

ANCIENTS' ROYALE

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Christopher Ushko

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The following story is based on true events. Unfortunately, said events were obscured in the face of divine intervention and you may find yourself questioning all the historical, geological, theological, and mythical inaccuracies involved therein. It is for this reason that you should simply regard this account's inaccuracies as fiction and save yourself a lot of lost sleep.

While many made chronicling these events possible, special thanks must be thrown out to my family, friends, and editors without whom this novel wouldn't be possible.

Thank you for believing I could write a book.

Special Thanks to:
Lina Ushko and Jenney Lin: Editors

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1. The Day the Sky Screamed

Many stories are told of the brave and righteous men who boldly stood against the forces of darkness and forever changed the course of history. Very few stories recount the legendary tales of those who turned and ran like bunnies. Even fewer stories recount the legendary tales of bunnies who, instead of running, inexplicably stood their ground, but we'll get to that in a moment.

Enter the case of Mr. Gary Johnson, attorney-at-law, resident of Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the odd happenstance which transpired one fateful summer day which involved both a bunny and an ancient pagan deity.

Gary was fumbling with the stations on his car radio as he took another bite of his chicken burrito and awkwardly steered with his elbow. He felt the sweltering heat of the hot sun and cursed his broken air conditioning as he rolled down a window to let the cool highway winds blast into his back seat. He was driving west beyond the city, on route to visit a client, and was completely oblivious to the unimaginable horror descending upon his hometown.

He had travelled this highway so many times before that the trip had become a recurring blur in his day-to-day activities. An hour beyond the hustle and bustle of the downtown area was a great stretch of road that cut through the fields and forests en route to his destination. For any normal highway-navigating Canadian on any normal day, this normal stretch of road was otherwise quite normally unremarkable. Unfortunately, this particular day could not be considered normal at all.

To reflect on a consequence-to-be: in many parallel universes, Gary would have died today. Had he maintained his current vehicular speed, he would have met an early demise. Fortunately for Gary, fate, in this universe, saw fit to send a small bunny into his path. Not just any bunny,

mind you, but a very, very stupid bunny who blankly stared at the oncoming vehicle like it were an old friend coming to say hello.

Gary's daze was broken at the sight of the small creature and a choice had to be made. To either hit the bunny for its stupidity, or spare it by any means possible. And thus, Gary took it upon himself to spare Mother Nature's mistake by hitting the brakes and swerving around the bunny, dropping his burrito in the process. This deceleration ultimately saved his life, because moments later, his vehicle smashed right into the face of a gigantic woman.

The accident left him shaken. His seat belt had saved his life and, to his surprise, his airbag had failed to deploy. Unlike Gary, however, the entire front of his vehicle had been demolished. Regaining his composure, he stumbled out of the car to make sense of the giant woman who had appeared out of nowhere.

His wasn't the only vehicle that had stopped. For kilometres behind, all the way into the city, other motorists had come to a screeching halt and left their vehicles in order to stare at the spectacle around them.

The sky was gone and replaced with thousands of video screens that formed over the expanse of the city in the shape of a dome. Every screen shared the same image of a very famous person, a woman known to many by the name of "SexxyGrrrLOLzers".

SexxyGrrrLOLzers was an Internet celebrity, famous for producing a viral video. The video in question depicted her dancing in a banana costume, scaring her cat with a feather duster, and then putting on a puppet show of "King Henry the VIII in Five Seconds". The video was an amateurish cry for attention at best, and would have been otherwise ignored if it weren't for two things: her eyes.

SexxyGrrrLOLzers' eyes shone with a kind of madness unseen in any other human being. Many regarded it as an illusion caused by poor video quality, but there was no question about it, that looking into her eyes for too long could drive any human insane. The video soon spread,

giving thousands of people nightmares for days on end. Whatever power resided behind those eyes was from another reality – that was the worldwide consensus thus far, and not one rational thinker could bring himself to claim otherwise.

However, a new question now plagued the people's minds: what were thousands of SexxyGrrrLOLzers doing in the sky over the city of Halifax?

They weren't just in the sky, either. Her face was reflected in every window, mirror, and bright surface. Her hair was dark and highlighted with many sickening colours. Her black make-up, while gothic in appearance, appeared to be applied with crayons. Steel chains were draped over her shoulders and traces of a black halter top could be seen under the metal. Not that anyone in Halifax was noticing her wardrobe, of course – not when hundreds of the craziest eyes you'd ever seen were staring down at you, burrowing their way into your very sanity.

In unison, every face spoke with a soft English accent.

“Five stars for surprise?”

There was an awkward moment before she spoke again.

“By now, you've probably noticed that there are hundreds of me in the sky. I assure you, this is not a trick; this is a quarantine. I have placed a special dome over the city. No, don't try to break it; it's magical. You can't break magic. And it's making sure no one leaves.” She flashed a smile that sent shivers through everyone's soul.

“You see, dear people, you've been harbouring the fire-bloods for quite some time, and I do so desperately desire them. In a few hours, the Chaos will descend upon your city and destroy it like they did the cities of old. That is, unless you relinquish the fire-bloods and save your precious families.”

She allowed another awkward silence to settle in before concluding her message.

“Also... we will show no mercy. Just something to think about.”

With that, her face disappeared and was momentarily replaced by a short amateur video of two people getting hit by a car. The video took Gary by surprise, so he missed any important details the video might have tried to communicate.

After the video was over, the woman suddenly let out a wild ear-piercing shriek that ripped through the sky. Gary covered his ears as the sound rattled his vehicle. The scream was filled with a horrifying madness that could only come from the most warped mind imaginable. It lasted only moments, and then the sky cleared up as if nothing had ever happened.

Gary was shaken more than he'd ever been shaken in his life. As the ringing in his ears subsided, he turned back to the highway and placed his hand on the invisible wall that had stopped his car. It felt like plain air, but a light shimmered under his hand and repelled any further movement.

High above, birds were raining down as they crashed into the dome. The threat could very well be real. He didn't know what a Chaos was, and he didn't know how to react. Was this a trick? Was the city really about to be destroyed? What about his family? Was there anything he could do?

The answer was no, because the rest of this story isn't about Gary. He'll be fine, I assure you. His car is insured and his family will continue to be taken care of as always. For now, simply consider him, his car accident, and the bunny, the opening act for tonight's events.

Incidentally, the stupid bunny, having fulfilled its purpose of saving this random man's life, merrily bounded away back into the bushes from whence it came, never to be seen again. Whether it went on to father hundreds of baby bunnies or get eaten by a wild dog will be left up to you.

The sky blinked and the TV dome turned back on. SexxyGrrrLOLzers was there again, with one last important message.

"By the way, thanks for all the subscriptions."

2. How the World Ends

To really understand why an Internet celebrity was threatening the city of Halifax, one would have to turn back the clock five months to a wet and dreary day in March when a random act of sticking one's neck out would doom us all.

The hour was half past ten, the night was young, and a woman was closing up shop in a downtown liquor store. One would peg her in her early twenties – hair of auburn, eyes of hazel. She was a bit reserved in her manner with her shoulders tensed as she turned off the lights and locked the doors behind her.

As she pocketed her keys and stepped away, she found herself staring at a very desperate man in a trench coat. She looked down and saw his hand in his coat pocket pointing at her as if it were a gun.

“Unlock the door,” the man demanded.

“I kind of just finished cashing out,” the woman said. “Can you rob us tomorrow? I’m really not in the mood for this.”

She averted her eyes and casually walked away from the burglar. The burglar took in a moment to process this turn of events.

See, this woman had grown to learn the art of invisibility over the years. Not in the supernatural sense, mind you (we’ll get to the supernatural parts of the story later), but rather in the sense that she could attend a party for a few hours and still manage to avoid eye contact with any of the guests. It helped her to avoid the usual onslaught of boys who would eventually flood her phone with text messages and missed calls.

It was for this reason that night that she instinctively tried to ignore the burglar in hopes that he would simply go

away. Anyone else would panic, of course, but this had become her normal response to most social encounters.

"Are you stupid?" he asked, snapping out of his confusion. "I've got a gun!"

"That's your finger," she stated, never looking back.

As it would turn out, this man certainly didn't have a gun, and he certainly didn't pose any threat to her. Nevertheless, some hero deemed it necessary to come to her rescue.

Clad in a black trench-coat, the hero leapt down from the liquor store roof and tackled the burglar. The woman turned to see two men wrestling on the ground. A few pedestrians across the street had taken notice as well, but did little to assist the hero.

The hero delivered a solid, but apparently ineffective, punch to the side of the burglar's head as the burglar returned the favour, knocking the hero to the sidewalk.

In this window of opportunity, the burglar fled into the night. He'd later catch a bus out of town, move back into his mother's basement, and cry himself to sleep for the next several months. Some people just aren't cut out for life in the big city.

The woman hurried over to her fallen hero and assisted him back onto his feet. He was a tall lanky man with messy brown hair and a young face. He rubbed the sore spot on his forehead where the burglar had struck him.

"Oh my gosh, are you all right?" she asked. He wobbled around slightly before answering.

"Did I just get my ass kicked?"

"I... think so," the woman replied, inspecting his injury. There was no bruise.

"But I saved the day, right?"

"You probably saved the day... yeah, thank you," the woman nodded.

"Excellent," the man grinned, staring aimlessly into the night and trying to regain his composure, "But in light of getting my ass kicked, I think I'm going to rethink my career as a crime-fighter."

It began to rain.

The woman met the man's eyes. They were a deep, rustic brown colour. She found herself fixated on the man who supposedly saved her life and felt her invisibility waning.

"Do you need to go to a hospital?" she asked him.

"No, no, it doesn't even hurt anymore," he answered, taking a cue to stop rubbing his forehead. "My brain can take a lot of damage."

"You really shouldn't have done that," the girl scolded him, "what if he really had a gun? What if he had shot you?"

"I don't think I can die from gunshots," was his bewildering answer. "Of course, I haven't tried it yet. I'm not keen on trying it either."

It began to rain harder.

"We should probably get out of this rain," she said.

"Yeah, I should get going," the man nodded, and looked for an exit, "Well, it's been nice saving your life. If we ever meet up again, we should do coffee."

"Uh, thanks!" the girl sheepishly replied.

The man saluted her, and they began walking away from the store. Something quickly became apparent.

"We're walking in the same direction," the man noted.

"I see that," the woman acknowledged.

"You live near here?" he asked.

"Just a block," she answered.

The man sized her up. She was a skinny little thing. Her bright pink jacket looked very out of place for her shy demeanor.

"You don't look like the kind of girl who stares down the barrel of a gun every day," he noted.

"Actually, that was my first."

"Rule of thumb is: just give them the money," he wagged his finger at her. "It's not worth getting attacked over."

"And that's why you're fighting crime?" she asked him.

"I'm just out late a lot," he answered. "I thought I'd kill time by lurking on some rooftops for a change. See if I could save any damsels in distress. You know, like on TV."

"And how was that working out?" she asked.

"Not so hot," he recollected. "The police order me to get off a lot of roofs. Did you know crime rarely happens when you wait for it?"

"I don't think crime rarely happening is a bad thing," she pointed out.

As they crossed the street to the next block, the rain fell harder. They stopped in front of a small apartment complex and turned to say their farewells.

"Well, here we part ways," the man reached out to shake her hand. She smiled and accepted the offer. "I didn't get your name, by the way."

"Christine," she answered.

"Christine, Jesse O'Ryan," Jesse answered.

She felt her personal barrier slip away as they exchanged smiles. In a moment of weakness, she couldn't simply let him walk away.

"You don't have a long walk, do you?" she asked.

"I live under a bar about twenty minutes from here," he said with very nervous mannerisms, "but personally, I could stand to get wet."

Her personal barrier completely evaporated as she forced the next set of words out. "Listen, don't take this the wrong way. I never do this, but... do you want to come upstairs? Wait out the rain? It's the least I can do to show my thanks."

"Oh, I really shouldn't," he waved her on and began to step away.

"I'll make you some tea?"

A dilemma raged in Jesse's mind. He was bending some very serious rules by simply talking to this woman. Eventually, the desire to get to know Christine won out.

"What kind of tea?"

Christine's apartment was very cramped. The sink in the kitchen was piled high with dirty dishes and the living room looked like someone had failed to build a fort out of couch cushions. Lining the walls were many paintings of bunnies.

Jesse removed his coat and hung it up. He had a red hoodie sweater on underneath. He took great interest in the paintings as Christine got a kettle running.

"You like bunnies?" he asked. One painting depicted four of them playing poker.

"I like painting them," she answered. "Got a few stuffed ones on my bed, too. I dunno. I just think they're cute. My roommate thinks I'm insane."

Jesse easily accepted that she was into bunnies. Somehow it was more comforting than seeing cats everywhere. "So you paint? Do it professionally?"

"I actually came to Halifax just to do that," she answered. "A friend of mine in Vancouver went to an art school here so I followed her lead. Graduated. Graphic Designer. No jobs. Liquor store. Went back to painting bunnies. End of story."

"The economy will pick up," Jesse shrugged. "Just keep doing what you love. I hear there's a good market for freelancers."

"It's too big a hassle for me," she shuddered. "Most jobs are gotten through networking and... I don't do the networking thing. People just kind of freak me out."

She poured them each a cup of chamomile and they shared a drink, burning their tongues in the process.

"You still have talent," Jesse said, admiring a lovely painting of a bunny pole vaulting at the Olympics. "I meet a lot of industry people at my brother's bar. I can send someone your way. Just give me your cell number."

"No, that's all right," she shook her head. "I've given up on it at this point. I'm learning to move on with my life."

"Hint, hint; I'm asking for your phone number," Jesse waved his cell in her face with a friendly smile. "And I really shouldn't be doing this either."

She looked up from her drink and saw Jesse awkwardly sitting there and reaching out with his phone, giving her a very comfortable smile. Again, she hesitated on whether or not to share her number. When he saw her going back for another sip, he took the hint and timidly put his phone away.

"You're cute," she blurted out. "What's this about you living under a bar?"

"My brother and I run a bar with his girlfriend downtown," Jesse shrugged. "It's a fine establishment. We do have the best honey garlic wings in town."

"And running a bar isn't keeping you busy enough at night?" she inquired.

"It's complicated," Jesse admitted. "I'm not a big fan of my brother's rules in regards to leaving the bar and fraternizing with the public, but..."

That statement caught Christine off-guard, "I'm sorry; your brother doesn't let you leave?"

"It's not what it seems," Jesse tried to reassure her. "He's very protective of me. That's all. It's not like I have to sneak out at night."

"Why would he make that rule, though?" she asked.

"That's the complicated part," Jesse muttered, debating something else in his head. Finally he spoke again, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Not entirely," she said.

"Very well. I'm a creature of the night. A Nosferatu."

"As in a vampire?"

"Yes."

There was quiet between them. Not even the raindrops made a sound against the window.

"Sorry, I've been wanting to get that off my chest," Jesse said. "I had to tell someone."

"You're a vampire?" Her expression of disbelief was priceless.

"Yeah."

"Show me your fangs."

"I... don't have any fangs."

"Then fly. Leap. Show me some cool vampire thing."

"Yeah... I don't have powers either."

"What kind of vampire are we talking here? Dracula? Lestat? Angel? ...Edward?"

"Definitely not Dracula."

"You don't sparkle in the sun, do you?"

"God, no."

"And I don't have to worry about you drinking my blood?"

"No, I can't drink blood," Jesse shook his head. "Like, ever. It's bad for me. I can't even eat meat."

"You do realize you're the worst vampire ever?" Christine laughed.

"I still catch fire in the sun."

"You and half the Internet," She smiled.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Jesse asked.

"It's an interesting fantasy, but you're barking up the wrong tree if you're trying to impress me," she told him. "I'm not turned on by the whole vampire thing."

"Was never the intention," Jesse said, finishing off his tea. "Nonetheless, I should really go back home. I'm not kidding about my brother being really uptight about me staying out late."

"And he's a vampire, too? And his girlfriend?"

"His girlfriend is more a normal vampire, actually. Fangs and everything. He and I, we're... reverse-vampires."

She sighed and chuckled, "All right, fine – go on home, little vampire. Go to your little crypt."

"It's just a basement with a cot and a television."

Not quite a maniac, Christine thought, *but far from Prince Charming*. With her fantasies shot down, she sighed and walked him to the door, her personal barrier slowly coming back together.

As he walked away into the darkness, she reminded herself that this was why she rarely looked other people in the eyes. Sometimes, she just brought out the weirdness in them. Still, there was something intriguing about him that she hadn't seen in anyone else before. Just being in his presence gave her a feeling that her life had been forever changed. Somehow, she knew that he had felt the same way. What it all meant, however, was something she would never see coming.

That night, Christine fell asleep in her bed, dreaming of a take-two fantasy where it turned out that Jesse was actually Batman. She never once gave thought to the credibility of his statements, most of which were partly true.

Five months later and several hours before SexxyGrrrLOLzers' public debut, Christine was awakened by a knock on the door.

There was a brief period where her brain told her she was dreaming and that the knocking was merely coming from the construction yard next door. She had trained herself to ignore the daily hammering, but today, the hammering sounded different.

Somebody knocked again.

Maybe, she thought to herself, if I ignore them, they'll go away.

The continued knocking suggested otherwise. Someone was convinced she was home.

She finally brought herself to shuffle out of bed and claw her way across her apartment in her t-shirt and pink pajama bottoms. She found her house-coat hanging off her latest painting, a silhouette of two bunnies that when viewed at a certain angle, resembled a completely different bunny.

The knocking continued. She somehow found the door and cracked it open, leaving the chain locked.

On the other side were three people in suits. The first one, standing right in front of the door had a dead-serious withered expression framed by his goatee, with several facial features that gave him a distinct Eastern European appearance. The other two, male and female, also had dark hair and were on stand-by in case Christine tried anything funny. The first man flashed his badge. Christine had never seen a police badge before, so she simply accepted that this man was with the police.

"Inspector Rousseau," he introduced himself in a thick multilingual accent, "Miss Christine Marx, I presume?"

"Oh, god, was somebody murdered in the building last night?" She didn't have time for this crap. Not this early in the morning.

"No, we're on a man-hunt and we just need to ask you a few questions," the inspector replied. "This will only take a few moments. May we step inside?"

Christine hesitated, and then averted her eyes. "I think you can ask your questions right here."

"We are not with the police department," Rousseau explained, fumbling in his jacket, "We are with Interpol. We've been tracking down an international terrorist for the last few years and we have reason to believe you may have come in contact with him. Do you recognize this man?"

He handed Christine a photocopy of a composite sketch. The face was that of an unfamiliar man with shaggy hair. The shaggy hair rang a bell, but the face meant nothing. Christine noticed the age markings around the sketch and discerned that this had been photocopied from a very old sheet of paper.

"Never saw the guy," she answered.

"He may have had facial reconstruction." The inspector continued, "And we believe he was here in Halifax about four, five months ago. Tends to stick to the shadows, hang around with Gothic crowds... takes a lot of walks at night."

Christine smirked, "Sounds like that vampire dork from a few months ago."

All three agents fidgeted and exchanged looks. The three of them huddled together and whispered excitedly. Rousseau turned back to Christine, more anxious than ever, "What can you tell us about him? Can you give us a physical description?"

Christine tried her best to sum up his appearance, but details fell flat, "I'd know him if I saw him, but I'm sorry. I can't remember anything. He said something about sleeping under a bar. Name was Jesse or something. He actually forgot his coat here, but my ex-roommate took it when she left."

"Ms. Marx," Rousseau took a deep breath, "I'm sorry, but we need you to come with us."

"What?" her eyes widened, "No! Forget it!"

"Ms. Marx," Rousseau spoke gently, "This is of the utmost importance. This man we're looking for – this Jesse – is the most dangerous man alive. And only you can help

us find him before someone else gets hurt. Please... this entire city is at risk."

"What did he do?" she asked.

"It's not within our jurisdiction to share that information," Rousseau replied. "What matters is what he will do if we don't find him today."

Something didn't feel right to Christine. The idea that Jesse was a terrorist didn't fit in with what she remembered about him, but then how little did she know about him in the first place? And even if he was a terrorist, did she want these people to hurt him? What crime could he have committed? If she didn't go with these people, would someone get hurt? Could they arrest her if she didn't go?

"How long will this take?" she asked.

"A better part of the day," Rousseau said. "If we catch this man, you will be extremely well-compensated for your time."

Hesitation followed.

More hesitation followed after that.

She went back in and had some coffee without saying a word.

She felt like the walls were caving in around her.

Maybe she'd been cooped up in here for too long.

After ten more minutes of hesitation, she opened the door again. None of the agents have moved from their spots.

"All right," she swallowed. "Let's go capture the most dangerous man alive."

3. The Most Dangerous Man Alive

The most dangerous man alive was presently walking out of an afternoon matinee with the biggest, dumbest grin on his face. He had quite possibly just seen the best movie of his life.

His companion, an African-American woman with a caramel complexion and her long hair tied back in a ponytail, was not looking as pleased. She looked diminutive in her over-sized grey jean jacket and black trousers.

The movie in question was a rather successful, yet critically-panned, sci-fi action film entitled "Robo-Ninja Raptor Cop 3". It brought up some great discussion as they headed down the sidewalk together, basking in the shadows of the overhead buildings.

"Worst movie I have ever seen," she said. "I can't believe I came out into the sun for that. The things I do for your birthday."

"Come on, Trish," Jesse talked excitedly with his hands, "That's brilliant film-making right there. Pure unadulterated cinematic chaos at its finest. Seriously, I mean that's gotta have at least twice as many explosions as the last one."

"So fill me in; I missed parts one and two," Trish tried to process the movie in her head, "Why was the dinosaur a ninja robot?"

"Because the cops rebuilt Raptor Cop in the first movie after those drug dealers blew him up and shot his partner."

"And why was the dinosaur a cop?"

"Because when he was a human cop, he got into a car accident and his scientist grandfather put his brain into a dinosaur they had genetically-engineered together."

"Then why not just put his brain into a human body?" Trisha begged to ask.

"Because dinosaurs are awesome." Jesse casually replied.

"Fair enough," Trisha admitted, feeling defeated. "Still an awful movie."

"I think Nigel would have liked it," Jesse voiced. "We have to bring him one of these days."

"Nigel doesn't like any movie," Trish sighed, "he doesn't even watch TV."

"That's why we have to bring him." Jesse fumbled through his thoughts, "All he does is sit in that room writing his music and ignoring the customers. He doesn't expand his horizons."

"Speaking of which, we should have been back to work fifteen minutes ago," Trish said, picking up the pace, "Why did that stupid movie have to be three hours long?"

"Two and a HALF hours," Jesse reminded her. "The other half hour was previews."

As she began to jog, Jesse pulled back on her arm just as a ray of sunlight bounced off a moving vehicle, barely touching them. After glancing around, Jesse grabbed a newspaper from a trashcan and began walking on Trisha's street side, pretending to read the paper while using it to block incoming sunlight glancing off traffic.

"Thanks, Jesse," she said. "Seriously, why couldn't we at least have taken in a night show?"

"Two dollars off for matinees."

In case you hadn't figured it out, Trisha McNeil was that normal vampire Jesse had mentioned. She was different from Jesse in the sense that she did have fangs and did feast on human blood. She also had cold skin, whereas Jesse's was curiously warm. If she hadn't once seen him ignite in the sun, she wouldn't have believed he and Nigel were vampires – or "reverse-vampires" as Jesse would describe their condition.

Jesse led Trisha safely back to the bar where they worked and lived; she relied on him heavily when it came to navigating broad daylight since he was an adept shadow-walker. Shadow-walking is an advanced skill practiced by vampires and other supernatural sun-fearing

creatures which allows them to casually avoid sunlight without drawing attention to themselves in public. It usually involves sticking to darker-lit areas, knowing how to dress right, and how to use props to create shadows when needed. In Jesse's case, he could pass through an open field at noon without getting caught in the sun's rays.

Shadow-walking wasn't a skill most vampires enjoyed practicing since the likelihood of catching on fire and burning to death was often a result of screwing up. Jesse's fearlessness, however, gave him a survival advantage over most vampires. Trisha didn't have that same advantage and would either wear a heavy coat or sometimes bring an umbrella when she went out. Jesse discouraged using umbrellas since they were unwieldy in a breeze and would jam at the worst of times. His paranoia was justified since relying on umbrellas was both a common and deadly vampire mistake.

Now before you start asking yourself "Oh, god – why another vampire story?" it should be made clear that this is not a vampire story. It's a story and it does have some vampires in it, but it's not a vampire story. You'll see.

Truth be told, vampires aren't even a major presence or threat on this planet. Yes, the condition exists, but they don't normally organize or live in groups. Actually, most people won't even survive their first day as a vampire. This is mainly due to how quickly direct sunlight can kill them before they realize what they are. One in ten will survive their first day; one in ten of those survivors will survive their first week, and so on with months and years. They often fall victim to garlic-laced foods, mishaps with silverware and cross-shaped objects, or just plain starving to death. You might be wondering why they aren't extinct if they die so easily, and that's because they're not a species or disease. Sometimes people just wake up from the dead as vampires, simple as that.

Not that it matters since this story isn't about vampires. But now you know.

Jesse lived in the basement of a bar called "Hunter's Tavern" in the downtown peninsula. Hunter was the

surname that Jesse's brother and Trisha's boyfriend, Nigel, had chosen for himself. Jesse, too, had chosen his own surname as per Nigel's request, but we'll be getting to that later. The two-story bar opened at noon every day serving lunches and was situated on a corner of a shady intersection between two office buildings. Because of its lack of a sign, its location was almost invisible to any pedestrian who wasn't looking for the place. Still, word-of-mouth brought in a steady, respectable crowd of retirees and college students.

As they entered the bar, they were greeted by a young Chinese woman wearing a green apron. She was serving an elderly couple a plate of the bar's special honey garlic wings.

"Hey!" she waved at them. "How was the movie?"

"Terrible," Trisha answered, "How's the fort, Patti?"

"Pretty dead," the waitress humbly answered.

"Did the music trivia guy call back?" Trisha asked.

"He's coming in around eight," Patti answered, "Should be a good crowd with a lot of students coming out of their finals."

Jesse scanned the bar for the regulars. Only a handful had shown up this afternoon. As usual, there were the college drop-outs in the back, rocking out to some classic Skynyrd on the jukebox. Then there was a retiree at the end of the bar watching a rerun of a UFC fight on the televisions with his burned-out wife nursing a mid-afternoon beer. A few other regulars included a newly-wed couple who worked next door, a disgruntled war vet doing crossword puzzles, and a laptop guy who insisted on writing his novel here instead of a coffee shop. The rest were just your run-of-the-mill unfamiliar bar patrons who'd chanced upon this establishment. It was an odd crew, but they were generally very harmless, kept the rowdiness to a minimum, and really enjoyed Trisha's meals.

Behind the bar was the door to the kitchen and a stairway leading to Nigel's studio.

Today's Special read "Two Dozen Honey Garlic Wings - \$4.99 a plate." Trisha's honey garlic wings were somewhat

famous, which was ironic since she herself could never eat them (or at least, she couldn't without passing out for several days from the garlic). It was an old home-made recipe that she learned years ago when she was still human. She'd taken the time to teach this recipe to Patti in case she had to step out for an emergency or a really bad movie.

"So how's it going, Jesse?" Patti asked him as she cleared off a table. "Sorry to hear about the movie."

"No, the movie was great; I don't know what Trish is on," Jesse joked. "You liked the first one?"

"I didn't watch it," she admitted.

"Second one?"

"Dinosaur robots aren't my thing," she sheepishly smiled and shrugged.

Jesse sighed. It was tough to love "Raptor Cop" movies around these people.

Patti had moved in from Beijing about a year ago for school. She was yet another art student in a city of many. Over the course of the last several months, her part-time job waiting tables at Hunter's Tavern had earned her a seat of trust between Jesse, Nigel, and Trisha. Even though they didn't trust her well enough to share their secret (that her employers were creatures of the night), she was often left in charge of the bar during weekend afternoons.

As Trisha set up her till behind the bar, Jesse sat down and started browsing through the local paper. Nigel and Trisha usually left him in charge of digging up entertainment since he was the only one who had any friends outside the bar. Unfortunately, Jesse was still a bit naïve with computers, so a lot of his networking involved skimming newspapers and word-of-mouth through homeless people. One can imagine the talent that brought in.

"Who's lined up for music this weekend?" Trisha asked, "Please tell me it isn't Dancing Stan again."

"Oh, no – I got some of Patti's friends coming in," Jesse said. "A garage band. Little bit country. Little bit rock and roll. You'll like them. Except the bagpipe guy."

"They have a bagpipe guy?" Trisha couldn't have quite heard that right.

"Don't worry; he only plays it during their opener." Jesse could see her calming down.

"At least it isn't the Homeless Harmonica Quartet again," she sighed.

Jesse stared dishearteningly at the stairwell leading upstairs. He could hear the faint sound of piano music seeping in under the studio door. The music was soft, but far from inviting.

"I hate it when he's like that." Jesse noted, "I can feel the passive-aggressiveness from here. Do you think he's in a talking mood today?"

"I know what you're thinking, Jesse," Trisha said, counting her bills. "Just leave him alone."

"No, it's not healthy for him up there," Jesse got frustrated, "When was the last time he came down?"

Trisha just glared at Jesse.

"He could at least tell me." Jesse stared at his reflection in the bar's wooden finish. Trisha stared at hers as well, not giving a second thought to the old vampire-in-a-mirror superstition.

"If you're feeling brave, Jess, but I don't think you'll have any better luck today." Trish shook her head and sighed.

"It's my birthday," Jesse said, "He has to tell me."

Jesse stood up and marched upstairs.

Nigel's studio was a fair-sized space, but empty, dilapidated and sad. In the corner of the room was an unkempt bed where he and Trish slept. The windows had been boarded up, the wallpaper was wearing away, and scraps of paper littered the corners of the room. A lone TV was playing reruns of an unfamiliar sitcom with the sound turned down. Nobody was watching it. The cleanest parts of the room were Trisha's wardrobe and computer desk. Nigel's corner looked like a rat's nest, the only notable highlight being a cheesy snow-globe that contained a

miniature version of the Egyptian Sphinx on top of his piano. His personal closet looked like a war zone.

Nigel sat slumped on his piano bench, hunched over the keys and writing notes on his sheet music. He looked somewhat older than Jesse, closer to his mid-thirties, with more muscle, a worn unshaven face, and messy black hair. A cigarette hung out the side of his mouth as he played the same few notes over again. Jesse had no idea what he ever did with his music, or if he ever had a plan for it. He just seemed to wallow in writing it day-in and day-out like some kind of never-ending distraction. He paid little interest to Jesse's presence in the room.

"Hey, Nige," Jesse said, "You missed a good movie."

Nigel said nothing, as was his style.

"You should come next time."

Nigel wrote something on his sheet music, repeated the chords, then spoke.

"You took Trish out into the sun," he said, not looking at Jesse.

"It was safe. I was with her." Jesse answered.

"You went out into the sun." he replied. His voice was colder and deader with every word.

"Well, you know..." Jesse tried to figure out where this train of thought was going, but then dropped it. You just didn't argue with Nigel. His words rang through Jesse like an executioner sharpening his blade.

"I wanted to ask you something, and I was hoping you could answer me today," Jesse swallowed and prepared to ask his question. Nigel stopped playing.

"You want to know about our family. About our past," he stated.

"Well, I mean..." Jesse tried to assemble the words, "It's been eighteen years since we were vamped. I kind of figured that might qualify me as an adult in vampire years, you know...? So maybe..."

"I hear you loud and clear," Nigel nodded.

Nigel turned around his chair. He took a small green box off his piano and threw it to Jesse. Jesse turned it over in his hands. It was wrapped in a bright red ribbon. Jesse

cautiously removed the ribbon from the box and opened it. Inside was a flat piece of plastic.

"It's a gift card," he noted.

"Happy Birthday," Nigel replied, unsmiling.

"Ten bucks." Jesse nodded, "For the café down the road."

"I hear you like their coffee."

"So... you actually left the flat to get this?" Jesse asked.

"Yup."

"You walked a block down the road."

"Yup."

"This is..." Jesse struggled for the right words, but found that the only ones that came to mind were also very accurate, "...surprisingly thoughtful."

"Are we done here?" asked Nigel, folding his arms.

Jesse recollected his thoughts and stood his ground.

"No, I need my memory back." Jesse tried to justify his situation, but anger and frustration emitted from his words. "You remember everything about us, right? I need to know who we were, where we came from. Why aren't we like other vampires, okay? I didn't wake up from the dead thinking I was me. I had to re-learn everything. Could you at least tell me about how we died?"

Nigel stared a glassy stare off to his left, as if remembering some distant memory.

"Not telling you is the only way to keep you safe," Nigel answered. "I've told you many times before, you're better off not knowing."

"Then why are you keeping me around?!" Jesse asked, "You keep me in the cellar, next to the boiler, and why? Why do I need to stay here?"

"Why *do* you stay here?" asked Nigel. "You walk out that door every day. You always come back."

Jesse didn't want to answer that question knowing that the argument would be as good as over, but the truth came out. "Because... you and Trish... you're the only family I've got. But I don't know if I can handle all these secrets anymore. I thought we were supposed to be brothers. If

there's a burden to carry, why aren't we carrying it together?"

After another silence, Nigel finally answered Jesse's question.

"It's because I made promises," he answered, "And I keep promises."

"Promises to whom?" Jesse asked, "Our parents?"

"Among other people, yes," Nigel replied. "I don't keep you here out of some sadistic need for control if that's what you're thinking. And I don't make these rules to watch you squirm. So tell me, why *do* I make these rules?"

Jesse thought long and hard about Nigel's ever-growing list of do-nots. In the past eighteen years, Nigel had always been very strict about how they lived. There were the basic vampire rules such as not going into the sun, the reverse-vampire rule of never drinking blood, and then there were the Nigel rules. At first, Jesse assumed the Nigel rules were standard vampire protocol, but Nigel's motivations had grown more questionable over the years. Essentially, it boiled down to three things: never share personal information, never establish human relationships, and never try to have a life.

"Personal information... you don't want to share last names. You never want to use me as an emergency contact. Even my basement has its own mailing address. Either you're hiding me from the revenue service or I just plain embarrass you."

"Both aren't far from the truth," Nigel said. "Please continue."

"Human relationships," Jesse continued, "you're afraid someone will learn what we are. Blow the lid off of everything. Not too different from your 'no life' rule. You want to keep us out of the spotlight. You don't want us to trust anyone. I don't think I'm deriving any new information from this. You make rules, you keep secrets, and you want to hide. Sounds like fear."

"It's survival."

“Survival against what? You open a bar in the middle of downtown, so obviously it's not humans you're afraid of. What are we running from?”

Nigel quieted up again. Something was on the tip of his tongue, but the look on his face suggested he was going no further with this inquiry. His emphasis on the word 'survival' had carried more weight at the moment than any other time he'd mentioned protecting Jesse and it seemed maybe he had said too much.

“Just stick to the story. Our parents died in a car crash, and we both run a family business together.”

“Same lie as ever,” Jesse moaned, “but I'll see to it that you crack one of these days.”

“If you really wanted to know, you would have gotten it out of me already,” Nigel said. “For now, I can surmise that you rather enjoy your life here and don't want to throw it away prying into a life better left buried.”

“I just want the truth.”

“You'll get it when I decide it's time. Until then, go see if Trisha needs help with the customers.” He motioned towards the door.

Jesse sluggishly moved away from him in a slump, lost for words, and opened the door in time to see Trisha about to knock. The two of them shared a brief moment of surprise.

“There's, uh,” Trisha stammered, “there's someone downstairs looking for you, Jesse.”

“For me?” Jesse asked.

“For him?” Nigel leered.

“Yeah.”

Jesse moved away down the stairs.

Trisha looked back at Nigel and, smelling the contention in the room, said “You can be such an ass sometimes.”

Nigel shrugged.

Downstairs, Jesse found himself staring at a ghost from the past. In the doorway stood a very anxious Christine Marx.

4. Bad Coffee

It's difficult to say hello to someone when you were coming across as a lunatic the last time you saw them. Christine looked as beautiful as ever in her pink T-shirt and white cargo shorts, but even she had a hard time getting "Hello" out before one of them finally broke the ice.

"Welcome to Hunter's Tavern," Jesse smiled, "Can I get you a drink?"

"You said you lived in a bar..." Christine said warily, "There's a... there's a lot of bars."

"Yeah... there are..." Jesse was working his way up past the awkwardness, and failing terribly.

"Would've been easier if I'd known your name was Hunter."

"My brother's name; different dads," Jesse lied. Christine seemed more uneasy than the last time he'd met her. He wondered if something was wrong.

Tell him you want to start fresh.

Christine perked up, "I wanted to see you again. I don't think we made the best impression on each other the first time we met, and I thought..."

Get him out of the bar.

"I thought we could go for coffee and get to know each other better."

"We have coffee here," Jesse pointed at the coffee machine.

"I meant away from... the bar." Christine said nervously, scratching behind her ear.

"Is something wrong?" Jesse asked.

"Just my ear bothering me," Christine said, readjusting the earpiece under her hair. "It's nothing."

"Well, there's a café down the street," Jesse said. "I just got a gift card for it."

Street view. You want to sit outside.

"Does the café have a patio?" Christine asked.

"We could drag some chairs outside if they don't."

"Great," Christine said, "Let's go."

Boots stormed down the stairs. To everyone's surprise, Nigel had left his room. He stared at Jesse and his new friend.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"We're going for coffee," Jesse said.

"No, you aren't." Nigel looked at Christine like she was a fly in the soup. "You know the rules."

Jesse thought about it for a moment and said, "Sorry, but I think I'm done with your rules." Then he motioned Christine out of the bar, leaving Nigel dumb-founded.

Walking on Christine's right side, away from traffic and all the light reflections, Jesse regained his composure on route to the café.

"So what was that all about?" she asked.

"Old family problem," Jesse lied. "Car crash; family business. He's that over-protective brother I told you about."

"Oh."

Jesse and Christine headed over to the café where they found a nice outdoor table at which to sit. It came with an umbrella to provide extra shade. They placed their orders and sat down to chat.

"So where to begin?" Jesse asked, "What made you come looking for me?"

Keep him talking.

"I just kind of woke up this morning and remembered you," she said, "I had nothing better to do, so I figured why not bar-hop? Try to find the weird vampire guy."

"Great, so I'm the weird vampire guy," Jesse sighed.

"You did bring it up," Christine mentioned. "A girl doesn't really forget a come-on like that."

Ask him about being a vampire. Ask if there are others with him.

Christine's blood ran cold for a moment. Inspector Rousseau's request seemed odd. She wondered what the other agents were doing. Was this an assassination, or

would they try to take Jesse alive if he was the target? She looked around and couldn't find anyone suspicious spying on them. The three agents were well-hidden.

"So this vampire business... just joking around, right?" she asked.

"More or less," Jesse mused, "I do have a problem with the sun. Skin condition."

"Who do you live with again?" she asked.

"My brother, Nigel, runs the bar, or at least he thinks he does. Trish seems to think otherwise." Jesse was starting to feel uneasy himself. "You look green. There's something else on your mind. What's wrong? This is more than just a social visit, isn't it?"

Lie.

Christine hesitated.

LIE.

"I have... the flu," she lied.

Jesse wasn't buying it. What on earth was going on?

A waitress came out with their coffee and set it on the table.

Make sure he drinks the coffee.

Christine couldn't take it anymore. All she'd been asked to do was visit every bar asking for a Jesse. All this stalling for time and all these strange questions... this wasn't right. She wasn't being asked to expose a terrorist. Inspector Rousseau couldn't be a secret agent.

Jesse reached for his coffee and took a small sip.

"Don't drink the coffee!" she exclaimed, breaking her code of silence.

But it was too late.

The world went red and he tasted fire. As if a bomb were going off inside him, Jesse keeled over in excruciating pain. He tumbled from his chair clutching his chest. His cries turned into deep growls. Christine leapt to her feet screaming for help.

Then he looked at her. His eyes glowed with unholy fire, and she could almost swear his teeth were changing shape. Everyone on the sidewalk had stopped to watch, unsure of what was going on.

Jesse fought the pain and fire inside, but it was too much. The longer it stayed, the more he wanted... more. Suddenly, everything was blood. Everything was for him. Even Christine looked like a delectable morsel. He imagined his teeth tearing into her flesh and...

"NO!" he screamed, twisting away from this horrible vision.

He cowered on the ground for a few moments before his eyes re-adjusted. The world was normal again. All homicidal thoughts had disappeared. He looked back up at Christine who was paralyzed with fear.

"Help me," she croaked to everyone except Jesse, "Help me!"

"Christine, I can explain," Jesse started, and then realized, "No, wait – I can't explain. What just happened?!"

Christine screamed.

Suddenly three black suits appeared behind Jesse. It was Inspector Rousseau and his two agents. Grabbing Jesse, they wrestled him to his feet. Jesse found himself powerless to stop them.

"Thank you, Miss Marx," Rousseau mentioned, "You've been of great service."

"Christine, what's going on?!" Jesse cried, "What did you do?! Who are these people!?"

In that brief moment, Christine saw the Jesse she remembered again, but after what had just transpired, she couldn't bring herself to say a word. She watched as the three agents dragged Jesse out back into an alley, all of them flashing their badges and reassuring the crowd that everything was under control.

Jesse was forced against a brick wall at the end of the alley while Inspector Rousseau took out a small digital camera. The other two agents held Jesse down as they took enormous whiffs of him.

"He's got the smell," the male agent said.

"And he has the taste," the woman grinned. "Let's see if he has the touch."

Rousseau addressed Jesse directly.

"Your time is up, Aemon," he said. "Pandora will see you now."

The woman stretched out Jesse's right arm and held him against the wall, while the man took a butcher knife from his coat and raised it high above his head, ready to bring it down through Jesse's forearm. Inspector Rousseau started up his camera and prepared to film the horrible event.

"Look, I don't who you are, but you've got the wrong guy!" Jesse said, "I don't know who Aemon or Pandora is! Okay, well, I've heard of Pandora, but I don't KNOW a Pandora! Please don't chop off my hand! I LIKE MY HAND!"

The agent holding the blade suddenly gasped. He coughed up dust and then collapsed into a heap of carbonic rubble. In the heart of it all was a wooden stake.

Rousseau and the second agent turned around to see none other than Nigel Hunter charging down the alley, armed with two slivers of broken lumber confiscated from the ground. He threw his second wooden stake with professional accuracy, nailing the female agent in the chest. She screamed, coughed, and collapsed into rubble like her counter-part.

Jesse withdrew from the dusty pile and gazed at Nigel as he and Rousseau went head-to-head. Rousseau charged forward, dodged Nigel's attack, but was thrown furiously against the wall as Nigel spun around with a heavy elbow strike. Rousseau's digital camera smashed as he hit the wall. Before Nigel could deliver any more pain, Rousseau was already backing away down the alley. Jesse still stared at the piles of dust at his feet.

"They're vampires?"

"Jesse, stay back," Nigel stared down Rousseau who was gripping his side where Nigel had struck him. Rousseau was beginning to panic and his fear was plain as day. He looked towards the end of the alley, hoping for a quick exit.

And there it was.

Christine had been watching the whole thing from the sidewalk, clutching her shirt in terror, unblinking.

Rousseau raced down the sidewalk and scooped her up. Throwing her over his shoulder, he escaped into the streets. Nigel took chase. Jesse, paralyzed with confusion, stood stupid for a moment before pursuing them.

Vampires, contrary to popular fiction, don't come with super-strength or sonic speed. So a vampire chase on foot is almost no different than watching a cop chase down his perp. There are only two differences from a human chase:

1) That vampires don't need oxygen, and therefore can't feel fatigue or ever need to slow down, and

2) That cops don't have to worry about sunlight.

Much like Jesse and Nigel, Rousseau himself was also an experienced shadow-walker. However, to apply the principle to shadow-running always came across as awkward. There was just no way to conceal one's self from the public, and you'd always end up looking like a fool. While the buildings provided adequate cover from direct sunlight, they'd be constantly ducking and weaving, trying to dodge the reflected sunlight coming through traffic. To any pedestrian, they looked like two grown men performing a high-speed interpretive dance across the sidewalk. Rousseau had an advantage, since he was able to use Christine as a sun-shield, but a disadvantage since she kept scratching at his face and screaming for help. Jesse hurried along after them, looking equally as foolish.

Deciding to lose them, Rousseau ran up behind a passing bus and into its shadow just as the building cover ended. They were passing into a brightly lit intersection. Using the bus' shadow, he made his way across the street and under the large awning of a sandwich shop. He quickly pressed up against the glass of the store front as the bus sped away and was safely nestled within the awning's shadow. With the sun getting lower, however, Rousseau couldn't stay there for long. He'd have to make his escape when the next large vehicle passed. He watched Nigel on the other corner of the intersection come to a stop.

Nigel frantically scanned the area for a safe shadow path across the intersection. Leading from the shop was the shadow of a large tree he could walk across, but that shadow started on the other side of the road. He immediately regretted not bringing a jacket he could wrap himself in. With few vehicles to act as cover, he'd have to improvise.

A gust of wind blew and inspiration struck Nigel. Reaching into a nearby trash can, he grabbed a handful of fliers and Styrofoam containers. He would have preferred a large newspaper, but these would have to do. As the gusts of wind continued, Nigel took a running start at the street and launched the trash into the sunlight as he leaped into traffic. As he'd planned, the shadows from the airborne trash were providing a temporary shadow cover. Pain seared across Nigel's flesh as streaks of light came through, but fortunately, pedestrians were too busy watching the litter to notice him. He slipped into the shade of the tree and quickly started moving across the street towards the shop, taking care not to step into the path of a vehicle.

Without hesitation, Rousseau dropped Christine. He reached inside his trench-coat and drew a pistol with which he immediately fired upon Nigel. Nigel anticipated his shot and bent his knees just enough to duck, keeping his head and arms inside the shadow. Whether it grazed Nigel was up for debate, but the shot from the gun nonetheless pulverized a shop window with a deafening blast.

The crowds were both gathering and running away from this bizarre spectacle. Jesse found himself watching from the other corner of the intersection as Rousseau fired upon Nigel from the other. Nigel was trapped in the middle of the street unable to do a thing as he dodged bullets. By-standers were already busy on their cell phones, either calling the police or filming the whole thing.

Christine leapt to her feet before Rousseau could squeeze off another shot and tried to force the gun into the air, away from Nigel. Nigel used this moment to hurry across the street, dive into the awning's shade, and hit

Rousseau square in the neck. Rousseau released the gun, letting it fall into Christine's hands.

Nigel continued to pummel Rousseau repeatedly. Rousseau tried to fight back, but Nigel was too quick for him. As he fell to his knees, he scrounged for a weapon – anything – and his hand found a broken bottle. He slashed at Nigel's legs, forcing Nigel to back off. Rousseau nabbed this chance to get back on his feet. He'd have to throw his jacket over his head and run blindly into the streets if he ever wanted to get out of here.

Christine, who had been standing by the whole time, now felt herself getting forcefully shoved into traffic as Rousseau covered himself and began to run again.

As Rousseau made his escape, Nigel and Jesse watched as Christine fell into the path of an oncoming vehicle.

In the hours to follow, Nigel would catch up with Rousseau, finish him off with a wooden stake, and return to his mundane life, never explaining a single thing to Jesse who would pester him about it day and night. Life would return to normal, with the exception of Jesse's mourning period for Christine.

Or rather, that's how Nigel pictured everything in that split-second he saw Christine thrown off the sidewalk.

See, she didn't die. As Christine fell into the path of the car, everything happened in slow-motion for Nigel. Rousseau disappeared into another alley. By-standers were pointing at and filming this strange girl's inevitable demise. A flock of pigeons flew by. Christine was staring at a pair of oncoming headlights. And Jesse was leaping out into broad daylight to save her.

Jesse ignited.

As he passed into the sunlight, his hands exploded into flames. The side of his head facing the sun was a living inferno. Sparks sputtered from his collar while his clothes remained unscathed. And he kept on running.

Even Christine had no idea how to explain the experience of having a burning man catch and push you

out of the way of a moving vehicle. She didn't even feel the flames. It was like he wasn't on fire at all.

For Jesse, it wasn't quite the same. It HURT.

His arms around her, he let himself take the full brunt of the car. Like a whirling firestorm, they rolled over the hood and fell off into the shade under the awning where Nigel stood. Jesse once again took the full force of cushioning her fall. As soon as they passed into the shadow, the flames faded away and he was back to his normal self. There weren't any burn marks on his skin.

Nigel was so stunned at the event that he forgot about Rousseau. He gazed at the crowd. People weren't sure whether to applaud or scream.

But they did remember to film everything.

the combined efforts of Trisha, Christine, and a few patrons to pull him off.

"What's wrong with you?!" Trisha asked.

"Upstairs! Now!" Nigel repeated.

He stormed upstairs and immediately locked himself in the bathroom. The others followed upstairs shortly, Trish putting Patti in charge until they cleared up this mess. Jesse knocked on the bathroom door.

"Come on, Nigel, you don't have anywhere left to run!" Jesse said, "This is it. This is the day you give me answers!"

"And me!" Christine said.

"I'd like a few of my own." Trish added.

"I'm brushing my teeth!" yelled Nigel.

The three of them sat on his bed waiting for him.

And they waited.

And waited.

"So what just happened?" Trisha asked Jesse.

"It was weird; three vampires attacked me in an alley," Jesse tried to recount the events. "Nigel saved me and this one guy grabs Christine and we were running all over the place, the guy starts shooting at Nigel, and then she and I got hit by a car. It was insane."

"And why is he mad?" Trisha inquired.

"I sort of caught fire in the sun. In front of people."

"Oh."

There was another awkward silence before Christine jumped in.

"So you guys really are vampires?" Christine asked, trying to make small talk, "Do you... drink blood?"

"I do," Trish said, "Jesse and Nigel are allergic or something."

"We're special." Jesse smiled.

"So it is, like, animal blood?" Christine wondered aloud.

"No, vampires who drink animal blood tend to die," Trisha explained, "I get mine from donor clinics, or idiots at raves. A lot of college kids seem to love people sucking their blood these days. Hey, listen, Jesse, are you and this girl dating?"

"No, it's a... long story," Jesse said.

"He stalked me about five months ago," Christine said, "Then some secret agents showed up at my door this morning telling me they need me to stop some terrorist cell in Halifax. It was all very vague. They just told me to interrogate you – I'm sorry! I didn't know they were vampires. I didn't know you were a vampire! I didn't know vampires hunted other vampires! I didn't know vampires were real! I thought you were just hitting on me when you told me you were a vampire!"

"You were going around telling people about us?" Trisha glared at Jesse.

"Uh, yeah," Jesse confessed. "Just her, though. Sorry."

"For the record, I didn't believe him," Christine noted. Trisha continued glaring at Jesse in disbelief.

"Are you crazy? What were you thinking?" Trisha exclaimed, "We're not supposed to tell humans who we are!"

"Look, I've been living under Nigel's rule for the last eighteen years," Jesse started. "He doesn't want to fill me in on who we are and where we come from? Fine. But does he really expect me to sit in this bar all day and blindly follow his orders while he wastes away up here? Some of us want to have a life!"

Trisha sighed angrily. This was too much all at once.

The bathroom door unlocked.

"So you're ready to tell us who that guy was?" Trisha asked.

Nigel stepped out, headed towards the closet, grabbed a duffel bag, and started packing his clothes.

"He wasn't a secret agent," Nigel said, "His name is Vladimir Tsepish, son of Vlad the Impaler. He's been after us for almost six hundred years."

"Six hundred years?!" Jesse stood up.

"You're six hundred years old?!" Trish asked, "You said you were only vamped eighteen years ago!"

"Yeah, I lied," Nigel said, reaching into his closet and piling other things into another duffel bag. These things

made a metallic clanging as he tossed them in. Jesse wondered what all he was hiding in his closet.

Christine asked, "Why is this guy in Halifax? What did he want with me?"

"He wanted to use you as bait," Nigel said, "To draw Jesse out in the open because of your secret love affair."

"Affair?" Jesse shook his head, "We never had an affair!"

"Don't pull that on me," Nigel said, "Vladimir smelled you all over her. That's how he tracks us. Six degrees of separation is all it takes for her smell to rub off on her sister, from her sister to her boyfriend, from her boyfriend to his mom, from his mom to her friend and so on. Once he catches the scent, he backtracks through everyone. He questions them. He finds out where they've been. Guess what? The trail ends here. Vladimir has found us. I made a very important rule when we started travelling: Humans are off-limits. This is why."

"This is why you never leave your room?" Jesse asked.

"This is why you never deal with the customers?" Trisha asked.

"I don't have a sister," Christine said.

"It doesn't matter!" Nigel yelled.

"We only met that one time!" Jesse said to Nigel, "One time!"

"And that's all it takes," Nigel grumbled, shoving more socks in the bag.

"So what about me?" Trish asked, "I deal with customers, and I'm covered with your scent."

"Normal vampires can only smell us, not carry our scent," Nigel explained. "Your natural musk hides our presence on you from other vampires."

Trisha sniffed the air, locking in on Nigel and Jesse's scents before speaking again, "I can smell this Vladimir guy on both of you. This is the first time I've ever smelt another real vampire."

She took a deep breath and marched towards Nigel, "You know, I've always accepted this 'reverse-vampire' thing you keep going on about. But now that I smell real

vampire on you, I'm starting to think you heard this 'reverse-vampire' idea on 'The Simpsons' or something."

"Actually, that was me," Jesse raised his hand, "Nigel didn't have a name for vampires like us."

Nigel stopped packing. He didn't look his girlfriend or Jesse in the eye when he said this:

"It's because we're not vampires."

"What?" Jesse asked.

"It was just easier to say we were than explain the truth," Nigel said as he walked over to the wall where he kept a decorative sword mounted. He removed it from his sheath and wielded it towards Jesse. The sword was curvy, double-edged and made of glistening crystal. Jesse had always wondered about that sword, and until now, had relied on Nigel's word that he had simply just found it. Now he began to wonder if the sword had a lost history as well.

"Stick out your hand," he said.

"Not a freaking chance," Jesse said, his eyes racing down the shimmering blade. He remembered being held down in the alley with the butcher knife over his arm.

"I need to show you what they were after," Nigel said, "Don't worry. You'll be okay. Just trust me."

"I'm not letting you chop off my hand." Jesse answered.

"Fine," Nigel said, lowering his sword.

Then, in a lightning-fast blink, he stepped forward and decapitated Jesse.

The world went dark for Jesse, but he remained aware of the darkness. Thoughts raced through the mind that was no longer atop his neck. All of them were screaming in absolute terror.

A second later, the terror was replaced with the most painful burning sensation ever.

Everything went white and Jesse could hear himself screaming.

His eyes adjusted to the light. He was cowering on the floor, staring up at a very shocked Trisha, a screaming Christine, and a very annoyed Nigel.

"YOU CUT HIS HEAD OFF!" Christine screamed, "HOW DID HE DO THAT?"

"I did what now?" Jesse nervously looked around, uncertain as to what transpired.

"How did he do that?" Trish asked, helping Jesse up, but inspecting his head for any damage along the way.

"Did he just chop off my head?" asked Jesse.

"He just chopped off your head." Christine said, trying to remember to blink. This was too much excitement in one day. Patti burst through the door.

"I heard screaming! Who just died?!?" she asked.

"Me!" Jesse yelled.

Patti looked quizzically at him for a moment, and then quietly closed the door, pretending nothing had happened.

"Then why do I have a head?" asked Jesse.

"Stick out your arm," Nigel repeated, "And I'll show you."

Trish and Christine took a step back, but got in a good position. They needed to see this happen again. Jesse hesitated and slowly stuck out his arm.

"Don't look away," Nigel said, raising the sword again.

Jesse braced himself.

The sword came down, taking off Jesse's forearm. The girls tried their best to conceal their fright. The forearm, sleeve and all, fell and dissipated into flames. All that remained was an arm stump, smoldering with hot embers. Jesse watched in surprise as the stump instantly re-ignited into flames, and his missing forearm grew back – quite painfully - with the sleeve properly re-attached to the shirt. After the shock of the fire, he took a moment to let this settle in.

"I can regenerate," he said.

"Any part of you, except the heart," Nigel said. "Your heart contains everything – your memories, your appearance, your personality, everything. It even remembers what you're wearing. Always protect the heart."

"Your head did the same thing," Trish said, "Poof, and it was gone. Then it was back. Do you remember anything?"

"Just the darkness," Jesse said.

"So if you aren't vampires, what are you?" Christine asked.

There was a loud knock at the door. Patti re-entered. "You guys! Get down here! You're on TV!"

Moments later, everyone was downstairs, watching video footage of Jesse's rescue on the news. The news tried to shake it off as a possible camera trick when it showed Jesse igniting into flames, but eye-witnesses were convinced that they had seen something supernatural just happen.

"The sun hit him and then poof! He's on fire!"

"But he saved the girl!"

"And there were gunshots, and the guy just stood there!"

"Went up like the Human Torch!"

"Like a vampire, but without sparkles!"

"Never seen this before in my life!"

"The footage has already made its way online, with each uploaded video finding thousands of hits. Are there vampires? Is this a new kind of human skin condition? Or perhaps a viral marketing gimmick? Either way..."

Nigel turned off the TVs. The patrons in the bar kept looking at him.

"What?" he asked them, threateningly. "Go back to your drinks."

Just then, the televisions turned back on by themselves.

Everyone looked up at the craziest eyes they'd ever seen.

And SexxyGrrrLOLzers spoke:

"Five stars for surprise?"

"No..." Nigel gasped, "This is too soon..."

"By now, you've probably noticed that there are hundreds of myself in the sky. No, this is not a trick; this is a quarantine."

Nigel raced outside. Many others followed. Sure enough, the sky was covered in a dome of hundreds of video screens. One enormous one was overlapping the center of the dome. Her face even appeared on store windows and inside cars. Many motorists had come to a grinding halt; others were rear-ending each other in surprise.

"Nigel, who is it?" asked Trisha.

"I have placed a special dome over the city. No, don't try to break it; it's magical. You can't break magic. And it's making sure no one leaves. You see, dear people, you've been harbouring the fire-bloods for quite some time, and I do so desperately desire them. In a few hours, the Chaos will descend upon your city and destroy it like they did the cities of old – that is, unless you relinquish the fire-bloods and save your precious families."

Fire-blood. For some reason, this sounded familiar to Jesse. Nigel continued to stare like a drowning turkey into the sky.

"Also... we will show no mercy. Just something to think about."

Before the video cut out, a brief replay of Jesse's rescue played all over the city. This was followed by a loud, deafening shriek, as if the woman had decided to end her call by screaming bloody murder into a megaphone. Everyone covered their ears as the sound hit them from all sides. Windows cracked and car alarms went off all over the neighbourhood. The scream subsided and she was gone.

All of the bar patrons who had come outside looked at Jesse and Christine.

"Is she looking for you?" one of them asked.

"I don't know," Jesse said.

"No," Nigel told them.

But the people around them continued to bombard them with questions.

"What was that?"

"What's going on?"

"What do you have to do with this?"

"Why does she want you?"

"Nigel, what's a fire-blood?" Jesse asked, "And who is she?"

"She's Pandora." Nigel answered.

Pandora's face appeared in the sky again. She spoke: "By the way, thanks for all the subscriptions."

6. The Demon Age

Nine thousand years ago, the Kingdom of Xeras was a thriving metropolis in the heart of the then-modern world. Its ruler, King Xeraphoxes, was a cruel and sadistic god-king who built his empire on the backs of slaves and children. His armies would branch out across the land, razing any village that refused to bow down before and worship their deity.

In time, Xeraphoxes came to rule the entire known world, but not all was within his sights. One small village continued to elude his grasp. Word came that a sorceress by the name of Azalea had been single-handedly destroying any soldiers he sent to her village. So he took it upon himself to meet this so-called sorceress.

Azalea was anything but welcoming, and upon seeing the god-king, she summoned an army of ghostly warriors to destroy him. His very loyal troops fell at his feet and sacrificed their own lives to enable his escape back to Xeras.

Xeraphoxes soon grew to covet the sorceress' power, and instead of leaving the small village alone, decided to send in a spy to seduce Azalea and steal her secrets for his own. It wasn't enough that he had the world, but this woman controlled the very forces of the nether-realm. This was a power he so desired.

The spy came in the form of a young man named Turk, a sick traveller who had lost his way. Azalea's village took him in and gave him food and shelter. He lived as a villager, met with Azalea, and soon formed a bond with her over the following months. Using knowledge borrowed from her apprentice, Nione, Turk was able to deceive his way into Azalea's heart. Following many nights of passion, he convinced Azalea to reveal the secret of her powers. She led him to a hidden cave where she had stored a

small collection of magical tomes. One of them included the spell that allowed Azalea to summon entities from the nether-world. Turk's mission was complete.

By morning, the books were gone. Turk was nowhere to be found.

Azalea fell to her knees when she realized his betrayal and not tears, but madness overcame her. In but a brief moment, she remembered the most powerful spell she had sworn never to cast.

Drawing a ritual circle in her own blood, she projected her spirit into the nether-realm. There, she offered her soul to the fire demon, Urobach. In exchange, she requested physical access to the pits of Hell. Urobach's masters had forbidden him to make deals with mortals, but the prospect of owning something as powerful as a sorceress' soul was too much to pass up. He gave her a small chest (roughly the size of a breadbox) and provided a special key to go with its lock. This was all Azalea needed.

Abandoning the village, she set forward on a trek across the desert, without food, water, or sandal.

For one hundred days and nights, she lived off the madness that urged her on, carrying nothing but the box and the key. Nature itself would keep her alive, as if to warn her – to tell her to go back – but she would not listen.

In the city of Xeras, King Xeraphoxes had managed to master the spell. By tearing out the fires of Heaven and Hell, he could forge the ultimate warrior here on Earth. And this he did, many times. Soon, he had an army of these warriors – Aemons, he would call them – immortal soldiers who could not be destroyed, for their blood was everlasting fire. The fire-blood army was born.

Or so he thought.

Azalea arrived at the gates of his city, begging to see Turk. The guards foolishly allowed her inside, thinking the sorceress no longer had magic.

She found her way to the palace courtyard, and upon seeing the great army that Xeraphoxes had assembled, she held her breath, placed the key into the lock, and opened the box.

From the box she brought forth seven powerful elemental demons. They were the Chaos, gestated in the pits of Hell and now running amuck at Azalea's command. Plagues of pain, hatred, despair, selfishness, madness, greed, and fear swept across the city, and the Chaos attached themselves to human hosts, Pandora included. Together, they obliterated Xeraphoxes' city, his army, and took Xeraphoxes himself. By morning, all that remained of Xeras was sand.

When Azalea finally returned to her village, her people could see she was a changed woman. Possessed by the Chaos of Madness, she was now a greater monster than Xeraphoxes ever was. With the demons following her around, no one dared challenge her, not even Azalea's own apprentice, Nione.

So one night, Nione sneaked into Azalea's hut while she slept, and stole the key to the box. She knew that without the key, Azalea would not be able to release more evil spirits into this world.

But the key alone could not be destroyed, cast away, or simply hidden. It needed to be protected. So, escaping deep into the desert, she used the same Aemon spell and created her own warriors: Jezebuul and Naveen. But with these warriors, she gave them special protection spells (both blessings and curses) as well as free will. One Aemon would choose to carry the key, and the other would swear to protect the other, for as long as it took for Azalea's madness to end.

Nione and the Aemons left the country and carried on with their journey, until Nione herself died of old age. Then the warriors continued travelling. Forever.

As for Azalea, she had become immortal by hosting a demon. This threw a snag in Urobach's plans since he had anticipated on collecting her soul when she died. Without that soul, he had no leverage with his masters and would have to face serious penalties for allowing a mortal to tap into their realm.

Urobach decided to cut his losses and cancelled their contract on the grounds that she returned the key

immediately. When Azalea realized the key was missing, Urobach became livid. He chained her to the box using Tartarus-forged steel (the strongest material known to demons) and cursed her to forever walk the earth until she and the other six Chaos could find and return the key.

Year by year, century by century, they searched. In their travels, Azalea agonized over the betrayal of her apprentice. The demon within gradually took hold and Azalea lost all control of her madness. She began to see Nione's betrayal in everyone and everything. Her thoughts turned from breaking her curse to making it worse. She was going to find that key, but she had no intention of returning it. Not when there was so much in the world left to destroy.

In the millennia to follow, the Chaos would become weaker, and their influence over mankind lessened until eventually their plagues became nothing more than household annoyances. Yet even at their weakest, they remain to this day some of the most destructive beings ever unleashed upon this planet.

And they were heading straight for Halifax.

"Any questions?" asked Nigel. He stood behind the bar before Trisha, Jesse, Christine, and the regulars, who had gathered around like campers around a fire. All had very puzzled expressions on their faces. Nigel had made sure to usher as many of the other patrons out of the bar before locking the door behind them, although considering the cat was out of the bag, he felt it was safe to let the regulars in on the situation.

"Two questions," one of the drop-outs raised their hand, "What kind of drugs are you on? And... why aren't you sharing them?"

"So wait," Christine tried to wrap her head around this, "That lady in the sky... was Azalea?"

"She goes by the name of Pandora now," Nigel answered. "I guess she felt a connection to the old Greek myth."

"And what about us?" Jesse asked, "Are we Aemons? Are you Naveen? Am I Jezebuul?"

"Yes," Nigel answered, "Half-Angel, Half-Demon, forged from the fires of Heaven and Hell. Sworn to protect the key to Pandora's Box, lest she release even more plagues upon humanity."

The war vet took a large chug of his beer.

"So we're the ultimate warriors!" Jesse exclaimed, "Sorry, Trish, but this is better than being a vampire! Hey, can we eat garlic? I always wanted to try our chicken wings!"

"Avoid any kind of meat," Nigel said, "Just remember that sunlight still burns, and taking blood is like poison to us."

"So how many more demons are there exactly?" Trish asked, "What's coming for us?"

"Pandora's lot still has a total of seven," Nigel explained, "but the nether-realms are home to potentially billions more. Minor demons will occasionally cross over to our world, but this has rarely happened since the Dark Age. It takes a powerful relic like Pandora's box to summon a true chaos demon."

"And you're saying that in nine thousand years, no one has ever killed one?" Jesse asked.

"Not one of the Chaos," Nigel explained, carefully choosing his words. "Normally, demons exist as free-floating energy until they possess a human host. To banish them back to their realm, you need only exorcise the host or destroy its heart. Unfortunately, the Chaos don't follow garden-variety standards. No one has ever been able to vanquish one, and if Pandora gets that key, we're going to have a lot more of them on our hands."

"So which of you guys has the key?" asked one of the newly-weds.

"He does..." Nigel pointed at Jesse's chest, "It was Jesse who claimed it. It's embedded within his heart. It's him we need to keep alive."

"Have you all been taking crazy pills?" inquired the laptop guy. "This has to be some kind of government thing."

Some hi-tech mumbo-jumbo in the sky designed to mess with our minds. There's no way all these pagan gods are real." Demons and gods were two different things, but Nigel didn't feel like correcting him.

"They're very real," Nigel stared at him with a chiseled hard-boiled gaze. "They destroyed Xeras, they destroyed Atlantis, they destroyed Ubar, and they even took out Sodom and Gomorrah."

"So where have these demons been these last nine thousand years?" asked Trisha, "How come no one ever sees them?"

"Because in demon form, they attract too much attention," Nigel said, "In the old days, they were hunted like dragons. Simply attacking random cities incurred the wrath of too many armies and made it easier for us to evade them. So in order to keep searching conveniently, they had to assume their human forms and hire vampire mercenaries to root us out."

"Why vampires?" asked Jesse.

"Like I said," Nigel explained, "They can smell us. This is why we avoided larger cities and smaller towns. Here in Halifax, the entire vampire population is basically Trisha. It's been far easier to blend in until you two started getting along."

He glared at Jesse and Christine.

"But we didn't..." Jesse thought about Christine for a moment, "At least, not long enough to... we were never together."

"I still had your coat." Christine said, "You forgot it when you left my apartment. My roommate borrowed it before she left."

"Oh, crap," was all Jesse could say.

"All this is happening because you gave her your coat?" Trisha asked.

"Our scent doesn't grow stronger or weaker," Nigel said, "We reek of the nether-world, which is a smell vampires are exceptionally attuned to." He nodded to Trisha, then back to Jesse, "When I found Vladimir cornering you in the

alley, he was trying to obtain video evidence of your fire-blood abilities, most likely to show Pandora.”

“But you broke his camera,” Jesse remembered.

“True,” Nigel recollected, “I don’t know how he managed to convince her of our presence. There have been too many false alarms for them to risk exposing the wrong people as Aemons...”

Something was kicking around in Christine’s head. Déjà vu hit her and she suddenly understood what Pandora meant by “subscriptions.”

“SexxyGrrrLOLzers,” she whispered, “Crazy eyes. I saw the video.”

“What video?” Nigel asked. Several regulars were nodding in the realization that they had all seen Pandora before. The laptop guy stepped forward and placed his computer on the bar.

“Here, I’ll show you,” he said, bringing up a video site.

“I don’t understand,” Nigel said, “What are we looking at?”

“It’s a computer thing,” Jesse said, “Videos on the interwebs. People keep them in tubes.”

“What, for other people to watch?” Nigel asked. Trisha was convinced that even word-dropping an ‘abacus’ would confuse Nigel.

“There it is,” Christine pointed at a video link. Everyone huddled together to watch. Sure enough, a grainy video of Pandora was present right on the monitor. Pandora glared into the camera for about thirty seconds, and the video was over. Christine clicked on another video – same results – just Pandora staring into the camera.

“Pandora is on the Internet,” Trisha said, “It makes sense. The Internet is connected all over the world. What better way to find you guys, right?”

After ten similar videos, they stumbled onto one of the more popular clips. This one revealed Pandora dancing around in a banana costume and horsing around in a hotel room. Finally, she stopped, stared in the camera and spoke in a very childish and sing-song voice:

“Hello, I am Sexy and I am a Girl. I seek the fire-bloods. If you ever see a man catch fire in the sun and then stop being on fire in the dark, please post a video reply and show me where he is. If you post just the right video, I might show you my boobs.” Then she flashed the scariest smile ever and the video ended.

“Over three hundred million views,” Trisha noticed, “And look at all these video replies. People have been sending her Jesse’s rescue footage.”

“One hell of a trap,” Christine noted, “Using the eyes and ears of the whole world like this.”

“And everything would have been fine if Jesse hadn’t saved you from that accursed vehicle,” Nigel growled.

Trisha scrolled down a little to read the comments. Sure enough, there was an onslaught of posts: “SHOW US UR BOOBS” and “I POSTED THE VIDEO. ITS IN HALIFAX. WHERE’S UR SCARY BEWBS?” Further down were people posting comments about her eyes, calling them “crazy.” And for every person who used the word “crazy,” Pandora had replied to them with the exact same message: “I WILL DESTROY YOU.”

“She IS crazy,” Jesse said.

“She’s the Chaos of Madness,” Nigel said, “What did you expect?”

An afterthought hit Nigel: “Incidentally, don’t use the word ‘crazy’ around her. She doesn’t like it. She’s not kidding about destroying you.”

Jesse swung his head around trying to absorb this information. Just this morning, he was accusing Nigel of lying about his family and now he was learning all about this, and...

A new thought occurred to him.

“Hang on,” Jesse realized, “if we’re the guys from the story, aren’t we...”

“Nine thousand years old?” Trisha inquired.

“Over nine thousand, actually,” Nigel corrected her, “We lost track after the invention of the Gregorian calendar. But yes, after Pandora and the demons, we are the oldest living beings in this world.”

"You guys are super-grandpas," Christine commented.

"So this is why I instinctively know how to shadow-walk and... but why don't I remember any of this?" Jesse asked. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Excuse me," the retiree raised his hand. "This history lesson is fascinating and all, but... what do we do?"

"There's not much you can do," Nigel shrugged. "It falls on Jesse and me to save this world."

"So should we go home to our families?" one of the newly-weds asked.

"Is Halifax going to become the next Atlantis?" asked a drop-out. "Is this one of those 'last days on earth' scenarios?"

"Possibly," Nigel said. "Treat it as such. Go where you will. Do what you want. If you haven't anywhere to go... drinks are on the house tonight."

Something about the words 'on the house' scared Trisha more than the prospect of being destroyed at the hands of Chaos incarnate.

"Does this mean I still have to wait tables?" asked Patti.

"If you want," Nigel told her. Patti heavily leaned towards grabbing as much beer as possible and getting plastered with the drop-outs instead. "For now, the demons are coming for us and we need to go confront them. Jesse, Trisha, follow me. You too, Maxine."

"Christine."

"It doesn't matter. Jesse, grab two shovels and meet us in the truck out back." Nigel motioned him outside. Inside, the regulars were left alone to do with the tavern as they would. Jesse wondered whether they'd still be here when they got back. Trisha wondered how much this was going to cost them.

"How are we going to fight the seven demons with shovels?" Jesse asked. "Didn't these monsters wipe out entire cities back in the old days?"

"There's a trick to it," Nigel said. "Now come. I'll show you how we save the world."

7. Anger Management

Around back was Nigel's rusty yellow pick-up truck. It was a used model from the seventies that he'd acquired on Trisha's behalf for hauling kegs and equipment for special occasions, but until now, he'd never really driven it that much.

Parked next to the truck was a newer sports bike that Jesse had won in a raffle a few years earlier, but for which hadn't yet been able to acquire an operator's license. At this time of crisis, Jesse figured he should just drive it anyway, but didn't know where Nigel had stashed the keys, so it continued to gather dust.

As the sun set, it was easier for Nigel, Jesse and Trisha to move about in the city. It was only during these times that they could safely drive around the city without fear of igniting. Trisha sat up in the front seat with Nigel while Jesse and Christine shared the back.

Trisha had finished talking to someone on the phone. She hung up and relayed the message to Jesse: "Music trivia guy called. He's not coming in on account of the apocalypse."

"So what's the plan, Nigel?" Jesse asked. Nigel sat in silence, simply driving through the streets. "How do we defeat these demons? Are we going to lead them away from the city? Or are we tracking down Vladimir? Maybe he knows how to beat them? What's with the shovels? Are we going to stab these through their hearts?"

"Jesse, you wanted to know why you don't remember anything." Nigel asked.

"Yeah, what about that?" Jesse inquired.

"The sad truth about being immortal is that the mind can only maintain about a few thousand years' worth of information," Nigel explained, "Otherwise, the brain starts to remove memories on its own. Even as Aemons, we

aren't protected from this. You and I had to learn how to forget the parts of our past we didn't need. This usually included all the non-essential elements, like sleeping, eating, travelling, and so on. But we never chose to forget the most important events and we never chose to forget our wisdom."

"So what happened to me?" asked Jesse, "Why did I forget?"

"Because you chose to."

Jesse was taken back, "Why would I choose to forget nine thousand years?"

"Because of the mistakes you made," Nigel went on, "Because you believed we could defeat Pandora at her own game."

"That doesn't make sense, Nigel," Trisha said, "Stop being so damn cryptic about this."

"Yeah, give it to me straight: what happened?" Jesse asked.

"Your over-confidence is what happened!" Nigel snapped, "We'd settle into a new place, and you'd prance around in the daylight, your presence always taunting the Chaos to come find you. You believed we could defeat them every time! Well, guess what? We never did! Not once in nine thousand years did we ever so much as hurt them! Entire towns, entire cities fell because of you!"

Jesse fell back against his seat, horrified.

"You chose to forget all the blood on your hands," Nigel said. "Eighteen years ago, you couldn't handle the guilt anymore. I ordered you not to do it; I told you that you needed to remember this guilt if you were to save lives, but in a moment of desperation, you took off your own head... and willed your memories to never return."

"So this promise you made to protect me..." Jesse was starting to feel more shaken up than before, "I was the one who made you promise."

"Unfortunately, wiping out your own memories has once again caused history to repeat itself," Nigel said, "Instead of doing the smart thing and hiding in the basement, you've been gallivanting about, lathering your scent on everything

and everyone. I should have just locked you up in a steel box and buried you.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t do that,” Jesse said, “But... uh... where are we going anyway?”

“To bury ourselves.”

“WHAT?!” was everyone else’s synchronized response.

“I told you, we cannot defeat the Chaos.” Nigel explained, “This is the only way we’ve ever survived nine thousand years!”

“By burying ourselves?!” Jesse exclaimed.

“We can’t leave the city, and they will destroy everything inside the dome – reducing it to sand.” Nigel answered, “Our only hope is to find a deserted location and bury ourselves while the city is razed. With any luck, we should be able to dig our way out in a few years and start over.”

“Sorry, I’m not accepting you guys burying yourselves as a viable option!” Trisha said. “What am I supposed to do? Die up here?”

“Don’t be foolish.” Nigel repeated, “You’ll be buried with us.”

“What? No! Not a chance!” was Trisha’s reaction.

“It’s either that or face disintegration when Pandora decides to vaporize Hunter’s Tavern along with the rest of the city,” Nigel said, “I’m sorry I had to lie to the regulars, but I will not leave you behind. It’s not like any of us need oxygen to live, after all.”

“Oxygen?” Trish exclaimed, “I need blood to live!”

“Not if you’re buried,” Nigel jumped in. “Vampires only need blood if they’re not hibernating in a grave.”

“What about me?” Christine asked. “I need oxygen!”

“After we stick Jesse in a bag and bury him, we’ll need you to bury us,” Nigel said. “Then I’m afraid you’re on your own.”

“So I’m going to be destroyed, too?” Christine was starting to sound lost.

“Most likely,” Nigel said.

“This is crazy. You’re all crazy!” Christine yelled, and then pointed at Nigel, “Especially you!”

“Nigel, turn this truck around and go back to the bar.” Trish scolded him, “This plan of yours is stupid.”

“Who in this vehicle has nine thousand years’ worth of experience in these matters?” Nigel raised his hand, “Oh, right. It’s me. So why don’t we all heed the voice of reason? This is the only sensible course of action. I’m sorry if spending three years in a trash bag is going to ruin anyone’s day, but we have *no other choice*.”

Suddenly something large came down in the middle of the road. Nigel swerved to avoid it, but careened off of what appeared to be a large clawed foot. The truck flipped onto its side and slammed into a bus stop near the harbour side of the road.

Everyone was dazed by what had just happened, but as they began to undo their seatbelts, large teeth snapped around the body of the truck. The walls of the vehicle began to close in around them as the vehicle slowly lifted from the street.

“Jesse!” Nigel yelled, “The door!”

Both Jesse and Nigel reached over and opened the passenger doors, holding onto the girls as the doors flew open. They fell out onto the sidewalk, using their own bodies to cushion the girls’ falls.

They stared up as the truck was tossed aside by the clamp-like jaws of a giant fanged beast. They scurried away as the loose junk inside the truck rained down upon them.

“Move, move, move!” Nigel ushered the three of them ahead.

Pedestrians everywhere were clearing out the area screaming “They’re here! They’re here! We’re doomed!”

They ran half a block before Jesse stopped to turn and see the creature. The monster was four stories tall, with the head and body of a wolf, the wings of a bat, and the tail of a scorpion. It picked at Nigel’s truck like a dog scrounging for food before it turned its attention back to Jesse.

Nigel pulled at Jesse’s arm, screaming “Run, you idiot!”

"What is that?" Jesse asked, unable to take his eyes off the beast.

"It's Raaj! Come on!" Nigel started to drag Jesse, but Jesse couldn't bring himself to run. He turned to the others.

"Trisha, get Christine out of here!" Jesse yelled. Then he turned back to the beast and ran straight for it. Nigel took chase, completely unsure of what Jesse was planning.

The truth was, Jesse had no plan. The creature known as Raaj swept its wing down upon him, and clutched him in its withered clawed fingers. It mashed Jesse against the side of a brick building. Pain gripped Jesse, but he knew he could regenerate if he held on long enough to squeeze out of the monster's grasp.

Nigel, having always been prepared for the worst, hurried back to the crumpled truck. In the back seat, caught on a seat belt, was his duffel bag. Reaching into the bag, he pulled out the crystal sword he'd used to decapitate Jesse earlier.

He raced forward and swung the blade into Raaj's leg, easily slicing through the tendon. The beast lurched back, dragging Nigel with it, but releasing Jesse who fell two stories before hitting pavement.

Raaj chased his own tail trying to get rid of Nigel, but Nigel was already climbing onto its back. Jamming the sword into the monster's back, he used it to get his footing and raced up toward the neck. Finally, he reached the head and drove the sword deep into one of Raaj's eyes. The monster howled in pain as Nigel pulled out his blade, leapt off its face and landed in the streets. He hurried over to Jesse.

"Let's go before he can see again," Nigel said.

"What is he?" Jesse asked.

"Raaj, the Chaos of Hatred, Anger, War, Strife – that kind of thing." Nigel said. "Can we go now? This is the monster that invented being pissed off, and we just pissed it off."

Jesse didn't argue. They hurried down the street looking for an exit, but with by-standers everywhere, Jesse was hesitant to hide in any shops.

"We have to lead him away from these people," Jesse said.

"Don't be stupid," Nigel said, "These people are doomed. Come, let's go down this alley. With luck, he won't tear apart too many buildings."

Jesse looked back at Raaj, who was now beginning to breathe fire as he struggled with his healing eye. Looking ahead at the end of the street was a twenty-story blue office building. At this time of day, it had to be abandoned. He had no basis for this reasoning, other than the stray thought that everyone had probably gone home in this emergency.

"I've got a better idea," he said, running for the building. Nigel chased after him.

"No, you don't have a better idea!" Nigel yelled, "You never have a better idea! Just listen to me!"

Jesse took a running start at the doors of the lobby and threw himself through the window glass. Or rather, he hit it quite painfully and bounced off. Nigel caught up with him.

"Why can't I break the window?" Jesse asked, "I thought I had nether-world strength or something!"

"You don't!" Nigel said, "We can only heal!"

"But that's stupid!" Jesse exclaimed, "How can we be ultimate warriors if we can't even break glass?!"

They were interrupted by the angry return of Raaj, storming down the street towards them, fire erupting from his maw and his eyes glowing red with fury.

No longer hesitating, Nigel stepped past Jesse and kicked open the doors.

"See? You can do it!" Jesse pointed out.

"I just know how to kick down doors." Nigel said, running into the building. Once in, Jesse saw his mistake. The night-shift janitors were already holding a poker game in the lobby.

"Shoot!" Jesse said, "This building should be empty!"

"Why?" asked Nigel.

"I don't know!" Jesse said.

A large clawed hand tore through the entrance. Jesse and Nigel jumped to opposite sides as it ripped a gash through the tiled floor between him. They quickly got back to their feet while the night shift ran screaming for the bathroom.

"The emergency stairwell!" Nigel yelled, running for the emergency exit. He pushed it open and the two of them began ascending the building's tall spiral staircase.

"Weaknesses!" Jesse realized, "Do they have any weaknesses?"

"No!" Nigel said as they continued running, "They never have weaknesses!"

"But you said they've been getting weaker over the years!"

"They have been!" Nigel yelled. "But not by much!"

The wall shook, and claws punctured the cement over their heads, shaking the whole building in the process. They continued racing up the stairs.

"How did we defeat this thing the last time we saw it?" Jesse asked.

"We didn't!" Nigel said, "We just buried ourselves and let it blow over! But I guess that didn't work out too well? Oh, wait – it did. Because *we survived*."

"We didn't even get a chance to bury ourselves!" Jesse yelled, avoiding the falling rubble, "So don't blame me for this!"

"Don't blame you?" asked Nigel, "No, why shouldn't I blame the idiot who couldn't stay in the basement and had to go out, meet girls, and watch Rabbit Cop movies!"

"Raptor Cop!"

"Same thing!"

"Different thing!"

"It doesn't matter!" Nigel yelled, stopping in his tracks, "The fate of the world is at hand, and you're always playing games. In nine thousand years, you still haven't grown up. You're a threat to every living thing on this planet. Killing you would have saved so many. But it's the one thing I can never do."

"You could have just chained me up in the basement all these years if I were so important."

"But I didn't!"

There was a quiet breathing moment between the two of them. Jesse was unable to collect his thoughts quick enough to say anything.

Dust fell from the walls as the building shook again.

Nigel turned the sword over his hands and casually tossed it over to Jesse, handle-first.

"It's yours," Nigel said. "Let's pray you still have the muscle memory to use it."

Raaj took a big bite out of the walls above them.

"Roof," Nigel motioned, running up the stairs. Hurrying past the collapsed sections of wall, they broke down the maintenance door and came out on top of the building. The sun was in its last moments of setting and Raaj was nowhere in sight. Jesse steadied his sword and stood back-to-back with Nigel, both watching the ledges for their opponent. Nigel bent down and grabbed a length of spare pipe from a pile of construction supplies under a tarp.

"I can't even hear him anymore," Jesse said, looking around and waving about his sword as he tried to get a feel for its weight.

"He's there," Nigel went quiet for several moments.

"This is an awesome sword, by the way." Jesse noted.

"Thanks," Nigel said, "it once belonged to Alexander the Great."

"Really?"

"Nah."

Raaj threw himself over the top of the roof at that moment, taking both of them by surprise. Appearing like a great mighty fire-breathing bat atop the office building, it hissed at its prey and let loose a great deafening roar.

Jesse's hidden reflexes took over as he spun around and thrust the sword upwards through the monster's jaw. He twirled the blade about again, striking the creature repeatedly in the forearms, trying to loosen its grip on the rooftop. Nigel joined in, smashing the pipe against the giant claws with more strength and devastation than Jesse

was unleashing. At most, all their attacks did was to continue to provoke the most threatening monster any one had ever seen. Raaj clambered its way over the roof, forcing Jesse and Nigel to back up against the ledge.

“Great plan, Jesse,” Nigel said.

Jesse looked down behind him at the twenty-story drop and said, “I have another plan. Just one question – how far a fall can we survive?”

Nigel perked up, “Oh, it’s one of those plans.”

With that, Nigel spontaneously grabbed Jesse and yanked him off the roof. Together, they fell towards a construction zone situated next to their building. Steel girders made up the skeleton of the skyscraper under construction. Raaj dove off the roof after them, and into the steel cage waiting for it.

As they fell into the construction site, they somehow managed to hit every single girder on the way down, as did Raaj. The skeletal infrastructure of the building proved to be too tightly knit for a beast of its size to fall through. The demon fell unto the support beams and the girders began to break loose, collapsing inward, taking Raaj with them.

Jesse and Nigel hit the ground with a resounding “OOF!” They both took a moment to heal, but not too long a moment as they rushed to get out of the way of the falling Raaj. The monster impacted with the ground leaving a noticeable imprint within the infrastructure.

Jesse and Nigel struggled across the street to avoid being hit by the falling girders as the incomplete building came crashing down on Raaj. Steel beams penetrated it from all angles and its cries were flushed out in a flurry of destruction. A large dust cloud rose up and the creature’s fiery breath faded out behind it.

The two terrified Aemons took a breather as Raaj stopped moving.

“Did we kill it?” Jesse asked, “Can it die from that?”

“Don’t know,” Nigel said, “I never dropped a building on one before.”

Then the dust exploded as the demon, snorting fire, leapt from its crater. Like a lion attacking its prey, he

opened his jaws and flew in for the kill. Jesse and Nigel were done for.

Two shots rang out.

Raaj howled in pain as he crashed down on Jesse and Nigel. Both were pinned against the immensity of the monster's body, but the monster itself was no longer attacking. It was in its death throes. Nigel saw a stream of black blood trickle down from its chest, moments before the entire body collapsed into a black mist that reeked of ozone.

In excruciating pain (but at least healing), the two old boys stood up. They held their tender, throbbing parts and looked around to see who had saved them.

No more than twenty feet away was Christine, holding a large pistol, with a very surprised Trish standing behind her. The pistol was smoking.

"Did... did I kill it?" she asked.

Nigel slowly approached her.

"How did you do that?" he asked, "What did you do?"

"I'm sorry she got away," Trish said, "Started screaming that she could help... did she?"

"Do demons usually turn into black mist like that?" Jesse asked, shaking his recovering leg as it un-crushed itself.

"No," Nigel said. "I've never seen it happen before."

He took the gun from her. It was just an ordinary pistol, but it seemed familiar.

"This is Vladimir's gun," he said.

"I picked it up after he dropped it," she said, "I thought it could help."

"Bullets can't stop these things," Nigel said. "It's impossible."

"Maybe it's magic?" suggested Jesse.

"Might I propose an alternate possibility?" asked a new voice stepping out from the shadows in the direction of the river. All four of them looked up to see a weathered old man with a dark grey beard and heavy fisherman's trench-coat step out from behind the dust. Only Nigel showed any sign of recognition.

"And what possibility is that?" Nigel asked.

"That the girl may be the chosen Warrior of the Seven," the old man replied, "The one of prophecy who can singlehandedly destroy all Chaos."

"Me?" Christine looked around to make sure he wasn't talking about someone else.

Nigel looked at the very confused Christine, and shook his head in disbelief.

"Her?" he gestured blindly in her direction, "Not a chance."

"Well, in any case, might I ask who dropped the ball on summoning Pandora?" the old man looked to Nigel and Jesse.

"It was entirely the boy's fault," Nigel said.

"And now Pandora has returned," the man put his hands in his pockets. "Well, don't keep an old sea-dog waiting. If you have a bar around here, I could use a stiff drink. Given this latest development, we have much to talk about."

Jesse stepped up to him and asked, "Do we know you?"

"Memory's gone," Nigel said. The old man nodded.

"I see," the old man took a bow and introduced himself to Jesse and the ladies, "Jezebuul, ladies, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Poseidon, God of the Sea, at your service."

8. The Warrior of the Seven

Trisha's chicken wings were delicious. Christine chomped down on one after another, savouring the sweet honey garlic sauce. It was nothing short of amazing how a vampire could cook so well with garlic. In a way, Christine likened Trisha's skill with cooking to Beethoven's inability to hear his own music – a true prodigy in itself.

Of course, this paled in comparison given that the Greek god Poseidon, Ruler of the Seas, was busy picking at everyone's hair like a chimpanzee.

They hadn't even bothered going upstairs to Nigel's studio, away from the prying ears of the regulars who had chosen to stay and drink away their remaining hours. Surprisingly, even more customers had shown up and Nigel's 'on the house' policy had depleted most of the stock behind the bar. Fortunately, they still had several kegs on hand to keep the tap running and the patrons happy. Jesse had even broken out the old karaoke machine and let everyone have free run of it.

Patti didn't even notice their arrival as she was too busy having a drunken shouting match with the drop-outs and laptop guy. Patti was a mean drunk.

When inquired about saving the world, Nigel simply stated "We killed one," and left it at that. A few people offered to help kill the next one, but Nigel politely rejected their offers, still unsure of how the first one died in the first place. It was miraculous enough that the truck still worked well enough to bring them home after the beating it took.

There weren't any sports on any of the TVs as every channel was broadcasting footage from the attacks on Halifax. Videos of their battle with Raaj were already running on the news, and outside sources had determined the force field dome to have a fifty kilometre radius from the heart of Halifax. The military was already hard at work

using heavy explosives to try and break the field, but their efforts were wasted.

"Look at this," Poseidon said, picking a small black jewel out of Christine's hair.

"What is it?" asked Jesse.

"A Chaos Tear," Poseidon commented.

"It's a specially secreted stone from a demon's body." Nigel said, "Pandora uses them like beacons so she can keep track of her bounty hunters. Vladimir must have planted it on Christine. That's how Raaj found us so quickly."

"Well, how much longer until the other six demons are here?" Trisha asked.

"That's a good question, but I can find out," Poseidon said, palming the small stone. "Nigel, if you would? I require a lantern and some silver."

"Building a relic?" Nigel asked.

Poseidon nodded, "If they can find us, we can find them."

"I don't know about lanterns, but I can make a quick run outside. Can you bring Jesse back up to speed?"

"Sure thing," Poseidon nodded.

"Yeah, I was kind of wondering why a sea god was here," Jesse said.

As Nigel left the bar, Poseidon got comfortable and helped himself to a glass of ale.

"So are Greek myths actually real?" asked Christine.

"Of course not," Poseidon said, "If myths were real, they wouldn't be myths now, would they? But that doesn't make most of our stories any less true. A bit exaggerated perhaps, with a few facts misconstrued, but angels, demons, gods, and titans... we're all very real."

"So what about Zeus? Hades? I don't know the rest... Hercules?" asked Trisha, "Are they coming, too?"

"Unfortunately, it's just me among my kin," Poseidon explained, "Many of the older gods and titans left Earth ages ago, including my brother Zeus. My other brother, Hades, is still on earth, but he's useless in a fight. Then there's my niece, Artemis, but she'd welcome a world full

of demons to hunt. We really are a disorganized bunch. My nephew Hermes could gather the rest, but he went away on business the other day and I haven't been able to reach him."

"Are there other gods besides the Greeks?" Jesse asked.

Poseidon chuckled and nodded, "Oh, there's plenty of them hanging around. The Norse, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Aztecs, the Hindus – hell, even Canada has its own gods. Problem is, most have either gone off-world, or they're tied up in personal politics with their respective pantheons. A god's involvement in anything is rather complicated these days. Besides, only the Chaos can physically get through the force field."

"How did you get in?" asked Christine.

"Quite easily," Poseidon went on. "Since I'm the last remaining sea deity, I have a special brand of teleportation that allows to me to jump into any ocean and re-surface anywhere. That includes the water in the harbor."

"But having a Olympian god on our side is perfect!" Jesse exclaimed, "Now we stand a chance against Pandora! Right? You can shoot lightning bolts and summon Krakens, can't you?"

Poseidon sighed, "Not since Titan War II, I'm afraid. All I can lend you is my knowledge and expertise in dealing with these monsters."

"Oh ...fantastic," uttered Jesse with the utmost disappointment in his tone.

"If you're expecting miracles," Poseidon went on, "the only miracle I've seen in a long, long, long, long time... was that girl slaying the Chaos of Hatred." He gestured towards Christine and drank once more.

"So how did I do it?" Christine asked, "I'm nobody special."

Poseidon stared at the gun lying on the table.

"I have no doubt that this weapon wasn't what slew the beast," he looked back to Christine, "I think it was you, the chosen Warrior of the Seven."

"The Seven what?" Jesse inquired.

“Seven Virtues,” Poseidon rummaged about in his brain for the right words, “Pandora’s Chaos demons are elementals, shaped from seven human evils, and incubated in the pits of Hell. It was prophesied that only a warrior who could master the seven virtues that complemented each evil would be able to destroy them.”

“But I’m not a master of anything!” Christine exclaimed, “I’m just a starving artist who works night shifts at a liquor store – oh, shoot,” her mind trailed off, “I didn’t call in. Oh, well. I’m sure Emma will cover me. What was I talking about again? Oh, right – I can’t be a warrior!”

“And yet, in nine thousand years, you’re the only one who has ever destroyed one of these demons,” Poseidon remarked. “This means something. This means Halifax can still be saved.”

Nigel re-entered the bar, carrying a headlight. He snatched some forks out from behind the bar. Jesse leered over at him.

“Is that a headlight from the truck?” asked Jesse.

“It should do,” Poseidon said. “Gentlemen, to the bathroom!”

Poseidon motioned for Jesse to follow him. Trish stood up, but Poseidon waved her down. “Sorry, dear, this is divine business. We’ll be back out soon. And whatever happens, make sure absolutely nobody comes in after us.”

“Great,” Trish said in a condescending, sarcastic tone. “We ladies will just sit around while the boys go to the bathroom together.”

“Be back soon,” Poseidon winked.

The three-stall men’s room was currently vacant. After confirming the stalls were empty, Poseidon opened one and motioned Nigel and Jesse to enter with him. They crowded around the toilet in the tiny stall while Poseidon began jamming the forks in around the edges of the headlight. Nigel gave the toilet a flush and lifted the seat. Jesse stared uncomfortably at the two of them, as if he’d just been invited to the most bizarre ritual imaginable.

“Any reason we’re packed together in a stall?” Jesse asked.

"We could do this by the sink, but then someone might walk in on us," Poseidon said. "Better safe than sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"Gods can't use their powers in front of people," Nigel explained, "We're Second Age, so we're exempt to the rule."

The words 'Second Age' sounds awfully familiar and personal to Jesse, but he was too distracted by the unusual contraption Poseidon was building with the headlight and forks. He watched as Poseidon jammed the Chaos Tear through a hole in the glass and shook it up. The forks poked up around the rim of the headlight like tiny spires.

"What's a relic for?" Jesse asked.

"Deities build them as power amplifiers from time to time," Nigel went on, "the Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail, or in this case, the Enchanted Forks-in-a-Headlight GPS."

"You realize silverware isn't real silver, right?" Poseidon criticized.

"For someone with your power, it shouldn't matter," Nigel said. "Are you sure you won't get in trouble for doing this?"

"I only get in trouble if I'm actively interfering in anything," Poseidon said. "This is more like reconnaissance."

"Looks like some kind of freaky satellite dish," Jesse noted.

"All right, stand back," Poseidon said. They gave Poseidon as much space between him and the toilet as they could in these cramped quarters. Poseidon's eyes started projecting a light. It was a mesmerizing, magical light that could only be described as "crystalescent". Jesse watched with great interest as Poseidon raised a sphere of floating water from the toilet and motioned it over the headlight. A glow softly channeled its way through the headlight, and the forks began infusing the water with magical energy. The energy in the water sphere began to form a rotating 3D image of the earth with tiny glowing dots everywhere.

"Now that's cool," Jesse said in awe.

Five dots were pulsing on the map. Three were in the upper reaches of North America, one in Europe, and the other down by the southern coasts of Africa.

"Those are the demons?" Jesse asked.

"We can't tell which ones, though," said Poseidon, "Only five spots. That means either another one has also died, or two are travelling together."

"One's moving east across Ontario, another's up by Greenland, and a third is in Pennsylvania," Nigel said. "This one over here is in France, and that one's out near the Antarctic Ocean. He won't be here for a while."

"Can they swim?" Jesse asked.

"Swim, fly, they do whatever they can," Nigel said, "They also move at different speeds, so they could arrive at once, one at a time, or in random groups."

"So what's the plan?" asked Jesse.

"The plan is that we put our theory to the test," Poseidon said, "They're all drawn to the Chaos Tear, so we'll set a trap. Christine will be our sniper."

"Sniper?!" Jesse's eyes shot wide with terror, "No, no, no, no! We can't drag her out into this again! Did you see the size of that last one?"

"I still think it's the gun," said Nigel, "It's been a long time since we last fought them; modern weaponry didn't exist back then. Maybe that's our edge now. Or maybe Vladimir had his modified. It could be magic."

Jesse stared with concern with Nigel. Half an hour ago, he was dead-certain there were no way to kill one of these things. Now that Nigel knew better, why did he think he was suddenly the expert on killing these monsters?

Poseidon placed the water back in the toilet and mumbled something inaudible. Nigel popped open the headlight and removed the Tear, handing it back to Poseidon.

The men took the ladies back upstairs to the studio where they explained the situation to Christine. Her reaction was about the same as Jesse's.

"And what if this doesn't work?" she asked.

"Then the city is destroyed and we all die," Poseidon shrugged. "It really is a no-brainer."

Jesse fumbled around, not liking this idea at all, but even he had to admit it, "I think you should take the shot, Christine. You don't have to do it alone. We'll all be there."

"The fewer the better," Nigel said, looking towards Trisha. "Honey, I need you to stay here. Hold down the fort."

"And let you all run off to certain doom without me?" she asked. "Intriguing proposition, but in case you haven't noticed, the fort's already been over-run. Our own waitress was last seen standing on a chair swatting at a light bulb while singing some Madonna karaoke."

"I put out a distress alert before coming," Poseidon said. "If any other gods show up to help, you send them our way."

Trisha couldn't help but feel she'd just been volunteered as a bench warmer.

"So it's decided, we set a trap and wait," said Poseidon.

"That should be my decision," said Nigel, "After all, I am five thousand years your senior, sea god, and I think we should stock up on weapons."

It sent a chill down Jesse's spine to imagine that he and Nigel pre-dated the legendary Poseidon himself.

"I'm your senior, too," said Jesse, "And I like both ideas. If Christine's the Chosen One or Vladimir's gun is just a natural demon-killing machine, we have nothing to worry about. If not, guns will be Plan B."

"And where exactly are you going to find all these guns?" Trisha asked.

"I've been collecting," Nigel reluctantly said, moving towards the back wall behind his piano. He rolled the piano out of the way and pulled down a secret panel embedded in the wall. Everyone's eyes lit up as Nigel revealed an enormous stock-pile of assault rifles, ammunition boxes, and other assorted weaponry.

"You've been keeping that in our room?!" Trisha exclaimed, digging through the pile.

"It was necessary," Nigel said.

"Where did you get all of this?" Jesse asked, "You didn't mail-order this stuff, did you?"

"Antique shops."

Trisha dug out a small flat cylinder, terror in her eyes.

"There are land mines in here!"

"And hand grenades," Nigel shrugged.

"Any RPGs?" Poseidon asked.

"Nah, couldn't find any," Nigel said with disdain.

"Do you actually know how to use all this stuff?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah, he does," Trisha said. "He used to take me to the firing range on dates. It was the only time I ever saw him take an interest in anything outside this room. We'd spend hours shooting the place up!"

"He used your dates for target practice?" Jesse asked.

"What can I say?" Nigel asked. "Have you even seen this woman hold a shotgun?"

As he said this, Trish lifted a pump-action shotgun from the pile. She glanced around the room to see all three men staring at her as if her hotness level had just sky-rocketed through the roof. This was clearly one of those guy things.

"You know there's another construction site a few blocks from here," Jesse said, trying to change the subject, "It'll be a perfect place to set a trap. We just need to get all of this in the truck and we're set. What do you think, Christine?"

They all looked to Christine who stood there in her pink top and white cargo shorts, looking dumbfounded. She shook her head with disbelief, but threw her arms up and agreed, "Sure. Why not? I'm about as excited as a girl can get when she's surrounded by giant flaming wolf-bats, angel-demons, Greek gods, and a vampire with a shotgun. Incidentally, do we have a Plan C?"

"Oh, I have a Plan C," said Poseidon, taking out his cell phone. "Let me just make one call."

It was late in the afternoon when a phone rang in a Los Angeles apartment. Jonathon Arthur Ptolemy clawed his way out of his blankets and crawled across the floor

searching for the phone. Eventually, it stopped ringing, so he gave up and went back to sleep on the filthy floor.

Then it began ringing again. He tried to pass it off as a dream, but his body got the best of it and he began searching the floor for his phone. The floor was a buffet of dirty laundry, X-Box games, and candy wrappers. He quickly found the phone beneath a pair of Boba Fett boxer-briefs and answered in a very drawly voice.

“Wahaahszhzz?” he muttered.

“J. Arthur Ptolemy, this is Poseidon,” said Poseidon, “It’s time.”

“Time?” Ptolemy muttered again, “No, not time! Sleep! Final exams in the morning!”

“It’s seven in the evening where you are,” Poseidon said. “You slept in all day again. The exams are over.”

“Wha?? That’s not right,” Ptolemy crawled over to his computer and checked the clock. “Oh, wait – nah – you’re right. That sucks. What day is it again?”

“Chaos is descending upon the city of Halifax,” Poseidon said, “And if we can’t stop them, the world will end. This is what we’ve trained for.”

“Do you think they’ll let me take another make-up exam?” Ptolemy asked. “This was already a make-up exam. I just want to know how many of those I can miss before they kick me out of school.”

“Just get your ass to Halifax now.”

“Wait a minute,” Ptolemy tried to remember something. “You know, I’ll have to take a rain check. Me and my buddies, we’re supposed to be doing a Doctor Who marathon over at the common house. I’m already late; it’s my turn to bring the chips and there’s going to be this girl there and...”

“I won’t ask you again, Ptolemy,” Poseidon said.

“All right, all right, just give me an hour or something,” he said.

“You’ve got ten minutes.” Poseidon said, and hung up.

“Man, this sucks.”

Ptolemy got to his feet and shuffled his feet to the bathroom. He couldn’t believe the ridiculousness of it all.

Not once did Poseidon ever show up at a convenient time. Not once on a boring day did the god ever decide to show up and make life a little more interesting. No, he just lived to make Ptolemy's life ever the more complicated.

He could have fallen asleep under the warm shower had Poseidon's voice not been nagging at the back of his mind. He stepped out of the tub, did his routine toiletry business and got dressed in a simple white T-shirt and khaki shorts.

He put on his sunglasses and tried to absorb what Poseidon had been talking about. The situation did sound serious enough, but what did Poseidon expect him to do about it? He hadn't even fed his goldfish yet, so he took care of that business directly, but took his time about it.

Then he texted his friends and told them he'd have to bail tonight. As usual, his friends replied with the typical onslaught of derogatory terms. Ptolemy knew he wouldn't be hearing the end of this for a while. Nobody bails on Doctor Who Night.

Throwing on his jacket, he left his flat, locked the door and crossed the street to a small gas station. In the back of the store, he poured himself a cup of not-so-fresh coffee and went to pay for it. The elderly woman behind the counter stared at this boy with a sense of general apathy.

"You look like hell," she said.

"Yeah," Ptolemy nodded, blowing on his coffee, "I think 'tequila shots before exams' wasn't my best idea. Especially twelve of them. Hey, which way from here is Halifax, do you think?"

"Is that in Europe?" she asked.

"Canada," he remembered. "Somewhere on the eastern seaboard."

"That in Newfoundland?" she asked.

"Maybe," Ptolemy shrugged. "Maybe I should look it up on my computer first? Nah. I'll check Newfoundland. I'm sure someone there can give me directions."

"Why are you going to Halifax?"

"Gotta save the world."

"Fair 'nuff."

He made his way out of the gas station and stared up at the sky, taking a sip of his drink. He took a wild guess at which way Halifax was.

"Sometimes," he said aloud to himself, "destiny can be a real pain in the ass."

And with that, he soared into the sky and disappeared into the horizon.

9. Operation Overkill

The trap was simple enough. The Chaos Tear had been placed under a pile of rubble in the center of a construction zone. No actual construction had taken place yet, so the parcel of land was completely vacant (save for some equipment and vehicles scattered about) and was perfect for target practice. It was cradled between another office building and a parkade, which is where, everyone agreed, it was ideal for the stake-out. The intruding night would provide the perfect cover.

Jesse and Nigel were up on the fourth floor of the parkade, and safely off the roof (out of sight from any flying demons) and accompanied by Poseidon and Christine. There were curiously very few pedestrians and almost no traffic in the streets, as if the day's events had driven the community into the safety of their homes.

Nigel was carefully sorting through a pile of guns they had hauled up the stairs. Submachine guns, sniper rifles, and AK-47s were but a few of the armaments strewn across three empty parking spots. They had even accounted for ammunition which took up another four spots. Jesse had suggested this might be overkill, but the look on Nigel's face told him that all of this might not be enough. It didn't even include all the artillery they had left in the truck.

Poseidon, Jesse, and Christine camped out about thirty feet away from Nigel. Poseidon, now armed with his trident, waited patiently, tucked between a parked car and a short blockade that gave him a clear view of the site. Jesse and Christine sat on the ground nearby, anxiously awaiting their prey. Jesse had brought his sword and kept it sheathed over his shoulder, knowing full well it wouldn't fare him too well in this fight. Christine had never been more scared in her life.

"When we say so," Jesse told her, "Just take the shot. It'll be okay."

Christine found herself staring at Poseidon and his trident. His trident was a shimmering bronze colour, double ended as it had a full trident on each end. She wondered how useful he would be in a fight without his powers.

"If I weren't here," she said, "would you be able to use your powers to fight them?"

"No," Poseidon shook his head. "We can't use our gifts to interfere with mankind's fate, and that includes fighting the Chaos. And even if I could, I wouldn't stand a chance."

"So what does a god without powers do with his time?" she asked.

"Mostly travel and read," Poseidon said. "It's no different from being retired."

"What do you read?" asked Christine.

"I like Tom Clancy," Poseidon admitted. "And I really like Moby Dick. I always root for the whale."

Jesse wondered, "Why can't you use your powers again?"

"It's because of the Aeonomega." Poseidon said, "It's a very old war ritual."

"You lost your powers in the war?" Jesse asked.

"To really understand the war, you need to understand history itself," Poseidon gazed into the night. "Has Nigel told you the true history of the planet yet? Did he tell you anything about the ancients?"

Jesse shook his head no. "Just the bits about Pandora."

Poseidon prepared to explain. "Earth itself has experienced six ages since the First Light. An age, by the way, is defined by the period in which a divine ruler, or ruling class, controls the planet and its unique energies."

"I know some Greek stories," Jesse said, "The Olympian Gods ruled the Silver Age."

"The Fifth Age, yes," Poseidon said, "The First Age, the Age of Light, was ruled by the Creator. You may know of it as the Six Days of Creation from the Bible. Only instead of six days, the Age lasted millions and millions of years. Of

course, you try telling the Creator how long a day is supposed to be.”

“By Creator, you mean God, right?” asked Christine.

“God, Allah, Jehovah, Atum, Pan Gu, Chuck Norris,” Poseidon shrugged. “Pick your name. More or less, every religion is right.”

Christine, for some reason, was having a harder time accepting this than she had believing in the ancient sea deity sitting right in front of her. “So, THE God is real? If He’s real, why isn’t He here helping us?”

“You know, that’s actually His least favourite question,” Poseidon pointed out. “We deities try not to question the Creator’s methods. He tends not to hold back on the lightning when it comes to immortals.”

“Have you ever met God?” Jesse asked.

“I don’t know,” Poseidon said. “The Creator takes on the form of whomever we imagine Him to be, no matter how extraordinary or mundane. I could have met Him many times and not recognized Him.”

“So if I pictured God as an old man,” Christine said, “He’d appear to me as an old man?”

“What if I pictured him as Raptor Cop?” Jesse asked.

Poseidon continued, deliberately ignoring their questions, “You may also know about the War of the Angels. It was the revolution led by Lucifer who revolted against the Creator and tried to claim Earth for himself. This was the beginning of the Aeonomega in which the Creator decided that if Lucifer and his fallen angels wanted Earth, they would have to fight the Creator for it. The nature of the Aeonomega is that both sides would lay out a set of rules to ensure a fair fight, and the Creator would referee the battle and punish those who broke the rules.”

“So wait, they had a battle where they fought the Referee?” asked Jesse, “Isn’t that kind of... one-sided? I mean, the Referee upholds the rules, right?”

“True, but the Creator always had a sense of humour,” Poseidon said, “He was toying with them. There was no way they could ever win. But in the end, He forfeited the

match and gave the earth over to Lucifer's angels, anyway."

"Why did He do that?" asked Christine.

"I know it's a strange choice," Poseidon muttered, "But it did set the Great Plan in motion."

"The first Aeonomega ended with Lucifer's fallen angels inheriting the Earth, and taking a small portion of the Creator's power with them. But the joke was on them as life on Earth was hellish and brutal, and many of Lucifer's followers abandoned him and chose to follow their own respective factions. It took them thousands of years before they got it running properly. It was the birth of Earth's oldest pagan religions, and the birth of the Second Age, the Age of Fire. That's the power from which Jesse and Nigel were born."

Poseidon tried to recollect what happened next, "And then came Pandora's demons. At first, the angels tried to destroy them themselves, but when Pandora learned of the Aeonomega, she challenged the angels to a battle in order to strip them of their power."

"And how did that end?" asked Jesse.

"It could have ended worse," Poseidon said, "The spoils they decided on involved Lucifer and his minions returning to the depths of the nether-world. I don't know by what means Pandora won, but the battle was bloody and lasted several decades. You would have been able to tell me more, Jesse, as you were around at the time."

Nigel spoke up, clearly listening to the story, "Lucifer's angels outclassed Pandora's demons in strength and numbers, but the demons made up for it in resilience. The battle lasted for decades across the planet and ended with Lucifer's army in full retreat. That's the power we're going up against."

"So this Aeonomega," Jesse said, shaking off Nigel's ominous forecast, "It's like a battle royale of the ancients? With God as the Referee?"

"Except that a battle royale involves one man left standing," Christine corrected Jesse. "This sounds more like a team death-match."

“Yes,” Poseidon said, “In this case, an Aeonomega can only happen if a descendant-class deity challenges a senior-class deity to a battle. Angels, demons, titans, gods, and demigods - demigods are the youngest class, so they could challenge any higher class to a battle for their powers. Then a time and place must be determined, a wager must be made, and three rules must be set on both sides. Failure to comply with any rule then results in immediate disqualification, forfeit, or punishment... which can be very hazardous to one’s health. Let’s just say that you shouldn’t get the Referee angry.”

“What kind of rules do you set?” Jesse asked.

“Well, like I said, the Aeonomega is about having a fair fight,” Poseidon explained. “A ruling class must prove their worth without any overwhelming advantage. For example, at the height of their power, the titans were rulers of time, space, and life itself. If they wanted to, they could have cast the gods to the end of the universe or even the end of time. So when we fought them, rules were set to make sure things like that didn’t happen. Likewise, the titans had us agree that only three gods could battle any one titan at a time, since sheer numbers were to our advantage. It took me eight years as it was just to defeat my father, Kronos, and that was with the help of Zeus and Hades. The titans had to set similar rules when battling the Chaos or they would have been destroyed in a heartbeat.”

“So the Chaos ruled the Third Age...” Christine summed up.

“Yes, the Age of Darkness.” Poseidon said, “The titans eventually challenged the Chaos - many times, actually. They never won until Pandora got fed up with them and threw the fight just to get them off her back. That was the birth of the Fourth Age – the Golden Age.”

“And the gods beat the titans, right?” asked Christine, “Silver Age?”

“That’s correct,” Poseidon said, “We ended up banishing them to Tartarus and taking their powers for ourselves. We reigned in an era of peace and order until the demigods started getting uppity.”

"So how did you lose your powers?" asked Jesse.

"A certain demigod released the titans from Tartarus, and set them upon us," Poseidon could feel a heaviness coming down on him as he recounted the event, "The titans challenged us to a second Aeonomega, and in determining the battle conditions, the demigod played mediator for us and found a loophole that would strip both the gods and titans of their powers if either side won."

"In order to keep the demigods from inheriting our strength, we made a truce with the titans to no longer use our divine abilities to rule man. We would pass our inheritance of Earth to the demigods, but they would have no control over the sky, oceans, or after-worlds. Much like the Creator, we decided to see how they would fare on their own. And it's been like that ever since."

"So we're in the sixth age, ruled by demigods?" asked Christine.

"Indeed," Poseidon nodded, "Most of history's most influential figures were secretly demigods. Most modern celebrities as well. It seems as the divinities evolve, our classes become more and more human. Soon, mankind will rule without any of us."

"And then what happens?" she asked.

"Haven't a damn clue," Poseidon shrugged. "There's been an increase in immortal humans lately. Maybe they'll start evolving into gods and the tables will turn on the rest of us ancients. Anything is possible."

"But back to the situation at hand," Jesse asked, "there's nothing divine you can do to help us fight?"

"If I break the truce and use my powers to interfere with the world of man, the titans could hold council as a means to return to power," Poseidon said, "We have enough problems without them running around as well."

"But you used your powers to get here, right?" asked Jesse.

"I can only use my powers when I'm alone or in the presence of senior classes," Poseidon said, "That's why many of us left the planet – to find new worlds where we

didn't have to live like mortals. But to use our powers in front of men would shatter any truce we ever had."

"Wow," Christine said.

"If you're done with your history lesson, how about you give that Ptolemy guy another call?" shouted Nigel, "I want to meet him."

"Who is Ptolemy?" asked Jesse.

"He's a Zodiac knight," Poseidon said, "A human mortal chosen to directly inherit the powers of the Creator. Whenever one dies, another is born. We found Ptolemy about ten years ago in California. We've tried to train him, but they're resilient at a young age; especially these days with their video games and café lattes. But if anyone truly stands a chance in this fight, it's him."

"Where is he?" asked Jesse.

"That's a good question," Poseidon said, as he dialed in the number attempting to reach him. "He wields First Age magic; he should have no problem stepping across the country." They'd been waiting over half an hour for the guy.

Nigel seemed to smell something on the wind. There was a faint itchy feeling in the air. Nigel took that as a cue to take his position.

"What's going on?" asked Christine. Poseidon put away his phone and motioned for her and Jesse to stay as low as they could. They ducked down under the blockade and peered out across the construction site.

And then they saw it.

The demon came up from the ground. Like a very angry mole, he burrowed his way out from beneath a backhoe, knocking it over and shook off the dirt. He was much smaller than Raaj, but also uglier. He was human in basic appearance with a hunched-over, hulk-like build, but his face was wrapped in metal bands, and plates were bolted in all over his bruised, deformed body. He carried himself like a beast of burden, which was fitting because two large bull horns protruded from his skull. Wrapped around his wrists were barbed wires on which hung two large serrated blades dragging on the ground.

The abomination stopped to scoop up a handful of nearby cement mix and proceed to swallow it, as if it were meant to do something. Moments later, he spit it out and began to search for the Chaos Tear.

"What is it?" Jesse asked.

"It's Turk, the Chaos of Pain and Misery," Poseidon whispered.

"Turk?" Jesse asked, "Like the guy from the story?"

"Did you really think Pandora would grant him a simple, merciful death?" Poseidon asked.

"I guess not, but this..." Jesse looked at the ungainly form below, "This is just sick."

Christine was frozen in shock at the appearance of Turk. Part of her was terrified, but seeing him like this also brought out the sympathy in her. "He's hurt."

"He's always in pain," Poseidon said, "You can end it. Put him out of his misery."

"I can't," she said. She knew what she had to do, but didn't want to be one to do it. Now that she knew these things were human, it was suddenly a lot harder to pull the trigger.

"You have to," Poseidon saw that she was lowering the pistol. He held it firmly by the barrel and helped her steady its aim back at the monster. "We need to make sure you are who we think you are."

"This doesn't feel right."

"Do it." Poseidon said, letting go of the barrel.

"She says she doesn't want to," Jesse whispered, "Maybe it is the gun that can kill them. Give it to me. I'll try it."

"We will not get a second chance at this," Poseidon said, "These demons never give anyone a second chance. She killed one; she has to take the shot."

Suddenly, Turk turned his warped face towards Christine, as if to sense her inner pain. The shock of knowing that the pain demon was staring right at her made her jump. She held onto the gun, of course, but Poseidon and Jesse were the first ones to really panic.

Caught up in their arguing, they both reached for the gun and pulled it out of her hands, causing it to fall off the parkade. They watched it land on the pavement below.

"Nigel!" Poseidon yelled, "Plan B! Plan B! Plan B!"

Nigel acknowledged Plan B, threw a few grenades out into the construction yard and opened fire with a hunting rifle directed at Turk's heart. The first impact took Turk by surprise, and the ensuing explosions knocked him off his feet, but only momentarily. They could already see the demon's burns healing as he got back up.

Desperately, Nigel swapped out the hunting rifle for an assault rifle and kicked a few more guns over to the other three. Jesse and Poseidon joined in as Nigel leaned over the wall and filled Turk's struggling body with lead. The rain of bullets made the demon twist and turn in excruciating torture. Still, nothing they inflicted on Turk appeared to be permanent.

"Guns aren't killing it!" Poseidon shouted over the gunfire.

"Keep shooting!" Nigel yelled, swapping out clips.

Just then, Turk took Nigel's momentary reprieve as an opportunity to get on his feet. Rearing up, he then sprung forward in a mighty bound, flying up four stories and crashing through the walls of the parkade, right in the middle of everyone. He took both blades in hand and threw them at Nigel.

Concrete exploded over Nigel's head as the blade pierced the wall and the barbed wire rang past his ear. Nigel ran forward, grabbing onto the barbed wire and yanked the blade out of the wall. He then turned in Turk's direction as Turk pulled back on the wire, and drove the weapon deep into the monster's chest. Turk keeled over only for a moment, but managed to pull the blade out without any blood loss whatsoever. He swung his weapon, throwing Nigel into a nearby car. Nigel impacted with enough force to shatter the windshield, break off the driver's side door, and leave a Nigel-shaped dent in the hood.

As Turk looked around for his other prey, he was met with a barrage of bullets at point blank range against his head. Poseidon screamed in fury as he emptied a clip right into the monster's temple. Then, throwing away his gun, readied his trident as Turk swung his blades around again.

Like a Shaolin monk, Poseidon wielded his trident with professionally honed skill and lightning fast reflexes. The blades sparked against the trident with every blow, and with every blow, Poseidon managed to cut another gash into the lumbering hulk's torso.

Nigel was back on his feet and joining in, trying to take out Turk's knee-caps with a shotgun. Still, for all their efforts, they did little to slow the monster down.

Jesse and Christine quickly hid in the vehicle that Nigel had smashed into and watched the battle unfurl.

"Okay, here's the plan," Jesse said, "You stay here; I'll go get Vladimir's gun."

"Why do you have to go?" asked Christine, "Why don't we just go together?"

"Actually, you're right - that's a better plan," Jesse agreed, "We make a run for the stairs in three, two..."

Just then, a large blade embedded itself in the car's roof. The car was yanked away with incredible force, causing Jesse to fall out the driver's side door, with Christine still inside. Turk swung the car around like a ball on a chain, forcing Poseidon and Nigel to hit the deck. Christine screamed for dear life as she white-knuckled the steering wheel.

Doing as little thinking as possible, Jesse rushed towards the swinging vehicle and tried to catch it. This worked out exactly as you would have thought. The car smashed against the wall, crushing Jesse against it. The crush was only momentary as Turk pulled the vehicle back to take another swing at Poseidon. Jesse regenerated off the wall in a flash of flame and continued working his way around the demon.

Once again, Jesse tried to leap onto the swinging vehicle, and actually succeeded that time. He threw himself into the open door as the car landed against

another wall. Of course, now that he was back in the car, he wasn't sure what to do.

Turk stopped swinging that blade momentarily as Nigel leapt on his back and drove a combat knife with a grenade attached into the back of his shoulder blade. Both he and Poseidon hit the deck as the grenade crippled part of the monster's arm, stunning him in the process. In these few brief moments, the car stopped swinging around and was now sitting firmly on all four wheels back in its original spot with Jesse and Christine still in their seats, stunned. The large blade sat motionless in the vehicle's roof while Turk tried to regain proper control of his disabled limb.

As Jesse looked at the dashboard in the aftermath of the confusion, he was suddenly struck with inspiration. The access panel beneath the steering wheel had come off in the assault and the wiring harness was dangling by his legs. He quickly squeezed down and began working with the wires. Christine watched as he used his teeth to strip away some insulation from the wires and began touching them together.

"Are you trying to hotwire this car?" she asked.

"Don't worry, I almost know exactly what I'm doing," he said.

"How?!" she asked.

"I watch a lot of movies."

Suddenly, she heard the car engine revving. Jesse looked up and showed her some wires.

"Keep touching this wire to this other wire," he told her. "I need to do this with another car."

As she took the wires from him, Jesse hopped out of the car and hurried two parking spots over to a neighbouring vehicle. Along the way, Jesse picked up a small handgun that had been tossed across the parkade in the fight. He fired right at Turk's head. The sparks off the metal bandages caught the demon's attention. Jesse waved his arms like an idiot.

"Over here, ugly!" he shouted, not taking the time to come up with a more clever insult.

In his delirium, Turk swung his second blade. Jesse leapt over it, feeling incredible pain as the blade sliced through his legs which regenerated instantly in a blaze. The blade embedded itself into the car's bumper.

"That's two," Jesse said, opening the vehicle's busted door and reaching under the steering wheel. He reached for the access cover under the steering wheel, and quickly realized he needed a screwdriver to get it off. He cursed as he fumbled with the cover, desperately striking it with all his strength to no avail.

Turk, in the confusion, swung his blade and sent Jesse's car flying upwards into the ceiling. It crashed back down in the same spot as Jesse sat upright to brace himself, the blade still firmly lodged in the bumper. Poseidon quickly jammed his trident into Turk's other shoulder blade, temporarily preventing Turk from swinging his weapon again.

A small spare key fell out of the overhead sun visor into Jesse's hand. With cautious optimism, he put the key in the ignition and turned it. The car started.

"That'll do," he smiled, thanking the car's owner for recklessly leaving their keys lying around. He gave a thumbs-up to Christine who gave a thumbs-up back, as she revved her engine.

Nigel finally saw what he was doing. Both barbed wires were crossed over in front of Turk, and the blades were stuck in two different vehicles. Rushing away from the fight, Nigel hurried over to Christine's car and told her to get out. Christine quickly exited the car and moved aside as Nigel hopped into the driver's seat and waited for Jesse's signal.

Jesse waved.

Both Nigel and Jesse hit their accelerators simultaneously. Each vehicle pressed forward with a sudden burst of speed. Poseidon got out of the way as both vehicles raced past Turk, dragging the barbed wire back into him. Turk raised his arms, only making it worse as the wire dug into his wrists and against his neck. He

was pulled off his feet and dragged headfirst across the parkade.

At the last moment, Jesse and Nigel leapt from their respective cars as the vehicles collided against the breaker. While the breaker held, Turk was thrown backwards out of the parkade. He was airborne only for a moment before swinging back against the building with the barbed wire wrapped around his wrists and neck.

Everyone peered over the edge at the hanging beast.

"That won't hold him for long," Nigel said, "Poseidon, cut him free. Jesse, downstairs with me now!"

Nigel and Jesse hurried downstairs and rushed to the construction site. Along the way, they spotted some thin steel bars piled up, which Nigel told Jesse to gather up for him. They then hurried back to the parkade and stood by the wall near Turk as Poseidon finished cutting him loose.

The monster fell to the ground, landing on his back. Suddenly, Turk found himself skewered to the pavement as Nigel drove several steel bars through each of the monster's limbs and other body parts with his bare hands. Jesse watched in amazement as Nigel pinned down the monster in seconds flat. He wondered if super-human strength was a detail Nigel had neglected to mention during his Aemon briefing.

Poseidon finished it by leaping off the parkade and driving his trident right through Turk's neck, completely stopping his movement. Thanks to the trident and the rebar, Turk was efficiently anchored.

Everyone stood around and looked at their handiwork. Turk was still very much alive and moaning.

"Plan B was very effective," Jesse commented.

"Jesse, if I were you, I'd be grabbing Vladimir's gun," Nigel sneered at him.

Jesse nodded and ran off to find the pistol.

"Good thing it was only Turk," Nigel said, "The other demons won't get pinned down so easily."

"That was easy?" asked Jesse, returning with the gun.

"Give it to Christine," Nigel said, "And let her finish the job."

“She doesn’t want to shoot him,” Jesse said.

Nigel reached forward, took the gun forcibly from Jesse and proceeded to fire two shots directly into the monster’s heart. Again, the monster didn’t bleed. Instead, skin healed over the wounds and the monster began to squirm again.

“Okay,” Nigel said, throwing the gun to Christine, “We’ve confirmed the gun isn’t magical. Warrior of the Seven, show us your stuff.”

Christine slowly stepped up to Turk and looked at the pitiful monster he had become. This wasn’t like shooting Raaj. Turk had been easy to subdue because he wasn’t a killer at heart – he was just following orders. Realizing this, she found the creature’s pain was becoming her own. The longer she hesitated, the more reluctant she grew to finish the job. She cradled the gun in her hands and then slowly took aim at Turk.

“He’s always in pain,” Jesse reminded her, “He’s hoping you’ll do this. You’ll be doing him a favour.”

Christine closed her eyes and squeezed off a single shot.

10. Streets of Chaos

As it turns out, Christine was not the fabled Warrior of the Seven, because Turk survived the gunshot.

"Try it again," said Nigel.

"But..." she protested.

"One more time?" Poseidon asked.

Christine closed her eyes and fired again. Turk stopped moving, but only for an instant before he surprised everyone by howling again. His wounds were starting to heal.

At this point, Christine was no longer feeling any pangs of sympathy for this creature. She had just put two holes in his heart and he was still moving. Without even closing her eyes, she fired three more rounds into the head and fired a few more into random parts of his body for good measure.

"Just die!" she screamed. Turk didn't die.

"I guess I was wrong," Poseidon said, "Well, as long as we have him pinned down, does everyone want to take a crack at it?"

Everybody took turns attacking and mutilating the poor monster, trying everything from shooting a crater through his body to decapitating him. This went on for about fifteen minutes before they realized that they were getting nowhere. They couldn't even sever a limb. Something always held that last piece of skin on, allowing the rest of him to heal. Even Christine was getting frustrated.

"How about fire?" she asked, "We haven't tried fire yet."

"Or we could cook him in a nuclear explosion," Jesse remarked. "Did you have any nukes in that pantry of yours?"

"This doesn't make sense," Poseidon was extremely agitated, "Think, Christine, think! How did you kill Raaj? Was there anything special happening?"

"It just happened!" Christine said, "I saw him coming at Jesse and... my hand just found the gun in my pocket!"

"Were the stars aligned in a special way?" Poseidon was throwing out ideas, "Did you feel possessed at any point? Are you on your period?"

"No... I don't know!" Christine was getting angry.

"We have to act fast," Nigel said, "Two more of these things will be arriving shortly."

Poseidon was checking his phone again, "Still no sign of Ptolemy. I don't know if he'd even be able to handle this."

"You should text him," Christine said.

"I don't text," Poseidon sneered, "No sea god should ever have to type with their thumbs."

"Hey... sea god... could we drown him?" asked Jesse, "We could at least try giving him a painless death."

Ears perked up.

"A painless death?" Poseidon was intrigued by this. "A painless death for a pain demon? That actually sounds like a plausible solution, all things considered."

"Should I grab a pillow?" Nigel sighed.

"We could shoot him up with morphine!" Jesse was excited about this idea.

"Or horse tranquilizers!" Christine was all over this as well.

Nigel shook his head in disbelief, "What's the point? We're wasting time here. We should just get back, grab Trish, and get out while we still can."

"Dude, we have the monster right here!" Jesse exclaimed. "Let's just finish him off!"

"There are five more of these things!" Nigel yelled, "They know we're here. Even if we were to bury ourselves, they'd still find us now that Vladimir's in the city. At this point, they could just have him smell us out."

"We have to try something," Jesse said, "We have to make a stand or this entire city's done for."

"That's the attitude I'm talking about!" Nigel smugly said, "We can do it! We can defeat them! Of course, we never do. That fluke with Raaj was just a fluke. But hey, at least

we have to try. Those are the keywords, aren't they? *HAVE TO TRY*. It's not like we have nothing to lose!"

"You're less than constructive right now," Jesse bluntly stated, "A little more optimism would be appreciated."

"I'm swimming in optimism!" Nigel said, "I'm optimistic we're going to die, I'm optimistic that Pandora will recover the key, and I'm optimistic that the entire world is going to end because you two love-birds couldn't keep your grubby paws off each other!"

Christine punched him in the arm. Nigel shook it off. Jesse held her back before she could go after him.

"Easy there, girl!" Jesse warned her.

"No, if he wants to fight, we'll fight!" she said, "I don't care if he's immortal – I'm sick and tired of his attitude! I never wanted to cause the end of the world! I didn't ask for this! You and me! Right here, right now! May the best girl win!"

"You think that hurt?" Nigel asked, "Go ahead! Hit me again!"

"Can't we all just get along?!" begged Jesse.

"Quiet, all of you!" Poseidon ordered them in his loudest voice. Everyone shut up. He was holding a hand to his ear and heard a faint buzzing in the air. It was getting louder.

"Yeah," Nigel said, "I think we should all get back to the truck right now."

"But what about Turk?" asked Jesse.

"There's nothing we can do about him," Nigel said, "because his reinforcements have arrived."

"To the truck then," Jesse said.

Jesse rushed across the street, watching the sky. Apparently more demons were in the area, and one of them buzzed. He hopped into the driver's side while Christine hopped over his lap into the passenger side. Nigel and Poseidon leapt into the truck bed and started digging through the additional weapons they'd brought.

Nigel caught sight of a shadow buzzing past in the sky, "Get us out of here."

Jesse pulled out and raced into the empty streets, heading back towards the bar.

"Take the long way around," Nigel said, shouting from the truck-bed, "We might need to lose them on the way to the tavern."

"Where are they?" Christine asked.

"Believe me, if we can't see them, it's all the better." Poseidon said. His words were brought to a halt by a giant snake-lady crashing down in the streets in front of them. Jesse swerved to a stop, everyone holding on for their lives, and stared up at the monstrosity before them.

She was enormous – over five stories tall - her head swimming in dark magenta mist pouring from her hair-like snakes. Her upper-half (while covered in scales) was gorgeous and well-toned, with heaving bosoms, slender arms and pouting lips. The lower half beyond past her hips was coated in mist and laid out all over the street like a snake's tail, with no evidence of legs anywhere. For a demon, she was very beautiful, but much like a puddle of gasoline; it was a ravishingly grotesque kind of beautiful.

"Floor it, Jesse!" Nigel yelled, "Floor it!"

Jesse drove down the adjoining street as quickly as possible just before the snake-woman lobbed her tail around and brought it crashing down into the pavement where they'd just been. The tail struck with the force of an asteroid, sending pavement in all directions. She hissed and began crawling after them.

Poseidon loaded one of the assault rifles and began shooting at her. She twisted about as the bullets pierced her scaly skin. Crawling on her belly like a crocodile, she clambered along the side of a building and took refuge in an alley.

"Always shoot for her face!" Poseidon yelled, "She hates that."

They heard a loud howling approaching. They turned their heads around in time see Turk's massive figure leaping over the construction site's fence, pulling Poseidon's trident out of his neck. He began chasing after the truck like an enraged gorilla.

"Who freed him?" Jesse asked.

“His other friend is here!” Nigel said, standing up in the back of the truck and pointing at the sky. He threw a tarp off a large concealed weapon, and hoisted it up with great difficulty to reveal an enormous mini-gun he’d been saving for a rainy day. He began firing into the sky at the flying demon that was descending upon them. The gunfire illuminated the sky, revealing the creature hovering over their heads. It had the appearance of a hellish dragonfly crossbred with an alien carnivore and covered in oil. Its wings emitted a loud buzzing sound. In its claws, it held the steel bars that they had used to pin down Turk. It began throwing them at the truck.

“Evasive maneuvers, Jesse!” Nigel said, “Swerve, damn it!”

Jesse was already swerving, and it did nothing to stop the spikes from skewering the truck-bed. Nigel threw himself in front of Poseidon and the cabin to protect them, taking a steel bar straight through the hip. Nigel pulled the bar from his hip, swung his massive gun around and began shooting at the dragonfly again.

For all the trouble they were having simply keeping their balance in the back of this moving vehicle, Nigel was finding no difficulty in laying waste to his opponents. He was absolutely determined not to let them get any closer.

Poseidon continued to shoot at Turk, who pressed on in spite of being riddled with bullets. Pain simply wasn’t a deterrent for him.

The snake-lady swooped in from an alley ahead and swung down at the vehicle with her giant hand. Jesse hit the brake, allowing her to miss as her claws came right down in front of the vehicle. The vehicle bounced as Turk grabbed onto the back of the truck bed and dragged on the pavement. He was attempting to claw at Poseidon as Nigel was concurrently swapping out ammo clips.

As the vehicle maneuvered around the hand, Christine looked up through the window and saw the gaping mouth of the snake-woman as she hissed at them. At the same time, Christine’s hand found a land mine in the front seat, and a strange epiphany hit her. The disk was heavy, but a

childhood of playing with Frisbees had prepared her for this moment.

She flung the land mine out of the window with all her might straight into the mouth of the giant snake-woman. As the woman bit down on the mine, her mouth exploded in flames, and a stunned look overcame her. She flailed and flopped in excruciating pain as she began to fall forward.

Jesse hit the accelerator, driving through the snake-lady's cleavage, beneath her belly and around her hips before she completely hit the ground, shaking Turk off their truck in the process. They drove through the magenta mist of her tail, choking on its thick fumes, and sped away.

Only concerned for the well-being of her face, the snake-lady rolled around, clawing at her wounds. Her giant tail swung through the air, swatting the dragonfly against the side of a building and flattening Turk on its way back down.

The truck turned the corner and made its escape.

"Nice throwing arm," Jesse complimented Christine.

"Good driving," she replied. "Let's never do that again."

Poseidon opened the cabin window and shouted to them "Speak for yourself – I wish I had a camera for that one!"

"Who are they?" asked Christine, "What are they?"

"Despair is the flying bugger," Poseidon said, "It's the Chaos of... Despair. We really don't have a name for it."

"The big ugly wench is Venya," Nigel said, "The Chaos of Hubris, Arrogance, Vanity, Selfishness. All the worst aspects of pride, basically."

Venya erupted from another alley behind him, more furious than ever. She began slithering after them again at an accelerated rate.

"Vanity..." Christine started to wonder, "Jesse, take a right up here!"

Not arguing, Jesse turned right on the street ahead.

"Drive two blocks and take a left!" she ordered.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Before she could answer, Venya came down around them, smashing her arms wildly against the pavement,

trying to overturn the vehicle. Jesse focused on any open space, trying to avoid the crashing limbs while the others continued to fire various weapons.

Finally, Nigel threw his gun away, "I'm out!" He grabbed one of the steel bars that infiltrated the truck bed and began jabbing at Venya whenever her face got close enough. She was so busy trying to keep up with the vehicle that she was having an even harder time trying to hit it now.

Jesse took the left. "Okay, end of the road, now where?" he asked. "Left or right?"

"Anywhere," Christine yelled, "And cross your fingers!"

For poops and giggles, Jesse took a hard right.

As he drove away, everyone watched as Venya suddenly stopped chasing them and seemed stuck in a trance in the middle of the intersection. She was looking into a tall building covered in windows and admiring her reflection.

"Well, I'll be damned," Poseidon said.

Nigel looked around to be sure that the others weren't following them. There was a good chance that Despair was still flattened against a building somewhere and Turk was still pulling himself off the pavement. They could now safely return to the bar and come up with another plan.

As they drove off into the night, a blinding light could be seen falling through the sky south of their location. It disappeared into the city.

Nigel felt uneasy about the light, having seen it before.

Pandora was here.

11. Playing with Madness

Pandora's power over the Chaos was overwhelming. With but a thought, she could summon them, and summon them she did. Despair scraped itself off the building it was plastered on, and flew off to find her. Turk pulled his head out of the street and stumbled blindly into the night. As for Venya, she just rolled her eyes and slithered off, fed up with having to do anything that wasn't in her own best interest.

On their own terms, the demons would have nothing to do with Pandora. She may have hosted a demon, but it didn't possess her. She still retained her human aspects, and her inner demon contributed nothing to her already-fractured mind. In fact, it seemed like it was she who possessed her demon, and this is what ultimately terrified the other Chaos. Insanity fueled her natural sorceress abilities on a level beyond a demon's understanding. This made her a very scary person to work for, and an even scarier person to disobey.

The three demons were led into a middle city high school from which their mistress had summoned them. Venya was forced to shrink herself down to human size just to fit inside the doors, but still insisted on riding Despair through the hallways. Turk lumbered on behind.

They entered the school gymnasium where they found Pandora playing basketball with two of the night janitors. The two elderly gentlemen had just woken up from an all-day nap in the supply closet, and now were having the time of their lives going two-on-one against this young woman who had arrived out of nowhere.

Pandora had cleaned herself up for her arrival in the city. While still dangling in chains with her box hung over her shoulder like a purse, her clothing and make-up were no longer rags and crayons. She wore a black mini-dress

and had put on proper dark mascara and lipstick. Her black hair was still a fright, but as least it was no longer a rainbow of unpleasant colours. Of course, she was still crazy for playing basketball in high heels, but she had easily mastered the art of being crazy ages ago. Not that she liked being reminded about it, of course.

Venya, Turk and Despair bowed before their master. The janitors were taken aback by their presence, fumbling the ball in disbelief. Pandora quietly turned to the three of them, raised her arms and laughed.

“So who’s got the key for me?” she asked. The three demons exchanged looks.

“What the hell are those?!” one of the janitors asked.

“These?” she asked, “These are my friends. My loyal, faithful, trustworthy friends...”

She walked up to Despair and petted the alien bug on what was presumably its skull. She stuck her hands in its toothy mouth and opened it wide, looking around inside.

“I’m not seeing a key in here, buggo,” she moaned, then turned to the janitors, “My bug didn’t bring me the key. How should I punish him?”

The janitors didn’t know what to say. This strange girl had just randomly shown up and started dribbling a basketball, and now she was... introducing them to a giant bug. This was definitely not the shift they should have been working.

“Or maybe punishment is better left reserved for a lover,” she said, gliding over to Turk. Literally gliding, one might add. The brute cowered at her presence, quietly wishing to be put out of his misery. Pandora brushed her hand over his mutilated visage, “What’s the matter? No key for me, either? Why do I even bother putting up this dome and entertaining the townsfolk with my presence when you can’t even be bothered to find a small simple key?” Looking to the janitors, she winked and gestured towards Turk, “This is my ex-boyfriend.” The janitors were inching their way out of the gym.

Pandora looked upon Venya, who had taken an effort to shrink herself down just under Pandora's height – but only just enough.

"And you..." Pandora started.

"Don't have the key either," Venya replied in a thick Russian-like accent, "None of us do. You called us in the middle of the pursuit."

"So I did," Pandora reflected upon this and stared at the ceiling. "And where is Raaj?"

"Raaj is dead," Venya spoke solemnly.

"A tragedy," Pandora tilted her head to one side. "A very curious tragedy. Was it gingivitis? I've always warned him to floss between the fangs."

"The fire-bloods killed him."

Pandora tilted her head to the other side, crossing her eyes. "That's not quite... possible. Are you certain he's dead? Maybe he's just sleeping? Perhaps pining for the fjords?"

"He's dead."

"Well, then," Pandora summed up, "That's rather... quite inconvenient."

Pandora fell flat on her back and backstroked her way over the gym floor, intercepting the janitors. Standing up, she put her arms over their shoulders and grinned, saying "My disciples have failed me. One has somehow died. I should be angry, but I just feel hungry. You have a funny mustache." She tugged at one janitor's mustache, and then stared into space for a while before saying "Knock-knock?"

The exit door at the end of the gym was thrown open. In stormed Vladimir Tsepish at a furious gait. Pandora's eyes lit up at the sight of him.

"Vladdy," she smiled, pushing the janitors aside, "is it you I have to thank for this fantastical evening?" She rushed up towards him and gave Vladimir a huge smothering hug. Vladimir did little to resist, and even less when Pandora suddenly sat on his shoulder. She weighed practically nothing. He held his composure and, tilting his head, looked her in the eye.

“We had a deal, Pandora,” Vladimir said, “and I’ve held up my part of the bargain. I flushed out the fire-bloods for you. Do as you will with them, but I expect to receive what’s been promised to me.”

Pandora rolled her eyes, “Right, right.” With that, she reached down the front of her dress with both hands and pulled out two duck-like birds with blue feet.

“These are my boobies,” she said. “This one’s Hannibal and the other one’s Mr. Cat. They whisper fortunes in my ear.”

“I’m not here because I want to ‘see your boobs’,” Vladimir said, watching her birds explode into flames, “The bounty was considerably higher than that for me.”

“Oh, you want the other bounty,” Pandora said, floating over Vladimir and throwing her arms over his head, “Just nasty business it is. I can see why I’d want it, but you?” Her eyes drifted through the air for a moment. She briefly considered penguins. Then she asked, “How many penguins did you want again?”

“I’m not interested in penguins,” Vladimir said, clenching his teeth.

“Fine, you want power?” she asked, “When I’m done, I’ll pick up Australia and Japan, squish them together into a little ball, put it on top of Mt. Everest, and you can be its king. And I shall rule as queen!” She laughed, because for a moment, ninja kangaroos seemed like a great idea.

“I’m not interested in that kind of power.” Vladimir said, resignedly. Pandora sighed.

“You make it so hard for a girl to please you,” she mused for a moment

“One of the janitors started hurrying out of the gym whispering, “These people are crazy!”

As the sound of the word ‘crazy,’ the most terrifying thing that could ever happen... happened. Pandora’s eyes went horrifically insane – as in, a hundred times worse than previously described. She turned to the fleeing janitor and screamed blood-curdling death. The fleeing janitor exploded into thousands of tiny pieces of ash, the other one collapsed on the ground in terror, unable to speak.

Pandora cleared her throat and turned to Vladimir.

"I'm sorry, what were we speaking of again?" she asked.

"Our deal," Vladimir spoke.

"Right," Pandora recollected. "See, I rather like you, Vladdy. I don't want to see you carry our burden. To be one with the Chaos is not quite... tasty, if you catch my drift."

"I've lived long enough as a vampire," Vladimir said, "I no longer want to hide in shadows or fear the sun. I wish to become a true demon."

"But look at my darling pets," Pandora pointed Vladimir in the direction of the giant alien bug. "Do you really want the burden of being so beautiful?"

"You're the one who twisted them into these shapes, love," Vladimir noted.

"True," Pandora grinned. She leered at Despair and snapped her fingers. Despair was now covered in Christmas lights, had a raccoon tail, and wore fuzzy dice at the end of its antennae.

"I want to live free of your control," Vladimir said, "to live as my own demon."

"Then I suppose our deal must be upheld," she said. "But alas, we have no vacancies you'd be interested in. Perhaps wait until after we've located the fire-bloods and opened the box? I will have many new demons for you to choose from."

"Why wait?" he asked. "I know where they live. You can have your key tonight."

"Do you now?" she asked, pressing up against him. "You certainly do know how to show a girl a good time. So pray tell, where are my lovelies hiding?"

Vladimir grinned and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. His gaze got lost in space as he struggled to remember exactly where Hunter's Tavern was, but soon realized he couldn't even recollect the name of the bar.

"I do remember," he said. "Give me a moment."

"Somebody's been tampered with," Pandora giggled, poking him in the head.

"I haven't been tampered with," he said, growing ever more fearful of the situation. Something was deliberately tampering with his memory. "I know the area... south of the bridge. I just need to find... the girl. The girl can take us there."

They both heard a loud screeching overhead. Vladimir turned his head upwards to see a strange misty shape in the rafters. It appeared as a small raven to him.

"A new pet of yours?" Vladimir asked.

"He's the seventh of us, I'm afraid," Pandora stared longingly at the bird, "My lovely darling goose. Poor dear keeps rejecting his human hosts. But he seems to have taken a likening to you."

Vladimir started to realize he was looking at one of the Chaos in its elemental form. It was intelligent, but animalistic in its nature. He'd met a fair share of the demons, but this one was new to him. Somehow, he felt a very strong connection with this creature.

"What is it a demon of?" Vladimir asked.

"Fear," she replied. "But you wouldn't be interested in that one."

"A fear demon," the very notion appealed to Vladimir. "Perchance I could maybe... give it a test run?"

A wave of concern fell over Pandora's face. This demon was a very touchy subject for her. Unfortunately, Vladimir was too caught up in the prospect of finally hosting a demon to notice her concern. Eventually, her madness caught up with her and she twisted and wrenched her face until a wide grin happened.

"You do like to live dangerously," Pandora said. Then she whispered in his ear, "Very well. Tonight you may join us as a master of fear. Perhaps help us find this girl you speak of?"

"To be one with the Chaos," Vladimir whispered to himself, staring at the elemental above him.

"Indeed," Pandora smiled. "Have a goose. A scary goose."

The raven opened its wingspan. The lights in the gym flickered as it flew from its perch and engulfed Vladimir in a shadowy blaze.

12. Trivia Night

The stake-out had failed. All their efforts to kill even one demon had gone to waste, and all their theories regarding Christine had also gone out the window. On top of that, they had also successfully managed to piss off the Chaos of Pride, Pain, and Despair who were now running loose around the city.

As they re-entered the bar, tired and worn out, they were treated to some unusual sights. All of the patrons were still here. They appeared to be engaged in casual discussions, but none seemed to be panicking. Even stranger was that Patti had cleared out a small corner near the door and was sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by over-turned tables and chairs. She was wearing over-sized headphones and chanting mantras in a deep meditation, ignoring the yells of Trisha who was screaming in her ear and shaking her violently.

"Nigel!" Trisha yelled, "Something's wrong with Patti! She just sits there speaking Chinese and listening to music!"

"We're alive, thanks for asking," Nigel yelled back.

"You sure she isn't just drunk?" Jesse asked.

"She startled all of us," Trisha explained. "She just went quiet for a moment and then her eyes started glowing and she wandered around like a zombie, drawing cryptic symbols everywhere."

Nigel looked around the room and saw large Chinese characters scattered about on everything from the walls to the furniture. The only difference was that he hadn't seen this form of Chinese writing since the earliest of dynasties.

He walked up to Patti and looked into her eyes. They were faintly glowing. He peeled back one of her headphones. There was some loud techno rap music coming from inside it. He spoke to her in Mandarin and her

trance suddenly stopped. She looked at Nigel and replied in Mandarin as well.

"You can speak Chinese?" Jesse asked.

"I'm nine thousand years old," Nigel said. "I speak many languages."

"What's Patti doing?" Christine asked. Nigel and Patti had another exchange of words. Finally Nigel relayed the information.

"She isn't Patti anymore," he said, "His name is Wu Tang. He's the ninth of the Chinese Immortals. It seems they've been tracking us. He's been sent to help."

"Wu Tang?" Trisha asked, "Like the rap group?"

"No, like his name," Nigel replied.

"Well, what's he doing in the body of our waitress?" Trisha asked.

"Casting a protective spell over the city, I believe," Nigel said, "He apologizes for the inconvenience, but jumping into another person's body is the only way he could pass through the barrier. Apparently, Patti was the most accommodating vessel for him."

"Because she's Chinese?"

"Because she speaks it. Their minds need to communicate for this to work."

"Is she aware of what's going on?" Christine asked, frowning her brow, "or did he just jump in without asking?"

Nigel peeled back the headphone and relayed the question, relaying the answer right back to them.

"She's quite aware, and very comfortable, I might add," he said. "The possession lasts four days, but they've already worked out terms of agreement. She promises to let him use her as a magical conduit to save the city, and he promises not to spend the next four days maxing out her credit card."

"So what's this spell he... uh... she's casting?" Jesse asked.

"It's a herding spell," Nigel explained. "It keeps citizens calm and safely herds them away from danger zones. Most notably the downtown area. This is why the streets are so

empty. He's also using the same magic to fog the memory of anyone who can lead Pandora to us."

"So this is why there's nothing on the local stations?" Trisha asked, gesturing to the televisions. "Even the radio stations and Internet are all down. Laptop guy is going crazy over there. All we have are lights and phones."

"Yes, I'd imagine this herding spell has resulted in a city-wide communication lock-down," Nigel guessed. "Be grateful the power's still on."

"So what's our plan now?" Jesse asked, "And don't say burying ourselves again. Because that's a stupid plan."

Nigel delivered another swift kick to Jesse's groin.

"That was the ONLY plan," Nigel said, "Stop asking me what to do when no one ever listens to me anyway! The god of the ocean is right over there checking his texts – why don't you ask him?"

Poseidon was indeed checking his texts at the bar.

"So... I thought sea-gods don't text," Christine said, sitting down with him.

"Ptolemy replied," Poseidon said, "Listen, everyone hang out here for a while. I need to go meet with him."

"Didn't you say he's a Zodiac knight?" Nigel asked, "Why can't he just pass though the barrier and meet us here?"

"That's what I intend to find out." Poseidon said, grabbing his trench-coat and heading out the door. "Now, if you excuse me, I need to go jump in the harbour."

"So how many demons are here now?" Trish asked.

"Four, at least," Nigel replied. "Including a giant bug and a snake woman. Pandora, too. We were lucky to get away."

"All thanks to Christine," Jesse pointed out.

"Who isn't the legendary Warrior of the Seven," Nigel reminded him. "Couldn't even pull the trigger on Turk. Where was that bravery when you killed Raaj?"

"I didn't know these things were human at the time!" Christine snapped. "I thought Raaj was just a giant wolf-bat scorpion-dragon thing!"

"It's to our understanding that Raaj was a captain of Xeraphoxes' personal guard," Nigel told her. "A rather bloodthirsty one, I might add. When choosing a host, demons are always attracted to the worst of us."

"So who was Venya?" Jesse asked. "One of Xeraphoxes' wives?"

"His step-sister, actually," Nigel said. "She was a nasty piece of work. Tried to stay young by bathing in the blood of virgins. Just rumors, of course, but plausible considering she's now a gigantic snake demon."

"And who did the giant bug used to be?" asked Christine.

"Damned if I know," Nigel shrugged. "In any case, you're no longer our trump card."

"So what was our first plan?" Jesse asked, closing the door behind Poseidon, "I mean a long time ago, when we first met the Chaos. We haven't been burying ourselves for nine thousand years straight, have we?"

"No, we used to fight them head-on for a while, but it didn't take long before we ourselves started to run," Nigel stated, "Guess which of those two plans has had better results thus far?"

"But there had to have been something that kept them at bay," Jesse said.

"There was," Nigel said, "The titans and the gods, and now neither of them can help out like they used to."

"What about angels?" Christine asked. "Could we summon angels to help at all?"

"Have you been praying a lot?" Nigel asked.

"Quite a bit this past hour," Christine nodded.

"Then chances are that the angels heard your prayers, filled out the appropriate paperwork, and are awaiting clearance to come help." Nigel said.

"How long will it take them to get here?" Jesse asked.

"Probably never," Nigel said. "The Creator doesn't prioritize military response the same way we do. He usually reserves angels for teaching someone about Christmas spirit or helping them win a baseball game."

"So no angels, then?" Jesse asked.

"We could probably raise a few of Lucifer's fallen angels," Nigel said, "but then that would require us to break the Seventh Seal, awaken the Four Horsemen, and unleash Hell on Earth."

"And do we have the Seventh Seal?" Jesse asked.

"We do not," Nigel answered.

Jesse muttered, "Scratch that idea, then."

"Where did you hear about the Warrior of the Seven exactly?" asked Christine, "Who told you about this thing? Some fortuneteller?"

"From the Sphinx," Nigel said, "Answer its riddle, and it will answer any question you have, as long as it isn't about the future."

"Too bad the Sphinx is in Egypt," Trisha sighed.

"No, it's here," Nigel replied, "I keep it in a snow-globe on my piano."

Sure enough, everyone just ran up the stairs, leaving the customers to their own devices once again. Nigel was the last one up, as he knew what was coming.

Upstairs, Jesse was inspecting the snow-globe. He had seen it many times before, but only regarded it as a cheap souvenir. But now, as he looked closer, he could see no brand name, no 'Made in Taiwan' markings, or even snow. It was just a replica of Egypt's Sphinx inside a small glass ball filled with sand. The sand seemed to shift, but didn't fall, no matter which way he held it.

"Is this it?" Christine asked.

"That's the legendary Sphinx," Nigel said, "Egyptian wizards trapped the evil creature in glass ages ago. Jesse and I recovered it ourselves, in order to prevent Pandora from ever finding and using her. Go ahead. Look her in the eye and ask for her riddle."

Jesse looked into the eyes of the statue and said, "Okay, Sphinx, give me a riddle."

The Sphinx's hollow eyes opened and her mouth began to move.

"Three sides I use for separating. Strike me down and I will cleave. In the end, I easily shine."

"Oh, my god – that's so cool!" Jesse exclaimed, "Why didn't you show us this before? This can answer all our questions!"

"Because no one's been able to answer its questions in three thousand years," Nigel said, "It used to be that all it ever asked were riddles about the sun, the sand, the clouds, mankind, whatever wandered into its line of sight. But now that it's seen the world, it only asks very vague riddles about any impossible number of very obscure and very specific things which no one can answer."

Christine thought about the riddle for a moment, and asked "Is it a Slap-Chop?"

"That is correct."

Nigel's eyes went wide. He rushed forward, tore the Sphinx from Jesse's hands and quickly shoved her under his blankets, shocked. He pinned the globe down and tried to take in the moment, breathing heavily and deeply.

"You answered the question," he stated, trying to accept that the impossible had once again just happened. "No one answers the questions. What the hell is a Slap-Chop?"

"Ooh, it's a thing on an infomercial," Christine said, "It's a three-sided knife that you can cut food with by slapping the button on top."

"It's also easy to clean," Jesse said.

"How does the Sphinx know what a Slap-Chop is?" Nigel asked.

"I leave the TV on a lot at night," Trish said, "Maybe the Sphinx watches infomercials?"

"Okay, well... either way we have a question to ask." Nigel said, "Let me think this through."

"Christine answered the riddle; she should ask the question," Jesse said.

"No, no!" Nigel said, hoarding the Sphinx, "You don't know which questions to ask! Just let me figure something out!"

Nigel thought clearly for a moment, took a deep breath, and then took out the Sphinx. He looked her in the eyes and asked his question.

"Why was Christine Marx able to destroy Raaj, the Chaos of Hatred?"

"The Chaos of Hatred can only be destroyed in an act of love. In but a fleeting moment of passion, Christine Marx's love for Jezebuul imbued her with the power to vanquish Raaj."

The Sphinx's eyes closed.

Nigel looked to Christine who was flabbergasted as her cheeks swelled in a very embarrassed and rosy blush. She and Jesse tried to avoid eye contact, but you can guess how well that went.

"Love," Nigel said, "All we needed was love."

"Love is all you need," continued Jesse.

"I wouldn't call it love," Christine said sheepishly. "It's more like... a strong... emotion... brought on by... Jesse? Help?"

"Love defeats hatred; logical enough," said Jesse, changing the subject. "So maybe we really do need to kill Turk painlessly."

"What was all that nonsense about a Warrior of the Seven then?" Trisha asked.

"The last time we asked the Sphinx a question," Nigel said, "she said we needed a Warrior of the Seven to kill all seven demons."

"Ah, but to kill ALL seven," pointed out Jesse. "What about killing them individually? I bet you don't need a Warrior of the Seven to do that."

"True, what about the others?" asked Nigel. He looked at the Sphinx and asked for another riddle.

"Who carries a head of fire, can summon a ranger, and only speaks at night?"

Everyone thought about it really hard, but no answers came to mind.

"This is what I'm talking about," Nigel said, "The riddles - they don't make sense."

"Not to us, anyway," said Trisha. "But someone must know the answer."

"Well, I'm not about to go door-to-door asking for people's opinions," Nigel said.

"Maybe not," said Jesse, "But don't we have a bunch of people downstairs? And... isn't it supposed to be trivia night?"

Nigel was having the worst day ever. First came Pandora's demons and then came Jesse and Christine proving him wrong at every turn. Nine thousand years of experience should have prepared him better for this night, but there was little he could do to fight it. Jesse had a damn good idea and it only took a few minutes to put the plan in motion.

It was all very simple. They'd ask the Sphinx for a riddle behind a curtain, and then Trisha would pose the same question to the regulars, who were only too happy to help if it meant saving the world. Naturally, there were many puzzled looks when they heard the questions, but a good uproar of laughter when they heard the answers. As it turned out, the answer to the first question was "Conan O'Brien," a late-night talk show host with red hair who could summon clips of the TV show "Walker, Texas Ranger" by pulling a prop lever. Several other answers throughout the night included advertisements for various films, reality shows, pop artists, TV celebrities, and random television shows that came on late at night.

Nigel had a list of questions set up for the Sphinx, and after every answered riddle, they'd go behind the curtain and interrogate the Sphinx once again. It was like Christmas for Nigel, being able to dig up so much dirt on Pandora's lot. The only catch was the Sphinx would sometimes get vague on her own answers, leading everyone to word their questions more carefully each time. Throughout the course of the night, they eventually came up with the following answers to the following various questions:

Q: How do we kill Venya, Chaos of Pride?

A: *Her weakness is humility. You must destroy her by accident.*

Q: How do we kill Turk, Chaos of Pain?

A: *His death must be painless.*

Q: How do we kill Despair, the Chaos of... Despair?

A: Despair can only be killed in an act of hope. Its death must be inspirational.

Q: How do we kill...?

A: Look, I'll level with you guys so we aren't here all night. There are three chaos demons left: Fear, Greed, and Madness. A fear demon can only be killed through bravery. A greed demon can only be killed through sacrifice. And Pandora herself can only be defeated in a moment of truth.

Q: How do we create a moment of truth that can kill Pandora?

A: You must convince her of her madness. Only then will she be vulnerable to any attack.

Q: How do we convince Pandora that she's crazy without getting destroyed?

A: Nobody can.

There was no arguing with that last answer. The Sphinx always spoke the truth, and if she said that "nobody can", she meant it. But at least she didn't say that Pandora couldn't be destroyed, only that whoever convinced her of her insanity would meet a horrific end. Nevertheless, they pressed on for more answers.

They were able to extract a few more answers from the Sphinx, but at this point, the answers were starting to sound more like suggestions. The Sphinx was becoming less helpful, and the bar patrons were starting to get too drunk to answer any of the questions logically.

After declaring the newlyweds the winners, Trish sat down with Jesse, Nigel, and Christine at the booth near the entrance. The possessed body of Patti continued to invoke the protection spell from the floor. Jesse finished going through his notes and laid them out on the table.

"Okay, so here's what we've got," he started, placing the Sphinx in the middle of the table, "The Sphinx confirmed it: Turk is susceptible to drugs. So we're going to need tranquilizers – lots of them. Preferably for elephants."

"And nothing for the snake-lady?" asked Christine.

"Just that we're going to have to kill her by accident," Jesse said, "It makes sense. Humility is the opposite of

pride, and I'm sure nothing would humble an arrogant demon more than getting killed by accident."

"Also, she's vain," Christine said, "Remember the mirrors? And shooting at her face? She's attracted to herself. And remember how easily she threw aside her own friends? She's practically on our side!"

"She's on nobody's side but her own," Nigel said.

"I guess the only reason she works for Pandora is because of self-preservation." Jesse said.

"I'm concerned about Despair," Nigel said, "Its death has to be inspirational and seen by a lot of people in order to kill it."

"How about fireworks?" Trisha asked, "They're eye-catching, explosive, and have that whole patriotic thing going for them."

"Regarding Pandora herself..." Jesse checked his notes, "The Sphinx was useless. She pretty much said we need to convince Pandora of her craziness, but we ended up wasting seven questions just trying to get specifics. Let's save Pandora for last."

"How does she not know she's crazy?" asked Trisha, "She IS insanity! That's her label!"

"She thinks she hosts the Chaos of Bubbles and Tea Parties." Nigel said, "Don't ask me how she ever came to that conclusion."

"So what about these other two?" Christine asked, "Fear and Greed?"

"Fear is a wild card," Nigel said, "Sometimes Pandora can't find a suitable host for it, so it follows her in elemental form. If she does find a host, all we have to do is be brave enough to kill it."

"And Greed?" asked Jesse. "What happens when that thing shows up?"

"The greed demon is all that remains of King Xeraphoxes," Nigel explained, "Or rather what Pandora turned him into. I've never seen him in person, but the Sphinx says a great sacrifice is needed to destroy him."

"Like a human sacrifice?" asked Christine.

"I doubt a human sacrifice would suffice," Nigel said, "Although in the old days, rams were quite powerful, even among demons. Sacrificing a ram invoked very powerful magic back then."

"You sacrificed rams?" asked Trisha.

"Everyone sacrificed rams," Nigel said, "It was good for harvests, weather, and repelling evil spirits. I really don't know why it went out of style. It always worked. I could sacrifice a ram tonight and we'd probably win a brand new car."

"So we could try sacrificing a ram on Xeraphoxes," Jesse said, "What does the Sphinx think?"

Everyone looked at the snow-globe in the middle of the table. The Sphinx sat motionless.

"Ask for the riddle again," Christine said, "Maybe we'll get it this time."

"What's the riddle?" Nigel asked, looking into the eyes of the Sphinx.

"I exist in many windows of time, growing ever fearful of clockwork, and always end in a horse. What am I?"

It was the same question from earlier. Everyone was stumped. Even the patrons had been stumped. This question had brought trivia night to a complete standstill.

"Could be anything, I'm afraid," Nigel shook his head, "Are there any obscure songs about clocks and horses?"

"Maybe it's a late night show?" Jesse guessed, "It could be a Twilight Zone episode!"

"I wish the internet was back up," Trisha groaned. "Just give me five seconds online; I could find the answer."

"How long until it asks a new riddle?" asked Jesse.

"Could be forever," Nigel said, "The Sphinx takes pleasure in keeping secrets from us. That's why her riddles are so awful; they don't even challenge wisdom anymore. You have to literally know what she knows."

"I can't believe we're at the mercy of a snow-globe," Trisha said, "Can't we shake her up or break the glass?"

"No, because she's not actually a snow-globe," Nigel said, "She's a magically-contained evil spirit trapped inside

a glass prison. If that glass ever breaks, it's rigged to explode."

"Rigged to explode?" Trisha's eyes lit up in horror. "You were keeping that in our bedroom?!"

"I was careful with it," Nigel shrugged.

"Land mines, hand grenades, exploding Sphinx prisons – what else in our room can explode?!"

"In the meantime, we should stock up," Jesse said, "What did we need again? Elephant tranquilizers, ram's blood, and fireworks?"

"I know of a butcher shop," Trisha said, "I don't know if they have ram's blood, though."

"Pig's blood is about half as effective," Nigel said.

"There's a vet clinic on the other block," Christine said, "I can probably pick up some horse tranquilizers there."

"And I know where to find some fireworks!" Jesse said.

"No chance of that," said Nigel, snapping abruptly to life, "Pandora's dogs are out on the streets searching for you, so you're staying here tonight."

"It's just a block away," protested Jesse.

"You're not going for the cheap gas station fireworks, are you?" Trisha asked.

"Maybe," Jesse admitted.

Trisha sighed, "I know a corner shop that has some good under-the-counter stuff. I'll grab some while I'm out."

"There you go," Nigel motioned to her, "She's got you covered."

Jesse caved in and slumped back into his seat. Christine and Trisha stood up and left the tavern in a hurry.

"Great," Jesse commented, "and now we play the waiting game."

"You're all too excited," Nigel said.

"We should be," Jesse retorted, "Just think. Nine thousand years and we're finally getting the answers we need. We know how to destroy them! And you said we were going to die."

"The night's still young," Nigel commented. "Pandora's goons won't be going down without a fight. And once they've swept the streets, buildings will start coming down."

Wu Tang's magic can only steer the civilians away so far before they themselves start running out of places to hide."

"So as long as our bar is full," Jesse observed, "Hunter's Tavern should be considered a safe-haven."

"You would think so," Nigel said, taking a drink, "but something still bothers me. Tell me, Jesse, how did Vladimir recognize you in the café? Did he come up and smell you directly? Ask any questions, perhaps?"

"Haven't we met him before?" asked Jesse. "He probably just recognized me."

"Yes, but remember," Nigel said, "much like how we can control our memories, we can also control our physical appearance when we regenerate. To some degree, of course. But the fact remains that we've been repeatedly changing our looks for the last several thousand years. The last time Vladimir saw either of us, we looked completely different. So the question remains, how did he know who you were? He can't identify a fire-blood by smell alone."

"I was sitting at the café with Christine," Jesse said, "He showed up and... no... before that..."

Jesse vaguely remembered drinking his coffee and going insane with bloodlust.

"There was something in the coffee," Jesse said, "It awakened something in me."

"They poisoned your coffee," Nigel immediately realized. "Probably with an old drug used to expose demonic or angelic beings like ourselves. All right, well, I supposed that clears things up."

"But when I drank the coffee," Jesse said, "I felt powerful. Crazy, but powerful. If we got more of that stuff..."

"We can't," Nigel said, "unless you want to hunt down Vladimir and ask where he gets his drugs."

Jesse dropped the subject and looked into his drink.

"I've got to ask," Jesse said, "What was I like before the memory loss?"

"About the same as you are now," Nigel said, "Your memories disappeared, but your personality never died. But at least you lost that haunted glaze in your eye."

"It's weird," Jesse said, "I thought I would have at least written myself a letter."

Nigel sat quiet for a moment, nursing his drink.

"You'd better come upstairs with me," he said.

He took Jesse back upstairs to the studio where he opened the lid on his piano and fished around inside. He pulled out a dusty old cedar box, and set it down on the bed next to their swords. He opened it, revealing a trove of knick-knacks and papers.

"What are these?" Jesse asked, "Souvenirs?"

Amongst the knick-knacks were travel guides, postcards, and tiny commemorative flags. As Jesse watched Nigel fish around, he noticed many Greek travelogues inside.

"We were in Greece?" he asked.

"Bypassed it completely," Nigel said, "Was too dangerous at the time. Moved right on to Western Europe instead. It's a shame. I would have loved to have seen it at its apex."

"Did we ever meet anyone famous?" Jesse asked, "Attila the Hun? Cleopatra? Jesus?"

"Not really," Nigel said, "We spent most of our time in hiding."

"I supposed that makes sense," Jesse shrugged, "It's not like we're getting around to meeting many celebrities in this time period either."

"We were celebrities in our day, though," Nigel recollected. "We had our own fan clubs even. Travelling warriors were always joining our mission with dreams of someday vanquishing the Chaos."

"And what happened to them?" Jesse asked.

"They died."

"Is that why we've been travelling alone since?"

"No, it's because some of them were complete raving loonies," Nigel cringed, "Completely jeopardized our

mission. I remember this Magnus fellow in France about a thousand years back... he made Don Quixote look sane by comparison. He blew himself up trying to use a runaway manure cart as a jousting horse against Raaj."

"Sounds like an interesting guy."

"Here it is," Nigel pulled out a piece of paper, "Are you sure you want to read it?"

"Is it a letter to myself?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah."

Jesse cautiously took the letter, sat down on the bed, opened it, and read it. He recognized his own handwriting; it hadn't changed.

"If you are reading this, then my plan has failed miserably, and the fate of the world is once again at stake. The only counsel I can give you is this: trust in our brother. He's made a vow to protect us, and in these nine thousand years, he has given everything to keep that vow. Do not fight him, do not question him, and certainly do not believe that by denying his wisdom will you ever defeat Pandora. When he tells you to run, you run. When he tells you to hide, you hide. Believe me; I've lived through the consequences of the errors you intend to make. The risk is never worth it. If you want to save the world, save yourself. Run."

Jesse looked at Nigel, "Did I actually write this?"

Nigel nodded, "Yeah."

"Why didn't you show me this before?" Jesse asked.

"Because of what you're thinking right now," Nigel said, "You want to believe that we can still beat the odds, but you needed to see our enemy up close before you knew what we were up against. Perhaps now you'll listen to your own advice."

"And run away?" Jesse asked, "Before, I was trying to prove you wrong. But guess what? I succeeded. The Chaos can be destroyed."

"I see that now, yes," Nigel said, putting things back into the box. "But we cannot let ourselves get carried away. You must remember that you've reduced yourself to the

mindset of a reckless young adult. People will die if we don't proceed with caution."

"I get that, yeah," Jesse shook his head in agreement, "but what would my old self say if he knew what we knew now?"

"He'd grab a sword and go running blindly into the streets," Nigel sighed, "laughing like an idiot the whole way, I might add."

Jesse picked up the crystal sword from the bed and twirled it about in the air, contemplating this new plan of running around screaming like an idiot. "Well, how about I promise you that I don't go doing that right away?"

"You won't keep that promise," Nigel said, brushing back his hair. He looked over at his weapons pile and spied a rusty old sword in the mix. He glanced at Jesse's swordsmanship and made a fair estimate of his skills.

"You still know how to handle that sword," Nigel noted.

"Yeah, it's weird." The sword was starting to feel like an extension of his arm. "Is this that muscle memory you were talking about?"

"We used to train with each other a lot," Nigel remembered. "I always won." He stood up, moved over to the stock pile, and grabbed the rusty sword. He pointed it at Jesse.

"Let's see how much you've retained," he nodded to him. He pushed aside his piano and kicked some laundry out of the way.

Jesse smirked and stood up. They cleared the room of any obstacles to give themselves some space.

"You think you can take me with that rusty old blade?" Jesse asked. "You'll be lucky if it doesn't turn to dust right away."

"Let's find out," Nigel raised his eyebrows.

The two of them advanced on each other. With a flourish, Nigel disarmed Jesse, whose sword unexpectedly found its way into the ceiling. Jesse stared down Nigel's metal blade and tried to figure out what just happened. He had felt pretty confident about his abilities moments ago, but now that confidence was wavering.

"How did you do that?" Jesse asked.

"Grab your sword," Nigel said. "Try again."

Jesse yanked the crystal weapon out of the ceiling and took a different stance. He calmed himself and tried to concentrate on Nigel's movements. Nigel permitted him a moment to get into a steady breathing rhythm, and once he felt Jesse was ready, he motioned for him to attack.

Jesse advanced. This time, things felt different. He felt in the zone. He felt time slip past in slow-motion as he moved in with perfect precision and aimed to disarm his brother. It almost felt as if his entire life had come rushing back into him.

A searing pain in his shoulder suggested otherwise.

Jesse screamed as he watched his right arm come off. It dissipated into thin air and the sword fell to the ground. Another searing pain later, Jesse's arm had regenerated back onto its stump. He gave it a look-over to ensure it was all still there.

He turned to Nigel, "You cut off my arm!"

Nigel responded by jabbing Jesse in the torso several times. Jesse backed away to let himself heal, and then quickly reached down and grabbed his sword. He took a very aggressive stance, but forced himself not to lose his cool.

"Mind giving me some pointers?" Jesse asked.

"You're thinking too much," Nigel said.

"How about filling me in on those super-powers of yours?" Jesse asked. "I saw the strength you were using to pin down Turk."

"That isn't a super-power," Nigel said. "That's discipline and experience. Even humans can summon that kind of strength in an emergency. Ever hear about mothers lifting cars off their children?"

"And you can do that all the time?" Jesse asked.

"I can do it when it matters," Nigel said. "What's important is maintaining control. You need to do the right thing without thinking."

Jesse considered this and tried to clear all thoughts from his mind. He was suddenly beginning to understand

why Nigel always hid in his room writing music. He wasn't hiding; he was meditating.

"We're already designed to be perfect warriors," Jesse spoke. "It's our minds that need to stay in shape."

"If you want," Nigel said, "come at me again. I won't attack."

That was all Jesse needed to hear. He cleared his head and confronted his brother again. This time, his attacks were more than perfect. Each strike, while deflected, would have cleaved any other foe in half. His moves were faster, stronger, more beautiful than anything he could have imagined himself doing. As he and his brother sparred, he felt a long-lost energy return to him. A vibrant resolve burned into his heart that he could indeed destroy the Chaos with nothing but his will if he so desired.

Staring into his brother's eyes, he could see Nigel's concern. There was a moment where he even saw weakness. It was an opening to strike. Time slowed down more than before, and Jesse transfixed himself on a single opening – a quick jab into Nigel's right breast. He took the shot.

Nigel stepped aside, and with three quick strikes, took off Jesse's legs, arms, and head all at once.

The torso fell to the ground, flopped forward, and Jesse regenerated just in time to fall flat on his face. Nigel kicked the sword back over to him.

"You said you wouldn't attack," Jesse said.

"I lied," Nigel sneered.

"I don't get it," Jesse said, crawling to his knees. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing, your fighting style is perfect," Nigel said, helping him up. "It's your experience that's gone."

"You were too fast," Jesse said, shaking it off. "I didn't see any of your moves coming. You're unstoppable."

"Of course," Nigel said, sitting at his piano and lighting a cigarette. "Yet in the face of Chaos, I'll always choose to run. So start picking your battles wisely, Jess. The Chaos won't give you three chances like I did."

With that, he turned and began playing a soft, carefree melody.

13. Knights and Shadows

On the outskirts of town, Jonathon Arthur Ptolemy was having a dreadful time traipsing about in the woods. He had landed just outside the dome and had been waiting several minutes for Poseidon. In all this mucking about, he'd forgotten about what the deal was with these demons and just wanted to go home already.

Through the darkness in the trees, he heard a rustling. He turned to see the old sea-fart walking his way – his trident now back in hand. Poseidon had meant to retrieve his trident earlier, but had decided to wait until there weren't any mortals present before summoning it back into his hands. Shortly after, he simply had to dive into the harbour to magically resurface at a nearby beach outside the dome. Sadly, Ptolemy didn't receive the greeting he was expecting.

"What the hell took so long, and why are you on THIS side of the barrier?" Poseidon asked.

"Hey, give me a break. I had to fly the whole way," Ptolemy said, "And did you know Halifax wasn't in Newfoundland? Because I didn't. It wasn't in Norway, either!"

"Fly?!" exclaimed Poseidon, "You're the Zodiac knight! Why didn't you just teleport?"

"Don't be crazy, man," Ptolemy said, "I can't teleport. I haven't reached that step in my training yet."

"Then you haven't been keeping up with your training at all?" asked Poseidon.

"Hey, some of us aren't gods and actually have real lives to deal with," Ptolemy said, "I mean, my schoolwork and girlfriend alone are full-time jobs as it is."

"Oh, so you have a girlfriend now?" Poseidon asked sardonically, "What's her name?"

"Her name is... hang on," Ptolemy looked over at an incredibly cute blonde woman in her twenties who was sitting on a nearby rock. She looked all dressed up for the night and seemed both amused and tipsy. "Hey, what was your name again?"

She answered in a sweet and shy Norwegian accent, "Ingvold."

"Ingvold – isn't that cute?" Ptolemy chuckled to Poseidon. Poseidon's mouth was agape.

"You brought your girlfriend? We're fighting a war here!"

"I'm just kidding, I picked her up in Norway," Ptolemy explained. "She speaks a little English. It was just enough to tell me where Halifax was. I told her I'm on my way to save the world and she wanted to come. Isn't that adorable?"

"You flew her here?"

"I know, right?!" Ptolemy was ecstatic. The girls back home would have called him a freak if he'd come flying up to them on a street corner asking for directions. "She's really cool about my whole super powers thing. She thinks she's on a date with Superman!"

"Forget it," Poseidon was beginning to freak out a little, "What about the Signs? Have you mastered any of the Elements?"

Ptolemy was starting to freak out as well. The first time Poseidon explained the art of becoming a Zodiac knight to him, it sounded like he was trying to explain the overly-complicated rules of a stupid fantasy-based board game. After all this time, mastering these powers still somewhat eluded him.

Poseidon stepped forward and pulled up Ptolemy's sleeve to reveal a tattoo that encircled his upper arm. In the form of a ring were the symbols of the twelve Zodiac signs which had been engraved there since birth. Some of them were of varying colours, while others were pure black. A few even glowed. Poseidon carefully (and awkwardly) reviewed the tattoo as if he were evaluating Ptolemy's training. He shook his head in disdain.

“None of the elements are complete,” he said, “You haven’t even begun to learn half of your powers.”

“Yeah. Life. Busy. Sleeping.”

To clarify, the powers that come with being a Zodiac knight are broken up amongst the twelve Zodiac constellations and organized by that sign’s corresponding element. Each sign came with a special power. The powers are then invoked through will by means of grueling practice. Once a power was mastered, the knight could summon that power at will. Once all twelve were mastered, that knight could become a master of reality itself.

This was not case with Ptolemy who’d only mastered three powers to date, but he had his reasons.

As a free-spirit, Ptolemy was more acquainted with the air signs. Telekinesis, the power of Aquarius, was the first he’d learned by accident, before even meeting Poseidon. He’d been using it to fly for years, and as a result, that symbol on his tattoo was already glowing bright yellow. Gemini, the power of astral projection, was also glowing. His day-dreaming had caused him to have multiple out-of-body experiences in his youth and he had learned to control it carefully after people kept finding his comatose body. Unfortunately, the Libra tattoo had barely turned yellow. Libra was the power of balance (which manifested itself as creating force fields) and this wasn’t something Ptolemy had found time to practice. This was a shame since learning a full element set enabled special bonus powers, too, including teleportation through respective elements.

The only other power he’d learned thoroughly was in the earth signs – Taurus. Taurus gifted him with super-human strength. Ptolemy had willed himself to fight back against bullies so much in high school that his powers kicked in of their own accord. Capricorn was the power of invincibility, and the tattoo for that one was a medium-green as he’d barely dabbled in the art of beating himself up enough to practice. Virgo, the power of heightened physical senses, was still pure black. He just wasn’t paying enough attention in class to really practice this one.

"I mastered three signs," he admitted, "Taurus, Aquarius, and... Gemini."

"Only three?!" belted out Poseidon, "But we got you started years ago! Why haven't you kept up with your training? You could have mastered the third air sign and simply teleported through the sky into the city – or mastered the Aries sign and walked right through the barrier!"

Ptolemy wasn't a fan of the fire signs. Aries enabled him to phase through objects, Leo permitted him to influence minds, and Sagittarius gifted him with cognitive sight. But as these all required a little more aggressive training on his part, he just figured he'd save them for last. Henceforth, those tattoos were still black.

Fortunately, his college experience had encouraged him to dabble in the water signs a little bit, as the training involved body flow and went hand in hand with dancing and parties. As a result, he could occasionally summon up super-speed with the Scorpio sign, invoke the power of Cancer to heal most hangovers, or read girls' minds through Pisces. Ptolemy had attempted this on Ingvold, but his Norwegian mind-reading was rusty. He'd have to complete his mind-reading training if he wanted to become fluent in all languages.

Ultimately, J. Arthur Ptolemy had all the power in the world at his disposal, was living the dream of being the real life superhero, and yet would still rather sit in his room and play X-Box Live.

"To be honest, a lot of that training doesn't fit into daily life," Ptolemy explained, "Granted, flying everywhere saves on gas, and strength gives me a certain edge in sports. And astral projection is great when I'm looking for my keys or throwing my voice."

"It also helps with peering into women's locker rooms, I'd imagine." Poseidon snorted.

"Please, I'm a total gentleman," Ptolemy fibbed. "And did I mention how annoying it is to practice these powers? Practicing Aries alone requires me to keep walking into

walls. You try doing that a thousand times without throwing in the towel.”

“It’s your responsibility to walk into a million walls if you have to!” Poseidon exclaimed.

“Hey, I never asked to be your saviour,” Ptolemy said, “You and the other gods just show up one day and put me to work on these stupid powers. For that matter, why did they send you and not Aphrodite? I get along way better with Aphrodite.”

“Now listen here!” Poseidon barked, “Pandora’s demons are inside that city right now and only YOU are powerful enough to stop them!”

“I’m sure there’s someone else,” Ptolemy protested.

“First Age magic trumps Third Age magic all the time,” Poseidon said, “They’re Third Age; you’re First Age. You can drive the Chaos away. Now unless you know of another Zodiac knight, you are officially the planet’s last hope.”

“What about Second Age?” asked Ptolemy, “Surely there must be people from back then hanging around still.”

“There are, but I’d sooner provoke the wrath of Chaos than invoke the true power of the Aemons,” Poseidon said solemnly, “Please, Jonathon. We need you on this. How soon can you get through this barrier?”

“Well, I suppose I could start practicing my Aries now,” he said.

“Practice the Libra sign,” Poseidon said, “Always complete element sets when you can. The extra powers come in very handy.”

He picked up a small rock and threw it at Ptolemy. Ptolemy failed to produce a force field in time and it bounced painfully off his shoulder.

“Hell, Poseidon!” Ptolemy cursed.

“I can’t stick around for this,” Poseidon said. He looked at Ingvold, “and she had better not distract you from your training.”

“A distraction?” Ptolemy gestured in Ingvold’s direction, “Her? Nah.”

"We'll see about that," and Poseidon approached the lovely young woman. For a moment, she looked very intimidated by his approach, but a warm comforting smile came across her face as he knelt down and kissed her on the hand. He spoke to her in Norwegian using his deep, soothing voice. She seemed entranced by his manner. She replied accordingly.

Ptolemy tilted his head quizzically and tried to make sense of their conversation.

Finally, Ingvold nodded and hopped off the rock.

"What was that all about?" Ptolemy asked.

Ingvold reached down, grabbed a handful of pinecones from the earth, and began flinging them one at a time at Ptolemy. Ptolemy braced himself in surprise.

"Stop the pinecone!" Ingvold shouted, "Save the world!"

"You heard the lady," Poseidon said. "What's wrong? Don't you think your new teacher is adorable?"

"Are you serious?" Ptolemy begged to ask, "What kind of mumbo-jumbo magic did you use on her?"

"Just the old Poseidon charm," the old man smiled, "I explained the situation, and she's only too happy to throw things at you until the world is saved."

Ptolemy attempted to block the incoming pinecones, but this training was definitely as annoying as he remembered it as the pinecones continued to bounce off his head.

"So these guys inside the city – the ones you told me about," Ptolemy asked, continuing to get pelted by pinecones, "Can they stand some ground against Pandora for a while?"

"They've done well so far," Poseidon said, "but the night isn't over. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"And what if we need more time?" Ptolemy asked.

Poseidon thought about this.

"We have one last option," he said, "but let's really hope we have more time."

Ptolemy raised his hand and a pinecone suddenly deflected off an invisible shield of light. Poseidon smirked while Ingvold excitedly jumped up and down clapping.

“Keep it up,” Poseidon gestured to her, “I think she’s impressed.”

Ptolemy gave a sly smile. She threw another pinecone at his head, shouting in her adorable accent. “Stop more, Superman!”

They didn’t have more time.

Back inside the city, Christine was hurrying through the streets, carrying a box full of tranquilizers for cats and dogs, as well as some pain-killers she’d grabbed from the drug store. It was unfortunate that the vet wasn’t equipped to handle horses and elephants. Odds were that Tylenol and ibuprofen would not be enough to kill a demon, but it was the best with which they had to work.

It was eerie running through the streets at this hour and seeing no one in sight. Christine was used to hearing all the night noises, especially night traffic sounds. However, now that the protection spell had been invoked, nobody was driving. Nobody was walking on the streets. Even the liquor stores had closed down and people had migrated to a safer part of the city. It was very unnerving to think the demons would pass through here again shortly, so Christine picked up the pace.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement in an alley. Every instinct in her body told her to hide but her mind told her to ignore it, and so she followed that thought. Unfortunately, all the streetlights suddenly extinguished. Without warning, the street was shadowed in darkness; even the clouds overhead hid the moonlight.

This is not good, she worried to herself. She remembered the general direction she was going, but couldn’t even see her hand in front of her face. Terror gripped her, but she pressed on into the darkness.

Suddenly, a small porch light came on near another alley. The momentary flash of light stunned her, and when she had recovered, she was completely disoriented. Christine had no choice but to proceed towards the light.

The alley was exactly as she anticipated – cold, inhospitable, and terrifying. She continued moving through

until the light dimmed and she realized that whatever trap had been set had finally sprung.

She felt the box of tranquilizers get pulled out of her hands. The box landed on the ground, and was dragged into a dark corner of the alley as if by its own shadow. The light went out.

Then she felt the coldest shiver run up her spine, like a hand crawling up under the back of her shirt. She twisted around, but she could only feel more cold hands crawling all over her. She immediately began to run, but it quickly became apparent that the hands were only toying with her. They slowed her pace to a crawl and she felt herself leaving the ground.

She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She swung her arms and kicked at the coldness. She felt herself lose consciousness...

Suddenly an ear-shattering explosion rang through the alley. Red and white sparks illuminated the darkness and she saw them – hundreds of tiny shadows retreating from her body as she was released. She fell hard on the concrete and was immediately helped up by Trisha. Moments ago, Trisha had seen her in peril and threw a lit firework into the alley. But now that the light was going out again, they only had seconds before the shadows would return.

“Hurry!” Trisha urged her to run. They made a beeline toward the exit of the alley. Behind them, the darkness began to grow even darker and more solid. It started rolling after them like an avalanche.

At the edge of the alley, Trisha reached into her bag and pulled out a bag of blood. She bit open one end and sprayed a line of it across the mouth of the alley. The rolling cloud of darkness hit the blood-line like a brick wall, and began rising over the buildings just to get around.

“Pig’s blood,” Trisha shook her disbelief. “Who knew?”

Christine grabbed a couple of fire-crackers from Trisha’s bag as they ran and lit them. Keeping an eye on the rooftops, she carefully timed her throw and launched

another cracker at the cloud of darkness. The explosion of light caused the dark shadows to scatter once more.

Just then, as they passed another dark alley, Trisha felt a sharp tenacious hold on her hair. The light began to flicker and darkness engulfed both girls. Christine leapt onto Trisha, trying to free her from the cold icy grip of the invisible hand, but only got caught herself. The shadows pried them apart and Trisha escaped. She quickly stumbled out of the alleyway.

As she turned to help Christine, she saw Christine already lighting another fire-cracker and dropping it on the ground. The light illuminated the alley long enough for Trisha to see a dark looming face bearing down on Christine. Something pulled at Christine's legs. She fell and was dragged off into the darkest corners of darkness.

Trisha ran.

14. Invasion

Jesse was admiring his sword as they waited for the others. The blade was simple, yet elegant - long and slender, with hourglass curves. There were barely any scratch marks on it, and it didn't look like anything you could just pick up in an antique shop. He turned to Nigel who was patiently looking through the blinds, waiting for the others.

"So where did we get the sword?" he asked.

"We found it," Nigel said.

"Just found it?" asked Jesse, "Come on – tell me we took it from the treasure room of an Arabian king, or that it was forged in the armory of Mt. Olympus."

"We found it," Nigel said, "In a ditch. In what's now Poland."

Jesse's expression saddened. "So my sword doesn't have any super powers?"

"If I tell you that it's Excalibur II," Nigel asked, "and that it was blessed upon us by the Lady of the Lake's more beautiful older sister, will you shut up about it?"

They heard someone yelling downstairs. Nigel and Jesse leapt to their feet and hurried downstairs to very surprising sight.

The bar was empty.

In the middle of the emptiness was Trisha completely out of breath, and Patti still in her meditative state.

"What's going on?" asked Nigel.

"They took her," Trisha said. "Shadows. They're here."

"Where are all the customers?" asked Jesse.

Nigel turned to Patti and began shouting at her in Mandarin. The man in the woman's body replied very calmly in Mandarin as well. They had a brief exchange before Nigel finally translated.

"He... she... says they all just walked out," Nigel said.

"Without finishing their drinks?" Jesse looked at the half-full glasses lying around everywhere. Nigel only saw half-empty glasses.

"It's the herding spell," Nigel said.

Trisha, in a panicked state, was busy pouring a line of pig's blood around the entrance of the tavern. Nigel stopped her before she started tearing open every bag she had.

"That won't hold them for long," Nigel said. "We need to get out of here."

The jukebox fizzled and a new song came on. Everyone quieted down as the music of the Eagles played through the bar.

Somebody's gonna hurt someone

Before the night is through

"Trish?" asked Nigel, "Please tell me that thing changes songs at random."

"We don't even have this song in the jukebox," she answered.

Right on cue, all the lights went out and the bar was bathed in darkness.

The front door flew open and an inexplicable blinding white light was cast across the bar. A figure came flying in, causing the blood-line to boil. It was a giant shadowy tendril with what appeared to be a human cocoon at the end of it. The cocoon's face opened to reveal a terrified, unspeaking face staring at them.

It was Christine.

The tendril pulled her back outside. Jesse ran after her. Nigel yelled at him to stop, but it was too late.

As Jesse reached the door, a hulk-like figure smashed its way into the entrance. Jesse retreated on cue and they all made a run for the stairs. Trisha reached behind the bar and grabbed the shotgun she'd salvaged from the stockpile earlier. As they hurried up to the studio, she spun around and fired as Turk smashed through the wall and overthrew a few tables.

They didn't fare any better upstairs. Venya, giant-size once more, was tearing through the wall, knocking over the

bed and piano. Despair flew in through the window, forcing Jesse to grab his sword and start slashing away at the rampaging bug-beast (without getting too distracted by the Christmas lights and fuzzy dice). Trisha went right for Venya's face, unloading one shotgun blast after another into it. Nigel quickly braced the wardrobe in front of the door as Turk came upstairs.

Downstairs, Patti quietly sat meditating and was practically oblivious to everything around him/her.

"They're everywhere!" Jesse yelled.

Suddenly both Jesse and Nigel were pulled off their feet. Looking down, they saw their own shadows dragging them from the building. Trisha tried to hold onto their hands, but had to let go as they were lifted out of the broken second-story wall and violently thrust onto the roof.

They stopped fighting as soon as they perceived the source of the shadows – or rather, the source that controlled all shadows. In the brief moonlight, they could see that these dark appendages were emerging from other shadows, and clasp onto theirs, pulling them, and twisting them until they were pinned down against the roof of Hunter's Tavern. They found themselves wrapped in darkness like mummies. And right in the middle of the roof was none other than Vladimir Tsepish standing over Christine, lying supine on the rooftop, also wrapped in darkness.

Trisha emerged from the roof's hatch in time to see the rest of the Chaos crawling onto the roof, surrounding Jesse and Nigel. The sight of all these great monsters together looked like a nightmare come to life.

The clouds swirled above, and Pandora descended down from the sky in a shimmering light. She swan-dived, did a forward somersault and landed gracefully on her feet on the roof, then applauded herself as if given a perfect ten score.

"Thank you, thank you!" she took her bows. Venya hissed, so Pandora materialized a giant baseball bat in her hands and swatted the snake-lady off the roof. Venya crawled back up, shrunken in size and ever the more

reluctant to hiss at her master. Pandora transformed the wooden bat into a real bat, bit off its head, and turned the rest into sparkles. She stepped up to Jesse and Nigel, still wrapped up in shadows, and laid down between them.

"Found you," She sang and clapped her hands. Then she sat up and looked at Trisha. "Hello, you have tacos."

Trisha looked at her shotgun and realized it had been turned into tacos. Then she felt an uncontrollable urge to start eating them, so she did.

Pandora turned and squatted down between Jesse and Nigel and she gave them a good long appraisal.

"So which one of you has my key?" she asked.

Nigel said nothing. Jesse murmured. Pandora snapped her fingers and Vladimir let him speak.

"Please," Jesse said, "Let Christine go and I'll tell you where the key is!"

"Jesse, you are an idiot," Nigel sighed.

"You mean the hostage?" Pandora asked, looking at Christine, "Hey, Vladdy, why do we have a hostage?"

"Because we needed to probe her mind to find this bar," he said.

"Do we still need the hostage?" Pandora pondered. She snapped her fingers and Christine disappeared.

"Christine!" Jesse yelled, struggling.

"Easy, Jess" Nigel quietly reassured him. "As long as there aren't pieces of her everywhere, it's us you should be worried about."

"Now," Pandora said, strolling around the roof with her arms behind her back, "The question of how to retrieve the key. See, we have two Aemons, but it's unlikely either of them would merely keep it in a safety deposit box."

"Why is that unlikely?" asked Nigel, "That's exactly what we did."

"YOU LIE!" Pandora pointed at him, "But on the other hand, maybe it's true. Perhaps if I kill one of you, the other will tell me how to find it?"

"And perhaps only one of us knows," Nigel said.

"Then perhaps I'll kill the one who doesn't know!" Pandora snapped.

"Then perhaps you'll kill the wrong one!" Nigel snapped back.

"Vladdy, sweetie," Pandora addressed him, "Probe their minds and find out for me."

"They're Second Age relics," Vladimir replied, "the damn buggers are off-limits." He scratched a sharp itch on his neck uncomfortably. Hosting the demon hadn't been a seamless transaction and his body wasn't yet settled.

"So, Pandora, you finally found a host for the fear demon?" Nigel asked, "How long do you think he'll last?"

Vladimir laughed, "I'm sorry, are you making a joke? In case you haven't noticed, I've evolved beyond a mere vampire. I control the shadows, I am the darkness, I am the ruler of the unknown. If there's nothing to fear but fear itself, then guess what? You need only fear me."

"Evil is such a good look on him, don't you think?" Pandora gushed.

Nigel calmly gave Vladimir a look that suggested Nigel knew more about this fear demon than he was letting on. Vladimir started feeling a pang of fear. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea on his part?

"Just give us the key so we can get this over with already!" Vladimir barked at Nigel. "I hate the way he's staring at me."

"Then maybe we should invite your girlfriend to join the party?" Pandora gleefully squealed, "The more, the merrier."

With that, Pandora reached out and summoned Trisha from across the roof. Trisha continued eating the tacos and found herself being dragged against her will by an invisible hand into the clutches of Pandora. Pandora raised her by the collar with one hand, Trisha's mouth spewing lettuce and cheese.

"Leave her out of this!" Nigel struggled, "You'll never get the key if anything happens to her!"

"That's possible," Pandora pondered, "but... I don't quite get the key if nothing happens to her, either. Something must happen... to somebody."

"Jesse!" Nigel yelled, "Jesse's the useless one! Destroy him!"

Jesse felt a sudden tightness with Nigel's outburst; what was going on?

"Uh, Nigel?" Jesse asked, "What are you doing?"

"Ordering Pandora to destroy you," Nigel explained, "Sorry, but we both know it had to come to this. Between you and Trisha, I must go with Trish."

"But she's going to kill all of us!" Jesse exclaimed.

"True, but at least we can go out with the same dignity that Christine did, am I right?" Nigel winked at Jesse, and quietly whispered, "It's our only shot."

"Oh, yeah..." Jesse answered tight-lipped, remembering that Christine had merely faded and wondering where she actually turned up. "Christine's death looked very enjoyable. May I try one?"

"Such brotherly love," Pandora laughed. "And it's been a long time since I last saw a fire-blood die. It would be my pleasure to grant you your departure." With that, she dropped Trisha and glided over in Jesse's direction.

"Pandora, it's been an honour to meet you," Jesse smiled.

"And you, my dear," she grinned. "Farewell."

Pandora laughed as she took one of Turk's blades and plunged it into Nigel's heart.

15. Divine Rites

To recap, Nigel's escape plan was a failure.

Nevertheless, he survived.

He was in terrible pain (having been stabbed with the blade of a pain demon) but he was still alive. Pandora was puzzled, and stabbed him a few more times, just to make sure. Nigel's wounds would keep regenerating in bursts of flames.

"This is interesting," she noted, then looked at Jesse. "Can he do that, too?"

She stepped over Nigel's body and stabbed Jesse in the heart. Jesse also lived, and was very surprised at this turn. Trisha just kept staring in horror.

"I'm sorry, but fire-bloods normally die when I do this," Pandora casually said, pulling out the blade. She watched the fire heal the wound. "Turk, darling? What's wrong with your knife?"

Turk just grumbled painfully.

Despair screeched in angst.

Venya ignored her.

Vladimir shrugged.

"Now why can't I kill either of you?" Pandora asked Nigel, "You can tell me, can't you? You just seem to be swimming in secrets."

"Perhaps you lost your touch," Nigel said, "Aemons don't die like they used to."

"Perhaps not," said Pandora, throwing her blade back at Turk (and hitting him in the liver), "But after nine thousand years, I have a yen to experiment."

She raised her hand and summoned a great war hammer from the ether. The hammer looked big enough to easily crush Jesse or Nigel in one strike.

"It's time for Mr. Smashy-Crashy!" she screamed, raising the hammer high above her head. And just as she

about to bring the hammer crashing down into the center of Jesse's heart, Poseidon leapt up on the roof screaming "Stop! Wait a minute! I need to talk to you!"

Pandora glanced over at the old man. All her demons followed suit.

"I'm sorry, but can you come back later?" Pandora asked, "This is such a bad time."

"I am Poseidon, God of the Sea!" Poseidon declared, brandishing his trident, "And as an Elder God of the Fifth Age, I hereby challenge you to partake in the ancient rites of Aeonomega!"

"What?!" exclaimed Nigel.

"Really?" Pandora asked, "Right now?"

"Just kill them!" Vladimir shouted.

"Shush, Vladdy, big people are talking," Pandora scolded him, before turning back to Poseidon. "As for you, why would I want to fight another of those Aeonomega things? The titans were quite the nuisance as it was. What could you offer me that they couldn't?"

"I'm the last remaining stockholder of Earth's oceans, and I can also throw in the power to conjure up storms and summon earthquakes," Poseidon offered.

Pandora's eyes lit up. "I want that," she said.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Vladimir, "Just kill the Aemons already! You have them right there!"

"Oh, yes," Poseidon said, "Just imagine: Pandora, Queen of the Ocean. Has a certain ring to it. If you agree, merely shake my hand and the Aeonomega shall be declared."

Poseidon held his hand out to Pandora. Pandora tossed the great hammer aside, crushing Despair in the process.

"I know this game," Pandora said, "You offer the power of a sea god, but what do you desire from me?"

"I don't suppose it would be too much to ask the Chaos to leave this realm of existence forever?" asked Poseidon.

"Not quite," Pandora smiled.

"Very well," Poseidon said, "A god for a god. If I win, I get your power. If you win, you get my power."

"Deal," Pandora said, shaking his hand.

Brilliant lightning flashed across the sky. If the Creator was truly responsible for over-seeing all Aeonomegas, then the Referee had just shown up.

"Name the arena," Pandora said, still holding his hand, as per the rites. Her hand felt very warm, but trembled uneasily. Poseidon didn't fancy holding onto it for much longer.

"The old Angus L. Macdonald Bridge," Poseidon said, "Away from civilian buildings. The battle shall take place over the harbour."

"Over the harbour?" Pandora laughed, "How delightful. If the rumors are true about the truce, you'll be surrounded by ocean and unable to use any of it."

"Name the time." Poseidon said.

Pandora thought about it, "Hmmm... right now?"

Thunder rumbled overhead. The Referee did not approve of this. One of the many unwritten rules of Aeonomega was that neither team was allowed to make a rule that would put the other team at an unfair disadvantage. The thunder was a sign that Pandora had to give the other team more time to prepare.

"Very well," she said, "In three hours."

This next part required the leaders of both parties to openly discuss participants and the conditions of winning.

"Myself and my minions," Pandora said, "versus you and the vampire girl over there."

Trish nearly coughed up a taco as thunder rumbled again.

"Okay, fine!" Pandora sneered, "How about myself and my minions versus... anyone you can bring? I mean, we are the Chaos, after all. Bring the whole damned city if you want. It'll be a soiree."

"Deal," said Poseidon, "And the condition for winning: last one on the bridge standing."

"Oooh," Pandora giggled, "I love these things! All right, then. Name your three terms."

Poseidon thought about the terms carefully before speaking.

"First term," he said, "The Chaos shall not use their divine powers to directly affect anyone in my army. I will not have you disintegrate my people with a snap or control their minds with your evil auras!"

"My first term," Pandora said, "The official drink of the battle shall be diet cherry cola!"

"Second term," Poseidon said, picturing the most obvious worst-case scenario, "No demons are allowed to collapse the bridge."

"My second term," Pandora said, "I shall provide the music."

"Third term," Poseidon said, "You shall neither kill nor inconvenience anyone until battle."

"My third term," smiled Pandora, "thou shalt not eat until battle!"

Thunder rumbled. Even the Referee knew that warriors needed a hearty meal.

"All right – revision," Pandora considered, "No eating CHICKEN WINGS until battle! Ha, ha!"

The Referee approved of all these rules and lightning flashed signifying the beginning of the Aeonomega.

Vladimir suddenly felt the compulsive urge to release Jesse and Nigel from their bonds. Trisha managed to crawl away to safety. They were all free of Pandora's control.

"I shall see you in three hours, sea god." Pandora said, winking at him. "Until then, what's there to do in this city for three hours? I'd love to destroy a building or two, but I suppose that counts as an inconvenience."

"You could always go see 'Robo-Ninja Raptor Cop 3'," Jesse said.

Pandora inquired, "What is this 'Robo-Ninja Raptor Cop 3'?"

"It's a really good movie down the street," Jesse said, "You should bring all the demons to see it."

"And why would I want to do that?" asked Pandora.

"Because you want to!" Nigel yelled.

"I do?" asked Pandora.

"No you don't!" Vladimir yelled, desperately not wanting to go see 'Raptor Cop 3'.

"I think he's calling you... crazy." Nigel suggested. Pandora's eyes flared up at Vladimir.

"YOU DARE TO CALL ME CRAZY?!" she screamed.

"No, no – of course not!" Vladimir cowered, "I'd love to see it! We'd all love to! Right, guys?"

All the demons reluctantly nodded yes. Except Venya, but she didn't have a choice.

"Then it's settled!" Pandora said, "In three hours, we shall engage in battle for the power of the oceans! Until then... we shall watch 'Robo-Ninja Raptor Cop 3'!"

And with that, all the demons left the building and disappeared into the night. Jesse and Nigel got to their feet, bewildered at the events that had just transpired.

"I can't believe we just convinced five demons to go watch Raptor Cop," Jesse said, "Is Pandora always that easy to fool?"

"Usually," Nigel said, "but don't press your luck."

Nigel turned to Poseidon who was staring blankly into the night. Trisha walked up to them, wiping taco sauce from her mouth.

"I'm sorry, but what just happened?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Nigel said. "Only that Poseidon challenged Pandora's crew to an ancient battle royale, and threw control of Earth's oceans into the pot in spite of the fact that we have no chance of winning this fight."

"We needed to buy time," Poseidon said. "It was the only thing I could do. Now we just have to hope that Ptolemy can finish his training in time."

"How did you know she would go for the oceans?" asked Trisha, "I thought all she wanted was the key."

"She's the Chaos of Insanity," Poseidon said, "In hindsight, I could have offered her a bologna sandwich and she might have taken it. Maybe I should have done that first."

"Christine!" Jesse exclaimed happily, seeing Christine climb onto the roof from the outside ladder.

"She teleported me into the bathroom downstairs," Christine said. "So ... did I miss anything?"

“Come downstairs and help us clean up,” Nigel said,
“We’ll explain everything.”

16. Desperate Measures

"Hello, people of Halifax," Pandora's smiling face said on all the televisions, windows, and her omni-angled sky-dome. "It's me again. I just wanted to let you know that I have found the fire-bloods and will not be destroying your city."

There were sighs of relief everywhere.

"However, I will also soon be in control of the forces of Hell as well as the power of Earth's oceans, which I will unleash upon you with great prejudice at my earliest convenience," she laughed. "Ain't I a stinker?"

People all over the city screamed and prayed for their lives.

"Anyhow," she continued, "I just thought I'd let you know that you have a chance to stop all this. We have agreed to the challenge of Poseidon and will be meeting with his army at the Angus L. Macdonald Bridge at three 'o clock I welcome you, one and all, to join in the festivities if you want to defend your meager little city. Diet cherry cola shall be provided, and there will be music, so pack your picnic baskets! NO CHICKEN WINGS!"

Her face went red with rage on that last line and she took a moment to settle down.

"Otherwise, Poseidon's army is recruiting," she said, bringing up a map of the city and showing the location of Hunter's Tavern. "If you think you have what it takes to save your city, come on down. We'll be waiting."

Jesse, Christine, and Trisha were in the upstairs studio watching the announcement flicker on the windows outside the damaged wall as they helped turn Nigel's piano right-side up. The sky returned to normal, although the magical dome remained intact.

"At least it's free advertising," Trisha said.

"So we just don't go to war," Christine said. "We've got three hours to run."

"It's not that easy," Jesse said, "Poseidon said an Aeonomega contract is binding. If we don't show, the battle is forfeit to Pandora and she collects the spoils of war."

"What I don't get is why Pandora wasn't able to kill you," Trisha said, "Nigel said your heart was the weak spot."

"Yeah, that's... what I'd like to know," Jesse said.

From downstairs they heard arguing. Poseidon and Nigel were at it again.

"Come on," Trish said, "Let's go join in."

The bar itself had been trashed, thanks to the arrival of Turk who had recklessly destroyed the nicer parts of the bar. While the jukebox and karaoke equipment were still intact, all the TVs and liquor bottles behind the bar were completely obliterated. Patti continued casting her meditation spell on the floor, having also previously cast an invisibility spell on herself. This had made the demons oblivious to her presence when they broke in. When asked why she didn't cast it on everyone, she simply stated: "It doesn't work that way."

They found Nigel sitting in a booth yelling at Poseidon who was pacing back and forth hectically.

"I know it was a stupid idea!" Poseidon exclaimed. "But consider the alternative! If they had found the key then, we'd be swimming in demons right now!"

"But we have no army!" Nigel said, "It's just you, me, Jesse, Trisha, and our possessed waitress! We can't beat them like this!"

"And Ptolemy!" Poseidon said, "We have a Zodiac knight! He's our trump card!"

"A Zodiac knight who can't even get inside the city," Nigel reminded him.

"We're working on it!" Poseidon yelled, "And what are you doing to help besides complain? We need the strength of an Aemon out there!"

Nigel stood up, looking Poseidon angrily in the eyes, "Not if I can help it."

"Boys," Trisha stepped in, "If we could have a little less arguing? Poseidon, what's Ptolemy's status?"

"I'm going to check on him right now," Poseidon said, "You all just stay here. And try not to eat any chicken wings. At this point, that's literally a lightning strike against anyone who breaks the rules."

Poseidon stepped outside into the night, leaving everyone to their thoughts. Jesse and the others figured they'd join Nigel in the booth.

"So what's the deal with our hearts?" Jesse asked, "Why couldn't Pandora kill us?"

"It's one of Nione's counter-measures," Nigel explained, rolling an empty shot glass around in his hand. "An adjustment she made to the Aemon spell. She encased our hearts in metal."

Jesse was stunned at the sound of this, "Is that why I always feel top-heavy?"

"Is this that indestructible Tartarus-forged steel you were talking about?" Trisha asked.

"I wish it were so," Nigel said, "Nione was able to manifest a steel-type alloy with the magic at her disposal, but it's no match for a demon. We were lucky up on the roof. Pandora's war hammer would have crushed us for sure."

"And why didn't you tell me about this?" Jesse asked.

"I didn't tell you because now you're just going to poke at your chest all night." Nigel said.

Jesse looked down. He was definitely poking himself in the chest.

"I see," was all Jesse could say.

"What did Poseidon mean," Christine spoke, "When he mentioned the strength of an Aemon? What's with the strength of an Aemon?"

Nigel sighed and averted his eyes from them.

"Remember when I said that we Aemons were forged to be the ultimate warriors?" he asked, "Well, King Xeraphoxes didn't exactly want us because we kept regenerating. The fire-blood army was literally the most powerful force on the planet, and if Pandora hadn't

ambushed them, this entire planet would be the kingdom of Xeras by now.”

“But you said we don’t have super-strength,” Jesse said, “You told me your strength is all mental.”

“We do have a hidden strength,” Nigel said, “But it’s too dangerous to use.”

“I think we’re past the point of too dangerous,” Trisha said.

“It’s...” Nigel hesitated, “It’s blood. That bloodlust you felt when you drank that coffee, Jesse? They used but a single drop of blood to spike your drink. They had your smell; they needed to identify the fact that you also carried the same taste for blood.”

“So blood isn’t actually poisonous to us?” Jesse asked.

“It might as well be,” Nigel said, “Once an Aemon has a taste of blood – any blood – their demon side begins to emerge. They grow hungry for more and they tear apart any living thing in their path. They become unstoppable killing machines until the blood wears off.”

Jesse remembered how for one brief moment, he felt like destroying Christine right there in the café.

“How much blood can we drink before we lose control?” Jesse asked.

“Never drink blood,” was Nigel’s response. “Not for anything. You’ve never had the discipline to control it. One drop too many and you’ll wake up in a pool of your own friend’s blood, with the bitter taste of his bile in your mouth.”

Jesse was starting to wonder if this had happened before, or if Nigel was painting a worst case scenario. Had he and Nigel tried to defeat the demons like this once? Was that what had happened?

“I’m the only one of us who has any control when I’m under the influence,” Nigel said, “And even that’s not enough. If you were to release me on that bridge, and if I were to taste any demon blood, I would no longer know friend from foe. By the time I’d burned through all the blood, I would have destroyed this entire city by myself.”

“So that’s why you guys don’t eat meat,” Trisha said.

"Poseidon thinks we may be a last resort," Nigel said, "but that's something we can never risk. We are Aemon."

"But you're also half-angel," Christine pointed out.

"We've never been able to bring out the angel side in us," Nigel said, "To become a demon, we must take blood. But to become an angel, we must earn a soul."

"And how do we do that?" asked Jesse.

"We can't," Nigel stated bluntly. "That's the crux of our situation. By the law of the Second Age, our angel side would be the most powerful."

"So what happens now?" asked Christine.

"Now you go home." Nigel said, "Your part here is done, Christine Marx. So go see your friends and family for the last time."

"But..." she protested.

"You can't help us fight," Nigel said, "You don't have any power. You aren't immortal. You even have a hard time shooting a demon when he's nailed to the ground. You're a liability, if anything. So please, say your good-byes to Jesse and just go home."

Christine stood up and started walking out of the bar. Jesse rushed to intercept her.

"You don't have to leave," he said.

"Maybe it's for the best," she answered sadly. "I think I've caused enough trouble already."

"Are you kidding?" Jesse asked, "You're our good luck charm. You destroyed one demon already. You used a land mine to save us from the snake-lady. You solved the Sphinx's riddle and taught us how to kill these things."

"I admit, she's been pretty helpful, actually," Trisha said. "You should have seen her against the shadow guy. Maybe there's more to Christine than we think."

"Which is why you should see it through to the end," Jesse explained to Christine. "You're a miracle worker, and we both know you want to be here. You can still help."

"Can I?" she asked. "Nigel's right. I'm the reason this is all happening. I really shouldn't push my luck. I should go. I have friends and family I should be checking in with."

She turned to leave. Jesse grabbed her arm and stopped her, but she raised a hand to stop him.

"I don't care what Nigel says," Jesse explained, "I believe you're going to be a crucial part in winning this war. We didn't meet by accident. This has to be fate."

"Let her go, Jesse," Nigel said. "If I recall, it was you who didn't want her involved in the first place."

That part was true. Maybe Jesse felt he had to put Christine's safety first. He remembered the power he felt fighting Nigel upstairs, and how easily he'd been cut down again and again. Was he really trying to drag Christine back into this?

A sadness came over Christine, and she leaned in and gave Jesse a kiss on the cheek.

"It's been fun," she said. "But I think you need to do this without me. I brought you this far; you can take it the rest of the way. Good luck, Jess."

As she walked out the door, Jesse turned to Nigel.

"You didn't have to do that," Jesse said, "She wanted to help. We could have found something for her to do."

"She started this war," Nigel said, "She's lucky that we're not sticking her on the front lines. I mean, seriously, Jesse, do you really want her going to war?"

"This just seems wrong," Jesse mumbled.

"You have feelings for the girl," Nigel spoke, "I get it. The Sphinx called you both out on it, remember?"

"It's not like that!" Jesse exclaimed.

"Of course not," Nigel said. "It's not real love unless she comes back. I believe what you two are experiencing is a form of camaraderie. There's a meeting of the fates, you save her life, and she saves yours. But that time has passed, and you need to let her go. She's not a fighter. She's the one who's meant to live."

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"History is made by the strong," Nigel said, "but written by the meek. A lot of people are going to die on that bridge tonight. I'm making sure she won't be one of them."

"What people?" Trisha asked. "We don't have an army."

"We will," Nigel said, standing up and looking towards Patti. "All around the city are scared families. Brave husbands and mothers, angry men and women who want to make a stand. All that's keeping them at bay is Patti's spell."

"No," Jesse said. "You don't plan on dropping the protection spell, do you?"

"It's the only way," Nigel said. "Anyone who wants to fight will now get their chance. We'll need the numbers."

"But they're all humans," Jesse said. "They don't know what's going on or what they're up against! We'll be leading them to a slaughter!"

"Don't underestimate humanity," Nigel said. "It's said that at the dawn of the seventh age, mankind will overthrow all deities and inherit the earth. Let's see if they're right. I'm going to initiate a draft."

He turned to Patti and shouted something in Mandarin. Patti took off her headphones, and looked at him with an expression of uncertainty. She didn't like the idea of dropping her spell. They began to argue.

As they argued, a large husky figure appeared at the broken door and knocked against the frame. Jesse and Trisha took notice and Trisha went to go address him. Jesse stared at this visitor with an odd curiosity. Something told him it might not be wise to give in to Nigel's plan just yet.

Jesse looked back to Nigel who was starting to insert a lot more English into his argument. He couldn't believe how much trouble Wu Tang was giving him over this decision.

"Uh, hey, Nigel?" Jesse tapped him on the shoulder and stared towards the door. "I don't think we need to ready a draft just yet."

Nigel turned to Jesse, "Well, an army isn't just going to pop out of nowhere!"

Trisha called out from the doorway:

"Nigel, an army just popped out of nowhere. Should I invite them in?"

17. Army of a Madman

The night held many surprises. As far as miracles go, having an army show up on one's doorstep seemed to be on par with the rest of the night's events. In fact, at this point, all shock value was completely obliterated.

Just outside the door were a thousand men. At first glance, they appeared to be an army of Templars, all clad in what appeared to be white armor with red crosses. On closer inspection, one could see that no two soldiers were actually dressed alike. Some wore heavy medieval armor, others wore SWAT gear. The rest dressed like they had assembled their armor out of scrap metal, and considering one man had a bucket on his head, chances are it was very likely. Even their weapons were of a strange assortment. While several assault rifles were visible throughout the crowd, there were still quite a number of soldiers carrying enormous spears, long swords, and battle axes. It was as if they were planning to fight in the crusades. Some had taken the time to duct tape machine guns to the end of their spears, although this could only make the guns more difficult to fire.

Before Jesse and Nigel could take in this sight, an enormous man suddenly blocked their view. He was built like a statue - huge, chiseled, and hard. His face commanded respect and he was clad in a hero's garments with a flowing blue cape, a trimmed beard, and long blonde curly hair. He extended his arms as if to embrace Jesse and Nigel and spoke in a loud, idiosyncratic British voice.

"My friends! Naveen! Jezebuul! It's so good to see you again!"

"Dear lord, no," Nigel said in complete shock.

Nigel reached over, grabbed what was left of the door, and quickly slammed it in the man's face. He then hurried to barricade the door with tables and chairs.

"Uh, Nigel, what are you doing?" Jesse asked.

"It's Magnus!" Nigel said. "Don't let him in!"

"Magnus?" Jesse asked, "You mean the guy who died in that manure cart explosion?"

"General Charlie Magnus!" Magnus boomed through the door, "Holy Commander of Her Blessed Lady's Paladin Army!"

"Why aren't we letting him in?" asked Trisha.

"He's crazier than Pandora!" Nigel whispered very stressfully.

"But he has an army!" Jesse exclaimed.

"We'll take our chances!" Nigel said, throwing another table onto his pile.

Magnus appeared at the window and pressed his face against the glass. As he leaned in, the broken frame gave away and he fell through the window into the bar. He quickly got to his feet, took a bold, heroic stance, and brushed himself off.

"Well, now!" he said. "With that out of the way, I'm to understand you're recruiting for the war against Pandora's minions? Am I correct?"

Nigel sighed in defeat and approached Magnus.

"How are you alive?" he asked, "The last time we saw you was back in France and you were riding an exploding manure cart into the mouth of Raaj!"

"And I would've died indeed, had the Fates not smiled upon me that day!" Magnus stated, "By the will of Her Blessed Lady, I was thrown clear of the explosion, fell off a cliff, landed on sharp jagged rocks and was promptly set upon by a family of bears. That, too, I survived."

Nigel face-palmed and figured it out. "Let me guess. It turns out you were immortal the whole time."

"Not just immortal, but a demigod!" he bellowed, "Son of Mars, Roman God of War! 'Twas I to whom the Fates entrusted with a prophecy to gather an army and prepare for battle on this day in this place! And so – here I am!"

"A prophecy?" asked Nigel. "There's a prophecy about this? As in, you knew Pandora would attack Halifax for the last thousand years and you didn't try to warn anybody?"

“We warned many people!” Magnus explained. “They thought we were completely mad! So we came into town last week to address the problem directly. We’ve been staying at the Holiday Inn ever since waiting for Pandora to arrive.”

Jesse felt the compulsive urge to march right past Nigel and welcome this guy. He shook the general’s hand with great admiration. General Magnus’ handshake wasn’t unlike sticking your hand in a press. Had Jesse not been an Aemon, he probably would have been dealt a few broken bones.

“Sorry about my brother,” he said. “You and I probably met before, like a thousand years ago, but I have amnesia. So don’t get offended if I don’t remember you. The name’s Jesse. My brother’s now called Nigel.”

The General evaluated Jesse’s weak physical handshake with disappointment, but admired Jesse’s confident attitude in delivering it.

“It is a pleasure and an honour to once again meet the valiant warriors with whom I once fought side by side,” Magnus acknowledged them. “Now then, where are the libations?”

The General ordered a round for himself and his generals. Three soldiers crawled in through the window – one short, one medium, one large. They up-righted a table, grabbed some chairs, and helped themselves to the bottle of rum found on the floor. They poured themselves each a broken glass and toasted to their forthcoming victory. Jesse and Nigel sat with them, but didn’t drink just yet. Trish opted to stand and watch.

Magnus chugged down his glass and gave a satisfied exasperation.

Nigel caved in and finally addressed Magnus as if it were a job interview. “All right, so maybe you can help. First things first: where the heck did you get an army?”

“Where did I get an army?” Magnus almost took offense to this, “My boy! I was a king in a past life! And now we are the disciples of the prophecy! The followers of virtue! We

are the hand of fate itself! We've been recruiting for a thousand years in preparation for this night!"

"So you're all immortals," Nigel realized.

"Immortals and demigods alike!" Magnus added. "Take my fellow general, Vincenzo here. He's not much of a talker, but he is a former vampire hunter for the Vatican and a son of Sol Invictus." He gestured towards the medium-sized man with the skinny head and the pointy nose. Vincenzo was digging wax out of his ear with a tiny cross. He and Trisha exchanged looks. Their presence made each other nervous.

"Or my zombie shaman, General Ngozi," Magnus gestured towards the large muscular black man on his left. The giant African zombie replied with a low hollow moaning. Magnus followed up, "He's not much a talker either."

Jesse looked to the third general, a nervous wreck of a man who looked like he had one too many coffees. He also didn't talk much. "And this is?"

"Steve," Magnus introduced him. "Crazy Steve. He's been reincarnated over four hundred times and has a perfect memory of every life. And I mean perfect. He remembers the agonizing details of every death and birth he's ever experienced. Met him back in the Spanish Inquisition. Very prone to death. Still, every time he dies, he just gets reborn and finds me again within twenty years."

"So why would he be good in a fight?" asked Nigel.

"He breathes fire for some reason," Magnus shrugged. Steve coughed up a light flame. "But immortals aside, I've trained all my men to move as one in battle."

"So for the last thousand years," Jesse realized, "you've been raising the ultimate army?"

"Ah, but the ultimate army cannot stand alone without the strength of the fire-bloods," nodded Charlie. "We were fortunate enough that Pandora revealed the location of your bar to us. We were expecting to meet Poseidon, to be honest. Where is that old sea-dog?"

"Poseidon's out at the moment," Nigel said. "Listen, Magnus, it's wonderful to have you and your army, but you should have firsthand knowledge that that these demons aren't pushovers. They need to be killed in specific ways. Even a powerful god can't destroy them. We'll need more than just warriors in this battle."

"We're well aware of the dangers and we've prepared accordingly," Magnus carried on. "In the last week, I've called in some favours with the heads of the Canadian and British militaries. I've been able to sneak several jeeps with mounted guns into the city, as well as a tank, helicopter and a Harrier Jump Jet. We have them all in a nearby warehouse."

"You have a Harrier?!" Jesse exclaimed.

"Actually, no, not anymore," Magnus said. "While parking the tank, they backed into the Harrier, and now the wing is bent. But we do have a tank."

"They have a tank," Trisha smiled.

Magnus turned back to Nigel, "So, shall our little army join your cause?"

"Well, I don't know..." Nigel hesitated. Jesse wasn't sure why Nigel was hesitating. Magnus seemed like a pretty legit guy to him.

Magnus snapped his fingers. Two of his men carried in a large metal case through the window, placed it on the table and opened it up. Inside was an RPG-7 which immediately caught Nigel's eye.

"You're in," said Nigel.

"Great!" Magnus clapped his hands, "So... where is Her Blessed Lady?"

"The who?" Nigel asked.

"It can't be this fine woman behind the bar, is it?" Magnus asked, "Or the oriental lass by the window? Neither of them really speak Blessed to me."

"No, that's Trisha and Patti," Jesse said. "Patti's possessed by a Chinese Immortal if that counts."

"No, I'm speaking of God's chosen warrior!" Magnus exclaimed.

"The Zodiac knight?" Nigel asked. "He's outside the city. He hasn't been able to get in all night. I don't know if he qualifies as a lady. I haven't met him yet."

"No, no, no. Who has slain the first demon?" Magnus clarified, "Who's the woman whose actions tore a hole asunder in the fabric of destiny? Whose might was so great that it caught the eyes of the Fates and birthed a prophecy so great that would guide our spirits for an entire millennium? Where is Her Blessed Lady, the prophesied Chosen One, the Slayer of Demons, the Answerer of Riddles, the Mother of the Paladin Army? She is the one whom we will not march without!"

"You don't mean Christine, do you?" Jesse asked.

There was a sudden silence as Charlie and every soldier in the room quickly knelt on one knee and bowed in reverence to the name, performing the sign of the cross as they did so.

"Her Blessed Lady," Magnus whispered. "The name of the ages. Our saviour."

Nigel and Jesse exchanged looks. Both were awkwardly stunned.

"She... stepped out," Jesse told Magnus. "But, I'm sure she'll be back soon. Right, Nigel?"

"Of course," Nigel nodded slowly.

"Excellent," Magnus clapped his hands. "Now then; more libations!"

Nigel leaned in and whispered into Jesse's ear: "Get her back."

18. Troubled Waters

While the others brought General Magnus up to speed, Poseidon was enjoying his time in the woods a lot less. Ptolemy's training was going nowhere, and the grave repercussions to follow if Pandora won this Aeonomega would spell out an even bigger doom for the world than if she had merely opened the box.

He began to wonder what Pandora would do with his powers. A person possessed by Insanity itself would drive the tides into a never-ending miasma of whirlpools and tsunamis. Even the water inside a person's body would force them to go mad after a long enough time.

J. Arthur Ptolemy was covered in sores and bruises. At some point, Ingvold had run out of pine-cones and started throwing rocks at him. He'd been able to deflect a few more, but harnessing the balance between opposing forces wasn't an easy trick when incoming projectiles were involved. Often, it sometimes didn't feel worth the pain.

He was quietly wishing he could just keep trying to walk through Pandora's barrier instead, but having tried it a few times already, he was convinced this was a level of magic he wouldn't be able to penetrate tonight.

"Pull your elbow in!" barked Poseidon, "Get more swing with that left arm! See with your third eye!"

"I don't have a third eye!" Ptolemy protested.

"You know what I mean!"

"No, I don't!" Ptolemy threw up a force field right in front of his own face. The force field smashed against his jaw, knocking him backwards into the dirt. Poseidon groaned at the sight of the Zodiac knight wiping mud stains off his khakis.

Even Ingvold was starting to lose interest in this side trip. She had been on her way home from the club when Ptolemy showed up and whisked her away. Now that she

was sobering up, she was quickly coming to grips with how ridiculous and terrifying it was that she was stranded in Canada, in the middle of the night, throwing rocks at a second-rate superhero.

"We barely have two hours," Poseidon said, "and you aren't making any progress! Do you realize what's at stake?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah – the world," Ptolemy said, "Go ahead, feed me the line again. Tell me how every living man, woman, and child on this planet depends on my ability to stop a rock. You should know I don't work well under pressure!"

"How could you neglect your training like this?" asked Poseidon, "You're not going to be ready in time!"

"Well, if you wanted me to be a true knight," Ptolemy pointed out, "you and the other gods wouldn't have run out on me. Always so damn obsessed with starting new worlds elsewhere. You think you can show up in first grade, tell me I have powers, and then leave me to figure them out?"

"You got your training," Poseidon said, "We spent a whole year with you. You were meant to complete your training on your own."

"Right, and guess what happened after that?" Ptolemy asked, "You think my parents approved of me practicing magic in the backyard? Of course not! They didn't believe this nonsense! They sent me to a shrink! They convinced me that I was a complete nut-job."

"So how did they explain your glowing tattoo?" Poseidon asked.

"They didn't!" Ptolemy exclaimed, "Apparently, regular humans can't see this thing!"

Poseidon raised his eyebrows in surprise. This was news to him.

"I didn't even realize I actually had powers again until graduate year!" Ptolemy complained. "And where were the Olympians that whole time? Just sitting content in their palaces on Neptune? Thinking they've got their own secret weapon on Earth if they ever need him?"

"You think we wanted you for ourselves?" asked Poseidon.

"Why else have I never met any gods other than the Olympians?" asked Ptolemy. "I'd right like to meet Odin or Marduk one of these days. Or what about Isis? Never introduced me to her, did you? You'd think all the gods would want a piece of me. But perhaps they don't even know I exist."

"If some knew you existed," Poseidon said, "They'd stop at nothing to make you their slave. We Olympians have even kept you a secret from some of our own."

"Well," said Ptolemy, "I'm starting to suspect all this is getting a little shady. This Aeonomega you go on about... it's sounding political. All these years, you've been banned from using your powers, but if you win tonight's battle, you get new powers, don't you? The power of Madness? I don't like the idea of the Sea God also being the Madness God."

"This isn't about that," Poseidon calmly spoke. Ingvold threw another rock and Ptolemy caught it but not with his powers.

"I think it's about something," he said, "but you are right. I'm not going to be ready in time."

He pulled up his sleeve to look at his tattoo. The Libra sign had barely changed colour. Poseidon knew he was right; there was no chance of getting Ptolemy inside the city at this rate. It would take weeks of training at this rate.

"There has to be another way," Poseidon wondered. "Can you punch your way through the barrier?"

"I'm strong, but I'm not that strong," Ptolemy said, approaching Pandora's wall. He made a fist and braced himself as he threw a Taurus-charged punch into the barrier. The energy absorbed the shock of his blow and he reeled back in pain. "Augh! Hate that!"

As Ptolemy focused his healing powers on his hand, Poseidon tried to come up with an alternative. Even though Ptolemy was First Age, he was still mortal, and getting him through the barrier using Poseidon's powers would break the truce. The barrier itself was a perfect sphere around the city. They couldn't even dig under it if they could.

Ingvold noticed Ptolemy doing something unusual. Ptolemy had begun crouching and his eyes were glowing yellow. Poseidon has taken notice, too, and stepped in to see what he was up to.

In his sight, Ptolemy was projecting himself onto the astral plane and searching inside the city. Floating invisibly above the streets, he found multiple paths of destruction left by Pandora and her goons, and they all led to a small theatre.

Inside the theatre, he saw them. Pandora was hogging the middle row, eating popcorn and talking loudly on a cell phone. The rest were scattered about, biding their time until the battle. Their very presence scared Ptolemy. Now he knew what they were up against. But something seemed wrong.

Pandora looked in his direction and stared into his soul.

Ptolemy quickly pulled himself back into his body and gasped. His heart was racing.

"I saw them," he said to Poseidon, "and she saw me."

"You can project inside the city?" Poseidon asked.

"Yeah," Ptolemy said with surprise. "Hey, were you ever going to tell me about the snake-lady or the giant bug covered with Christmas lights?"

"Can you spy on them?" Poseidon asked. "Maybe you can still help from out here."

"I don't think so," Ptolemy shook his head. "For some reason, she can see me in astral form. She knows what I am, but she's not worried."

"I was afraid of that," Poseidon muttered.

A morbid thought entered Ptolemy's head: "How did the last Zodiac die?"

"He passed away in his sleep," Poseidon said. "A simple mortal death."

"And the others?" Ptolemy asked. "Why haven't any of them tried to hunt down the Chaos before?"

"Some..." Poseidon started, but then he truthfully corrected himself, "...many already have. But then, many have never completed their training."

A chill ran down Ptolemy's spine. "These things have killed Zodiac knights before?"

"In the last nine thousand years..." Poseidon said, "we've lost many. Without proper training, you aren't invincible."

"And you were just going to send me in there?" Ptolemy asked. "Not warn me that I'm heading off to fight things that have killed people like me?"

"This is different," Poseidon said. "You're not here to hunt them down. You're here to stop the world from ending tonight."

"Yeah, fat chance that'll happen," Ptolemy said. "I think I'm done here."

He motioned Ingvold to piggy-back onto him, and using the power of telekinesis, he started rising into the air. Ingvold didn't completely understand what was going on, but she was grateful that she didn't have to throw more rocks. Poseidon ran to him.

"Ptolemy, where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," he said, "I'm not getting through that barrier; I'm not going to be able to help. I'm sorry I wasted your time. Good luck with saving the world."

"You'll never earn your armor this way!" Poseidon shouted.

Ptolemy paused.

The armor he spoke of was the Armor of God – a mystical relic that shaped itself over any Zodiac knight of worth. The Armor always took on a unique form for each knight. Ptolemy remembered being fascinated by the idea of it when he was younger, always wondering what his armor would look like. But now that he was older, he couldn't get hung up on this.

"That was a childhood dream," he said. "Get us through this night, and I promise I'll train. Until then, I'm going to go make the most of what time I have left."

"You're the last chance we have!" Poseidon begged. "We can't battle the Chaos alone!"

“No,” Ptolemy told him. “I saw them with my own eyes. They aren’t friends. They aren’t allies. They’re the ones who are fighting you alone.”

Poseidon sensed some truth in his words. Chaos was, in itself, chaos. They didn’t organize, they didn’t work together, and they shared no love for each other. But love alone was only ever able to kill one of them.

“Fine, run away.” Poseidon said, “We’ll find another champion.”

And with that, Ptolemy waved goodbye and flew off into the night.

Poseidon stared up at the stars and felt his silvery blood drain from his face. He’d played his last card. It was up to the others now.

19. The Hard Decisions

Nigel sat in his room alone on his piano bench, staring into the same night sky through the hole in his wall. Downstairs, the rowdy sounds of drunken warriors filled the bar as their hour slowly drew near. Time was ticking, and he could feel the world closing in around him.

Part of that world was Trisha, who was now standing behind him, her hands massaging his shoulders.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“About all the hard decisions I’ve ever made in my life,” Nigel said. “All the ones I’ve made that have kept us alive this long. But history is once again repeating itself. Everything’s falling into Jesse’s hands. He’s throwing himself into the path of danger again, and this time, I won’t be able to protect him.”

“He doesn’t need protecting, Nigel,” Trisha said, sitting down next to him. She had come to accept Jesse as a brother after all these years, but even she wasn’t as over-protective or haunted about it like Nigel was.

“It’s different for me,” Nigel said, “The vow I made... it isn’t binding. But it’s the only thing I’ve ever known. No matter how much he drives me crazy... I have to keep him alive. I have to keep him away from all this.”

Trisha put her head on Nigel’s shoulder, “Do you remember when we met?”

“Vaguely,” Nigel confessed, “On a train, wasn’t it?”

“Baggage compartment,” Trisha said, “heading east. Jesse kept playing in the suitcases like a little dog. And you just sat there watching him, but not in a weird creepy way. It was the look in your eyes that I liked. It was as if you had made every choice you would ever need to make. You were years ahead of your time. Nine thousand years as it turns out, but still... you were different.”

“Did you think I was a vampire right off the bat?” Nigel asked.

Trish chuckled at the sound of hearing vampire and bat in the same sentence. “No. Not until you told me. A lot about you screamed vampire, but your warm skin threw me off. Still, you were definitely old.”

“So when do I get to hear your origin story?” asked Nigel. “I’d think tonight might be our last chance.”

“It’s not that special,” she said, “My family was living in Georgia right after slavery ended. We were free... but then I got sick and died in my own bed. It was only temporary, of course. I awoke before they could even bury my body. My family thought my resurrection was a miracle until that first fateful sunny day. I remember my skin burning... and my mother screaming. And then the hunger started. I remembered reading stories about vampires, so... that night, I ran away before I could hurt anyone. Or before they could hurt me.”

“Are you over a hundred and fifty?” Nigel asked, remembering her once saying she’d been born back in the sixties.

“Hey,” Trish smiled, “you’re not the only one who lies about their age.”

“No, it’s good,” Nigel said, “So many people are real idiots when it comes to being vampires. There’s a saying that if any vampire is smart enough to live past a century, they’re as good as a million years old.”

“Lucky me,” said Trish, “So, do you expect me to fight? Or are you over-protective of me, too? I really don’t want to hold down the fort again while you’re out there risking your life.”

“I’d rather not see you on the bridge,” said Nigel, holding her hand, “but there’s a lot of good vantage points along that road... and there’s something sexy about a woman with a sniper rifle. Can I trust you to cover me while I’m out there?”

“I’ll keep you in my sight,” Trisha said facetiously. She looked at the clock, “Not much time left. Think Jesse found Christine yet?”

"I don't care what the general thinks," Nigel said, "We'll have to march without her."

"Kind of funny, isn't it?" Trisha asked, "This whole night centering around that one girl. She summons the demons, she kills the first one ever, and she unexpectedly raises an army. I never believed in prophecies until tonight."

"I can't bring myself to believe it, personally," Nigel scoffed. "Christine is just an ordinary woman drawn into an unfortunate series of events. She isn't divine or special at all."

"What did Magnus say the prophecy was, again?" Trisha inquired.

"That on this day, in a city named 'Halifax'," Nigel started, "a blessed woman would strike down evil, lead her people into battle and end nine thousand years of suffering."

"Sounds accurate enough," Trisha grinned. "Maybe it will all end tonight."

"And perhaps by ending suffering, she'll bring about the end of the world," Nigel said, stating another possible meaning of the prophecy. "The Fates only foresee death."

Trisha sighed and pretended she didn't hear that.

Outside, she heard a motorcycle pull up. Since they were temporarily safe from the demons, Nigel had given Jesse the keys so he could go check on Christine's apartment. But looking out the window, Trisha could see Jesse had returned alone.

"The general's not going to be happy," Nigel said.

"Will they march without her?" Trisha asked.

Nigel kissed her and stood up, "They don't have a choice."

Trisha nodded. Nigel ran downstairs and found Jesse entering the bar. Poseidon was wandering around, flabbergasted at the sight of all the people.

"Nigel, who are these people?" asked Poseidon.

"Christine's army," Nigel said, many people bowing before the name, "Friends of General Magnus over there. He'll fill you in. What's the situation with Ptolemy?"

"We've lost him," Poseidon said. "He ran out on us."

Jesse approached them, "She's not at her apartment."

"You can't find Her Blessed Lady?" Magnus asked, wandering up to everyone in a tipsy manner.

"No," Jesse said.

"This is a bad omen," Magnus sighed, slightly off-balance.

"You'll have to march without her," Nigel said.

"It's in the prophecy," Magnus reminded him, "She will lead us to victory. No Blessed Lady, no victory."

"You know how these prophecies are," Nigel said. "Always bollocks."

Jesse followed up with something more positive. "Sometimes you just have to go ahead and let destiny fall into place. Maybe she'll be at the bridge. Or maybe she'll be like Han Solo, showing up to save us all at the last minute."

"In other words, we should march forth on faith alone?" Magnus asked.

"Exactly!" Jesse said.

"You're right," Magnus said, slapping Jesse on the back. "We've thrived on faith these last thousand years, and we can do it again for the rest of the night. But we still need a good omen."

Jesse thought hard about this and inspiration hit him.

"Have you ever seen this?" he asked. He reached into his sword sheathe and drew his crystal sword. Magnus' eyes lit up at the sight of it.

"What is this weapon?" he asked.

"It's Excalibur II," Jesse said. "It's a blessing from the Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister."

"My word," Magnus leaned down and barely touched the surface of the blade. "Yes, I feel the blessing indeed. A second Blessed Lady has joined our cause!"

"Is that a good omen?" Nigel asked.

"It's an amazing omen," Magnus said, his mind wandering.

Poseidon gestured at Patti, "How about Mrs. Magic-Pants?"

Nigel shouted at Patti who shouted back at him.

Nigel translated, "She's not coming out to fight. She needs to continue her spell. Listen, Poseidon is here – he's going to take the lot of you out to the bridge in a few minutes. Can you get your men ready?"

Magnus saluted Poseidon. "You are the God of the Sea, right? You're not just some fellow called Poseidon?"

Poseidon laughed as he acquainted himself with Magnus. The two hit it off instantly.

"Why is Poseidon taking them?" asked Jesse.

"You and I are going to hop on the bike and do some scouting," Nigel said.

"Oh, sure thing," Jesse said, putting his sword back into its sheathe. Nigel said his good-byes to Trisha, and they headed out the back door.

The night had grown cold and stale, and the sea air was heavy with fog as they drove their motorcycle through the city en route to the bridge. Jesse held onto Nigel as they swerved through the streets, completely disregarding traffic laws.

"I don't know about you, but I'm stoked for this," Jesse said. "I just have a really good feeling about tonight. Yeah, yeah, I know you don't think we're going to live, but..."

"Jesse, shut up," Nigel casually reminded him.

Soon, the bike stopped and they dismounted. Through the fog, Jesse saw a 'no entry' sign among some trees and realized that they were nowhere near the bridge. He and Nigel were heading into a vacant park area.

"Why are we here?" asked Jesse.

"There's something I need to show you," Nigel said, "One last thing you need to see before you fight. One last thing I need you to see."

They moved through some trees and over a hill until they reached a small summit in the woods. Through the fog, Jesse couldn't place where they were exactly, but it was apparent that no one ever came through here on purpose.

"I didn't even know a place like this was downtown." Jesse said.

"We're not downtown anymore," Nigel said, "Look down."

Six meters down was a slope. At the bottom of the slope was an old wooden well, about ten metres deep.

Jesse felt himself moving forward quickly, as if he were pushed.

As he fell into the well, he realized he had been pushed.

As he landed in a hard pile of dirt, he completely forgot about being pushed.

And as he regained his bearings, he remembered being pushed and looked up to see who had done it.

Nigel stared down at him, cold and emotionless.

"What are you doing?!" asked Jesse as he tried to scramble back up the well.

"If we lose tonight," Nigel said, "you'll become the spoils of war. I can't let that happen. Poseidon can throw away the oceans, but I can't throw you away. You're more valuable than anything."

"No, this is stupid!" Jesse said. "Let me out of here!"

"If we win," Nigel said, "I'm coming back for you."

"How do you plan on keeping me down here?" Jesse asked.

Then Nigel moved out of sight and began doing something. Jesse could only wonder what those noises were before the rumbling started.

The slope above began to crumble, then to collapse and then finally fell down on top of the well, burying Jesse at the bottom.

Trapped in darkness and unable to move, the last thing Jesse heard was Nigel's motorcycle driving away.

20. Into the Fog of War

Had anyone been in the area that night, they would have heard the unusual marching of a thousand soldiers through the streets of downtown Halifax as they headed towards the old bridge. Behind them rode the heavy artillery: six jeeps with mounted guns and a huge tank. At the very front of the charge was Poseidon, brandishing his double trident. Magnus was at his side, carrying his mighty, bronze battle axe. Trisha strode along next to them, carrying an L96 sniper rifle. She wore sunglasses and a cowboy hat because 'that's what all the cool snipers do'.

Eventually, they realized that they had misjudged the walking distance to the bridge and began running. Soon, the buildings began to get shorter, and they were entering an older area of Halifax. The neighbourhoods now reminded them of the old fishing villages, but with a lot more overpasses and intersections running through them. They arrived on the south end of the old bridge's exit ramp on McDonald Bridge Road and scouted the area.

The Angus L. MacDonald Bridge (locally known as the Old Bridge) was a suspension bridge, crossing Halifax Harbour and linking the peninsula to Dartmouth on the north side. The bridge was held aloft by two green towers, was 3 lanes wide with a pedestrian and a bicycle lane attached to the structure on either side, and spanned over a full kilometre. While the name itself "Old Bridge" conjured up images of a rickety old wooden bridge, it was still up to modern metropolitan standards.

"There's not much for vantage points," Trisha said. "I don't know what Nigel was talking about. I guess I can camp out on that red building over there, but the wind shear will be awful."

Poseidon reached into his trench-coat and gave her a few spoons wrapped in a red ribbon. The spoons tingled in her hand slightly as she looked it over.

"I made a few relics before leaving," he said. "Pass these among the snipers and the sea winds should help you hit your marks."

"So my silverware controls the weather now?" Trisha asked.

"It's a measure to protect us against friendly-fire," Poseidon said, reaching into his coat and fishing out more blessed kitchen utensils. "I hope you don't mind that I helped myself to your kitchen. I'll be passing these out among the men – personal shields, stamina surges, wards against bathroom breaks, the occasional hand grenade, etc."

"You didn't turn my egg beater into a hand grenade, did you?" Trisha asked, eyeing her kitchenware.

"Of course not," Poseidon replied. "Your egg beater has been blessed with the power of keeping soldiers from checking their texts during battle. Believe me. We'll need it."

"So why did you pick this place to fight?" asked Magnus.

"Bridges are more isolated," Poseidon said. "We didn't need the Chaos trampling the city any more than they already have. Besides, it also restricts their movements. One of the fighting conditions is that they're not allowed to destroy the bridge. This means they can't transform into giants and trample us without risking the bridge's destruction. We can also use the bridge's cables as a defense against flight."

They heard a motorcycle approach. Nigel pulled in from the off-ramp and parked next to everyone. Trish couldn't help but notice Jesse's absence.

"Where's Jesse?" she asked.

"Safe," was Nigel's reply. Poseidon closed his eyes and let out a frustrated sigh.

"You buried him, didn't you?" asked Poseidon.

"Nigel, tell me you didn't!" exclaimed Trisha.

"I did," Nigel confessed. "He has the key to Pandora's box. We can't risk him running around during the battle."

"But he's your brother!" Trisha pulled at his arm. Nigel didn't fight back.

"Don't talk to me like this wasn't a hard decision," Nigel told her. "He should be so happy that we're actually going ahead and fighting anyway."

"You have seniority," Poseidon told Nigel, "So we won't question your choices. But it is quickly approaching the time, and we're awaiting your orders."

"You've been in four Aeonomegas," Nigel said. "You should know the rules by now."

"Right," Poseidon nodded, and then he turned to Magnus. "Let's get as many soldiers onto the bridge before three. The battle is over for us if we all die or leave the bridge, so we need as many people as possible. Those fighting from the mainland will not count towards the tally, and neither will any reinforcements. Keep your men evenly spread out. The demons will attempt to overwhelm us and we don't want to consolidate our forces. Keep all vehicles in the back to provide cover fire. Is that clear?"

Magnus nodded and turned to his soldiers, shouting the same thing in many different languages. Finally, he repeated the same thing in English and raised his axe. All of his soldiers belted out a mighty battle cry.

As they marched forward onto the bridge, Nigel turned to Trisha.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If I don't make it out, but we still win, I buried Jesse in that well over at that place where we used to take walks. I hope you understand... I have to protect Jesse, no matter what."

Trisha nodded. She didn't like it, but there was no time to argue. She hugged Nigel tightly, gave him a kiss, and soaked in this last moment before running off with the other snipers, her enchanted spoons in hand.

One of the soldiers threw Nigel a sword. He caught it and stepped out onto the old bridge.

Christine was elsewhere in the city. She had gone to her boss Emma's apartment to be precise. It had been her intent to go home at first, but had felt she at least needed to stop in and apologize for not coming to work. Her boss doubled as a really good friend, after all. It turned out it didn't matter because when she arrived at the door, she found someone had already left it ajar. Pushing the door completely open, she discovered the apartment to be full of people – neighbours, friends, strangers, and vagrants alike. Emma, an older woman in her forties, came up to her and gasped in surprise.

"Christine, I was so worried about you!" she said. "Have you been out there? The streets are simply mad! I'm so happy you're here!"

"What's going on?" asked Christine. "Why are all these people in your apartment?"

"It's been so strange," Emma recounted, "Ever since the incidents and news reports began, people have been showing up by the barrelful, wanting sanctuary. And for some reason, I just keep letting them in. It's not just my apartment. The others are full as well. It's as if the whole city is moving around like a swarm of birds. But the best part is that nobody is taking anything. People are being very decent about staying here."

It occurred to Christine that this was Wu Tang's doing. People were avoiding any danger zones, and it was only natural that they would clump together in places like this. Wu Tang's magic must have also been affecting their minds in the sense that Emma was actually a very strict woman who would sooner kick a Girl Guide in the face than let any stranger into her apartment. It would also explain why the movie collection was still intact, in spite of all the homeless people eyeballing it.

She noticed the TV was off. In any emergency, people would normally be crowded around it. Instead, they were mingling and telling stories rather than subjecting themselves to fear. No one even seemed to be looking out the window.

She leaned against the door and sighed. The greatest battle was about to begin outside, and no citizen in Halifax would ever see it first-hand.

Just as she was pondering why she herself had been unaffected by the spell, her phone suddenly vibrated.

She dug it out of her phone and saw she had a text... from Jesse.

“NEED HELP BRNG SHOVEL.”

21. The Battle Begins

3 'o clock.

Trisha watched the troops move cautiously across the bridge in an organized formation through her scope. Curiously, many people had abandoned their vehicles on the bridge, making it look like the Rapture had hit and all the people had gone to their maker. She scanned ahead but there was no sign of the demons.

Poseidon didn't like this one bit. If the Chaos had failed to show up on time, then the battle would be forfeited. Pandora's powers would have already gone to Poseidon. Instead, he felt no different, meaning the demons were already on the bridge.

To make matters worse, fog was settling in, neatly obscuring the snipers' vision. Trisha hoped the magic spoons worked as well as Poseidon promised.

Magnus raised his hand, ordering his troops to cease movement as they heard a strange metallic sound furling in the mist. An empty can rolled out of the fog ahead of them. It stopped against Poseidon's foot. Poseidon picked it up and examined it. It was... diet cherry cola.

Pandora stepped out of the fog in her finest "belle of the ball" attire. She was now adorned in a black antebellum hooped dress draped with heavy chains. Her box hung by her side like a purse while her hair remained uncombed. Turk and Vladimir marched at her sides. All three of them were drinking diet cherry cola. Turk was chugging entire six packs.

"It's about time," she smiled. "And look – you brought so many! Gasp! Is that Charles?"

Magnus raised an eyebrow and drunkenly nodded at the woman.

"I'm afraid so, my dear," he said. "I've come to vanquish you once and for all."

"You and Pandora know each other?" Poseidon asked.

"I've battled her on occasion throughout the centuries," Magnus said. "From time to time, we'd stop and share an evening stroll. She's rather quite lovely once you get to know her."

"It's always a pleasure to see you, Charles!" Pandora said, "I look forward to destroying you!"

"Not if I destroy you first, my dear," Magnus chuckled.

"And Nigel!" Pandora squealed. "Where's... the other one?"

"He won't be participating in this battle," Nigel said. "How'd you like the movie?"

"What movie?" asked Pandora.

"The movie was terrible," said Vladimir. "Pandora spent the whole two and a half hours talking on her phone... to herself."

"I don't suppose Xeraphoxes has arrived yet?" asked Poseidon.

"No, but he's certainly taking his time," Pandora grinned. She shot a pointed glare towards Nigel and Magnus. "I can't wait to see the looks on your faces when you finally get to meet him."

Turk smashed an empty six-pack against his skull, and started drinking another six-pack. Nigel noted his thirst. Maybe he wanted to drink his worries away? It was the wrong drink for it, that's for sure.

"And there we go." Pandora smiled. "The battle has begun. Bottoms up."

She sipped her cola, and waved good-bye as she glided backwards into the fog. Turk lumbered after her. Vladimir slipped into the shadows and disappeared.

Polka music began to blare over the bridge's speaker system. Nigel didn't even know the bridge had a speaker system.

Moments later, Vladimir was booted out of the fog. Pandora laughed a cruel laugh.

"You're up first, dearie." They heard her shout from the fog.

"What?!" Vladimir protested, "No! Why don't we just fight them all at once?! Don't toy with them!"

He looked back at Magnus' army. Behind the Aemon, the Sea God, and the General stood a vast army armed with rifles, swords, axes, bazookas, torches, and a tank.

"Looks like I'm up first," Vladimir said, unenthusiastically.

"Excited?" Nigel asked.

"Not entirely," Vladimir said as he curled his lip.

"What's wrong?" Nigel asked. "I thought you were all-powerful. You were talking a big game back on our rooftop."

"Yeah, it seems being a fear demon has its drawbacks after all," Vladimir sighed, shuffling his feet against the ground.

"It's part of the trade," Nigel explained. "Pain demons feel pain, anger demons feel angry, and fear demons feel..."

"Are you calling me afraid?" Vladimir pretended to take offense to this. "I'll have you know I'm just savouring the time it takes before I kill you all."

"Go ahead," Nigel said. "Make the first move."

"Maybe I will."

"Maybe you won't... chicken."

"You better believe I will," Vladimir pressed on. "And once you're all dead, I'll get a brand new demon out of the deal and then I'll be truly unstoppable. How does that strike your fancy?"

"Quit stalling!" called Pandora.

"I'm getting to it!" Vladimir called back.

"Can we attack yet?" asked Magnus.

"Knock yourself out," Nigel said.

Magnus raised his axe and sounded the battle cry: "ATTACK!"

His army let out a mighty roar and bravely charged upon Vladimir. Vladimir quickly melted down into the shadows of the bridge and disappeared from the light.

The army stopped in its tracks. Nigel and Poseidon got into a defensive stance.

“Watch your feet!” yelled Nigel, “Keep those torches steady!”

There was a moment of silence as everyone expected the surrounding shadows to suddenly drag them to their deaths.

Suddenly Poseidon remembered, “He can’t use his godly powers to control our shadows. That’s one of the rules.”

“Then what does he expect to do?” asked Nigel.

His question was answered as all of the vehicles’ headlights exploded at once. Only the moonlight remained.

Then several soldiers were suddenly launched through the air. Everyone turned to see a dark figure in the middle of the army retreating as the others stepped in to attack it. But it didn’t end there.

All around them, Vladimir’s shadow doppelgangers were stepping out of the darkness and attacking people left and right, striking them down and casting them aside. Poseidon stepped forward and cut through one with his trident, slicing it into black mist. Nigel wasn’t as lucky, taking a blow from another one that knocked him off his feet. Dozens of the creatures were raining down on Magnus’ troops – easily getting cut down, but also easily re-emerging from other shadows.

Nigel grabbed one of the torches and used it to fend off several shadow monsters as they ganged up on them. The monsters fled from the light and circled around trying to find another opening, only to get ripped apart by gunfire.

Magnus ducked as bullets flew past his ear. He shouted to the artillery men, “Close-range weapons only on these things! Concentrate your fire into the fog! Don’t let the other demons just sit and watch!”

The gunmen atop the jeeps began firing overhead. The bullets soared across the bridge and disappeared into the fog. With luck, they were tearing into some demons on the other side.

Nigel swung again and again, trimming Vladimir’s shadow clones into mist, but he soon grew weary of this.

“Vladimir!” he shouted, “Show yourself!”

"That coward will never show his face," Poseidon replied.

"So how do we stop these things?" asked Magnus.

"Light!" Nigel said. "We need lots of light!"

"Crazy Steve, you're up!" shouted Magnus. Steve came running through the crowd, coughing and gagging. "We're going to need a big steady stream! Can you handle it?"

Steve saluted to his general, worked in some air, and let out a great belch into the air. The air ignited into flames as Steve turned into a living flame-thrower. The light was so intense that the doppelgangers immediately dissipated back into the shadows.

Everyone took a breather.

"We did it," said Magnus. "No thanks to this music."

"No," said Poseidon. "It's just begun."

As if right on cue, all hell broke loose. Venya, Turk, and Despair emerged from the fog and entered the fray.

Elsewhere, Christine hopped out of a truck and arrived at the road sign Jesse had texted her about. Thanks to Wu Tang's spell, Emma had been sweet enough to loan her the vehicle for tonight. She grabbed the shovel out of the truck bed and hurried into the park. She texted back to Jesse:

"@ SIGN NOW."

Then she waited.

A moment later, he replied:

"GO IN2 TREES. TURN RGHT @ 2ND BROKEN STMP."

She followed the orders, heading into the nearest patch of trees. She stumbled through the forage until she passed a broken tree stump and found the second one. She texted back her position. He replied:

"GO STR8 2WARD BUSHES. WATCH STEP."

She again headed into the nearest grove of bushes and immediately felt the ground slope downward. She arrived at a clearing and saw what appeared to be a landslide in the middle of it all. A sheer drop loomed before her. A lever mechanism had been rigged up inside the ground at the

top of the drop. A large metal plate protruded from the collapsed dirt at the bottom. Christine surmised that someone had used this to cause the landslide. It must have been set up years ago.

She quickly texted Jesse with the news. He replied with:
"CAN HEAR U. FIND WELL N START DIGGING. PLZ."

22. Through the Monster's Eyes

The Chaos were living up to their name as the now less-than-thousand soldiers were sent scattering all over the bridge. In the midst of it, Steve was unable to maintain his fire-breath, and many of Vladimir's shadow clones had returned.

Venya stood tallest over everyone else and had become easy fodder for the gunners. The tank operators decided she was the best target and fired a shell her way. Venya quickly leaned out of shell's path, plopped down onto her belly and brought her massive tail around as the shell exploded somewhere on the other side of the bridge. She tossed several soldiers and abandoned vehicles up over the suspension cables and into harbour. Many held onto the suicide barriers for dear life while others were crushed against it. Many more soldiers were crushed against the green barrier or were sent flying through it onto the walkway.

Venya arched her body, twisting it so that the tail would sweep yet another group upwards off the bridge deck. Unfortunately for her, this second sweep allowed Vincenzo to leap onto her back and plunge his silver vampire-slaying blade into her neck. He held on tightly as he rode Venya like a rodeo bull. Other soldiers began throwing grappling hooks over the snake-woman, trying to drag her down to the ground. This didn't end well when she twisted around again, throwing Vincenzo off her back and yanking the other soldiers off their feet.

Meanwhile, a group of warriors were using their spears (with duct-taped guns on the ends) to keep Turk at bay. Nigel would run in, slashing at the monster. He was simply trying to disable it again as they did back at the parkade, only now Turk was more resilient than ever. He brushed aside some of the spearsmen and made a mad dash at

Nigel. Turk flopped over side-ways when Trisha fired a nice clean shot into his head through the fog.

Turk stumbled for a moment or two, and then found himself picked up off his feet by the zombie shaman Ngozi. Ngozi flipped the pain demon over his head and pile-drove him headfirst into the pavement. Turk was quick to recover, and the two began wrestling right there on the bridge.

A black screeching beast flew past them, getting swarmed in gun fire from the jeep turrets. The soldiers below unloaded every long-range weapon they had on Despair, desperately trying to cut through its wings. In addition to its raccoon tail, Christmas lights and fuzzy dice, Despair was now also decorated with neon lights on its wings and was wearing a bright orange "I'm with stupid" T-shirt. Unfortunately for them, every time Despair got low enough to attack, it would also snatch another one of Magnus' men off the bridge. The air exploded in light as a bazooka shell suddenly hit the flying nightmare. Despair fell into the cables and came crashing to the street. A ton of soldiers quickly piled up on it with their swords, desperately hoping that they were 'hopeful' enough to kill it.

Poseidon cut down yet another shadow clone and shouted to everyone, "We're wearing them down! Don't worry about killing them – just get them off the bridge!"

Then he turned back to the north side of the bridge where he saw Pandora stepping through the fog. Having enjoyed the little show (and having finished her cherry cola) she threw away her can, cracked her knuckles, and observed the scenario before her. The other demons were clearly too incompetent without her. So Pandora did the one thing she did best.

She screamed.

The sound of her voice tore through the crowds, forcing everyone to cover their ears. The vehicles rattled under the shockwave and one jeep even fell over from the horrendous noise. Venya, Turk, and Despair used this opportunity to promptly slip away and prepare for a

counter-attack. The balance of power had just swung heavily against Poseidon's army.

Magnus turned to see many of his troops retreating. He yelled after them, "Stop retreating! We're not even warmed up yet!"

Steve was one of many who started running, but he didn't run fast enough as Venya scooped him off the ground and used him as a projectile to bowl over several other men.

Magnus cringed at the sight of Steve's dying body flopping around like a rag dummy. "See you in twenty years, lad," Magnus said to his fallen comrade. Grievously, he then chose to avenge him by attempting to lop off Venya's massive tail with his axe. The blade embedded in her tail but didn't go all the way through, of course, and he soon found himself getting swung around, refusing to let go of the handle.

Pandora herself chose Poseidon as her first target. She flew at him completely unarmed, or so it seemed. For a frail-looking girl, she bore incredible strength and resilience as she blocked the trident's blows with her forearms and painted fingernails.

Then, with amazing agility, she unwrapped the chains draped over her shoulder and swung her box around like a wrecking ball. Her first swing alone went over Poseidon's head, throwing a gang of soldiers over the girders. She laughed with delight as this happened.

"This is crazy!" yelled one soldier.

Pandora's eyes flared up in anger, and for but a moment, she forgot her pact. Raising her arm, she pointed at the soldier who spoke the word "crazy," and he exploded into dust.

Immediately, the Referee stepped in, delivering a solid lightning strike right down onto Pandora's head. The electrical explosion sent her flying backwards, smoldering. Unfortunately, as a demon, it would take more than one lightning bolt to kill her. Recomposing herself, she decided she would walk off the lightning and then continue fighting.

Back in the woods, Christine took another scoop of dirt and chucked it away. Again and again, she swiftly continued to dig Jesse out of the landslide.

Finally, she hit an air pocket. A small hole ran down the side of the well and through the dirt. She called down to Jesse.

"Jesse," she called, "Are you in there?"

"Christine!" he yelled, "You found me! Quick! Dig me out!"

"Who did this to you?" she asked. He told her. "That son of a... how far down are you?"

"About twenty, thirty feet!" he called back.

Christine let out a breath of exasperation, "I'm not going to be able to dig that far! It's too tight!"

"Do you have dynamite?" Jesse asked. "You could throw it down the hole and blow the dirt out! I'll probably survive that!"

"No, I don't have dynamite!" she yelled back. Then she thought for minute. "Can you move at all? Can you see anything?"

"I think I see the surface," Jesse yelled. "Yeah, that's definitely the sky. Right up that little hole."

"Okay, I'm going to try something," she said. And she spit down the hole. A moment later, she heard Jesse sputtering.

"Did you just spit on me?!" he asked. "That's disgusting!"

She smiled, "Okay, I have an idea! Remember when Nigel said how powerful you were in demon form? Do you think you might be able to dig your way out if you were a demon?"

Jesse thought about it, but remembered nothing but the bloodlust.

"Are you suggesting... you send blood down?" he asked.

"Just a few drops," Christine said. "Enough for you to get some power going. Think of it as an experiment."

"I don't like this idea," Jesse said. "The last time I had blood, I wanted to kill you."

"I'll just prick myself with something and send a couple drops down," she said. "Then I'll run and hide. I'll be safe."

"We can't risk it," Jesse said.

"Too late, I'm bleeding," Christine said.

Jesse was about to ask why she was bleeding, when it happened: the salty taste of human blood dropped into the corner of his mouth. And again. And again. He tried to spit it out, but the taste was already on his tongue.

Then his eyes began to go hazy. The world seemed to be disappearing. He felt hot and angry. His muscles tightened up and his teeth felt sharp. Suddenly, everything around him was his enemy.

The first thing he noticed was that he really wanted more blood. It was delicious.

The next thing he noticed was that there was a lot of dirt preventing him from finding more blood. So he tore at the dirt with his claws.

Oh, that's right. His fingernails had grown into claws. This was a delightful development. He could use them to gore something with later.

As he dug some room for his arms, he decided this might be faster if he cleared all the dirt out at once. So he let loose an ear-piercing roar as he threw himself upwards through the earth, exploding out onto the surface.

Now that he was on the surface, he recalled that there was a source of blood around here in the form of a girl. He must find and kill this girl. She will have much blood for him. This was good because he could feel the blood wearing off in his own body. He needed fuel quickly.

He threw aside a tree, and then a rock, and then another tree. He hated rocks and trees! None of these had blood in them or girls beneath them. So he stopped to smell the air to determine where she might be hiding. Oh, how exciting this was! He would savour the taste of her corpse when he found her.

There! A scent. Behind another tree. He swung at the tree with all his might, but only ended up ripping through the trunk rather than uprooting it.

Frustrated, he tore up the stump and saw her, cowering in the tall grass, terrified. She screamed and threw dirt in his eyes. But he laughed in the face of dirt and delighted at the sight of her about to die. He lunged upon her.

His fangs were now scraping the skin of her neck, but something was wrong. He didn't feel like biting down and tasting her blood anymore. What was this strange sensation? Why was he here again?

Looking into her eyes, he realized he knew this girl. Her name was... Christine? Yes, Christine. And she was... a friend?

"Oh, god." Jesse said, standing up and getting away from Christine. "You're... you're... I..."

Christine stared at him with uncertainty, her heart pounding. Her neck had been scratched across the jugular, but no blood had been drawn. From her point of view, she had taken shelter behind a tree, only to see the well explode, and a monster in Jesse's clothing emerge. It ranked up there as one of the top scariest things she had ever seen (next to Pandora's eyes, anyway). She had no idea a few drops of blood would have that kind of effect.

"I wanted to kill you," Jesse said, his fangs transforming back into regular teeth and his claws retracting. "Everything in my brain told me that you were no one, and that killing you would be something I'd enjoy. If you had given me any more blood..."

"It's okay," she said, "But let's not do that again."

"I need to get to that bridge," Jesse said. "Can you give me a ride?"

"Yeah," Christine said, still shaking.

As she and Jesse lumbered hastily back to the truck, Jesse checked to make sure he was back to normal and hadn't left anything in the well. His sword has survived the transformation well enough, but his phone had been pulverized.

"When did I ever give you my phone number?" she asked.

"That night at the apartment," Jesse said.

"I didn't give it to you then."

“You got me,” Jesse confessed. “I, uh, went back to your store the next day and got it from your co-worker.”

“Let me guess – wanted your coat back?” she asked.

“I wasn’t trying to get my coat back,” Jesse said.

“I know,” she smiled.

They hopped into the truck and hurried back into town.

23. A Voice From Beyond

The numbers in Poseidon's army were dwindling. They were down to two hundred people. Everyone else had either been killed, swept off the bridge, or had retreated.

Trisha and the other snipers continued to pick off shadow clones when they could, but it was doing little to stop their numbers. Somebody had to find and kill Vladimir already.

All over the bridge, everyone was either dealing with the clones, or engaged in a battle against one of the demons. Ngozi and Turk were still locked in hand-to-hand combat, with the zombie shaman trying to wrestle the pain demon off the side of the bridge. Other people threw stray cans of diet cherry cola at the monster in an attempt to distract it. Many warriors were going against Venya with Magnus leading the charge. Everyone who had a gun was hard at work trying to keep Despair at bay. Defeating Despair wasn't necessary for winning the battle since the flying beast wasn't on the bridge, but that didn't stop it from being a royal pain. In a brief moment, Despair managed to lift the tank right off the bridge and hurl it into the river. Meanwhile, Pandora (having finished her time-out) and Poseidon continued to fight. Poseidon could do nothing but dodge as Pandora swung her chains at him again and again. At this point, nobody could tell if his relics were having any effect on the battle.

The only one not fighting was Nigel. He and Trish didn't have a psychic connection, but they were both thinking the same thing. Someone had to take down Vladimir and fast. But where was he hiding? Nigel couldn't just stab at every shadow. No, Vladimir had to be hiding in the fog. That was it.

Running past Pandora and sliding under her swinging chains, Nigel threw himself into the fog, hunting down the coward who watched the whole battle from the sidelines.

"I know you're in here, Vladimir!" Nigel said, "You want a rematch from earlier? Come on – you're the whole reason we're here tonight! Can't have a party without a host, can we?"

Vladimir said nothing.

"Scared, huh?" Nigel asked. "I'd be, too, if I were the easiest of the Chaos to kill. You know Pandora will never give you another form, right? You're stuck like this! But maybe she'll take it easy on you if you had the key, right? All you have to do is take it. Come on. Show me what you got!"

The air behind him grew colder. Nigel spun around and thrust his sword right into Vladimir's chest, piercing his heart.

"Figures you would sneak up from behind," Nigel sneered. Vladimir's shocked expression told Nigel that he had succeeded in defeating the demon. Or so he thought.

As Nigel pushed him out of the fog, he realized that Vladimir wasn't dying. Wasn't Nigel's act brave enough? Wasn't merely facing fear the only way to kill it? Then a thought occurred to him.

"You're still a vampire," he said. Vladimir smiled.

"That's right," he grinned, pulling the blade away from himself. "I hope you remembered to bring a wooden stake."

"I didn't," Nigel said. "But Vincenzo over there could help you out."

Vladimir spun around to see a white cloak descending upon him. The Vatican vampire hunter had two wooden crosses in hand, each sharpened to a point, resembling stake-shaped swords. He furiously lunged forward repeatedly at Vladimir. The vampire demon decided not to test his luck and retreated into the shadows.

"Thanks," said Nigel. He stopped to inspect the battlefield. No progress was being made. In fact, they were still losing men quickly.

Something struck Nigel from behind. He and Vincenzo were thrown to the pavement, along with Poseidon. They looked up to see Pandora standing over them. She was staring blankly into space and swinging the box around casually.

"You know, I'd forgotten how much fun these fights can be," she said. "We really need to do this again sometime. But for now, you need to die. Good-bye."

Nigel prepared himself for the crushing blow of her box, when a miracle suddenly happened.

Pandora was run over by a flying car.

Nigel and the others sat up and looked around, surprised to see all the vehicles on the bridge were now suspended in mid-air. It was as if someone had turned the gravity off. The vehicles were hurling themselves back down on the bridge, bowling over demons and slamming them into the pavement.

"Okay, which one of us is doing this?" asked Nigel.

When all the cars had been properly smashed, the Chaos themselves started getting thrown around like toys. Venya was whipped around by the end of her tail by an invisible entity, and once again swatted Despair out of the sky. Turk was repeatedly getting his head slammed into the ground, and Pandora was choking on her own chains.

A familiar voice spoke next to Poseidon's head.

"About halfway home, I had a change of heart," said Ptolemy's voice, "and a brilliant idea."

"Ptolemy?" asked Poseidon. "Where are you?"

"Back out in the woods," Ptolemy's disembodied voice said. "So I was practicing my Norwegian with Ingvold - did you know she's a business counselor? She started giving me this whole idea on how to how maximize my output by consolidating my assets."

A car smashed down on Pandora's head again.

"You're combining telekinesis with astral projection!" exclaimed Poseidon. "Brilliant, Ptolemy! Brilliant!"

"So you can fight from outside the city?" asked Nigel.

"I could do this from home on my couch if I wanted to!" Ptolemy bragged. "Get inside the barrier, my ass! All I have

to do is project my sight and I can move whatever I see! Eat some First Age magic, suckers!"

With that, he ripped Vladimir out of the shadows and threw him against Turk.

Poseidon laughed, "This is perfect! Quick, Ptolemy! Throw them all off the bridge, now!"

Turk suddenly found himself suspended off the ground and hurtling towards the cables. He grabbed onto them and held on just long enough to get hit in the face by a flying Venya. Both demons toppled off the railing and fell into the river below.

"No!" screamed Pandora, as she was lifted off the ground. She knew she was next, and she looked around in panic until something caught her eye.

Ptolemy stopped in his tracks. She was looking right at the place from where he was projecting his vision. Their eyes had met.

"I see you," she grinned, and threw up her hands.

Suddenly Ptolemy's mind started screaming and he released his astral projection, falling back against a tree. Ingvold ran to check on him. He had just been mind-shocked by a demon of neurological disorders.

Pandora fell to her feet laughing. Vladimir helped her up and she looked to Poseidon and the others.

"I was wondering when you would bring out the Zodiac!" she laughed. "Too bad for you they're so easy to kill!"

"What did you do to him?" asked Poseidon.

"Not much yet," Pandora said. "I just scrambled his noggin a little. But he's definitely next on my list."

"Look around you, Pandora," Nigel said, gesturing to a gang of soldiers wearing Viking hats who were trying to lift the squished Despair over the suicide barrier. "Your minions are falling. And you're next."

"Maybe we should cut our losses," Vladimir said. "If you turn on your powers and risk a few more lightning strikes, maybe we can get out of here and..."

Pandora back-handed him and turned back to the others. Many warriors were moving in around Vladimir and Pandora.

"You're getting ahead of yourselves," she said. "You've forgotten we still have one other player."

Just then, the fog began to part and something large began moving around outside the bridge. Everyone stopped to stare at the spectacle as hundreds of enormous tentacles wrapped themselves around the bridge from the harbour below. Each tentacle contained a row of suckers, all brimming with razor-sharp teeth.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pandora presented, "King Xeraphoxes."

"Poseidon, did you know the Chaos of Greed was a giant mutant squid made of teeth?" asked Nigel.

"No, I definitely did not," Poseidon said.

"Because you are a sea god," Nigel reminded him. "We expect you to be on a first name basis with anything that has tentacles."

"All I know," Poseidon said, "is that I really regret choosing a bridge."

The tentacles rained down upon them.

24. Breaking the Rules

Jesse and Christine could only imagine the horror happening on the bridge as they drove up to it. From the outside, all they saw were hundreds of tentacles poking up through the waters and swamping the bridge like seaweed. That is, if the seaweed were alive and pulling people off the bridge deck.

Christine stopped just at the edge of the bridge. Jesse hopped out of the truck, drew his sword, and grabbed the shovel from the back-seat. This was going to take some dual-weapon work.

"I don't think a shovel will suffice," Christine said, but Jesse was already racing down the bridge. He hurried past retreating soldiers, brandishing the shovel to deflect incoming tentacles. He twirled around to slice them off with the sword as he dove into the sea of teeth.

Inside, soldiers were getting thrown about and devoured left and right as the great beast had its way with them.

Nigel dove under a car, where he found Charlie Magnus checking his text messages.

"Is this really the time to check your phone?" Nigel asked.

"My legs are crippled, so I'm ordering my men to leave me behind," Magnus said. "If I die, I will die under this vehicle hacking at the ankles of anything that comes near me."

Nigel spotted Poseidon's anti-texting egg beater nearby. He grabbed it and shook it up. "So much for this relic." He threw it away. A tentacle caught it just as the egg beater exploded. Magnus and Nigel covered their eyes.

"Did that egg beater just explode?" Magnus asked.

"I think Poseidon mixed up his charms," Nigel groaned. "So what happened with your legs?"

"Snake-lady," he said. "You should have seen what I did to her face to deserve this. That was a jolly good bout!"

"Can you walk?" asked Nigel.

"Haven't you been listening?" Magnus asked. "I have no intention of running away from this battle!"

A tentacle lifted the car and hurled it away, exposing them both.

"But if you could carry me part of the way," Magnus said, "I'd greatly appreciate it."

"Okay, we're getting you out of here." Nigel said.

He got to his feet and threw Magnus over his shoulder. He began running back down the bridge, slashing at every tentacle that came at him. Along the way, he found some retreating soldiers and handed Magnus over to them.

"Get your general to safety," Nigel ordered them, "and save your own asses, too. I'll cover you."

As they ran through the attacking tentacles, the greed demon became a lot grabbier. Soon, it began pushing down on the bridge cables themselves. Nigel prayed that it would collapse the bridge in the process, but such a thing was not happening. Pandora wasn't about to break any rules and let them win this easily.

Nigel stopped halfway when he saw who was coming his way. Swinging a sword and shovel around, Jesse batted away any incoming tentacles, and allowed Magnus and the two soldiers to pass through. Ngozi and Vincenzo hurried past them to escort their general the rest of the way.

"Give Pandora my love when you slay her!" the general shouted.

Jesse and Nigel had a short face-off.

"You buried me," Jesse said.

"You... unburied yourself." Nigel answered. He gestured to his own face. "You got some dirt right here."

Jesse wiped off the dirt. He was still covered in a lot of it everywhere else.

"So how's the battle?" he asked.

"It was good until the giant octopus showed up," said Nigel.

"Anyone left for me to fight?" Jesse asked.

Nigel paused for a moment.

"Yeah," he said. "A chicken-wuss vampire and the Wicked Witch of the West."

"Sounds good," Jesse said. "Let's get 'em."

Nigel rolled his eyes. Both he and Jesse started running back towards the center of the bridge.

As they ran, more tentacles and shadow clones came at them. Back to back, they sliced and hacked away, clearing a path through the middle of the bridge.

Jesse felt a nine thousand year-old synergy growing between him and his brother as they fought. Soon, they were anticipating each other's movements and battled stronger, faster, and more fluidly than Jesse could have ever imagined. He felt like they were two sides of the same coin, spinning through the air and never coming down. Jesse would duck as Nigel swung to take out a tentacle behind him, and Jesse would thrust his blade past Nigel to take out one of the shadow clones.

The closer they got to the center of the bridge, the more extravagant their battle moves became. Jesse would use his sword to toss a pistol off the ground through the air into Nigel's hand, and Nigel would unload entire clips into the shadows while hacking about with his blade. Then Nigel would duck down and give Jesse a jump boost off his back as Jesse leapt through the air and sliced his way through a few incoming tentacles. They continued pouring inwards, flowing like the wind. They were an unstoppable mini-hurricane of brotherly destruction.

Up ahead, they saw Poseidon furiously fighting against the tentacles with the few armor-clad soldiers who had stayed behind to help slay the leviathan. Pandora sat off to the side on the railing, laughing her butt off at the sight of it.

Jesse and Nigel were about to push Pandora off the bridge when Vladimir stepped in between them.

"She, uh," he muttered, "she wants me to kill you guys. Don't ask me why she isn't doing it herself."

“Jesse, does that shovel have a wooden handle?” asked Nigel. Jesse snapped the shovel over his knee and gave one end of the splintered wooden handle to Nigel.

“Let’s fight,” said Nigel to Vladimir.

And they fought.

While Vladimir, Jesse, and Nigel were having an old-fashioned throw-down, Poseidon tried to fight his way in towards Pandora. That’s when he was taken by surprise. A tentacle wrapped around his waist and lifted him high, high above the bridge. The tentacle tightened around his arms and he was unable to move. He could feel the teeth biting into his skin.

Down below, an enormous eye opened beneath the surface of the water. The eye looked right at Poseidon, and opened to reveal even more teeth.

“So long, sea god,” Pandora called to him. “I’ll promise to feed the fishes while you’re gone.”

A tempest brewed in Poseidon’s mind as Xeraphoxes prepared to swallow him. In these last moments, Poseidon thought of just one small simple thing – *To hell with it.*

The waters below violently stirred to life and the whole harbour transformed into an enormous whirlpool. Poseidon’s eyes glowed blue as the ocean, and he let out an earth-shaking roar. Pandora jumped to her feet.

“No! No!” she screamed, “That’s breaking the rules! No godly powers!”

“No godly powers for you!” he yelled, “But for me...!”

Jesse, Nigel and Vladimir stopped fighting long enough to look upon the sea god coming to life. He shined a bright furious light and in a quick swing of his trident, let out a surge of energy that vapourized the surrounding tentacles. King Xeraphoxes bellowed in pain.

“You want the power of the ocean?” he yelled at Pandora. “I’ll show you the power of the ocean!”

Flying high in sky, he continued slashing away at the monster, but the tentacles just kept on coming. Great hammers of water emerged from the harbour, striking blow after blow on the enormous sea-beast as if they were beating upon a war drum. Icy spears shot through the

monster's body as the water froze through it. The ice shattered explosively, sending slimy demon fragments in all directions. It was truly an epic spectacle to see, and there had already been a lot of those tonight.

Inspired, Jesse, Nigel and Vladimir continued their battle while Pandora watched in stunned horror.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" she yelled.

Sure enough, however, a Fifth Age god was no match for a Third Age demon, and Poseidon soon grew restless. Xeraphoxes healed from every attack and showed no signs of slowing down. It had taken Poseidon and his brothers eight years just to defeat their father, Kronos. He doubted Xeraphoxes was any less a match.

In fact, there was only one way to get rid of this beast before it made its way to the mainland.

He called out to Ptolemy.

"Ptolemy!" He shouted, "Where are you?!"

"I'm here," Ptolemy said, in his non-corporeal voice. "I can't see you, but I can hear everything. What's going on?"

"I broke the truce," Poseidon said. "We may have problems with the titans later, but this is crucial. I have a plan to destroy this thing and I need something from you."

"What is it?" Ptolemy asked.

"I need you to find my trident when this is all over," Poseidon said. "It's yours now."

"What do you mean?" asked Ptolemy.

"It takes a great sacrifice to kill the Chaos of Greed," Poseidon said. "And I'm an Olympian."

"Wait!" Ptolemy yelled, "What are you doing?"

"Something that's really going to hurt," Poseidon said.

He dove down towards the sea monster, holding out his trident. His body began to glow bright white and the earth began to shake. The turbulence of his descent was paralyzing as he plunged into the heart of Xeraphoxes, screaming a famous line from his favourite book.

"From hell's heart, I stab at thee!!!"

The harbour erupted in flames as the Olympian self-destructed inside the demon. The tentacles unwrapped and writhed until they turned into black mist and collapsed

harmlessly against the bridge. The waves crashed against the shore, overturning several docked boats and flooding the streets.

Pandora's jaw went slack at the sight of this. The mist and fog intertwined and all grew cold and damp. Her greed demon had been destroyed.

Jesse, Nigel, and Vladimir, however, were too distracted by each other. Little did they know that their battle would soon end this Aeonomega, though not in the way they would expect.

25. Hearts of Steel

Had they already been fighting for two hours? Three hours? The fog was dissipating. The first light of daybreak was showing itself in the distance, and all who remained on the bridge were Jesse, Nigel, Vladimir, and Pandora. Trish had fallen back to a better-shaded vantage point in order to avoid the incoming sun.

Pandora, having watched her favourite monster get blown to pieces from the inside-out, was at a loss for words. That counted as two – TWO – of her minions who had fallen in the last twenty-four hours. Maybe they were losing their touch? After nine thousand years of being invincible, suddenly watching her subordinates die around her was beginning to give her a new perspective on the situation. She then also remembered cake. Cake was important, too, but she did not know why.

“Vladimir!” she yelled to the vampire.

Vladimir was engaged in hand-to-stake-to-sword combat against the two Aemons. With the power of a demon, he moved with incredible speed and agility, but both Nigel and Jesse were experienced fighters and able to keep up with his techniques, if not his speed. Vladimir blocked repeated attacks from the two fire-blood warriors and called back to Pandora.

“What is it?!” he asked.

“Did we remember to buy a cake?!” Pandora asked.

Vladimir tried to tune her out. The insanity of her question almost caused him to slip up and get staked.

“Cake isn’t important right now!” Vladimir yelled back, “Do you think you could help me here?!”

“It could be important later!” Pandora shouted at him, “Also, look out for the sun!”

Vladimir looked up in time to see the sun’s rays blinding him. Jesse and Nigel cringed in pain as the sun hit them

from behind and the back of their heads erupted into flames. Expecting to burn as well, Vladimir took a leap backwards and threw up his hands to block out the sun. But then he realized the sun wasn't having any effect on him. His own shadow had wrapped around his skin, as if the demon side of him were rejecting the sunlight.

"The light," he said, gazing into the sunrise. "I can see the light."

Jesse and Nigel's heads were burning as the light hit them. Jesse screamed for a bit, but Nigel stayed calm and reassured Jesse that they'd just have to fight through the pain of being on fire.

The two fiery Aemons lunged at the shadow-clad Vladimir. Vladimir, high on the thrill of seeing the sun, fought even harder than before. Jesse and Nigel, while still quick, were starting to slip up. The intense pain on any part of their body facing the sun was becoming very distracting.

In a moment of misjudgment, they swung their stakes, only to have Vladimir grab onto them in mid-swing. He tore the weapons from their hands, and with a great heavy blow, knocked the two of them flat on their backs.

"Now!" shouted Pandora, "Finish them!"

"It will be my pleasure," Vladimir said, conjuring up a black, shadowy spear.

As Nigel started to get to his feet, he looked up to see Vladimir throw his spear. The dark weapon soared through the air at blinding speed – too quick for even Nigel to dodge.

Jesse, on the other hand, had seen it coming. Before Nigel could react, Jesse threw himself in front of his fire-blood brother, taking the spear right in the heart.

Vladimir pulled back on an invisible chain, drawing Jesse into his hands. As Jesse cringed in pain, Vladimir clutched him tightly by the collar, and pulled back on the spear, tearing Jesse's heart out of his chest. Jesse dissolved into flames almost instantly, and all that remained of him was a steel heart-shaped container in the palm of Vladimir's hand.

Nigel cried out to Vladimir, "Let him go!"

Jesse's heart began to re-manifest his corporeal form, but Vladimir threw a shadowy sphere around the steel heart, containing the nether-worldly flames before Jesse could regenerate.

He peered up at Nigel and smiled. Then he cradled the heart with both hands, squeezed tightly, and crushed the container.

The flames died instantly.

Nigel's heart sunk.

He stormed towards Vladimir with all his might, but the vampire demon threw him aside like a wet towel. Nigel landed flat against the pavement, shaken and hurt. Nothing seemed real to him anymore.

Vladimir peeled open what was left of the steel heart and peered inside. Inside, he found a small key. He took it out and showed it to Pandora.

"We got it." He smiled. "Ha ha, we got it!"

What was the look of utmost satisfaction quickly dissolved into utter shock on Pandora's face when a sniper's gunshot rang out, and a single bullet ricocheted against the key. The key flew out of Vladimir's hands and off the bridge. Trisha, through her sniper scope, saw Pandora descend into panic.

Pandora ran to the rail and watched the key disappear into the turbulent waters below.

"The key!" she shouted to Vladimir, "After it!"

"We're fighting an Aeonomega here," Vladimir said. "Shouldn't you finish it?"

"Finish it for me!" Pandora said, leaping over the suicide barrier and into the harbour.

Vladimir sighed and looked back at Nigel who was motionless on the ground and being barbecued alive in the sun. As he formed another spear in his hands, a sudden shock overcame him and he felt himself being consumed from the inside. He dropped to his knees and tried to resist this painful sensation. As he did so, he noticed someone else running in from the south end of the bridge. It was a girl who was carrying something.

Nigel looked up at the girl with his one eye that wasn't on fire. It was Christine looking down at him.

"Did he just...?" Christine asked.

"Yeah," Nigel nodded. "Jesse."

Christine took in a moment to absorb what had happened, but then remembered why she was here.

"Trisha," she said, "told me to give you this."

She dropped a loaded RPG-7 in Nigel's lap.

"Good luck," she said, and she ran back the way she came.

Nigel got to his feet and turned to Vladimir, holding up the RPG-7 so Vladimir could see it clearly.

Vladimir forced himself to stand and laughed, "You think you can defeat me with one of those? I'm one with the Chaos! I am invincible! Go ahead, Hunter! Give me your best shot! Last man standing! Let's end this battle now!" He then collapsed under his own power again, acting as if he were having a heart attack. Some unseen force was at work.

Nigel lowered the RPG and slowly approached Vladimir. He felt no threat from the vampire in his current state.

"Funny thing about fear," Nigel said coldly. "It consumes you."

"What are you talking about?" Vladimir asked.

"Someone like you needs to be afraid," Nigel said, "or the demon inside starves to death."

Vladimir started to realize why Pandora could never find a suitable host for the fear demon. The shadows within his body were eating him alive. Fear overcame him and the pain started to ease off.

"That's right," Nigel nodded, getting closely. "Feel the fear of death. Let it keep you alive just a little longer, like it did so long for me... and my brother."

Vladimir felt his strength returning, but now the source of his fear had become the look in Nigel's eye. Without his brother around to keep him tethered, Nigel now knew no fear.

Vladimir's guard was down, but instead of firing on him, Nigel used this opportunity to run up and grab him by the

collar. Vladimir tried to force him off, but Nigel's plan was already in motion.

"Battle's over. Let's call it a draw," Nigel said, firing the rocket-propelled grenade right into the pavement at their feet.

The explosion that followed would have torn apart any normal man. Of course, blowing a demon into pieces would be next to impossible, but making one adhere to the laws of physics was not so much. Both he and Nigel were blown off the side of the bridge together. Nigel was in pieces, but still regenerating. Vladimir panicked as they, the two last men standing, now fell towards the water.

"NO!" Vladimir screamed, casting out a shadow chain and throwing it around the railing, "This battle is ours!"

Nigel realized that his plan had failed. Vladimir was now the last one on the bridge. This meant the demon would win unless Nigel did something drastic. And something drastic he did.

Before he could finish regenerating, Nigel punched into his own fiery chest cavity and pulled out his steel heart. Then, with all the strength he could muster, he threw it back to the bridge. His entire body then fizzled out into flames. The steel container soared over Vladimir's head and flew over the railing, landing back on the walk-way. Nigel regenerated immediately from the heart and stood back up. He was safely on the bridge.

Before Vladimir could climb back up, Nigel grabbed Jesse's sword, raced back to the railing, and sliced through the shadow chain. The demon vampire fell into the river below.

A great heavenly light descended from the sky, shining on Nigel. A warm wind caressed him and the clouds swirled over his head. Then, as soon as it had begun, the miraculous weather phenomenon was over.

The polka music stopped.

Nigel Hunter had won the Aeonomega.

Christine ran to his side.

"Nigel!" she said, "Is it over?"

"No," Nigel said. "It's not over."

"But we won," Christine said, "Pandora is powerless now, right?"

"The deal was that Poseidon would get her powers," Nigel said. "Poseidon died tonight, so we get nothing. Pandora remains one of the Chaos."

"So, then...?" Christine wasn't sure what to ask now. "What about Jesse?"

"Jesse is gone," Nigel said. "The key is in the harbour. They'll soon find it and there's nothing we can do to stop them."

Christine's heart sank. She and Nigel looked over the harbour as the sun rose, both trying to let the truth sink in. For all the fighting they did, and for all their victories, they still hadn't won.

And Nigel was still on fire.

"We should get you into some shade," Christine said.

"I need another minute," Nigel said, completing ignoring the pain. "Go see Trisha. Get everyone to gather the wounded and regroup back at the Tavern. Once there, I'll tell everyone what has happened."

As Christine shuffled away, Nigel stared down into the waters, and did two things that no one else in nine thousand years ever saw him do.

He cried. And he smiled.

26. The Aftermath

Hunter's Tavern had begun to look more like an infirmary than a sports bar. At least half the soldiers who went onto the bridge had come back out alive. Many immortals who had fallen into the harbour had been able to make their way back to shore and help the others carry the wounded back to the tavern. Magnus was included among the injured, having broken his legs fighting Venya.

As they travelled together, Magnus looked over to Christine, who carried a very sad and solemn expression on her face.

"What's your name, young lady?" he asked.

"Christine," she replied.

"Her Blessed Lady," he forced a grin. "You came. Forgive me if I don't kneel. I'm afraid my knees are rather inoperative at the moment."

Jesse had told her about Magnus' army and how they had worshipped Christine for a thousand years before even knowing her. Christine wasn't sure what to say to a Christine-worshipper, but she came up with something.

"Sorry I'm late."

"This battle wasn't your battle," he said. "When you're ready to march again, we will follow."

She wondered if he was being sarcastic as they re-entered the bar. Part of her just wanted to be invisible again.

True to his word, Nigel told the story to everyone with the assistance of the general. Magnus praised the courage of every fallen soldier and called each by name, including fire-breathing Steve. Nigel regaled them of Ptolemy's feats and his eventual mental blindness, of Poseidon's sacrifice to destroy King Xeraphoxes, and of Jesse's sacrifice to save... Nigel.

Nigel never finished that part of the story. He left Christine to finish it, and chose instead to go upstairs and play piano for a while. The studio wall was still broken. The sun would eventually be high enough to reflect off the buildings outside and set him on fire, but he didn't care.

Wu Tang/Patti had taken a break from the protection spell and was now using his/her special abilities to heal the many injured soldiers. He/she would constantly slap them in the head, calling them cry-babies in Mandarin when they cringed at the healing pains.

Trisha, seeing this as a time for their soldiers to eat and rest, got around to cooking up as many chicken wings as she possibly could. The soldiers were hungry and they needed chicken now.

There was a general loss for words around the bar. This battle hadn't been a victory. Delaying the end of the world only granted them more time to grieve. The soldiers had lost their friends, just as Nigel and the others had lost their own. Poseidon had died a brave noble death, and it felt like Jesse (in spite of being one of the oldest living beings) had died years before his time.

Ngozi finished assembling a make-shift wheelchair out of debris from the broken bar, using bar seats as wheels. For a speechless zombie, he was surprisingly good with construction. He let Vincenzo take Magnus out for a ride with it on the streets. With that, Magnus and his two remaining generals disappeared into the morning to enjoy what was left of the day.

Finally, Nigel stopped playing the piano and looked at the Sphinx globe resting on his piano. He asked for her for another riddle, but all she asked was the same stupid one about time windows, clockwork, and horses. Fed up, he put her in his satchel and went downstairs.

He looked for Trisha who was sitting with a group of French soldiers. Both she and Nigel spoke perfect French, so it didn't take Nigel long to butt in on their conversation.

"Hey," he said to Trisha, "I know this is going to sound weird, but... I think I'm going to go for a drive now."

Trisha nodded. "I'll come with you. The sun's not that high yet."

"I need to be alone for a bit," Nigel said.

"Take your sword," she said. "Come back to me in one piece, okay?"

Nigel kissed her and nodded, "Okay."

Grabbing his sword off the bar, he stepped out onto the streets, hopped on his motorcycle, and drove off into the early morning. He'd occasionally pass through a sunlit intersection, but the blazing torment of being on fire was no longer a concern.

The image of Jesse throwing himself in front of him kept replaying in Nigel's head. Had he failed as a protector? Or was this just a sign that he was meant to finally stop protecting Jesse? Either way, it was a long time coming.

Jesse was in a better place now.

27. Chapter 27

Jesse was in Hell.

At first, his arrival was jarring. The fires of Hell, being the most painful kind in existence, burned at his flesh and boiled his mind. But it only took him a few moments to get used to the pain. He was, after all, partly forged from the fires of Hell, and the flames soon felt warm and comfortable.

He took a moment to explore his surroundings. He had arrived at a pit within a pit, within an even larger pit. On all sides were the fires of Hell, with souls reaching through, screaming obscenities and cursing God's name.

Jesse himself was on a plateau of hot embers, in what appeared to be a waiting room. He was sitting on a couch. In front of him was a coffee table covered with outdated fashion magazines. There was also a fake plant nearby. Even with all the embers, fire, and crude rock formations everywhere, there was no doubt that a waiting room was exactly what Lucifer had in mind when he designed this place.

Jesse sat down to collect his thoughts.

"Well, this sucks," he said to himself.

Looking up, he saw a great shadowy figure with horns stoking the fires of Hell with a shovel and coal refined from the souls of the damned. The great horned monster looked down at him and grinned. He knelt down very slowly and lowered himself to come face-to-face to Jesse. His face was as filthy as a coal miner's and was the size of a coal refinery. The giant didn't look friendly at all, but he spoke in a harsh, yet civilized manner.

"This is curious, indeed," he growled. "A fire-blood has returned to the flock."

Jesse tilted his head and tried to figure this guy out. Something about him seemed familiar.

"That's right," the demon said, "you remember me, don't you? I am your true lord and master."

"The devil?" asked Jesse.

"What? No!" the demon raised a finger to his mouth and shushed Jesse. "He might be listening!"

Then it dawned on Jesse, "You're Urobach. You're the demon Pandora struck a deal with."

"Yes," Urobach replied. "Your essence was stolen from my forge by human magicks long ago. I am quite delighted to see you've found your way home."

"I am in Hell, right?" Jesse asked stupidly.

"No, it's sunny Costa Rica!" barked Urobach. "Of course it's Hell! You're not one of the brighter flames, are you?"

"Sorry – it's my first time being dead," Jesse shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," Urobach said, slowly standing back up and turning away. "Your memories arrived not too soon before. If you so desire, you may step forth into the lake of fire and rejoin both your memories and your brethren."

Jesse looked at the lake of fire that encircled the waiting room. The lake was screaming.

"I'll pass on that," Jesse said. "How do I get out of here?"

"Nobody leaves," Urobach said.

"It's not impossible," Jesse reminded him. "Pandora's cronies escaped, didn't they?"

"That particular gate is forever locked," Urobach said. "The key is lost."

"No, I had the key," Jesse said. "Pandora will probably use it to suck a whole army out of here."

Urobach spun around and furiously addressed Jesse, "You allowed the sorceress to take the key?"

"You gave it to her!" Jesse replied.

"I didn't know she could use it to summon Chaos and become immortal!" Urobach argued, "I thought she was just going to use the box to conjure some evil spirits! Sorcerers do it all the time! If I had gotten hold of her soul, I could have used that power to become lord of this domain!"

"But then Lucifer showed up and got the job instead," Jesse said.

"Don't say his name!" Urobach growled. He raised a hand to swat at Jesse, but a bright white light appeared before him. The sound of gunfire erupted over the waiting room and a stinger missile struck the demon in the face. Urobach quickly backed away from Jesse.

"Step away from the boy," I said.

Urobach took one look at me, hissed, and lurked back to his fire-stoking duties, grumbling.

"Looks like someone more important has taken an interest in you," he muttered to Jesse.

"Who's there?" Jesse asked turning around and seeing no one.

I hid in the shadows awaiting my dramatic entrance.

"I apologize for the welcoming committee. Urobach can be quite temperamental," I said, "Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of wealth and taste. I've been around for a long, long year. I've dealt with many a man's soul and faith."

Jesse raised an eyebrow at me.

"The devil?" he guessed.

"No," I answered. "Some refer to me as the Referee, but you may call me..."

I stepped out of the shadows to reveal my full metal glory. A stunned silence fell over Jesse's face. This was an unexpected twist for him. Nobody travels to Hell expecting to be greeted by a big red velociraptor covered in metal body armor with shoulder-mounted missile turrets, a shiny police badge, and a switch on the back for karate-chop action.

"Raptor Cop!" smiled Jesse, standing up. It was the greatest moment of his short afterlife.

"May I sit down?" I asked, stomping over to his chair. Jesse motioned for me to sit down, so I did. Quite loudly, too. I sat at an angle so my tail could drape over the couch's arm.

"Are you comfortable?" Jesse asked.

"I'm always comfortable," I replied. "Although I must admit, you've chosen quite an interesting form for me. Most people settle on an old man with a beard."

"So what are you doing in Hell, Raptor Cop?" Jesse asked.

"I can go wherever I want," I explained. "Lucifer has no power over me. It is my choice to be here and meet with you. That is all."

I spoke very elegantly for a robot dinosaur.

"But isn't Hell for sinners?" Jesse asked. I laughed.

"Yes, but it also has its share of resources," I explained. "Hellfire, brimstone, unobtainium – Hell is a good mining community, actually. The nether-world economy would completely collapse if we wasted the entire realm on simply punishing people. But the real question is, if Hell is for sinners, why do you think you're here?"

"I'm an Aemon," Jesse said. "I was forged of stolen nether-world fire and born without a soul. I guess it only makes sense that I would end up down here."

"Perhaps," I said, scratching my bolts, "but it's quite a shame considering that your friends still need you up there."

"There's not much I can do from down here," Jesse said. "I'll just have to trust in Nigel to protect everyone."

"You don't have to be down here, you know," I said. "Fire-bloods generally come here by default because they don't have souls. But you, on the other hand, gave your life to protect your brother, and that earns you a soul. There is a place in Heaven for you, now."

"A soul would have been handy earlier," Jesse said. "I hear we Aemons can do wonders with one of those."

"It's true," I said, nodding. "Souls last longer than blood, they don't have to be used all at once, and you retain complete control over your actions. You could have ended the battle on the old bridge rather easily. Too bad they only work in the realms of the living."

"So why are you here?" Jesse asked. "To taunt me? I'm already in Hell. I don't think it gets worse than this."

"I wanted to show you something," I said, pointing towards the souls in the flames. "Do you know what this pit is? These are the very pits of Hell from which Chaos is born. It's here where all the worst aspects of humanity collect and fester until they eventually form Chaos elementals. Seven have already escaped and unleashed their respective plagues on the world, but so many have grown in power since."

Jesse looked deeper into the fires. He could see ghostly shapes circling around under the flames. He could almost even swear he saw a familiar wolf-bat scorpion swimming around in there.

"That one's Raaj," Jesse said.

"Once destroyed, Chaos returns to the pits," I explained. "At the moment, Raaj is enjoying the company of his newfound siblings."

"And what are they?"

"These are Urobach's prized possessions." I explained. "They are manifested from the dark ideas of mankind that have yet to become plagues upon humanity. Zombies, Black Holes, Mutants, Alien Invasion, Synthetic Life, the writings of H.P. Lovecraft – all these apocalypses and more will be unleashed upon the Earth should Pandora ever re-open that box."

"Then why don't you do something about it?" Jesse asked.

"I am merely an observer," I confessed. "Although I do dabble from time to time. I could have easily destroyed Pandora ages ago, but it would have interfered with the Great Plan."

"You mean the 'everything happens for a reason' Great Plan?" asked Jesse. "What's so Great about this Plan that you have to let all this pain and suffering happen?"

"Trust me," I said. "At the end of time, when all have ascended into Heaven, you shall all be seated at my right hand to watch as the final moments of the Great Plan unfurl. All will know the true meaning of their existence. You will all agree that the pain and suffering was worth it."

"It better be worth it if you're going to let psychopaths like Pandora walk around," Jesse said. "We could have really used your help during the Aeonomega."

"Hey, do you want to know what the meaning of life is?" I asked. "It's to man up, move on, and stop whining about why bad things happen to good people. Don't think I'm here to coddle you. I may love everyone, but it's a very tough love. I expect you to figure out things on your own."

Jesse was getting very frustrated. He soon carried a very confused look on his face.

"How do I look confused?" Jesse asked.

"Beg pardon?" I asked.

"You just said I was getting frustrated and had a confused look on my face," Jesse said

"Oh!" I said, realizing my mistake. "Sorry, I'm being omnipotent out loud. One of my hobbies is narrating third-person novels, so it gets kind of awkward when I'm one of the characters. You weren't supposed to hear that."

"So back to my question," Jesse said. "Why are you here bothering me? Why aren't we doing this in Heaven?"

"Because as an Aemon, you're unique." I said, "You are neither living nor dead. In fact, when you died, you simply regenerated here. There was no loss of body, spirit, or mind. So I've come to tell you your choice. If you choose to do so, I will let you through the gates of Heaven right now. All of your friends will be welcomed when the Chaos destroy their world, and you will soon be reunited with them."

"And what's the other choice?" asked Jesse.

Raptor Cop pointed a claw out across the lake of fire at small fissure carved into the rocky cliff side. Many floating stones rose from the fire to carve a path across the lake.

"Your other choice is to go hide in that crack and spend eternity hoping someone else saves you," I said.

"Why hide in that particular crack?" Jesse asked.

"Because that's where a part of you is already waiting," was My answer.

Jesse took a moment to let it sink in before uttering the words: "...My memories?"

"They had to go somewhere," I said. "Your memories are part of the fire. Crossing the lake to the fissure could cause them to return. But be warned: that path is a one-way trip."

Jesse approached the lake of the fire and held out a hand to it to see if he could feel any memories returning. At first, he felt nothing. Then, a moment later, he re-experienced a lost memory. He was standing out in a field. Nigel was calling to him. Jesse swung his sword and took it to his own neck in grief. The memory was so vivid, so painful, and so dark, that he collapsed and retreated back to the couch.

"That was your last memory before you forgot everything," I told him.

"It was horrible," Jesse said. "That didn't feel like me."

"You were wiser then," I remembered. "But you were more ridden in guilt and regret than most men will ever know. If you want to see your brother again, then that is the weight you must bear."

"You mean I can go back to the world of the living?" Jesse asked.

"Not by My hand," I said, "but only by My counsel. You should know that Pandora doesn't yet have the key and all is not yet lost."

"So do I have to choose now?" Jesse asked.

"Choose whenever you like," I said. "Heaven is yours if you want it, but only by crossing the lake might you find your salvation. And once you choose Heaven, there's also no coming back."

"And what about my friends?" Jesse asked. "Will I see them again?"

"If the world ends," I said, "You'll see them up there very shortly. Christine, Poseidon, even your vampire friend Trisha... they were born with souls. They'll be taken care of."

"And Nigel?" Jesse asked. "Has he earned a soul? Will I see him again?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid."

"But he's already sacrificed so much for this world," Jesse argued, "Are you telling me that if the world ends and he can't throw himself in front of anybody in time, he's damned for all eternity?"

"Indeed," I nodded. "No soul. Fires of hell. All eternity."

"And you can't do anything to fix this?"

"Correction: I *won't* do anything to fix this."

"That's just evil!" Jesse exclaimed.

"No, that's just neutral," I said. "Lucifer's the one in charge of all the evil."

"So who's in charge of all the good?"

"People like you."

"Then I've made my choice," Jesse said, moving towards the lake. "I'm going back."

"Very well," I said. "Best of luck, young one."

"Thanks, Raptor Cop."

With that, I stood up, transformed into a robot pterodactyl, and flew away. I ascended away from the fires of Hell and into the light of Heaven.

As I flew, Jesse looked up to see the Gates of Heaven open wide to welcome Me. Beyond the gates were banquets of fabulous meals, a dazzling array of never-ending parties, millions of beautiful women, swimming pools, movie stars, and free mini-golf.

As the flames of Hell got hotter and the screaming souls clawed closer, Jesse braced himself. This was going to get painful very quickly. Even Urobach had stopped shoveling to watch with great interest.

Jesse made the first leap.

It was easy enough to hop from rock to rock as he crossed the blazing path. The inherit danger came with the memories that were flooding back into his head as he traversed the fires.

First came the smaller memories: travelling with his brother, arguing together, meeting old friends, etc. Waves of déjà vu fell over him, but did little to slow him down.

Then the bigger memories started to hit. Like a bat to the head, he fell to his knees gazing upon an ancient city turning to dust. People were screaming. Buildings were

burning. And then he sunk into a hole and buried himself while everyone suffered. All that pain was because of him. He'd brought this plague upon these innocent people. He deserved to be in this hole; he never deserved to walk in sunlight again after this.

Almost rolling off the rock, he caught himself. Looking into the fire almost felt like a mirror pool. He could see eternity in the flames. He could return to them and suffer forever as well.

He forced himself to cross over to another rock. Urobach laughed from the side-lines. He was enjoying this far too much.

Another important memory hit Jesse. It was the same as before, only the setting was different. He'd done this to several cities. Thousands of people died in Jesse's wake, all because of his recklessness. Why was he pressing on for a second chance? None of these people ever got a second chance.

He carefully made it across to another rock and felt his life slipping away. A heavy depression fell over him as he collapsed face-first on the rock. Not all of his memories had returned, and not all in the same order. The ones he saw – the ones he experienced – were destroying him little by little. Decapitating himself in the field finally made sense. No one should carry this burden. Even slipping into the fires right now seemed like the better option.

He stopped trying to cross the lake. It wasn't much further, but he suddenly couldn't find the strength to continue.

He closed his eyes and accepted the harsh reality of his life.

He was never the hero.

Urobach watched in silence and stopped laughing. Jesse looked so pathetic just lying there.

Jesse breathed and prayed for another death.

And then his rock started moving.

Jesse lifted his head and saw a light ripple in the flames pushing the floating rocks towards the alcove. He glanced up at Urobach who was carefully stoking the fires in

Jesse's direction. Urobach pretended it was a complete accident, but there was no hiding it. Urobach didn't want Pandora releasing his babies any more than Jesse did.

The rocks rested against one another at the mouth of the alcove. Jesse had only to crawl ten feet to reach it.

Even then, his will was lost.

He begged for one good memory to return. Anything that could give him the strength to move on, but the worst of the worst memories continued to invade him. There was nothing in his past worth dwelling on.

And that's when he realized that was the key.

Nothing in the *past*.

One of his hands reached out and began to drag his body across the stones. The other hand soon joined in.

"Christine," he said, "Trisha, Nigel, chicken wings, karaoke night, Tuesday matinees, café lattes ... freakin' bunnies!"

He crawled off the stones into the fissure and rolled over onto his back. Not all of his memories had returned. He didn't remember half the cities of which Nigel had spoken. He didn't even remember meeting Charlie Magnus or Poseidon. His nine thousand years still had a lot of gaps left.

A good memory finally hit him: he almost beat Nigel in a sword fight once. He chuckled and lifted himself up from the ground.

A second good memory softly entered his mind. He saw a girl walking beside him in the desert. Her skin was dark and her hair was black as night. She dressed in dusty old robes and looked very plain and unremarkable. He could see she was still young, not even sixteen. He could feel himself smiling, and she smiled back. There was pain and regret in her eyes, but in a way, the girl seemed to have found her peace.

Before the memory ended, the girl spoke to him in a language he didn't remember. What she said was insignificant. She might have been saying he had a piece of broccoli in his teeth for all he knew. Yet hearing her voice alone brought Jesse closer to home than he had

ever been. He wasn't just going to escape this place and help his friends. He was going to escape because Nione expected no less of him.

Exploring the fissure, Jesse found a small indentation in the wall, a tiny square locked door with a keyhole in it. Through the keyhole was a dark, watery murkiness. He found no means of opening the door. The fissure was completely empty otherwise.

He leaned against the wall and waited. He'd crossed the flames; he'd chosen his path. Now he had to trust that Nigel was coming for him.

28. Redemption

Nigel was sitting in a graveyard, leaning against a tombstone and drinking heavily from a bottle of Malört. Aemons didn't actually get drunk, but they still felt the nasty aftertaste, and Nigel sincerely believed he deserved every horrible drop of the poison.

The sun was slowly rising over the horizon. The graveyard itself was basked in the shadow of the tall buildings, but in a couple of hours, the sun would soon enflame him. Not that Nigel cared anymore. Hiding from the sun was no longer a priority. The Chaos had had their way with him and taken his life's purpose. Now he was free to live a normal life. The only problem was that after nine thousand years, he didn't know how. Also, once Pandora had the key, there'd be no life left to live.

He looked to his left to see Christine standing alone in the graveyard, watching him.

"Oh, look," Nigel said. "It's you. What do you want?"

"Nothing," she replied. "I just thought I'd follow you. See where you were going."

Nigel motioned for her to sit on down next to him. She plopped herself on the ground and leaned against the tombstone. Nigel offered her a drink, but she rejected the offer.

"Well, I hope you're miserable," Nigel said. "Jesse's dead, and any time now, Pandora will re-open the box and unleash countless new evils into our world."

"I am suffering right now if that makes you feel any better," Christine replied.

"It doesn't," Nigel said, and took another swig.

"So all the demons are in the harbour right now?" Christine asked.

"Supposedly," Nigel answered. "That's where the key is. I hope they enjoy swimming. I know Vladimir hates it. I threw him into a moat once. That was a good day."

Christine started choking up a sob. Something fragile in her had finally broken and her eyes were welling up.

"I'm so sorry for everything," she said, a tear running down her eye.

Nigel sighed and looked at his pathetic reflection mirrored on his bottle.

"Who am I kidding?" he asked. "This isn't your fault. I don't blame you for digging him up. It's Jesse who's always been like that. Always needing to be in the spotlight. Always needing to be the hero. In fact, I'd sooner blame Nione for creating him. She forged everything about him – his looks, his personality. But then you have to blame Pandora for Nione, and Turk for Pandora, and Xeraphoxes for Turk, and... bad parenting for Xeraphoxes."

He thought about it long and hard.

"Maybe you can blame me," he said. "Even the Chaos knew I was the weak link. Their power preys on the insecure, and whenever they were near, I could feel the worst brewing up inside me. They never once got to Jesse. He really was the better man."

"Couldn't we bring Jesse back?" Christine asked, "Using the same spell that Nione used?"

"That magic was lost ages ago," Nigel said. "He's gone now."

They sat in silence for a bit before Nigel spoke again.

"If it's any comfort, it wouldn't have worked out between the two of you," Nigel said. "Don't try to hide it. I can see that you loved him. As to why, I couldn't say. He's kind of an idiot."

"I couldn't say, either," she said. "I thought he was crazy when he told me he was vampire, but now I see where he was coming from. Now that I met you, I mean. I guess we could have been friends. You know, go for mini-golf, eat some sushi, watch that new Raptor Cop movie together..."

"On second thought," Nigel said. "Maybe you two would have been perfect for each other."

A new thought entered his head.

"You mean the two of you didn't actually...?" Nigel asked, making a rude gesture with his hands. "You know... get involved?"

"No," she said. "He insisted on not getting involved. Kept saying it was against your rules."

"I'll be damned," Nigel said, completely surprised that Jesse had ever followed any of his rules.

"Well, at you least you still have Trish to take care of," she said.

"Yeah," Nigel nodded. "But she does well enough on her own."

"How did Trisha manage to slip past your rules?" Christine asked. "You don't seem like you could trust anybody."

"I don't know," Nigel said. "Shortly after Jesse lost his memory, she found us. I suspected she was one of Pandora's spies at first, but... I'm not sure. At some point, she started taking better care of Jesse than I ever did."

"So you became a family," Christine smiled

"I guess so," Nigel sighed.

"Have you had a lot of families over the millennia?"

"No," Nigel said. "Not ever. We'd occasionally let someone into our lives, but we'd always leave them behind for their protection. I could never do that with Trish. She's special."

"So what would you two do with your last day on Earth?" Christine asked. "Take her out? Stay in? Propose?"

"She'd never go for marriage," Nigel chuckled. "Cursed vampires and blessed unions just don't mix. But I would like to take her back to the park one last time before the sun gets too high. We spent a lot of time there when we first moved in. It's where I first realized she was always going to be a part of us."

"That's sweet," smiled Christine.

"What would you do?" asked Nigel.

"I think I'd like to draw a bunny," Christine said.

She started drawing a picture in the dirt with her finger. Nigel watched her draw a crude bunny for him. The bunny had a grumpy sneer.

"Is that supposed to be me?" Nigel asked.

"I always draw bunnies," Christine confessed. "Got paintings of them all over my wall at home. Friends think I'm crazy."

"Friends and acquaintances alike, I'd imagine."

"But you know what? I think you and I... we're bunnies."

"We eat carrots and multiply?"

"We're always running. Always hiding in our bunny holes. But not anymore. Until Pandora finds that key, we've got free run of the world."

Nigel nodded again. They no longer stood a chance against Pandora, the world was doomed, and they had these last few hours on Earth left to themselves. They had no hope of running anymore. Nigel could just accept his fate and watch the world burn. It would be a very interesting weekend.

"So what do you REALLY want to do with your last few hours?" Christine asked again.

"I want to go find Vladimir and kick his teeth in," Nigel assured himself.

"I want to drive a tank up Pandora's ass." Christine smiled.

"Where'd you pick up that kind of language, sailor?"

Neither Nigel nor Christine had said that. Nigel looked around for the new male voice, but saw nobody in sight.

"Ptolemy, is that you?" he asked.

"Yeah," the disembodied voice said, "I've been listening in for a while. You're having a fabulous mourning period, I must say. TV movie of the week. I'm practically in tears."

Christine glanced around, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Don't bother," Nigel said, "He's astral-projecting. You're still out in the woods, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he said, "My vision's finally returned. Pandora did quite a number on my brain back there. Fortunately, Ingvald has a degree in mental health and psychology."

She's really been helping me get in touch with my inner child."

"Well, the demons are messing around in the harbour if you want to toss them around a bit," Nigel said.

"Nah, Pandora will just brain-blast me again," Ptolemy said. "But who's this fine lady?" Christine felt someone brush her hair back. She jumped and swatted at him. "Feisty, isn't she?"

"This is getting really creepy," she said.

"Ptolemy, do you think you can be less of a jerk right now?" asked Nigel.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm cranky when I'm up all night like this. I can't believe Poseidon went and blew himself up like that. I should've never skimmed on my training."

"Too bad the Sphinx isn't helping us anymore." Christine said.

"What Sphinx?" asked Ptolemy.

Nigel reached into his bag and took out the crystal ball. The Sphinx remained still.

"You answer her riddle," he said, "and the Sphinx tells you anything. Unfortunately, we're stumped on the new one."

"What is it?" Ptolemy asked.

Christine tried to remember, "I exist in many windows of time, growing ever fearful of clockwork, and always end in a horse. What am I?"

Ptolemy was stumped as well. "No clue, I'm afraid. I keep thinking Big Ben, but that doesn't have a horse. Otherwise, all it reminds me of is 'The Girl in the Fireplace'."

Nigel's eyes lit up, "What's that?"

"It's an episode of Doctor Who," Ptolemy said. "In that one episode, the Doctor finds a ship full of windows that leads to different time periods of a girl's life, and the girl is always being terrorized by these clockwork robot aliens. Also, there's a nice scene with a horse at the end. Fantastic episode."

"I think we get that show here in Canada," Christine said. "Is it possible that the Sphinx saw an episode of it on TV one night?"

Nigel looked into the eyes of the Sphinx, "Sphinx, is the answer 'The Girl in the Fireplace?'"

There was a pause.

"YES," the Sphinx answered with frustration.

"Whoo!" Ptolemy exclaimed, "The Doctor is IN DA HOUSE!"

"We get a question," Nigel said. "Any question."

"We should wish for the key!" Ptolemy said.

"It's a Sphinx, not a Genie," Christine said, then she contemplated something different, "Hey, are genies real, too?"

"SSSHHH!!!!" Nigel said. "Don't ask any questions out loud! I'm thinking!"

"We could use it to get the key back," Ptolemy said. "If I knew exactly where the key was, and I'm talking about precise Google Map coordinates. I could look it up on my home computer and retrieve the key."

"Do it!" Christine said.

"Sphinx," Nigel said into its eyes, "what Google Map coordinates can the current Zodiac knight use on his home computer to find the key to Pandora's Box?"

"It is at," the Sphinx said, "44.656345, -63.576487."

"You got that?" asked Nigel.

"I'm entering it into my computer now," Ptolemy said, "Just wait."

"How is he doing this from his computer if he's in the woods?" asked Christine.

"Long-range telekinesis." Nigel told her.

"Got it! Hang on!" Ptolemy's presence disappeared for a bit, and then came back. "All right. I'm projecting into the water. It's very murky down here. I think I saw something large swimming past. I'm not alone, either. Man, these coordinates cover a lot of ground. This could take a while. Wait while I search."

They waited.

Finally, his voice spoke up. "I found the key!"

"Can you get it to us?" Nigel asked.

"Sure," Ptolemy replied. "It's wedged in some rocks underwater, but I can move it out and... oh, heck, no."

"What's wrong?" Nigel asked.

"Snake-lady. She's here. She just saw the key."

Nigel and Christine went cold.

"Ptolemy," Nigel said. "Get that key out of the harbour now!"

"Copy that!" and Ptolemy went silent. Nigel and Christine ran to the motorcycle. Christine hopped on behind Nigel and the two of them raced towards the shore.

They arrived in time to see the shipyards getting torn apart. Venya, Turk, Despair, Vladimir, and Pandora were scrambling after a small object suspended in the air that was whipping and zooming all over the place. Ptolemy was using all of his mental energy to keep the key out of their grasp as they fell over each other trying to reach the tiny piece of metal.

"Ptolemy," Nigel whispered. "Hide that thing now!"

The key sped away from the Chaos, over the freeway and into the business district with Pandora and the others in hot pursuit. Nigel and Christine stayed out of sight as the monsters rushed past. They waited several minutes as Ptolemy moved the key through the area, trying to split them up and lose them.

Soon, the noise died down, and Ptolemy's voice came back.

"She's blinded me again," Ptolemy said. "But I hid the key in a cellar. I'll tell you where."

"We can't go in after it," Christine said. "They'll find us."

"Don't worry, I'll cause a distraction," Ptolemy said.

"How?" Nigel asked, "You're blind!"

"Only my third eye is," Ptolemy said. "My other two can see just fine."

Ptolemy told them the location of the key. A moment later, they heard the crack of thunder. The magical dome overhead flashed a bright light as if someone had just detonated a nuclear bomb over it. Christine and Nigel stayed in their hiding place and watched as the Chaos

emerged from the shops and office buildings. They started moving towards the direction of the light. Another crash of light struck the dome on another side of the city. Everyone could feel the magical vibrations off the barrier. Pandora's crew ran off after the source, like moths chasing a light.

"What's going on?" asked Christine.

"I don't know," said Nigel. "But this is our chance."

Nigel revved up his bike and tore through the district, trying to find the small house Ptolemy had mentioned. Sure enough, they found the right avenue and came up next to a small white house. A basement window had been left wide open. Nigel and Christine ran towards it and peered inside.

There on the couch was Pandora's key.

"I'll get it," Christine said.

She squeezed through the window and fell down into some stranger's basement. She hurried toward the key, recovered it and ran back to Nigel who helped her up through the window.

Together they examined the key. This was the first time in nine thousand years that Nigel had really laid eyes on it.

The key was grey and made of an unknown metal, which shone almost like copper. The stem of the key was made of bizarre eccentric shapes that were bigger than even the bow of the key. If somebody wasn't careful, this was the kind of key that could easily fall through a lock. Nigel was overwhelmed that he was literally holding the key to Earth's destruction.

"Ah, you found it," Ptolemy said.

"What are you doing out there?" asked Nigel.

"Ramming the force field," Ptolemy said. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like meteors raining down on the city," Nigel said.

"How is he doing that?" asked Christine, as Ptolemy rammed the barrier again.

"He has superhuman strength and can fly," Nigel replied.

"Great," Christine said. "He's a telekinetic Superman who can spy on me in the shower."

"I hope that's an invitation," Ptolemy said, crashing into the force field again.

"How's the barrier holding up?" Nigel asked.

"I think I'm actually wearing it down," Ptolemy said. "I don't know if my bones can handle much more, though. I'm not invincible enough to keep this up."

"Just keep it up as long as possible, then!" said Nigel.

"So we just wait for the barrier to come down, and then we leave town!" Christine said, "You can take the key somewhere else and they won't have to destroy Halifax to find it!"

Leaving the city. That had always been Nigel's plan and he immediately began to agree with Christine until he realized that nothing would change. The Chaos would continue to pursue him, and he'd have to go into hiding. What if he didn't see Trisha again? And how would he defend himself the next time Pandora came around? They couldn't even beat Pandora in an Aeonomega, and Pandora had made all those stupid rules to...

Nigel blinked and realized that Pandora's ridiculous terms weren't stupid at all. The cherry cola, the polka music, the chicken wings... crazy as she was, she had still planned to win. She knew she was going to get the key, open the gates of Hell and...

The key, Nigel realized. Had the solution been so simple all along?

"Nope," said Nigel. "I've got a better plan. Pass me your phone."

Christine gave him her cell. Nigel dialed up the number for Hunter's Tavern. Fortunately, the landline for the bar was still working and someone answered. He spoke into it, "Pass me to Trish."

"Nigel?" She asked, "Where are you?"

"It doesn't matter. Has everyone there been eating your chicken wings?" Nigel asked.

"Of course they have," Trisha said. "But what's going on? What's happening outside?"

"Ptolemy's distracting the Chaos and trying to bring down the barrier," Nigel said. "But they're still around here."

I need you to do the following things: load up the truck with kegs from the back-room. All of them. And speakers. And the jukebox. If there are any engineers in Magnus' army, get them to hook up some portable power stations pronto and then take any men who can fight and bring them back downtown. We're going Round Two with the Chaos."

"Are you insane?" asked Trisha. "They're going to kick our asses again! You can't just declare another Aeonomega so soon!"

"I'm not declaring Aeonomega," Nigel said. "Only descendant classes can do that. Me, I just want a good old-fashioned throw-down. And this time, there are no rules."

"You have gone insane," Trisha said.

"Maybe so," Nigel replied. "But just do exactly as I say. Speakers, jukebox, kegs – even the karaoke machine - the works. Oh, and make sure all the men know Her Blessed Lady is ready to lead them into battle. Very important. Call me when you're ready to move out."

He hung up and gave the phone back to Christine.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Christine said.

"Trust me," Nigel said, unsheathing his sword. "I've got a plan."

"That's what Jesse said," Christine said.

"Yeah," Nigel shrugged, and revved his motor, "but mine will work."

29. Ancients' Royale

It was seven in the morning at the intersection of Duke Street and Hollis when Pandora and her cronies stumbled into the neighbourhood. Pandora had grown quite steamed at the Zodiac knight who was whipping around the city trying to break through her precious dome. Ptolemy hadn't quite mastered super-speed yet, but he'd learned just enough to stay ahead of Pandora.

Frustrated, her chains rattled as she conjured up a cake and threw it at Vladimir who quickly avoided it. The cake bounced off Despair, whose neck had been replaced with a spring, turning it into a living bobble-head doll. It also now had a top hat and giant novelty sunglasses.

"This day is not going well," Pandora said. She vented her frustration further by slapping Turk, Venya, and Despair with one even swipe. "If this is how they want to play, then we can stop taking it easy on these wretched mortals."

She pointed at a bench and it instantly exploded into splinters.

"Turn this city to dust if you have to," she ordered her Chaos flunkies, "but bring me my key!"

Up the street towards a green mound known as Citadel Hill, they heard the hum of a motorcycle. Nigel pulled into an intersection with Christine riding in the back.

"I hear you're looking for something," Nigel shouted. Then he whispered to Christine, "Stand clear. Things are about to get ugly." Christine nodded and hurried across the street, seeking cover in a store.

Nigel turned to Pandora, staring down the Chaos for, hopefully, the final showdown.

"I think it's about time you left town," Nigel said.

"And why would we do that?" Pandora asked.

"Because you once told me that the cheese and the monkey were in cahoots with Colonel Mustard all along," Nigel explained. "If you don't leave this town immediately, you've never get to Timbuktu on time and you'll miss the train to Macaroni Land."

Pandora thought for a moment, "He's right. That sounds like something I would say. Come, minions! We must flee this city immediately! To Macaroni Land!"

"No!" Vladimir exclaimed, "He's just taking advantage of your... thing!"

"Vladimir's calling you crazy," Nigel said. Pandora's eyes flared up.

"No!" Vladimir yelled, "HE'S calling you crazy!"

"Stop calling me crazy!" Pandora screamed. A lamp post exploded. The other demons backed away. She looked ready to disintegrate everything on the spot when she took a deep breath and relaxed. Then she started to laughed, "Oh, you had me going there for a second, Aemon. Ha! I know full well that the train never runs out of lasagna and we can meet with the talking pajamas later! So you see, I'm in no hurry to leave."

Nigel sighed. Plan A (confuse Pandora with crazy talk) wasn't working. So Plan B was set into motion.

"All right, then," he said. "In that case, get out of this town before we kick your ass."

"You and what army?" Pandora laughed.

"This army," Nigel said.

Then nothing happened.

"I said this army!" Nigel shouted.

"We're only marching for Her Blessed Lady this time!" some guy shouted out from behind one of the stores. Nigel let out an exasperated sigh.

"Christine, you want to handle this?" Nigel asked.

Christine stepped out of the store, stood in the middle of the road, stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled loudly.

A loud uproar echoed and an epic guitar solo blared through the streets as what remained of Charlie Magnus' army stormed out from all the intersecting streets and

avenues. Riled up to a heavy metal anthem on the portable jukebox in the back of Trisha's truck, they flooded past Christine who stood like a boulder against their river. She quietly enjoyed having this kind of power. Soon, the street was packed, and all the soldiers were looking downhill at the five remaining demons. They were ready for battle... again.

"Didn't we do this already?" Pandora asked.

"Yeah," Nigel said. "And guess what? We really enjoyed winning the first time."

Pandora sighed and looked to Vladimir. "Vladimir, dispose of these pests."

"Why me?!" he begged. "Stop throwing me out there first! Just disintegrate them and let's find the key!"

"Do I sense fear?" she asked.

"Yes! I'm afraid of everything!" Vladimir yelled, "If I'm not afraid, I die!"

Pandora slapped him in the back of the head. Vladimir gave in and unleashed his shadows upon the army. Almost instantly, anyone who was standing on a shadow began to trip or slip up as he tried to knock several warriors off their feet. His shadow clones leapt from any dark corner, taking the troops by surprise.

Nigel kicked his bike into gear and drove into the fray, slashing down shadow clones left and right with his sword. The monsters kept coming, but the soldiers kept fighting bravely against the invading force. Soon the shadows began to overwhelm them again.

Pandora smiled, "They never learn, do they?"

She turned to see Vladimir coughing and choking. Many shadow clones began to fall out of his control.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"Their breath," he choked. "I can feel it in their pores! They're swimming in it and I can taste it through my shadows!"

All the shadow clones instantly dissolved and the warriors were left fighting nothing. Vladimir collapsed and began to crawl away.

Pandora looked at Nigel, and suddenly realized, "Chicken wings?"

"Honey garlic," Nigel nodded. "Best in the city. Not recommended for vampires."

Pandora chuckled for a few moments. "Clever, clever," she said. Then her smug expression disappeared, and the expression of someone who had just broken the camel's back replaced it. She raised her hands and motioned for the other three demons to attack.

Venya, Turk, and Despair leapt into action. However, instead of maintaining a manageable size like they did on the bridge, they exploded into several-story high behemoths, raining down on Nigel's army like a gang of colossi.

Venya had returned to the size that she had used when she first attacked everyone during her arrival. Being the most arrogant of the group, she threw herself into the frontlines swinging her tail and clawing at the troops like a whirling dervish. Only this time, her size became her weakness as she kept bumping into buildings. Several warriors grabbed onto her enormous scales, and started climbing all over her, like a cluster of ants.

Despair flew over the buildings, breathing a black misty fire. It was the size of a bomber jet now, which only made it easier to hit as the archers and gunmen gushed a maelstrom of munitions on him from below. As a demon, already dead and humiliated on the inside, Despair found it was reluctant to get any closer. It could feel the soldiers' newly restored confidence as the rock anthems from the jukebox pumped them up with the will to fight. It wasn't like back on the bridge where the polka music had only left them confused and slightly dance-happy.

Trisha manned the jukebox and queued up a playlist of everything from the best of Judas Priest to AC/DC. It was fortunate that over the last thousand years, all the soldiers had developed the same excellent taste in music. They were riding into battle and the sound of rock was their chariot.

Turk made a beeline through the crowd, forcing many soldiers to dive out of the hulk's path as he tore a crater through the pavement, dragging his blades behind him. Much like Venya, his blades got wedged in the streets and buildings, so he abandoned them and proceeded to bring his enormous fists down on everyone. He was also slower in this size, but that didn't make him any less dangerous. While everyone else got out of his way, Nigel pulled up in front of Turk, and cracked opened a beer.

Nigel held up the beer and shouted out to Turk, "Hey, big guy? Thirsty?" He chugged back some of the drink and prayed that this worked. Turk saw Nigel and leaned in towards him, letting out a great roar. Nigel tossed him the beer, which Turk immediately caught and tossed into his mouth.

Nigel's hunch had been right. Every time he saw Turk, Turk was always sticking something in his mouth. Now Nigel realized what Turk had been looking for all along: something to kill the pain.

"Trish!" Nigel yelled, "Roll me a keg!"

Trisha booted a keg of beer out from the back of the truck. It rolled down the hill towards Nigel, where he caught it and waved Turk down.

"Come and get it!" Nigel yelled, kicking the tap open and letting the beer spew. Turk shrunk down to his usual eight-foot self, picked up the keg, and began chugging right from the tap. Nigel shouted out to some of the other soldiers, "More kegs! We're getting this demon wasted!"

"And it's on the house!" shouted Trisha, kicking another keg their way.

Venya rushed forward to pull the kegs away from Turk. As she approached the truck, however, Trisha took her by surprise by hurling a bag of pig's blood into her face. As the blood bag broke open, Venya shrieked and clawed at the blood sacrifice on her face, screaming "It burns! It burns!" Trisha whipped out her shotgun and unloaded round after round into the enormous snake-woman. Venya cringed in pain and desperately slithered away only to be attacked by another group of soldiers.

Pandora watched in shock as her minions got the ass-kicking of their lives. Vladimir was huddled up and crying in an alley next to her. Venya was getting shot at and chopped up by people who kept apologizing in hopes that one of them would somehow manage to kill her by accident. Despair was flying in circles and repeatedly slamming into the sides of buildings trying not to get shot. Then there was Turk who was surrounded by a dozen soldiers who were all shouting "CHUG! CHUG! CHUG!"

"Vladimir, do something!" Pandora yelled, grabbing the crying demon by the collar and hurling him into the battle. Vladimir flailed helplessly as he landed in the middle of another group of soldiers who immediately set upon him like a pack of dogs. Vladimir struggled to escape the dog-pile, but kept getting dragged back in.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" shouted Pandora. The earth rumbled as she began to increase in size. Soon enough, she was twenty stories tall and boiling mad. She swung her chains forward, tearing through a pedway and ripping into the street, overturning several parked cars on impact. She stepped forward and tore apart the pedway remains, causing debris to rain down on everyone who was already running from her gigantic bare feet. Then she swung one arm, tearing through another building and forcing everyone below to flee in terror as an entire office space was emptied of its furnishings, electronics and papers and was spilt on the street below.

Nigel retreated from the raining office supplies and pulled back to Trisha's truck where they watched Pandora lumber forward like the bride of Godzilla.

"Did you have a plan for this?" Trisha asked.

"I was banking on that she'd be crazy enough not to do this," Nigel said, reaching into the back of the truck and finding another RPG. He loaded a warhead into it and fired it at Pandora's face. Pandora knocked it out of mid-air slamming it against a building. The explosion was contained between the building and her fist. Several other soldiers continued shooting at her.

Suddenly, two missiles soared out of the sky, striking Pandora in the collar bone, causing her to stumble backwards. Her chains hooked onto the building debris. She hung off the infrastructure as she checked to see who was shooting at her.

A Harrier jet flew in from the sky, raining machine gun fire on her over-sized body. She cringed and swiped as it flew past.

“Good morning, my dear!” shouted Charlie Magnus as he maneuvered the jet around for another go. He opened the cockpit window and waved at Nigel and Trisha. They saw that the damaged wing that been repaired using duct tape and pieces of the bar that Ngozi had used to assemble Magnus’ wheelchair. But mostly duct tape.

Ngozi and Vincenzo were riding on top of the jet, holding onto grenade launchers. They leapt off the jet, landing on Pandora’s face, and fired two rounds into her nostrils. They hopped down onto the streets as the rounds went off inside her head. The explosions didn’t cause her head to explode, but that didn’t make the experience any less unpleasant for her.

Magnus flew back and forth across the street, spending all his ammunition on Pandora. Missiles erupted all over her body and gunfire tore through her left and right. Soon, she looked like a tattered rag doll, with her clothes in shreds and her mascara running. She continued to swing at the jet to no avail.

“Charles, you rascal!” Pandora shouted, “Get back here!”

“Come now, I thought you liked to play hard to get!” Magnus laughed, launching his last missile into her head and shoulder. As adamant as he was about destroying her, he couldn’t help but imagine the things he could do with a twenty-story tall woman.

She swiped again at the jet, hitting the wing. Magnus started tumbling out of control. In his spin, he managed to maneuver the jet around for one last strike. He fired up the afterburners and flew right for her face.

"You really know how to break a girl's heart, don't you, Charles?" she asked, bracing herself for the inevitable.

"It's not your heart I'm aiming at, my dear."

Moments before the plane impacted with her head, Magnus hit the ejection button, launching himself out of the plane. The parachute deployed as he watched the Harrier crash into Pandora's face. Jet fuel sprayed all over her. He pulled out a pistol and began firing into the fuel, igniting it and setting Pandora ablaze. Pandora screamed and struggled to pull herself free from her chains.

Finally, she had no choice. She shrunk back down to human-size, taking the chains off the building with her. She took a moment to heal before she stood up and prepared to unleash her signature scream attack on everyone.

That's when she noticed Vincenzo at her feet, connecting some cables. While Pandora had been distracted, the soldiers had set up a circle of speakers around her. Vincenzo placed a karaoke mike in front of her, adjusted its height, and gave her the go-ahead as he ran for cover. Pandora didn't give this a second thought.

She screamed the loudest scream anyone had ever heard. The sound was fed back through the speakers into her ears. Throw in the incredible feedback that came with having the mike so close to the speakers, and Pandora found herself trapped within the tiny blast radius of her own scream amplified a hundred times over. Windows shattered everywhere. The feedback exploded through her body, destroying everything else within a five metre radius of her.

When the scream was over, Pandora stood stunned, staring blankly ahead. Black blood was dripping out of her ears and nose, and she fell to her knees in silence. Her clothes were barely hanging off her body, with only her modest chains left to cover her nudity. To her, the entire world was spinning, and not in the way she was used to.

Nigel took this chance, kicked the bike into full gear and stormed towards Pandora at top speed. Before Pandora could even begin describe the object flying right at her, Nigel's bike collided with the mostly-naked woman, and the

two rolled down the hill together entangled in the chains. Pandora clawed at her attacker, but was still too disoriented from the event to properly hit him.

Then Nigel got his hands on it: Pandora's Box. Holding it up so Pandora could see, he took the key, shoved it in the lock... and pushed it all the way in.

Pandora went absolutely insane, which really was something for her. Throwing Nigel off, she grabbed onto the box and start shaking it, trying to get the key out. She looked inside the keyhole, and sure enough the key was gone.

"Do you know what you've done?!" she asked.

"Yeah," Nigel said. "That box is a gateway to Hell. So I just sent the key home. Now no one ever has to open it."

Pandora threw the box against the ground like a little child and began screaming. All these centuries of being chained to this stupid box, and now she would never be able to open it.

After she had properly vented, she took a moment to fix herself. Her hair cleaned itself up, her scars disappeared, and her clothes magically re-appeared all over her body. She turned back to Nigel who was still on his hands and knees. She scowled.

"You think you've won," she said, "don't you? Well, don't think this is over. Don't think you've saved this city, or the world! For every minute I spend strapped to these chains, for all eternity, I will see the end of your race... and you will have only yourself to blame."

And that's when she heard a strange clicking sound.

She stopped her raving, peered inside the lock, and saw the end of the key fidgeting around.

Somebody was opening the lock from the other side.

In other words, something from inside Hell was opening Pandora's box. And as the box exploded open in Pandora's hands, what came out was neither an elemental, demon, nor a damned soul.

It was an angel.

Jesse O'Ryan was shining brightly, with beautiful ethereal wings flowing from his back. He hovered over the

street for a few moments to take in the situation. Everyone could practically feel Heaven's power flowing off of him.

Christine stepped out of the shop in absolute shock and awe. Seeing Jesse as an angel, she couldn't decide if he was alive, but he was certainly back.

Nigel, never taking his eyes off the angel or blinking, decided this was a good time for a cigarette. He then took his sword in hand and threw it high into the air to his brother. At soon as the handle landed in Jesse's palm, the blade absorbed some of his power, doubled in size and emitted gorgeous white flames.

Pandora just squinted and scratched her head. Then she said, "That's not right."

Jesse flew into action, scoping out his first target: Despair. The beast flew from the sight of the oncoming warrior angel and the two engaged in an aerial game of cat-and-mouse. Soaring high above the buildings, Despair kept losing ground as Jesse would fly past him, cutting through another wing with every pass. The Christmas lights came off and the fuzzy dice went flying. Even the top hat didn't stand a chance. Finally, Jesse delivered a solid blow with the blunt of his sword, knocking the alien bug out of the sky and sending it down into the pavement.

Then, for the first time ever, the Despair demon felt a brief moment of self-respect and it picked itself up, grew back its wings and screeched at the angel above. In one last ditch effort, Despair threw itself directly into the air, brandishing its claws and baring its teeth.

Jesse dove down at the monster, swung his sword, and in a flash of light, the battle was over.

Despair, split in half, disappeared into black mist. Jesse continued his furious descent, and then gracefully landed on the street below.

As Christine watched Jesse vanquish Despair, she was briefly reminded of the actual myth of Pandora's box. After releasing all the evils upon the earth, all that had remained at the bottom of the box was Hope.

And now Hope had arrived.

Jesse turned his attention to Turk, but noticed Turk was chugging down his fourth keg of beer and was no longer a threat.

So Jesse turned his attention to Venya, who was struggling to free herself from the many weapons that were pinning her to the streets. There was no way he could ever kill her by accident like this, so he did the next best thing. He grabbed her by the tail, tore her off the ground, and leapt into the air. Then, with a great swing, he launched her as far as he could into the ocean. She struck the inside of the dome about fifty kilometres out and fell in the water.

Then Jesse looked straight at Vladimir who was wetting his pants at the sight of Jesse.

"You killed me," Jesse said.

As Vladimir backed away from Jesse, he bumped into someone else. He turned around to see Nigel, looking rather angry. Nigel took advantage of Vladimir's stunned state by delivering three solid punches to his head, followed by a round-house kick to the teeth. Vladimir stumbled back the other direction and landed in Jesse's arms.

"My turn," Jesse smiled. With that, Vladimir melted out of his arms into a shadowy puddle and hastily escaped into a nearby sewer grate. He was quite done with Aemons at this point.

Pandora watched him and yelled, "Vladimir! Get back here, you coward!"

Then she turned to Jesse. He sheathed his blade, cracked his knuckles and prepared to take Pandora on with his bare hands.

Pandora screamed and threw herself at Jesse with all her might. Jesse threw himself at Pandora with all of his might. The two collided, fist to fist, and time seemed to stop as the two opponents' energies exploded between them.

Unfortunately, Pandora had forgotten: Second Age always trumps Third Age. As the energy exploded, Jesse's punch threw her back, sending her tumbling several blocks down the street. She made a Pandora-shaped crater in the

side of the courthouse, where she settled for a moment before falling flat onto her face.

Jesse took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and let his wings fade away. He was now completely back to normal, although his soul remained intact.

Christine, Trish, Nigel and even Magnus ran to him (Magnus was running with the aid of his fellow warriors as crutches, of course.) For a moment, nobody knew what to say. Jesse was dead, and now he was back and delivering the best beating anyone had seen all day.

Christine was the first to break the ice by giving Jesse a huge hug, as well as skipping all formalities and kissing him directly on the mouth. Trisha joined in the hugs shortly after. Nigel took his time before he moved in, shook Jesse's hand and gave him a good man-hug.

"Thanks, Nigel," Jesse said. "I knew I could count on you."

"Don't thank me," Nigel said. "I was just trying to hide the key. I didn't actually know you could unlock the box from the other side."

"Neither did I," said Jesse, "but there I was sitting there, and then this key fell out of the wall. Just like Raptor Cop promised."

"Raptor Cop?" asked Trisha.

"Yeah, I met Raptor Cop in Hell," Jesse said. "Long story. I'll tell you about it later."

High above, another thunder clap hit the dome.

"Is that Ptolemy?" Jesse asked.

"He's working on destroying the dome," Nigel said.

"Awesome," Jesse smiled.

He looked to Pandora who was starting to crawl back to her feet.

"We'll never kill her like this," Jesse said. "What did the Sphinx say we need?"

"We need a moment of truth to make her vulnerable," Trisha said.

"We have to convince her she's crazy," Christine said.

"And whoever does that won't survive," Nigel remembered.

"Then get everyone clear," Jesse said. "I'm going to try and talk some truth into her. In my angel form, she shouldn't be able to destroy me too easily."

"It's too dangerous," Nigel said.

"I know it is," Jesse said. "But we've risked too much already. This is my shot at redemption and I'm taking it. Nobody else dies because of me."

That last line was delivered so gravely, that even Nigel felt an immense sense of sincerity in Jesse that he hadn't felt in eighteen years.

"You remember?" Nigel asked.

"I remember enough," Jesse said.

"How much did you get back?" Nigel inquired.

"Enough to know I'll never beat you," Jesse smiled.

He took the key out of his pocket and threw it to Nigel. "Brother, you've been protecting me for too long. How about you hold onto the key, and I take over for a while?"

Nigel took in the moment as he held onto the key before pocketing it. "So roles reversed, huh?"

"Get everyone out of here," Jesse said. "I'll take care of Pandora."

Then, before they knew it, Pandora was leaning against the two of them, her arms around their shoulders.

"Such a touching moment," she said. "But it's not interesting enough. Not yet."

With that, she wiped some blood from her brow, forced open Nigel's jaw, and smeared the blood into his mouth.

30. Blood Brothers

As Christine could attest to, there was nothing scarier than seeing an Aemon in their demon form. She grabbed Trisha and yelled at everybody to run as Pandora held back Nigel, and Nigel's transformation begun.

Of course, this wasn't a normal blood transformation either. Transforming under the blood of a demon takes on a whole other meaning. Nigel's eyes turned blood black, his teeth sharpened like jagged rocks, and his veins burst with unholy strength, tearing through his shirt. Fire and shadow began to flow out of his pores as the true demon inside began to take hold.

Pandora faced Nigel towards Jesse and snickered. "Sic 'em."

Jesse only had a brief moment to turn on his angel form as demon Nigel threw himself at his brother. Nigel shred through the air, spikes and claws growing out of his joints. The demon slashed at Jesse, tearing through his clothes. Jesse grabbed hold of Nigel and threw themselves high into the air and away from the others. Jesse had to get Nigel as far away from everyone as possible.

Soaring over the city, the two brothers ignited in the morning sun. Jesse was covered in a bright yellow flame, while Nigel was covered in shadowy red fire. Nigel mauled his brother like an angry cat. Jesse's flames replenished his body easily, but it was difficult to fight back when your nerves and tendons were getting destroyed over and over again.

Jesse threw himself off Nigel and crash-landed through the roof of a brewery down on the waterfront. The two came to blows on the work floor. Jesse knew full well that his only hope was to wear Nigel out long enough for the blood to wear off. But with the blood of a demon, how long could this take? Using his ethereal sword, Jesse slashed at

Nigel's limbs, cutting them down, only to watch them grow back instantly in bursts of flame. Unlike Jesse, Nigel wasn't getting slowed down by this. For every limb lost, Nigel just fought back harder with his three remaining limbs.

All around them, the brewery walls and floors started caving in under the stress of their battle. Jesse tried to pin down his brother, but Nigel's strength was overwhelming. As they fought, Jesse realized that the collapsing brewery had become an extension of Nigel's rage. The infrastructure would tear itself apart and fly at Jesse every time Nigel attacked. Jesse had no choice but to make a run for it. He threw himself through the ceiling back into the sky. He swung his sword downwards, creating a flaming arc of energy that demolished the rest of the brewery with Nigel inside. Nigel burst through the arc and tackled Jesse head-on.

They landed against the side of a skyscraper. Having no respect for gravity, Jesse began running vertically up the side of the building with Nigel in hot pursuit. Like two fireballs wearing pants, they soared over the building tops, taking swipes at each other. No end to the battle was in sight.

Jesse was losing focus. While his soul would sustain his angel form for quite a while, he wasn't fueled like Nigel was. Before he could finish that last thought, Nigel struck him with all his strength.

Like a meteorite tearing through cardboard, Jesse was thrown across the district, smashing through building after building, never losing speed. He fell south of the district and landed on the green grass of Citadel Hill where his body plowed through the earth, leaving a nice long crater. He fell over the hilltop and crashed into the ruins of Fort George.

The three-hundred year-old star-shaped fortress that was Fort George rested atop the hill overlooking the harbour. Once a popular tourist location, it had now become a battleground between brothers as Nigel landed in the courtyard and found Jesse recovering from that last attack.

Picking up an ancient cannon, Nigel hurled it at Jesse, throwing him into the battlements, causing them to collapse on the angel. Under normal circumstances, this would have done nothing to injure an angel. However, when a Chaos-fueled demon is throwing a cannon, the cannon tends to wrap around anything it hits, and everything it hits tends to wrap around the cannon. Jesse was able to tear the fused metal off his body, but it was clear that he wouldn't last much longer like this. He could feel his control slipping away inside. Nigel was just too powerful like this.

As he struggled to crawl out from under the fallen stones, Nigel walked up to him, and threw over a wall, burying Jesse once again. Jesse's angel-side temporarily gave out, and he became himself again. The weight of the stones eventually crushed him in a puff of flame.

Behind Nigel, Pandora was clapping her hands and laughing. She hadn't been this entertained in a very long time.

"Well," she asked, "What are you waiting for? Fish out that metal heart of his and finish him!"

Of course, also being the Chaos of Ignorance, Pandora didn't exactly think things through when she decided to confront Nigel like this. Instead of obeying her orders, Nigel began attacking her. Unfortunately, his animal nature was no match for her elegant chain-wielding. She stepped aside, dodging his attack, and threw her chains around his neck, dragging him off his feet and pinning him down. She quickly wrapped his arms and legs together.

"Go ahead and struggle," she said. "These chains were forged by your master Urobach himself. You'll never break them."

Then Pandora saw something out of the corner of her eye. Christine had climbed up the hill after them. For what purpose, nobody knew. But knowing Christine, she probably thought she could help in some way.

Pandora smirked, turned Nigel towards Christine, and loosened the chains.

“Eat up,” Pandora said. Nigel tore himself out of the chains and went after Christine.

Pandora didn't even watch as her new demon toy went after the poor girl. Instead, she walked over to the pile of stones where Jesse was buried. She could see the flames under the stones as Jesse was desperately trying to regenerate himself. Unfortunately, the weight of the rubble was too much for him to properly reform his body, and he couldn't summon his angel strength without his body. Pandora re-forged her old war hammer out of thin air. She raised the hammer over her head and prepared to turn the stones to dust with Jesse's heart inside.

Then she heard Nigel's voice: “Pandora, that's enough.”

Turning, she saw Christine perfectly healthy, and Nigel standing next to her... still in his demon form. He was breathing more calmly.

“My blood should have kept you under for a few more hours,” Pandora said.

“I won't let you control me or destroy anyone else,” Nigel said, breathing smoke. He was trying his hardest to control his transformation, and with Chaos flowing through his fire-blood, this was no easy feat. He took a deep breath, and his demon form began to withdraw back inside. Soon he appeared normal again, even if he was still running on blood.

He reached into his satchel and pulled out the Sphinx.

“Do you know what this is?” Nigel asked. “We've been keeping her from you for quite a long time.”

Pandora smiled warmly at the little snow-globe. “So, you had the Sphinx all along? That would have come in handy millennia ago. We could have found you a lot sooner and not had to deal with all this trouble.”

“Then you know,” Nigel asked, “that she always tells the truth, right?”

“Well, duh,” was Pandora's reply.

Nigel handed the Sphinx to Christine.

“Get a riddle,” he told her. Christine looked into its eyes and asked for a riddle.

"I contain everything, except that which is not water. I am yellow as the sun and..."

"Is it a Sham-Wow?" Christine asked, before the riddle could be finished.

"It... is a Sham-Wow," the Sphinx answered.

Nigel took the Sphinx. He looked Pandora in the eyes, and then the Sphinx in the eyes. Pandora was trying to figure out Nigel's game.

"Sphinx," he asked, "Is Pandora... crazy?"

Pandora's eyes flared up. The Sphinx did NOT want to answer this question. Pandora began marching forward.

"Answer it!" Nigel yelled.

"Yes," Pandora said furiously, "ANSWER IT!"

The Sphinx squeaked out a single answer, "...Yes."

Pandora screamed louder than ever. Snatching away the little snow-globe, she shook it violently, screaming "No! I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy! I'm not crazy!" Nigel grabbed Christine and ran off, taking cover behind a nearby wall.

As Pandora screamed and clutched the snow-globe ever so tightly, a small crack began to appear in the glass. But Pandora didn't care. She just squeezed tighter and tighter, trying to destroy the little Sphinx inside its prison, and not realizing her mistake until it was too late. She had already triggered the fail-safe.

As the glass shattered, and Pandora was engulfed in the explosion screaming "I'm not crazy!" only one last thought rang through her mind.

Or am I?

Fire and smoke went up through Citadel Hill as the bright light blew Pandora into thousands of tiny pieces, all of which contemplated the nature of mashed potatoes and kiwi birds before evaporating into black mist.

The demon sorceress was no more.

31. Loose Ends

Trish worked her way through the crowds, marching up the streets towards Citadel Hill. She had been run ragged once again trying to get all these warriors under control, and now that she had seen the explosion from atop the hill, she had no choice but to get up there and see what had happened.

As she approached the hill, she realized she would have to brave the sunlight standing between here and there, and escape the safety of the shadows. Fortunately, a flicker of fire illuminated the top of the hill. She stopped in her tracks.

Nigel, Jesse and Christine were marching down the side of the hill together, having looked like they'd had better days. Nigel and Jesse were on fire, of course. Christine looked pretty beaten and burnt, but had apparently survived the explosion all right. Cradled in her arms was Pandora's box. Nigel had used his own body to protect her while the explosion had cleared out the rubble under which Jesse was trapped.

They reunited on the street where Nigel embraced Trisha and kissed her very passionately. This was the most emotion anyone had ever seen Nigel display in public.

"So what happened with Pandora?" Trisha asked.

"The Sphinx convinced her she was crazy," Nigel said. "It didn't end well for the Sphinx... but it didn't end well for Pandora either."

"So it's over?" asked Christine.

"We still have to clean up these other demons," Jesse said, looking over at Turk. The pain demon was sitting against a truck with a few soldiers, drinking out of another keg like it was a baby bottle. They were all laughing, singing, and enjoying drinks with the big guy. Charlie Magnus was sitting on the tailgate, taking a breather.

"So how is Pandora?" he asked.

"In a million pieces," Nigel answered.

"A pity," sighed Magnus. "She was a fine woman and worthy foe. Absolutely psychotic, of course, and a complete threat to humanity, but a fine woman, nonetheless. We shall drink to her!"

"So what's going on with this guy?" Nigel asked.

"He's a rather nice fellow." Magnus said. "Get a few drinks in him and he loosens up quite nicely."

"You do realize we have to kill him, right?" Nigel reminded him. "Once he sobers up and feels pain again, he's just going to start attacking people."

"True enough," Magnus said, "I'll do my best not to get attached to this one. And we've got what – seven kegs left? We've been injecting him with a few tranquilizers here and there. The guy doesn't even notice anymore. We sent some guys on another beer run just in case we need more. But don't worry. When he's ready, we'll put this fine fellow out of his misery. Leave him to us."

"Does he really have to die?" Christine asked, looking to Jesse. "He isn't under Pandora's control anymore. We could teach him to be nice."

"Urobach is expecting him," Jesse said. "Don't worry. I saw other Chaos elementals down there. They seem happier in Hell. Besides, spending nine thousand years wrapped in self-replenishing barb wire couldn't be fun for anyone."

Christine felt someone tap her shoulder. She turned to see Turk leaning over and patting her with his over-sized mitt of a hand. He moaned something unintelligible and slowly gave her a thumbs-up.

"You're okay with this?" she asked him. Turk nodded. It was a very sad nod, but Christine could tell Turk was looking forward to this. It was strange to think that the monster who had been trying to cleave them in half all night was now trying to make its peace with them.

"Demons don't really die as I found out," Jesse said. "They just go home."

"Then have a safe trip, big guy," Christine sighed. "Don't forget to write."

Turk moaned and continued his chugging. Magnus sharpened his battle-axe nearby.

Jesse, Nigel, Christine, and Trisha took a walk down the street inspecting the aftermath of the battle. Buildings and cars had been demolished, and glass was everywhere. A couple fires had started and there were the remains of Magnus' jet nearby. All in all, winning two Aeonomegas in one day was pretty good by any standard, even if the second one wasn't official.

"So how did you pull this off?" asked Jesse. "I thought you would have just gone and buried yourself after finding the key."

"I wanted to," Nigel said. "But without you, I guess I needed to fill that annoying void in my life with another idiotic hare-brained plan that had absolutely no chance of working. It worked, of course."

"So the only way to beat them was in an Aeonomega with no rules, huh?" Jesse asked.

"It was rigged from the get-go," Nigel said. "Pandora knew we had honey garlic chicken wings, and that they'd interfere with Vladimir's shadows. Then that whole bit with the cherry cola was just a red herring to keep us from bringing booze to the battle and distracting Turk. Then the polka music... it's crazy until you realize that you can't boost the enemy's battle morale if they're listening to polka. It's simply ludicrous, and it made killing Despair next to impossible."

"We needed the power of rock," Trisha explained, making a fist-pump in the process.

"And what about Venya and Pandora?" Jesse asked. "Did you have any plan for them?"

"Nah," Nigel shrugged. "The Jesse side of me told to just go ahead and play the rest by ear."

"Speaking of which," Trisha pointed out. "We still have Vladimir and Venya to deal with."

"Yeah, but without Pandora," Nigel said, "they have no reason to come back and fight. I mean, Vladimir's a fear demon now and scared of his own shadows. And Venya's a pride demon and..."

Nigel thought for a moment.

"...and she has her pride."

Venya stormed back into the scene, breaking through an office building, and angrier than ever. As Nigel had just realized, she was not going to back down until she had avenged the humiliation she just faced.

Everyone ran out of the way as she began tearing up the street, only to get distracted by the loudest clap of thunder they'd heard all day.

All over the city of Halifax, the protective dome shattered. The mystical energies shone like glass as they fell and faded away. Even Venya had to stop and stare at the wonders above.

Then through the sky fell a figure. It was a young man, clad in shining armor, waving his arms and legs as if he were trying to fly. He fell toward Duke St, landing right on Venya's head.

Everyone ran over to the armored man and helped him to his feet. As they did, they looked down as Venya who was haphazardly trying to get back up.

"You crushed her," Christine said.

"Sorry," Ptolemy said, lifting off his helmet. "It was an accident."

"Not... like... this..." Venya choked. Then she turned into black mist and faded away.

Nigel slapped him on his back, "Good job, kid."

"Why?" he asked. "What did I do?"

Then he looked down and saw the armor he was wearing. It was a shining white color and covered with golden Zodiac symbols. The full-body armor had been forged with a muscular physique, and a flowing gold cape was draped over the shoulders. In a way, it made him look more like a contemporary superhero than a medieval knight. He let out a jump of joy and laughed.

"I did it!" He exclaimed, "I got my armor! The Armor of God is mine!"

Like an angel who just got his wings, Ptolemy danced around for a few moments before realizing he looked like an idiot, and then settled down. He waved his one of his new gauntlets in front of his face. Suddenly, it disappeared, only to re-appear when he gestured for it.

"Sweet, I can toggle it on and off!" he grinned, making his armor magically disappear and re-appear. He appeared much taller when wearing it, so he left it on, but kept his helmet off to address everyone, "So... it's nice to meet everybody in the flesh. Is it all over? Did I miss the fight?"

"I think it's over," Jesse said. "Vladimir's still on loose, but he won't be coming back. Unless it's for the key."

"You mean this key?" Nigel reached into his pocket. The key had somehow stayed in there throughout his entire battle with his brother. Christine held up the box and he shoved the key back inside the lock. "There. Now nobody will ever open it. And if either one of us ever gets killed again, we'll have a way out."

"So what do we do now?" asked Christine.

"It's over," said Trisha, running off. "I really need to get back to the tavern before the sun gets too high. Some of us actually die in the sunlight, you know."

"And Magnus' men are going to clean up the mess," Nigel said. "Ptolemy, are you sticking around?"

"Nah, I've got to fly Ingvald back to Norway," he said, sounding quite disappointed. "Apparently her boyfriend's taking her out for their anniversary tonight."

"All right," Nigel said. "Don't forget to keep up with that training."

With that, Ptolemy flew off into the sky and headed off to find Ingvald, who would become one of the unsung heroes of the revolution.

"Well, it's still early in the day," Christine said, "and I don't feel the least bit tired. You guys want to go do something?"

"It's been nine thousand years since I ever went to 'do something.'" Nigel said, "What's there to do around here?"

"Breakfast at the café," Jesse said. "We could go for a walk, or even see a movie."

"Have you seen 'Raptor Cop 3' yet?" Christine asked, "I would totally see that again."

"I loved it!" Jesse said. "But Nigel hasn't seen it!"

"Well then he has to come see it!" Christine exclaimed.

"I don't know..." Nigel said, sounding very skeptical about this.

"Dude," Jesse said, with a good-natured slap to Nigel's back, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Live it up."

"Well, all right," he said, "but I have one question: what's a Sham-Wow?"

"It's a special type of towel," Christine said. "It's from another infomercial. From the same guy who sells Slap-Chop."

"Ah," Nigel nodded. "And are these things available in stores?"

"Let's go find out!" Jesse smiled.

So Nigel shrugged and spent the whole day exploring the city with Jesse and Christine, shopping, going for food, enjoying the parks, seeing the sights, and – of course - watching 'Raptor Cop 3'.

Incidentally, he hated it.

So now you're probably wondering: what about the rest of the people in the city? How did Jesse take his friends on a fun-filled day through Halifax when no businesses were open? Well, once again, you'd have to chalk it up to Chinese magic. Once Wu Tang was informed that the Chaos threat had been neutralized, he cast a serenity spell over the city. This caused people to come out of their homes and resume their normal day-to-day activities. Of course, this spell didn't erase their memories, and many people still had questions. They had many more questions when they saw the destruction that had been visited upon their city. Nevertheless, the first few days went swimmingly, with people returning to their daily lives and being very mellow about the disaster that befell them.

It wasn't until three days later when Wu Tang was finally able to jump out of Patti's body that the spell was released. Then, the once-mellow people of Halifax started asking serious questions, analyzing the disasters, and questioning their own unusual behavior. Not to mention that just about every demon and immortal present in battle had been captured on film by various traffic and security cameras situated throughout the city. It didn't take long before the authorities caught up with Hunter's Tavern, who had Pandora to thank for the free publicity.

So, you ask, how on Earth did anyone ever manage to forget about these events that fateful summer? When the authorities brought in Jesse, Nigel, Trisha, Christine, and Patti in for questioning, why wasn't the lid on vampires, immortals, and Aemons blown wide open?

Because the lid was blown wide open.

The discovery of gods and immortals inside the city of Halifax sent the entire world into mass panic. Traffic video footage of Poseidon's battle against Xeraphoxes alone blew a crater into many wide-spread religious beliefs. Soon, reporters were banging on doors, wanting to learn more about the angel-demons who had saved the city. Historians wanted to interview them and get the full truth on what had happened these last nine thousand years. Who were the Chaos? What was the secret to immortality? What became of the Olympian Gods? How many vampires are there? Do any of them sparkle in the sun? What's God like? Was he the classic 1980's Raptor Cop or the new Michael Bay version?

Then there was the non-immortal, Jonathan Arthur Ptolemy. Videos of him flying around the city, and soaring over the streets encouraged the media to dub him "The Canadian Superman", which the Californian Ptolemy had to correct them about in later interviews. Of course, Ptolemy totally took advantage of his new-found fame (especially after failing his other make-up exam) and soon grew fat off his popularity, presumably never to resume his training. He'd continue checking Ingvold's relationship status from time to time and often sent her drunk-texts.

Charlie Magnus and his army somehow avoided most of the media publicity and quietly dispersed among society. They invited Christine to come with them and possibly help lead a crusade against evil everywhere, but Christine politely declined, saying her time as a Chosen One was over. Having fulfilled their prophecy, they retired into the wilderness. They were last seen drinking beer and riding grizzlies through the Rocky Mountains.

All these discoveries hit the world hard, leading to multiple conspiracy theories led by distinguishable public figures. Politicians and religious leaders were soon at each other's throats, blaming each other for the cover-ups. Most video sites were shut down as a result of an international lawsuit that claimed these websites were harbouring extra-dimensional terrorists. Soon, religion was outnumbered by cults worshipping everyone from Pandora to Crazy Steve. Politicians were on the brink of World War III, fighting battles over anything that might lead to the secret of immortality.

In the years to come, the planet would eventually destroy itself over what happened in this one small city.

Or at least, it would have if events hadn't dictated themselves otherwise.

In the month following the events of the Aeonomegas, Hunter's Tavern was enjoying the most business it had ever seen. All the repairs had been made, the net losses had been minimal at best, and Trisha's world-saving chicken wings were famous the world over. She was even in talks with distributors to create a line of frozen ready-made wings. At some point, she was asked to come up with a classy brand name for her wings, and the words "Ancients' Royale" slipped off her tongue. The distributors didn't care for the name, saying it sounded too much like a brand of whiskey, and instead went with "Auntie Vamp's Honey-Garlic Chicken Chunkies".

Jesse embraced being a local celebrity. When he went for his walks, people would greet him with a smile, have their picture taken with him, and ask if he could do that

cool “fire in the sun” trick for the kids. Jesse always obliged. Occasionally, Jesse would get kidnapped by the government, thrown into a black van, and taken to a research facility for testing. Fortunately, that didn't happen too often, and when it did, Nigel was always there to rescue him.

As for Nigel, he returned to the studio and settled back into his old routine of writing music and ignoring customers. The only indication that anything had changed in his life was a breadbox-sized chest atop his piano where the Sphinx once sat. Next to it, he kept a small note which had been pushed out of the chest's keyhole. It read:

“Pandora has been received and secured. Thank you for your assistance. Yours sincerely, Urobach.”

“P.S. I'm leaving the key out for you. Don't tell my boss.”

“P.S.S. The Referee says hi.”

Patti continued working at the tavern. She rather missed Wu Tang's presence in her body. Any other girl would be freaked out at the idea of being possessed by a man, but Patti and Wu Tang actually had a wonderful internal dialogue going on the whole time, chatting about clothes, shoes, and boys. It had been a like a girls' night out for both of them. She and Wu Tang were already making plans to go clubbing the next time he was in town.

It was on the evening of this day that a familiar girl walked into the tavern. While Jesse was enjoying drinks with some of his new friends, Christine walked into the tavern carrying a long duffel bag and a smile. Jesse ran up to meet with her.

In the past month, the two of them had actually tried dating, but had been very unsuccessful. They'd been a cute couple at first, but without the threat of demons or immediate danger, all their dates became awkward and uneventful. Even make-out sessions had become awkward with both parties pushing all the wrong buttons. At one point, they'd just thrown in the towel and admitted that their love for each other wasn't the romantic kind. Having a common interest in coffee, sushi and Raptor Cop movies meant diddly-squat in a relationship. From then on, they

decided to remain very good friends and Christine would come visit often.

“Hey, what’s up?” Jesse asked.

“I was just in the neighbourhood,” she said. “I thought I’d return this. My roommate finally brought it back.”

She reached into her duffel bag and pulled out Jesse’s coat. Jesse took it gratefully and threw it over his shoulder. He took a whiff of it to see if he could smell what Vladimir has sensed, but the coat smelled like someone had been letting their dog sleep on it.

“So have you been busy?” Jesse asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m been working with the city to help get everything back up to code. Been joining the clean-up crew and all that. You guys really did a number on this place. But it’s all good. I’ve been getting job offers up the wazoo. Sometimes it’s great to be one of the city’s saviours. That is, when the government isn’t locking you up and asking if werewolves are real.”

“They aren’t,” Trish said from the bar. “I checked.”

Jesse looked at Christine, who was starting to look sad. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m leaving town,” she said. “An art gallery down in New York bought some of my paintings and my bunnies are going to be part of a featured gallery. They also have a project they want me to do in Times Square in time for Easter. Should be fun.”

“I guess being a celebrity has its perks,” Jesse said.

“That’s the thing,” she said. “I sent my paintings in anonymously. They didn’t know I was friends with immortals or had saved the world. They just wrote back... and they liked my work. And I have you to thank for giving me the courage to take that step.”

“Why me?” Jesse asked.

“When we first met,” Christine smiled. “Something about you brought out the risk-taker in me. And after all this, it just seemed like anything could be worth the risk. So thank you. It may have been the most traumatizing month ever, but this really has changed my life, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

"Come on," Jesse said. "Give me a hug."

They hugged. Then Jesse looked at her duffel bag.

"I have a feeling there's something else in that bag," Jesse noted.

"There is," she said. "Is Nigel here? He should see it, too."

Of course Nigel was there. They went upstairs and found Nigel was back to his old routine. Christine giggled and waved hello as he didn't even bother turning to greet them.

"Nigel," Jesse said, "we have a guest, and she's brought us something."

Nigel stopped and slowly turned around to see her digging in the duffel bag. She lifted out something long, heavy and wrapped in bubble wrap. Jesse helped her take it off and they all soon found themselves looking at a long piece of black iron shaped like a trident.

"Is that...?" Jesse asked.

"Poseidon's trident," Nigel nodded. The bronze, jewels, and secondary trident had vanished, but everyone still recognized the size and shape. "Without the God of the Sea, it's lost its flair."

"We found it while cleaning up some of the bridge debris in the harbour" she said. "Isn't this Ptolemy's now?"

Nigel said, "Yeah. Does anyone have his number?"

The answer was no.

A quick internet search revealed that Ptolemy was completely unlisted now that he was famous. He wasn't even answering their random shouting, half expecting him to use his Gemini ability to hone in on them. After about half an hour, they gave up trying to contact the lad.

"I guess it's ours now," Nigel said.

"I feel bad about keeping it," Jesse said. "Can't we contact the other Olympians? See if they want it?"

"That's not the best of ideas," Nigel said. "Poseidon's trident is one of the most powerful weapons in the divine realm. Giving it to another god could upset the balance of the earth."

"Well, we should do something with it to honour his memory," Jesse said. Then he remembered Nigel's treasure box and all those flyers and travel brochures for Greece that Nigel had kept. "Say, didn't you say we've never been to Greece?"

"We'd cause a panic if sunlight hit us on the plane," Nigel said.

"But we're famous now," Jesse said. "They can make accommodations. And I think we deserve a vacation."

"Are you suggesting we...?" Nigel's eyes grew concerned.

"Come on," Jesse smiled, "it'll be fun."

"I don't think..."

"Come onnnnnnnnn...."

32. The Fate of Humanity

As it turns out, getting two angel-demons onto a plane was more trouble than it was worth. For starters, their fire-forged skin didn't appear on X-rays. Instead they appeared as two floating metal hearts passing through security, and security refused to acknowledge their unique celebrity status. It took a few days of dealing with airport security and trying to explain Poseidon's trident before they finally got on their plane.

It was just the two of them travelling, as it had been in the old days. Of course, the last time they'd crossed the Atlantic Ocean was in the hold of a Spanish ship back in the 1500's, so this was the first time either had ever flown on a plane. They spent most of the trip hiding under blankets while under the surveillance of airline security, doing crossword puzzles by flashlight.

After a brief stop in the Amsterdam terminal (where Nigel had to keep dragging Jesse out of every chocolate shop they passed), they finally arrived in Athens. Instead of taking a taxi to their destination, Nigel insisted on hiking the whole way there. He refused to get anywhere near another piece of machinery until this pilgrimage was over. So for several days, they braved the wild landscapes of Greece, fighting wolves, bears, scorpions, and at one point, a Minotaur. Right about then, Nigel finally admitted they should have brought a map.

Jesse had insisted on wearing some umbrella hats that he'd bought at an airport kiosk for the trip. He'd always been against carrying umbrellas, but the novelty of having one in hat-form was too amazing to pass up. Nigel thought the hats made them look stupid, but it did make cross-country shadow-walking far easier.

Five hundred kilometres of being lost in the wilderness later, they finally arrived at the base of Mt. Olympus.

After several hours of exploring the mountain side, they finally found a small crevasse in the rock where their pilgrimage would end. Jesse stepped forward with Poseidon's trident and plunged it into the stone. There, it would be nestled safely from tourist eyes.

"Will it be safe there?" Jesse asked.

"Go ahead and try taking it now," Nigel encouraged him. Jesse tried lifting the trident, but it was firmly embedded in the rock.

"Only someone worthy should be able to remove it," Nigel explained.

Jesse nodded. It was the same situation King Arthur once had with Excalibur.

"So we did it," Nigel said. "There it is. We've returned Poseidon's trident to Olympus. I hope you're happy."

"I am," Jesse smiled.

"So do you want to say a few words?" asked Nigel.

"Yeah," Jesse nodded. "We should say something. Do you still have that booze we bought in Athens. We should dump it here."

"Why?"

"That's what people do, right? Dump booze on graves."

Nigel sighed and took from his satchel the bottle of ouzo he'd bought for himself and Trisha, telling Jesse "You owe me a new one."

Jesse poured the ouzo over the ground where the trident rest and cleared his throat.

"So long, Poseidon," he said. "You were a great God of the Sea. You made many an awesome storm, caused many an epic earthquake, and scared the living daylights out of mortals back in the day. We will always remember you for your noble sacrifice in saving the city of Halifax from a giant octopus. So thank you. May you find peace in Strawberry Fields. Strawberry Fields forever. Amen."

"Amen," Nigel said.

"Hey, get a picture of me by the trident," Jesse said.

"Why?"

"You know, as a memento of the trip," Jesse said.

"You realize this is basically a funeral?" Nigel asked, getting his camera out. "It's not like we're collecting souvenirs."

"Who cares?" asked Jesse. "We climbed Mt. Olympus; I'm on vacation. Take a picture."

Nigel snapped a picture while Jesse struck a pose in front of the trident.

They began their descent down the mountain.

"You know," Jesse said, "I feel we did something special today. And I'm glad you were able to come."

"I have to admit, it is like the old days," Nigel said. "And it's nice to finally see Greece. Life's going to be strange from here on out."

"Don't worry, bro," Jesse said, "I'll walk you through it."

Just then, Mt. Olympus exploded.

Or at least a portion of it, that is. Jesse and Nigel were thrown several metres down the mountain side and painfully rolled into some sharp jagged rocks. After pulling themselves out, they turned to see the source of the explosion.

Behind them, stood Poseidon, God of the Sea, draped in elegant robes and holding his bronzed double-ended trident once again. Jesse and Nigel blinked.

"Was he there before?" asked Jesse.

"Poseidon?" inquired Nigel, in spite of the obviousness.

Poseidon walked down towards them, looking around.

"Who returned my trident to Olympus?" he asked.

Both Aemons held up their hands.

"How did you know?" Poseidon asked. "How did you know it would bring me back? I told you to give my trident to Ptolemy."

"We didn't have his cell number," Jesse said. "So we just brought the trident up here and poured some ouzo on it. We even took a picture. Are you saying that you're not dead anymore? Or are you a new Poseidon?"

"The last thing I remember is blowing up inside the harbour," Poseidon said. "My word, this is strange. I've never died and been brought back before. My goodness – Pandora... is she?"

"Dead," Jesse said. Poseidon sighed in relief.

"Wait, how does this work?" Nigel asked. "We're just on vacation! We weren't trying to resurrect any Olympian gods!"

"To completely kill a god, one must destroy their symbol of power, too," Poseidon said. "By returning my trident home and making a sacrifice in my name, you've brought me back. One of you must have really wanted that ouzo."

"So why didn't you tell us that before you blew yourself up?" asked Jesse.

"If I told you how to bring me back," Poseidon said, "my sacrifice would have failed. It seems through sheer luck that we should meet again."

Poseidon stepped past them and started down the mountainside.

"Well, now," he said, "I sense much has changed since my death. What say we head down to Litochoro for a bite to eat and you fill me in on everything that's transpired?"

They found a small café in Litochoro, just east of Mt. Olympus. This small town was a popular tourist destination for anyone who wanted to climb the mountain. Jesse constantly reminded Nigel that they could have taxied here easily in a few hours rather than having spent days in the wilderness eating bugs and fighting Minotaurs. Nigel would casually slap the back of Jesse's head whenever he mentioned it and then return to his drink. There was a nice overcast going on, so they sat out on the patio.

The two of them explained the world situation to Poseidon. They told them of how video footage was collected all over the city of their battles, and how knowledge of immortals, gods, and vampires had now become public.

"I don't think it's all bad," Jesse said. "Now we don't have to hide all the time. Give it a few generations and people will warm up to the idea of us. Nigel here isn't as hot on it, in spite of having the best business turn-out in years."

"This will still be a problem," Poseidon said.

"It will," Nigel said, leaning forward. He took another drink and mused upon it. "But now that you're back, I'm thinking we could fix it."

"What do you mean fix it?" asked Jesse.

"We need a Deus Ex Machina, Jesse," Nigel said.

"It's the only way," Poseidon said. "Mankind can't know about true history, immortality or the nether-world beyond. In the past, humanity had nearly torn itself apart over these issues. I'm sorry, but give it a few generations, and it will only get worse."

"So what's a Deus Ex Machina?" Jesse asked, "What does it do?"

"In the old days, ruling deity classes could combine their powers to erase events," Nigel said. "Any time humanity became too involved, it became a liability for the whole planet. So their memories would become erased. The gods or titans would fix the damage and remove any evidence of the ancients at work. Right now, this is the best option for the world."

"So what about the battles in Halifax?" Jesse asked. "We can't forget that stuff! You said so yourself!"

"It only applies to mortals," Poseidon said. "Everyone will most likely remember the events differently, thinking of it as either a really good week or bad week. They'd remember it as however they would have spent it had Pandora not arrived. Any proof of the Chaos will be erased, including all video footage, pictures, newspapers, internet articles, and property damage."

"But you can't do that," Jesse said. "Olympians can't use their powers on humanity, right?"

"This is a rare instance where exceptions must be made," Poseidon said, taking out his cell phone. "I shall arrange to have my nephew, Hermes, unite all the gods and titans for a summit meeting tonight. Hopefully by morning, every mortal will be back to the way they were before any of this nonsense began. Providing the titans don't make a big stink about my breaking of the truce, of course."

Jesse's heart sunk. By morning, life would be back to the way it was. He'd be back to hardcore shadow-walking. All the friends he made in the last month would be gone. Trisha's chicken wing deal would be gone. Ptolemy's celebrity status would be gone. Christine would never know who Jesse really is and be trapped in her dead-end life once again.

"This is unacceptable," Jesse said. "This can't be for all mortals, right? What about Christine? She deserves to remember what happened! She was right there saving that city!"

"Jesse, she was also one of the reasons the city needed saving," Nigel said. "In time, she will go back to blaming herself for that. You remember her trying to kill Turk... she's a sensitive girl. She's bottling it up now, but what happens later? Do you really want her to remember what she did?"

"Yes!" Jesse said. "Her life is better now! She said so herself! Does she really need to be caught in the crossfire of this? Put that phone away, Poseidon – we don't need any Deus Ex Machina!"

Poseidon sighed and dialed a number. Jesse tensed and stood up.

"I'll go angel if I have to," Jesse threatened him.

Poseidon spoke.

"Ptolemy," he said, "this is Poseidon."

There was a pause before he spoke again.

"Yes," he said. "I'm alive. I can't believe it either. Now listen, we're in the city of Litochoro - that's in Greece - right now at this lovely café. Can you home in and find us? I need to ask a favour of you."

He then cupped his hand over the phone receiver and whispered his instructions. Jesse wasn't sure what they were saying, but he already didn't like it.

Finally Poseidon started speaking normally, "Don't worry, Ptolemy. You won't be affected by it. People will forget who you are and you can go back to playing X-Box Live all you want. I just need you to do this for me first. Thanks."

He hung up and looked to Jesse.

"You're right," Poseidon said. "Christine's a good girl. Unfortunately, this Deus Ex Machina must still take place, and she will be a victim of it."

"So what do you plan to do about it?" Jesse asked.

"I'm sending you back to see her one last time," Poseidon said.

Suddenly, Jesse felt himself being lifted by his waist and being hoisted off the table. All the other café customers pointed to and questioned this strange magic trick happening in front of their eyes. Jesse dangled in mid-air trying to escape the grasp of whatever had him.

"Ptolemy," Poseidon said. "Please deposit Jesse back in Halifax as quickly as possible. Nigel and I will stay here for the summit meeting tonight, and should the titans cooperate, everything will be back to normal by morning."

"Wait, no!" Jesse struggled, "Put me down!"

With that, Ptolemy used his long-range telekinesis to send Jesse flying off into the west and into the sunset. It would be a long ride.

Nigel looked to Poseidon as Poseidon dialed up his nephew's number.

"So Ptolemy's all right with losing his celebrity status?" he asked.

"The guy had all the power in the world and still only used it to find his car keys," Poseidon said. "He's quickly finding out he's not cut out for a life of fame."

"And that's the life of an ancient," Nigel said, holding up his drink and proposing. "Cheers."

"Cheers," said Poseidon, tapping glasses.

33. Closing Time

Jesse's trip back to Halifax was fast and intense. The wind rush burned against his face, but not as badly as whenever he came out from under cloud cover and burned through the sky like a fireball. At times, he even tried to invoke his angel powers to break free, but it was no use against First Age magic. Nothing trumps First Age magic.

At least I don't have to buy Nigel another bottle of ouzo, he thought.

He crash-landed near the liquor store where he first met Christine. He rushed over to her apartment, and finding nobody there, ran to all the others places they usually hung out.

He went to the café. She wasn't there.

He went to the theatre. She wasn't there.

He went to the park. She wasn't there.

He went to Emma's house. She wasn't there.

Panic started to set in. Had she already gone to New York? She wasn't scheduled to go for another week. What if she had gone earlier? What would happen to her if the Deus Ex Machina occurred while she was out-of-town? Would it send her home, or would she be stranded in New York without a memory?

He ran back to her apartment. She was there now. Apparently she had been getting groceries.

Not thinking straight, he climbed the side of the building and knocked on her patio window, asking to be let in. She opened it up and invited him into the apartment. She reminded him which room number was hers so that she could buzz him in next time.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "I thought you were in Greece."

"Poseidon's back," Jesse said. "We accidentally resurrected him."

"Well, that's great news!" she said.

"No, it's bad news," Jesse explained, "because now he and Nigel want to do some Deus Ex Machina thing that will wipe out everything involving the Chaos last month! And they want to do this tonight! This means changing everybody's memories, including yours!"

"Wait, slow down," she said. "How far back are these memories going to change?"

"You know how you were before Vladimir showed up at your door?" Jesse asked. "That far back. You won't remember anything about demons, vampires, Aemons, Olympians, Zodiac knights, immortals or anything!"

"Will I remember you?" she asked.

"Only as a creeper," Jesse said.

"What about my job in New York?" she asked.

"It'll be gone," Jesse said. "I'm sorry. But... you can always send them your paintings again, right? They hired you for you!"

"But I won't remember to," Christine realized sinking into her couch. "I won't want to. Not if I'm back to the way I was. I was ready to give up back then. What about you? Will you remember me?"

"I'm immortal, so yes," Jesse said.

"But we won't be friends anymore," she said. "I'm guessing if I write myself a letter... it'll disappear, won't it? Same if we took a picture together? Even my new painting will disappear?"

"I think so," Jesse said.

"So why did you come tell me this?" Christine asked.

"It wasn't my choice," Jesse said. "But now that I'm here, maybe I can do something about it. When you wake up in the morning, you won't remember me, so I'll need to find some way to regain your trust. If I can do that, maybe I can help you get your life back on track again. You don't need to lose everything – not if I can remember it for you."

"You could always show me your Aemon powers," she said. "But that would probably freak me out."

"Here, I'll throw down a scenario," Jesse said. "You wake up tomorrow morning and see a strange creepy guy

sleeping on your couch. That creepy guy is me. What can I do to make sure you don't call the police or throw a frying pan at my head?"

Christine thought about and said: "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Jesse's face saddened.

"That night I invited you up," she said, "I expected you to wake up on my couch. I could see it in your eyes that you were no creeper. A little misunderstood, maybe, but I knew you would never hurt me. You were already somebody I could trust."

"Well," Jesse said, "that's a nice sentiment, but you'll still have questions about me."

"I have an idea," Christine walked over to her kitchen, opened one of the top cupboards and dug around in the back. She pulled out a bottle of Bailey's, some coke, and some choices of rum.

"I always use Bailey's for special occasions with friends," she said. "If I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning without a memory, I might as well get plenty wasted tonight. That way, when I ask questions, you can entertain me with your answers."

She sat down on the couch, placed some bottles and glasses on the table, and began mixing drinks.

"So your plan to trust me is to rely on your instincts and... a hangover?" Jesse asked.

"I'm not going to let a little thing like divine intervention get between us," she said. "All I'm trying to do is keep myself from kicking you out. If you think you can get us back to the way we are now, I'll trust you."

"There's a lot of trust going on here," Jesse said.

"Hey," she started, "you're the guy who exploded out of Hell, turned into an angel, and defeated the Chaos in one night. I don't think anything's impossible in your book."

"Likewise."

She gave him his drink and they sat on the couch together. As they did so, Jesse noticed a painting-in-progress on a nearby easel which depicted an angel bunny and a motorcycle bunny battling a giant bunny-bat-scorpion in a sea of fire. It was by far her finest work. She

leaned her head against his shoulder and, much like Nigel and Poseidon back in Greece, raised her glass. Jesse did the same.

They tapped glasses and drank to remember.

ANCIENTS' ROYALE

Ancients' Royale
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