

****Under correction****

In Jeanne d'Arc's fist were white lilies, a Jacob's Ladder lifting its illuminating veil around her to reveal Kensal Green Cemetery. The Ladder's insignia dissipated, leaving Jeanne behind in English territory.

Vines had been trimmed from gravestones and mausoleums, their stone figures keeping vigil even after losing sections to the elements. Jeanne listened to the leaves crunching beneath her feet, sheltered by the yellowing shade of nearby trees.

Jeanne's breath hitched upon spotting a parked Regera and its owner's blonde mop, slowing down upon meeting Lucifer near Michael's grave.

Merde.

Resuming her footsteps, Michael's headstone came into view. It read as Jeanne recalled.

Michael Elwyn

?????? B.C. to 2003 A.D.

*'Let us now start fresh without remembrance, rather than live forward and backward at the same time. **We cannot build the future by avenging the past.** Let us sit down as brothers, and accept the Peace of God.*

- T.H. White, 'The Once and Future King'

A holy crest was carved upon the slab, an eagle's wings forming laurel wreaths wrapped around an eclipsed sun. Jeanne's gaze met Lucifer's as she approached, the demon lord presenting his olive-branch in the form of a wine bottle.

He asked, "Drink?" and lifted the drinking glasses.

"Were you going to pour one out for Michael?"

"He wouldn't want us to waste good wine on the dead."

Freshly replaced flowers filled the memorial vase. Lucifer's, Jeanne assumed as she added her flowers into the vase. Meeting the demon lord here soured something within Jeanne, bowing in deference towards Michael's headstone but giving Lucifer a curt nod.

"Looks like this is an inconvenient time. I'm leaving," and as Jeanne turned away, a hand stopped her by the shoulder. Her immutable body resisted the heat wave Lucifer radiated, even as her armor began sizzling.

Glaring over her shoulder to meet Lucifer's penetrating gaze, Jeanne's hand was already at her hip, countermanding battle instincts which screamed to summon Excalibur.

Not on Earth, and certainly not around Michael's grave.

Lucifer spoke, "I *insist* you stay. Or is it not common courtesy in heaven to respect your seniors? And while you're here, shouldn't we drink to honor the deceased?"

After awhile, Jeanne shrugged off Lucifer's hand, folded her hands and sat on the Regera's fender. The graveyard was now filled with wilted flora and dried tombstones, fallout from Lucifer's temperamental radiance.

Jeanne asked, "Won't you say anything to Michael?"

"What *haven't* I said already?"

Lucifer sat beside her, handing over his wine bottle. Materializing a metal corkscrew, Jeanne uncorked the Château Laroque 2049 bottle, her tool dissolving back into the ether. Filling both glasses, Jeanne raised her glass.

"Age before beauty, Mr. Lucifer. *I insist*," and waited for Lucifer to take the first sip.

Lucifer muttered, "Brat," but complied.

Jeanne savored the wine's tang, feeling it wash down her throat. Inhaling Kensal Green Cemetery's earthy scent, it all blended together to help Jeanne forget Britain was once her sworn enemy. Looking down at the vermillion pool in her glass, Jeanne was reminded of Nikita's pink hair turning red with anger at Lucifer's revelation.

That he was Nikita's father.

On her friend's behalf, Jeanne asked, "What happened between you and Celine? Michael never talked about his involvement, our records are expunged, and Nikita deserves an answer as your daughter."

Her question had the demon lord remaining silent, Lucifer eventually answering.

"Celine was a forerunner to you New Testament kids, captivating me in hitherto unknown ways." Lucifer's flaxen eyebrows creased upon dredging up dormant romantic feelings.

"We were engaged in amour, later becoming one. And I stand by my accusation to this day: God created Celine specifically *to break my heart*." Lucifer's bubbling radiance flared up in parallel with his darkening expression, nearby plants shrivelling before Lucifer could contain his simmering temper.

"Our affair was exposed, and I was outvoted into abandoning Celine. Pregnant, she was exiled from heaven by Michael to avoid scandal and the sticky issue of abortion."

Jeanne wondered if Michael never shared his role because he believed he could've done more for Celine and Nikita?*

Is this the right psychic distance?

She asked, "Did being a single father ease you into your civilian job as a kindergarten teacher?"

"Children secrete saliva, snot, excrement and tears. Easier to wash away than blood, a fact I believe you're familiar with." Jeanne certainly was. Her fingers tightened around the glass as echos of her warring life, returning to the forefront of her mind, were all silenced with another mouthful of wine.

And Jeanne commented, "'Children'. Not like raising Charlene exactly worked out for you," as Lucifer's smile froze. Smoothing his rictus grin, he withheld himself from losing his temper and changed the topic after another sip.

"Pray tell, what'd Michael deem worthy about you to inherit Excalibur? You're a natural leader, but certainly no ruler..."

"What does it matter to you?"

"Everything. It belonged to my brother, I've every right to know." Lucifer's curiosity had Jeanne frowning in suspicion, but she answered honestly lest he respond poorly to being lied to.

"Well, thanks to Martha, I overcame some vengeful thoughts surrounding my death, which let me lift Excalibur."

"A saint," Lucifer arched an eyebrow, "with vengeful tendencies?"

"Well, my virtue isn't 'forgiveness', it's *war*. I won't deny I once had these knee-jerk, vengeful urges."

Lucifer eagerly leaned in, his eyes twinkling at Jeanne's revelation.

"So you not only performed a leap of faith by trusting God with your life, but found it within you to forgive all who wronged you, thus allowing you to lift Excalibur?"

Excellent! The epitome of a saint, honest about your flaws, yet striving to overcome them. I am ashamed to say I am not so virtuous."

High praise coming from a biblical manifestation of pride, Jeanne placing her empty glass beside Lucifer's to refill both glasses. Jeanne knocked on the Regera's bonnet,

"I assume you drove this to Michael's funeral."

Lucifer nodded, "Aye. Like the moon reflecting sunbeams, I saw Michael in the mirror since my own reflection means one too many Lucifers in existence. My greatness measured by how often I'd best him during battle! But now, my nemesis, my equal and opposite, he is no more."

His poignant admission visibly * took the wind out of his sails*, another sip of wine bringing the color back into his downturned cheeks.

Jeanne recalled her conversations with Michael, asking,

"You wished to grant Michael a deathmatch in a grand send-off, yes?"

"Aye, imagine it. An Old-Testament battle reshaping continents, tearing space-time apart as our blades clash. My Mordred to Michael's Arthur in our Battle of Camlann! But I suppose it was like Michael to pass on quietly.

Michael helped keep Celine and Nikita alive on my behalf; he *never* turned his back on me..." the crestfallen Lucifer failed to reconcile how his nemesis withered away, ambivalent feelings un-exorcised from his heart by ending their feud with an apocalyptic bang.

Jeanne could see it.

Even after Lucifer was disowned, a brother was still a brother to Michael. Lucifer was ultimately outshined by Michael's humility and kindness, refusing to spend his final moments watching his brother suffer.

Jeanne asked, "What do you want out of this invasion, Lucifer? Aside from becoming God..."

"A New Earth and New Heaven, my dear. A fragile peace, three races divided..."

Mankind's caused two World Wars, an averted third promising global annihilation. I can't leave mankind's fate in their own hands. The world is cruel to pit us against each other, all while God manipulates and foresees all from behind the scenes.

Like Alexander the Great, Qin Shi Huang and Tokugawa Ieyasu, I aim to subjugate and unite all three realms under one rule. *My rule*."

"But isn't that tyranny?"

"That's what plebeians, who can't comprehend greatness, will always complain about. Even if I shoulder the fate of all three realms, my skill and power will never let me down."

Jeanne's gaze rested on Michael's gravestone as she mused over Lucifer's goals, her experience as a human and Michael's lessons pointing her to one conclusion.

Jeanne said, "So you want to become a god-emperor and rule an empire spanning the ends of the unified world? Toppling a god's reign is beyond me, but regarding the 'emperor' and empire bit..."

Lucifer raised an acknowledging eyebrow at the symbolism, especially since Jeanne defied the British empire with heaven's guidance.

There was just one niggling question in Jeanne's mind which she indulged,

"But would you rewrite history as God? Reuniting with Stella and Celine, your daughters Nikita and Celine, even reviving Michael, any happiness you'd feel would be empty. It's either worship or oblivion as your empire, vast like the sea, reflects your splendour with the depth of a puddle. But for someone like you..." Despite the ominous crack of Lucifer's curling knuckles prompting Jeanne to tense up defensively, he instead inhaled softly as the golden roof of Lucifer's parted bangs overshadowed his creasing expression.

Lucifer eventually countered, "Is God's reign any better, creating his children in His image to be abandoned? I will be strict but fair, encouraging my subjects to strive for greater heights. Wouldn't that be grand?"

Jeanne answered after another sip of wine.

"Because mankind's achievements would never truly belong to them. Pride can't be humbled, you'd take credit for everything. A proud parent who sees his child doing well almost always thinks, 'My blood flows in my child's veins, his achievements are my own.' I don't doubt you can genuinely love, but one death's a tragedy, a million's a statistic. While individual deaths can hurt you, your subjects will never amount to anything more than your reflection.

You don't care whether millions perish under you, what matters is their deaths not tarnishing your reflection. You risk earning everyone's hatred, urging them on to overthrow you the way you will overthrow God, and the revolution comes full circle."

Lucifer's radiance flared up again, Jeanne taking his sullen silence as consent to continue after another sip, "Anyway, maybe God *is* cruel to throw mankind into the deep end. But no sensible parent raised their children without exposing them to hardship. Even if mankind dances on the edge of a third world war, with metahumans as their army of mass destruction, they've listened to the better angels of their nature before. They'll still err even with our intervention, but they'll join us in the light eventually."

"How do you know?"

"I don't exactly know. But I *believe*. However, faith isn't realized by idle prayer, but through our own efforts. That's why I, who's had some experience conquering the sun, was chosen to face you."

Lucifer backed off, his gaze softening in grudging recognition of Jeanne's conviction.

"Well said," and his radiant aura lifted, having evaporated the clouds and left withered flora all around them. Lucifer spoke after another sip, eons of experience buried underneath apparent youth revealing itself as he spoke,

"Michael entrusted you with Excalibur, so I'll believe in you, Jeanne d'Arc. I won't say this isn't personal, not when we fight in the shadow of Michael's death. For both our sakes, I hope you don't stay in, or try to fill the void he left behind.

We'll meet next time on the battlefield," Lucifer's tone contained genuine respect for Jeanne's from-the-ashes rebirth.

And yet, Jeanne discerned an ounce of fear in his aloof gaze.

Lucifer piped up, "Hell's torments are arguably naught compared to the horrors of war, giving a glimpse into the End of Days made manifest. Appropriate how you, a saint of mass destruction and inspiration, were chosen to be Michael's successor."

His description of war gripped Jeanne's heavy heart, taking care not to crush her glass from chills jerking her fingers into a fist.

Jeanne muttered, "Explain."

"You lot know of hardship, sacrifice, pain and death, but what do your heavenly comrades know about *war*?"

I admit your battle-hardened pragmatism, distilled from half a dozen wars, scare me more than everyone else's magical prowess, although it doesn't come without its fair share of anticipation to face you in battle."

Dredging up Jeanne's military career had her lips curling in a frown, recalling Nikita's seething hatred for her absent father.

"Nikita will be with me, she's dying to get another crack at you."

Lucifer's eyebrows furrowed, "Then let her come. I don't think she's the kind of person to take defeat lying down."

"Yeah, I wonder who she got that from?" Lucifer's head snapped around to stare at Jeanne as she finished her glass. The demon lord eventually letting out a deflating snort of laughter before downing his wine.

As Jeanne handed over her glass, Lucifer opened his supercar's door and packed his drinking utensils before getting in the driver's seat. Listening to the growl of Lucifer's Regera starting up before driving away, Jeanne gave Michael's headstone one last glance. Her mental order to be extracted was answered by a Jacob's Ladder insignia etching itself into thin air.

A pillar of light beamed down, snatching Jeanne from the face of the Earth.

Sections

Devoid of wildlife noises, the silence preserved Kensal Green Cemetery as a bastion against the march of civilization.

permeated the air,