

Lucifer sighed sadly to himself, staring at a picture of little Charlie when she was ten years old. She was so innocent back then, full of wonder in her eyes and a song on her lips. Where did the time go? Now his little girl had become a hulking warrior, no matter the number of songs she sang or how her eyes would light up, finding wonder in the smallest things. He could not ignore the passage of time and how those days of innocence seemed so far behind her. Her hotel, her goals, her ambitions. It felt like she was growing out of his reach.

“Children are meant to grow up.” The Lord of Violence, Kul’as, intoned deeply as he sat at his side on the VIP booth. Looking down at the tournament arena as the crowd filled the seats and the competitors arrived. “She would never remain the little girl she was.”

“But she could have!” The Lord of Hell wailed. “I used to hold her in my arms! Now I’m barely half her size! She’d be holding me at this point, fetching me my walking stick and giving me porridge once I lose all my teeth in my old age!”

“You do not age.”

Logic was lost on the Sin of Pride as he continued to lament. “Where does time go, Kul’as? One day she’s singing about redeeming sinners and the next she’s participating in gladiatorial combat.”

“Let the guy mope,” Beezelbub called out from the rows behind them, munching down on sweet popcorn. “He’s going through a midlife crisis.” All around her, the other Sins could only agree. Honestly, just seeing their King at all in any ‘official’ capacity was a miracle.

“Well,” He shrugged. “At the very least, few will dare mock her once she proves her might.” He believed this competition would be good for Charlie and her reputation. The girl had faced so much ridicule and detractors in the past. A good demonstration of her power would silence many of those voices and make her enemies think twice about mocking her in her face.

“Preach.” Satan groaned in reply as he leaned into his hand.

“Oh, you guys are all too hard on baby girl!” Asmodeus, ever the ‘fun uncle’, popped up to Charlie’s defense. “She’s young, she’s just to hit her stride!”

As dear as Charlie was to him, Kul’as truly believed she had to show some spine if she was to inherit the throne one day.

It's not like Lucifer was doing much of a job *ruling*, leaving most of his duties to the other Lords. So perhaps Kul'as was looking forward to the day Charlie would be called queen. And he suspected this competition might be a step in the right direction.

"That's the spirit!" Their mood was instantly ruined as the icy arms of Glacier surrounded their necks, pulling them closer and making them grimace at the contact with the *annoying* master of treachery. "Come oooooon! This is gonna be a show for the ages!"

"Uh-huh, yeah." Lucifer removed his arm like he was holding something particularly nasty. "We all know this is just you making a huge fucking mess like always for your entertainment."

"Whaaaaat?! Perish the thought, my king! When have I ever been duplicitous?!"

"You hail from Treachery." Kul'as pointed out with an arid tone. "Everything you do is duplicitous..."

"Whatchu gonna do, I'm a rascal!"

"You're an annoying little parasite, is what you are." Kul'as felt the need to melt him grow. "What has Vox to gain from this partnership with you?" Aside from a completely unsurprising betrayal, that is.

"Okay, real talk, being constantly called out hurts." His smile showed he did not feel the slightest bit wounded. "I'm just a guy trying to make some nice entertainment for the awful people of hell. Is it too hard to believe I don't have any ulterior motive for this?"

"YES." The King of Hell, the Lords of the Rings and Sins, pretty much any important person present in the VIP booth.

"Hahah! Oh man, we gotta do this more often!" He excitedly jumped to the front of the booth. "But I gotta make sure things are going to schedule. Glacier. OUT!" And he vanished in a burst of frost. Making the whole place feel uncomfortably chilly.

Then it felt humid with Satan's temperature rising and melting away the frost. Bee looked at her ruined snacks and conjured another one. "I hate that guy..."

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"Are there too many people here?" Charlie muttered with a dry heave, voice cracking as though she hadn't had water in a long time. Usually, she was never ashamed to act out to her heart's content, singing for all the world to hear. But this was different; she was meant to be *impressing* people with her *combat skills*.

She barely had combat skills! She could barely impress people at all!"

"Relax, babe." Her dear girlfriend helped settle her nerves a bit, massaging her massive traps. The two wore their own versions of battle uniforms: Charlie a battle gown with long gloves, and Vaggie a full-body suit with X-patterns. "We'll knock this out of the park, you'll see."

"There's just a *lot* of people watching." She murmured and subtly pointed to the side. "And a *lot* of ladies out for blood..."

The amount of muscular Sinners and demons present *was* distracting, Vaggie had to admit, particularly with how some of them were making downright threatening gestures to Charlie. She'd make sure to watch Charlie's back in case anyone here attempted something underhanded.

"Chin up, your highness!" The cheery voice of the Imp with the wrathian accent called out. Charlie looked down slightly at the heavily muscular imp lady with shaggy black hair and a tooth gap smiling at her. "Bet you a thousand souls you're twice the fighter half of these gals *think* they are!"

"Ohhh, thank you, Millie!" Charlie cooed, touched. Vaggie had to roll her eye fondly. She barely met the woman, and Charlie already decided she was a dear friend.

"Hope you don't plan on taking it easy on her." Another taller imp with curled horns called out. "Highly doubt you don't want the prize."

"Winner takes all, as they say." Verosika Mayday purred, leaning on the muscular imp's shoulder. Their outfits looked more like bikinis than anything one should wear for a fight.

“Heh, you two gals are in it for the reward.” Millie sniffed, rubbing her nose at them. “Trish and I are in it for the *thrill*.” She thumbed over her shoulder at another imp lady who was in the process of doing one-fingered pushups, lifting her entire body up in a vertical position.

“Do not take your eyes off the goal, princess.” The ever-elegant voice of Carmilla said, as she walked with a regal poise and *presence* that Charlie was certain she could never replicate, not even with the royal blood flowing through her veins. The way those muscles stretched her own battle-gown was a sight to behold.

Charlie had to gulp nervously. Even the friendliest here looked like a dangerous bunch. How was she supposed to keep the damn Qlipoth potions from falling into the wrong hands when everyone here was going to give it their all?

The biggest threat was on the other side of the preliminary stage. Wearing a fuzzy coat with a halter-top and microshorts, Velvette of the Vees was glaring daggers at her, smiling so dangerously, looking like she could barely contain herself from starting a fight right then and there.

Charlie could feel the *power* radiating from her. She had been dosed with a *highly* potent dose of Qlipoth, of that she had no doubt.

Of course, Vox was going to let one of his own allies compete if it meant he didn’t have to give away *anything* as the price. And of course, Glacier had no problem with that if it meant a bigger show. That demon wanted nothing but chaos, and he had everything in place to ensure that’d be the case.

Stage lights flooded the arena, turning in all directions and making the crowd go wild as the show was about to start. The lights centered on one of the corners of the arena at one of the largest and most expensive-looking booths. Two figures stood there with microphones in hand.

*“Heeeello there, people from the Rings!”* Vox intoned with a showman’s charisma. *“I hope you lot are ready for one of the wildest, deadliest, and most amazing displays of barbaric entertainment this side of the Underworld has seen in ages!”*

*“We’re here to see who are the biggest, meanest, badest, and strongest ladies in all the Rings!”* Glacier rasped into the microphone. *“They’re gonna get their hands bloody, their bodies broken, their spirits crushed! All for the chance to win one of the most coveted prizes in all of hell!”*

*“For what better reward can be for a contest of strength than the promise of more strength!”* Vox laughed. *“That’s right. The legendary fruits of the Qlipoth, distilled into the finest elixirs, will be given to the winner of this most magnificent competition!”*

*“And what will determine the winner, you ask?!”* Glacier said. *“Well, with violence, duh! Have you been paying attention?!”*

*“What my... partner here means is: All the ladies here will be fighting hordes of the deadliest and most sophisticated war machines VoxTech’s arms division has to offer! Each competitor will be tallied on how many machines they destroy. The more dangerous the machine, the more points you earn!”*

*“But fighting just machines is boring! This is gladiator stuff, baby! Competitors are encouraged to fight each other for a whopping 100 points!”*

*“Ohohoho, that’s right! Nobody’s safe here! There are no friends, no teams, no rules! It’s everybody for themselves, law of the jungle up on this bitch!”*

Vaggie and Charlie shared a look. No teams, huh? Well, the two didn’t count on them watching each other’s backs.

*“Everybody!”* Vox’s eye waved maliciously with arcs of electricity. *“Let’s get ready to rumble!”*

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What could they have expected from a free-for-all gladiatorial combat other than absolute chaos?

The moment Vox announced the start, the competitors were ushered into the open field, spread at a good distance from each other. Lights flashed everywhere as the walls of the arena opened and from their depths stepped forth rows and rows of machines. Simple droid walkers that would only be a threat in numbers, large quadrupedal machines that took the shape of predators. Smaller panels in the walls opened so swarms of drones would fly in and buzz around the arena like an electronic hive.

It did not take long for the mechanical opponents to attack, swarming at the competitors in a sea of metal.

Charlie's eyes darted from side to side as the mayhem started. Machine parts flew around in blasts of sparks as metal was torn and bent by the fury and strength of muscular flesh. The smell of oil littered the air and plagued her nose.

A large machine with enormous arms and short legs, its head filled with lenses and a maw full of sharp teeth, bore down upon her. Raising its great fists and slamming them upon the ground with tremendous force, enough that it cracked the group. Charlie dodged at the last moment, feeling her lack of experience in battle weigh down on her once more.

But Vaggie was a dutiful girlfriend; she made sure her beloved would not be helpless in a moment like this. She had been *very* thorough in her teachings.

Charlie took a deep breath and charged at the machine. The infernal and heavenly power of her Nephilim nature burned through her arms as she clenched her fists, making her veins throb in response, as she delivered two swift strikes at the machine's thorax, denting the plates into small craters before completely demolishing its maw and splintering metal and glass, none of which managed to do more than slightly scratch her skin.

"Wooo! *Esa es mi chicha!*" Vaggie celebrated her girlfriend's victory as she pirouetted through the air, making her angelic spear cut through several drones out of the air. "Knew those lessons would help!"

"I'm still not really in favor of violence!" She replied, shaking the metal and oil out of her hands. "But I can see how it's cathartic!"

"Well, you'd better keep it up! We need to rack up the points if we wanna win this thing!" She huffed as she jumped over a tiger-like machine and stabbed it in the head with her spear. "Might wanna look for any other competitor to take out!"

"I-I don't think I really wanna fight the other ladies here!" Charlie said skittishly as she side-stepped the charge of a droid with multiple chainsaws for arms, conjuring her trident to destroy it in one fell swoop. "I have nothing against them!"

“Well!” Vaggie grunted, dusting off her outfit and pointing with her spear at a group of women who were easily tearing through the machines. Setting their sights on Charlie. “I don’t think the sentiment’s mutual...”

Oh... great...

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Millie was having the time of her life. Really, she’d been living through a constant blast ever since she first started training under Trish. Fighting against an Abyssal monster, getting huge and ripped, becoming far more powerful than most imps ever could in their entire life.

And now she was fighting in an honest-to-hell arena, against hordes of murder machines for all of hell to see.

She once told Blitz that reputation was everything for a mercenary, doubly so for Wrathians. If you couldn’t make a name for yourself, you were just setting yourself up to go hungry. But even with their business booming (in large part thanks to the bounties on the Abyss border she collected from Trish), their little business would not be having problems with money in a very long time. And yet Millie found herself starving for more.

More battle, more challenges, more *everything*.

She grinned maniacally as she slashed the machines to pieces with a swing of her axe. Three at the same time, and she was looking to up the ante even more. She spotted a group of demon ladies backing away from a massive, thrashing bull-shaped machine, and Millie instantly knew what she had to do.

She jumped over to the bull, burying the edge of her axe over its back, and directed it to move from side to side. It thrashed and kicked, letting out metallic bellows, as she made it kick the competitors away with enough force to knock them out.

Up in the stands. She saw her team, her family, carrying signs and cheering her on. Shouting her praises even amongst the roars of the crowd, she could feel her dear Moxxie cry out, ‘You’re the best, sweetie!’

Millie smiled and then grabbed the bull by its mellitic horns. She pulled and pulled with such strength that her arms bulged out, throbbing with veins. The head jerked as pistons and cables began tearing, the plates ripping as oil spilled out. A flanged sound came from its voice box before it was completely ripped out by her titanic might.

“YEAH!” Millie roared as she jumped down from the now inactive machine, flexing her arms and boasting her strength for all of hell to see.

“Getting a bit too confident, are you?” Trish grinned at her, sitting on top of a pile of scrap metal that used to be robots. “What’d I always tell ya? Confidence is good-“

“Overconfidence is death.” Millie parroted, retrieving her axe with a huff. “Yeah, yeah. I’m just having fun! Don’t tell me you’re not!”

“Darling, this is a holiday for me.” The imp veteran jumped down from the pile, hoisting her greatsword over her shoulder, and strutting toward her with a hypnotic gait of her muscular legs. “If they really wanted to challenge me, they’d bring the big guns already.”

Millie’s ear twitched as she heard a roaring devil lady charge at her. She merely shifted the position of her axe and turned to the side, planting the blunt of her weapon against the woman’s face. The body froze before falling to the ground. “Ya think they’re saving the best for later?”

“Heh, with a tournament like this? No doubt.” Trish chuckled to herself, idly picking up a large chunk of metal from her fallen foes before chucking it with so much strength it picked up a dust cloud on the way, hitting a demon in the head and instantly knocking her out.

“Ya know, if you want a challenge.” Millie grinned at her saucily, idly playing with her axe. “How about takin’ me on?”

“I mean, that sounds fun. But think we’d get disqualified from doing it in public.” She shrugged. “Or we’d get a thousand points. I heard that Glacier guy’s a freak.”

“Nah, let’s save it for the celebration. I wanna get Moxxie sandwiched between all this sweaty beef.” She chuckled darkly in anticipation. “I meant...” And pointed her axe at her friend. “How about we fight?”

Trish replied with a stunned stare that morphed into a euphoric smile. “Really?”

“We never did have a proper match between us.”

Licking her lips, the imp soldier ever so slowly brought her greatsword to bear. “Well... how can I say no?”

The two massive imps wasted no time once the challenge was issued and accepted, charging at each other and clashing their weapons with a resounding boom.

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