

/ Welcome! You've got Sins

Annie Levin

Enid hoofed it down the black alleys that led like roots to the backend of St. Rune's Cathedral. Turning a corner, she spotted one of its castle-gray towers, poised thinly against the canopy of darkness. Further down, another tower revealed itself, and then, one at a time, another and another. The candelabra of turrets could only be seen by the winged demons patrolling the outskirts of Hell's Metro Tech Torture Improvement Center (formerly Pandemonium). Enid, an entry-level nightmare, had materialized outside town and taken the Incu-Rail over the bottomless abyss to center-station. She had a meeting in Old Town that evening, a *very* important meeting. As she'd left her office in the Fifth Circle, shrugging on her shroud of sorrows and tidying her cubicle, a white-hot tumbleweed of nerves burned in her belly. She could lose everything: The condo with its view of Sisyphus's Mountain, the all expense paid trips to the trenches of the Somme, the orgaz-o-matic function on her Blackberry; everything would be taken if things went wrong. On the rail trip she kept clicking through her iPod, never sticking to a single track. Mad Doc Molloch's new synthesized mix of the Wails of Unrequited Lovers had just come out, but Enid couldn't concentrate.

Hell had gone wireless five years before. At the platform station, beetle-winged and snake-scaled junior VPs typed hard and fast on their laptops, waiting for the express to the suburbs.

Wireless was a small change compared to the revamping of the city a decade ago. As a child Enid and her classmates had been taken out of school to witness the destruction of Mammon's palace of gold. It had been replaced by an executive glass tower, a gleaming ebony rectangle, daunted only by the throne of The Morningstar. Soon after the dwellings of the hordes were replaced by concrete blocks and the whole city began to look like a highly symmetric ant farm. Only the center city, Old Town, remained of ancient Pandemonium. Rounding the cathedral, she passed the chic computer stores of Old Town. Their windows were filled with flat screen, HD monitors displaying the newly arrived damned, falling from the scales into the awaiting arms of web-footed pit demons. At the end of the road, a flight of stone steps led down



to another tiny, twisting maze of black alleyways. She clopped down the steps, suddenly excited and gleeful.

An elderly demon, hung with the ministerial robes of Lucifer's house, passed beneath the steps and paused, glancing up at her. He was a great yellow slug, crusted over

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in sores and stinking of rotting cabbages. Enid stopped in her trot a step above the last so she wouldn't collide with him.

She raised her eyebrows and waited for him to move, but he just stood there, smiling at her.

"Off someplace in a hurry?"

"Hardly...sir..."

"Then you must slow yourself. Quickness hardly suits your station. And, I should say, hardly appeals to your particular..." he paused, raising a gooey lump to brush aside a clump of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes "beauty..."

"I shall endeavor towards the utmost sloth sir."

"Visiting friends here?"

"No sir. I'm here to perform a vigil before the Lords of the Bureaucracy."

"Oh, what a good girl! There I was thinking you were some slinking young thing off pursuing mischief."

"Always sir. I toil with rapture for Lord Lucifer sir."

"Superior news. *Hmph!*...Not in the habit of high treason then?"

"I...sir...I..."

"No, no no no. The young are no good at lying anymore. It's no good..."

The minister gave a cynical '*harumph*,' shook his head and oozed off. Enid flared her snout at his backside. All the ancient ministers were going to get theirs in the end. She would make sure of that.

She waited until he had passed before scampering off to a small wooden door a ways down the alley. She knocked six times and stood there a moment before the door opened onto a small, crowded room. It was lit only by the light of twelve damned luddites with laptop screens welded onto their bellies. She heard several sharp intakes of breath as the door creaked open.

"S'only Enid," she announced softly.

She went in and took a seat beside the others.

"We are gathered?" asked a high, child-like voice in the darkness.

"We are Abdiel," croaked Pobeley the Amphibious, under-scourge of the pimps and panderers.

"Welcome followers all," Abdiel began.

He was carried to the center of the circle, held in the arms of a teenaged boy whose hands had been turned into game control sticks. A tiny digital demon in the shape

of Yoshi the Dinosaur sat on the boy's shoulder, feeding him mushrooms that made his head shrink and expand every few seconds. From the waist up Abdiel was a tiny, bald cherub, but his legs were withered and hung like limp rubber bands over his servant's arms. Little titanium horns popped out of his pale forehead, and in his hands he carried a silver Game Boy that he played while he spoke, never taking his eyes off it.

"Your loyalty to me in my banishment is admirable," he said numbly, his red eyes flashing with the light of the Game Boy.

"When I am in power, you will, as you know, be amply rewarded."

He paused a moment and his face contorted as he entered a particularly difficult level.

"I trust you have been toiling as I commanded?"

"We have Abdiel," said Enid, "we are your loyal slaves, as ever."

"Excellent. To your machines then," he commanded.

The twelve assembled demons knelt before the twelve damned luddites, ripping keyboards out of their lower intestines.

Enid logged into her account in the ministries' network. Punching in a random series of codes, she then hacked, with the other eleven, into Satan's mainframe. In minutes they were scrawling through the endless lists of the damned, each ascribed with a name, date of death and mode of punishment.

"We are there Abdiel," said Joa the Millipede, secretary to the minister of the Hoarders and Wasters.

Abdiel sighed.

"Yes...very well, commence Project Technocalypse. And make sure the damned bring me Lucifer's wings plucked so I can roast them."

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For several years the damned had been tagged with computer chips so they could be kept track of. They had a tendency to run off and hide in the vastness of Hell instead of enduring their eternal suffering. Lucifer put a stop to that as soon as the technology became available. The chip corresponded to a code in Satan's mainframe connected with the damned soul's personal information. From the mainframe one could find the soul and control it through the chip. This meant that most torture, at least at the executive level, was done from home, hands-off. With these devices Lucifer and his ministry maneuvered the massive population of Hell.

Enid and the other demons slogged away, changing the codes. The damned were to leave their places of torment and march on the city to tear down Satan's throne. Abdiel, in the aftermath, it was planned, would seize power.

They worked for hours and did not stop until they heard the damned, galumphing like zombies down the alleys.

Abdiel elbowed his servant in the ribs, still not taking his eyes off his game.

"Outside Brian," he said, "I'll lead them in battle."

Pobeley ran to open the door, "let us join you Abdiel. Your victory is our only joy."

"No! Mind the machines. You don't have enough guile for where I'm going."

Pobeley was about to open the door for Abdiel when something hard and fleshy thumped

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against it. The thump was followed by another and then another: the damned were throwing their bodies against it, trying to barge their way in. The door jittered on its hinges, and all twelve demons had to push against it to keep it shut. Peeking through a crack in the door, Enid saw a batch of spindly computer scientists – occasionally stopped in their tracks by popup advertisements materializing out of the air. When not prevented by popups they careened at breakneck speeds into the door.

Suddenly, a low and smoky laugh (reminding one of cellars in Calcutta and oil refineries in Northern New Jersey) bellowed out of the screen.

“Oh Abdiel,” Lucifer twittered, “Oh silly Abdiel.”

Gray-haired, clean-shaven Lucifer in office casuals, sat behind his desk with his usual thin-lipped, world-weary expression.

“Come on Abdiel, it’s tiring already. Wasn’t it enough that I banished you from the city and prevented you from excessive...*eh*... traveling for your last piece of treason?”

“This is too much. You’re all fucking fucked. All of you. You, Abdiel, perhaps you’d like to be sewn into my personal footstool. As for the rest of you, you’re going to Limbo to take care of unbaptized babies for all eternity.”

The other demons fell to their knees, begging Satan for mercy. Enid fled. She slashed her way through the collected damned. They followed her. She was faster than them as they were thrown back by their popup ads. She ran to the steps at the end of the alley, but they caught up and grabbed a hold of her hooves and pulled her down. Holding onto the top step with all her strength, she spotted the slug minister glooping by. He paused and looked down at her.

“Whoah-ho...” he uttered in a strange tone of grandfatherly concern. “Be careful my dear or you might just...” he chuckled, “...fall,” he said, sliding his gooey tail over and pushing Enid over the edge.

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