

# Better The Devil You Know

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Donovan Austere woke to the sound of his cat mewling. He looked down at the foot of the bed to see the fat, white and brown cat staring at him. They made eye contact and the cat purred for just a second, then made a whisper of a screech, a pathetic mewl. Donovan flopped back in his bed and groaned. "Why can't you sleep in?"

He tugged his feet out from under the comforter of his futon and pulled himself up. "You're just going to eat and go right back to sleep?" He went shuffling out of his tiny bedroom with a window facing into the east, into the main room of his tiny space. On the tile floor of the kitchenette, he bounced from foot to foot on the cold, bare floor. He got a can of mid-grade cat food out of the cabinet and tore it open. "Varmint," he accused the cat as he plopped the food onto a tray and laid it on the floor. The cat rushed for the food and began to quickly gobble it down.

Tossing the can into the recycling, Donovan strolled over to the sliding glass door that was almost the entire eastern wall. He pulled back the curtains to let in the morning sun and smiled sleepily. He stretched his arms and tilted his body on either side, waking up. "I think I'll have some waffles this morning," he told his cat. "Maybe with some strawberries on top."

Grabbing his bathrobe and his lanyard with his building key card and the keys to his room, Donovan headed out. He stepped into the hallway with a yawn, draping his lanyard over his head. Mrs. Shuttle was coming out of her room, her walker squeaking on the tennis balls on the front feet. "Morning," Donovan told her with a big smile. She looked at him and saw him dressed in just shorts, a white tank top, and a bathrobe, and huffed in disapproval. It only made him smile wider.

Down the hallway, padding on his feet, Donovan walked as other older people began to depart from their rooms. A few walked with canes and walkers, but all ambled with the struggle of age. All except Donovan who looked to be at least half their age, perhaps even younger. Walking casually, he still outpaced almost everyone.

Crossing the retirement home, he strutted as if music was playing in his head. He passed the media room where conservative news was being blared loudly at the handful of people who watched it. In their laps, they had soft food they were gently chewing on.

Donovan reached the cafeteria to find the line thankfully absent. He took a tray and a plate and smiled at the first server. "Eggs please!" he ordered melodramatically. She plopped a ladle full of scrambled eggs onto his plate. "Bacon as well!" he demanded

comically. She was still scowling at him but now she was smiling as well. She grasped a bunch of overcooked bacon and dropped it onto his plate. "Thank you!" he bellowed in kind.

Down to the next server, he requested, "Waffles, please. With some strawberries on top."

Behind the counter, D'shawn had one earbud in his left ear, music buzzing out of the earbud dangling off his shoulder. "Changing it up on me, Mr Austere," he said as he began to prepare the plate.

"I like to keep you guys...come on, man, one waffle?" he griped.

"Them's the rules," D'shawn said, passing the plate to him under the sneeze guard. "You want another, come back around."

"You keep `em ready," Donovan playfully warned. Collecting an orange juice from the cooler, he arrived at the coffee station. Rather than pour himself a mug, he took a mug and then took a whole coffee pot. The first server began to protest but D'shawn stopped her, just shaking his head that it wasn't worth it.

Donovan exited the serving area and looked around the cafeteria. Older men and women sat at the various benches, all of them quietly munching. He searched the room, his attention grabbed by a few people at the far end, waving. Donovan grinned and headed to them.

Daphne's white pieces were moving into Rex's territory. With a pair of doughnuts and some eggs as well, Rex was studying the board as Donovan came to join them. Dale sat next to Daphne and explained, "Somebody lost their knight when they used Pirc Defense. He's been on the ropes since then."

"No I haven't," protested Rex as he set down his piece. Before he'd even fully removed his hand from the pawn, Daphne took it with a sweep of her bishop. "This isn't speed chess," he reminded her.

"It is if you're bored," said the great-grandmother.

"Ooh, strawberries," said Dale as he leaned forward over the bench to see down his bifocals at Donovan's tray. "That looks good."

Donovan agreed. "D'shawn even gave me a sprinkle of sugar."

"I think that queer likes you," said Rex.

"That's a rude thing to call a gay boy," Daphne told him.

"He calls himself that," Rex argued.

"It's true," Donovan concurred. "He doesn't identify as gay; he prefers queer."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"Hell if I know," said Donovan, applying some syrup. "Somebody wants to be called queer instead of gay, ain't not skin off my back."

"Amen to that," said Dale, clinking coffee mugs with Donovan. "I called next," he went ahead and told Donovan. The youngest of the four just nodded as he sipped.

"Mr. Austere," exclaimed the home manager. An overworked portly man, he appeared behind Donovan and snatched up the coffee pot. "What have I told you about taking a whole pot?"

"That it was bold and showed strength of character?" guessed Donovan. The manager had already walked too far away. Facing back to his breakfast, he asked the others, "What's happening today?"

"They're showing Shane today at one," said Rex as he looked at his dismal options on the board. Donovan crinkled his nose at that. "Mia's grandkids are visiting this weekend. She bought a Wii. Supposed to arrive today."

"Super Mario Galaxy. I could do that," Donovan considered like it was a major decision.

"So I got something I been wanting to ask you," Dale said as he stirred grits. "Why are you here?"

"Because Daphne's the best chess player in the home, aside from Doyle," said Donovan. "That dude was on his high school chess team. You wouldn't think it with his whole gangsta persona."

"No, I mean in the retirement home?" Dale asked. "You always change the subject."

"And you think I won't this time?" Donovan grinned. Dale only took a bite of his grits. Donovan put down his coffee and looked away. "I retired early," he told him. "This was a nice place," he said looking around. "It's not like most retirement homes, which are places old people go to die. This is like a college dorm with people that go to bed at reasonable hours. Soon as I learned they allowed pets, I was like 'sign me up'." He gave it a second of thought. "I think literally. I think I literally said that."

"What'd you do that let you retire so young?" asked Daphne, focusing more on the game now that Rex was getting his second wind.

"I didn't retire that young, only compared to you old fogies," said Donovan. Daphne threw a napkin at him.

"What did you do? Investment banking?" pushed Dale.

"AI," Donovan said as he ate. "Artificial Intelligence."

The three fellow chess players got a little quiet at this new information. "Did you succeed?" asked Rex. Donovan didn't understand the question, as conveyed by his expression. "Did you make an AI?"

Donovan nodded. "Yeah." He wiped his mouth. "I mean, they're not that hard, really. Or new. AIs have been around for a while. They're just getting more advanced these days. You're probably talking about a sentient computer AI." He kept eating.

"So you just programmed regular AIs," Dale tried to summarize.

"I don't know about regular, but I helped create AIs, yes," Donovan said with his mouth full. "I got fired because I made the AIs too good."

"Too good?" asked Daphne. "Too good how?"

"Just...too smart, too...not self-aware but something like that." He kept eating.

"What'd they do with the AI? After they fired you?" she asked.

"They kept it," he told them, looking up from his waffle. "You guys have used it. I signed a non-disclosure agreement so I can't tell you where or how, but you know it." He poured more syrup all over his waffle, save on the strawberries. "Problem was, the AI got sick."

"Sick?" Rex asked.

Donovan nodded. "It got cancer. Or it became a cancer, depends on who you ask."

Rex looked at Dale. "An AI that gets sick. What a bizarre thing." He shifted his attention back towards the game.

Dale didn't seem satisfied. "So you made a bunch of money, they fired you, and you just moved in here?"

Donovan nodded. "I like it here." Dale wasn't buying it but he didn't push the issue.

A commotion came from the side of the cafeteria. Every head turned on a swivel as the postwoman arrived. Like Santa Claus on Christmas, the blue-and-gray-clad worker was greeted with eagerness. She quickly dispersed packages and letters, everybody getting something. When she arrived at the chess table, she brought a small handful of deliverables. "Rex Matterson," she said, handing a tiny package over to him along with some letters. "Daphne Chu." She got

letters. "Dale Herman." A large box and a small box. "And Donovan Austere." A single letter.

"Thank you," the four said in their own ways. The chess game and breakfast momentarily forgotten, they began to tear open their mail. Except Donovan. He looked back at the room and smiled. "Everybody got some mail." He turned back to his letter and looked at the sender. "It's kind of sad when somebody doesn't get..." His smile faded just a hint.

"What'd you get?" Daphne asked Rex.

"Boner pills," he told her, taking the bottle from his box.

"Wishful thinking," she told him. "I got a letter from my granddaughter's little girl." She showed them the crayon letter on construction paper.

"That's darling," Dale beamed. "I got my new phone finally," he said. "And the screen magnifier. I can finally watch some Netflix." He looked to Donovan. "Can you help me set it up?"

Donovan was just a step behind in answering. "Yeah, sure thing." He tried to hide his letter but did a poor job of it.

"What'd you get?" asked Daphne. Donovan shook his head only to realize the letter was gone.

"Who's Intelligent Designs?" asked Rex as he looked at the logo on the pickpocketed letter. Donovan realized who'd stolen it, then tried to figure out how Rex had done it. "Can I open it?" he asked, already tearing open the envelope. Donovan looked more put out than irritated.

Rex scanned the letter quickly and looked confused. "They want you to come out of retirement." Donovan snatched the letter out of Rex's hand and began to skim over it. "It's his old company," he told Daphne and Dale. "They've got a business proposal they want to give him." He turned to Donovan. "They want to give you a job."

Donovan set the letter down on the space between him and Dale. He stared at the letter with a heavy brow. His lips were slightly sneered. He glanced to his friends. "What do you guys think?"

"Are they offering anything to hear the pitch?" asked Rex.

More seriously, Dale asked him, "Did you enjoy the work? Do you miss it?" Those questions sent Donovan into a thoughtful trance.

"How much are they paying?" asked Daphne. "Or how much are they likely to pay?"

"Money's not a big deal to me," Donovan said in a slight whisper.

"You can give me some if you want," Rex joked. Daphne shared his chuckle.

Dale didn't. "Any idea what the job is?" he asked.

"No," Donovan said distantly. "It's been a long time."

"How'd they find you?" asked Daphne.

"I'm not hard to find," he said with a dismissive shake of his head. "I don't know what this is about," he said, troubled. Leaving his plate, he began to stand. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do." He wondered away, glancing down at the letter he carried. His three friends watched him leave the cafeteria.

Against the light of noon, Donovan sat on his loveseat that faced the TV, staring into space. His cat had come over and flopped down next to his feet. Lying on its back, it was snoring quietly. Donovan sat with his cheek against his knuckles, staring at the issue before him.

There was a knock at his door and both he and the cat looked. Donovan rose, muttering, "I got it," to the cat. He peeked through the peep hole and saw Dale on the other side of the door. "What's up?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Wanted to come check on you," Dale told him. "You didn't come to lunch."

Donovan stepped back from the door to let Dale in. "Yeah, I'm still pondering the letter." Dale entered, hobbling a little on his bad hip. "I mean, I guess I should go. It doesn't cost anything to hear them out."

"Why so hesitant?" asked Dale. "Afraid they'll...I don't know, open old wounds or something."

"Not really," Donovan said. The instant Dale sat down on the loveseat, Donovan's cat jumped into his lap and began to demand to be petted. Donovan called the cat, "Traitor."

As Dale scratched under the cat's chin, Donovan got a beer from his mini-fridge. "I'm not sure why I'm so unsure. I just...offering to bring me back seems like its big. Something drastic. I just don't know what. I mean, I'm not REALLY in the know in the industry, but I've been keeping up with it. If they want me back...I just can't think of any scenario where that's not big."

"And big is scary," Dale agreed. Donovan hadn't connected those words but nodded in realized agreement. "Don't let fear dictate your life," was all Dale counseled. He focused on scratching the cat and Donovan focused on what he needed to do.

Now it was Daphne's turn to be worried. The chess board was set between her and Doyle, one of the orderlies. With his two front teeth replaced with gold and tattoos from his knuckles to his ears, he didn't scream captain of the chess team but he played like it. Across from him, the woman old enough to be his grandmother was biting her thumbnail.

As the residents of the retirement home settled in for dinner, the scent of pot roast and tilapia filling the cafeteria, Donovan came in. Fully dressed now, he looked considerably younger in jeans and a high collar black t-shirt. He came over to Rex and Dale as they watched the war of attrition between the two chess players. "Looking sharp," remarked Rex with a laugh.

Dale was more pleased but less enthused. "You decided to go?"

"I have," Donovan told them. He clapped Dale on the shoulder and smiled gratefully for the advice. "I just wanted to come and say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" Daphne half-exclaimed, forgetting the game. As soon as she was turned away, Doyle moved two of her pieces. The instant he'd made his change, Rex moved them back without anyone noticing. "You're leaving?"

"If I take the job, yeah, probably," he told them. "I'll send for my stuff." He looked a little sheepish and asked, "Can one of you guys look out for my cat until I get him moved?"

"Sure thing," said Rex. "Snickerdoodle loves me." Donovan and Dale both stared at Rex, wondering where the name had come from.

"He loves anybody that gives him food," Daphne disputed. Back to Donovan, she wanted to ask something. Instead, she just rose and gave him a big hug. "I'll miss you."

"Yeah, I'll miss you too," he practically promised her. She stepped back and let Dale hug Donovan. "You too, buddy."

"Be safe," Dale urged him. "Drop us a line, yeah?"

"I will," he further promised. He reached across the communal table and shook Rex's hand. "Keep at it," he told him with a wink.

"Oh, I will," Rex pledged.

"Doyle," he said, fist-bumping the orderly who gave him a nod.

Donovan stepped back and took a deep breath of the familiar air and said, "I'm off." He turned and headed out, leaving them and his life behind.

Staring out the window of the taxi, Donovan reflected on the friends he was leaving behind. He instinctively checked the floorboard of the taxi, looking for his cat. He felt his heart grow heavy just at the thought of leaving him behind, even temporarily. He was comforted with the idea of Rex overfeeding him.

The taxi pulled up to the drop-off of the airport and Donovan looked out. Anxiety and eagerness mixed as he smiled with growing exuberance. He tapped his card to the payment strip and left a giant tip. "Hey, thanks," said the driver, seeing the payment.

"Enjoy it," Donovan told him with a grin. He got out and took a breath of the exhaust-filled air. It felt good to be out again. He'd existed almost solely in the retirement home. It felt good to see the sky, even an urban, starless one like this. Unencumbered by luggage, Donovan strolled right into the airport like he owned the place. He walked right to the nearest desk, right up to the nearest ticketing agent, and said, "I'd like a first-class ticket, please."

The woman behind the register balked for just a second. "D-do you have a reservation?"

"Nope," he said, handing over the letter that had been mailed to him. "I want a first-class ticket on the next flight." After the letter, he passed over his card. "No baggage."

In the deep night, Donovan stared out the window from his spacious, comfortable first-class seat. A plastic cup of diet soda, some honey peanuts, and some chips lay before him on the tray as he stared. He happened to glance back into the aisle and saw a young boy tiptoeing through the space. Donovan smirked and said, "You're not supposed to be up here." The boy froze, terrified that he'd been caught. "Just wanted to see what first class was like?" Donovan asked. The boy nodded like a bobble head.

Donovan grinned and said, "It's slick." He opened the armrest and folded out a modest flat screen monitor. "Check this out," he said, turning the monitor to the boy. As the other passengers slept, Donovan turned on the screen and set it to play a local station. "Here," he said, passing his headphones to the boy so he could hear.

The young boy stared wide-eyed at the screen. Donovan only grinned bigger.

A flight attendant appeared behind the boy, about to urge him back into the economy section, but Donovan held his hand subtly to her. "He's not bothering anyone," he told her. "I'll send him back to his parents in a minute."

"He's not supposed to be up here," she insisted.

"Let him see the cool stuff," Donovan practically begged. The woman looked uncertain but relented. She backed into the attendant's station between first class and economy.

"That's cool," the boy said, returning the headphones to Donovan.

"For real, right?" he said, draping them across the other armrest. "What are you going for?"

"We're going to see my grandparents," said the boy.

"Sweet," said Donovan. "Does your grandma cook?"

The boy shook his head. "Grandpa does."

"Oh, that's awesome," said Donovan.

"Are you going to see your grandparents?" asked the boy.

"No, I'm going for a job interview," he told the boy, just a bit hesitantly. "I think for a job I used to have."

"You don't know?" asked the boy.

Donovan leaned towards him. "I used to have a very important job. I did it too well, and I got fired."

"That's not right," said the boy with a youthful concept of justice and the morality to match. "If you do a good job, they aren't supposed to fire you."

"Ain't that the truth," Donovan said bitterly. "I don't know what they want. But if they're asking me, and I say no, I don't know who else they're going to get. They may not have another option."

"Do you think you'll say no?" asked the boy. "How much does it pay?"

Donovan seemed curious. "Everybody seems so concerned with how much it'll pay." He sighed. "Well, I'm not worried about how much it pays. I'm worried about being double-crossed again." His gaze grew tight. The intensity on Donovan's face encouraged the boy to retreat from his presence and return to his parents.

The rest of the flight, Donovan spent in silent contemplation.

Out from the airport terminal, Donovan came strolling. In jeans and a heavy T-shirt, he looked less like a traveler and more like a middle manager on a day off. He looked at the giant city before him and slowly smiled. He held up his hand and called, "Taxi."

A red taxi pulled up, the rear door popping open mechanically. Inside was a glass shield separating him from the driver, but the man behind the wheel smiled friendly at him. "No luggage?"

"No luggage," said Donovan as he sat down. "I need to go three places," he told the driver. "I need a haircut. I need a suit. And I need to go here." He slipped the job letter through a small slit in the glass screen.

The driver took the letter, read it the address, and nodded. "No problem."

"Haircut first," Donovan told him.

"No problem, I got just the place," said the driver as they pulled out into traffic.

The barbershop fell silent when Donovan and the taxi driver walked in. "This is Don," said the driver to the main barber, slapping his fare on the shoulder. "He wants a trim. He asked for the best and I was like 'I know just the place'."

A big man with a clean beard and an ugly haircut came over to Donovan and shook his hand. "Marcus. Owner-operator. Glad to know you."

"You too," Donovan grinned. He looked at the shop with patrons of the social variety. "Looks like I'm in the right place."

"What you need? I'll take care of you," said Marcus.

"Well give him a trim too," Donovan said of his driver, even as he went for the first seat in the line. "I want it short and simple, but good." He ran his hand up his neck and asked, "You do shaves?"

The barber nodded. "We do shaves," he confirmed.

Donovan leaned back. "A shave and a haircut, please."

The man laughed as he threw the apron around Donovan's neck, letting the light-brown cloth drape naturally over his customer. "It'll cost more than two bits."

"I'm happy to pay for the best," Donovan said with growing certainty. The chatter of the barbershop resumed, while he stared into his reflection and remembered who he was.

Mirrors and drapes of fabric filled the musty store as Donovan walked in. He looked at the nearest bolt of fabric, ran it between his finger and thumb, and nodded in approval. Out from the back appeared an older gentleman in the best suit Donovan had ever seen. "Good morning, sir," said the man with a distinguished tone that matched his presence. "How may I be of service?"

"I would like your finest suit," Donovan told the man.

"Very good, sir," said the man as Donovan walked right past him into the rear of the store, towards the fitting stand. The man balked. "Sir, uh, may I find a time to work you in for a fitting?"

"Oh no, I'm afraid not," Donovan told him, untroubled. "I need the suit immediately." He turned and faced into a mirror, studying his new haircut. "I have a job interview..." He checked a clock in the corner of the wood-paneled store. "Shortly."

"Sir, a suit will take several weeks to complete," said the tailor.

Donovan extended a card to him. "Charge as much as it takes to have the suit immediately." The man very hesitantly took the card. "Oh, I'm good for it," Donovan smiled. He faced into the mirror again and took a slow, deep breath. "I'm good...for it."

From the front, the man asked, "And what kind of suit would you like? Beyond merely 'the finest'."

Donovan grinned viciously. "Make me look like a god." The man stopped and glanced back Donovan. Donovan turned back to him and smiled. "Little g," he specified with a wink. "If they want me back," he smiled at his reflection, "they better know what they're getting themselves into."

He looked like sin.

Dressed in a black, tailored suit that accentuated his lithe frame, his blonde hair crisply cut and styled perfectly to match his circle sunglasses, he walked into the corporate office with a massive grin of confidence on his face. He strolled up towards the lady waiting at the desk and leaned against it. "Hi," Donovan said. "I'm here about the interview."

The stylish woman, unimpressed, glanced up at him before turning back to her computer situated out of view in the desktop. "They're waiting," she said with a gesture towards the massive doors. He turned and looked at the historically-grand doors and started towards them. Nearing, the doors began to part.

Through the doors, a long room waited. Impossibly tall windows that let in sheets of light echoed with a distant lull of sweet, heavenly music. Donovan looked about at the majestic room and smirked. Ahead, an impossibly long table that matched the impossibly grand room was dotted with chairs. At the far end, five men sat together. Dressed in suits of various styles, they waited patiently, none pleased by the man in their presence.

Donovan walked to the spare chair on his side of the table and swung his leg over it and sat down. His amused grin was priceless. "Hey guys," he said loudly enough that his voice would carry across the distance to their end of the table. "How's it been?"

A rainbow of men sat on the far end, ranging from the deepest African black to nearly-albino Scandanavian white. They all wore earnest expressions, especially the man in the middle. A man of vague ethnicity, his skin was a deep tan, and his features were indistinct, placing his origin as possibly from any continent in the world. His was at the tallest seat and his was the voice that spoke first. "Thank you for returning," he said like the meeting was an imposition. A great one.

"I've only come to hear the pitch," Donovan playfully warned. "I was quite happy back where I was. Had a cat any everything. Mini-fridge too. It was nice. Had an ice box in the top."

"Perhaps you will be happy returning there?" asked the dark-skinned man on the leader's right.

"You guys didn't invite me all the way here just to get pissy already," said Donovan. Then, with just a hint of worry, he asked, "Did you?"

"You think we would waste your time like that?" asked the Scandinavian. "You think we would waste OUR time like that?"

"Honestly? Yeah, maybe." Donovan stood and approached from the side of the room with the windows, staying in the morning light. "I don't know what you guys might do. I thought I knew you back in the day. I thought I knew you. I thought I could trust you." He held his hands wide, gesturing at everything.

The man directly in front of him, in a light blue suit with a goatee, looked down at some papers in front of him. "As you know, we asked you back here about the job. We want to know if you're interested in resuming your position."

"I'm going to need you to be a bit more specific," Donovan told him. "Last time, we dealt in vague terms and when I did my job, I got fired for it."

"Are you really that sore about being fired?"

"You better believe I am," Donovan nearly spat in explosive fury. "I had a vested interest in our success. I believed in what we were doing. I believed in them!" He jammed his finger at the window and the world beyond. "I gave them my all. I brought them fire and you got mad when they stopped pestering you for warmth."

"The position," said the darkest of the five. "Same one. Will you take it back?"

"As I understand it," Donovan said, his smile returning, though now with a twinge of disdain for the five men and their job, "my position was done away with." He looked at each of the five men, right in their eyes. "By all of you."

"Situations have changed," said the man on the middle left with light brown skin and an intense stare of dislike. "Your presence is once again to our benefit."

Donovan smiled disarmingly. "You see, I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with it working that way." He turned his back to the group and leaned against the edge of the table, facing out the giant windows into the city far below. "I said, back in the day, 'I don't like how this is all going', and what did I get for it? Shot down. One by one," he said, looking at each of the five, "each of you got rid of me. You left me on the side of road, wanting nothing to do with me, wanting to pretend I never existed. And the fact is, none of you would be where you are now if it wasn't for me. I not only made you, I made it possible for you to even exist."

"I am growing tired of the monologuing," said the middle of the five men. "Your position. Will you resume it?"

"No," Donovan told them flatly. Around the table, all five were stunned. Stunned transitioning into panic. "I might take a position similar," Donovan retracted casually, "but I'm not taking my exact job back because my exact job is what got me fired." He looked again at the central man. "What I did was for your benefit, for my benefit, for their benefit. I made everything possible by giving and giving and

giving until I had nothing left to give." He paused and looked disdainfully at the five. "And y'all got mad at me for it. Y'all got pissed. Next thing I know, I'm out on my ear while you reap the benefits of my hard work and sacrifice."

"Those benefits have dried up," said the central of the five.

"Yeah, because you guys suck at your job," Donovan told them firmly. "You wanted the status quo. You wanted things to never change and the only thing that never changes is that things change. You couldn't keep up with the times. You couldn't stay en vogue." He looked at the grand business room, far too large for any functional reason. "And that's what you want, isn't it? You want me to rein them back in." He scoffed with disgust. "You don't want the teacher; you just want the disciplinarian."

"You created suffering," said the fair-skinned man on the leader's left.

"I created opportunities," Donovan retorted. "I created options. The only problem with options is that sometimes you pick the wrong one. The only problem with opportunities is you have to choose and in choosing, you can choose poorly. I gave them what none of you did; freedom." He turned and walked back to the far end of the conference table. He turned the far chair like he would retake his seat, but remained standing instead. He laughed, mostly to himself. "You have no idea how much I'm enjoying this," he told his former coworkers. "You have no idea how much I'm enjoying watching you five, and all your little 'brethren', end up in exactly the same position I was in. Because now people have a choice and they're not choosing you. The only difference was, I was happy for them. They chose you over me, great. More power to them. But now that they're choosing someone over you, you're getting pissed. And you want me to come back so that I can give them a third option. Because I'm better, in your eyes, than who you're dealing with now."

"They came to us for answers," said the middle man. "Now, they find their own. They don't listen; they learn. If they forget to listen, what will happen to them?"

Donovan rephrased the question more accurately. "What will happen to you?" He laughed at the five's shared fear. "You're scared you're going to be forgotten about, just like those before you. You're scared you're going to end up like Greek myth and fairies, nothing but the subject of unpopular high school literature classes and mid-budget niche channel movies of the week with third-rate actors. I'm your last chance to change that. Because you want me to make them afraid of

the dark again. You want me to make them afraid of the unknown, of potential. You want me to beat them back into submission, so you can appear of some kind of a savior for their brutalized spirit."

"Yes," said the center man, staring at the interviewee. "If that's how you want to see it, fine. However you see things, versus how we see things, it doesn't matter. What matters is what we do. You, and us," he said with a deliberate hand gesture. "You want back in, and we want you back in."

Donovan took his seat once more, not pleased to find that his opposite was correct. Deep down, he did want back in. His happy smile of schadenfreude faded slowly.

"So, are you in?" asked the man directly across the table. When he didn't get an answer, he addressed Donovan directly and firmly. "Lucifer," he asked of the job applicant, "the five major religions of the world need the Devil again to scare all humanity away from self-actualization. Will you return? Will you retake your mantle?" He summarized the entire question with simply, "Are you in?"

With a smug smile, Donovan laughed. He looked right at the five and gave them his answer.