

"Maelduin."

The druid jumped, whirling in surprise to see Aethnid standing behind him.

"Aethnid! Wh—ah, when did you get here?" he asked nervously.

The goddess and Cythraul exchanged glances.

"I've been here awhile," she replied. "Come."

Maelduin sighed and reluctantly followed her.

"You're looking guilty," the goddess observed over her shoulder. "Why?"

Maelduin stopped short. "Me? Guilty? Uh, no, Goddess." He cleared his throat. "It's just that every time you show up, something terrible happens to me, and I—I guess I'm waiting to see what it's going to be this time."

"Maelduin!" Aethnid gasped, looking hurt.

The druid winced.

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said!" the goddess grinned, then turned and continued forward.

"You know, I was quite pleased with how you treated that gazelle," she observed. Her eyes rolled back in her head a little, and she added huskily, "Very pleased."

"I—I'm glad you approve," Maelduin said halfheartedly.

"Now that you've demonstrated that you know what you're supposed to do, I'm going to expect it of you all the time going forward," she added pointedly.

"I—I guess," Maelduin replied noncommittally.

"Come," she said again, grabbing him in her vise-like grip. "There's something you need to see."

She half-pulled, half-dragged him up a shallow slope. Cresting the hill, Maelduin stopped short again and gaped helplessly as a man, just as naked as he was, sprinted right for them.

"Aethnid!" the man cried, "Please! Don't do this!"

He hesitated a moment, as if hoping that Aethnid would stop whatever it was she was doing. Then, in desperation, he looked over his shoulder, let out a cry, and sprinted past them. As soon as the man had passed, Maelduin yelped and leapt backwards to avoid being trampled by a troop of baboons hot on the trail of the hapless man.

"Are—are you gonna help him?" the druid asked anxiously.

"Why, no," Aethnid replied with a cold smirk. "This is *punishment*."

The man stumbled and cried out, and the baboon horde caught up to him. Grabbing at his arms and legs, they worked to restrain him while he screamed, kicked, and punched ineffectually at them. Within seconds, they had him pinned down on his back. One sat holding each of his arms, two sat on each leg, a smaller one sat at his head, and the largest of them sat on his chest, facing his face.

"Wh—what are they gonna do to him?" Maelduin asked, though he was certain he already knew the answer.

"Let's go find out!" Aethnid said enthusiastically, grabbing his wrist again and dragging him right up close.

As they approached, the largest baboon let out a triumphant roar and began to urinate on the man's face. He coughed and sputtered, but just then, the smaller baboon grabbed his head and held it still. The man's body twitched and jerked as the largest baboon, who had stopped urinating, reached forward and grabbed the man's mouth. The man winced and tried to grit his teeth together, but the monkey's grip was too strong. Maelduin caught a glint in the animal's eye, an expression that he realized with a sinking feeling was very similar to one Aethnid had given him on many occasions: a look of determination, of confidence that in a battle of wills, the baboon had the clear advantage.

Inevitably, the man's mouth opened, and the baboon's dirty, hairy fingers jammed into the sides of the man's cheeks made sure it stayed that way. The baboon roared at him, and Maelduin knew with absolute certainty that it was a rebuke of the man, scolding him for trying to resist.

Maelduin cringed, knowing exactly what was coming next, yet unable to look away as the baboon resumed pissing, using his other hand to aim his stream right into the man's mouth.

"Mmph, Aethnid, this is cruel," he whimpered, squirming uncomfortably. "Can't you get them to let him go?"

"What do you think?" Aethnid asked, raising an eyebrow and smirking, giving him the exact same look as the baboon had given the captive man.

Maelduin huffed and tried to look away.

"Oh, no," Aethnid said, grabbing him by the chin and turning his head back to the man on the ground. "It's important for you to see this."

"But *Aethnid*," Maelduin whined, "It's bad enough *being* in that position! It's even worse having to stand here watching, knowing that there's nothing I can do to help!"

Aethnid cocked her head. "Worse, is it?" she asked quietly with a curious look on her face.

Maelduin paled. "Uh, th—that is—"

"You'd better be careful what you say to me, Maelduin," Aethnid warned. "I might take you at your word next time."

They returned their attention to the man. The largest baboon had evidently finished pissing because he'd moved between the man's legs, grabbed hold of them, and begun thrusting roughly in and out of his ass. The man's body jerked, and tears streamed down his face. Yet as Maelduin winced and tried once more to turn away—Aethnid stopped him again—the smaller baboon straddled the man's face facing the other baboon and began to thrust down his throat. The man's body jerked much harder as the smaller monkey hit his gag reflex over and over, yet the troop of baboons pinning him down rendered even his mightiest thrashing completely impotent.

At last, the largest of the baboons climaxed—quite loudly—and moved over to pin down the man's leg. The baboon he replaced took his place and wasted no time sliding his own cock into the man's already-leaking passage.

One by one, each baboon took his turn raping the man's face and ass, but then, to Maelduin's chagrin, they went for another round, this time using the hole they themselves had not already defiled. The torment went on for over an hour nonstop, but at last, all eight of them had used both holes. Maelduin breathed a sigh of relief, certain that now they would at last let him go.

But, to his dismay, the large one took up his place between the man's legs again and began thrusting.

"Oh, come on, Aethnid!" Maelduin cried. "They've each already used both his holes; why do they need to go more than once?"

"Why, to bide time, Maelduin."

The druid didn't like the tone of her voice. He glanced at her nervously.

"For... what?" he asked timidly.

"For you to take *your* turn," she replied with a wicked grin.

The druid did a double-take. "Me? What do I have to do with this?" he asked. "I—I don't even *know* him!"

"That doesn't matter," the goddess replied. "He needs to be punished, and I have chosen you to carry it out."

"B—but, I—I did a good job with the gazelle," Maelduin faltered. "Why do I have to do it? I don't *want* to punish him!"

"Yes! Because you did such a good job, this is your reward. For once, you get to be the one punishing someone else rather than being punished."

Maelduin shook his head. "If it's all the same to you, Aethnid, I'll pass," he said flatly. "I don't want to be involved."

"It is *not* all the same to me," Aethnid hissed as the sky darkened. She grabbed his chin again. "I gave you an order, now *do* it!"

"No," Maelduin snapped, scowling up at her. "If you want to punish him, *you* do it. I'm not going to be part of your sick games."

To his surprise, Aethnid's expression softened. The dark clouds dissipated. As she let go of his chin, he glanced around uncertainly.

"I'm proud of you, Maelduin," she said, pleased. "Even though I've subjected you to all manner of humiliation and pain, rather than taking it out on someone else, you've decided to take the high road. Well done!"

The druid ventured a cautious smile.

"In fact, that was just a test," the goddess said, sticking her pinkies in her mouth and whistling sharply. "I think you've earned your *real* reward!"

The largest of the baboons turned his head, then came bounding up to them. Maelduin's eyes bulged, but Aethnid's hand on his shoulder steadied him as the 90-pound beast strode right up to him.

"Easy, Maelduin. Despite his size and ferocious appearance, he's actually quite gentle," Aethnid said.

Maelduin tensed, eyeing the baboon nervously as the latter leaned forward, sniffed of the druid's crotch, and then stuck out his tongue and began to sensually fellate him. The druid jerked in surprise, then gasped and leaned his head back, his mouth opening in pleasure as the baboon slurped his rapidly hardening member into his mouth. Aethnid relaxed her grip on his shoulder, leaving him to lean forward slightly over the baboon, lightly thrusting his hips into the monkey's supremely talented mouth.

Relaxing and giving in to the pleasure, Maelduin looked down at the baboon, who looked back up at him with shockingly kind, intelligent eyes that almost seemed to ask, "Do you like this? Am I doing a good job?"

Startled at the intelligence, Maelduin cocked his head and peered at the baboon's face.

He saw the glint too late.

The baboon's lips curled back to reveal a mouth full of very sharp teeth. Maelduin gasped, but the baboon's hands shot out beside him, clasped his buttocks, and pulled him forward.

"A—Aethnid?!" Maelduin cried. "Augh!"

The baboon bit down, sending alarm bells screaming up to Maelduin's head.

"Oh, psh, he hasn't even drawn blood, yet," the goddess said dismissively, studying her nails.

"Aethnid!" Maelduin screamed, "Do something!"

"What was that about you not playing my sick games?" she asked, still studying her fingers. "About it being better to participate than watch?"

"Aethnid, I—I'm sorry! I—ugh!"

The baboon's teeth were digging into the top of the druid's shaft and the underside of his very sensitive scrotum, causing more pain than was proportional to the amount of damage inflicted—which was negligible. Nevertheless, it had Maelduin's full attention.

"I'll give you a choice, Maelduin," Aethnid said, turning her attention abruptly to him as the sky darkened once more. "You can either do what I tell you *WITHOUT QUESTION*"—lightning cracked—"or I can let this nice male swallow your cock." The sky cleared. "Which will it be?" she asked sweetly.

"I'll do what I'm told; I'll do what I'm told!" Maelduin cried. "Please, he—"

"All right, Charlie, let him go," the goddess said, and Charlie immediately relaxed his jaw, gave Maelduin's pecker a final slurp, and turned to look at her attentively.

"Good boy, Charlie. Go on back to your troop."

The baboon bounded off.

"Well?" Aethnid demanded.

"Huh?!" Maelduin looked up from minutely inspecting his junk—sure enough, despite his size and sharp teeth, the baboon had not even drawn blood.

"Time for you to go do as you're told," Aethnid said, tapping her foot and pointing.

Maelduin sighed, hesitated, and then began trudging down the hill to where the baboons and the man were all watching him.

"P—please," the man croaked as soon as Maelduin approached, "If you just tell them to be off, they'll let me go. I—I'll be forever in your debt!"

The druid huffed uncomfortably. The baboons all watched him intently. For a moment, the words lingered at the tip of his tongue, but at last, he shook his head and knelt by the man's face.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely, "But it's my dick or your mouth, and I—I just can't face Aethnid's wrath again."

"No, wait! Please, I—"

"Oh, *Maelduin!*" Aethnid singsonged. "You're supposed to be fucking his *ass!*"

"No! Please, not my ass! They've already fucked it raw! Please, *use* my mouth, I beg you!"

Despite the man's pleading, a glare from Charlie got Maelduin up and had him reluctantly move between the man's legs. He started to kneel down but stopped short, gasping in dismay on seeing the man's mangled ass. It was red, swollen, gaping, and distended, and cum was plastered and frothed in an irregular ring around it. The sight of it made Maelduin look away instinctively, and he couldn't help but think that the man's backside looked an awful lot like that of the baboons who had fucked him. The sight of it turned his stomach.

"Aethnid, this man needs medicine!" he murmured over his shoulder.

"Let's see!" the goddess said, pushing forward. "Oh, pshaw," she said on seeing it. "Yours has looked ten times worse, Maelduin. Carry on!"

Maelduin cringed. *Ten times worse than that?!* The thought made him shudder.

"Please..." the man begged.

"I'm sorry," Maelduin croaked, awkwardly positioning himself between the ranks of baboons and trying to line himself up. "It's my dick or your ass, and I—I..."

He grinned suddenly and got back up.

"Maelduin?" Aethnid asked, "What are you doing?"

The druid shook his head. "I'm sorry, Aethnid. The position is just too awkward. I couldn't get my penis into him if I tried."

"Oh, well, that's easy," Aethnid said.

Before Maelduin could protest, she snapped her fingers, and the baboons sprang into action. The man began to protest and struggle, but the troop worked together to move one leg over the other, synchronizing his arms at the same time to roll him onto his side and then onto his stomach. They took turns readjusting their positions, and even the biggest and smallest of them joined in, making sure that at no time could their victim shake himself free. As soon as they had him on his stomach, two of them began tickling his sides, making him laugh involuntarily and try to double over. The ones holding his arms and legs moved with him, letting him raise himself up vertically before yanking his arms back down again, getting him into a doggy-style position with surprising effectiveness.

"You were saying?" Aethnid asked.

Maelduin just stared helplessly, a croak of protest catching in his throat and refusing to come out.

"Get to it," the goddess prompted.

The druid sighed. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "It was stupid to think I could outwit her on something like that."

He knelt down and got himself into position. From this vantage point, the swollen, irritated orifice looked even worse, and Maelduin winced on seeing it as he gingerly lined himself up.

"I really, *really* am sorry," he murmured.

"Augh!"

Unbeknownst to Maelduin, Charlie had casually moved in behind him, and seeing the druid balking, he had lunged forward, lined himself up, and buried his prick in Maelduin's well-used ass. The force had knocked the druid forward, driving *his* cock into the hapless man.

For a moment, the two humans gasped in shock, but before they could recover, Charlie began humping and thrusting with gusto. Maelduin gritted his teeth as the baboon's snub-nosed prick rattled his insides. Though a little smaller than Maelduin's own cock and certainly *much* smaller than many of the penises previously buried in his ass, the baboon easily compensated for his lack of size with enthusiasm bordering on aggression. Wrapping his arms not only around Maelduin's waist but around the other man's as well, he thrust forward and backward like a woodpecker, each thrust powerful enough to yank Maelduin out of the man and shove balls-deep back into him.

Once he recovered from the shock, Maelduin had to admit that the feeling of having his ass and cock stroked in unison was indescribably pleasurable. Despite the man's intermittent grunts and wails of pain below him, Maelduin found himself increasingly able to ignore the man's plight, his attention a moth to the flame of lust radiating from his cock, balls, and ass. As the man continued to moan piteously below him, Maelduin began to rock forward and backward in rhythm to the baboon behind him, maximizing the latter's stroke into him and his own stroke into the man's ass, which was delightfully tight—surprising, given the circumstances. His balls throbbing, his prostate oozing, and his cock buzzing with arousal, Maelduin threw himself wholeheartedly into fucking the man's ass.

He's being punished, he reasoned in the back of his mind. Aethnid told me to fuck him. It's not my fault if it feels really good!

No! You're complicit in all this; you could have stood up to Aethnid like you have before. You're a monster!

Gosh, this ass feels good, and so does that cock, if I'm being honest.

You disgusting degenerate. Whatever happened to you being mortified at the thought of fucking someone?

Yeah, but he's a human.

That you are absolutely raping right now!

The druid cringed.

Yeah, but Aethnid—

Don't go trying to blame this on her! She's not making you hump his ass right now!

No, of course not. That's the baboon who's... who's...

Maelduin gasped and glanced down. The baboon's arms were no longer wrapped around his sides. He whipped his head behind him, then gasped again. Charlie was, in fact, sitting next to the man's face, looking at Maelduin with a smug expression.

The druid stopped humping mid-thrust, mortified at the realization that he was himself doing 100 percent of the raping at that moment.

"Maelduin? What are you doing? Keep going!" Aethnid urged.

"No, Aethnid!" Maelduin cried. "Can't you see what I've become? I'm *raping* this poor man!"

"And you'll keep doing so until—like countless males have done to you—you get your rocks off and go find something else to do," the goddess replied with a cocky smirk. "You are no more and no less than an animal looking for a nice hole to empty his balls into, Maelduin. You are a boar seeking a sow's cunt, a buck rutting a doe's slick snatch. Here's your female baboon raising her swollen, engorged pussy to your face and begging for your seed. Now, fuck her until she bears your child!"

Testosterone surged through Maelduin's body. The druid was overcome by a desperate need to flood the baboon's twat—ah, the *man's ass*—with his virile seed.

"I'm not a baboon!" the man cried, but his plea fell on deaf ears as Maelduin reared back and slammed his cock balls-deep into the man's ass.

Slap, slap, slap, smack, slap, smack.

Hips met buttocks over and over again, and unlike Maelduin's usual encounters, both crotches had so little hair that the percussive meeting of flesh resounded noisily in his ears. He didn't care. Each thrust sent a chill up his spine, each grasp of the man's surprisingly clingy anus urging him toward climax.

Slap, smack, smack, squish, smack.

And yet, even as he felt himself driving harder and harder towards his goal, it felt as though it was beginning to pull away from him. He thrust harder.

SLAP! SLAP! SQUISH! GRIND! SMACK!

The man wailed in pain below him as Maelduin thrust as hard as a bull and as fast as a dog, desperately chasing that elusive climax. He grunted, beginning to feel desperate.

"I—I'm sorry!" he said in response to the man's increasingly urgent pleas for clemency, "I—I have to do this—*need* to do this!"

He began slamming as hard as he could while the baboons began to whoop enthusiastically, drowning out the man's cries. Maelduin didn't care about any of it. He could feel himself about to catch his climax, and by Aethnid, he was going to have it!

SLAM! SLAM! SLAM! SLAM!

"Augh!" Maelduin cried, lodging himself in the guy and shuddering all over as his balls dumped their contents.

Something hot, thick, and sludgy suddenly flowed around Maelduin's cock. Though startling, it felt so good that the druid didn't even question it; he just leaned forward, grabbed the man's waist, and pulled himself up tightly against him.

The hot sludge suddenly erupted from the man's ass and plastered itself between his buttocks and Maelduin's groin. An odious smell reached the druid's nostrils. Half-formed thoughts began to swirl in the back of his climax-addled mind. As the smell grew stronger, so did the urgency of those malformed thoughts.

"*Shit!*" Maelduin cried, suddenly, throwing himself backwards.

Sure enough, his cock was covered in a thick layer of the stuff. He looked down, then sprang to his feet, crying out in disgust.

"I—I'm sorry!" the man called after him. "I—I couldn't help it!"

Maelduin didn't hear him. He alternated between the urge to wipe the stuff off his penis with his hand and the revulsion of having that stuff on his hand. For several seconds, he made false start after false start, moaning in displeasure.

"Maelduin!" Aethnid called, her voice piercing the haze of post-coital fog and the chaos of panic.

The druid's head swiveled to look at her.

"*He's* the one who got your penis dirty," the goddess said pointedly. "*He* should be the one to clean you up. It's only fair, isn't it?"

Maelduin's eyes darted to the man, who looked back up at him with a wide-eyed expression and began to struggle, clamping his mouth closed and shaking his head desperately.

"Do it, Maelduin! He deserves to be *punished!*" the goddess said, her words punctuated by a lightning flash.

For a split-second, Maelduin balked. But then, his own eyes grew hard, his fists balled, and he moved towards the man's head. Charlie and the little baboon moved aside and grabbed the man's face.

"Please," the man begged, imploring Maelduin with his eyes as the druid's cock—covered in the man's own feces—hovered beneath his nostrils, "*Please!*"

Maelduin thrust forward. The man's eyes bulged, and the baboons all held on tightly as his muscles tightened and tried with newfound desperation to shake them off. Tears erupted from his eyes, and snot ran down his nose as Maelduin began to stroke ruthlessly into and out of his mouth. Each time the druid pulled back, he glanced down at his cock to find it a little cleaner than the last time, but still unsatisfied, he thrust in again, adjusting his angle this way and that to scrape the fetid ordure off inside the man's mouth.

Despite his protests, the man succeeded in getting Maelduin clean unusually fast, and the feel of his tongue and throat on the druid's member felt so good that even though he'd just climaxed and was at that moment trying to rid himself of the man's poop, Maelduin thought it seemed only fair that the man get him off again as penance for shitting on him. He thrust again and again, driving himself down the man's throat. The man blubbered and cried with each thrust, yet his tongue, lips, and throat manipulated Maelduin's member with expert precision, quickly pushing the druid to the edge. Without overture, Maelduin crossed the threshold, hunching over the man and grunting bestially as he spat his cum down the man's throat. He stayed that way for a few seconds to catch his breath, then pulled out and sat back.

As the thrill of conquest gave way to post-coital regrets, Maelduin suddenly gasped, realizing what he'd done. He staggered backwards, his eyes filled with horror and remorse.

"I—I'm sorry, I—" he stammered, then turned and fled back to Aethnid, holding his head in his hands.

"And where do you think *you're* going?" the goddess demanded.

"I *did* what you wanted, Aethnid!" the druid cried through angry tears, "I let myself become an animal and *raped* that man. What more—"

"You didn't *become* anything, Maelduin," Aethnid replied, rolling her eyes. "You were already—and still are—an animal looking for a nice hole. You found it. Now, do as the baboons do: get back there and take your turn holding him down so they can take their turns with his holes."

Maelduin gaped at her. She responded by pointing firmly over his shoulder at the man.

Beaten, Maelduin trudged back to the group.

"Hold his mouth," Aethnid called. "And be sure you get your fingers deep into his cheeks so he can't bite down."

The druid looked down at the man's tear-stained, shit-streaked face, then looked away.

"I'm... so sorry," he murmured.

"Bullshit," the man spat angrily.

Maelduin reached over, grabbed his cheeks, and drove his fingers into them, forcing the man's mouth open. Charlie came up and took his place at the man's face and began running his dark red, sharply mushroomed cock down the guy's throat. The man began to struggle and retch.

"Hold him fast, Maelduin!" Aethnid ordered. "You don't want to *know* what I will do to you if he gets loose!"

Forcing back his growing unease, Maelduin reached forward with his other hand to reinforce the first one's grip on the man's cheeks. He could feel the heat of the baboon's groin, the brush of his hair, and the surprisingly gentle thumps of his balls against the back of his hand. The baboon didn't take long to get off, and to Maelduin's surprise, he actually pulled all the way out to spit his cum on the guy's face *and* in his mouth.

Like an assembly line, the baboons took turns trading places. At one point, Maelduin got moved from his position at the man's face to a new position holding one of his legs. From that vantage point, he got a front-row seat to watch the baboons' long, slender penises lightly piercing the man's anus and then disappearing into it. It really did look just like a female baboon's swollen vulva, he thought. From time to time, they pulled back at an angle such that the druid could see the gaping chasm—whether he wanted to or not—but for the most part, the man's ass seemed to lightly caress their cocks, clinging to them with what seemed to Maelduin to be downright *neediness*.

The druid brushed the thoughts away as his near-passive involvement in the goings-on gave him ample time to ruminate on his much more active transgressions. A terrible feeling of guilt built in the pit of his stomach, consuming him to the point that he stopped paying attention to what was going on.

An abrupt commotion among the baboons suddenly brought him to his senses. All the baboons had suddenly let go of the man and lined themselves up. Maelduin was left holding the man by himself, and on realizing it, he recoiled, staggering away and leaving the man lying there on the ground.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.

Physically and emotionally drained, Maelduin looked up slowly to see Aethnid looking at the man and slow-clapping.

"Bravo!" she said, her clapping accelerating. "You *almost* had me convinced, Khailiaan," she said to the man.

To Maelduin's shock, the man rolled over, sat up, then got to his feet and bowed low.

"I shall try harder next time, Goddess," he said, beaming.

"And the rest of the troop did *most* magnificently, as well!" Aethnid said.

The man nodded and extended his arm to the group of baboons. "Indeed, they did. Charlie's done a great job of training them. C'mere, Charlie, you old sap!" the man said, squatting down.

Taking the invitation eagerly, Charlie bounded towards him and leapt into his arms. The two embraced passionately, then turned to look back at Maelduin.

"Uh, oh," Khailiaan chuckled. "I think *somebody* was convinced."

"Indeed!" Aethnid grinned, putting her hand firmly on Maelduin's shoulder. "I'd say you had him *completely* convinced."

Maelduin's mouth opened helplessly, then closed again. "B-wh...?" he managed, looking at her imploringly.

"I *raped* that man!" Khailiaan imitated, laughing. "Oh, you poor guy; our goddess really does have a wicked sense of humor, doesn't she?"

A range of emotions played across Maelduin's face: bewilderment, mortification, and at last, fury.

"This was all a *joke*?!" he roared, making both Khailiaan and Aethnid laugh so hard that they clutched their sides. "All this time, you were *playing* me?!"

"Teaching, Maelduin, *teaching*," Aethnid replied, wiping away a mirthful tear.

"Animals don't think about *rape*!" Khailiaan said, punching Maelduin's shoulder. "It's like she said: we guys are just looking for a nice hole to put it in, and the girls just kinda roll with it."

"Oh, they'll let the guys know if it's *really* not the time," Aethnid interjected.

"But, the begging and pleading? T-th—the piteous eyes? Your damn chimp trying to *bite* me?" Maelduin stammered, his anger giving way to self-doubt.

"He's not a *chimp*," Khailiaan said indignantly, ruffling his baboon's hair. "He's a good little boy, isn't he? What a good familiar he is, just making sure that Daddy got a nice cock in his ass!"

"And—and the ass-to-mouth," Maelduin murmured, shuddering at the thought.

The Fallen Druid: Chapter 21

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"Gotta go!" Khailiaan said brightly. "These guys are all in search of a nice, *real* female to breed. Bye, Aethnid! Call on me anytime!"

He went off, whistling gaily, as the troop of baboons followed after him.

Maelduin stared after him, his jaw slack as he tried to grapple with all that had just happened.

Aethnid sighed behind him. His head jerked to look at her.

"Maelduin, what *am* I gonna do with you?" the goddess asked. "One day, you're making good progress and actually seem to be really embodying what I've asked of you, and the next"—she gestured towards the man in the distance—"you're disobeying me and being insubordinate again." She shook her head. "I appreciate your improvement, but I *am* going to have to punish you for failing me again."

Maelduin huffed, too emotionally drained to tense up. "What are you gonna do?" he asked, defeated.

Aethnid put her hand on his shoulder and looked at him with a hint of remorse. "Your punishment has already begun," she said quietly. "Now, run along and find Cythraul. I'm sure he's missed you in your absence."