

Ancients' Royale II

# Wrath of Ages

Christopher Ushko

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ISBN: 9781520978451

## Foreword and Acknowledgements

The following tale of gods and Titans turning our planet into their own personal playground is based on a true story. In fact, it may have happened last week. Nothing can be certain because of a little thing called divine intervention. With history already in flux, the accuracy of ancient mythology and world religions in this account may seem a little awry. Simply regard it all as fiction and avoid diving headfirst into any subtext. It's honestly not that deep.

Also, hey – thanks for making it to the second book. Along with my family and friends, you're also included in this special thanks section because people like you are awesome.

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## **Part I: Fall of the Fire-Bloods**

## 1. The Morning After

In the beginning, there was light.

Christine Marx threw a blanket over her head as the Halifax morning sun entered her apartment window. Her head felt like a ton of bricks and her whole left side was numb from sleeping on it. As she wrapped herself in more blanket, her feet became exposed to the cold air. That's when she noticed she was still wearing socks. And above that were not her usual pajamas, but yesterday's jeans and pink blouse. And above that was her face chewing on her pillow as she tried to remember why she was hung over. Last night had been exceptionally ordinary. She hadn't gone out, she hadn't thrown a party, and she certainly didn't invite anybody over. At most, she remembered making travel arrangements for New York over the phone while doodling a vampire bunny on the back of her hand. Christine checked her hand and realized that between now and then, she had also drawn a Frankenstein Bunny, Wolfman Bunny, and Mummy Bunny as well. There was also a crudely-drawn Godzilla Bunny that she was positive wasn't her own work.

She rolled over and fell out of bed.

After twenty minutes of trying to sleep on the floor, Christine gave up and decided to solve the mystery of last night. She entered her living room and analyzed her

surroundings. Present was her studio of bunny paintings, misplaced laundry, empty bottles, and four mostly-eaten pizzas still in the boxes. There was also a man on the couch. He was tall with shaggy brown hair and a large red hoodie that looked very out-of-place given the hot weather. She immediately recognized him as a man named Jesse O’Ryan.

"Jesse?" she asked.

Jesse mumbled and opened his eyes. A sly grin crept across his face.

"Hey, good morning," he answered. "How are you feeling?"

"I think I forgot math," she said, rubbing her head. "Think you could fill me on what happened last night? There’s an empty tequila bottle over there and I rarely get through one a year."

"You were a bottomless pit last night," he said as he sat up. "It was nice seeing you again, but we really didn’t need to party this hard. There’s leftover pizza if you’re hungry." Christine continued to piece things together in her head. Some very important details were missing, but she couldn’t put her finger on them.

"If it’s all the same to you," she said, focusing on the pizza aftertaste in her mouth, "I think I’ll cook up some bacon and eggs. You game?"

"Hell, yeah!" Jesse said. He seemed extraordinarily satisfied with himself, as if he’d just woken up to find out he’d won the lottery.

"You’re unusually chipper this morning," she observed.

"Oh, believe me, my head’s killing me," he said, rubbing his temples. "You mix a mean margarita, girl."

"That’s funny," she said, grabbing her cooking pan and turning on the stove. "I thought Aemons couldn’t get drunk."

"What did you say?" he asked in surprise.

"Aemons can't get drunk, right?" she asked. "I just assumed that if your blood is forged from the fires of Heaven and Hell, you're automatically the designated driver."

"This isn't right," Jesse said aloud to himself.

"So what do you do when you sleep anyway?" Christine asked. "I mean, your brain technically never needs rest, so do you just spent the night meditating or what?"

"How much do you remember?" Jesse asked.

"About what?"

"About me!" Jesse exclaimed. "Tell me what you remember about me!"

"Is this a test?" she inquired.

"It's an emergency!" Jesse insisted. His flakiness was beginning to bother her.

"You're a fire golem who was created nine thousand years ago to protect the key to Pandora's Box," Christine said.

"You lost your memory eighteen years ago, thought you were a vampire, saved me from a mugger last spring and then teamed up with your brother to save the city from Pandora last summer."

"So you remember my brother too?" Jesse asked.

"Nigel?" she asked. "He's a grumpy old softie with a weapons locker in his bedroom."

"And Trish?"

"Nigel's vampire girlfriend," Christine said. "Drinks blood, makes chicken wings and doesn't have superpowers."

"Poseidon? Ptolemy? Patti?"

"Greek God of the Sea, Zodiac Knight, Waitress. Are we going to be doing this all morning?"

"Last night!" he finalized. "Do the words *Deus Ex Machina* mean anything to you?"

"Mah-kina..." Christine dropped her pan as her memory came flooding back.



She and Jesse looked at each other in complete surprise. "The gods were going to erase my memory!" she suddenly remembered. "The whole world's memory! It was supposed to happen at midnight!"

"Exactly! You should be missing a month's worth of memories right now!"

"So I gave myself a hangover for nothing?"

Jesse tried to figure this out. "I don't know. Poseidon said it would happen at midnight, so he sent me here to warn you and... of course! The gods and Titans were meeting at Mount Olympus in Greece! I got the time zones wrong! They meant midnight tonight over there! God, I'm such an idiot!"

"Call your brother," Christine said. "Call Nigel. Find out what's going on. Maybe we have time to stop this. I really don't want to risk alcohol poisoning two nights in a row."

Just as Jesse reached into his pocket, his flip-phone started ringing. A name appeared on the display.

"It's Nigel."

"Answer it!" Christine exclaimed.

Jesse answered. "Nigel! What's going on? Where are you?"

"Things are bad, Jesse, really bad." Nigel said, "I'm in the palace on Mount Olympus right now and the council's just finished their meeting--"

"What palace?" Jesse interrupted. "We climbed all over that mountain; I didn't see a palace."

"Believe me, there's a palace," Nigel said. "Will you let me finish? I need you to do something. After this call, run to the butcher shop and buy as many bags of ram's blood as you can."

"Trisha already has a freezer full," Jesse said. "We special ordered them, remember?"

"And now they're about to be discontinued everywhere," Nigel said. "Once you do that, stock up on salt, silver, and canned peaches. Then go to your room and wait for me to come back. We need to start your training."

"Nigel, you need to slow down," Jesse said. "What's happening with the council? When is the Deus Ex Machina going to begin?"

"There isn't going to be a Deus Ex Machina!" Nigel snapped. "The Titans' leader didn't show up, the gods are talking mutiny, and I think Poseidon threw a shoe at Odin. Nobody cares that humanity has blown the lid open on the gods."

"That's good!" Jesse exclaimed. "The gods need to stop hiding in the shadows! The world needs to know the truth! Gods, demons, Titans, angels – everything's real! I think mankind's ready for this!"

"Mankind is never ready for this!" Nigel retorted. "We need to nip this before the nuke hits the fan. Now call Trish to do the same and..."

His call cut out.

A female voice spoke from the receiver: "I'm sorry. Your call has been interrupted for an important public announcement. Please hold."

Jesse and Christine exchanged looks.

"So I guess we don't have to worry about anyone's memory getting erased?" she asked.

"I suppose not," Jesse said nervously. "I'd like to know what's going on, though. The last time Nigel acted like this, he tried to bury me alive."

"Maybe he's just over-reacting," Christine said, picking up her pan again, "So... how do you want your eggs? Scrambled or sunny side-up?"

Suddenly, there was an odd flicker in reality and a man's face suddenly appeared everywhere.

Christine dropped the pan again as she looked around her apartment. All of her paintings, all of her smooth surfaces, windows and shiny appliances all bore the face of a grizzled, yet dignified old man with a neatly-braided grey beard and one eye. His other eye was a golden orb with a built-in red laser-sight.

The TV turned on. The man stood there in a glittery, red three-buttoned suit. His mere presence caused Christine to retreat to the couch with Jesse. The last time anyone had presented themselves in this manner was last month when the sorceress Pandora had addressed the city through the same means. Now it was happening again, but this time, there was no doubt in their heads that this man on television was a god.

On the television, the god stood at a podium in front of many microphones. He appeared to be standing in the great hall of the United Nations building.

"Mortals of Earth," he said. "In the past month, humanity has become aware of our presence. It is no longer a secret that gods live among you.

"I stand before you as Odin All-Father, King of the Gods and Ruler of Asgard, to announce that after three thousand years, the divine societies are returning to Earth. The events in the city of Halifax left us with a very difficult decision, and rather than risk open war with the Titans, we've agreed to end an ancient truce. The gods are already meeting with your governments and a new world order will be in place by the end of the day.

"Fear not, for we have no intention of returning to the days of rituals and worship. Instead, we will deprive you of your wars and corrupt governments, clear all debts, and put an end to world hunger and disease. We will also create jobs and provide specialized education and health care to every individual at no extra cost. Additional information will be

included via a pamphlet that will appear in your nearest pocket once this broadcast is concluded. As a human, you are free to refuse these services, and no penalties will be applied."

"To any deities watching, this public outing does not entitle you as a ruling class. All deities, including Titans, gods, and demigods will be allowed to live and act freely amongst humans, but abuse of power will not be tolerated. The Zodiac Knight has joined our cause to preserve the balance, and special enforcement units are already in place should any deity break the peace. This means you, Surtur.

"In finalizing this address to all mortals, I beseech your cooperation during what will be a seamless transition. We intend to build a mutual trust between races and it begins by putting your freedoms first. Put your faith in us and we will set your world right."

He concluded with "We now return you to your regular day, already in progress."

With that, the TV turned off and Odin's face disappeared from all affected surfaces.

Jesse and Christine stared in stunned silence. It took a moment or two before Jesse realized Christine was squeezing his hand very tightly. She didn't even notice her hangover anymore.

Christine reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny five-page pamphlet that looked like a red mini-bible. It read "Divinity and You: Everything you need to know about Gods and Men." Underneath the title was a small sub-title that read: "Pray and you shall receive, no worship necessary".

Jesse finally cleared his throat and spoke to her.

"I think I'll take those eggs scrambled, please."

“Good call,” she said, still looking at the pamphlet in bewilderment.

Her pan sizzled and was suddenly full of perfectly-cooked scrambled eggs with diced peppers and melted cheese. The two of them stared at this miracle in absolute surprise. “Did you pray for these?” Christine asked, setting the pan on the table.

“A little bit,” Jesse said.

“What if we prayed for toast?”

The toaster in the kitchen popped up two crispy, buttered slices.

“I think Nigel might have been trying to warn us about this,” Jesse said.

“Agreed,” Christine said as she looked at the eggs in her pan. “Although one could get used to it.”

A glass of chocolate milk appeared in Jesse’s hand. Jesse took a cautious sip and found it was the most delicious thing he’d ever drank. He quietly savoured its richness.

“Can we pray for jetpacks?” he asked inquisitively, looking to the pamphlet.

“Let’s find out.”

## **2. A Night at the Opera**

The answer was no. Breakfast was complimentary, but you still had to go to work and save money if you wanted a jetpack. Fortunately, jetpacks became readily available in stores as soon as people started praying to the right deities to supply them.

“Divinity and You” defines deities as a meta-biological race of super-beings who’ve been around since the birth of the universe. In the First Age, there was the almighty Creator who created the angels, majestic winged spirits of pure light. The Second Age began when the angel Lucifer rebelled and fell to Earth with his subordinates. There, they somehow created the first demons, which were dark spirits who possessed humans. During the Third Age, demons took over while the fallen angels were forced to retire into the nether-realm of Hell. From the demons came the Titans, fearsome warrior giants of the golden Fourth Age. Then the Titans birthed the gods who, in the Fifth Age, used their powers to bring peace and order to the people and make the world a safer, happier place (it should be noted that “Divinity and You” was written, edited and distributed by the gods.) Finally, in the modern Sixth Age,

there came the demigods who just ran around looking for fights, fellowship, and free drinks.

At the turning of each Age, a great war known as an Aeonomaga was always fought. These inter-deity battles were refereed by the Creator to make sure the passing of the torch involved a nice, clean fight that didn't get too many humans killed in the crossfire.

Humanity itself was a very different animal from deities and followed a more genetics-based evolutionary path. Over the course of two hundred thousand years (or six thousand years, adjusting for when humans finally developed shame), humans evolved to stand up-right, cook their food, and wear parachute pants. On occasion, they'd even be born with birth anomalies, allowing them to mutate into such beings as vampires, wizards, or immortals.

When Odin publicly announced the divine re-occupation of Earth via his omni-surface meta-projection (or his "smoking mirror" as the Aztec gods first coined the term), it had confirmed the fears of the world's populace. Many humans rallied to defend their planet. Odin's army responded to these uprisings with god-like speed by instantly hiding all of their ammunition. This lack of gun violence led to mass hysteria which was quickly quelled the next morning when Odin gave everyone new barbecues and gift cards for the spa.

Soon after, people continued about their daily lives wondering if it had all been a practical joke. The world only started taking notice when the lack of inconvenience became apparent. Traffic jams stopped happening. Long-lost socks reappeared in the wash. The coffee at work didn't taste like motor oil. Automated phone systems were done away with immediately. The gods were working their magic.

Finally, Odin went on the TV talk show "Ellen" to address all the changes humanity would expect in the coming months. He assured the world not to worry, showed off his lightning powers, and then performed a traditional Nordic happy-dance with Ellen to win over the studio audience. This was the precision strike he needed to help win the hearts of humanity.

Gods thrived on the love of humans, and humans thrived on their miracles. A symbiotic relationship was born.

Six months had passed since the announcement. The gods had settled in months ago, but only just now did social order reach equilibrium. With the gods running the show, progress was sure to take several hundred leaps forward in all aspects of modern living.

The gods had found their place in the world.

And this enraged Surtur.

At the steps of the newly-redesigned Sydney Opera House stood an eight-foot tall burly man with a wrestler's body, a heavy red tan, a bald head, and a thin black beard that outlined his square jaw. Normally, his beard was made of flames, but he drew less attention to himself this way. He didn't bother dressing up; he was perfectly fine with his jeans and checkered red wool jacket. He took a ticket from his pocket, walked up to the doors, and let one of the doormen scan it for him.

Smiling, they handed the ticket back saying "Enjoy the show, Mr Suttur."

"Surtur," he growled as he ruthlessly stepped past them.

Surtur was a Titan. Please note that he wasn't a 'titan', but a *Titan* with a capital T. Most elder Titans were old enough to remember the Golden Age where Titans were the dominant race, so capitalization was very important to them.



For the last several centuries, life played out like retirement for Surtur. His former title was "Lord of the Fire Jötunn" (with 'Jötunn' being the Nordic term for 'Titan' or 'Giant'), but after Odin's rise to power, Surtur was released from his prison for 'good behavior' and he was promoted to "Lord of the Titans" as no other Titan was willing to accept the title from a god. It was an empty title, however. He was still powerful by divine standards, but his fire magic was mostly spent lighting campfires and cigars.

Tonight, however, he was in Australia on business. He'd been invited to the new Dickey Vogner opera tonight to meet with someone. Dickey Vogner was the not-so-subtle pseudonym adopted by the famous composer Richard Wagner, a demigod who'd retired to Asgard after news of his mortal death in 1883. Such demigod comebacks weren't uncommon as they normally lived a few lifetimes longer than humans and loved returning to the spotlight every century or so. Even people like Bill Shakespeare and Michel Nostradame were popping up on Twitter promoting their new books. Many hoped for an Elvis comeback, but if he were a demigod, it was apparently still too soon.

The Opera House, like every major city in the world, had already undergone massive renovations at the hands of the gods. The building itself looked the same, but was twice its original size, with four times the seating capacity. Surtur's seat was in one of the new balconies, in the upper center of the concert hall. The balcony only contained two seats (both recliners) and had its own mini-bar with a fridge. An interactive holographic display was at the front of the balcony so patrons could use it to read information on the play as well as check their e-mail and shop the souvenir store online. Surtur sat down and swiped the obnoxious holographic display from his sight.

The Titan checked the program. Vogner's new opera followed the story of two brothers hunted by an evil sorceress, both of whom go into hiding in New York where they both fall in love with the same woman, eventually leading the world to ruin somehow. Apparently it was a comedy.

Surtur eased back into his seat, popped a beer and watched as the lights dimmed and the orchestra began to play. Vogner stood at the front of the orchestra, bowed to the audience, then turned to the musicians. With a wave of his baton, he slowly built up the operatic ambience before the stage lights came on and holographic projectors transformed the stage into a futuristic version of New York City. The music shifted into an upbeat Broadway number as dozens of dancers came flooding onto stage dressed as Templars and started singing the opening musical number "Ain't no Thing but a Chicken Wing".

Surtur couldn't help but notice the parallels between this story and last year's events in Halifax. A boy with a secret past meets a girl, but is forbidden to see her. When he does, the sorceress rains fiery destruction upon the city. Many liberties were taken with the story, such as the change from Halifax to New York, how the elder brother played tuba instead of piano, and how it was the mighty Hercules who came to the city's rescue instead of Poseidon. They also cast Betty White in the role of the sorceress Endora and had her command an army of killer rabbits instead of chaos demons. Overall, it was very goofy and not very Wagner-esque. It was clearly targeted towards a different demographic, as was the case with most artists late in their careers.

After an hour, the first act ended with Hercules and Endora singing "The Diet Cherry Cola Polka" before the curtain dropped. Surtur had already depleted the mini-bar and was

thinking of walking out when he realized somebody had been sitting next to him all along. It was a man cloaked in grey hooded robes with indistinguishable features. Even with Surtur's limited omnipotence, he had a hard time getting a fix on this man's appearance.

"The music and effects are quite nice," the man noted, "but I think I liked the book better."

"Nice cloak," Surtur sneered at him. "Grow a twirly moustache and you'll almost look suspicious."

"Subtlety is overrated."

"If Odin finds out you're alive..."

"He already knows," the man replied. "It's funny how you concern yourself with him. For over two thousand years, a truce has existed between gods and Titans to abstain from human affairs. Yet every time one god breaks that truce, your war is never reinstated. Now the gods rule the world while Titans continue to live as second-class deities."

"Have you come with business, or are you merely here to annoy?" Surtur asked, his patience wearing thin.

"I've come to play chess," the man said. "I've been plotting a strategy for quite some time and now I'm prepared to move my pieces into play. But before it begins, I must have a king on my side. I require someone who's not afraid to become the most powerful piece on the board."

"If you only speak in chess metaphors, I'm leaving," Surtur said as he prepared to stand.

"Before you leave, did you receive anything interesting in the mail?" the man asked. Surtur reached into his jacket and pulled out the envelope he'd been sent with the invitation. Surtur carefully took out three black feathers from within.

"Are these genuine?" he asked.

"I thought those might get your attention," the cloaked man said. "Plucked them from Odin's raven myself."

"But no one has ever broke into his vault," Surtur said.

"Odin's vault is more of a walk-in closet, really," the man said. "Getting past security required some assistance and escape was quite challenging, but the gods have fortunately grown careless."

"So a weakness had been exposed in the Kingdom of Asgard?" Surtur asked.

"In all the divine realms," the man reiterated.

"What became of the raven?" Surtur asked.

"The raven is of no consequence," the man said. "I merely needed the feathers to whet your appetite. The task of destroying Odin belongs to the Titans alone and the time has come for your people to seize their destiny."

"Three feathers are not a weapon," Surtur sneered. "If we rise up, the gods will crush us."

"And what if you could crush the gods?" the man asked, "Would you?"

"Like an egg," Surtur said, anger swelling up in his voice.

"But these are empty words. The gods will submit to nothing less than another Pandora. What relic in Odin's vault could possibly match that?"

"How about the source of Pandora's power?" The man asked, reaching under his cloak.

From beneath, he took out a small translucent amber ring. The ring housed an eerie black mist and seemed to change colour at his touch. He placed it on the arm of Surtur's chair.

"A ring?" Surtur asked.

"From the Second Age," the man said. "Pandora was a sorceress possessed by a demon, yet some claim the demon was possessed by her. This ring contains a living power that would make such a feat possible. In the hands of the right Titan, it would be a very formidable weapon."

"Do you honestly expect me to wear that accursed thing?" Surtur asked.

"The gods outmatch your people on a scale of ten to one," the man said. "This ring will even the odds. It can unify your people."

"Under what banner could this ring possibly unify us?"

"How about *Ragnarök*?" the man said.

Surtur's blood almost boiled at the mention of that word.

"That prophecy is a myth; even the Fates do not acknowledge it," he said.

"That prophecy is an idea," the man said. "The gods fear those who would make it a reality."

"If you want the gods dead, take the ring and do your own dirty work," Surtur said. "There's always some fool trying to bring about the end of days and I will not be that fool's errand boy."

"Don't fool yourself, Surtur," the man said. "You know as well as I do why I've come to you. In the prophecy of Ragnarök, a hero of the Titans is referred to by name, and if there's ever a time to reclaim your Golden Age, this is it."

"No mortal should ever seek to restore the Titans' Golden Age."

"I am no ordinary mortal."

Surtur stood up and turned to the exit.

"Come after me again and I will tear your heart out," he growled. "I will not be part of this plot."

"You'll miss the rest of the show." The man gestured to the stage.

"The show is rubbish," Surtur said, and marched out of the balcony.

The mystery man helped himself to some popcorn.

\* \* \*

Outside, Surtur inhaled the calm sea air. The night sky was dark and beautiful, with stars going on as far as the eye could see. The Sydney skyline had changed dramatically over the last few months with buildings reaching uncomfortable, garish sizes. Surtur had grown fed up with this nonsense. He wanted to get as far away from the gods as possible. He wanted to go home.

With that, he transformed into a fireball and launched himself into the sky. He soared over the clouds, flew over Australia, and continued on over Indonesia.

*"The nerve!" Surtur thought to himself. "To lure me out here and try to fool me! In the old days, I would've taken off his head, mounted it on a spear and paraded it through Muspelheim for his arrogance!"*

There was no place for Titans in this new, changing world. Titans were a prideful lot and always dealt in absolutes. In the Golden Age, the Titans had set the groundwork for civilization and taught humans to survive. Then the gods came along, took credit for the Titans' accomplishments, and perverted the Titans' perfect world with their bureaucracy. Now this was a world where a Titan couldn't even cripple a man for disrespecting them and Surtur wanted no part of it.

Surtur was soaring over the Himalayas in Tibet when a foreboding presence started looming up behind him. Lightning struck and Surtur was thrown from the sky. He plummeted out of the night and crashed through the peak of Mount Everest. The force of his impact unleashed a massive avalanche that buried him as he fell over twenty thousand feet to the mountain's base.

When it was over, Surtur exploded out the snow, four stories taller. In his enormous Titan form, his skin was red, his thin beard was aflame, and steam poured off his body. He searched for his attacker, only to have a powerful

bludgeon strike the side of his head and send him flying back into the remains of Mount Everest. Surtur felt no pain, but the impact left him winded. Before he could get to his feet, a small god quickly landed on his chest, pinning him to the rocks. For all his strength, Surtur could not lift the weight of this man-sized god.

His attacker had long red hair and a braided beard. In one hand he wielded a mighty sledgehammer with a short handle. It was none other than Odin's son, the Nordic god of thunder himself, Thor.

"Who is the cloaked man, Swarthy One?" Thor asked.

"Answer me!"

"Get off me, thunder god!" Surtur yelled. Surtur breathed a blast of fire from his mouth that wove around Thor like wind. Thor smacked him in the head again with the hammer for his insolence.

"I won't ask you again!" Thor bellowed, "What business did you have with him?"

"There was no business!" Surtur growled. "I wanted no part of his villainy!"

"What about the feathers? How did he get them?"

"They could have come from any bird!"

"You're lying!" Thor snapped, tightening his hold on Surtur,

"You know they came from the Odin's raven! They're the reason you met with him!"

"Okay, okay!" Surtur struggled to free himself. "I admit it, I thought he knew something about the prophecy!"

Thor leapt off of Surtur's chest, allowing him to sit up.

Surtur felt annoyed and humiliated. In a one-on-one fight, he didn't stand a chance against a god.

"The prophecy is a lie," Thor said, turning away from Surtur.

"That's what I told him," Surtur said.

"So you're not clinging to the age-old belief that war is coming and you will be the victor?"

"The gods won," Surtur submitted. "There will be no war."

"That's what I like to hear." Thor said, lowering his hammer. "I'm taking you to Asgard for questioning. The others want this man found as soon as possible."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I didn't say it would be easy," Thor said, raising his hammer.

Suddenly, something dark and blurry struck Thor. Surtur barely had time to register what had happened.

Lightning flashed. Thor was flung around the night sky, firing bolts of lightning from his hammer at an unknown assailant. An enormous black figure chased him through the air, smashing through every mountain peak in its path. Surtur got his feet and jumped aside as debris and lightning rained down around him. The dark clouds swirled around the Himalayas conjuring up a snow storm as Thor and his opponent came to blows above him. The battle was so fast and so intense that Surtur couldn't follow any of it. In a burst of fire, Surtur shrank back down to his eight foot self just to avoid some of the lightning and debris being cast about.

After the battle raged on for a few moments, the violence subsided. Thor came in for a landing in front of Surtur. His face was flush, as if all the energy had been sucked out of him. Silver blood ran down Thor's face and arm and he stopped to contemplate the nature of what had just happened.

He took a step towards Surtur.

And another.

Surtur stood his ground and watched in amazement as Thor lumbered forward for seven more steps, clutched



onto Surtur's jacket, and then collapsed into a pile of silver dust. Only his hammer, Mjölnir, remained in the snow. Through the snowy darkness, the man from Sydney reappeared, still cloaked. Behind this man, two enormous glowing red eyes could be seen in the darkness. It took Surtur a moment to realize this creature was the darkness. The man was leading this gigantic beast. Electricity cackled over the creature's exterior as the man stepped forward to inspect the remains of Thor. The man appeared to be winded.

"Thor always put up a better fight in the comics," the man said.

Surtur was shaken in disbelief as he looked at the monster. "What is that thing?"

"It's the living embodiment of the ring," the cloaked man said. The man raised his hand, the ring shining on his finger. The dark beast flew towards it like a falcon to its trainer. The monster shrank in size and took the form of a dark, oily python that wrapped itself around the man's arm and gradually vanished into the ring. He took off the ring and felt his energy return to him. "Sadly, such a force was not meant to be wielded by the likes of an old man like me."

Surtur looked to the ground and saw Thor's hammer lying dead in the snow. He felt a sense of urgency looking upon it.

"You should destroy the hammer," Surtur said. "It's the symbol of Thor's power. They can revive him with it."

"Don't bother," the man said. "It was forged in a dying star. The hammer would take weeks to unmake. Besides, why go after a pawn when you can take their king tonight?"

"Tonight?" Surtur asked with hesitation in his voice.

"The Titans were once a proud warrior race, Surtur," the man said. "Now the best of you waste in the dungeons of

Tartarus while your youngest live among the gods, long disconnected from their heritage. As for you, you were the Titans' chosen one until Odin shamed your name by making you his emissary. Now you live alone, spending your nights drinking and watching '*Top Gear*' reruns in that old log cabin of yours. Face the truth, Surtur, you want this war more than anyone else. You can restore your honour by restoring your people's glory."

"Odin will never agree to an Aeonomega," Surtur said. "It's all on him and the gods have nothing to gain from us."

"He will if he fears for his people," the man said. "When Pandora fell, stock rose in a man that too many gods believed to be a new prophet. Now the ley lines have converged on him and Odin's world rests in a delicate balance. If we strike down this one man, the gods will fall. Only then will you have your war."

"The gods easily outmatch us," Surtur said. "This so-called prophet will be well-protected."

"You'll be well-armed," the man said. "Merge with the forces within Pandora's ring and you'll control the power of the Second Age. Use it to free your people and take back this world and I promise that the gods will fall by your hands."

The man threw his ring to Surtur. Surtur caught it and looked upon the ring with great concern. He sensed no malevolence from it, yet it grew darker in his hand. Slowly, the darkness began to be overwhelmed with tints of red and purple as Surtur suddenly felt a fire burning deep within himself. The magic of the Second Age had been lost long before his time, but it was a power that could surely overthrow the gods.

"Best take it now," the man said. "You may not see me again after this. My age is catching up with me, and if I am

to see the death of the gods, I must entrust my endeavors to you."

"A war will bring ruin to this world," Surtur said.

"It will be worth the cost."

"And the gods have the Zodiac Knight on their side." Surtur reminded him.

"The Zodiac will not be a problem."

After inspecting the ring a few moments more, Surtur pocketed it and turned to the man.

"Which name do you go by these days?" Surtur inquired.

"Solomon," the man replied.

"Haven't you gone by that name before?"

"I like the name."

"All right, Solomon," Surtur said, "Who is this prophet the gods have foolishly invested their fates in?"

"He won an Aeonomega, vanquished a sorceress and defeated the Chaos all in one day," the man said, "He's the Fire-Blood from Halifax known as Nigel Hunter. Destroy him and you can shut down the gods."

### **3. The Man Who Would Be Destroyed**

A few bodies of water away in the Canadian Maritimes stood the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Six months ago, it would have looked like any other coastal city, but when the gods moved in, they brought with them a makeover of megacity proportions. In honour of the demon sorceress' defeat in this city, hundreds of gods arrived from around the world to make Halifax the divine epicenter of planet Earth.

It only took a few months for them to transform the city. The skyline soon tripled in size, freeways rose over the streets, and magnificent marble statues seemed to appear overnight. At first, many described it as garish, but then the gods rearranged everything until it all looked nice enough for people to stop complaining.

Even health care had taken an unexpected turn. Aside from miracle cures for virtually every disease known to man turning up, the gods had also managed to pull some strings in the underworld. Soon, the gods of death were working in public sectors, and any unnatural death caused during the summer's battle was reversed. Many people killed by Pandora suddenly found themselves reconstituted with fresh new bodies, including one very confused school janitor. Not counting two evil vampire bounty hunters, a few chaos demons, and a fire-breathing guy named Steve

who'd already reincarnated somewhere else, the overall death count for Pandora's attack turned out to be zero. Then the streets were cleaned up. The homeless found homes. The hungry found food. The poor found work. The addicts found rehab. Charity workers were enjoying a well-earned vacation.

The gods had even seen fit to monitor the city's weather. It was a week until Christmas and the city had yet to see a snowfall or feel the bite of winter's chill. Of course, the Christmas lights were up in full force, turning Halifax into Santa's workshop on steroids. The gods had spared no expense to help spread the holiday cheer.

To the gods' dismay, however, holiday cheer was lost on the one man who looked upon this city of wonders and began preparing for war.

Nigel Hunter had the appearance of a hardened, but well-toned man in his thirties, with brown eyes, pale skin and an aquiline nose. His long, chiseled face was framed with a five 'o clock shadow and rugged black hair that grew past his ears. If you met him on the streets, you'd be charmed, disgusted, terrified, and intrigued by him all at once. His presence kept him mysterious, but far from invisible. It's also important to note that Nigel was a reclusive nine thousand year-old Fire-Blood warrior, and that you'd normally never see him outside the studio apartment above his tavern. However, when the gods casually returned, Nigel took it upon himself to take on several side-projects as a means to prepare the public for the coming storm.

"Bend your legs more!" he shouted to his class, "Lewis, bring your weight forward on your stance. Mandy, keep your right hand closer to your hip; your quarterstaff is not a mixing spoon."

Nigel, dressed in a charcoal turtleneck with black jeans, stood in front of twenty people of all ages, genders, and races, each wearing a white karate uniform (or '*gi*'). He paced on a large blue mat and watched as everybody made a defensive stance with their quarterstaff.

The dojo's main instructor, Quetzalcoatl, stood to the side of the room in his red gi, observing Nigel intently. He was an Aztec god from Mexico with a scarred face, a handlebar moustache, and long black hair tied back in a ponytail. A former king from the fifth century, Quetzalcoatl had undergone many humble career changes from being a maize farmer to a stunt double in a few Robert Rodriguez films. He was now a security consultant for Halifax's police force and taught two self-defense classes a week.

Nigel was an old friend of Quetzalcoatl and had been asked if he could come and give lectures every other Monday. For a man who'd lived mostly in seclusion, Nigel was exceptionally knowledgeable when it came to self-defense.

Today's topic was fighting with quarterstaves, one of Nigel's favourite classic weapons. A quarterstaff was basically a wooden pole, six feet in length, but its simplicity made it a very diverse melee tool.

Nigel approached the one named Lewis, an exceptionally handsome, awkward man wearing thick-rimmed glasses with a pocket protector clipped to his belt. Lewis kept changing his stance as he looked around at other people. Nigel could tell he was new.

"Lewis," Nigel said, "A stance is a pose, not a dance."

"Sorry," he said. "I'm just trying to get it right."

"Are you a god?" Nigel asked, looking at the pens hanging from Lewis' belt.

"Sort of," he replied sheepishly. "I'm a lesser god of office supplies."

Nigel steadied Lewis and moved his hands around so the staff was in proper position.

"If you're a god, you can't watch what other people are doing," Nigel told him. "You need to turn off the omnipotent part of your brain and focus on yourself, got it?" "I don't think I can do that," he said, "I keep hearing prayers in my head asking for stapler refills."

"Then talk to Keith over there," Nigel gestured to an aged hippie. "He's a lesser god of classic rock and he used to have the same problem."

"Lewis, dude," Keith said in a distant drawl, "your mind is your temple, and you are your greatest worshipper. Just ignore the voices and believe in *yourself*."

Nigel stepped over to a small human girl with brown hair named Mandy. A necklace full of silver crosses hung around her neck. Her stance was looking okay.

"Better, Mandy," Nigel said. "Does Quetzalcoatl always let you wear jewelry during class?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, in a thick Georgian accent. "It's for protection."

"Protection against what?" Nigel asked.

"Well, there's gods and monsters in class, sir," she whispered, glancing at the rock giant in the corner.

"Silver crosses will mostly protect you against vampires," Nigel said. "You can proof yourself against omnipresence with some custom-made relics. You can even give a deity hives with kitchen salt or canned peaches. But there's no known corner store knick-knack that repels deities. Not unless you've got a mace can full of fresh livestock blood on hand. Preferably goat or pig."

"Nigel, friend, we do not teach such tactics here," Quetzalcoatl reminded him.

"Or use ram's blood if you can get your hands on it," Nigel said to the class, ignoring his friend. "Yes, even you lesser

gods can bring down the likes of Odin if you just sacrifice a sheep on his doorstep.”

“Dude, not cool,” Keith said, “That ram’s blood stuff burns like crazy.”

“But it’s also non-lethal and washes off,” Nigel said.

“Can we please continue?” Quetzalcoatl asked, trying to change the subject.

“Sorry,” Nigel nodded to him. “Mandy, your stance is looking good. Just keep your shoulders straight.”

Mandy nodded in turn. Nigel could tell she was another “faith crisis” victim still adjusting to having gods everywhere. One of the most common problems with Odin’s takeover was how it affected faithful believers of monotheist religions. While many adopted the gods into their respective Creator’s grand design, others like Mandy were taking self-defense classes like these in preparation for the apocalypse.

“The rest of you are getting it,” Nigel said, looking over the rest. He looked to the rock giant who was picking his teeth with his quarterstaff. “Especially you, Orgos. Good job.”

Nigel stepped back to his mark on the mat to address the class. He raised his staff defensively and demonstrated a few moves. His attacks were swift, precise, and difficult to follow, even for the gods. His nine thousand years of training were apparent.

“It’s one thing to know how to fight,” he said, “it’s another to know when to fight. A quarterstaff can do very little if you’re attacked by a high-level deity, but at an opportune moment, it can save your life. Now last week, we covered how to defend yourself if a demigod attacks you. This week, can I get a god to volunteer, please? Somebody powerful who doesn’t mind getting hurt.”

The rock giant raised his hand.



“Not you, Orgos,” Nigel said. “We’ll cover Titans next week. Preferably outdoors.”

The rock giant lowered his hand.

Several demigods were raising their hands, but none of the gods in class. Nigel decided to pick a volunteer out of the room himself.

“Quetzalcoatl,” he said turning to the instructor. “Aztec God of Maize and Creation, would you assist me in a brief demonstration.”

Quetzalcoatl held out his hand and a quarterstaff flew off the wall into it.

“Certainly, friend,” he said.

The two of them met on the mat and bowed to each other.

“When you’re fighting a human or demigod,” Nigel said, “you can fight to disarm. But when you’re fighting a god, you’re fighting a living weapon. There are two options to surviving an encounter like this: either escape, or turn their strength against them until you find an opening for escape. Quetzalcoatl, if you will, please attempt to destroy me.”

Quetzalcoatl swung his staff with great speed. Nigel sidestepped it, and sidestepped again as Quetzalcoatl jabbed at his heart. With god-like reflexes, the wrath of Quetzalcoatl descended upon Nigel like a small mini-typhoon. But for all his conventional attacks, Quetzalcoatl could not hit Nigel. In fact, Nigel seemed to be grinning the whole time.

“Routine is key,” Nigel told the class as he dodged his attacks. “The longer you practice your moves, the more they become part of your muscle memory. On a long enough timeline, you can instinctively predict the moves of any opponent, giving you more time to plot a counterattack.”

Quetzalcoatl swung one more time and missed.

“Yoink!” Nigel said, as he plucked the staff out of Quetzalcoatl’s hands. It was so quick and seamless that it seemed Quetzalcoatl had given his weapon to Nigel. Nigel held both staffs aloft and asked his opponent, “Shall we get serious now?”

The god’s eyes glowed and a burst of energy shot out of them at Nigel. Nigel casually tilted his head as the energy went past his ear and hit the punching bag behind them, spilling sand onto the floor. Quetzalcoatl’s entire body glowed green and his arms lashed blazing whips of energy at Nigel. But for all of Quetzalcoatl’s ferocity, Nigel seemed to predict every attack rather easily. Everyone else took a step back.

“All opponents lead with their shoulders,” Nigel said.

“Deities are no exception. They might attempt to distract you with glowing eyes, but that’s just misdirection. The shoulders will always tell you where they’re focusing their attack.”

As Quetzalcoatl charged up the energy in one fist and lunged at Nigel, Nigel quickly raised both staffs in a T-shape to twist Quetzalcoatl’s hand away from Nigel’s face and into his own. The exploding green energy knocked the Aztec god to the floor.

“Sorry about that,” Nigel said as he helped Quetzalcoatl up.

“Quite all right,” Quetzalcoatl said with no visible injuries.

“Don’t hold back next time.”

“You shouldn’t expect to fight like this right off the bat,” Nigel explained to the class. “According to experts, it takes ten thousand hours to master any skill. I’ve had closer to ten thousand years against over ten thousand opponents and...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Nigel’s entire body burst into orange flames, engulfed by a green light. He was

vapourized on the spot. A steel heart fell from where his chest was and landed on the mat. Almost instantly, new fire sprang from the holes in the steel container and Nigel rematerialised out of the fire onto his back, clothes and all. He looked quite surprised.

Quetzalcoatl finished his sentence, "...and even he gets his ass kicked from time to time."

"That's another point," Nigel said, getting up. "Some gods like Quetzalcoatl can destroy you with just a thought. Not everybody can regenerate their own bodies, so the key to surviving an encounter with a hostile god is to stun and run."

"Or you can pray to the police gods," Quetzalcoatl said.

"But mostly run for your life," Nigel corrected him.

"What about those of us who are already gods?" Lewis asked. "How do we fight other gods?"

"The same basics apply," Nigel said. "You fight to survive, not to win."

"But don't worry," Quetzalcoatl said. "Inter-deity warfare hasn't been common practice in over two thousand years. Many of you will never see a fight in your life if you're lucky."

"Not counting the occasional Aeonomega in the streets," Nigel said to him.

"We're keeping those under control."

"Trying to anyway."

"Maybe we should speak of this after class," Quetzalcoatl said, gesturing to the crowd of people who were looking uncomfortable with this line of dialogue.

"Maybe we should," Nigel agreed.

Quetzalcoatl addressed his class. "We'll now partner up and practice some sparring. Nigel, if you could assist me without trying to lead a revolt, that would be well-appreciated."

\* \* \*

"So how did it go?" Jesse asked from the other end of the phone.

An hour had passed, the sky was getting darker, and Nigel was now standing on the skytrain heading home. The skytrain was a recent addition to the city, but instead of running on a solid track, the train literally soared through the sky on a magical rail system that materialized in front of wherever it needed to go. Somebody had even taken the sun-sensitive immortals of the city into account by putting UV-proof windows into the train, meaning Nigel could travel anywhere without igniting in the sun. Not that it mattered on an overcast day like today.

The car Nigel stood in was mostly empty, so he felt free to speak over the phone.

"The class was cut short because Lewis had to go to the emergency room." Nigel said.

"Will he be okay?"

"Yeah, it was just his... face." Nigel said. "He'll be up and running in an hour." He didn't want to think about what had happened too much. Orgos had somehow wound up as Lewis' partner and had put him out of commission while bowing to him.

"It's strange to picture you as a teacher," Jesse said. "I remember back in the summer when you were stockpiling ram's blood and holy weapons because you thought another war was coming."

"Rightly so," Nigel said. "There was another Aeonomega outside our bar this morning."

"Really?"

"Just a small one," Nigel said. "A God of Pancakes was fighting a Titan of Waffles over the rights to rule breakfast. The cops handled it."

"See, that's the kind of stuff you should be teaching," Jesse said.

"I do," Nigel said. "I've been inviting you to class since day one."

"And I will show up someday."

"Then how about we jump on your training when you fly home tonight?"

"Didn't Trish tell you?" Jesse asked.

"Tell me what?"

"We're extending our trip by a few more days," Jesse said.

"Instead of coming back to Halifax, we're going to Vegas to see what Cirque de Soleil is like when gods are performing."

"Are you kidding?" Nigel asked. "You've been extending your trip for three months. The least you can do is be home for the holidays."

"Just one last detour," Jesse said.

"Is Christine there? Put her on the phone."

"Hi, Nigel!" Christine shouted over the phone.

Christine was Jesse's close, yet strictly-platonic, human friend. A few months ago, Jesse had gone to visit her in New York and hadn't come home since. Instead, the two of them ran aground of some very affordable travel packages (courtesy of the travel gods) and decided to empty their bank accounts traveling the world together for the fun of it. Since New York, they'd already been to Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Casablanca, Istanbul, Cairo, New Delhi, Beijing, Tokyo, Machu Picchu, and Winnipeg. The last Nigel heard, they were finally on their way back home.

"Make sure this is Jesse's last trip," he told her, "We don't pay Jesse enough to afford all the vacations he's been taking."

"Don't worry, he's really good at stretching a dollar," she said, "And I'm paying, too, so it's all good."

"You need money to live; he doesn't."

"It's cute how much you care about him," Christine said as she passed the phone back to Jesse.

"Which airport are you in right now?"

"Newark," Jesse said, looking around the packed airport terminal. "The plane's just a little delayed. I guess even the gods can't get an airline running efficiently. Too bad I can't fly us there myself."

Nigel knew Jesse was referring to his Fire-Blood ability to turn into an angel. It was a perk that came with earning his own soul since Fire-Bloods were naturally born without one.

"Remind me, how much time is left on your watch?" Nigel asked.

"About forty-five minutes." Jesse said, checking his special soul watch. The soul watch was a gift from Poseidon. It monitored Jesse's remaining soul energy. He had already burned through several minutes' worth during the battle for Halifax. Since then, he had occasionally (and very recklessly) transformed into an angel just for the super-powered thrill of it, prompting the need for a monitoring watch.

"You've got forty-five minutes of soul energy left and you want to use it to fly to Vegas?" Nigel asked.

"I'm just joking," Jesse said. "I know my soul is for emergencies only."

"It took you nine thousand years to earn that soul," Nigel said sternly. "Don't waste it."

"It looks like our plane has landed," Jesse said, "We'll give you a call when we get there."

"And you'll be back for Christmas?" Nigel asked.

"Of course," Jesse nodded.

"I'm serious," Nigel said. "Don't hop in somebody's van and end up in Mexico."

"Yes, dad," Christine chuckled.

"We'll be back," Jesse said. "You and Trish have fun tonight."

"Bye, Nigel!" Christine shouted. "Tell Trisha Happy Anniversary for me!"

Nigel put away his flip-phone and sighed. They were good kids, but they lived in their own little world whenever they were together.

He rested his head against the window and watched the buildings go by.

Nigel observed several gods wearing white flight-suits soar past in formation. It was the Thunderbirds, Halifax's local police force, armed with heavy rifle-type weapons. The Thunderbirds were a special armed forces unit of thunder gods, mostly native to the west coast of North America. They were a flying patrol team, trained to handle problems like rogue Titans, rampaging minotaurs, and the occasional sasquatch.

The Thunderbirds were heading towards a small dust cloud at the far end of the peninsula. Lightning struck in the dust and Nigel recognized what was happening immediately.

"Looks like somebody's fighting another Aeonomega," said a voice from behind Nigel. "The fifth one this week. You've started something most unwelcome."

Nigel spun to see an old man standing behind him. The old man wore a majestic red suit and had a large white braided beard. His left eye was a swirling golden orb with a red

light for a pupil. He stood confident and proud, emanating overwhelming power that caught the attention of the other passengers.

“Odin,” Nigel mumbled. “Fancy seeing you on public transit. Tell me, did Asgard run out of high horses for you to ride on?”

Odin nonchalantly stepped over to Nigel, brushing some lint off his sleeves. He clearly didn’t need to walk anywhere if he could teleport onto a moving train at any time.

“Joke as you wish, but your actions over the summer popularized Aeonomegas among the young ones,” Odin said. “We’ve had to increase security just to keep up with all the battles. But I digress. This is a formal visit, and we require a little privacy.”

Odin snapped his finger and the other passengers vanished into the other car. Odin and Nigel were now completely alone.

Immediately, Odin’s confident posture collapsed and his overwhelming power dispersed. Even his suit started looking frumpy and worn. The once proud god was now neurotically grasping for a bottle of pills from his coat pocket. He swallowed a handful of aspirin and choked it down.

“You want water with that?” Nigel asked.

“I can’t take it anymore,” he said. “I try to do something nice for the world and the world just keeps inventing new problems. Did you know world peace is impossible? Approximately a quarter million people get pissed off by something every second. And curing death, disease, and famine? What was I thinking! All humans do is eat, get sick and die. Now they just eat. And don’t get started on my own people when I’ve got ‘The Queen’ hacking my e-mails trying to usurp my throne. The humans are unruly, the



gods are unruly, everything is unruly. I don't understand how Zeus and Marduk handled it during their reigns."

"Through human slavery and ritual sacrifice," Nigel reminded him. "Are you saying you get headaches?"

"I'm King of the Gods; prayers get stuffed into my head like a Thanksgiving turkey," Odin said. "You can't imagine how much aspirin it takes to get rid of a god-sized headache. But that doesn't compare to the headache you're causing me."

"Excuse me?"

"Going around, telling humans to prepare for war," Odin said. "Mondays and Wednesdays, teaching self-defense. Tuesdays and Thursdays, volunteering at the firing range. Even giving history lectures and coaching little league rugby on the weekends with your anti-Asgard agenda. And you used to keep such a low profile, Naveen."

Nigel flinched at the sound of his true name. It was the name that deities called him whenever they wanted to sound like an old friend.

"With Pandora dead, I have some free time on my hands."

"We're doing our best to keep the peace," Odin said. "See those new magma cannons the Thunderbirds are sporting? They fire molten stygian rounds, guaranteed to incapacitate any deity. See that giant cannon we're building on Citadel Hill?"

"You mean that gigantic eyesore?" Nigel asked, motioning to the massive railgun atop the hill in the distance.

"That thing can gun down a Titan from across the planet. As you can see, we're taking preventative measures; you don't need to go around telling people a war is coming. It's bad P.R. for all of us."

"Are public relations your big concern, is there another reason you're here?"

"There's another reason."

“And that is?”

“That the war might actually be coming,” Odin finally admitted.

“Not surprised.”

“Dark things are amiss in the realms, Naveen. Many gods are running scared.”

“Is Loki behind it?” Nigel asked.

“It’s definitely not Loki.”

“Vladimir?” Nigel asked. Vladimir Tsepish was the vampire bounty hunter who served Pandora over the summer. He’d escaped the battle, but not before getting possessed by a demon that only fed on his own fear. If Vladimir was still alive, he would have been a cowering mess by now.

“The seventh chaos demon is still unaccounted for,” Odin said as he pulled a holographic display pad out of his pocket. “But if he ever surfaces, you’ll be the first to know.” He turned on the pad and showed it to Nigel. A fuzzy security video appeared, depicting a cloaked man sitting with a large bald, bearded man in an opera house balcony. The cloaked man offered the other a ring. The two had an exchange before the bald man left.

“This was taken at the Sydney Opera House last night,” Odin said. “The footage was distorted by a third party, but the large bald one is Surtur, Lord of the Titans. The other is a human we’ve been tracking for the last few days who goes by the name of Solomon.”

“As in, King Solomon from the Bible?”

“It’s an obvious pseudonym,” Odin said. “Ten minutes after this meeting, the god we sent to track Solomon was found dead in Nepal, slain at the foot of Everest. We suspect the two of them were involved and that the ring might have played a role, although our knowledge of god-killing relics is fairly limited.”

"It would have be Third or Fourth Age magic at best," Nigel said.

"It's not Second Age?"

"Not likely," Nigel said. "There's only three Second Age weapons in the world. One weapon has been lost for ten thousand years, and another's flying to Vegas flying right now."

"And the third one?"

"Pandora's spellbook," Nigel said. "But even if anyone finds it, only people who can read ancient Xeran can use it. Whatever the ring is, it sounds like Solomon is using it to recruit Titans. Killing a god was just a demonstration of its power."

"Oh, god," Odin said he swallowed another handful of aspirin. "But he surely can't assemble an army of Titans. We locked up the worst of them in Tartarus."

"Unless he's plotting a prison-break," Nigel said.

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're high on extra-strength pain-killers?"

"Listen, we need your help," Odin said. "If the threat is real, we need to stop Solomon now. By my honour, I can't ask you to join my army and lend your demon powers to the cause. But that's not what I want. We need you to set aside whatever grudge you have against the gods and just come to Asgard for a few days."

"Maybe you should talk to my brother if you're so desperate for power."

"We aren't looking for power, we're looking for experience," Odin said. With a wave of his hand, he caused the image on the screen to change. The video now showed an angry, young man standing in the center of a field surrounded by gods who were hurling small brown things at him. The objects annoyingly bounced off his body. Nigel recognized the person in the video.

"Is that Ptolemy?" he asked.

Ptolemy was a lazy college boy from California who'd been chosen by the Creator to be the latest in a long line of super-powered peacekeepers known as Zodiac Knights. Originally mentored by Poseidon and now under the tutelage of Odin, Ptolemy was potentially the most powerful person on Earth.

"We've been training the Zodiac Knight for quite some time, but he's resilient in his practices," Odin said. "He's a First Age warrior and he might be our only shot at finding Solomon and stopping this war before it begins. But we need to unlock his hidden abilities."

"You're throwing pine cones at him."

"It's a standard exercise," Odin said. "This is how he'll learn to defend himself."

"I repeat; you're throwing pine cones at him."

"This is how the gods have trained Zodiacs for countless eons!"

"Then what do you need me for?"

"We, uh," Odin said reluctantly, "we need you to train him for us. Because obviously this is not working."

"Because obviously you're throwing pine cones at him."

"Can you please come down to Asgard for a few days?"

Odin asked. "Just spend time with the boy. Figure out what we're doing wrong and show us a thing or two, okay?"

"A few days would be too long," Nigel said. "From the looks of it, you could get this boy trained in an afternoon if your heads weren't so far up your asses."

"Then please, just an afternoon," Odin said. "I'm humbling myself before you, Naveen."

"Forget it," Nigel said, "My life's already complicated enough without pissing off another would-be sorcerer and endangering my family. Besides, I need to train my brother as soon as he gets home."

“But this is what you’re training for!” Odin said. “You spend day in and day out preparing for Titan War III, and now that it’s at our doorstep, you won’t even answer the call to arms?”

“That’s where you have me wrong,” Nigel said. “See, I’m not preparing the people of this city to fight a war. I’m teaching them to survive it. War will come one way or the other. Take it from someone who saw the turning of the Fourth Age: if there’s a man going around pushing the Titans’ buttons, things are going to get biblical. And between you and me, I’d rather get my brother on the job than that Ptolemy kid.”

“But this Solomon character...”

“Keep an eye on him,” Nigel said, as the skytrain started pulling into the station. “In the meantime, I’ve got to run. I’ve got flowers to buy and a special lady to attend to, so enjoy the holidays, Mr. All-Father. And good luck with the headaches.”

“Naveen, one last thing,” Odin said. “The god who was killed in Nepal? It was my son, Thor.”

Nigel paused before speaking, “Are you sure it was him?”

“His hammer was found,” Odin said. “As were his remains.”

“Did you recover the hammer?”

“It’s being dragged back to Asgard as we speak,” Odin said.

Nigel knew that gods often employed power symbols as a means of backing themselves up in the unlikely event of their demise. For Thor, it was his hammer just as Poseidon had his trident and Odin his raven. A god could be resurrected with their power symbol, but only after the symbol was returned to their homeland and put through a ritual. Thor’s hammer, unfortunately, was the heaviest item in all the divine realms. It would take the gods a while to return it to Asgard.

"From what we could discern, he took *exactly* nine steps before he died," Odin said solemnly.

Nigel paused again before exiting the train.

"I'm sorry," Nigel said as he left the train. "I hope you find the guy."

As he stepped out, Odin shouted from behind him, "You can't forsake the gods forever, Naveen! We Ancients have to stick together!"

The doors closed, leaving the King of the Gods to gather his thoughts.

A Titan uprising couldn't happen this quickly, Odin thought. Even if the Lord of the Titans was swayed, it was inconceivable that they would assemble. They'd been without strong leadership for ages.

It was the whole reason Odin had put that idiot Surtur in charge.

## 4. The Titans' Keep

The realm of Tartarus is one of the more unpleasant places. The air is freezing, the stone walls are damp, distant screams are common, and if you don't stick to the torch-lit areas, the three-headed dog guarding the realm is likely to have you for dinner. This cavernous labyrinth of an underworld is a miserable realm that no man, let alone a Titan, would want to be imprisoned in for eternity.

The resident guardians of Tartarus were grey, bat-like women known as Furies. They were feral barbarians who really had nothing better to do than eat rocks and sharpen sticks all day. So when the massive stone entrance of Tartarus exploded into rubble, the Furies swarmed by the hundreds to meet this new intruder head-on.

What the Furies met was an angry magic-fuelled Super-Titan.

A blazing ball of fire and shadow flew into the realm at blinding speed hurling fireballs and lightning bolts at its attackers. The Furies, armed only with spears, quickly retreated to the safety of their secret tunnels as this strange, serpentine abomination tore through their numbers. None could even catch a glimpse of this creature's face.

The creature flew into the realm's main cavern. Throughout the cavern flowed the largest river in existence: the River

Styx. The water reflected the walls with its oily texture and light blue luminescence. It was an ancient river whose poison was toxic to all deities. Even looking at yourself in the water for too long caused your reflection to disappear. Surrounding the River Styx on all sides was abandoned mining equipment, once used by the gods to mine metals for crafting stygian steel.

The river flowed up, around, through a few walls, and down a steep slope before entering a richly lit cavern filled with small holes. Each hole was lined with steel bars, and behind those bars were figures in the shadows screaming in anger. Small embers floated through the air in this cavern.

"Rise, my brethen!" Surtur shouted from atop his fiery, shadow steed.

Lightning discharged from the fireball as it ripped the barred doors out of the rock. Inside, the people in the cells lit up in flames. Hulkish giants of smouldering ash and ember stepped to the edges of their cells and shouted victoriously. Their leader, Surtur, Lord of the Fire Giants had returned. Crawling up the walls, they clambered up to some metal walkways and followed after him.

Surtur soared over the shore of Styx towards a massive grotto full of cells. These cells were of varying sizes and their interiors were lined with barbed steel. At the far end of the hall was a locked door that had to be a thousand feet tall at least. Surtur had reached the edge of the Fields of Punishment where the greatest Titans of all time were being held.

Surtur landed on the floor of this cave, his heavy frame leaving an impact crater. Brushing off the excess flame and shadow, Surtur stood transformed, four stories tall. His fiery beard and eyes were now consumed in black fire. An oily presence embraced his body and slithered around his



arms, turning his left hand into a dark fire-breathing wolf's head, and his right hand into a lightning-spewing snake's head. At the heart of that snake's mouth was Pandora's ring, pulsating a bright red.

With a swing of his right arm, Surtur had his serpent hand blast every single cell in the hall wide open. He laughed with glee as the ring's power easily tore the stygian steel from the stone.

Surtur looked up near the ceiling. Cerberus, the three-headed dog of the realm, was watching him from one of the tunnels. It had been following him. Surtur growled at the animal. The dog scurried away.

Surtur's dark energy fell away into his ring. Only the red giant that he was remained. He called to the cells.

"Titans! Lords! Giants! Masters of Natural Law! I have returned to free you from the gods' imprisonment! Pandora has fallen and Odin has risen to claim the planet! The day of Ragnarök is at hand! Step forward and let us assemble a new Pantheon of Twelve so that we may crush Asgard once and for all!"

As first, nothing happened.

Then, Surtur was taken by surprise as a lumbering twelve-foot oaf rushed out of one of the cells and gave him a huge bear hug. Surtur struggled to pry him off.

"Yay!" the oaf shouted. "Surtur-buddy!"

"Get off me, Krios!" Surtur yelled. "I didn't know you were still down here!"

Krios stepped back several feet until he was well out of Surtur's comfort zone. He was a large, muscular man in a loincloth with a long blond braided moustache and a helmet with ram horns on it. On his face was biggest, dumbest smile that no prisoner of Tartarus should ever have reason to wear. He hobbled around on his knuckles

and then flopped over on his butt like a little kid. Needless to say, Krios was special.

Surtur looked to the other cells. Figures stood in the darkness, but hesitated to come out. Surtur glanced from cell to cell, trying to recognize anybody.

"Ymir? Perses? Bunyan? Anybody?"

"Arrr!" Somebody shouted from a nearby cell. Surtur lit his hand ablaze and used it to look inside. He saw a shriveled up old man with an eye-patch wearing a pirate hat and sitting naked in a tiny boat made from toenail clippings. He waved a little Jolly Roger flag around.

"Hrym!" Surtur exclaimed. "What's happened to you?"

"Yarr-harr, me matie!" Hrym laughed. "Hop in me ship and we be setting sail for Jotunheim to look fer treasure!"

"He lost his mind half a century ago," said a low, coarse voice behind Surtur. Surtur turned to see a four-foot, dwarvish man in an over-sized red coat. He was bald with a large white beard, and wore dark round goggles over his sooty face. The small Titan spoke in an elegant Dutch accent, "But if it's Odin you're after, you'll need an airship. So count me in. The name's Krindel. I'm a Sky Titan."

"Aren't you a little short for a Titan?" Surtur asked.

"It's my maximum height," Krindel said, with disdain in his voice. "Take it or leave it, sparky."

"Heh, heh," Surtur chuckled, "I love it when small Titans talk big. So is there anyone else? We need a bigger pantheon than this!"

Surtur took a flame to each cell to inspect its prisoner.

Krindel shook his head.

"Many of us have been down here for too long," he said.

"We don't age well behind these bars."

Surtur kept inspecting the prisoners. Inside the next cell was a man wrapped in bandages who stared with terror in

his eyes when Surtur brought the fire close. The name over the cell read: "Prometheus". Surtur looked in the next one. He saw a large, elderly man sitting comatose in a sofa chair watching television. His scarred body looked like it had been chopped into a thousand pieces and sewn back together. His name read: "Kronos".

"These used to be some of our best guys!" Surtur exclaimed. "What about Loki? Is Loki here?"

"The Half-Titan?" Krindel asked, gesturing to a cell on the far end. Surtur hurried over to check it out.

Inside Loki's cell was a large steel slab hanging on the wall with the figure of Loki protruding from the front of it. Inside, Surtur could hear Loki mumbling to be let out.

"Odin got sick of his tricks back in the eighties and dipped the guy in molten steel." Krindel explained. "We can bring him along if you don't mind me using him to decorate my ship's lounge."

"Blast it all!" Surtur cursed. "After two thousand years, we've finally got the edge on the gods, and all our greatest warriors are out of commission!"

"So Ragnarök's off?"

Krios looked very sad all of a sudden.

Surtur brushed his bald scalp in frustration and shook his head.

"No," he said. "We'll do this together. We don't need a Pantheon of Twelve. It'll be you, me, my small army of Fire Giants, Wall Ornament Loki, maybe even Krios. I've come too far already. I will not back down!"

"Even if we're hopelessly outmatched?"

"Especially if we're hopelessly outmatched!"

"Now you're talking like a Titan," said a woman's voice from one of the higher cells. A fifteen-foot, heavyset Icelandic woman with blue skin wearing a parka of white

animal skins dropped down to the floor. As she breathed, her breath chilled in the air.

"Sinmara," Surtur said, his heart sinking. He gradually shrank down to meet her. "My love..."

As he approached to embrace her, she reached out with one finger against his chest and stopped him in his tracks. Ice spread across his chest hairs and quickly melted. She looked at him with a cold icy stare.

"Hands to yourself," she said. "You and I are history. This is business."

"Right," Surtur nodded. "Of course."

"You need generals," Sinmara said. "Before going off-world, my father Ymir left behind an army of Frost Giants. I shall seek them out and lead them in his place."

Two other large figures dropped from the ceiling next to Sinmara. The one on her right was an eighteen-foot bronze bodybuilder with a golden beard full of dirt. He wore speedos, was quite dusty, and had a nasty smirk.

"Atlas the Earth Titan has heard your pleas," he declared in his most high-and-mighty voice while flexing his muscles on every other syllable. "And Atlas is ready to fight! Just point Atlas at whoever's head needs a-crushing!"

The other figure was a twenty-five-foot tall mechanical man with a bear-shaped head, covered in steam-powered armor with massive arms built for crushing. A furnace raged in its belly and Surtur could see the heat from the fire emanating from its mouth.

"Who's this guy?" Surtur asked.

"Mishnykov," Sinmara explained. "He is a Metal Titan. He does not say much, but he will fight."

"I like him," Surtur said. "I like this pantheon. Fire and ice, earth and sky, metal and--"

"And Krios!" Krios happily shouted while clapping his hands.

"... and Krios," Surtur uttered. "We've got our Pantheon of Twelve."

"Six of us is not a Pantheon of Twelve," Sinmara said.

"We'll add more as we go," Surtur said. "It doesn't matter. Half a dozen generals is good for now."

"Before we begin," Krindel said, "do you mind filling us in on how you've broken us out?"

Surtur raised his right hand to show off his ring. The ring surged with darkness which quickly transformed Surtur into a Second Age monstrosity with shadowy animal heads for hands. He grinned through his dark flaming beard as he spoke. "In Pandora's absence, one of her old toys has fallen to me. Behold, the power of the demon sorceress!"

"I don't remember Pandora ever looking like that," Sinmara said.

"Why is your right hand covered in lightning?" Krindel asked.

"I'm not sure," Surtur said. "It ate a thunder god earlier, so maybe that's a thing."

Krindel carefully looked him over before speaking. "Surtur, does the Well of Elysia mean anything to you?"

"I don't follow new bands," Surtur said.

"So this creature you're wearing doesn't send up any red flags?" Krindel asked. "It doesn't give you a sense of déjà vu? Possibly from the First Titan War?"

"The only flag it sends up is that of victory for the Titans!"

Krindel shrugged. "Tales of your great asininity have not been exaggerated, oh, mighty leader."

"Thank you," Surtur smiled, not quite certain of what 'asininity' meant.

Sinmara looked deeply disturbed about Surtur's appearance as well, but withheld her concerns. She forced herself to look past her worries and ask, "So what's next?"

"Sinmara," Surtur said. "Seek out your father's Frost Giants. Krindel, take what's left of Loki, Hrym and the others and find that flying battleship of yours. The rest of us must journey to Halifax to contend with one more loose end. We'll rendezvous in... uh... where's a good place?"

"How about the Well of Elysia?" Krindel asked. "It's a few miles downriver and to the left. It wouldn't hurt you to visit."

"Very well!" Surtur asked, "We will rendezvous in the *Well of Elysia*!"

"Boo-ya! Atlas likes!" Atlas shouted. Mishnykov quietly cracked his mechanical bear knuckles.

"What about Krios?" Sinmara asked.

Krios was happily breathing in Surtur's ear.

"Krios can stay here and guard... something," Surtur said.

"Now the rest of you, we must move quickly! Our war begins now! To victory!"

As Surtur rocketed into the air to lead the Fire Giants and Atlas out of the cave, Sinmara gestured to Mishnykov. The giant bear leaned down to listen.

"Be careful," she whispered. "If that creature he wears is any indication, I don't think Solomon intends for Surtur to survive this."

Mishnykov nodded and hurried off after the others.

Krindel and Sinmara waited until Surtur was out of earshot before speaking their minds.

"Like a lamb to the slaughter," Krindel said. "He really doesn't know what he carries, does he?"

"Surtur was stationed in Muspelheim during the First Titan War," Sinmara said. "He wasn't at Olympus when *it* happened. Perhaps this is why he trusts Solomon too easily."

"And we don't?" Krindel surmised.

"We don't have a choice."

They turned to Krios who was sitting down and sticking his foot in his mouth.

"Find your people," Krindel told Sinmara. "I'll get my ship out of the Tartarus lockup and put Krios in the air for the next phase of Solomon's plan."

"Should we leave someone on guard until our return?" Sinmara asked.

"How about the big guy?" Krindel said, gesturing to the large doors at the end of the hall. Surtur had broken them off their hinges, and a deep, heavy breathing could be heard from within. "It's been a few thousand years since he last stretched his legs."

"Yes," she said deliciously. "He will do nicely."

"Then it's settled," Krindel said. "Krios!"

Krios looked to Krindel and drooled a little. "Hmmm?"

"Saddle up, buddy," Krindel said. "Solomon's got a very important job for you."

"Me has job?" Krios asked delightfully.

"Yup," Krindel said. "You, my friend, get to catch a plane."

## 5. Hunter's Tavern

Nigel opened the door of Hunter's Tavern and marched in with a skip in his step and a bundle of roses in his arms. There was a nice comforting vibe to welcome him home. The bar had been renovated over the last few months but looked relatively the same as it always had with the bar on the left, many tables to the right and a stage in the back. Behind the bar was the door to the kitchen, and beside that was a stairwell leading up to Nigel's studio apartment. The door to the bathrooms and Jesse's room was down the stairs behind the stage. Beyond that was one last door which connected to the noisy new club behind their bar. Its front entrance accessible from the alley, the club was an unsolicited gift from the gods that Nigel did his best to ignore, even if it was now their main source of income. Nigel glanced up at the televisions over the bar. Some were playing hockey reruns, others had the holiday fireplace channel on. Nigel had insisted on keeping these channels on after the gods swamped the air with their own brand of overrated drivel. Presently, the top rated shows were miracle-based reality programs like "The Love Goddess", "Titanium Gladiators", "Who Wants to Marry a Historical Hottie?", "Survivor: Mars Edition", and "Dragon's Den" (now with actual dragons), but Nigel found that the surreal visual aspect of these programs quickly distracted



normal people from drinking. To mortals, watching the gods be naughty was new and exciting, but to Nigel, the novelty had worn off sometime after the invention of baked clay.

Their waitress, Patti, was behind the bar playing games on her iPad while talking to somebody via her Bluetooth. The only customer present was a long-time regular with thick-rimmed glasses and a porkpie hat known only as Laptop Guy, who was still writing his novel at the end of the bar and eating chicken wings. Looking around, Nigel determined Trisha was probably upstairs.

"...and for the next month, we're offering a bundle deal on all cable channels..." Patti spoke into her Bluetooth as Nigel sat at the bar and nodded to Laptop Guy. Laptop Guy tipped his porkpie hat and grinned from behind his glasses before going back to writing.

"Evening, Patti," Nigel smiled to her, then asked "what's our special tonight?"

Patti averted her gaze and motioned for him to wait as she listened to the phone.

As he waited, Nigel ran his fingers along the top of the bar. There were many small deliberate markings left behind by his brother who, in his thoughtlessness, had the occasional habit of scratching down information and messages into his fine mahogany bar-top whenever a pen and paper weren't available. As a result, the edge of the bar was littered with call-back numbers, last names, and important notes like "jesse rulez!"

Finally, Patti said, "Well, I'm sorry we couldn't help you tonight. Maybe next time you're not interested in unsolicited material, you'll hang up when a prerecorded voice tries to sell you something. ...Yeah? Well, the same to you, buddy."

Patti hung up and sighed. "I can't believe it. Easiest job in the world and there's still idiot people capable of messing it up. How hard is it to hang up on a marketing machine, really?"

"I wish you wouldn't do that during work hours," Nigel said.

"Technically, I'm not doing anything," Patti explained.

"There's a prerecorded message, and if you press a button for more information, you get another pre-recorded message. It's all very idiot-proof. You'd have to be mashing buttons for twenty minutes just to get transferred to me."

"Just don't let it interfere with your work."

"Most of our patrons go to the club section now, so no worries there," she said. Patti's eyes suddenly lit up as she looked down at the large bundle of roses Nigel was carrying. "Ooh! Flowers! Those for me?"

"These are for Trish," Nigel smiled. "Fifteen flowers for fifteen years."

"I'm so jealous of you two," Patti said. "Do you think you'll ever married? Or is it still illegal for vampires to do that?"

"It's always been legal, just not safe," Nigel said. "Blessed unions are like holy water to vampires. Even a legal marriage could leave a burning stain on her soul."

Historically, Nigel had known a few vampires who had attempted such a thing. By their nature, vampires were solitary beings and a contractual union with someone else could wreak havoc on their psyche. As a rule, this either made them more docile or more aggressive, neither of which Nigel wished on Trisha.

"But you can still adopt, right?" Patti asked. "Or can Fire-Bloods and vampires actually have kids? Wikipedia wasn't clear on that."

"Why adopt kids when we've already got you and Jesse?" Nigel said with a smirk. "You still haven't told me what today's specials are."

"Oh, right!" She answered "Four dollar pints, and a little shot I've invented for your anniversary called the Fire-Blood Sunrise."

"Does it have tequila?" Nigel asked.

"A little."

"Hit me up."

Patti got to working mixing him a drink. She was former art student who'd moved to Halifax from Beijing over a couple years ago. Her interests included late night partying, telling off authority figures, and drinking whatever somebody put in her hand. All three of those contributed to her dropping out of school and pursuing her new part-time career goal: telemarketing.

During the summer's battle, Patti had volunteered to become a temporary magical conduit for a Chinese Immortal named Wu Tang. This experience brought out a more rebellious side in her otherwise chipper attitude.

Soon she started coming into work with dragon tattoos on her arms, nose piercings, and blue highlights in her hair.

She also started picking the songs for the tavern's playlist, which meant a lot less Eric Clapton and a lot more Green Day.

She placed a shot glass in front of Nigel. Something green was floating in the red liquid. Nigel fired the shot into his mouth and almost immediately coughed up a lung.

"What is that?" he gasped.

"It's mostly Tabasco sauce," she replied. "And a few other spicy things I found in the fridge. Burns like hell, doesn't it?"

"It's in my sinuses!" Nigel choked.

"That would be the wasabi."

"A Fire-Blood Sunrise is the right name for it, then," Nigel coughed, shaking it off.

A Fire-Blood, much like a vampire, caught fire in direct sunlight. Unlike vampires, however, a Fire-Blood just kept burning alive until they stepped back in the shadows. This drink was not too far off from the real experience.

"Hey, maybe we should open up the wall," Patti said. "The club section has that new 'pray for drinks' system and we could start getting customers in here again."

"We don't need divine magic," Nigel said. "The city needs a traditional tavern. People like waiting for drinks and food. They like having a normal night out."

"Is that why all our regulars are mysteriously vanishing?"

"It's a phase," Nigel insisted. "You'll see. The novelty of being served by the gods is going to wear off and people will start coming back here. Just ask Laptop Guy. He doesn't buy into all these god fads, does he?"

"I'm just a very stubborn atheist," he said flatly as he sipped his coffee.

"Is Trish upstairs?" Nigel asked Patti.

"Yeah, she's been up there all day with that game of hers," Patti motioned to the stairway, "I think she might be heading out on a hunt later, but -- oops. Have another call. Gotta take this."

She answered her Bluetooth before she could finish her thought. Nigel wondered why Trisha would go hunting tonight of all nights. Vampires naturally needed to hunt, even if their blood cravings were satisfied, but Trisha was generally very good about scheduling her hunts throughout the month so that they didn't interfere with any planned events. Nigel carefully made his way up the stairs and knocked.

"Come on in!" Trisha shouted.

Nigel entered his apartment and saw a lovely caramel-skinned woman in black sweat pants and a white tank top sitting on the bed. In her hands was a black game

controller and at the foot of her bed was a television that she was fixated upon. She brushed back her curvy black hair to reveal a headset and blew a kiss at Nigel.

“Happy Anniversary,” she said.

“Bought you flowers,” Nigel held them up to her delight.

“Bought a vase,” Trisha said, gesturing to a vase sitting on Nigel’s piano.

Theirs was small studio with one bathroom and a couple of he/she closets on the inner wall. The outer wall was recently rebuilt without windows for Trisha’s convenience, following its destruction by a giant snake demon last summer. At the far end of the room was Nigel’s studio piano next to the bed. On top of it were a few of his world-traveling souvenirs, including his latest addition: Pandora’s box, which peacefully sat atop the piano. For a portal to Hell, that small wooden box really tied the room together.

“So how was class?” she asked.

“Went well enough,” Nigel said as he set the flowers in the vase. “I’m getting a little rusty, though. Quetzalcoatl vapourised me with his mind at one point. I should have been able to stop it.”

“How could you defend against that?”

“By breaking his focus,” Nigel said. “Thanks to their omnipotence, gods have limited attention spans. If I kept him on his toes, he wouldn’t have caught me off-guard. But enough about my day. How about you? I thought you’d be getting ready for tonight.”

“I am,” Trisha said, “right after I finish this battle here.”

On the television screen was a tiny little man with a grey beard running around with a trident alongside an Egyptian girl wearing giant boxing gloves. Trisha appeared to be making the girl fight a beak-faced god armed with a khopesh blade while the tiny man fired magic missiles at the monster.

"No!" she shouted into the headset, "Don't waste your magic on him! Cure me! I'm almost dead!"

Nigel watched for a few moments, but couldn't wrap his head around it. Then again, Nigel had a difficult time understanding most movies, games, and songs. He was simply too old for them. Trisha, on the other hand, somehow maintained a modern sensibility towards pop culture in spite of being over a hundred years old.

"Is that Poseidon you're talking to?" Nigel asked.

"Yes, and he says hi," she said.

"Are you fighting him?"

"No, he's supposing to be fighting *with* me," she said.

"Instead, the douche-turd is trying to kill Seth Omega first and steal all my EXP from the battle because he's lame."

"And the game you're playing is... 'Mario', right?" Nigel asked.

"It's an MMORPG called 'Realm Rage: Retribution'," she explained. "I create my deity, build their skill tree, and work with other players to go on epic quests through the divine realms. Right now it's just Poseidon and me, though Magnus, Ptolemy and Patti join in on some nights."

"There aren't real gods trapped in the game, are there?"

"There could be; it's a divine server."

"How much longer are you going to play?"

"Just need to find a save point."

"Patti says you're going out for a hunt later tonight," Nigel said. "I thought we might stay in and, you know, celebrate our anniversary."

"We can still do that," she said. "I just need some time off tonight."

"You've been going out a lot lately," Nigel said. "Have you been running into problems out there?"

Trisha and Nigel had a long-standing habit of never questioning each other's extracurricular activities. For

Nigel, this now extended to keeping his nine thousand year-old past confidential since Trisha didn't want to dredge up any ancient baggage or discover he might have had five hundred wives. And for Trisha, this meant keeping the details of her hunts private. As far as Nigel knew, she was a vampire who didn't kill people or prey on anyone who wasn't already looking for a little trouble. Beyond that, he didn't want to imagine her approach on strangers or the intimate blood-sucking to follow. Things likely went wrong from time to time, and Nigel had to trust she could handle herself.

"No, I just need to keep active," she said. "Video games aren't cutting it and our one-woman staff downstairs is handling our one customer just fine."

"You could always manage the new club if you're bored."

"No, because it's self-moderated," Trish said, angrily hammering away at the controls. "Our friends from Asgard manage everything remotely. They restock drinks, they break up fights, they mop up vomit. It might as well be run by robots."

"Maybe you could come to my classes or the firing range then."

"I'd rather do some night-time hunting," she said. "Don't take it personal, but slipping away from here for a few hours a night really helps."

"We should take a cue from Jesse then," Nigel said, walking over to his closet. "We could take a weekend off after the holidays. Go someplace exotic."

"I'm a vampire, honey," Trisha said, "Exotic usually means lots of sunlight."

"Then we'll get a sun god to give us a blessing or two," Nigel said. "Lord knows they won't stop giving us everything else."

"You're being difficult again, sweetie," she said.

"I only sound difficult because I love you." Nigel said as he swapped out his charcoal turtleneck for a charcoal button-down. "Speaking of difficult people, why didn't you tell me Jesse was heading to Vegas?"

"I found out this morning," she said. "They change their plans so often, I didn't think it was relevant anymore."

"He needs to come home already."

"He spent thousands of years living with you," she reminded him. "The boy needs his space."

"The boy is the second most powerful being on Earth," Nigel said. "With Aeonomegas in the streets and elder Titans on the loose, he needs to stop frolicking and start taking responsibility."

"And the old man needs to stop being such a grumpy old fart on his anniversary."

"Did you find a save point yet?"

"No, but Poseidon just got me killed, so there's no point in saving anymore," she sighed. She turned off the game, said goodbye to Poseidon, and hopped off the bed declaring, "I'm getting dressed!"

As she hurried to her closet to pick out somewhere to wear, Nigel finished changing into some slacks and sat down at the piano to wait. He was ready to go, but she was going to take a while. He began to play an upbeat version of one of her old favourites.

"Is that 'Moon River'?" she asked as she took a shimmering golden dress into the washroom.

"I've been practicing it lately," he said. "How does it sound?"

"Great, but I thought you were writing something new," she said.

"I haven't had the inspiration lately," he said. "Too much of everything else going on."



"That's a shame," she said. "That sonata you were writing sounded absolutely gorgeous."

"I'll get back on it eventually," he said. "In the meantime, any requests?"

"'Limelight' by Rush," she said.

"Oh, sure, the hard one," Nigel said, as he began to leaf through his songbooks.

As he searched, he looked up at Pandora's Box which calmly sat on his piano.

Since the defeat of Pandora, a few collectors had tried to sneak in and steal it, but were unsuccessful. Something about the Box always turned would-be thieves around. It was like the Box was under the protection of Hell itself, which couldn't be too far from true. In his correspondence with Urobach, the manager of Hell's flames, Nigel had learned that the Box's main functions were now disabled. One could use it to travel from Hell to Earth, but no one on Earth could ever use it to summon anything from Hell. This made the Box worthless to everyone but Nigel and Jesse who kept it on standby in case they ever needed to escape Hell again.

But news of Thor getting killed began to weigh heavily on Nigel's shoulders. It was one thing for a sorcerer to be targeting gods, but what if something bigger than just a mere war was at hand? He knew Thor walking nine steps before collapsing was a very bad omen on its own.

Nigel stopped playing to grab his little treasure box from atop the piano. It was a small tin box that housed a lot of his collected documents over the years. He shuffled through various travelogues, Greek brochures, cuneiform primers, and a first edition of the Old Testament (complete with all fifteen commandments) before finding a small pocket-sized poetry book bound by string. The book's cover read, in old Icelandic: "Prose Edda: by Snorri

Snurluson, 1220". The book contained old fictional poetry written about Odin and the Aesir, often confused for prophecy by some deities. Nigel located a small passage he recalled about Thor's fictionalized death during the Battle of Ragnarök at the hands of Jormungandur, the Midgard Serpent. It read:

*"Against the serpent goes Odin's son.  
In anger smites the warder of earth,—  
Nine paces fares the son of Fjorgyn,  
And, slain by the serpent, fearless he sinks."*

Nine paces. It had to be a coincidence, Nigel thought. Either that, or somebody's done their homework. Nigel assured himself that there was nothing to be worried about. Thor wandered the Earth helping people in all kinds of crises; he probably got killed all the time.

"To Nighendal and Jessur, You should read this for a good laugh. Your buddy, Thor", it read it on the back of the book as Nigel put it back in the box.

"Damn it, Jesse," Nigel said to himself, wishing his brother was here. "Get home already."

"What was that, honey?" she asked.

"Nothing," Nigel said as he stood up and stepped into the washroom, "Are you ready to go?"

Inside, she was wearing a gorgeous golden dress that went all the way up to her neck. It did a far more flattering job of showing off her athletic curves than her sweats did. If Nigel had a heartbeat, it would have skipped just then. She turned her back to him to reveal her bare back.

"Zip me up?" she asked.

Nigel zipped up the back of her dress. "There. Now you're perfect."

"Thanks," she said as she turned around, "and Nigel? Don't worry about Jesse. He didn't run out on us."

"No, he just went on vacation and didn't come back."

"I know the two of you can't stand each other, but I don't think you can stand being apart from each other either. He'll come back, and when he does, you'll be writing new music again."

"I'm doing my best to be a better man as it is."

"I know you are," she said, turning him towards the mirror.

"Just don't feel like you need to change for me. The reclusive old grump I fell in love with still had his charm."

"And I bet my good looks don't hurt either."

"Speaking of which, you should do the thing again."

"I'm not doing the thing again," he said. "It hurts like hell."

"Please?"

"I should've never shown you."

"Just use it to shave then," she said. "And maybe add a little tan. And bigger ears. I've been having a thing for big ears lately."

"Trisha..."

"Okay, just shave," she said. "And maybe tan. Pretty-please?"

Nigel looked deep into the mirror, took a deep breath, and surrendered himself to his inner fire.

His skin spontaneously combusted into flames. While cool to Trisha, the flames caused him great pain. He used all his willpower to keep from screaming. In those few seconds, he imagined himself clean-shaven with a slight tan. As he exhaled, the flames vanished, and he was back to normal again. Only now, his face was smooth and a light tan covered his body. Nigel had been using this Fire-Blood technique to modify his appearance for centuries and had gotten quite good with it, even if he couldn't make any drastic changes at once. He'd shown it to Trisha a few months ago and now she was obsessed with touching him up whenever she could.

“Damn, a tan looks good with that shirt,” she said. Then her eyes widened and she squealed as she hugged him, “You got the ears! You’ve got bigger ears!”

“Happy Anniversary, hon,” Nigel said.

“Now try to look like Pierce Brosnan.”

“Don’t push it.”

## 6. Turbulence

"Excuse me, sir?" the stewardess prodded Jesse. Jesse looked up from the Raptor Cop movie playing on the seat in front of him and removed his headphones to acknowledge her.

"Yes?"

"We've serving drinks," she said. Jesse's lit up with delight at the sight of the cart. He turned to Christine whose face was pressed against the window as she slept. He shook her shoulder and she awoke.

"Hmmm, what?" she asked, gazing out at the twilit sky.

"Drink time!" Jesse said. Christine's eyes lit up.

Jesse turned to the stewardess. "So, this airline serves all the same things as any plane with Asgard Air?"

"That's correct, sir," she said.

"Well then, in that case," Jesse started, "I'll have a chocolate-banana milkshake filled with Lucky Charm marshmallows and gummies shaped like famous German philosophers with a cactus sticking out of it."

"And I'll have Lychee bubble tea served in a cowboy hat with little papaya fish swimming around in it while a tiny bald eagle blows bubbles on the rim."

"And can we have two bendy straws to go with those?" Jesse asked.

"Here you go," said the waitress, handing them their drinks without missing a beat. She smiled and commented

"You've flown with us before, haven't you?"

"Oh, my god!" Christine squealed. "My tiny bald eagle is wearing suspenders and roller skates! So cute!"

As the stewardess moved on to the next row, Jesse poked around in his drink and found the gummy heads of Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant floating around in it. He and Christine gave each other a high-five.

"Next time, we have to order something with fireworks," Christine said.

"I was thinking of a punch bowl with its own halftime show," Jesse said. He poked around in his drink and more gummies surfaced. "Ooh! I got Albert Schweitzer!"

While the airlines still had their share of problems, the actual experience of flying had changed immensely. The gods had modified airplanes with expanded interiors, allowing for every seat to be first-class recliners complete with massaging features. You didn't even have to shut off all electronics prior to take-off. But the best part had to be the complimentary beverages. The stewardesses' carts worked like 3D printers, creating any drink you could imagine in seconds and even decorating them with enchanted figurines like the roller-skating eagle on Christine's cowboy hat. Jesse and Christine had discovered this perk early in their travels and made a game out of ordering outrageous drinks every time they flew. So far, the only downside to flying was the personnel. Since demigods were allowed to fly again, airplanes often ended up wherever the pilots felt like going, meaning a flight to Hawaii could wind up in the Congo if the pilot suddenly decided to go join his friends on a treasure hunt. Overall, the experience of flying was still enjoyable. The gods themselves had faster, more personal means of

traveling long distances, but Odin decided against sharing those methods with humanity until the time was right. For now, mankind would just have to settle for flying in luxury.

"Here's to flying in luxury," Christine toasted Jesse.

"Enjoy it while you can," Jesse said.

"How long do you think the gods are going to let us fly cheap like this?"

"A few more months, I'd imagine," Jesse said, "I hear they're hiking up prices in the spring."

"Man, that's gonna blow," Christine sighed. "At least we've seen most of the world already. I really should be getting back to work at some point."

Christine had recently come off a four-month contract job in New York City where her bunny gallery was showcased at the Metropolitan Museum. They even commissioned her to paint a mural of every "Saturday Night Live" cast member as a bunny which would later be unveiled this spring in time for Easter.

One would've thought Jesse and Christine were a happy married couple toasting each other on their honeymoon, but couldn't have been farther from the truth. Jesse and Christine had attempted a romantic relationship for about a week following Pandora's attack, but both quickly discovered they lacked the basic human cravings that followed romance. Kissing and cuddling often got cast aside for video games, and spending the night together meant a pajama party with pizza. Yet somehow, life between them was working out perfectly without any of the traditional relationship labels.

"So you're really going back to work?" Jesse asked.

"We all work, Jess," she said. "We've got to plant our feet sometime."

"Or we could keep going without the plane," Jesse said.

"We could do some cross-country to L.A. after we're done with Vegas."

"You have to go home at some point," she said. "You can't hide from Nigel forever."

"I can try," Jesse insisted. "If I have to hear one more lecture about how I'm wasting my potential..."

"Angel training might be good for you," she said. "How couldn't it be?"

"He's never even met an angel," Jesse protested.

"He met you," she reminded him. "He kicked your angel ass, remember?"

"It didn't count; he was possessed by demon blood."

"Or you can't admit that your brother might be right."

"Are you siding with him?"

"Jesse, you can't even hold down a real job," Christine said, "What we're doing; this is fun. But your family, your responsibilities... that's life."

"So you saying I can't be responsible?"

"I didn't say that," she said.

"You insinuated it," Jesse noted.

"Well, you have to admit you tend to be a tad scatter-brained," she said.

"Name one time."

"You climbed and fell off the Eiffel Tower chasing a pigeon that stole your chocolate bar."

"Name more times."

"You also fell off the Arch of Constantine, Huayna Picchu and the Royal Canadian Mint."

"Name a time where I wasn't chasing a chocolate bar."

"Thanksgiving," she said. "You told Trisha we'd see her tonight, and then you bought tickets for Istanbul."

"I had turkey on the mind," Jesse protested. "It was an honest mistake."



"Just admit you're afraid."

"I'm not afraid to go home," Jesse said. "And if I'm lying, may God strike me where I--"

The pilot's voice came on over the intercom. His voice crackled as if the system were damaged. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. We're hitting a little turbulence and would appreciate it if everybody could put on those seatbelts we said you would almost never need to use."

"Jesse?" Christine looked concerned. "Did you just challenge the Creator to strike you down while we're in a plane?"

The lights in the plane flickered.

The little bald eagle on Christine's drink stopping blowing bubbles and fell over, now completely inanimate.

"I swear it wasn't me," Jesse said.

They heard the pilot shout over the intercom to the co-pilot, "What the hell is that?!"

The plane rocked violently, throwing Jesse and his drink forward from his seat. Christine clung to her seat belt as the cockpit ahead exploded open.

In a brief moment, Jesse thought he saw what looked like the pilot and co-pilot getting punched out of the cockpit by a large hulkish man in a loincloth. The three of them flew down the aisle, hit the back of the plane, and tore the tail off the body. The plane spun out of control as the tail was barely hanging onto the plane by a shred of fuselage. The passengers screamed as oxygen masks fell from the overhead compartments.

The sudden depressurization was more powerful than any normal airplane could have produced. The expanded space that the gods created inside the plane was escaping into the outside world. Five seated passengers and all four stewardesses were immediately sucked from the plane.

"Be right back!" Jesse shouted as he got to his feet. He raced to the back of the falling plane and dived out.

The piercing wind froze his face as he fell through the clouds and concentrated.

A small fire sparked in his heart. His soul came to life, igniting the holy fire in his body. Vibrant bluish-white ethereal wings erupted from his back and his body glowed with the light of Heaven.

He could now sense all the people who were falling through the clouds: five passengers and four stewardesses. The pilot, co-pilot and thing that had destroyed the plane were nowhere to be seen.

Jesse summoned a surge of energy that propelled himself towards the first falling passengers, an elderly couple. He caught both of them with graceful ease, then sped off towards the next two, a businessman and rotund gentleman. His arms almost full, Jesse finally caught the last falling passenger, a young hysterical woman who clung to Jesse's head.

"Everybody stay calm," he shouted, "It's just a little turbulence!"

As he peered through the clouds, Jesse briefly glanced what appeared to be the large loinclothed man flapping his arms furiously. Jesse heard him shout through the clouds:

"Found you! Ha ha!"

"I don't have time for this," Jesse said, flying towards the falling stewardesses. All four women were holding hands and falling in a skydiving formation.

"I might be able to squeeze in a few more!" he shouted

"Are you all humans? Can anyone survive this fall?"

The stewardesses shouted, "We'll be fine! We do this all the time! Save the passengers!"

Jesse nodded. In this world, if someone claimed they could survive a fall from this height, they probably could. Most demigods could survive a fall from space if they had to. "Everybody hang on, we're heading back to the plane!" Jesse shouted to their protests. As unsafe as a crashing plane was, it was still the closest place to unload the five people.

He soared towards the plane at supersonic speed. The plane was caught in a tailspin, so Jesse had to time his re-entry perfectly. As the back of the plane spun around, he landed inside of it and helped the five passengers secure themselves in some empty seats.

All the other passengers were either panicking or bracing for impact. Thankfully, they were all now wearing their seatbelts and nobody else was missing..

Jesse then hurried to the front where he found Christine staring into the cockpit. A large hole was torn through the front, taking out the windshield and a large chunk of the console. The wind blasted through the cockpit as they looked upon the ground slowly rising up to meet them.

"Can anyone here fly a plane?" Jesse shouted to the passengers.

Nobody answered.

"Christine, can you fly a plane?" Jesse asked.

"I don't think this thing is flyable at all," Christine motioned to the dangling tail.

At that moment, the plane got struck again. It tilted heavily to the left and the tailspin slowed. While their descent continued steadily, Christine was able to get to her feet.

Out the left side window was a large muscular man who was hanging onto the wing. The man was wearing a helmet with ram horns and waving enthusiastically to Christine.

"Hi!" he shouted, "Me am Krios!"

"I don't believe it," Jesse exclaimed. "Wait here, Christine. Try to fly the plane or something."

Jesse let himself fall out the back of the plane and turned on his angel form again. This time, he reached out and let a beautiful crystal sword materialize in his palm. This sword was a keepsake from his past life with Nigel, and he kept it in his room at home for safekeeping. But in cases like this, he could easily summon it using his angel powers. He flew towards the starboard front of the plane to intercept Krios. Jesse guessed he must be a deity of sorts by how easily Krios was crawling over a falling jet. Suddenly, Jesse's wings vanished and he found himself pulled away by the wind. He reached out and braced himself against the plane's wing, right next to the spinning turbine. His hand held onto the sword, but he lost his grip quickly. The sword fell into the clouds before.

"Darn it!" Jesse cursed.

"You okay, fire-man?" Krios asked.

"Just dandy," Jesse groaned as he clung to the wing. He could feel the pain of his chest being crushed by the wing, but he wasn't healing for some reason. He struggled to activate his soul but the angel within wasn't surfacing.

"Listen, Krios, I don't know why you're crashing this plane, but you seem like a nice guy and I could really use your help at the moment."

"Me am sorry about plane," he said, reaching down and grabbing Jesse by the collar. "But me not supposed to help you. Me am supposed to capture you."

"All right, fine, I'll save it myself!" Jesse yelled through the wind, "Just let go!"

"But me gots to make you my prisoner!"

"And you can do that!" Jesse said, "Right after this plane is safe on the ground!"

"Well... okay," Krios said as he released Jesse. Jesse was sucked into the jet engine and spit out the other side in shreds.

The darkness hit Jesse instantly. His body had just been destroyed in the engine, but his steel heart passed through it, still intact and falling through the sky. In a moment, he'd regenerate.

That moment then passed.

He was still in darkness.

He'd never gone this long without regenerating before.

He counted to ten.

One... two... three... four...

The light seared his eyes and he found himself falling.

Without a moment to lose, he summoned his angel form. It was back on!

There wasn't much time left. He flew back inside the plane, grabbed the tail from the inside, and pulled it against the fuselage. The end still rattled around violently, but Jesse's angelic will was keeping the rest of it from ripping apart at the seams.

The plane started to pull out of its nose-dive as Christine pulled back on the yoke in the cockpit.

"We're doing it!" Christine yelled. Krios could be seen staring in from the hole at the front of the plane. He was clapping his hands gaily as Jesse held the two parts of the plane together.

Suddenly, Jesse's wings flickered.

"Not again," he muttered. *Why was this happening of all times?* The soul energy on his watch still had a good forty-three minutes of power left. "Christine! I don't think I can hold on!"

Christine looked to the giant man crawling into the cockpit and screamed, "Go help him!"

"But me am not supposed to help fire-man!" he exclaimed.

"Krios, you're the only one who can help!" Christine said.

"Please, do something!"

Jesse's power gave out.

The tail, no longer anchored by divine will, pulled Jesse from the plane.

Suddenly, Krios reached out and grabbed both Jesse and the tail at once. He carefully pulled them back in. Jesse wound up on the plane's floor and watched as Krios held the tail in place.

"No worry," Krios happily said. "Me not helping you! Me helping everyone else!"

"Much appreciated."

"Krios," Christine called. "Hold it steady!"

Krios kept it steady. Jesse hurried back to the cockpit and saw the ground coming up fast. Miles of desert were ahead, leading to the edge of a massive canyon.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked.

"The Grand Canyon," she replied.

"Can you land it before we get to the edge?" Jesse asked.

"I don't even know how to lower the landing gear!"

Jesse realized what he had to do, but wasn't sure he could do it.

He took a breath and focused once more.

His wings reappeared. They flickered, but they were back on nonetheless.

"Just land it on me," he said as he flew from the cockpit.

The ground was rising quickly as Jesse steadied himself beneath the front of the plane. His wings propelled him upwards against the nose and he placed his palms against the fuselage, readying his feet. This was about to get tricky.

He hit the ground running.

His angel form held up as he ran the plane along the ground and carefully tried to slow it down. The tail end

dragged on the desert floor, but Krios held onto it tenaciously.

The weight of the plane pressed down as they crept closer to the edge of the Grand Canyon. Jesse finally stopped running and dug his heels into the ground. The plane violently slowed to a near-halt. With several metres to go, he set the plane down by shutting off his angel form. His wings disappeared and the plane fell on top of him. His body vapourized into flames as the wreckage swept over him.

The plane skidded to a halt, with the nose sticking out several feet over the edge of the canyon.

Christine and every passenger breathed a sigh of relief. The plane then lurched backwards as Krios dragged it away from the edge to safety.

Christine grabbed the intercom and spoke to the passengers: "This is your pilot speaking. We're pulling away from the edge of the Grand Canyon. Please wait until the plane has come to a complete halt and then exit the plane past the large horned man in the loincloth. And thank you for flying Asgard Air."

Soon, every passenger was outside. Many tended to the injured. Others were still in shock. Quite a few were either praying or yelling at their phones, as all electronic devices seemed to be malfunctioning. Nobody's prayers were being heard.

No one paid heed to the massive Titan lumbering around outside the wreckage. As angry as they were for his destruction of the plane, no one dared face him and his loincloth. Krios searched the dirt of the plane's trail trying to locate Jesse.

Christine was the first to find him, or rather part of him. Several yards behind the wreckage was a heart-sized metal container pressed into the dirt. Christine dug it up

and carefully examined it. It was from this heart that Jesse always regenerated. Small arterial holes were shaped into the container which allowed Jesse's fire to come out.

Christine peered inside and saw a pulsing flame, glowing as if it were trying to reignite itself.

Jesse's heart was alive, but he wasn't regenerating.

"Me take this," Krios said, as he plucked Jesse's heart from her hands. "Me give back fire-man when friends are done with other fire-man."

"Wait, Krios, stop!" Christine shouted, but it was too late.

Krios leapt over the plane with Jesse's heart in hand and disappeared into the canyon. She hurried to the cliffs in time to see Krios racing off along the edge of the Colorado River.

As Krios vanished, Christine felt her pocket vibrate. She checked her phone to discover it had found a signal.

Several other people were also excitedly clamoring for their electronic devices as the plane's lights came on and everything around them began to work again. A few people could even hear the gods in their heads telling them that help was on its way.

But Christine knew otherwise.

She hurriedly called Halifax.

Something else was on its way.



## 7. The Hanging Gardens

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were built over fourteen hundred years ago in the heart of Iraq and were considered one of the original seven Wonders of the World. Built by Emperor Nebuchadnezzar II for his wife Amytis, the Garden was a five-story truncated pyramid, each story supported by large stone pillars and decorated in luscious green vegetation with beautiful engravings on the walls. Flowers, roots, and hanging vines were abundant through the tapering structure, making it the most beautiful structure in all of Babylon for its time. Now the Hanging Gardens were hanging in the air over Halifax, and had been converted into a five-star flying restaurant, complete with patios and live music. The Garden itself delicately rotated over the city, having been tethered to a highrise below to prevent it from drifting. The restaurant was only accessible via flying cab which, along with the skytrain and emergency vehicles, was the only other kind of flying vehicle permitted in the city. Nigel and Trisha had a wonderful table on the second level patio overlooking the city. In the distance, they could see the twilight of the sunset, which was a real treat for both of them. Dining at this hour meant both vampires and Aemons could enjoy sunsets without fear of igniting into flames in the middle of a restaurant.

Nigel perused the menu and wondered why there was so much steak and not enough salad options. He was sure steak was nice, but eating meat (let alone tasting blood in general) caused his homicidal demon side to come out. He settled for vegetable soup.

Trisha, on the other hand, already knew what she was getting: top grilled sirloin (covered in human blood) with a side of the house salad (covered in human blood) and to drink, a Bloody Mary (with human blood). All vampires only needed a few ounces of human blood per day to survive and the gods seemed to have an unlimited supply for some reason. If it weren't for her primal instincts, she'd never have to hunt for blood again.

Much like deities, neither one of them actually required food to survive, but since their bodies processed it like any normal human's, they were perfectly okay with stuffing their faces for the fun of it.

As they waited for their food, Nigel swirled the wine in his glass, completely lost in thought as Trish regaled him with one of her video game stories.

"...and then Magnus ran into the wyvern's lair without us and completely botched the raid!" Trisha said. "We lost half our party trying get back down the mountain. Between you and me, I think our demigod friends should sticking to slaying real dragons."

"Yeah, need to have real dragons," Nigel said in a daze as he watched the sunset.

Trisha snapped her fingers in front of his face and asked "Nigel, are you with me?"

"Sorry, just something on my mind," he said.

"First you're asking me not to go out on a hunt tonight, now you're not even here," Trisha said as she leaned in and asked, "What's wrong?"

Nigel checked around to see if anybody was listening in. Above their table was a small, white pyramid-shaped 'privacy stone' that canceled out omnipresence. Traditionally, 'pyramid power' was one of the few things that could siphon away divine energy, making sure no deity could listen in unless they were addressed directly.

Nigel decided to fill her in. "Odin came to see me today after class. There's been some trouble in Asgard and he's asked me to come train the Zodiac Knight for a few days." "As in, become Ptolemy's tutor?"

"Yes, that kid."

"And you're not going?"

"It's complicated."

"What kind of trouble are we looking at?" she inquired.

"Just some bad omens that have the higher-ups running scared," Nigel said. "Somebody might be trying to start that war I've been going on about."

"Is it Loki?" she said. "In the movies, it's always Loki."

"No, it's someone who goes by the name of Solomon," Nigel said. "But it shouldn't concern us. Whatever's going on, it's in Odin's court to fix."

"But how serious is it exactly?" she asked, sounding very interested. "If it doesn't concern us, why do you look so concerned?"

Nigel looked about shiftily and then leaned in close to Trisha. "All right, I'm going to let you in on something. But this is a highly confidential thing from my past."

"Do tell."

"I received word that a friend of mine was killed today," he said. "Thor."

"As in, *the* Thor?" she said. "How do you know Thor?"

"If I had to pick three elder gods who didn't strictly piss me off," Nigel said, "Poseidon, Quetzalcoatl and Thor would be right up there. In fact, when Pandora put a bounty on

Jesse and myself in the late fourteenth century, Thor stuck his neck out to help us escape Germany.”

“What were you doing in Germany?”

“Living under a rock, but that isn’t important,” Nigel said.

“What is important is this.”

Nigel carefully took the poetry book from his pocket and showed it to Trisha. She couldn’t make sense of the writing. She asked, “What is this?”

“This is a transcript of the ‘Prose Edda’,” Nigel said. “It was a gift from Thor. It’s a fictionalized account of Scandinavian mythology that includes a complete recap of the legendary Battle of Ragnarök: the Twilight of the Gods at the hands of the Titans.”

“As in, it’s somebody’s fan-fiction of how the gods die,” she said.

“The gods used to think it was hilarious,” Nigel said.

“Roosters and horns sound off a great battle. From the east comes an army of the dead on a ship made of nail clippings. From the west come the Frost Giants and, from the south, come Fire Giants. A great wolf named Skoll devours the sun, a sea serpent battles Thor, most of the Nordic gods get killed, and the nine realms are set ablaze.”

“But how does this apply to the real Thor dying?” she asked.

“There was something in how Odin described it,” Nigel said. “In the poem, Thor takes nine steps before dying. When Odin told me the same happened, there was genuine fear in his voice. There was something on the tip of his tongue. I think there’ve been other omens.”

“But’s it fictional, not a prophecy,” Trisha said. “Right?”

“Books have ways of starting wars,” Nigel said. “There are fanatics who believe in this book and if anyone ever wanted to provoke the Titans, using these poems as a strategy guide would be the way to do it. But creating these

omens would require powerful magic, and that level of magic was long since secured by one person until I took her out of this world.”

“You think defeating Pandora was a mistake?” she asked.

“I feel I might have left a door open,” Nigel said, “and someone might be stepping through.”

“Do you think she had an apprentice?” she asked.

“Besides Nione, I mean.”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think the beefed-up security is going to help,” Nigel said, looking out the window. No one else noticed it, but there were more Thunderbirds patrolling the skies than usual. There were even snipers camping on rooftops. Nigel couldn’t help but feel the snipers were looking directly at him.

“If the gods are praying to you for help, maybe you should answer,” Trisha said.

“I’m starting to think so, too,” Nigel said.

Nigel’s phone suddenly buzzed. Somebody was calling. The name “Christine” appeared on the display.

“It’s the kids,” Nigel said as he answered it, “Christine?”

“Nigel, something’s happened to Jesse!” Christine said.

“Take it easy, where are you?”

“Climbing down the side of the Grand Canyon,” she said.

“Our plane’s destroyed and Jesse’s heart is gone.”

“What?” Trisha asked as she overheard them.

“As in he’s dead?” Nigel asked.

“As in he’s not regenerating,” she replied. “A Titan named Krios stole his heart and ran down the Colorado River with it. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“Not personally, no.”

“Did she say Krios?” Trisha asked.

“I think he cancels out energy,” Christine said, “Phones, planes, deities, Fire-Bloods, nothing works right around him.”

"That's because Krios is an anomalous Ram Titan," Trisha said. "Regard of your Age level, his presence nullifies divine magic and drains the player's mana."

"The player...?" Nigel asked, surprised that she heard of this guy.

"Krios is an optional boss character in my game," she said.

"Get within twelve feet of him and your power level drops by ninety-eight percent."

"He came for Jesse and said somebody's coming for you," Christine said. "You need to get out of there now."

"All right, Christine, but you have to climb back up that cliff face and wait for help," Nigel said.

"No can do," she said. "I have to follow Krios while the trail's fresh."

"Into the Grand Canyon?"

"It's not the worst place I've followed Jesse," she said.

Just then, the city exploded.

Everyone in the restaurant turned their attention to the windows. Debris from skyscrapers rained across the skyline as enormous fireballs came crashing down through the city. They looked like living meteors as the fireballs swirled around the taller buildings and fell upon the people below. Nigel watched the Thunderbirds scatter as the fireballs honed in on their positions. This wasn't another random Aeonomega; this was a precision strike.

The restaurant shook violently. Nigel and Trisha fell from their seats, their drinks spilling everywhere. The Hanging Gardens continued to shake as explosions rocked the interior. Customers hurried for cover.

Then, through the windows and exits stormed a group of monstrous men made of hot embers. They flipped over tables and cast fireballs at the bouncers as they made their entrance.

Before anyone could spot them, Nigel flipped over his table and took cover behind it with Trisha. He pulled it up against a nearby wall to provide cover on both sides. He then carefully peered over the table to inspect the situation. The restaurant had erupted into chaos with fire and dishes scattered across the floor.

Nigel recognized two of the people coming up the stairs. One was a bronze body-builder in a speedo with a golden beard full of embers named Atlas. The one leading the charge was Surtur. Behind them, several more Fire Giants swarmed into the room armed with iron-hot spears. They started rallying the patrons and covering the exits. The last one up the stairs was a sixteen-foot mechanical man-bear that lumbered behind them with fire and steam pouring out of its joints. The bear's head scraped against the ceiling as it walked.

"Everybody on the ground!" a Fire Giant yelled.

"No funny business," another one said, throwing a fireball at a nearby table. As the table exploded, the two demigods sitting there dove to the ground. "First person to pray to the cops gets charbroiled!"

"What's happening?" Christine asked on the phone.

"We'll call you back," Nigel said as he hung up.

## 8. Fire and Shadow

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Surtur shouted, his voice booming over the privacy stones, "Gods and demigods! My name is Surtur, Lord of the Fire Jötunn, and I'll be your server tonight. Tonight's special is death and destruction with a side-order of *pain!*"

"Yeah!" Atlas shouted, flexing his muscles at everyone, "And instead of soup and salad, Atlas is going to punch your faces until your faces are... soup and salad. With fries."

Surtur turned with annoyance to Atlas. "Atlas, a quick word?"

"Yo, bro!"

"See Mishnykov?" Atlas gestured to the giant bear robot.

"See how he's maintaining an intimidating presence and not saying anything? I need that from you right now."

"Atlas does what Atlas does."

"Right, but if Atlas could stand up straight, look serious, and keep his mouth shut," Surtur explained, "Atlas would look a lot more fearsome. It would also help if Atlas could put some pants on."

"Atlas cannot be censored!" Atlas exclaimed. "Atlas is proud of his divine physique!"

"Atlas will shut up and let me do the talking," Surtur said, turning to the other giants in the room. "The rest of you



spread out and find the Fire-Blood. Destroy anyone who stands in your way."

One businessman stood up in a three hundred dollar suit. He looked exceptionally brave and stupid.

"I am Peterson, God of Accounting," he said as he made a fist, "and if you want to hurt these people, you'll have to go through me."

Surtur pointed one finger at him. With a shooting gesture, a fire missile flew from Surtur's fingertip. Peterson was blown out the window, across the city, and into a explosive gas truck. Peterson survived. His three hundred dollar suit didn't.

"Anybody else want to be a hero?" Surtur asked.

Several demigods raised their hands, but quickly lowered them after reconsidering.

Nigel peered over the edge of his table and looked around. Nobody was looking right at him, meaning the privacy stones above were doing their job. For the time being, he and Trish were invisible to the room.

"It's Surtur," Nigel said. "Odin was right."

"Is he relevant?"

"He's the star of Ragnarök," Nigel said. "The one who sets the nine realms ablaze and destroys the world. All these years, I thought the gods had him on a leash."

"So what are we going to do?" she asked.

"We wait for an opening," Nigel said. "Then make for the exits."

"But you can fight these guys, right?"

"I'd rather not," Nigel said. "With Titans, it's like punching a steamroller."

Trisha soaked up some blood from her fallen meal with a napkin and offered it to Nigel.

"Then go demon on their asses," she said. "Find out what they did to Jesse."

"Too dangerous."

"I thought you had your demon under control."

"Going demon is the nuclear option," Nigel said. "These Titans are here for me and the best thing I can be is gone." The table lifted, exposing them to the room. Nigel and Trisha looked up to see a Fire Giant looming over them. The table turned to ash in its fiery grasp and the Fire Giant growled at them.

"What if being gone isn't an option?" she asked Nigel.

"We make it one."

With that, Nigel grabbed a fallen pitcher of water and threw the ice cubes into the Fire Giant's face. The ice steamed into its eyes, forcing it to drop the table. Nigel took Trisha by the hand and the two of them raced for the stairs. As they ran, Nigel flung various desserts and drinks from the surrounding tables at any giants in their way. The giants were startled by the sudden onslaught of Tiramisu and Baked Alaska.

Atlas saw them and quickly bounded for the stairway shouting, "Atlas spots them and Atlas gots them!"

Trisha snatched a bloody steak off a table and flung it at Atlas' face. Atlas clawed at it as the cattle blood seared into his face and he fell over screaming, "Atlas has not gots them! Atlas is in pain! Horrible, horrible pain!"

Surtur turned to them and shouted, "Mishnykov, don't let them get away!"

The bear robot lurched towards the stairs. As it moved in to intercept them, Nigel snatched a baked potato off a table, slid between Mishnykov's legs and jammed the potato into what appeared to be an exhaust pipe protruding from the bear's hindquarters. The man-bear machine started choking on its own steam as Nigel and Trisha bounded towards the stairs.

"Enough of this!" Surtur shouted as he aimed his ring at the two of them. Dark energy surged from his body and lashed out across the room. Nigel pushed Trisha out of the way in time to get ensnared in Surtur's power. Surtur dragged him into the center of the room. With a circular blast of energy from his body, Surtur cleared the surrounding tables and formed a ring of black fire around himself and Nigel.

Nigel watched as Surtur activated his Second Age form, an oily dark presence forming over his body from his ring.

Even for a Titan, it was an unnatural sight to see.

Surtur laughed and said, "So this is the famous Fire-Blood, Naveen. I imagined you might look older in person."

"And you looked better on your mug shot," Nigel said as he got to his feet. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Surtur? Attacking an entire city? The gods won't let you get away with this."

"I'm through with gods," Surtur said. "My people have been persecuted and punished by their lot for long enough. But now I wear Pandora's ring and command the power of the Second Age. And if destroying you in battle is all it takes to cripple Odin's regime, then so be it."

With that, Surtur raised his snake arm and blasted a beam of lightning at Nigel. Nigel dived out of the way as the beam ripped through the floor and tore through the wall behind him.

"Surtur, you have to listen to me," Nigel said. "Solomon is tricking you. Pandora never had a magic ring."

"One problem at a time," Surtur said, melting a hole in the floor at Nigel's feet with his fire-breathing wolf arm. Nigel jumped back in time and kept his cool. He looked through the flames trying to spot Trisha, but only saw Titans closing in around them. Surtur glared at him through his dark, empty gaze.

"I'm not kidding," Nigel said. "I don't know what's in that ring you were given, but it can't be Second Age magic. You need to take it off before it's too late!"

Surtur lunged at Nigel. Nigel saw an opportunity and took it. He stepped inward as Surtur lunged, grabbed his ring hand, and threw the massive Titan over his shoulder, slamming him to the ground. In the process, he quickly removed Surtur's ring. The dark essence vanished from Surtur's body as soon as the ring was removed.

Nigel stopped to clear his head and let his shoulder heal from throwing the Titan's weight. The fire burned brightly beneath his shoulder's skin. Only then did he notice something strange about the ring he'd taken. It was changing colour in his hand and faint lettering could be read on the inside. A startling realization took Nigel by surprise.

"Made in China?" he read. "It's a mood ring?"

Surtur stood back up, the dark presence having returned to him. He turned to Nigel with his mouth wrapped in oily darkness in the shape of a cruel grinning face. Even Surtur seemed taken aback by this turn of events before he found himself speaking in a harsh, hollow voice, *"And so the curtain has been lifted. Well played, Naveen. You were quite right about the ring, but I assure you, the power of the Second Age is alive and well. Pandora's spells are indeed in effect."*

The presence fell away from Surtur's face, leaving behind a horrified expression. He had not spoken those words himself. He managed to croak out a few words. "Whats going on? I didn't say that!"

The presence overwhelmed Surtur's face again and spoke, *"You played your role well, Surtur, but as our opening gambit has been denied, so too must I change our strategy."*

"Solomon!" Surtur shouted, "This was not part of the deal!" The voice returned. *"The deal still stands. By your hands, the gods will fall."*

Surtur's right arm involuntarily snapped forward and fired a burst of energy across the restaurant, blowing out the circle of dark fire in the process. Patrons and giants were vapourised in its wake as the creature controlling Surtur tore the restaurant to shreds. Outside their circle, Atlas and Mishnykov hit the floor in surprise as lightning swept over their heads.

"Atlas does not approve!" Atlas shouted.

"Sorry!" Surtur shouted as he tried to get his arm under control.

The dark Titan bounded towards Nigel and pinned him to the floor with his wolf arm. Nigel struggled under Surtur's weight, who was desperately trying to break free of his situation. The creature took control of Surtur's mouth again.

*"It's taken a lot of planning to bring us here tonight,"* it said.

*"And now that we're together again, it's time we resume our old game with you as the star player."*

"What game?" Nigel asked.

*"Surtur came to destroy a Fire-Blood,"* it said, *"but I've come to destroy the real you. There's enough blood about for you to feast on, so please, show your true side and indulge me in a real fight."*

"The gods will tear you apart before I ever do," Nigel said.

*"Go ahead and pray to them if you must,"* the creature said. *"The gods are too busy for your prayers."*

"The gods I trust don't wait for prayers," Nigel said as he looked out the window. At that moment, Quetzalcoatl soared in through the patio, armed with a glowing green quarterstaff. He struck Surtur in the head, launching him across the room.

Behind him flew several Thunderbirds armed with Magma Cannons. They fired upon the surrounding Fire Giants. Tiny strands of molten metal flew through the air and wrapped themselves around their targets, cooling instantly and incapacitating the Titans.

Mishnykov took this as his cue to exit. He grabbed Atlas with one arm and hurried for the window. Together, they leapt from the window and fell into the city streets below, escaping the skirmish.

As Thunderbirds ushered patrons to the exits to taxi them back to the street, Quetzalcoatl helped Nigel to his feet.

"Took you long enough," Nigel said.

"My friend, you have no idea how bad it is out there," Quetzalcoatl said. He swung his staff again, throwing another Fire Giant across the room.

"We need to get these people out of here," Nigel said.

"Surtur's been possessed by some kind of demon and--"

Just then, a great surge of lightning cut through the restaurant, shredding through the ceilings and floors.

Thunderbirds caught in the blast were disintegrated, dropping their weapons in the process. Nigel and Quetzalcoatl stepped aside as the restaurant began to rip in half.

At the far end of the room stood Surtur, slowly growing in size with the creature swelling on his body like a pulsating vein.

*"You look upon no demon,"* the creature said. *"Only Solomon!"*

He fired another lightning blast at Nigel and Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl pushed Nigel out of the way and prepared to take the brunt of the blast himself.

"Don't!" Nigel shouted.

It was too late. Quetzalcoatl, not prepared for the amount of power this creature harboured, was destroyed instantly.

His body vanished into a green vapour, leaving nothing behind.

Nigel backed up against a table in horror.

The creature prepared to fire another blast at Nigel.

*“Come now, Fire-Blood,” it shouted. “Become that which you hate!”*

Surtur struggled to speak through the presence. “Help me! I can’t control him!”

The temptation dug in as Nigel scanned the room for emergency blood sources.

Suddenly, a strand of molten metal flew at Surtur from the other side of the room and wrapped itself around his firing arm. The creature struggled in pain to rip off the stygian steel, but the steel was causing a swell in his arm

Trisha hurried up to Nigel armed with one of the dropped Magma Cannons. It looked too heavy for her, but she seemed determined to carry it.

“The restaurant’s coming down,” she said.

She and Nigel hurried down the stairs as the creature wrestled with the metal strands around its arm. Trisha watched as it forced its arm to shrink in size, making it easier to pull off the ensnaring steel wire. Normally, deities wrapped in steel couldn’t do that. This was all the more cause to run.

As they arrived downstairs, several of the patrons had already escaped in the restaurant’s flying cabs. The ceiling above was crumbling as the restaurant fell apart around them.

“There’s one cab left,” Trisha said, pointing to a white shuttle parked outside the entrance. They hurried towards it, the floor tilting drastically as the restaurant tipped out of balance. Tables and chairs swept past them as they hurried for the cab.

As they approached the entrance, a bolt of lightning struck past them and the cab exploded before their eyes. Behind them stood the possessed Surtur as he fired off another blast in their direction. Before Trisha could squeeze off another shot at him, she and Nigel lost her footing and fell under the second blast of lightning. The two of them slid down the floor towards the patio railing. The weight of the restaurant lurched over and Nigel braced for impact as they fell over the rails and rolled over the planters. At the very last moment, Nigel's hand brushed against one of the thousands of vines hanging from the restaurant. He clung tightly as he fell and found himself dangling from the bottom of the Gardens by one hand, holding onto Trisha's with the other. From here, he could see the restaurant's sandstone underbelly along with the large iron chain anchoring it to the highrise below. The chain was growing slack as the restaurant descended quickly.

Above them, the creature peered over the edge at its prey and laughed. Nigel and Trisha dangled helplessly under the falling Garden.

"Swing me!" Trisha said, raising her heavy gun with one hand, "I have a shot!"

Nigel tried to swing her, but faltered as his grip began to fail. The vines were breaking under their weight. Below, he spotted a passing cab coming their way.

"I can throw you to that cab!"

"No, trust me, I can hit him!" she said. "Just swing me again!"

"Sorry, honey."

To Trisha's protests, he swung her out into traffic instead. She fell and landed on the roof of the cab which quickly shuttled her away from the chaos.

Surtur reached down and grabbed Nigel by the scruff of his shirt. With a single leap, he bounded up the side of the



building and landed on the Garden's roof just as the base collided with the skyscraper below. The Garden continued to crumble.

The creature showed Nigel the chaos and violence erupting through the city. Gods and Titans were still battling through the streets and skies, destroying everything in the crossfire.

*"You could easily end this; you need only give in to your demon,"* the creature said.

"What are you?" Nigel asked.

*"As I said, I am Solomon,"* the creature replied. *"I am a proxy of his wrath, and through me, the world will watch as the Titans parade through your city hunting down everyone you've ever loved. Your friends, your woman, your brother... all will suffer until your demon steps forward."*

"You're insane."

*"And you,"* the creature said as it dropped Nigel on the roof, *"are getting one last chance. Find me again when you return from Hell."*

He rose into the air, aimed his serpent arm at Nigel and charged it up to full power.

*"And if you see Pandora,"* he said, *"tell her there's a new Shadow-Blood in town."*

He fired a blast of dark energy dead-center through Nigel's heart into the Gardens below.

High above the city, the Hanging Gardens exploded into millions of pieces.

Nigel Hunter fared no better.

## 9. Bound by Darkness

When Jesse had been killed by Vladimir during the summer's battle, his essence returned to its primary source of origin. With Heaven being the secondary source, this meant a trip into Hell.

Based on Jesse's description, Nigel had a few expectations of the afterlife. Fire, brimstone, and a giant fire-stoking demon named Urobach all waited for him on the other side. There was even supposed to be a small reception area complete with furniture and magazines. Most importantly, however, there was an alcove with a small door in it that an Aemon could use to return to the physical realm. If they had Pandora's key, of course. Nigel's arrival, however, took many different twists from Jesse's. Instead of feeling the intense burn of Hell, he only felt cold numbness. Instead of a reception room, Nigel found himself curled up on a stone dais only a few metres in diameter. Instead of fire and brimstone, the walls were a cold, shimmering grey colour and the sea of fire surrounding him was now a frozen blue sea of icy shards. And finally, instead of the giant fire-stoking demon, there was now... a giant, angry demon chipping away at the ice around his feet with a shovel.

Nigel looked up at Urobach, who was off in the distance cursing this sudden freeze. Urobach's size was about as immense as that of any Titan Nigel had met today. He wore dirty blue overalls and his horned face was dirty from all the smoke and soot he worked in all day. The huge demon barely took sight of Nigel until the Aemon got to his feet and started searching for the alcove.

There had initially been a bridge of stones that Jesse had crossed to find the alcove, and sure enough, it was still here. Nigel quickly skipped over the bridge and hurried to the crack in the wall where he found a small square door set into the rock. It was the size of Pandora's Box, which seemed appropriate since this whole realm was inside of it. Nigel scoured the floor for the key. It had been pushed back into the box's keyhole after Jesse's previous escape. It should have still been here somewhere, but Nigel found nothing.

"Damn it!" he cursed, "Where is it?"

"Are you responsible for this?" The deep, guttural voice of Urobach asked, as he bent down towards the alcove to address Nigel. "Hell freezes over for very few people."

"Where's the key, Urobach?" Nigel asked sternly.

"Not even a hello?" Urobach smiled, "Naveen, you break my heart. After nine thousand years, you finally come home and you're ready to leave so soon?"

"I won't ask again," Nigel said, his breath on the edge of infuriation.

Urobach laughed, "You're threatening *me*? You have no power down here! You have no friends! Your death didn't even earn you a soul! You're here *forever*!"

Nigel picked up a small rock and threw it at Urobach's eye. Urobach flinched and let out a tiny yelp.

"Key!" Nigel demanded.

"I don't have it!" Urobach said. "It was taken."

"Taken by who? Does your boss Lucifer have it?"

"Don't say his name!" Urobach insisted, "I don't need the big guy looking in and finding out I let the fires freeze again. It was taken by... someone else."

"Who?"

Urobach hesitated. "I'll take you to her, but I don't think you'll like it."

Nigel didn't need to guess twice at who *she* was.

\* \* \*

The clock was ticking, but Urobach marched swiftly, carrying Nigel in the blade of his shovel. Nigel kept his footing as Urobach strode through the caverns towards a massive walled fortress buried among the icy depths. High above them, Nigel saw the cliffs of Hell rising in four concentric circles all layered upon each other like an enormous inverted wedding cake. Nigel recognized the layout from Dante Alighieri's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. The nine levels of Hell each hosted a city of souls being punished for very generic sins. If they were on the fifth level, Nigel could only surmise that the realm descended four more circles beyond the wall.

"I thought you had Pandora under lock and key," Nigel said.

"We did," Urobach said. "She escaped on her first day."

"How did she escape?"

"She slipped out of her chains, stole my car, drove up to the Third Circle and started a food fight."

"But back on Earth, those chains held her for nine thousand years!"

"Yeah..." Urobach moaned. "Apparently she could have taken them off anytime."

Nigel's eyes grew so wide with fury that his face actually hurt and a blood vessel could have popped. Instead, he held in his rage and asked, "Is she under maximum security?"

"We tried maximum security," Urobach said, ascending the staircase to the fortress. "We used chains, bars, laser turrets, guard-dragons - the works. We even dipped her in molten steel, froze her in Lake Cocytus, and imprisoned her within a mirror dimension all at once."

"And she still got out?"

"I turned around and there she was playing an accordion."

"So how did you manage to keep her contained?"

"We had to think like her," Urobach said. "She embodies madness and, as such, her prison had to reflect that."

Urobach set Nigel down at the doors of the fortress and stepped back. The doors were heavy bronze without handles. Urobach motioned them to open and they did, revealing a dark passageway lit with torches.

"You'll find her at the end of the hall," Urobach said. "Get what you need, but don't draw attention to her prison. If you do, she might escape. The demon inside may be gone, but the human that remains is far more unbearable." Nigel nodded and hurried down the long hallway. The torches swished past as Nigel hurried through the fortress' corridors until he finally arrived at a large, round fire-lit room that seemed built for the sole purpose of imprisoning the woman at the heart of it.

Nigel saw her.

Pandora.

Trapped in a giant hamster cage.

Pandora stood still in the center of her cage, smiling. Her long, frazzled black hair fell around her big, grey, unblinking eyes. She wore an orange prison jumpsuit. Her prison itself was lined with cedar chips, with bars so widely

spaced that she could have easily stepped out. On the sides of the cage were a giant water bottle and running wheel. There was also a small plastic igloo for her to play in.

Nigel carefully approached the former-demon sorceress. She seemed delighted at his presence.

"Is that Little Billy?" she asked in a British sing-song voice.

"Have you come to play with grandma-ma? Or perhaps you're the pillow from my dreams?"

"You know who I am," Nigel said. "And you have something I need."

"Such boldness," she giggled. "And to think there was a time that gentlemen offered wine and roses before propositioning a lady. Come closer, let me see your handsome face."

Nigel didn't get any closer. "You took the key."

"So I did," Pandora said, reaching down inside the front of her jumpsuit and lifting out a small, copper-iron key from between her breasts. "But if I give it to you, you'll leave, and this is such a rare opportunity for us to... get to know one another."

"I don't have a lot of time," Nigel said. "Give it to me."

"Come now!" she protested. "At least stay for tea!"

She gestured to the small plastic children's table that appeared next to her. Nigel unexpectedly found himself sitting in a little chair inside the cage, holding a teacup and wearing a flowery bonnet. Needless to say, he was quite surprised. Pandora sat down on a tuffet, and poured both herself and Nigel some imaginary tea.

Pandora took a sip and spoke, "You've wandered into my den like a fly into a spider's web. How can I not play with you? But more importantly, how is it you've fallen so far from grace? How did someone else accomplish in a few months what I failed to do since the fall of Xeras?"

Nigel threw off his stupid hat and lunged across the table at Pandora. She darted away and perched atop her igloo like a vulture with her devilish smile. Nigel threw a handful of cedar chips at her.

"You!" he yelled, "You chased my brother and I for nine thousand years! You destroyed countless cities! You killed millions of people for that key! And yet you could have taken off your stupid chains at any time! Why?"

"Because I love messing with you, darling," she giggled. She leapt to the ceiling of her cage and clung to the bars, playfully swinging over Nigel's head. "We had such lovely times together. Remember Sodom? Remember how wonderfully depraved that city was, and how I blew it up with you inside? And then I thought you landed somewhere in Gomorrah, so I blew that city up as well? But silly me, you escaped anyway. What's a girl to do?"

She hopped down into her exercise wheel and began jogging.

"But in all fairness," Pandora said. "It was never personal. I'm not one to marry a grudge. Even that nasty business with Turk was forgiven after I turned him into a disfigured minion and made him do my laundry. All in all, I suppose I'm just a flower in the wash. I do what I do, because cows go moo. You could even quite possibly say I'm a tad bit... *crazy?*"

Nigel stormed over, grabbed her wheel and spun it very quickly, causing Pandora to spin along with it. He then reached out and stopped the wheel with one hand.

Pandora was now hanging upside from the top of it.

"You *are* crazy," Nigel said.

"I know I am, but what are you?" she said as she looked Nigel in the face, leaned forward and planted a quick kiss on his nose. "You're adorable when you're angry. But you

still haven't answered my question, darling. *Why are you here?*"

"Titans have attacked Halifax," Nigel said. "One of them has gone Second Age. I need to get back and stop him now."

"Titans?" Pandora said, quite surprised. "Oh, my. Yes, yes. I see the problem now. Hmmm... a funny lot they are. Their muscles always make me happy. Except when they make me sad. But what's this about Second Age?"

"A monster has possessed the Titan Lord, Surtur," Nigel said. "It claims to be Second Age and told me to tell you there's a new Shadow-Blood in town."

"Oh, my," Pandora's gaze vanished into the distance and she fell from her wheel to the cedar chips below. She barely got to her feet and looked quite shaken. "Are you certain you've heard those exact words?"

"The gods used to whisper the word 'Shadow-Blood' after the first Titan War," Nigel said. "They took a vow of silence on the matter."

"Of course they did," Pandora said, sounding less insane than usual. "The gods dabbled in magicks they could not understand. In my absence, a hole is being filled. It's all too clear."

"What's too clear?" Nigel asked. "What is a Shadow-Blood? Is it a demon?"

"Think higher, darling."

"An angel?"

"Lower."

"You're telling me that shapeless thing is part-angel, part-demon?"

"Bound by darkness, not by fire," she sang. "It's a nightmare formed by man's desire."

The truth sank in. "It's a Dark Aemon."



Pandora spun to face him. She was growing more serious with every passing second. "Has the Zodiac been summoned to battle? Is the angel on guard? What news of Vladimir?"

"Vladimir's still missing, Jesse's been captured, and the Zodiac hasn't shown up yet."

"And I suspect there's another name on the guest list?"

Nigel remembered one name in the mix. "The Shadow-Blood mentioned he's a proxy of Solomon."

"Solomon, you say?" Pandora's smile reappeared, "well, then, everything's quite good."

"It is?"

"Quite so," she said. "Just bury yourself in the sand as always and all will be well."

"What...?" Nigel said, surprised at those last few words.

"Bury yourself," she repeated, "like you always did when I came to visit. You've always done well to be the safe little bunny. After all, I'm sure the gods have everything under control. Regarding that Shadow-Blood, it's a problem best left to the Zodiac. Have him finish his training and the beast will fall."

Nigel couldn't tell if she was messing with him or actually trying to give advice. Either way, he couldn't get over the fact that she not only could escape her chains, but also knew Nigel had been burying himself for years to escape her.

"I can't bury myself," Nigel said. "The Shadow-Blood's destroying the city as we speak. I can stop it if I just get out of here."

"You'll only make matter worse, darling," Pandora said.

"You're such a mess without me. Solomon is quite adept at chess, and if there's a game at work, it's best you don't play. Any opening he offers is merely the path to your own demise."

"I'm not going to stand by and let him kill everyone!"

"If you enter his game now," she went on, "there will be no one to stop him when he comes for your brother."

"Who *is* Solomon?" Nigel asked. "Why does he possess Second Age magic?"

"Because, darling," she said, "he created it."

"Come again?"

"Well, surely somebody must have written my spell-books," Pandora said. "I'm surprised my mentor has lasted as long as he did. He's quite well-lived for a human."

"He's mortal?" Nigel asked, "And he's older than me? But how is he...?"

"Time's up," she smiled. "You should go now."

"I still need the key."

"It's all yours, darling," she said, patting her chest. "Go ahead. Take it."

She tilted back her chin and gave Nigel room to reach into her jumpsuit. There was an awkward pause as Nigel hesitated. Finally, he cautiously reached down her shirt to take the key.

Pandora quickly slapped him across the face with an offended look. She then reached behind his ear and pulled out the key. She smiled, winked, and dropped it in his hands as she leaned in and whispered. "This was so much fun. I certainly hope we can do this again sometime."

Nigel wasted no time jumping through the bars and dashing down the hall.

Pandora sang after him, "I had a lovely evening, darling! Be sure to drop by again tomorrow for Tiki Tuesday and salsa dancing!"

## 10. An Aemon's Fury

The lid to Pandora's Box flew open. The Box leapt sporadically off Nigel's piano as a storm of fire emerged from within. Magical self-forging steel wrapped itself around the fire in the shape of a human heart, and even more fire wrapped itself around the heart in the shape of a full-grown man. Nigel landed on his studio floor face-first as the fire subsided and the Box snapped shut.

It took a moment for Nigel's senses to readjust to the physical world. Everything was dimmer, quieter, and duller. The air was more relaxing than whatever he'd been breathing in Hell.

He got to his feet and returned Pandora's Box to its place on the piano. He carefully slipped the key back through the keyhole and headed downstairs.

The bar was vacant and the lights were out. The ground frequently shook beneath his feet and a flaming car wreck could be seen outside the window. He looked around nervously before shouting, "Trish! Patti!"

"Under here," Patti's voice said from beneath one the tables. Nigel bent down to see a faint glow in the darkness. Patti and Laptop Guy were hunched over his computer.

"Patti!" Nigel exclaimed. "Did Trisha make it back yet?"

"No, but we saw the Hanging Gardens get destroyed on the news," Patti said. "Did she get out alive?"

"Yes, we need to find her and get out of here."

"Maybe you should first look at this," Laptop Guy said as he turned his computer to Nigel.

There was a live news stream of the battle from a helicopter. Half the city was in ruin. Smoke rose from the ashes of the burning buildings and there was no sign of the battle slowing. The Thunderbirds were firing their new magma cannons at the monstrous Fire Giants. The Fire Giants continued throwing volleys of fireballs throughout the streets. The city was quickly falling to pieces.

As the heart of the battle was Surtur, now fifty feet tall and striding through the streets. Still wearing the Shadow-Blood, Surtur fired off one destructive lightning bolt after another through the buildings. The wolf on his other arm sprayed flames on the surrounding neighbourhoods. With the Shadow-Blood forcibly controlling him, Surtur wasn't appreciating the carnage as much as he normally would.

"Ptolemy hasn't shown up yet?" Nigel asked.

"Not yet," Laptop Guy said, readjusting his glasses. "But according to the Twitter feeds, Odin's fleet is expected to arrive any second, and - oh, no, wait. They need to reroute through Hawaii for some reason."

"Ptolemy's in Hawaii?"

"It's some technical thing with realm travel," Laptop Guy said. "Apparently, the only way out of Asgard is by using a rainbow, meaning Odin's fleet has to exit through a daylight time zone."

"What about others?" Nigel asked. "Any word from the Chinese Immortals? Magnus' army? Poseidon?"

"They're all reporting difficulties as well," he said. "It's just Halifax against Surtur."

"No, it's Halifax against Solomon," Nigel said. "What's Surtur doing now?" On the video, he saw the Fire Lord

taking aim at a small building several blocks away. The building looked familiar.

"Is that our tavern?" Patti asked.

"Get out of here!" Nigel said, pulling his waitress and regular to their feet and towards the door.

The three of them raced out the front of the tavern as Surtur fired. A blast of electric energy ripped through the city and struck Hunter's Tavern. Nigel, Patti and Laptop Guy were thrown clear from the blast as the Tavern exploded into thousands of pieces.

When the dust had settled, all that remained of the tavern was a smouldering pile of debris. Behind it, the wall on the connecting building had come down to expose the club section which was still untouched by the destruction. The place was still partying as if the city weren't under attack.

"Well, there goes the wall," Patti said.

"No..." Nigel uttered, looking back at his bar. He stood up and ran towards the crater. He picked up large boards and threw them aside, trying to find anything that survived. All he found was Pandora's Box, completely unscarred, a few keys from his piano, and one can of Red Bull.

Laptop Guy was catching his breath. He looked on in horror at the remains of the Tavern.

Surtur continued his rampage without taking a second look back.

A quiet fury began to storm in Nigel's heart.

"I'm so sorry," Patti said as she put a hand on his back.

"All preventable," Nigel said with sharp breaths. "This should have never happened."

"You can't blame yourself."

"You're right."

Nigel continued digging through the debris until he found what was left of the bar. Beneath it, he found a small mini-

fridge containing a few bags of ram's blood. He took one out and helped himself to a broken glass on the ground. "Is that ram's blood?" Laptop Guy asked as Nigel crawled out of the wreckage. "Isn't blood supposed to make you cuckoo?"

Nigel poured the can of Red Bull into his glass.

"Ram's blood repels deities," Nigel said. "On creatures like myself, it's one the weakest bloods that can bring out my demon transformation. It makes the demon easier to control, but it doesn't last long unless I dilute it and mix it with caffeine."

"You've tried this?" Patti asked.

"I'm speculating," Nigel said, pouring the blood into the glass of Red Bull.

"Oh, god," Laptop Guy said, his face going white. "You're making an Aemon Jägerbomb."

"Stand back," Nigel said, walking out to the middle of the street. "This thing wants a demon, it'll get a demon."

"Stop!" Patti shouted, "I thought going demon was a bad thing!"

"There are three people in the world who have the power to stop this," Nigel said, "and I'm the one who isn't on vacation."

Nigel knew the only trick to control a demon was to feed its greed. Once the transformation began, the demon would seek out the nearest meal. Nigel needed to direct that hunger somewhere else. He needed to convince the demon within that there was only one thing it wanted in this entire city.

He stood in the center of the road and looked up at Surtur marching past in the distance. But it wasn't Surtur he wanted. It was Solomon.

He downed the drink and threw the glass to the ground. The demon took hold.

\* \* \*

Trisha angrily dismounted from the flying cab she'd been riding. She couldn't believe Nigel had thrown her clear when she had a perfectly good shot at Surtur.

The cab had landed not too far across the bridge in Dartmouth. The driver had been rushing to get his family out of the peninsula where all the action was taking place. He was quite surprised to see a woman with a magma cannon hop off the roof after landing.

She hurried towards the nearest bridge to witness the action taking place and what she saw was incredible. Something bright was leaping through the air towards the rampaging Surtur.

It was Nigel-sized, exploding in red flames, and covered in black veins and boney spikes.

It was an Aemon fuelled on ram's blood and Red Bull.

*"Tenderize him!"* Nigel told his inner demon.

Before Surtur could react, Nigel plowed into his torso and knocked the wind from his gut. Trisha watched as the force of Nigel's attack burst Surtur's enormous body into flames. From the flames fell Surtur's smaller eight-foot self with an angry Demon Nigel bearing down on him. The two of them fell towards the streets together.

Trisha sprinted off across the bridge to help.

Nigel and Surtur fell past buildings, exchanging punches. Nigel was doing his best to pull his punches as the demon inside kept wanting to tear apart the Titan's flesh and feast on his entrails.

*"No, keep tenderizing!"* Nigel told the demon.

His inner demon begged, *"But Demon Nigel wants it now!"*

*"The Titan will taste better if you get to the sweet Shadow-Blood inside!"*

Demon Nigel agreed that would be satisfactory.

The two of them landed on a passing skytrain. They fell through the roof of the last car and landed among the seats. The automated train was empty on account of nobody in the city wanting to take public transit during a war. Surtur was first to get up.

"Okay, okay," he shouted, "I give up!"

"No!" Solomon shouted through Surtur's voice. *"We need rage! Show us rage!"*

Demon Nigel agreed.

Demon Nigel uppercut the monster through the skytrain ceiling where he landed on the roof. The Shadow-Blood got to its feet and ran ahead to the next car with the demon in pursuit. As Demon Nigel hopped the gap between cars, he turned around and thought of a way to speed up the tenderizing process. He grabbed the top of the last car and pulled the whole thing off the tracks. The rip was so quick that the connections between cars split like tissue paper. Demon Nigel swung the entire skytrain car over his head and brought it down towards the Shadow-Blood. The creature leapt forward as the two cars sandwiched together.

Landing on the front of the train, the Shadow-Blood watched as Demon Nigel leapt over the two flattened cars. Demon Nigel came down fist-first and punched Surtur through the roof again.

Surtur fell into the front car. Solomon was losing his control on him, but he wasn't in any less danger. The skytrain was rocketing out of control through the city now. He had to get off this train and out of Halifax.

Demon Nigel obliged by jumping in through the roof, grabbing Surtur by the collar, and punching him through the front window of the skytrain. Surtur briefly fell through the air helplessly before the skytrain's tracks materialized



beneath him. He landed butt-first in the path of the oncoming train. The train hit him from behind and he was dragged underneath for a few seconds before a clawed hand tore through the floor and pulled him back inside. Surtur was almost in tears as Demon Nigel pinned him against a seat and bared his fangs. Nigel bit into the Shadow-Blood's serpent head and ripped it off Surtur's arm. He then clawed the wolf's head off the other arm, and carefully tore the Shadow-Blood piece-by-piece from Surtur. Surtur winced as the claws slashed millimetres from his skin. Pieces of the Shadow-Blood congealed into a living mess of black ooze on the floor, desperately trying to form itself into anything. Demon Nigel grabbed the oozy mass of shadow and flung it out the window. The Shadow-Blood vanished into the night. Surtur sighed in relief, "I'm free! You saved me!" Demon Nigel growled at him. Surtur squealed in terror. Surtur's cries were drowned out by the sound of the skytrain being bitten in half. The back of the skytrain was ripped off and the back of their car dragged on the magical tracks. Flying behind the train was a gigantic shadowy serpent covered in thunder and fire with the heads of a snake and wolf. Several tiny clawed limbs jutted out from its body as it attacked the skytrain. As the wolf head bit onto the train, the snake head lunged forward to devour Nigel. The demon's first instincts were to go after the bigger prey, so it looked away from Surtur and grabbed onto the serpent's fangs as it attacked. Surtur cried himself into the farthest corner and held on for dear life as the demon and Shadow-Blood fought for control. The Shadow-Blood was winning.

Nigel was feeling the demon inside slip away. His spikes were slowly retracting. His fangs were disappearing. His strength was vanishing.

Nigel felt something crawling over his left arm. The dark ooze from the creature's fang was spreading across his skin towards his shoulder. It spread over his chest and began to tighten its grip on him.

As Solomon's creature latched onto Nigel, the train fell across the city and crashed onto the roof of a small office building. The whole thing went over the building's ledge and fell to the streets below.

When the dust settled, Nigel crawled from the smoldering wreckage of the skytrain. He stumbled around in confusion for a few moments before realizing the Shadow-Blood was still wrapping itself around his body.

Surtur was hobbling away. Deities, as a rule, didn't limp, so this was Surtur's psychosomatic response to getting beaten so badly. But as he looked back at his attacker, Surtur saw Nigel in absolute terror as the Shadow-Blood grew and engulfed Nigel's demon form.

Nigel fought against this nightmare with all his strength, but the beast forced him to his knees.

Then everything stopped.

Nigel couldn't move.

He couldn't breathe.

Solomon was inside his lungs, forcing Nigel to speak silent whispers.

As he whispered the creature's words, Nigel's mind went blank.

He felt the universe slip away.

His entire body was pain.

Nigel felt what strength he had left drift away as he collapsed.

The Shadow-Blood lifted itself from his eyes and Nigel saw the city shutting down around him. Traffic lights and skyscrapers went dark. Ships fell from the air. Hundreds cried out in terror. Whatever Solomon was doing to him was changing the world as it happened.

Nigel spoke words that were forced from his own mouth. *“A gambit well played, Naveen. Through your sacrifice, the strength of the gods is now undone.”*

“What did you...?” Nigel managed to croak.

Solomon forced Nigel to face Surtur. *“And you, Surtur. Do you see now what we can achieve together?”*

“You took possession of me, Solomon,” Surtur said as he cautiously approached them. “You deceived me.”

*“I enlightened you,”* it said. *“To serve your needs, my proxy required a voice, and you required its power. And now that you know what I can do, will you abandon me to someone else and face the wrath of Asgard alone?”*

Surtur hesitated before speaking. “Where’s the real Solomon?”

*“I’m safely hidden while this surrogate acts in my stead,”* the Shadow-Blood said, as it started lifting off of Nigel’s body. *“And you, Surtur, shall become my ally. Merge with me once more and embrace your glory.”*

“No more deceptions?” he asked.

*“None needed,”* the Shadow-Blood said as it escaped Nigel’s body and returned to Surtur’s. Surtur struggled only for a moment before Solomon’s creature settled against his skin in the shape of many tattoos across his head and body. Wolf and snake tattoos crawled down his arms and dark body armor grew over his shoulders. Their reunion was taking on a fearsome, more unified form. Surtur once again felt in control.

Nigel heard Solomon whisper through Surtur's voice, *"Your role in this is over, Naveen. Your brother's, however, is just beginning."*

"What did you do with Jesse?" Nigel struggled to speak.

*"That's the beauty of it,"* Solomon spoke. *"When your brother returns, I won't have to do anything at all."*

"It's Surtur!" somebody shouted from above. "Shoot him!"

Magma cannons fired from the sky upon the Titan. Several Thunderbirds descended on Surtur as the molten rounds wrapped around him, dampening his powers. As the metal cooled, the Fire Giant was unable to move.

"Surtur, Lord of the Titans, you are under arrest," one of the Thunderbirds said. "You will be served justice in the high court of Asgard by a jury of your peers."

"Fools!" he shouted in his own voice, "You look upon no mere Lord of Titans! You look upon the harbinger of your twilight! I am the scourge of Asgard! You will not contain my rage!"

They immediately tasered him.

Beyond them, Nigel saw a glimmer of gold. A caramel-skinned woman in a golden dress was running to meet him. She raced past the Thunderbirds and cradled Nigel in her arms. Her eyes were in tears. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Nigel, what happened to you?" she asked.

"Nigel?" one of the sentries asked with uncertainty, as if he didn't recognize the man. "Are you telling us *that's* the Fire-Blood?"

"Trish," Nigel moaned, "I can't... see... can't... think..."

Trish ran her hand over Nigel's forehead and gasped.

"Oh, my god," she uttered.

She looked at the markings on her hand.

She had just wiped blood from Nigel's brow.

Actual blood.

"What... is it?" Nigel asked.

Her voice was shaking and her eyes welled up.

"You're human," she spoke.

Nigel passed out.

## **Part II: Scourge of the Titans**

## **11. Movement in the Dark**

Jesse couldn't tell if his eyes were open at all. At first, he presumed he was trapped under the plane, but the fact that he could walk around and feel stone walls suggested otherwise. He kept waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but it didn't happen. He didn't even see the blurry green floaters in his eyelids that he always saw when his eyes were closed.

He realized he'd been here before.

When his body fell through the jet engine, there had been a delay of several seconds before his body regenerated. His regenerations had always been instantaneous. But in those moments, he perceived himself as being in a completely different place. The dank stench, the clammy feel of the floor, the stale taste of the air... this is the place he had been to. But where was it? And how long would it take before he went back?

He took a few more steps and fell down a long stone stairway that spiraled around a tower of sorts. He tumbled for a full minute before resting at the base, feeling no pain at all. There was no usual burning sensation that came with his injuries. He wasn't even sure he'd been injured. He

stood up and began walking again, only to fall down a second set of stairs.

After falling down his second flight, he started feeling his way around more carefully. As far as he tell, this could have been a castle. The walls were laden with stone, but he could occasionally feel a doorway, window, or even some wooden furniture. People had lived here at some point.

He tried a louder approach: "Hello? Is anybody out there?" His voice echoed through the halls of darkness, followed by a long silence.

Suddenly, there was a sound behind him.

A faint clattering could be heard, followed by the sounds of gnashing.

The clattering caught his curiosity, but the gnashing was what got him running.

The sounds were getting closer and faster. They sounded hungry.

Jesse's sprint felt lighter than usual, as if he'd lost mass coming here. He quickly followed the walls around corners, hoping not to hit another staircase.

Something nipped him on the leg. He stumbled and fell.

Several more creatures bit into him. He felt almost no pain other than the minor nuisance of being eaten alive. He struggled to free himself, but the biting persevered.

Fed up with this nonsense, he willed his crystal sword to return to him. Nothing happened. He couldn't transform into an angel or summon his weapon.

Just then, he felt an extraordinary pain inside his throat. It caused him to fall to his knees as the pain rose up through his neck, launched itself through his head and vanished into darkness. He gasped and felt his face. Nothing had changed.

Then the biting continued.



He heard the swish of several arrows and the screams of the creatures attacking him. He backed away on all fours and bumped into a pair of bare legs.

Looking up, he saw a blinding silvery white .

Through the whiteness, he saw the vague outline of a young woman with mystical flowing hair looking down on him. She was clad in leather armor with a short skirt and a large massive bow. She aimed an arrow down at Jesse's face.

"Interesting," she said in a Greek accent.

"Who are you? What's going on?"

"Come now," she said. "Before more return."

Jesse didn't hesitate getting up. But as soon as the woman turned away, all went dark again.

"I can't see you!" Jesse said.

"Keep your voice down!" the woman said. "Listen for my footsteps!"

Jesse obliged and followed her through the dark maze. He barely heard her soft, delicate footsteps over the loud clomping of his sneakers. She must have been running barefoot over this cold floor. Jesse wondered where that light of hers had disappeared to.

"Where's your light?" Jesse asked.

"Light is devoured in this place," she answered. "My arrowheads are of the moon's silver. They repel darkness, but they do not cast light."

"Neat!"

"What manner of creature are you?" she asked.

"I'm an Aemon."

"Aemon?" she inquired.

"A Fire-Blood," Jesse said. "A warrior forged from the fires of..."

"Ah, yes," she said. "One of the Fire-Bloods. That explains much. If you're seeking refuge from Pandora, you've certainly come to the wrong place."

"We already destroyed Pandora in Halifax last summer," Jesse said.

"A likely story."

"It's true! She exploded and everything!"

"Really?" she sounded shocked. "A pity. I rather liked her. Did she at least unleash eternal chaos upon the planet?"

"Nope."

"How disappointing."

"Listen, I really need to get out of here," Jesse said. "My friend Christine was in a plane crash and..."

"By what means did you get here?" she quickly asked.

"I think I got here by accident. My fire fizzled out and this is where I regenerated."

"Nobody gets to this place by accident," she said.

"And does this place have a name?"

"It did once."

Her cryptic wording was really starting to annoy Jesse.

"Do you have a name?" he asked.

"I do," was all she said.

"Should I guess it?" Jesse asked.

"If you'd like."

"Are you a god?"

"Do I look like a god?"

"You look like a goddess."

"Then why do you ask I'm a god?" she asked.

"Are you a goddess, then?"

"Yes."

"Greek?"

"Once."

"A Greek hunting goddess..." Jesse's words stumbled for a moment before a name came to him, "...is your name Artemis?"

She spun around and the silvery-whiteness appeared in Jesse's face again. The silver arrowhead ate away at the darkness between their faces.

"Did my family send you?" she asked, anger in her blank white expression.

"No, no," Jesse said. "I just know your uncle Poseidon, that's all. He mentioned you had a bit of fondness for Pandora."

"Does my family hunt me?"

"Not that I know of," he said. "Could you stop pointing that at my face?"

"I will not leave," Artemis said. "Not until my training is complete."

"And how long will that take?"

"Another three hundred years, I suspect."

She fired.

The arrow passed through Jesse's face and disappeared into the darkness behind him. A creature screamed in the darkness.

"Those things are still here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "They're following the sound of your voice."

"Should I be quieter?"

"No," she said. "Keep talking. I like the challenge."

Jesse wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not. She sounded serious as she prepared another arrow.

"What are they?" Jesse asked.

"Hantu Penanggal," she replied. "Filipino head demons."

"We're in the Philippines?"

"No, I brought them here myself," she said.

"Why would you do that?"

"To hunt them, of course" was her response. "The darker it is, the deadlier they become."

"Thanks for saving me, then," Jesse said.

"I didn't save you back there," she said. "I was letting you die."

"You what?"

"Once bitten by the Hantu Penanngal," Artemis said, "your head detaches from your body and flies through the night hunting for more prey. I needed more target practice and you brought a fresh head into this realm."

"But I guess it doesn't work on Aemons," Jesse said.

"Of course not," she said with a sinister chuckle. Jesse felt uneasy about that chuckle. "Still, your body is unnatural. You appear as a ghost to me, but your essence is physical. You are being torn between two worlds right now."

"But why?"

"Far be it that I should know," Artemis said. "Perhaps it's because this world is so close to the Void."

"The what?" Jesse asked.

"It is oblivion in its purest form, darker than even this realm," she said. "It creeps in the shadows of this place. Should you ever see the Void, do not blink or it will take you."

"How do I know I'm looking at the Void if I can't see anything?"

"It helps to never blink," she replied.

"I don't want to be here anymore," Jesse said. "How do I fix this?"

"It is beyond my control," she said, "but I can take you to someone who might be able to help."

"More people live here?"

"In a manner of speaking," Artemis said, "but I cannot be held responsible for how they help you. You will unquestionably learn things better left unlearned."

"I'll do anything to get out of here."

"Then follow swiftly," she said, picking up the pace. "I'm taking you to see the Fates."

## 12. The First Awakening

Nigel awoke for the first time in memory.

His body felt groggy and sore. The light hurt his eyes. He was seeing blurry double-vision.

How long was he out? Why was he out? Where was he? Whose bed was this?

The room he was in was white. Light shone in from the window and silky white gossamer curtains flapped in the breeze.

At the end of his bed, he saw Trisha staring through the window. Even with his obscured vision, he saw she was wearing a large silver winter coat with a white fur collar. He checked his own clothes and found he'd been placed in a mint green hospital gown. Several heaters had been set up around his bed to keep him warm.

He managed to speak.

"Where am I?"

Trisha, deep in thought, jumped at the sound of his voice.

"You're awake!" she exclaimed as she hurried to his side.

"How do you feel?"

"There's a loud, pounding pain in my chest, and my head feels like it's about to explode."

"That's..." her words lingered, "that pounding in your chest is your heart. You have an actual pumping heart now. The doctor had to remove your steel casing to save your life."

"Where is it?" he asked.

Trisha reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small metal heart-shaped container.

"Do you want to keep it?" she asked.

"Hold onto it," Nigel said, exasperated. "Could make a great paperweight."

"And that feeling in your head is probably a headache," she said as she put the heart back in her pocket. It left a noticeable bulge in her coat. "Though, it might be something else."

"What else could it be?"

"See for yourself."

Trisha slowly took a mirror by the bedside table and handed it to Nigel. Nigel took it and looked upon his face. It took a few moments for his blurry vision to subside.

He was older. His skin was a deep, faded brownish-olive.

His hair was longer with many grey streaks. His cheekbones were higher, his nose was larger, and his brow ridge was more prominent. But most noticeable was a large white scar from his forehead across his left eye, the iris of which looked greyer than the right. He alternated closing his eyes a few times to check his visibility. His right eye appeared to be stronger than his left.

"The doctors fixed up most of the scarring," she said, "but that big one over your eye was beyond their magic. They say it's too old for them to fix. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Yeah," he said. "It means this is the face I was born with."

"Your eyes still look the same."

"I've changed my face many times before, but the eyes are always hardest," Nigel said

"So this is the real you?"

"Yes," he nodded, touching his face. He felt wrinkles and pockmarks at his fingertips. "It appears when Solomon made me human, I returned to factory settings."

"Solomon?" she asked.

"His creature attached itself to me," Nigel said. "It forced me to cast a spell on myself."

"Do you think he'll do the same to Jesse?"

"I'm not sure," Nigel said. "Did they even find Jesse yet?"

"They found the plane, but Jesse wasn't there," Trisha said.

"What about Christine?" Nigel asked. "The girl's chasing after a Titan."

"Odin called off the search before they could find her," Trisha said. "Said he didn't want to waste resources chasing after Krios."

"But he can't find a single girl in the Grand Canyon?" Nigel said. "It's not like Christine could have gotten far with those scrawny legs of hers. Did you try calling her?"

"Her phone's dead," she replied. "There's nothing we can do until we get out of here."

Nigel let out a sigh. "Where are we anyway? Help me up." She took his hand and helped him to his feet. Every muscle in Nigel's body was sore. Even though his body seemed to be in peak shape, it was his first time using real muscles and walking on real bones. He felt the strain with every inch of movement. They slowly made their way over to the balcony.

Outside was a world of endless fog. A city of massive neo-Gothic towers rose out of the mist, and golden light blazed through the atmosphere from some unseen source.

Bridges of shining prismatic energy passed from one tower to another as divine traffic flowed through the world like a river of life. Upon looking closer, Nigel could see people walking on those bridges, as well as shops and homes



built into those towers. Looking above them, Nigel realized there was no sky, just an enormous ceiling where the towers rose like arches to meet each other. This realm was a beautiful endless hallway shaped like a landscape. In the distant fog was a glorious marble cathedral basking in the shade of a great clock tower, upon which an enormous neon Christmas tree was mounted.

"Welcome to Asgard," Trisha said. "After we found you, Odin's men brought us here to patch you up. It was a pretty neat ride. I got to ride of one those giant flying boats into a rainbow to get here."

She gestured to one of the vehicles flying through the city. The Asgardian ship was a huge flying yacht with a dragon figurehead on the mast and silky eagle wings propelling it through the air.

Nigel then noticed something odd.

"We're standing in sunlight," he said. "I mean, I'm human, so I should be fine, but you?"

"The sunlight's not real," she said as she soaked it in.

"Divine realms don't exist in normal space. We're in an artificial pocket dimension that the gods contained within the prismatic spectrum. I take it this is your first time to one?"

"Now that you mention it, yes," he said. "I never risked coming to a place like this with Jesse. We would have been too exposed. Though I must admit, I expected something a little more extravagant."

"This isn't extravagant enough for you?"

"Don't get me wrong, the rainbow aspect looks great on the realm," Nigel said. "But the modern European look just doesn't speak 'epicenter of Norse mythology' to me. It's far too commercial."

"How is any of this commercial?"

"Because I can count at least seven Starbucks coffee shops from here."

They shared a small laugh which shortly settled into an awkward silence. What followed was a very unusual sight for Trisha as she watched Nigel casually start rubbing his chest.

"Are you feeling tingly?" he asked.

"Asgard's core is located somewhere under Iceland, so it's naturally cold here," she said. "For some reason, the realm's thermostat is broken. There's a coat on the rack if you want to warm up."

"My nipples are tingling," Nigel said, feeling up his own chest. "Do humans play with their own chests all the time? Because this is extraordinarily exhilarating."

"I thought you were in pain."

"I am," he said, "but now I'm liking it. I could feel things before, but now I can *really* feel things!"

Trisha grew concerned as wary hints of giddiness crept over Nigel's visage. It was one thing to see him with a different face, but another to witness his personality change firsthand. "Maybe I should call the doctors."

"Come here a moment," Nigel said as he quickly took Trisha in his arms and laid a huge, passionate kiss on her. He pulled away to contemplate the sensation.

"That's different too," he said. He quickly planted several tiny kisses all over her face to her bewilderment. "I mean, it feels the same as before, but with a real body, there's more kick to it. I can't describe the feeling."

"That would be your hormone levels going out of whack," she said as he smelled her neck voraciously. "You need to get that under control."

"Just need time to explore," Nigel said. "New body, new senses, new territory."

"Well, just a heads up that this a little creepy."

"Right," Nigel said as he pushed himself away, embarrassed. "My new face. Sorry."

"It's not that," she said, looking at him with disbelief. "The doctors said you might be different. They said that without your healing factor, your body's chemistry might over-adapt and... you might become unpredictable."

"So I'm a little more sensitive," Nigel said as he wiggled his fingers for fun.

"I think we should get some food in you," she said.

"Oh, yeah, that's mandatory now, isn't it?" he asked, "Well, I suppose there's worse downsides to being human."

"Like bringing about the end of days?" asked a male voice as it entered the room.

They turned to see a man in a black bell-bottoms with a purple shirt enter the room with a clipboard. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top with gold chains hanging around his neck, and his sleek black hair dangled behind him in a ponytail. His black beard was short with a splash of white coming down from his lip. He looked eerily similar to their friend Poseidon (if Poseidon had never left the 70's.)

"I'm sorry, but what?" Nigel repeated.

"That was quite a gong show in Halifax," the man said.

"Ten thousand, three hundred and forty seven people and deities dead. Normally, all deaths would be easily reversible, but you had to go and get exorcised. Couldn't just stay a martyr, could you?"

"You look familiar," Trisha said.

"Hades, Lord of the Underworld," he said, shaking her hand with his cold, clammy palm. "And you must be Trisha. The doctors said you've been by his side all night."

"You're Poseidon's brother," Trisha said, shaking his hand.

"Through the most basic definitions of the term, yes," Hades said. "Me and that beach-bum share the same

father, got eaten by the same father, and chopped the same father into a thousand pieces together."

"Is Poseidon here?"

Hades held back a laugh. "Not if Odin can help it. That loser's still got a bad rep for breaking the truce last summer. He's probably lounging away in his secret underwater palace somewhere."

"So why are you here then?" Nigel asked.

"Because I work the dark side of human resources," Hades said. "Since you're now a nine thousand year-old mortal, Odin wants me to make sure your age isn't catching up with you before we send you back into the field. Tell me, do you feel irregular pains, bouts of senility, or the looming presence of death?"

"I'm not about to fall over and die," Nigel said.

"Famous last words," Hades mused, checking something off his list.

"Excuse me, but did you mention sending him back into the field?" Trisha asked.

"We'll get to that," Hades said. "We just need to exercise caution. Nigel's still missing a soul, so we really need to check his health before we send him into certain doom."

"*Certain doom?*" Trish pressed on.

"Wait, even as a human, I don't have a soul?" Nigel asked.

"I'm afraid not," Hades said. "Fire-Bloods are born soulless because they're projected from the fires of Hell. Becoming a human disconnects them from that privilege. Since a soul acts as a personal backup drive, Mr. Hunter's at risk of plopping out of existence if he dies. No Heaven, no Valhalla, no blissful Nirvana – he wouldn't even make it to Hell. His essence would just scatter."

"But you could revive him if he dies, right?" Trisha asked.

"Nope," Hades said. "Without a soul, our friend has to be very, very careful."

"Then why you are sending him into certain doom?"

"Yes, why are you sending me into certain doom?" Nigel asked. "Is this about finding Solomon?"

"Part of it," Hades made a note on his sheet, "But this largely involves restoring all the lives lost in Halifax, which we can no longer do thanks to you compromising the ley lines."

"Ley lines? What are you talking about? How is any of this my fault?"

"I'll explain on the way," Hades said. "Are you good to walk, or should I get you a wheelchair?"

"I'll be fine."

Hades sighed, "Famous last words."

## 13. The Halls of Asgard

Getting around Asgard was very different from getting around any mortal realm. As soon as Nigel threw on some clothes, the door opened up into another massive white room that looked like the interior of a temple filled with walls of columns, stained glass windows, and hundreds of video displays.

Countless gods were crowding around a tower of holographic displays and shouting at each other like a scene out of Wall Street. This was the first time Nigel had seen so many gods in one place. It quite a sight considering that many weren't in human form. There were jackal-headed gods, gods of pure light, gods made of rain clouds, gods of many arms, gods of many heads, gods without heads, beaver gods, elephants gods, flying whale gods, and even a large backhoe tractor god rolling around. Every single one of them was wearing loose-fitting clothes with assortments of capes, cloaks, and long hair to flap in the breeze. You couldn't walk through the crowd without stepping on somebody's robe.

It took Nigel a moment to realize where they were.

"This is that cathedral I saw miles away outside the window."

"Around here, everything is as near or as far as we need it," Hades said. "Or at least it will be until our well runs dry."

Nigel looked up at the displays as they pushed their way through the crowd of gods. The blue screens were lit up with numbers rising and plummeting. Assorted words like "warfare", "vengeance" and "world's end" kept flickering through the rapidly changing lists. At the top of the display tower was a virtual leaderboard with the names *Odin*, *The Queen*, and *Poseidon* standing firm at the top of the ever-changing list. The bustling of over-activity overwhelmed Nigel's senses, but he pushed on through the crowd who seemed oblivious to his presence.

"You said I compromised the ley lines," Nigel said. "What are ley lines?"

"Geomagnetic energy streams that run through the Earth," Hades explained. "Traditionally, they're aligned with monuments and spiritual places. The gods use them as supply routes to channel and store prayer energy. But after the Titans attacked Halifax, the ley lines became compromised and the gods were cut off from their power reserves."

"And why is that my fault?"

"See these gods?" Hades said, gesturing to the crowd.

"They're looking for a bail-out. Many believe the world's end is on the way, so the gods are re-assessing their power portfolios. Stock in peace has plummeted, prices in death and destruction are going up. Thanks to you, War Gods are about to make a resounding comeback."

"Again, why is this my fault?"

"Because every now and then, the gods invest in a person they deem to be a prophet," Hades said. "And I'm not talking Jesus, Mohammed, or one of the Creator's personal picks - I'm talking about normal people who become visionaries. Alexander the Great, Abraham Lincoln, John Lennon... people who influence the world. When enough gods start investing in a single person, the

power of the ley lines converge on them, creating a massive well of energy we can tap into.”

“You’re saying *I’m* a prophet?”

“You were.”

“But I’m not a visionary,” Nigel asked. “I practically spent nine thousand years living under rocks.”

“Other gods don’t know the real you,” Hades said. “They just saw you on the news as the ‘Flavour of the Week’, and more often than not, gods make bad investments. If a prophet falls from grace, the event scrambles the ley lines and cuts off our power. Sometimes for minutes, other times for years. Total divine black-out.”

“Nigel didn’t betray anything,” Trisha said. “It was Solomon who turned him into a human.”

“Look, we don’t know the details,” Hades said. “All we know is that the second he turned human, the divine stock market crashed and now we’re all running on fumes.”

“So you’ve all been leeching off me,” Nigel said.

“More or less,” Hades said. “And now Odin’s resorting to desperate measures to fix the system.”

“What kind of measures?”

“The kind involving Titans and Aeonomegas,” Hades replied as he gestured to a large display on the wall. There was a live news broadcast in which two news gods were covering the aftermath of Halifax’s destruction. Hades willed it so that Nigel and Trisha could listen in without hearing everyone else in the room. The news showed pillars of smoke rising out of Halifax. The city looked like an apocalyptic wasteland with its smouldering buildings and fallen bridges.

“...following the attack on Halifax, the Titan Lord known as Surtur was taken into custody. An hour later, he was released by officials and Odin All-Father gave a worldwide press conference.”



The television depicted Odin doing his “smoking mirror” trick again as he appeared on every screen and billboard in Times Square in New York. He spoke solemnly with great weight to his words: “People of Earth, we regret to inform you that in light of the tragic attacks on Halifax, we are unable to repair the damage at this time. Our efforts must be consolidated towards ending the Titan threat immediately. As so, I have decided that in the best interests of all races, I have initiated an emergency Aeonomega. At midnight tonight on the Winter Solstice, all gods and Titans will be summoned to the Fields of Vigrid where our two races will fight for the fate of this world. For all deities watching, you are forbidden from violence against each other for the next twenty-four hours. Use this time to make peace with your loved ones.”

Nigel’s jaw dropped. “Son of a...”

“They let that maniac go?” Trisha asked.

“Odin didn’t have a choice,” Hades explained as he willed the channels to change. “Once the Aeonomega was in effect, all Titan prisoners had to be released.”

He stopped on another news channel that revealed an army of Frost Giants marching through the snow-covered streets of a Greenland city while chanting victoriously. The giants had frosty blue skin and were dressed in animal skins.

“...in other news, yet another Titan prison opened its gates. As per the agreement of the Aeonomega, the servants of the Frost Lord Ymir were released from the Ultima Thule Detention Centre into the custody of his grand-daughter Sinmara. Following the siege of Tartarus and the release of prisoners from Mount Etna and Rura Penthe, this is the fourth facility today to relinquish Titan inmates. While rules are in effect to protect civilians, people are encouraged to stay indoors and refrain from praying until further notice.”

In the back of the Frost Giant procession, Nigel saw a beefy red man covered in black tattoos walking alongside a hefty blue woman in a fur coat.

"That's Surtur!" Nigel exclaimed, "That's him and the Shadow-Blood!"

"But why did Odin agree to a war?" Trisha asked.

"With the ley lines on the blink, the gods are vulnerable and need emergency power," Hades said. "Since the Titans bottle up their power internally, the gods seek to take theirs."

"But the gods already took half the Titans' power during the first Titan War," Nigel said.

"And now we're coming for the other half," Hades said.

"Believe me, I know it's insane, but there hasn't been a ley line crash of this magnitude since the fall of the Egyptian dynasties. With the threat of the Shadow-Blood looming over our heads, we must be ready to do anything."

"Since when have the gods ever faced a Shadow-Blood?"

"It's not my place to explain."

"There has to be a Plan B," Nigel insisted. "Odin wouldn't declare war as a time-saving device. Not when the last war took eight years to finish. There has to be another way to stop this."

"There is," Hades said as he led them up some steps to a large set of wooden doors. "But I'll let the All-Father take it from here."

He snapped his fingers and the great doors opened.

The three of them were engulfed in light and delivered through a spinning tunnel of colour. What could have been an eternity only took seconds as they passed through the doorway into another distant section of Asgard.

Beyond the doors was a large stone study with an enormous raging fireplace. Odin furiously paced, looked more tired than ever. His suit was coming apart, his hair

was frazzled, and his eyes were blood-shot. He swallowed another handful of aspirin and greeted them as they arrived. The doors closed behind them.

"Nigel the Human, I welcome you," Odin said. "You seem to be handling your transformation well. I trust senility hasn't caught up with you yet?"

Nigel spoke up, "Care to explain why you just agreed to an Aeonomega with Solomon?"

"I did it to buy us time," Odin said. "Please, have a seat."

He gestured to two easy chairs in front of the fire. Nigel obliged by sitting in one while Trisha and Hades sat on a nearby futon. Odin swept back his messy hair and sat to address Nigel.

"I want to speak to you as one Ancient to another and beg your forgiveness," he said. "There's things we haven't told you. Things that the gods have sworn secrecy to that we can no longer contain - such as how this isn't the first time we've dealt with Shadow-Bloods."

"As in *plural*?" Nigel asked.

"They're devastating beasts," Odin continued. "The man known as Solomon uses their power to possess and transform deities into Second Age weapons. In the past, we've had to risk certain extremes to cover up their existence, but our darkest hour is at hand and those methods are no longer viable. You must understand that I've considered all other options first, but it seems fate had led us both to this moment."

"What are you asking me to do?"

"At midnight tonight, the Battle of Ragnarök begins," Odin said, "All deities, including Solomon's Shadow-Blood, will be instantly transported to the field of battle and we'll fight until the last one standing. But until then, no god, Titan, or demigod may engage one another in combat."

“Under penalty of lightning bolt from the Referee,” Hades added.

“Which means we have an opportunity for a pre-emptive strike,” Odin said. “At this very moment, Surtur is returning to Tartarus to meet with his people. Little does he know, the real Solomon has taken refuge inside that same realm.”

“He hides in a place we can’t follow,” Hades said.

“That gives us exactly fourteen hours to send someone behind enemy lines, find Solomon, and force him to unmake his monster. That way, the Titans will have no choice but to call a truce. Are you with me so far?”

“And you mean to send me after him?” Nigel said. “I thought I was a fallen prophet.”

“Those who hold onto faith in dark times best chance to see the brightest light,” Odin said. “Not that you’ll be alone. I’m assembling a special team to accompany you. If you pull this off, this act could not only restore your honour, but the ley lines as well.”

“Sorry to interrupt, but Nigel’s been turned into a frail old man,” Trisha said, “and you want to send him up against Titans? This isn’t the Avengers Initiative and he’s not exactly Captain America.”

“I’m not that frail,” Nigel said, poking at the loose skin on his elbow.

“But that’s the beauty of it all!” Odin exclaimed. “Naveen is our fallen prophet! Once an indestructible warrior, he’s been reduced to a mortal shell of a man. This makes him an ideal candidate for undergoing a quest from the gods! Like Odysseus or Robert Downey Jr., he’s fallen from grace but can rise again more powerful than before! His story will be written in ages to come as the immortal who became a man and, from this humble state, rose to become a scourge of the Titans!”

Odin seemed very aroused at his own words.

"If we need power, shouldn't finding Jesse be our priority?"

Trisha asked. "You didn't say the rules applied to angels.

He could still stop this."

"We can't waste resources recovering Jesse from Krios,"

Odin said. "He's inexperienced and would be an ideal target for the Shadow-Blood to possess. Naveen, on the other hand, has a skill set that makes him an ideal candidate for a stealth mission into Tartarus. We need somebody who can keep their head low and has the know-how to confront various Ages of magic should it come up. Sadly, there's very little we can tell you about Solomon himself, but..."

"He's Pandora's teacher."

That caught everyone's attention.

"Are you certain?" Odin asked.

"Pandora told me herself." Nigel said. "He fancies himself a chess player; likes to use people as pieces. We can beat him if we can stay ahead of his moves.

"Bless the Creator, I knew you were a good investment!"

Odin said.

"But finding Solomon in Tartarus won't be easy. We'll need a good team and one of those flying ships."

Odin agreed. "You want it; you got it. First-class all the way."

Trisha tugged at Nigel's arm to pull him away. "Nigel, one second?"

"One moment," he said to Odin as Trisha led him back to the doors, away from prying ears.

She whispered to him. "Nigel, are you seriously entertaining the notion of going on this crazy mission?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"You're out of your mind! You're mortal, they're desperate, and we haven't heard anything close to a plan. You're

barely out of the hospital bed and you're already agreeing to do the gods' dirty work."

"It's different now, honey," Nigel reassured her. "We'll just keep our hands clean and let the team do their job. If Odin follows through, I won't even have to face a Titan."

"But you keep saying we can't trust him!"

"We can hear you," Odin said off-side.

Nigel looked to Trisha and said, very uncharacteristically.

"He doesn't seem to be all *that* bad."

"Who are you and what did you do with Nigel?"

"Nigel's still in here; but for the first time ever, he's found a new calling," Nigel said. "Don't you get it? The gods literally worship me! I feel like I'm more than just a simple peon for once! I can finally make a difference!"

"That's just excess adrenaline and dopamine you're experiencing," Hades said. "It'll pass."

"That's another thing; you're literally high on life right now," Trisha said. "Is nobody else seeing this as a problem? He needs bed rest and medication!"

Odin asked, "Have you reached a decision yet?"

Nigel turned to face him and said, "I'll do it, but I have terms."

"Anything," Odin said.

"First, Jesse has to stay out of this," Nigel said. "The Shadow-Blood manipulates people, and he said that Jesse was integral to his plans. So until all this is over, Jesse stays missing. No one goes after Krios."

"But what about Christine?" Trisha asked.

"That leads to my next condition. Hades?"

Hades looked up from his clipboard. For the last few moments, he'd been completely out of it and had been doodling pictures of dogs.

"What?" he asked.

"I need you to re-open the search efforts and find Christine."

"No can do," he said. "Everyone's preparing for war. We can't afford to..."

"Then you find her," Nigel said.

"What? No!" he exclaimed. "I've got a clipboard and things to staple!"

"You're an Underworld God," Nigel pointed out. "The Grand Canyon is mostly under the world. Should be cinch for you. Just find her before she finds Krios."

"Odin, can you help me out here?" Hades asked.

"Do it, Hades," Odin commanded. "Last I checked, kidnapping women was your specialty."

Hades lowered his clipboard, shouting. "That was only one time! And that Persephone incident was blown completely out of context."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah," Trisha said with a nod. "If he does this; we want Halifax restored to the way it was. No more *City of the Gods* crap. That goes for my bar."

"What she said," Nigel shrugged.

"Is that it?" Odin asked.

"I'll think of more later," Trisha said. "Right now, I just care about keeping Nigel alive until he can be cured. Please tell me you have a good team for this job."

Odin nodded. "We do have the right team, but the full mission will rely heavily on one warrior."

"You mean...?"

"He just needs the right teacher," Odin said. "And you were the one who claimed it would take an afternoon to set him straight."

With a wave of his hand, the great doors of his lounge swung open. Mist from the outside poured in, and where there was once a grand cathedral stock exchange, there

was now a green meadow covered in druid stones. Through the mist walked a young man in blue jeans and a black Offspring T-shirt with spiky red hair. He smiled and gave a little wave.

“So I hear you’re going to be my new mentor,” Ptolemy said. “The scar kinda suits you. But please, if you’re going to be my teacher, tell me you’ve got something better than pinecones.”

“I’ve got a few ideas,” Nigel said. He looked to Trisha for approval. “But if we’re going to save the world, it’s not the gods’ blessings I’ll need.”

Trisha gave a shrug and nodded.

“I’m all aboard,” she said. “But if this goes sideways, don’t be surprised if I start kicking your ass. You’re supposing to be stopping a war, not making it worse.”

“If we’re done with the pleasantries, let’s head downstairs to the hangar,” Odin said. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”



## 14. Mission Launch

A surprise didn't begin to cut it.

They soon found themselves outside Odin's study in a great glass elevator that descended through the fog of Asgard. Hades had already gone on ahead to find Christine, so everything else fell on Nigel's shoulders as he mentally prepared himself for the mission. Meanwhile, Nigel's mental condition fell on Trisha's shoulders as she took it upon herself to make sure he didn't do anything too reckless. She didn't need Nigel becoming the new Jesse at this point.

Nothing could have prepared either of them for what was coming, however.

"You know, I really missed you guys," Ptolemy said. "I feel we should have stayed in touch more because we didn't get a lot of bonding time when Pandora attacked. I haven't been on the internet in forever so I haven't been following your status updates. But me, it's been nothing but pinecones, meditation and tai chi since I got here. I'd say it sucks, but really, the food in this place is delicious. Have you been to the food court yet? The perogies are to die for."

"Nigel hasn't eaten since he became human," Trisha said.

"Dude," Ptolemy said as he dug into his pockets, "have some gum."

Nigel took the spearmint gum that Ptolemy offered and chewed it. He seemed to enjoy it.

"Gum isn't food," Trisha said.

"Don't worry, he'll be fed soon enough," Odin said.

"You guys have to see my training grounds," Ptolemy said.

"Every day they send me to Avalon and I get wisdom from the ghosts of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table while I train. They're senile ghosts, though, so it's really bad wisdom. But it's still awesome."

"Have you learned any new powers?" Nigel asked.

"I've got strength, telekinesis, and astral projection."

"Those are the same powers you had last time," Nigel realized. "Aren't there twelve in total?"

"Learning takes time," he said. "But I'm more disciplined now. You'll be happy to know I never use my astral projection to spy on my lady friends in the shower."

"Because you're a gentleman?" Trisha asked.

"Exactly," Ptolemy said. "I only spy on people I don't know."

"Ah, yes, very gentlemanly," Trisha said.

"So how are we finding Solomon?" Ptolemy asked Odin.

"You'll be briefed shortly," Odin said.

"Just tell the boy," Nigel said. "A book will lead us to him."

"We're going to find a book?" Ptolemy asked.

"It was Pandora's," Nigel said. "This one was called the Book of Summoning. It was the same book Xeraphoxes used to create his Fire-Blood army, and it's the only thing that could summon a creature like the Shadow-Blood. I thought it had been destroyed with Pandora's other spellbooks, but clearly it fell into the wrong hands. Namely Odin's."

Odin looked shocked at the statement. "I beg your pardon?"

"That would explain why you'd been following Solomon," Nigel said. "After Pandora died, I'm guessing your people found some of her old effects. And I'm willing to bet Solomon broke into Asgard and stole the book from under your nose. Probably made a big noise about it too like doing something to your pet raven while he was in there. Probably scattering some of its feathers on your bedspread."

"How could you possibly know that?" Odin asked.

"Solomon thinks himself better than the gods," Nigel said.

"The raven is your power symbol, and if I wanted to send you a message, I'd tamper with it as well."

"But how does the book lead us to Solomon?" Ptolemy asked.

"Because Odin likely put a tracer spell on it," Nigel said.

"My paranoia precedes me," Odin said, producing a small touchpad from his coat. "According to this monitor, Solomon brought it to Tartarus. We find the book, we find Solomon."

He handed the touchpad to Nigel. Nigel glanced at it, but couldn't make sense of the on-screen data. He passed it to Trisha who studied it for a few moments and nodded accordingly.

"Yes, but why would he go there?" Nigel asked. "To hide, or to lure us in?"

"Tartarus is Titan-controlled, so I'd gather for security purposes," Odin said. "That's why this is a stealth mission."

"The Titans will see us coming from half a world away," Nigel reminded him.

"Don't worry," Odin said. "We're setting you up with state-of-the-art stealth transportation."

Nigel had certain expectations regarding godly transport. Gods built fascinating things, but creativity was not one of their strong suits. It always had to be an 'improvement' on

a human design. Nigel expected something along the lines of a flying submarine or space toaster.

As they approached the lower level, Nigel saw the shipyard and its hundreds of docked ships. There were yachts, cruise liners, destroyers, dreadnoughts, a couple of schooners, and yes, even some flying submarines. All of them were docked on the edge of what appeared to be a massive aircraft carrier floating in Asgard's fog. Nigel expected he'd probably get one of the older models. A flying paddle steamer wouldn't be so bad, after all.

He, Trisha, Ptolemy, and Odin stepped off the elevator and approached one of the larger boats. Trisha's mouth fell open at the size of it. It was a Royal Navy battleship with two masts and gun turrets at the fore and aft of the ship. On its side read: *HMS Agamemnon*.

"Is that an actual warship?" Trisha asked.

"I like to collect old relics like these," Odin said. "I got this one a few years after World War I ended. It's the ship that they signed the Armistice of Mudros on, thus ending hostilities between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies."

"And you retrofitted it to *fly*?"

"I retrofit everything I own to fly," Odin said.

"So we're going to fly the HMS Agamemnon, then?" Nigel asked.

"Goodness, no!" Odin declared, "This is my baby! I have something different in mind for you. An operation like this requires something more personal."

They stepped past the battleship to its other side where a different ship was being worked on.

This was the part Nigel couldn't have been prepared for.

At first, he didn't recognize it. The walls had been reshaped to resemble the shape of a boat, and the upstairs had been reformed into the cabin. It also had wings with jet engines and gun turrets mounted all over them. Still, it had

the wooden finish, the same décor, and the neon sign above the door.

Hunter's Tavern had been turned into a flying boat.

"That's my bar!" Nigel exclaimed. "You just turned my bar into an airship!"

"It's more like a fast attack craft, actually," Odin said, observing the tavern's new design.

Trisha screwed up her face, feeling two very different emotions at once. As much as she hated this mission they were on, the gods had just given her a houseboat with wings.

"Pretty sweet, huh?" Ptolemy said with a grin. "Now it's the only tavern that can take you home at three in the morning."

Nigel turned to Trisha and laughed. "They fixed the bar! Isn't that great?"

"Great, wonderful," she said sardonically.

"It was in shambles when we found it," Odin said. "You have to admit this is an improvement over shambles. Come inside. I'll show you around."

They boarded the ship from the port side from a gangplank that led into the hull. The interior of their bar had been completely redesigned to fit the ship. Inside the hull was a new lounge area complete with bar, pool table, darts, and a pinball machine. Nigel's piano had been repaired and placed at the side of the bar. At the back of the lounge were doors to the bathrooms, a stairway leading to the bridge, and a back door to the kitchen.

Nigel excitedly ran around the room checking out his newly refurbished belongings with Jesse-like glee. The pool table had been polished, the jukebox looked like brand-new, and all the ugly notes Jesse has scratched into the bar were now gone.

"Look, honey!" he exclaimed. "They moved the piano downstairs!"

"I've been asking you to do that for years."

"And now it's down here!" he exclaimed. With one hand, he jauntily played the first five seconds of Chopin's 'Minute Waltz' perfectly. "The tuning's out of whack, but I can work with it. We can do live-band karaoke and..."

Nigel paused as he saw a fresh plate of honey-garlic chicken wings on the bar. The tender meat steamed with a beautiful honey-garlic scent. The sensation of it overwhelmed him religiously.

"Is that...?"

"Yes," Odin said.

"Can I...?"

"You're human," Odin said. "Chicken is perfectly safe.."

Nigel approached the plate, took a chicken wing in hand, and took a long, slow bite out of it. Trisha watched with bewilderment as he cried tears of happiness .

"It's so good," he said. "Trish, this is amazing. You have no idea."

"That's not my chicken," she said, pangs of jealousy burning within. She had no right to tell Nigel what to eat, but Odin had no right letting Nigel's first human meal be someone else's chicken wings.

"Of course it is," Odin said. "That's Aunty Vamp's Honey Garlic Chicken Chunkies. You licensed out your recipe last summer."

"Then they changed the recipe for marketing purposes," she said. "Those are not my wings."

"Who did all this?" Nigel asked.

"I've had my best engineers working around the clock to get this ship in shape," Odin said. "Elf labour helps quite a lot too. Turn your back and poof! All the work is done, plus you get shoes and cookies out of the deal."

Odin led them to the back room to reveal the kitchen had been modified into an engine room. A large glowing blue lava lamp could be seen standing in the center of the room while Nigel's red motorcycle was parked nearby with a shiny new paint job.

"Your bar is powered by a fusion reactor," Odin said.

"Completely harmless, even if ruptured. And we even tuned up your bike for you."

"Can we still cook in here?" Nigel asked.

"Yes, and the freezer's fully stocked," Odin said. "You've got pre-cooked chicken wings for days!"

Trisha opened the freezer and dug through all the boxes of chicken chunkies before noticing something unusual.

"Where's all the ram's blood we stocked up on?"

"We thought it might be best to remove it from your stock," Odin said. "It's sort of an unwritten war crime to use it against other deities."

"We're fighting Titans and you removed our Titan repellent!" she said. "Am I the only one who sees this as insane? Nigel? Ptolemy?"

Both boys were too busy staring at the giant hypnotic lava lamp.

"I think you'll find the amenities to your liking," Odin said.

"The interior is equipped with artificial gravity fields, UV-protected windows, and ram-stone insulation which will cancel out omnipresence, making your ship invisible to deities. We've also cleaned the bathrooms and installed airblade hand dryers for your convenience."

"Hear that, Trish?" Nigel asked. "Hand dryers!"

"Who wants to see the bridge?" Odin said quickly as he ushered them from the kitchen and up the stairs.

\* \* \*

Ptolemy's head almost exploded at the sight of the room. Entering Nigel's studio was like walking onto the set of "Star Trek", albeit more rustic. On the wooden walls were brightly-lit computers with flickering displays next to his beer signs and sports banners. A cozy-looking captain's chair was on a raised platform, with Pandora's Box safely tucked beneath it. In front of the chair was a long desk console where two crew members in white uniforms were sitting. At the front of the room was a large viewing window overlooking the forward deck of the ship with patio doors on each side.

The two people at the front consoles turned in their chairs to greet them.

On the left, wearing a white Asgardian cadet uniform was Patti. Her eyes looked unusually iridescent.

On the right was Laptop Guy, also in a uniform, but still wearing his porkpie hat and glasses. His laptop sat on the console in front of him, with his novel still being worked on. Patti was quick to salute, shouting "Captain on deck!", although she had to do a second take when she saw Nigel. She had heard about his transformation, but hadn't quite expected this level of change.

"Patti!" Ptolemy exclaimed.

"What are you two doing here?" Trisha asked.

"Odin's paying me overtime for this," Patti said.

"We were there when the gods dug the bar out of the street," Laptop Guy said. "They didn't even ask questions. They just hauled us here and gave us uniforms and upgrades."

"What kind of upgrades?" Nigel asked.

"Patti is equipped with a telepathic Bluetooth magically implanted in her head," Odin explained. "She'll be able to mentally open communications between you and everyone on the crew whenever you need to think to each other."



"As in, we think thoughts and she transmits them?"

Ptolemy asked nervously.

*"Only the ones you want to share to the people you want to speak to,"* Patti thought directly into his head. *"Otherwise, every depraved thought you have would be flooding the room right now."*

"Did everyone else hear that?" Ptolemy asked.

"Hear what?" Trisha asked.

*"It takes some getting used to,"* Patti thought to everyone in the room, *"but it's pretty intuitive once you try it."*

*"Testing, testing, one, two, three,"* Nigel thought aloud.

*"Trish, do you copy?"*

"Please stay out of my head," Trisha said. "We have no way of knowing if this is a secure means of communication."

"Yeah, how did Patti know I was thinking depraved thoughts?" Ptolemy asked.

*"Because you're Ptolemy,"* Nigel thought to him.

*"It's a closed circuit among us,"* Patti said to Nigel. *"Even Odin can't listen in. We're totally free to have secret conversations among ourselves."*

*"I'd rather we keep secret conversations to minimum until we know more,"* Trisha thought back.

*"What are you two thinking about?"* Ptolemy asked. *"You keep making faces at each other."*

"Can somebody *please* say something out loud?" Laptop Guy asked. "Everyone went quiet after Ptolemy said 'depraved thoughts'."

"Laptop Guy," Nigel addressed him. "What's your part in all this?"

Laptop Guy adjusted his badge and read it aloud. "I'm the Chief Science Officer, apparently."

"You're a scientist?" Trisha asked.

"No, they just saw I had a computer and made assumptions," he said. "They've upgraded my laptop with a divine hyper-net connection. Any information you need on deities and their worlds, I can access from Asgard's personal archives. Just don't expect me to do any fancy technical nonsense. I told them I'm not a hacker when I signed up."

"So your job is checking Wikipedia," Trisha said.

"Pretty much," he said. "I also know where all the medical equipment is on this ship, so if Nigel keels over, just ask me and I'll point at a defibrillator for you."

He pointed at the wall. There was a wall-mounted defibrillator awaiting use on it. Next to it was a small display case full of medical equipment and miracle potions that read: "In Case of Nigel: Break Glass."

"This is pretty nice, Odin," Nigel said. "This is a far cry better than all the magic shields and clockwork owls you used to give demigods back in the day."

"Just because we're ancient doesn't mean we're not 'with it'," Odin said. "Today's modern hero requires a little bang for their buck. A little rocket power, a little wi-fi, there's even a cappuccino machine downstairs."

"Does this rig come with weapons?" Nigel asked.

"Does it ever!" Odin said. "We have magma cannons built into the wings with hundreds of stinger turrets in the hull. This baby has enough firepower to carve a path through the Rockies."

Trisha looked above the captain's chair and spotted a control station that looked like it was made from a game console. A game controller was attached to the center. She quickly grabbed it and checked the controls.

"This is my Playstation!" she exclaimed.

"It was in pieces when we found it," Odin said.

"You better not have deleted my save games," Trisha said as she checked her control panel.

Nigel and Ptolemy stood with Odin as they assessed the bridge.

"This is good," Nigel said. "Really good. But what's the mission parameters if this is the crew you're sending? I thought you might send a few specialists. Maybe some immortals, perhaps?"

"I want you to work with people you're comfortable with," Odin said. "Besides, even with non-deities, we didn't want to risk breaking any Aeonomega rules."

"What are the rules anyway?" Nigel asked.

"Very standard," Odin said. "We meet on the fields of Vigrid on the winter solstice tonight. No time or reality-altering magic, no violence between deities prior to battle, and the Zodiac Knight may not be present. Unfortunately, participation is mandatory for all gods and Titans, and I couldn't negotiate the Shadow-Blood from the deal."

"Can you recruit off-world gods for the cause?" Nigel asked.

"If I could, I'd have my second-in-command, Athena, laying down the battle plans," Odin said. "But, no, she's off visiting the Andromeda galaxy and the rules forbid off-worlders from returning to Earth."

"So what's the deal with this Shadow-Blood anyway?" Trisha asked Odin.

"Yeah, there's nothing about these things in Wikipedia," Laptop Guy said.

"It was mentioned that the gods faced one before," Nigel said. "This isn't the first time someone got their hands on Pandora's spells, is it?"

"It's from a dark chapter in our history," Odin said begrudgingly. "During the first Titan War, the gods were

overwhelmed and sought help from a Titan traitor known as Prometheus.”

“Wasn’t Prometheus the guy who stole fire from Mount Olympus?” Ptolemy asked.

“Prometheus was a spy for the Titans who tried to steal powerful relics from the gods and was captured in doing so,” Odin said. “His own people disavowed him for his incompetence and he was locked away. Years later, he broke out of prison and returned to Olympus bearing a new source of power. He demanded the gods use it to overthrow his people.”

“Solomon created a Shadow-Blood for him?” Nigel asked.

“He created twelve,” Odin said. “In our blindness, we unleashed these creatures upon the Titans, driving them into the depths of their home realms. Only then did we see Solomon’s treachery. After the Titans were defeated, the Shadow-Bloods turned on us and these dark giants stormed our realms.”

“How did you defeat them?” Nigel asked.

“We sent a small team of demigods to recover the Book of Summoning from Prometheus who had gone into hiding,” Odin said. “From it, we found a spell that allowed us to summon great chains that could trap the Shadow-Bloods in the bowels of...”

“Run that by me again,” Nigel said. “The part where the gods were able to use the spellbook?”

Odin sighed and said, “Well, the book was written in an ancient language that we couldn’t read ourselves. We had to make a deal with a Second Age personality to cast the spell for us.”

“You used Pandora,” Nigel said.

“Yes,” Odin said. “In exchange for the book, she took care of the Shadow-Blood threat and helped us end the war. But the realm we cornered them in became poisoned by

their presence. Their darkness seeped into that world, light became impossible and that world was pulled into the Void. That will be the fate of Earth if the Shadow-Blood is not contained.”

“What else do you know about Shadow-Bloods then?” Nigel asked.

“Very little, sadly,” Odin said. “Our scriptures and seers have no information. As far as we know, they simply attach themselves to deities and hijack their powers.”

“Like a demon possession?”

“No,” Odin said. “They don’t control the minds, just the bodies. In fact, they need to possess a body just to communicate. During the war, the twelve of them possessed twelve Titans and turned them against their kin before turning them on us. To date, there is no known way to kill one since they don’t appear to have hearts.”

“So the original twelve are still alive,” Trisha said.

“Imprisoned by Pandora’s magic, but yes, still alive,” Odin said.

“If Solomon made twelve of these then, what’s to stop him now?” Nigel asked.

“That’s why you need to find him immediately,” Odin said.

“When the second Titan War was engineered, most likely by Solomon again, the rules prohibited us from using demigods to seek out the book. We had to use a Deus Ex Machina just to undo the war. Now that we’re cut off from the ley lines, we don’t have that luxury. Our best chance to end this is to send Ptolemy after Solomon and use the spellbook to stop the Shadow-Blood. Only then can we scare the Titans into succumbing to a truce.”

Nigel looked to Ptolemy and asked, “Am I going to regret training you, kid?”

“No, sir, I’m excited to learn from someone new,” he said.

“So we’re not going after Jesse?” Patti asked.

"Jesse is not part of this mission," Nigel said. "He takes precedent after Solomon's been dealt with. Our objective for now is to infiltrate Tartarus, take down the Shadow-Blood, and put an end to this nonsense. Are you with me?" There was a short smattering of uninspired cheers around the bridge.

"Well, then," Nigel said as he sat in the soft, heated captain's chair. "I guess we should get a move on. Will you be joining us, Odin?"

"I need to get off this ship before the ram-stone walls make me puke," Odin said.

"Then where are we going?"

"The coordinates to Tartarus are on that touchpad I gave you," Odin said. He looked to Trisha. "Your pilot should get you there in a couple hours."

"Who, me?" she asked.

"That's your game controller."

"It doesn't mean I'm a qualified pilot."

"Don't worry," Odin said. "My engineers studied the remains of your game collection and mapped the ship's controls to match your preferences. Flying this tavern should feel as natural as any of your flight simulator games. That is, unless you want one of my own pilots to take over."

Trisha's hands tightened around the controller. She leered at the All-Father as if to say, "No, it's mine."

"I thought as much," Odin chuckled. "I'm going to leave you all then. I need to get back on damage control and pray nothing goes wrong until tonight. I'll keep you updated should we learn anything about your brother."

"Thanks," Nigel said.

"Oh, and one more thing," Odin said before leaving the bridge. "Everyone on my council thinks I'm crazy for sending a flying pub full of civilians into enemy territory to

fight Titans. If you could prove them wrong, it would much appreciated."

With that, Odin left the ship, and the gangplank retracted. Nigel carefully thought out his orders. He set his plate on the arm of his captain's chair and took a bite of a chicken wing.

"All right, folks," he addressed the bridge. "Looks like we're on a mission from the gods to save the world. We're venturing into dark territory, so if anybody wants out now, speak up, and I'll understand."

"If we stop anywhere nice, I want out," Laptop Guy said.

"Anybody else?"

Nobody spoke up.

"In that case," Nigel said. "Start the engines."

Trisha hit the start button on her controller. The engine room below revved to life and thankfully didn't explode.

The ship rocked as the artificial gravity kicked in. Slowly, the tavern began to stabilize.

"What's our travel time to Tartarus?" Nigel asked Laptop Guy.

"Under an hour, captain."

"And do we have clearance to leave?" Nigel asked Patti.

"They've opened a rainbow bridge at the end of the ship yard," Patti said as she listened to her Bluetooth. "It's being secured to compensate for our ram-stone shielding. We have clearance."

"Excellent," Nigel said. "In that case, Trish, make it... go."

The ship lurched forward, lurched backwards, then fired a stinger missile into the side of a vintage Viking boat on the other side of the yard. They watched as the burning ship sank into the clouds..

"Sorry, inverted Y-axis," Trisha said, adjusting her controller's settings.

She carefully moved the ship forward. The engines roared outside as the lava lamp energy coursed through the ship. She made a hard starboard turn down the runway towards the end of the bay where a rainbow gateway opened. Several engineering demigods hurried out of her way as the flying tavern loomed overhead. "Rainbow bridge in ten seconds," Patti said, reading the console. "Ship is holding steady. Nigel's vitals are elevated, but within safe parameters. We are good to go." Trish punched it through the gateway. The sudden acceleration caught everyone off-guard as the ship vanished in a burst of colourful light, leaving the foggy world of Asgard behind.



## 15. The Price of Fate

Jesse felt Artemis tugging at his arm.

"This way," she whispered. "There's a door here."

He followed her down a short corridor and momentarily lost her as she released his arm to unlock something.

"These Fates," Jesse said. "Are these those seers I keep hearing the gods talk about?"

"They're three old women from the Dark Age," Artemis said. "Nobody quite knows what they are or where they come from. All that's certain is that they have *the sight*."

"The *sight*?"

"They read everything in our lives," she said. "Past, present, and future. They even read the connections between people. They might be able to tell you why you're here."

"But can they get me out of here?"

"That remains to be seen," Artemis said, opening the door.

"Head down this path. It's an old sewer that leads to their lair outside the city limits. The darkness does not extend that far. Try not to stray from the path and become lost. Lost things in this place have a habit of being found by the Void."

"So you're not coming with me?"

"I need to lead the Hantu Penanggal away from here," she said. "The Fates came to this city for solitude. I cannot

deliver demons to their door. Go now. Follow the left wall and you'll find your way."

She pressed Jesse through the door and closed it behind him.

Jesse took a few steps into the dark sewers and felt around for the left wall. It felt dry for a sewer. He slowly followed the left wall through a tunnel, hoping nothing else was down here.

Eventually, he felt the wall turn down a slope. After several minutes of walking, he carefully made his way down deeper into the sewers where something strange happened.

Light was visible.

From around a corner, he could see candlelight flickering against the cobblestone sewer walls. He hurried towards it, turned the corner, and almost went blind. He had been in pure darkness for so long, that even dim candlelight was painful to look at. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust before he finally saw them.

The Fates were three elderly women in light blue cloaks with frazzled grey hair and greyish olive skin. Their pale eyes suggested blindness, meaning the candlelight might have only been for staying warm. The first on the left was thin and frail, with an erratic twitch in her eye. The lady in the center was short and pudgy. The one on the right was larger and rotund with massive shoulders.

The three women were sitting in a stone room atop an enormous pile of colourful yarn. The pile seem to extend beyond the room as yarn crept in through the cracked walls like vines. The women were ravenously pawing through the treads and inspecting them with their hands. The first one shouted out, "I found it! Tony and Amanda are getting married next spring!"

"Oh, isn't that lovely," the rotund one exclaimed. "I always thought they were the most adorable couple."

The smaller one dug up a string and carefully ran her fingers along it, "is this their string, Chloe?"

"I do believe it is, Lacey!" The first exclaimed.

"It looks like Tony is going to have an affair with his boss' secretary," she said, running her hands further down the string, "and then Amanda's going to get revenge by going to Mexico with Pedro."

"Oh, my!" Chloe exclaimed. "How scandalous!"

"And then Tony dies in five years after getting run over by a steamroller," the third one said, finding that same string.

"You ruined the ending again, Aisa!" Lacey exclaimed.

"Well, not much else happens after the affair," Aisa said.

"I'm really saving you a few years' worth of filler."

"A steamroller's a rather uncommon way to die," Chloe said.

"Well, Amanda was the one driving it,".

"Really?" Lacey said, pulling the string through the yarn,

"Pass me the end of that string! I have to see this!"

"Excuse me!" Jesse shouted.

"Are you getting a cold, Aisa?" Chloe asked. "You sound manlier than usual."

"No, that was me," Jesse said. "Hi, I'm Jesse. Jesse O'Ryan."

The three women were quite startled at this unexpected visit. They looked around, absolutely confused.

Lacey smiled and almost shed a tear. "Chloe! Aisa! You two wonderful sisters! You remembered my birthday and got me a stripper!"

"It's your birthday?" Aisa said.

"I thought it was my birthday!" Chloe exclaimed. "It's the 23rd of Maimakterion today, right? Or did we switch over to that new Julian calendar?"

"Check this boy's string!" Aisa shouted.

Chloe fumbled through her yarn until she dug up a shiny red string.

"Ooh," she said. "This is a special string. Nice and long too. Not quite a *Jesse*, though. I do believe we're looking for a *Jezebuul*."

She gave the string a few tugs so her sisters could find it. Jesse watched as they felt up his life string.

"A lot of tragedy tied to this string," Lacey said. "A lot of near-deaths too. Jesse's quite accident-prone. Why, this part where he roasted in the belly of a giant Slor should have killed him instantly."

"Read between the knots, girls," Aisa said. "We're in the presence of a Fire-Blood."

"Ah, that clears up quite a lot," Lacey said. "Especially all these beheadings. You've made quite a lot of enemies in nine thousand years, Jezebuul."

"What are you ladies doing?" he asked.

"He asks us what we're doing!" Chloe laughed. "My young boy, we're the Fates. We're the ones who can read the strings of life and answer any question one might have about their past and future."

"Obviously, too many people started bothering us," Lacey said. "We set up shop here so we could get our reading done in private."

Aisa pulled up a blue string, "I knew I saw his thread recently. He's friends with the Blessed Lady! You know, that nice, young girl from Halifax who draws bunnies and helped defeat the Chaos. Remember how we tried to set her up with Charles, but that silly demigod turned her into a religion?"

"Ah, Christine," Chloe sighed. "Such a nice girl. You hold onto this one, my boy. There's not a lot of knots on her thread."

"Do you girls want to hear how their story ends?" Aisa asked, reading ahead on Christine's string. "Or should we wait until Jezebuul leaves the room?"

"Leave the poor boy alone!" Lacey said, checking his string. "It seems he's already got quite a lot of knots and frays as it is. Tell me, Jezebuul, are you a ghost right now?"

Jesse checked his body. He seemed corporeal enough. But when he raised his hand to the candlelight on the wall, his palm was distinctly transparent.

"I'm fading!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, quite so," Lacey examined the surrounding threads.

"There's a lot of threads jumbled about in here. Christine Marx, Patricia McNeil, Naveen... Krios? What's Krios doing tied to your string?"

"Krios!" Jesse jumped. "That's the Titan who attacked me!"

"Well, no wonder the boy's trapped here," Chloe said.

"Yes, it's a very loose knot," Lacey said. "It seems the presence of Krios has bound Jesse to this place. Fire-Bloods are magical beings, and lost magic is always drawn near the Void when it can't return to its source."

"But what's bothering me is how Naveen's thread keeps getting tangled in here." Aisa commented, tugging at a black thread.

"The two Fire-Blood brothers are often intertwined," Chloe said.

"Yes, but the entanglements are getting worse farther down the line," Lacey said, pulling at the black string wrapped around Jesse's shiny red one. "It's almost as if Naveen were responsible for Jesse's predicament."

"Why would Nigel be responsible?" Jesse asked.

"I'm not sure," Aisa said. "The strings are hard to read when there's this much going on. Your brother and friends are facing much in the world above right now. Battles

against giants, expeditions into dark places, confrontations with pure evil, and... oh, my."

"What?" Jesse asked.

"Shush!" Chloe said. "Spoilers, Aisa!"

"Do any of these strings tell me how to get out of here?"

Jesse asked.

"I'm afraid not," Lacey said. "According to your string, you're scheduled for a rescue, but that's in about a week."

"I can't be down here for a week!" Jesse exclaimed. "Can't I just untie Krios' knot from my string and get out of here?"

"No more than tearing up a newspaper can change the news," Chloe said.

"Whatever is upon the strings will come to pass," Aisa said.

"That includes the fate of your brother and... uh-oh."

Aisa dropped her strings except for Nigel's black thread.

The end of Nigel's string dangled in the air.

"What does the end of a string mean?" Jesse asked.

"Aisa, that's enough," Chloe scolded her. Aisa quickly dropped the thread.

Jesse's heart felt cold with fear.

"How soon?" he asked.

"Quite soon," Aisa said. "Of course, the string might have just snapped by mistake. Perhaps the rest of it is around here..."

"I need to leave," Jesse said. "How do I get out of this place?"

"You cannot leave in your state," Lacey said.

"But Artemis said you can help me," Jesse said. "You must have a way of communicating with the outside world. Don't you send prophecies topside?"

"Not if it tampers with fate," Chloe said.

"Except for those few times," Aisa pointed out.

"I heard an 'except'!" Jesse said. "What's the exception?"

"Oh, let's not do that to the poor boy," Lacey whined.

"Why not?" Chloe asked. "These old strings have been getting filthy anyway."

Aisa sighed and said to Jesse. "Some people seek us out to change their fates. But there's always a price."

"A restocking fee, if you will," Chloe said. "It's our job to monitor all history, and if we help you escape, the future changes and our old strings become outdated. We'll need to order in new strings, and our supplier does not accept cash."

"So what do you need?"

"A change of fate requires the price of memory, body, and soul," Lacey said.

"But I need all three of those to help Nigel."

"All of one, or half of all," Lacey said. "That's the minimum price."

Jesse checked his watch. "But half my soul's twenty minutes' worth."

"Twenty minutes for a week," Aisa said. "Whether it's a good deal is up to you."

Jesse's mind flurried with deliberation. After a few brief moments, he nodded rapidly.

"I'll take the half price, then," Jesse said. "I can easily regenerate half my body. Just leave me enough memory to save Nigel."

"Okay, but we should warn you that these deals usually carry ironic twists," Chloe said.

"Our supplier's sort of jerk that way," Lacey noted.

"Just get me a deal where I'm left with enough of myself to save Nigel," Jesse said. "I'll handle the ironic twist when it comes."

"You heard the boy," Chloe said to the others.

"It's his fate," Lacey said as she picked up several handfuls of string. "Gossiping time is over, girls. Grab some strings, call the supplier, and let's find this boy an exit."





## 16. Training Games

The tavern soared through the sky at sonic speed. Fog whipped past as they passed over the Atlantic Ocean. Their departure point from Asgard had been somewhere near the Icelandic coast, so it would take about an hour to reach their destination. Overhead, the skies were cast in grey clouds with sunlight barely seeping through the cover. Inside the ship, people were on downtime. Trisha manned the helm, much more confident behind the wheel. Laptop Guy and Patti took a break to go downstairs for a game of pool.

Outside on deck, Nigel found himself at the ship's bow gazing at the sun through the cloud cover. He could only wonder what real sunlight felt like now that he was human, but he'd have to wait for better weather to find out. He brought along his plate of chicken wings and now found himself picking at the bones for any meat scraps. Behind him, Ptolemy was sitting cross-legged on the deck. The rushing wind felt like a light breeze, thanks to whatever deflection technology Odin had built around the ship. "So is what Odin said true?" Ptolemy asked. "Can you train me in an afternoon?" "I can if you're willing to learn," Nigel said, spinning around. He stood up straight and approached Ptolemy as he would

any member of his class. "So let's cover the basics. Since the dawn of the Second Age, the Zodiac Knight has always acted as a mediator between deities and the laws of man. Entrusted with the Creator's power, it's the Zodiac's responsibility to maintain balance in the world. And unfortunately, you're severely behind on your duties."

"It's not my fault," Ptolemy said. "What Creator picks me of all people to save mankind?"

"In the old times, Zodiacs weren't distracted by movies and video games," Nigel said. "They actually spent that reserved energy on their training. But what makes you special is that your brain is hard-wired to embrace creativity. You can accept the possibilities of your gifts."

"Then why can't I master more than three of my powers?" he asked.

"Because you've been trained by gods," Nigel said. "The gods lack creativity. They need everything to be neatly categorized and properly explained like a technical manual. Like your powers, for instance."

"Yeah, I know," Ptolemy said. "There's twelve powers classified into four elements, starting from the fire sign of Aries which lets me transform matter into energy. Then Taurus controls strength, Gemini is astral projection, Cancer heals, Leo is persuasion..."

"Wrong!" snapped Nigel. "There is but one power."

"I'm pretty sure there's twelve," Ptolemy said, raising his sleeve to expose his Zodiac tattoo. It was a circle of the twelve astrological signs. A few parts of it were glowing bright, but many of the symbols were dim or completely black.

"That's what training under a god does," Nigel said. "Your learning is scattered. You're focusing on the smaller picture. Poseidon meant well when he was teaching you,

but a Zodiac's journey is personal. You learn your gifts through instinct."

"You're saying Poseidon blocked my powers?"

"The Creator doesn't mix and match His powers," Nigel said. "He just does as He wills. That's the thinking you must embrace. Now, what are your strengths?"

"I can beat '*Gears of War*' on insane mode," Ptolemy said.

"What else?"

"I can summarize every episode of '*Doctor Who*' from 1963 on, including the lost episodes. And I know all the choreography to the light-saber battle at the end of '*The Phantom Menace*'."

"I don't know what any of those things are."

"Movies, shows, video games."

"Yeah, not my thing."

"How about older movies?" Ptolemy asked. "'*Casablanca*'? '*Lawrence of Arabia*'?"

"Those ones are okay, but my tastes are a little more old-fashioned."

"Or a little more refined," Ptolemy said slyly. "Come on, what's your favourite movie?"

"We're getting off-topic," Nigel said. "Clearly, your strength is memorizing everything you see on TV."

"Right," Ptolemy said.

"And when you were helping us in Halifax last summer," Nigel remembered, "you tapped into other powers, didn't you? Speed, invulnerability, healing, force fields... you were even combining powers to fight Pandora on the bridge."

"It was adrenaline," Ptolemy said. "I can't do it on a whim."

"It was instinct," Nigel said. "You didn't need to perform martial arts or fancy hand gestures to do anything. You just willed it. The only question is, how do we get your other

instincts to activate? Because from looking into your eyes, something tells me you've already mastered your gifts."

"How is that possible?"

"For all your slacking, you've still practiced somehow,"

Nigel said. "Something's just holding you back."

"Then how do we unlock it?"

"I think you need to step outside yourself," Nigel said. "Use your gift and watch yourself in astral form."

"How is that supposed to...?"

"Just do it," Nigel said. "Humour me."

Ptolemy closed his eyes and imagined himself outside his body. Sure enough, he felt himself leave his host and he could see himself sitting on the deck with Nigel watching over him. This was one of the first powers Ptolemy learned on his own and he was quite good at it.

"*Did it,*" Ptolemy's essence said. Nigel looked in the direction of the disembodied voice.

"Good," Nigel said. "Now I need you to stand up."

"*You mean my body?*"

"Yes," Nigel said. "Play with your body like a puppet or video game. Use your gift of levitation."

"*You mean Aquarius?*"

"Stop thinking in Zodiac signs," Nigel said. "Just try to visualize it as a movie."

Ptolemy focused on his body and tried to visualize it standing up. Suddenly, his overactive imagination went wild and he instead visualized it leaping into the air, doing a triple backflip, and posing in mid-air with a stylish karate kick before landing back on deck. To his surprise, his body did exactly that. His astral form felt his body's heart pounding from the experience.

"What was that?" Nigel asked.

"*We gamers call that a 'combo move'.*"

"Can you do that when you're not astral projecting?" Nigel asked.

*"I'm not very good at first-person games," Ptolemy said. "I prefer over-the-shoulder shooters."*

"Then visualize your body doing something else," Nigel said. "Anything else. Use your imagination."

Ptolemy's body did a little Irish jig.

"Imagine something more useful than that," Nigel said. "Try teleporting."

*"I've never been able to teleport," Ptolemy said. "I think I have to unlock more of my powers before pulling off that trick."*

"Just imagine your body scooting over two feet," Nigel said.

Ptolemy tried to visualize it. He tried to imagine a Nintendo game glitch, where a sprite would suddenly disappear and reappear elsewhere on-screen. In response, his body momentarily glitched and reappeared... off the side of the ship. It fell towards the ocean.

*"I did it!"* Ptolemy exclaimed.

"Go get your body," Nigel said. "Then we'll try a few other things."

Ptolemy couldn't believe what he was capable of. He'd performed impressive stunts in astral form before, but he didn't realize this was the key to everything. All he had to do was direct himself like a movie. If he could visualize it, his powers would make it happen.

*Anything at all*, he realized.

He held back from chasing after his own body and instead tried to visualize it coming back to the ship on its own. He even tried to imagine an elaborate way for it to happen.

His body flew back to the ship on its own, riding on a horse-drawn chariot made of clouds. He deposited his body back on deck and let the clouds dissipate.

"See?" Nigel said. "You just needed to think outside yourself."

*"This is unreal!"* Ptolemy exclaimed as he glided back into his body and took control of his mouth once more. "What else can I do?"

"How's your senses?" Nigel asked. "Don't astrally project yourself around the ship. Don't use Patti's communicator. Just use your instinct to tell me what everybody's up to."

"I'd be guessing," Ptolemy said, standing up.

"Then guess," Nigel said. "What are your feelings telling you? Imagine how a video game might communicate this to you."

"Like with a heads-up display?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Okay... Patti and Laptop Guy are arguing over landing an eight ball," Ptolemy guessed as he tried to imagine a small picture-in-picture video display in the corner of his vision.

"And Trisha?"

"She's staring at us," Ptolemy said. "And she's worried about you."

"Can you read her mind?" Nigel asked.

Ptolemy thought hard, but shook his head.

"I can't," he said. "Maybe it's a vampire thing. She might lack a delta brain wave or something. I can read her emotions, though."

"And how does she feel?"

"She's frustrated," he said, imagining her emotions as a glowing red aura around her head. "I think she's taking this whole 'you' thing personally."

"I didn't ask to be turned into a human," Nigel said.

"Seems deeper than that," Ptolemy said. "Like she misses the old Nigel sometimes."

"I've been getting out and meeting people," Nigel said.

"Isn't that what she wanted?"

"Maybe she just wants to hear you play new music again."

"I thought you said you couldn't read her mind."

Ptolemy shrugged. "A wild hunch."

"To tell the truth, I worry about her too," Nigel said. "She's been very secretive lately. It's not uncommon for people our age, but I think she's been doing something other than hunting when she goes out at night."

"I'm sure it's fine," Ptolemy said. "Maybe, like you, she's just looking for a place in this world."

Nigel silently contemplated this before asking. "You don't think I'm crazy going on this mission, do you?"

"I barely know you, man," Ptolemy said. "But for all of the last twenty minutes, you seem pretty cool. Everyone was making you out to be a real hard-case."

"You think I'm... cool?"

"Sh-yeah!" Ptolemy said. "I spend all day around Yoda wannabes, and you're the only one who's ever made sense."

"I don't know who that is."

"Never saw '*Star Wars*'?" Ptolemy asked. "I've got '*Empire Strikes Back*' on my phone if you want to watch some Yoda clips."

"Nah, Jesse tried to make me watch that once," Nigel said.

"Couldn't get past the flying words."

"Hey, quick question: You're a classical music guy, right?"

"I play piano."

"Mozart," Ptolemy said. "What's your opinion of him?"

"That annoying little punk?" Nigel scowled. "His music was everywhere! Imagine music shops shoving second-rate symphonies down your throat just because some eight year-old composed them."

"I knew it!" Ptolemy exclaimed. "I always thought he was overrated!"

"You want overrated music?" Nigel said. "Try '*Hurrian Hymn No. 9*'. It was almost literally the only song anybody in Syria played for a thousand years."

"That's why you're cool," Ptolemy said. "My old history teacher droned on and on about the brilliance of classical music, but you lived it, and you *know* it sucks. If I try to talk to gods about this stuff, they don't even care. They think everything sounds good."

Nigel laughed as he leaned on the railing. It was oddly refreshing to talk about the old times with a young man like Ptolemy.

"It's funny," Nigel said. "I never talk to Jesse about things like this."

"I don't imagine he'd have a lot to say," Ptolemy said as he leaned against the railing as well. "He always struck me as odd."

"I always thought you two were alike."

"Nah, I've been getting serious these last few months," Ptolemy said. "I really like my solitude, but I want movies and games to be my kung fu, not just a distraction. I want peace of mind. Maybe learn an instrument after this is all done."

"Piano?"

"Bass guitar."

"Well, you came a long way with your training in just ten minutes," Nigel said. "I wish my brother shared your attitude."

"I think I just needed an outsider's perspective," Ptolemy said. "Incidentally, if you and Trish ever need a relationship counselor, I know a nice Swedish girl who's got degrees in everything."

"I take it you've got your eyes on her?"

"No, I'm seeing somebody else right now," Ptolemy said.

"Somebody from Asgard?"



"Not quite," he said. "Maybe I'll introduce you two after this is over."

"So are you feeling confident enough with your powers?" Nigel asked.

"Nope," Ptolemy said. "There is but *one* power."

"Now you're learning."

Ptolemy rolled up his sleeve and checked his tattoo. The darker parts of it were now softly pulsing with light.

"I should have stopped taking Poseidon's advice a long time ago."

"Shall we practice some more?" Nigel asked.

"Certainly," Ptolemy replied, "Then we can watch '*Star Wars*'."

"We'll see."

"Mind if I practice my power of persuasion on you?"

"Go ahead, but I'm not easily persuaded."

"Raise your hand."

Nigel raised his hand involuntarily.

"Not bad."

"Tell me your favourite movie," Ptolemy said.

"*Fantasia*," Nigel blurted out. He quickly covered his mouth in surprise.

"I knew it," Ptolemy said with a smile. "Closet Disney fan."

## 17. Landslide

Christine trudged alongside the Colorado River, ankle-deep in water. She'd been moving for hours, growing ever winded by the moment. As she marched, she kept her eyes on the canyon ahead. Krios had left a very clear path of destruction in his wake. She hoped to see Jesse's heart dropped on the ground by accident so she could give up this hike, but there was no such luck. There was no telling how far the Titan had gotten, or what she would do if she ever caught up with him.

She checked her phone to see where she was. The battery was still dead. She prayed for a charge, or even a clean glass of water, but the gods had stopped listening.

"Un-freaking-believable," she said to herself. "Should have saved Vegas for next year."

As she turned a corner in the river's bend, she found herself taking refuge behind a boulder. A large figure was seen on the river bank in the distance. Christine slowly peered out from behind her hiding spot. The figure was unquestionably Krios, washing his face in the water. Hanging from a strap on his loincloth was a heart-shaped steel container.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed her shoulder from behind. She suppressed a yelp and turned to see a black-bearded

stranger with a purple shirt standing behind her. His eyes looked very familiar.

"Is your name Christine?" he asked.

"Poseidon?" she asked, quite unsure.

"I'm his brother."

"Zeus?"

"I'm Hades!" he said. "Nigel sent me to rescue you."

"Well, you're just in time," she said. "Look! I found Jesse!"

Hades peered around the corner at the half-naked Titan.

Krios was happily scratching his favourite body parts.

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

"We're not leaving Jesse here."

"Actually, I have specific orders to do exactly that," Hades said.

"Orders from who?"

"His brother."

"Why wouldn't Nigel want his own brother rescued?"

"It's complicated," he said. "There's an Aeonomega in effect, a Second Age sorcerer named Solomon is mucking about, and there's a giant wolf-snake shadow monster somewhere, but the gist of it is that until everything else is resolved, Jesse is off-limits."

"I don't believe this," she said. "So we do nothing?"

"We do nothing."

"Can I rest for a moment before we leave?"

"Knock yourself out," Hades said. He produced some bottled water from his sleeve and passed it to her. She hastily opened it and gulped it down before passing it back to Hades. She leaned against the wall of the canyon and sighed.

"You know, I expected a God of Death to be dressed a little more metal," she said.

"Underworld," he said.

"Hmmm?"

“God of the Underworld, not Death,” he said. “I’m a realtor; not a reaper.”

“And how did a realtor get roped into saving me?” she asked. “I’ve been praying all night with no answer.”

“The prayer network’s on the blitz,” Hades said. “You’re just lucky Nigel’s watching out for you. But you really should’ve waited at the plane. It’s dangerous enough down here without having to worry about Krios.”

“Just have to ask: what’s his deal?”

“He’s a Ram-Blood Titan,” Hades said. “Born with the power to disrupt divine magic and other energies. The sorcerer must’ve sent him to keep the Fire-Blood contained.”

“Is he normally dangerous?”

“All Titans are dangerous,” Hades said. “Krios especially. We had to lock him up because his power kept causing car accidents and blackouts wherever he went. We also didn’t care for his lack of pants.”

“He looks innocent enough to me,” she said. “Maybe we can reason with him.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Hades said. “You can’t reason with a Titan. Titans were born from chaos. Destruction is in their blood. They only respond to brute force.”

“I reasoned with him before,” she said. “I could do it again.”

“You’re dehydrated and talking crazy,” he said. “Let’s just go and...”

With that, she stepped out from behind the boulder and shouted to Krios. Krios took notice of her and waved happily.

“Hi, Krios!” Christine shouted. “Remember me?”

“Nice lady!” Krios shouted. “Look! Me keep friend safe!”

“Stop!” Hades said as he rushed to grab her. As soon as he jumped out from behind the boulder and grabbed her

arm, Krios furiously shouted and struck the ground with his gorilla-like fists.

"Mean god leave nice lady alone!" he shouted.

"Let go of me!" Christine said to Hades.

"Wait, what?" Hades said, releasing her. "No! I'm not a mean god! This isn't what it looks like!"

"Don't worry, nice lady!" Krios said as he dashed towards them. "Me help you!"

"Oh, balls," Hades cursed as he quickly picked up and hurled the giant boulder they were hiding behind at Krios. The rock bounced off the Titan's head and the giant flopped over onto his back, seemingly stunned.

"What was that for?" Christine said.

"He was going to kill us!" Hades exclaimed.

His argument was cut off by a blast of lightning from the cloudless sky. Hades was struck in a brilliant blast that sent him through smouldering through the air. He fell to the river bed and groaned loudly.

"What was that?" Christine asked.

"The Referee," he said weakly. "I'm not supposed to hit Titans."

Krios suddenly hurried over and grabbed Hades by the leg. Hades flopped over like a rag doll as Krios repeatedly slammed him into the canyon floor.

"Bad god hurt lady!" Krios yelled. "Krios smash bad god!"

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!" Hades said between smashes. "Why isn't the Ref stopping this?"

His answer came in an electrifying bolt of lightning that struck both him and Krios. The lightning seemed to harmlessly deflect off Krios while Hades took the brunt of the blast. It took a moment for Hades to register that Krios was immune to even the Creator's divine power.

"Point made," he said with a cough.

Krios skipped Hades across the river and into the other side of the canyon. Before Hades could get up, Krios hopped over and flattened him into the earth with a heavy downward punch. Hades rested at the bottom of the crater. "Krios, it's okay!" Christine shouted. "He wasn't hurting me!"

"Bad god threw rock," Krios said. "Rock hurt Krios!"

"Krios, we need that heart you're carrying!" Christine said.

"That's our friend you're trapping in there!"

"But friends say Krios need to keep heart safe," Krios said, looking at the steel heart hanging from his waist. He picked up Hades' staggered body by the ankle. "Bad god try to take it."

"Well, I'm a nice lady and I think you should give me the heart before you break it," she said. "Or before you break him."

"But he bad god!" Krios protested.

"No, he's a good god!"

Krios looked to Hades who was angrily scowling.

"He no look so good to me," Krios said.

"Come on, you big lummo!" Hades said, "Hit me! I dare you!"

"Sorry, nice lady," Krios said to Christine. "Me gonna hit him now."

He immediately smashed Hades into the side of the canyon wall repeatedly.

"You call that a hit?" Hades challenged him.

Krios hit him harder against the wall. The rocks cracked under the sheer force.

"Hades, stop goading him!" Christine shouted.

"Christine, stand back!" Hades shouted.

Krios pulled back his fist and smashed Hades deep into the cavern wall. Hades' body was buried from sight.

"Krios bury bad god," Krios said, turning around.

He heard a cracking noise. Turning around, he saw the wall of the Grand Canyon coming down upon him. A hundred tons of sand-orange rock hit him in the face and collapsed across the river. Christine had to scramble several feet away to avoid getting hurt.

When the dust had settled, a very-beaten Hades climbed out of the wall and stepped over to a large hand jutting out from the rock. Krios was mumbling incoherently beneath. Hades sifted through the dirt and pulled Jesse's heart from the debris. He casually strode across the new land bridge towards Christine, juggling the heart in one hand.

"Told you to stand back," Hades said.

"Quick, hand me the heart!" Christine said as she hurried forward to take it.

Hades swiftly lifted it up beyond her reach. "That's far enough."

"But we need to get it away from Krios!" she said. "It's the only way to bring Jesse back!"

"Taking this heart was too easy," Hades realized. "Nigel was right; this is a power play."

"What are you talking about?"

"Whoever arranged for Jesse to get trapped also expected him to be saved. We can't free him yet."

"Because of your orders?" she asked.

"Forget my orders," Hades said. "I'm done following orders. All I ever do is push pencils for Odin and for what? Bad publicity and a Titan beat-down? All I'm certain of is that freeing your friend will lead to some bad mojo."

"So, what are you...?"

"Here, take the heart," Hades threw it to her. "I don't care what happens anymore. Somehow I don't think we're going to win this war anyway."

With that, he began walking away.

"If that's the case, what am supposed to do with it?" she asked.

"Why are you asking me?" he asked. "You're the one who walked all night for the man. Set him free for all I care."

Christine held the cold metal heart in her hands and looked to Krios who was slowly crawling out of the landslide. She suddenly felt a pang of urgency that she didn't agree with. Somehow, she knew Hades was right.

"Krios," she said as the Titan lumbered towards her. "Can you keep this safe until we need it?"

"Nice lady not take it?" he asked.

"I changed my mind," she said. "Just promise me you'll give it back when we're ready."

"Krios promise," he said.

She offered the heart back to Krios.

Suddenly, a bright golden glow surged through her eyes.

She screamed in pain, and a burst of energy flowed from her body, causing Hades and Krios to step back in fear.

Christine spoke in a deep, hollow voice, "*The price is paid; all fates will change.*"

With that, she crushed Jesse's steel heart in her hands with amazing superhuman strength.

The golden glow ended and Christine fell over. Hades rushed forward to catch her before she hit the ground. The crushed steel canister fell from her hands, life no longer flowing through it. She was barely conscious.

"This is bad," Hades said. "Real bad."

"Why nice lady do that?" Krios asked.

"It wasn't her," Hades said. "Solomon's plan is moving forward on its own. That possession was initiated by someone else on the other side."

Christine softly spoke, "Hades... what happened?"

"It was the Fates," Hades said. "They've just freed Jesse."

"I see," she said with a weak cough. "One question..."



“What?”

“...Who’s Jesse?”

## 18. Battle of the Serengeti

"What are you boys up to?" Trisha asked as she stepped outside to the front deck. At some point, Nigel and Ptolemy went from training to laying on their backs. They were now watching something on Ptolemy's phone. Nigel pointed excitedly at the screen.

"That!" he said. "The thing Space Boy is doing with the robot's legs! Jesse and I took down a runaway war elephant like that once!"

"You used a tow cable?" Ptolemy inquired.

"No, just a regular rope."

"And it fell over?"

"Not quite. Our legs got caught in the rope and it dragged us for half a mile."

"Well, you might be interested to know the animation of these walkers are modeled after actual elephants," Ptolemy said. "Except that they're only fifty centimetres tall in real life."

"You don't say?" Nigel asked. "You mean there's actual trivia behind these explosion movies? Jesse just makes 'pew-pew' noises the whole time he watching them."

"You're supposed to be training, not watching *'Empire Strikes Back'*," Trisha said.

"It's just the Hoth sequence," Ptolemy said. "I'll fast-forward to the Yoda parts in a moment."

"It'll have to wait; Laptop Guy wants to brief us," Trisha said.

Ptolemy put away his movie and the two boys followed Trisha into the cabin where Laptop Guy and Patti were waiting. Their large viewing window displayed a video extension of the laptop.

Laptop Guy began his slideshow. The first slide came on, revealing a familiar ugly face.

"Surtur. Nordic Lord of the Fire Giants," Laptop Guy read from his computer. "Multiple arrests and incarcerations following the first Titan War for inciting rebellion against the gods. Was last released from Tartarus in 1805 for good behavior. Currently possessed by the Shadow-Blood. Threat level: high."

The picture on the bridge's viewscreen changed.

"Atlas. Greek Earth Titan. Former general of Kronos' army during the first war. Was confined to Tartarus where he was forced to hold the world's weight on his shoulders for a thousand years. No reports of violent activity since then. Was reportedly hiding in a dumpster during most of Halifax's siege. Threat level: minimal."

An image of Sinmara appeared.

"Sinmara, Frost Giant and Granddaughter of Ymir. A former insurgent along with Surtur during the first war. Was arrested for attempting to claim the Arctic Circle in the name of the Frost Giants by sinking all human trade vessels in 1789 A.D. Formerly nicknamed 'The Siren' for her strategy of luring sailors into icebergs. Threat level: moderate."

"And finally, Mishnykov. Machine Titan of Russia's Industrial Revolution. Has a penchant for extreme patriotism and was arrested for trying to resurrect the dark

sorcerer Rasputin during the Siege of Leningrad in 1943. He was finally arrested and taken to Tartarus in 1962 following his involvement in the Cuban missile crisis.

Threat level: Extreme."

"And these are the only Titans we know of who escaped?" Nigel asked.

"The gods haven't been able to put together an escapee list yet," Laptop Guy said. "These are the Big Three who came to Halifax plus the one seen on the news, although their ability to work as a team is questionable."

"Any known weaknesses?"

"Just typical elemental stuff," Laptop Guy said. "Fire Giants hate water, Frost Giants hate heat, and Mishnykov hates sugar in his gas tank."

"Honey, we've arrived at our destination," Trisha said to Nigel.

The ship left the cloud layer and began its descent to the continent below. The sky surrounding the area was filled with dark ominous clouds. The fields below were littered in burn-scars and spots of flame. Nigel knew these weren't campfires, however. There had been a battle here.

Tiny snowflakes rushed past the window as they arrived.

"Is that snow?" Ptolemy asked, seeing the specks through the floodlights.

"It's coming from the ground," Laptop Guy said. "Since the entrance to Tartarus is locked down here, the weather from its location in Antarctica is tampering with the regional weather."

"And where are we exactly?" Nigel asked.

"Tanzania," Trisha said. "We're just over the Serengeti plains near Mount Kilimanjaro."

"What's with all the fires?" Patti asked.

"Fire Giants," Nigel said. "They must have burned the plains during their escape."

"So where is Tartarus?" Trisha asked.

"The entrance to Tartarus can always be found in the shadow of a mountain," Nigel said.

"The African pantheon just sent me the location of the entrance," Laptop Guy said, checking the location on Google Maps. "It's just off the west side of the Mawenzi peak. It's fairly large. Almost looks like the opening to an old coal mine. You shouldn't miss it, Ptolemy."

"I shouldn't miss it?" Ptolemy asked. "Aren't you guys coming with me?"

"We'll follow you in the ship after you clear a path," Nigel said. "Surtur's bound to have set up some guards out here."

"And how exactly do I fight Titans again?" Ptolemy asked.

"Take them down in a territorial display," Nigel said. "Titans always respond to the highest authority."

"So just give a big rousing speech?" Ptolemy asked. "Or do I actually have to kill something?"

"No killing," Nigel said. "We're going for zero casualties. If Titans attack, challenge the largest one. Then take them out of commission by any means possible. Be creative."

"I'm not much for creativity," Ptolemy said.

"We'll stay in touch and talk you through it," Nigel said.

"Consider this a simple scouting mission. If something goes wrong, we'll rescue you. Got it?"

"Roger that," Ptolemy said, saluting Nigel.

"Good, then suit up," Nigel ordered him.

Ptolemy summoned the Armour of God, a prize he won from the Creator defending Halifax last summer. The golden white body armour appeared instantly over his body and head. He'd tested the suit in various conditions and found it to be completely indestructible, as well as heat-resistant, non-conductive, and water-tight.

They opened the hatch in the lounge and lowered the gangplank. Ptolemy carefully stepped out and stared into the flames below on the Serengeti plains. He could feel the heat from here, so he lowered the visor on his helmet. Nigel shouted to him, "Just clear the way! We'll be right behind you!"

"Clearing the way!" Ptolemy said as he let himself fall backwards off the gangplank towards the ground. Wind rushed past as he projected from his own body and prepared to fly it into battle. With a thought, he sent his body flying off towards Mount Kilimanjaro at missile speed. His astral projection stayed close behind.

"Ptolemy's closing in on the mountain," Laptop Guy said, "ETA 60 seconds and closing. No sign of Titans yet."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Nigel said.

"Are we safe up here?" Patti asked.

"Our ship is shielded," Nigel said. "Unless they look directly at us, we're invisible to their senses."

"And what if the Shadow-Blood shows up?"

Someone's phone started ringing.

"Patti, no telemarketing while we're on a mission," Nigel said.

"But that's your phone," she replied.

Nigel checked his pocket. It was.

He answered it.

"Knight to F3," the voice on the other end said.

"Solomon?" Nigel inquired. "Or is this the Shadow-Blood?"

"Does it matter?" Solomon asked. "Your role in this is over. Why come here of all places? I didn't turn you human so you could come waltzing back into my game and ruin years of well-planned moves."

Nigel clenched his fist. "Solomon, this isn't a game. What you're planning could destroy the planet."

"So misinformed," Solomon chuckled.

"20 seconds," Laptop Guy said.

"Why are you calling?" Nigel asked.

"In my game, I only move twelve pieces," Solomon said.

"Some pieces, like my bishop, are moved to be sacrificed. Others are placed to control the other player's movements. I want you to ruminate on that as I introduce you to one of my pieces. This one's a little pawn that's been locked up and longs for elbow room."

"You're sending a pawn against our knight?"

"As to why, I'll let you decide," Solomon said.

He hung up.

"Solomon knows we're here," he said.

Laptop Guy continued reading his numbers. "Ptolemy's closing in on the portal and..."

The sound of a loud explosion erupted from the mountain. Nigel rushed to the outside deck to see what had happened.

Near the base of the mountain, they saw Ptolemy fall from the sky and plummet to the ground.

Something massive moved around the mountain and began to bear down on the boy. Nigel wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it. In the firelight, he saw the mountain-sized figure had several arms and hundreds of dragon heads, each with fiery eyes. It roared victoriously as it approached Ptolemy's fallen body.

"What happened?" Nigel asked.

"Ptolemy's been knocked from the sky," Laptop Guy said.

"We're reading only one Titan. It's a big one. It's... holy crap."

"Which one?" Nigel insisted.

"He's called Typhon," Laptop Guy explained, reading the Wikipedia entry on the creature. "Regarded as the Monster Titan, Typhon's claim to fame was destroying three of the original seven wonders of world including the Colossus of

Rhodes, the Statue of Zeus, and the original Temple of Artemis. He also savagely beat Zeus to a bloody pulp and fed his remains to the dragon Delphyne. Eventually, Zeus returned to life and buried Typhon under a mountain where he's been confined to Tartarus ever since. And now he's destroying our Zodiac Knight."

"Damn it!" Nigel said, "Patti, connect me to him!"

*"Connecting,"* Patti thought.

*"Ptolemy, you're up against Typhon,"* Nigel said. *"He's a bruiser and he doesn't back down. Hit him with everything you got!"*

*"I'm trying!"*

Typhon started throwing his many fists into Ptolemy, driving him deeper into the ground.

*"Fight back, Ptolemy!"* Nigel said. *"Get out of there and pin him on his back!"*

*"My powers aren't working!"* Ptolemy cried.

*"They were working fine a few minutes ago!"*

*"They aren't now!"* Ptolemy said. *"Just leave me! I'll be fine! The armor will protect me!"*

Nigel cursed and turned to Trisha. "Get our weapons online!"

"Why aren't his powers working?" Trisha asked.

"They are," Nigel said. "He's just panicking."

"He didn't fold in Halifax," Trisha said. "Not when he was fighting Pandora. Why is this different?"

A thought hit Nigel.

"He needs a push," Nigel said. "We need to throw something at him."

"You mean pinecones?" Trisha asked.

"I mean me."

Before Trisha could say a word, Nigel was already racing down the stairs and heading for the engine room.

"I need ground transport!" Nigel shouted.



"Are you insane?" Trisha yelled. "Typhon will destroy you!"  
"Not if Ptolemy can help it," Nigel said, hurrying into the kitchen.

The cargo bay doors of the ship opened. Before anyone could stop him, Nigel drove his motorcycle out of the ship and into the dark skies. The bike plummeted towards Earth.

"Whoo!" Nigel shouted as he spiraled towards his doom.  
"*Nigel!*" Trisha screamed inside his head. *"That bike can't fly!"*

*"I know!"* Nigel said. *"Ptolemy, I need a lift!"*

*"Nigel?"* Ptolemy asked from under the ground. *"What do you think you're doing?"*

*"Coming to save you, but I need an airlift now! Timing is critical!"*

Ptolemy quickly projected his powers over to Nigel's bike. The bike caught itself in mid-air, and gently touched down on the ground.

Nigel hit the gas and raced across the Serengeti plains towards the Titan in the distance. He weaved around the burning patches of tall grass, narrowly avoiding a stray antelope as it bounced away from the carnage.

*"Nigel, turn that bike around right now!"* Trisha ordered him, *"You're in no condition to fight a Titan!"*

*"Don't worry,"* Nigel said. *"I trust Ptolemy."*

With that, he reached into his bike's storage compartment and withdrew a flare gun. He fired it directly at Typhon.

Many of Typhon's hundred heads swung his way and fire flowed from their maws as the bright searing light flashed past their faces. Typhon began turning towards Nigel.

"That's right, you over-stuffed lizard," Nigel muttered, "Come and get me."

Typhon raised a cruise ship-sized foot in anticipation of stepping on Nigel. Nigel headed straight for it.

*"Nigel, are you trying to get killed?"* Ptolemy's floating voice asked.

"I'm bringing my bike to you," Nigel said. "Make sure I get there."

*"But I can't concentrate!"* Ptolemy exclaimed.

"Well, I'm about to get flattened in five seconds," Nigel said. "So now's a good time to start!"

Ptolemy screamed.

Typhon's foot came down on Nigel.

Nigel drove through it as if it were air and continued towards Ptolemy's crater. As he drove, he looked down at himself and the bike to see they'd been turned transparent.

"Nice," Nigel said as he became tangible once more. "I was expecting a force field, but whatever that was works too."

*"You're crazy!"* Ptolemy said. *"Hang on, I'm climbing out of here."*

Nigel pulled up to the crater as Typhon lumbered overhead and prepared to strike again. He helped Ptolemy onto the back of his bike and prepared to evade Typhon's next set of punches.

"I need speed," Nigel said, revving the engine.

"Just drive!" Ptolemy said, watching the fists start coming down.

"I said this bike needs speed," Nigel repeated. "Supply it!" Ptolemy's eyes shone blue.

The bike suddenly roared to life and surged with divine energy.

Nigel hit the gas just as Typhon's fists struck. The bike sped away at near the speed of sound. Ptolemy steadied the bike as the two of them shot through the grass, putting out several fires in their wake. The bike was moving several times faster than it was built for, but was staying

ahead of Typhon with no difficulty. Even Typhon didn't understand what he'd just seen.

Nigel began circling around the monster to keep it off-balance.

"We so didn't cover this in training," Ptolemy groaned.

*"Trisha, I'm safe," Nigel said to her. "We're getting this battle back on track. Start laying down suppressing fire. We'll handle things down here."*

*"Copy that."*

"Mind explain what's going on?" Ptolemy asked.

"What's going on is that you're a good man," Nigel said.

"Astral projection helps, but your power really shines when you're protecting people. So as long as my life is at risk down here, you're operating at full capacity."

Typhon launched a heavy boulder at the two of them.

Ptolemy raised a hand and generated a force field inside of it, splitting the boulder in two. Both halves narrowly missed the bike.

"See?" Nigel said. "Now, let's take the fight to him."

From high above, the tavern laid down a steady stream of magma blasts. The molten steel slashed against Typhon's skin like a light drizzle. Nigel watched as Typhon brushed the tiny steel bands from his skin.

"Our ammo's not large enough," Nigel said. "We might as well be throwing paper clips at him."

"Drive straight at him," Ptolemy said. "I'm going to see how heavy this guy really is."

"Give him hell, kid," Nigel said, veering towards the Titan.

Ptolemy closed his eyes and projected himself outside his body following the bike. He looked at Typhon in the near distance and tried to imagine throwing a large invisible fist at him. Nigel saw it too, as clouds were parted by a fist-like shape. Typhon was struck in the chest. He took a mile-wide step back to steady himself.

"Again!" Nigel shouted.

Ptolemy visualized a rope around Typhon, binding his dozens of arms together. Then he imagined more hands coming out of the air to hold the monster steady as he prepared for a final blow. For Nigel, all he saw was Typhon being restrained by some invisible force. Ptolemy imagined himself twice the size of the monster and delivering a solid kick to its midsection. He kicked Typhon like a football, right over the peaks of Mount Kilimanjaro. The monster disappeared into the darkness.

Nigel brought the bike to a rest and took a moment to breathe.

*Touchdown*, he thought.

Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in his chest. His arm went numb and he fell from his bike. Ptolemy shouted after him.

*"Ptolemy, what happened?"* Trisha asked.

"My chest..." Nigel said.

Ptolemy hopped off the bike and rolled Nigel over onto his back. Nigel was having a hard time breathing and his eyes were rolling back into their sockets.

"Hold on, buddy," Ptolemy said. "I can fix this."

He rubbed his hands together like a defibrillator, placed them on Nigel's chest, and shouted "Clear!"

Nigel's body lurched and went motionless.

Ptolemy did it again. "Clear!"

Nigel lurched again. He quickly sat up, coughing, and collapsed again. His heart rate steadied..

"Too much excitement," Nigel chuckled.

"I'm getting you back to the ship," Ptolemy said, hoisting Nigel onto his shoulder.

As they shambled back to the bike, Nigel looked behind them and saw something massive moving through the air.

"Ptolemy..." he pointed to it.

Ptolemy turned to look.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's Mount Kilimanjaro."

Ptolemy immediately dropped Nigel, realizing the mountain in the distance was now missing. Typhon stood in its place, looking quite pleased. Ptolemy ran forward to intercept the airborne landmark.

Mount Kilimanjaro crashed against Ptolemy's head. The mountain immediately split in two and shattered around them, completely missing Nigel but destroying the bike.

Nigel curled up as loose debris rained upon him.

Ptolemy swooned and fell over unconscious. Head-butting a mountain had been too much for him. Nigel hurried to his side. Ptolemy was alive, saved by his armour, but wasn't responding.

Looking up, he saw Typhon moving towards them again, moving miles at a time.

There was no escape this time.

Nigel considered praying.

Fortunately, he didn't need to. At that moment, an angel appeared.

## 19. Battle of the Serengeti, Pt. 2

*“Nigel!”* Trisha shouted, *“He’s here! He’s here!”*

Jesse soared from the tavern, his glowing ethereal wings rocketing him towards Typhon at full speed. He hit the Titan with all his strength and knocked it over onto its side, leaving an enormous crater across the landscape.

Jesse floated in the air, posing triumphantly. His light cast a ray of hope across the Serengeti. He looked to his brother and smiled.

“It can’t be,” Nigel said.

Typhon quickly sat up and swatted Jesse with two hands. Jesse died instantly.

Nigel’s relief vanished.

Typhon laughed a hundred fearsome laughs and turned his attention to Nigel. Nigel scrambled away. As furious as he was that Jesse had been rescued somehow, his best hope was to keep the monster away from Ptolemy long enough for Jesse to return.

*“Trish,”* he relayed to her, *“Get Pandora’s Box to the lounge and keep the hatch open. Make sure someone’s on key duty so Jesse doesn’t lock himself in the box.”*

*“Patti’s on it.”*

As Typhon’s foot came towards Nigel, Nigel slid into a small ditch and laid as flat as possible. The enormous foot came down over him, compressing the ground around him. Typhon’s scaly foot barely touched Nigel’s nose.

Typhon was struck by fire from the ship. Trisha had switched from magma rounds to stinger missiles for stronger attacks. The Titan stumbled backwards. Typhon swatted the missiles away and set his attention on the ship itself. As Typhon came towards them, Trisha put the ship in full reverse and continued firing. Typhon caught one of the missiles in one of his many hands and threw it back in their direction. Trish swerved to evade it. Down in the lounge, Patti set Pandora's Box on the bar and stepped back just as Jesse popped out of it. He got to his feet and angrily brushed himself off.

"I can't believe that happened," he said. "I'm going to wreck that monster!"

"Jesse, the key!" Patti reminded him. Jesse quickly fished the key from his pocket and handed it over. She returned it through the keyhole.

He then dived out of the ship's hatch and dive-bombed Typhon, building up speed as he fell. Trisha fired a volley of missiles to accompany him. As the missiles exploded around Typhon, Jesse summoned his crystal sword and began lobbing off Typhon's heads. One dragon head after another fell from the monster. He carved a path through Typhon's necks.

*"Jesse, you have to stop!"* Laptop Guy shouted.

"Who said that?" Jesse asked.

*"It doesn't matter! You have to stop cutting off heads! Typhon's like a Hydra!"*

"A what-now?"

*"Cut off one head, two grow back!"*

Jesse turned back to see twice as many heads as the ones he cut off reform on Typhon's body. What was once a small grove of heads was now an entire forest.

"Well, don't that beat all," he sighed as one of the heads sneaked up from below and crushed him in its jaws.

*"Nigel, Jesse's dead again," Trisha said. "I'm putting some distance away from Typhon so I can pick you up."*

*"Cancel that," Nigel said, "Patti, can you patch me through to Asgard? I need to speak with Odin."*

*"Connecting," she replied.*

Odin's voice came up, *"Naveen, what's happening? Why are you in my head?"*

"I'm in Tanzania right now," Nigel said, "Trying to avoid becoming Typhon toe-mulch."

*"Did you say Typhon?"* Odin asked.

*"You know that giant cannon you built on Citadel Hill?"*

Nigel asked. "Can it attack overseas?"

*"That's what it was built for,"* Odin said. *"But we haven't tested it yet."*

"Now's as good a time as any," Nigel answered.

Typhon lost interest in the ship and started moving towards Nigel again, with more heads than ever.

*"I've ordered them to warm up the cannon,"* Odin said, *"but they need a lock on the target. Do you have a smart-phone?"*

"I have a flip-phone," Nigel said, taking the phone from his pocket and flipping it open.

*"That might work,"* Odin said. *"Just keep camera mode turned on and point it at the monster. I'll track your SIM card."*

"How long is this going to take?" Nigel asked.

*"A couple minutes,"* Odin replied. *"Can you keep Typhon busy?"*

Nigel watched as Jesse flew at Typhon for the third time. Typhon reached out and crushed Jesse between two fingers without flinching.

"If by busy, you mean winning, then yes," Nigel said. "Just get that cannon operational. I don't care how much divine energy you spend, just do it!"



He kept the camera pointed at Typhon, but steadily kept moving backwards through the grass. Typhon continued his approach and cracked dozens of his knuckles at once. He stepped towards Nigel, who scooted out of the foot's reach in time. The tip of Typhon's toe brushed his sleeve as he rolled away. Nigel wouldn't escape a second time. Trisha continued to rain down heavy artillery, but Typhon shook it off like nothing. His sight was fixed on Nigel and that little camera of his.

His foot came up again.

And then it stayed up.

Pressed up against the sole of his foot was Ptolemy, flying through the air like Superman. He gave the foot a great shove. Typhon fell over backwards hard. The earth quaked under the impact of his weight.

Typhon immediately sat up and lashed out at Ptolemy, but an invisible barrier kept his fists from even touching the flying Knight.

On Ptolemy's face was pure, unbridled anger. He glared at Typhon and told him, quite sternly, "Back off."

Typhon involuntarily found himself backing off. He quickly shook off Ptolemy's mind-trap and attacked again. Ptolemy grabbed one of his fists with his mind and punched it backwards into several of Typhon's own heads. The monster attacked again to the same effect. Typhon continued to give himself hundreds of nosebleeds as every attack he sent Ptolemy's way was returned with twice the devastation.

"Quit hitting yourself," Ptolemy mused.

Typhon bellowed in fury as he lunged at Ptolemy with all his might. Ptolemy teleported right through him and Typhon fell forward, inches away from Nigel again. Nigel stared into the glowing eyes of a dragon's head, keeping

the camera fixed on the creature. Ptolemy grabbed the Titan by the foot and dragged it away.

*"Nigel!"* Odin shouted, *"We're ready to fire, but gods can't attack Titans, so you'll have to pull the trigger. We're remapping the controls to your phone. Just press the pound key when he's in position."*

Nigel watched as Ptolemy pulled Typhon to his feet and began flying circles around him at supersonic speed, punching every head he could find. Typhon was helpless to fight back.

"Ptolemy!" Nigel called him, "Stand clear! We're sending something your way!"

Ptolemy faced the hundred heads and told them, "Stand still for a moment, will ya?"

Typhon found himself obliging.

Nigel got the whole creature in frame and hit pound as Ptolemy flew away.

For a moment, it seemed like nothing happened.

Typhon was starting to get control of his minds again. He slowly began stepping out of place. Ptolemy raised his hands and produced a temporary barrier to keep Typhon from straying.

No one heard the blast approaching.

Jesse soared out of the ship, sword in hand, angrier than ever.

As he attacked Typhon for the fourth time, a heavy wave of magma came flying out of the horizon and wrapped itself around the Titan's entire body. The metal solidified instantly and Typhon was trapped in a crude metal wrap. Ptolemy raised barriers to protect himself and Nigel from stray globs of molten metal as they scattered across the plains.

Jesse stopped in mid-air, several feet away from the monster. He watched as Typhon toppled over, unable to escape his bonds.

He fell directly onto Jesse.

The Serengeti plains thundered as the Titan smashed into the Earth. Every dragon head belched flames as they tried to break free of the steel, but it was no use. The monster Titan was finally down.

Nigel fell on his back laughing. Ptolemy floated down to make sure he didn't have a heart attack again.

"That was the worst thing ever," Ptolemy said.

"If that's the worst thing that happens to us today," Nigel said, "the rest of this mission should be a breeze."

"What happened to Jesse?" Ptolemy asked, breathing heavily.

"Died four times by my count," Nigel said.

Ptolemy fell to one knee.

"Are you okay?" Nigel asked.

"Yeah," Ptolemy said, inspecting his arm. His Zodiac tattoo was glowing completely. He started to sway. "Nigel, my friend, I think you were... right. I'm a... I'm a full master. Heh, heh... Why are there two of you?"

He coughed and went still.

The tattoos on his armor went completely black, and he collapsed in a heap.

Nigel shook the armor, but the boy didn't answer.

"Ptolemy!" he shouted, "Wake up!"

"*What's wrong?*" Trisha asked.

"Trisha, prepare for retrieval," he called to her, "Ptolemy is down! Repeat, Ptolemy is down!"

## 20. Banana Pancakes

There's nothing quite like traveling at breakneck speed on the shoulders of a nearly-naked Titan.

Whenever Hades traveled, he normally took a shortcut through one of his underground tunnels to anywhere. It was one of the perks of being a God of the Underworld. Unfortunately, with Krios around, his shortcut system wouldn't work. With Christine unwilling to leave Krios alone, they had to make different travel accommodations.

That's when Krios crouched down, gestured to his somewhat-hairy back and asked, "You wanna ride?"

In a single bound, they were out of the Grand Canyon.

From there, Krios sprinted across the desert wastes, covering several miles in seconds and leaving an enormous trail of dust in his wake.

They shortly arrived in the small desert town of Bunkerville, where Hades insisted on grabbing a coffee and Christine insisted on finding Krios a shirt.

Soon, they were sitting in a red booth of a fifties'-style diner called 'Peggy Sue's'. Hades had scored Krios an XXXXL T-shirt off a street vender that read 'One-Man Wolf Pack', though it looked incredibly tight on Krios for its size. It became even tighter as Krios happily gorged himself on several full stacks of banana pancakes. The waitresses

paid him no attention as a large, muscle-bound man with a braided moustache, ram-horn helmet and loincloth didn't seem too out-of-place this far from Las Vegas.

One young waitress delivered a pot of coffee to the table with two mugs. "Sorry about the wait. The prayer system's out of whack. We have to serve you the old-fashioned way."

"I'm sure you'll manage," Hades said as he poured coffee for himself and Christine. After the waitress left, Hades handed Christine her coffee and addressed his concerns. "So the name 'Jesse' means absolutely nothing to you?" Hades asked.

"Nadda."

"Who helped you defeat Pandora last summer?"

"Nigel, Trisha, and a bunch of immortals."

"And how did you meet Nigel?"

"He saved me from a mugger one night."

"Then who were you traveling with these last few months?"

"I was traveling by myself."

"But you climbed into the Grand Canyon," Hades said.

"Surely you were following somebody."

"I was following Krios," Christine said. "He seemed like a nice enough monster once you got past the whole 'tried to crash my plane' thing."

"Which you landed by yourself."

"With the help of Krios."

"Me helped!" Krios clapped his hands excitedly, squishing several pancakes in the process. Strawberry syrup splattered on Hades' shirt.

Hades waved Jesse's flattened metal heart in front of her.

"This," he said. "You crushed this with your bare hands.

Any memory at all?"

"None."

"But you remember everything else," Hades went on.

"Hunter's Tavern, Chinese Immortals, the Chaos, Odin's takeover..."

"I really don't know who this Jesse guy is," she said. "Why is it so important?"

"Because I promised I'd bring you home, and a part of you is missing," Hades explained. "I don't do half-assed work. If Jesse made a deal with the Fates and sold part of your memory, I need to figure out what's in your head and what isn't. Because a deal with the Fates always comes with baggage."

"He sold part of my brain? Why would he make that deal?"

"Because he's not too bright, apparently."

"Then why was I hanging out with an idiot?" Christine asked. "Look, we can clear this up. Just call Nigel and..."

"I've tried; he's not answering," Hades said. "Odin's keeping him on a secured line."

"Then call Odin."

"I'm going to level with you: with the war coming, no one's answering their phones," Hades said, waving his phone full of unanswered texts at her. "But I might have something that can jog your memory."

He flipped his phone around and showed Christine a picture of Jesse. It was a traffic cam picture that had appeared on the news following Pandora's attack. It featured both Jesse and Christine. In the picture, Jesse was pushing Christine out of the path of an oncoming car. Part of his face was aflame in the sun, but the other half was clearly visible.

She shook her head in disbelief and said, "Nigel saved me from that car."

"It was this guy."

"He *does* look familiar."

"So you recognize him?"

"I've seen his face before," she said, wracking her brain for some semblance of truth. "But it's not from my memory. He's... he's..."

She gripped her head in pain as if something were trying to claw its way out. She did exceptionally well to not scream. Hades reached over to help, but she motioned him away as she caught her breath. As the pain subsided, a woman's voice echoed through her head.

*"Don't be afraid. Embrace it!"*

"You okay?" Krios asked.

"Teeth and claws," she uttered under her shallow breaths,

"Teeth, claws, and fire... and shadow."

"What happened?" Hades asked.

"There's memories in here that aren't mine," she said.

"Memories of... I don't know."

"What do you see?"

"In one week's time," she said, her eyes darting around as pictures danced in her head. "I see the world consumed in a pillar of shadow. Gods and Titans crying out in agony. I see teeth and claws in a future beyond. A river of fire devours the heavens!"

Again, she heard the woman's voice. *"Don't look too far! Listen to the here and now!"*

"I can't" Christine screamed, catching other patrons' attention. "It's too much!"

*This isn't a memory, Hades realized, It's a vision.*

"You're referring to the war, right?"

"I don't think so." She stared at Hades disconcertingly, as if she were ready to flee from this diner. She asked, in a hushed tone, "If the future is changed, what happens to the future that was?"

"I guess it would cease to exist."

"Or it could reschedule."

"So you're seeing the future?"

"I think I'm seeing what the future was before Jesse changed it."

"But he changed it, so it's not going to happen."

"If I'm seeing it right," she said, "The only thing he changed was *when* it happens."

"So when *does* it happen?"

"Could be as soon as tomorrow."

"I need to tell Odin," Hades said, rushing to try and call him again.

*"Your visions will not harm you,"* the voice said. *"Give them time."*

"*Who* are *you*?" Christine asked her. The voice did not reply.

Hades looked up from his phone. "Beg your pardon?"

"Don't call Odin," Christine insisted. "I'm not seeing these visions clearly yet. We can't risk him finding out about them."

"If we don't get you help, these visions could kill you."

"They won't. I just need time to work them out."

"Big bad Odin-man make hurt!" Krios exclaimed

"He's not going to hurt anybody," Hades sighed.

"Uh-huh!" Krios nodded urgently. "Sol-man says he has big weapon! Gonna hurt all Titans!"

"He already gave a Shadow-Blood to the Titans," Hades said.

"No, no, he say there be something else!" Krios said.

"When did you speak to Solomon?" Christine asked.

"While ago, Solomon come talk to friends in jail," Krios said. "Talk to Sinmara and Krindel a lot. Said he gave something to Odin. Titans become very scared. Gave monster to Titans to make fair."

Christine's ears perked up. "Wait, are you saying Solomon struck a deal with Odin before he freed the Titans?"

Krios nodded unenthusiastically.



"That can't be right," Hades said. "Why would Odin associate himself with a wanted criminal?"

Christine pressed on, "What else can you tell us about Solomon, Krios?"

"Just all he be planning."

Hades and Christine exchanged looks with a hint of surprise.

"Well, in that case," Hades said as he took a sip of coffee,

"Please, do continue."

## 21. The Fallen Knight

After the ship had landed, it took the combined efforts of Jesse, Nigel, Patti and Laptop Guy to drag Ptolemy and his five-hundred pound suit of armor back onboard. They considered leaving him on the floor by the bar, but Patti insisted on hauling him up the stairs and getting him into the captain's quarters behind the bridge. After much trouble, he was finally in Nigel's bed, still unresponsive. Patti inspected him carefully and seemed optimistic. Trisha turned to Nigel, infuriated, and asked, "What were you thinking, jumping out of the ship like that? You could have been killed!"

"I had it all under control," Nigel said. "You saw the kid out there. I had to help."

"You were enjoying it," Trisha said. "How does he look, Patti?"

"He's resting," she said. "Whatever happened out there took its toll on him, but I think he'll be fine. Why didn't you take his armor off?"

"We tried, but the Armour of God isn't made for disassembly."

"Not without a universal can opener, anyway," Jesse said. Nigel turned to Jesse. "It looks like you don't need rescuing anymore."

"I thought I'd speed things up; save you the trouble," Jesse said. "Excited to see me?"

Nigel rubbed his scarred, wrinkled old face. "You missed a few things while you were gone."

"I was looking at that," Jesse said. "Please tell me it's make-up."

"I'm human," Nigel said. "A sorcerer named Solomon has acquired Pandora's spellbook. He used it to summon a Dark Aemon who did this to me. Now this so-called 'Shadow-Blood' is working with the Titans to bring about Ragnarök."

"We're heading into Tartarus to find Solomon and recover the spellbook," Trisha summarized.

"And the tavern's a flying boat?" Jesse added.

"Yes, that too."

"Awesome."

"So what's your story?" Nigel asked.

"It's complicated," Jesse said.

"Enlighten me."

Jesse took a deep breath.

"First a Titan named Krios attacked our plane, but he's actually nice, so he helped us land it, and then we crashed at the Grand Canyon where I sort of died and went to a dark world where there was no light and Artemis was there hunting Filipino Head Demons and I got to meet the Fates who just sit around gossiping and they told me that Nigel was going to die so I struck a deal with the ladies to send me back through Pandora's Box and stop that from ever happening."

Jesse took another breath.

"But then Urobach kept delaying me wanting to know why Fire-Bloods kept dying today so I filled him in, he filled me in on this whole Solomon situation, and then I kept getting killed by Typhon, so on my last visit, Urobach gave me this

nifty punch-card and stamped me for the six times I've ever died in total. Four more deaths and I get a free ice cream."

Nigel tried to let it all sink in.

"What kind of deal did you make?" he asked.

"It was a memory/body/soul sort of deal," Jesse said. "Half of each to escape."

"You traded half your soul?" Nigel asked, quite shocked.

"I guess so, and they took half my memory," Jesse said as he paced around the room, "but I don't know what half they took. I remember all of you. I remember my trip with Christine. I even remember the last eighteen years. So what else could be missing?"

Jesse sat on the edge of the bed and immediately fell off as if he were drunk. Nigel watched with great curiosity as Jesse fumbled around, trying to get to his feet. Something seemed off about his movement since his return. Nigel approached his brother, grabbed him by the arms, and shook him frantically. Jesse was distinctly bottom-heavy. "Your heart is missing," Nigel said. "That's the half of your body they took."

"My heart?" Jesse said, "But..."

"Your heart of steel," Nigel said. "The metal casing that kept you from dying so easily all these years. It's gone."

"So now neither one of you has a steel heart?" Patti asked.

"The important thing is that you're both alive," Trisha said.

"Excuse me, but what about our Zodiac?" Laptop Guy asked. "Did he blow a fuse or what?"

"Maybe," Nigel said. "He did just master his powers in an afternoon. He could have overloaded. That means we're short a point-man if he doesn't recover."

"Good thing I'm here, then!" Jesse said.

"Wait, you're still planning on going into Tartarus?" Trisha asked. "Even after Solomon knows you're here? You

realize both him and the Shadow-Blood are down there, right?"

"Then I'll just be more careful," Nigel said.

"And I'll have his back," Jesse said.

"No, you won't," Nigel said. "You're part of Solomon's plan. I'm not letting you go down there."

"I'm an angel," Jesse said. "What could go wrong?"

"You got killed four times fighting Typhon," Nigel said. "And did we forget to mention that the Shadow-Blood possesses deities?"

"Then I'll do this without using my powers!" Jesse said. "I sold half my soul to be here; at least let me help! Why else were you looking for me?"

There was an awkward silence to follow.

"Wait a minute," Jesse said. "You *were* trying to rescue me, right?"

"Not exactly," Nigel said.

"Trish? Patti?" Jesse asked.

Patti just shrugged. "We would have eventually."

"I gave up half my soul to be here," Jesse said, "and nobody was even *looking* for me?"

"No offense, Jesse," Nigel said, "but rescuing you was not a priority. If the Shadow-Blood got ahold of you, we'd be done for."

"That's fair," Jesse said. "But since I'm here anyway, let's make the best of it. We'll go capture Solomon together."

"Sorry, but you're a liability," Nigel said as he made for the door. "I'm going on my own."

"You're the liability," Trisha said. "If it weren't for Ptolemy, you would have died from a heart attack out there. If we're not aborting the mission, then at least wait for him to wake up."

"Well, we're not sending Jesse," Nigel said. "Fighting Typhon was one thing, but I know my way around other Titans. I can do this part of the mission on my own."

"You've got the experience, but you also have the senility," Trisha said. "We'll go together. You, me, *and* Jesse."

"You?"

"I'm a vampire," Trisha said, "I'm attuned to netherworld scents. My sense of smell can guide you down there."

"It's true," Laptop Guy said, checking Wikipedia. "She's actually the most qualified person here to venture into Tartarus."

"I'm not going to win this argument, am I?" Nigel asked.

"Not unless you want to carry your own medical gear," Trisha said.

"Fine," Nigel said. "We'll go together."

"Anything we need to know before heading down there?"

"Yeah, dress warm."

## 22. Guardian of the Dead

Three cables dropped over the edge of the ship's deck. Jesse, Nigel, and Trisha, dressed in the appropriate winter gear, secured their safety lines and began their descent. Down below, a massive mineshaft was nestled in the shadows. Nigel found some night-vision goggles in the engine room to help see the entrance clearly. It was a square entrance, about twenty metres wide, supported by large, wooden beams. The cables supposedly reached to the bottom. If they fell, it would be on Jesse to save them. Sure enough, the mine shaft descended for another fifty feet from the top before they set foot on damp stone. The air was cold and bitter. Nigel felt it the worst, being completely human. He was suited up in a heavy grey parka with winter boots and gloves. Trisha's purple parka was lighter and better suited towards winter sports. Jesse was still in his red hoodie and jeans since Fire-Bloods weren't bothered by cold weather. Not that he didn't feel it, of course.

"It's *really* cold down here," he said.

"Come back when you're warm-blooded," Nigel said, his breath freezing in the air. Right about then, he started to think coming down here was a mistake, but took care not to think it out loud.

Nigel shone his flashlight around the room. Ahead of them, two large stone doors had been smashed open. Distant screams of misery could be heard beyond them. There were no guards in sight.

"That's where Surtur made his grand entrance," Nigel said.

"If the Titans are down here, they'll be in the Fields of Punishment. That place is large enough to hold any army. Hopefully, Solomon won't be anywhere in that direction."

"How do you know so much about this place?" Jesse inquired.

"Six thousand years ago, you and I tried hiding from Pandora in Tartarus," Nigel said. "The screaming drove us mad after three days."

"Are people being tortured in there?" Trisha asked.

"Most of that screaming is just wind echoing through the tunnels, but I wouldn't put it past the gods to leave a few of their inmates in eternal torment. Come on - let's go check it out."

They stepped through the doors and found themselves on a ledge overlooking the River Styx. Jesse and Trisha marveled at the depths of cavern and wondered what the light at the distant ends of Tartarus was if there was no sun. Jesse shined his flashlight at the walls. The Furies who once resided here had long since fled.

"All the stairs are upside-down or the wrong way," he said.

"It's like an M.C. Escher painting. Are you sure we're under Antarctica?"

"Believe me," Nigel shivered, "we're under Antarctica."

Trish's nostrils flared up. "This place smells so strong. Especially the water."

"The River Styx is a soul passage," Nigel said. "It's a conduit between the realms of life and death. Try not to fall in."



Trisha took the touchpad from her coat and checked her tracking program. A small red blip appeared on an overhead display of Tartarus.

"The book is still here," she said. "About ten miles downstream. I'm not sure how we'll get there, though. There's way too many overlapping tunnels on this map."

"What do we do, fearless leader?" Jesse asked.

Nigel got down on all fours and put his ear to the ground as if he'd done this a thousand times before. He motioned for them to be still as he listened carefully.

Finally, he spoke. "The Titans are patrolling these corridors. Frost Giants mostly, judging from the slower pace. There's a patrol heading back into this cavern. Frost Giants don't have exceptional hearing, so we should be able to slip around them if we move into one of these smaller passages."

"Are you sure it's that simple?" Trisha asked.

"I've been evading Titans for centuries," Nigel said. "I know what I'm doing."

With that, Nigel marched up a small staircase and disappeared into an adjoining cave. Before Trisha and Jesse could join him, however, he re-entered the chamber through the main entrance. He looked momentarily shocked to find himself back where he started.

"Let me try that again," he said.

He stepped back into the entrance and exited through a passage in the ceiling, now walking upside-down. From there, he backtracked and arrived at the far end of the cavern on a narrow ledge. He backtracked once more and found himself on the wall above Trisha and Jesse. He vanished into the caves one more time, pushed aside a rock that was blocking his path, and crawled out of a hole at Jesse's feet. He got up, brushed himself off, and started swearing like a sailor.

"You're handling this well," Trisha said.

"I'll figure this out," Nigel said. "Let me stew for a few minutes."

"Aren't Titans coming?"

"Right, right," Nigel desperately prodded at his temples.

"Think, think, think - hey, how do humans think when they're stressed like this?"

Jesse answered, "They don't."

"This isn't working out," Trisha said. "We've hit a dead end; we need to go back."

"Not until we find Solomon!" Nigel insisted.

"Why is this so important to you?" Trisha asked.

"It just is!"

They heard something large move behind them from the room they'd just left. Jesse spun around to confront it, but Nigel put a hand on Jesse's shoulder to calm him.

"Who's there?" Nigel asked.

A large, four-legged beast pawed its way into the chamber, trapping them between it and the ledge. It was an elephant-sized black Rottweiler with three heads. It eagerly sniffed them.

"Should I kill it?" Jesse asked.

"Wait!" Nigel said, patting the left head on the nose. The dog wagged its tail.

"It's friendly?"

"It's Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of the dead," Nigel said. "I haven't seen this pup in ages."

"Whose dog is he?" Trisha asked.

"Cerberus belongs to no one," Nigel explained. "He's one of the oldest known creatures in the realms. Could be as old as myself."

"Cool, we got a pet!" Jesse laughed. The rightmost head growled at him.

"No!" Nigel scolded it. "That's Jesse. Jesse is our friend."

The head stopped growling and licked Jesse's face. Its tail wagged happily.

"This is fun and all," Trisha said as she grabbed a length of deadwood from the ground, "but there's Titans lurking about and we need to get out of here."

She threw the stick back into the cavern Cerberus had crawled out of. The dog chased after it. A moment later, it returned with the stick and playfully dropped it at her feet.

"I think he likes you," Nigel said.

Trisha tried to throw the stick again in hopes that the dog would stay gone this time, but one of the heads playfully snatched it from her hand. Another head randomly fired lasers out of its eyes at a passing bat.

"Oh, yeah, watch the heads," Nigel said. "One of them shoots lasers and another can exhale bees. I can't remember what the third one does."

"It exhales *BEES*?" Jesse asked in surprise.

"Yes, when it barks, it shoots bees at you. Try to keep up." Cerberus' three heads started whining. It gazed into the distance and growled.

"What is it, boy?" Nigel asked. "Is there something bad over there?"

Cerberus' heads whined mournfully in perfect harmony. One of them lowered its head and the others motioned for them to climb on.

"I think we got a ride through the caves," Nigel said. "Come on. I think Cerberus is going to take us to Solomon."

"It's a dog," Trisha said. "Dogs don't understand English."

"It's a sad dog who's happy to see a friendly face," Nigel said. "Not to mention it seems to want to toward the book. So climb on before it leaves us behind."

Trisha and Jesse couldn't argue. After all, how often does the three-headed guardian of the dead offer you a ride?

Nigel and Jesse respectively climbed on behind Trisha who held on tight to the middle neck. The dog leapt off the ledge onto one of the sideways stairwells and hurried over the ceiling into a tunnel. The dog took several sharp turns and eventually turned right side-up again. It entered a lit area where several large excavators had been abandoned and disappeared down a mining tunnel. It scurried into darkness.

Eventually, they arrived at another lit tunnel. This one overlooked the River Styx where they could see dozens of destroyed jail cells lining the walls. Further down the tunnel was a destroyed cage of barb wire that had once been a spherical super-prison.

"That's where all the major Titans were held," Nigel said.

"Typhon must have destroyed the Fields of Punishment after being released. It's hard to imagine they ever kept something so big in there."

"Why do they call it the Fields of Punishment?" Jesse asked.

"The gods used to administer nasty tortures to their enemies in this place," Nigel said. "It's a dark chapter of their history that they'd sooner forget. Unfortunately, a Titan never forgets."

"Then where's the Titans if not here?" Jesse asked.

Down in the water, they saw someone paddling a boat. It was a crazy naked man with a paper pirate hat riding a canoe made of toenails.

"Arrr, mates!" he shouted. "Three sheets to the wind and set sail for Dinghy Island! Captain Long John Solomon be the scurviest scalliwag in these waters! Blow the man down and step on his cheese! Yar-harr-harr!"

"That's Hrym," Nigel thought aloud. "He used to be Surtur's helmsman during the old Viking days. I'm guessing time in prison didn't agree with him."

Trisha checked her touchpad and said, "The book should be farther down these tunnels."

As if it understood her intention, Cerberus bounded away through another detour.

"What do we do when we get there?" Trisha asked. "I doubt Solomon will be unprotected."

"Just let me keep my wits about me," Nigel said. "With luck, we'll get in unnoticed. Then we take the book and scramble."

"Not to judge, but your wits aren't our greatest asset at the moment," Trisha said.

"There's a light!" Jesse exclaimed. Everyone stayed quiet as the dog slowed down to approach it.

They arrived on large catwalk overlooking an incredible field of rusty green iron. It looked like they'd just entered a sewer, if the sewer was just one big round room that was eight miles wide. Scattered across the walls were thousands of sealed hatches, behind which were the echoing sounds of real screaming. The room was literally lined with torture chambers. Jesse wondered what somebody had to do to get punished in here of all places. But even the walls lined with torture chambers weren't as interesting as its main attraction. Along the walls, twelve enormous black beings, roughly forty stories tall and made of a watery substance were chained in place, forever moaning to be released. They came in all shapes: human, wolf, spider, lion, shark, etc. Some even changed their shapes as they struggled to free themselves. Somehow, the enormous chains kept their watery forms from spilling out onto the floor.

Nigel realized what he was looking at. These were the original twelve Shadow-Bloods.

Trisha looked at the labels at the monsters' feet. Not all of them were legible at this distance, but some were clearly marked in an ancient language.

"What do those say?" she asked Nigel.

"Vesuvius, Briarios, Yam, Behemoth..." Nigel's mouth was agape. "I know these names. I didn't know *they* were Shadow-Bloods."

"Wasn't Vesuvius the volcano that destroyed Pompeii?"

"And Briarios was one of the Hecatonchires described in the Titanomachy," Nigel said. "That was the lost account of the First Titan War. These are all famous god-killing monsters throughout history. I'm willing to bet the original Titans they merged with are still trapped within."

"Where's the book?" Jesse asked.

Trisha checked her tablet and looked perplexed.

"We're standing on it," she said.

"As in it's below the catwalk?" Nigel asked.

"No."

She ushered Cerberus to back up a little. The dog took a few steps back. Beneath them was a small pile of ashes sitting on the rusty metal catwalk. Nigel dismounted from the dog with the others and carefully approached the pile. He sifted through the ashes and came up with a small piece of burnt crimson leather binding.

"It's the book," he said. "Solomon's destroyed it."

"Why would he destroy it?" Jesse asked. "I thought that thing was valuable."

"The information within it is," Nigel said, "and information can be copied."

Further sifting revealed a page buried in the ash. Nigel examined the sheet and saw it was covered in ancient chicken-scratch. To him, the words were clearly legible. It was arguably the most important thing he'd ever read. But as he read it, the information immediately slipped from his

mind. He struggled to commit one word of it to memory, only to forget why he was doing it.

"What it is?" Trisha asked.

Nigel looked to her as if to answer, but his thoughts trailed to a crawl. "...It's just a page."

"Does it say anything?"

"I don't know," Nigel said. He tried to read the page aloud, but he again forgot its words before he could relay anything to Trisha. "I can read it. But I don't... remember it."

"Why didn't Solomon burn it with the rest of the book?" Jesse asked.

At that moment, the sound of voices emanated from below. Nigel folded up the page, slipped it into his pocket, and crept to the edge of the catwalk. He peered into the heart of the massive chamber. Down below, he saw an ancient mineral refinery work-floor. An enormous gate at the base of the room began to open. The marching of hundreds could be heard fast approaching.

"Because it's exactly what I was afraid of," Nigel said.

"What?"

"Bait."

## 23. The Well of Elysia

They came by the hundreds.

The army of Fire Giants were like a sea of smouldering embers as they entered the chamber. Joining them were a small blue army of barbarians: the Frost Giants. They were accompanied by a few other legions of assorted warriors.

In the center of the legions was Surtur, still wearing Solomon's Shadow-Blood as his tattoos and body armour. He was accompanied by Mishnykov and Atlas, along with Sinmara and a dwarf Titan whom Nigel hadn't encountered yet. While they appeared tiny to Nigel at this distance, the Titans were currently five to ten stories tall each, with Mishnykov easily the tallest. Surtur climbed atop one of the furnaces on the work-floor and looked upon his army. Nigel and the others kept their heads low.

They could hear Surtur speak, "Krindel, what is this place?" "It's the Well of Elysia, m'lord," Krindel said. "After a long day of freeing your people, I thought you might be interested in a little history lesson."

"Are these creatures Shadow-Bloods?" he asked.

"The same who attacked Olympus," Krindel said. "It took the magic of Pandora to bring them down."

Surtur let out a laugh, "This is amazing! Look at the great beasts! With the power of Solomon, I too can strive for such potential!"

"To each their own, I suppose," Krindel said. "Your followers are expecting a speech."



Surtur turned to the giants who were eagerly waiting to hear details about the coming war. Surtur adjusted his flannel shirt and stepped forward to speak.

"Our time is come!" he shouted. "On the winter solstice, the three roosters shall crow, Heimdall shall blow his horn, and we shall march unto the Fields of Vigrid and crush the gods once and for all!"

The Frost and Fire giants cheered gloriously.

"I personally will lead the charge from the south!" he declared, "Leading my victorious Fire Jötunn into... um... victory! Then... uh... Sinmara does something!"

"I shall cover the east advance," she said in her thick Icelandic accent. "My Frost Giants shall cut off their retreats and force them towards the western ridge. Then Krindel shall ambush them."

"The *Goliath* is prepped and war-ready," Krindel said. "My contacts within Ultima Thule have generously donated their own personal reserve of mercenaries to fight with us. We Titans will not be fighting alone."

"Atlas is confused!" Atlas said. "This battle strategy sounds vaguely like the prophecy of Ragnarök, but several details seem broken. Like, isn't Sköll the Wolf supposed to devour the sun? And aren't Hrym and Ymir supposed to be leading charges instead Krindel and Sinmara? And how can we go to war if Loki is just a hood ornament on Krindel's battleship? Atlas is distressed!"

"Look, Atlas," Surtur said angrily, "I'm getting fed up with your whining. We can't follow the prophecy *exactly*. Odin spent way too much time tampering with our plan, so we'll just have to wing it."

"Then how do we win this war?" Krindel asked.

"Solomon generously provided us with a fool-proof contract that works in our favor," Surtur said. "If we win, we earn all the gods' powers and split it evenly among ourselves. If

they win, they get our powers. I have it all in writing right here."

Surtur handed Solomon's contract to Sinmara from his breast pocket. She glanced over it and then handed it to Krindel for inspecting.

"And how do they win again?" she asked.

"They have to defeat every single one of us," Surtur said, "and not only kill us, but do it in a single blow. A feat impossible for even a god. Believe me, it's foolproof."

"That's not what this says," Krindel said.

"Yes, it does."

"No, you're wrong," Krindel snapped back. "You agreed that they only need to kill a single Titan. Not every single one. Just one. And that one is 'Party C'. Namely you."

"I'm who now?" Surtur asked. "I'm not Party C."

*"And the Titan referred to as Surtur shall hereby be known as Party C,"* Krindel read. "Right here in small print."

"Nobody reads the small print!"

"Also, you got everything else wrong," Krindel said. "The gods are Party A, the Titans are Party B, and you've actually just signed over our entire race's power to the gods if one of them happens to kill you and *only* you." Every Titan in the room glared at Surtur.

"That's not how Solomon explained it," Surtur said, his voice trembling. "Tell them, Solomon! Speak for me!"

The creature on his body remained still and silent.

"Solomon screwed us over," Krindel said. "You sold us out."

A silence fell over the room.

"No, no," Surtur shook his head in disbelief, "he wants the gods dead as much as we do. Why would he give them our power? Are you sure you're reading that right?"

"I used to read lists for a living," Krindel said. "I'm pretty damn sure."

"Speak, Solomon!" Surtur said, punching himself wherever the creature was attached. "Explain yourself! Tell them how it's a misunderstanding."

"Something wrong with your monster?" Sinmara asked.

"Perhaps we should call a truce."

"But the Aeonomega is our destiny!" Surtur said. "We have to fight! And you all have to protect me! It's our only hope! Defeat the gods, right? Who's with me? Huh, huh?"

A deep, metallic growling interrupted him. Mishnykov lurked over Surtur and roared at him angrily.

"Mishnykov's right," Krindel said. "We must protect Surtur at all costs. We need to keep this traitor alive."

"I'm not a traitor!" Surtur said. "It's Solomon who did this! Behold, his power!"

Surtur aimed an arm at Krindel and willed it to transform into a lightning-spewing snake cannon. The Shadow-Blood didn't respond to the gesture.

"Solomon has forsaken you," Krindel said.

He heard the machinery start up. One of the Fire Giants was in a nearby operating room working some levers. Surtur's own people were conspiring against him.

"Krindel, my love," Sinmara said, "I think it's time for a change in leadership."

"Agreed," Krindel said.

Mishnykov suddenly seized Surtur by the arms. Surtur struggled to free himself, but the giant bear machine was too powerful. Mishnykov slowly crushed Surtur into a small, manageable, seven-foot size.

"Your love?" Surtur asked, terror in his voice. "Sinmara... sweetie... you don't mean you and Krindel...? But look at him! He's barely half a Titan!"

"Time in prison makes a difference," she said, stroking the dwarf's bald head. "You got out for good behaviour. He didn't. That makes him twice the Titan you are."

The conveyer belt started moving. Mishnykov held Surtur over it as the furnace brought a large vessel of ore to a molten boil.

"Fellow Titans," Krindel addressed his followers. "We've been deceived. Our appointed leader has betrayed us to the gods for his own worthless pride. Our only hope now is to ensure the gods never kill him. He must share Loki's fate, forever sealed in the steels of Tartarus."

"Burn him!" the Frost Giants shouted.

"Give him the dip!" the Fire Giants bellowed.

"No, no, no!" Surtur yelled. "Don't give me the dip! Atlas! Comrade! Amigo! You and me! We're friends! Talk them out of this!"

"Atlas updates his opinions based on the latest information," Atlas said. "Atlas is switching sides."

"Sinmara?"

"Sorry, sweetie," she said. "I'd say it was fun while it lasted, but you never lasted."

The pot of molten steel started moving out of the furnace down the conveyer belt towards Surtur. He kicked furiously to no avail.

"You can't do this to me!" he shouted. "I'm the hero of Ragnarök! I'm your saviour!"

Above on the catwalk, Jesse, Nigel and Trish watched with great enthusiasm while Cerberus laid low.

"That's solves all our problems," Jesse turned to the dog.

"Let's go home."

"We have to save him," Nigel said.

"Come again?"

"We need Surtur to end this war," Nigel said. "If the Titans encase him in that much steel, it could take years to cut him out."

"So we've gone from trying to defeat Surtur to saving him?" Trisha asked. "How do you propose we do that?"

Mishnykov started lowering Surtur into the molten steel. Surtur screamed as the metal encased the soles of his feet.

“Jesse, go angel,” Nigel said.

“But what if the Shadow-Blood contaminates me?,” Jesse asked.

“Don’t worry; I’ve got a plan. Now go!”

“Wait, Jesse, don’t!” Trisha shouted, but it was too late.

Jesse leapt off the catwalk. He unleashed his wings, summoned his sword, and shot off towards the Titans. He caught Mishnykov by surprise as he sliced off the bear’s metal hand. Surtur fell into the molten steel and sank ankle-deep. He struggled to free himself, but was weak against the power of the stygian steel.

Jesse soared erratically around the room, swinging his blade at Titans left and right, holding them at bay.

Mishnykov summoned metal from several nearby machines to reform a new hand and took a few fruitless swings at the out-of-control angel. As the Frost and Fire giants threw fire and ice in all directions, their two powers collided, creating a cloud of steam that enveloped the room. Soon, everyone was fighting blind.

“Prep the dog,” Nigel said. “We need to gun it as soon as Jesse’s out of there.”

Jesse flew over the pot, seized Surtur by the hand and pulled him from the steel just as he was up to his calves.

The two of them flew back to the catwalks, the molten steel solidifying around Surtur’s legs as they flew through the steam.

They landed on the catwalk just as Trisha prepared Cerberus to escape. Surtur was surprised to see his saviours face-to-face as Nigel and Jesse helped straighten him up. His legs were now bound in a solid block of steel, rendering him unable to walk.

"It's you!" he exclaimed, "Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!"

Nigel slapped him. "You're in a lot of trouble."

"I know, and I'm sorry," Surtur said. "I just want to go home to my log cabin! I want to learn an instrument! I want to read a book! I want to see *'Fiddler on the Roof'* before I die! Just get me out of here!"

Jesse, in his angel form, hoisted Surtur onto the dog's back. The dog barely felt Surtur's weight.

"Did any of the Shadow-Blood get on you?" Nigel asked. Jesse quickly gave himself a once-over. He appeared to be clean.

"I think I'm good."

Suddenly, Jesse reeled in surprise. Nigel had picked up a sharp metal pole from the catwalk floor and ran it through his brother's heart. Trisha shouted at him to stop. Jesse could only stare in utter disbelief at his brother.

"Better safe than sorry," Nigel apologized. "See you back at the ship."

Before he could say a word, Jesse erupted into flames and vanished, dropping his sword. The metal pole clattered to the catwalk floor.

"Nigel, what did you do?" Trisha exclaimed.

"You can chew me out later; let's run!"

Down below, Krindel was shouting: "They're getting away! After them!"

"Mush!" Trisha shouted to the dog as Nigel hopped on.

The large animal galloped into a nearby tunnel as giants came leaping towards the catwalks after them.

It was like riding a horse in the dark. Every sharp turn nearly caused them to fall as Cerberus hurried for the exit. The Titans shrank themselves in size so they could pursue them through the tunnels.

Fireballs and icicles flew through the air. Cerberus swerved as their pursuers lobbed projectiles in their direction.

“Ha, missed!” Nigel shouted. “You call that a throw? I’ve seen drunken frat boys play Quarters better than that!”

“Don’t goad them!” Trisha said.

“Pft, these guys couldn’t hit a dartboard with a wrecking ball.”

As if to accept his challenge, the pursuing giants threw everything they had at him at once. A flurry of fire and ice hailed after them. Escape seemed impossible until something got between them and their attackers.

It was dark and fast. The wall of fire and ice dissolved at its touch and the figure quickly turned to attack the Titans. In the middle of the carnage, Nigel could almost swear he saw a human figure.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“I didn’t see anybody,” Trisha said.

“Somebody just saved us.”

The dog veered left and led the giants down one tunnel, only to come out another one. By the time they realized the misdirection, the dog was already running across the ceiling and escaping down a different tunnel. For all the years the Titans spent imprisoned down here, they had no way of knowing these tunnels (nor the rules of physics that applied to them) as well as Cerberus did. With the presence of River Styx, they couldn’t even fly after the dog; they were just too weak in this realm to exercise their true potential.

The dark figure struck again, knocking several giants off their feet. It moved like a deity, but Nigel couldn’t tell it was god or Titan. In the attack, he saw a strange face belonging to the figure.

It was a dark, grinning face that was all too familiar.

“There it is again!” Nigel said.

Trisha was too busy focusing her senses to listen. On the surface, her sense of smell was like that of a human's, but down here, she could use it to map out the caves. She could sense the dog retreading its path through the tunnels toward the exit. She also sensed something following beneath the ground.

The earth quaked around them.

Large geodes of rock erupted from the walls. The cave began to collapse behind them.

Out of the collapse came the Earth Titan, Atlas, somehow able to keep up with the dog. He jogged after them in his fancy speedos, hurling stones in their direction.

"Atlas is the rock, Atlas is the hard place, there is no escape from the mighty Atlas!" he shouted.

As a boulder flew in their direction, one of the dog's heads swiveled around and fired a bright purple laser from its eyes. The boulder was split in half, both halves falling away from their target. From another head, the dog barked furiously, releasing a swarm of bees in Atlas' direction.

"Not the bees!" Atlas shouted as he swatted at the swarm and slowly began to fall back.

As they crossed a stone bridge leading over the Styx, Atlas pushed his way through the bees, grabbed another boulder and hurled it ahead of them. The boulder came down in front of Cerberus, sealing off his next tunnel. Atlas wasn't prepared for the dog's next move, however, when the big pooch leapt off the bridge towards the River Styx. The River Styx was cold, corrosive, and merciless. Even if the dog could doggy-paddle, they didn't stand a chance in those waters.

Fortunately, Cerberus didn't need to doggy-paddle.

The dog let out a blast of icy breath from its third head and instantly turned the water into ice as it landed. The dog struggled to balance on the floating block of Styx water



which sizzled at its feet. Then it let out another icy blast and paved a path to the next shore. Atlas watched as the dog hurried away, the ice cracking under its weight. Cerberus leapt out of the river, landed on shore, bounced up a few stairways, climbed a ledge, and carried everyone back through the gates of Tartarus.

Sinmara and a few Frost Giants caught up with Atlas, who was standing dumbstruck at the sight of the dog.

"Where did they go?" Sinmara asked.

Atlas pointed across the lengthy river and towards the exit.

"The dog can breathe ice. And bees."

"He froze the river?" Sinmara asked, looking at the icy chunks sinking into the water. "But no one can freeze the River Styx!"

"Then they just escaped on Dog Jesus."

Sinmara turned to her giants, "Return to Krindel. Tell them Surtur has escaped. We must go after them in the Goliath at once."

"Yes, m'am," they said, and hurried off.

"And you," she said as she turned to Atlas, who was covered in squashed bees, "Go wash up."

\* \* \*

Outside the gates, Cerberus took them to their escape lines in the tavern's spotlight. Trisha quickly hugged Cerberus' head and gave him a kiss.

"Good dog!" she said as they disembarked. "Now go hide before they find you!"

The dog heads yapped and Cerberus retreated into the shadows.

Trisha and Nigel hurried to wrap a line around Surtur who was busy trying to stay balanced on his new metal uni-boot.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Surtur said. "All of you are my personal heroes. I love you."

"Stow it, Surtur," Trisha said.

"Yes, anything you say, m'lady," Surtur said.

"There was someone in there helping us," Nigel said. "I think I saw his face."

"Who was it?" Trisha asked.

"You won't believe it, but I think it was Vladimir Tsepish."

"You don't say?"

"But why would a chaos demon help us?"

"Maybe we should stick around and find out," Trisha said.

"Not a chance," Nigel said. "Let's get Surtur out of here before the others catch up."

Nigel and Trish quickly secured their lines to their belts and held onto Surtur.

*"Pull us up!"* Nigel thought to the ship. *"We need to get out of here now!"*

Patti retracted the lines and the three of them were lifted into the spotlight.

In moments, they were aboard the Tavern. The ship engines roared to life and they fled from Tartarus.

## 24. No Way Out

Luckily, they had extra chains aboard.

No sooner did they get Surtur on deck did they tie his arms up with Stygian chains that were graciously left hanging in the engine room for such a situation. Surtur's body swelled up against the magical steel as they tightened his bonds, and neither him nor the Shadow-Blood were able to move. "Trish, get us as far away from here as possible," Nigel told her. Trisha raced upstairs to put some distance between them and the pursuing Titans. "And Patti, contact Odin. Tell him we're heading back and we have both Surtur and the Shadow-Blood as our prisoners."

"But where's Jesse?" she asked.

"He should be coming through that box any minute," Nigel said. "For now, we have to get this guy out of our hands."

"You couldn't find Solomon?"

"All we found were the ashes of the spellbook," Nigel said.

"He used them to lure us in."

"Why lure you in?" She looked to Surtur. "To collect *this guy?*"

"You're making a big mistake!" he shouted. "You can't bring me to Odin! Just let me off; I swear I'll get rid of this Shadow-Blood! The damn thing doesn't even work right anymore!"

Patti looked the Titan over. "This guy cries a lot. You sure he's supposed to be Lord of the Titans?"

"Not anymore," Nigel said. "It sounds like they just promoted someone named Krindel."

"Does that change anything?" she asked.

"No. According to the contract, Surtur is the still key to ending this war."

"Okay, I'll go let Odin know," Patti said as she hurried up the stairs.

Nigel knelt down next to Surtur. "Surtur, we need you to speak with Odin and end the Aeonomega."

"Okay, I swear I'll end it!" he said. "But don't take me to Odin! He'll kill me!"

"There's no truce unless the two of you shake hands."

"You're making a huge mistake," Surtur growled. "Odin will never agree. He means to wipe us out!"

"Where's Solomon?" Nigel asked. "I want to speak to him."

"Speak to him, then," Surtur said. "See if his Shadow-Blood answers to you."

Nigel looked at the tattoos on Surtur's skin, but they didn't move. He began to wonder if Solomon was playing dead, or if he was even in there at all.

"Solomon, wake up," Nigel said, not sure how to address the creature. "This is Naveen. I want you to answer me."

The Shadow-Blood stayed silent.

"He hasn't spoken since we returned to Tartarus," Surtur said. "Perhaps the real Solomon is busy elsewhere."

"Or maybe those chains are keeping it docile."

At that moment, Pandora's Box opened on the bar and Jesse was launched out of it. He landed on the floor next to Surtur.

"It's about time," Nigel said.

Jesse struggled to his feet. "Nigel you son of a... you killed me!"

"You're *welcome*."

"I'm not thanking you!"

"You should. The Shadow-Blood could've turned you human."

Jesse mumbled, "At least give me a little warning next time."

"If I warned you, you would've put up a fight."

"True, but it's the principle of the thing," Jesse pouted.

"Hey, listen, could you keep an eye on Surtur? I'm going upstairs to speak with Odin."

"But what if the Shadow-Blood tries to possess me?"

"It only possesses deities," Nigel said. "Don't be an angel and you'll be fine."

Jesse grumbled. "Believe me, the last thing I want to be is an angel right now."

"Jesse?"

"What?"

"You did good down there."

With a casual thumbs up, Nigel vanished up the stairs.

"I thought you were wonderful," Surtur said.

"Shut up."

\* \* \*

Upstairs, Patti finished her call to Odin. Nigel sat in his comfy chair while Trisha drove through the clouds. She was doing her best to keep the sun on their left so it didn't seep in through the windows. They hadn't tested the UV-protection yet and now certainly wasn't the time.

"Odin will rendezvous with us over the Adriatic in ten minutes," Patti said.

"I've already laid in the course," Laptop Guy said.

"And I've got Jesse watching Surtur downstairs," Nigel said. "How's Ptolemy?"

"Still asleep," she said. "Should we try waking him?"

"Let him rest. This mission's almost over anyway."

"This mission was a disaster," Trisha said. "Between Ptolemy losing his powers, you killing Jesse, and us bringing back the wrong guy, it's a miracle the rest of us got out of there alive."

"You can relax," Nigel said. "We've got Surtur. Once the gods end the war, they can fix Halifax and we can all go home."

"With Titans on our asses," Trisha said. "I'm surprised they haven't shown up on our radar yet."

"We're doing fine," Nigel said. "Just knock on wood and keep her steady. Say, is anyone else hungry? I think we should have some wings."

"You killed Jesse down there," Trisha said. "That's not doing fine."

"It was the only way to save Surtur and avoid contamination," Nigel said. "I knew he'd come back to life. It was a calculated strategy."

"Sacrificing your brother is a strategy? You sound like Solomon."

"I didn't mean it like that," Nigel said. "Can we drop this?"

"I don't care what Odin says about you being the hero," Trisha said. "Ever since you became human, your judgment's been all over the place. From now on, we make decisions together, and it starts with you apologizing to your brother."

Before Nigel could speak, Patti said, "Captain, I've got an incoming transmission."

"Is it Odin?"

"No, it's Hades and he wants to speak directly to you," she said. "Do you have your phone?"

Nigel reached into his pocket and opened his flipbook. It was still charged, surprisingly. He answered it as it rang.

"Hades, what's happening?" Nigel asked. "Did you find Christine?"

"I found her, but I'm using my own energy reserves to mask this call and I can't speak for long," Hades said.

"There's something happening and I need to go over a few things with you. Firstly, did you get Jesse back on your end?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"You should know he made a deal with the Fates to escape."

"Yes, I've heard. Why, is there a problem?"

"You can't barter with the Fates without losing something important," Hades said. "When Jesse offered up half his memory, it was taken from the person who matters most to him. Namely Christine. She doesn't remember him at all. She remembers everyone else, but she's convinced she spent the last few months traveling by herself."

Nigel's heart felt limp. He wasn't sure if that was a physical coincidence or an emotional response, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling. He dreaded to see his brother's reaction when he found out.

"Where is she now?" Nigel asked.

"She's with me and Krios," Hades went on. "We're searching for a church so I can place a personal call to the Fates and register a complaint."

"Is Christine there? Can I speak with her?"

"Hi, Nigel!" Christine shouted over the phone.

"Christine, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, "save for a few bruises, a rewritten memory and the strange ability to see futures that don't exist."

"...What?"

"Is that Jesse guy there?" she asked. "Is he listening?"

"He's in the other room."

"Good," she said. "Please do me a favor and tell him I'm safe and sound. Don't mention my memory thing, okay? I don't want to upset him."

"Jesse's not the upsetting type."

"What little memory I have of him begs to differ," she said.

"Please, promise you won't tell him."

"I promise."

"Good. I'm passing you back to Hades."

Hades was now on the phone. "I had one more thing to ask you."

"What's that?"

"Completely off the record, this Book of Summoning,"

Hades went on, "What kind of things can it summon.

Besides monsters, I mean?"

"I've never read it myself," Nigel said, "but I imagine it could be used to conjure up goods and items. Pandora was always able to summon weapons and birds on a whim."

"Could it be used to summon lost artifacts?"

"What kind of artifacts?"

"Krios says Solomon paid visits to Tartarus," Hades explained. "During one of his visits, Solomon mentioned that someone in Asgard came into possession of a sword."

"There's a lot of swords in Asgard."

"But this one scared the Titans," Hades continued. "He then promised to provide them with a similar weapon as well. Something from the same Age."

"He gave them the Shadow-Blood," Nigel said. "You mean to say Solomon gave the gods a Second Age weapon of their own?"

"I'm saying it's possible Solomon was engineering this war on the gods' side long before it came to the Titans," Hades said. "Of course, this is coming from Krios. But if it's true..."



"The Aeonomega contract mentioned killing Surtur in one blow," Nigel said. "There's only one Second Age weapon in existence that can do that and it was lost ages ago."

"But if Odin were to have it...?"

"...he'd be too eager to start this war."

"Krios mentioned a lot of other mumbo-jumbo concerning chess pieces and prophecies, but that was the big one,"

Hades said. "I think you should steer clear of Odin if possible."

"Thanks for the heads-up."

Hades said. "Don't worry about Christine; we'll keep her safe. Just tread lightly. I'll keep in touch."

Hades hung up.

"What's wrong, Nigel?" Trisha asked.

"They found Christine," Nigel said.

"Is she okay?"

Words dangled from the edge of Nigel's tongue, but he swallowed them. He didn't understand why Christine wanted to keep her condition a secret, but Nigel had no reason to give Jesse something new to worry about until they knew more.

"We'll find out when we get to Asgard," Nigel said.

"Did he say anything else?"

A thought ran across Nigel's mind. "Laptop Guy, what information do we have about Krindel? He's the new Titan leader."

Laptop Guy checked the appropriate Wiki page and returned the results. "He's one of the lesser known Sky Titans. Back in the middle ages, he considered himself a champion of justice and proposed traveling the world once a year infiltrating people's homes and punishing those he deemed wicked."

"So he's like an evil Santa Claus?" Patti asked.

“Like the original, actually,” Laptop Guy said. “Krindel invented throwing coal at naughty children during the Sol Invictus holiday. He was incredibly powerful during this time of year, so the gods saw fit to lock him up and... oh.”

“What’s an ‘oh’?” Nigel asked.

“Krindel’s extended family,” Laptop Guy read. “He has a god for a younger brother who took over for him, but switched from coal to presents.”

“You mean St. Nicholas?” Trisha asked.

“Way before St. Nick,” Laptop Guy said. “Before even Sinterklaas, way back in the oldest Santa myths, there was... there was Odin.”

“Odin and Krindel are brothers?” Nigel asked.

“Half-brothers, but yes,” Laptop Guy continued. “They’re not exactly on speaking terms.”

Before Nigel could say anything, Patti spoke up. “We’re approaching Odin’s ship. Should I get clearance to dock with him?”

Beyond the window, they could see a large battleship out in the clouds. Odin had arrived in the HMS Agamemnon. Nigel imagined the King of the Gods would have arrived with an entire fleet to capture the Shadow-Blood, but showing up in one ship implied an ulterior motive. The tavern slowed and came to a rest, hovering in the sky.

“Wait,” Nigel said, Hades’ words ringing in his ears. “Get him on the viewscreen. I want to speak with him.”

A moment later, she turned the window into a video screen. On-screen, they could see Odin sitting in a captain’s chair of his own. They saw many Asgardians hurrying about their duties, dressed in white cadet uniforms. There were even a few tiny elves manning the turrets.

"It seems Ancient minds think alike," Odin said, "I was going to call you before we transferred. Is it true you retrieved both the Titan Lord and the Shadow-Blood?"

"Are you working with Solomon?" Nigel asked bluntly.

"Why on Earth would you ever ask...?"

"Did Solomon come to see you before Thor was killed?" Nigel asked. "Did he offer you something?"

"This is nonsense!" Odin said, standing up and stepping towards the camera. In his tone, it almost seemed like he was blocking out the rest of his crew from overhearing.

"Have you been speaking to the Shadow-Blood? Did Solomon poison your thoughts with this rubbish?"

"You knew Solomon was luring us with the book," Nigel said. "You saw on the map that we were heading for the Well of Elysia. You meant for us to go there, just as Solomon arranged for the Titans to be there. That was not a coincidence. Somehow, you were counting on us to come back with Surtur."

"There's no proof that--"

"Your brother was recently appointed the Titan leader," Nigel said. "Are you two working together, or is going to war with Krindel the reason you agreed to Solomon's plans? Because if Surtur dies and your brother is the Titan Lord, all of his holiday magic goes to you by default."

"What exactly are you accusing me of?" Odin asked.

"By Aeonomega law, you couldn't detain Surtur, but you could reacquire him through us," Nigel said. "Are you planning a truce with him, or are you plotting to execute him on the solstice?"

"Why would I--?"

"Because all this prophet stuff is baloney," Nigel said. "You don't believe I'll restore the ley lines. You're counting on winning this Aeonomega to steal the Titans' energy reserves with a single strike. The only question is, if

Solomon won over the Titans with a Shadow-Blood, how did he buy you?"

There was a cold silence. Nobody else on the crew was certain what was happening, but Nigel had definitely hit a nerve somewhere.

"Is it such a bad thing?" Odin asked. "To put an end to the Titans? Have you forgotten that Surtur killed you and destroyed your home? Is this how you repay the gods for all the kindness we've shown?"

"When Pandora died, divine power was thrown out of balance," Nigel said. "You stepped in and rewrote the world. When the Titans are gone, what will you do then? What will you do with that much power? Sweep the dark chapters of your history under the carpet? Rewrite history? Undo the past mistakes of the gods? Pretend thousand of years of bloodshed didn't happen?"

"Nigel, take it easy," Laptop Guy said. "I'd rather you didn't piss off the King of the Gods."

"I'm going to correct this world," Odin said. "I can make it all work. World peace, ending famine, controlling death, unbridled love and happiness... I just need a little more power."

"The Titans are the original guardians of natural law," Nigel said. "I'm not letting you wipe out their race over a pipe dream."

"And what of a world with only Titans?" Odin asked. "They were born of Chaos. When they ruled the world, they enslaved humanity. They demanded sacrifices, rituals, and blood. It took the gods centuries to sort out the stains they left in their wake."

"One race brings Law, the other brings Order," Nigel said.

"We get it. Demigods are still cleaning up after the gods. The point is, this stops now."

"No," Odin said, shaking his head. "Don't think me as a naïve old man. Our racial feud has gone on long enough. You have ten minutes to hand over Surtur, or I will blow your ship out of the sky and collect him myself."

"We have a Titan on board," Nigel said. "Fire on us and the Creator will blow you out of the sky."

"Not if a human member of our crew pulls the trigger."

"We have an angel below deck."

"With no training."

"And a Zodiac."

"Whom I can clearly see passed out in that bedroom behind you."

"We have firepower."

"We built your ship and we can bring it down. There will be no fight. There will be no running. You'll either hand over Surtur peacefully, or I bring your nine thousand year legacy to an end with a push of a button."

Odin's face vanished from the viewing window.

The bridge went completely quiet.

Everyone looked to Nigel.

Nigel nodded to no one in particular.

"That changes things."

\* \* \*

Down below, Jesse sat at the bar and watched over Surtur. His mind was so preoccupied with how easily Nigel had cast him aside that he failed to overhear anything happening upstairs. He helped himself to a bottle of bourbon and downed a few shots. He couldn't get drunk, but it helped kill the time. He put Bob Marley on the jukebox and drank his cares away to the tune of "Three Little Birds".

"Odin is here," Surtur said. "He'll take me soon."

"Good riddance."

"You can't let me go," Surtur said to him. "You need me."

"Like I need another pain in the ass," Jesse said, disgruntled. "I gave up half my soul to be here and Nigel's throwing me around like a piece of meat."

*"Perhaps he's meeting his destiny,"* Surtur said in a dead, hollow voice.

Jesse turned to see the Shadow-Blood swimming across Surtur's face. Surtur's eyes panicked as the creature juggled his jaw and vocal cords.

"Solomon?" Jesse asked.

*"In time, all brothers go their own ways,"* Solomon said. *"All alliances meet their end, for even his treachery doesn't end with you."*

"What do you mean?"

*"The deal you made,"* Solomon said. *"The memory you lost... was taken from her."*

"Christine?" Jesse asked.

*"Your brother just learned of her fate,"* Solomon said. *"He intends to hide it from you."*

"That's not true," Jesse said. "You're just messing with me."

*"A Zodiac could save her, as could an angel,"* Solomon said. *"Your brother has given up on you, but I still see your potential. Merge with me, boy. With my teachings, you could become great."*

Jesse set down his glass. "Are you asking me to join the dark side?"

*"Is it working?"*

"Hardly."

*"How about this, then?"* Solomon said. *"You made a deal to save your brother. You saw his end when you visited the Fates, didn't you?"*

"How would you know about that?"

*"I know the world's too far gone, as is your brother,"*  
Solomon said. *"You've seen his eyes. He craves the weight of the world on his shoulders at the expense of those he loves. He will take this world down with him. He just doesn't realize it yet. But you can stop it. There's a way you can make your sacrifice mean something."*

Jesse poured himself another drink and downed it. He wiped his mouth and set his glass down. His sacrifice had already achieved nothing and only made matters worse. "You destroyed Halifax," Jesse said. "Why should I trust you?"

*"I destroyed Halifax because I intend to bring it back,"*  
Solomon said, with sincerity in his hollow voice. *"I sent you to the Fates to bring you here. And I made your brother human to show you who he really is. I've done all of this to give you the conviction you need to become the guardian this world deserves. Free me from these chains and I will show you your true purpose. I will show you how to save this world."*

"How do I know this isn't a trick?"

*"Because unlike your brother, I know you're not easily fooled."*

Jesse set down his glass and turned to the creature.

"All right," he said, "let's talk."

## 25. The Fire-Blood

Upstairs, the awkward silence was broken by the sound of a loud thump coming from the captain's chamber. Trisha rushed to check on Ptolemy.

"Is he awake?" Nigel asked Trisha.

"He's awake, but under the bed," Trisha said.

"Under the...?" Nigel rushed into his quarters and dropped to the floor. Underneath the bed was Ptolemy flat on his back. The bed seemed perfectly intact.

"Hi, Nigel," he said. "I think one of my powers is working again."

"You passed through the bed," Nigel said. "I think that means your Aries sign is up and running. Shut off your armour so you can get out of there."

"I think my armour is broken. It's not coming off."

"It might be a side-effect," Nigel said. "Try not to fall through the floor. I don't need you breaking anything important."

"I think my Pisces sign is working too," Ptolemy said. "I can hear your thoughts. Did we switch sides? Why is Odin trying to kill us and why are we harbouring a known terrorist?"



"It's a long story," Nigel said. "I'd ask you to help, but it seems you won't be able to stand until your Taurus strength kicks in."

"Why is Odin doing this?" Ptolemy asked.

"He's seizing an opportunity," Nigel said. "We've got Surtur, and by executing him on the solstice, Odin will gain un-tethered control over humanity."

"Then give him to Odin so we can get out of here," Ptolemy said.

"It's not that simple."

"It is," Ptolemy insisted. "I'm the Zodiac; it's my job to bring balance to the world. If I can't save Surtur before his execution, then it's my job to make sure Odin doesn't get away with this."

"He's right," Nigel heard a voice from the door say. It was Laptop Guy. He, Patti, and Trisha were standing outside the door.

"You're seriously considering giving him Surtur?" Nigel asked.

"I'm just saying if we hand over the Titan terrorist and let Odin have his way with the world, Ptolemy can go on damage control afterwards. It sounds like a reasonable course of action."

"Nobody's dying on my watch," Nigel said. "We can fight Odin. Trisha can fly us out of here, and both you and Patti can map out a place for us to hide."

"Stop it," Laptop Guy said. "Stop trying to fix things. You did this before, back in Halifax when you turned into a demon. All you had to do was stay out of the way and none of this would be happening. But you went ahead and got yourself turned human. Now we're hearing the best course of action is to give into Odin's demands, and again, you're fighting it. Why are you gambling with our lives?"

"I'm not gambling," Nigel said, standing up. "I just need to stay ahead of Solomon's game."

"You're playing into it."

"I won't give in to Odin's demands," Nigel said. "There's too much at stake for the world."

"The world's not your responsibility anymore."

"Humanity has to survive!"

"Stop talking about humanity like you're one of us," Laptop Guy said. "You've been human for a day. You have no idea what real mortals have been experiencing since gods and monsters showed up."

"Laptop Guy," Nigel started, "if you think..."

"My name is Brian, damn it!" Laptop Guy snapped. He stormed through the bridge and went onto the outer deck to sulk.

Trisha looked to the others, "I guess his name is Brian. Did any of you know?"

"I knew," Patti said. "But I kept calling him Laptop Guy because you guys did."

"Same here," said Ptolemy.

"I'll go talk to him," Patti said.

"Nigel, you should go too," Trisha said.

"But we have a situation with Odin," Nigel argued.

"Talk to him," Trisha said. "I'll go fill Jesse in."

Nigel shrugged and trudged after Brian with Patti.

\* \* \*

On the outer deck, the air was cold and windy. Nigel and Patti met up with Brian as he stared at the HMS Agamemnon from the railing.

"Brian, I'm sorry," Nigel rested on the rail next to him.

"You're not human," Brian said. "You don't speak for us."

"He's only trying to help," Patti said.

"Help?" Brian chuckled. "He's the cause of all this. The world made sense until his kind came around. Suddenly, everything we know is wrong! The Ancients are real! Religion, mythology, fantasy, everything is real! Do you know what it's like finding out for the first time? Tell him, Patti."

"I was possessed by a Chinese Immortal," Patti recalled. "I'm still not sure how I handled it. But learning about you, Trish, and Jesse... it was scary at first."

"I'm still scared," Brian said. "The gods are always begging for my worship. I spent months working on my novel, and when I sent it off to the editors, some god looked at it and sent back a completely different story. My book made the top ten list in the New York Times."

"That's good," Nigel said.

"Every book makes the top ten now!" Brian said. "It wasn't even my story anymore. The gods, they know how to make everything perfect, but I can't handle perfection. This world... there's no magic to it anymore."

"You can't blame Nigel for that," Patti said.

"I can blame him if he thinks we can fight the gods," Brian said. "Humans don't do this. All this divine warfare with flying boats is a fantasy. Something humans only dream of. We're not cut out to live with them."

"And letting Odin win is the best option?" Nigel inquired, "From a human point of view?"

"He's the king of the gods. I don't know what that means to you, but it scares the hell out of me. Solomon's playing you because he knows you don't have actual human fear."

"I'm scared too," Nigel said. "If I die, I'll have nowhere to go. But if I can control just one move of Solomon's, it might be enough to end this."

"Then you'll hand over Surtur?" Brian asked.

"Hell, no," Nigel said, coming to a sudden realization. "If Solomon's playing our side of the board, then he's also playing Odin's side."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Solomon won't attack his own pieces," Nigel stood up. "He won't let Odin destroy this ship."

*"Nigel!"* Trisha thought to him, *"Get down here!"*

*"What's wrong?"* Nigel asked.

*"It's Jesse and the Shadow-Blood! They're gone!"*

\* \* \*

Nigel was downstairs in a flash. Sure enough, Jesse was gone and the Shadow-Blood tattoos had vanished from Surtur. Surtur was still on the floor, wrapped in chains.

"Where did he go, Surtur?" Nigel asked.

Surtur didn't reply. He lay dormant on the ground, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"I can't get a response out of him," Trisha said. "It's like he's in a Titan coma."

"Or the Shadow-Blood did something to him."

Patti desperately reached out with her mind-link, but Jesse wasn't answering.

"Do you think Jesse released the Shadow-Blood?" Patti asked.

"Jesse wouldn't leave us like this," Trisha said.

"Unless Solomon talked him into it." Nigel said. "Damn it, I should've been nicer to him."

"Has anyone seen Pandora's Box?" Patti asked. "It's not on the bar anymore."

"Jesse took it with him," Trisha said.

Brian spoke, "Then maybe we should hand over Surtur before he disappears too."

"That's enough, Brian," Nigel sat at the bar. "If we tell Odin that the Shadow-Blood's missing, he'll think we're compromised and storm this ship with everything he has."

"Then we fly away," Trisha said. "This thing's got some good speed, plus ram-stone shielding."

"And go where exactly?"

"We continue looking for Solomon," Trisha said. "He's the only one who can stop this. He must have left some clue to his whereabouts. Are there any bread crumbs we might have missed?"

"He didn't leave anything," Nigel insisted.

"What about in the Well of Elysia?" Brian asked. "Did he leave anything there?"

"Just ashes and..." Nigel's finger stumbled across the page from the spellbook he'd found earlier. As soon as he touched it, he almost forgot what it was. He forced himself to remember the page long enough to take it from his pocket and show the others. "...and this."

"A page from the Book of Summoning," Trisha said in quiet awe. "How did we forget we had that?"

Nigel stood transfixed on the wording upon the page.

Every time he lifted his gaze, the lettering slipped from memory. He forced himself to remember this as he kept his eyes on the ancient script.

"Can you read it aloud?" Trisha asked.

"I just did," Nigel replied. "Three times. None of you remembered."

"But what did it say?"

"I... don't know," Nigel checked the page again. The scripture was clear as any other language he spoke. But when it came to reading it aloud, he was at a loss for what it said. He read it aloud for a fourth time. Again, no one had any memory of him reading it. "It's a Second Age spell. I think it's written to be forgotten."

“But what kind of spell it is?”

Nigel continued to stare at the writing, oblivious to the presence of the others. As he read the page in his mind, he came to the realization that Second Age magic didn't rely on words, gestures, relics, or ingredients. The writing struck at the center of his faith and he found himself lost in a miasma of memories. Visions of traveling the Assyrian riverbanks with Jesse, fighting alongside Thor in Germany, and meeting Trisha on that fateful train ride poured out of his being into the ether around him. He couldn't remember what he was reading, but whatever it was, he wanted to see it through.

“Nigel, snap out of it!” Trisha snatched the page away from him and Nigel's trance was broken.

“Give it back!” Nigel exclaimed. “I need to finish the spell! I need to perform the last...”

But it was too late.

They all heard a guttural breathing near the direction of the kitchen.

Everyone turned to see a figure standing alone in the doorway, unmoving.

It was a mirror image of Nigel. It glared with murderous intent.

Trisha's jaw dropped.

“I'm sorry, I couldn't help it,” Nigel said as his doppelganger drooled and wrenched its head.

“What did you do?” Trisha asked.

Nigel felt a lump in his throat as he stared at his copy.

“I think I made a Fire-Blood.”

## 26. Into the Storm

In the moments to follow, many things happened at once. First, Nigel's double lunged at Nigel, teeth first. Second, Trisha and Patti moved in to intercept the creature.

Third, Nigel, already anticipating the attack, rushed to tackle the monster.

Nigel pinned the Fire-Blood to the ground and secured its arms behind its back. Patti and Trisha were quick to help him hold it down while Brian hid behind the bar.

Evil Nigel wasted no time getting free. It ripped its own arms from its sockets to free itself from their grasp. Its arm sockets spontaneously erupted into flames with two new arms growing back. With a heavy shove, it threw all three of them across the room towards the pool table.

Nigel was the first to get up. He confronted the Fire-Blood, quickly ducking its first attack. The two of them sparred, matching each other blow for blow. The creature had all of the same moves and fighting instincts as Nigel.

Unfortunately, Nigel didn't have its regenerative strength and got winded easily. Patti leapt onto its back and threw her arms around its neck. The creature tried to claw at her arms, but Nigel took this opportunity to sweep its legs.

Or rather, he would have if the Fire-Blood didn't hop over his leg and roundhouse kick him into the pool table. Patti was thrown from its back onto the bar, narrowly missing Brian as she fell.

"How is it so strong?" Trisha yelled as she grabbed Jesse's bourbon bottle from the bar and smashed it into the creature's face.

"That's pure adrenal strength," Nigel said. "We have to destroy its heart!"

The Fire-Blood pushed past Trisha and came at Nigel again. Nigel was ready this time. He fell to his back, using his legs to kick the creature over his head, across the pool table, and into the jukebox. The creature braced itself on impact as if anticipating this move and came after Nigel again.

Everyone watched as Nigel and Nigel fought across the room, their ferocity heating up with every missed attack. Their moves were exactly the same. It was like watching someone fight their own reflection. They danced around Surtur's body and made their way past the pool table. Nigel was wearing down quickly and blood was pouring from his nose. He wouldn't be able to keep this up much longer. As he backed up against the pool stick rack, Nigel then had a flash of inspiration. As the creature came for him again, Nigel wiped the blood from his nose and crammed it into the creature's mouth. The Fire-Blood paused as it tasted his blood.

"Nigel!" Trisha screamed, "What have you done?!"

Everyone took a step back as the blood crept into the monster's mouth and the demon inside began to take over. Its eyes went red. Its teeth went sharp. Its veins went black.

Before it could act, Nigel pulled a pool stick from the rack and skewered the monster through its heart. There was a



brief look of terror in the creature's eyes before it vanished into flames. The pool stick clattered to the floor.

Nigel collapsed to the ground, breathing heavy with relief.

"What the hell was that?" Brian asked.

"You tried to turn it into a demon!" Trisha exclaimed.

"It was the only way," Nigel said, his eyesight cloudy.

"When the blood takes over, there's a few seconds of hesitation. That was the only time I could hit him."

"I don't understand," Patti said, "Are Fire-Bloods *supposed* to attack you?"

"It attacked me because I didn't finish the spell," Nigel said.

"I didn't even realize I was casting it. The words were just there in my head and then... you saw!"

"Why would Solomon even leave that page for you?" Brian asked. "What kind of bread crumb is a bloodthirsty doppelganger?"

"It's not a bread crumb; it's a message," Trisha realized.

"Like a warning?" Patti asked.

"Worse than a warning," Nigel reflected on what he'd just seen and came to the same realization as Trisha. "Oh, god - everything I know is wrong. It all makes sense!"

"What does?" Patti asked.

"Whatever happens," Nigel said. "We can't give Surtur to Odin. We have to go stalemate on this for as long as possible. Solomon wants... he wants... cookies... he's... he's... a... cake... buh... duh..."

Nigel's words became disjointed. His mind went fuzzy and he felt himself drifting to the floor. He flopped over and began shouting strange noises as his eyes danced around the room. Trisha hurried to his side to help him up but he seemed oblivious to her presence.

"He's what, Nigel?" she shook him. "Say something!"

"He's..." he blubbered, "Solomon is... *me*."

Nigel closed his eyes and let his head sway.

Trisha leaned in close and smelled Nigel. She wiped blood from his lip with her finger and carefully tasted it. Her vampire taste-buds pinpointed the problem immediately.

"No blood sugar," she said. "He's a diabetic."

"Do I give him candy?" Patti asked.

"Fruit juice behind the counter, go!" Trisha said.

"Wait, I got this," Brian said as he hurried for the nearest first aid kit on the wall. Inside, sure enough, he found a glucagon injection. He helped them feed it directly into Nigel's veins.

"We just happened to have that?" Trisha asked. "Odin knew about this?"

"I guess so."

Nigel slept.

"Wake up, Nigel!" Trisha said as she slapped his face a few times.

They heard the intercom beeping upstairs.

"It's Odin," Patti said.

"And just us," Trisha said, looking to Patti and Brian.

"I vote surrender," Brian said.

Trisha took a deep breath before quietly mumbling to herself, "It matched his every move..."

"What was that?"

"We're not surrendering," she said. "You saw that Fire-Blood. We can't hand over Surtur at any cost."

"What are talking about?" Brian asked. "What does the Fire-Blood have to do with it?"

"You heard Nigel."

"I heard him say a lot of nonsense about cookies, cake and being Solomon," Brian said. "I don't know how much of this quest you've been following, but I'm pretty sure he's not in a rational state of mind."

"I'm finished with this stupid quest," Trisha said as she began dragging Nigel back to the stairs. "Both of you, help

me bring him upstairs and get to your stations. We're punching our way out of here."

"But without Nigel..."

"Do it!" she snapped at him.

They carried Nigel back to the bridge, set him on the floor by the captain's chair and took their stations. Both Patti and Brian looked apprehensive about Trisha's sudden outburst. She seemed like a very different person all of a sudden. She got on her gamepad and checked her settings to ensure the ship's systems were still operating.

"Ptolemy!" Trisha shouted to the captain's chamber, "We're going to *Plan B*!"

"Finally!" he exclaimed.

"Plan B?" Brian asked. "What Plan B? Nobody said anything about a Plan B!"

"Sorry to keep you out of the loop," Patti said, "but trust Trisha on this one."

"What, you knew about a Plan B too?" Brian asked.

"Patti, keep an eye on that console on your left," Trisha said. "I need constant updates on the ship's shields and missiles. Inform me whenever our shield integrity drops ten percent. And Brian, stop looking at Wikipedia for the next five minutes and keep your eye on that radar display to your right. If Odin throws anything at us, I need to know what, where, and how many."

"You're serious?" Brian asked. "We're going to fight Santa Claus?"

"Hail the Agamemnon," Trisha told Patti.

"Hailing the Agamemnon," she replied. Odin's face appeared on the viewing window.

"Where's Naveen?" Odin asked, looking at the three of them.

"He's indisposed on the floor right there," Trisha said. "I'm the captain now."

"Indisposed? What's going on over there?"

"You knew he was diabetic," Trisha said. "You didn't tell us. Why?"

"I didn't tell him because I needed him focused," Odin said.

"My doctors patched him up so he wouldn't be afflicted by his maladies. The magicks shouldn't be falling apart."

"There's more?" Trisha asked.

"He's old; he's got a hundred things wrong with him," Odin said. "The magic holding him together is probably wearing off. With him incapacitated, though, I suppose our transaction should be a lot easier."

"There's not going to be an exchange," Trisha said. "We're taking Surtur to go look for Solomon."

"Is this a joke?"

"Nope, it's all Murphy's Law over here," Trisha said. "We just had a very enlightening run-in with a Fire-Blood and the Shadow-Blood's gone missing. My gut's says we're exactly where Solomon needs us to be, so we should both get out of here immediately."

"Not with the Titan Lord, you won't!" Odin said. "At the solstice, Surtur will be returned to the field of battle anyway. What could you possibly do with him?"

"We'll find a way to end this war without you."

"This is a trick, isn't it?" Odin asked, his calm exterior deteriorating. "Where's his brother? Is the angel is coming for me? Is Solomon planning to turn my heroes against me?"

"We're the ones who called for a truce," Trisha reminded him.

"Enough of this! Wake up, Naveen! Hand over Surtur or I'll destroy your ship!"

"Go ahead and try," Trisha said. "There *will* be complications."

"Quiet, you! This is between us Ancients!"

"If you're going to throw threats at us, at least have the courtesy to throw some firepower to back it up."

Odin's nostrils flared. Trisha could tell he didn't want to do it, but trusted Odin might follow through on his threats.

"I see why Naveen likes you," he said, "but you're out of your league."

"And I play against jack asses like you all the time in 'Realm Rage'," Trisha said. "So either let us go, or prepare to get pwned."

"Very well," Odin turned to one of his cadets. "Ensign, target that ship's engines. Fire when ready."

"But the prophet's on that ship!"

"Just do it!"

The ensign at the console pressed a few buttons. "Firing in three... two..."

As he spoke, Trisha and the others saw the large gun turrets on the Agamemnon stir to life and begin targeting them. Trisha took a calm, deep breath and steadied her fingers on her control pad. Odin had no idea how ready for this she was.

The Agamemnon fired. Several large missiles soared through the sky towards their ship. As they neared, Trisha cranked her controls and forced the tavern to perform a sharp barrel roll out of the missiles' way. The ship's gravity stabilizers kept everyone anchored as Trisha brought the tavern under control and moved away from the Agamemnon.

"Oh, hell no!" Odin exclaimed.

He stepped out of his cabin onto the ship's deck, his eyes glowing red with rage, and summoned a shining spear into his hand. He bellowed to the skies and the surrounding clouds encircled the two ships. The tavern was struck by a heavy wind. Clouds and fog swarmed around their ships like a tornado.

"Incoming pressure front!" Brian shouted.

The tavern soared past the Agamemnon, trying to cut through the winds, but lightning struck the tavern's side and sent it spiraling towards the ocean. The damage was minimal, however, and Trisha managed to recover control of the ship.

The clouds and winds continued to swirl. Through their fog-lights, they saw the storm shape itself into a perfect sphere. They were trapped in a raging hurricane of thunder that reached five miles around. At the heart of it was Odin's ship. Trish struggled to keep the ship from rolling in the heavy winds. The front window shattered under the pressure.

Everyone on the bridge was in a panic. Patti and Brian buckled themselves in as the ship rocked back and forth. Ptolemy probably wasn't having a better time of it either.

"Is this part of Plan B?!" Ptolemy shouted.

"The ship's stabilizers are damaged!" Patti shouted, looking at the displays, "We need to get out of here!"

"No," Trisha shouted. "Fire up the cannons and return fire!"

"That is a World War I battleship with Asgardian

upgrades," Brian said. "We don't have the firepower to beat it!"

"We don't have to beat it," Trisha said. "We just have to buy time."

Several portside weapon hatches opened and the tavern delivered a volley of missiles through the storm. Odin's lightning rained down from the clouds, blasting down one missile after another. Odin ducked as the shrapnel tore into his ship's hull.

As Trisha powered her ship through the winds, Odin's voice came over the intercom.

"Enough of this, vampire," he said. "You're not an Ancient. This is not your war. Stand down, immediately!"

“Sorry, All-Father,” Trisha replied, “but in the ‘Realm Rage’ community, we don’t take kindly to team-killing n00bs who slaughter their friends for EXP.”

Several hundred lightning bolts fell upon the tavern at once. Trisha, Brian and Patti covered their eyes as every single bolt missed the ship in a blinding blast. In his rage, Odin had lost his focus.

“I’m not a n00b!” Odin shouted in tears as he commanded several clouds to part.

Before her eyes, Trisha saw the clouds parting to reveal an exit from the storm. Only then did she realize the dirty trick Odin was about to play on her. Streaks of sunlight came through the clouds and entered the cabin of the tavern. With the glass broken, there was nothing to protect Trisha from the harmful UV rays as they burned her skin. She threw up her arms to cover her face and ducked down behind her console, forcing the tavern to make a sharp turn away from the light.

She blew feverishly on her forearms as they sizzled. Large burn marks ran along her arms and shoulders. She could feel the burn on her forehead and ears as well.

“Trish, are you okay?” Patti asked.

“I’ll be fine,” Trisha said, standing up again. The pain coursed through her skin, but she struggled to get the ship moving again. Unlike television vampires, Trisha didn’t have the luxury of rapid healing. In fact, since her body only ran on blood, her healing factor was slower than a human’s.

Odin’s voice spoke again. “I’ll give you one last chance to surrender. Surely now you see there’s no point in resisting. Hand over the Titan Lord and...”

“That was a dick move, you ass.”

“It was strategy!”

“Pathetic.”

"It doesn't matter!" Odin said. "You can't fly in that condition!"

"Maybe I can't," Trisha said, "but I still have an ace up my sleeve. Something you forgot."

"And what's that?"

Brian saw something on the displays and shouted, "Something big incoming!"

"We've got Titans on our tail," Trisha said with a smirk. They saw it through the windows. Through the clouds came an enormous shape, with a wingspan the size of six football stadiums. It was shaped like a manta ray, with cannons and engines mounted on every panel, an enormous maw for its main hangar, and bright glowing letters painted on the left wing that read "G O L I A T H". They heard Krindel's voice carry over the wind, "Move aside, brother. Surtur belongs to us."

"Great Gaia, mother of gods..." Odin's jaw dropped. He shouted back to his crew, "It's Krindel's ship! About face!" The Agamemnon swung about and flew out of the way just as the Goliath's cannons fired at the tavern. Rocket-powered cannonballs ripped through the storm, tearing past Odin's ship.

Seeing these two in action, the difference between gods and Titans became quite apparent to Trisha. While Odin's ship was more versatile in its attacks and graceful in movement, the Goliath was built with one goal in mind: *more power.*

"Merry Christmas!" Krindel shouted from his cockpit as he fired on Trisha.

"How is this any better?" Patti asked. "Now we've got two pissed-off Santas shooting at us!"

"That's exactly what we want," Trisha said as she spun the ship around and made a beeline for the Goliath. "Hold on



tight, we're going to use some friendly fire to get out of here!"

"I hate to ruin things," Brian said. "But the wind's still too strong for us to escape."

"Not too strong for the Goliath," Trisha said, noticing that the enormous ship was still pushing through the sphere of clouds.

The tavern soared towards the Goliath. The wind rushed in their faces as the occasional cannonball ripped through the hull, gradually destroying the tavern around them.

"Shield integrity down by forty percent," Patti said, "Twenty missiles remaining."

"Do we have an exit strategy?" Brian asked.

"Coming right up!" Trisha said as she veered a hard left.

Trisha put the tavern in between the Goliath and the Agamemnon. Cannonballs flew past the tavern and struck Odin's ship instead, shredding through the metal hull like tissue paper.

"Krindel, you fool!" Odin shouted.

In response to the Titans attacking the gods, the Referee stepped in.

Several blasts of heavenly lightning surged through the storm cloud and ripped several holes through the Goliath.

The ship stopped firing long enough for Trisha to fly the ship past the Goliath's outer defenses and into their hangar.

Inside the ship, hundreds of Titan soldiers were lined up, ready for battle, along with dozens of their special souped-up fighter jets. Many hurled fireballs and icicles at the tavern as it raced through the hangar. Trisha swerved to avoid hitting catwalks, pillars and additional lightning strikes from the Referee. The hangar itself seemed to extend the length of the ship itself, which went on for a quite a distance. Even then, she still saw the wall coming.

"There's no exit!" Brian yelled.

Trisha fired every last missile she had at the wall.

The back of the Goliath exploded, sending Titans flying across the hangar. Trisha cut through the dust, grit her teeth, and plowed into the hole she just created.

Moments later, they escaped the Goliath and were free from the storm.

Waves of relief fell over the bridge. Brian almost fainted.

Suddenly, something caught his eye on his computer.

There was a small warning light.

"That big Machine Titan, uh, Mishnykov," he said. "He's in the hangar and it looks like he's ready to throw something at us. Actually - scratch that. He already threw it."

A large metal object struck the right wing, tearing it off. The tavern spun out of control. They fell towards the ocean below.

As they fell, they saw the thrown projectile fall past the front of their ship. It was a man trapped in a steel casing. Mishnykov had thrown Loki at them.

"The ship's not responding!" Trisha yelled.

"That ocean's coming up really fast," Brian said, double-checking his seatbelt.

"Orders, captain?" Patti asked.

"Pray," Trisha said, staring at the oncoming water. "Pray like you've never prayed before."

"But prayers don't work!" Brian exclaimed.

"Then scream really loud into the water! It's our only chance!"

"Whaaa...?"

The water hit them like bricks. Trisha flew forward. Water rushed through the window to meet them. The ship submerged and sank like a rock.

For a moment, everything went dark. The only light visible was outside the ship as the interior lights vanished.

Trisha's body ached as the salt water stung against her burns. She couldn't tell if Brian and Patti were still in their seats or crushed by the water. Ptolemy was likely bouncing around his room. And Nigel... how could he possibly survive this in his condition? The former Fire-Blood's body floated in the water before her eyes.

The ship drifted under the cold, dark ocean.

### III. Vault of the Gods

## 27. The Second Awakening

An enemy of the gods.

Prey for the Titans.

Abandoned by his brother.

A mortal coil without a soul.

*New Orleans, 1882.*

Jesse and Nigel hit the ground with a resounding thud as the station guard threw them from the train. The large burly man brushed the dust from his hands and stepped back into the car, mumbling something along the lines of “hoodlums” and “no tickets”.

Nigel shouted back some obscenities before he and Jesse retreated to the safety of the empty train station. Both were nervously watching the clock, but only Jesse felt particularly troubled by what had just happened.

“I could have sworn those tickets were real,” Jesse said as he sat on a bench. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just avoid scalpers in the future,” Nigel said as he paced around the station. To him, Jesse was always a nervous wreck. Nigel found it best to tiptoe around his foibles whenever they happened rather than chew him out. Jesse’s psyche was damaged enough as it was. Instead, Nigel chose to change the subject. “How much money do we have left?”

Jesse turned out his pockets. "Five cents, enough for breakfast."

"We don't need to eat."

"Then maybe we should just stay the night."

"It's two hours to sundown," Nigel said as he lit a cigar.

"The vampires will be out in full force by then and they've got a mountain troll with them. We need to be on this train and halfway to Colorado by tomorrow morning."

"We can hop on as it leaves."

"We may have no choice," Nigel muttered. "Just try not to trip and get caught in the wheels again. Not unless you want to spend another night hiding in the bayou."

Jesse shuddered. "I'm still finding leeches in strange places."

"Smoking's bad for your health," said an old, croaking voice from across the station. Both boys turned their heads to see an old bearded man in a heavy prospector's coat sitting at a small table. He appeared to be playing chess by himself.

Nigel looked at his cigar. He generally used its smell to mask their natural scent since people rarely took offense to him smoking it. But when they did, it was over its smell and not over health concerns.

"If you don't like it, there's plenty of fresh air outside," Nigel said.

"As will be a couple of train-jumpers if the station manager finds out about your plan," the man said. "Unless, of course, one of you fancies to humour me with a game."

"I like games," Jesse said.

"We don't have time," Nigel said to him. "We need to scrounge up cash for tickets."

"It just so happens I have a pair of tickets myself," the man said. "Genuine ones too, unless you'd rather go about it the hard way and face that there... Mountain Troll, was it?"

He don't sound like much of a friendly fellow to get stuck with a name like that."

"You'd part with those tickets?" Nigel asked.

"I buy a pair everyday," the man said sadly as he produced two very real-looking tickets from his coat. "Some scalp for money, I scalp for company. Indulge me in a game and they're yours."

"Do it," Jesse said as he poked Nigel. "You used to be great at that game."

"I haven't played in years," Nigel said. "We can't gamble with our time like this."

The old man chuckled. "You don't have to win. You just have to play."

Nigel considered the offer before finally agreeing to sit down with the man. He sat at the table and took the black side of the board, keeping one eye on the clock.

The man left no impression on Nigel. His averted gaze, his constant head movement and his trembling hands all looked like signs of senility. Yet, as the game opened, the man flawlessly executed a queen sacrifice within the first few moves, giving up his most powerful piece on the board.

As the minutes went on, Nigel found himself less interested in the clock and more in the game. His opponent continued to surprise him with every move, turning over every strategy Nigel could think of. He found his own pieces spread thin and diminishingly swiftly. In turn, he managed to take out a few of his opponent's key pieces, but couldn't help but feel he was being fed those few small victories.

"Three minutes before the train leaves," Jesse said, watching the clock.

The old man made his last move and said, "I think you've won."

Nigel looked at the board. He was on the verge of cornering the white king into a checkmate, but the old man had just successfully navigated a pawn to the other side of the board where he upgraded it to a queen. Nigel shook his head and said, "No, you can take me in three moves." The old man moved his queen in the wrong direction, smiled and said, "Now I can't. This win goes to you. Thanks for the game."

He politely handed the tickets to Nigel. Nigel felt entranced by the exchange and couldn't help but wonder if he were dealing with a god or merely a kind old man. There was something ancient about his manner and Nigel couldn't put his finger on what.

"One minute," Jesse said.

"Who are you?" Nigel asked the man.

"A survivor like yourself," he replied. "Be well to your brother. People like us have a duty to this world, but an even greater duty to the bonds we share. Never lose sight of the smaller picture."

Nigel nodded and hurried off with the tickets, barely mouthing the words "Thank you" as they left.

The old man smiled and calmly set up another game.

\* \* \*

Nigel awakened for the second time in his life.

He didn't know how long he'd been out. Was it hours?

Days? How had he survived the crash?

He was in another bed, but there were no silk sheets or gossamer curtains this time. He was lying in what appeared to be a hotel room with walls of glowing blue brick. Outside the window, he thought he saw something swim past. A fish? Was he underwater? All he could see outside was a foggy blue murkiness.



He tried to roll out of bed, only to find he could barely feel his limbs. His right forearm was cast in a splint, and his left leg was heavily bandaged. He looked in the mirror to see his tanned human form once again, an old man looking back at him. He was wearing grey sweatpants and was covered in bruises. If he'd been rescued by any gods, their doctors were nowhere near as good as Asgard's.

He slowly hobbled towards the door, being careful not to put too much weight on his injured leg. He heard voices on the other side. He carefully inched it open and peered through. On the other side of the door were two large jackal-headed security guards brandishing magma cannons off to the left. They were speaking in an Egyptian dialect that Nigel was unfamiliar with.

Nigel didn't know how he got here, but a prisoner was the last thing he wanted to be.

A sound down the hall caught the guards' attention.

Another guard was calling out to them. Both turned away from the door momentarily. Nigel hastily hobbled out of the room, closing the door behind him, and hurried down the hall to take refuge behind some potted plants.

As he ran, one of the guards heard him scuffling. They turned to see Nigel's foot slipping out of sight. One of them shouted, "Over there!"

Nigel leaned in tight against the plant and heard the guard approaching. The jackal-headed god approached the plant, stopped to look around, and then walked away as if he'd seen nothing at all. Even for a god, short-term memory like that was unusual.

The hallway was long and filled with cell doors. Further away from the guards, the straight hallway became a balcony overlooking a massive chamber. Nigel made his way over to it.

As he crept, he noted the floor felt unusually unsteady. It vibrated with every step he took. Even the stone pattern in the floor looked unusual with the same repeating flaws in every stone.

Nigel carefully crept towards the balcony and hid behind a pillar where he could get a better look at the room. He was inside a huge, 30-story pyramid with balconies wrapping around the interior of each level. There must have been hundreds of rooms on the floors above. Down below, he saw people and gods wandering around an extensive computer farm. Many were busy working at terminals, while others were diligently moving weapons and equipment about. Judging from the set-up alone, Nigel had the feeling he was being held prisoner in an underground military complex. The computers were networked around a large, raised platform. Upon that platform was Surtur sleeping on a slate, several wires hooked up to his body from the terminals.

A man in a long black overcoat with greasy black hair and grey skin strode through the computer farm and approached the platform. Nigel could barely hear him speak to one of the jackal-headed guards nearby.

"Is it ready?" the man asked.

"It will be soon," the guard replied.

"Good, and how are our guests?" he asked.

"One's asleep, but the rest are in the upstairs lounge with the Queen," the guard said. "Shall I fetch them?"

"I'll do that momentarily," the man said.

"The Queen..." Nigel whispered to himself, remembering the leaderboard back in Asgard. *This pyramid belonged to the second most powerful god in the realms.*

As the man turned around to leave, Nigel felt the colour drain from his face.

It was Vladimir Tsepish.

Nigel had to find the others quickly.

He scanned the hallways and spotted a pair of double doors at the far end of balcony. That had to be the lounge the guard had spoken of. Nigel quietly made his way around the pyramid's halls, hiding from patrolling guards as he went. The guards all seemed to exhibit the same strange behaviour, where they patrolled the corridors in repeating patterns as if they were machines. Fortunately, studying their patterns made it all the more easy to avoid them.

Nigel approached the lounge doors. They appeared to be unguarded, so he crept into position and put his ear against the door to listen.

There was a woman inside, and the sound of someone being brutally beaten.

*It's Trisha! She's in trouble!*

His heart racing, Nigel quickly checked his pockets for something to pick the lock with. He searched the area only to spot a small splintered chip in the sandstone wall. He pulled it from the brick and worked the lock with it.

So many thoughts raced through his head. How did they survive their encounter with Odin? Where was the tavern? Where did the Shadow-Blood take Jesse? Where were they and what was Vladimir doing here? And what was waiting for him on the other side of this door?

"Oh, good, you're awake!" a voice said from behind him. Nigel spun around to see Patti wearing a purple Snuggie. "Patti, what are you doing out here?" Nigel asked.

"I had to use the crapper," she said. "Are you picking the lock?"

"I'm trying to get inside."

"Did you try opening it?"

Nigel sheepishly turned the handle. The doors were already unlocked.

“You’re probably ready for some answers,” Patti said.  
“Come on in. We’ll bring you up to speed.”

## 28. Answers

They entered a large lounge with refurbished furniture, a mini-bar, an HD television being watched by Brian and Ptolemy (still wearing his armour) and a small buffet complete with shrimp salad and chicken satay.

Near the mini-bar, Nigel saw Trisha, her arms covered in bandages. She was wearing sweats and taking her frustrations out on a jackal-headed guard who sparred with her bare-handed. Trisha got in several punches, the guard flickering out of existence with every blow. Above the guard's head were ten floating hearts that gradually vanished as Trisha dealt one blow after another. An old man with a grey beard sat on a nearby recliner to watch while a white Pomeranian scurried around the room.

"It was reckless letting things get as far as they did," the old man said to Trisha as he perused a touchpad. "Did you see this doctor's report? Did you see what Odin covered up about him?"

"What was I supposed to do, Poseidon?" she asked, quite irritated. "Odin had his fingers in everything. If I went off-mission, I could have blown everyone's cover."

"Type-A diabetes, schizophrenia, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis," Poseidon read off the list, "not to mention his many allergies. And there's not a trace of proper medication in his body. Do you know what Odin's faith healers did to him? They patched him together with

second-rate magic just to get him walking. That archaic practice is akin to stapling a house together.”

“Don’t yell at me about it; my hands were full keeping him alive as long I did.”

“And now we’ve got the damn Fire Lord downstairs in the atrium,” Poseidon said. “None of this was in the plan. What do we do if Odin or Surtur’s people come looking for him? Ptolemy sure as hell can’t protect us.”

“Hey!” Ptolemy snapped to his feet, having recovered the strength needed to lift his suit. “For your information, I toppled Typhon today. So don’t pick on me just because Nigel’s a better teacher than you.”

“We’ve got one hour til Ragnarök and you’re not even at half power yet,” Poseidon argued.

“It’s still more power than you have, sea god. The world is eighty percent water and you still stored all your assets in those stupid ley lines.”

Nigel marched forward and shouted, “What’s going on?” Trisha acknowledged him but begrudgingly continued her assault on the poor guard.

Poseidon greeted him, “The fallen prophet awakes!”

“Is there something I should know?” Nigel asked as he limped towards them. Everyone looked extraordinarily comfortable in their surroundings.

“We were going to tell you, but Odin was watching you too closely,” Ptolemy explained.

“This is the Alexandria Hotel & Casino in Atlantis,” Poseidon said. “Home of the rebellion against Odin.”

“It’s not a rebellion, it’s a moderator forum,” Trisha corrected him.

“I always thought of this as an intelligence agency,” Ptolemy said.

“Pft, intelligence,” Patti scoffed as she sat with Ptolemy.

“You guys just play video games all night.”

"This can't be Atlantis," Nigel realized, "The real Atlantis was completely destroyed by Pandora around 6000 B.C. There was nothing left."

"I had it rebuilt in the forties as an underwater tourist destination for the gods," Poseidon said. "Unfortunately, even gods prefer the real Vegas. So now I just use it as an extra-large man-cave."

"How long have you all been coming here?"

"Since the takeover," said Patti.

"Six months. You've all been meeting in a big underwater pyramid for six months."

"Not me; I've been doing undercover work in Asgard," Ptolemy said.

"And I'm only out here once a month," Patti explained.

"Someone had to mind the bar."

"But how have you been getting here?" Nigel asked.

"Through a secret portal in the broken stall of our club's bathroom," Trisha explained. "We've been using it to slip between realms every other night."

"*This* is where you go on your hunts?" Nigel asked, "And this is what? Poseidon's Secret Service? The Order of the Kraken? Ancients Anonymous?"

"Damn, two of those names are pretty good," Ptolemy said.

"I told you guys, we totally need a team name."

"Don't look at me; I wanted to call this organization *AHAB*," Poseidon snorted.

Trisha let out a frustrated sigh. "We're not calling ourselves an abbreviation if you don't have anything to abbreviate it with."

"The Atlantean Heavenly Affairs Bureau," Poseidon said.

"*There's* your abbreviation."

"You realize Captain Ahab went down with the ship in that book, right?"

Nigel interrupted, "What exactly are you doing here?"

"Trying to stop Ragnarök, of course," Trisha explained.

"After Odin denied the world a Deus Ex Machina, somebody had to step in and monitor his takeover."

"It's one of those ideas we came up with after a late night of gaming," Poseidon said. "We're basically Internal Affairs."

"So you police the gods," Nigel said.

Poseidon continued. "When Odin seized control of the world, he knew Solomon would return. Unfortunately, Odin's a god of war and poetry at heart. He over-romanticises the effectiveness of heroes and prophecies during a crisis. That's why instead of sending an army, he sent you in the worst condition possible. He believed it would bring out a miracle."

Nigel showed off his splint. "At least his doctors can fix arms."

"Fifth Age magic can't heal a body as old as yours,"

Poseidon said. "Odin's doctors threw a glamour over your deteriorating health when what you needed was proper medical attention."

"But don't worry," Ptolemy said. "Once my healing power kicks back in, I should be able to patch you right up."

"So who else is part of this?" Nigel asked.

"The Chinese Immortals and Magnus' Army have been very helpful when comes to field-work," Trisha said, "We also have groups in Geneva, Roswell, and Tirnanog, but most of our operations run out of this hotel & casino."

"But I saw Vladimir downstairs," Nigel said. "And he said 'The Queen' was here."

"Oh, right," Poseidon said. "We'll let Vladimir tell his story, but as for The Queen of the Gods..."

Trisha delivered a solid side-kick into the gut of her training partner and demolished it. The jackal-headed god



vanished and was replaced with floating letters that read  
“5000 EXP! *The Queen Levels Up!*”

Nigel stood speechless as he tried to process this information.

“But you’re not a goddess,” he said.

“It’s complicated.”

Nigel’s attention swayed to the others. “Are there any other secrets I should know about?”

Ptolemy put his arm around Patti’s shoulder. “Patti and I have been dating for five months.”

“And that Pomeranian around your feet is our Chinese Immortal friend, Wu Tang,” Patti said. “He kept breaking my diet whenever he possessed me, so we keep a dog around for his visits.”

Nigel looked to the other side of the couch. “And you, Brian?”

“Don’t look at me; I didn’t know a damn thing about this,” he said scornfully.

“So let me get this straight,” Nigel said. “For the last few months, I’ve been teaching self-defense and coaching little league rugby to prepare people for the coming war.

Meanwhile, this whole time, Poseidon has had you doing the same thing on a global scale?”

“Most of the credit goes to your missus,” Poseidon said.

“Trish?”

“And to you, Nigel,” she said. “After you predicted this war, I met with Poseidon and we had an interesting discussion. He told me all about Solomon and his previous attempts to destroy the gods. A lot of Ancients shared the same concerns.”

“Trish is our chief coordinator,” Poseidon said. “She’s the one handling the investigations. I just handle room and board.”

“And she’s *The Queen*,” Nigel reminded himself.

"*TheQueen*," Trisha said. "No spaces or underscores."

The doors opened. Nigel turned to see Vladimir Tsepish standing in the entrance, looking smug.

"I see you're awake," he said. He turned to Trisha and said, "They're ready to operate on Surtur when you're ready."

"Lead the way," she said, stepping past Nigel.

Nigel took her arm and pulled her into a nearby corner as the others stood up to leave the room. Everyone's attention was on them, so Nigel tried to keep his voice low.

"I don't know what's going on here," he said, "but I don't like this cold treatment."

"Don't pretend that Fire-Blood you created never happened," Trisha said. "We both know *you're* the one who can't be trusted."

"*I* can't be trusted? You're friends with a chaos demon who tried to *kill* us last summer."

"And you saw the Fire-Blood. It looked like you, it moved like you. It had all your instincts. You know what that means. You said so yourself."

"It was a flawed spell."

"The message was there," Trisha said grimly. "A Fire-Blood is born in its maker's image. Why else would Solomon give you that spell if he didn't want you to know the truth?"

"I was created by a young woman named Nione," Nigel said. "Solomon is *not* my father."

"And yet he's centered his entire plan around your predictability," she said. "He may not be your 'father', but he is your maker, you're his double, and if that Fire-Blood is any indication, Solomon knows exactly how you think. So don't be surprised if I exercise caution around you. Your humanity is bringing out a side I've never seen before and it scares me."

"I'm not *him*."

“Solomon seems to think otherwise.”

“Hey, guys,” Poseidon interrupted. “Hate to break this up, but the clock’s ticking.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Trisha said. “It’s time to go operate on a Titan.”

## 29. A Vision of Despair

“So guys,” Brian whined as they left the room together, “Nice to know I’m good enough to read from Wikipedia on your suicide missions, but not popular enough in your little group to be let in on the important stuff.”

“Stow the attitude, Brian,” Trisha said.

“Yeah, don’t be the Negative Nancy,” Ptolemy said. “In movies, people like that always flip out and betray everyone.”

“Whatever,” Brian said as he reached into his satchel. “You guys are lucky my computer still works after that crash. I would’ve sued the ass off your tavern for a new one.”

“You can’t sue what’s in pieces at the bottom of the ocean,” Patti pointed out.

“Well, I sure as hell won’t sue the Titans who destroyed it.” As they headed for the stairwell, Nigel looked outside the window. In front of the pyramid was an enormous courtyard decorated with a massive mirror pool and surrounded by palm trees. Beyond the courtyard stretched the main strip filled with a variety of deity-themed casinos, including *‘El Dorado’* and *‘Pluto’s Palace’*. The combination of Greek and Egyptian architecture mixed with neon lights gave the sunken realm a very modern look, worthy of being its own Las Vegas, Atlantic City, or Monte Carlo.

Atlantis even seemed to have its own faux Eiffel Tower. Beyond that, the city was covered in a large glass dome. Thousands of fish swam freely through the glass and city's air as if it were water. For such a tourist location, the only signs of life other than the fish were the jackal-headed sentries patrolling the perimeter.

"Are we safe down here?" Nigel asked.

"Odin doesn't know where this city is," Poseidon explained.

"I keep the realm contained between the ocean currents and the wi-fi from the fibre-optic cables on the ocean floor."

"We're in the... sorry, say that again? We're in the wi-fi?"

"Is it that hard to believe?" Trisha asked. "Asgard's in a rainbow, Tartarus is in a shadow."

"Yeah, but I never imagined Poseidon would keep Atlantis on the internet," Nigel said. Suddenly, all the electric hums and vibrations coming off the floor were starting to make sense. Even the design of the building with its simple geometry and repeating textures looked like something out of Trisha's video games. They were hiding inside a digital realm.

"Don't mind the guards," Poseidon said. "We ripped their game sprites from 'Realm Rage'."

"Are we inside that game?" Nigel asked, certain that it was possible at this point.

"We're inside one of its servers," Ptolemy said. "Trish, Poseidon and myself are moderators on the game's official community forums."

"In fact, Trish is quite the celebrity on those forums," Poseidon said. "She's the first player in a community of nine million subscribers to complete the unbeatable Temple of Oboun Badagris. I know that means nothing to you, but to gamers, that's worthy of godhood."

"Is that how you became the Queen?"

"*TheQueen* is my username," Trisha said. "I wasn't trying to end up on the pantheon leaderboard, but gamers are a weird sort when it comes to worship. What started as a joke about me being Queen of the Gods exploded into memes, hashtags, and rumors. But the most popular joke was that I owned every cat on the internet. Next thing I know, *TheQueen* is registered as a legal goddess in Asgard and nobody outside the 'Realm Rage' community knows the truth."

"So you're not really a god, then."

"No more than Gene Roddenberry, Weird Al Yankovic, or the Helix Fossil," Ptolemy said. "We nerds will call anything a god just to be funny."

"But you don't have any real power," Nigel said.

"Over cats, no," Trisha said. "Odin seems to think otherwise."

"Then what's Vladimir's story?" Nigel asked as they descended the stairs. "Is he a gamer too?"

"I don't play games," he spoke.

Wu Tang the Pomeranian scrambled around Nigel's legs barking. Poseidon translated, "The Chinese Immortals found him not too long ago hiding in the Arctic Circle. His demon had flayed his mind to shreds."

"They brought me to their temple in Shambhala and taught me to balance my fear," Vladimir said. "I still live in perpetual terror of being consumed from within, but it's easier to control my sanity."

"And so you're helping out of the goodness of your heart?" Nigel asked. "Especially after you hunted us for centuries, brought the wrath of Pandora upon Halifax, and tried to kill all of us?"

"I'm helping because I want this nightmare out of me," Vladimir said, rubbing his temples. "Trisha's group is

already doing more to find a cure than the gods ever have.”

“A wooden stake through your heart will fix both our problems.”

“Try it, gramps,” Vladimir said daringly.

Nigel addressed the group. “Are you all okay with Vladimir being here?”

“He’s very good at gathering intel,” Trisha said. “He can move through darkness and enter people’s minds. Not to mention he can make shadow clones of himself.”

As they arrived in the lobby, Trisha gestured to the computer desks around Surtur. Shadowy blobs shaped like Vladimir were busy programming and checking Twitter. Nigel remembered battling these fearsome creatures during the summer’s battle, but now they appeared harmless and more interested in web browsing than killing him.

“As long as you look past his cockiness and stupid grin, he’s been pretty valuable,” Poseidon said.

“Thanks for the letter of reference, Posie,” Vladimir grumbled.

As they approached Surtur, an eccentric old man with a large glasses and a lab coat turned to greet them.

“Ah, signora!” the man proclaimed in a heavy Italian accent, “The experiment, she is ready!”

“Thanks, Lido,” Trisha said. “Have you met Nigel yet?”

“Yes, Lido saw him come with the others,” Lido said.

“Signore, so pleased to meet you. I am Lido Da Vido.”

“Lido is one of the most brilliant demigod scientists in the world,” Poseidon said. “He’s visiting from Geneva to assist us with Surtur.”

“Yes,” Lido said. “The Titan Lord, he hasn’t been any trouble. Thanks to elephant tranquilizers, he sleeps like a little baby.”

Surtur was happily swaying his head side to side as Lido tried to attach the last sensor to his skull. He mumbled a few incoherent words. "Monkey man, fly guy... you don't know what you're doing, but that's okay... 'cause I like stuff..."

"We're trying to determine what happened to Jesse, and Surtur's the last one who saw him," Trisha said. "We think the Shadow-Blood left something behind that's keeping him comatose."

"If Second Age magic is blocking him, then we need First Age magic to get it off," Nigel said.

"No!" Lido shouted. "All wrong! No magic! In Geneva's lab, we have a special project studying god particles. From it, we've learned it is possible to cut through the Age factor of a deity's meta-biology using *science!*"

"It's a *magical* possession. You can't fight that with science."

"Wrong again! In actuality, the Shadow-Blood attaches itself to its host, not through magic, but through an extremely polarized quantum vacuum, otherwise known as the 'Casimir Effect.'"

"Like a water drop hanging from a leaf, only a lot more clingy," Poseidon explained.

Lido continued. "We've learned that a deity's genetic chakra is bound through a positive charge and believe the Shadow-Blood's to be entirely negative. So it is possible to disengage Surtur from the Shadow-Blood's effects if we put a heavy zero-point energy jolt through his body."

"That's a... thing?" Nigel asked in bewilderment.

"Of course, we've only tested this on a few cursed gods," Trisha said. "This is our first time trying to remove a Second Age presence from a Fourth Age entity."

"Well, turn it on then," Nigel said. "Let's see."



Everyone stood around the table as Lido clamped a pair of jumper cables onto Surtur's nipples and carefully re-adjusted a few of the sensors on Surtur's head.

Surtur giggled, "You're a naughty girl... ain't ya, Mrs. Robinson?"

Lido typed a few commands into his 1981 Apple computer and activated a program. A small battery-like device next to his desk began to hum. He picked it up, carried it to the table, and attached the other end of the jumper cables to it. A small light on the device turned green.

"Lido requires a non-deity to turn it on," Lido said. "Just in case the Referee calls foul. Signora, do you wish to do the honours?"

Trisha turned on the small device without hesitation.

Everyone stepped back as sparks surged from the Titan's nipples. The hefty body lurched in its chains and Surtur's shape began to warp and expand. His colours turned to static and a ghost image of himself projected around his own body.

Lido ran to the computer and checked the stats on Surtur's condition.

"The Shadow-Blood's influence is disengaged!" he exclaimed. "His body is rebooting. He'll have full brain function in five... four... three... two..."

Surtur's body settled and returned to its previous form. His skin was red again and his thin beard was aflame. In the reboot, a small pair of horns sprouted from his forehead. His eyes opened and he chuckled.

"...Do it again," he said with a drunken slur. "I just been to Pluto and guess what? It's *totally* a planet."

"Success!" Lido shouted.

"Can we use that device on anyone the Shadow-Blood possesses?" Nigel asked.

“Just the people we chain down and attach nipple clamps to,” Lido said. “Lido can whip up a portable one now that the prototype works.”

“Surtur!” Trisha said to him, “Do you remember what happened on the ship? Where did the Shadow-Blood take Jesse?”

“Oh, hang on, yeah, I sort of... maybe,” he drawled on and off. “Better if I just show you.”

His eyes shone like flashlights and a small projection appeared over his head. In the image, they saw Jesse through Surtur’s eyes, sitting at the bar.

“All right, let’s talk,” Jesse said, his voice echoing through Surtur’s memory. “Tell me about this spell.”

In the vision, the Shadow-Blood spoke through Surtur’s garbled voice. *“Legend has it that during the ancient wars with the Titans, Pandora possessed a form of magic that allowed her to control the outcome of any battle. The Titans recovered the page with that spell, but before they could use it against her, Pandora transformed the page into a single shard of knowledge and sealed it within a stone marked with an angel’s sigil. Unable to break the Angel’s Seal, the Titans stored it within their home-realm of R’Lyeh, years before the realm was poisoned by my brethren. Now the Seal sits on the edge of the Void, and within it lies the power for one man to change the world.”*

Jesse’s words hung. “You don’t mean...?”

*“It takes the combined will of the gods and Titans to pull off a spell of this magnitude, but with the shard, you alone could shape into the world into anything you desire. As an angel, you’re the only one who can break the seal. You can save your brother. You can save the woman you love. You can save everyone. All you have to do is join me. We’ll journey to R’Lyeh together and take the power of the Deus Ex Machina for ourselves.”*

Jesse hesitated before he let out a laugh.

"R'Lyeh?" he said. "Edge of the Void? Funny, but I'm not keen on going back to that place. Nice try at tempting me, though. You could give the devil a run for his money."

*"You should really consider my offer,"* the Shadow-Blood said. *"I'm willing to share it with you."*

"And I'm willing to leave you tied in chains."

*"That's where you're mistaken,"* the Shadow-Blood said. *"It takes bigger chains than these to hold me."*

Suddenly, a dark mass of ooze flew from Surtur's body and wrapped itself around Jesse's. Jesse couldn't scream as he struggled to take the Shadow-Blood off his face.

*"It didn't have to be this way,"* the Shadow-Blood said as it poured off of Surtur and enveloped Jesse. *"You could have gone willingly. Now you've forced my hand."*

Outside the vision, Nigel whispered his under breath,

"Don't do it, Jesse. Just hold on..."

But Jesse panicked.

His wings emerged and the Shadow-Blood took hold.

The creature engulfed him until Jesse struggled no more.

The Shadow-Blood stood up, Jesse's eyes peering out through the darkness in terror, unable to move.

Through Jesse's voice, the Shadow-Blood said, *"I'm sorry. That played out much more gracefully in my head. But now that we're together, it's time to see what an angel can really do."*

With that, he snatched Pandora's Box from the bar. Then, in a blaze of light, Jesse's body blinked out of sight.

Surtur's projection turned off and he murmured something along the lines of, "Tune in next week for more adventures of Spooky and the Furby Man..."

Everyone at the table exchanged unsettling looks.

"So Jesse's going somewhere called R'Lyeh," Nigel said.

Poseidon was the first to snap as he threw over a chair and let out a few fisherman swears in his rage. "Blisterin' typhoons, it's over! R'Lyeh! It had be mother-fraggin' *R'Lyeh!*"

Trisha sunk into a chair and sighed while Ptolemy put his head into his hands and shook it disapprovingly.

"What's wrong with R'Lyeh?" Nigel asked.

"Dude, R'Lyeh is known as the Nightmare City," Ptolemy said. "We're talking about a realm that teeters on the edge of existence, was poisoned by Shadow-Bloods, and was written about by H.P. Lovecraft as the birthplace of all madness."

"The darkness in that place feeds on light," Poseidon said.

"Unless you're properly warded with the right magicks, you'll not only lose your soul, but be devoured by the lurking Void."

"Pft, I can't believe I'm the fear demon and I'm the one not pissing my pants about it," Vladimir let out a laugh. "I command the bloody darkness. I say bring it on."

"You were pissing your pants for several weeks before Wu Tang found you," Poseidon said. Wu Tang let out a little bark to remind everyone that he was an awesome dog. Vladimir fired them both a friendly middle finger.

"And don't we have any of these 'magicks' to protect ourselves?" Nigel asked.

"We'd need moon-silver or some other form of extraterrestrial darkness absorbent," Poseidon said.

"Nothing that we have on-hand."

"Nothing except myself," Vladimir reminded.

"We're not sending you after a Shadow-Blood," Trisha said. "Too high a risk if it possesses you."

"Well, we have to make some effort to rescue Jesse," Nigel said. "We need to find him before the Shadow-Blood finds the Angel's Seal."

"That's not a problem," Poseidon said. "An Angel's Seal has to broken knowingly and willingly. The creature may have Jesse, but it doesn't control his free will. Our real problem is that Jesse won't be able to help us stop the war now. Unless that was Solomon's plan all along."

"Or maybe he knows Jesse can be talked into doing stupid things," Nigel said. "We have to find a way to go after them."

"It's impossible," Trisha said. "We need to trust that Jesse won't break the seal."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Nigel asked. "Just sit here?"

"We have the Titan Lord and deity-hacking equipment," Poseidon said. "I think we need to take advantage of this opportunity. There's one hour until the solstice. If we can disengage the Shadow-Blood from Surtur, it might be worth trying to disable the Aeonomega as well."

"What about tracking down Solomon?" Nigel asked. "The Shadow-Blood can't possess Jesse if we capture the real Solomon."

"Well, let me ask you this," Trisha said, "if you were Solomon, where would you be hiding?"

Nigel tried to imagine himself in Solomon's shoes, and came up with a very accurate answer. "I'd be in the least likely place anyone would ever look for me, and then I'd move around a dozen times to throw off my pursuers while letting a pair of dice determine which direction to go."

"And that's why we've stopped chasing Solomon."

"Fine, do your fancy science stuff, but I'm getting my brother back," Nigel said as he started to limp away.

Everyone watched as he took a few steps, stopped and turned around. "Is anyone coming with me? Ptolemy?"

"Do you even know how to get to R'Lyeh?" he asked.

"I was hoping you'd fill me in."

“Nigel, man, I’m sorry,” he said. “The training was fun, but I need to finish recovering.”

“You really should lie down,” Trisha said to Nigel. “We’ll do what we can to stop this, but the quest is over for now. Get some rest.”

Nigel took a moment to breathe. As commanding as he tried to sound, echoes of the failures that led him to this place were prominent in his heart. He was no longer sitting in the captain’s chair. He was no longer the prophet of the gods or Odin’s saviour. The problems of the world were no longer his to carry.

“You don’t happen to have a buffet around here, would you?” he asked Poseidon.

“Down the hall to the right,” Poseidon gestured.

“Watch your intake,” Trisha said. “We need to check your blood sugar in ten minutes.”

“Right,” Nigel said as he hobbled away.

The others continued their work on Surtur who carried on giggling.

### 30. Nigel the Man

The world was changing.

For nine thousand years, it had all been so simple. To survive and protect his brother was the only thing Nigel ever had to concern himself with. He learned to fight. He learned to hide. He learned to pass unnoticed. He studied his enemies and learned their weaknesses. He even mastered the art of self-control. But the weight of how much he failed to learn about the world never hit him until today.

He dipped a fishstick in tartar sauce and took a bite out of it. Fish had been one of those “off-limits” foods and he was surprised to find it severely overrated. Disgusting, even. He sat at the counter looking into the window of the casino’s kitchen. Behind him was a very modest buffet that Poseidon had prepared for his friends’ arrival. Naturally, it was full of seafood. Nigel had helped himself to some of the food, but none of it tasted as good as the chicken wings he’d had back on the ship.

“Can we talk?” he heard Trisha say. She sat with him.

“This food is disgusting,” Nigel said. “I thought Poseidon would eat better.”

“Everything tastes better to a god.”

"I don't know what I'm doing anymore," Nigel said. "I thought I had what it took to see this mission through, but now I'm over my head. What was I thinking? Why did I agree to this?"

"You believed in yourself and there's nothing wrong with that," Trisha said. "But sometimes people burn out. You're not incompetent, Nigel, you're just learning your limits. It's part of being human."

"This was happening before I became human," Nigel said. "I couldn't let go of Pandora. I needed a war to fight. Nothing I did filled that gap. It's only when I became human that I actually felt free for a change. Like for the first time ever, I could live like there was no tomorrow."

"Mortality does that to a person."

"I think this is why Solomon changed me," Nigel said. "He knew what mistakes I'd make if I were human. He counted on me to fail. I just wish I knew why."

"He took advantage of you, that's all," she said. "But I'm willing to bet he didn't count on the rest of us."

"I still can't believe you're *TheQueen*," Nigel said, staring into his tartar sauce. "If Odin ever found out his pantheon was comprised of false gods, he'd go nuts."

"He's already nuts," she said. She stared at Nigel's food and sneered. "Mind if I make you something?"

"Be my guest," Nigel said.

Trisha stepped around the counter and had the jackal-headed chef move from the grill as she grabbed a few ingredients from around the kitchen. She also grabbed a few fresh chicken wings from the fridge. Nigel watched her perform her magic as she stirred up her own special batch of honey-garlic sauce and mixed it with the chicken wings. She performed a few other choice steps and set the wings on the grill. A few minutes later, a fresh plate of steaming hot honey-garlic chicken wings were at his fingertips.



"Eat up," she said.

Nigel picked up a wing, blew on it very carefully, and took a slow bite. The flavour swept over his tongue like a warm summer wind and he felt his other senses dull instantly. The crisp juiciness of the meat was spot-on perfect. Unlike the pre-packaged wings he had on the ship, these were the genuine article. These were the famous wings that had kept his tavern in business all these years and only now did he understand why.

"You must have made at least ten thousand wings in your life to get them this good," he said.

"I'd wager more," she said, "but numbers don't matter as long as it's cooked with love."

"Trisha, I need to apologize," Nigel said.

"Don't," she said. "You weren't right in the head. Everything we've done is--"

"Jesse sold Christine's memory," Nigel said. "She doesn't remember him."

"When did...?"

"Hades told me when he called," Nigel said. "I thought I chose not to tell Jesse because I didn't want him doing something stupid. But the truth is, I did it because I stop caring. After nine thousand years, he and I... we're not friends. We've never been friends. Once I started bonding with Ptolemy, I realized how little I needed my own brother. Now he's gone and the one person who cares about him most... doesn't remember him anymore."

Trisha let it soak in before speaking. Surprisingly, she didn't seem angry at all. "Friend or not, Jesse's family. You don't always get along, but you still care about him. Do you remember the mission you were born with?"

"Nione needed someone to help her protect the key to Pandora's Box."

"She created two of you," Trisha reminded him. "When Nione asked who would carry the key, Jesse took on the burden. Which meant..."

"It was my role to protect Jesse," Nigel recalled. "That was Nione's first and final wish."

"Protecting your brother. It's what you were born to do."

"There's not much Nigel the Man can do for him now."

"No, but maybe Nigel the Soldier can," she said. "Maybe we can stop Solomon after all."

"What do you mean?"

"If we had a way into R'Lyeh, would you hesitate to go after Jesse?" Trisha asked.

"In my condition?"

"Odin may have been an idiot, but he was right about you," Trisha went on. "You're at your best when your back's against the wall. Maybe you're not the strongest asset as a leader right now, but you are Jesse's strongest asset as his brother."

"Pandora warned me not to get involved," Nigel remembered. "In Hell, she told me that if I did, it'd be my duty to go after Jesse."

"And if anyone can get into R'Lyeh and rescue him, it's you."

"And me," said Vladimir as he materialized out of Nigel's shadow and took a seat next to him.

"Damn it!" Nigel exclaimed. "You'll give an old man a heart attack. And how are you still alive? Shouldn't you be a quivering mass crying in a cave somewhere?"

"The demon only devours the fear in my heart," Vladimir said. "As long as I'm scared for my life, I can be as big a dick towards everyone else as I please. It's quite nice, but I think being a regular vampire was far less demanding."

"Serves you right for everything you've done."

"I became a demon for my own reasons," Vladimir said.  
"But what's important right now is getting into R'Lyeh. See, Solomon's done me wrong in the past and I'm looking for a bit of revenge. I planned on going in anyways, but I'd fancy the company."

"Why would I need your help?"

"Because, my friend, I control darkness and R'Lyeh is as dark as it gets," Vladimir said. "Not to mention I happen to know my way around that place."

"The Shadow-Blood can still possess you," Trisha said.

"That's why Lido fixed me up with one of these," Vladimir said, taking a small taser out of his jacket and putting it on the counter. "A zero-point energizer, he calls it. Should knock a Shadow-Blood off anyone. Still needs a field test, so this is as good a time as any."

"Do we have a way into R'Lyeh?" Nigel asked.

"We can go anywhere we want," Vladimir said. "The question is, will *you*?"

"You're damn right I will," Nigel said, taking a bite from another chicken wing. "That's my brother down there."

"That's the spirit!" Vladimir exclaimed. "Now finish your dinner, friend. We're going for a ride."

## 31. The Present of Future Past

The silence of a frozen rainforest was shattered as a Fire-Blood, wrapped in the oozing tendrils of a Shadow-Blood, leapt through the bushes and trees, shattering leaves as he went.

Still clutching Pandora's Box, Jesse dove through a hole in a log. He vanished down a rabbit hole into a wonderful realm of floating clocks that only turned backwards and spoke Spanglish.

Then he fell through another portal and emerged from a janitor's closet in the Taj Mahal before Jesse sprouted large black wings and flew through the starry tile ceiling into the spirit realm of Nirvana. Within Nirvana, Jesse reincarnated as a dolphin, a sasquatch, and a ring-tailed lemur before attaining enlightenment, ascending to the top of the world and becoming one with the Northern Lights. As he went into the light, Jesse managed to wrestle control of his mouth from the Shadow-Blood.

"Stop wasting my soul!" he shouted. "I only have seventeen minutes left!"

*"The path to R'Lyeh is much easier for an angel to traverse,"* Solomon said, quickly taking control of Jesse's mouth. *"There are many twists and turns, but our trip nears its end. I will require some wilful assistance from you."*

"I'll never help you!"

*"That remains to be seen."*

Jesse materialized on a cold sandstone floor. He found himself in a dimly lit room with no apparent source of light. He expected Solomon to stand him up, but found he now had control over his body again. He stood and looked around. In this sandstone room, where darkness crept in all corners, there was a small waterfall washing over a golden archway. Behind the archway was yet another dark passage.

Solomon spoke, *"R'Lyeh is beyond the waterfall, but the water itself is from the River Styx. We must cross it, but I cannot shield you from its effects."*

"What kind of effects?"

*"You'll die."*

"So if I get stuck in Hell, your evil plan will be ruined," Jesse said.

*"Not really,"* he said. *"I can carry Pandora's Box through the water. You need only return once I'm through."*

"And what if I choose to stay in Hell?"

*"You won't. Before we go any further, there is something I must show you. Something that will guarantee your return."*

Jesse looked around the room, but saw nothing of consequence. What could Solomon mean to show him in this musty old cavern?

*"Not here,"* he said. *"I must use some of your power to allow us a brief detour. Try not to squirm."*

Darkness veiled over Jesse's eyes and he felt himself getting lighter, as if he were escaping his own body. The wetness of the Shadow-Blood disappeared and Jesse felt free again. Through the darkness, he saw colours spinning toward him. The spinning settled and the darkness lifted to reveal Jesse was standing in the middle of a small church.

The church couldn't have been older than a hundred years. Within these dusty, wooden walls were four rows of pews looking upon a small altar with a crucifix hanging overhead. Jesse's eyes were still blurry, but he made out a dark figure standing next to him.

"You'd think this church hadn't been used in ages," it spoke in echoes, "but in truth, it was deserted just a few short months ago. The rise of the pantheons plunged a knife of terror into the hearts of the monotheists. When one God becomes many, very few can hold onto their faith."

"Where are we?"

"Nevada, I believe," it said. "Not too far from where your plane crashed."

"I can barely see you."

"Let me clear this up for you," it said. At that moment, Jesse's eyes focused on the dark figure and he saw it for what it really was: a dark figure. It was the Shadow-Blood in the shape of a human. Immediately, Jesse checked himself for any trace of the creature. The beast was gone.

"I thought you needed my body to speak."

"I do, but we're nowhere near your real body right now," Solomon said. "Consider this a form of astral projection available exclusively to angels."

"You mean like how Ptolemy projects himself?"

"In a matter of speaking. I trust your brother never trained you in the way of angels?"

"How would he know the first thing about being an angel?"

"The same way I do," Solomon explained. "We both studied the theories and sure enough, here we are putting them into practice. There's so little you understand about your own powers."

"What's to understand?" Jesse asked. "I have wings and kick ass!"

"Angels aren't warriors by design; they're guides," Solomon explained. "They have the gift to open up realities and reveal truths. Perhaps you're familiar with a little holiday story called '*It's a Wonderful Life*'? The one where an angel named Clarence shows a man what his life would be like had he not been born? Or maybe the Charles Dickens' classic '*A Christmas Carol*' in which three spirits show a greedy old miser his past, present, and future?"

"You mean I can create parallel universes and time travel?" Jesse asked.

"To some extent," Solomon went on. "In your case, I thought we might visit a brief window into the present and look in on someone you miss dearly."

The room became clearer, and Jesse saw through the stained glass windows that the church was in the middle of the desert by a long highway. As the sun set, Jesse saw two people sitting in the front row. One was a large muscular man with a ram-horned helmet, and the other was a young auburn-haired woman in a pink top.

"Christine!" Jesse exclaimed. He hurried to see her, but suddenly found himself back where he was standing as if his existence were on a rubber band.

"I wouldn't get closer to the likes of Krios," Solomon said.

"He's interfering with the projection something fierce."

"But Christine..."

"Can't hear or see you."

Across the pews, Jesse started to make out the conversation between the young woman and the muscle-bound Titan.

"...you didn't do anything wrong, Krios," Christine said.

"You just didn't know any better."

"Me made bad mistakes," Krios sobbed. "Me follow bad men, make you lose friend. Now you mad at me."

"No, no, you have to believe me, I'm not angry at you," Christine consoled him, "Hades will talk to the Fates and find out what's going on with me. And even if they can't fix me, it's okay. My new memories *are* my real memories. I don't want these being changed over some boy."

"What are you talking about, Christine?" Jesse asked, but his words weren't heard.

"But he be your friend!" Krios insisted.

"Between you and I," she said. "I didn't tell Hades everything I saw in my vision. I heard a strange woman's voice trying to guide me. But I don't think she was one of the Fates. Maybe an angel?"

"Like angel-man?"

"No, not like him," Christine said. "But I did see Jesse too. I *do* remember him. But not the way people think I should."

"How you remember him?"

"As a monster," she said. "He's half-demon, but unlike his brother, he can't control it when he transforms. Last summer, he was ready to rip out my jugular after one drop of blood."

"He no demon; he be angel-man!"

"Not in my vision," she said. "He's the teeth and claws at the end of the world. I know everyone wants me to remember him as he was, but as far as the future's concerned, Jesse shouldn't exist."

"What do you mean I shouldn't exist?" Jesse shouted upon deaf ears. "I'd never destroy the world!"

"I told you your return carried a price," Solomon said.

"The Fates didn't tell me this would happen."

"The Fates are ancient beings who live by ancient oaths. To break any of those oaths would surely destroy them."

Jesse turned to the front of the church to see a third person looking into a bowl upon a pedestal. He was speaking into the holy water.



Jesse felt himself pulled towards this man. He and Solomon looked over the bowl of holy water as the purple-shirted man with the gold chains spoke into it. A familiar woman's voice bounced back.

"...to break those oaths would destroy us," said the voice of Aisa, one of the Fates.

"But now I'm in charge of returning Christine home safely and her head's full of prophecies. Do you realize how screwed I am that this happened on my watch? She's the legendary 'Her Blessed Lady'!"

"Come now, you know people try to change their destinies all the time," Chloe said. "How many mortals ventured into your Underworld to reclaim a loved one, only to never return?"

"That's completely different; those mortals got trapped because they didn't follow the clearly-marked rules at the entrance. You entered Jesse into a binding verbal agreement that he didn't fully understand."

"We're sorry, but what do you expect us to do?" Lacey asked. "Go back on the deal?"

"I need you to fix her!"

"Sorry, but nothing short of a full reset from the Man Upstairs can fix her," Chloe explained. "Fate was tampered with, and her memory was the unfortunate price. We don't make the rules, dearie, we just abide by them. It's for our own health, you understand."

"Then what about the visions?"

"A side-effect, I'm afraid," Aisa said. "When we changed her memories, some of our own got wedged in there. What she sees aren't true visions, but our memory of how all things once tied together."

"And to be honest, the old future isn't all that different from how it is now," Lacey explained. "What she possesses truly is a gift."

Hades argued, "How is having constant nightmares a gift? "Because she walks the Earth and sees all possible truths. In essence, she's become a Fate unbound by divine law."

"So what am I supposed to do with her?"

"According to your string, nothing," Chloe said. "She's about to take matters into her own hands. But if you wish to absolve yourself of blame, look no further than the path you're already on."

"What do you mean?"

"It means you need to pick sides," Christine spoke up as she approached Hades. The picture of the Fates upon the water vanished as Krios approached as well. Jesse felt the Titan's presence push him aside as they gathered around the bowl.

"I told you to stay back during the call," Hades scolded them. "Do you know how many favours I called in just to speak to those--"

Christine stopped him. "It's not important."

"Your memory's at stake."

"My memory's just fine," Christine said. "The Fates are right; what I have is a gift. I can help people with my visions and I'm not about to trade them in."

"Except your visions are from *the wrong future*."

"Enough of them are still real," she argued as she stepped past the god and ventured outside with Krios. "Beyond Ragnarök, there's a vision of an even greater threat. If I can stop one, I can stop the other, but we need your help getting to Asgard."

"Forget it; I'm taking you home before the war begins."

"Halifax was *destroyed*, remember?"

"Well, we're not going to Asgard. That place is about to become ground zero."

"It's worth the risk."

"I promised Nigel I'd keep you safe!"

Christine let out an exasperated sigh and hopped onto Krios' back. "Poseidon was right about you. You really are a coward."

"Do you think I give a crap what my brother thinks?"

"If you won't help us get to Asgard, we'll find it ourselves," she said. "So long, Hades. Good luck with the war."

"Wait--!"

It was too late. With a pat on the back, Christine ushered Krios to hurry off. The Titan stormed away across the desert, leaving Hades in his dust. The god found himself taking chase on foot, leaving a very startled Jesse alone with Solomon's shadow.

"She doesn't succeed," Solomon whispered into Jesse's ear.

Jesse drifted away.

The desert disappeared from under his feet.

He looked upon the crystal Fields of Vigrid, deep beneath the fogs of Asgard.

Thousands of dead gods and Titans lay scattered across the wasteland in piles of silver and gold. Swords and axes were embedded in the ice while war machines stood abandoned. Fires spread out in the distance.

At the heart of it all, he saw Christine lost in the wild, her clothes blood-soaked and tattered. In her eyes, he saw madness. He saw grief. He saw a lust for revenge.

She seemed to look directly at him.

Solomon's voice resonated through the cold, miserable air.

"The battle of Ragnarök carries on. Your friends don't survive, but *she* does. And all she sees you as now is the threat beyond Ragnarök. This is the last you see of her before the Day of Reckoning."

Jesse tasted fire.

A day would come when he would once again drink blood.

This time, nothing would stop the demon.

The world would survive the war of the gods, but it wouldn't survive him.

"These are illusions," Jesse said. "You're tricking me."

"I need not trick you. You already know in your heart that you paid a price."

"But none of this is real. You don't know the future!"

"Through your power, I can see the world through her eyes. Whether it's real is up to you."

The only real thing Jesse was certain of was his fear. In his haste, he'd traded in the most precious thing he had to save an ungrateful brother. Now he was being offered a chance to take it all back.

A full reset is what the Fates had said it would take to save her.

Jesse found himself back at the gates of R'Lyeh. He was once again covered in the Shadow-Blood's ooze. He looked into the waters of Styx and sneered.

"If we break the Angel's Seal, what's to stop you from betraying me?"

*"You have my word you'll survive," Solomon said. "I've no interest in your death and, to be frank, I quite like you, Jezebuul. Help me find the Deus Ex Machina and I will return to you everything you hold dear. Including Christine, memory and all."*

"What about Ragnarök?"

*"If we break the seal, I can make sure it ends quickly,"*

Solomon said. *"Otherwise, there's nothing I can do to contain the gods' war. It will spread to the outside world if a higher power does not intervene."*

"I still need a sign I can trust your word."

*"My words have no value," Solomon said. "But if actions speak louder, then please, lead on. I will not stop you if you try to escape."*

Jesse felt control return to his limbs.

For a moment, he considered running back from where he came, but the feeling subsided. A gut instinct told him that Solomon wouldn't need to stop him this time. Solomon knew Jesse's feelings for Christine were too strong. If breaking the Angel's Seal and unleashing the power of the Deus Ex Machina was the only way to save Christine, then so be it.

Carrying Pandora's Box, Jesse stepped through the waterfall.

Instantly he fell forward, his body burning away under the waters. The box slid from his grasp and the Shadow-Blood fell from his being. Jesse's body dissolved and he returned to Hell.

The oozy mass of black slime patiently flopped on the floor next to Pandora's Box for a few minutes. Solomon began to worry Jesse may have second thoughts and not return from the pit this time.

Finally, the Box opened and Jesse emerged from inside. Without saying a word, Jesse picked up the Box and returned the key to the hole. He held out a hand to the Shadow-Blood and summoned it to his arm. Jesse and Solomon merged once more. With that, they set off down the tunnel into the darkness of R'Lyeh.

## 32. The Lighthouse

Nigel's leg ached with every step as he descended a long stone, spiral staircase.

"Need a hand?" Trisha asked.

"I can make it," Nigel insisted.

"Just so you know, R'Lyeh isn't handicapped-accessible," Vladimir said. "If that fractured leg of yours sets us back..."

"It'll be fine," Nigel said, his lungs burning as he made his way down the stairs. "Just another couple of stories."

Vladimir and Trisha brought Nigel down beyond the dungeons to the sub-sub-basement. Nigel expected something damp and cold downstairs. He was surprised to find it warm and inviting. As he descended the last few steps, he saw a large lounge area complete with bar, pool table, and big-screen TV hooked up to several game consoles.

"Old fish-breath spends a lot of time down here," Vladimir said as he headed toward a tarp in the corner of the room.

"He also uses it for storing one of the most important relics we own."

He threw off the tarp to reveal an enormous lens mounted on the edge of a large stone bowl filled with strange liquid. It looked very old and very cracked. Vladimir carefully

wheeled it into the middle of the room and aimed the lens at a blank wall.

Vladimir then lit a lighter and tossed it in the liquid. It set ablaze and an eerie blue flame shone through the lens onto the wall, casting a large circular projection.

"I'll need something gold to activate it," Vladimir said as he perused the room.

Trisha peered behind the bar and began leafing through Poseidon's personal stash. Poseidon had very expensive tastes and sure enough, she found what she was looking for.

"How's this?" she asked, presenting a bottle of clear liquid with tiny sparkles floating inside. "Smirnoff Gold Cinnamon Vodka. Triple distilled with natural cinnamon flavouring and edible 23 karat gold flakes."

"Perfect," Vladimir said as he took the bottle and unscrewed the cap. He took a swig of the liquor, then proceeded to slowly pour the contents into the fire.

"Mind explaining what this thing is?" Nigel asked.

"It's the torch from the Lighthouse of Alexandria," Vladimir said. "After the original lighthouse was destroyed in an earthquake, the Egyptian gods recovered this torch and made a few modifications. By Ra's decree, what was once used to guide sailors home became a relic that could guide the gods to their respective realms."

"You're saying this can open portals."

"To any realm, I might add," Vladimir said. "The enchantment of this object was a great collaboration between the pantheons back in the day. There's no other relic like it."

"How did Poseidon come by it?"

"Won it in an auction a few hundred years back after the Egyptians decided to go off-world," Vladimir said. "Odin wasn't that thrilled when Poseidon made off with most of

the Egyptians' relics, but the dear king was too busy dealing with Loki business to show up and bid against him."

"And what's with the gold?"

"It's how you tell the fires where to take you," Vladimir said.

"If you want to go to Avalon, you throw in some dry ice and make some mist. Tartarus, you cast a shadow upon it. Asgard, just fill it with Skittles or coloured crayons. We've been using it to sneak in and about the realms without Odin watching."

"And where does gold take us?"

"To R'Lyeh, of course," Vladimir said. "It was, after all, the first realm of the Titan's golden age."

"What if it sends us somewhere filled with cinnamon?" Nigel asked.

"Then at least it'll smell nice," Vladimir said as he poured the last few drops in.

The projection on the wall turned a pure black colour and began to vanish into the wall as if it were forming a tunnel. Vladimir approached the tunnel and waved his hand over it. The darkness seemed to repel from his presence, leaving grey smudges near his palm.

"That's the place," he said. "Once we're inside, stick with me. I can keep the darkness at bay. And trust me, you don't want any of it on your skin. The corrosive residue of the Shadow-Blood isn't as forgiving as the Shadow-Blood itself."

"Where are you guys going?" they heard a male voice ask from behind them.

They turned to see a large suit of armor at the bottom of the stairway. Ptolemy had his visor pulled back so he could see them clearly.

"Vladimir and I are getting Jesse back," Nigel said.



"I thought Trish said that was a high-risk no-no," Ptolemy said. "To rescue Jesse, you have to go through the Shadow-Blood. That's out of everyone's league."

"I've changed my mind," she said.

"But Nigel's barely hanging on by a thread with the fractures and diabetes."

"I said I'll be fine," Nigel insisted.

"Yeah, and in the words of Hades: *'famous last words'*."

"Saving his brother is what Nigel does best," Trisha said.

"He'll make it back."

"And when I do, you and I will finish watching *'Star Wars Strikes Back'*," Nigel said.

"So you're leaving us defenseless?" Ptolemy asked Vladimir. "What if Odin or more Titans show up?"

"Then we're counting on you to protect everybody," Nigel said.

"A lot of good I did last time. I don't even have all my powers back!"

"You're a smart kid; you'll figure it out," Nigel said. "Just keep the home fires burning and take care of Patti. She's kind of like of daughter to me."

"You guys should get in there and hurry back," Trisha said. Nigel leaned in to embrace her, but she stepped away and scornfully said, "No goodbyes. I expect you to be *right back*. Understand?"

Nigel was startled by her attitude, but nodded agreeably.

"We won't be gone long."

"After me," Vladimir said as he stepped into the tunnel. As he entered, the colour and light vanished from his body, leaving a vague outline.

Nigel stepped in after him. Ptolemy and Trisha watched as the two disappeared into the depths of R'Lyeh.

As they stood alone in the room, a slight tremor rattled through the floor. Its source was coming from

above. The tremors continued at an alarming rate. Growing up in California, Ptolemy knew firsthand this wasn't an earthquake.

*"Ptolemy! Trisha!"* Patti shouted through their mind-link.

*"Come quick!"*

They hurried up the stairs without a second thought.

### 33. Realm of the Nightmare City

*"You want to be quiet,"* Nigel heard Vladimir's voice in his head.

*"Are we using Patti's mind-link?"* Nigel asked.

*"No, I'm speaking directly into the shadow of your thoughts,"* Vladimir said. *"This is not a place we want to be found."*

*"I thought this place was abandoned."*

*"It is. And many dangers have been abandoned here as well."*

Nigel stayed close behind Vladimir. Surrounding them was a sphere of greyish-white. He knew it couldn't be light, but was rather the absence of darkness. At his feet were cobblestones. Against the walls, Nigel could make out outlines of window sills and debris. They were definitely in a corridor. The air was cold, damp, and smelled of death. Faint screeching could be heard in the distance.

*"Don't ask what that is,"* Vladimir said. *"This is my second time in here and I still don't know what horrors lurk in these shadows."*

*"When was your first visit?"*

*"When Odin's men came to retrieve the spellbook."*

*"Pandora kept it HERE?"*

*“Yes,” Vladimir replied. “R’Lyeh was home to Pandora’s Sanctum. That is where we’ll find the Angel’s Seal.”*

Vladimir took a whiff of the air and turned a corner. Nigel limped faster to keep up.

*“Your brother is in this direction,” Vladimir said. “The smell of the Shadow-Blood is stronger in this place. We must hurry.”*

As they moved, Nigel tried to get a sense of this realm. It felt nostalgically familiar. He couldn’t make out details beyond what he saw in outlines, so he could only guess at this realm’s infrastructure.

Vladimir motioned Nigel to stop.

*“We’re at a cliff,” Vladimir said. “I’m going to push the shadows farther and look for a path. Keep your eyes peeled for movement.”*

With that, the grey radius around them expanded.

Darkness vanished from the surrounding area and Nigel could see where they were. They had been marching along an old bridge, passing broken-down merchant stands. As the radius increased, Nigel saw they were standing at the collapsed edge of the bridge, overlooking a dried river bed. Beyond the river bed was a beautiful array of shapely buildings. Beyond those, Nigel could see the base of a great statue. A hundred foot-tall robust woman was reaching to the sky, while a statue of a muscular man descended from the ceiling, reaching to touch her. As Nigel looked further up, he saw outlines of what appeared to be another city on the ceiling. The scope of it took his breath away. The composition, the structures, the lack of advertising... while Asgard had adapted to a new modern look, R’Lyeh was exactly as Nigel remembered the ancient world.

*“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Vladimir asked. “Imagine how it would look in colour.”*

*"The statues are Gaia and Ouranos," Nigel said. "Those are the original Titans. Gaia reaching out from the earth, and Ouranos from the sky. Through some miracle of divine evolution, they were the first deities to embrace innovation. They built all this."*

*"And the war of the Shadow-Bloods took it all away."*

Vladimir stepped off the front of the bridge and dropped a foot before landing on a small slope of rubble. He started down a path across the river.

*"This way,"* he said. Nigel carefully climbed off the bridge and followed him, careful not to put too much weight on his leg as he went.

*"I thought you said you were after Solomon for payback,"* Nigel said. *"What did he do to you?"*

*"The man's been breaking alliances for a long time,"*

Vladimir said. *"My father knew him during the Ottoman wars. Deals were made, promises were broken. Long story short, I don't want to talk about it."*

For a brief second, Nigel thought he caught a glimpse of Vladimir's childhood in his mind.

Vladimir was a young prince once, ruled over by his tyrannical father. Nigel saw the young boy merrily sprinting through the castle's halls adorned by lovely tapestries.

He was looking at the castle of Vlad the Impaler, he realized.

He also saw the anger in Vladimir's father's eyes as the boy grew older. Vladimir had no taste for violence. He did not wish to follow in his father's footsteps. His father was furious with his failure of a child.

During these flashbacks, a man could be seen wandering the hallways in the background. He was steeped in mystery, but Nigel sensed himself in the man.

Nigel almost fell back as he heard Vladimir screaming at the hands of his father. Vladimir was older, looking the age

he does now. His father was strangling him in a cellar, begging for his child to fight back. To show just a hint of bloodlust.

The father sunk his fangs into his son's neck.

Somebody in the corner looked on.

*"I'm sorry," Vladimir's voice interrupted him, the images vanishing, "Those memories are private."*

*"I wasn't intruding," Nigel said.*

*"No, my mind was just wandering."*

*"Was that Solomon in the room when you were attacked?"*  
Nigel asked.

*"He was a friend of my father during the wars," Vladimir said. "They often spoke of the future and their dreams of conquest. My father was a vampire at the time, but didn't know it was a genetic trait that skipped generations. Solomon told him to attack my mother and siblings one night, convincing him to strengthen our family through his curse. I was the only one to turn."*

*"Why would Solomon have your father murder your family?"*

*"Why does he do anything?" Vladimir fired back. "All I know is that in the coming weeks, the Ottoman empire descended on our country and my father lost his will to fight. Our kingdom was conquered and Solomon conveniently vanished."*

They climbed over a short wall on the other side of the river as Vladimir shrank his shadow bubble to remain inconspicuous.

*"The evils of Pandora are like a force of nature," he said, "but the lowest circle in Hell is reserved for monsters like Solomon. To find him, I needed to become more than a vampire. I had to become the demon."*

*"You realize going after the Shadow-Blood won't get you closer to Solomon."*

*"It'll get me one step closer to stopping him," Vladimir said.  
"After all these years, I'll take anything."*

Vladimir ducked as something came at him, screeching like a barn owl. The thing made straight for Nigel, but was promptly snatched from the air as Vladimir whipped around at demon speed to intercept it.

He clutched a rotting head in his palm. It was impossible to tell if it had ever been male or female. The creature screeched as it struggled to fly free of his grasp.

"Hantu Penanggal," he said. "No sense being quiet anymore."

With that, he crushed the head into dust with one hand and moved on.

"Aren't those things native to the Phillipines?" Nigel asked.

"Someone must have brought them here," Vladimir replied.

"These are the worst kind of predators. One bite and your head comes off. Then your head starts biting other people."

"Jesse mentioned getting attacked when he was here before," Nigel said. "Do you think these things are after him too?"

"I wouldn't worry about him," Vladimir said. "If a Fire-Blood loses their head, it just grows back."

"But what happens to the head that comes off?"

As they stepped around the corner into an alley, they froze in their tracks. Floating in the air, staring straight at them were a dozen Hantu floating aimlessly. One turned to look right at them. It's facial features were unmistakable.

"I think the Fire-Blood's head starts flying around and biting people too," Vladimir said, quite disconcertingly.

The heads attacked. Vladimir lashed out, skewering the creatures and slicing them with his shadows. In mere moments, most of the Hantu were destroyed, save for

Jesse's head. Vladimir struck at it, but the head regenerated instantly.

Thinking fast, Nigel grabbed a sharp wooden stick from the ground and struck at the head. He stabbed through the creature, pinning it to a crack in the brick wall. He clutched his chest in pain at the over-exertion, light-headed from the adrenaline rush.

"Thanks," Vladimir said. He fished into his pockets and found some wrapped toffee. "Here, take this for your blood sugar. Trish will kill me if I don't watch your health down here."

"So considerate."

"I just need you on your feet for when we confront the Shadow-Blood."

"How much farther?"

"Not far," Vladimir said. "We should hurry. Someone else is already there."



## 34. The King's Crux

Horns blared and the towers of Asgard swarmed with activity as gods scrambled in preparation for the coming battle. Through the fog, a flying World War I battleship struggled to stay aloft as it approached its landing vectors. Smoke continued to pour off the ship, the hull torn asunder by Krindel's cannons.

Moments after landing, Odin found himself hurrying off his ship and racing for the elevators. As he ran, he continued checking his watch. Midnight was fast approaching and all the gods would be swept off to the battle of Ragnarök shortly. He couldn't afford to enter that battle unprepared. As a god, he could have normally teleported into his office or summoned his ship to Asgard, but even his most basic powers were faulty with the ley lines broken. His initial attempts to open a portal to Asgard had somehow landed the Agamemnon respectively in Venezuela, New Zealand, and Alaska before he decided they had no choice but to fly directly to Iceland and use Asgard's backdoor.

With a swipe of his hand, he ushered the elevator doors to open. His powers still malfunctioning, he accidentally opened a portal into someone's bedroom within Asgard. Without regard for privacy, he stepped through the doors into a dimly lit bedroom, surprised a war god and two love goddesses, and used their closet door to exit into a bathroom stall on the other side of the realm.

It took a few more tries before he finally entered his office. The fireplace still raged in the dark room as he crossed his Nemean lion-skin rug, hurried past his desk and headed straight for his vault. The large steel door was locked with an electronic keypad that Odin quickly opened. The door swung open and Odin stepped inside to find what he was looking for.

Odin's vault, while no larger than a modest walk-in closet, was a treasure hunter's dream. Items with labels like "Armour of Beowulf", "The Golden Fleece", and "Girdle of Hippolyta" adorned the shelves, only to get pushed aside as Odin searched for one very particular item.

"Where it is?" he growled. "Don't tell me Solomon came back and took that too!"

With an angry kick, he stubbed his toe on a pot of leprechaun's gold and fell backwards, hitting his head on the real statue of David which promptly fell over and broke a shelf. In the resulting mess, a jade skull got cracked, a first edition of "Action Comics #1" got torn, and orichalcum jewelry spilled all over the floor. In the corner of the vault, a caged raven screeched in surprise.

Odin cursed at his own bad luck and backed out of the vault, wondering where it could have gone. He'd been so careful to conceal it.

The intercom on Odin's desk began to buzz. Odin quickly pressed its button.

"All-Father," his secretary said, "Heimdall, Freya, and Vidar are in the war room awaiting your counsel."

"Tell them to reschedule!"

"But the war begins in twenty minutes."

"Tell Freya to start the briefing without me," Odin said. "I'll see them at the battle!"

"Yes, sir."

Odin slumped on the floor against the front of his desk and put his head in his hands. He swallowed some aspirin and groaned. Ragnarök was here and he was without his secret weapon.

"Tough to be king, isn't it?" a voice asked from behind his desk. Odin snapped to his feet and stood at attention as his large leather chair spun around to reveal someone who'd been sitting at his desk all along.

In Odin's chair sat Hades, calmly running his fingers along a long wooden object in his lap.

"Hades, what are you doing here?" Odin exclaimed. "I trust you found the girl?"

"There were complications," Hades said. "She ran off with Krios."

"But she's safe?"

"I suspect so," Hades said. "I wasn't feeling particularly good about it, so I thought I'd come back and tie up some loose ends."

"Then, if that's all, I'd like to be left alone. I need to--"

"...look for this?" Hades asked, presenting the four-foot sheathed sword in his possession. The sheath was made of ancient oak and engraved with heavenly sigils.

Odin stood transfixed on the weapon. "Hades, give me that sword."

"You really should change the password on your locks," Hades said. "I know we gods aren't much for creativity, but

1-2-3-4 doesn't keep people like Solomon from touching our stuff."

"Give me the sword, *now*."

"What sword? You mean this one?"

Hades unsheathed the weapon. A blinding fire emanated from the blade and both gods shielded their eyes from its holy light. Hades quickly re-sheathed the weapon.

"Not a lot of gods carry flaming swords in their vaults," Hades said. "And those that do don't have ones engraved in Second Age scripture. Mind telling me where you got this?"

"It's none of your concern where I got it, Hades," Odin said.

"That weapon is the key to everything. With it, we can end this war and lose no god in the conflict."

"This is the legendary Flaming Sword of Uriel," Hades said.

"Forged in Heaven to protect the Garden of Eden. You should not have this. Nobody should have this. For all intents and purposes, this doesn't exist. And yet there it was, in your vault, safely nestled between a vintage *'Mork & Mindy'* lunchbox and the Tablets of Destiny."

Odin stepped forward to take it but Hades quickly unsheathed it again, repelling Odin's advance. The searing flames gave off a powerful heat that Odin could feel through his being, yet didn't affect the wielder of the blade.

Hades stood up from the chair, moved around the desk and brandished the four-foot blade in its flaming glory.

Odin carefully moved away as Hades approached.

"Hades, what are you doing?"

"You've been engineering this war since the beginning," Hades said. "Our entire race depended on your guidance, yet you've been fraternising with the enemy and getting suckered in with gifts. Tell me, did you ever actually meet Solomon, or did he trick you with messengers?"

"I was the one tricking him!" Odin protested. "I let him get close so I could study him! So I could see beyond the enchantments on his face and learn his true nature! I let him get as far as he did because it was my only chance to prevent history from repeating! I did it for the safety of our people!"

"And executing Surtur," Hades continued, inspecting the blinding flame of the sword. "Was that your idea or Solomon's?"

"You have no idea who that man is," Odin said. "He's more than just Pandora's master. He's beyond either of us. And if destroying the Titans is what it takes to stop him, I swear I'll..."

"You'll do nothing," Hades said, pointing the sword at Odin's throat.

"Hades, I order you to back off!"

"You've betrayed your people," Hades said. "We followed you. We trusted you. Now you've sold us out because Solomon gave you an easy shot at a little more power."

"And we can have it! Just give me the sword!"

Surprisingly, Hades sheathed the sword. Odin looked on in surprise.

Hades spoke, "Krios, grab him."

Two large arms wrapped around Odin from behind and the King of the Gods was pulled off his feet by a huge bear hug.

Odin yelled as he struggled to free himself.

"Busted!" Christine exclaimed as she stepped out from behind the couch.

"Guards! Guards! Get in here!"

"I relieved them when I arrived," Hades said. "You can try a divine summon, but Krios is sapping away all the energy in the room. You might as well stop struggling."

"Me doing good?" Krios asked.

"You doing great, buddy," Hades said. "And nice job on the visions, Christine. Odin walked right into your trap."

Odin gasped. "Visions? What visions?"

"I can see the future now," Christine said. "Well, not *the* future, but I can see the one where you kill the Titans, brag to your friends about how you did it, and not change the passcode to your safe. I can also see a future where Hades is a useless sack of crap, but he redeemed himself in this timeline."

Hades smiled. "She guilt-tripped me."

"When I get out of here, I'll see you tried for treason!" Odin said.

"You'll never get the chance," Hades said. "I've already located your personal files and collected a few memories from your raven as evidence. Your dealings with Solomon have been sent off to the other pantheons. When Ragnarök is over, you'll be lucky if you don't get exiled to the Andromeda galaxy for your crimes."

"Those files were password-encrypted!" Odin exclaimed.

"Your password was '*password*,'" Christine said.

"So what now? You can't imprison me. Not with the war soon upon us."

"Of course not, which is why Krios and I want to try a little experiment."

A wary expression fell over Odin's face.

"Krios nullifies all magic, including that of the Creator's," Hades said. "When the clock strikes midnight, all gods will be transported to battle except anyone within twelve feet of him. So let's ask ourselves: what happens if the King of the Gods doesn't show up to Ragnarök? Christine, any thoughts?"

"Not a clue. I'm eager to find out."

"You fool," Odin growled as he struggled in Krios' arms.

"The Titans will win all our powers by default!"

"Or the battle gets a raincheck for another day," Hades said. "I checked your copy of the contract. It's very vague on those details. Either way, I'm protected by Krios. So let's see how this plays out."

"You can't do this," Odin said. "Do you want to know what I learned about Solomon? That he's had far too long to plan this war. We need the Titans' power. We can't beat Solomon without it."

"Why?" Hades asked. "Because he carries Pandora's magic? We've held off Pandora on countless occasions."

"No, there's much more at stake!" Odin struggled. With a sharp kick, Odin drove his heel into Krios' ankle. Krios howled in pain as he dropped Odin. Before Hades could react, Odin pressed into him and reacquired the sword. He quickly ran towards the window.

"Odin, stop running!" Christine shouted. "It's over! We need to stop this war!"

"I *need* to win this war! I *have* to! Solomon's going to break the Angel's Seal!"

"Angel's Seal? But that's..."

"He's on his way there now," Odin said.

"Whatever he told you, he's lying," Hades protested. "He won't get Pandora's final spell!"

"Forget that legend; it's not a spell he's after," Odin said.

"It's *his own soul!*"

With that, Odin leapt through the window. Glass fell around him as he plummeted from his tower and vanished into the fog below.

"His own soul..." Hades repeated. "What on earth could that possibly...?"

A strange sense of urgency hit Hades like a ton of bricks. There was another legend he had forgotten about.

One that, if true, could explain why Odin was so eager to study Solomon.

"What's wrong?" Christine asked.

"But that's impossible..." Hades said to himself. "Solomon couldn't possibly be... unless..."

Suddenly, Christine heard the strange woman's voice in her mind again.

*"Solomon's rise is inevitable. We must plan for a new future."*

"Wait - who are you?" Christine asked, catching Hades' attention.

*"Leave this place and come find me. We will speak again then."*

Christine then saw it. Beyond Ragnarök, there lurked many threats, but even worse than that of Jesse was a face in the shadows. The name "Solomon" rang through her ears, as if whispered from a higher power. She then realized this wasn't just any vision. It was a message from on high telling her to get her butt in gear.

"Christine?" Hades asked, addressing her silence.

"His rise is inevitable," she repeated. "Solomon is coming."

Hades' blood ran cold at those words. He spoke, "I need to find the communications tower and warn Nigel immediately. "

"We need to leave," Christine said.

"I'm not leaving," Hades said. "The two of you go somewhere safe. I'll find you when it's over."

"But you can stay with us. You don't need to go to war."

"The stakes go beyond the war," Hades said. "If I don't get down there and do everything I can to help the others, there's no telling what Solomon will unleash."

"Why? Who is he?"

"I can't be sure," Hades said. "But if he is who I think he is, Ragnarök's about to become the least of our problems."



## 35. Titans on Ice

Ptolemy and Trisha rushed into the lobby of Poseidon's palace as he and Patti were running for the entrance doors. Every guard in the building was racing to get outside.

"The Titans are here!" Poseidon shouted. "Where's Vladimir and Nigel?"

"They're in R'Lyeh," Ptolemy said.

"You let them leave?" Poseidon exclaimed.

"Point fingers later," Trisha said. "What's the situation outside?"

"Look for yourselves!" Poseidon said as he threw open the outside doors. As they looked upon the city, they saw a distressing sight at the far end of the strip.

The Goliath had broken through the glass dome.

The Titans' enormous ship was sticking halfway out through the glass. The incoming sea-water froze instantly around it, sealing the city from the rest of the ocean and creating a convenient ice slide from the ship's hangar to the streets below. Dozens of frost giants were leaping from the ship and charging down the strip towards them.

At the front of the charge was a twenty-story tall rotund woman with white cornrow hair, a yeti fur parka, and frosty

blue skin. Wielding an ice harpoon, Sinmara led her forces who swarmed around her feet. The frost giants themselves appeared tiny compared to her immense size, but each were about eight to nine feet tall as they bore down on the palace. At Sinmara's sides marched Atlas and Mishnykov, not much bigger than herself. Krindel stood atop Mishnykov's mighty metal shoulders while Atlas still seemed comfortable in his bright red speedos.

As they passed by the faux Eiffel Tower, Atlas reached out and tore it from the ground, taking large chunks of marble pavement with it. He threw it over his shoulder like a baseball bat and smiled smugly.

Poseidon sighed. "Aw, man, not my Eiffel Tower."

"How did they find this place?" Ptolemy asked.

"Ten minutes until the solstice," Trisha said, checking her watch. "Think we can stall them?"

"Not for long."

Poseidon's Egyptian jackal guards lined up outside to form a perimeter around the pyramid. Sinmara's frost giants lined up at the far end of the courtyard on the other side of the mirror pool. Sinmara was the first to join them as she shrunk down to a more manageable two-story height so she could stand among her kin.

With a snap of her fingers, the mirror pool froze in a flurry of frost. The freeze traveled up to the front of the pyramid and stopped short of touching the jackal guards' perimeter. Two frost giants arrived with a large vat of molten steel and set it down by Mishnykov.

"Poseidon!" Krindel shouted from atop Mishnykov's shoulder. "We know you have Surtur! Surrender him at once!"

"You'll just dip him in that vat!" Poseidon shouted.

"...no, we won't," Krindel lied.

"How did you find this place?"

"When friends of Poseidon crash into the ocean, they don't easily drown," Krindel said. "The only challenge was locating your lost city and Atlas was quite helpful in that department."

"Atlas is proud of his cartography know-how!" Atlas said proudly. "This is why Atlas fully endorses having his name on books about maps!"

"But we're on the internet!" Ptolemy exclaimed.

Atlas boasted, "Atlas also endorses Google Maps!"

"Atlas, your privileges in the high roller's lounge are hereby revoked!" Poseidon yelled.

"Awww," Atlas suddenly looked very sad. "Now Atlas has guilt."

"Is that how you knew where this place was?" Krindel asked.

"Atlas had a Gold Membership in Poseidon's High Rollers Lounge back in the fifties," Atlas admitted. "One should not have a gambling problem when one cannot count to twenty-one."

"Weren't you in Tartarus back in fifties?" Sinmara asked.

"Atlas is only a prisoner voluntarily," he replied. "Atlas leaves once a year to coach a young Titans' basketball league in Minnesota."

Mishnykov growled, urging a segue.

"Unlikely as it seems, we are not here to fight," Krindel said. "Our freedom for Solomon's war; *that* was the deal. If we knew Solomon was setting us up for a slaughter, we would have stayed in Tartarus."

"Surtur must be imprisoned by his own people if we are to survive," Sinmara said.

"If we give him to you, you'll make sure this war never ends," Poseidon said.

"If he stays in your hands, you'll deliver him to Odin!"

Poseidon shouted back, "I'm not friends with that jackass!"

"Send out the Fire-Bloods," Krindel said. "I'm sure one of them will listen to reason."

"They're indisposed," Trisha said.

"No Fire-Bloods?" Krindel asked, quite surprised.

"No Fire-Bloods!" one of the Frost Giants shouted. "Let's get them!"

One Frost Giant stormed out of line and stomped across the ice toward the others waving a gigantic ice sword.

"Get back in line, you fool!" Sinmara shouted.

"For the glory of Niflheim!" he shouted.

"Guards, take defensive positions!" Poseidon shouted.

"Hold the line! Do not attack!"

"Poseidon, are these virtual guards of yours *real* gods?" Trisha asked.

"They're all under my control," Poseidon said, "so let's see."

The Frost Giant leapt through the air and lunged at one of the jackal guards. At the moment of striking, a large white blast from above sent the Frost Giant flying backwards and landing in a smouldering heap. He let out a faint groan before passing out.

Everyone looked at the top of the dome. A section of glass had melted from the Referee's lightning strike, but the seawater had cooled it instantly. Nonetheless, the strain didn't stop small cracks from spreading across the dome.

"Yes, Aeonomega rules!" Poseidon shouted as he twirled his trident around. "You can't touch a god for the next ten minutes!"

Trisha whispered to him, "I've got a bad feeling about this. Maybe we should get Surtur out of here while we can. We can use the lighthouse beacon downstairs."

"We're in no danger," Poseidon said. "If they try to force their way past us, they'll be struck down. If they try to peacefully walk in, Ptolemy will show them the way out."

"Yeah, I'm not too keen on being a line of defense right now," Ptolemy said.

"Somebody throw me a gun," Trisha said. One of the jackal guards obliged. She caught the heavy magma cannon and turned to Patti. "Patti, I want you upstairs. You and Brian need to be our eyes in the sky. Warn us with the mind-links if you see anything funny coming."

"Got it," she said. She gave Ptolemy a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried back indoors.

*"Lido,"* Trisha thought to the demigod, *"I need you to get Surtur out of the lobby and somewhere safe. Lock yourself in a vault with him if necessary."*

*"Sì, signora!"* The demigod scientist acknowledged her.

On the other side of the mirror pool, Sinmara was conferring with her cohorts. As they nodded in approval, it was clear they were up to something.

Sinmara finally turned back towards the palace and spoke. "You've left us no choice, sea god. If you will not relinquish the Titan Lord, then we will come inside and take him ourselves."

"Try it!" Poseidon shouted.

Sinmara started running towards the palace, several Frost Giants in her wake. The storm of Titans charged over the ice, the ground shaking as they neared. They waved their swords and harpoons as they bore down on the hotel & casino.

"Same as before!" Poseidon shouted. "Hold the line! Let them strike first!"

As he said this, Trisha got behind Ptolemy and whispered, "Brace yourself."

Suddenly, the unexpected happened.

Instead of growing larger, all the Frost Giants shrank in size to a meager two feet each.

A blast of frost exploded from Sinmara's hands as she attacked. In a brief moment, a snowstorm swept overhead and great walls of ice quickly sprouted across the courtyard. The guards were taken by surprise as the ice walls surrounded and separated them. Trisha and Ptolemy ducked as the ice sheets formed complex hallways that cut through the front entrance of the casino. The ground at their feet froze and they found themselves slipping and tumbling over each other.

When the frost settled, no one had been hurt. Trish stood up and tried to remember which way she'd been facing.

*"Trisha!"* Patti shouted. *"Where are you? Are you okay?"*

Trisha looked around to see she'd been trapped within a small room of ice with Ptolemy. She was sure Poseidon was on the other side of these walls, but she couldn't see anything through the thick ice.

*"We're fine, Patti, what's happening?"* Trisha asked.

*"They just made some kind of big-ass ice maze around the mirror pool,"* Patti said. *"The Titans are so tiny, they're rushing right past all the guards! Now they're climbing over you! Holy crap - they're inside the casino!"*

"Damn it!" Trisha exclaimed. "Ptolemy, break the ice! Get us inside!"

"Which way?" he asked, looking around in confusion.

"Just pick a direction and charge!"

With that, Ptolemy head-butted his way through the first wall, shattering the ice as he went and raced through other walls with Trisha in pursuit. As they ran, Ptolemy occasionally had to kick away a tiny Frost Giant or apologize to a jackal guard he just trampled. Trisha covered him from behind, tripping giants with shots from her magma cannon as they emerged from the corridors. She took careful aim not to hit Ptolemy. The two of them

hurried as quickly as they could without slipping on the frozen ground.

*"Oh, my god, they found us!"* Patti said.

"Get out of there!" Trisha shouted as she slid between a giant's legs and fired an upwards shot at its chest to bind its arms.

*"Wait, what?"* Patti sounded very perplexed. *"No, Brian! Don't tell them!"*

"Tell them what?!"

*"The good news is we're alive,"* Patti said after a brief pause. *"The bad news is that Brian told them where Lido took Surtur. So... hurry up."*

"Called it!" Ptolemy said. "The guy had betrayal written all over his face!"

Ptolemy burst through the last wall and his expression dropped. He was standing face-to-toe with an enormous Atlas. Trisha hurried out of the maze to be greeted likewise.

"The casino's the other way," she realized.

*"They have Surtur!"* Patti shouted to Trisha. *"They're hauling him out of the casino!"*

"Quick, back the other way!" Trisha said.

"Hey, Zodiac!" Atlas shouted from above, distracting Ptolemy. "What's the square root of the square root of two hundred and fifty-six?!"

"Huh?" he asked.

"FORE!" Atlas shouted as he swung the Eiffel Tower at Ptolemy. Catching the Zodiac off-guard, Atlas hit him with the perfect golf swing. While Trisha dove into the safety of the ice maze, Ptolemy was sent soaring across the city. He bounced off Pluto's Palace, crashed into the Statue of Liberty's face, and landed on the Chapel of Love's roof.

*"I'm okay!"* Ptolemy relayed to her. *"I'll be right with..."*

Before he could finish his thought, Atlas leapt after him. With a heavy swing of the tower, the mighty Titan wiped the Chapel of Love off the strip and sent Ptolemy flailing across the city once more.

"Atlas wants you to know this is nothing personal!" Atlas shouted as he chased after Ptolemy, who was now dangling from the Statue of Jesus atop the Rio Hotel & Casino. Ptolemy fell from the statue and landed in a gondola floating through the Venice hotel. Before he could get to his feet, however, Atlas had caught up yet again and batted Ptolemy through three more casinos.

*"Never mind; this might take a while!"* Ptolemy said to Trisha. *"Don't let them get Surtur!"*

Trisha hurried back through the maze, trying to find the path back. As she ran, she saw bright flashes shine through the ice, followed by virtual gods and Titans getting thrown through walls. The maze was falling to ruin as the chaos ensued. In the confusion, deities were accidentally running into one another and incurring the Referee's wrath. She could only imagine the damage being done to the glass dome above.

*"To your left!"* Patti said. *"Now your right! Keep going straight! Then left and right again!"*

Poseidon emerged from a corridor and joined her. His hair looked charred and smoke was coming out of his ears as if he'd just survived a few rounds with the Referee.

"Okay, so linking all the virtual guards up to me might have been a bad idea," he said.

"Where's Surtur heading, Patti?" Trisha asked.

*"They're carrying him on your right!"*

"I got this!" Poseidon shouted as he prepared to break the wall.

"Don't!" Trisha exclaimed, but it was too late.



Poseidon threw his godly strength into body-checking the wall. He brought down the wall on a pair of tiny Frost Giants who were hauling a chained-up Surtur out of the casino.

Immediately, the Referee regarded that as a major strike. Lightning crashed down on Poseidon, launching him over Trisha's head, through several walls, and into one of his palm trees. This time, he didn't get back up.

The other two Titans who were caught in the blast were unexpectedly met with molten rounds as Trisha rushed forward and gunned them down. She hurried over to Surtur who was lying on the ground, still high on tranquilizers.

"Hey, pretty lady," he said in a sing-song voice. "What's a nice place like you doing in a girl like this?"

She tried to drag him away to no avail. "You're too damn heavy!"

"Heavy to the levy," Surtur sang, "but the levy was dry..."

*"Trish! Heads up!"* Patti called.

Before she knew what was happening, Trisha was kicked by a large winter boot and fell flat on her ass. She watched as Sinmara hoisted Surtur over her shoulder and pointed her harpoon menacingly at Trisha. Trisha quickly aimed her cannon and fired off several shots at the frost woman. Sinmara easily caught every shot around the shaft of her weapon. With a quick swipe, she knocked the gun from Trisha's hands.

"Very commendable efforts," she said. "But you are a long way from Titan, vampire."

With a snap of her fingers, Sinmara dropped the ice walls. The ice scattered into the wind. She began carrying Surtur back to Mishnykov.

"Do not worry, darling," she told Surtur. "We're taking you home. The war will be ours."

"I'm not a banana..." Surtur mumbled. "...You're a couch."

A sharp pain suddenly cut into Sinmara's jugular vein. Sinmara arched her back and dropped Surtur in surprise. She reached for the source of the pain and found none other than Trisha sinking her fangs into the female Titan's neck, drinking her blood. Grabbing Trisha by the torso, Sinmara threw her to the ice.

"Very dirty fighting," she said to Trisha. Then she noticed Trisha was struggling with a sharp pain in her arm. Trisha's eyes shone ice white and, with a snap of her arm, she unleashed a flurry of ice crystals from her palm. The ice hit Sinmara square in the face.

Trisha's body went out of control. A fog of dry ice poured from her mouth as she attacked Sinmara in a berserker rage. With a powerful, Titan-strength roundhouse kick to the chest, she forced Sinmara to the ground. Trisha's eyes flared with magic as icicles flew from them and repeatedly struck her opponent. Sinmara braced herself against Trisha's icy fury.

It wasn't long before Trisha collapsed. Ice magic was pouring out of her body uncontrollably. She screamed as she fought to bring it under control.

In her ice blindness, Trisha failed to see a small figure approach and deliver a sharp blow to a nerve center below the left side of her rib cage. The Titan blood within her slowed to a crawl and she felt calm again. The ice magic subsided and Trisha found herself paralyzed on the ice. Krindel stood above her and sneered. "Rule of thumb, kid: never drink the blood of a Titan."

Sinmara stood up and brushed the excess ice from her person. She looked at Trisha's paralyzed body and shouted, "Let me at her! I'll freeze her favourite innards for that!"

"She's learned her lesson," Krindel said, stepping between them. "We're warriors; not savages. Now grab Surtur and

let's get him to the vat. The Aeonomega's starting in a few minutes."

As the fog cleared, Trisha managed to move her head and look about. Gods and Titans were scattered across the ice. Some were disoriented, others were recovering from the lightning. She saw Sinmara taking Surtur towards the vat of molten steel. In mere moments, Surtur would be encased and the war would never end.

*"Ptolemy!" she called, "Where are you?"*

*"My head's stuck in a slot machine somewhere in the Riviera, and Atlas is --- AAAAHHH!!!"* There was a moment before Ptolemy continued. *"And now I'm airborne again. Man, this guy's got a good swing."*

Sinmara raised Surtur over the vat and prepared to dunk him in. She hesitated.

"Do it!" Krindel insisted.

"Is this really necessary?" she asked, her feelings for her ex-husband suddenly beginning to surface. "Perhaps there's another way."

"Mishnykov!" Krindel snapped. "Drop him in!"

"Wait!" Sinmara insisted, but the Metal Titan had already snatched Surtur from Sinmara's grasp. He hung him over the vat and dropped him in.

Immediately, something in Trisha's body surged to life.

Paralyzed, her focus on the boiling vat became stronger and her eyes glowed once more. At her whim, she expelled some of Sinmara's Titan energy and the vat froze instantly.

Surtur landed headfirst on hardened metal.

Trisha exhaled sharply and felt Sinmara's ice powers leave her blood.

Krindel cursed, "No! Mishnykov! Heat it up!"

Mishnykov was already busy trying to reheat the frozen vat with fire from his belly furnace, but it was no use. Once stygian steel cooled, it couldn't be melted again.

Sinmara looked at Trisha in complete shock. The two of them exchanged conflicted looks, but Sinmara's eyes were the ones that quietly spoke, "Thank you."

"Save him for later," Krindel said. Mishnykov opened the door on his belly's furnace and placed the Titan Lord inside. He slammed the door shut and flipped a latch to lock Surtur within. "If Odin wants Surtur, he'll have to go through us."

Atlas rushed through the streets to reunite with his comrades. He still carried the Eiffel Tower, although now it was dented and bent in many places.

"The Zodiac Knight has been detained," he said. "We should make haste before he finds his way out of that petting zoo."

"We have the Titan Lord," Krindel said. "Everyone return to the Goliath! The battle of Ragnarök will be starting momentarily!"

The Frost Giants helped each other to their feet and stormed back to their ship.

Trisha finally found the strength to stand. Poseidon and Patti rushed to her side. She looked worse for wear, but considering she'd just been possessed by the power of a Titan, things could've been worse.

"They took Surtur," she said.

"Damn it!" Poseidon cursed.

"What happened to you?" Patti asked.

"Drank a Titan's blood," Trisha said weakly. "Wasn't the best of plans."

"That's raw power," Poseidon said. "You could have been killed."

"I felt ready to explode until Krindel kicked me in the ribs," she said, clutching the side of her chest. She couldn't see it beneath her coat, but there was going to be a large bruise there for a while.

"He probably attacked a pressure point to thin out the blood," Poseidon guessed. "He may be an angry runt, but Titans still live by a code of honour. You got lucky."

"Hate to butt in, but the solstice is starting in a couple minutes, give or take," Patti said. "Don't we need to find Ptolemy and the others and get out of here before we lose Poseidon?"

"That's right; I'm going to vanish to the field of battle when the clock hits midnight," Poseidon said. "I'll get back inside and open a portal back to Halifax for you. And somebody kick Brian's ass for me when you find him."

"Did we win?" they heard Ptolemy said as he hopped through some rubble and hurried over to meet them. His armour was wet and covered in debris.

"No, the Titans stole back Surtur," Trisha said. "Where were you this whole time?"

"Hey, I was getting Eiffel Tower'd," Ptolemy said. "What's your excuse?"

"Guys, the clock's ticking..." Patti said.

Poseidon agreed, "Yes, let's get back inside and--"

He was cut off mid-sentence as a bright light enveloped him. In a shining blaze, he vanished from sight. Moments later, all the jackal-headed gods disappeared as well.

"Where'd they go?" Ptolemy asked.

"I think it's the solstice," Trisha said. "They've been summoned to Ragnarök. You said we had more time, Patti!"

"I also said 'give or take'."

They saw a bright light at the far end of the street. The enormous ship stuck in the glass began to shine as well.

“Isn’t that ship is the only thing standing between us and the entire ocean?” Ptolemy asked.

“Get back inside!” Trisha said, not wasting a minute as she sprinted for the front doors.

The others watched as the Goliath vanished in another shining blaze. From behind it surged a massive onset of water that quickly swept into the streets of Atlantis. The dome continued to crack until it couldn’t stand the pressure any further.

The glass above the city shattered.

The ocean fell upon them.

They ran like hell.

## 36. Descent into Darkness

R'Lyeh was a darker place than Jesse remembered. Of course, that was because he was now completely wrapped in a slimy Shadow-Blood as it directed him through the halls of the ancient realm. This was the only way Jesse could safely travel through the realm, now that he was here in corporeal form. His previous journey here as a spirit left him unaware of the realm's toxicity. Even Artemis must have been wearing some form of divine protection to survive down here.

Now he traveled blindly towards Solomon's destination, unaware of what would happen when they found the seal and broke it. Would Solomon honour his word and help save Christine? Or would he cast Jesse aside like a used tissue after he found what he was looking for?

"Not too far now," Solomon said. "You may want to stay quiet. There are Hantu nearby, and I'd rather avoid attracting their attention."

Jesse found himself leaping down a set of stairs and turning a corner into a long corridor. They were heading deeper into a small sub-section of the city. Here, he heard faint drops of leaking water against stone echoing through the corridor. The darkness drifted away until a deep blue ambient light filled the room. They'd arrived at an

underground grotto surrounding a tiny island. On the island was a small house made entirely out of canned spam.

*"We're beyond the poison now,"* Solomon said. *"You should be able to speak freely."*

The Shadow-Blood relinquished its hold on Jesse so he could speak. Jesse took in a breath of air and smelled the unwelcome scent of heavy mould.

"So that's Pandora's Sanctum?" Jesse asked.

Immediately, the Shadow-Blood seized his mouth again.

This had been happening so frequently and seamlessly that Jesse barely noticed anymore. The two of them were now holding steady conversations without any struggle.

*"Who else would live in a house made of spam?"* Solomon asked.

"So she likes spam then?"

*"That's the strange part. If you open one up, they're full of actual ham."*

"Then what's inside the actual hut?" Jesse asked, stepping forward.

They entered the open doorway of the spam shanty and looked around. Pandora's home looked like a small, run-down studio apartment, if a crazy person had been its interior designer. Her kitchen appliances (including the fridge, stove, and sink) were crammed into the corner like a pile of dirty laundry. There was a baby's crib on the couch with a plastic watermelon inside. Pandora had drawn a happy face on the watermelon with magic marker. There was also a DVD collection on the shelves with exactly five hundred copies of *"Smokey and the Bandit 2"*, even though Pandora didn't have a television. But creepiest of all was an old victrola in the corner of the room playing a loop of a little girl singing "La-la, la-la, la-laaaaa".



A frightened turkey leapt from the kitchen sink and escaped through the doorway, gobbling until it disappeared into the toxic darkness of the city.

"This is both terrifying and hilarious," Jesse commented.

*"A very fitting abode for the demon sorceress."*

"What did Pandora do down here?" Jesse asked, trying to make sense of anything.

*"Math, mostly."* The Shadow-Blood gestured to the ground.

Jesse took a step back and noticed the entire floor was covered in paper. Complex mathematical equations were scribbled on each sheet that must have taken Pandora years to work out. *"Don't try to make sense of it. I think she was trying to calculate the square root of apple pie."*

Looking around her shack of solitude, Jesse couldn't help but feel pangs of sympathy for Pandora. There had always been hidden meaning in her words, and her lifestyle could have reflected that sentiment. Were the scribbles on the floor symbolic of her trying to find a higher answer to something? Did her movie collection represent her fruitless struggle through the centuries? Did the watermelon in the crib mean she had an inner desire for a family, or did she just like watermelons? What kind of life did she give up for this nightmare? The more Jesse learned about Pandora, the less he understood her.

The music on the victrola began to get on Jesse's nerves. He did themselves a favour and turned it off.

*"Cast aside your pity,"* Solomon said, almost sensing Jesse's thoughts, *"This woman led a rich, happy life in ways we could never imagine."*

"Do you know where she could have hidden the seal?" Jesse asked.

*"She bound the seal to this grotto. We'll search in here first."*

Immediately, Jesse lost control of his limbic system again as he found himself throwing aside the appliances in the kitchen, searching for some unknown stone seal. Soon, he was shifting through the papers on the floor, searching for a possible hidden vault. They searched the shelves, cleaned out the cabinets, and even found seventy-four cents worth of change in the couch cushions. At one point, they even cracked open the watermelon, but only found marshmallow peeps inside. The Shadow-Blood began flipping open DVDs, wondering if the seal were small enough to fit inside a case. For all their efforts, there was no sign of the stone.

"Are you sure it's in here?" Jesse asked.

*"Pandora would have kept it close," Solomon said. "She fools with many things, but even she wouldn't let the stone stray from her strongest wards."*

"If this spell was so important to her, why didn't she use it to find me and Nigel when she had the chance?" Jesse asked. "From what you told me, she commanded the power of the Deus Ex Machina for a thousand years before it was taken."

*"Just keep your eyes peeled," Solomon growled.*

Jesse was ready to give up when he noticed a faded red tapestry at the end of the hall stapled to the wall. Until now, he hadn't given it much thought because of how much it blended into the wall. The tapestry was embroidered with a picture of a horse in a field of wheat and looked incredibly old. It was the only thing in the room that didn't seem insane.

"What is that tapestry from?" Jesse asked.

*"Early Syrian," Solomon said. "Maybe sooner. It looks too plain for this decor. If you ask me, this tapestry is the only thing that doesn't belong here."*

"Tear it down."

The Shadow-Blood tore down the tapestry to reveal a square stone embedded in the wall of cans. Engraved on the stone was an eye with wings.

*"An angel's sigil,"* Solomon said.

"We found it?"

*"Yes, and now comes the moment of truth."*

Jesse's felt his angel abilities activate and his sword magically appeared in his hand. The Shadow-Blood loosened its grip and Jesse was free to move again.

"What are you doing?" Jesse asked.

*"Giving you the honours of breaking the seal."*

"What, smash it open with my sword?"

*"Would you rather I make you do it myself?"* Solomon asked.

"Are you sure about this? This still sounds like a really bad idea."

*"Look, I've put a lot of time and effort into bringing us this far and helping you out,"* Solomon said. *"But the gods have our backs against the wall and the human race is on the threshold of the next great extinction if we don't stop this war immediately."*

"But I don't want to break it," Jesse said.

*"Foolish boy, do you realize what could become of Christine if you don't?"* it asked. *"All your time together. Every memory you share. All possibilities of a future forever gone if we don't reclaim the power within that stone."*

"You... can't do it yourself, can you?"

*"This part of the journey is sort of a collaboration."*

"Wait a second," Jesse said. "Hold up. That's why you showed me those visions? You wanted me to *want* to break this seal, didn't you?"

*"Those visions were the truth and the danger is no less real."*

"Oh, no, no, no. I see your game now. I'm not breaking anything for you."

*"Look, do I have to find a Void somewhere and throw both you and Pandora's box into it?"* Solomon asked. *"Because I will wait another several thousand years for another angel to come along if that's what it takes."*

"Threats!" Jesse exclaimed. "Very mature. You know, I actually expected more given how elaborate your plan was to get me this far."

*"If that seal isn't open in the next ten seconds,"* Solomon said, *"I will personally bring you home and make you drive that sword through the heart of the woman you love."*

"I don't think you will," Jesse said. "I don't think that's part of your game."

*"Don't tempt me."*

"Try it."

*"I will!"*

"Jesse, stop!" they heard a voice shout from the door. Jesse turned to see Nigel standing at the doorway. He looked tired and broken with his splintered leg, bruised face and bandaged arm. He had a very difficult time breathing.

"Nigel, how did you get here?" Jesse asked.

"Don't listen to a thing it says," Nigel warned. "You have to treat it like it's me. Don't even do the opposite of what it asks. Just ignore it completely."

*"Ah, Naveen, congratulations for making it this far,"* Solomon said. *"I assume by now you know what you're up against."*

"And I know how you think," Nigel said, inching nearer.

"You study your opponents and plot out every conceivable move. You forge alliances and break them as a means to move your enemies into place. You planned for Jesse to

be here. You planned for me to be here. And you even know what I'm going to do next."

*"You're going to do something unexpected as a means to break my flawless strategy."*

"Precisely."

*"Well, before you do, I just want to remind Jesse of one thing,"* Solomon said. *"That you knew about--"*

Before he could finish his sentence, Nigel whipped out his taser and fired it at Jesse. The two nodes struck the Shadow-Blood's hide and delivered a powerful volt of zero-point energy across its form. It didn't even get a chance to make Jesse scream as it spilled off his body like water, leaving no stains behind. Jesse coughed and spit the rest of the lifeless Shadow-Blood from his mouth. They watched as the black puddle of goo desperately tried to pick itself up off the floor.

"You did it!" Jesse exclaimed as he stepped away from the pile.

Nigel admired his handiwork. He then looked up at the sigil on the wall and breathed deeply.

"It's in there, isn't it?" he asked.

Jesse nodded. "That's what it said."

"Then we need to leave immediately," Nigel said, heading for the door.

Jesse followed him for a few feet before he stopped and asked, "What was Solomon trying to tell you before?"

"Nothing. Don't listen to him."

"Was it about Christine?"

Nigel stopped at the door and said, "We'll talk about this topside."

"We'll talk about it now," Jesse said. "I saw her with Hades. Her memory's gone and it's my fault. But you knew about it, didn't you?"

"...I did," Nigel nodded.

"And you didn't say anything?"

"She made me promise not to say anything." Nigel looked to the squirming Shadow-Blood. It was slowly reforming from the shock. "We really need to leave."

"Is there a cure for her?"

"I don't know."

"Is there a cure for *you*?"

"I don't know."

"How are we planning to stop the war?"

"It's not our problem!"

Jesse's eyes narrowed and his hand tightened around his sword. "Was Solomon telling the truth about what's inside the seal?"

"Jesse, don't even think about it."

"Maybe we shouldn't run away from our only opportunity to fix everything."

"This isn't an opportunity," Nigel said. "They don't bury things in cursed places without good reason. Whatever's in there will only make things worse."

"*If* it falls into the wrong hands."

"Jesse, step away from the seal!"

"Sorry, Nigel," Jesse said. "The world's too far gone. It's a chance we have to take."

Ethereal wings sprouted from his back and his body shined as he turned to the sigil.

With a swipe, the crystal blade split the stone.

The seal was broken.

### 37. Vir Ex Machina

There was a cold silence as pieces of the seal fell to the floor. It took a moment before the weight of his own action sunk in.

"I... screwed up, didn't I?" Jesse asked Nigel.

"You screwed up so hard."

Jesse reached into the shattered remains of the seal and extracted a small, white diamond-shaped crystal.

"What did you find?" Nigel asked, sweat pouring off his brow.

"That's a good question," Jesse said as he showed him the crystal. "This isn't a page from a spellbook."

"Then what is it?" Nigel asked. "Do you feel anything from it?"

"No... nothing."

The Shadow-Blood pounced from the floor and latched onto Jesse's arm. Jesse tried to pull away, but it was scrambling towards his hand, desperate for the crystal.

"Vladimir, Plan B!" Nigel shouted.

At that moment, something came through the wall. Canned spam flew everywhere as Vladimir broke into the sanctum and grabbed onto the Shadow-Blood, ripping it from Jesse's arm. Using his shadow energy, Vladimir forced the creature onto his own arm and slammed it into the wall.

"Hello, Solomon, remember me?" he sneered.

The creature pounced for Vladimir's mouth to speak, but Vladimir wrestled it away. Apparently possessing a demon that controlled shadows was significantly more difficult for the Shadow-Blood.

"Go, get out of here!" he shouted as the Shadow-Blood spread over his body. "Go on without me and cast the spell! I'll hold him back!"

"What's Vladimir doing here?" Jesse asked, "Nigel, what's going on?"

"No time to explain," Nigel said as he picked up Pandora's Box. "Just move it!"

The two brothers dashed out of Pandora's shack just as Vladimir and the Shadow-Blood erupted into a monsoon of shadow energy. The shack was engulfed in its wake, torn to shreds. The storm of shadows hurled itself after the two brothers.

From the grotto's entrance, several silver arrows shot past the brothers' heads into the dark flurry. The Shadow-Blood recoiled as the arrows penetrated its watery hide. From the corridors, Artemis raced into the grotto, firing one arrow after another at the monster.

"What manner of fool created another Shadow-Blood?" she yelled. "Stay behind me, the two of you! The creature mustn't leave this room!"

As Artemis held off the attacking Shadow-Blood, the brothers turned to the toxic darkness of R'Lyeh. They were trapped.

"Maybe if we run, we can get through quick enough," Jesse said.

"No, you need to teleport us out of here," Nigel said.

"I can't teleport!"

"You did it when you left the ship, you can do it now."



"That was Solomon using my power," Jesse said. "I can't do it myself."

They backed away as the swirling madness encroached on them. From within R'Lyeh, they heard the screeches of the Hantu Penanggal creeping towards the grotto.

"You can do it," Nigel said. "Just relax, close your eyes, and focus on someone you know. Picture yourself as a guardian angel by their side."

"What about you?"

"It doesn't matter; I'll be the devil on their shoulder," Nigel said. "Just do it. I believe in you."

"You didn't even believe in me two minutes ago."

Suddenly, there was a flash of light where Artemis was standing.

The goddess vanished.

Jesse's jaw dropped. "Where did she...?"

"It's the solstice!" Nigel said as the Shadow-Blood recovered from Artemis' arrows. "Jesse, just trust me! Please! Of all times, now is the time you have to trust me! You can do it!"

Jesse put his hand on Nigel's shoulder and nodded. He took a deep breath and concentrated.

From within, he felt his soul reaching out to the rest of the world. His angel senses honed in on the people he knew.

He felt the transmission from Patti's bluetooth and suddenly knew where they had to go.

"Hold on," he said.

There was a burst of white light and they vanished, leaving Vladimir to battle the monster.

\* \* \*

Nigel and Jesse found themselves on the lobby floor of Poseidon's palace.

Breathing heavily, Nigel said, "We made it. Good job, brother."

"I can teleport," Jesse let out a sigh of relief. He glanced at his surroundings. "Hey, are we supposed to be in Vegas or did I take some kind of cosmic detour?"

Nigel noticed the palace was empty. "Where is everyone? They should be here."

"There they are," Jesse pointed to the door.

The front doors smashed open as Ptolemy ran through head-first with Patti and Trisha on his tail.

"Run!" Trisha shouted.

"Up here," Brian called from the upstairs balcony. He was standing with Lido and Wu Tang who was barking furiously. "Get to the stairs!"

Nigel looked back to the entrance and saw a massive tidal wave heading for them. He hastily hobbled for the stairs.

Ptolemy was quick to scoop him up as the others hurried to the steps. The water struck the pyramid and destroyed the lower floor in seconds. Computers and slot machines were swept away in the flood. The windows on the upper floors shattered and the seawater exploded from rooms all along the balcony. The walls flickered as the water scrambled the integrity of the virtual building. The eight of them, including Wu Tang, continued up the stairwells, making a break for the top floor.

"Where's Poseidon?" Nigel asked. "Why isn't he stopping this?"

"He and all the gods are at Ragnarök," Ptolemy explained.

"We're on our own."

They stopped at the seventh floor as the stairwell collapsed ahead of them. The water surged past the balcony and the eight quickly backed up against a lounge bar as the water destroyed the surrounding walls. They

were stranded on an outcropping overlooking the rising waters.

"Can you teleport us, Jesse?" Nigel asked, as he climbed out of Ptolemy's arms.

"I still feel spent after that last one," Jesse said. "I don't think I can do all of us."

They heard a loud metal groan. High above them, hanging from the center of the pyramid was an enormous marble statue of Poseidon that adorned a golden chandelier. The weight on the building's capstone caused the chandelier's canopy to break loose. The massive marble statue fell over and plummeted into the waters below. An enormous wave came towards them.

Ptolemy ran to the edge of the balcony and held out his hands to the wave, desperately willing the water to go away. Instead, the water hit an invisible wall and passed around them safely.

Ptolemy laughed, "My force fields are working!"

And then the balcony crumbled at his feet. He and Lido fell into the raging waters below. Wu Tang ran forward yapping, but his tiny paws were unable to grab anyone.

"Ptolemy!" Patti screamed. As she ran for the edge, Trisha grabbed her arm and tried to calm her down.

"This is it," Brian said, hugging his laptop. "We're doomed."

"We're not doomed," Jesse said, fishing around in his pockets. He pulled out the white crystal. "I broke the seal. I found something that might help."

"That's Pandora's final spell?" Trisha's voice trailed.

"No," Nigel shook his head. "We don't know what it is."

"Then why was Pandora keeping it in an Angel's Seal?"

Jesse asked. "It has to be important!"

"Just focus on getting us out of here!" Nigel insisted.

Patti's eyes flashed open and she gasped for air. She looked around as if something was speaking to her.

"What's that...?" she asked. "Hades, is that you? ...a message for Nigel? Hang on, I'll patch you through."

*"Nigel!" Hades shouted. "I have to make this fast! The battle of Ragnarök is going on outside this window. Whatever you do, don't go into R'Lyeh!"*

"Too late," Nigel said.

*"Then whatever you do, don't let Jesse break the Angel's Seal!"*

"Again, too late."

*"Then whatever's in the Angel's Seal, don't take it out of R'Lyeh!"*

"...Why?"

*"Because it's Solomon's soul!" Hades said. "He mustn't be reunited with it!"*

Wu Tang's barking became louder.

"Nigel, the water's getting higher," Trisha reminded him.

"What do you mean it's his soul?" Nigel asked.

*"We were looking to the wrong legends for information," Hades said, "He's not just Pandora's master. He's far more ancient than that. It explains how he wrote those books. He not only wants the power of the Deus Ex Machina, he also wants--fzzzt--"*

"Hades, I didn't hear that last part."

*"I said ---fzzzt--- he wants to --- fzzzt --- his soul and --- fzzzt --- you!"*

"What?!"

*"I said he's probably there with you!"*

Wu Tang's barking ceased.

Nigel's heart grew cold.

He spun around to receive a solid kick to the chest, knocking him flat on the ground.

Before he hit the ground, Nigel saw Jesse burst into flames as he was skewered through the heart from behind with a

bar stool. He dropped the soul crystal which was promptly snatched out of the air by Jesse's attacker.

The sound of a dog growling could be heard moments before Nigel heard the sound of a small Pomeranian getting kicked off the balcony into the waters below.

The attacker was so swift that it appeared as a blur. Patti and Trisha rushed at it, only to be floored with a few precision attacks. Patti was elbowed in the ribs and thrown over the bar, while Trisha was lep-swept off her feet. The blur threw her towards the edge of the balcony. Nigel reached out and grabbed her forearm just before she fell over. Nigel's arm tightened in pain as Trisha's weight dangled over the rising waters.

Nigel felt himself slipping towards the edge.

As he struggled to hold onto Trisha, he saw the pixelized pyramid dissolve around him. Textures vanished, polygons derezzed and garbage programming could be read across the walls. As the water fell in from the ceiling, he caught a brief glimpse of the 'Realm Rage' top scores scroll across the walls, with '*TheQueen*' at the top.

Only there was no queen.

Not in their game.

Nigel flashed back to New Orleans.

He had it wrong. That's not how Solomon had ended their game.

In his final move of their game together, Solomon hadn't changed his pawn to a queen.

He became a knight.

"Finally figured it out, have you?" Their attacker asked.

Nigel slowly turned in time to see Brian, standing at the bar. He put the small white soul stone into a martini glass and mixed it with vodka. He swirled it around as the stone dissolved and the drink began to glow.

"Brian?" Nigel asked.

Brian shrugged and removed his hat and glasses. He was older, wearier, and his skin was scarred from centuries of surviving as a human, but he and Nigel were nonetheless the same person. All he did to hide in plain sight was put on a hat and glasses. His performance as a young hipster was so perfect that nobody even noticed his age, let alone his name or the fact that he and Nigel had the same face. Solomon sipped his soul martini until the crystal's glow vanished from the drink. He wiped his mouth, smiled, and winked at Nigel. With a deafening blast, the pyramid imploded around them. Time stopped.

## 38. Endgame

As Trisha slipped from his hand, Nigel's head swam.

He tried to remember how it came to this.

How could *Brian* be responsible?

Piece by piece, it sunk in. Brian had been feeding them information all along.

Whenever they were out of options, Brian always offered a new solution.

Whenever Nigel was ready give up, Brian's hopelessness encouraged him to go on.

Even back in Halifax, Brian had been watching over them and subtly guiding their actions through his criticisms and complaints.

He knew every piece on the board. He knew how to move them. He even disguised himself as a mere pawn in this great game.

As elaborate as it seemed, it had been the perfect play.

"How is this possible?" Nigel asked as he stood up and looked around. The entire imploding pyramid was frozen in time. Like a 3D painting, Patti was being blown away by the water. Trisha was falling over the edge. Lido was being tossed around in the water like a ragdoll. Wu Tang was doggy-paddling alongside him. Ptolemy was nowhere to be seen. Drops and streams of water were frozen in the air,

thick to the touch. Another second and this entire casino would have been obliterated.

"Sorry, I wanted to savour the moment," Solomon said. He was glowing brightly and his very presence had become monochromatic. He was literally nothing but black, white, and vague shades of grey. Nigel watched as Solomon's age vanished. His scars and wrinkles disappeared. His eye scar healed. His hair grew long and beautiful. Even his clothes transformed into elegant robes. He stepped out from behind the bar to admire his work. His body considerably stopped glowing so that Nigel could see him clearly.

"You're a Zodiac," Nigel said, carefully choosing his words. "I was, and am again," Solomon replied, overseeing the chaos around them. Glancing at the ceiling of the pyramid, they saw the capstone collapsing, and millions of gallons of seawater coming down on top of them. He couldn't have chosen a better moment to freeze. "But not just any Zodiac, mind you. I was the *flaw* in God's plan."

"You were the first," Nigel said. "You were created to bring balance between men and angels."

"Or so I was told," Solomon sighed. "It's funny how the Creator has difficulty admitting His own mistakes. There was no balance to be held between mankind and the forces of Lucifer. Not when Lucifer's evil was infecting humanity so easily."

"So you tried to destroy him," Nigel said.

"It was my birthright," Solomon said, poking at a few curious sparkles in the air. "But just as I was about to deliver the killing blow, the Creator plucked me from the battlefield. My choice to kill Lucifer wasn't in the Creator's Great Plan, and thus he sealed my soul away, severing the link to my powers."



Solomon approached the balcony and looked into the frozen waters below. With a wave of his hand, he parted the water like clay to reveal Ptolemy laying on the lobby floor below. Nigel could see his armour fading away like dust in a breeze.

“So what’ll happen to him?” Nigel asked.

“There can only be one, it seems,” Solomon said as he watched Ptolemy’s armour slowly vanish. “Divine magic always answers to the highest authority. With my power returned, so will his fade. Quite a shame, really. The lad could have been a great apprentice. But alas, let us not dwell on trivialities. I’m quite parched. Fancy a spot of tea?”

Nigel suddenly found himself in a chair at a large table across from Solomon. They were in a large dining hall with a huge fireplace and paintings scattered across the walls. The paintings were depictions of Nigel’s journey through the ages from his treks through the Middle East to the streets of Spain to their tavern in Halifax. In the center of the table, far out of each other’s reach, was an antique chess board with all the pieces ready for a game. At his hands, Nigel found a cup of tea waiting for him. Solomon was already pouring himself a cup.

“What is this?” Nigel asked.

“My own personal blend of almond oriental,” Solomon said as he took a sip. “Add a dash of cinnamon and it does wonders for the heart.”

“I meant what we are doing here?” Nigel asked. “Where is everyone?”

“Perfectly safe for as long as I will it,” Solomon said. “In the meantime, after nine thousand years, I thought we deserved a proper conversation as father and son.”

“I’d sooner break your jaw.”

"Please, indulge me," Solomon said. "I'm certain you have questions."

"All right," Nigel said. "You've been human for nine thousand years. How are you still alive?"

"When I was the Zodiac, I had all the knowledge of the universe at my beck and call," Solomon said. "Through First Age magic, I saw hidden secrets in the code of existence and understood how even a simple human could exploit them to create, prolong, or put an end to life. So I took great care to document what forbidden knowledge I could."

"I thought your spellbooks covered Second Age magic, not First."

"Second Age magic can't be remembered, but can be documented," Solomon said. "First Age magic, on the other hand, is too powerful to exist in written form."

"But a magic spell keeps you alive?" Nigel asked.

"Yes, though I hesitate to call it magic," Solomon said, rolling up his sleeve to reveal some ancient scripture tattooed on his forearm. "Second Age magic is really just a fanciful form of 'life hacks'. For example, the trick to a long, healthy life is actually a well-planned regime of exercise, proper sleep, and healthy eating in varied proportions. I had the exact equation tattooed on my arm so I'd never forget. Of course, even a long human life isn't indefinite. Until you defeated Pandora, I feared my time would come to an end in a few decades."

"Unless you could find your soul."

"I searched for it, I really did," Solomon solemnly shook his head. "But it was hidden even from my own spells. Sadly, even as a human, I couldn't bring myself to stray from my duties, so I continued with my secondary objective."

"You trained Pandora to fight Lucifer."

"Pandora was a mistake, I'll admit," Solomon said, sipping his tea. "Teaching First Age magic to a Second Age sorceress who later became a Third Age demon turned her into something unique. When it started, she was just a promising young orphan with an unnatural ability to remember Second Age magic. I thought she might become my saving grace, so I took her under my wing. But for all the magic she learned, she still existed in her own strange, unpredictable world. She lacked the conviction to become a champion for justice."

"A champion for revenge, you mean," Nigel corrected him. Solomon brushed off Nigel's sass.

"Then one day she took my books and left an ostrich in my hut," Solomon said. "I'll never quite understood where she found the ostrich."

"She has a thing for birds."

"Believe me, I noticed," Solomon replied. "I soon after learned of my soul's location through a few demon spies, only to discover that Pandora had cruelly placed it within an angel's seal before I arrived. Only an angel could ever break that seal."

"Pandora was good for something after all," Nigel sneered.

"Tell that to the citizens of Xeras," Solomon reminded him.

"In circa 7000 B.C., Pandora's apprentice, Nione, came to me with dreadful news of her transformation. She also brought me my last remaining book."

"The Book of Summoning."

"Many pages were missing," Solomon said, "In fact, only seven spells remained, including the one for creating a Shadow-Blood. I knew if a Fire-Blood could earn a soul, they could use it to break the seal. So my apprentice and I assisted her in that matter. We then shortly disposed of the book and box knowing full well Pandora would find them."

“Who was your apprentice?” Nigel asked. “Is he the one who created Jesse?”

“He was more like an intern, really,” Solomon said. “He was an inept little toad by the name of Waarb. An interesting side-note: he died two weeks later from falling off a cliff after getting bitten by a poisonous snake while dealing with fatal case of dysentery from eating a stick.”

“Jesse used to fall off cliffs and eat unsanitary things all the time,” Nigel remembered.

“And now you know where he got it from.”

“So you what, followed us around for nine thousand years?” Nigel asked.

“I kept tabs on you,” Solomon said. “The first hundred years was a real gong show. You, your brother and Nione were causing trouble all over Xeras. Every few years, I’d follow up on a lead or two only to find a small town destroyed by Pandora in your wake. I suspected you spent a lot of time in caves in the next thousand years to follow. I myself tried to train more apprentices, but eventually gave up.”

“So you were on our trail the whole time?”

“Syria, Babylon, the East Borders, Sodom, Gommorrah...” Solomon counted off on his fingers. “Wasn’t it about 5500 B.C. you headed to Europe?”

“Romania, Poland, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain...” Nigel recalled. “Until about 15-something A.D.”

“But you never visited Greece,” Solomon recalled. “Around that time, I’d gotten bored with following you. Demons, Titans, and gods were causing more trouble than it was worth, so I set about trying to restore balance. I managed to recover Pandora’s book for a short period and used it to trick a poor Titan by the name of Prometheus into starting the first Titan War.”

“You created the first Shadow-Bloods.”

“And they worked far better than I could have imagined,” Solomon said. “So obedient and so indestructible. Did you know a Shadow-Blood cannot die until the purpose for which it was born is fulfilled? It’s the perfect assassin.”  
“So the Shadow-Bloods can’t die until the gods are dead?”  
“Gods and Titans alike.”

“And you rounded them all up with a war for easy pickings.”

“Sadly, the war didn’t end as I planned. The book was stolen by some demigods and returned to Pandora who summoned chains to bind my creations. But I found the book a couple thousand years later and tried it again with another Titan called Loki. That war didn’t even last eight days thanks to the truce.”

“Did you ever consider having a family or getting a real job?” Nigel asked. “Being a normal person has its merits too.”

“Been there, done that, and it was so dull,” Solomon said, pouring himself another cup. “Then the whole ‘new world’ movement started happening and I followed you to the Americas. I found a comfortable life in Costa Rica for a while, but old habits die hard and I found you again in New Orleans.”

“Which is where this story starts,” Nigel said, looking to the chess board.

“It was a friendly game at the time,” Solomon said, “but it remained so clear in my head that surely you must have remembered it too.”

“So you disguised yourself as a hipster and started writing novels in my bar?”

“In nine thousand years, you hadn’t once tried to start a business,” Solomon said. “In fact, aside from run, hide and fight, you hadn’t done anything. I had to stop in and see why you had become so interesting. I’m guessing your lady

had something to do with it. You weren't wrong before; she is quite the catch. I too would have let my guard down for her."

"So when did you decide to start a third war?" Nigel asked. "It was when you defeated Pandora," Solomon said. "That was my opening. Jesse had finally become an angel. From there, my sole mission became getting that boy into R'Lyeh."

"He's been wandering the globe for three months," Nigel said. "You couldn't get him then?"

"I tried," Solomon said. "I spent months extending that kid's vacation trying to learn his habits and coax him into joining me. Unfortunately, his loyalty to his older brother kept him on his guard. He resisted every deceptive effort I put forth. The most luck I had luring him to R'Lyeh involved training pigeons to steal his chocolate bars. I knew I had to play to his weakness: Christine."

"You actually *organized* her memory loss?"

"The plot was simple: get Jesse to R'Lyeh in spirit form and the rest would fall into place," Solomon explained.

"Preparing Odin to go to war was the first step. Recruiting the Titans and organizing their escape was the next. From there, I knew Artemis would find Jesse when his lost spirit was drawn near the Void. And I knew she'd take him to the Fates who would offer him the dreaded deal as they often do to outsiders. I also knew Christine would tie into that deal somehow. Her loss would divide his priorities and make him vulnerable. Afterwards, taking Jesse's physical form into R'Lyeh was simply a matter for the Shadow-Blood."

"But how were you controlling the Shadow-Blood from inside my ship? We were watching you the whole time!"

"I wasn't," Solomon grinned. "Just as a Fire-Blood takes on the image of its creator, a Shadow-Blood is an image of

their mind. I don't control the Shadow-Blood because I don't have to. It knows what I want and it makes the same choices I would."

"So was that the Shadow-Blood I was talking to on the phone when you called?"

"No, it was a pre-recorded message I was playing from my computer," Solomon explained. "I talk to myself a lot, so a conversation with you is very predictable. It helped feed the illusion that I was hiding elsewhere."

"But you couldn't have predicted that Jesse would break the seal," Nigel said. "Even with Christine's memory was gone, you should have known he would resist."

"I did," Solomon said. "That's why I had to shatter his faith in everything around him, from his beloved Christine to his own brother. Your presence in R'Lyeh was the tipping point. Your lack of trust showed him that the only way forward was through me."

"That plan doesn't make any damn sense," Nigel said.

"There's too many factors. What if Odin didn't send me on a quest? What if we didn't get shot down? What if we didn't come to Atlantis? What if Vladimir didn't know how to get to R'Lyeh?"

"That's why I didn't rely on a single plan," Solomon said. "A good chess player doesn't go into the game with only one strategy. He foresees every possible outcome to every move and adapts as the game continues. I knew who my pieces were and how I could play to their strengths. And if anyone failed me, I was prepared to move other pieces into play to compensate. So you see, I didn't have just one plan. I had a thousand."

"So what now?" Nigel asked. "Why the obsession with exterminating deities?"

"You tell me," Solomon said. "You're the one who god-proofed his tavern, stocked up on ram's blood, and started training his own army when Odin took over."

"Those were precautions," Nigel said. "I was at the heart of Pandora's war; I made enemies. End of story."

"You did it because you and I share common truths," Solomon said. "We believe that necessity motivates creativity. We believe that balance is found in freedom. And we most certainly believe, above all things, that the world would be a better place without gods."

"That doesn't mean we kill them."

"Tell that to all the holy wars that have risen in their stead."

"The elder gods have grown beyond that," Nigel said. "With your power, they can listen to reason."

"With my power, I won't give them a chance," Solomon said. "Too much bad blood has passed between the races. The wrath of ages has swelled up in their hearts like a poison. They've grown too powerful and their next war will be their last. The balance of man must be preserved; the gods must die. Do you disagree?"

Nigel went quiet for a few moments before speaking.

"In your perfect world," he asked, "what's to stop the Creator from taking your soul again and restoring power to Ptolemy?"

"If He meant to, He would have done it by now," Solomon said. "I've officially become part of His Great Plan. He will not admit His failure twice."

"And what's to stop the war from destroying the world?" Nigel asked. "Millions of humans will die in the crossfire."

"It'll never come to that," Solomon said. "A Zodiac may not be permitted on the battlefield, but there are other ways of killing the gods quickly."

"One Shadow-Blood can't kill every deity overnight," Nigel said.



Solomon smirked. "But thirteen can."

"You wouldn't dare release the rest."

"Each lives for the same purpose," he said. "When that purpose is fulfilled, the Shadow-Bloods will fade away. The rest of the world will never know their fury."

"So what now?" Nigel asked. "You kill me?"

"Nigel, what happened the last time I knighted myself?"

"You gave us train tickets."

"Exactly," Solomon said. "I'll give this world the gift it needs. Instead of complimentary breakfast and missing socks, I'll give humanity the world order it craves. I'll restore your cities and return all life to the way it was before Odin's visage appeared on televisions worldwide. No one will be the wiser."

"You're going to perform a Deus Ex Machina of your own."

"Seems like an appropriate start to my rule," Solomon said.

"And you won't even wait until the war is over?"

"No need to," Solomon said, "Deities are exempt from my gift and the Aeonomega is binding. But should all go to plan, the war will be over before noon tomorrow with zero human casualties, just as planned."

"And what about us? Your friends?" Nigel asked. "We've fought to stop you every step of the way and you expect me to believe we'll just go home and forget this ever happened?"

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple," Solomon said. "You're all too close to these events for them to truly be erased. But if you gave your consent, as their leader, things might flow a little easier."

"You expect me to consent to anything you say?"

"You may," Solomon nodded, "because I can return to you the one thing you hold onto more dearly than anything else."

"And what's that?"

"The same thing that drove you from the beginning," Solomon said. "A return to the way things used to be." Nigel didn't reply.

Solomon stood up and began walking around the table towards Nigel.

"I can take you back to that time in your life when you were completely in control. Before Pandora arrived in Halifax. Before your brother met that woman. Before Trisha learned your secrets. Try to remember a time when your word was law and your family was safe. That's the life you've perfected, and that's the life your family deserves."

"We'll go back to living in fear."

"You'll live in comfort," Solomon said, putting his hands on Nigel's shoulders, "just as you always did. You'll believe Pandora is still hunting you, but that fear will keep you strong. In truth, you'll be safer than ever, because for all your fears, no misfortunes will ever fall upon you."

"I'll be mortal," Nigel said. "I'll know something is wrong."

"With my power, you won't even know you're human."

"Why would you offer this to me?"

"Because I already know how you'll answer," Solomon said. "I saw it in your eyes. That for all the battles you fight..."

"...I only want to bring us home."

"Precisely."

"I can't offer you their memories," Nigel said.

"You don't need to," Solomon said. "You need only offer yours."

"In exchange for the lives of the gods."

"And you can't save them, no matter what you do,"

Solomon said. "So just let go of this crusade, Naveen. Home is right around the corner."

Emotions welled up inside Nigel. His anger for Solomon was slowly being replaced with a sense of despair and

feelings of weariness. He had no way of beating Solomon this time. Solomon was a force beyond anything he'd faced. For all he'd done, maybe this was not the battle he was meant to fight.

Not if it meant saving his family.

"Everything as it was?" he asked.

"You will never hear from the gods or myself again,"

Solomon said. "On this I swear."

Something inside Nigel broke.

"Do it," Nigel said, his eyes welling up.

Solomon smiled, put a hand on Nigel's shoulder, and said,

"So glad you chose reason. Have a good life, my son."

Nigel fell asleep for the last time.

## IV. Rise of the Shadow-Blood

### 39. The Third Awakening

It was eleven in the morning and four days until Christmas when Nigel Hunter decided to slip out of bed. Sleep, for him, was quite different than that of most people. He never got tired, so he could reasonably stay awake forever if he chose. In his experience, however, constantly staying awake took valuable time away from his nightly meditation. Between the late and early hours of the morning, he could lay down, close his eyes, and focus on training his mind. This practice helped keep his wits sharp and his skills tempered. It also kept him from flying off the handle whenever his brother did something stupid. Downstairs, he heard "*Jingle Bell Rock*" on the radio and the sound of the door slamming as his waitress, Patti, arrived for the lunch shift, yammering incessantly about nothing of consequence. His girlfriend, Trisha, woke up an hour prior to get the kitchen ready. The smell of her honey-garlic chicken wings wafted in under the door beckoning to Nigel. Alas, meat products were not a luxury Nigel could afford for the sake of the world. See, Nigel wasn't just any ordinary man. He and his brother Jesse were nine thousand year-old Fire-Bloods: ancient warriors forged from the fires of Heaven and Hell. This meant a multitude of physical benefits including the

ability to instantly heal and never grow old, but also came with its share of curses. As a Fire-Blood, Nigel couldn't touch sunlight without catching fire and couldn't taste blood without transforming into an unstoppable rage demon. Otherwise, he could eat, laugh and love among humans. He could even pass himself off as a special type of vampire for the sake of Trisha (who just so *did* happen to be a real vampire!)

About ninety minutes earlier, Nigel had heard his brother leave. Jesse was going for one of his day-long sabbaticals. It was mostly overcast today, so sun exposure wasn't going to be a problem. Unfortunately, cool temperatures meant indoor activities which usually meant Jesse was going to be in close contact with a lot of people. Nigel made a mental note to wipe down Jesse's clothes with a car freshener later. The scent prevented Jesse's smell from sticking to other people. Leaving their scent around wasn't in Nigel's best interest since there were a few beings in this world he'd rather stay hidden from.

He decided to announce to the world that he was awake by playing his piano. This always relaxed him even though he didn't like playing publicly.

He got out of bed and felt a strange temporary pain in his lower back. It subsided. For some reason, he felt heavier and lighter at once. He didn't normally experience strange pains other than in direct sunlight, so he wondered if he imagined it.

"That's different," Nigel thought aloud, heading for his piano.

A strange urge compelled him to play along with the music downstairs. "*Jingle Bell Rock*" soon filled the room to accompany the holiday cheer. This was one of his favourite modern pieces, even if he didn't share that piece of trivia with anyone.

Downstairs, Trisha wiped the bar while Patti set tables. Patti had dropped out of school recently to pursue a part-time career in telemarketing, only to receive a visit from the police after the company she signed up with got busted for fraud. She'd been let off with a stern warning and was now unsuccessfully seeking careers with her philosophy minor. Trisha remained quiet in her morning routine. She was quite surprised to hear something lively on Nigel's piano, and not just his usual repetition of practice notes. Secretly, she'd been wishing he might someday move his piano downstairs to play, but to her, Nigel was a classic vampire in the most introverted way at times. Sure, he was distant, cold, and emotionless, but he had a strange reliability about himself that she found charming. Even though he spent all day cooped up in his room, he was always on top of building maintenance, paperwork and ordering supplies. Whatever needed doing, Nigel somehow finished it yesterday. As a vampire, she was vulnerable to many things and needed security and structure in her life. Nigel brought her that comfort.

Jesse was Nigel's polar opposite. While Nigel used the night to meditate, Jesse spent his nights in the basement playing video games or binge-watching Netflix. Very rarely did Jesse ever sneak out at night; he found daytime activity more to his liking. Once morning struck, he was out the tavern door to wander the city, greet businesses as they opened, and make friends with homeless people. Thankfully, Jesse kept to the shadows on his walks, even on overcast days just to be safe.

Jesse was on his way back from a cafe when he thought he might head to Christine's and...

He stopped and wondered why he thought about that girl just now. He'd met a girl named Christine about nine months ago outside a liquor store. He walked her home,

made an idiot of himself, and hadn't seen her since. So why, after all this time, did he feel the strange urge to walk to her place?

Upon having that thought, he walked into a tree. Ever since he woke up this morning, he felt unusually unbalanced, as if a great weight had been lifted off his chest. He found himself constantly drifting on the sidewalk and falling down steps everywhere he went.

Maybe the oddness of today was a sign. Jesse decided he would walk past Christine's apartment and chance a meeting with her.

Throughout the rest of the morning, everyone went about their normal days.

Trisha remained content in her safe, morning routine as she prepared lunch.

Jesse merrily jaunted through the streets of Halifax, not a care in the world.

Patti did her best to pretend she wasn't hungover.

Nigel continued to play.

For some reason, he felt safe and happy.

Maybe he was a little *too* happy.

He looked atop his piano and saw only his old tin box and a vase of flowers from his anniversary a couple nights ago.

He could have sworn he had a large wooden box and a snow-globe, but perhaps his mind was playing tricks on him. Perhaps it was one of those lunar phases.

He assured himself nothing was wrong. Everything was exactly as it was meant to be.

And yet, somehow, that thought caused his happiness to subside for a brief moment.

In that moment, he longed to step outside and see the world again. But that was an ancient memory long since gone. This was his life now, and it was the life he needed to live.



\* \* \*

Today's first patron entered the bar for lunch. Patti was quick to greet him.

"Welcome!" she said. "How many are you seating?"

The stranger was out of breath and cradling a laptop.

Breathing heavily, he exclaimed, "Patti, it's me! Don't you recognize me?"

Trisha and Patti exchanged confused looks.

A minute later, Trisha was knocking on Nigel's door.

"Honey," Trisha said, "there's a strange guy downstairs.

Says he needs to talk to you."

"Are you sure he's not here for Jesse?"

"He says his name is Ptolemy," she continued. "He's kind of crazy."

"Then don't let crazy people into the bar."

"He also said to mention that Pandora is dead," she continued. "And that your favourite movie is '*Fantasia*'.

Who's Pandora?"

Nigel stopped playing.

He turned to Trisha and said, "Send him up."

## 40. Total Recall

Nigel locked the door to their studio and pulled Ptolemy into his bathroom.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Nigel asked.

"Nigel, man, it's me!" Ptolemy exclaimed, "Don't you recognize me?"

"I haven't seen you in my life," Nigel said. "How do you know my favourite movie?"

"You told me!" Ptolemy exclaimed. "You were training me to be a Zodiac and..."

"You're the Zodiac?" Nigel asked. "Is Pandora on her way?"

"No, she's really dead!"

"You killed her?"

"You did!" Ptolemy exclaimed. "Last summer!"

"I would have remembered that."

"Everything's been erased!" Ptolemy complained, "The city's back to normal, Trish and Patti don't recognize me, and you're apparently not an old Persian guy anymore."

Nigel looked in the bathroom mirror. His was the same young, pasty white face he always had. He hadn't looked Persian in centuries.

"Why would I look Persian?" he asked.

"Because Solomon turned you human!" Ptolemy said. "Or maybe he turned you back into a Fire-Blood. I don't know what's going on anymore. He made everything normal again."

"You're saying there's been a Deus Ex Machina?"

"Yes, one of those!" Ptolemy said. "The bunch of us, we were in Atlantis with Poseidon, there were Frost Giants everywhere, and then time froze. My armour disappeared, so I stayed absolutely still as Brian revealed himself as the bad guy and started monologuing about his victory."

"Who's Brian?"

"Laptop Guy!"

"Laptop Guy's name is Brian?"

"No, he's really named Solomon! And he's your father! Then the two of you disappeared, so I crawled out of the frozen waters to grab his laptop off the bar and look for anything that could help us. And guess what? He copied the Book of Summoning onto this thing! All seven spells! In English, no less! Long story short, everybody disappeared, Atlantis flooded, and I used one of these spells to get to safety at the last second."

"Why does a Zodiac Knight need to use one of Pandora's spells?"

"Because Solomon stole my powers!" Ptolemy explained.

"Don't you get it? He's like a new evil Zodiac! A Dark Zodiac! And I'm immune to his abilities, so I'm the only chance we have at stopping him!"

"I don't understand," Nigel said. "Is Poseidon here? Can I talk to him instead?"

"It was going on midnight, so I presume he's at the Fields of Vigrid," Ptolemy said. "For the Aeonomega, I mean."

"An Aeonomega against who?"

"Gods against Titans," Ptolemy said. "The Battle of Ragnarök."

"And we're supposed to...?"

"Help me stop it!" Ptolemy exclaimed.

Nigel paused.

"I think the Battle of Ragnarök might be a little out of my league," he said.

"We've got his spells," Ptolemy said, placing the laptop on the toilet seat. He flipped it open and began browsing through a folder of text documents. "I think he meant to erase these during the Deus Ex Machina, but couldn't since I was holding his laptop at the time."

"How to summon Fire-Bloods, Shadow-Bloods," Nigel said, reading the table of contents out loud. "How to summon food, tools, relics, yourself, and... *Oblivion*? How do you summon *Oblivion*?"

"It's supposed to summon a gateway into the Void," Ptolemy said. "It's not something I'm keen on trying."

"So this really is Pandora's book!"

"Every spell he needed to recover his soul and turn back into the Zodiac Knight," Ptolemy said. "But they're not so much spells as they are reality hacks. Anybody can do them as long as they're reading from this laptop.

Otherwise, the spell vanishes from memory."

"So we could make our own Fire-Blood," Nigel said with a hint of excitement in his voice.

"No, no," Ptolemy hastily said. "Don't do that. That did not end well."

"Can we try making a Shadow-Blood then?"

"You *especially* don't want to do that."

"Does Pandora know you have this?" he asked.

"Pandora's dead," Ptolemy said. "You kept her box on your piano, but I'm guessing Solomon hid it."

"And did you tell Trisha?" Nigel asked. "Does Jesse know?"

"Not yet."

“Good,” Nigel said. “We need to keep our heads low and move out to the country. Avoid big cities, mountain ranges, ocean views, forests, and prairies. Our best chance of surviving this war is to hide in the least interesting place imaginable for the next hundred years.”

“I didn’t come to you for advice on where to bury my head,” Ptolemy said. “We’ve got Second Age Magic at our command. We can use it.”

“Against a Zodiac Knight?”

“He used it against me when I was a Knight,” Ptolemy said.

“I can use it against him. I just need ideas on how.”

“This isn’t my field.”

“It totally is!” Ptolemy insisted. “I’ve been training to become a Knight for over twenty years, and you made me master it in ten minutes! We fought Typhon together, remember? You have ideas in your head, and when you aren’t burying it in the sand, you deliver. I need you on this.”

Nigel bit his lip. It slightly hurt. The pain subsided as if it were trying to avoid detection.

“You said I was human,” he said as he lightly scratched the back of his hand. He felt the burning sensation of his skin cells growing back through tiny flames, indicating he was a Fire-Blood. “If you’re right, there’s a chance I might still be. Jog my memory. Can you prove these spells are real?”

“I’ll do you better,” Ptolemy said. “I’ll show you Ragnarök.”

\* \* \*

Ptolemy finished washing his hands and stepped out of the washroom.

“When I escaped Atlantis, I wound up somewhere in Afghanistan,” Ptolemy said. “I spent most of the night

studying the spells and used this particular one to get here. It's easy enough to use."

Trisha was knocking at the door.

"Nigel, what's going on in there?" she asked.

"It's nothing," Nigel called to her.

"Let her in," Ptolemy said. "She's part of this too."

"I'm not going to expose her to this of all things!"

"Listen we don't have time to undergo your personal journey all over again," Ptolemy said. "You're not a reclusive ass anymore. You're a nice, friendly guy who entrusts his family with secrets."

"I've never been that."

"Open the door or I will."

"What will we tell her?" Nigel asked, moving to the door.

"The truth," Ptolemy said. Nigel opened the door. Trisha and Patti entered.

"What are you two doing?" Trisha asked. "Who *is* this guy?"

"This is Ptolemy and he's a wandering magician," Nigel said.

"Right," Trisha said, unconvinced. "What's he really selling?"

Patti squinted her eyes at Ptolemy and said, "You look familiar."

"Is it the sexy kind of familiar?" Ptolemy asked.

"Eww, no," Patti said, stepping away.

"Damn," Ptolemy cursed. "Oh, wait! Did you maybe have a dream about me wearing armour on an ice rink or us playing video games together in a giant pyramid?"

Patti almost went cross-eyed. "And then someone threw a mountain at your head?"

"That happened!" Ptolemy said. "You remember!"

"I think I'm going to leave now," Patti said, quietly backing down the stairs. "I don't handle '*Twilight Zone*' situations very well."

As Patti left, Ptolemy wracked his brain trying to understand. "She remembers me. The event was supposed to be permanent on humans. Maybe it was the telepathic link, but she definitely remembers me. Can either of you hear my thoughts right now? No? Damn! Solomon took her implant!"

"Ice rinks? Pyramids? Implants?" Trisha scratched her head. "Nigel, I don't know what weird things you have planned with this man, but..."

"Come and watch, honey," Nigel said. "He's going to show us how to open a portal."

"Is that code for something dirty?"

"No, he will literally open a vortex between two worlds."

That caught her interest. Trish stepped aside to watch.

"Carry on then."

"Okay, the first step was to..." Ptolemy read from the laptop he was carrying. As he read aloud, a lot of the instructions seemed to disappear from everyone's memory. Nigel even forgot Ptolemy washing his hands, which meant it might have been part of the spell.

Finally, Ptolemy turned to the closet door, grabbed the handle, and closed his eyes.

"See you in a minute," he said as he opened the closet and took a backwards step inside. He closed the door behind him.

They waited.

"Where's the portal again?" Trisha asked.

"Ptolemy, you're in a closet," Nigel answered.

No one replied. Nigel approached the closet and opened it. It was full of their clothes.

“Good trick,” Trisha said, “but I think we should stick to hiring bands.”

Nigel was still trying to figure out where Ptolemy went.

“He entered and...” Nigel couldn’t even remember how Ptolemy entered the closet.

“Is there a secret door in there we didn’t know about?” Trisha asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, this is dumb,” Trisha said. “I’m going downstairs if you need anything.”

“Stop,” Nigel said as a sudden thought occurred to him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Trisha, I think I... did something wrong.”

“No, we just let a weirdo in. That’s all.”

“I meant beforehand,” Nigel said. “Are you... happy?”

“Not with the present situation.”

“I mean with this life,” Nigel said. “Do you really want to be here? Are you happy with me?”

“Of course I am,” she said sincerely. “Why wouldn’t I be? I think we made a good life for ourselves, all things considered.”

“Then why do I remember you being happier?” Nigel asked. “I think I did something that took it away. I think I made a deal I shouldn’t have.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, unclear as to whether this was a break-up or a breakdown.

“I had a dream last night,” Nigel said. “I had a chance to throw away something special and be normal again. But it all feels strange. This life... it’s familiar, but it’s not home.”

“How did you dream?” Trisha asked. “You don’t even sleep.”

“Honey, I was wrong,” Nigel said. “I shouldn’t have tried to hold you back. You’re the most ridiculous, most reckless,



most amazing woman I know. And for the first time in nine thousand years, you made me feel alive.”

“Nine thousand...?”

The studio door opened and Ptolemy came out, a blast of snow following in his wake. He closed the door and opened his eyes.

“Asgard’s been destroyed,” he said. “By the way, don’t open the door after I go in. I can only open portals through closed doors.”

“What do you mean Asgard’s been destroyed?” Nigel asked. Small memories of being there were coming back to him.

“As in, the realm’s been torn apart,” Ptolemy said. “The war’s already come and gone. I tried a few other realms, but they’re gone too. The Fields of Asphodel, Muspelheim... I sure as heck wasn’t going to try Atlantis. This war’s been moving from realm to realm for almost half a day. There’s too many deities fighting for any one place to hold them. Once they tear through all the realms, Earth will become their battlefield.”

Trisha was stunned, unsure of what was taking place. Something was stirring within her that seemed linked to Nigel’s emotions. Whatever he was rejecting was starting to vanish inside her as well. She vaguely remembered being a queen.

“Where’s the war now?” Nigel asked.

“I don’t know all the realms,” Ptolemy said, “but there was one place that looked like it was ready to breach: Elysian Fields.”

“That’s in Antarctica,” Trisha suddenly spoke, shocked that she knew this. “Located directly above Tartarus.”

“It’s a trap,” Nigel realized. “Solomon said he was going to destroy the gods by noon. He must’ve known the war would pass through that realm.”

"You remember?" Ptolemy asked.

"I remember giving up," Nigel said, his skin colour slowly changing to a darker, olive tan. His hair began to grey. "I remember letting Solomon make me believe the worst of myself."

"Nigel, your face..." Trisha said.

Nigel's eye scarred over.

"I take back my move, Solomon," he thought aloud. "The game's still on."

Trisha's memories returned. She gasped as every missing thing she experienced flashed before her eyes. The attack on Halifax, piloting the tavern, escaping Atlantis... real memories were washing over her new ones. The last six months returned to her.

"We're alive," she said as the last memory of Atlantis collapsing flashed before her eyes. "How did we get here?"

"Solomon is the first Zodiac," Nigel said. "He disguised himself as Brian and set this whole thing up in order to take back his power from Ptolemy. When he got what he wanted, he changed history and sent us home with new memories. He Deus Ex Machina'd us."

"I guess it could have been worse," Trisha said.

"He's still carrying on with his plan to kill the gods and Titans."

"So why do we remember now?"

"A Deus Ex Machina is only temporary on non-humans," Nigel said. "The deal was that our new memories needed my consent. But I can't go back to my old life, even if it means staying human."

Patti screamed downstairs and dropped a glass.

"I thought humans were permanent," Ptolemy said.

But Patti hadn't screamed because her memories had returned. She screamed because Jesse had broken through the front door and overthrown a table.

A burst of flame erupted at Nigel's door. Jesse had violently teleported into his room, rage in his eyes, his veins pulsing with fire.

He raised his arm and angrily summoned his sword. His entire body engulfed itself in blue flame. Fiery angel wings sprouted from his back. The madness settled down to reveal Jesse had just transformed his own body. His arms were thicker. His jaw was stronger. His brow was angrier. His eye sockets were dark as coal. His hair was longer. Jesse had put on his war face.

"I went to see Christine," he said. "She left town three months ago. There was no forwarding address. Solomon said he would fix her. He gave me his word."

"Jesse, I'm so sorry," Nigel said.

"Will she remember me?" Jesse asked.

Nigel hesitated before speaking, "No. It's not just her memories of you that are gone. Solomon must have taken everything."

Jesse's veins throbbed. "Then point me at Solomon."

"You heard the man," Nigel said to Ptolemy. "Take us to Tartarus."

## 41. Return to Tartarus

The tavern closed early that day.

Patti, confused by all the excitement, was told to take the rest of the afternoon off. She'd have to be brought up to speed at a more opportune time. Trisha turned off the "Open" sign, locked the doors, and shut down the kitchen while Nigel and Jesse frantically searched the closets for supplies and winter gear.

Several minutes later, they were ready for war. Ptolemy created a portal through the bathroom door and brought the four of them to the cold, miserable realm of Tartarus. Jesse, Nigel, Trisha, and Ptolemy emerged from an empty prison cell and found themselves on a catwalk overlooking the River Styx. It took a few moments for Nigel to get his bearings and work out where the Well of Elysia was from here. Ptolemy had come armed with Solomon's laptop while Trisha had helped herself to one of Nigel's shotguns, even though she had no chance of hurting a deity with it. Jesse had put away his angel wings for now, but his sword was still battle-ready. He eagerly awaited Nigel's command.

"That way," Nigel pointed down a nearby tunnel. With that, Jesse led the charge with the others close behind. Every

bone in Nigel's body ached, but he soldiered on with a limp, determined to face his maker.

Ptolemy kept browsing the computer for spells to use against Solomon. He considered making his own Shadow-Blood to battle Solomon's, but the spell could only be cast under a new moon. There was also a summoning spell that he could use to acquire Odin's sword, but wasn't sure the weapon would be much use against a Zodiac Knight. His other options weren't as promising. There was nothing they could summon that could hurt Solomon, and there wasn't any spell to remove his soul.

As they ran, Trisha noticed Jesse picking up the pace.

"Jesse, are you okay?" Trisha asked.

"I'll be fine," Jesse huffed, bottling up his anger.

"I ask because you don't look fine."

"Remember, we're not trying to kill Solomon," Nigel reminded him.

"We may not be able to," Ptolemy said. "Can this guy really release the Shadow-Bloods?"

"The chains are forged from Second Age magic; he's First," Nigel explained. "Once the gods breach the realm above, Solomon will free the twelve and end the Aeonomega himself without setting foot on the battlefield." Jesse gripped his sword even tighter and said, "But the gods beat them before."

Nigel shook his head. "Solomon will have a failsafe this time. He won't make the same mistake twice."

They arrived at the Well of Elysia. The twelve Shadow-Blood giants loomed overhead, still chained to the walls. A single catwalk extended towards the center of the room. Standing at the edge of it was Solomon, looking upon his creations and biding his time.

Jesse brandished his sword as they approached him. He furiously charged towards his target, his wings unfolding as he cursed Solomon's name.

Solomon turned to glance at Jesse. Jesse was immediately thrown backwards by an unseen force. The Fire-Blood tumbled across the metal grating and quickly got to his feet, his wings retracting. His opponent hadn't even flinched.

Trisha responded by cocking her shotgun and firing at Solomon. Shrapnel from the blast swept harmlessly around him like air. With a thought, he easily relieved her of the weapon and sent it flying off the catwalks. This wasn't an unforeseen outcome, but Trisha figured it was worth a shot.

"I thought we had a deal," Solomon said to Nigel.

"I wasn't satisfied," Nigel said.

"I predicted that possibility, though I hoped it wouldn't come to pass," Solomon said. "Let me guess: you had a crisis of conscience. You couldn't bear the destruction of two races on your shoulders, so you came to appeal to my better nature. You probably had a lovely speech lined up as well where you prattle on about how taking revenge on the Creator solves nothing and how I must find it in my heart to forgive. I had this conversation with myself already and even then I wasn't convincing."

"You don't need to be a smartass about it."

"You of all people should hate deities more than anyone," Solomon said. "Need I remind you of how--"

"...they constantly pursued Jesse and I back in the old days?" Nigel interrupted. "How the worst of them tried to destroy us, and how the best of them tried to deceive us? How their parasitic need for worship has held back scientific progress for centuries and given us nothing in

return but false hope and holy wars? Yes it's clear they're an insufferable lot."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Solomon said with a smile. "You learn quickly. You'll also understand that I--"

"...have to destroy them because you were once within your rights to," Nigel said, interrupting again. "But if you think killing them--"

"..will put an end to war and suffering, then I'm wrong?"

Solomon interrupted right back. "That this whole war is just a sanctimonious charade I'm using to piss on the Creator's plan? Yes, I've considered the audacity of my actions and I'm--"

"Irritatingly at peace with yourself, I know," Nigel said. "But the gods held back your Shadow-Bloods before. Why will this be any different?"

"Because I have a new piece on the board," Solomon said, "and this one can properly holster the power of all the Shadow-Bloods at once."

It took Nigel a moment to understand who he meant. "You mean Vladimir. You plan to use a chaos demon as a host for your monsters!"

"It will be quite a show." Solomon said, snapping his fingers. A chain broke on one of the humanoid Shadow-Bloods called Vesuvius. The monster roared as it struggled to release itself. The room shook violently as it did so. Jesse lunged at Solomon again. Solomon knocked him away again.

"You might want to keep your brother alive," Solomon said to Nigel as Jesse got to his feet. "I put Pandora's Box at the center of the Earth for the purposes of this plan. One wrong move and he's..."

Solomon finally took notice of Ptolemy. The young man had been standing behind the others this whole time,

browsing the laptop for anything that could help. Solomon was disrupted by this sudden reveal.

“...I destroyed that thing,” he said, looking at the laptop. Before Ptolemy could react, Solomon raised a hand and made a crushing motion. The laptop, however, remained intact. Solomon then tried to summon Ptolemy towards himself to no avail. His powers weren’t working on Ptolemy at all.

“That’s interesting,” Solomon noted.

“Didn’t plan on this, did you?” Ptolemy asked.

“This is unplanned for, yes,” Solomon said. “I should have seen this coming.”

Before Solomon could address this concern, they heard noises above. The ceiling rattled.

“The gods...” Trisha said. “They’re here.”

“Showtime,” Solomon grinned, releasing all the Shadow-Bloods at once. The enormous chains snapped and rained down past the catwalks like a great metal avalanche. As the chains crashed to the floors below, the Shadow-Bloods fell from their perches and drifted through the air, seemingly unaffected by gravity. Immediately, they caught the smell of a thousand deities fast approaching and began ramming the ceiling, tearing down rafters and metal plates. The dirt above began to seep through as they burrowed their way out of Tartarus.

“As for you,” Solomon said to the others, “the mercy I once offered was a courtesy. Maybe it’s time I cut you off permanently.”

Solomon was suddenly set upon by an enormous three-headed dog. Cerberus had leapt down from one of the overhead caves and tried to maul the Zodiac Knight. Unfortunately, Solomon easily overpowered the dog and threw him towards the others. Cerberus landed at their feet, dazed, but still managed to get up. Two of its heads



looked with fondness to Trisha while the third head happily offered its stick back to Nigel and wagged its tail.

Solomon charged up a fiery ball of energy in his left hand and hurled it towards the five of them. Before it struck Cerberus, however, Ptolemy leapt in front of the dog. The fiery blast bent around him and dissipated, leaving no trace. Solomon cursed.

"I'll handle Solomon," Ptolemy said. "Nigel, you and Trish head to the surface. Try to warn everybody. Jesse, do whatever you can to slow those Shadow-Bloods down. Don't let any of them touch you."

"On it," Jesse said, firing up his wings. As the Shadow-Bloods dug into the ceiling, Jesse soared in after them sword-first.

"You can't take Solomon alone," Trisha said to Ptolemy.

"Don't worry about me," Ptolemy said. "Just get to the gods and hurry!"

Nigel and Trisha hopped on Cerberus' back. Nigel looked to Solomon who leered back at him.

"Come now, son!" Solomon said. "What about our big finale? You'd leave this boy to confront me instead?"

"It's for the best, pops," Nigel said. "Like you said: in the end, I just want to go home. So give him hell, Ptolemy."

With that, Cerberus galloped into the tunnels.

In a blind rage, Solomon began unleashing every power he had against Ptolemy. Telekinesis, disintegration, psychic manipulation... nothing was working. He couldn't even control anything Ptolemy was touching, including the catwalk at his feet. He tried ripping machinery out of the wall from a distance and hurling it at the boy, but it simply fell out of the air as it approached them. No matter what, his powers wouldn't touch the boy.

"Uncanny," he said. "It seems the Creator has chosen to get involved after all."

With that, he unsheathed a long, thin, straight sword out of thin air and began approaching Ptolemy.

"We'll have to do this old school," he said.

Ptolemy smiled sheepishly, turned tail, and ran.

He scurried into the caves of Tartarus with Solomon at his heels.

## 42. Twilight of the Gods

Cerberus raced through the caves like a rabbit through a tunnel. Higher and higher they rose through the caverns, the air growing ever colder. Nigel shivered in his jacket as they approached the surface.

The dog emerged through a large crack in the ice. It was twilight wherever in Antarctica they were as the sun sat just below the horizon. Trisha could feel a slight tingle from its rays on her skin, but there wasn't enough direct sunlight to do any harm. Cerberus took refuge on a small ice shelf in the shadow of a mountain and surveyed the wintry wasteland known as Elysian Fields. The blowing wind gnawed at their skin and even the magical ice-breathing, laser-bee-shooting dog shivered.

"I thought the Elysian Fields were supposed to be a giant garden," Trisha said.

"It was nicer in the spring," Nigel said. "A few thousand years ago, anyway."

"So where's the war?" Trisha asked.

They felt the ground rumble, but the source of the rumble was coming from above.

Enormous glowing tears streaked across the sky, pulsing with light. The largest breach tore open. Gods and Titans of all shapes and sizes poured through like fish out of a

net, armed with swords, spears, rocket launchers, and monster trucks. The downpour of deities flooded upon the ice around them, barely missing the ice shelf. Other tears began to break open too, filling the sky with thousands of angry gods and Titans battling their way to Earth, leaving behind only a wasted realm.

Trisha and Nigel held onto one another as the war swelled around them. Deities spread out for miles in all directions engaged in battle. It was impossible to keep track of anything. While some engaged in traditional sword-and-shield combat, others flew around shooting fire, ice, and lightning from their hands. Modern deities attacked each other with arm-mounted tanks and microwave eye-lasers. There were even a few dozen airships flying over the field, launching missiles at everything in sight.

Nigel turned to Trisha and said, "I bet you won't see this in your video games."

"Not until next-gen anyway," Trisha replied, trying to take in the surrounding battle. To her, it was like watching all the action parts from *'Star Wars'*, *'Lord of the Rings'* and *'Dragon Ball Z'* at once.

Somehow the battle managed to shape itself around their raised ice shelf, leaving them completely untouched.

Deities were exceptionally good at avoiding bystanders when they needed to.

Nigel scanned Elysian Fields for familiar faces. Several of Odin's battleships soared overhead exchanging fire with the Goliath. Sinmara and her Frost Giants were once again engaged in battle against Poseidon and his jackal-headed virtual warriors. Nigel even caught sight of Lewis (God of Office Supplies) and Atlas grappling with each other on the ice while Keith (God of Classic Rock) cheered on Lewis with a guitar solo.

Trisha found herself playing *"Where's Waldo?"* with the crowd as well. She spotted a few of Charlie Magnus' Templar demigods happily fighting around the battlefield even though they technically didn't need to be here. She even found Typhon who was still encased in steel, lying on the ground a few miles away and not hurting anyone. Wu Tang the Pomeranian viciously barked at the Monster Titan.

"How are we supposed to stop this again?" Trisha asked.

"Gods and Titans always listen to the highest authority," Nigel said. "We just need to find Odin and Surtur... or Mishnykov. That's it! Look for a giant bear robot!"

Trisha located the giant bear robot immediately. Not too far from them was Mishnykov at his full four-story size battling a man-sized Odin. Odin danced around with the Flaming Sword, swiping at the great beast. Mishnykov was quick, however, and evaded his attacks by transforming his mechanical body to bend around Odin's strikes. In the belly of the great bear was Surtur, caged in Mishnykov's furnace like a rat. Surtur's feet were still encased in steel. It became very clear that their battle was for his life.

"We need to save Surtur again, don't we?" Trisha asked.

"No, I think it's me that has to do it," Nigel said. "If we want any chance of stopping this madness, a human has to get in there and beat the gods at their own game."

"But you can barely walk."

"I have strength enough for this," Nigel said. "Odin's fighting pattern is predictable. Mishnykov throws more weight around, but leaves himself open. It's like amateur hour at my dojo. I know my judgment's been off lately, but if there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that I can take these two boneheads."

Trisha gave him the same look she gave him before he walked into R'Lyeh. She'd seen the man face down Titans

and walk away without a scratch, but now he looked ready to fall apart. Still, she sensed a sincerity in his voice that had been lacking during his time as captain.

“Always a better soldier than a leader,” the corner of Trisha’s mouth scooped up. “Only you could look at Ragnarök and call it amateur hour.”

“I only need a weapon.”

One of the dog’s heads responded by offering him the stick in its mouth. Nigel took the stick and gave the drool a quick wipe-down. In his hand, it felt like a good quarterstaff.

Trisha smiled, “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“The crazy part is yet to come.”

She leaned in and kissed him. It was the first time she’d done that since his face changed.

Nigel winked at her, “I’ll be right back.”

Trisha slid off the dog’s back and Nigel shouted for it to charge. Cerberus obliged, leaping off the ice shelf into battle. Trisha ran to the edge of the shelf and watched him vanish into the crowd.

The dog raced through the battlefield. Dodging debris and leaping over blasts of lightning, the dog carried Nigel into the heart of the skirmish. With a blast of its ice breath, the dog froze a path through the soldiers, knocking frozen gods and Titans out of the way as it bore down on Odin and Mishnykov. For other deities, the dog expelled swarms of bees from its other head. Every god unlucky enough to encounter these swarms involuntarily found themselves screaming, “Not the bees! Not the bees!” because that’s the only thing one can truly yell when that happens.

Through the insanity, cannonballs rained down around them. Nigel twisted around to see the Goliath bearing down on him, firing the full fury of its coal-based arsenal. Cerberus bounded over the ensuing craters as they heard Krindel’s laugh over the wind.

Then, in a very anticlimactic twist, the dog's left head wrenched around and shot a steady stream of lasers from its eyes. The lasers sliced through the Goliath's hull like butter. Krindel screamed as his gigantic manta ray-shaped ship crashed into the crowd of deities, carving a massive multi-football field-length trail through the ice. Any deities it struck immediately retaliated at close range, using their powers to tear apart the ship that had landed on them. Nigel gave Cerberus a rewarding scratch behind the ear and clutched his quarterstaff as they approached their targets.

Odin struck Mishnykov in the back of the leg with the Sword. The fire severed the Titan's mechanical tendon, causing the bear to fall to its knees. Odin approached the monster's heart, raising his sword for the killing blow. Mishnykov was in excruciating pain, the fire from the Sword pouring into his gears.

At the last moment, Nigel raced past on the dog, sweeping Odin's legs with his staff. Odin missed his mark and fell ungracefully into the snow.

Nigel dismounted from Cerberus, who hurried away to give Nigel space. Nigel's joints ached as he forced himself to step forward and confront the King of the Gods.

Odin didn't even bother with words. His shoulders moved to swing at Nigel from the ground. Nigel stepped back to avoid his attack and watched Odin hurry to his feet.

Next came a flurry of sword-strikes as Odin rushed to take off one of Nigel's limbs. His eyes glowed red with fury, but his shoulders gave away every move he made. A step to the left, a step to the right, and a small hop were all it took for Nigel to dodge the Flaming Sword. This left Nigel a small opening to strike the back of Odin's head with the staff, forcing Odin to stumble past. Nigel took a deep breath of freezing air and soldiered on.

As Odin spun around, Nigel could tell from his tense shoulders that he intended to finish off Nigel with a thought. Before Odin could even formulate that thought, however, Nigel struck him once upside the chin to deliver Odin's focus to the sky. With a strike from the other end of his staff, he knocked the handle of the Flaming Sword up and out of Odin's hand.

"Yoink," said Nigel as he plucked Odin's sword from the air.

Armed with the Flaming Sword in one hand, Nigel spun around and swept Odin to the ground with the staff in his other. A slice of the Sword, and he shaved Odin's beard, leaving only smoulders hanging from his chin. Nigel stood over the King of the Gods, his sword pointed at Odin's throat. In his other hand, he twirled his staff distractingly to throw off Odin's focus.

"Go ahead," Odin said. "Finish me. Then the Titans will get nothing."

"Sorry," Nigel said. "But I need you alive to end this."

Mishnykov rose up behind Nigel and plunged his mighty fist upon him. Nigel dropped his staff and rolled through the snow as Odin was crushed into the ice. Nigel was certain that Odin could survive that attack, so he focused on Mishnykov.

"Hey, buddy," Nigel said, steeling himself. "You're Krindel's whipping bear, aren't you?"

Mishnykov growled at him with disdain. He could see Nigel breathing heavily in pain. The old man's age was catching up to him.

Surtur was squealing inside his cage. "Fire-Blood, get me out of here and I will name my children after you. I'll even name myself after you."

"Relax, I got this," Nigel said as he kept an eye on the Titan's shoulders.



Mishnykov punched the ground at Nigel's feet. Nigel dropped the Sword and fell away from the bear.

"I thought I got this," Nigel reiterated, searching for his weapon.

He saw the Sword sitting a few feet away, but before he could grab it, Mishnykov picked it up by the handle with the tips of his fingers. Nigel leapt after it, grabbing onto Mishnykov's thumb. The bear hoisted Nigel into the air. He dangled from the bear's left hand trying to reach the sword. Mishnykov made a grab for him with his other hand. Nigel let go of the thumb, dropped through the Titan's grasping hand, and grabbed onto some loose cables jutting out from the wrist. He quickly scampered up the forearm and raced up Mishnykov's shoulder, his own shoulders burning with exertion.

Mishnykov swung the tiny Flaming Sword at Nigel, stabbing himself in the shoulder in the process. The bear growled in pain as Nigel climbed around his neck. Nigel grabbed onto the bear's jaw and used it to swing himself back over the chest, making a grab for the sword. His hand wrapped around the handle and his weight pulled the flaming blade free from Mishnykov's shoulder. Nigel fell down the torso and slid off the bear's knee, landing in the snow. A sharp shooting pain in his lower left leg told Nigel he might have cracked another bone.

The mighty bear machine made one last grab for Nigel, but howled in agonizing pain as the tiny man moved forward and severed his hand. All that remained of Mishnykov's stumpy arm were whirring servos and machine parts, melted in the fires of the Second Age weapon. The Titan fell back, clutching his stump.

The entire war stopped as Mishnykov bellowed. The gods and Titans fell quiet as their superiors were being cut down by a mere human. Even Odin didn't dare leave the crater

he'd been smashed into. He was still embarrassed about losing his ultimate weapon so easily.

Mishnykov fell onto his side and his belly cage cracked opened. Surtur fell into the snow. The Fire Lord quickly scampered towards Nigel on his hands, his steel-bound feet dragging behind.

"Praise be to Gaia!" he exhaled. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, I love you! You are my... hey, what are you doing?"

Nigel swung his sword at Surtur.

Surtur buried his face in the snow and raised his arms to block, but Nigel wasn't aiming at his head. With two precision cuts, Nigel sliced right through the hardened steel on his feet, freeing him. Surtur quickly kicked the stygian metal away, delighted that he had his feet back.

"What have you done?" Odin asked.

"Surtur, I ask only one thing of you..." Nigel said, breathing heavily and limping on his damaged leg. His body was in no shape for fighting any more Titans and he was ready to pass out at any moment.

"End the war?" Surtur asked. "You got it. I will truce this. We can all go home."

"Odin, do you agree?" Nigel asked.

"Of course not," Odin said. "If we make a truce, nothing will change."

"I'm not fighting change," Nigel said, turning to every deity in sight. "I just want both races to embrace it together. Look at you all - you're supposed to be family. And yet every famous story about the great gods and mighty Titans is a mockery of how dysfunctional you are. Solomon has been engineering these wars between you for thousands of years, taking advantage of your ancient feuds. Don't just end this war; do yourselves a favor and end every future war."

"Atlas agrees!" he shouted from across the field. "Atlas is tired of fighting and wants to open his own bakery!"

"And I just want to keep playing with paper clips and refilling staplers!" shouted Lewis.

"And we just want to get drunk and watch hockey," said a Frost Giant.

"No, you fools, we *must* fight!" Krindel exclaimed, pushing through the crowd from the wreckage of his ship. "Where is your Titan pride?"

"We've been fighting since midnight!" shouted a Fire Titan.

"Most of us were hoping this would be over by now."

"These wars normally take years," a Thunderbird said.

"Who agreed to *years*?" asked Sparkles the Unicorn God,

"I've got shows recording on my PV-R."

Odin screwed up his face in confusion. "What part of an Aeonomega made anyone think this *wasn't* about the end of the world?"

"94.3 percent of us were born after the last war," a statistics god said. "81.9 percent of us don't even know how these things work."

"Yeah, I don't know about war, man," said a hippy Titan,

"I'm only fighting because the Creator strikes me with lightning when I try to protest."

"Besides, you elder gods took all the good powers," said Barry, God of Ugly Christmas Sweaters. "A lot of us regular folk are just here as filler. Where's the pride in that?"

"So nobody wants to fight?" Odin asked.

"I do!" shouted Tyr, Heimdall, Vidar, Freya and Odin's other friends and family.

"Me too!" shouted Happy, the Fighting God, dancing around in his boxer shorts.

"Show of hands," Nigel said. "Should they call a truce?"

Almost everybody present raised their hands. It was unanimous.

Krindel shook his head with disappointment as he entered the inner circle.

"And so it happens," Krindel said to Odin. "What we once called glory, our people now call embarrassing. Brother, are we really this dysfunctional?"

"You and I are both supposed to be Santa Claus," Odin chuckled. "As far as spreading holiday cheer goes, I'd call this an absolute failure."

Krindel looked back at the smouldering remains of his ship and sighed. Then he looked to Mishnykov with his missing hand who was letting out a light metallic whimper.

Centuries ago, warriors would gather around such carnage and celebrate. Now everybody just wanted to go home.

Krindel reluctantly helped his brother to his feet. For the first time ever, he suddenly felt like he and Odin had something in common.

"Maybe we should end this after all," Krindel said.

"Your call," Nigel told Odin.

Odin looked to Surtur who seemed very desperate for this truce to happen.

The King of the Gods sighed.

Then, Odin took everybody for surprise as he grabbed the Flaming Sword from Nigel. With blinding speed, he cut through Surtur's chest. Surtur howled in pain for a moment before he vapourised into a pile of golden dust. Great light poured out of his essence as Odin and every other god absorbed the powers of the Titans. Odin cheered triumphantly as he won the Aeonomega, rose to a level beyond any god, and rewrote history with himself as its saviour, forever changing the world.

Or rather, that was the dream he gave up as he reluctantly shook Surtur's hand.

"I declare this war over," he said.

"Agreed," Surtur replied.

The Titan crushed Odin's hand. Odin winced and pulled away as Surtur laughed. Nigel shot him an angry look and Surtur stopped laughing, feeling rather silly. He apologized to Odin and confirmed that the war was still over.

Trisha came running through the crowd and threw herself over Nigel, hugging him tightly.

"You did it," she said. Cerberus ran up and licked them both with three tongues at once.

Nigel addressed everyone else, "You should all go home now. Solomon has released the Shadow-Bloods from the Well. They'll be here any minute."

"The Shadow-Bloods are free?" Odin asked in surprise.

"I'm not leaving," Surtur said. "If the Shadow-Bloods are loose, we must recapture them."

"I'm not going anywhere either," said Poseidon, stepping out of the crowd.

"You have my strength," said Atlas.

"And my bow," said Artemis, also appearing out of nowhere.

"And my axe!" declared Keith, God of Classic Rock, as he played a face-melting solo on his electric guitar.

The ground trembled.

Everyone tried to spot the source of the quaking, but what caught their attention was a new player on the field.

Coming out of the twilight was a man in dark clothing. The ice shook under his feet and a dark ooze swarmed over him as he limply marched towards the field of deities. It was Vladimir Tsepish, commandeered by the Shadow-Blood.

Vladimir's voice carried over the wind to the thousands of deities standing before him.

"I'm sorry," Vladimir spoke in his own voice. "I tried."

The ice exploded at Vladimir's feet. A small figure was thrown from the ice, sailing through the air. Everyone

stepped aside as Jesse fell towards the crowd. He landed in Artemis' arms, very conscious, but quite dizzy. She promptly dropped him in the snow.

From the shattered ice surged a heavy stream of dark, watery energy. The Shadow-Bloods had merged into a single shapeless entity. All that dark energy flowed into the sky and fell upon Vladimir. He floated off the ground as the Shadow-Bloods merged with him, using his shadow power for fuel.

Vladimir's shape changed into a large shadowy mess of heads, tentacles, wings and crustacean-like parts. And from those parts sprung other parts until he looked like a hundred monsters crawling out of each other, growing like a pillar towards the sky.

Many gods and Titans moved away from the horror, exposing Nigel and his comrades.

The Shadow-Blood had taken its final form.

It had become...

"Ragnarök," Surtur growled.

A ray of dark power blasted from the heart of the pillar into the crowd towards Nigel. The ground burst at Nigel's feet as Jesse pulled Trisha out of the way and Odin ran into the path of the blast to block it with his hands. The dark energy rippled around them as Odin fought against the sheer amount of power burning away at his palms. Unfortunately, he was not strong enough.

Odin fell away and Nigel was struck by what little energy was left.

He fell against the cracked ground so hard, it was impossible to imagine he survived.

In fact, that might have been the case.

Nigel's body didn't move as the ground collapsed and his body fell into Tartarus.

In the moments to follow, everyone felt a fire rage in their hearts.

Trisha and Jesse leapt into the chasm after Nigel's body. Surtur watched them with his fists clenching. To see it happen firsthand was too much to run away from. Something snapped inside his mind and he craved a new kind of retribution.

Poseidon, Artemis, and a slightly-charred Odin stood beside Sinmara, Atlas, and Mishnykov as they prepared to fight.

All other deities stood by, awaiting further orders.

Ragnarök loomed over them menacingly.

Surtur's voice reached all as he moved to the front of ranks, "Gods! Titans! This day will last forever in the hearts of legend! So stand fast your rage and ride it against the darkness for all glory on high! For we are the Ancient Ones of this planet! The Guardians of Law! The Champions of Order! And together, our fates will not be bound by prophecy! Tonight, our pantheons fight as one!"  
With that, the final battle began.

### **43. Fall of the Zodiac**

Ptolemy rushed through the caverns with a sword-crazy Solomon on his trail. Solomon's powers failed around Ptolemy, so Ptolemy was able to take detours through the rocky caverns without Solomon being able to magically track him. He crossed a foot-bridge over the River Styx, and hid himself behind a stone pillar.

Solomon entered the boy's hiding cavern, desperately trying to sniff him out. Ptolemy was too much of a liability to keep alive if his presence nullified his powers.

Ptolemy stayed quiet. Solomon couldn't use astral projection, cognition, or super-senses to locate him, but he could still use ordinary mortal hearing and intuition.

Ptolemy was essentially up against a more experienced version of Nigel, which meant he didn't stand a chance in close combat.

Solomon heard the sound of unknown scuffling in the distance and hurried to investigate.

Ptolemy, still clutching the laptop, found a small alcove in the rock and hid inside. He moved a rock to block the outside light, leaving himself in total darkness. He opened his laptop and searched the spells for anything he could use.



The summoning spell for relics only worked if he was more familiar with the relic in question. He could probably summon the Flaming Sword, but again, would stand no chance in a fight.

There was also another spell for opening portals into Oblivion, but the risk of opening a portal into the Void was too great. One blink and he'd also be pulled into the place where nothing exists.

Then there was that Fire-Blood spell, but he wasn't about to repeat Nigel's mistake.

He had no idea what to do.

*"Resourceful, you must be,"* I said to him in a fun, quirky voice.

Taken by surprise, he turned his laptop screen towards Me. All he saw was a green, rubber puppet with pointy ears in a cloak.

"I'm not seeing this," he said to himself in disbelief, not breaking eye contact.

"It doesn't matter what you see, it's what you believe," I said to him from another angle in the room. My voice was now deeper, gruffer, and more concise. "And the time has come to start believing in a higher truth about yourself." He turned the laptop towards this new voice. Standing before him was a tall, bearded wizard in a grey cloak and pointy hat with a wonderful white beard.

"Yoda? Gandalf?" Ptolemy asked. "Why are there two of you? I thought the Creator only picks one form per person."

"Yes, indeed," I said in a snappy british voice behind him. Ptolemy turned to see a large-jawed gentleman wearing a beige jacket, suspenders and fez step out of a blue police box. I had now taken the form of a famous television Doctor. "But that's the funny thing about kids these days. They're all so wrapped up in their television boxes and internet doo-dads that they recede into a modern form of

polytheism. Or in layman's terms, nerds worship too many gods."

"So do I get my own personal pantheon to fight for me?" Ptolemy asked.

"Fighting for you would be highly illogical," I said, discarding all emotion, growing pointy ears, and putting on a blue science officer's uniform. "Regulations state that we cannot interfere with primitive life-forms. Fortunately for you, circumstances have pressed us to lend guidance."

"In other words, you're fighting a losing battle," I continued in a deeper, coarser voice. I was now an archaeologist wearing a leather jacket with a fedora. "We can provide you with tools and weapons, but you're out of luck if you think that's all it'll take. Knowledge is the key to beating Solomon."

"Okay, hit me with knowledge!" Ptolemy begged.

From behind, I hit Ptolemy many times in the head, knocking coins out of his ears.

"Mamma mia!" I shouted in a stereotypical Italian accent and hopping around the cavern in my fancy 8-bit overalls, "This Solomon, he plays a one-man game of chess! To beat him, you must be *Player Two!*"

"You must become the night," my voice said, dropping to its lowest. I was now *the Bat*. "You must become a symbol of everything he stands for. Only then will he drop his guard. Only then will you find justice."

"But what does he stand for?" Ptolemy asked. "I can't figure out anything with all the childhood nostalgia in here."

"He stands for *fun!*" I exclaimed, now a bouncing pink pony.

"No, no, no, he stands for the game, dude," I corrected myself, now a giant talking turtle with an orange ninja mask. "You've gotta challenge him to the game, but bend some rules. Use the skills your master taught ya."

“And don’t forget to bring a towel!” I said as a talking towel.

“ROOOOOAAAAARRRRR!!!!” I bellowed as Godzilla.

“That’s enough!” Ptolemy exclaimed. “Guys, this pop culture parade of yours is pretty awesome, but can I speak to just one guy?”

“You may,” I said, taking on one final shape.

Standing before Ptolemy, I was a jolly old elf, dressed in red fur from my head to my foot, with clothes all tarnished with ashes and soot. My cheeks were like roses, my nose like a cherry, and the white beard of my chin was majestically hairy.

Ptolemy’s eyes twinkled before he squealed, “Santa!”

“Ho, ho, ho!” I chortled, so prim and so sunny, “I hope this form pleases you, my little young Jonny! Now down to business, and on my authority, I insist beating Solomon is of the highest priority!”

“Nigel taught me how to be a Zodiac Knight, not fight one,” Ptolemy said.

“You’re already a knight,” I told the boy quite sincere, “Find your courage within and all will be clear. I chose you for *you*, not just for your vessel, create your own rules and you can beat him at...uh... ‘chess-el’.”

“But if I go up against him, I’ll...” Ptolemy’s thoughts wandered off. A new idea was entering his head. “...I’ll be destroyed.”

Ptolemy looked back to the laptop and quickly browsed through the spells. “You’re right. I can do it. But this could go wrong very fast.”

“Sacrifices, sadly, are often quite hard. But as the flaw in his plan, you can catch him off-guard. As a Zodiac, he’s great, as a human, you’re greater, now go kick the butt of that tea-swilling traitor.”

“Okay, you can go now,” Ptolemy said, perusing the spells.

“I got this.”

"And so, young Ptolemy, I will leave you to fight. Merry Christmas to all, and..."

"...to all a good night?" Ptolemy finished.

"Er, I suppose that would be right." I said as vanished in a bright blaze of light.

\* \* \*

Solomon kicked a rock into the River Styx. Ptolemy's disappearance bothered him to no end. That boy could not be allowed to carry the summoning spells under any circumstances or he could ruin *everything*.

As he stepped onto a bridge crossing the Styx, he was surprised to see Ptolemy standing on the other end, no longer carrying the laptop. Solomon drew his sword.

"Easy, I won't run," Ptolemy said. "I thought you might like to play a game."

"I'm finished with games," Solomon said, making his way across the bridge. "Where's the laptop?"

As he stepped into the middle of bridge, large patches of blackness washed over them. Rips into the Void surrounded the bridge. Solomon stopped in his tracks and froze. The Voids were open on both sides of the bridge, preventing either from leaving.

"Don't blink," Ptolemy said, staring him down. "*That's* my game."

"You're mad," Solomon said. "How did you even cast the spell without the words in front of you?"

"I don't need to read it as I go," Ptolemy said. "I remember it pretty well."

"So the Creator's endowed you with the memory for ancient magic," Solomon realized.

“And here’s my game,” Ptolemy said. “First one to blink gets trapped in the eternal Void of nothingness where you’ll never grow old, hungry or tired again.”

“A staring contest to the death, then.”

“Not to the death,” Ptolemy said. “Just to an eternity of nothing.”

“You can’t hold the portals open forever.”

“You can’t *not blink* forever.”

With that, Solomon grabbed a handful of dust from the bridge and threw it in Ptolemy’s face. Ptolemy quickly held his eyes open with his fingers. The dirt stung his eyes but he didn’t let go.

“Solomon, you disappoint me,” Ptolemy said. “All these years and you didn’t even plan for a staring contest over the River Styx with some dumb-ass kid from California? I mean, come on, man. Oldest trick in the book.”

Solomon wouldn’t have it. He marched forward, his sword in hand.

“What are you doing?” Ptolemy asked.

“I’m finished with you.”

Before Ptolemy could react, Solomon drove the sword through the boy’s heart.

The surprised expression on Ptolemy’s face told Solomon the kid hadn’t fully planned this through.

Then Ptolemy did something unexpected.

He reached out and closed Solomon’s eyes for him.

Solomon suddenly felt the pull of the Void. He opened his eyes, but it was too late. He was getting pulled into the infinite expanse of nothingness. For all his power, nothing would save him now. Ptolemy had sacrificed himself to...

“No,” Solomon said in disbelief as he watched Ptolemy disappear into a puff of flame. Solomon’s sword fell to the ground. “A... Fire-Blood?”

All fell still and silent. From beyond the bridge, Solomon heard Ptolemy's voice say three simple words:

"Checkmate, butt-munch."

On those words, Solomon vanished into the Void.

The rips in space closed behind him, sealing the Dark Zodiac away forever.

From the other side of the bridge, the real Ptolemy ended his Void spell and came out of hiding. He said goodbye to his Fire-Blood double and thanked the heavens he didn't screw up the spell like Nigel did.

Satisfied with a game well-played, he closed the laptop and hurried to find his way out of these tunnels.

## 44. A Soul to Keep

The horror of Ragnarök unleashed black, fiery devastation upon the Antarctic landscape.

The creature tried to press forward and devour the buffet of deities standing before it, but for all its efforts, the combined forces of the gods and Titans were slowing it down considerably. From the ground, Fire and Frost Giants fired elemental blasts upon the monster while Odin's ships hit it with lightning from above. Several other deities worked together to generate walls of ice and energy to hold the creature in place.

A enormous tendril of salt water soared in from across the landscape as Poseidon summoned the ocean. With a wave of his hand, he hurled its incredible weight against Vladimir's chthonic body.

Artemis darted about, firing one arrow after another into the beast. Her arrows were the only things that seemed to be causing the creature pain, though they did little to slow the monster. Still, everyone trusted she knew what she was doing. She was, after all, the one who helped bring down the original twelve.

Ragnarök continued lumbering forwards, its hundreds of heads, arms, tentacles, and assorted body parts lashing out at any god who came close. Surtur knew they couldn't

keep this up forever. Their backs were against the mountain of ice, but standing together was the only thing that kept the beast from overwhelming them.

Down below, Jesse and Trisha descended through the broken ice into Tartarus. Trisha desperately scanned the bottom of the crack, looking for Nigel. Jesse followed close behind, making sure Trisha didn't fall in either.

They finally found him, lying on his back on a flat grey rock in the heart of ice. His face was bruised and blood pooled beneath him. He stared blankly ahead and took short shallow breaths. Trisha hurried down to him. Nigel barely noticed her.

"Nigel, say something!" she pleaded.

On one last breath, his chest stopped moving.

"Jesse, get over here!" Trisha yelled.

"Is he okay?" Jesse asked.

"Heal him! Bring him back to life!"

Jesse placed his hands on Nigel. Light flashed from his palms as Jesse poured his energy into Nigel, but Nigel continued to lay still. Tears were pouring down both his and Trisha's faces. They couldn't lose Nigel now. Not like this.

"Live, damn it!" Jesse screamed, pouring more healing energy into him.

"That's not going to work," a voice from behind them said.

They turned to see Hades climbing down the cavern after them. Still in his seventies' duds, he was worn ragged from the battle. Hanging from his belt were a pair of damaged nunchucks, which, as Hades' many self-inflicted bruises suggested, were not very effective weapons in this battle.

"Can you fix him?" Trisha asked.

"I'm a God of the Underworld," he said. "I don't deal in death."



"But I saw you in Solomon's vision," Jesse said. "You spoke to the Fates! You can change this!"

"Changing fate is how we got to this point," Hades said.

"Even then, it's too late."

"What do you mean too late?"

"No soul," Hades reminded them.

"Then give him one!" Jesse angrily shouted. "I already lost Christine! I'm not losing Nigel today too!"

"It's not that easy," Hades told him. "He has to earn it through official channels."

"Where are these official channels?" Jesse shouted.

"Hasn't he sacrificed enough? I say he earned a soul. Trisha says he earned a soul. Don't *you* think he earned a soul?"

"Well, yeah, but it's not our call," Hades said, "This kind of decision goes high up..."

"What about everybody else?" Jesse shouted, his voice exploding. The ice around them vibrated from an unseen force. It took Trisha a moment to realize Jesse was that force.

Jesse's eyes glowed brightly, and both Trisha and Hades found themselves being pulled into his anger. Jesse's emotions swam with passion, reaching out to every mind around them. Gods and Titans alike felt his presence in their minds. The voice in their heads was screaming for Nigel's right to live.

Even Surtur almost faltered when it happened. Jesse's intrusion was fast and hard-hitting. The truth poured into Surtur's heart, and he found himself screaming "Yes! Give him a damn soul already!"

Other deities were screaming the same, begging to save him.

Jesse's presence reached as far as Halifax where Patti had no idea what was going on, but she couldn't bring

herself to disagree. Jesse's love for his brother was making a very powerful statement worldwide.

The voices returned to Jesse from all over the world calling for the same thing: *give Nigel a soul.*

The last voice said it loudest: "*Do it, Jesse.*"

"Christine?" his eyes opened. Did he just connect to Christine?

His connection to everyone faded. Hades was stunned at what had just transpired.

Jesse continued trying to heal Nigel.

After a few moments, there was still nothing.

Nigel wasn't moving.

Trisha knelt down and put her hand on Jesse's back.

Peace slowly fell upon them as they looked upon Nigel's remains.

Hades quietly spoke up, "He's not lost."

Jesse and Trisha simultaneously turned to him. "What?"

Even Hades couldn't register what he was saying, but Jesse's connection to the world had opened his eyes to a new possibility. "Your brother's essence is scattered, but he's not lost. I felt him everywhere just now. The man's so old, the memory of him is ingrained into the planet. There might be just enough to rebuild him if we knew the spell."

Jesse didn't need to know the spell. At once, his hands began to shake. His previous tantrum had only been the opening act. Now he felt an even deeper connection to his angels powers than before. He didn't need a spellbook or incantation. He *knew* what he was doing.

"What are you doing?" Trisha asked as she stared at his now-glowing hands.

Jesse said nothing as he took a deep breath and placed his hands on Nigel's abdomen.

Energy exploded from Jesse, sweeping over Trisha and Hades. His wings shone brighter than ever and his magic

could be felt from a mile away. The icy walls cracked and shuddered under his power. Waves of memory began pooling into the cavern in a beautiful aurora of light. In his mind, he begged Nigel to accept this last gift as his memory poured in from all corners of the Earth. Not only people, but plants, trees, deserts, oceans, and even the moon all bore some distant memory of Nigel. The more he poured into his brother, the more Nigel's body resisted. Something inside his brother wasn't holding on. "He still needs a soul to bind it!" Hades shouted over the whirlpool of energy. "Not a problem!" Jesse shouted back. From his hands poured light brighter than any sun. Nigel's body began to rise off the ground. Jesse felt his memory collide with Nigel's, and suddenly understood why, through all his pain and suffering, Nigel had never received a soul. With a final surge of power from their hearts, Jesse and Nigel simultaneously erupted into flames. Through the flames, they heard Nigel scream. His limbs flailed in agony. Trisha and Hades couldn't believe their eyes. Nigel was alive. Jesse fell backwards as Nigel lunged forward and fell on top of him. Nigel's fire extinguished and his face was not only healed, but back to the way it looked before he ever turned human. He opened his eyes and a small glint of magic could be seen within. "Nigel!" Trisha said, leaping to his side and hugging him ecstatically. The two of them rolled on the ground together as Jesse stood by, very winded for someone who didn't breathe. He checked his soul watch. "I've still got a minute left," Jesse said. "You gave him your own soul?" Hades asked.

“Just half of it,” Jesse said.

“I’m an Aemon again,” Nigel said, feeling his young, strong skin. “How did you do that?”

Jesse looked back at where Nigel had lain. The others looked back as well and, to their surprise, saw Nigel’s body still lying there. Nigel uneasily gazed upon his own dead body.

“I copied what was left into a new Fire-Blood,” Jesse said.

“So the real me is... dead?”

“You *are* the real you,” Jesse said. “I might have missed installing a memory or two, but you’re still Nigel. When my soul went in, it was the real you fighting me the whole time.”

“But how *did* you get the soul in?” Nigel asked. “I thought it had to be earned.”

Jesse smirked, “You already earned it. You just had to accept it.”

“But how...”

Trisha put a finger over his lips to stop his train of thought.

“Just let yourself have something nice for a change,” she said.

The ice above them cracked as Ragnarök moved closer.

The cavern shook and the ground became unstable.

Hades quickly rallied them to a safe spot near the wall.

They watched as the rock at their feet collapsed. Nigel’s mortal body fell through the cracks, disappearing into the depths of Tartarus. In the darkness, it disappeared into the waters of the River Styx and was forever washed away.

Nigel shuddered at the sight of it.

“We should get out of here,” he said.

## 45. Wrath of Ages

They returned to the surface where the deities were still keeping Ragnarök at bay with their incredible firepower. The wind, snow and clouds swirled around the battlefield. Thunder roared across the sky as Ragnarök grew larger. Nigel whistled at its size, but nodded accordingly, "At least it's just one. That's not so bad."

On that cue, Ragnarök's shadows stretched around the battlefield's perimeter. Several walls of oily darkness rose up and enormous shadow-clones of Ragnarök emerged in their place. The creature was using Vladimir's clone ability to encompass them. The shadow-clones carved blasts of energy through the crowd. While many gods and Titans used their powers to put up shields and divert the energy wherever they could, others were vapourised in its wake. Trisha scoffed, "You were saying?"

Artemis rushed by, firing three more arrows into its body. "Artemis!" Jesse called, stopping her movement. She aimed an arrow at him, only to lower it a moment later. "It's about time you showed up," she said. "I've lit up the beast's innards for when you're ready."

"Ready for what?" Jesse asked.

"The beast is being fuelled by twelve Titans and a chaos demon," she said. "You're the only one powerful enough to get inside and extract them."

"He's not the only one anymore," Nigel said.

"Are you an angel as well?" Artemis asked.

"We're about to find out."

"Very well; just seek out the silver light of my arrows once you're inside," Artemis said. "I've planted one inside each target."

"Are you sure you hit your targets?" Nigel asked.

"I've been training in darkness for five hundred years," she said. "I can hear a heartbeat through any shadow."

"Even if we extract them, the Shadow-Blood will just possess more deities," Nigel said. "We need to get this thing off the battlefield."

"Isn't there a way to kill it?" Jesse asked.

"A Shadow-Blood's life is bound to its purpose. It won't die until all the gods are dead."

Jesse's eyes lit up instantly as he had an epiphany. "Oh, my god - there's totally a way we can kill this thing."

"Come again?" Nigel asked.

"There's a trick Solomon showed me," Jesse said. "Nigel, once I pull the Titans out of there, you need to teleport this thing to another realm."

"Which realm?"

"Anywhere but here."

"It'll possess me before I can take it anywhere."

"Trust me; it won't."

Nigel looked at him suspiciously. "Jesse, this plan of yours doesn't involve killing me, does it?"

"That's a good question; we'll sort out the details when we get there," Jesse said. "But for this to work, we need all the Shadow-Bloods in one place. I'm sure we have the god-

power to pull it off, but I haven't managed a crowd this size before."

"I have," Trisha said, stepping forward.

"You?" Artemis asked, unsure as to who this strange vampire woman was.

"Yes, but I need to speak directly to the leaders."

Nigel shouted into the crowd. "Hey, Surtur! Odin! Team huddle!"

Surtur and Odin took notice and hurried over to greet him.

"Praise the Creator, you're cured!" Odin exclaimed.

"Get this Aemon some blood!" Surtur yelled, "We've got a demon on our side!"

"Forget the blood and listen up," Nigel said. "We need to rally up these monsters so Jesse and I can close in and finish them off. Trisha says she has a plan."

"I already have a plan," Odin said. "We bolster our defenses and maintain a steady retreat around the globe. Humanity will learn to live as nomads as we keep the Shadow-Blood busy destroying their cities for the next several hundred years."

"That's a terrible plan," Trisha said.

"Like you can do better."

"My two boys need to get on one target," she said. "This means I need the shadow-clones rounded up. Surtur, I need you to take the Fire and Earth Titans on one side of the wall. Sinmara can take the Ice and Sky Titans on the other side. Concentrate your elements and force the Shadow-Blood back into one spot. Keep it contained as long as possible. Do it now."

"Aye-aye, captain!" Surtur said, rushing off to find some comrades.

"And Odin, we need the power of the gods. All of it. You need to channel it through Poseidon and the Titans. Buff up their strength and defense as much as you can."

"Give our power to a rogue god and our worst enemies?"

Odin asked. "Are you mad?"

"The Titans need that power to contain the Shadow-Blood," she said. "And with enough power, Poseidon can slip his sea water inside the Shadow-Blood and use it to gather the possessed Titans for extraction. Did you get all that, Poseidon?"

"Can't wait!" Poseidon yelled as he launched a tidal wave through the sky at the creature.

"This is madness!" Odin exclaimed. "I'm a God of Strategy! We can't use up all our resources on a single attack! What gives you the right to make this call?"

"I'm a top-ranking '*Realm Rage*' monk who's spent the last several months conquering fictional monsters in fictional multi-player dungeons," she said. "I know a thing or two about guiding dysfunctional brats through boss battles."

"Plus she's *TheQueen*," Nigel pointed out.

"What, her?" Odin screwed up his face. "She's not a goddess!"

"No, but I'm registered as one in a video game," Trisha chimed in. "And since Solomon erased your takeover, but didn't erase my save games, I think I outrank you."

"She does!" shouted someone named Rick, God of Rankings.

"Aha! See?" Trisha smiled. "Ante up, Odin."

Odin let out an exasperated grunt and helped himself to another handful of tylenol before grumbling, "Yes m'am."

"The rest is on you boys," she said to Jesse and Nigel.

"I'll rescue the captives," Jesse said. "You just get the creature out of here."

"What's our timeframe like?" Nigel asked.

Jesse checked his watch. "We only have a minute of soul energy left each."



"Then this will need to be fast," Nigel said as he turned to Ragnarök and called to Surtur, "Got those Titans ready?" Surtur, Sinmara, Atlas, Mishnykov, and a host of other giants rushed to his side. "Ready!"

"Let's get biblical," Nigel said.

Nigel's eyes glowed and his wings sprouted. A moment later, his ethereal wings were covered in ethereal artillery, including missiles and mini-guns. He glowed again as an avatar of blue energy encased his body and grew exponentially, lifting him high off the ground. Everyone gave him space as his angel energy forged itself into hundred-story tall battle armour with Nigel floating in the center of its chest. He summoned the Flaming Sword to the avatar's hand, the blade growing to match the size of the battle armour. Jesse watched in amazement at this transformation.

"I really have been using my power wrong," Jesse realized.

"Let's go," Nigel said, charging towards Ragnarök. The Titans grew to their largest respective sizes and charged after their targets like the greatest fantasy football team of all time. Jesse followed while Poseidon soaked in the energy of the gods.

Surtur, Atlas and Mishnykov attacked the east wall. The latter two summoned earth and metal from under the ice and created massive walls to surround the pillars of shadow-clones. Surtur and the Fire Giants leapt into the air and began pelting the darkness with fireballs. As Odin ushered the gods' strength into them, Surtur found his people were easily able to put pressure on their opponent. On the west end of the wall, Krindel and Sinmara did the same thing, with Sinmara using the ice to transform the ground under Ragnarök's footing while Krindel leapt into the sky and summoned lightning. With their powers combined, Ragnarök slowly receded into its singular form.

Nigel knocked aside all incoming energy blasts as they stormed across the ice towards the black pillar. With a quick slice, he cut through the monster's exterior into the darkness of its body and used his enormous hands to keep the gap open. Inside was pure raging darkness swarming with tiny white specks where Artemis had fired her arrows. Ragnarök tried to back away, but the Titans were quick to raise walls of rock and ice around its base and drop pressure barriers on it from the sky. The Shadow-Blood was locked in place.

Odin funneled all the power he had towards Poseidon. The power of the gods poured through Poseidon who raised his hands to the creature and focused on channeling sea water into its body. The arrows in Ragnarök's core began to swirl, forming a grey pool. In the pool, Nigel could make out humanoid shapes - thirteen to be exact. Ragnarök struggled to conceal them, but Poseidon's power kept them together.

"Now, Jesse!" Nigel shouted.

Jesse soared in over Nigel's enormous shoulder and plunged headfirst into the shadowy storm. He felt the black ooze burn at his skin. Preoccupied by Nigel, the Shadow-Blood didn't even try to seize Jesse.

As Nigel used his power to hold the creature steady, several hands shot out from Ragnarök's body and tried to grapple with the hundred-foot angel behemoth. Nigel could feel Ragnarök's presence trying to infiltrate his armor and merge with him again. Nigel furiously fired several white laser blasts from his wings into the creature. He could hear Ragnarök screech in anger before it retaliated with a dark energy blast of its own. Nigel stood against the megaton blast as it struck his armor and caused him to stumble back, losing his grasp on the Shadow-Blood.

Just as the Shadow-Blood was about to strike again, it felt a power surge rip through its body. Jesse exploded out the other side, his sword in one hand, twelve Titans and one chaos demon being pushed out with the other. The fourteen of them fell several stories to the ground and tumbled across the icy plane, completely drained of energy.

Without its hosts, Ragnarök began to cave in on itself. It managed to let out some high-pitched squeals before it summoned up the strength to lunge at Nigel. The oozy mass wrapped around Nigel's soul avatar's arm and absorbed itself directly into his body. Nigel struggled as the thirteen Shadow-Bloods infiltrated his armour, transforming him into a hundred-foot dark angel.

Before they could possess him completely, Jesse shouted, "Nigel, do it now!"

Nigel focused on the most desolate place he could think of. Millions of light years away, he imagined a desert planet he could strand the Shadow-Blood on. Every molecule in his body pulled away from the Earth as he tried to take the creature with him.

But nothing happened.

His teleportation failed as the Shadow-Blood continued permeating his armour.

"Jesse, it's not working!" Nigel said. "If you have a plan, now's the time!"

Ragnarök took control of the angel armour and lashed out at Jesse with one of its arms. Jesse barely had time to defend as his brother's armoured fist fell upon him.

Nigel looked on in horror as he crushed his brother into flames.

*"I expected more from you, Naveen,"* it said through Nigel's voice as it repossessed him. *"You think I didn't plan for this*

*deception? We're too much alike for you to sneak anything past me!"*

Nigel struggled to reply, but the Shadow-Blood denied him that courtesy.

*"Now watch as you lay waste to the gods for your insubordination."*

Nigel fought for control, but it was no use. Ragnarök stepped around to face the gods and Titans who were unleashing their full fury upon the giant. Nigel stared into the crowd and saw Trisha standing on the platform and looking on in despair. Ragnarök raised a hand to the crowd and summoned the last of Nigel's Second Age energy to its palm.

"No, don't do it!" Nigel begged.

A wide blast of dark energy surged across the ice..

The eternal twilight of Elysian Fields was forever darkened as the gods, the Titans, and everyone present was scattered into dust.

\* \* \*

The Antarctic winds swept over the fields and Nigel stared into the sky. The smoke and dust from the blast blackened the stars. The snow he lay upon was mostly ash.

Nigel couldn't move. He couldn't think. He watched his life flash before his eyes, and their lives scatter by his hand.

The fields grew still.

Nigel felt himself speak in a horrible garbled voice, *"Good game, Naveen."*

Distraught, he spoke with his own voice, "Was it worth it, Solomon?"

*"After ten thousand years, I would hope so. You'll someday see why it had to be done."*

"You killed everyone by my hand," Nigel said, his breathing speeding up, "You killed Trisha!"

*"The world doesn't change without sacrifice,"* it continued.

*"This had to be done for the fate of the future. For the fate of all."*

"You just did this for yourself!"

*"I wish I could see it,"* the Shadow-Blood said. Nigel felt his legs grow lighter. A black mist slowly evaporated off his body. *"But with my will be done, I suppose the real Solomon will have to enjoy that luxury instead."*

"Why would you do it?" Nigel asked. "Why would you go through with it if it meant your demise?"

*"It's the life of a Shadow-Blood,"* it said. *"We're born out of anger. We're born to die. We're born to see the end of our rage. For us, there is nothing else."*

"Then it wasn't worth it."

*"It doesn't matter if it's worth it. It's done."*

Nigel saw twelve other shapes stand around him. The other Shadow-Bloods were evaporating as well. The Shadow-Blood lifted off Nigel's body and slowly faded into the sky. The others followed suit, vanishing into the smoke. Nigel laid on the ash and watched as they disappeared without so much as looking back.

He closed his eyes as Solomon's presence disappeared from the night air completely.

No breath escaped his lungs. No thought crossed his mind.

No tears were shed. He couldn't face what had just happened. He didn't want to believe it.

And he didn't have to.

Through the darkness, he heard Jesse laugh.

## 46. Fool's Mate

Nigel stood up and looked upon the crystal clear night sky. The roar of thousands of deities cheering overwhelmed Elysian Fields as the the gods and Titans converged on Nigel in celebration. Jesse was running around high-fiving every deity who wanted to congratulate him as he made his way through the crowd. Smoke was still rising from the battlefield, but there was no sign of the Shadow-Bloods at all. They were gone. Completely gone. Returned to the shadows from whence they came.

Nigel looked to the group of rescued Titans who looked bewildered and confused after being possessed by Shadow-Bloods for thousands of years. Hades was helping Vladimir to his feet. The chaos demon was having a difficult time standing after that debacle.

Trisha rushed through the crowd and leapt onto Nigel, hugging and kissing him enthusiastically.

"You did it! You did it! You did it!" she squealed. Nigel squeezed her right back, happier than he'd ever been in his life.

Jesse joined the group hug and laughed. "I knew I could count on you!"

"For what?" Nigel asked. "What just happened?"

"Yeah, you were fighting the Shadow-Blood and then it just... disappeared," Trisha couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth. "How did you kill it?"

"I did better," Jesse said. "I let it win."

Nigel's jaw dropped. "You created a false reality. You tricked the Shadow-Blood into thinking it already killed everyone!"

"Like I said, Solomon taught me a little trick. I'm sorry I had to pull you into that illusion. If you didn't believe it, Solomon wouldn't have believed it either."

"So you knew I wouldn't be able to teleport it out of here."

"Once the Shadow-Blood latches on, it's pretty resilient," Jesse said. "My best chance of deceiving it was to keep its attention on you. Thanks for trusting me."

"So you used me as bait."

"Let's call it even for that stunt you pulled back in Tartarus."

Nigel chuckled. "Fair enough."

Jesse checked his soul watch and handed it to Nigel to check their time. They both shared a laugh when they saw the result.

"One second left," Nigel said.

"Same here," Jesse said. "I guess angel's training out of the question."

"It's still enough to get us into heaven someday," Nigel said. "Or at least perform one miracle."

"Or maybe a few tiny ones," Jesse chimed in.

Surtur, Sinmara and Krindel hurried past to meet the Titans who'd been trapped within the Shadow-Bloods for thousands of years.

Surtur squealed a delighted greeting, "Aristaeus!

Polybotes! Eurymedon! ...and the rest! You're all okay!"

Alive as they were, the rescued Titans were too exhausted to reply or even care that Surtur was addressing them. A few collapsed from weariness on the spot.

"You're somewhat okay!" Surtur corrected himself. "We'll... uh... we'll get you help."

As the Titans attended to their own, Vladimir finished getting to his feet. He braced himself on Jesse's back as he struggled to stand. Something about him seemed different.

He clutched his chest and felt his neck. Fear wasn't gripping him anymore. He smiled and said, "It's gone. The demon's gone!"

"The Shadow-Blood exorcised you?" Nigel asked.

"That worked out exceptionally well," Vladimir said to himself. He looked to Jesse and grinned. "Hi, I'm the guy who killed you last summer. Thanks for saving me."

"No problem," Jesse said, not sure what to do about the vampire leaning on his back.

"I think I want to go home now," Vladimir said, adjusting his jacket.

"Nobody's going anywhere!" Odin shouted. He waved his arms in his air, trying to do something, but apparently failing. "I can't feel my power returning yet! The ley lines aren't fixed! Naveen, what did you do wrong?"

"Was saving the world supposed to fix them? Nigel asked.

"Yes!" Odin insisted. "You were the chosen one! Your victory meant our power world return!"

"Except I didn't save the world by myself," Nigel said. "That honour goes to everyone here."

Odin turned to the crowd and shouted, "Poseidon, you need to give us back our energy!"

"Sorry, but I used it up fighting the Shadow-Blood," he called back.

Surtur took notice and immediately addressed Odin, "Do you mean to tell me that the King of the Gods is without his strength?"



"Yes, he does," Krindel said, smelling his brother's aura. "All the gods are now discernibly weaker. If I'm not mistaken, the odds may have just been evened between races."

All the gods and Titans exchanged suspicious looks at one another. Nigel could feel a fight brewing, so he shouted for a cease-fire promptly. "Hey, we just talked about this! No more fighting!"

"Silence!" Surtur shouted as he marched towards Odin, rage in his stride. He pushed Nigel aside and stepped up to Odin, staring him down with a mad glare. Odin tensed his shoulders defensively. Surtur inhaled deeply and growled, "If it's true that we're evenly matched, perhaps you care to test your luck, All-Father? I will not hold back." The two of them exchanged a long stare.

Odin was the first to blink.

Surtur laughed and slapped Odin on the shoulder. He shouted to his followers, "The All-Father concedes! This war goes to the Titans!"

All the Titans shouted victoriously.

"I didn't concede!" Odin protested, but his words fell on deaf ears. Surtur threw himself into a crowd of Titans who promptly raised him into the air and body-surfed him across the field.

Krindel slapped Odin on the back and said, "Just let him have this, brother. If there's one thing a Titan loves more than a glorious battle, it's bathing in the humiliation of their enemies."

"But I'm not humiliated! I can still fight!" He turned to the other gods, but no one was paying attention anymore. In fact, many were already leaving. Even Krindel had already left his side. "We can all fight! Come on! Who wants another Aeonomega?"

An arrow lodged itself in Odin's ass. He stumbled and fell to one knee.

Artemis marched past and whispered, "Summon me away from training again and the next one will go through your good eye."

"Understood," Odin cringed as he pulled the arrow from his ass.

"It could be worse," Nigel said as he helped Odin up. "I could've trimmed more than your beard."

He gestured to the Titans. Mishnykov could be seen in the group trying to repair his broken hand while other Titans salvaged what was left of the Goliath. Odin felt his singed chin hair and nodded. "I suppose I should thank you, Naveen. I haven't been my best as of late."

"You should," Nigel said as he held aloft his sword.

"Consider that beard of yours a reminder, because I don't think anything severed by this sword grows back."

"Speaking of the Flaming Sword..."

"I'll be keeping it."

"Fair enough," Odin said, backing away. "Just checking."

"The rest of you," Nigel said to crowd. "Thank you all.

You've been a great help. Now go home."

Keith and Lewis high-fived and disappeared into the crowd.

As they left the others behind. Nigel, Jesse, and Trisha caught up with Poseidon, Vladimir, Lido, Hades and Wu Tang. Around them marched a procession of deities, while above them, Odin's airships vacated the Antarctic airspace.

They saw Ptolemy approaching them through the snow, looking quite worn and bruised. The laptop was cradled in his arms. He called to the others, "Solomon won't be bothering us anymore."

Nigel asked, "How did you..?"

"Trapped him in the Void," Ptolemy said. "I won't be getting my powers back, but that's all right. I've got enough firepower on this thing to handle anyone. So how did the battle go?"

Trisha answered, "The Shadow-Bloods merged into a giant blob and every deity worked together to hold it off while my boys destroyed it in an alternate universe."

"Also, Nigel turned into a super-big battle angel," Jesse said. "It was pretty sweet."

"Did anybody get it on video?" Ptolemy asked.

"No, but I can re-enact it with puppets later if you want," Trisha said.

"I'm cool with that."

"So can you use any of those spells to get us home?"

"There's a spell for it," Ptolemy said, "but the laptop's out of juice. Is there a Battery Charger God in the crowd?"

"I'm a Battery Charger God," one called. "But I didn't bring my battery charger."

"You had one job, man," Ptolemy shook his head in disappointment.

"Do any of you need a lift?" Poseidon asked the group.

"I've got a yacht a couple miles from here that can take you back to Halifax."

"I'll hitch a ride," Ptolemy said. "I'm freezing my ass off out here and I really want to see Patti again. I hope her memory isn't too far gone."

"Same here," Jesse said. "I need to track down Christine. I know she's got her memory back. I just know it. Hades, care to join me?"

"I'll find her on my own time," Hades said. "See you guys around. Brother, it's been interesting seeing you again." Poseidon nodded likewise. Hades shrugged him off and vanished into the earth in a puff of smoke.

"Nice family," Jesse said. "Thanksgiving must be fun."

They heard a loud panting and the sound of four padded feet approaching. They turned in time to see Cerberus leap through the crowd and start licking Nigel and Jesse's face. Wu Tang yapped at the three-headed dog excitedly. For a man in a dog's body, he was really embracing the role. "Ah, there you are, boy!" Nigel said. "Where've you been?" Cerberus whined happily.

"That dog's not coming on my boat," Poseidon said.

"Then you go on ahead," Nigel said, as he climbed onto Cerberus' back. He motioned for Trisha to join him. "I think we'll take the long way around."

"What, you're going to ride a dog back to Halifax?" Ptolemy asked.

"It's a pretty fast dog," Vladimir said.

"What about the ocean?" Poseidon asked.

"The dog walks on water," Trisha said.

"What about the sun?"

"We'll race the sunrise," Nigel replied.

"But what about--?"

Nigel cut him off. "Hey, a little alone time with the lady, if you don't mind?"

Poseidon smirked. "Don't let us keep you."

With that, Nigel prompted the dog to take off. The couple of them raced across the Antarctic landscape into the rising night together as the Southern Lights glowed to greet them.

## 47. Joyful and Triumphant

Their romantic moonlit escapade across Antarctica went swimmingly. Cerberus even took them across the oceans to see Peru, Hawaii, Australia, China, India, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Spain before they finally arrived home in Halifax (never once seeing sunlight). They beat Poseidon's time by one minute and proved the remarkable power of three-headed dog travel.

Cerberus, happy with his walk, merrily ran home to Tartarus. As much as Trisha wanted to keep him in her basement, he was one of those special magical dogs that needed to be free.

The gods went home to their respective realms and sorted out their own affairs. With the ley lines still broken, it took a lot more time and energy to revive their fallen. Many gods had been destroyed during the battle, but since many younger ones kept their power symbols at home or in safety deposit boxes, it was easier to bring them back. Thor's hammer would still take a few more days to drag back to Asgard, but they managed to locate Quetzalcoatl's power symbol (a green feather boa) and return it to his homeland. One ritual later, the Aztec god was back on his feet. He was quick to make it back to Halifax and see what he missed.

Christmas came and went without a hitch. Hunter's Tavern stayed open for the holidays with an open invitation over the door reading "Our Most Divine Customers Welcome". With the world back to the way it was, deities who found themselves out in the cold were happy to see a friendly face. Nigel even offered to move his piano downstairs for one night only and hammer out some holiday tunes.

That night, the bar was full of gods and Titans who came to celebrate their favourite pagan holiday. Beer mugs clanked in joy, laughs were shared and ugly Christmas sweaters were worn. The good sport that he was, Nigel even saw fit to invite Odin. Vladimir was invited too, but he kept to himself in the corner and didn't speak to anyone.

While Nigel and Trisha played an upbeat duet of "*Joy to the World*" on the piano, Jesse reacquainted Ptolemy with Patti at the bar.

"...and if I turn my head this way, I can pick up a country station," Patti demonstrated as she tilted her head. While the mind-link implant no longer seemed to function, it didn't stop Patti from picking up radio waves in her head. "Odin said he'll take it out later, but I really just want a remote with volume control."

"For a girl who lost her memory, you're handling the truth about gods very well," Jesse noted.

She shrugged. "Being drunk at work helps sometimes."

"What about you, Ptolemy?" Jesse asked as he sipped his eggnog. "Any idea what you're going to do with those spells?"

"I'm not going to do anything," Ptolemy said. "After I defeated Solomon, the laptop shut down of its own accord. The hard drive is completely fried."

"Can you recover anything?"

"I wish I could, but I think the Creator personally took a sledgehammer to it after I was finished. It really ticks me

off, considering He could have destroyed the spells at any time and saved us all the trouble.”

“He works in mysterious ways,” Jesse shrugged.

“He works in annoying ways.”

“Do you remember of any of the spells?” Patti asked. “I need a Fire-Blood to cover some of my shifts. I promise I’ll kill it afterwards.”

“Are you being serious or...?”

“I’m joking, Jon,” she said with a giggle. “Man, how were we ever dating? You’re such a lamewad sometimes.”

“*You’re* a lamewad.”

“You’re a poop.”

“You two have the weirdest chemistry,” Jesse noted.

“Speaking of which, any leads on Christine?” Patti asked.

“Hades called and said she’s staying in Vancouver with her mom,” Jesse said. “He and I are heading out tomorrow to see her.”

“Right on,” Patti said. “I hope you two hit it off again. I have absolutely no memory of how cute you two were, but it sounds like something I’d ship.”

Suddenly, a deep voice boomed from the entrance, “Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas!”

They turned to see a large red man with a flaming beard and Santa hat enter the bar carrying a large bag. As he stomped around the bar greeting everyone, his bag swung about and knocked over people’s drinks.

“Surtur,” Nigel grumbled as he left the piano to Trisha and helped the large Titan over to a booth where Poseidon and Odin were eating chicken wings. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to spread holiday cheer with my favourite Fire-Blood and the King of the Gods!” he bellowed as he dug into his bag. “Also, presents! I brought presents for everyone! What’s a Christmas party without a Santa?”

“I *am* Santa,” Odin said, trying not draw attention to his smoothly shaved chin. The wrinkles around his mouth made him look ten times grumpier without his beard.

“Surtur, you’re far from Santa,” Nigel said. “You blew up Halifax, killed thousands, and started a war.”

“But everything turned out fine,” Surtur shrugged.

“Solomon fixed the city, everyone’s alive again, and now we’re all friends.”

“We’re not friends.”

“Yes, we are,” Surtur said. “I saved your life, you saved mine.”

“You never saved my life,” Nigel reminded him. “In fact, I distinctly remember you killing me.”

“Odin tried to kill you too!” Surtur said, “Why does he get to stay? He started a war too!”

“I saved Nigel’s life!” Odin protested.

“Just before he fell down a hole and died!” Surtur snapped back, “That’s not saving his life!”

“You guys are hilarious,” Poseidon snickered as he chomped down on Trisha’s chicken wings. “Here, Surtur, you got try these wings. They are positively divine.”

As Surtur helped himself, Nigel turned to Odin and asked, “So what’s happening with you and your brother? Is he still the official Titan leader or what?”

“Surtur had his moment in the sun, but it seems the Titans are following Krindel now,” Odin said. “He was especially miffed after your dog shot down his ship.”

“Is there word of another war?” Nigel asked. “He seemed like the crusader type.”

Odin shook his head. “I spoke with him recently. It seems he and I both have the same idea.”

“Which is?”

“That it’s time to leave this world.”

“You’re going off-world with the rest of the gods?”



Poseidon nodded. "My sister Athena called me up from the Andromeda galaxy. Said she has a colony going on over there if we feel like retiring. Personally, I'm not opposed." "Hiding in divine realms just isn't cutting it anymore," Odin said. "We elders don't have a place in this world. Even Krindel is taking the Titans to another system. It's high time we started anew elsewhere."

"Do the other gods still follow you?" Nigel asked.

"I'd like to say yes, but the truth is, I don't know my own people anymore," Odin admitted. "If I'm expected to lead the gods to another land, they need to follow someone they can trust."

"So you're handing responsibilities over to... who? Poseidon? Thor?"

"Definitely not me," Poseidon said.

Odin stared into his drink and quietly said to Nigel, "In the short time I've known her, your wife has demonstrated an uncanny proficiency with commanding deities. She knew how to use all of their strengths to our advantage. It's a skill I once knew, and would like to learn once again."

Nigel narrowed his eyes. "You're not suggesting that Trish becomes...?"

"An official ruler of gods?" Odin replied. "Heavens no. We already took her off the leaderboard. But *'TheQueen'* would be invaluable as a consul on our journey. She could work with Athena to help set up and keep the peace between colonies over the next several months. Were I to ask her, do you think she would accept such a responsibility?"

In the pit of his chest, Nigel felt his Fire-Blood heart sinking as he imagined the prospect of Trisha leaving the Earth for several months to travel the stars. He knew the gods were capable of caring for her vampire needs and that she'd be traveling with a handful of beings whom he trusted. His

true fear lied in the idea that if she left to go on such an adventure, she might never choose to return.

Finally, he replied, "I'll ask her."

"A fine choice for consul, indeed!" Surtur laughed. "The woman's got the spirit of a Titan in her!"

Surtur's lack of volume control grated on Nigel's nerves.

Nigel snapped irritatingly, "Why are you still here?"

"I said I have presents!" Surtur said, fishing out three small packages from his bag and handing them to everyone at the booth. "Now, I know we've all had our differences, but before I go off-world, I'd like to extend an olive branch, if you will."

Nigel opened his first. "It's a McDonald's gift card with a coupon."

"Dinner for two! To make up for that time I ruined your meal."

Odin opened his next. "Is this the same arrowhead Artemis shot into my ass?"

"The one and the same!" Surtur smiled.

"What did you get, Poseidon?"

"*'Pacific Rim'* on Blu-Ray," Poseidon waved his movie around. "Surtur, *compadre*, we should get a bunch of people together and totally watch this tonight."

"And I have presents for all," Surtur said, "but before I start handing them out, there's one big special present that Atlas helped me acquire. Hey, Jesse! Get over here!"

Jesse warily got off his stool and met with Surtur. Surtur stood up and pulled a large heavy box from the bag. He held it chest-high as Jesse cautiously unwrapped it.

The wrapping paper fell to the floor. Underneath was a crude box-shaped rock made of iron ore.

"What it is?" Jesse asked.

"It's Pandora's Box!" Surtur exclaimed. "Atlas and I searched all over the center of the Earth to find it for you!"

Of course, it probably won't open until you get all that ore off. Here, hold it for a second. I bet I can karate chop it off with one blow."

"Wait, stop--" Jesse protested as Surtur tossed him the box. Jesse caught the heavy stone box and fell flat onto his back. The box crushed his chest instantly. Everyone watched as he exploded into flames.

An awkward silence fell over the bar as the music died. All eyes were on Surtur.

"I'll just... fix this," he said as he knelt down and began breaking ore off the box with his bare hands.

Trisha shrugged off the awkwardness and continued playing. The whole room resumed being merry.

As Patti went around collecting mugs, she saw a figure at the entrance in a large grey coat wearing a fedora. She hurried over to greet him.

"How many?" she asked, regarding the seating.

The man spoke in Mandarin, "I'm not here to eat. Just to deliver a message."

Patti understood him clearly and replied in the same language, "For who?"

"A friend," he said, handing her a card. He looked to Ptolemy at the bar. The boy was busy blowing bubbles into his eggnog. "Could you please see to it that Ptolemy gets this letter? We know he's lost a great gift; but an even greater opportunity has just opened up. We think he'd be very interested, though you may have to read it for him." Patti took the letter. It was in an envelope sealed with a dollop of red wax.

"I'll see that he gets this," she said. She peered closer at the figure and asked, "Have we met?"

"You wouldn't know my face," he said. "But perhaps you'll someday remember our meeting of the minds. Until then,

thank you, Patti. And from the rest of the Chinese Immortals, have a Merry Christmas.”

He stepped back outside and vanished into the streets. Patti looked closer at the envelope she’d been just given. The red wax was marked with a symbol she vaguely remembered seeing in a dream. It was somebody’s name. “Wu Tang,” she recalled.

A loud crack was heard by Nigel’s booth. Surtur cleared the iron ore off Pandora’s Box, revealing the undamaged container underneath. The Box opened and regurgitated Jesse onto the floor.

“There; no harm no foul!” Surtur said. “How are you feeling, Jess?”

“Better than okay!” Jesse exclaimed as he held up a small bowl in his hands. It contained a banana split. “My ticket got punched for the tenth time. Free ice cream!” Everyone cheered.

## 48. Yet to Come

The morning after, Nigel spoke to Trisha about Odin's request.

Later that day, she gave Odin her response.

Also later that day, Ptolemy found the letter from Wu Tang stuffed in one of his pockets and had Patti translate it for him. He took a little longer to get back to Chinese Immortals.

But before any of that happened, Hades came to collect Jesse.

Using a super-secret tunnel network of his own creation, Hades took Jesse from Halifax across the country to Vancouver in mere minutes. They arrived outside a flooring store and took a bus to a residential area in Burnaby where Hades led Jesse to a small white home. Immediately, Jesse knew something was off by all the enormous footprints on the front lawn.

"Are you sure this is where she lives?" Jesse asked.

"It's her mother's house," Hades said. "Care to knock?"

Jesse took a deep breath and knocked on the front door.

A few minutes later, Krios answered the door, wearing stretched-out sweats and an XXXXL t-shirt that was still too tight for him.

"Yay!" he shouted as he hugged Jesse. "Angel man back! And bad god back! Everyone back!"

"Who is it, Krios?" Jesse heard Christine call from inside. Jesse peered inside to see her exit the kitchen wearing an apron. The smell of cookies wafted through the home. Hades leaned past Krios and waved, "I'm here to collect the big guy. His people are going off-world. He'll probably want to go with them."

"Oh, hey, Hades," she said. "Come on in. My mom and I are just showing Krios how to bake."

As Krios dropped Jesse, his eyes met hers. She scrunched up her face with a sense of familiarity. "Are you Jesse?"

"Do you remember?"

"No, I just... I just expected you would probably show up," she said. "I heard your voice in my head a few nights back."

"And I heard you answer!"

"It sounded important," she said. "Please, sit down. Both of you. We need to talk."

"Has Krios been causing any trouble?" Hades asked as he, Jesse and Krios sat in the living room. From the kitchen, they heard Christine's mom reclusively washing dishes.

"No, he's been a real dear," Christine went on. "I told mom I'm doing some volunteer care-taking for special needs people. She bought it. She also bought Krios some pants."

"But I thought your memory was erased by Solomon," Jesse said.

"It would have been if I hadn't been traveling with Krios," she explained. "When the Deus Ex Machina took place, the world changed and ignored us completely."

"Magic god stuff always ignore Krios," the big lug grinned. Christine set a tray of cookies on the table. They were full of assorted pantry goods and pieces of melted plastic.

"You should try these. Krios will be heart-broken if you don't."

"Me make cookies!" Krios squealed as he gave one to Hades and Jesse. Hades easily scarfed down a disgusting cookie. Jesse had a little more trouble, but managed to swallow it and give Krios a thumbs up. Now that Krios was happy, Christine brought out some real cookies which Jesse enjoyed more sincerely.

"I suppose you're here about my memory," Christine said, as she sat down with Jesse.

"Yes, and I'm very sorry about what happened," Jesse said. "I promise I'll do everything I can to fix it. All I need from you is--"

"I don't want my memory back."

"Why not?"

"Because you opened my mind to whole new possibilities," she said. "Jesse, Hades, now that Ragnarök's over, I need to share something with you from my visions."

"You're talking about your vision from beyond, aren't you?" Hades asked.

"Ever since I became a Fate, higher powers have been speaking to me. They told me people have changed their fates before, but never so close to the end times. Now there are spirits from across the realms who fear for the future. As the only one who can see the true destiny of this world, it's my duty to help correct it."

"...End times?" Jesse asked. "But how soon? Do you need any help stopping it?"

Hades piped up, "Do you mean to say you've spoken to the Creator?"

Christine shook her head no. "Not exactly the Creator, but..."

"Fate changes all the time according to the Creator's Great Plan," Hades said. "You can't restore fate just because you've spoken to angry spirits."

"It's not about restoring fate," she said. "I got these visions for a reason. I see a Day of Reckoning coming and I have to stop it at any cost. But I can't do it alone."

"I can get as many gods as you need," Hades said.

"I only need one," Christine said. "I need you to get me in touch with your nephew, Hermes. I need a messenger god to begin my work. Everyone else can't know a thing about this. Not Poseidon or any of the gods. Jesse, I need you to keep this all a secret from Nigel and Trisha as well."

"I'll do anything you need," Jesse insisted. "What else can I do?"

"I also need you to let me go."

"Come again?"

"You're a Fire-Blood, Jesse," she said. "Even without your angel abilities, you have powers beyond the gods. In my visions, I see a realm awash in a river of fire. At the heart of it, I see a demon. It's your teeth and claws ready to tear the world apart and nobody can stop it."

"But I've *never* been able to control my demon side!"

"And that needs to change," she said. "It's not just your literal demon. You and your brother have a long, torrid history of personal demons and you need to confront those before someone like Solomon takes advantage of you again. So until you learn to master that curse of yours, we can't be together."

"This can't be goodbye."

"I'm still friends with your family," she said. "Trust me, it's not goodbye. When the Day of Reckoning has passed, we can learn to know one another again. Until then, you have to train."



"But I don't want..." Jesse stopped as she pressed his lips together.

"Don't finish that thought," she said. "Just move on. Become the better you."

Jesse paused to consider her words before he nodded in agreement.

"All right, but no goodbyes," he said.

"I can give you a '*so long*' kiss for old times' sake, if you want."

"We didn't really do the kissing thing."

"Aren't we a couple?"

"No, ours is a platonic asexual relationship. No romance whatsoever."

"Seriously?"

"Everybody thought we were really cute."

"But it sounds so creepy!"

"I'll take a kiss," Hades said. In their moment, they had forgotten Krios and Hades were sitting by and watching the show. Krios threw his arms around Hades and planted a slobbering kiss on his greasy head. Hades struggled to free himself from the amorous Titan.

Jesse looked to Christine and smiled with his eyes. She smiled back.

It was all he needed.

After the three made their departure, Christine found herself staring out the front window at her mother's front yard. She didn't just see grass and a sidewalk, however. She saw the world vanishing before her very eyes. She saw the fabric of space and time come apart. She saw the heavens collapsing. For every tragedy, she saw a turning point that could be changed. Unlike Solomon, however, she didn't have the gift to predict who could change any of

this. The scope of this problem went beyond a mere game of chess.

"Are your friends gone?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"They've left, mother," Christine replied. "It's safe to come out."

Her mother stepped out of the kitchen. She looked like an older version of Christine in a cooking apron with longer hair tied back in a ponytail. Unremarkable as she seemed, one would wonder why she felt the need to hide from their guests. As she approached Christine, however, it became obvious that her magical iridescent eyes were hiding something.

"You don't need to call me mother," the woman said.

"Borrow my mother's body, expect to be called mother," Christine said. "I think I got Hermes onboard, and Jesse should start his training soon. Any word back from the Chinese Immortals?"

"Ptolemy hasn't given his reply, but he will."

"Well, we don't have long," Christine said. "Send word back to Heaven that we're getting a team together. This universe isn't going to end on our watch."

"As you wish, but other angels aren't as wayward as I am."

"So says the one hiding in my kitchen."

"Beg pardon?"

"You could've said hi to Jesse," Christine said. "He would've liked to meet you."

"I came here on business. Besides, it's been far too long."

"You'll have to speak to him eventually."

"In time," her guest said. "Until then, you and I have work to do."

"Right you are, Nione," Christine smiled at her. "So... what's next?"



## 49. After Hours

For now, life went on.

Jesse returned to Halifax and promptly asked his brother if he could continue his training. Of course, with only one second of soul energy left on their watches, they couldn't do any advanced angel techniques. They carried on with Jesse's Fire-Blood training, re-teaching him the fine art of combat and shape-shifting. Nigel regretted teaching him that second skill, as it resulted in several weeks of Jesse showing up to practice with a different face each time. Nigel eventually sat down and watched "*Empire Strikes Back*" with Ptolemy. After watching it in its entirety, he finally had to admit that he didn't understand one second of the movie outside of the Hoth battle sequence.

Patti kept Ptolemy hanging around Halifax for much longer than planned. While his bromance with Nigel was short-lived, he was happy to see the two brothers reunited again. In the weeks to come, he'd eventually reply to Wu Tang's letter, but until then, he felt he deserved a much-needed break.

Trisha didn't share that sentiment.

Upon receiving Odin's request, her decision was far more timely.

She responded exactly as Nigel expected, much to Nigel's dismay.

When the gods left the planet, many people claimed to see a meteor shower in the sky running in reverse. Those shooting stars were Odin's airships carrying his followers to a new world with the other pantheons. Even all the Titans had tagged along, too closely-knit as a race to be away from their own kind. For all the hatred they showed the gods, they still shared a sense of family.

Jesse and Nigel were on the tavern roof that night as the gods left and watched the shooting stars vanish into the night sky.

From high above, Trisha waved back as she set off on a new journey.

She promised it wouldn't be forever.

In the halls of the Fortress of Dis, a visitor approached Pandora's prison.

Pandora had nothing prepared. No quirky decorations, wacky birds, tea parties, or Thanksgiving parades were present. She hadn't even bothered dressing up for the occasion. She remained in the same black dress she died in.

Through the darkness stepped a shadowy, ethereal figure. The figure moved like a man, but was barely visible as he kept flickering out of existence like bad television reception.

Pandora addressed him, "So they call you Solomon now?" "Azalea, it's been a long time," Solomon's voice said.

"By what miracle are you here?" she asked. "I was certain one of my boys would've cast your worthless carcass into the Void by now."

"I've become the Zodiac once more," he said. "As I drift through this timeless Void, I'm slowly rediscovering more

about the limits of my powers. As you can see, I can already project myself into Second Age realms.”

“You look like a walking stain, dear.”

“I can become more than that,” Solomon said. “There’s more than one prophecy we can use to tear the gods apart. You see, I have a *new plan*, but I can’t put it into effect from the Void. There’s too much emptiness here. I need a skilled sorceress to carry it out. I need you.”

Pandora laughed, “Again with the prophecies and plans?”

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s such a tired cliché,” she said. “You knew what the flaw in your game was, didn’t you?”

“It was *you*.”

“That’s right,” Pandora giggled. “I was the most valuable piece on your board, and you had to gamble that I wouldn’t warn Naveen. I alone could’ve outed you from the beginning and your plan would have been worthless. And now here you are, inviting me into another one of your myopic machinations.”

“So what do you want?” Solomon asked. “Freedom?”

“Honey, I’m not even in a cage.”

“Then you want your spells back,” Solomon said. “I can make that happen.”

“Hardly,” Pandora said. “They’re already up here in me noggin.”

“Then what?” Solomon asked. “Is there a relic you want? Family to track down? Somebody to kill?”

Pandora smiled and went quiet.

Solomon threw up his blurry hands and moved to the exit.

“Forget it,” he said. “I forgot how frustrating a student you were.”

He suddenly felt himself pulled back to the cage. His ethereal presence was pressed face-first against the bars and Solomon’s projection was helpless to struggle. He

looked Pandora in those crazy, crazy eyes of hers and experienced pure terror. As much as he wanted to stop projecting, Pandora would not allow him. She grinned as she stepped towards Solomon's beaten presence and stroked his chin with one finger. She leaned in close and whispered in his ear.

"I think we can make a deal," she said.

"Why the change of heart?"

"Because your game is over, darling," she said with a slick, twisted grin. "Mine is just beginning."

Ancients' Royale II: Wrath of Ages  
Christopher Ushko, 2016