

**Word Count: 10k**

**Title: The Epitaph**

**Author: Lorne Ryburn**

As the figure on the stake was at last fully consumed by the fire, the surrounding area buzzed with consecration, white radiance spilling from the inferno's center like a halo. Emperor Franz watched the burning impassively, his fingers tapping the scepter that lay across the armrest.

He glanced down at his son. "What do you think?"

The boy seemed not to hear, his eyes wide. The tassels on his epaulets—miniature versions of the emperor's own—quivered. Franz grabbed the scepter and smacked the boy's arm. The metal rod clinked on the sleeve's brass buttons.

Startled, the boy turned to his father and blinked rapidly, his eyelashes long and pale. He had a fragile, doll-like appearance that reminded Franz of his late wife. The words fell softly from the boy's mouth as though he were unused to speaking. "It was very loud." He fixed his eyes back to the charcoal figure on the pole, visible like a dark smudge from within the flames. "I thought the screaming would never stop."

The emperor chuckled humorlessly. "The screaming always stops, Josef. If you want to kill a demon, fire is the surest way. There is no resurrection from ashes."

"Tutor Linda says that demons don't burn," Josef murmured.

The emperor snorted. "Tutor Linda says many things, not all of them true. As you grow older you'll learn that most things are not as they seem." He steepled his fingers and leaned to the side, his eyes scanning the ranks of the priests. Between the distance and the low light, he had trouble distinguishing between them. He liked to play a game where he guessed their identities based on the numbers above their heads.

### **Eyes of The Emperor**

*You see the hearts of men. They are all wanting.*

Name: N/A  
Sin: 67,000,443

Name: N/A  
Sin: 12,129,028

Name: N/A  
Sin: 763,584

The sin in his empire was truly endless. As those collected watched the immolation, their numbers ticked steadily up.

When at last the pyre died, it was dark. While Holy Emperor Franz attended to the dukes and cardinals, Josef approached the blackened sand at the square's center. Only the glow of torches ringing the plaza provided light. He stared in morbid fascination at the blackened remnants of the corpse. Most intact was the head, the last part of the body to succumb to the flames.

When Josef reached out a finger and tapped the forehead, the area collapsed inward in a puff of ash, dirtying his white sleeves. He fell backward in fear at the unexpected movement. Regardless of his father's words, Josef trusted the wisdom of Tutor Linda. Demons loved fire. What if the demon was still alive, hiding underneath?

But a second passed and the demon remained a pile of ash on the ground, embers smoldering faintly around it like the fangs of a hellhound.

—

What does one say then they're tied to the stake, arms thrust roughly upon the wood? When they're bound tight, sigils of weakness flashing. When their power slips between their fingertips, drained into a firestarter array?

The fire flares around me and licks at my feet, finding no purchase.

"Are you sure he will burn?" Evantriss whispers under his breath, fiddling with his cardinal's mask.

"All demons do, eventually. Even him."

Even me.

I laugh at the crowd, summoned to the kaisarion for the execution. There was no kaisarion in Austalis until two weeks ago. I'd torn down the imperial stadium when I outlawed the death penalty five years ago.

How quick everyone was to erect the place anew. If they could build such an arena in two weeks, why has it taken them years to construct public housing and schools, such that even now they remain unfinished projects, over budget and behind schedule? And the stadium's name—*Josef's Kaisarion*. They mock me even in its naming.

The emperor-apparent Duke Leo stands on an elevated podium. He motions for the crowd to be silent and holds up a script. As the heat grows increasingly unbearable on my feet, my concentration drifts. When the fire catches, it'll spread its agony.

Leo eventually gets around to reciting my many crimes—or a list of accomplishments, depending on your point of view.

“Josef ruined the careful hierarchy of balance. He abolished the practice of serfdom and threatened to weaken the hegemony of the church. Now thousands are without work and unable to provide for themselves without a guiding hand, and our people celebrate false gods—the deities of our enemies. His actions have crippled the power of the elite, leading to successive failures in confrontations at our borders. Only by killing Josef do we stand a chance at victory in our wars.”

Personally, I think the crowd tuned out everything until the last sentence, their ears perking up at “kill.” They roar in satisfaction, demanding the blood of their former emperor, the very man who had worked relentlessly to free them from the yoke of oppression.

*So ungrateful.* But they're like children, ignorant and weak. They don't understand what's at stake. They don't realize the depths of their exploitation. They don't see the world like I do.

As my eyes trail over the crowd, numbers appear at my bidding over each head, a tally of accumulated sin. In the Austalis Empire, sin is strength, and it is hierarchical. Those who serve offer up a portion of their sin to their masters. Every level of abstraction leads to more sin extracted until the common man has almost nothing left, the sin evaporating with their will, their freedom. Those at the top reap the greatest benefits without lifting a finger. Longevity, beauty, fitness, intelligence, magic acumen—all are enhanced by sin. Sin baptizes our highest ranked nobles, clergy, and soldiers in Belphebet's flames, allowing them to perform incredible feats of strength. Sin forges men into legends.

As the emperor, I have the most sin of all.

The fire begins to smoke around my toes, finding first purchase. I seek a distraction—anything to take my mind off the pain.

My mind returns to the day of my coronation. I'd been afflicted by my first curse at the time.

### **Echo of Apathy**

Guilt haunts lesser men, yet when you killed your father, you felt none.  
*Haunted by the echo of your father.*

In the coronation chamber, my phantom father's clothes changed from typical blacks to his full regalia. A sumptuous cape was fixed to his breast and fell over his back, trailing across

his right shoulder to terminate above his knees. He was already tall, but the heels on his boots made him a giant, towering over everyone.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” a voice had called out. It was one of the cardinals, not that I recognized him; he was dressed identically to the others in the standard red gown and ruby-studded mask.

The man proceeded to ask something about the flower arrangements, as if I cared about aesthetics with the weight of the empire pressing upon my shoulders. I remember being enthralled by the number above his head, something impossibly regular like 23,333,333. *So many threes.*

He continued to speak, but I’d ignored him by focusing on the two attendants on the balcony taking down black funeral drapes. The textiles draped lazily onto a pot of flowers on the ground level.

I remember the lilies, their white blooms everywhere. I remember how the servants painted them gold, even their stinky stamen and stomata, exchanging their natural beauty for gilded opulence. They turned the funeral flowers into coronation bouquets.

I remember bending down and rubbing a gold-coated petal between my fingers. “Why would anyone think to do this?”

“Gold is propitious,” the cardinal answered. “It symbolizes a rule of good fortune.”

He hadn’t understood.

At that critical moment, I went up in front of the seated audience—the nobles and clergy. I remember beholding them with my blessed—cursed?—sight, bestowed upon me with my father’s passing. How large those numbers had been, how great their sin. A peasant might have sin totaling in the thousands. A wealthy business owner, perhaps in the low millions.

And yet compared to mine...the numbers were all a rounding error.

*Emperors never enter battle, Father had told me when I was a boy. If one emperor joins the fight, others will flock, and soon nothing will be left.*

I hadn’t understood what he meant until I felt the strength of my position firsthand. My power was absurd, even when I first became emperor—when I did the unthinkable.

—

I scream as the fire consumes the soles of my feet, inching toward my ankles. I can’t even lose myself to delirium or unconsciousness—my attributes are too high. Pain resistance helps but only goes so far. In the end, agony is agony. When you burn, you hurt.

*I hurt.*

But if I can't lose my mind, I can at least distract it. Dive deeper into the refuge of my memories.

—

The emperor's breath was short. An assassin's dagger had nearly killed him in his sleep. Only one of his direct subordinates would've had the power to disable his defenses and brewed a poison powerful enough to undermine his prodigious resilience. Emperor Franz had been betrayed.

"You called for me?" I'd asked, standing at his bed. He looked terrible, the weakest I'd ever seen him. I didn't know about attributes back then, only that those in power were always stronger, faster, sharper, and able to work certain magics using church sigils and rituals. That power was what allowed me to traverse the capital's dark underbelly without fear.

Speaking was difficult for my father, but his eyes shone with determination. "How old are you, boy?"

"Twenty four."

"The same age as your mother, when she had you," he'd said, coughing.

"You didn't wait long to kill her, else I might still remember what she looked like."

"You wound me, Josef. Maria's death was necessary to secure the empire after her father ran it to the ground, letting weakness fester. She didn't care what the eyes told her, didn't care that the number above her head decreased day after day, withering the strength of all."

I scoffed at him then in my ignorance.

"You really thought that our god would turn a blind eye to everything you've done? Now look at you, wasted, dying."

My father chuckled bitterly. "I am no longer young, but I could still kill a man with a flick of my finger."

I didn't believe him—I had never truly seen his limits. He didn't practice with the soldiers, didn't spar with the nobility. He watched, he governed, he schemed. If my father had the power to fight legions single-handedly, why had I never seen it?

Rather than call him a liar, I chose that moment to reveal my heart, Father's weakness loosening my lips. "You've made our military strong. You've won wars. You've expanded the church. But the people suffer as they never have before. They live in terror."

He sneered at my accusation. "I know you sneak away from the palace to mingle with the masses. For all that you claim to hate depravity, you surround yourself in it, walking through the darkest alleyways and the dingiest pleasure houses."

"That's not—"

“Not to *indulge*, but to *help*,” he continued, shaking his head. “You refuse to learn how to fight and test your growing limits with private instructors. I know it’s because you don’t trust my men. You test yourself instead by brawling in back-alleys and attempting to apprehend thieves and murderers.”

“I’ve brought in more criminals each month than the entire force of marshalls in a year.” I spat in his face in disgust. “Do you know how often I’ve wondered whether I should just kill you and end this farce?”

When my father gave me a grim smile, I knew I’d fallen into a trap. He’d gotten me to reach the conclusion that he’d intended from the beginning. “Then do it. I invite you to kill me.”

“Don’t tempt me.” My voice wavered.

“Give in to the temptation and do it,” my father whispered. His expression fell and he wheezed, gritting his teeth in pain. “Put me out of my misery.”

That’s when it finally sank in. “You’re really dying, then?”

—

My concentration slips.

*I’m really dying?* Where before I kept the fire at a distance, now it draws close, like a flaming serpent coiling around my ankles. I am acutely aware of the pained groan that slips through my teeth. *No. Don’t let the flames break you.*

*Retreat into your mind.*

—

I was back at my father’s bedside, right where we left off.

“I never wanted you to suffer, Josef, but such is our lot. In this empire, it is necessary.”

“How do I do it?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. You carry a blade—unsheath it.”

I did so slowly, my fingers trembling under lace-lined cuffs.

He snarled in disgust. “You know how to wield a blade. Act like it.”

I stepped forward and drew the blade up so that it pointed at my father’s collarbone.

“All men have it in them to kill,” my father had said. “It’s really quite easy with a sharp blade. Draw a line here—” Franz dragged his finger across his throat— “and it’s over.”

“You fool,” I whispered, tears beading in my eyes. I felt their wetness both in my mind and in reality, dripping down my cheeks. “You think you’re the first?” I swung the ornamental

shortsword like a saber, beheading my emperor in a single strike. My father's eyes bulged, his lips flapping like those of a fish. His parted throat weeped a river of blood.

If someone were to strike me like that now, the blade would leave a thin wound and I'd heal in seconds. At full strength, my father was never as strong as I am now, but my blow wouldn't have normally been mortal. The poison left his flesh weak, rotten. It parted like a ripe fruit.

That's when revelation came to me. That's when I finally understood.

### Eyes of the Emperor

**Congratulations! You have become Demonic Emperor of the Austalis Empire.**

You have gained the skill Eyes of the Emperor.  
Because you are the rightful heir, +5.0% to all stats.  
*You see the hearts of men. They are all wanting.*

***May Belpemet bathe you in fire and blood.***

**You killed Franz Stefan Theiss of Austalis.**

*Perk activated—Emperor's Burden.*

By killing your blood predecessor, you have gained the full burden of his accumulated sin.

*Warning: you have surpassed the safe threshold for day-over-day sin increase (15%).*

*Amount of increase: 342.2%.*

*You may experience adverse effects.*

Name: Josef Benedikt Michael Theiss of Austalis  
Species: Human  
Title: Demonic Emperor  
Sin: 30,023,230,976 (↑ 23,233,778,013)  
Level: 24 (↑ 2)  
Class: N/A

### Abilities

Eyes of the Emperor (Belpemet) [N/A]

See the world as do the divine and damned. Allows you to see accumulated sin and directly access Belpemet's candidate interface.

Superlative Philosophy Mastery [Epic]

You've read innumerable books ruminating on human nature, governance, and the natural world since your mother's death. The writings of history's brightest minds are with you.

Greater Writing Mastery [Rare]	Reared by tutors and surrounded by intellectuals, most young nobles would have a lesser writing mastery at best. They lack your vision.
Greater Sword Mastery [Rare]	You hate what the sword represents, but you're good at wielding it. Your father made sure of that.
Lesser Piano Mastery [Uncommon]	You love the piano, but you're mediocre despite hundreds of hours of practice. At least you can pay others to play for you.

—

I had asked my father years ago, "Why must those beneath us suffer?"

He'd whispered an answer to me under his breath, his lips curled with contempt. "To rule is to shoulder the burdens of our subjects, assuming their sins and responsibilities. Suffering is penance. It tempers us, leaving our bodies lithe and powerful, our minds clever and sharp. In Austalis, we stand above all. Our penance is power. Our power is sin."

Afterward, he invited me into the study adjacent to his bedroom. Rust-red curtains were pulled over the windows, meaning that he intended for the conversation to be private, or so I assumed. Instead, the bastard unsheathed and swung his sword while I was closing the door behind us. I evaded by a hair's breadth, drew my own blade, and prepared to defend myself.

"Passable." That's all he said before dismissing me.

Thinking back on it now, I almost can't believe I hesitated when he asked me to kill him. I wonder what he'd say now, if he were the one condemning me instead of Duke Leo?

He would be so disappointed. The thought gives me strength and I laugh as the flames crawl up my shins. I can't feel my feet anymore, they're just...gone. Tears mingle with sweat and fall into the hissing flames. Smoke curls around me, acrid, like spoiled, burning meat.

I want it to be over, but demons are slow to burn.

—

My resilience keeps me alive even when the fire has consumed my neck. I can live without oxygen for hours, if needed. My mind retains its focus.



It's a cruel kind of magic that empowers me. All this power, all this pain. *You'd have been better off without it*, the worst part of me whispers. *You failed in everything you did. Even now, they undo all the good you instituted, all your hours of toil.*

I'd passed thousands of edicts. Literally *thousands*, far more than any emperor before me. I forfeited sleep to patrol my city in secret, going to the places that those in power abandoned. Of course I tried rallying people to my cause. I hunted for allies.

*What you're doing is going to drive us to ruin.*

To everyone, my actions were treasonous. Since I was the emperor, and far more powerful than them, they had to bide their time behind fake smiles. They were vipers waiting for the right moment to strike, as they had with my father.

The irony of all of this? My efforts at reform actually *increased* the empire's sin, and my sin disproportionately. Freed serfs who no longer fell under the purview of nobles reported directly up to me, giving me a much larger portion of their sin. But more significantly, the quiet, insidious rebellion of the nobility and the church did far more harm than my programs did good. They busied themselves with undermining every good work, trying to ruin my public image.

If it wasn't already obvious, they succeeded. But it wasn't really my fault. When I started to pick them off one by one, absorbing a fraction of their accumulated sin, I accelerated my jump to level 25.

Bad things happened at level 25.

Father certainly never got there. Information about levels isn't common knowledge since only emperors can see the full attribute and level breakdown. Since my nobles and priests can only see sin numbers, they use it as an abstract measure of underlying attributes.

In my few discussions with other emperors, I only know of one other emperor alive today who's achieved such a high level—the Eternal Emperor in the far east. He's known for the third eye on his head that allows him to scry possible futures.

I'd heard a rumor that a physical transformation happened at level 25, but emperors were so few that most utterings were only speculation. Unfortunately, this rumor was accurate.

When I reached level 25, I didn't receive an eye. Of course not. The common folk don't know that Austalis is, in fact, a *demonic* empire, built on deception, fueled by sin. In the eyes of the common people, what would be logical for Josef, Holy Emperor of Austalis, to manifest? A halo? Feathered wings?

I manifested fucking devil horns. I tried cutting them off but they grew back. I shaved them down every few hours with a file and styled my bangs to cover the stubs. I avoided public appearances.

That worked well until a celebrational dinner I couldn't avoid went on too long and the horns grew back earlier than they should have, almost as though my constant filing had trained

them to regrow faster. Because it was a feast with the nobles and cardinals in attendance, they circled me at once like slaving wolves surrounding a wounded elk. They finally had a reason to attack, my transformation granting their cause legitimacy.

The narrative was obvious. Not only had I failed to reform the empire, but our god had recognized my failures and smote me, revealing my true nature to the world.

The only person who came to visit me as I waited for my execution was my childhood friend turned present-day enemy, Duke Henrik. He'd charged at me like the others, eager for my end. He'd been sent to honor the last courtesy afforded to me.

On the ground, written in the dirt of my cell, was a single sentence. With my hands bound and secured to the wall, I wrote it with my foot.

"Here lies Josef," Henrik had dictated, pausing. A cruel smile played on his lips. "They allowed you one last indulgence—the inscription for your epitaph—and you used it to write this?"

My wrists rubbed against the tough rope. I was unwashed, unshaven. Once lustrous hair fell lank on my shoulders, framing a gaunt complexion.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What do you want?"

He flinched, then laughed to hide his fear. "Only the combined strength of every nobleman and all the clergy could subdue you here. You should see the wards they've written outside—it's outrageous." He spat at my feet. "With that much power, you could have led the empire into a golden age. Instead you let it fall apart."

I didn't answer him.

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Here lies Josef, who failed in all he undertook."

"That's the epitaph," I confirmed.

"So you do consider yourself a failure."

I considered my words. "I failed to change our empire for the better. That much is irrefutable. But would I change my path, knowing what I do now?" I shrug. "I did what I thought was right, and for that I have no regrets. To live without regrets...how could I consider myself a failure?"

When he left, he slammed the door.

—

I can feel it. The end.

Finally my mind is failing. The succor of unfeeling washes over me, but a kernel of consciousness remains.

What do you think of, at the moment of death? I'd wondered as my father bled out, the dignity leaving him along with the blood. I'd like to think that there's more dignity to be found in the flames, a certain cleanness in the char and smoke.

There isn't.

I've seen others burn. One of my earliest memories is of a supposed demon-woman roasting like firewood and meat. She'd screamed until her voice came in croaks, smoke poisoning her lungs, stealing her final breaths. It was desperate. Animal. Inhuman. How very like beasts we are when pushed to our ends.

Like the woman, I can't even breathe my last breath. There's nothing left of me but spirit.

*Then...nothingness.*

**Candidate Trial Completed.**

**Analyzing Results.**

**Analyzing...**

**Analyzing...**

**Congratulations! You have reached the minimum threshold for the Practical Examination. You will be delivered to your Deific Sponsor in 5 seconds.**

**5...**

**4...**

**3...**

**2...**

**1—**

**ERROR: CANDIDATE BODY IS UNRECOVERABLE.**

**Escalating Decision.**

**PROTOCOL CONFIRMED.**

**Candidate will be reconstructed to state 24 hours previous.**

From the emptiness...pain.

Agony assaults my senses, like salt water inhaled through the nose, but all over my body.

*Body?*

I feel myself regenerating. It starts with my chest, regrowing my torso and extending out to create my limbs and head. When my skin regenerates, I feel the sensation of still air, like I'm in some kind of cave. Under my bare feet is a cold, metallic floor. When my ears form, I hear only the sound of my breath and my heart. When my nose returns, I smell a saltiness, like I'm on the beach by the Crescentfall Sea to the south. I'd visited there every year before I became emperor.

My eyes are last. I open them and behold an expansive, dark chamber made of a blackish-gray metal. At the end of the room is a massive throne. Upon it sits a behemoth straight from the fear-mongering propaganda playbook of the priests. He is large and sculpted like a palatial statue, towering above men. He has skin of slick gray, like slate, and yellow eyes that glow red. Handsome aquiline features are equally ruined and enhanced by the pointed horns that curve over his skull.

He is the demon my people fear, the demon they unknowingly worship. I know because when I look upon him to gauge his sin, I see no number.

Instead, I see a name.

*Belpheget.*

"You died," he says. An accusation. His mouth doesn't move like I expect. He opens it to reveal a mouth of fangs, like that of a chimpanzee. Words come from his throat, guttural and inhuman, as though a gremlin speaks from within his lungs.

Every part of me flinches away under his scrutiny, and yet...I am equally enthralled. Hypnotized. This is the source of my power, the foundation of my empire? I've always wondered how such a thing came to be. Did gods bless man to make empires, or did the emperors first approach the gods? And what happens when empires collapse and rise?

I clamp down on my curiosity. This isn't a pleasant meeting. As the missive stated, this is an examination—his probing eyes confirm as much.

How does one reply to a god? With wit? Candor? I recall the revelations from my **Eyes of the Emperor** skill. If the ability is a gift from Belpheget, it stands to reason that its words are a reflection of his character.

Two words describe the skill's deific messages: savage and sarcastic.

I adopt an aloof expression. "Die, did I?" I flex my hands. "Does it matter?"

He stares at me, unblinking, his eyes like smoldering embers—like *my* embers. "All men die," he concedes. "Most have more than cinders left."

"Is there a greater torture, for a demon?"

He grunts. "Of course. I could flay you, pluck out your tongue, and place a hot poker upon your eyes and teeth. Then I could set you aflame, or slowly cut you up, slicing off more and more. Maybe force you to eat your own flesh."

"That sounds like torture for a man. As a demon, I would recover. Every slice, however painful, a tempering for body and mind." I tap my head. "No—aside from a slow, inevitable, hungry pyre, demons need not hold fear. At least the powerful ones."

"No—everything fears pain. Men and demons alike fear the poker. By the end they beg for death. But you are different," Belpemet says, his voice a low, gravelly purr. His eyes flash with inner light. "There is strength in accepting what cannot be changed, in recognizing that death comes for us all." He stands up to his full height, dwarfing the now-vacant throne. "You wonder what will happen to those who betrayed you and your cause, who fought your agenda at every turn. They killed you and tried to make your sin their own."

I *hadn't* been thinking of my enemies. The knowledge that Belpemet cannot read my mind bolsters my confidence. He may be a god, but he isn't all-knowing.

"I know they tried to steal my strength," I say. I'd seen their arrays, but the sin is still mine. I feel it in my skin, my bones, my mind. They wouldn't have been able to take even a fraction of my sin with their sigils, the conversion rate poor enough that ritual sacrifice isn't considered a valid method to acquire sin. Still, even a fraction of my sin would be a massive gain for them. They'd be fools to relinquish it. "Did they fail in the undertaking?"

He blinks. "For now. Time moves faster here. This is what we call an intercession—time stolen for judgment."

"What you said before was wrong, you know. I wasn't thinking of those I left behind. They're small, unable to see beyond themselves and their needs. I am happy to be rid of them forever."

"And your people?"

I don't respond.

"It's not often that one of my candidates is a socialist."

The word is unfamiliar. "A what?"

He gesticulates. "Imagine a society where common people own all that they do. Hierarchy is inevitable, as is inequality, but such a system seeks to curtail social and economic stratification."

"Such a world doesn't exist," I say softly. "Even the Grekus with their democracy had slaves, freemen, and the oligarchs."

He shakes his head. "You must see beyond the ancient peoples."

My gaze grows steely. “I’ve tried to.” It’s not for nothing that I have **Superlative Philosophy Mastery**. “I’ve read the works of the greatest minds to ever walk the earth, past and present.”

“Are thoughts unspoken lesser than those voiced aloud, or penned to paper?”

I pause. “No.”

“Then listen when I tell you the greatest mind to ever walk your world was a woman born thousands of years ago. There is no memory left of her. No recollection. Only dust. Time makes dust of us all.”

“You surprise me,” I remark. “You are well-spoken. Enlightened.”

At that, he laughs. “Your compliment falls on deaf ears. You are here because you fear not the shadow of the reaper and you have reached your first evolution. Like any good demon, I’m going to invite you to make a wager.”

My heart rate accelerates.

“If you can deal me a mortal blow, I will free your people. All your dreams in your innermost heart... I will manifest them. Those that betrayed you will be rendered impotent, divested entirely of their power. Sin will flee. Your empire will crumble.” He clenches his fist. “The Empire of Demons—the Empire of Austalis—will be no more.”

“And if I fail?”

“I’ll eat your soul.” He licks his lips, a long, thick, pointed tongue writhing around pointed fangs. “And your sin will flow back to the empire that has forsaken you.”

“You’ve stated the stakes, but not the challenge,” I point out.

“It is simple. Me, versus you, in this room. Demon against demon, like two bucks fighting over a doe in heat.” He chuckles raucously. “Fighting recklessly over the fate of an empire and the fate of a soul.”

I’m powerful, but compared to Belphemet, I can’t imagine my attributes are noteworthy. It’s possible there’s more to this I don’t understand. Maybe Belphemet is restricted in this space. “Do you consider this wager fair?”

“Hells, no,” he replies. “Our positions are what they are. You are a human who has digested enough of my power to gain my fleeting notice. Let me ask another question: Is life fair for your serfs? Consider a situation where the merciful master allows the upstart serf a chance at gaining his freedom, if only he can prove himself.” Belphemet snarls. “You think such a game is fair? Is the serf supposed to win? Or is he to be humbled? Castrated? Destroyed?” Belphemet’s voice grows in volume until it is as loud as anything I have ever heard. It is thunder rolling in my ears, crackling like a cannon. I place a finger in my ear and it comes back slick with red.

“He is used to make a statement,” I say. My gaze hardens. “What is the alternative, if I do not accept your wager?”

He sneers. “Death.”

“So there isn’t really a choice, then.”

“The choice is clear,” he says. “You are already dead. If you do not accept my wager, things return to how they were. If you accept and fail, you will forfeit your eternal soul and never be reincarnated again.”

Hearing that, I’m tempted to refuse the wager and welcome death. But I can’t get the words of the system out of my mind: *You have reached the minimum threshold for the Practical Examination. You will be delivered to your Deific Sponsor in 5 seconds.*

I am a candidate being tested by my sponsor. For what, I still do not fully understand. But how could I turn back now that I’ve peered beyond the curtain? I refuse to bear the burden of regret.

“I accept your wager.”

He grins savagely. “Prepare yourself. Because I proposed the wager, you get the first strike. Take all the time you need; I will not attack until you move on me.”

“I have no sword,” I say. “And neither do you.” We’re both nude—armorless, weaponless.

He holds up his clawed hand. “Why does a demon need a sword?”

I wiggle my fingers. “Maybe you don’t have a need, but I do.”

He rolls his eyes and a sword appears in front of me. I catch it on reflex before it clatters to the ground. The weapon is well-balanced and simple in appearance, but it’s a fine blade. Suddenly the sword shrinks, metamorphosing into a wickedly curved dagger.

“You trade a sword for a knife,” he notes, his curiosity evident.

“The greater reach won’t help against a foe like you.”

He nods his head. “I await your advance.” A whip-thin tail—I’d almost mistaken it for a belt—uncoils from his torso, emerging like a serpent behind his back. His horns glow from within with sanguine light.

I doubt a scratch of my blade will do anything to him. But that’s okay—I knew that when I placed the wager. I’ll rely on my skills.

**One With Shadows.** The darkness of the room embraces me. Belpheget definitely has night vision—it’s one of the passive perks of being his follower—but it cannot fully penetrate a

supernatural gloom. I activate several other passive and active effects to temporarily boost my attributes.

And finally... **Blade of Honor, Dagger of Vindication**. The ability lets me strike from the shadows with a blow that can't be parried, blocked, or dodged. It pierces armor to do 1000% damage, but only works if I truly believe my cause to be just, and a killing necessary. It's my evolution of **Greater Sword Mastery** and **Greater Dagger Mastery**.

It isn't an ability from Belpheget. No—this ability is *mine alone*. It's the most powerful skill in my possession.

True to his word, Belpheget doesn't react until my blade is upon his throat. This is my only chance to use my assassination ability since it can only be triggered out of combat. I'll either end this before it begins, or succumb.

A vicious gash opens up on Belpheget's throat. Red blood spills out, eerily human in contrast to his gray skin. He immediately retaliates with a flash of his claws, scoring a hit against my bare chest. His talons scrape against my ribs, overcoming my **Pain Resistance**. His tail threatens to gut me, but I narrowly twist away, avoiding his strike.

I moan and grit my teeth, but roll to break my fall and spring to my feet. The wound on Belpheget's neck is already closing. Those on my chest burn as though envenomed.

This isn't meant to be fair. He said as much. But why wager if the outcome is decided?

*This is a test.*

As Belpheget charges toward me, I will the dagger to extend into a longsword. It obeys and I stab it down.

The floor buckles, my strength more than enough to warp and pry apart inches of metal. I slip down into the hole and enter the depths of wherever we are. *Belpheget's palace? His citadel?*

I duck into the shadows of a support pillar as Belpheget heaves the metal apart, forming a hole big enough to permit his passage. He drops down and lands mere feet away from me.

My lungs are still, my breath held. My muscles are coiled like a spring. With our combat interrupted, I can use **Blade of Honor, Dagger of Vindication** again.

This time I aim for the top of his neck, severing his spine. His body sets upon repairing itself even as he collapses, stemming the tide of blood. But he can't defend himself. His arms and legs are still, his tail motionless. His horns swell with energy, an ominous pinprick star forming between their tips.

Just as the star detonates, I swat the longsword down onto it, pushing it into his head. The longer reach makes a critical difference. The blade shatters along with half of Belpheget's head, white shards of skull flying everywhere like splinters of tree from the lumberjack's ax.



“Stop,” he says. “The wager is over.”

**Congratulations! You have won a Devil’s Bargain.**

**Rewards:**

Fulfillment of Josef Austalis’s Enlightened Despotism  
Dissolution of the Austalis Empire

**ERROR: REWARDS MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE. PLEASE SELECT A SINGLE REWARD.**

I thrust my blade into his throat, pinning him to the ground. “It says the reward you promised is impossible,” I hiss. “Should I be surprised that a demon lied?”

Belphemet gurgles his own blood as he tries to speak. “I do not control the system.”

I twist the blade. “Then who does?”

Belphemet growls and a sonic shockwave throws me into the wall—the first obvious form of proof that he hadn’t gone all out against me.

“The only way to change the system is to rise within its framework,” he explains, massaging his ruined neck and face. “If what I promised cannot be fulfilled, I will instead confirm you as a candidate and give you the tools to change not just your small empire, but the universe. What say you?”

“You planned this,” I murmur. This was the exam, but on which criteria did Belphemet assess me? I exhale sharply. “Why?”

In the darkness of this lower level, his eyes are the only source of light. They glimmer with hunger.

“I see many candidates and most are selfish, small-minded. The wishes inside their hearts? To be immortal, to be rich beyond measure, to return to the past, to obtain access to a library of lost knowledge... These are just samples.”

The last option doesn’t sound so bad. “The foundation of your system of power, sin, rewards vice and conceit,” I point out. “And emperors are in a position to take hedonism to extremes.”

He pauses. “That isn’t all. I see how you analyze my speech, my gestures, feeling out the limits of my knowledge, discerning my goals and intent. I am your chosen god, the master of your pact of power, and yet you test me, just as I test you.” He sneers. “The only candidates worth confirming are those who have a demon’s arrogance. The ones who question, who are never satisfied, who ever hunger. You, Josef, hunger.”

His gaze becomes vacant. When it snaps back into focus, he speaks slowly, weighing his words, tasting each syllable on his long tongue. "There may yet be a way to fulfill both rewards that I promised you."

"How so?"

He smiles and leaps back up through the hole, returning to the throne room. He reposes carelessly, his legs crossed and hanging off one of the armrests, his head draping over the other.

"I can send you back," he explains. "It's the only loophole I could find, and it's only an option because I've decided to confirm you as a candidate. That affords you certain privileges."

Send me... back? "To when?"

"Whenever you'd like."

"No."

"The possibilities are—" Belphemet cuts off, his mouth snapping shut. "No?"

"I refuse. The past is set."

"The past is mutable," he insists.

My eyes are piercing as I address him. "You tempt me with the only thing you can—boundless possibility. But I see what you are. I've felt your influence. I understand how your framework of sin operates, and I've inadvertently reaped its benefits." I pause. "There's only one way this ends for me and the people of Austalis: poorly."

He shifts on the throne, his expression inscrutable. "You think too lowly of your capabilities."

I laugh. "Changing the past to rewrite the present and future goes beyond arrogance. It goes beyond any emperor's entitlement." I shake my head. "It's outrageous hubris."

"If I forced the matter, to what time would you return?" he asks. "Satisfy my curiosity."

I respond without hesitation. "I'd go back to before my mother's death and protect her."

"That's not what you wished for."

"It doesn't matter because I won't go back. A positive outcome isn't guaranteed—I might die to my father's sword in the act of saving my mother. And who knows what she'll become

decades down the line? In a worst case scenario she might contract insanity and lead the empire to ruin—a fate that is distinct from the dissolution I desire. To save her means re-rolling the dice of fate. If the metaphorical dice fall poorly, how can I escape regret?”

He taps his chin with a talon. “What if I gave you more than one chance?”

My heart skips a beat. I don’t respond immediately and he takes that as a cue to elaborate. “Three attempts is the best I can do.”

“Ten,” I haggle.

His eyes glow with wicked light, his mouth expanding into a too-wide smile. “Seven.”

“Ten,” I repeat.

He shakes his head. “Seven—take it or leave it.” His tail curls in front of him like that of an agitated cat. After navigating court politics the last few years, I can tell when a man is at his limit.

“So if I perish, I’ll enter into the next attempt?”

“That is correct.”

“And the last time, the seventh. When I die, what then?”

He leans back over the armrest. “You’ll return to me here.”

“What if I am satisfied and wish to end early?”

He grins. “Seven is what you asked for, and seven is what you’ll get.”

The response makes me uneasy, but I’d rather have more attempts than less. “And when I regress, what of my sin?”

He hums contemplatively. “When you return to the past, you’ll start with the sin you had then. When you return to me after the seventh time, however, all the accumulated sin from the seven runs will be yours. But you’ll also be beholden to me as my candidate.”

“To clarify... I’m already your candidate, yes?”

“Correct.”

So I have nothing to lose.

I can test six paths to change the course of history. If all are worse than the original timeline, I can follow my original life to its original conclusion. Part of me wonders if I'll have the will to relive my life seven times.

Another part of me knows that I'll always regret it if I don't try.

I steel myself, then nod. "I accept."

<b>Avenged Sevenfold</b>	
Charges: 7/7	
<i>Your last pitiful life ended in betrayal and failure. You now have seven tries to make wrong right.</i>	
<b>Would you like to return to the past?</b>	
Yes	No

Yes.

—

A man can fail so completely that he drowns and sinks, a smooth, tormented stone.

At the outset, I thought it might happen to me. When I died—as I suspected I might—trying to save my mother, I added another failure onto the weighty pile. The failures lay behind me like a chain, links of my past, shackles on my will.

When I came back again, I had a decision to make. When to return. What would I regret more—wasting another iteration, or letting her die.

*There are six more, I'd reasoned. You can save her in another. Bide your time, accumulate wisdom. Use all the time you can to plan.*

Time—I needed time to think. So I made it.

I knew it was possible to live for a long time, with enough power. I had the emperor in the East as a living example.

Over my iterations, I learned that the fastest way to death—but also to power—was through war. Violence, conflict, hate, cruelty—war brought out the worst in us humans. The

longer it boiled, the better for me. As our empire gluttoned itself on the power of sin, people's lives improved. The nobles and clergy who had so hated me? They began to believe in my right to rule.

No longer was I a failure in the eyes of Austalis.

Each iteration I lived longer, outpacing savage plots against me and killing traitors early on.

At the sunset of the sixth iteration I am all but immortal. My horns are my crown. I do not age, my sin sustains me. But I know that this world is a lie. When I die, it'll all be undone.

It's easy to forget how I came here to tear everything down, to elevate the weak and equalize life outcomes across social and economic classes. In my roundabout way, I've done just that. Over time I've groomed those in power around me, finding and elevating the meritorious.

With allies at my side, I've managed to make a marvelous new world. There is no war—no other emperors are on my level, and though many powers conspire in the shadows, threats go unrealized. Perhaps if I lived on here until the end of days, they would succeed. It would depend on how fast they could innovate their weapons relative to the people of Unified Austalis. So far, no other empires have come close to matching our speed and resort to imitation.

Droplets of rain fall, slowly at first, wetting my exposed fingers. I laugh into the worsening deluge, tail lashing behind my back, muscles rippling in the light of sunset still peeking through half-gray clouds.

My sin doesn't deplete, but the stagnant number I see when I use my demonic sight is my single greatest measure of success. The second best is the city of Veneria. Before me she stretches unlike any metropolis I could have ever imagined. The greatest things in life, I've realized, come not from the dreams of individual men, but from the slow accumulation of insight, of brilliance, like drops of rain that gather to form a river, cutting plain rock into a cascading canyon.

The ingenuity of man has made my youthful dreams of utopia seem dull and uninspired, like a childhood bauble rediscovered in a dusty attic. I rule over an empire of towering glass skyscrapers, of commercial temples and bazaars of endless plenty.

With more people and less sin, the power of the individual wanes, leaving the populace of Unified Austalis weaker than other empires whose people gain energy from other sources. But my people have shown me that they need no demon's magic to work miracles.

It's time now to see if they can pull off the greatest miracle of all.

Sabrina finds me on the balcony. Her head hangs low as she approaches and wraps her arms around my torso, pulling my thin shirt taut.

“If you don’t return...”

I turn around and pull her to my chest, angling her head with my hand, staring into her amber eyes. “If I don’t return, this dream will end. I can’t make promises that I’ll find you again, that you’ll even exist. I found you too late. The smallest changes—”

She gives me a smile that reaches her eyes, the corners of them creasing. Her tears don’t abate, so numerous that they’re distinct from the rain. She sobs a laugh. “Are you forgetting who invented chaos theory?”

I shed tears of my own. “Your mother.”

She grabs my hand. “It’s how we met, after all. Do you think that the world would ever be so grand without you in it?” She looks beyond me. “You really believe we could do all of this on our own?”

My laughter replaces hers. “It was never the magic that mattered.” I press a finger over her heart. “And yet still, when I pray for success... I suppose it’s to *him*. Who else could it be?”

“You pray to the rain, to the earth, to the endless sky, to nothing at all,” she replies softly. “And we pray in turn to you, that you might return and make this world everlasting.”

I scoff. “Most are blissfully unaware of this world’s transience.”

“But they hope for a tomorrow and believe that you will lead us there.” She goes up on her tiptoes and leaves a kiss on one of my horns. I pull her to my mouth, kiss her strongly, and then hold her for a time.

When she departs, the sky is dark, the sun has set, and the rain is cold and uncomfortable. I look for the stars and find none.

*Here lies Josef*, I whisper under my breath as I walk through the halls of my estate. *Who failed in all he undertook.*

I take an elevator to the basement bunker. A massive machine bigger than most houses lies within. This place was once a natural cavern, one I expanded and adapted to my purposes.

I don’t understand how the machine works. I’ve read countless books, but I’ve never had a mind for such hard science, even with all the enhancements of my sin. Perhaps I’m just too old to learn science so new; perhaps it’s the demon within me, its destructive chaos antithesis to methodical, lawful creativity.

Scientists swarm around the machine like ants, their sin counts flashing above their heads and revealing their locations. After an hour, they’ve properly shepherded me into the main chamber of the apparatus and explained what they *think* will happen, as well as what might befall me if their predictions go awry.

Nothing has survived the chamber, but they’ve sent the inanimate into it successfully. But they haven’t tried sending in an immortal.

The lead scientist concludes his explanation with a heavy sigh, his fingers squeezing tightly together. "Emperor Josef, are you sure this is the only way?"

*So formal.*

I summon my ability's prompt to renew my conviction.

<b>Avenged Sevenfold</b>	
Charges: 1/7	
<i>One attempt remains to change history. How will you use it?</i>	
<b>Would you like to return to the past?</b>	
Yes	No

I turn to the scientist. "Ryan, you know the stakes."

He leads the coterie of white-coated scientists away, leaving me alone in the chamber. A countdown begins. I can feel the chamber buzzing with power before I hear it whine.

My enhanced perception allows me to time my action just right, down to the millisecond. As the countdown elapses and energy floods my position, I select Yes.

I find myself back in the past, when the machine was configured for and when I willed **Avenged Sevenfold** to take me.

It is a different world, though it is the same. I am me, in my full power, with all the sin of the sixth iteration. Before me is my mother, my father, and then a small, scared child. A boy.

*Me.*

I don't have time to linger. I grab my mother and shield her with my body. Young Josef screams while my father bellows in anger, drawing his sword.

I release the power of my sin and he chokes, falling to his knees under the pressure.

There's a way to die without really dying, when you're almost fully immortal. A sort of... temporary death. It involves really being dead, for a bit, but that's followed by resuscitation.

The resilience of my body allows me to heal almost anything, and the medicine of the humans is a wonder unto itself. I don't know what will happen, but I have to have faith. *Not in the rain or earth or even Nothing, Sabrina, I think. Faith in all of you.*

I focus on the watch on my wrist. 3... 2... 1...

Something from *beyond* yanks me, hard. I lose consciousness. I feel like I'm tumbling, untethered.

I wake with a gasp and find myself in a white room. A hospital. On a breathing machine next to me is my mother, her skin pale and sallow. If I was ever unwell, my body has fully recovered, so I reach her side in an instant.

Sabrina enters the door in a haste, running to my side and burying her face in my chest. "Were we able to change the timeline?" she asks softly.

I nod. "I saw myself as a child." The woman before me is not my mother in this world, but that's irrelevant. I don't feel pity for the boy I left behind; I am stealing away a woman on the cusp of death. There was a reason I'd waited until the very last moment before she'd died to return. I wouldn't rob myself—any of my selves—of any more time with her.

"And what of your ability?"

"It's gone," I say. "0/7. I returned to the past, after all. It didn't say anything about a specific world, a particular timeline. And it never stipulated anything about returning to the future."

"So that's it," she says.

My mother wakes up eventually and I finally get the chance to know her. I live a long life with Sabrina, though that approaches its eventual end. The sin cannot sustain her as it does me, and I can't transfer it.

She makes me pick out a headstone next to her, as though I'm withered and frail and accompanying her on the cusp of death. Her hand is cold in mine and so, so weak. But her mind is sharp.

"It's bad luck," I insist as we approach the empty plots.

"Superstitious as ever," she retorts. "I want to know that you'll be at my side, forever."



“I’m not sure that’s even possible. Belpheget will just reconstruct my body when I die and become his candidate. Besides, what if there’s an earthquake or a flood?”

“Draw your blade,” she says, referring to my ceremonial shortsword. It’s a relic of a bygone epoch, but it’s become associated with me. “Now write. Here lies Sabrina, who dared to love. And here lies Josef, who challenged fate and time itself.”

I roll my eyes, but carve the words. I know I’ll never convince her to change them. “Dramatic much?”

“I’m not done,” she says, clearing her throat. “May he become the god of our prayers, our emperor everlasting.”

“You’re etching that part yourself,” I tell her.

When she snatches up the sword and hobbles over, then slashes the sword weakly at the granite, I wrap my hands around hers, granting her my strength. She directs my arms, etching the sentence in her own handwriting, distinct from my own, more neat.

—

I am ready when she breathes her last. I know that I’ll find another, one day, but my heart is torn asunder. I could find another Sabrina, reach into some other strange branching timeline and pluck her out, but I know she’d never want that. This is my Sabrina, and she lived well, died content.

The funeral is broadcast live, but millions still flock the streets to witness it in person. I see the ocean of numbers. It feels like the entire world is watching my reaction, as though I am the kind of man who cannot grieve, and my now-visible tears are more precious than gold.

When they ask me to read the epitaph, I cannot. So they read it with me. Everyone.

I feel like I am collapsing as they lower her ashes into the ground. They repeat the epitaph again and again, turning it into an impromptu prayer.

“—May he become the god of our prayers, our emperor everlasting.”

**Congratulations! You may now become a god.**

Grants **True Immortality.**  
Grants **Divine Spark.**

Grants **Idealist's Wish**.  
Removes all candidacy titles.

**ERROR: SUBJECT IS A DEMON.**

**Escalating Decision.**

Suddenly the world around me is gone. I'm back in a dark, steel-covered room. On a throne in the back sits Belpheget.

"Well met," I say, narrowing my eyes.

He blinks, seemingly surprised by my appearance, but then his eyes widen. "You've gotten this far?"

The majority of my strength is from the sixth—and final—iteration, but the sin I accumulated over the earlier iterations funnels into me, giving me the largest boost in sin that I've had in over a hundred years.

"I do not understand why I am here," I confess.

"You can't become a god," he explains. "You can only become an archdemon."

"And how do I do that, assuming I even want to?"

He grins savagely. "You kill another archdemon, of course."

I freeze. "What?"

"Did your prompt mention something called **Divine Spark**? Demon's need something else—a **Corrupted Godheart**. Only obtainable from fallen gods... or from archdemons." He points to his chest. "It's not a real heart, but a ruined **Divine Spark** that lives in my chest like an ever-burning ember of power. It's the source of all sin energy."

"So I need to kill you for it?"

Belpheget's gaze grows vulnerable, his eyes gaining a far-off look to them. "The **Corrupted Godheart** is a curse. You'd be doing me a blessing by taking it and letting me die."

"Curses can always be broken," I say. "Yet you act like this godheart is impossible to overcome."

“There is a way, though it’s only a legend. An archdemon must purify a **Corrupted Godheart** to become a true god. That is the only way.”

Belpheget offers no resistance as I sever his head and pierce his chest with my other hand. An energy like molten lava enters my body, crackling around my heart. I remain in a catatonic state for an indeterminate period of time, but the sound of chanting brings me back.

Suddenly I am at the funeral.

**Congratulations! You are now an ascended demon.**

Grants **Demon’s Immortality**.  
Grants **Divine Spark of the Incorruptible**.  
Grants **Devil’s Bargain**.  
Removes all candidacy titles.

I immediately look at the skill **Devil’s Bargain**—the one that replaced the wish ability.

#### **Devil’s Bargain**

Choose any entity, living or dead. If both your souls hold the same heart’s desire, it will be honored. If either side is lacking, you suffer extreme backlash, losing your divine powers for a year.

May be used instead to create wagers; if you lose, you will suffer agreed-upon consequences. If the other party loses, you will devour their soul.

I am unable to use the ability at first. I think part of me can’t believe that I can succeed, it’s too good to be true. If I use this ability and fail, my enemies won’t let me survive the year. If I succeed...

*No regrets.*

Before all the world who is watching, who still do not understand what has happened to me, I activate **Devil’s Bargain**.

*I wish to be with Sabrina, to have her by my side, forever. I wish it more than anything else in this world.*

—

The broadcast often feels more immortalized than I. However many years later, it's still the subject of countless creative muses. *The Rapture of Josef*.

"Oh look," Sabrina says as we pass by a sculpture in a public square. We're disguised so as not to attract notice. "It's us."

I nod, unimpressed. "Uh-huh."

She gives me a crooked smile. "The artists always make you look constipated."

I smile and squeeze her hand, pulling her in close. "They always make you look beautiful."

We kiss in public and someone clears their throat in annoyance.

The woman whom I credit for my divinity sticks her middle finger in the air and kisses me again. "No regrets," she says conspiratorially. "I'm way older than they are and *I'm* not such a prude."

My heart sings. *No regrets, indeed*. "I love you, Sabrina."

She points to the sculpture and smiles. "I know."

**THE END**