

Conspiracy Amid the Brimstone

I must have Mansoul at any cost,” said the giant Diabolus. “I will settle for nothing less.” He was sitting on his haunches, pushing up little mounds of brimstone as he spoke. His warlords sat around him in a circle in one of the private conference caverns of the pit, eyeing the mounds of brimstone. Periodic spurts of fire erupted from crevices and lighted up their faces and sent their shadows shooting up the sides of the walls. From the huge yawning cavern beyond came occasional blasts of hot air, sometimes rushing through the stalactites and stalagmites with a formidable roar, sometimes winding through with great sighs and moans, sometimes in whispers.

“And just how,” said one of the warlords, still watching the mounds of brimstone, “do you propose to do this, M’Lord?”

“That is why I called this council, Beelzebub,” said Diabolus, looking up for a moment at the speaker. “I do not know exactly how. But of one thing I am sure. It will be easy.”

“May I remind you, M’Lord,” said Beelzebub, “that this is not B.B.”

They all exchanged glances in silence.

“B.B.,” Beelzebub went on relentlessly—“‘before banishment.’ Then you were Lucifer, son of morning, created by the great King Shaddai, ruler over all his angels, carrying his government to the angels, carrying their worship back to him—greatest in beauty, greatest in power—”

“Mansoul is Shaddai’s treasure,” interrupted Diabolus, beginning to flatten out his mounds of brimstone, “the one creation Shaddai has set his heart on, cares the most about. What sweeter revenge could I possibly have than to take his most precious possession? I must have it.”

“You must have it,” said Beelzebub. “That is exactly what happened B.B. You were not satisfied with your lot. Your paunch was growling for more. Only that time you cried, ‘I will set my throne above the throne of Shaddai. I will *be like* Shaddai.’ You wanted nothing less than absolute, ultimate power, and you tried to start a rebellion—”

“I *did* start a rebellion,” corrected Diabolus. “And it worked.”

“Yes, it worked,” said Beelzebub, “if you mean you were successful in getting enough angels to follow you. But it’s like saying ‘the operation was successful but the patient died.’ We were all banished to this miserable pit forever, you and your fallen angels with you.”

They were all silent for a moment, watching the mounds of brimstone being pushed up again.

“Because you overlooked one thing,” said Beelzebub finally, pressing his point.

“I did not overlook,” said Diabolus. “I underestimated.”

“Underestimated then,” said Beelzebub. “The power you sought, King Shaddai had reserved for his son, Prince Emmanuel—in fact had already bestowed upon him.”

“Have you anything more to say?” said Diabolus.

“And you’ve had a one-track mind ever since. You hated King Shaddai.”

“And I *hate* King Shaddai. So much that I can think of nothing else. Have you anything more to say?”

“No,” sighed Beelzebub, “except to repeat, this is A.B.—‘after banishment’—and you are living behind the times.”

A long moaning rush of hot air reverberated throughout the huge labyrinth of caverns outside the conference room and expired with a sigh, away off in the distance. They all stopped to listen.

“And stop doodling,” Beelzebub said at last.

Diabolus swept the mounds of brimstone away in an elaborate gesture and uncrouched himself. “Are you finished?” he asked Beelzebub.

“I am finished,” said Beelzebub. “I merely wished to reiterate the facts to be perfectly sure it is clear in our minds what we are up against. Chipping at your arguments to find a possible chink. I am, of course,” he added, leaning forward hungrily on his haunches, “with you all the way.”

“Of course,” said Diabolus.

“Provided you are realistic about it.”

“Realistic?”

“You cannot hope ever to become Lord of the Universe.”

“That would be highly improbable.”

“That would be highly impossible.”

“I rather fancy being Lord of the Universe,” sighed Diabolus, “but one does what one can.”

“You *are* being realistic,” said Beelzebub. “What are your plans?”

Diabolus sprang into action. “Apollyon,” he said, “hand me that stick, will you? Legion, draw up closer. And

Alecto, perhaps you'd better take notes. The rest of you, watch and listen." He leaned forward with the stick Apollyon handed him and began to make marks in the brimstone. "Now," he said, "this whole area is Universe—situated between these two poles—Heaven and Hell. And right—here—is—Mansoul. Here. Now. As you know, Mansoul is a town so fair, so commodious, so wonderful, so—well, it has no equal under Heaven. King Shaddai made it for his delight and for his glory; he gave it dominion over everything around it and it enjoys privileges and powers beyond belief—"

"We know that, we *know* that," said Apollyon. "How are you planning to take this town?"

"There is a wall of course," Diabolus went on, "and five gates: the Ear-gate, the Eye-gate, the Mouth-gate, the Nose-gate, and the Feel-gate. The three highest in power are Lord Mayor Understanding and Lord Willbewill and Mr. Conscience."

"How are you planning to take it?" said Beelzebub.

"How are you planning to take it?" said Apollyon.

Alecto and the others remained silent.

"It's impregnable," Diabolus admitted at last. "The walls are so made that they cannot be scaled or breached without the consent of those inside."

"And the gates?"

"The gates cannot be opened—"

"—without the consent of those inside," they all finished it together.

There was a long silence.

"If we muster all our forces—" suggested an underling timidly.

"You are very stupid, my friend," Diabolus shot back. "All our forces would not make a dent. No, my idea—" he paused

for effect, “my idea is to make them *want* to let *us* in.”

“*Want* to let us in!” they all cried at once. “Who would want to let *us* in?”

“We look pretty seamy, M’Lord,” Apollyon finished lamely. “Our onetime princely appearance is a thing of the past.”

“I know,” said Diabolus. “I’d thought of that. A scrubby lot, all of us, a scrubby lot indeed. One look at us and the whole town would be on a red alert. And that is just my strategy. They will not see us. We will be invisible. And they will not see our intentions either.”

“Our intentions will be invisible too!” said Legion.

“We’ll cloak them with lies and deceit!” said Apollyon.

“And flattery!” said Beelzebub.

“Yessss,” said Diabolus. “We’ll cajole them, delude them, pretending things that will never be and promising things they shall never get. Lies, lies, lies—the only way to get Mansoul to let us in. And so our intentions will be invisible and we will be invisible—that is, all except one of us. And I suggest—” he looked around the circle of faces, “I suggest that I be that one.”

“By all means!” they all cried at once. “For you are the genius at deceit, a master liar!”

“*The* master liar,” Diabolus corrected. “I say this in all modesty. There has never been my equal.” He waited for someone to challenge him. No one did. “Well then,” he said, “now that that’s decided, the next question is my disguise. What shall it be?”

They all began to talk at once.

“A mouse! What could be more harmless than a mouse?”

“No! What could be more *stupid* than a mouse?”

“It must be something over which they have dominion!”