

SERAPH

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Open your eyes. Look around. Squint a bit, from the blinding reflections of white teeth and white hair and white walls and white lights. Glance and see the empty, yawning space that stretches so far it turns into a foggy haze, only interrupted by a single white desk. Be welcomed to the family by a couple kindly figures with clasped hands and polished grace. One introduces himself, Michael, and tells you that he and his associates do not like to be called anybody's superiors, although everyone inevitably reports back to them regardless of title. They tell you that you are here to make things better, to improve the lives of the people. *Poor things*, they lament to you, so *unable to help themselves without the guidance of those who know best*.

You do not know much of humanity yet. There is time to learn. For now, just nod and take to heart your new purpose—you are a guide to the path of a better, more honorable life.

You start out being given small tasks. People always need more food, and seeing them bow their heads in thanks for another day without hunger leaves you feeling proud. You welcome weary and struggling people, even if only temporarily, and send them off having listened to their stories. You start collecting ideas for what you and your family can improve.

Lose yourself in helping as many people as you can. Minutes or lifetimes or mere seconds pass for all that you're paying attention, hands now calloused from hauling lifesaving supplies to those in need and toiling alongside them to build better lives.

Societies rise and fall, but you notice that there are always groups coming out of it better off than they should be. Take your concerns to Michael, asking why there is such inequality between the people who are growing fat and lazy in their greed, and others who claw and struggle just for scraps. That's just the way it is, he says, shaking his head in tepid disapproval. *Some people just take advantage of their opportuni-*



ties and improve their lives in greater quantities than others. No use worrying about it when you're busy guiding others. He pats your shoulder and gives you a smile, asking instead about what you've been up to recently.

You've lived amongst humanity now. You've seen the shining eyes and smile-lined mouths of a couple laughing with each other, youthful joy just as apparent three decades into their marriage as it was at the start. You've witnessed the soft beam of a mother looking down at her child in awe, as small and precious as the life she just brought into the world while death rages around her. You've seen the reassuring upturn of lips from a father as he told his children to eat, knowing that he could not afford enough food to feed them all.

You've seen many smiles, so it is clear to you now that Michael's is fake.

Despite your best efforts and those of your family, the world only seems to get worse. You're forced to bear witness to the accumulation of wealth among those who misuse it with wrath and greed at heart. You've tried talking to Michael again, tried contacting other superiors of yours, but have been dismissed each time. Violence has become prevalent to a wasteful degree. The loss of life is not something you can easily ignore, like the others.

It is by mere chance that you see a flash of white while offering your help in a war-torn, bleeding city. You've wandered away from their refuge, searching for any injured or dying who need help among the rubble. The dusty wind blows copper and smoke into your nose until you can smell nothing else. Your clothes were stained gray long ago, but you know the grime will settle on them in a way you won't be able to fully get rid of after today.

The noise clues you in first. The thundering of a tank or several coming down the adjoining street, followed by the marching of heavy boots. Press yourself against the wall, peering out as much as you dare. Behind the tank, in an armored vehicle, sits white teeth and white hair and white suit. Pristine and out of place, compared to his surroundings. Next to him, the

warlord of the region, malevolent smirk on full display as he takes in the leveled buildings and plumes of dark smoke polluting the sky. The parade passes by. Without thinking, follow on unsteady feet.

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Stay hidden, and wait for them to retreat back to the warlord's palace. Listen to them discuss profit and loss, planning a future around the suffering of a dying people wiped out by their hand. *Of course this needed to happen, Michael simpers, it's all so you and your people can have better lives.*

You've heard enough.

Return to where you were once welcomed into something you thought was just. Look at where the shadows now seem to creep around corners farther than they should be able, look at the hint of fang and malice beneath pleasant veneers.

Look back at what you're leaving behind, one last time. Look into the eyes of those who claimed to be family and see them now for what they are, so unlike how they see through you, ravenous for their own self-importance and veiled greed.

Turn back around.

Jump.

Set your wings ablaze on the way down—better the pain than the reminder of your association to them.

Scream amidst your agony. Let the ash and smoke bleed them black, half branded and wholly monstrous.

Become better.

