

That Time I Met a Demon Lord

Epic tales are said to be unbound in time, their words shared for generations as the line between truths and legends begin to blur. The most epic of epic tales was that of Marchuis and the Demon Lord Beelzeborn. A hero born from the common folk, it was his valour and bravery that allowed the ancient wizard Saladorlinquikistestion to seal the demon away for a hundred years. This has been a story that has held true for ninety-nine years, eleven months, twenty-nine days, sixteen hours, thirty-four minutes, and forty-two seconds. Give or take, anyways. And in roughly seven hours and twenty uhhh... twenty-five minutes, Beelzeborn will return. Naturally, the world with such ample time the world had prepared, and it produced an heir to Marchuis' legacy. A great-grandson, trained from a young age to battle the Demon Lord and defeat him, once and for all.

Valedorian in name, he, much like his ancestor, was a lion of dark brown fur, though strangely no mane to his name. Tall (from much time on the rack) and broad (from six hours of weight training since he was six), he was the perfect blade to cut down Beelzeborn so that he may never threaten the world again. And even as the time approached, Valedorian still trained, his countless hours of image training keeping the visage of the demon in his mind so that he may cut it down. In fact, he had already spent countless hours swinging his blade, known as the Divine Blade Sugnwr against his mental foe. His trainers couldn't have been prouder as they observed him fighting as if his very life was on the line. "How long has he been at it now?" a bespectacled peacock queried from the upper floor of the training room.

"I'd wager at least five hours now" a burly bison with a missing eye replied as he lent on the railing. Rolling the barley in his mouth from one side to the other, he nodded approvingly. "That demon doesn't stand a chance with the kid around" he said approvingly.

"One would hope so. We've sunk a lot of time and effort into getting him ready for this. And if he fails--"

"He won't fail. He'd die first before he fails."

"That's what I'm afraid of" the peacock sighed as he pushed his glasses up his beak.

“Come tomorrow when he comes back with the demon’s head, we won’t have to worry ever again” the bison grunted as he hobbled off the box he was standing on, his short meaty legs moving him down the nearest stairs. “Okay boy, that’s enough of that” he declared. Stopping immediately, Valedorian sheathed his blade and stood to immediate attention. His focused ahead, and he held himself still as he was eyed by the trainer. “Relax kid” came the order.

The lion knight did not relax, remaining still in his heavy plate armour. “I said relax kid.”

“I am relaxed, sir” the feline explained.

“Right. Well, the higher nobles said they wanted to uhh, talk with ya about the mission. So run along and go see them in the meeting place” the bison explained.

“Yessir!” Valedorian said sharply, before bending his legs and running off.

The bovine snorted loudly as he shook his head. “Think I trained the boy *too* well” he said to himself.

The meeting place was a large room with a semi-circle table, where numerous high ranking figures would meet as the High Council. Most notable among them was the Pope of the Church of the Guiding Winds, the King, Saladorlinquikistestion’s pupil the wizard Aghanimisqistianermammagnon, and Valedorian’s father Marquistian. They were quiet as the noble warrior entered, and immediately stood to attention before them. “At ease Valedorian” the King spoke.

Valedorian’s stance did not change. “Sit down, Valedorian” Marquistian sighed.

The lion knight took the nearest available seat, the sturdy wood bending under his weight. “We will be keeping this brief Valedorian, as the fated hour grows near” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon warned with a stroke of his beautiful silver beard. “Now, you have trained for many years now Valedorian, many years now,” he said wisely, “and we are pleased with how you have progressed in that time.”

“Thank you, great wizard” Valedorian stoically replied, clearly showing his affection towards the wizened mole.

“With that said, do you consider yourself prepared for the trial ahead of you?” the King inquired.

The lion stared at the ruler, a chimpanzee pushing forty who he had known since he was young. “I have prepared for this day. I have been prepared for many years now” he answered in a crisp manner.

“Well uhh, jolly good” the King nodded thoughtfully.

“And you do not believe you will fail?” the Pope inquired with dubious airs.

Valedorian stared at him too; a cobra in holy robes and a mitre, with divine signage tattooed upon his hood. “Failure is not an option, nor a possibility” he responded.

The holy reptile raised a doubtful brow, but remained silent. “Then we have nothing else to instruct you upon. Gather your things and head towards Beelzeborn’s castle. And we shall in turn pray for your safe return to us” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon uttered.

“My things are prepared already in the entrance hall. I will leave now” Valedorian swore as he rose from the chair, which gave a low **groan** of gratitude.

Saluting bravely and turning away, there were casual murmurs from among the council, save for Marquistian who silently watched his son go. Drumming his fingers awkwardly, he turned to his fellow Councillors. “I must take my leave” he declared, and made haste from the chamber.

He was not too far from Valedorian, who of single-thought was heading to gather his materials. “Father?” he inquired, noting the particular sound the elder made when he walked.

Marquistian, now caught up with his son, seemed ill at ease as he looked up his child. "I thought I would see you off" he explained.

"Appreciated father, but not necessary. Surely you have something else you could do?" the hero figured.

"I doubt there is anything more important for me right now than seeing my son off to his destiny" Marquistian answered, his mane bristling with annoyance.

"If you so wish then father" Valedorian conceded as they went together.

"Are you nervous, son?"

"Should I be?" the younger lion inquired, his face marred with stoic confusion.

"No! Well, it wouldn't hurt to be a little nervous. You're only going up against a demon lord so powerful Gramps couldn't even beat him" Marquistian answered, and immediately regretted it. "Look, not that that's-

"I understand your sentiment, but I do not fear Beelzeborn father. I have prepared for so long that I fear nothing he or his fiendish powers could throw at me. It is not a matter of if I beat him, simply when and how long it will take to sever his head from his shoulders."

The father looked to his son, his look of pain unseen by a hero only ever looking forward. "I'm proud of you, Valedorian" he said warily.

"I know father. I thank you for you believing in me" Valedorian replied crisply, and yet, he seemed relieved that they had made it to the entrance hall. "This is where we depart from one another" he stated while an attendant handed him a satchel.

"Be safe, Valedorian" Marquistian requested.

“Nobody will be safe when Beelzeborn returns to our world. Only once he is dead shall we all be safe” Valedorian asserted. “And I would rather die than put the safety of other’s at risk.”

The older lion opened his mouth, but no words came out. Not a single sound could be made until his own son, trained for years for a fight that could cost him his life, was gone. “That’s what I’m afraid of” he said quietly as the door shut in front of him.

There had been no fanfare as Valedorian had left, no cheers. It was just as expected. There was no reason to cheer for Beelzeborn’s inevitable return. There could be no joy nor celebrations, not until the demon was erased from this world. A time fast approaching as the lion made it to the ruins of Beelzeborn’s castle. Menacing, tall, ugly. These were all words to describe the structure rooted near the very pit of evil that had once spawned the demons of yore. Clearly having seen far better days, the very insides bore musty, moth-eaten tapestries, and imprints where valuables had once been kept. “No better fate for a demon’s castle” Valedorian uttered as he momentarily stared at the space a large painting would have hung.

It was quite the contradiction to reconcile the scumbag act of vandalism and looting with it being done in a demon’s abode, but somehow it just worked. Regardless, it left at least a clear path to Beelzeborn’s throne room, where it had all gone down. The doors themselves had been sealed with magical glyphs to prevent outside interference, and for once Valedorian felt a tightness in his chest. Freeing a hand from his gauntlet, it gently ran down the ancient wooden doors. To think he was going to finish what his great-grandfather had started, so long ago. “I will make you proud Marchuis” he vowed in reverent tones.

Breathing calmly, he kept his hand to the door as he recalled the words Aghanimisqistianermammagnon had told him: “GADEWCH I MI I MEWN!”

The shouting was probably wholly unnecessary, but it got the point across as the glyphs faded away, allowing the doors to swing open. Inside was nothing short of a mess, with smashed furniture and torn drapery everywhere. The only things that appeared to have survived was the throne itself, which was somehow even uglier than Valedorian had expected. The other was a painting of Beelzeborn: A demon with the head of the goat and four evil eyes, and four just as evil ears crowned by three pairs of horns. He had a muscular body of slick black skin emblazoned with thick tufts of black fur and a pair of enormous leathery wings stretched out behind him. An evil whip-like tail coiled behind him, no doubt

what had been responsible for taking away Marchuis' eye in the battle. He was posed among flames and corpses, no doubt made as a precursor to his greatest dream.

Beelzeborn, the last true Demon Lord had desired total genocide of all life on the planet, be it mortal or demon. Insanity at its finest, he was put away before he could begin his plans. Had he not... it was best not to consider it. Turning back to the greater room, Valedorian's image training called to the battle that took place, his weathered and injured ancestor fighting boldly against a cruel and sadistic monster. He fought valiantly, and with all his might he weakened the creature enough for Saladorlinquikistestion to seal him away. Strange that there was no sign of any magic, though Aghanimisqistianermammagnon had said the seal would return to this physical plane moments before it would break. With time aplenty, Valedorian studied the painting carefully, the image a far better comparison than images he had seen all his life. Though it was not the real thing, it would be enough for him to study weak points and weaknesses he may have. His wings would make turning hard, though he could compensate with his tail. And he could use them to box Valedorian in, so it would require careful planning. This wasn't accounting for whether or not Beelzeborn may have been weakened from his imprisonment, and if the wounds earned in the last battle had stayed with him.

Time seemed to lose him as he waited, and it was only when the room gained a reddish glow was his attention finally turned from the painting. The source of the shine was a small red sphere hovering above the landing before the throne. It was soon accompanied by sigils and lines drawing themselves across the ground, no doubt a sign of Saladorlinquikistestion's ancient magic. Drawing his sword, he held it defensively as the sphere started to grow larger and larger, its growing weight pulling it down towards the ground. And in spite of the phenomenon, the lion was not frightened one bit. This was what he had been born for, this was his *destiny*. When that demon gets released, he will be the one to cleave his head from his shoulders.

The sphere pulsed in a rather disgusting way, much like a heart as it kept expanding and expanding, soon finding solace in the middle of the magic circle. The pulsing hastened, and yet the sphere continued to grow vaster and vaster, a figure appearing below its surface. Valedorian tightened his grip on Sugnwr, and braced as the magic erupted into a vast explosion of light and smoke. Spreading like mist across the floor, the lion maintained his guard as something seemed to be moving from within. Taking a cautious step closer, his finely tuned hearing seemed to pick up the sound of... chewing?

“UUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRPPPPPPPPPP!!!”

Valedorian held onto his blade as he weathered the unnatural gust that blasted away the smoke. The force was so extreme his arms rose to shield himself, even as his boots slid on the cold stones. Beelzeborn truly was the force that had been promised to him. The lion wasn't even able to lower his arms until he was sure the gust had past, and the red lights had faded away. But once he had, he was... let's just say he was bemused. "What... is... this?" he whispered to himself, staring ahead.

Before him was not the muscular and wicked demon the tapestries had foretold. Nor was he anything like his grandfather's descriptions. The vile Beelzeborn, scourge of the worlds, had an immensely rotund face, with two of his disgustingly fat chins covered in a thick beard. The other, creased chins wobbled as he chewed on a horrifically big hunk of meat, his fat cheeks rolling as he blissfully chewed away. In hindsight, it was hard to call them chins as where they ended and the rings of supple flab where his neck would be was nothing short of an enigma. To say nothing of his disgustingly doughy shoulders and broad, completely undefined arms that either rested at his side, or held aloft the horrific snack. And that wasn't even distracting from the moobs, whose girth far outweighed Valedorian's own head and possessed enough depth between to smother him. A single, unnaturally thick golden ring hung from one of his thumb-sized nipples; the metal casually slapping and sending ripples through the moob it rested upon. This gruesome figure only seemed to get worse from there, and yet the lion's head was already shaking in disbelief.

How could this be? How could the brutal, monstrous demon lord be... be like this? How could his gut be so impossibly massive in both height and width? No living being could possibly wield a belly of such mass that only hung just low enough to obscure all but the lowest part of his shiny red speedo, which had even more flab crammed into it. It was impossible to tell what grabbed even more attention actually; the goat demon's bloated outie bellybutton, or the sheer amount of pubic fat crammed into the front of his speedo. In truth Valedorian preferred the hideous outie, as then he wouldn't have to look at something so... forbidden.

"UUUUUUURRRRRRRRRPPPPPPP!!"

Another rush of air as Beelzeborn belched, his plump lips and round cheeks flapping in the gaseous gale. Sighing, he mindlessly wiped away drool as he continued munching, his eyes hazy and two of his ears lazily twitching. Though the lion wasn't paying attention to this, as all his years of training hadn't prepared him for this. Seriously, how could *anyone* have prepared him for the demon lord's impossibly chunky thighs which squished together in a manner not unlike the kitchenhand's bread dough. And only at the end of his equally fatty thighs ending in plump, sore-looking feet did Valedorian look back up, catching the demon's

eyes. Beelzeborn blinked a couple of times, the haze fading as he finally seemed to focus for once, with all four of them focusing on the hero. Opening his mouth, he immediately took another gluttonous bite of meat, to which he chewed slowly and methodically while he itched at his belly. His heinous mastication was the only source of noise for twenty straight seconds until he finally swallowed. "Who are you?" he inquired casually, taking another bite of meat.

Valedorian seemed to have trouble finding his tongue, given that Beelzeborn had clearly already won the first battle here. But fine! That was to be expected with an evil, conniving demon lord clearly adept at trickery. Steeling himself, the lion pointed at the flabby lout with Sugnwr. "I am Valedorian, son of Marquistian, son of Valediction, son... of Marchuis!" he declared.

The demon lord tilted his head thoughtfully, some ash cascading off of his hairy mug. "Marchuis, huh?" he mused. "How's he doing?" Beelzeborn inquired as he turned towards his throne.

Another victory rang out for the demon lord, as the behind was just as bad as the front. Countless rolls of backflab presented themselves, each one cascading into another or bunching up as if to amplify their size. And his rump was worse! How could it possibly be that big?! And how the hell was the speedo still on despite digging into his waist so tightly, and stretching across what little of his impossibly vast hindquarters as it could? Valedorian had to shake his head and restraighten his arm. "Marchuis is dead!" he announced.

"Really? That's a shame. Thought he'd last the century" Beelzeborn mused as he sat down on his throne... sorta. The goat demon grunted as his dumpster-sized ass and field-sized hips got jammed halfway down by the armrests. "Typical" he sighed as he forced himself up, the chair breaking free to follow him. "Mind helping me here?" he requested to the hero attempting to kill him, but upon seeing the death glare aimed at him he said "Nevermind".

Grunting and straining loudly, Beelzeborn shattered the throne, freeing him of the infernal prison that caged his fine physique. "Damn thing. Knew I should've made it bigger" he grumbled.

Snapping his fingers, a thick and sturdy bench formed from the remnants of the throne. Testing it, the demon slowly lowered himself upon it. The thick wood **CRRRREEEEEEAAAAAKKKKKEEEEEDDDD** with every second he spent lowering his generous carriage onto it, the wood bowing beneath his gargantuan weight until it was eight inches

lower than either side. Still, it stood the test, and Beelzeborn sighed agreeably with the newest arrangement. "Sorry, you were saying?" he said to Valedorian, who he only seemed to realize was there.

The lion cleared his throat, though he was still quite unsure how this was supposed to go. He was trained in combat, not diplomacy. "Beelzeborn!" he instead shouted.

"Yes?" the demon asked mildly.

"I am Valedorian, son of Marquistian, son of Valediction, son of Marchuis. I have trained all my life in preparation for this day, so that I may end your threat once and for all. Every waking moment of my existence has been spent so that I will counter your every move, to prevent you from committing genocide on the land of the living. This is my solemn vow as Valedorian. Right here, right now, I will end you!"

Beelzeborn tilted his head in thought, his cheeks squishing on his plump shoulder as he mulled it over. "Oh, I'm not doing the genocide thing anymore" he declared.

Valedorian's brow creased. "You're not... committing genocide... anymore?" he said slowly.

"That is correct" the goat responded. "Do you mind if I whip up a feast? I'm famished actually."

"Sure" the lion responded out of blind courtesy.

"Thank you" Beelzeborn said with a content smile, and he snapped his fingers. A vast, heavy-set table coated in the most decadent foods from all corners of the earth appeared behind the demon, who frowned. "Eh, still rusty I guess" he chuckled, before spinning around and shoving his face into a mountain of mashed potato and gravy.

Valedorian was once again gobsmacked at the blasé attitude Beelzeborn was showing, and how much more his rolls of obsidian back fat bunched up. They held a noticeable sheen to them from a caked-on layer of sweat, and it was only now that the hero realised he could see the back at all. The demon's wings, once vast and mighty in the tapestry, were now puny, plump, and all about useless. And the same went for his tail, its whip-like quality gone

in favour of being plump, short, and curly in a way not unlike a pig's. It also made a fine distraction for ignoring Beelzeborn's rump, whose girth was so massive it hung over the edge of the heavy bench by at least a foot. "Oh, you were saying anyways?" the demon spoke up, once again remembering the lion's presence.

"Is this a trick?" Valedorian demanded.

"Why would it be a trick?" Beelzeborn burred through a mouth full of turkey.

"Because you went away looking... looking like that!" the hero exclaimed, using Sugnwr to point at the far more majestic painting of the demon lord.

The demon stared it thoughtfully. "That was then" he said with a shrug, and continued to indulge himself, ignoring the grease pooling in his fat flaps.

"Then what is now?!" the lion demanded testily.

Pausing from his feast, Beelzeborn sighed heavily, before grabbing a tureen of soup in his porky hands and upending it as close to his ravenous maw as he could. "Do you realize how long a century is kid?" he asked gravely, soup slopping down his neck folds as he put the empty pot down and belched disgustingly.

"A hundred years" Valedorian answered matter-of-factly.

"Do you know where I've been?" the demon queried.

"You were sealed away for a hundred years, so that someone more prepared than my great-grandfather could destroy you once and for all."

"Yeah, I've been sealed away. Sealed away in a small world where I got everything my heart desired."

“I could not fathom what kind of hell someone as heartless as you could desire” Valedorian spat.

“It was quite nice actually. Sandy beaches with pure white sand and crystal clear waters. Paradise” Beelzeborn recalled with great longing. “I got everything I wanted when I wanted it. Food, drinks, things to amuse myself with. Do you know what it was missing? People!”

“Given your plans to kill everyone, it must’ve been heaven for you.”

“It was... for two weeks, give or take” the demon sighed as he rested his bulbous cheek on his bulbous palm. “After two weeks I became lonely, and then I desired some company. Any would do. Nobody came” he lamented.

“Sounds like you got what you richly deserved” Valedorian scowled as he slowly began approaching the goat.

“I did. The world was first made based on my heart’s desire, and I desired no one to exist. There was nobody but me. And I couldn’t kill myself either; I tried multiple times in multiple ways. And during the century I was away, I realised how awful my plan truly was, and how awful I had been” Beelzeborn groaned as he gripped his brows and ran his sausage fingers down his face.

“Because you’re a demon” Valedorian pointed out while flanking said-demon’s side.

“Being alone means being alone with yourself. So much rage and hatred boiled within me, and I had nobody to inflict it upon. There was nobody to experience my cruelty. I couldn’t even destroy everything, as it immediately came back! I even tried inflicting it upon myself, but my wounds would heal. I was trapped in a limbo, unable to die, unable to hurt others, unable to speak to anyone” the goat sighed.

“Wait” the lion said, thinking. “So what? You just... gave up on your plans?”

“I said I did, didn’t I?” Beelzeborn responded irritably.

“I assumed you were lying.”

“Demons can’t lie. We can twist the truth, but we can’t outright lie because we’re divine beings. Divine beings can’t lie because doing so is beneath us. Also, I think we explode if we do.”

Valedorian was silent, though his mind was screaming as loudly as it could.

“Regardless, over time I had to think about things. There was nothing else I *could* do. And it came to me that, once my rage and hatred were gone, I wouldn’t have much left. The ironic hell that was my prison made me realize what the end result of my plans would be, and how... how empty they were” Beelzeborn said bitterly, tears shimmering in his four eyes. “That’s why I decided that I couldn’t go through with my plan anymore. It wasn’t worth it. So for eighty years I’ve waited patiently to come back, so I can just... leave the world alone. No more hatred and anger. No more plans of genocide. I’ll just... create a few imps and shadow creatures to serve me as I live my life comfortably.”

The hero that stood by him was silent, save for his rapidly increasing breathing. He placed a hand too his chest, but it did nothing to stop his heart’s rapid pulsing. “No. No no no *noooo*” he moaned, walking over to the nearest corner and squatting in it. “NOOOOOOO!!!!”

“What’s your problem?” the demon asked with a raised brow.

“How... how could you be reformed? How could you just want to live peacefully? Do you realize what the world has been through? What *I’VE* been through?” Valedorian demanded as he began to hyperventilate.

“And what have you been through? Sorry if I wasn’t really paying attention before” Beelzeborn apologised as he stifled a belch.

“Since I was old enough to hold a sword, I trained every day to prepare for you, to be the one ready to strike you down. I’ve been training for twenty-one years to kill you. And you... you just got better in your banishment?!” Valedorian demanded, tears streaming down his face.

“Long and short of it, yes” the demon answered, and devoured an entire lamb chop. “Have you really been preparing since you were a kid to fight me?”

“Since the age of three” the lion confirmed.

“And here I thought I had it bad losing a hundred years of my life. All the advances in the world I never got to see” Beelzeborn mused. “And yet... you’ve got it far worse. I only lost a hundred years of life, but you? You never got to live at all. You were just a tool to be used on me.”

“A tool? I’m just... a tool?” Valedorian repeated as his stomach knotted.

“If your entire life was spent on preparing to take me down, then yes” the demon nodded.

The hero was silent, his armour **clanking** as he trembled on the spot. “My... my life. It’s been... utterly pointless” he decreed in hollow tones.

“Yeah, it has” Beelzeborn confirmed as he rose from his bench, gravity pulling at his flabby self. Waddling slowly, the goat grimaced as his full belly kept shifting uncomfortably. He really shouldn’t be waddling under his condition. Regardless, the kid needed help. Looming over the lion, he gave a small, sheepish smile. “Look, I mean, could be worse, right?” he said, trying to be helpful.

The response was quite sudden for his lazy senses, as Valedorian screamed madly and swung Sugnwr at the demon. Beelzeborn grimaced as a large glowing cut was left in his arm. “FIGHT ME!” the feline hero shrieked, tears streaming down his face.

The demon stood firm, shielding himself with his chunky arms as Valedorian kept swinging, his sword arms growing weaker and weaker in only two swings. Raising Sugnwr over his head, the hero’s arms trembled until, he couldn’t hold on. Sword clattering on the ground, Valedorian followed it down to his knees as he hugged himself miserably. “I... I can’t do this. I can’t... you’re not fighting back!” he sobbed pathetically. “I can’t kill.... I can’t kill you if you won’t defend yourself!”

“That’s kinda a given kid” Beelzeborn snorted as his wounds started to heal. “I don’t *want* to fight. And really, that little butterknife wouldn’t be able to slice up a roast wildebeest, let alone kill me” he explained.

“All my life.... I was destined to fight you. To possibly defeat you. How can I defeat someone... who’s already defeated?” the lion moaned.

“Well that’s just rude” the goat snorted. “I’m not defeated, I just gained a different perspective of things” he insisted.

“But... what now? This isn’t a trick, it can’t be. You would have killed me already when my guard was down.”

“Dunno kid. It’s not my problem” Beelzeborn shrugged indifferently. And indifferent was how he was going to stay. Totally.... Definitely.... The kid’s sobbing was in no way going to deter him.... Not one bit.... Not a.... “Damn it all” he groaned under his breath.

Hunching down as far as his ham hocks would take him, the demon carefully balanced on his massive rump as he reached out his chunky arms and pulled Valedorian into his ample bosom. “There-there hero, it’s okay” he said soothingly as said-hero was sinking between his massive tits.

“MRRRMMFFFFMRRRR” Valedorian mutely screamed as he was sure he could see Tartarus on the other side of the cleavage.

“Sorry” the demon chuckled as he didn’t hug quite as tightly.

The lion gasped for air deeply, his fur matted from the absurdly thick layer of sweat that seemed to coat Beelzeborn like a second skin. Even his armour was starting to corrode from the constant contact. “I AM NOT A CHILD! RELEASE ME!” he insisted.

He was released, onto the floor as the force of the hug had temporarily crippled him. “Well, I’m sure you got a family to return to, so I think it’s best you were on your way” Beelzeborn requested, turning his jiggly ass to Valedorian so he could return to his feast.

“If I do, we will both be in jeopardy” the hero warned.

“How so?” the goat inquired, his ears twitching as he ignored the continued **ccccccccaaaakkkkiiiiinnnggg** of his seat.

“If I tell the others you have been reformed, they will not believe me. They will think I have failed. Or gone mad. Or both” Valedorian pointed out.

“How’s that bad for me?”

“Others will seek you out in my stead to finish you off!”

“Now, that is true” the demon mused, rubbing his beard. “Alright then!” he decided, grabbing a bone. Levitating the item and rolling his hands around it, the hunk of calcium was magically transformed into a replica of his own head, but much skinnier. “Here” he said, tossing it to Valedorian.

Catching it with ease, the hero regarded the false head carefully. “I am to tell the others I beheaded you then?”

“That’s the plan”

“But will anyone be suspicious of it? Most probably won’t notice it’s a fake, but would the wizard Aghanimisqistianermammagnon be able to?”

“If he’s as good Saladorlinquikistestion... maybe? It’s a very good enchantment and honestly Saladorlinquikistestion was one-of-a-kind as wizards went. You should be fine. However, it just needs one final touch.”

With a click of the demon’s bloated fingers, a cauldron appeared above Valedorian. It immediately upended itself, splashing him with an excess of fake blood. At least, he hoped it was fake. “Thank you” he grimaced.

“Think nothing of it. And uhh, enjoy yourself. Hope you find some purpose in life now that you’ve sorta fulfilled this one” Beelzeborn wished with some genuine sincerity.

“Am I really someone else’s tool?” the lion questioned. “Everyone back home... was I really just their puppet?”

“Only as much as you let yourself be kid” the demon shrugged. “But now you got a chance to make something of your life, so use it.”

“Then... I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... thank you, Beelzeborn.”

Beelzeborn just gave a silent wave as he went back to indulging himself on his feast, his rolls thickening as Valedorian returned home.

Not even knowing what to say as he returned to the fort that was his home, scouts were already reporting Valedorian’s return with great enthusiasm. He didn’t smile once as he returned through the front doors, still dripping blood and clutching the head tightly to his chest. And in seconds the hallways were flooded with people, most noticeably from the High Council. “My boy you did it” the King declared with glee upon spotting Beelzeborn’s head.

“An adequate job you have done for our Lord” the Pope of the Guiding Winds admitted.

“Incredible,” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon said before seeing the head, “work?” he ended quizzically.

“Are you alright son?” Marquistian inquired.

“I am fine. I’m just wearied after what I have been through” Valedorian answered.

“Then have all the rest you need son. All of it in the world” the king said with glee. “Without Beelzeborn’s threat looming over us we all can live far more carefree lives. In fact, I’ll speak with my ministers so we can declare tomorrow a kingdom-wide holiday!”

“A wondrous idea, sire. Perhaps we of the Guiding Wind could assist?” the cobra Pope offered.

“Certainly” the King nodded as he led the reptile away.

“Might I see the head Valedorian?” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon inquired suddenly.

The lion grimaced, and held it behind his back. “I’d like to... hold onto it, for a bit longer. As a reminder of this moment that my life has led up to” he answered.

“He just fought a demon lord and won wizard, he needs rest” Marquistian said irritably to the mole.

“Very well” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon said stiffly with a courteous bow, and he too departed.

“Bloody wizards” the elder lion grumbled.

“Father, can you help me to my room?” Valedorian meekly requested.

“Of course son.”

The trip was short, and held with reverent silence until they returned to the hero’s quarters, which was filled with posters of combat stances, weapons, and a rack for his armour. And in the middle of it was a sizable, very uncomfortable bed. The mattress sank under the boy’s weight, and quickly staining with the (hopefully fake) blood still coating him. “I think you deserve a long rest after what you’ve been through today” Marquistian suggested with a proud smile.

“Father?”

“Yes son?”

Valedorian stared at the floor, still holding onto Beelzeborn’s fake head like a good luck charm. He clenched his hands while seeking the courage to ask. “You are proud of me, yes? For killing Beelzeborn and saving everyone?” the younger lion asked meekly.

His father tilted his head, his brow raised quizzically. “Of course son, even if you had just maimed the monster enough that you could retreat I’d still be proud of you” he answered truthfully. And yet, he couldn’t help but notice such a tormented look on his son’s face. “Did something happen when you were fighting him?”

Valedorian looked at his armoured boots guiltily. “He... he attempted to get into my mind, is all. Filling it with his lies. They’re simply lingering feelings that I’m sure will pass” he lied.

“Bastard” the older lion said under his breath, before catching himself. “Well, whatever bullshit he tried to fill your head with, you clearly proved you were stronger than that. But after such a hard battle, I suggest you get some rest Val. You have long days of being a true hero ahead of you, so it’s best to do it after a good night’s rest” Marquistian said kindly as he left his son. “Goodnight Val, and sweet dreams. You deserve them after everything that has happened.”

The door closed behind his father, leaving the failed hero alone in his room. Falling upon his bed in full armour, he hugged his trophy as he stared up at the ceiling, and thought about that awkward hug Beelzeborn had given him. Why had it felt so good?

Valedorian hadn’t eaten since had left to slay Beelzeborn; he simply didn’t have the stomach for it. And this morning... he had slept in. He couldn’t even remember a time ever that he hadn’t been up before the sun. And he felt tired as well, another first for him. Yes, he had been fatigued, but never tired like an elder would be. And he was still clinging tightly to the fake head Beelzeborn had given him. It just... made no sense. A demon, let alone a Demon Lord, reforming? And not just that but hugging him? Being kind to him? It was no accident either that it was midmorning and nobody had come to see him either. Leaving the

hero alone perhaps? Probably. It's not like they needed him anymore. It was just like Beelzeborn said, he was just a tool.

At least, he thought so until there was a **knocking** upon his door. "You can enter" Valedorian said wearily as he rose from his bed.

His father entered, and was immediately surprised. "You slept in your armour?" he remarked.

The young lion looked at himself; his self, still in the armour corroded by Beelzeborn's sweat, and caked in the (still hopefully fake) blood he had been doused in. "I was... very tired yesterday" he responded.

Marquistian carefully regarded the less-than-stoic look on his offspring's face. "Are you still being troubled by what the demon did to you?" he asked gravely.

"I... perhaps a little, father" Valedorian admitted. "While I have been shaken before, he did rattle my confidence far more than I ever thought it could be."

"I swear, if I was there I would rip his heart out. But, he's gone now Val, and you're still here to enjoy that fact. So how about I arrange you a warm bath so you can be cleaned up? As then, we can find you a nice tunic for tonight. His Majesty, in a fit of unusual generosity, has decided to have one last big feast here in the keep to celebrate your victory over Beelzeborn on top of the national holiday. So we can enjoy a feast with all our friends here, and after that? Well, we'll have time for each other again" Marquistian said with a fond smile.

Valedorian hugged the fake head tightly. "Please let me know when the water is ready, father" he meekly requested.

"Okay, son" the older feline replied, taking one last good look at his son before leaving.

Slumping back down, the former "hero" held his prize aloft, staring into the glazed eyes of the demon he didn't even kill, let alone behold. "Time for each other? Yes, I suppose" he murmured to the fake head. "*I'll have nothing but time now, but what can a tool without a use even do?*" he thought bitterly.

Turning over, Valedorian shut his eyes and hoped his father would be a while.

He was, no surprises there. Marquistian truly was a councilman first, and a father second, but he did try. But two hours later he had his son in a large tub to soak in while he had several servants present numerous dress outfits. "Would you like to wear this one?" he asked of his son as he was presented a navy blue military dress tunic and pants.

"I do not think blue is my colour father" Valedorian said lethargically as a servant shampooed his head.

"Then would black suit you better?" the older feline asked, presenting the same outfit but in black.

The younger lion stared at it. "I think that will be fine, father" he declared.

"Excellent" Marquistian smiled brightly as the black tunic was set aside, and he waved a hand to shoo the servants away. "Then once you are dry you can try it on to see if it requires last minute changes, as you are a bit broader in the chest than most. Especially more than your old man" he said with an awkward laugh.

It seemed to fall on deaf ears, as Valedorian was clearly miles away inside his own head. "Val," the older lion began, "if there's still something troubling you, you can tell me, alright? I am still your father, and I want to know if you're okay."

The younger feline sank into the water and bubbles of the tub, his mind still going back to yesterday. Before he went out to slay Beelzeborn everything seemed to make so much sense. And then after... the world made *too* much sense. He wanted to say something, anything, and yet his throat seemed to close around the words he so dearly wanted to ask. "Everything is fine, father" Valedorian sullenly answered.

"Alright" Marquistian nodded respectfully, before eying the servant washing his son. "Be sure to get all the blood out. We don't know what that stuff will even do, and if it corrupts my son... *I'll have your head*" he warned darkly before leaving.

The young feline caught a cold shudder from the servant, and he said nothing else as time seemed to run away from him.

And in no time it was dusk, and he stood before a dresser's mirror in a plain black tunic, and a lump in his throat. "I dare say you look as incredible as Grandpa did in his military regalia" Marquistian said proudly.

"Father... is my presence really required this evening?" Valedorian asked, his heart thumping in his chest.

"Well, yes son, you are the honoured guest after all. We wouldn't even be having a feast if it weren't for you" the father answered.

The son nodded, a sense of guilt eating away at him as he thought of Beelzeborn, still very much alive and not beheaded. "I just... worry I didn't kill him thoroughly enough, now that the malaise of battle no longer affects me" he explained.

"You cut his head off Val, you can't get much deader than that unless he also happens to be a hydra" Marquistian scoffed as he applied a dress pin to the younger lion's breast. "There we go," he said with pride as he regarded his vast child, "you will certainly be turning a few heads tonight."

"I will?" Valedorian asked as he rapidly realised he had never been to a truly formal affair before.

"Well, now with all your extra time, I dare say there might be a cute girl or two who might wish to spend some... "quality time" with you" the older feline grinned.

"As in they would want to... spend time... with... me? For any particular reason? Most girls I know do not tend to be all that invested in the ways of war" the younger lion pointed out.

“Well, you might get lucky and find one very into maces. And uhhh, “polishing them”” Marquistian said suggestively.

“Why would you polish a mace, father? Maces only need to have blood and bits of matter removed as not to corrode or tarnish the metal” Valedorian thickly answered.

“Uh, well, perhaps she just likes a shiny mace” the older lion said in defeat. “Anyways, you shouldn’t worry too much son. This night is all about celebrating the enduring and ensuring peace you have given everyone. So no need to look so sad. Beelzeborn can’t hurt you anymore” he said soothingly.

The liar of a hero gave a weak, but comforted smile. “Thank you father. Your kind words truly are helping me after everything that has happened. I just simply hope that there will be enough food at the feast, as I feel my old hunger returning to me.”

“That’s the spirit” Marquistian grinned as he slapped a hand on his son’s broad back.

Valedorian continued his weak smile, until a thought occurred to him. “Would I be required to bring the head with me? As proof of my conquest?” he inquired.

“Probably not; least not now anyways. I heard that nasty little wizard snuck into your room while you were bathing and took it. Gods only know what he plans to do with it, but I could tell you a thing or two about what I’d like to do with *his* head” the older lion seethed.

The young hero’s breath caught in his chest as he truly hoped that Aghanimisqistianermammagnon would not be able to figure out that the head was a fake. Beelzeborn did figure he wouldn’t, and if he was to be believed, that was no lie. “I’ll ask to have it back when he’s done with it, then. I was hoping to have it mounted” Valedorian said to distract his father.

“It would look pretty good on a board too” Marquistian nodded. “I’ll talk to the runt during the feast to see if I can get it back earlier, since it is yours by right of conquest.”

“Will I have to talk much during the feast?”

“Well, people will want to know what happened, but if you’re feeling overwhelmed just try to signal me, okay?” the old father requested.

“I will do that, father” the son nodded.

“Anyways, we should be going now. So uhh, just feel free to relax from now on, or at least for the party yeah? The hard part you trained all your life for is over now, so take it easy Val” Marquistian said kindly.

“I will try father, though, I have felt lost without a sword in my hand.”

“Speaking of which... where is Sugnwr? I don’t think you came back with it” the old feline realized.

“It... shattered when I was beheading Beelzeborn” Valedorian lied. “It took all its blessed energy to decapitate his evil head, and it fell apart when the job was done.”

“Well, it served a good purpose then” Marquistian nodded. “But uhh, if anyone asks you tell them that it shattered while fighting him and you used the broken blade to cut his head off. It’s a bit more dramatic that way” he advised.

“I will do so if the need arises father” the young hero nodded.

“Attaboy. Now we should really be going, otherwise some of those pigs on the council will have eaten all the food already” the old feline said.

“Strange,” Valedorian thought, “Councilman Mikiaih is the only swine on the council.”

It was a very grand affair for all, and it truly dawned on Valedorian just how little he knew beyond the art of killing one specific demon lord. Everyone wanted to talk to him as he sat

by the King's right side, and he felt himself truly out of his element. "Please," Councilman Mikiaih requested, "tell us how it all went down between you and the vile demon. It must've been truly exciting!" he snorted.

The hero of the hour, the utter liar and failure he was, was at a loss for words. "Well... in battle.... You see.... I don't... I don't remember... much" he said lamely.

"Battle fervour" the King commented. "Now, I haven't experienced it myself, but some of my footmen have spoken how sometimes a warrior's instincts overtake them, and they lose all track of everything but the battle."

"I think that's what happened" Valedorian said gratefully. "I remember flashes of fighting. The Demon Lord slashing my face with his claws."

"Your face?" someone amongst the group remarked. "But why, there isn't a scratch upon it!"

"I umm, just remember being slashed at. I must've blocked it" the lion suggested, not really sure of it himself.

"You've clearly been trained exceptionally well" Aghanimisqistianermammagnon said from further down the table. "I don't think there's a single scratch upon you at all."

"You sound suspicious wizard. What? Unhappy that magic didn't solve life's problems for once?" Marquistian snarled from next to him.

"It must've been Sugnwr that preserved him" a different Councillor suggested. "Magic holy swords like that probably have the power to heal and protect their wielders from evil. I mean nobody really knows how they work, but they do a damn fine job of killing demons."

"Speaking of Sugnwr, I don't recall you returning with it" the King remarked as he had his wine goblet refilled.

“It... it was....” Valedorian stammered, before catching his father’s eye. “It was shattered in a double fatality against Beelzeborn’s own evil sword. And I used the remains to cut off the demon’s foul head” he asserted confidently.

There were many thoughtful nods and one clapping, and out of the corner of his eye, the lion saw a knowing smile from his father. “Pity,” the simian ruler said, “I was hoping to have it returned to the Royal Archives, but it can’t be helped if it still did the job regardless.”

“I am sorry, your majesty” Valedorian said meekly.

“Oh don’t be. Really I had a suspicion the holiness was wearing off the blade anyways, but I was told it was still fine. I guess it saves the effort of smelting it down when it became useless” the King declared.

“Useless, yes” the feline hero repeated.

That was something of an end to the discussion, as Valedorian seemed to have proven he didn’t really recall much else after that. And nobody seemed to have much else to say to him as he quietly sat by the King’s side, enjoying food that tasted hollow as really, they were all celebrating not him, but a miraculous epiphany instead. “Oh yes, Valedorian?” the King spoke up.

“Yes your majesty?” the feline responded.

“There will be some speeches shortly; typical stuff to please the masses. And of course, you be the hero everyone should hear a rousing speech from you as well. Now I know this is sudden, which is why I’ve had one of my clerks prepare one for you. Nothing special, just something to ignite the warrior spirit in everyone. So all you need do is read this paper as confidently as you can and everything will be fine” the chimpanzee said as he handed the hero a sheet of paper.

“I will do my best, your majesty” Valedorian promised as his heart pounded against his chest.

Father hadn't mentioned a speech. He wasn't ready! "Well everyone, it is lovely to see you all here for both this national holiday, and of course this splendid feast" the King declared as he stood up from his chair.

"Best yet ever your majesty!" one of keep's guards said aloud.

The King waited patiently as a round of laughter subsided. "And here's hoping for many more now that peace isn't just assured but outright guaranteed. The threat of the genocidal Beelzeborn is gone, and we all have one person to thank for that. And I believe that person has a speech prepared for us, don't you Valedorian? Please, Slayer of Beelzeborn, share with us the tales of your heroics on that fateful day!"

Everyone turned to the hero of the hour, save for one concerned father attempting to hide the fact that he got blindsided by this. Valedorian's adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, and he rose from his seat. Turning to the paper in his hand, he looked at it, and looked at it, then, he kept looking at it. What... what were these words? He had never seen these before. He had barely seen anything that wasn't diagrams of combat techniques. What was he even reading- Wait... did... did he even know *HOW* to read? He must've known words. He knew big words. But... did he read them, or did he... hear them? What was going on? Everything was getting shaky, and his heart was pounding harder than his ten mile jogs. Everyone was staring at him, and he was getting very hot. "I... I..." he stammered as he drew the paper closer to his face in the hopes that squinting would help.

"How could you even put what he did into words your majesty?" Marquistian said with a loud laugh as swooped in. "I dare say the deed and the severed head and the fact that he was covered in blood tells a tale no mere words could."

"Perhaps, yes, yes you are correct Marquistian" the King nodded as he caught on. "Who needs a speech when I myself saw the severed head as proof Beelzeborn was destroyed?"

"Exactly your majesty. So I say who cares for speeches when there's plenty of drinking to do?!" the old lion cheered.

There were loud cheers as the party continued after that awkward moment, and Valedorian sat down, his face burning intensely. What was this feeling? Why did he feel like he had been kicked in the stomach? "Excuse me wizard, I need to have a talk with you."

The hero turned his head to see his father and his barely disguised look of fury as he stared at Aghanimisqistianermammagnon. "I'm busy" the wizard said testily.

"It wasn't a request" Marquistian snarled as he grabbed the mole by his robe and dragged him away.

"Ow ow owwww fine! At least let me walk you brute!" the wizard snapped.

Nobody else seemed to notice they had gone, as wine and ale seemed to be a very good distraction. And yet... Valedorian felt compelled to follow. Nobody even noticed he had left either as he followed his father or the wizard down the halls until the latter was unceremoniously pinned to the wall by his throat. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" Marquistian bellowed as he clasped the wizard's throat tightly.

"Wh- GRK! What are you talking about" Aghanimisqistianermammagnon rasped.

"YOU! WERE SUPPOSED! TO TEACH! MY SON! TO READ!" the old lion screamed as he slammed the mole against the wall repeatedly.

"I... I didn't have time!" the wizard gagged while feebly clawing at Marquistian's wrist.

"You had twenty-one fucking years you little rat!" the feline bellowed as he threw Aghanimisqistianermammagnon to the ground. "TWENTY-ONE YEARS!" he roared furiously.

"I was, grf, going to get around to it," the wizard groaned as he picked himself up, "but he seemed so happy with his little sword training I figured I'd do it some other time."

"When? When were you going too?" Marquistian demanded.

"Well," the mole began, hiding a hand behind his back as he began to prepare a fireball, "when I had time" he answered.

“You little-” the old feline growled, before catching the glow. In a deft move Marquistian snatched Aghanimisqistianermammagnon’s wrist and gripped tightly, causing the fireball it held to dispel before he also grabbed the other one too and hoisted him up. “I know your wretched kind already wizard, and if you even for a second think of saying an incantation, I will head-butt you until you don’t have a single tooth left to enunciate with” he warned with a deep growl.

“Fi-fine, point made!” the wizard said in defeat. “How about tomorrow I’ll teach your son to read? I’ll open up two hours for a real good study session.”

“Oh yes, wonderful idea. Acting after the fact that he looked like an illiterate BOOB to everyone out there already. Does he know how to count? Did you at least teach him that?!”

“I uhh, heh heh, it must’ve slipped my mind” Aghanimisqistianermammagnon chuckled nervously.

Anything else that was said went unheard as Valedorian left, but not to go back to the party. And unbeknownst to him, his father Marquistian just glared at the wizard. “I swear if you weren’t useful I’d have burned you at the stake long ago you vile little creature. But instead I swear this: I am going to make you pay for what you’ve done to my son, both now, and back then” he said as he let the mole go.

“Are you still on about that? So what if we chose Valedorian over you? Clearly we made the right choice. For one thing he’s far less emotional than you”
Aghanimisqistianermammagnon scowled as he rubbed his wrists.

“Congratulations then. You helped turn my son into an empty shell for a one-time quest”
the lion scoffed.

“Please, he may be illiterate but with his talents he’ll be a general in no time. They have people to write stuff for them. He’ll fit right in.”

“Oh good. One potential meat grinder for another. Just how you like it!” Marquistian snapped as he stomped off.

Upon returning to the party, he found his son missing. "Have you seen my son your majesty?" he asked of the King.

"Hmm? Oh, he's gone has he? Must've been a while ago" the chimpanzee remarked.

"Thank you your majesty" Marquistian nodded, and immediately went to Valedorian's room.

His hunch was correct, not that he knew where else his son would even think to go, except maybe the training grounds. But they were presently being used to a host a feast. So of course his one and only child was currently curled up on his own bed. "Son, are you worried about the speech thing?" he said softly as he tiptoed towards Valedorian. When he got there, even the old man was surprised to find tears soaking his son's face. "Val!" he gasped.

The young lion looked mournfully into his father's eyes. "Am I an illiterate boob, father?" he asked huskily.

"I... wh-where did you hear that?" Marquistian stammered, but he couldn't escape the look in Valedorian's eye. "Do-don't take it to heart, okay son? I wasn't angry with you, I was angry with that bloody wizard who didn't think to teach you basic literacy."

This was it, wasn't it? There was no escaping it. He can't read. He can't write, now that he thought about it. What did numbers actually matter to him? All he knew... was how to kill Beelzeborn. "Father. Am I... was I just a tool made to be used on Beelzeborn?" he questioned, staring his father directly in the eye.

The old man was surprised by this, and his chest deflated as if his ego was stored in there. "That's ummm... that's a strange question to ask, isn't it?"

"But was I?" the fallen hero pressed as he tried to keep it together.

"It's... complicated, son. I can't... I-I-I can't say I agreed with, with, with what was done here" Marquistian stammered uncomfortably.

“But was I a tool? Just something to be used against him? Was that why I don’t know anything else?”

“Again son, it’s not that simple-”

“Father please!”

Marquistian turned away, his own son’s eyes burning a hole through him. “Yeah... you were” he regretfully admitted. “I hated every second of this son, I just want you to know that” he bitterly explained.

“Did you see me as a tool too?”

“No!” the elder feline exclaimed, turning back to his son. “I hated that you got picked over me!”

“You were... an option?”

“Yeah, anyone from Grandad’s line was. But they picked you. You were younger, easier to mould. I regretted every day that I didn’t contest the Council’s decision. That I didn’t fight harder to be the one to train. It... it should’ve been me that went out there, not you” Marquistian bitterly sighed.

“Even though the result was victory?” Valedorian questioned.

“At what cost Val? At what cost? You’ve been raised a weapon all your life, and now you gotta live in a world of peace. The one thing you were made to do is done, so once all the pomp and circumstance is over you’ll be forgotten until another demon lord comes along” the older lion said with rising fury.

“At least you believed in me.”

“I’m your father Val, it comes natural. And..., and I’m sure we’ll figure something for you to do now. I just... don’t know what to do next. I thought I was in the know, and yet, somehow, so much has slipped by me after all this time. And I’m... I’m so sorry, Valedorian” the elder lion uttered in defeat.

“I think I need to be alone now, please” Valedorian requested.

“Okay son. And if you need me, I’ll be back at the feast, okay?” Marquiston said.

“Okay” the young lion nodded, and he was left alone.

Curling back up, his mind drifted back, to what Beelzeborn had said. And what he had done. How could the target have sympathy for the arrow?

The feast had gone on for quite some time, raging like a joyous fire. And now, naught but embers remained as people were passed out, or barely hanging in there. But one person out of some many was wide awake. Valedorian, now in simple travelling attire, carefully crept through the halls littered with those passed out, while avoiding those still carrying on. He held his satchel tightly to his chest as he made it to the front doors. They, like the watch houses outside, were completely unguarded. Of course they’d be, as everyone would be at the feast. So it was everything the lion needed as he went out the front gate, leaving everything behind as he walked off into the empty, moonless night.