

The chill that ran down his spine. That...that was too familiar. It was like someone had slipped a stream of cold water under the collar of his massive, worn leather duster. He could feel the draw of his enemy, one he had crushed, but never defeated. An enemy that had grown in power as his own had faded.

Altaer cast a glance down at his daughter. She, of course, was oblivious to the threat. As she danced her way through the Air and Space Museum, Altaer's face froze into the iron mask of a veteran of war. Ever since he had first fought and defeated Zalgo, he could sense the presence of the Destroyer of Worlds. They had met again, but never were able to finish that fight. Now...now he knew Zalgo wasn't just after him. He was after her.

He strode over to Kathryn and swept her up in his sinewy arms. She giggled and squirmed for a moment, then settled into the crook of his right arm. He smiled softly at her, leaning his head against her silky black hair that smelled vaguely of the children's shampoo she used. Turning, he ducked under the wings of an SR-71 Blackbird and headed into the massive marble and glass hallway that composed the main corridor. She protested.

"Daddy, where are we going? I wasn't done in there!"

A half-formed laugh rumbled in his chest. Growing up with him her tastes were entirely those of a typical little girl, but that was something he loved. He kept his voice kind and level. Concealing his emotions was second nature to him after so many years of deceit. "Well...I've got to get you home for now. But...I'll be bringing you a gift when I get home today, okay?"

She hesitated, studying her father, deciding if she should still try to stay at the museum. The idea of a gift sounded better, though, so her little cheeks puffed up, framing a broad smile. "YAY! What?"

He chuckled as he pushed through the main doors on the front of the building, quickly heading to the long white car parked in the closest spot. David's tall, lithe form was leaning against the side of his Rolls-Royce, still on the phone with whoever had called while they had been inside together. He turned, and covered the speaker on his cell phone. His voice was low and airy as he spoke softly.

"I told you I'd be back in as soon as I finished this call, I –"

He paused, eyes probing Altaer's. He had known Altaer more closely and longer than anyone else alive, so he didn't even need his empath skills to tell his comrade knew of danger. David hastily cut his connection as Altaer passed Kathryn to him.

"David, you'll need to drive Kathryn home. I've got someone I have to go see, okay?"

David heard the unspoken command and placed one hand on Altaer's shoulder for a moment before getting in the car. Altaer watched them drive off, turning his gaze towards the airport a couple miles off. Zalgo was there. Waiting.

Altaer would not let him be disappointed.

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Zalgo was only partially amused by dispatching the guards, workers, and travelers at the airport. They were just rabble to be subjected and used, but he expected they would be useful in the upcoming battle. Altaer, however, was the only mortal being he...feared. He detested that word, but deep down he knew it was true. The first time he felt himself crushed by Altaer and introduced to the cold companion of Death, he had been introduced to this unwelcome emotion, and it had arisen every time the thought of this man rose again in his mind. Now...now he was stronger than before. And he had been paying attention to what he heard from the other Gladiators he knew – Altaer was weaker. Human. Just another person to be crushed, but Oh! The sheer pleasure and joy that he derived from crushing the minds of those who were actually a challenge.

He heard Altaer before he saw him. It was a low rumble at first, combined with noise. Zalgo turned from his position in the middle of an airfield, the pools of his black Fraysan oil prepared to face whatever Altaer wished to bring.

The noise, however, he was not expecting. Well, he called it noise – the raucous combination of sounds humans call music was blaring across the tarmac. “B-B-B-Bad to the Bone” was being growled out in pairing with electric guitar from the cab of a tanker semi-truck that was racing towards him. His four eyes searched the window to see Altaer, but a set of bullet holes and blood splatters on the driver's side prevented that. It didn't matter – he could guess the only person insane enough to charge him like this. Moving his oil to stop the vehicle, the cab slammed full force into the oncoming wall and forced the trailer up into the air as it jackknifed. Altaer rolled out of the driver's window, whipping out a pair of guns. The tank soared over the wall of oil and skidded across the asphalt for a moment before a stream of bullets tore it open.

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Altaer gave a satisfied grunt as he stood to his feet. The tank ballooned into a massive fireball, letting him watch Zalgo fly like a ragdoll through vehicles and walls before the pressure wave of exploding jet fuel. He settled his hands onto the grips of his PP19 customs, flexing his shoulders as he stalked towards the last place he saw Zalgo. The sun glinted fiendishly off of the black oil that splash around his boots, his steps keeping pace with the growl of George Thorogood coming from the overturned cab of the tractor-trailer. As he expected, a series of oil spires rose from the ground and hurtled towards him – but instead of running, he opened fire on them. His explosive rounds shattered and shredded the oil, flinging it through the air where it dissolved and reducing the attacks to nothing. As the oil settled again, he squinted through the midday glare to where he could see Zalgo staring him down.

Altaer grinned and tipped the end of his right-hand PP19 to his forehead in mock salute.

“Ya miss me, Slick?”

Being immune to Zalgo’s telepathy, he couldn’t hear Zalgo’s response...nor did he care to. Still, he could see the alien overlord’s eyes narrow, and chuckled.

The oil around his feet suddenly contracted on his legs, but a few short blasts from his guns solved the issue. Another glance told him Zalgo was trying to decide how to handle this new tactic. A confused enemy was always a good enemy, Altaer knew, so he laughed mockingly and launched his “charge.”

He did not run. Rather, he stalked towards him. Slowly, blasting away at any of Zalgo’s attacks, changing magazines when he ran out of bullets, gradually getting into fighting range. Letting his sheer arrogance and laughter and mockery do the deeper damage bullets could never do. As he closed the distance, Zalgo met him with another attack.

This time, his guns responded with five shots and then an empty click.

Altaer dropped the useless weapons and leapt for an overhanging Boeing 757’s wing. He caught the lower edge and swung his legs up as the oil’s razor edges surged under him, crumpling his discarded SMGs like tinfoil. He rolled onto the top of the wing and grabbed the aileron slots as another surge ripped the wing off and sent it flying through the air. Losing his grip as the metal was ground and torn apart, he planted his feet on the steel panel under him and swayed his legs. The metal skidded across the wave of oil just like a surfboard, allowing him to extract his DSR-1 auto-sniper from under his duster while keeping his balance on top of the lethal wave instead of under it. The kickback from his first set of shots was enough to hurl him through the air and into the upper floor of the airport, rolling as the glass shattered behind his back. The oil wave collapsed to the ground as Zalgo was flipped backwards from the triplet of concussive rounds.

Altaer shifted positions inside the building, drawing a bead on Zalgo to fire again when he felt an aggressive hand on his shoulder. Spinning, he found himself staring into a set of dead eyes. The man was some traveler, still in a business suit and tie. His hair was still combed neatly back...nothing would have been amiss had there not been a narrow trail of black oil dribbling from the corner of the man’s mouth. Altaer blasted him from the hip, the concussive round at point-blank reducing the poor fellow’s upper body to a shredded splatter of flesh and oil.

At the sound of the gunshot, however, he found himself under assault from more of Zalgo’s thralls. One security officer fired off shots. Slipping his sniper rifle back under his duster, Altaer drew his seax from his boots and lunged towards the attackers, hewing them down with ease. They moved with the same speed and agility as if they had been alive, but their unnatural faces

gave the semblance of a freakish zombie horde. Oil shot through the room, narrowly missing his head as he dove to the ground, only to have to roll back up into the air to escape yet another attack. A quick scan told him Zalgo himself could not see where he was...unless...Altaer stared back into the eyes of the thralls. Zalgo had planned this.

Altaer fled through the airport, trying to put distance between him and easy access to the outside and Zalgo's oil. As he neared the center of the airport, he could feel the building rumbling as oil surged through the foundation and walls. Zalgo was sealing him into a death trap.

Ever more people were streaming towards his location as he mentally reviewed the layout of this airport. As he ran he hacked away at anyone that managed to get in his way or draw too close, his heart-rate rising as every one he killed was replaced by three more. Like any building of relative importance to him, Altaer had used his natural knack for mental mapping and memorized the layout of this airport upon moving to this city with David. Now this odd little habit held-over from his free-lance days was thankfully serving its purpose as he found the central generator and communications rooms, designed to be bomb-proof. As he headed down the hall at full speed, he pulled his cell-phone out and yelled at it.

"SPECTRE!"

The screen flickered, and a single line wobbled across as the A.I. came to life. "Yes, Master?"

Altaer resisted the urge to look over his shoulder as one of Zalgo's undead horde screamed out after him. He gave his command with even more urgency.

"GET ME INTO THIS DOOR AHEAD NOW!!"

"Right away...done."

Altaer slammed the phone back in his pocket and pumped his legs harder. His footfalls echoed through the corridor, barely keeping ahead of his numerous pursuers. He hit the door at full pace, grabbing the handle and rotating with his shoulder as he pulled it open and slid inside. It snapped shut behind him, giving a satisfying "Clink" as the lock sealed just when the first group of people smashed themselves into it. They stared at him through the reinforced glass, clawing to get in. He hesitated for a moment, eyes locking onto a woman that was still holding her baby. Both were long since dead, but...the sight stuck with him. One mistake and that could be him and Kathryne.

He could feel a strange tingle as subtle tendrils of fear and apprehension tried to creep into his mind, as if Zalgo was silently forcing himself back into his own mind. He shuddered, stepping backwards deeper into the central complex. The walls around him shook as they were beaten with oil. From the center of the main room he could see the glass around him covered in

writhing piles of people, gradually mixing with pool of oil that was encasing his room. He could hear the creaking of the metal walls under the ever-increasing strain.

Altaer caught his breathing before it accelerated and set his jaw. The tendrils were crushed – fear was put to flight, and any hold Zalgo had tried to recreate was smashed to pieces. The fires of hell seemed to have been stolen and lit in his eyes, such was the determined fury that burned inside. He slid out his rifle, retreated to behind one of the generator units, and began firing at the main structural supports.

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Zalgo's face split into a four-way smile as he watched the airport collapse with a roar. He ground his oil further into the earth blindly, crushing concrete, steel, flesh, glass – everything it touched into rubble. The dust from his attacks rose across the airfields, settling as a thick white gritty fog.

Seconds turned into minutes as he waited for the dust to settle. Altaer was merely human, but he had managed to survive death before – this time Zalgo wanted to ensure there was nothing left to exist at all. The few parts remaining intact slowly creaked and collapsed under their own weight as he relaxed, waiting. Another conflict had been settled. He was becoming ready to resolve his final --

The impact he had no chance to anticipate. His head whipped backwards, eyes blinded by the searing heat of the explosive round that punched a hole straight through him. His body slammed into the ground, but he quickly pooled oil and used that to force himself back to his feet. Seeking to pierce the settling white fog, however, he found himself locked in a pounding darkness of complete blindness. Bullets began hitting him faster now. His skin tore and shredded under the onslaught as his body was tossed back and forth. His Fraysan oil spurted and gushed around him through the growing numbers of holes, and he lashed out. He shifted into his full engine form, pumping out floods of oil in an attempt to kill his attacker. There was no question it was Altaer...and a part of him panicked. He was locked in blindness, his powerful mind already once defeated and sealed off, and now under attack from a silent, lethal foe.

His rage demolished everything in its path as it swung aimlessly in all directions, sweeping up trucks, planes, and debris. He spread his attacks further as his vision slowly returned, ensuring that every possible hiding spot was overturned or destroyed. Finally, exhausted, he ceased pumping out oil and straightened himself slowly. Out of the silent grey dust a dark form materialized from the ground as if a ghost was rising out of the earth. Zalgo recognized the duster instantly. Altaer's right leg had a piece of a gun strapped to it with cloth and was streaming blood. His torso was wounded and bare, his shirt having been used as a mask to keep the shards of dust from his lungs. He tossed aside a man-hole cover, his eyes a burning red from the stinging haze, but despite his body shaking with each step the gaze was more powerful than ever.

Zalgo snapped, and hurled himself into one of his newest mutations as his eyes turned blood red. His blasted body swelled with power as his previously lumbering form sped into action. Altaer seemed surprised, and failed to dodge a flying punch from the alien. The human spun into the rubble, tumbling across the ground before coming to his feet. Zalgo was at him instantly, but this time Altaer was ready. He spun down under the blow and planted a chunk of twisted steel into Zalgo's side. Zalgo, surprised by the force from such a petty being, lost his balance for a moment, enough to let Altaer drag a bundle of cables from the wreckage, flailing the knarled ends at his enemy.

Zalgo rushed in, but found himself flipped onto his back as the cables worked like a whip to tear his feet out from under him. He roared in fury, kicking out at his enemy and leaping back to his feet. Altaer was favoring his good leg, so Zalgo targeted his next attack to the wounded one. Altaer hopped backwards, lashing out to buy more space. Zalgo's metallic skin and bones served him well, however, as he bull-rushed Altaer. Instead of retreating as he expected, Altaer gnashed his teeth and leaned into the attack, catching Zalgo's own fists in his.

The pair froze like this, alien and human, immortal and mortal, oil and blood. The massive black monster pressed his immense weight down on the much smaller human, and grinned as Altaer's arms began to jerk and shake, slowly pushing him down into the rubble. Zalgo spoke at this close range, his voice a strange inhuman growl.

"You are the only mortal enemy I have ever found challenging. I will take pleasure from crushing your bones to dust like the rest of this building. Give up and die faster, Altaer. Surrender and I will make the death of your friends and daughter die swiftly instead of slowly filling their blood with my oil. You are merely a human...feel my power and DIE!!"

Altaer narrowed his eyes, then shook his head free of his shirt-scarf and spat blood in Zalgo's face, smiling a bloody grin. His voice was raspy and wet, but the power seemed to shake the very ground around them.

"FUCK NO GREASY SPACE NIGGAH!!!"

To his astonishment and horror Zalgo felt the bones and skin of his hands begin to crush under Altaer's renewed force. As uncertainty and fright settled in, he tried to pull free, but succeeded only in stumbling backwards. Before he regained his footing, he was smashed to the ground by a fragmented support beam Altaer hurled at him like an enraged gorilla. The human pounced onto him and began landing a fury of blows with enough power to bounce Zalgo off the ground like a rubber dummy. He opened his central mouth to impale Altaer with a spire of oil.

Instead, however, he felt a tremor run through his heart, then spread through his body. To his urge for oil, his body responded with a dry spasm.

His oil was gone.

The fear he had been fighting gripped him as he sought to flee, but now found himself weak and trapped by his aggressor. Under the attacks the world slowly began to fade, the pounding matching the beating of his shaking, racing heart.

Thud-thud thud-thud thud-thud.

Except as the fury of the blows grew, his own heartbeat faded. The world drifted to darkness again, and suddenly he wasn't the overlord of oil anymore. He was a child in his home world, fleeing tearfully from his father's death. He was running into the underworld, fleeing from sorrow just as hope and life were fleeing from him. His footsteps were pounding deeper into the darkness. The oil was rising. The Fraysan – mysterious and powerful being – was surrounding him, embracing him, promising him power and vengeance.

The sorrow, though...that was still pounding too. It had never died. The fear – the fear of being powerless....it was so real. It was here. Now. Beating him with fists of flesh and bone, beating his body of blackness and steel that could survive the conquest and enslavement of worlds! Something deep inside wanted to curl into a tight ball and cry the tears he had never shed, to somehow break from the fearsome, powerful curse of The Fraysan that filled his soul and once and finally DIE!

The pounding continued. Hope was dead. The Fraysan murmured its promise of emptiness and darkness and pointless power. The darkness tried to flee, but he clung to all he knew desperately, and pleaded with the darkness in his shrunken, twisted heart to return. It obliged, and swallowed him whole into its oblivion.

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Altaer continued beating his enemy until Zalgo's body was bent, broken, and limp. His fists torn down to bloody bone from the alien's irony flesh, he stood and balanced on his bad leg as he kicked at the black body until his legs were too tired to continue to support him. Dropping to his knees, he grabbed a nearby propane tank and beat Zalgo's head to a flattened pulp until his shoulders could take no more. He heard military and RHG Containment Officers arriving on the scene, but the dust concealed them...and he cared nothing about them anyway. His fury was fully engaged in destroying the creature that had threatened those he loved, and his body was swelling with too much adrenaline to stop now.

Standing, he used his hands to pry open the seam on Zalgo's chest and tore out the monster's heart, ground it under his boot, then shoved the tank into the gaping hole. He stepped back, grabbed a length of rebar, and stabbed the tank until he punched through. The friction of steel-on-steel sparked and ignited the tank, exploding with enough power to knock him onto his back. Men yelled at the sound in the distance. Pushing himself up, he stared down at the form. Blue flames curled through the numerous holes that perforated Zalgo's body. Altaer grunted, using the rebar as a staff to help himself walk away silently.

He passed an overturned supply crate and spotted water. He tore into the container and guzzled four bottles before his thirst was sated. Preparing to leave, he noticed a few food items. He glanced from them back to Zalgo's flaming body, and smiled.

"Well now...Slick...seems I can kill two birds with one stone..."

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Altaer waved down a pair of RHG Containment officers on his way out. He pointed them to Zalgo, and while they called an ambulance for him he stole their Humvee. After a brief car chase and a few crumpled police vehicles, Altaer rolled up to his house. His new place was a nice Victorian in the old elite uptown neighborhood of SP City. Not precisely his choice, but it made little Katy happy, and that was enough for him.

The businessman next door was frozen with his lawnmower stuck in mid-push, mouth agape. Altaer waved a hand coated in streaming rivulets of blood and gave a toothy smile as he limped towards his own front door.

"Nice day, isn't it Tod?"

The man didn't respond, but merely stared as Altaer made his way into his house. He swung shut the oaken front door and hung his duster on the wrought iron coat rack, pulling out a large aluminum box from one of the coat's many secret compartments. Kathryne's footsteps echoed from upstairs. He heaved a long sigh. There was something about the sound of tiny feet pattering across a hardwood floor that was irreplaceable. She was running to greet HIM. Her father.

She nearly tripped down the stairs as she flew towards him. Her eyes scanned his beaten body, but she didn't hesitate as she flung herself straight into his open arms. Altaer grunted from the unwelcome impact against his wounds, but wrapped her gently in one muscular arm, squeezing her lightly.

"I got held up at the airport. Got...uh...in touch with a person I knew. BUT...I did manage to get you a surprise..."

She held onto him a moment more. Altaer knew she wouldn't believe him, but also knew she trusted him with her life. There wasn't the need to explain what happened. She didn't care about anything except him. Altaer's eyes pooled with tears, but he blinked them back. This was a time to keep her happy. Out of his peripheral vision he noticed David heading towards him. The Doctor took the stairs in slow, silent steps, a warm smile of relief on his face...then rolled his eyes.



“I watched the news coverage they got towards the end. I’m guessing this will probably be a bit of a long night for me as I put your ass back together. Glad you’re safe, though.”

Before he could reply, Kathrynne stepped back and eyed the metal container. “Soo...what did you bring me?!”

Altaer merely lifted off the top as he chuckled.

“Fresh fire-roasted S’mores! Courtesy of a friend.”