her serious eyes. K: “Two.” She moves two steps back. K: “Or one.” D: “I heard a splash.” Kim faces forward. K: “And, we’re almost there.” She runs towards the main gate. Demon moves his gaze to the village. For every bent frame and scarred entryway, steel shutters now protect those doors and windows. The guards, eyes of the village, march on the wall with new equipment. Demon’s looks at a shifting curtain, at a home by the wall. A woman is at the window. Her jaw is missing. Her tongue is shredded and drooping forward at a strange angle. K: “We! Are! About! To! Leave!” Demon jolts upright, the children around Kim at the gate glaring at her. He glances towards the woman. The curtain is closed. Mindful of the puddle, he hurries to Kim before she shouts again. **AE**

Sc: IV Ti: XXXVI

Surrounded by guards, the children enter the wilderness. While the main group plays under watch, Kim and Demon walk to Tobi. Within reach of help but far enough for privacy, Tobi hands a book to Kim and Demon. To: “There are many who prefer a night outside alone

than attempt to sit through this.” He shakes his head. To: “Here I lend it to children upon request.” Kim smiles. K: “I’m almost a teenager. Darren is the baby.” Demon looks at the book. D: “You can’t be that much older, but if that’s what you want, forgive me for not being an old woman.” Kim sticks out her tongue, Tobi smirking. To: “Yet, you still behave like children.” A ball rolls past, and Tobi watches a child chase it around tree stumps and old farming ground. Frowning, he spits, causing Kim to shudder while Demon shrugs. D: “Is there something we need to know?” Demon gives Kim the book. To: “Do you want to know?” Kim sits on a stump, flicks through the pages, as Demon stares at Tobi. D: “If it means I’ll be prepared.” Tobi nods. To: “Then, I’ll respect your choice. A demon is evading us.” He blinks the sunlight out of his eyes. To: “We call it Unspoken.” Kim closes the book. To: “It’s targeted many villages, but we’ve yet to understand how it hunts. Unspoken may have a body that repels light. It punctures small holes into solid walls, and perhaps this is how it enters a home. It always captures the emergency bell.” Kim grabs a hold of Demon’s hand. K: “That would leave them helpless...” To: “Unspoken targets those who live alone or with young children. It forces itself down its victim’s throat, tearing apart the jaw and vocal cords. The children have never been found.” Seeing Demon and Kim cling together, Tobi muses to himself. T: *Regrettable, but a survival instinct evolves against innocence.* He almost believes to sense movement deep within the nearby trees. To: “The guardian of the home is often unable to call for help. They often die choking on their own blood.” Gulping, Demon whispers. D: “The woman...” Tobi nods again. To: “We found her this morning. A guard is with her now getting her... written account. She won’t last long.” The children stay silent, Tobi glaring at the ground. To: “Is there anything else you’re interested in?” The guards distant from them overlooking the other children, Tobi motions at the book. To: “Perhaps, something I might be able to understand this time?” The fear in their

eyes falls to curiosity, and Tobi smiles at them. T: *There aren't that many years between us. How easy it is for a young heart to curse the world, but they still laugh and seek each other.* He knows. T: *They must not make my mistakes.* **AE**

Sc: V Ti: XXXVII

K: "I can't reach." Stretching upwards, Kim sits on Demon's shoulders. K: "Use your tiptoes." Demon mutters from underneath. D: "If you lose your balance?" K: "I trust you... to break my fall." D: "And that's the problem." Kim places the new book among their collection, but the ring of a massive bell causes her to sway. Sighing, Demon tries to catch her, and she topples onto his stomach. She pats his head while he groans. K: "Forgive me." Dolm enters to find them piled on the floor. One points at their bookshelf. The other struggles to breathe. Sighing, Dolm moves into the kitchen. Kim gets Demon to the couch and goes to the window. She loses herself in the light of the setting sun. The strong beams of light contrast the dull steps of the villagers entering lockdown. K: *They're the same as I used to be. The moments of peace are few and far. The days fade together under those shadows of death. They are too afraid to embrace joys that could soon disappear.* Kim steadies herself against her own violent memories. K: *There are battles and suffering, but there is a tomorrow filled with beauty. As I once did, they only see the dark.* She pulls down the metal grate over the window, a second hand joining hers. Demon's eyes mirror her own vow, their growing knowledge proof of their will to be more than their darkness. He offers a pained smile, and together, they lock down the house. They gather in the kitchen, Dolm and Kim serving the food while Demon fills the cups. They all welcome a homemade meal. Do: "You seem to be healing well. If need be, I can do your share of work tomorrow alongside my own." Demon touches the bandage hidden in his hair. D: "It isn't giving me trouble." Do: "You're not acting tough?" D: "Tobi didn't notice. I would recognize a

concussion.” Dolm laughs. Do: “We would. You wouldn’t recognize the time of the day.” Kim looks up from her empty bowl. K: “He’ll survive. I’m with him.” Demon rubs his stomach. There is gratitude and a mild fear. They clean the table before going to their corners to get ready for bed. Within the light of the moon, Dolm watches the landscape beyond the window. Kim and Demon settle into their blankets on the floor. The guards are stationed at their towers and on the wall. All is as it needs to be, but Dolm mumbles to himself. Do: “It can’t be much longer now...” A sharp noise echoes from behind. K: “You’re supposed to say, bless you.” Demon scowls. D: “Bless you, but you sneezed on me.” Kim pouts. K: “I was trying to give you a goodnight hug.” Demon loses his glare. K: “I’ll get you a cloth.” As Dolm settles away from the window and to the couch, Kim’s footsteps go to and from the kitchen. She turns off the lights, drawing the home into darkness, while Dolm battles his thoughts. Kim falls asleep, and Demon follows not long after. Dolm struggles to find rest. **AE**

DM

Sc: VI Ti: XXXVIII

Distracted by the reflection of the fire, Demon’s heart races to the rhythm of Dolm’s snoring. Near the emergency bell, Demon skims through the book on the table. K: “Aren’t you up late...” Yawning, Kim enters the circle of candlelight. K: “What chapter are you on?” Demon touches the pages. D: “There are no chapters. It’s divided into acts, scenes, and years.” She rubs her eyes. K: “Is it a play?” D: “Not quite.” Demon retells her the story to its current point. K: “Not a lot has happened, has it?” Demon holds back a yawn. D: “We’ve only started to explore a country lost to monsters. There a dictator risks his very soul to draw strength from their dimension. His son grows cruel and sadistic underneath him as the man plays with human lives. The man succeeds, but in his arrogance, unleashes a curse across the globe.” K: “Hmh... how uplifting.” D: “No, but its truth should stay with you.” K: “What happens between acts?” D: “A

characters speaks to you to help set the atmosphere.” K: “Like we’re doing right now?” D: “What would we be doing in a book?” He leans back and Kim, noticing his lowered guard, tickles him. Demon shakes her off while she laughs quietly. K: “I suppose. You may not make a very interesting protagonist, but what would I be?” She pokes his shoulder. K: “Childhood friend turned heated rival?” D: “Logical.” K: “Perhaps, even a surprise villain?” D: “Why do you seem excited?” K: “Or... a love interest?” Demon turns away from her. D: “How... would I know what chances and twists are next? Plus, if it’s not handled well, it wouldn’t play to the strengths of your character.” Kim nods. K: “Strengths of which there are many.” He glances at her. D: “If you insist.” They share a smile and read hours into the night.

Sc: VII Ti: XXXIX

Dolm, Kim, and Demon rise to a loud ringing and the echoes of gunfire. Spotlights on throughout the village, the central bell sways in its tower. Dolm curses, runs to the supply cabinet, while Kim and Demon quickly change clothes. A man, disheveled and bruised, limps to their window. V3: “Let me in! They’re here! They’ve taken my home!” He pounds on the glass, the metal grate shaking. Pursued by humanoid blurs, villagers are running by behind him. Dolm shakes his head, stands in front of Kim and Demon. The man’s shrieks echo into the home. V3: “Do you want them to see me die!?” Kim looks at the door. Do: “Stay. He’s not human.” The man trembles, cracks forming in the glass as his fingers bleed. V3: “I am very much human.” Do: “But, I don’t recognize you. Why don’t you show the rest of your body?” Only the man’s torso is visible while he clings to the window, oblivious to the surrounding chaos. V3: “It won’t let me.” Disturbed by the man’s dead stare, Kim and Demon step back. V3: “Help me. It won’t let me leave.” A dull thud is heard from the roof. The man gazes above them, fear rippling across his face. His lower body pulls away from him. He tries to hold on before being torn from view.

The three inside watch the ceiling, a demon moving on their rooftop. Kim turns on the lanterns as black rods puncture through the ceiling. She yelps, the monster striking near her face. Demon clenches a knife in his fist, more punctures appearing in the ceiling. The shadow oozes through the holes, its body regaining form inside. Dolm raises his weapon, and Kim and Demon huddle behind him. Guards approach the house, seen through the window hoisting their firearms. Hit by gunfire, the demon slithers back outside and leaps away. All but two of the guards pursue. Dolm shrugs his shoulders. Kim holds her breath. Demon watches the holes in the roof. The remaining guards curse, disappear from the window as a creature barrels into them. Dolm puts himself before the damaged ceiling. Do: "Open the door." Residents run outside distressed, guards attempting to protect them. D: "But..." Demon feels himself being shoved by Kim. D: "Right." Together, they work on unlocking the door. A new demon stomps on the roof. Dolm stares down the barrel of his shotgun, the damaged section of the roof collapsing in. V3: "Help me..." With glowing red eyes, a demonic Growth stands before them, its large humanoid body pale and grizzled. Attached to its back is the torso of the man from the window. Kim and Demon staring, he sees Dolm's weapon. V3: "Don't shoot, please!" The Growth brings its face to the floor, makes its human portion a shield, while lunging forward. Do: "Look away!" The man attached to the demon raises his arms to protect himself. V3: "No!" Kim and Demon shut their eyes. The shot echoes followed by splattering and the sound of the Growth falling over. Dolm walks to the door, blood on his chin, the moon shining in from the ruined roof onto the stained carpet. Do: "Ready?" Holding hands, Kim and Demon nod. They leave and hear a fading whisper. V3: "Help... me..." Once outside, they are aware of the village shaking. Pillars, grey humanoids as tall as the wall, strike the enclosure. Those protecting the wall fire down into their thick skin. Guards lose balance and fall screaming, left to be trampled or devoured. The dying Pillars, their

bodies petrify at an angle. Pinwheel demons run and, by locking their jagged limbs into a wheel formation, use the corpses as a ramp to soar over the wall. They continue with momentum, crushing any villager in their path. Corrosions, large insectoid creatures, spew flaming liquid from an extendable jaw. The metal barriers protecting a home, shielding a family, soon dissolve. Behind Dolm, demons enter their home from the roof and swarm the door. Dolm tugs at Demon's shirt, pulling him and Kim, running as best as he can manage. Most attackers are kept engaged by the guards' technology and resolve. Tobi intercepts a Corrosion preying on an exhausted mother and her child, the acid splattering off his cloak. More demons climb the Pillars before the guards can strike them with explosives. Many drop their weapons, hands clenched to their ears, an approaching Pillar throwing a screeching shadow. Several Hatchets, tall, gaunt humanoids, use an arm formed as a bladed whip to hoist themselves over the wall. Dolm grunts, the shotgun heavy in his hand. Demon holds Kim's trembling hand through the surrounding yells and gunfire, past the mangled bodies, human and otherwise. They reach a group of villagers running to the safe house, but they all are made to kneel. A Screecher brings them to their knees. Before it can attack, its neck disintegrates mid-song to a high velocity impact. A sniper on the central tower, the villagers stand and hurry away from the conflict. V4: "Incoming, scatter!" Several darting shadows infiltrate the crowd. A Hatchet, also, sees potential victims and moves in their direction. The villagers attempt to disperse, but a man and a child are caught. The man is overtaken by an exaggerated grin, his body slumping. A possession demon, a Bliss, turns the man's eyes red. Unwilling to move, the man is left to his own altered reality. The child tugs at her mother's grip, possessed by a Futility. With a forced desire to fight, she slips away to charge into battle, and her mother pursues. The villagers move faster, but a guard blocks their path. His eyes glow red, and he opens fire. Dolm moves to shield Kim and Demon. Men, women, and

children fall at their protector's feet until the guard is shot by the few villagers owning firearms. An Aggressor abandons the guard and slinks along as a shadow towards the villagers. It claims a man at the center of the crowd, and he attacks his own family. Punching and resisting, he charges through his fellow villagers. Dolm mutters an apology and waits for an opening. Other men pin the individual down, but he shrugs them off with enhanced strength. They raise their weapons. Demon and Kim hide at the edge of the crowd with the other children, several members of the group bloody and bruised. Crippled or dead, villagers of all ages rest in the dirt around them. To: "Don't fire!" From near the tower, Tobi shoots a dart into their group, and the man collapses. Behind them, the Hatchet is shot down as it is tearing into a smiling villager. The crowd nears the second safe house, its walls layered concrete. Guards form a perimeter with their leader standing by the open, steel door. Wheezing, Dolm motions for Kim and Demon to run ahead. Do: "I'll be there soon..." They shake their heads, but he pushes away their support. Do: "Go!" Kim tries to force Dolm forward. Do: "No. They know they're losing. They become desperate..." Demon squeezes Kim's hand. D: "We... have to..." Kim snarls, and they begin to run. Dolm sighs and walks at the rear with the old and wounded. The chaos of the village blurring past them, Kim and Demon reach the safe house. Guards pierce their wrists with a needle, checking their eyes and blood, before letting them inside. Two guards stand in the safe house center. Villagers face the wall, both hands placed upon it, heads bowed. Kim and Demon find an open position. Her lip quivering, Kim glances towards the entrance. G1: "You! Stay still!" Kim shuts her eyes. Outside, Dolm's group is nearly to the entrance. He draws his shotgun, it appearing to him as if the shadows on the safehouse are moving. Dolm steadies himself and fires. The guards, the villagers in his crowd, immediately aim at him. They stop when drops of blood fall from the safehouse roof. The guards turn to see a demon perched above

them. Wounded, it tries to flow into the gap between the open door and building. The villagers inside panic as the door clangs shut. G2: "Don't move!" The villagers continue to ramble and tremble. A man moves toward the guard. The guard shoots his foot, and he whimpers back into place. G2: "Wall, now." She speaks softly, but the villagers quickly obey. The guard to her back whistles. Unspoken, locked out and denied its toys, lunges through the air. It flies through the gunfire, landing next to Dolm and impaling him into the ground. Those around him running, Dolm screams. Inside, their view to the village lost, Kim's breaths are short and inconsistent. K: "No, no, no, no, no..." Around them, the villagers wonder how many of their loved ones will be alive when the door opens. Demon sees Kim's quiet sobs, can only move to grasp her hand. Outside, Dolm falls, blood gushing from his wound. Unspoken retreats to the guards' pressure. Its thin expressionless figure, wearing a necklace of jawbones and hollowed bells, vanishes into the concluding battle. Villagers within both safe houses count the seconds as Unspoken, its fellow monsters that can climb the wall, return to the surrounding forest. The night falters, but the remaining demons already begin to plan again. They wonder how they must evolve.

Sc: VIII Ti: XL

Demon passes a chunk of candy over his shoulder. A weary Kim nibbles at it, her head resting on his back. In the infirmary around them, families comfort each other. They avoid the corner where the captured are kept. Heavy cages contain wounded demons. Possessed are fighting against their bindings, many of them mauled and shouting nonsense. Some begin to remember. V1: "No! I couldn't have killed her! Please..." The guards push away the villagers, in anger or sorrow, attempting to reach the monsters. Demon feels tears seep into his shirt. D: "Do you need anything more?" There are supplies in the room's center. Kim is slow to respond. K: "No..." Demon tries to look at her, but she wraps her arms around his stomach. K: "Trust me."

Gazing into the bowl in his lap, Demon sighs. D: "What color?" She mumbles. K: "Yellow, please." Demon passes a yellow candy over his shoulder, and Kim begins to chew. A medic emerges from the curtains at the end of the building and points at them. M: "Follow me." Kim and Demon rise from the bench. The medic leads them to a compact room of equipment. Dolm is lying on a surgery table. Gauze covers the tear in his stomach. The children gasp, Dolm's pupils discolored and twitching. M: "It missed any vital organs, but It carried a vile poison." Kim kneels by Dolm. Trembling, she offers an orange candy. K: "Candy?" The medic coughs. M: "We can only ease his pain. This is beyond our understanding." Turning his head, Dolm manages to touch Kim's hair. Do: "You... don't... need me... You're as strong as... you believe yourself to be..." Kim shakes her head. K: "I... can't do anything against them." She wipes her eyes. K: "I can't help you." Dolm chuckles in spite of his failing body, certain Kim and Demon should see him enjoying life even now. Do: "I... I will not die if I can help it." Kim bows her head. Her hair masks her face. Do: "If these are our final moments together... don't bow to me. If you've remembered anything I've tried to teach you... don't bow to this world. Life isn't something... to be taken in all at once. It... may be a while... before your retribution." He fights to regain his breath. Do: "You cannot... beat them now, but it doesn't... mean you let them win. Don't allow them to define your existence. Once they sink their... claws into you... they will never let go." Kim raises her head. Do: "I know it's hard to have... others hurt you, realizing you can't... protect yourself, but I still see in you... a future without demons." He coughs, those breaths turning into wheezing. The medic moves Kim and Demon to the door, before Dolm stops her with a gesture. Do: "By honoring me... you will save me... even if I'm not by your side. You... are strong." Dolm looks to Demon. Do: "Look after him. After all... he won't survive without you." The medic stands between them. M: "He must rest." Kim stands, determination and sorrow

fighting within her slow nod. They leave, Demon lingering behind. D: "Thank you. I won't let you down." His body shaking, Dolm smirks. Do: "It's your life... to lead at this point." He gives Demon a final stare. Do: "Be careful you don't invest in... something more than it's worth... even if it seems right." Demon smiles. D: "Of course." The door shuts, and he joins the medic in the hall. M: "You don't have long. I may not know you well, but I can guess what you intend to do." In the other rooms lie more patients forever scarred by living nightmares, the medic kept motivated by her quiet anger. M: "Do remember, he is not your friend." She disappears into another door, Demon pushing aside the main curtain. G3: "Boy, this way." A guard leads him into another room while the adults return to the streets. The children play with simple toys, their parents outside looking at the fallen bodies. Demon locates Kim in the corner with a pile of blocks. He sees Tobi near the window. To: "Hello." Tobi smirks at his approach. D: "Take me to Tobenala." Tobi yawns and sticks a hand in his pocket. To: "Oh? I understand your worry, but if you want to ask for his mercy, you'll have to be prepared for his plans." Tobi pulls out a lighter. Dozens of names are etched into its surface. To: "I have explored the world for his sake. These are those I have known that did not survive his scheming." Demon frowns, the guards present strict and serious, the nearby children lonely and discouraged. D: "He protects us. Is there a motive behind that too?" Tobi puts away the lighter. To: "Tobenala gives to the least fortunate because it makes sense to him. He was once one of you, and that makes him both a hero and a monster. Tobenala will help you, but if he gives an answer, he expects one in return. It may be best for you to stay, to accept your loss, and hope he never calls for you." Aware of the children and guards staring at him, Demon shakes his head. D: "I have to go." Tobi can only shrug. To: "Then, once more, I'll respect your choice. You can leave tomorrow." He pats Demon's shoulder and strides towards the other room. To: "We have a ceremony tonight. You there!" More guards

have entered the infirmary. To: "Take them to the gate. Prepare to leave." Demon reaches Kim, the crowd parting for him, content and disturbed in equal measure. She is no longer in tears as he sits down. K: "I was asked to give a memento for Dolm." Together, the two start to build a castle. D: "Your response?" Kim places a peak on a block towers. K: "We only honor the dead." Demon smiles. D: "Their response?" K: "They believe we'll have to present at the next ceremony, but Dolm will survive today, this week, this month, and probably another decade or two. It's not wishful thinking..." Her hand stops. K: "Right?" Demon lays his fingers over hers, and they finish the castle. D: "Though he's not prepared for another decade with us, we won't let him go." Kim smiles again with her usual energy. **AE**

Sc: IX Ti: XLI

Guards surround the bonfire. In the clearing, illuminated by flickering flames, stand the families of the dead. They cast their mementos into the fire, the untold memories fed to the all-consuming light. At a hidden location, a caravan has arrived carrying dead and possessed bodies. Smoke soon leaks from the unseen compound into the golden-crimson sky. It reaches for the same stars as the smoke from the open bonfire, the villagers' ashes meeting their families' final goodbye. Kim and Demon stand apart from the rest. He flinches, fire reflecting into his eyes, while she stares ahead. The silence is inevitably disturbed by the ringing of the town bell. The villagers leave the clearing. Several walk to new households, their own in pieces. Kim and Demon enter the home of an aged couple and are shown where they are to sleep. Kim claims the couch, and Demon settles on the floor. The fire rages outside, objects blistering within its heat. Kim and Demon hear snoring from a separate bedroom. Demon yawns, adjusting himself, when Kim lands on him. K: "Surprise." Demon squirms underneath her, her hair in his mouth. D: "Why?" She wiggles next to him, and the two rest staring at each other. K: "It's cold up there."

Demon closes his eyes. K: "What did you talk about with Tob?" He does not reply. K: "If you leave me to guess..." She prods his shoulder. K: "Do you think Tobenala will help us?" Demon opens his eyes. D: "If I ask him directly." K: "What do you think he wants from you?" D: "Nothing that would kill me... ideally..." K: "Is he our answer? What if he only takes you? What if he can't heal Dolm?" His doubts ever at her mercy, Demon frowns. D: "He's still our best opportunity." Sighing, the two turn away from each other, backs pressed together for warmth. K: "If you insist... goodnight." As she grows still, Demon watches the stars beyond the wall. D: "Goodnight." **AE**

Sc: X Ti: XLII

D: "Another nightmare?" K: "Too much stress, too many bad memories..." D: "They can't hurt you." K: "No... I can't be like you. I'll always remember them... and they... never would have died to protect me." D: "I... hmm..." K: "And if he goes, what do I have left?" D: "I'm here." K: "But for how long?" D: "With how terrifying these nights can be... I can't say. Though, whatever happens, I'll still be there with you." K: "You won't betray me?" D: "Oh, I don't think I could ever be quite that dumb." K: "You won't abandon me?" D: "I'm the one who should be worried. It's likely you'll finally find the sense to go away on your own before I ever leave you." K: "You won't hurt me?" D: "I... can't make that promise." K: "That's not what you're supposed to say." D: "But there will be accidents and misunderstandings... I can only keep trying to do what's best for us. If that isn't enough... then help me make it so." K: "If... you're determined to share that burden with me... I'll believe in myself. I can believe in you." D: "Then, please, go back to sleep." K: "Right. I'll see you in the morning?" D: "Unless something sneaks in and kills me... which it would probably get you as well..." K: "Wonderful... Thank you" D: "Goodnight." K: "Goodnight."

Sc: XI Ti: XLIII

Demon wakes with Kim no longer by his side. The aged couple asleep in another room, he looks to the window to smoke leaking from Dolm's house. Demon stands, runs to the door and across the street. Recognizing the smell, he stops outside his home. K: "Good morning." Demon enters slowly and approaches Kim. K: "Though, it's almost lunch." She sits down at the table and waves away dark mist from a plate. Slowly, still, Demon joins her. She watches as he raises the nearby spoon. D: "What is this?" She only gestures for him to eat. D: "How far is the infirmary..." Demon whispers. He drops the spoon. D: "You mock me." Kim smirks. K: "Of course. Don't try that, or else Dolm won't be the only one who needs help beyond human means." She moves to the kitchen and returns with a more welcoming plate. K: "It's difficult without Dolm to handle the subtleties. I did get it right at the end. Have it. The food is safer in your hands." Demon stares at the food. D: "Thank you for making breakfast." K: "Don't patronize me." She winks. K: "I murdered breakfast." Demon moves over in his chair. D: "We can share. The chef, at least, deserves half." Kim nods, and they eat, content in each other's company. K: "I'm going with you." He speaks at same time. D: "You can come." She grins. K: "Agreeing so quickly?" He smirks back at her. D: "This is your fight, too. Besides, that's not a discussion I can win." He stands and puts away the dishes. K: "No!" A bird is fluttering over the couch. K: "Darren! Intruder!" Squawking, it flies away from Kim's wild gestures and into the hole in the ceiling. K: "We lack repairs." D: "But, they cleaned well enough." Only traces of blood are left on the furniture. K: "What do we do while we wait?" Demon thumbs through the books in their shelf. K: "Ooh, let me decide." She chooses one from the bottom row, and they sit on the couch. D: "What's this." K: "Another fantasy." D: "They say fiction has nothing to offer us." Kim pushes his shoulder. K: "But, fiction can present profound human truths with a grander

scope. By using elements not present in mundane life, it can weave a narrative of greater consequence or escapism. Regardless, non-fiction seems to be a lot of research..." Demon leans back. K: "This book deals with the supernatural world. It's fast paced, if occasionally funny." D: "Not everything need be so dreary. It sounds like a nice balance." He is satisfied to listen to Kim read.

Sc: XII Ti: XLIV

Demon closes the door and lingers by it. D: *What could he have me become? Will I see my home again? Would...* Kim grabs his hand. K: "Stop being ominous." She pulls him away and down the street. K: "We don't have that time to waste." They go through the devastated village and join the other children by the gate. Tobi is observing them. As the rest leave with their escort, Tobi gestures for them to follow past the others. The few that notice them stare blankly. D: *The extra freedom does help their spirit. How close are we at any moment to a hidden nest...* Demon watches the group disappear around the wall. Kim pokes his cheek. K: "Tobi speaks words." Demon turns his attention to an annoyed Tobi. To: "Focus. I must remain here, but I have prepared an escort. He's not as interesting as me, but you'll get where you need to." The sunlight falling at their backs, Kim frowns. K: "You can't send a better medic here?" Tobi shakes his head. To: "You're not the first to need healing. Tobenala will only prioritize those he has an investment in. For that, you must go to him yourself. Well... not you Kim. Evidently, you're here so he doesn't get lost." Kim nods while Demon sticks out his tongue. To: "The guards at the castle recognize your name, but not your appearance. The front gate of the castle is overflowing with protesters and dependents. It would do no good to try and work your way through the mass. It would take too long to get permission to use the path to the back gate. Your route is through the tunnels." Eyes widening, Kim and Demon turn to the castle in the

distance. Above the trees, it rests on a plateau. To: “You will be left at a village at the plateau base. You move underground and then into the lower castle. There, the guards will not ignore you.” Tobi patting one of the horses, Kim and Demon board the carriage. To: “You visit the dead. Tobenala’s ancestors rest in the catacombs beyond the tunnels. Try not to join them. Be prepared if he does not let you leave.” Carriage door closing, Kim adjusts herself into the padded seating. The guard in front tugs at the horse’s reins. Tobi waves at them as they abandon the village walls. Kim scowls. Demon thinks of the journey ahead, of his fear and excitement, while Kim speaks to the driver of the carriage. K: “Tobi thinks you’re boring...” AE

Sc: XIII Ti: XLV

Kim tightens her grip on Demon’s hand, her other hand covering a bleeding gash on her stomach. K: “We can’t go forward.” Guards block the tunnel ahead of them. His eye bruised, the corner of his lip torn open, Demon sighs. D: “We can’t turn back.” A similar swarm is at the tunnel entrance behind them. K: “At least their aim is poor. They won’t get to us soon.” The eyes of the guards are unfocused and unblinking, the stare of the dead. Their movements are sluggish, giving Kim and Demon time to dodge, as they fire their rifles, the shots echoing well above the children’s heads. D: “That’s what we need, a slow death.” Kim and Demon remain together while the mob closes in. K: “But we get more time together. Be optimistic.” Demon mumbles. D: “Optimistic? I’m terrified.” As they stand still, safe for the moment and unsure of where to move, Kim smile trembles. K: “Yes.” Their escort is with the rear group, an axe lodged in the gap between his eye brows. The guards do not speak, some of them similarly wounded. The crowded tunnel is large enough for a carriage with several offshoots spanning to hidden caverns and passageways. K: “We’re probably dead if we go.” Demon smiles at her. D: “Yes, but we’re definitely dead if we stay.” They enter an offshoot, Kim taking the lead. D: “Why this one?”

They crouch to squeeze into the narrow entrance. K: "It seemed the nicest..." The tunnel expands out, the new passageway poorly lit and covered with construction supplies. Demon sees silhouettes in the distance and pushes Kim out of the way, a rifle firing. K: "Darren!" She pulls him to the cover of a nearby crate. Two guards stomp towards them, their necks broken. D: "It's just a graze." Kim tears off a corner of her shirt and tries to wrap Demon's shoulder. He pushes against her fingers. D: "You're hurt more than I am." Under gunfire, the crate at their back shudders. K: "I'll be fine." Her stomach wound no longer bleeding, Demon sighs. D: "Thank you." Kim wraps Demon's shoulder. K: "I'll..." She flinches as splinters scatter on to them from the trembling crate. Risking a glance, Demon sees the guards about to reach them. Kim pulls at his shirt. The guards they left behind are arriving from the main tunnel. Kim and Demon stare at each other. They nod, and Kim stands holding a rock. She aims at a guard ahead of her, both of them taking aim at her. Demon stands and throws a patch of dirt into the closest guard's eyes. Kim throws the rock at the other guard. They stagger, blinded, and Kim and Demon run past them through the other crates and wagons. K: "Which way?" They reach an intersection of three other tunnels. There is light in the path ahead, the two to the side dark. D: "The guards have been active ahead. That could be a good, but..." He grips Kim's hand, gunfire echoing behind them. K: "It's our best option. We can't stop moving." She takes a deep breath, and they move towards the light. **AE**

Sc: XIV Ti: XLVI

Demon and Kim enter a cavern illuminated by a lantern resting on a stone pile. Hidden in the shadows, spread about the dirt, are several dead guards. A Prowler, a tall, muscular demon, rests nearby. Its skin is translucent, its inner organs visible. It reflects the dull color of the earth underneath it. Kim and Demon walk towards a corpse. Getting to his knees, Demon searches the

guard's pockets, Kim at his back ready to pull him away. They hear something crawling. Eyes wide open, Kim turns her head, but nothing has moved. Finding flashlights, Demon stands. He points at the dark corners. A narrow beam of light extends out. He hands Kim the other flashlight. They see fresh blood on the cavern wall streaking upwards. More scuttling is heard around them as if dozens of light footsteps are stampeding about the cavern. Kim and Demon turn but see no movement. Holding their breath, they pass the Prowler. They draw nearer to the exit and stare at the ceiling. The trail of blood arches across overhead. Kim closely inspects the bodies around them. She tugs at Demon's sleeve. The tan guard lying by the entrance has swapped places with a black-haired guard who was fallen in the corner. Similar swaps having happened all around them, Kim holds her stomach, and Demon begins to shake. He casts the light into the tunnel ahead. Through the darkness, pairs of red eyes stare at him before disappearing. Demon takes a slow step forward, unsure of what to do. Kim picks up a rock, her gaze angry and hurt. The closer they are to leaving the cavern, the more the noise builds up behind them. They turn back as the demons abandon their attempt to hide, the bodies repositioned in a semi-circle past the sleeping Prowler. Kim watches them while Demon returns to observing the tunnel. Another body has moved between him and the tunnel entrance. Demon and Kim keep their focus on the surrounding corpses. After a moment, the bodies vibrate and stir up the dirt. Their rib cages tear open, and the bones weave together to form four extra legs. The organs and flesh of the chest cavity mold into the bones to give them structure and mobility. Their hearts dangling, their necks limp, the parasitic Spiders hiss and form a circle around Kim and Demon. The guards' eyes open, red stares glaring, as they crawl forward. The Prowler scratches at its ear. It grunts in its sleep, the Spiders stopping and glancing back. Demon eyes dart around, but Kim scoffs at his side. She stares at him. K: "I can only hit one." She holds a

rock above her head. The Spiders arch their spines at the pair, but Demon nods. D: "Don't miss, please." Kim keeps herself from trembling the rock out of her hand. K: "But that would be ironic... It may be our best way to die..." The Spiders prepare to lunge. As Demon turns to face the Prowler, he focuses on Kim's voice and the warmth of her touch. D: "You assume I wish to die." The demons swarming, Kim throws the rock and screams as the jagged leg of the Spider strikes the flesh inside her boots. The creatures' screeching in her ear, she kicks and punches wildly. Demon pushes a few Spiders away. Their legs scrape by his stomach, but his sturdier boots protect his feet. Without opening its eyes, the Prowler catches the rock. It squeezes and reduces it to powder. The Prowler draws itself to full height, its skin and eyes the blazing color of the lantern behind it. The Spiders release Kim and Demon before scattering. One moves too slowly and is stomped to death by the Prowler's heel. Kim and Demon nod at each other and run into the next tunnel. Watching them go, the Prowler moves its stiff joints. Kim and Demon run past different monsters. Cautious of the howling Prowler, the demons only glare at them. Kim drags as their tunnel veers to the left. K: "You would be faster if you let me go..." D: "I certainly would. I don't care." Kim smirks, her face twisting in pain. K: "I think I'd be able to give it a good fight..." Demon hisses back. D: "But it's not our only problem. We move, together." The Prowler begins to bound through the dark tunnel. Sweating, Demon pulls Kim along on her wounded ankle. The Prowler once again howls, the other demons retreating into the darkness. At a second intersection, Demon explores each tunnel with the flashlight. He notices an object in the right path and leads Kim along. Its eyes falling on their backs, the Prowler bounds on its hind legs and closes in. D: "Jump!" Kim and Demon soar over a trip wire. Setting Kim down, her face contorting, Demon looks at the ground. The Prowler walks near invisible, reflecting the void around them. Seeing the wire, it lunges as Demon throws a stone. The Prowler in the air, it hits

its target, triggers the trap. The ceiling detonates and piles together, sealing the rear of the tunnel. Demon and Kim stagger away. Through a cloud of earth and debris, they cough. K: "Did it work?" She whispers, Demon looking for movement. When the dirt settles, the Prowler reappears ahead of them. K: "No..." Kim holds back a sob while Demon curses himself. He digs into the dirt in frustration and fear. The Prowler gives a low mocking chuckle. Filthy and bruised, Kim spits out the mud building on her teeth. She shakes her head. K: "What did Dolm say to you?" D: "He didn't want us to come, but..." Demon stands. D: "I have no regrets." Laughing, Kim drags herself up using his weight. K: "I do. We haven't changed anything yet. They won't find our bodies." She looks at him. K: "But, I understand. We won't die alone." Demon closes his eyes. D: "We won't die." The flashlight shows another tripwire at the end of the passageway in front. The Prowler tilts its head. K: "If we split up, it shouldn't get us both." Pointing the dimming flashlight at her, Demon slowly releases her hand. D: "That... is our best option." Feeling the distance between them, he smiles to her from the opposite wall of the tunnel. K: "Move quickly, please." She smiles, but Demon cannot read the emotion underneath her expression. They move, Demon matching Kim's pace. They prepare to fight the Prowler, but it allows them to pass on both sides. It observes, stretches, before running at the gap between them. The Prowler flicks Kim into the wall. She falls, her stomach bleeding once more. Demon jumps over the wire but refuses to go any further. The Prowler steps over the wire and knocks him to the ground. Leaning forward to crush his legs, the Prowler smiles over Demon. An object lands next to them. They both turn as a rock collides with the tripwire, Demon shutting his eyes and crawling forward. When the earth stops shaking, his light reveals a wall of disjointed stone separating him from Kim. The tunnel creaks above him. Coughing away the dirt, Demon runs to the blockade. He searches for an opening and resists the urge to scream Kim's name. He listens

for any sounds beyond the rubble, uncertain if the Prowler is caught by the rock fall. Kim trapped by both ends of the sealed tunnel, Demon hears a dull thump and the echo of a hoarse whisper. He falls to his knees. D: *Is it alive with her... Is she crushed underneath the rubble... If not, she's still bleeding, suffocating in the dark...* Demon whimpers and claws at the stones until his fingers bleed. They do not move. Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Demon steps away from the cave-in. He sees another flashlight at his feet, Kim trusting him to keep moving. He grabs it, and, unsure of where to go, afraid he might be too late, he focuses his flashlight on the tunnel behind him. Alone in the darkness, demons thriving around him, Demon carries on.

Sc: XV Ti: XLVII

Demon hears voices in the dark. "YOU LEFT HER BEHIND, HOW WORTHLESS."
"WE CAN FORGIVE YOU." "EVEN IF YOU'RE A FAILURE, WE WON'T ABANDON YOU."
"AREN'T YOU TIRED? YOU CAN REST WITH ME. THE PAIN CAN GO AWAY."
"TEAR HIM TO PIECES, TEAR HIM TO SHREDS, TEAR TO PIECES, TEAR TO SHREDS, TEAR PIECES, TEAR SHREDS." Demon keeps the light aimed ahead. Though he can sense them hiding at the edges of his vision, the demons leave him alone. Their mocking gives him the anger to cover his fear. P: *The Boy Has That Which He Does Not Want To Lose. **Don't they all? Will He Survive? Only with help.*** P: *He Could Set Me Free. **He could fulfill my ambition.*** P: *He Is Our Answer. **We have different goals.*** P: *He Will Choose The Path. **If he is not lost to darkness.*** Two voices, distinct and assured, speak into his mind. P: *Turn Right Ahead. **Or die.*** Demon reaches a split in the tunnel. D: *Can I do anything else?* Other noises building around him, he enters the right tunnel. P: *They Were Waiting For You. **Not all of them want to play games.*** P: *Don't Delay Here. **On the ceiling.*** The tunnel leads to a chamber of pillars wrapped in a pale substance. Poison-nets adorn the ceiling and the tops of the columns. The large black

spiders cast down a wide, almost invisible, web. P: *They Will Melt You Into Bones. From the bones new webbing.* P: *Go Straight. The intersection at the end is your safety.* P: *It's Our Ambition.* The chamber narrows into a long passage, Demon weaving his way through the first webs. He focuses the light on one of the demons. Its cluster of red human eyes reflect back, and it moves at him. Demon squeezes by, web inches away, his skin shriveling to its acidity. A Poison-trapper lands in the chamber behind him. P: *It Was Too Slow. How convenient.* P: *It Would Have Turned The Boy Into A Puddle. A puddle cannot help us.* Several times their size, the Poison-trapper scrambles in a thin black leg towards Demon, catching and tearing the Poison-nets from the ceiling. Timing his steps, Demon shifts alongside the webs to the intersection ahead. The Poison-nets adjust above him, the webs hanging from their bodies swaying. The Poison-trapper screeches at Demon's back and crawls away as another figure enters the passage. P: *How Well Can You Hold Your Breath?* A foul odor reaches Demon. **DM**
How is the integrity of your lungs? Demon rubs his eyes. P: *It Noticed Him. The boy is running out of time.* P: *The Boy Should Run.* His hand on the wall, Demon's vision blurs. P: *Move. They want you to stop.* The air becomes heavy, and Demon clutches his throat. He shines the flashlight behind him. The light reflects off a billowing mist. A silhouette with a massive mouth of jagged teeth stands in the toxic cloud. The Poison-nets hiss above, their webs closing in. P: *Watch The Ceiling. Look forward.* Demon steadies himself, his leg close to a web. The Poison-nets, limited by their heavy bodies, layer their web with little space for Demon to rush by. P: *Faster, He Must Move Quickly. Caution, he must move slowly.* Demon charges and stops as the webs dance before him. He coughs, his mouth dry and tongue sour, but he bursts forward before pausing once more. He looks behind, and each time, he squirms, the toxic cloud ever nearer. P: *He Will Not Reach. He could if he obeyed.* Demon's steps falter, his head throbbing and throat

swelling. He considers the voices, their cunning and complex power. P: *The Boy Is Beginning To Crumble. He cannot lose his mind yet.* After avoiding the webs, Demon falls unable to breathe. In his pain, he is aware of a large creature behind him. Attempting to crawl, his palm grazes a web. The bottom of his hand bubbles, revealing bone, as he stops and shakes his arm. Lying wrapped in mist, his eyes water and close. P: *You Will Die. Listen.* Demon prepares for a blind rush. He tries to remember, imagine, where the webs will be. D: “Tell... how... move.” Near the exit, his voice is a broken whisper. P: *He Has Acknowledged Us. Move, and we will guide you.* He stands and runs. P: *Left. Two steps.* P: *Stop. Three Steps. Forward.* P: *Stop. Continue, four steps.* P: *Left. One step.* P: *Forward, Three Steps. Halt.* P: *Go.* Demon surrenders himself to their guidance, the Poison-veil soon lumbering after him. P: *Stop. Now, you must decide.* Demon collides with the intersection. Standing before two separate tunnels, he forces himself to breathe. P: *Right. Left.* Demon shudders, the voices pouring every ounce of their presence into one word. D: “Who should I trust?” He is able to whisper. P: *Your Desires Are Obvious. You wish to know ours which are hidden.* P: *Such Is The Balancing Of Power. You shall receive no such comfort.* P: *I Can Say, I Have All The Power You Want. I will attempt to lead you where you need to go.* The Poison-veil’s footsteps poison closing in, the Poison-nets crawling to him, Demon grips his flashlight. The air tainted, the gnashing of teeth close to his spine, Demon enters the left tunnel. P: *Do You Know What You Leave Behind?* Demon opens his eyes. D: *No, but though you sound like me, I only care for the power I need.* The other voice speaks. ***This is truth. Prepare yourself.*** The voice of the right fades. P: *But I’m Not Done Yet.* Demon can only continue to run.

Sc: XVI Ti: XLVIII

It pursues. Demon wipes away the sweat and shakes the dimming flashlight. ***You are intriguing.*** He fights against the upwards slope, winces as he holds his bleeding palm. ***Fragile in***

a way that is not fragile. Unsteady in a way that is not unsteady. Hopeless in a way that is not hopeless. His body trembling, his feet slipping, Demon's knees dig into the dirt. **Endure. Reach the cavern.** He shines behind himself into the depths of the tunnel. The wall of mist is a nearly in reach, and he scrambles to his over the incline. **They avoid the quiet ones ahead.** D: *Then, should I approach? If you falter, only they grant a quick death.* Demon stumbles as the ground angles downwards. He slides into a standing position and runs with new momentum. Moving his flashlight across the darkness of the earth, Demon finds a small ledge leading into a chamber. **Do not drop down.** D: *What do I... Wait.* Demon focuses on controlling his breathing, the Poison-veil approaching, descending. **It will catch you, but that is what you want.** D: *That is very much a lie...* The large cavern below is silent and empty. Demon sighs and faces the monster chasing him. The Poison-veil draws close, roaring fumes through its layers of teeth. Demon takes a step backwards, his left foot suspended in the air. His eyes are closed. **Now. Be quiet below.** Falling into the chamber, Demon's legs tremble at the impact. The Poison-veil lands next to him. Barbed fingers clutch his throat and lift him off the ground. In his blindness, he struggles to hold his breath, the Poison-veil stretching out its jaw to clamp down on his skull. Stamping echoes throughout the cavern. **Shift your weight to the left.** Demon hears a metallic vibration before a mass collides with the Poison-veil. Demon is torn from its grip and drops to the floor. More heavy footsteps approach him, and Demon rolls away. His hair ruffles, a creature rushing through where he had fallen. Slowly, Demon takes a breath. The flashlight flickers as he resists the urge to cough. He watches the Poison-veil being dragged away. Its body is warped, its mouth empty of mist. A Charger pulls the Poison-veil into an opening in the cavern, its shoulder limp from the collision. **See what they are. They will not react.** Demon shines the beam on the Charger's face. With long ears, it has no eyes, mouth, or hair. The second Charger is listening for

him. More peek out, several dozen dens surrounding him. Demon stands and watches them strokes their palms, a vibration forming from their hand structure. More of them enter the cavern.

They call to each other, but you must lure the king. The path is there. Demon moves his flashlight, all the den entrances looking the same, before staring at his feet. The ground is solid ahead with patches of stone. *D: My boots will echo, but I may need them later... What if...* Eyes on his bleeding palm, Demon tilts his hand, lets the blood pool while catching stray drops with his shirt. He throws the blood onto the floor far from him. The Charger near sprints after the blood's echo. Demon moves as it slows down. Matching its steps, he stops when it does. He breathing slowly and quietly, and throws more blood. The Charger signals to the others, and they spread out across the cavern. Demon steps with the Charger nearest to him, its body glowing with his light as more gather in the dark. He is at the cavern center when Chargers stop to listen. Of the many surrounding him, they all appear the same. Demon throws more blood. Six Chargers react, two of them running through his location. Demon dives down, an outstretched arm soaring over him. Sending vibrations with its hand, another Charger approaches him. Near silence fills the cavern, the others waiting, the Charger moving slowly. On his stomach, Demon lifts his head. He crawls out of the Charger's path in pace with its movement. The creature's leg passes by, nearly stroking his cheek, as he stands. The area around him clear, his head throbs from stress and blood loss. He moves his arm, blood splattering on the cavern floor. No Chargers react. More appear but hover by their dens, their steps too distant for Demon to use. Demon fights against his anger, his fear. He raises his hand over his head and throws his blood at a distant Charger's feet. It moves its head around. Wincing, Demon scratches his injured palm. He throws the flowing blood in different directions. Acting on instinct, their communication failing, a pair of Chargers crashes into each other. The rest let the echo fade and spread out, Demon

sidestepping their extended hands. They attempt to re-order, more responding to their calls. Demon tries to take as few steps as necessary, faceless bodies exiting and entering the flashlight's range. The Chargers stop in unison. They release a single metallic screech. A creature emerges from an opening in the right corner. Though blind, the Chargers face the king. The new demon appears identical to them, a toned humanoid built for rapid bursts. It returns their vibration, but the tone is sharper. The Chargers fall into formation, encircling most of the area within the cavern. They face inwards. Demon passes his light onto the king, the Rampager, standing outside the circle. The Rampager's hand clicks, and the Chargers start their march inwards towards Demon. The Chargers step back in turn, the gap where they had stood sealing as the circle tightens. Walking to them, his wounded hand against his chest, Demon steps to their rhythm. Standing almost close enough to touch, Demon waits on his chosen Charger. The others to its left and right disappear from formation, the Rampager directing the circle's flow. Demon is careful to not startle the Charger in front of him. It takes a step forward, and he takes a step back. The Charger slips out, and Demon squeezes through without being touched. The cavern vibrating, Demon passes the Chargers who left the circle. Approaching the Rampager's den, Demon studies the king. His heart momentarily stops. Though it appears featureless, there are two grooves on its face. Slipping past it, Demon glances over his shoulder. The Rampager has turned its back to the remaining circle of Chargers. The Rampager is staring at Demon. Its eyes are white and diseased, flinching to the flashlight, but still aware. It stomps forward, and Demon knows he cannot run. He laughs in disbelief, near madness. The circle stops, Chargers gathering in the direction of the noise. **Remain firm.** Managing to nod, Demon places a hand on the den's entrance. The Rampager's gaze leaves him as it releases a powerful vibration to stop the Chargers mid-rush. As it turns back to him, Demon throws his flashlight. Catching it, crushing it,

the Rampager winces at the light, is blinded by Demon throwing blood. The creature drops the flashlight, the beam dying as it falls to the ground. Demon runs into the dark den. He trips, a sharp object stabbing his shin above the boot. Limping around, his hands search for an opening. Behind him, Chargers fight against the Rampager to fit into the small den. Demon twists his thumb on an outstretched stone. Holding the finger to his body, he finds a hole in the den wall. Sets of stomping feet approach as he moves into a narrow tunnel. He crawls until the ceiling expands and drags himself to his feet. In the complete darkness, he searches for the tunnel wall and hears the echo of Chargers crashing around. D: "Could you not have helped more?" He whispers to distract his aching body and spirit. ***Do not misunderstand. This was a test. You must show your strength, or you are useless.*** Sighing, Demon shambles forward. D: *How far? Only an old trap remains in your way.*

Sc: XVII Ti: XLIX

A speck of fire hovers above the horns of an imposing statue. ***There is your escape.*** A manmade entrance is on the other end of the chamber. Demon adjusts to the limited light of the flame, the dirt at his feet ending in a smooth floor ahead. It extends for most of the chamber, the statue at its center. ***This is your battle.*** D: *If I fail? What are you? I am beyond your labels. You chose me because you believed you were necessary to my plan. You may be wrong. You are not unique. Your strength, courage, and intelligence are not your own. You move fragile, unsteady, hopeless, and selfishly unselfish.* Demon frowns, the voice increasingly faint. D: *Thank you. You may regret surviving today.* D: *I will not regret expressing my gratitude now. Then do not lose. We may meet again.* Left to silence, Demon stares at the statue. It wields a silver sword and appears a monstrous torso placed on a stone pedestal. Demon moves to the edge of the smooth floor. He sees bodies facedown nearby, filled with maggots, the flesh on their back

open. Blinking away his blurring vision, trying to ignore the stench, Demon steps and waits. The statue soon quietly slides forward. Demon observes it and settles his left foot beside his right, blood leaking from his leg. The statue moves twice a short distance after a delay. Demon takes five large steps and a small one. After a delay, the statue moves ten times moderate distance then twice short distance. Demon stares at his feet. He jumps, airborne a second or two, before returning to the ground. His feet land slightly off-centered from their previous location. D: "One, two, three, four..." The guardian barely moves twice. Demon continues forward with different size steps and jumps. Looking at the bodies, he recognizes them as guards and realizes the statue's victims were slain by a cut to the back. The guardian moves diagonally to avoid a corpse. Demon sees it uses twice his steps but not his direction. Stopping, Demon stares again at his feet. Moving only his right foot, he points it in different directions without taking a proper step in any. The guardian moves as he expects it to, and Demon imagines possible futures. D: *If I run, the statue intercepts and reaches my back. It moves too quick...* The guardian nears, and he can see it has no back. Its other side reflects the front, its sword gold and more stained. Demon gulps. D: *If I had more people, could we distract it? If I was smarter, is there a correct sequence of steps?* Demon paces towards what he believes to be a monster in stone form. It stops in front of him as he bows his head to regret and shame. D: *Do I scream and hope there are guards in the catacombs ahead... How would they even help me...* He glances at the fallen guards, at their shriveled skin and frozen expressions, a distant one within reach of leaving the guardian's range. Aware of his strength fading, Demon stares at the sphere of light above the guardian. He places a hand on the statue, almost expects to be cut down for touching the cold stone. It does not react. Demon notices the carved grooves in the guardian but blood only on the swords. Nowhere near the exit, he punches the statue. Ignoring his twisted thumb, he strikes repeatedly. D: *Does this*

have a weakness... I can't even move from here. The flesh on his knuckles torn and purple, his body shivering to the cold underground, he forces himself to think. D: *They're suffering more than me.* Fighting against his body, its every pain and fear, he reconsiders the guardian's rules. Demon manages to smile. Dragging himself along, he climbs onto the statue, his small frame finding footholds. He crawls along, back hidden, face and body pressed against the guardian. His feet are off the floor until he reaches its other front. Underneath a gold sword, his back facing the exit, he steps down. Within four seconds, he climbs back on. The guardian moves diagonally, carrying Demon past the point where he had stepped off. When the guardian stops, he steps off quickly and climbs back on. The guardian, again, moves with Demon clinging to its second front, stopping beyond his movement but unable to reach his back. D: *Let it carry me to the exit. Let it fail to its own strength.* Demon, finally, steps off onto uneven dirt. Trapped on the flat floor, its stone eyes never once looking at him, the statue returns to the center. Demon exits the chamber.

Sc: XVIII Ti: L

Demon's eyes flicker. The infirmary around him is well lit, and he sees a man sitting at his bedside. Tobenala returns his gaze, and Demon grips at the empty air on his other side. T: "Where is the girl? Did she not come with you?" Tobenala stays emotionless. D: "How long was I unconscious?" Tobenala looks at the sun through the castle window. T: "A few hours." Demon sits up, pushing through his injuries. T: "How did this happen? You appear rather..." D: "Beaten, horrible, ragged?" Demon tries to move his thumb. T: "Not the words I would have used, but yes." D: "We needed to see you. We went through the tunnels..." Demon gulps and shut his eyes. T: "This manner of trauma in my framework? The main paths should be secure. They still send their required messages and pass inspection." Demon rubs his shoulder. D: "They're lost, at least

the one I went through. A demon is using the dead in a way that's hard to notice." Frowning, Tobenala's eyes narrow. T: "There are evidently problems I need to resolve, but... how are you here?" Demon grimaces. D: "We had to take a different path." Tobenala glares at him. T: "When I have made so few safe?" He stands. T: "You should be dead, the nature of your journey, your injuries. Are you up to your old games?" Opening and closing his palms, Demon stares at his bedsheet. D: "I followed the voice." Tobenala's eyes widen. He relaxes back into his chair. T: "What do you want?" Demon holds back his voice from rising to a shout. D: "She's down there, trapped. Back home, Dolm is poisoned, and the medics can't cure him. They're dying. They might already..." He fights for control over his emotions. D: "I'll do what I must. Help them, please." He leans forward, keeping eye contact even as his bandages apply pressure to his bruises and cuts. Tobenala observes the lone boy's determination. T: "I oversee groups of students. Leading members of society entrust their children to the tutors of this castle. I also select prodigies to give a necessary opportunity. How old are you?" Demon tilts his head. T: "Excuse me, how old would you say you are?" D: "11." T: "Then you would be a ... Or, better yet... Here is my offer. Stay, study with minds similar to yours, and prove yourself to them." Tobenala taps the side of his head. "Prove your mind to me. Pass my tests, and I will guarantee their health and security." Demon clicks his tongue. D: "What do you fail to tell me?" Tobenala's smile is still twisted. T: "We all have secrets lying just out of reach. Earn your way to that information." Shaking Tobenala's extended hand, Demon forces a smile. D: "I won't abandon her... I accept."

AE

Sc: I Ti: LVII

Placing his hand to cover the sun, Demon gets to his feet. He spits out blood while looking upwards. A group of students leave him, their leader limping. The medallion shines at the tree's peak. Demon sighs and begins to scramble from branch to branch. The ground spans below him as he edges upwards. He stops, his back to the breeze, to appreciate the movement of the world around him. N: "Hello!?" Nolan gazes up to him. N: "Any reason you're spending lunchtime in a tree!?" His jaw swelling, Demon points at the medallion far above him. Nolan shakes his head and starts to climb. He closes the distance with strength refined after years of training. N: "How many?" When they are on equal level, Nolan looks at Demon's injury. D: "Only five. They got in a good hit." Demon rubs the bruise on his chin. Continuing their climb, they stare into the different castle rooms through the distant windows. N: "Let's have a race." His body straining, Demon frowns. D: "That is another fight I cannot win." Nolan matches his pace with little difficulty. N: "I'll go easy on you." Demon fingers dig into the bark. D: "Then how is it a race?" Nolan lunges from branch to branch. N: "Because it will stir competitive spirit." He raises a fist upwards. N: "Ready..." D: "No." N: "Set..." D: "I might fall." N: "Go." Nolan launches upwards, and Demon follows him. He whispers to himself. D: "Why not?" Despite Nolan's promise, Demon lags beneath him. Nolan stops with the medallion at his reach. Demon stops just below him. N: "You can't give up n..." Demon bursts upwards, Nolan jolting and stretching. They extend out their hands, the wind rushing by them. Demon latches on and dislodges the strap. Nolan fails to grab on. N: "That was sly." Squeezing the tree trunk, Demon recovers his breath. D: "It was not worth it. What would you have done if I had fallen?" N: "I would have retrieved the medallion for you." Demon puts the medallion on his neck. D: "To

leave at my grave?” N: “It would be a nice decoration.” Nolan reaches into a bag on his back, his gold medallion swaying in the breeze. N: “Care for a picnic?” Demon accepts a wrapped meal. He stares at the ground far below. D: “Thank you.” Minding his balance, he sits near the peak. A tomato slice falls to the earth. N: “Why?” D: “I am returning it to the dirt that gave it life. That is where it belongs.” Nolan leans against the tree trunk. They see the landscape green and dancing beyond the grey walls of the castle. They eat in silence. Nolan gathers the trash into his bag. They stare off into different directions, the tree as tall as the castle’s towers. N: “Does it bother you how they look down on you?” Demon wipes away a smudge on his cheek. D: “Yes, but that’s not a problem I can solve right now.” Their gaze does not stray. N: “You can ask for help.” Demon sighs. D: “I’m too much of a target.” He cradles his bronze medallion in his scarred palm. D: “Others would attack me in more subtle, damaging ways. This group is careful to not go too far. They don’t complain when I strike back. Until I’m strong enough, I’ll settle for knowing my enemy.” Nolan stares at his own medallion. N: “You’re alright with that?” Demon remembers a world Nolan cannot see. D: “Their anger is not all there is. It doesn’t define them. It doesn’t define me.” Demon smiles as Nolan observes him in silence. They hear the castle bell. N: “Class time. Race you d...” Demon is moving down, his body disappearing into the leaves. D: “Go away.” Smirking, Nolan remains at the tree top. He looks for the home that gave Demon courage and hope but fails to see any difference in the villages. He rubs a scar on his cheek, and his eyes settle on a cemetery behind a castle tower. **AE**

Sc: II Ti: LIX

P1: “History teaches not only what has been done before...” The professor stands below a global map. Demon’s eyes scrunch against the glare of the windows. He looks at the rows of students above and below him. Past the divide in the center of the classroom, the area to his right

is fitted with chairs and desks worthy of children of privilege. Gold medallions are at their necks. Demon's area is close to a large window, the silver students around him in rundown chairs and desks. Many of the golds are busy with their own conversations. The silvers hide their gaze in their study material. Reaching the end of their lecture, the professor waves to dismiss the students. Those on the right stand ready to be on their way. Those on the left stand cautious and thoughtful. A knock rings from the door, and Tobenala strides in. He pulls a chair from an empty desk. The room stares at him, curious silence overpowering the desire to leave. The professor nods and exits into the hallway. Tobenala sits where all can see him. T: "Good evening." Shuffling a pile of cards, he motions for them to sit. Whispering to each other, they obey. Tobenala watches their mannerisms, their confidence. The golds have their disinterest. The silvers are discouraged. T: "This will not do." Tobenala shakes his head. T: "You still fail fundamentally." The students return his frown, a girl with a gold medallion raising her hand. O: "How? We do as instructed. We learn and demonstrate our knowledge. We have the accomplishments. What do we need?" She looks at the gold and silvers. O: "Are we not becoming more?" Tobenala smiles. T: "You overestimate yourself." Tobenala spreads a collection of note cards on their blank side in the center of the room. T: "If you humor me..." He makes eye contact with each student in rapid succession. T: "I will make it worth your time." Tobenala gazes at the window, blinking the light out of his eyes. T: "From one to ten, each card has a number." He motions at the bundle on the carpet. T: "Two of them are repeated. Find the highest." The students nod, and Tobenala reclines in his chair. T: "Your number will be revealed through one card. The prize will be an act of balance." Sirius, a silver youth, shakes his head. S: "Why should we care?" Sirius stands in the corner nearest to the window. S: "Some walls can't be broken. We've all been given a place." T: "Is that so? Look around, please." The golds gaze

with their pride. The silvers stare with dissatisfaction. In both groups, there are some who do not bother to look. T: "The winner will get to expel any loser of their choosing." The students' eyes widen. S: "By expel, you mean..." T: "Gone, banished, to wherever you were found or sent from with no opportunity to return, no debate, and no exceptions." Sirius's face reddens. S: "That's not..." T: "Fair? No, but fair is not what you were expecting." The golds would only risk their honor. They seem eager. The silvers would risk their only future. They are angry and afraid. T: "Acts of violence will disqualify you." Tobenala smiles. T: "Begin." He moves out of the students' path. The golds pause, aware of their nice clothing, while the silvers scramble through the pile. S1: "Out of the way!" S2: "Where!?" Demon joins the group on their knees. Through the mass of hands, he flips a card. It is a 3. To his right, a student drops a card with the 6. Smiling, a silver pulls a card to their body. Smirking, a gold steps back. The pile growing thin, more students leave in joy or frustration. S3: "I won't let you see this." S4: "What is going on?" Of the remaining cards, Demon finds several 01's. Evelynn and Nolan are whispering to each other. Sirius is holding a 01 and a 10 close to his face. The students and Tobenala staring at those who remain, Demon studies the numbers he has seen. The 3 and 6 are centered in bold ink. The 01's have the 0 centered and the 1 placed to its right. The 10 has the 0 centered and the 1 placed on the left. Sirius moves to the window with both of his cards. Watching him, Nolan, Ophelia, and Demon nod. Demon chooses a card and moves to his side of the room. Evelynn and Nolan are the last to pick their cards. They walk to the golds by the door. The students glance at their card, hidden against their chests, and to their peers. Both groups stare at the other with confidence as Tobenala stands. T: "We will begin with this side of the room." Smirking, a gold shows a 10. The students watch in confusion. S2: "How? This isn't..." T: "Correct? Fair? It is not supposed to be. Everyone, reveal your number now." Some angry, a few students reveal a 10.

Demon lets his card fall to the carpet. A silver youth whispers. S1: "Is it a tie?" Scowling, a gold mumbles. S5: "Was this pointless?" Tobenala points at Sirius. T: "I would not say so." Sirius is holding a 101. His cards stacked together, in the sunlight coming from the silvers' backs, the 0's join. The second 1 shows through from behind the front card. S6: "But that's against the..." T: "The rules were followed. Now... who will leave?" All attention upon him, Sirius pulls at his shirt collar. He points at an individual in the middle of the golds. The others sigh in relief. T: "Pack your belongings tonight. A guard will escort you home tomorrow." Shoulders rising, the student's lip curls. S7: "Why!?" Tobenala stares the student down. T: "You have disrespected my intentions." He glances at Ophelia. T: "Your role here is to demonstrate your knowledge, but you live in boundaries. Knowledge disregards past realities, specializes on doing more with less, yet you are divided. You are blind." The golds watch him from the door. T: "You are afraid to speak." The silvers nod by the window. T: "You succeed in every exam but fail where it matters." He points at the silvers. T: "Your position comes with potential." He glares at the gold. T: "Your position is not always secured. You all rely on the same strength. Learn to work together." Tobenala heads towards the door, the students parting for him. T: "I will not tolerate arrogance. I will not tolerate cowardice." Tobenala's eyes do a sweep of the room. T: "You are all here for a reason." **AE**

Sc: III Ti: LXII

N: "Sorry it turned out to be this late." Demon follows the torch light down the winding staircase. D: "I won't complain. I've always had trouble falling asleep." N: "Now... which key was it?" The two descend to a reinforced door. D: "How did you get those?" N: "Same way I've gotten everything. Determination, charm, and deceit." D: "In that order?" The lock clicks, and Nolan pushes the door open. N: "It depends." They enter the dungeon, Nolan's torch guiding the

way. The chamber consists of a long hallway, and several cells. The prisoners ignore the two visitors, their eyes seeing only the flame in the darkness. In silence, Demon and Nolan watch the modified cells. Some prisoners are bound while others wander in their limited space. D: "How did they become like this?" Before him, in differing states of insanity, are geniuses known for their contributions to the world. A man grasps at the bars dividing him from the fire. He sways, copying the flicker of the torch. A woman awakens and shrieks, cowering from the glare of the fire. Nolan glances at the door. N: "They were called." Demon turns away from the red glow in Nolan's hands. D: "What could be worth so much?" Nolan's face is hidden in the shadows. N: "They were offered a chance." Monarchs, scientists, and surgeons are among the few Demon recognizes, but they are incapable of recognizing themselves. He shudders. D: "Are they possessed?" Nolan shakes his head. N: "They are what remains."

DM