

Sometimes, the best soldier you can use against your enemies is one of their own.

-High Goddess Deis Aera, the Lady of Oaths and Vengeance

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The Contract

As pillars of fire speared down through boiling clouds, a dying goddess limped down the crumbling halls of her temple to ensure the ruination of her kingdom.

The sanctified fortress that stood as Deis Aera's place of worship for the past 500 years rumbled with each impact. With every impact, the light in the air dimmed, and the flow of the Arcane ran taut. The devastation sent tremors rumbling through her *Eidolon*—her awakened soul. Mere hours ago, she had the power to cleave mountains. To draw power from the concepts of honor, radiance, and vengeance. At her height, she stood a chance of facing the Outsider warship in the darkness beyond the sky.

After the betrayal she suffered, however, her Eidolon was a shriveled thing. The fading of the light around her symbolized the fading of her godhood. A spirit-rotting infection crept through her being, and it was only due to the immensity of her power that she remained.

"IT... it huRTTS. HURTSS," her Eidolon cried.

"I know," she whispered, doing all she could to draw power from her hatred and not succumb to despair. Her awakened self was crumbling. No longer a towering avatar. No longer a beacon capable of rivaling the dawn. As the poison ate through her, the radiant plates that once embraced her form grew rusted and varnished. With each passing second they dimmed. Of the six bladed wings that once sprouted from her back, only two remained, and one was dissolving into ash as if a tree branch consumed by fire.

Her incandescent aura now bore a diseased complexion—the emanation of her soul layered with festering boils and spirit-devouring cancer. It was the reason why she held herself back—refrained from joining her Arcanas with the reservoir of power resting at the heart of this temple. A blade lay buried in her chest: a weapon of entropy and betrayal driven deep by her own son in supplication to the invaders.

She wasn't long for this world. With how fast her Eidolon was withering, there wouldn't even be anything left of her to melt into the Final Dream. No wholeness of self preserved for resurrection. No way to achieve rebirth.

It was a dark end. Nothing left of her. No future left for her people.

Not unless she mustered the strength to accomplish this final deed—to deny her foes their prize.

Coughing a mouthful of blood into her hand, she pressed on, clawing her way along the white marbled walls, leaving a trail of bloodied handprints.

The transept of her holy sanctuary stood empty. She had the faithful sent home. Bestowed upon them her final orders before her arrival. She did not need them to pass needlessly, best that they be at home with their families. Best they be away from her presence, to be spared the sight of her ignoble end.

More importantly, she didn't want them to see her beg. To bargain. To offer dignity and spirit to the demons that lurked in the Abyss between worlds.

Another impact landed. Her spirit wailed. The temple's wards cracked.

Another beam splashed over her temple. The world beyond the windows grew blinding. Faintly, she felt the first cracks forming in the wards above her—the first fissure finally succumbing before the assault.

This temple—the Hilt of Victory—possessed enough power to deflect attacks that could reshape mountains. It had held admirably against the onslaught. For all of an hour.

A thin beam made it through her protection. The hammering of offensive magics doubled. A blade of light flicked past her, and the walls to her left peeled away, exposing the insides of structure to the world beyond. The tiled ground tilted up and tumbled down the mountainside upon where the temple was built.

Balefully, Aera turned to face her city, to look upon her home for a final time. Swordgrave sprawled up the curving bend of the horizon, stretching so far it ran the slow of this vast ring they called a world. Towering battlements shaped in representation of the city's namesake rose to kiss the clouds—five layers of protection for capital vast and esteemed.

It was here, 500 years ago, that the alliance achieved its final victory over the demonic scourge. It was here that they sealed shut the breach and claimed for themselves a wellspring of purified Arcana. It was here that she descended to become an Axiom—an arisen goddess to the peoples of Slake.

She remembered those times. She remembered when she was not yet a goddess. When she was just a wandering blade empowered by oaths of vengeance and retribution after emerging from the trials of the dreaming. She remembered the six companions that stood with her—that ascended alongside her.

That betrayed her.

Pain panged deep in her chest. Pain and agony beyond words.

The past was long gone now. Never to return.

The skies beyond the translucent wards protecting Swordgrave were droning with swarms of living metal. Outsider demon-bound golems that waited for the city's fall. Past the parapets beyond the first layer of her city, she saw countless legions gathered, their banners held high, displaying fealty to her traitorous comrades.

She knew what fate was to befall her people. She knew. She could prevent it. She had failed them. She had failed.

For the first time in centuries, the Lady of Oath and Vengeance bit back a sob.

The night before, she accepted the summons of the other Axioms. Long had they been discussing a resolution to the Outsider problem. Aera even thought they were close to an accord.

If only she knew they had already fallen under the invader's sway. If only she realized how alone she was in the end.

It wouldn't have mattered. It was her son that delivered the blow. Her own flesh and blood that buried the festering blade in her.

But where they expected her to fall, she stood, she fought, she fled. They had killed her. But at least she would be spared the shame of crumbling before them. At least she would pass on her own terms: with one final act of spite.

Spite. Spite and vengeance. Her emotions flowed into her Eidolon, and she found the strength to press on.

As she turned away from her city, she did her best to ignore their broadcast. Did her best to not wince with the withering of her final wing.

“ATTENTION: PEOPLE OF SWORDGRAVE!

**YOUR CITY IS FALLING! YOUR FORCES ARE DECIMATED OR HAVE SURRENDERED!
PLEASE PROCEED TOWARD THE DESIGNATED SPACES PAINTED WITH THE COLOR
[BLUE] TO AVOID THE NEXT ROUND OF BOMBARDMENT.**

**ONCE YOU ARRIVE, PLEASE WAIT IN ONE OF THE PENS FOR SORTING. PLEASE OBEY
THE SYSTEM'S REQUESTS TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF YOURSELVES AND YOUR
FAMILIES. FAILURE TO COMPLY WILL MARK YOU AS AN ACTIVE COMBATANT AND
WILL RESULT IN YOU BEING ENGAGED THUSLY.**

SURRENDER WILL ENSURE HUMANE TREATMENT AND RELOCATION UNDER THE OFFICIAL SOPHONT RIGHTS ENFORCEMENT ACT.

WE HOPE THAT YOU MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE.”

The broadcast was loud. Boom. Translated perfectly to their tongue. If the guard hadn't surrendered yet, they would start soon.

The faux geniality of their tongue drove a final spike of hate into Aera's heart. She stopped limping and returned to a stride.

Passing the cavernous naves that rested before a painted fresco designed in her likeness, Deis Aera looked upon her idealized self with loathing. Armored, radiant, with a burning hammer held high, a manifested dawning shining above her head, and six winds spread wide like scythes unfurled, she stood the personification of retribution; a promise of light to come.

Beneath the painted glass, however, stood a locked vault. A sealed place that none but Aera's chosen could enter. A Threshold to another world. Another layer in the Fathoms that bridged this world to another. Chains inscribed with animated runes coiled around its outside, the script whispering with oaths and promises. A brightness glowed from every link, and the dormant power of fire withheld remained within.

As Aera approached, the jingling stopped, and the gate recognized its mistress.

“**Open,**” she ordered. Her Eidolon flared once more, and briefly, the festering boils spreading over her aura dissolved. But as the chains shattered into motes of brilliance and the vault behind swung open, Aera groaned as the rot returned twice over.

The ground shifted at her feet. She tried to control her steps but she nearly tumbled instead. Her body shifted, and the floor rose to strike her—until she was halted from her fall by gauntlet hands.

Pushing off the bulwark that caught her, Aera lifted her head and beheld her armored faithful. The blessings she graced upon them still shone. Their Oathforged plates remained fused to their beings. They had not done as she demanded. They had not abandoned their posts.

Manning their barricades behind the vault, her soldiers stood at attention with arms and armor ready, with positions manned and an obvious will to fight. It was their eyes that scarred her. The mist building in their gazes. The look of pain consuming their expressions.

“I... told you all to leave. And go home to your families.” She forced each word out with as much strength as she could, desperate to preserve dignity and strength before her faithful.

Though she could see the heartbreak on their face, though she could read the unshed tears in their eyes, there was no judgment on their faces. No disgust at beholding the one who failed them—at serving a fallen goddess.

“You are mistaken, my lady,” the Oathsworn who caught her said. “You set us free before giving us our orders and we gave no promise. As such, we have decided to stay true to our duties. To stand for the city. Though death or despair may we reap.” He was a young man with serious blue eyes. She remembered his raven locks. Remembered he was one of her newest. If only she granted more favor to people like him instead of trying to right her son.

The sickness assailing her doubled in strength as she realized she couldn’t give these men and women what they deserved. That they were going to be overrun. That they were most certainly going to die here.

But staying true to oneself was its own reward. And she knew that with them, there was at least one choice she made right in this life.

“Then to your duties, soldiers. Make ready for... *memorable* ends.”

The young man who caught her lifted his fist, and a burning Oathforged hammer formed in his grasp. “The light abides!”

“The light abides!”

The chant went up as a chorus among the others, and she took them in. Five lances. Fifteen Oathsworn. Fifteen were enough to slay an army of demons. Fifteen would be enough to inflict a final debt upon her foes.

Their loyalty and determination almost stopped her. Almost turned her away from what she came here to do.

For if they knew the bargain she would make, the offer she would give, she had no doubt their faiths would shatter, and they would stand before her as lightless mortals once more.

Taking their places along the walls and with several make-shift barricades behind them, the Oathsworn made bets among themselves, boasting of how many they would kill before the end. Nostalgia mingled with despair in her heart. They wouldn’t be killing anyone today. They misunderstood her words.

They weren’t to be the valiant blades at the end of a song, immortalized in a final stand. No. They were to be the lambs offered to creatures in the black of night in exchange for services fell and vile.

Best that they didn’t know. Best, as she couldn’t find the strength inside her to tell them.

They were still laughing as she passed through the threshold, as she stepped through every subsequent gateway thereafter.

Each room she passed was more layered with chains, more imbued with her light. The distances between them numbered a meter or less, the constant stacking of separation made important by conceptual symbology.

This was a Threshold. A realm that grew between dimensions and worlds. Ladders leading up and down the Fathoms. Concept matter more than matter here, and as such was the Arcane strengthened.

Descending a rounding staircase, the light around her slowly faded as she coughed violently, her body threatening to topple with each step. As she finally arrived at the base, she could feel the thundering bombardment cease—sensed the shattering of the wards.

Ah. So they would be sending their minions in. How arrogant.

Past the final step, she arrived before two immense rune-carved doors made from cancerous flesh. Lines of blood flowed through the gateway's inlays, forming a sign that clawed at her very sanity. Whorling tendrils dance as a representation of building tides before pooling together at the center of the door.

She endured the telepathic assault now better than she ever did. Perhaps it was because she was close to the end. Perhaps it was because she, though near death, remained an Axiom, and her Embodiment of Mind could endure things that would leave someone lesser a drooling husk.

With final bit of exertion, she reached out with her Eidolon and bade the blood to dry. At once, the redness faded—blood changing to water—and the fluid spilled away. The mystical seal holding the gateway closed opened with a rumbling groan as curling fingers of darkness reached out into the light, dissolving in the present of her sickly aura.

Through the last gate, through the final barrier blocking her from beholding what rested at the heart of Swordgrave, she gazed into the brightening black and stepped into the fetid dungeon that once stood as an Archdemon's *Demesne*.

She emerged on a continent made from nightmares and rotting flesh. Enormous ribs rose from distant oceans of unknowable back, rising over the land like twisted archways. Tumorous totems lined with wounds and sprouting stalks out eyes peered down at her, each of their bloodshot gazes following her form across the wastes.

Floating aisles drifted in the sky where oozing pustules burst to rain blood and fetid essence down upon the barren soil. No dawn gazed upon this place. Only darkness parted by crimson lightning.

As a forking bolt leaped across the firmament, the horizon came alight, and Aera took in a flattened and empty world she scoured clean five centuries ago.

The mangled ground squelched beneath her sabatons as she forced her body to take its final steps. She walked. She walked. She walked. Until she neared the edge of the land and passed under the shadow of an enchained titan.

Seated upon a throne made from scabs, bone, and blood, the Archdemon Calamitous sat unmoving though his heart continued to quiver, though his presence was an omnipresent bolt upon Aera's awareness from the moment she entered this place.

A being formed from fire, wrath, atrocity, and rage.

His skin was stitched from those he slain. A million flayed faces screaming eternally. Blood flowed from gashes left in his gnarled flesh. It poured from it. It trickled down his spider-like legs and formed the festering land upon which she now stood. The horns that jutted from his skull were made from the bones of the innocent, and from them leaped volts of electricity to paint the sky. And from the orb of throbbing blackness that was its heart flowed an endless stream of darkness, spilling past his body, sprawling out as wings that spread out and back to merge with the colorless oceans that bore no tides.

Here sat her greatest foe. Here sat her greatest treasure. Here was the true heart from which Swordgrave derived its power.

In times of lore, different from what the bards sang, she defeated Calamitous but never truly slew him. Instead, she carved its self-awareness out from its mind to preserve its life and spirit before opening its chest to make a bargain with what lay beyond.

She. And all the other six.

It took more than mortal knowledge to understand how to become a god, after all. More than the meager understanding of their kingdoms to comprehend how to Descend and become Axioms.

Climbing the last steps between her and her final transgression, Aera looked up to the sky and bit down on her lip. "I wish... I could have... my people..."

She let her justifications die on her tongue. It meant nothing. It meant nothing. She failed. There would be no one to hear these words now. Looking up, she stared into the deep crimson eyes of her oldest foe and daydreamed falling in battle against him.

That would have been the better end. The better fate. She still remembered how it taunted her at the end, the words it used nauseatingly prophetic.

“Immortality doesn’t guarantee eternity, child. It only provides the delay of disgrace.”

Perhaps the creature gleaned some unknowable wisdom in its final moments.

For a heartbeat, she considered surrendering. Succumbing. This was a good place to die. Symbolic. Poignant.

But only for a heartbeat.

She was the Lady of Oaths. She was the Lady of Vengeance.

Vengeance.

That couldn’t be denied. She would not let her foes have what was rightfully hers. She would deny them the succor of Swordgrave spitefully, desperately, venomously.

She would reach across the Abyss once more and strike another bargain. Any bargain to see her last testament made true. Sinking her Eidolon’s aura into the Abyss at the Archdemon’s heart, she spoke with all her remaining authority and shouted into the Abyss.

“I am here,” she said, declaring herself to the darkness beyond worlds. Silence clung. Her guts coiled. No one answered. The light of her Eidolon faded evermore. **“I am here. You know me. You can feel my pain. You can feel the cruelty of my fate. Come to me, you bastards, Come to me, you vultures. Come and feed on my desperation. Come and take what little I have left to give.”**

The world was still. She waited. As darkness and death crept along the corners of her eyes, she waited. The infection was going to overtake her soul soon. Nothing would be left. Nothing at—

A chuckling interrupted her thoughts. A flapping of wings. Through the Archdemon’s heart, she perceived a shape in the distance, a gargantuan form emerging from the nothingness.

In the distance, it resembled some kind of crow. Then, in a blink, it was before her, peeking back through the window that was the Archdemon’s heart. It was dressed as if a person, sporting a white wig with a strange string-like fabric hanging from its neck. It danced and tumbled though there was no wind.

The crow turned its head and stared down at her. As it extended its wings, she realized it was made not of feathers but papers. Papers signed and stamped. *Contracts*. Two human-shaped arms emerged from its midnight feathers, fingers steeped together as it began to chuckle. Its voice was a legion. Human and not. Men and women. Loud and soft.

This close, even with her Eidolon on the verge of death, she could feel its aura was over her, feel the enormity of its Arcane Presence in the Fathoms. Its power must’ve dwarfed hers thrice

over even at her prime. Why this Demon didn't simply invade and devour her world, she would never know. She just found herself grateful it hadn't. But today. Today, with it standing right before her, she would change that. She would make any offer to unleash it upon the Outsiders and her betrayers.

“Oh, good morning, my Lady of Oath and Vengeance,” the crow-demon said. Its voice was a thing of smooth multitudes, and there was joy in every syllable it whispered into her mind. **“You look particularly ill today. Perhaps you are looking for a cure? Hmm. Soulplague. Ah. No cure, then. How delightfully vile. I would be interested in learning how you got infected with that. This world isn't nearly deep or developed enough to produce something like that on its own.”**

“No,” she said. “I seek another remedy. One for my opponents' victory.”

The crow let out a satisfied bark of laughter. **“Ah. Of course. Vengeance. I do so love vengeance. It is the reason I have so many *constituents*. But I digress. Tell me. Whisper to me what you want. And tell me what you are willing to give to see it done. Then, I will see if we can provide one another with... satisfaction.”**

Blood rose from the back of Aera's throat. She swallowed it back and spoke. “I wish for my people to be avenged. Protected, if possible. I wish for the other Axioms—my former companions—my *betrayers*, to be slain and broken. I wish for my son to... to be spared. But imprisoned. And I wish for the Outsiders invading my world to be banished from my world.”

“Outsiders, you say?” the crow hummed with amusement, and faintly, she felt a pressure probing at the fabric of her mind. **“Ah. What a mind you've cultivated. Shame you were born on this world. A few Fathoms deeper, and you could've really been someone—whoa. Huh. *Surfacers*. Well, then, this changes things. This changes lots of things. Ah. Let's hear your bid.”**

“I return to you,” Aera had to steal herself from shaking, had to push back the despair creeping up her soul, “I return to you the heart and Demesne of your Archdemon.”

“Oh, he's not mine,” the crow said, holding up its hands. **“And he's not a demon either. Just an Invader-Class Nightmar—never mind that. Keep going.”**

“I will... I will you...” It took all of Aera's to speak her next words. “I will you my Oathsworn. All of them.”

The crow gave a small nod. And let out a small sigh. **“Well. That really isn't much, if I'm gonna be honest. Are you sure you don't have anything else you're willing to give? You are dying, you know. For good. All traces gone. Poof. Can't take nothing with you like... say that Eidolon you've been cultivating. Why not throw that in? See if I change my**

mind.”

The way the crow spoke its words made her suspicious. It sounded impossibly overjoyed. Like it on the verge of laughter.

“My... my Eidolon,” Aera said. “It’s infected. Dying. I did not want to offend you with poison.”

“Yeah, well, more like you’re getting *deleted* from it. Factory settings and all that. It’ll go back to being a seed and someone else can use it after you’re gone.”

She didn’t fully understand what the demon was saying but simply nodded. She was tired. Too tired. “Very well, then. My Eidolon. My awakened—”

“Fantastic! We can do business. Now. The problem you’re facing makes me think you need a specialist. A veteran at dealing with incursions and apocalypses. And I. Know. Just. The. Guy.”

“Guy,” Aera said, blinking, unsure if she heard the crow right. “One person.”

“Don’t worry! He’s great at this kind of stuff. Or used to be. Haven’t checked in for a while—last we talked, his own people were trying to kill him and he was laying low.” The crow snorted. **“He’s gonna hate this. This’ll be great. I’ll kick off another breach. Send out a bunch of... what’d you call them? ‘Demons’? And then let our good friend sneak out in the aftermath. How’s that sound.”**

Aera opened her mouth but slumped to her knees. Her Eidolon shriveled and vanished. She collapsed as the woman she had been. Mortal. Mortal. Feeble. Nothing more. “Pro-promise me it will be done.”

In response to her words, the crow leaned in close, its beak curling in a strange imitation of a smile. **“Trust me. He’s pretty *fucking* great.”**

The dying goddess coughed and shrugged. What was left, then? “I... accept.”

And with that, the wings of the crow came ablaze as a contract formed within the space between them, forged from the melding of their auras. The page flopped through the Archdemon’s heart and joined the countless others along the crow’s wings as its Arcane Presence grew.

“You are not going to be disappointed.” the crow paused. **“Well, you’re not going to be anything ‘cause you’ll be dead in a few minutes, but I just want you to know that after you go, a lot of people are going to be very, very, very unhappy that you did this. Consider that a fitting legacy.”**

And then, as fell on her side, she watched the Archdemon's heart swell and rupture, tearing through the fabric of the Demesne as the Abyss poured in, swallowing her and spreading free from the insides of her temple.

As Aera's consciousness frayed, she felt the crow reach upward through the Fathoms, its own Eidolon manifested as unseen tendrils spread out from its being to tunnel across dimensions and worlds, breaching upward to seek the one she just contracted.