

Faulkner & The Demon In A Bottle

In a nearly grassless prairie, there was a house, crooked and ready to topple over, a man and a boy inside. The light from the flickering candles barely escaped through the windows. Books open, closed, on the floor, some pages unbound, and scrolls were stacked in mounds of disorder. The sandals on his feet were ragged and worn. Endless notes and maps and ripped pages littered the floor. Faulkner bolted from corner to corner of his room, which had previously been a barn, carousing each book with a voracious hunger.

He was tall and gaunt, his fingers blackened by coal and ink, his robes trailed behind him like the restraints of a prisoner, they were tattered and unwashed, inside and out.

That can't be everything! Surely this can't be the end! I cannot be finished! Not after only fifteen years! His mind ran rampant with the thought. There had to be something, a book he hadn't read, a notebook he hadn't violated with his god-given sight, anything. He fell back into his chair, the one that had accompanied him so many nights before, the smell of sweat and old paper festered in the air. The bitter taste of defeat invaded Faulkner's mouth.

"Has my pursuit peaked?" He asked no one. "There must be so much more to know! But no! God had to burden me! Damn him and this barn! This irrelevant existence! If I'd been a royal scholar, I'd have discovered Godhood by now!"

Faulkner brought a hand to his mouth, for if it continued to speak anxieties, it might as well fall off. He took a moment and gazed at his study, his refuge, with scrolls unfurled over tables he had not touched since last year. The light of half-dead candles prevented the night from creeping in.

Everything was where it was supposed to be, it was perfect; an orderly disorder.

A knocking came, from the door behind him, excited, rapid and hurried. A chubby boy with a wild mane of hair, pushed the door with his back, his hands busy carrying a box of paper, quills and scrolls. He cleared his throat and clutched the edgers of the box tighter.

“Heya Faulk! I got these from the market, where should I put ‘em?”

Faulkner straightened himself, and adorned his face with the most tired smile he could manage. He walked over to the boy and took the box.

“Not a problem Lucas,” he declared. “You must be tired after your valiant adventure. How was the market? Are you still supreme in your games of catch against the other kids?”

Lucas snickered, then put a hand on his chest and pursed his lips into the most pretentious form possible, his eyes narrowed.

“Ah yes yes, my dear gentle-brother,” Lucas avowed over-graciously. “Mine game of catch is most... I give up.”

Faulkner grinned and dropped the box on the table. He scooped Lucas up into his arms and swung him around. Lucas giggled and kicked his legs into the air. Faulkner chuckled.

“Twelve years old and still not sick of it, eh?”

“Never!” Lucas cried in defiance.

“Attaboy!”

Faulkner let Lucas down and sat at his table. Lucas walked forward and on the tip of his toes, glanced at the materials on the table, and jabbed Faulkner in the arm.

“Your research looks mighty terrible here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Faulkner rolled his eyes. “I promise to sleep at least thirty minutes tonight.”

“An hour.”

“Blasphemous! Forty-five minutes.”

“Three hours.”

“That's not how negotiations work!”

“Just get some sleep, okay?”

Faulkner ruffled Lucas's hair and walked back to his desk, his brother's presence crept out of his mind, wherein the thoughts were replaced by questions; what now? What's the next step? Is there a next step? Is he doomed to—

“Uh, Faulk? You are sweating again.”

Faulkner's mind was dragged back to reality by his brother's voice. He felt the wetness of his brow; viscous, salty, malodorous sweat. He grit his teeth and wiped at it with his robe's sleeve.

“Oh, thanks Lucas, my apologies.” he breathed out, he flexed his fingers, each joint cracked. “Now where was I? Ah, here.”

Faulkner rummaged through the box, some scrolls were blank, so he left them in. The ones with written words in them he read voraciously. Lucas did circles with the tip of his left foot on the ground. He glanced at the corners of the room, then the floor, then the ceiling.

“Hey, Faulk?”

“Hm.”

“The harvest festival is tomorrow morning, everyone's going.”

“Oh, that's an interesting detail.”

“Yeah!” Lucas smiled, his tooth-gap out for every book to see. “So will you go with—”

“This manuscript! I don't think I have read it before!” Faulkner beamed, he snapped his fingers and beckoned his brother. “Lucas, could you pass me my book and quill? Quick!”

Lucas's smile crumbled, his lips tight together. Lucas grabbed his brother's book and quill, from the desk to his right, and threw it on the table Faulkner was working on. Lucas's shoulders sagged and his nose clogged with small mucus, he walked to the door.

“I'm going to sleep now,” a faint ember of optimism remained in Lucas's voice.

“Have a good night Lucas,” Faulkner yelled, he didn't turn around to face him.

Lucas sighed, his high spirits leaving his body when he did. He walked out as if burdened with weight, and closed the door behind him. His voice reduced itself to a mumble; “Goodnight.”

Lucas left with the sound of a clicking door. Faulkner closed his eyes. The air stank of a post-rain night, the smoke of the candles a mere trail of an existence long past. Faulkner soothed himself with the caress of old paper, the pleasure of gripping a book's spine. Yet his thoughts still troubled him, what to ask? How to find answers?

And then, he saw it, a blot of red in his sight. Right in front of him, on his main table. All the scrolls and books were on the floor, they pooled around the legs of the sturdy table.

Faulkner heard no clattering, no shuffling. With but a look, he thought the red book seemed old enough to predate the calendar. His eyesight scattered all over the room, the same books were in the same place. The researcher turned back to his desk, to find that the book moved to the left end of the table. In the center there was some alchemy equipment. A cauldron, spherical bottles, a mortar, pestle and retort. He stood up, knocking the chair back, the wood clattered against the cold wooden floor.

Is this, is Lucas pranking me? He could steal a Jester's job for certain, but this elicits no laughter from me. He thought as he glanced around. It didn't feel right, he knew his brother had left him alone, so what could have—

Faulkner heard his own heartbeat, it was not like a drum, but like a knock. The knock of a bloodied fist against indifferent stone. He was a strange whirlwind of elation and dread, like a guillotine stood above him.

Is this the work of God? Is he guiding my hand? He thought as he clutched the rosary around his neck. His breathing intensified and thick drops of sweat pricked at his skin. The book called to him, it had no mouth, but it begged him, it begged him.

Faulkner dragged the book close, glancing back to pick up his chair, but he relented. He looked to the wooden door behind him. His brother's room was twelve steps away, he shook his head and went back to the book. He turned the book over, no cover, no name on the spine, no distinguishable features, just red. He opened it up and found a set of instructions.

"This is the Tome of Azangalof, Grand Saber and teacher of astronomy, plots and the unknowable. Your desires resonated into the void, and reached my cornucopia of mastery." Faulkner found himself reading. "If you are gluttonous, you may summon me. But should your desires not equal my might, your eternity in heaven is forfeit."

A chill snaked its way up Faulkner's spine. He saw his own breath in front of his eyes. Behind him, right next to his study door, where he had lit three new candles, there was an inky blot of shadow. All light died in that place.

Faulkner's neck twisted back to the book, not by his own will. He brought his hands to his neck, it was not wet with sweat, but wet in a foreign substance he had never seen before.

"My knowledge is infinite, for when God blinks, my eyes multiply." Faulkner said, swallowing a lump in his throat. "You have your tools, I have my entryway. Drip blood from your left hand into the cauldron. With the mortar, pulverize a farmer's tool never used. Boil a snake's fang in hot water. Empty everything into the cauldron, whisper your desire, place the mix in a bottle, and I may enter."

When he finished reading, Faulkner had noticed that all the candles had burned out. The moon was the only thing accompanying him, judging him. And yet in the blasphemous dark, he could see.

"Should blaspheming not be in the gallery of your mind, put the book down, walk out of your study, kiss your brother on the forehead—" Faulkner stopped. The trembles around his body intensified. *Brother? How does it know that I have a brother? It's supposed to be a*

book! His mind rambled. But his mind was not his own anymore, his gluttony, his thirst, it made him read more, more, *a little bit more.*

“And leave your study for three days, after I’ve had my fill, I will allow you to return. Make your choice, everyone is watching,” Faulkner set the book down and brought his hands to his mouth.

This was it. All he had begged for, what he had prayed for. An avenue into the unknown. He could finally broaden his boulevard of mastery, to be a peasant pig no more.

Is this greed? Faulkner’s question bounced against the corners of his mind. *I want knowledge, I’m not taking it from anybody, and it’s not evil by itself, knowledge is knowledge.*

I am still a peasant, that’s all I am. For all my standing upright, for all my walking with grace, to the world and the nobles I am just a pig. Faulkner chewed on his thumb’s fingernail. *Even the most in-bred noble must know what I know. I have to be better, my cave is too deep, the shadows too large. I cannot remain here forever, admiring these shadows like they are all there is. I need to see the light, I need more, more...*

The nail broke against his teeth, the taste of blood and putrid ink flooded his senses. He stood up and even in the obsidian dark that surrounded him, he didn’t trip, or tumble. He worked with the cold precision of carrion, a machine’s efficiency, a coal mine canary’s desperation. He pricked his hand with the shard of the blade. He smashed the sword fragment into dust. He set the fang to boil, it rubberized and stretched as soon as it hit the water.

Faulkner took a deep breath and poured the contents into the spherical bottle.

He spoke, his voice was not doubtful, or soft, but broken. Broken by the fact that his body wanted to scream and run, his brain repressed its protest.

“I want knowledge, enough to ascend, all the knowledge this world can’t give me. A mountain of knowledge to breach past God’s own clouds.”

His sight turned dark, the moon vanished.

Drip, drip, drip.

A step, a stomp. The sound of chains dragged by a mountain.

Faulkner saw it. It was a hand, clawed. It held a fire in the middle of the dark. It had the gaunt visage of something pretending to be a man. Its sockets without eyes, only thin white points, a glint of light in an oceanic abyss. They didn't break eye contact, it moved its hand like a lever, down into a candle, and it lit up.

“Glutton,” its voice rumbled. “Leave your heart by the door.”

The creature sat down, and its continental chains clanked against a floor he couldn't see. Faulkner remembered to breathe, pulled up a chair, and sat down in front of his... guest.

“Your study,” it said, the word foreign on its lips, “It's comfortable, like a coffin, was it inherited?”

Faulkner remained silent.

“You know how to listen,” it piped. “Good, that makes explaining the rules easier.”

Faulkner felt a bump on his head, he looked up, the above was a dark, endless thing, like he was at the bottom of a well.

The creature, what Faulkner assumed was Azangalof, stretched out a hand and sunk it into its chest. It made a sickening, cracking sound, the sound of broken wood under cannon fire. From the orifice, Azangalof pulled out an accursed flintlock, a mix of iron and living flesh. The weapon resembled a small cannon, a single eye on its left side, and a chambered cylinder in the center. The thing breathed, the barrel salivated.

Next, two six-sided red dice fell on the table, along with a pack of cards. The cards were the color of tar with no distinguishable design he could see.

“It's a game,” Faulkner muttered.

“How wise, how intelligent you are,” Azangalof stated. “Knowledge must solidify through exposure to the worst contradictions to become true knowledge. The experiment has more weight than the speculation. The gun has more weight than the sword.”

It stretched its two chained hands, which Faulkner chose to focus on, what it had for a mouth was as a gaping abyss. Each talon had rings and trinkets, broken, rusted. Each finger was of a leathery, squamous skin. Each digit belonged to different ethnicities, all dead from a different cause. Some joints were burnt, others putrid in their wetness.

“Welcome to Cain’s Last Chance. The challenged go first,” Azangalof said, amusement peppered in every syllable. He snatched the dice and rolled them on the table. A three and a two.

The weapon hummed and growled, the saliva of the barrel made a small puddle on the table. Azangalof wrapped its hand around the handle and pointed the barrel to its head.

Azangalof pulled the trigger.

Click.

Azangalof laid the weapon on the center of the table, the weapon's solitary eye glared at Faulkner. He reminded himself to breathe, breathe, breathe. His foot tapped against the stone floor, and brought a nail to his mouth to chew on.

Alright, he thought, the nail gnawed by his teeth. He rolled both dice, the result was a three and a two, five in total, an odd number. He took the gun and fired it at his head. The bullet's probably somewhere inside the cylinder, an odd result means shoot yourself, not knowing where the bullet is. Whoever is left wins. What are the other rules?

“Tell me,” Azangalof commanded. “What do you expect to get from this?”

Faulkner took the dice in his hand. They felt warm and a drum-beat palpitated against his fingers as he held them. He removed the thumb from his mouth.

“Knowledge, I want knowledge.” He felt the dice vibrate in his hand.

“Is this not enough?” Azangalof gestured to the rest of the study. “With the knowledge you have here would you not be able to cure a disease or two? Spread the truth?”

Faulkner rolled the dice onto the table. They rolled until they reached the edge. Two fours, doubles. His lips tightened, did doubles come with different rules? With a shaking hand and a sob desperate to escape his throat, he reached for the gun. It was cold, colder than death, he took his hand back immediately. The bulging, accursed eye of the weapon glanced at the stack of cards.

He looked at Azangalof, the black, abyssal pits that were his eyes showed no pity.

“I am not interested in that,” Faulkner snapped. “Curing diseases, sharing knowledge with the inept and the superstitious. What good does that do? New ones pop right up. This is self-betterment, ascension, my mind is still that of a peasant, I've not changed, not enough.”

Faulkner took a card, examined it. The illustration showed a sea serpent wrapped around a bearded man's hand; God, he guessed. He placed it face down so Azangalof couldn't see, but it did not move. He licked at his dry lips. Steeling himself, he snatched another card from the deck. The second card depicted a man with a torso riddled with arrows.

“It would surprise you, how selective that predator that is time can be.” Azangalof rambled, voice full of mirth. He rolled the dice, a four and a two. His long, spindly hands drew a card from the top of the deck. The one Azangalof knew to call Saint Sebastian, a man with a body riddled with arrows.

Faulkner interlaced his fingers and covered his mouth to prevent his muttering.

It was a four and a two, even number. The demon drew one card. Odd numbers; draw one card, even numbers; fire the weapon, and if you get doubles you draw two cards.

He grabbed his first card, inspecting the bizarre illustration.

But what do the cards do? What is their purpose?

Faulkner cleared his throat.

“I assume that you speak from experience, seeing as you must be older than me, or the ground we stand on, right?”

“Gaze upon my work, glutton. Ars Goetia doesn’t mention me, the bible denies I exist, and to the damned I am another prisoner in the lake of ice.”

Faulkner took the dice and rolled them. His eyes widened and his heart jumped to his throat.

Snake eyes.

“What happens,” Faulkner stuttered, his nail broken and thumb bleeding. “If I die doing this?”

“As a glutton for knowledge, I assume you read the book, correct?”

Faulkner remembered what he read. His teeth clattered against one another. The gun was already in his hands, he couldn’t remember picking it up.

“But should your desires not equal my might, your eternity in heaven is forfeit.”

Azangalof stared at him, getting drunk on his fear and nervousness. Faulkner looked at the cards that he had picked up. Faulkner had never seen snake eyes before, but he heard about them, the worst possible result on a die roll.

He looked at his cards, what did they do? How did they work? Faulkner’s lips quivered in doubt.

“You seem nervous,” Azangalof chided, his mangled features smiling. “You can ask questions, go on. What is knowledge without the questions that prelude it?”

“Snake eyes,” Faulkner blurted out. “What do they mean in this?”

The gaping gash on Azangalof’s face widened into a smile.

“Click, click.”

Faulkner’s eyes moved to the weapon, its barrel drooled a viscous, see-through malaise. He had to fire twice into his temple. He was more out of breath than before.

Faulkner took the weapon into his hand, its sole eye digging a hole in Faulkner's face. The icy trigger sent a bolt of cold through his hand, his finger curled around it—

What if he's lying to me?

He never told me the rules, why did he not tell me the rules?

Faulkner lowered the gun. Faulkner looked straight at Azangalof. Immediately, the contents of his stomach sought freedom, release. He swallowed back and looked to the table for some semblance of comfort.

“I don't— This is— Are you lying to me?”

The echo of rattled chains beat at his ear drums. Azangalof ran its talons over the table, careful not to carve anything into the wood.

“About what?”

“The rules, do I have to fire twice at my temple?”

A rumble came forth from Azangalof's throat.

“Why would I lie?” It giggled. “Now go on, The Breath Snatcher gets impatient.”

Azangalof pointed at the weapon as it said the epithet.

“Why do you do this?” Faulkner choked out.

“Survival,” Azangalof said, voice laced with schadenfreude. “Demons cannot die. Should we lose, we go back to hell to rot. Our names are erased if we stray from our purpose. Games are something I enjoy, survival is a better incentive.”

Faulkner moved the gun to his face, the gun seemed to pant, inflate and deflate, hungry. He closed his mouth, clenched his teeth and choked back a scream. The barrel of the weapon dug into his cheek.

Faulkner pulled the trigger.

Click.

To Faulkner the gun weighed a million tons now. Small streaks of white infected his brown mop of hair.

Azangalof remained static, the clanking of the chains was still there, cacophonous.

Click.

Faulkner drops the gun on the table.

He noticed that the gun had six receptacles, it had been fired a total of three times, there were only three left. Azangalof twirled the dice between its fetid fingers, rolled them on the table; snake eyes. Faulkner almost leapt out of his chair, an odd chuckle crawled its way out his throat.

Azangalof's face was now right in front of Faulkner's own, white and pale, bloodless. It placed a card face up in the center of the table. It was the same as the one that Faulkner had, the one with the man pelted by arrows.

It pulled the trigger, and the bullet scrambled its brains. The projectile froze in midair after it exited its cranium. The bullet reversed back through the wound, back into the barrel. Azangalof's head was completely unharmed.

The Breath Snatcher's cylinder spun like a carriage wheel and came to a halt five seconds later.

A trickle of vomit escaped Faulkner's mouth. The fetid stench of stomach acid invaded his nostrils.

“If the prospect of dying forever bothers you so much, your brother could take your place.”

Faulkner stood up fast, knocking over the chair behind him. He moved to grasp Azanaglof by the face, but his hand went right through him.

“You leave him alone, devil! Or so help me—”

“Or so help me what?” Azanaglof mocked, his voice drilled into Faulkner’s ears.
“You can’t break grammar rules. You can struggle to lift a weapon, and you have the grand foolishness to expect me to fear you?”

Some invisible force pushed Faulkner back into his chair, which was back up, somehow. The Breath Snatcher spun its cylinder. Faulkner could only guess that the bullet had changed receptacles.

Calm down, think! Azangalof died when the gun fired, but that card, the same one I have made the death null. I have that card so I will be fine, but is there a card that counters mine?

“Back to the quid pro quo, Glutton,” Azangalof breathed out a cavernous stench.
“What birthed this desire of yours?”

Faulkner grasped the dice in his hand, his veins alight with an indignant wrath.

His face awash in a curtain of sweat, eyes too wide. He rolled the dice, an odd result.
The gun sprouted diminutive legs and skittered over to him, Faulkner grasped the gun.

“My father told me that a peasant should know what a peasant needs to know,”
Faulkner growled out. “I hated that. What’s wrong with craving knowledge? It’s not corruption, or witchcraft or anything of the sort, perfection is a noble enough goal.”

He pushed the gun into his skull, he tore his throat with a guttural scream, and pushed the trigger.

Click.

“Draconic enough,” Azangalof congratulated. “You keep hoarding knowledge on and on, thinking it will elevate you from this pig-pen. Trapped here, a cave of comfort you made for yourself.”

Azangalof took the dice and rolled them on the table, four and six, even. It took to the stack of cards and pulled one out, this one depicted a man pummeling a look-alike with a rock, Cain. Azangalof's gash-mouth turned saccharine sweet. It unnerved Faulkner.

Azangalof has something he can use against me. Azangalof didn't even bother to hide it, he wants me to see it coming, he wants me to know he's gonna use it. Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!

Faulkner, anticipation hot in his palm, rolled the dice onto the table, odd. Faulkner took the gun to his temple. His eyes shut tight as he pulled the trigger.

Click.

He threw the gun back on the table.

Azangalof chuckled, though it sounded more like flailing bats. His abnormal digits placed the card of Cain onto the table. Faulkner looked it over, witnessing the scene of Abel's murder. He felt the cold steel of the Breath Snatcher's gun barrel on his forehead. The weapon chattered, Faulkner bolted to snatch one of his cards—

“Wait!”

BLAM!

The bullet flew like a god-guided tempest and tore through Faulkner's head. The concave surface of his skull fractured and scrambled under the pressure. The brain matter painted every wall.

The bullet froze in mid-air.

Brain matter peeled from the walls and ground as it reverberated back through Faulkner's head. He breathed in dysfunction. His chest struggled to contain air, and under his nose, was awash in strings of blood and mucus. The card he snatched, the one with the man pelted by arrows disintegrated.

“Now you know the effects of Saint Sebastian.” Azangalof clapped, the squamous flesh of its palms slapped against one another.

Faulkner erected himself, his swarthy nails dug into the table to keep steady. Everything was too much, too much light, too much dark. He slapped himself to keep some form of control.

That card he played, it allowed Azangalof to shoot me!

Azangalof's eye sockets ate every crumb of vulnerability in Faulkner's body.

I have to keep going, his mind ran rampant. Have the greatest minds not ever struggled as such? I must win it, I'm so close.

With his face laid on the table, he reached out his hand and grasped the pair of dice. His mind swam back to days of simplicity. The playful kisses of bladed grass, the tiredness after having Lucas ride on his back.

Get back to him, he swore to himself. I must win this, I will! I want it all, this knowledge, I must discover it, but even if I don't, I have to go back to him. God, I beg of you, if you can—

“He can't hear you, Faulkner.”

Azangalof's voice sounded so disappointed.

“He doesn't hear anyone.”

Did Faulkner say all that out loud? Could he read his mind? Had he read this mind the entire match? No, that could not be, that would mean he would have won a long time ago. Azangalof's voice was like thunder yet icy like the grave. Through blackened eyes and shattered face, he commanded, he ordered.

“Play.”

Faulkner rolled the dice on the table.

Odd.

Click.

Faulkner stared into Azangalof's pits, its eye sockets bore no emotion. Faulkner tossed the gun back at him, his body shook with tremendous tremors.

The dice rolled on the table.

Odd.

Click.

Faulkner assumed he was already dead. The candle in front of him was now a stump of wax, there was only smoke.

"How many days— how many years have I been here?"

"Twenty minutes."

Faulkner whimpered. He muttered apologies and prayed, but God was not there that night. The gun felt heavy again, he could barely lift it. He glared daggers at the very void inside of Azanaglof's eyes, his hand shook.

Cra-clunk.

Faulkners stopped. This was the sound of something heavy, he reasoned, something inside the receptacle. The bullet, it has to be the bullet!

He looked to his last remaining card, the one of the sea serpent. Faulkner had no knowledge of the card, but he knew that the bullet in that chamber had his name written on it. So it was either a probably deadly act, or a definitive deadly act.

Faulkner bit his lip, his tongue alight with the metallic taste of blood. He played the card, placed it in the center of the table. The gun vibrated, the cylinder spun faster and faster. The heat it irradiated made Faulkner drop it on the table.

"What happened?"

Azangalof rolled the dice on the table.

"Leviathan coils," its voice rumbled. "Allows you to spin the cylinder. My turn now."

They both turned to look at the dice, doubles. He took two cards from the deck, the guise of the leviathan smiled at first, and Cain smiled at him second.

Faulkner rolled the dice, one of which rolled off the edge of the table.

“Wait, no, I will roll again, I didn’t mean to.” He rambled.

As Faulkner rose to go pick it up, a single palm raised by Azangalof was enough to stop him. The dice on the table was a six. A writhing black mass extended from the dark, it wrapped itself around the fallen die, and laid it on the table. The face that the other die fell on, was a one.

“Go on, pick it up.”

“I am not scared of you, devil, not anymore.”

“Pick it up,” Azangalof barked.

Faulkner stood up, put the gun to his head, the needle moved back and hit the chamber of the accursed weapon.

“Go to hell!”

Click.

He clutched his chest in a vain attempt at hugging himself, something that gave him no comfort.

“I often like to go with some company.”

Azangalof grabbed the dice, he rolled them yet again, an odd sum. It grabbed the weapon, and spun the cylinder with a push of his squamous, rotten hand, and pointed it at Faulkner.

His hand flew up and caught the barrel of the gun. Azangalof tilted its head to the side.

“You didn’t play any cards,” Faulkner blurted out. “You are cheating. You cheated, it's my turn now.”

“I don’t need to play any cards, this is my final turn.”

“I did not know we were doing final turns.” Faulkner narrowed his eyes at him, then glanced at the unplayed cards on the table. "There are consequences to breaking rules, right?"

Azangalof chuckled, it slid the Cain card on the table and fired the gun at Faulkner’s temple. He stumbled back and covered his face with his hands.

Click.

The card vanished from the table.

For the brief, agonizing moments that Faulkner felt relief. He tapped his foot against the ground beneath him, he shut his eyes tight as the dice rolled on the table.

Four and two, even.

He grabbed a card from the deck, knocking a few over. The card he picked illustrated Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. He recognized them from the paintings in the town's church, one he had only visited a few times.

Faulkner failed to notice when Azangalof’s dexterous digits rolled the dice.

Click.

He glanced at Cain’s Rock, his last card. Each second of inaction a herculean anxiety. He already had a card to strike the killing blow, now, the dice needed to be in his favor more than ever.

Faulkner rolled the dice on the table, first fell on six. The second lost speed the more time passed, each grueling second like a drill to the back of his head. He bit at his swarthy nails, pulling skin and keratin, exposing foul blood to the arctic air.

Four.

The weapon skittered over to Faulkner. His eyes sunken shipwrecks, he slammed the card on the table, and put his finger on the trigger.

Azangalof thrust the leviathan card in front of him, the back of the card facing forward. Faulkner relented, what on earth was he doing? Was this some rule he did not know, or a different way to play a card?

“This,” Azangalof whispered, “Is my last card to play. If you fire that weapon at me, the bullet will bounce back to you.”

Faulkner shook his head. He cursed under his breath, in his heart, his mind, and shoved the barrel further into the card.

“You are lying, and what a lie it is.”

He pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

The creature's body was flung back, fell out of the chair and onto the floor, limp. Azangalof's head was a leathery paste.

“You foul, wriggling worm.” Azangalof's voice, venomous and unstable, came from the bleeding void. “Enjoy your knowledge. For while you will end, I do not.”

A drivel of drool spilled from Faulkner's mouth. He clutched the gun tighter and tighter, and refused to let go. He looked dead, dead like a man who wished to be. The demon's chains rumbled. When Faulkner blinked, he was back in his study. All the books he read over the years were gone, his shelves empty and vacant.

In the center of the room lay a mountain twice his size, made of books, scrolls, stone tablets and more. They were all held together by a single piece of red string. The door to his study was ajar, it was Lucas. Faulkner did not bother to turn around. He was separating the mountain by category. Everything he had ever wanted, here at last.

Everything was drowned out. It was often said that one day would be enough to change a person but Faulkner disagreed. It was the birthday missed, the dinners and breakfast shared together that stopped bit by bit, inch by inch, a gap grew and widened, a tree uprooted

from the very ground. Faulkner grew decrepit, from dusk till dawn to the dark and light, his study turned from a bard to a house.

The disagreements and misunderstandings spiraled into shouting matches, the distance chasm between them swallowed whatever good memory had remained of their time together.

Faulkner grew obsessed with his work, forgoing the need for slumber and meal, all for one more page, one more chapter, one more odyssey of discovery, all the while he refused to leave the confines of his study, his zone of utmost familiarity and comfort, which had morphed itself into a prison that did not need to restrain its own prisoner.

He was alone, but his mind pushed the curse of solitude out of it. And as his brother Lucas visited him, only to be turned away or not be seen by Faulkner's eyes, globes of useless matter that grew fonder and fonder of parchment and ink, forgetting the shapes and faces of his brotherhood that was mankind.

Now Faulkner was fat, shoeless and truly alone. His mind grew placid, full, but hungered, a gibbering and voracious set of eyes that no longer served him. Faulkner opened and closed the door to his study, made demands of servants to find him a red book written by someone with a name he could not remember. Trapped and strangled by the confines of his deathbed, his room was nothing, not a desk, not a drawer, merely a bed and a table, useless notes sprawled around the legs of what few furniture he bought on whims.

A strange man walked through the door, his wild mane of hair slicked back and tamed to an unexpected perfection, his previously chubby body now slender, but not spindly.

Lucas.

Faulkner extended a weak, frail hand towards him, his brother's eyes showed no pity and warmth, but instead small lakes of indifferent ice. Faulkner's hand fell, too weak to lift it, as his brother stared down at him he felt like God's own abominable roach.

From behind Lucas, a red thing he could see, it was just something but to Faulkner it had to be the book, it just had to be. "More. I just want more. I just need a little bit more. More time, more time. Please."

Faulkner's soul never left that bed, and he died a glutton consumed by his own detestable pride.