

Rebound volume 4

B.I.B.L.E. Comics script

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1.

Nicole, Nicholas and Lance have been camping out for a few days, just exploring the area around where they set up their tents and idly passing the time.

Nicole and Lance are sitting at the top of a small slope overlooking a lake, watching Nicholas who's in the water, wading towards a couple of very big fish with long barbels. He's still wearing all his clothes like he was too preoccupied with the fish to care if they got wet.

Nicholas: "These fish just couldn't care less. Look, I bet I can touch it and it won't even care."

Nicholas extends a hand towards one of the fish. Before he can touch it, it jerks its head around to face him. Nicholas is so startled that he falls over backwards into the water.

Nicole: Laughs. "Careful it doesn't eat you!"

Nicole is in the middle of taking off her hiking boots that seem a little overly heavy for the mild weather and terrain. She looks over at Lance who is sitting with a book in his lap, frowning and very confused by whatever he's reading.

Nicole: "Sorry, I didn't even think to bring anything to read that'd actually be interesting to you."

Lance: "There's so many weird words. What's an airplane..?"

Nicole: "Oh. It's like a big metal vehicle with wings so you can sit inside and fly around."

Lance: "Yeah, but how? How can something made of metal fly?"

Nicole: "Umm, something about how the wings are shaped that affects the air pressure so the plane is lifted up. I don't actually know well enough to explain it."

Lance only looks even more confused.

Nicole: "You know, physics?"

Since this apparently doesn't ring a bell for Lance, she continues.

Nicole: "No offense, but, man, Kimera's so far behind everyone else. I guess you don't even have electricity? There must be so many things you've never heard of. Like, computers, radiators, cameras, washing machines? Laser tech, x-rays, I guess not even recorded music and--"

When Nicole is about to run out of fingers to count technological advancements on, Lance suddenly stands up and lets his book fall to the ground beside him. He clutches his head like he's in pain.

Lance: "No..."

He keeps muttering "no" as he turns his back to the lake and starts walking on shaky legs. Nicole quickly catches up to him. She puts her hands on his shoulders to carefully try and turn him back around. Lance flinches and reacts by elbowing her in the face and pushing her away. For a moment he acts like he's about to attack Nicole, but then a dazed look comes over his face and he simply falls over.

Nicole: "Oh my god..."

Nicole drops down on her knees next to Lance. There's blood running out of his nose. She shakes Lance's shoulders in an attempt to wake him up.

Nicole: "Lance, can you hear me?!"

With a jolt, she pulls away when the grass under Lance sizzles and turns black. She stays at a distance, afraid to come into contact with whatever strange magic it is that surrounds him.

Nicole: Yells: "Nicholas, something's really wrong!"

Nicholas is already sprinting up the slope in his soaking wet clothes. When he sees that Lance is on the ground rather than about to kill someone, he slows down and comes to a halt next to his sister.

They both look down at the unconscious boy, unsure of what to do.

2.

In the old Skull Inc. camp by the sea, Dexter has stopped by to get instructions from Jamila on where to go and who to pick up next. The two of them are standing in an open square. Judging from the virulent expression on her face and the way she slowly circles around Dexter, it's clear that Jamila is very displeased.

Jamila: "It's crucial we can count on you showing up at the right time and place every time! Crucial, got it?! If I hear you slighting the assignments I give you one more time, I'm personally gonna find someone to replace you!"

Dexter grins up at her mockingly. Even when she's walking on all fours, Jamila is a bit taller than he is.

Dexter: "Sure you are. You really think there's anyone else out there who's half as good at this as me? I'm practically holding this whole establishment toge--"

Jamila: "Shut you mouth, you insufferable little shit!"

Dexter shuts up.

Jamila: "You're lucky James is vouching for you, or you would've been thrown out on your ass long ago! Are you really that desperate to go back to fending for yourself? That wasn't working out very well for you, was it?"

For a second, Dexter actually looks scared at that.

Dexter: "They tried to kill him!"

Jamila: "James is fine! We got more important things to worry about than your personal drama!"

The handful of other demons that are also residing in the camp at the present time have opted to stay out of Jamila's way and cleared out of the square. When Rex happens to walk past them and overhears the conversation, he has no such reservations. He approaches Jamila and looks at her disapprovingly.

Rex: "Come on, Jamila, give him a break."

Jamila: "A break?! This guy has the impulse control of a three year old, we should probably keep him on a leash!"

Dexter clenches his fists and stares at the ground like he's trying hard not to let that poor impulse control get the better of him.

Rex: “It isn’t always easy to stay rational when someone you care about has been hurt.”

Jamila shakes her head at Rex, glares at Dexter one last time, and walks away irritably.

Jamila: “I’ve said what I had to say.”

Dexter squints at Rex, unsure of whether he’s going to start yelling at him too.

Rex: “Honestly, you’re doing a tremendous amount of work. I don’t think it would be possible to replace you. People don’t give you enough credit. Although, yes, you could work on being less... Insufferable.”

After a few seconds where there’s nothing on his face but a blank stare, Dexter’s usual grin returns.

Dexter: “Yeah? Maybe I just need you to teach me how to be a little nicer.”

Rex: Looks away tiredly and decides to leave. “You’re not helping your case.”

Dexter drops the grin as quickly as he put it on and is left pensively watching Rex’s receding back as he walks the rest of the way across the square.

3.

Lana flies across a desert area on Balthazar's home planet Halashin. She has been travelling for quite a while in the hopes of finding the town where he is staying.

When she flies over the cliff where Balthazar was keeping his things earlier, she spots him sitting on the ground in front of the small cave that offers some of the only shade in the area. He is surrounded by wood and carpentering tools, in the middle of building a chair.

Lana lands on the cliff a little ways in front of him. She looks between Balthazar and the town below a little nervously.

Lana: "Goodness, I thought I had forgotten where this place was after all."

Balthazar is startled out of his own thoughts and looks up at Lana with a mix of confusion and annoyance.

Balthazar: "Am I really this easy to find?"

Lana: "I'm sorry for intruding. You told me you were staying on Halashin, so I hoped maybe--"

Balthazar: "Yeah, sure, you're just the third person to somehow make their way here."

With a frown, he returns to sanding down a chair leg that has yet to be attached to the rest of the chair.

Lana: "Oh..." She looks at Balthazar dubiously. "What are you doing?"

Balthazar: "Building a chair."

Lana: "Construction on a protected, mortal world is a criminal offense."

Balthazar: "I have been allowed to stay here with my possessions. My possessions now include this chair."

Lana: "You can't just sit here and build ghost chairs!"

Balthazar: "Look who's talking."

The comment comes out more resentful than intended.

Balthazar: "Lana, I don't think you understand how incredibly bored and tired of everything I am right now."

Lana: “I-- After I spoke with you, I realized I could not in good conscious sit and do nothing. I travelled Kimera to investigate for myself and I think I figured it out...”

Balthazar: “Figured out what?”

Lana: “What Rex is doing! From what I understand, the other angels have been looking at the incident all wrong. What the sin eaters were doing had nothing much to do with the ritual site, so...”

She realizes that her run-on sentence will only come out as rambling and stops herself.

Lana: “I want to find him. Will you help me..?”

Balthazar stops what he’s doing and looks at Lana for what seems like a long time. He internally debates with himself whether he wants to get involved at all, but finally lets out a resigned sigh.

Balthazar: “Tell me more about it first.”

4.

Elle is standing in the doorway to the kitchen in her apartment. She looks worriedly at Jerry who is packing some clothes and a few other items into a bag on the couch.

Elle: "I think maybe you should stay away for awhile. I've seen him stalking around, he even asked *me* if I knew where you were."

Jerry: Turns his head towards Elle at that, his brow furrowed. "Did he say anything to you?"

Elle: "No no, he was just really... skittish?"

She hands Jerry a bottle of water for him to pack as well.

Elle: "I didn't want to ask what was up with him because obviously something had gone wrong when Sherba and the others came straight back here without you. You've been gone for three days..."

Jerry: "Are they okay by the way?"

Elle: "I think so. After the circumstances." She anxiously fidgets with a lock of her hair. "Jerry, I was actually really worried."

Jerry: "Sorry, I guess I could've dropped by here right away, but it's just... a mess."

Elle: "It's okay, I--"

Elle is cut off when Dexter drops down right in the middle of the living room, followed by a shockwave that topples over all the lighter furniture and rattles the rest. Elle yelps and ducks into the kitchen. Jerry turns around to face Dexter and looks seriously angry with his entrance.

Jerry: "Do you mind? If you want to come at me, fine, but this isn't even my place!" He gestures at the now sorry state of the apartment.

Dexter clearly couldn't care less about the furniture. He bares his teeth at Jerry and looks absolutely vicious.

Dexter: "Don't even try to tell me you didn't know! That green fucking COW would've left James to die and sold all of us out and you HELPED HIM GET AWAY?!"

Jerry: "Okay, yes, I did have an idea and I really shouldn't have let him come with us, but James is fine, right?" He shrugs like the whole thing is no big deal. "And Balthazar changed his mind, he gave me the documents--"

Dexter: Looks like he's about to explode. "What so you could pass them on to Heaven instead?! Like the disgusting angel you are! How fucking convenient!"

Jerry: "No, just... look."

Jerry slowly leans towards a knocked over table where a bunch of documents and books have fallen onto the floor. He extends one arm between himself and Dexter, as to ward Dexter off, and picks up the Skull Inc. booklet lying among the scattered papers.

Jerry: "Here, you can have it if that makes you happy."

He offers the booklet to Dexter. Dexter knocks it out of Jerry's hand and stares at him.

Dexter: "Where is he?"

Jerry: "I don't know."

Dexter: Sneers: "But you have an idea."

Jerry: "Maybe I do, but I'm not gonna tell you about it."

Jerry looks at Dexter nonchalantly despite the fact that Dexter has walked right into his personal space and is coming off in every way threatening.

Dexter: "You really wanna do this?"

Jerry doesn't answer and Dexter is so aggravated by this that he shoves him backwards, hard, so he is knocked down onto the couch behind him.

Dexter: "You know, I actually LIKED you! Hahahahaha, but oh, I guess--"

He practically crawls on top of Jerry to snarl in his face. Jerry leans away, but still looks relatively composed. His eyes flicker to the bag beside him on the couch.

Dexter: "-I guess you really are nothing but a two-faced, repulsive--"

Dexter is so busy assaulting Jerry that he hasn't noticed Elle walk up behind him, clutching a frying pan in one set of hands. She hits Dexter in the back of the head with a very loud CLANG. He drops to the floor, unconscious.

Jerry lets go of the knife he had been about to pull out of his bag and looks down at Dexter.

Jerry: "Wow, Elle, just bash the guy's skull in."

Elle: "He was acting like he was about to kill you!"

Jerry gets off the couch and flops Dexter over onto his back. He crouches down to check if he's alright.

Elle: "Is he dead?! Oh no, he's dead, isn't he?" She looks like she could start hyperventilating any second.

Jerry: "Nah, he'll be fine." He pats Dexter on the chest and grins up at Elle. "He'll probably wake up in a few years."

Elle: "It isn't funny, Jerry!"

Suddenly someone knocks on the door to the apartment. Elle drops the frying pan, mortified like she was caught in the act of some horrible crime. Jerry just looks tired.

Lana's voice can be heard from the other side of the door, clear and assertive.

Lana: "Jeremias Daguerre, I demand that you open this door at once!"

Jerry stares at the door like he can't quite believe his own ears.

Jerry: "... Lana..?"

Balthazar: Speaks up from outside the apartment as well: "I'm here too, it's alright."

Jerry cautiously opens the door and looks out at the two angels. Lana stands there with her head held high and her body language stiff and disapproving.

Lana: "I have been informed that you know of the whereabouts of the mage demon known as Dexter. Is that correct?"

Jerry: "Uhh..."

He takes a step back to open the door fully and motions with one arm to reveal Dexter lying on the floor.

Lana looks puzzled, but doesn't comment. She walks inside the apartment and glances coldly at Elle who stands pressed against a wall and looks terrified by yet another angel. Jerry carefully takes a step back when she walks past him, not about to get in her way.

Lana makes her way to Dexter and looks down at him.

Lana: "This is him?"

Balthazar has walked in behind Lana. He looks even more puzzled.

Balthazar: "Yeah, that's him."

Jerry: "I don't think he's gonna wake up anytime soon, so uh..."

Lana has brought a sturdy chain with a handcuff at either end. She bends down to clasp one cuff shut around Dexter's right wrist, and the other around her left.

Lana: "This way he will not be able to teleport away without me, correct?"

Jerry: "Well, yeah. I guess."

Lana stands and tries to decide whether she should bother carrying Dexter outside before teleporting away.

Lana: "Please excuse my horrible manners, I will spare myself from carrying him outside."

She bends down and grabs the collar of Dexter's coat instead, as if to drag him away, and disappears in a flash of light. Balthazar is left behind and stands there looking vaguely apologetic.

Jerry: "Is this about Rex?"

Balthazar: "Yes."

Jerry looks like he has more questions to ask, but refrains from voicing them.

Jerry: "Don't get Dexter killed." He looks at Balthazar earnestly. "He's important, a lot of people are gonna be pissed. And they're still going to blame this on me. And just... Don't get him killed..."

Balthazar nods decisively before teleporting himself away as well.

5.

The sun has set on the world where Nicole, Nicholas and Lance are camping out. Nicholas is making a fire next to the tents they've put up while Nicole sits next to Lance and looks at him sadly. They have laid him on a mattress and put a blanket over him. He's still unconscious, but at least he isn't scorching everything near him anymore.

Nicole gently brushes Lance's bangs away from his face before she decides to get up. She walks over to Nicholas and sits down next to the fire with him.

Nicole: "I don't know what to do about him..."

Nicholas: "I know you don't want to hear it, but he's getting rreeally creepy." He keeps his eyes on the fire rather than looking at Nicole. "All the time he's either throwing a fit or zoning out. His brain is probably about to explode, he keeps bleeding out of his face."

Nicole: "That's happened before?" She looks upset. "Why didn't you tell me..?"

Nicholas: "I forgot!" He shrugs dismissively. "I'm not the one who spends all day fussing over him."

Nicholas hesitantly glances over at his sister. She seems very sad and defeated as she picks up a branch next to her and absentmindedly pokes at the burning wood with it.

Nicholas: "Do you still think it's a bad idea to take him back to Heaven? You know... You know, honestly I'm scared he's gonna get up in the middle of the night and stab us to death or something. I know I promised not to complain, but..." He shrugs.

Nicole: "I don't know, Nic... Can we talk about this tomorrow? I'm really tired..."

Nicholas: "Sure, okay."

Nicole snaps her branch in two and throws the pieces into the flames. With no further discussion, they put out the fire and go to sleep.

5.1

In the very early morning, Nicole is woken up by Nicholas shaking her shoulder. Bleary-eyed, she sits up and looks at him.

Nicholas: "Lance is gone." He looks worried.

Nicole: Practically jumps to her feet. "Gone? He just left?"

Nicholas: "I was half awake at some point and I thought I heard him get up, but then I must have fallen asleep again. I woke up just now because, wait, he isn't supposed to get up on his own."

Nicole hastily puts on her shorts and boots.

Nicole: "Which way did he go?" She has already picked a direction to walk in.

Nicholas: "No idea..."

Nicholas follows Nicole into the forest. He looks a little guilt-ridden to see his sister so obviously upset. They haven't walked very far before Nicholas notices a path across the forest floor where the fallen leaves and plant growths look blackened and charred.

He and Nicole look at each other before they hesitantly decide to follow the path. As they walk, the black trail only gets broader until they reach a large clearing where the whole area seems to have been worn down the same way as the forest floor.

Lance sits in the middle of it, unmoving and with his back turned. The air around him ripples strangely, like looking at the horizon on a very hot day. Nicole runs over to him, but she slows down when she comes closer, confused that Lance doesn't react at all.

Nicole walks around Lance so as not to startle him and Nicholas slowly follows her, looking very uneasy. Lance sits there with a knife held loosely in one hand, staring blankly at the ground like his mind is very far away. The white of his eyes are spotted with blood clots and there is red on his face betraying that he has attempted to wipe off another case of nose blood.

Nicholas: Whispers to Nicole: "I told you, he's gonna stab us to death." He peers at the knife and recognizes it as one he packed himself. "How did he even get that..."

Nicole gives him a disdainful glance and walks closer to Lance. She crouches down to be at eye level with him.

Nicholas: Still whispers, but too loud for it to actually be discreet: “Nicole, what are you doing?!”

Nicole: “Lance..?”

Lance still doesn't react, so she carefully reaches a hand towards him. As soon as the hand comes into his line of sight, his gaze snaps up to Nicole's face. His whole body tenses up and his grip on the knife tightens. He stares at Nicole with wide, panicked eyes like a feral animal and doesn't seem to recognize her at all.

Frightened, Nicole moves to stand up, but Lance lifts the knife and stabs her in the thigh. He jumps to his feet himself and looks at the now bloodied knife in his hand like he's not really sure how it got there. Then he turns around and runs.

Nicole cries out in pain and doubles over to press her hands down on her wound. The knife didn't hit anything vital, but it's still bleeding. Nicholas doesn't think twice before he sprints after Lance and tackles him to the ground.

Sitting halfway on top of him, Nicholas wrenches the knife out of Lance's hand and throws it away. Lance sputters angrily and struggles to escape, but Nicholas holds him down. Lance manages to pull one of his arms free and smacks his hand onto Nicholas' face. It sears right through his fur and into his skin with a nasty, sizzling sound as if Lance's palm was red hot. Nicholas stumbles away in a panic and lifts a hand to his scorched cheek.

Lance is about to run away again, but his movements are unsteady and he wobbles badly when he attempts to stand up. He only makes it a few, staggering steps forward before he collapses onto the ground.

Nicole: Looks extremely distraught. “Nicholas, are you okay?”

Nicholas: “Y... Yeah...”

Stunned, he removes his hand from his face and looks at it. There is no blood, but Lance's palm has left an ugly, patchy burn wound on his cheek.

Nicole: “W-We have to get help. You were right.”

Nicholas: “We should just take him back to Heaven like I said!”

Nicole: “No!” She takes a step forward, but winces at the pain from the wound in her thigh. “Stay away from him, it's not safe.”

Nicholas: “But--”

Nicole: “We have to get help. I-- We don't even know what this is.” She gestures at Lance's unconscious body. “Stay here and watch him, I'll--”

Nicholas: “But what if he wakes up again?!”

Nicole: “Then just let him run!”

Nicholas: “What if he doesn’t run, what if he comes right at me?”

Nicole: She raises her voice, frustrated and distressed: “Just stay here, Nicholas! I’ll hurry, I’ll be right back.”

6.

Duncan, Opal and Thera are sitting by a table in a meeting room in the building that Opal's platoon usually uses for their training.

Thera: "Just a couple of weeks with that general's halo and it's already impossible to get a hold of you."

Duncan: "I'm not complaining, but there is a lot to see to. It's very different with all the consulting and formalities, but it's interesting to engage with everything from a more top-down perspective."

After getting his new halo, Duncan's wings have turned colorful. Compared to how Balthazar's wings used to look, the feathers are primarily green rather than orange.

Duncan: Smiles at Thera. "How about you? Did everything go as planned while you were in Gluttony?"

Thera: "It went just fine. The rift is properly closed and the insect demons didn't give us much of a fight."

Opal: "The Tibra natives took that giant spider down on their own, even though she managed to level most of the city first. It looks like the rest of the demons disbanded after they lost her. I guess you could call it a success..."

Duncan: Looks at Opal a little sadly. "You don't sound like you think it's a success."

Opal doesn't reply to that.

Opal: "Now that Tibra is taken care of, can you please stop assigning me to any more missions you're responsible for?"

Thera: "You're still going on about this? I really don't see the problem, we make a pretty good team, don't we? Honestly, holding on to petty grudges is a little childish."

Opal: "I'm not going to sit here and pretend we're all such good friends when apparently all that earns you from Duncan is a knife in the back!"

Duncan: "I am not always the one who decides which lieutenants are assigned to me. But, please, if there is anything I can say or do to make this easier, I hope you will let me know."

Opal: "You could start by admitting that what you did was underhanded and unfair."

Duncan: “I see...” He crosses his arms, then uncrosses them. “I genuinely don’t believe that it was, though.”

Opal: “You didn’t even talk to Balthazar yourself!”

Duncan: “It wasn’t my place to question him, I only passed on where he had been after you confirmed it for me.”

Opal: “I know this was my fault too,” she points at herself, “but don’t even try to deny you had just as much part in having him banished.”

Duncan: “Of course.”

He starts to wring his hands, but quickly catches himself in it and puts them down flat on the table in front of him instead.

Duncan: “It’s only a precaution. I respect the Council’s decision.”

Opal: “Banished, Duncan! As a fallen angel! That’s something you punish high treason and serious war crimes with! It doesn’t even matter if the verdict is withdrawn, it’s a dangerous position to be in and not something he’ll ever live down!”

Duncan: “I realize that, but I must insist that Heaven’s safety is more important than one man’s reputation.”

He clears his throat, a little awkwardly, while Opal glares at him.

Duncan: “I would like to respect your wishes, but as you know there is an ongoing search for both Rex and the sacrifice from the vampire ritual. I have already been pulled into it, there is a good chance you will be too.”

Opal scoffs, throws her hands up angrily and leaves the room without another word.

She stands outside the door with her arms crossed for a while, trying to collect herself. When she is about to walk away down the hallway, Thera comes out of the meeting room behind her.

Thera: “Why is it so important to you to get an apology out of him? It doesn’t change anything.”

Opal: Gives Thera a look like that is an absurd thing to ask. “Balthazar has been his superior too. Balthazar has stuck his neck out for him in the past too.” She shrugs her shoulders quickly and aggressively. “The least he can do is show a bit of respect.”

Thera: “Duncan just prefers to do things by the book, it isn’t exactly personal. And the suspiciousness? That was mostly me.”

Opal is kept from continuing the conversation when she notices Ennet walking straight towards her with a worried look on his face.

Ennet: “Opal, good, you’re still here. You have to come with me, Nicholas’ sister just showed up, she insists she wants to talk to you.”

Both Opal and Thera are surprised by this. Opal hurriedly follows Ennet and Thera walks after them.

Ennet leads them to a side room where Nicole is already sitting. She is inspecting her wounded thigh with a dogged grimace. She has already closed the wound herself with her healing magic, but it looks messy with the blood that has run down her leg.

Opal: “Nicole, where have you been?! Everyone is looking for you!”

Nicole looks relieved to see Opal there, but her eyes flicker uncertainly to Ennet and Thera. Opal puts a hand on her arm a bit forcefully and directs Nicole’s attention onto her.

Opal: “Are you okay? Do you know where Lance is?”

Nicole: “You have to help me! Something’s really wrong with him, I-like some kind of magic! I don’t even want to try and go near him again and-- I didn’t know what to do, I’m sorry.”

Opal: “You shouldn’t have run off with him for one.”

Nicole: Hides her face in her hands. “I’m sorry. Please just come look at him, I left Nicholas there all alone.”

Opal: “Why didn’t you just find his guardian?”

She sighs tiredly when Nicole doesn’t answer, then turns her head towards Thera.

Opal: “Maybe Duncan should see this.”

Thera: Answers very promptly: “He already left.” She pauses for a second. “I’ll go with you. It sounds... bad.”

Nicole: “But--”

Opal: “Just take us there, Nicole! You have made enough of a mess already.”

Nicole bows her head abashedly before reaching for both Opal and Thera so she can teleport them to the forest where Nicholas is waiting with Lance.

When they arrive in the clearing, Nicholas is sitting with his back against a tree, staring warily at Lance who is still lying unconscious a good distance away. He quickly gets up and stands very straight when he sees that Nicole has brought Opal with her.

Opal: Looks at Nicholas sternly, then back at Nicole. "I don't know what reason you thought you had for doing this, but both of you should really know better than to kidnap a hospitalized child."

Nicole: Almost whispers: "I'm sorry..."

Thera: Has stepped closer to Lance. "What's wrong with him?"

Nicholas: "He did all this!" He gestures at the blackened and slightly distorted clearing they're all standing in. "He burned me with his hand and stabbed Nicole and then he just passed out!"

Opal: Looks confused. "This just happened out of nowhere?"

Nicole: "He, um... passed out the first time maybe two days ago? We couldn't get him to wake up, but then he walked off all of a sudden while we were sleeping and we found him here. He didn't even act like he recognized us..." Her voice trails off. "He was okay at first. I didn't know..."

Nicholas: "No he wasn't! He was bleeding out of his face and acting weird before that!"

Thera: "Weird how?"

Nicholas: "Like, I don't know, spacing out and forgetting things and stuff."

Thera: "Opal, stay here with them. I'll find his guardian or someone else who knows what's going on."

Opal: "Yeah. They should probably come see him for themselves."

Nicole doesn't look happy with this turn of events, but she doesn't intervene while Thera nods and teleports away.

7.

In the old Skull Inc. camp, Rex and Jamila are standing on a ledge behind the upper part of the wall facing the ocean. Jamila is looking out at the water with a contemplative expression on her face.

Jamila: "What do we do if we don't find him in time?"

Rex: "The same thing you would have done anyway. Pin the blame on me, lay low for a few years, then move on to the next step. If it helps to keep things down amongst our own, you can always say I led you on intentionally..."

Jamila: "Why would you do that?"

Rex: "Oh I don't know. Maybe all the questionable magic I have dabbled in have finally driven me delusional. I'm sure you can figure out a way to slander me."

Jamila: "To be fair, when you first proposed this plan to me, I thought you were a crazy bastard and you haven't really given me a reason to change my mind since."

She rests one elbow on the wall and props her head up on her hand while she studies Rex appraisingly.

Jamila: "Seriously though? There's no way you're gonna survive after this if our people are out for your blood too."

Rex: "I think I'll manage."

Jamila: Smirks skeptically. "You're a very strange guy, Rex."

Rex: "I don't think so. Just very determined."

Without either of them having noticed her flying towards them, Thera lands on the wall next to them.

Thera: "I found the sacrifice!"

Jamila and Rex look up at her, surprised.

Rex: "Is he still outside Heaven?"

Thera: "He is. The nurse came to ask one of my colleagues for help. The boy's definitely causing some kind of magical distortion at this point." She shuffles impatiently. "I don't have

a lot of time, I said I would go to Heaven for assistance. What's the plan, should I just let him be taken back to Heaven?"

Rex: "I would like to see him for myself first."

Jamila: "Why? Let's just get it over with."

Rex: "Now that I have the chance, I'm curious to see what it looks like, aren't you? Besides, if something goes wrong, Thera shouldn't be the only one to know where the boy is."

Thera: Briefly looks between the two others. "Fine, but it'll be at a distance."

7.1

Thera takes Rex and Jamila to the forest where Lance is. The two demons they discussed their strategy with earlier have joined them as well.

Thera has picked a spot to appear far enough away from the other angels that there is no risk of them seeing the glow from her teleportation magic. The group walks towards the clearing while Thera explains the situation.

Thera: “They have been out here for about a week, so if your original estimations hold up, something should be happening by now, right?”

Rex: “I thought you already confirmed that there is?”

Thera: “It sounds like the boy is losing his mind. You know, same as what happens if you carelessly use magic for a long time. Like that, only sped up a lot. He’s causing some kind of corruption to his surroundings too.”

They reach a spot where they can see the clearing with Lance still lying in the middle of it.

Thera: “Just look at that. If there was any healthy plant life in that clearing, it’s definitely dead now.”

Rex: “That does look like something happening.”

Thera: “Eehh, well? What did you agree on?”

Jamila: “No matter if he can tear a hole in Heaven or not, he has to go back there. It’s the only responsible thing to do.”

Rex: “Either way, I doubt he’ll survive for more than a couple of days. Then we won’t have to worry about him any longer.”

Thera: “If I take him to any of the people who have been involved with him, they’ll put him in a hospital.”

Rex: “Yes. That’s unfortunate.”

Jamila: “It’s what we’ve been expecting from the start. There’s no way to do this without any casualties.”

Demon2: Mutters: “It’s just angels anyway...”

Thera looks at the demon disapprovingly before teleporting away.

7.2

Thera appears back in the clearing. The other angels all look at her expectantly, waiting to hear what she has found out after her supposed trip to Heaven.

Thera: "I've been told to take him back to his own paradise for the time being." She looks at Nicole. "You can take us there, right?"

Nicole nods, but doesn't look very happy with the consensus.

Thera: "There'll be a couple of people coming over to take a look at him as soon as possible, it's just he's probably safer there."

Thera walks towards Lance who is still lying motionless on the ground.

Thera: "He hasn't moved at all?"

Nicholas: "Nope."

Thera looks down at the boy cautiously. Someone has to pick him up if they are to take him anywhere, so she bends down to pull him into a sitting position with an arm around his back.

Nicole: "Um, be careful."

As soon as Thera touches him, Lance snaps awake with the same panicked, animalistic look in his eyes that he had before he passed out.

With quick movements he shakes off Thera's arm, clasps one hand around her throat and manages to throw her off balance. Lance's hand sears right into the feathers on her neck as she lands on the ground. The effect only spreads as an overwhelming invisible force seems to grind into the ground in a circle, several meters in diameter, around Lance. The soil under the two is forced away, creating an indent in the ground.

Before Lance can burn a hole straight through Thera's neck, Opal comes to her rescue and kicks Lance away with her front paws. She hurriedly hooks her arms under Thera's armpits and pulls her away from the hole in the ground. Opal drops Thera behind her and stands between her and Lance awaiting another attack.

The attack never comes. Lance just sits on the ground where he fell after Opal kicked him and looks deeply confused.

Nicole: "Lance..?"

Lance dazedly turns his head towards Nicole, then to the hole in the ground in front of him and Thera lying behind Opal. She is unconscious and looks in poor condition, her entire upper body seared and blistering strangely. He puts the pieces together and slowly curls in on himself.

Lance: "I'm sorry..."

It takes a while before Opal feels she can take her eyes off Lance. She turns around to inspect Thera's injuries. Around the area where Lance touched her, her neck looks weirdly bloated and contorted.

Opal: "I have to take her to a hospital, I've never seen this kind of effect before."

She points at Lance and looks sharply at Nicole.

Opal: "Watch him, but stay away from him, okay? I'll make sure someone actually comes out here this time."

Nicole: "Okay..."

Opal hoists Thera up and teleports away with her.

7.3

From inside the forest, Rex and the others have been able to watch the whole scene. Rex looks like he's pretty fed up with his life at this point and the rest of the group don't look much livelier.

Jamila: "Well shit..."

They stand there in heavy silence, all of them trying to think of what to do next.

Demon1: "Maybe it's no big deal, maybe they'll take him back to Heaven on their own."

Rex: "I sincerely doubt that. It's too late, at this point you don't have to be an expert to tell how destructive this magic is."

He stares at Lance who is still sitting curled up on the ground in the distance.

Rex: "He's wearing the barrier of this world thin just by his presence. It won't take long before it suffers a proper breach."

Jamila: "Then let's stop wasting time and get on with it."

Demon2: "All of us are going to get caught at this rate." She sounds bitter. "Guess we can already count Thera out. Even if this doesn't blow her cover, she's getting way too suspicious."

Jamila turns and glares at the demon sternly.

Jamila: "Now's not the time to be selfish. We made this mess and now we clean it up, got it?"

8.

Lana is sitting on a rock right inside the mouth of a large cave that lies halfway up a mountain. She looks solemnly at the sleet that falls slowly outside and melts as soon as it touches the ground. Dexter is lying motionless next to her, still shackled to her left wrist.

Right outside, Balthazar is pacing back and forth with the uneasy energy that seems to hit him every time he has to wait for an extended period of time.

Lana: "Will you sit down, please?"

Balthazar turns towards Lana, confused for a second, then sighs and moves to sit on one of the other rocky protrusions that stick out of the cave floor here and there, brushing off the wet sleet that has landed on the shoulders of his coat.

Lana smiles at him gratefully, but doesn't say anything for a while.

Lana: "I wanted to thank you... I realized how important it is to me to do this, and I would not even have known what is transpiring if not for you."

Balthazar: "Honestly I talked to you more for my own sake at the time, but sure, that's... good."

Lana: "You came back after you learned what Rex is working towards. You didn't have to do that."

They sit in silence for some time.

Balthazar: "What are you going to do if we find him?"

Lana: "Make sure that justice is done, as it should have been long ago."

Balthazar: "I guess getting some actual closure will make it easier to move on too."

Lana: "It isn't about me." She looks offended at the very thought. "I'm not out for revenge, I am guilty as well, he never forced my hand."

Balthazar: "No, just stabbed you and left you behind."

Lana sighs wearily.

Lana: "In a way, I am grateful he did. I think I would have been even more lost if I had not been apprehended. I believe he knew that..."

Balthazar just gives her a disbelieving look.

Next to them, Dexter finally comes to. He groans as he tries to sit up. It takes him a few seconds to discern where he is, but then his immediate reflex is to teleport himself away. Having expected this, Lana puts a hand between his shoulderblades and pushes him down. The wind magic that was about to form around Dexter is flattened to the ground and pushed away to fan out around them in a big ring of unconcentrated energy.

Lana: “You had best not make any attempt to flee.”

Rather than listening to Lana’s warning, Dexter panics completely. He tears himself free of Lana’s hand, scrambles to his feet and attempts to run. He hasn’t really registered the chain binding him and Lana together. He only makes it a couple of steps before it stops him in his tracks. The pull on his cuffed arm spins him around and he falls on his back, dragging Lana down with him so she falls to her hands and knees.

When Dexter continues to pull away, Lana grabs his ankle with her free hand. With a snap and a sickening, shredding sound, the flesh around Dexter’s ankle and lower leg is ripped apart and the bone under it broken. The sheer force of Lana’s magic leaves a smell of burnt skin and fur in the air.

Dexter howls and instinctively pulls his mangled leg closer to his body, which only serves to make the pain worse. His leg is so badly torn up that the broken bones are clearly visible. His foot hangs at an odd angle and looks like it’s only still attached with skin and sinews.

While Balthazar looks on with barely suppressed shock, Lana stands up straight and looks down at Dexter with a cold, hardened expression.

Lana: “If you move without my instruction again, I will hurt you a lot worse than this. Do you understand?”

Dexter is shaking. He tries and fails to push himself to a sitting position, then laughs hysterically.

Dexter: “Hahahahaha! This... Really? You can’t even come after me yourself?”

Dexter turns his head in Balthazar’s direction and flashes a grin at him that can only be described as hateful. Lana janks the chain to get Dexter’s attention back on her. He winces badly.

Lana: “You are here because of me! I need to go wherever Rex is, and you will take me there.”

Dexter: Looks up at Lana with wide eyes. “No. No no. No way.”

Lana grabs Dexter's shoulder. Under her fingers his coat, and then his skin, breaks and tears apart from the unnatural force drilling into it.

Lana: "Do you want to lose an arm as well?"

Dexter frantically attempts to tear Lana's hand away. In the background, Balthazar doesn't look entirely comfortable with Lana's way of handling the situation.

Dexter: "OKAY! I don't want to lose an arm, just fucking back off!"

Lana lets go of him and slowly stands up straight, glaring at him all the way. Dexter turns away from her a fraction and holds his wounded arm. His eyes are locked on Lana's bloodied hand, his face openly displaying a mix of fear and astonishment.

Lana: "Do you know of Rex's location?"

Dexter: "I uh... am really not supposed to talk about that."

Lana: "I don't care, I asked you a question."

With a pained noise, Dexter manages to sit up. He stares at his broken leg in a blankly detached way. When he finally blinks and looks away, his eyes dart around the cave like he's still trying to figure out some way to escape.

Lana: Leans over Dexter threateningly. "Do I have to repeat myself?"

Dexter jumps a little and raises his arms to block Lana in case she tries to reach for him again.

Dexter: "I might know where he is. I can't be completely sure."

Lana: "Good enough." As an afterthought she adds: "If you try to drop us right in the middle of some of your associates or any such thing, you will not be the only one to die. I hope I have made myself clear."

With a malevolent glare at Lana, Dexter finally conjures up his wind magic and transports her, Balthazar and himself away.

8.1

Dexter and the two angels appear on a hill above the old Skull Inc. camp that Rex and the others left shortly before. As usual, being transported by Dexter's wind magic isn't the most soothing experience, not even to himself. He has to grind his teeth together not to cry out in pain and curls in on his bleeding leg.

Balthazar: Peers down at the camp. "It doesn't look like anyone's here."

Lana shoots Dexter a warning stare, then turns her head to Balthazar.

Lana: "Check if it's clear. I'll wait here."

Balthazar cautiously wanders down to the camp and finds the entrance in the stone wall that surrounds the area. When he comes back a while later, he walks to the foot of the hill, shrugs his shoulders and shouts to Lana.

Balthazar: "It's empty!"

Lana glances down at Dexter who is still sitting on the ground. Once again not bothering to carry him, she grabs the back of Dexter's coat collar and teleports away. A minute later she shows up inside the camp.

Lana looks around at the old buildings searchingly. Many of them have metal grates covering their windows. Lana drags Dexter by his collar to the nearest one while he hisses angrily and tries to get her hand off. Balthazar walks after them, somewhat worried by the blood trail drawn after Dexter's leg.

When Lana reaches the window, she takes a key from her coat pocket and unlocks the handcuff around her wrist. She clasps the cuff shut around one of the bars in the metal grating instead, so far up that the chain doesn't even allow Dexter to lower his arm from his position on the ground.

She contemplates her work for a few seconds, then reaches for the cuff locked around the grating and melts the keyhole and opening shut with her magic so there is no chance of breaking it open. Unkindly, she reaches for Dexter's arm and does the same to the cuff around his wrist.

Lana: "When will Rex be back here?"

Dexter: Sneers: "How should I know? I can't constantly keep track of where everyone is."

Lana: Glances at Dexter coldly. "Then perhaps I won't need your assistance after all."

Dexter: “Wait, I mean--” He tenses up nervously. “I have a couple more ideas where he could have gone, but just wait around for a while? Could be he’s just out somewhere in the area, you never know, heh.”

Lana turns away from Dexter to face Balthazar instead.

Lana: “Can you stay here? I will go look around.”

Balthazar: “Yeah, of course.”

Lana wanders outside the camp walls to scout the surroundings while Balthazar stays behind to watch Dexter.

The fox looks seething mad now that he doesn’t have to worry about Lana’s presence anymore.

9.

Nicholas is still sitting with his back against one of the few trees growing in the forest clearing. Next to him, Nicole stands and fidgets nervously while she keeps glancing over at Lance like she expects him to bolt any moment. Lance is sitting on the ground with his arms covering his head like he is trying to shield himself from the rest of the world.

Nicole: Cautiously tries to address Lance again: "Lance..? Do you know where you are?"

There is no response from the boy whatsoever.

Nicholas: "Just let him zone out or whatever he's doing."

Nicole crosses her arms in an attempt to stop fidgeting. A voice suddenly speaks up from behind her and Nicholas.

Demon2: "Put your hands up and don't try anything stupid, both of you."

Startled, Nicole turns around to find a blue-skinned gargoyle demon pointing a gun at her. Behind the woman is another demon with a gun, as well as a big, dark furred devil and a harul who looks very familiar.

Nicole stares at Rex indignantly.

Nicole: "You're that guy!"

Stumped as to what the guy's actual name is, Nicole looks questioningly at her brother who is hurriedly getting up from his spot at the tree. Nicholas raises his hands like he was told and glances at Nicole tensely.

Nicholas: "Rex."

Nicole: "Rex!"

Demon2: "Hey, what did I tell you!"

She flicks the gun up a little as a reminder for Nicole to put up her hands as well.

Nicole: Points furiously at Lance while she yells at Rex: "You did this! This is all your fault!"

Rex: "You could say that, yes."

Demon2 threateningly steps closer, angry at being ignored, but Jamila shoves right past her and stops directly in front of Nicole.

Jamila: “I’m just gonna get to the point. We need your help getting that boy,” she nods her head in Lance’s direction, “back into Heaven.”

For a moment Nicole is perplexed by the rather large woman now staring down at her, but then she goes right back to being furious and indignant.

Nicole: “I’m not helping you with anything!”

Jamila: “Will you at least hear us out?”

Nicole: “No!”

Jamila: “Okay...”

Jamila clamps one of her big hands onto Nicole’s arm rather forcefully. Nicole winces and tries to pull away, so Jamila just yanks her closer and looks her dead in the eyes.”

Jamila: Turns her head towards Nicholas. “This your brother?”

Nicole keeps her gaze lowered to avoid looking Jamila in the eyes.

Nicole: “Y-yes...”

Jamila: Yanks Nicole’s arm again. “Look at me.”

Nicole flinches and looks up with a fearful expression on her face.

Jamila: “You help us out, or you won’t have a brother no more. Got it?”

Nicole turns her head towards Nicholas with wide eyes like she is silently asking him for some kind of answer to what she should do. He looks back at her, just as scared as she feels, and doesn’t seem to have a reply.

Nicole: “I... I can’t... There’s something wrong with him and you’re going to hurt people.” She scowls fiercely. “How stupid do you think I am?”

Demon2: Points her gun at Nicholas’ head. “Pretty damn stupid if you don’t think we’re being serious right now.”

Rex shakes his head slowly at the demon, then walks a little closer to Nicole.

Rex: “It sounds illogical, but taking him back to Heaven is the safest thing you can do. You see, we made a mistake. Like you’re thinking right now, we thought we could damage Heaven by putting the boy there, but all it did was pacify him.”

Nicole can't help but snap.

Nicole: "His name is Lance! He's not just some-- TOOL!"

Rex: "Well. This is in Lance's best interest as well."

Nicole: "I don't believe you!"

Nicholas still has the gun pointed at his head. He looks very anxious.

Nicholas: Quietly speaks up: "Sis, maybe we should listen to them..? He really got so much worse after we came out here. All the... bleeding and burning things and stuff? That didn't happen before. And Thera said we should take him back too."

Rex glances at Nicholas with something like approval before focusing on Nicole again.

Rex: "You're putting this world in danger. I don't think anyone here is interested in that, do you?"

Nicole grinds her teeth together and tries to sort out her thoughts, enraged and confused and afraid all at once. She wraps her arms around herself and looks Nicholas firmly in the eyes.

Nicole: "Okay..."

Jamila: "Good decision."

With no further ado, Jamila drags Nicole towards Lance.

Jamila: "I'll go with her. Make sure she drops him off at the right place."

Rex: "Take him back to his paradise, you'll be alone there."

Jamila: "How am I supposed to know what that looks like?"

Rex: "Ah, good point..." He thinks for a bit. "Let's pick the next best option, then. Go to Faith, by the old stone gates." He addresses Nicole: "You know where that is, don't you?"

Nicole: Mutters: "Yes..."

Rex: "There are rarely any people there. It's just a big, grassy field with a lot of closed off portals marked by big standing stones."

Jamila: "That sounds easy enough to recognize."

She and Nicole are now standing a couple of steps away from Lance.

Demon2: “And I’m warning you - If you’re not both back here in fifteen minutes, your brother’s done.”

Jamila: “Better get to it, girl.”

Nicole very hesitantly reaches out for Lance. He is still sitting curled up into a ball with his arms shielding his head. He jumps a little when Nicole puts a hand on his shoulder and whips his head around to look at her. While there is still a delirious edge to his behaviour, he does at least seem to recognize Nicole again.

With a last, worried glance back at Nicholas, Nicole teleports her, Lance and Jamila away. They arrive at the big, green field that Rex described. It really is completely free of any angels.

Nicole pulls her hand away from Lance. He has left burns again. She looks panicked like she already regrets what she just did.

Jamila: Inspects the landscape, still holding on to Nicole’s arm. “Good job, girl. This really is--”

Nicole takes Jamila’s moment of inattentiveness as a chance to twist her arm free and then punch her in the face when she turns back around. Jamila looks surprised for a second, then bursts out laughing. She slaps one of her sizable hands down on the back of Nicole’s neck and holds her in place like that instead.

Nicole: “Let GO of me! I’ll scream!!”

Jamila: “Honey, if you wanna scream you should’ve gone for a less deserted place.” She drags Nicole a little further away from Lance to make sure she can’t run off with him. “But since you actually did what you were told, we better get back, if you wanna save your brother.”

Lance stands up. His movements are a little stiff after sitting curled up for so long.

Lance: “No.”

He just looks at them with wide eyes. His whole demeanour is desperate and terrified.

Lance: “Don’t leave. Please don’t leave...”

Jamila: “Sorry, kid. This is how it’ll have to be.”

Lance’s whole body is tense. He stares at Jamila with an unreadable expression. Wordlessly, he lurches forward to try and help Nicole, but Jamila is so much bigger than him, that she can easily push him away with her unoccupied hand. Lance flails, and in the

process he swats one hand against Jamila's neck and ends up pulling on her arm in an attempt to get past her.

Under Lance's hands, Jamila's fur covered skin starts blistering and swelling up. He lets go and stumbles backwards, frightened by whatever he just did. Jamila looks down at herself with horror. The swelling spreads all along her arm and up her neck where Lance touched her as well. At an alarming speed, the shoulder area is deformed into big lumps like cancerous tumors, while the lower arm turns dry and porous as if contracted by gangrene.

Just like it happened on the world they just came from, the grass under Lance's feet turns charred and black. The effect slowly spreads around him. Lance's nose has started bleeding again and he looks like he's about to fall over.

Jamila: "What the hell did you do?!"

The mutated tissue on Jamila's neck and shoulder keeps spreading. A couple of her fingers turn so crumbly that they simply fall off. She is way too distressed to keep her attention on Nicole.

Nicole pulls herself free and runs the short distance over to Lance, who has doubled over and put one hand on the ground in an effort to keep himself standing. She doesn't bother to slow down, but practically tackles Lance and teleports them both away.

They land on the side of a mountain in an open, dry landscape. They both fall onto the red rocks that cover most of the area. Nicole quickly moves away from Lance and looks down at herself with dread. The arm she briefly had wrapped around him is blistering, but nowhere near as fast or as bad as it happened to Jamila.

Lance is still lying on the ground where he fell. He coughs and, with some trouble, turns over so he can get up on his hands and knees. He nearly slumps over again when he retches and vomits blood onto the ground under him. Shakily, he clambers away a little and sits down, looking at the landscape that stretches out below with a blank face.

There are so many tears welling up in Nicole's eyes that she can barely see. She stands there like all she wants to do is help, but she doesn't dare touch Lance again, or even come any closer to him. There is no grass to turn black here, but the rocks around Lance are smoking like they're being overheated. There is still blood running out of his nose and one of his ears. He looks small and broken in the middle of it all.

Nicole: Carefully walks a couple of steps around Lance so she is standing in his line of sight. "Lance, I have to go."

Lance: Looks up at her with big, frightened eyes. "Please don't go. I'm scared..."

Nicole: "I have to. I have to get Nicholas."

Slowly, like it takes him a while to process Nicole's words, Lance completely curls in on himself again and sobs.

Lance: "Please..."

Nicole: "I'll..." She wipes her tears away and tries to sound convincing. "I'll come back for you. I promise."

Lance doesn't respond to that, he just weeps quietly into his knees. After a long moment of hesitation, Nicole teleports away and leaves him there.

10.

Back in the old Skull Inc. camp, Dexter has begun to look very tired. He slumps, the chain on his shackled wrist the only thing keeping him in a halfway sitting position. Balthazar looks worried. Dexter's leg is still bleeding in a steady stream that stains the ground under him. His shoulder doesn't look good either, but the wound there isn't so critical.

Balthazar: Walks closer to Dexter with his eye fixed on the leg. "This isn't good... Do you have any supplies here at all?"

Dexter snaps out of his daze. A cruel smile spreads across his face and he is about to say something, but then thinks better of it.

Dexter: "Try the house over there..."

He points at a building a little ways into the camp with the cuffed hand that's dangling over his head.

Balthazar walks towards the house. On the way, he looks over his shoulder a couple of times, worried that Dexter might try to escape somehow.

Balthazar comes back a few minutes later with bandages, a knife, and what looks to be a broken-off table leg. Dexter glowers at him uncertainly when he drops the items on the ground next to him.

Balthazar: "You're lucky, there was actual bandages." He crouches down next to Dexter. "I'm sorry, but we have to get your pants off."

Dexter: "Oh you'd like that, wouldn't you." He says it in a way that's more apathetic and spiteful than suggestive.

Balthazar ignores him and instead ponders what to do. He takes the knife and cuts the pant leg on Dexter's wounded leg up from where it was shredded, just like the flesh under it. He carefully peels the fabric away from the wound. Dexter looks extremely uncomfortable the whole time, like all he wants to do is bolt out of there, but he can barely even lean away without his leg sending another overwhelming, nauseating jolt of pain through him.

Balthazar proceeds to rip a strip of fabric off the cut off pant leg. He binds it tightly above Dexter's knee as a makeshift tourniquet. Then he looks to the wound again. Dexter's tibia has been snapped in two, the pieces no longer aligned, and the lower end no longer connected to his foot.

Balthazar: "Okay, uh... Don't move."

Balthazar yanks the bones back into place to the best of his ability. It's difficult to do anything about the foot, but at least it points in the right direction now. Dexter really does his best not to move, he barely even makes a sound, but he looks like he's about to pass out instead.

With some hesitation, Balthazar tries to straighten the mangled strips of flesh a little and wraps a good portion of the bandages around the wound. Finally, he puts the table leg flush against the outer side of Dexter's leg and binds it in place with the rest of the bandages, hoping that it can keep everything in place for the time being.

When he's finished, Balthazar looks up at Dexter to find that he has closed his eyes and slumps even worse than before.

Balthazar: Shakes Dexter's shoulder a little. "Hey. Don't fall asleep."

Dexter: Cracks his eyes open and smiles slyly. "Look at you, so caring."

Balthazar: "I don't have any interest in you bleeding to death."

Dexter looks at Balthazar expressionlessly for a while. He raises his free, blood stained hand to brush Balthazar's hair away from his face and smears a bit of blood on his cheek in the process. Balthazar jerks his head away, but Dexter grabs the collar of his shirt to hold him in place and leans closer to him.

Dexter: Continues to stare at Balthazar with wide eyes. "I have an idea. What if you just let me go?"

Balthazar: Smacks Dexter's hand away and stands up. "Why do you even bother asking that?"

Dexter: "That woman," he points in the direction Lana went, "hahahha, oh she's a... She's a real, old fashioned angel. I don't know if she's gonna get what she came here for, but either way, you think she's gonna let me live? Me?? Of course not! She's either gonna come straight back here and kill me, or keep me chained up and make me take her to everyone I know so she can kill *them!*"

He looks up at the chain shackled to his wrist, then back at Balthazar.

Dexter: "Maybe... Maybe we can make a deal, eyh? If you get this chain off me, I'll forget all about you! You're one hundred percent forgiven."

Balthazar looks unconvinced, so Dexter keeps talking.

Dexter: "Okay so I lost my temper. Maybe I was overreacting a little bit, you know? It happens."

Dexter attempts a jovial smile, but his face quickly falls when Balthazar's expression doesn't change in the slightest.

Dexter: "You think I deserve this? I'm not even that involved! I'm just... The getaway driver, you know? I'm not like Rex, making plans, setting things into motion. I do what I'm told. I get by. I don't even care what happens to Rex!" He laughs like it would be preposterous to think that.

Dexter still isn't getting much of a reaction out of Balthazar, so he starts to look frustrated. The gears in his head are obviously hard at work trying to come up with some way to turn the situation more in his favor. In the end he settles back on being angry.

Dexter: "This is on you! You got me here. If she comes back and kills me, that's on you! You might as well have let me bleed to death, then!"

He appears increasingly distraught over being ignored, like it's only now dawning on him that he probably won't be able to argue himself out of this bind.

With a sudden, frantic burst of energy, he pulls the chain that is still tying him to the window grating and tries to stand up on his good leg. He cries out in pain and drops right back on the ground.

Dexter: "You can't do this to me. You can't..."

He's starting to sound panicked.

Dexter: "WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?! Beg you on my knees? Suck your fucking dick?! WHAT?!"

Balthazar just looks at him with something like pity written on his face, apparently no more rattled than before.

Dexter: "I'm-- Please? Just..."

With some reluctance, Balthazar turns away to look out at the surrounding area instead.

Dexter: "Don't turn your back on me, you arrogant PIECE OF SHIT!"

11.

Rex and the two demons are still waiting with Nicholas. Rex has removed Nicholas' halo and put it on the ground nearby so he can't try to escape via teleportation.

Demon1: Takes a watch out of his pocket and looks at it. "Those fifteen minutes are almost up. It doesn't bode well for you, kid."

Nicholas: Mutters, mostly to himself: "She'll be back. She wouldn't leave me here..."

Demon1: "I really hope you're right about that."

They all notice a flash of light coming from somewhere between the trees on a hill a good distance away. It's still twilight, so it stands out clearly. Nicholas' ears perk up and he doesn't take his eyes off the spot.

Demon2: "You saw that too, right?"

Rex: "That was definitely an angel..." He looks over his shoulder at the others as he walks towards the light. "Stay here, I'll investigate."

Demon1: "I don't like standing out in the open like this. If that isn't her already, that warrior angel will probably be back soon."

The two demons walk towards the treeline in the opposite direction from Rex.

Nicole is standing up on the hill, looking at the scene from behind a tree. When Rex starts walking in her direction, she quickly moves to stand with her back pressed against the trunk, not about to risk Rex spotting her from a distance.

Nicole: "Fuck..."

She frantically tries to come up with a plan for what to do. There are a few decent sized rocks laying around her. She picks one of them up to at least have something to defend herself with.

Rex has made it to the foot of the hill, and the demons and Nicholas to the edge of the treeline, when Opal appears in the middle of the clearing. She is accompanied by Paolo, a doctor and an angel from the police - A hastily assembled group, only there with the purpose of deciding what to do with Lance.

Demon2's immediate reaction is to turn around and shoot at the angels. The other demon stops her before she can actually hit anyone.

The angels all duck, startled by the gunshot. They are not at all prepared for this kind of confrontation. Only the police officer happens to have a handgun on her person, the others are all unarmed.

There is nowhere very close to run for cover, so the officer opts for raising her hands above her head as a sign of surrender.

Police officer: "There's no need to shoot! I'm the only one here who's armed!"

Demon1: "Drop your weapon, then!"

Demon2: "You better not try anything or the kid dies!"

Demon2 pulls Nicholas in front of herself and aims her gun at his head again. Nicholas looks terrified, but his eyes flicker from Opal to Rex, who has made his way to the top of the hill and is about to disappear behind the trees.

The police officer does as she's told and drops her gun on the ground in front of her. Next to her, Opal has her hands raised as well.

Opal: "It's okay, Nicholas. It'll be fine, just do what they say." She looks nervous, but tries her best to sound reassuring.

Nicholas is still staring at Opal very intently, like he's trying to telepathically communicate to her that she needs to go after Rex. Of course, it doesn't work. Unable to stay quiet, he blurts it out in words instead.

Nicholas: Frantically points at the hill. "Rex is up on that hill and I think Nicole's there and you have to get her because Lance--"

All the angels look in the direction Nicholas is pointing. Demon2 throws him to the ground before he can say anything more.

Demon2: "What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

Demon1: Puts a hand on Demon2's arm to get her attention and whispers: "They're gonna go after Rex, let's just make a run for it."

Demon2 nods distractedly and Demon1 takes off towards the trees. Demon2 follows him a few steps before she changes her mind about just leaving Nicholas on the ground. She turns around and shoots at Nicholas' head, but in the same moment he moves to the side and is hit in the neck instead.

The police officer immediately throws herself after her own gun and Demon2 decides she doesn't want to stick around for a shootout. She sprints a few meters before she kicks off the ground and flies after Demon1.

Nicole: "NICHOLAS!!"

Nicole's panicked voice carries easily from the top of the hill. She had snuck closer to the downslope after hearing the commotion when Opal and the other angels appeared. Now she has completely forgotten that she was trying to hide, not registering anything other than the fact that her brother is hurt and possibly dying.

Even from a distance she can see that he isn't getting up. There is a large amount of blood gushing from his neck. The doctor rushes to his side, but stands for a moment like he doesn't know what to do. He drops to his knees and attempts to stop the bleeding with healing magic and his fingers putting pressure on the wound.

Nicole: "NO!! No no no!"

Nicole is about to race down the hillside, but Rex comes up behind her, grabs her wrist and stops her in her tracks. Startled, Nicole lifts the rock she is still carrying in her free hand, spins around and smashes it into Rex's face. Rex groans and bends over with a hand on his nose. It's bleeding and apparently broken.

Opal looks back and forth between Nicholas and Nicole like she can't decide who to run to. As soon as she sees Rex appear next to Nicole, she isn't in doubt any longer. She sprints towards them as fast as she can.

Nicole brings the rock down on Rex's head again. It hits his skull with a dull thump, but it doesn't stop him from catching hold of both Nicole's arms. He twists the rock out of her hand and manages to force her down on her knees.

Rex registers that Opal is flying right at him half a second before she knocks him to the ground with her front paws. In a quick motion, she snatches the gun sitting in a holster on his belt, flaps her wings once more and lands a couple of meters away. Rex is very quick to get back on his feet and moves towards Nicole again.

Opal: Points the gun at Rex. "Stand down!"

Out of any better options, Rex grabs Nicole's arm, plucks her halo from above her head and makes the incredibly risky decision to teleport away with it. He and Nicole disappear and leave Opal behind to stare unbelievably at nothing.

12.

Rex and Nicole reappear in the air right above a steep cliffside bordering the sea. If they had made their entrance into this world just a little further out, they would probably have plummeted to their deaths on the rocks below, but instead the cliff breaks their fall and they slide the rest of the way down to the very narrow stretch of beach below.

Nicole rolls all the way into the water. She accidentally swallows some of it and coughs as she stumbles to get on her feet. Rex lands more heavily on the rocks. He is still clutching Nicole's halo in his hand so tight that his knuckles have turned white. He props himself up on his elbows, covers his face with his hands and laughs in disbelief.

Rex: "My god, I can't believe it actually worked..." He sits up on his haunches with a slightly maniacal grin. "This is why you never try to teleport with someone else's halo!"

Rex briefly looks around to confirm that he is approximately where he wanted to go - Close to the abandoned Skull Inc. camp where he, Jamila and the demons stayed earlier.

Nicole sweeps her wet hair away from her face as she staggers towards Rex and reaches for her halo. There are tears streaming down her face.

Nicole: "Give it back! Nicholas... I have to--"

Moving stiffly and clenching his ribs on the side he just fell on, Rex stands up too. He holds the halo out of Nicole's reach.

Rex: "Your brother is dead."

Nicole: "No..."

Rex: "Aren't you a nurse? You should know that no healing magic can stop that kind of blood loss."

Nicole's legs give out from under her. She drops down right at the edge of the water and stares blankly ahead.

Rex: "We gave you a fair warning and you didn't listen."

Nicole doesn't respond at all.

Rex: "What did you do with Jamila?"

Nicole: "... Who..?"

Rex: “Jamila. The woman who went with you and the boy.”

Nicole: “His name is Lance...” The words come out dull and quiet like she’s mostly speaking to herself.

Rex: “Lance, then! Where did you take them?”

Nicole just sits there. A big wave rolls into the shore and splashes against her back. She doesn’t react, just cries silently.

Rex looks a bit exasperated. He places Nicole’s halo above his own head so he doesn’t have to carry it, then moves to pull Nicole to her feet. She doesn’t really resist, but doesn’t exactly help either.

Rex: “Come on, let’s get you out of the water at least.”

Rex drags Nicole after him along the narrow beach. Nearby, the stretch of sandy shore widens considerably. A worn down stairway leads up to the top of the cliff.

When they reach the top of the stairs, Rex can see the side of the camp and steers towards it.

Rex: “If the-- If Lance isn’t in Heaven, there’s no telling how much damage he’ll do. I don’t think you understand the consequences of what you have done.”

Nicole: “He’s dying...”

Rex: “Then it’s even more important that you listen to me! We don’t have much time!”

He turns around to grab both Nicole’s arms and looks at her imploringly.

12.1

Lana has been wandering around the area outside the old camp, anxiously on the lookout for any sign of Rex or his fellow “revolutionaries”. Suddenly she can hear what is unmistakably Rex’s voice. She quickly looks around for a place to lie in wait and decides to fly to the top of a watchtower that stands near the camp’s outer wall.

After a short while, she can see Rex walking in her direction, dragging Nicole with him.

Lana spreads her wings and swoops down at Rex. Rex reacts automatically and ducks, thinking he is about to be attacked, but Lana simply steals Nicole’s halo from above his head. The steep angle from the tower to Rex forces her to land right next to him. She immediately sets off again and flies a good 20 meters away from the two others.

With a look of intense concentration, Lana compresses the halo in her hands into a small, green ball and puts it in her coat pocket.

Rex: Looks completely stunned to see Lana there. “How... Why are you here..?”

Lana simply looks at Rex, her back straight, but her body language tense and uncomfortable. Both Rex and Nicole look terrible, covered in dirt and bruises from their tumble down the cliffside, Nicole soaking wet and bleary-eyed from crying so much, and Rex with blood all over his face from his broken nose.

Lana: “Let the girl go.”

Rex shrugs with a questioning expression on his face. He releases his grip on Nicole in the same motion.

Rex: “Sure.”

Nicole doesn’t attempt to flee, she just backs away a little and curls in on herself.

Lana: “I know what you were trying to do.”

She speaks very concisely, determined to appear calm, but it’s evident from her face how distressed she feels.

Lana: “You thought it would be like pouring water on hot oil. Just a small fragment of Wrath, and whichever virtue was exposed to it would tear itself apart to expel it.

But I think you were wrong. The great virtues are every bit as malleable as the sins. If that little piece of Wrath would be able to seep out of Heaven at all, it would not be an explosion, it would just be a slow trickle.”

Rex: “Yes, that’s the conclusion I’ve come to, too. I thought Hell would be more insistent about getting its missing pieces back, but there was no way to know for sure. After all, no one has ever done this before.”

Lana: “You knew it might not work.”

Rex: “Of course.” He smiles faintly, an odd, demonstrative arrogance to the expression.

Lana: “Then you must have considered that Heaven might get rid of the boy.” She looks down and thinks for a moment. “They would likely send him back to Kimera...”

Rex: “Well. If a tragedy had to happen, that wouldn’t have been a great loss, would it. We would at least have made our point.”

Lana: Stares at Rex, appalled. “It’s a mortal world like any other. It was our home once...”

She pauses and looks away.

Lana: “I can’t help but remember when we were just children and your mother tried to force you to be something you weren’t. Destructive and resentful and...”

She realizes that there are tears in her eyes and wipes them away with the base of the hand that isn’t covered in blood.

Lana: “And now you have become just that. Bitter and callous and without regard for anything but your own ideals. You can never know how much it pains me to see you now.”

For a very brief moment, Rex looks heartbroken. Then his face turns expressionless as he steps closer to Nicole.

Rex: “I thought I had a good grasp of how everything was going to work out, but then this little girl came and stole our magic trick away. Who knows where he is now? Perhaps somewhere with plenty of average, civilian people.”

Nicole has sat down on the ground and sobs like nothing will ever be okay again.

Rex: “To be honest, I don’t like the prospect of that.” He looks back at Lana. “So. Why don’t you take the girl and make her show you the way to the sacrifice. Take him back to Heaven if you agree that that’s what’s safest. Maybe this is your chance to redeem yourself.”

Lana: “I came here for you and I will not leave without you. Surrender yourself. Perhaps this is *your* chance to show that you still have some decency.”

Rex: “Lana, if I surrendered that would be my death sentence.”

Lana: “Heaven does not issue death sentences.”

Rex: “They will make an exception.”

Lana’s eyes flicker to the ground like she’s suddenly unsure of herself.

Lana: “I... What Heaven will do with you is not for me to decide.” She straightens up. “Surrender, or I will bring you to Heaven by force.”

Rex: “This is very distressing, Lana. This is an urgent situation and here you are, threatening me. If you won’t go with the girl, give her halo back and I’ll go instead.”

Lana starts walking towards Rex with long strides and a steely resolve that makes Rex visibly nervous. With a sweep of his hand, he summons one of his black, snake like dragons.

The creature flies at Lana and she calmly raises a hand towards it. When it reaches her, she graces its forehead with her fingers. The dragon’s head is scattered in every direction like it hit an invisible wall at very high speed. The long body swells up and then shreds and explodes into a shimmer of little red, magical constructs.

For a moment, Rex is stunned by Lana’s strange magic that he has never seen before. When he snaps back into action he goes for Nicole. He draws his sword, meaning to take the girl hostage, but in the meantime Lana has already intercepted him. She grabs the blade of Rex’s sword before he can do anything. The whole sword bends into a wobbly shape and snaps in two under Lana’s palm. She pulls it out of Rex’s hand and lets the two halves fall to the ground behind her. Rex backs away from her.

Lana: Stares Rex down. “Surrender. There is no need for you to get hurt.”

Rex: Takes another step back and looks a bit like a cornered animal. “If you are so determined to hand me over to Heaven, you might as well kill me yourself.”

Lana: “Don’t make me do this...”

Rex thrusts one hand at Lana, conjuring up lightning around it. Lana doesn’t manage to dispel this attack and gets shocked quite badly. Still, out of sheer reflex she grabs the wrist of the hand Rex’s electrical magic is focused around.

Lana’s hand leaves a wound so deep it makes an indent all around Rex’s wrist, blistering like an acid burn. With a yelp, he pulls his hand to his chest and doubles over as to protect it from further harm. Lana nearly falls to her knees, disoriented by the jolt of electricity she just received.

Lana: Realizing that she might not be able to detain Rex on her own, she yells as loud as she can: “BALTHAZAR!”

12.2

Balthazar twists towards the sound when he hears Lana yell for him. Despite the clear urgency in her voice, Balthazar only slowly jogs towards the camp exit, glancing over his shoulder at Dexter, still reluctant to let him out of his sight. Dexter is staring in Lana's direction too, sitting ramrod straight with a panicked look on his face. Balthazar decides to pick up speed and kicks off the ground to fly over the camp's outer wall.

He has only just made it out of the camp grounds when a hurricane strength wind picks up behind him. Perplexed, Balthazar turns around and lands on the ground. Unable to see what is happening with either of them, he wavers uncertainly between the choices of rushing to Lana's aid and going back to Dexter. He grudgingly decides on the latter option.

The wind coming from the camp is so strong that it makes it impossible for Balthazar to fly back in there and difficult to even walk. He struggles his way to the building where Dexter is shackled to the window.

The powerful wind Dexter is summoning around himself is tearing at the house through the open front door and shattered window. The building creaks perilously and Dexter covers his head with his arms like he's expecting the facade and the eaves above him to come crumbling down.

While Balthazar makes a hopeless attempt to push forward, the wind speed only picks up. Dexter doesn't so much teleport as briefly glitch out of view along with the entire front of the house he is chained to. The phenomena only lasts a fraction of a second, but happens multiple times, each time shifting the wall a little so it cracks and threatens to collapse in on itself. Dexter keeps it up until the front part of the roof and top of the wall is pulled from the rest of the house. Before any debris can hit him, the wind manages to tear loose the metal grating and a good chunk of the battered wall it's attached to.

Dexter disappears, and with him gone the hurricane wind abruptly dissipates. The facade of the house crumbles completely and the rest of the surrounding buildings look wrecked as well with broken windows and torn up roofs.

Balthazar only takes a second to gape at the spot where Dexter just sat before he turns around with outstretched wings and flies in Lana's direction as fast as he can.

12.3

After Lana yells for help, Rex lets out a small laugh that comes out more like a huff.

Rex: “I see Balthazar has been a lot more intent on tracking me down than I expected, if he is the one who led you here.”

Lana holds Rex’s gaze with unwavering persistence. Eventually he looks away to inspect his wounded wrist.

Rex: “When did you learn how to do that..?”

Lana: “I have had a lot of time to myself. I suppose the same can be said for you. Harul magic? Did you really stay on Kimera for so long?”

Rex: “Years.”

Lana: “You must have hated every minute of it.”

Rex: “I did. But I was an obvious candidate for the job.”

Lana: Shakes her head sadly. “What happened to you? Mingling with this demon rabble, it’s unbecoming of you.”

Rex: “The fact that many of them are demons does not make their struggles any less real. You must have been out here just as long as I and you still don’t see that?” He looks disappointed.

Lana: “Absolutely not. They are a plague upon the universe that should not be allowed to spread.”

While they have been talking, Lana has been inching closer to Rex. He looks on edge as he tries to keep the distance between them.

Rex: “Well. I really can’t stand here and talk all day.”

He eyes Lana for a little longer while she raises her hands in front of her, prepared to ward off another attack. He lurches forward quickly and manages to throw one hand under Lana’s arms so he can grab onto her jaw and release another jolt of electricity. With his other hand, he reaches for Lana’s pocket where Nicole’s halo is still tucked away.

Despite the shock, it takes Lana very little time to grab Rex’s arm and still the magic discharged from it. She twists the arm around and puts a hand on the back of Rex’s shoulder to shove him away.

In her rush, she puts more force into the motion than she intended and tears a hole into Rex's upper back with her own magic, partly dislodging his arm. He drops onto his side heavily while Lana covers her mouth with her hands in shock and backs away. The ribs and shoulder blade under the messy wound are broken and blood is quickly soaking into Rex's ruined jacket.

Right as Lana is about to reach out for Rex, there is a flash of light above them and a gust of wind pushes Lana off balance so she has to take a few more steps backwards. The extra weight from the metal grating attached to his wrist throws off Dexter's aim so he appears a couple of meters above the ground. He can't completely spare his broken leg from the impact as he drops down next to Rex. He falls over with a look on his face like he's about to throw up, the grating and pieces of debris slamming onto the ground next to him.

Rex tries to push himself up with a strangled noise. Dexter's eyes widen in horror when he sees Lana standing right on the other side of Rex. She stares at him with her shoulders tense and an uncharacteristically furious expression on her face.

Dexter scrambles forward, dragging the metal grating after him and throws himself over Rex. He conjures up a whirlwind strong enough to prevent Lana from coming any closer and teleports away with Rex.

Lana is left frozen in place with only the ocean wind that always sweeps over this place to break the silence. She stares blankly at the spot where Rex was lying a moment before. She stays like that until Balthazar lands next to her, flustered and out of breath.

Balthazar: "I couldn't do anything, he leveled the whole house you tied him to!"

Lana: "He got away again..."

Balthazar: "I saw. I'm so sorry, Lana..."

She doesn't move or say anything more. Balthazar suddenly notices Nicole sitting behind her.

Balthazar: "Wh-- Nicole..?"

Nicole either doesn't hear him or ignores him, because she stays as she is with her face obscured by her messy hair and her arms wrapped around her knees. She hasn't moved from the spot where she sat down earlier.

Lana frowns like a thought just occurred to her, then slowly looks over at Balthazar.

Lana: "Did you bandage the demon up..?"

Balthazar: "Uh, yes. He was--"

Lana: "... Why?"

Balthazar: Looks confused as to why they're even talking about this. "Well him dying wasn't part of the plan."

Lana narrows her eyes at him suspiciously, but realizes that she is wasting time. Nicole isn't crying anymore, but she raises her head and stares hollowly at the ground in front of her like she has completely shut down, not registering her surroundings. Lana walks over to her, crouches down and gently puts a hand on her shoulder. Nicole looks at her dazedly.

Lana: "The boy that Rex was looking for, you know where he is?"

Nicole lowers her head in something that might vaguely resemble a nod.

Lana: Tightens her grip on Nicole's shoulder with a bit more insistence. "You must tell me where he is. If it is a mortal world he can cause irreparable damage."

Nicole: Mumbles quietly: "I don't know... It was just some place I went hiking once. I don't know why I took him there..."

Lana: "Are there people residing there?"

Nicole: "I don't know. Maybe..."

Lana: "Can you take us to this world? We must make sure the boy is somewhere as isolated as possible."

Lana reaches into her pocket and pulls out Nicole's halo. She takes one of Nicole's hands and places the small, green ball in her palm. Nicole looks from her misshapen halo to Lana's face and realizes that she isn't even sure who this woman staring at her so insistently is. Her gaze travels onwards and lands on Balthazar who she hadn't really noticed until now.

Nicole: "I messed up really bad..."

Balthazar is still confused to find Nicole there, but appears to piece together her involvement in the situation.

Balthazar: "It doesn't matter right now. Can you take us there? We have to hurry."

She stares at him empty for a few seconds before she nods and slowly moves to stand up. With her halo clenched in her fist, she teleports all three of them away.

13.

When the three angels arrive near the place where Nicole left Lance, the landscape is no longer the plain hillside as when Nicole last saw it.

Lance is lying motionless on the rocks, his skin giving off smoke like it's slowly being burned, much the same as the searing effect Lance had on his surroundings earlier. In a large area around him, the landscape is distorted by the barren, volcanic desert of Wrath's circle trying to merge into it by force. It apparently doesn't quite know how to align itself, so sharp cliffs, ash and patches of extra ground form out of nothing at odd and impossible angles. The strain from two layers of reality grinding together tears wide gashes in the ground, revealing lava that is pushed to the surface where it spills out in thick streams. The molten rock clouds the air with black smoke as it eats its way down the hillside. The devastation is spreading fast with Lance in its center.

The angels look awestruck by it all. With a hand raised to her mouth in dread, Nicole mindlessly takes a few steps towards Lance.

Lana: Reaches out for Nicole. "Don't--"

Nicole disappears from view and finds herself standing on the edge of a cliff in an ash covered field, any sign of the chaos she was just looking at gone. She turns around and looks panicked to find that neither of the others are with her. A moment later, Lana appears right next to her.

Lana: "Be careful not to cross over."

Lana shifts them back to the other world with a light tug on Nicole's wrist. Balthazar shouts to her over the deafening sound of the ground eroding into new shapes

Balthazar: "We have to leave before the whole place is swallowed up by Hell! This doesn't exactly look fixable!"

Nicole: "But..."

She can't take her eyes away from Lance, even though he is hardly recognizable as anything but a black shape at this point.

Balthazar: "Forget about him, he's already gone!"

Nicole lowers her eyes to her feet and looks heartbroken. She straightens up suddenly like she just remembered something important.

Nicole: "I have to get Nicholas."

Lana: “Who?”

Balthazar: “Her brother.” He steps closer to Nicole. “Why, where is he?”

Nicole falters and clearly doesn't look up for explaining.

Lana: “Can you take us there?”

Nicole nods grimly and once again transports all three of them away.

14.

After Rex disappeared with Nicole, Opal returned to the clearing to try and get the situation under control. Now she is talking to the police officer who came with her earlier, both of them staring pensively into the surrounding forest. Paolo and the doctor have left and Nicholas has been taken away. His blood still stains the ground next to where the two are standing.

Police officer: "It shouldn't be too difficult to track those demons down, it's not like they have anywhere to run. Hopefully we can pry some intel out of them."

Opal is about to say something when she sees a flash of light out the corner of her eye. She turns her head towards it and does a double take at Balthazar and Lana who have suddenly appeared alongside Nicole.

Opal: Spins around and stares at the three, deeply confused. "W-- What?!"

Nicole's eyes immediately lock onto the pool of blood left behind where Nicholas fell earlier. She half-runs towards it like she expects her brother to come into view if only she can take a closer look. Opal drops any inquiries about the two other angels and instead moves to meet Nicole halfway.

Opal: Carefully puts a hand on Nicole's arm. "Nicholas is dead."

Nicole gives her a blank stare and Opal holds the eye contact, calmly and with a neutral face, not completely sure whether Nicole understood what she just said. Eventually Nicole looks away from Opal, walks a little closer to the pool of blood and quietly sits down.

Opal: Keeps her eyes on Nicole's hunched over back. "He's been moved to a hospital. We can go see him if you want."

Nicole sniffs, tucks her knees against her chest and wraps her arms around them.

Nicole: "I just want to sit here right now..."

Opal nods even though Nicole can't see it. She turns her attention to the police officer who has approached Lana and Balthazar and is eyeing them critically.

Lana: "You are discounting the severity of what I'm telling you! It is a planet wide disaster and we currently don't know whether there will be any casualties! I insist that you take me directly to the Council, it is urgent!"

Police officer: "I'm not taking you anywhere, lady. Do you have any idea how suspicious you're making yourself look right now?"

The officer faces Opal.

Police officer: “Not that I’m happy to leave you with two fallen angels, but can you hold them up while I go get clearance on this?” She huffs bitterly. “Again.”

Opal: “It’s okay, I uh... “ She points at Balthazar with her thumb. “Know him.”

Police officer: “Really.” She decides she doesn’t care to wait for an explanation. “I’ll be right back.”

Lana seems highly frustrated as the police officer teleports away without her. She shifts her attention to Nicole instead and, after a moment of contemplation, decides to walk over to her.

Opal: Looks at Lana when she walks past. “Hey...”

Lana briefly falters and gives Opal a strange look.

Lana: “Hello.”

She continues walking. Opal turns her head after her, a little wary that she is approaching Nicole.

Lana: “Can I sit with you?”

She addresses Nicole kindly, waiting in the spot right next to her. Nicole is pulled out of the stupor that has left her staring emptily at the blood in front of her for the last several minutes.

Nicole: “Yeah... I guess.”

Lana gives her a small smile and sits down gracefully.

Lana: Holds out one of her hands. “Can I see your halo for a second?”

Nicole finds that she is still holding her halo in her hand and wordlessly plops it down on Lana’s palm. Lana studies it for a bit before she puts all her concentration into morphing it back into its usual ring shape. She places the halo back above Nicole’s head where it stays floating in the air.

Lana: “Why did you take the harul boy from Heaven?”

Nicole doesn’t say anything right away, so Lana patiently waits for an answer.

Nicole: “Everyone was acting like there was something wrong with him, and he didn’t deserve that. He didn’t deserve any of this! But they were right, they were right and I fucked up so bad.”

Lana simply watches as Nicole breaks into sobs and her speech becomes more and more jumbled.

Nicole: “Nicholas said we should go back, but I didn’t want to listen and-- It’s all my fault. They’re dead because I’m such a s-stupid idiot, people are dead because of me. A-and I don’t even know, I don’t know what’ll happen to me, what am I supposed to do now? I did this, everyone’s going to know I did this.”

She runs a shaking hand through her hair.

Nicole: “I c-can’t stop thinking about one day when our parents die, I have to tell them about all of this, and I can’t--”

Nicole cries into her hands, unable to continue the sentence. Lana lightly puts a hand on her back to try and comfort her.

Lana: “Whatever happens, you will survive this.”

She says it with such unwavering finality that Nicole goes silent. She gapes at Lana like she wants it to be true, but doesn’t really believe it.

On the other side of the clearing, Opal is questioning Balthazar.

Opal: “So you’ve been trying to track Rex down this whole time?”

Balthazar: “Not really. I just wanted to know what was going on, but we found out too late.”

Opal: “Everyone did.”

She looks impossibly tired.

Opal: “I could ask how you got here, but I have a feeling it’s a long story.”

Balthazar: “Yeah, it kind of is.”

Opal: “Is it okay if I don’t feel up for hearing it right now?”

Balthazar: “I don’t feel much like telling it right now, so, yes...”

Opal offers him a weak smile.

Opal: “I’m glad you’re alright.”

15.

Balthazar, Opal, the police officer from earlier, and a few other angels have been gathered for a crisis meeting about the newly transpired events. After Balthazar and Lana were given permission to enter Heaven, Lana was taken away for questioning and they haven't seen her since. A hashmal angel with a glowing, blue halo speaks to the group.

Hashmal: "Most of our colonies on the planet have been evacuated, and search parties have already been sent to Wrath to look for the people we know are missing. We hope the transition has simply trapped them on the other side, but at this point it's difficult to say precisely what has happened. The incident was definitely very... destructive. It's already impossible to access the planet by normal teleportation."

Opal: "How many are dead?"

Hashmal: "A little under two hundred, that we know of."

Opal: Nods sadly. "What about us who've been involved in the incident?"

Hashmal: "You're expected to stand by and help with the investigation in any way you can." He looks at Balthazar. "I understand you especially might have some useful insight."

He returns his attention to Opal with a questioning look on his face.

Hashmal: "But I suppose you're thinking of the nurse? As far as I know, she won't be held responsible. She has been an unknowing party like all of you."

Opal: "She should be kept out of it completely. No drawn out interrogations, no media involvement."

Despite the fact that no one has implied that any such things should be set into motion, she manages to work herself up a little, so intent on defending Nicole.

Opal: "She's very young, she doesn't need her life upended by this any more than it's already been."

Hashmal: "I agree. There's no need to worry about it."

He claps his hands together in a closing gesture.

Hashmal: "I have nothing more to tell you right now. You'll be contacted as necessary."

The angels get up from their seats at the table in the middle of the room and leave. Balthazar stands up too, but stays behind with Opal, loitering in the meeting room since he can't really go anywhere on his own with the black fallen angel halo he's still wearing.

The hashmal gathers some papers lying on the table and moves to leave as well.

Hashmal: "Give me a moment, then I'll get you to your meeting with the Council."

Balthazar: "Sure."

He and Opal watch as the hashmal disappears out the door. Balthazar stares blankly out into the room.

Balthazar: "It's weird to be back to politics and formal meetings."

Opal: Lets out a small, amused snort. "You say that like you've been gone for years."

Balthazar: "It kind of feels that way."

Duncan shows up in the entrance to the room and knocks politely on the open door to bring attention to himself.

Duncan: "Balthazar. Hello, I was told I could find you here."

Opal quietly scowls at him while Balthazar simply looks a little surprised.

Duncan: "I would like to apologize for any involvement I had in having you banished. I don't know what I could possibly do to make it up to you, but I am deeply sorry and relieved to see you've come back safely."

He has been looking Balthazar square in the eye during his apology, but then falters and drops his gaze to the floor.

Duncan: "I had my suspicions, but they were directed at the wrong person. In the end I couldn't see what was right under my nose."

Balthazar: "I'm sorry about Thera." The words come out more cold than consoling. "I figure she has a lot of jail time to look forward to."

Opal's expression softens up a little.

Opal: "I didn't see it coming either... It was pure luck that I didn't just let her go on with whatever they were planning." She glances up at Duncan. "Is she... okay?"

Duncan: "I haven't actually seen her. But from what I've heard, no. Not exactly."

Opal: “Maybe you should talk to her? Clear up exactly how much she has been lying about.”

Duncan: “When things have calmed down a little, I will.”

Despite his commitment to remain composed since this conversation shouldn't really be about him, it's clear to see that he is painfully disheartened by the prospect.

Even so, he speaks like he considers it a promise.

15.1

Later in the day, Lana and Balthazar are standing before the Council in the big courtroom that Balthazar last saw when he was banished as a fallen angel. The 12 councillors sitting at the long, crescent shaped table in the room are all focusing on Lana while she speaks her case. Balthazar is standing a little in the background and looks distant like he has tuned out of the conversation.

Lana: “If I have to search through all of Hell and call upon the help of the Fallen One herself, so be it I will track Rex and the rest of this wretched organization down.”

She holds her head high in a defiant manner like she expects the councillors to try and stop her.

Amadihn: “I see no reason to object to that.”

Xifeng: Interrupts Amadihn before he can say anything more: “If you are doing this in Heaven’s name, it would make more sense for you to work with us rather than storm off on your own.”

Lana: Frowns warily. “What do you mean?”

Xifeng: “I mean that it would be more fitting to name you an official agent. I would rather not have a fallen angel represent us, much less one so impudent as to think she can go about an investigation however she wishes.”

Lana just stands there and doesn’t know how to reply. She folds her hands self consciously.

Lana: “Why... After all this time, why would you entrust me with such responsibility? I have done many things in Heaven’s name and never before have you given the indication that it would earn me any favor here.”

Xifeng: “You never asked.”

Lana looks outright angry at that and Xifeng can’t help but let out a short, sharp laugh in response.

Lana: “Councillor, I have been met with nothing but suspicion at my every attempt at reconciliation! Now you will suddenly take my word for my intentions?”

Xifeng: “That must have been before my time.” She looks at Balthazar expectantly. “You can vouch for her, can’t you?”

Balthazar acts a little bewildered to be dragged into the conversation. He looks back and forth between Xifeng and Lana before he manages to formulate a reply.

Balthazar: “Uh, yes.”

He pauses and looks away like he isn't completely sure he means it.

Balthazar: “Absolutely.”

Xifeng: “Excellent. Consider turning in your halo and we can talk. If you don't, I won't respond so kindly to your plans of treating the current events as your personal vendetta.”

She proceeds to write something on a pad of paper on the table in front of her, clearly dismissing any possibility of continuing the discussion.

Xifeng: “You can leave, Lana.”

Lana has been rendered speechless and doesn't know whether she should be furious or grateful for this development. A security guard that had been standing by the door walks over to lead her out of the room.

Looking a little resigned, Balthazar remains standing in the middle of the floor. One of the other councillors clears his throat to speak.

Councillor: “Well, General... Or rather, have we understood it correctly that you don't want your title back?”

Balthazar: “Yes. I'm retiring from the military all together.”

Xifeng: Drawls without looking up: “A shame, really.”

Amadihn: “Balthazar, I assure you this was not the outcome we wanted or expected, and I regret any hardship you had to endure after we expelled you. Is there nothing we can do to make you reconsider?”

Balthazar: “No. I should have done this a long time ago. You've told me yourself, you don't need noncompliant commanders, and right now I don't even know whether Heaven's military is something I want to represent.”

Amadihn: “I see...”

Balthazar holds Amadihn's gaze with a stern expression on his face.

Balthazar: “Anyway. If you're looking for a way to apologize, I have a request.”

16.

Balthazar has returned to Rover's Crossing with Max in tow. He is leaning on the porch railing outside Harvey's office with his arms crossed, watching Max and Harvey talk. His fallen angel halo has been replaced with the plain, golden halo of a common angel and it has currently left his wings an unflattering mess of both black and white feathers.

Harvey: "That's the most sensible thing I've ever heard come out the mouth of an angel!"

He shakes Max's hand, or rather his whole arm, fervently. Max looks about as unflappable as he always does.

Jerry has apparently caught wind of the two other angels showing up in town. In the distance he and Elle turn the corner to the street leading to the office.

Jerry: "Holy shit, Max?!"

As soon as he spots Max, Jerry runs the rest of the way over to him with the most sincerely bright smile anyone has probably seen on him in years and picks up the tiny man without thinking. Elle cautiously trails after him.

Jerry: "What are you doing here??"

Elle: Laughs nervously: "Haha, who's this?"

Jerry turns towards Elle, still holding Max up in his outstretched arms.

Jerry: "I never told you about Max?"

Max: "I sure hope you didn't." He looks pointedly at Jerry's arms. "Put me down."

Jerry: "Oh, sorry."

He places Max back on the ground. Max readjusts his jacket while he looks up at Jerry with an unreadable expression. He takes one of Jerry's hands and pats it solemnly in an odd, grandfatherly way.

Max: "Of course, I knew it already, but I'm glad to see that you're doing well out here."

Jerry: "Really, what are you doing here?"

Max: "Making arrangements."

Since Max apparently doesn't feel like being any less cryptic right now, Balthazar answers instead.

Balthazar: "Skull Inc. probably hasn't been in the area for the last time, so I thought you could use a helping hand. The Council kind of owed me a favor, so I told them Max would be a good pick to keep track of things here since you already know each other."

Max: Scoffs. "Calling it a favor is ridiculous. No one gains anything from letting them deal with this problem on their own."

Harvey: Frowns at Balthazar. "Happy as I am to be rid of any more of these blasted, shady mage demons, I don't appreciate you going around giving people the impression our resident angel's got any say in what goes on here."

Max: "He does now."

He looks Harvey in the eyes impassively and Harvey suddenly doesn't seem so appreciative of his presence anymore.

Max: "What did you expect? Any ideas you have will be a lot easier to sell coming from him than from you. No one likes a devil."

Next to him, Jerry doesn't look very comfortable with suddenly having new expectations thrust upon him, but Max drones on before he can protest.

Max: "You don't get to make demands. Take the hand you're offered or don't." He pauses briefly. "Actually, there is no saying no, there will be angels coming here no matter how you feel about it."

Harvey: "You're threatening me now?"

Max: "Of course I am."

He says it completely deadpan, then blinks in exasperation when Harvey appears to take it seriously.

Max: "I'm just letting you know how Heaven looks at an alliance like this, relax. Anyway, I don't have all day. I came here for whatever logs you have on your residents and I can't rightly leave without them, can I?"

Harvey: Eyes Max bitterly. "I figure I don't have any say in that either."

Harvey turns towards the door to his office, waiting for Max to follow him.

Jerry: "You're not just gonna leave, right?"

Max: Looks at Jerry like that was a strange question. “Of course not. You still have to show me around and introduce me to this girl of yours who’s never heard of me before.”

He continues into the office and leaves Jerry, Elle and Balthazar outside.

Elle: “Uh, well. He’s a little scary...”

Jerry: “I know, right?” He beams at Elle, overly excited about the fact, then remembers Balthazar is there. “Hey, by the way. You’re not dead.”

Balthazar: “Neither are you.” He smiles half-heartedly.

Jerry: Points at Balthazar’s halo. “Why are you wearing a normal halo?”

Balthazar: “I quit.”

Jerry: “Wow, really? So all it took for you to have some kind of big self revelation and reevaluate your life was to get kicked out for a few weeks? You must’ve been balancing on a real shaky foundation there.”

He almost starts laughing, but Balthazar looks so mournful as he stares down one of the surrounding streets, that Jerry stops himself.

Jerry: “Sorry, that was a shitty thing to say.” He shrugs resignedly. “Did you catch Rex or why did they let you back in?”

Balthazar: “We were close, but he got away. Dexter too, just so you know. Their group managed to shred the barrier of a whole planet so badly it’s being absorbed by Wrath. There was nothing we could do about it.” He lets out a pensive sigh. “It’s been a rough week.”

Jerry: “Oh... That’s...”

Balthazar: “Do you still think they deserve your sympathy?”

Jerry: “I don’t know? I mean, that’s definitely awful, but I don’t know the circumstances.” He seems a little defensive.

Balthazar: Shakes his head discontentedly. “I didn’t tell anyone that you’ve been helping them out, not even Max. So, do with that what you will. I think it’s best not to advertise it at least.”

He takes his weight off the railing and stands up straight.

Balthazar: “Was this even the right thing to do? Bringing Max here?”

Jerry: “I don’t... Honestly? This makes me wanna get the hell out of here and you have some fucking nerve to pull this without, I don’t know, maybe asking first? But... It’s Max.” He laughs in disbelief. “He fits right in, you know?” There is a hint of bitterness to his tone.

Elle: “I-I’m sorry, but we need help. What if Dexter or any of the others come back here? I mean, are we on their blacklist now? I don’t know if I should still be worried someone’s gonna drop in and shank you!”

Jerry: “Me personally pissing off Dexter isn’t going to reflect on the whole town, that’s not how they work...”

Elle: “Yeah but we don’t know that, we don’t know anything right now!”

She snaps around to look at Balthazar, earnestly and with none of her usual anxiousness.

Elle: “Thank you. We didn’t even think we’d see you again, you didn’t have to help.”

Jerry refrains from looking at Balthazar and doesn’t seem to approve of Elle’s decision to thank him, but he stays silent.

Balthazar: “I felt that I had to do something. It’s only right, to make up for all the trouble I’ve caused you.” He sighs. “If this brings more trouble, then... I’m sorry and I’ll do what I can to help with that too.”

Elle gives him a small, wavering smile before her eyes flicker to the ground.

Elle: “Thanks for trying. I haven’t met a lot of angels who do that.”

17.

Balthazar and Opal appear in a grassy field where a wide hill leads up to a half-finished house. Opal presents it with a big grin on her face.

Opal: “Tadah! What do you think?”

Balthazar looks around the landscape approvingly. The hill is surrounded by pine forest on one side and grass-covered plateaus on the other that lead down to a lake and more forest in the distance. There are a few other houses closer to the lake, but otherwise the vegetation has been left untouched.

Balthazar: “It’s very nice. Congratulations on the new house. You finally managed to drag Omar out of Heaven.”

Opal: “It wasn’t actually difficult, it’s mostly myself who’s been putting it off. Omar would be fine living in a tent, he really doesn’t care.”

She steps in front of Balthazar and glances up at the house. Omar is accompanied by Nicole as he inspects the rafters that will eventually hold up the roof.

Opal: “It’s a lot of work building a house and neither of us really know what we’re doing. We ruined the foundation because it started raining and we had to do it over. Great start, but the weather is a little unpredictable here.”

She sends Balthazar a warning look.

Opal: “Please don’t try to be helpful. Omar will literally kill you.”

Balthazar: “Well it seems like you’re doing alright, you already got a lot done.”

Opal: “Yeah, I suppose. But the best part? Real soil!”

She gestures excitedly at a bare area next to them where the ground has been upended to plant something or other there.

Opal: “Really, that’s all I need.”

Balthazar: “What are you going to do with all this land, though?”

Opal: “I don’t know yet. Maybe I should just become a farmer.” She smiles jokingly. “How about you? What are doing with all this free time you have now?”

Balthazar: “Hmm, I’ve mostly been catching up with people. I actually talked to my son the other day, I haven’t seen him in years...” He looks a bit contemplative at the mention. “Got a lot of job offers I’m obviously not going to accept right now. I leave the military and now they want me to teach for them instead, can you believe that? Kind of a big turnaround from suspecting me of treason.”

Opal: “I don’t know, that sounds nice. Don’t you miss the military at all?”

Balthazar: “Maybe a little. The people more than the work. Are you doing alright with your platoon and everything?”

Opal: “It’s been quiet lately. I’ve actually had time to do something about the issues we’ve had. Still, it’s been difficult, what with a handful more soldiers killed on Tibra. And then Nicholas of course...”

Balthazar glances over at Nicole who has sat down by the house, laughing at something Omar said.

Balthazar: “Is she okay?”

Opal: “No... But she’ll get better.”

The turn of the conversation has put a damper on Opal’s otherwise good mood.

Opal: “I’m glad she took me up on my offer to stay with us for a while. This way I can keep an eye on her.” She sighs listlessly. “It’s been impossible to keep it under wraps that she was involved with all that destruction. I’ve already had to fight off a few nasty people. She takes it very hard.”

Balthazar: “I’m sorry to hear that.” He looks at Opal with genuine sympathy. “It’s nice to see you’re in good spirits despite everything, though.”

Opal: “I don’t think I’ll give up on the military, or anything else, anytime soon. I’m not ready to be old and bitter yet.” She pats Balthazar on the arm consolingly.

Balthazar: Can’t help but laugh. “Good for you.”

Opal: “But take it from someone who’s made some wild career changes in the past - sometimes you just need to drop everything and start over.”

Balthazar: “I don’t think anyone wants to grow old and bitter... It’s just easy to get set in your ways.”

Opal: “I told you you needed a vacation.”

She quickly raises her hands in a placating gesture.

Opal: “Getting banished was maybe taking it a bit too far, but, you know.”

Balthazar: “I guess you were right. It definitely gave me a lot of time to think about whether I’ve been doing more harm than good in the long run.”

Opal: “I know.”

She frowns and crosses her arms a little self-consciously.

Opal: “No matter what, all you can do is keep trying to do the right thing, right?”

Balthazar: “Right.”

Out of nowhere the overcast sky starts leaking water.

Opal: “Oh my God, seriously? We’re never going to finish the roof at this rate!”

She hurries back to the the house to help Omar cover up the roof to protect it from the worst of the rain. Balthazar follows her with a fond smile on his face.