

Ancients' Royale III:
Destroyers of the Universe
Christopher Ushko

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

The following account was once based on a true story. Sadly, that is no longer the case. A world where history, mythology, religion and science collided in very real and unexpected ways is now lost. A few survivors remain to tell the tale, but the full scope of all that occurred during those end times shall forever remain a mystery.

Thanks for joining us on one last ride.

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Part I: A Day of Reckoning

1. In Retrospect

Before we begin, I'd like to get a few things off My chest. Firstly, bad things happen to good people because I work in mysterious ways. That should be a satisfactory answer. You should not be questioning those mysterious ways. It only makes the job more difficult when you smart off like that.

Secondly, I don't favour soup over salad, or vice versa. Some days I might have a soup, other days I might wreak divine vengeance upon a salad. Just because you write on a placard and shout from the sidewalk that I prefer one or the other doesn't mean it's true. Most days, I'd rather just have fries, but please don't put that in writing.

Thirdly, I love happy endings. I *plan* for happy endings. I order My happy endings with extra cheese. So if the following story about the universe's ultimate destruction somehow ends all feel-good at the most "cop out" moment possible, don't say I didn't warn you.

I wanted to mention those three things as a side-note before taking a trip down memory lane.

All together, I feel the universe has been a great success thus far. During the first day, there was a fantastic billion year-long explosion. Then, on the second day, all the heavens and planets came into existence. So far, so good, right? A few days later (or billions of years if you're using a modern calendar), I dropped mankind into the mix and the party finally started. What followed was a sheer joy to

watch as I relaxed and set the Great Plan into motion. My masterpiece was finally coming to light.

Unfortunately, like any artist, I felt a compulsive need to touch up My own work after the fact. Soon, deities like angels, demons, gods, and Titans (always with a capital 'T') found their way into the world. Accordingly, minor alterations had to be made to the Great Plan.

Alterations sometimes went awry.

The year was 3499 B.C. It was a thrilling time in history as wheeled caravans crossed deserts, petting zoos became commonplace, and people used pictographic proto-writing as an early form of blogging. It was also around the time that the Egyptian gods got a little uppity and I was compelled to intervene.

What followed was an incident which I haven't since repeated.

Fire rained from the night sky, scorching the granite of the mountainside as a hooded man in rusty grey robes hurried for cover. The man loudly cursed the heavens as he pushed through the burning rocks, ascending higher into the mountain. The surrounding flames seared at his flesh and he feared his robes would ignite at a moment's notice. "Up here!" shouted a male voice from a crevice above, "Quickly!"

The robed man saw the figure of someone waving to him through the light of the burning mountain. He promptly pressed on until he reached the safety of the crevice and escaped the hail of fire.

As he entered the cave, he was greeted with the tribal sound of percussion and woodwind. Through the roar of the flames outside, he had failed to hear the music from this cave. Playing it were three messy young men and a fair-haired woman dancing around a small campfire. They

all looked a little south of adulthood and greeted their robed guest with an enthusiastic, inebriated cheer.

“Hey, man, join the party!” shouted the youngest as he beat upon a small pair of drums and sipped from a leather wineskin. He offered a drink to their guest who politely refused.

The robed figure lifted his hood to reveal a crooked, old visage and looked upon their young faces. The one who’d waved him down had a childlike appearance with a curled lip and black, matted hair. He strummed a lyre and urged his guest to sit with them. When he didn’t respond immediately, the woman, incensed through the music and wine, danced over and led him to the fire. He soon became comfortable and looked upon the fourth man, the eldest of the four who calmly played the flute.

“Sumerians?” he asked in their respective language. They nodded accordingly.

“Buddy, you almost got scorched out there,” his host said in a thick, drawling accent. “It’s not a right time to be traveling in these parts.”

The robed man sighed. “It’s my own fault. I wasn’t aware the volcano was still active.”

The youngest laughed, “The fire out there? That’s no volcano, man! It’s the gods!”

The woman smiled and sang. “From Egypt ‘cross the Red Sea, they wage wrath and fury!”

Their guest’s interest was piqued. “The gods, you say?”

“You should eat,” the host said. “We’ve lamb to spare if you’re hungry.”

“Indeed!” the flutist bellowed, “Spread the wealth! Eat like there’s no tomorrow!”

The robed man was offered a bowl of spiced meat from the youngest and devoured it in seconds. The others looked

on in delight as the host played a few notes on his strings. The wineskin found its way around the circle.

"To the end of the world!" the woman shouted as she took a swig.

"We're all going to die!" the youngest howled as he played an energetic drum solo.

The robed man couldn't help but laugh at their buffoonery. As they frolicked, he gazed out the cave entrance and looked upon the desert below. Beyond the rain of fire, there was stretch of sea, and beyond that, more desert.

"You're not from around here," the host said as he strummed on the lyre.

"Certainly not from Egypt," the flutist said. "The rain destroyed all the ships. Nobody's crossing that Red Sea anytime soon."

"Are you a bandit?" the youngest asked as their guest swallowed another bite.

Their host held back a chuckle. "He's not a bandit. Our guest marches with the stride of a traveller and a mission in his heart. It's fate, not intent, that guides his feet. Tell us stranger, from where do you hail? Certainly not from Egypt. A Canaanite, perhaps?"

"I'm from a small village south of Sinai," he replied. "I pursue two men who came this way. Perhaps you've seen them? The elder of the two would have my eyes, and the younger would be addle-minded."

"Are they your sons?" the woman asked, quite interested.

"Two brothers came through here the night before in a hurry. The older of the two certainly had your eyes, but they didn't stay long."

"It's of the utmost importance that I find them."

"Well, you're not going out in this storm, man," the youngest said.

"You can camp here tonight," his host replied. "I'm sure the storm will be over by morning."

Their guest seemed agitated at the thought of waiting out the storm. "You underestimate how long the gods can brew a tempest, sir...?"

"Gilgamesh," the host replied. "My friends call me Gil. The lady is Suduri, the man on the flute is Dumuzid, and the youngest is Enkidu."

"Do you have a name, old man?" Enkidu asked.

A lie got caught on the man's lip, but retreated to back of his tongue. In a quiet, fearful voice, he found himself compelled to speak honestly. "My name is Sulei."

"Well, Sulei, feel free to share our warmth tonight," Suduri said sweetly.

"And might I ask what four youths like yourselves are doing on this mountain?" Sulei asked. "Certainly you exaggerate about the end of the world."

Gil strummed the strings and raised an eyebrow in contemplation. "Tell me, do you believe in God, Sulei?"

"I believe in more gods than I care to," he replied.

"But do you believe in a Creator god?" Gil continued. "Do you believe in the all-knowing will of a being greater than the stars themselves?"

"I've heard my share of stories."

"How would you feel if I told you that this very God is here tonight?"

"Hush, Gil," Suduri said, "Don't frighten the man."

"No, no, no, fate brought him here, so he needs to hear this," Gil said. "Something special is going to happen tonight that could possibly usher in a new age of faith. It's going to happen right across the Red Sea, and we have front row tickets for the grand finale."

Sulei looked to the cave entrance, but saw only fire raining from the sky. He smiled and shrugged.

“Nonsense,” he muttered. “You say it’s the one God, but I’d wager two Fire Giants are having a grudge match in the clouds above.”

Gil stood up and marched towards the cave entrance, waving his lyre enthusiastically. “You don’t know what’s going on out there. We’ve been on vigil for weeks and we’ve seen the impossible. First that sea turned red as blood! Then it began raining frogs! Plagues of flies and locusts! Droughts overnight! Livestock collapsing! Do you want to know why?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Because the Creator’s stepping in,” Gil said. “Across that sea is an empire ruled by lesser gods and built on the back of human slaves. The Creator has sent his own prophet to free those people through the power of his miracles! You have no idea how lucky you are to be a witness to such an event!”

Sulei laughed, “The Creator does not intervene. And even if he did, he wouldn’t waste his power saving a few slaves.”

“Things are changing, Sulei,” Gil said. “The Creator is growing merciful. He wants to build a covenant with mankind by overthrowing their false gods. He’s even sent his four most prestigious acolytes as emissaries to Egypt.”

“How is spreading plagues across Egypt considered merciful?”

Before Gil could answer, Dumuzid spoke up, “Gil, you’re getting ahead of yourself. We know nothing of these acolytes.”

“But we do! The first three acolytes have already overseen the first nine plagues, but the fourth acolyte is going to perform a miracle unlike any other! Can you guess what it is?”

Sulei shrugged. “Another worldwide flood?”

Gil laughed, “He’s going to *raise the dead!*”

Suduri sighed and shook her head in disbelief.

"None of you believe me," Gil said, stepping closer to the entrance. "But you'll see. The fallen slaves will rise from their graves by the hundreds, stand among their families and march out of Egypt! Not even the pharaoh's army will stop them!"

Suduri looked to Sulei and said, "You must forgive my husband. He's always been a tad scattered. But the four of us have traveled so long, God knows we'd follow him to the ends of the Earth if he asked."

"Which he likely will," Dumuzid said.

"Ignore his nonsense," Enkidu spoke up. "Once the rain has passed, we'll be moving on as well. It's best not to dwell on the ramblings of a madman."

Sulei looked back to Gil who quietly stared over the rain of fire. Sulei's eye was drawn to a small circle of tattooed markings on the back of the madman's neck. He couldn't read them from down here, but if he hadn't been looking for it, he would have missed the tattoos glowing.

Gil was no ordinary man.

He was here tonight for more than just a light show.

He's here for me, Sulei let his thoughts slip.

Sulei took a sip from the skin and allowed the wine to fog his mind.

He would need it to deal with Gil.

Hours passed into the night. Suduri, Dumuzid, and Enkidu soon fell asleep around the campfire. Sulei rested with one eye open while Gilgamesh continued his vigil at the cavern entrance, playing a soft melody on his lyre.

Sulei quietly reached under his robe and his fingers wrapped around the handle of an iron dagger.

Once he was certain the other three were asleep, he got to his feet and slowly crept towards Gilgamesh.

He couldn't afford to make a sound.

He couldn't even afford a thought.

Sulei produced the dagger from his robe and advanced on the young man.

He was soon inches from his prey.

As Sulei raised the dagger and prepared to plunge it through his enemy's neck, the music of the lyre ceased and silence adorned the caves.

The rain of fire stopped.

"I know who you are," Gilgamesh said. Sulei stopped in his tracks. "You're in no danger from me. Now put that ridiculous thing away and come sit. The show's about to start."

A feeling of shame and embarrassment washed over Sulei as he placed the dagger back within his robe. He reluctantly sat by Gilgamesh.

"How long did you know?"

"Since this morning," Gilgamesh replied. "I heard your thoughts from miles away, but I never imagined it could be true. To think, I'm in the company of a legend. And not just any legend - you're the first of our order. The first Zodiac Knight. Is it true that you're without power?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, you look good for your age. How do you manage it?"

"Eat right and exercise."

"And apparently spend a lot of time chasing those Fire-Blood boys around."

"So are you going to deliver me to the Creator?" Sulei asked.

"He's not interested in you anymore," Gilgamesh said.

"Hasn't been for a few thousand years. If following those boys from town to town keeps you out of trouble, why would the Creator bother with you at all?"

"The Creator knows well that one of those boys is the key to my ascension to His Throne. Surely, the Almighty hasn't forgotten that?"

"Hasn't forgotten. Just doesn't care."

"Typical," Sulei grunted. "So why are you four really here if not for me?"

"I was personally summoned by God to oversee this operation," Gilgamesh said. "It's the first time He's letting the acolytes serve Him out of heaven and, if anything goes wrong, it's my responsibility to keep His prophet safe."

"Why would God be afraid of something going wrong?"

"Because he works in mysterious ways, of course."

"Of course."

Gilgamesh's eyes lit up at the sky. Something strange was happening in the clouds. A blue light began to tear open the sky and shine a heavenly beam upon Egypt in the distance.

"This is it!" Gil exclaimed, eagerly leaning in to watch. Sulei leaned in as well, interested to see how this played out.

"What's happening?"

"It's the fourth acolyte coming to perform the final miracle."

Through the light, they saw a figure descend into Egypt. It was enormous, elegant, and appeared to have four wings that lightly flapped in the breeze. Even from a distance, the silhouette of the figure's majesty was unmistakable.

Sulei squinted at the sight of it and asked, "What is it?"

"It's the Angel of Death."

Though the wings might have been a dead giveaway, something was off about the creature's presence. Sulei shook his head disconcertingly and said, "I've seen angels before. That's not an angel."

They watched as it descended over the horizon and vanished into Egypt like a dark sunset.

"Are we safe here?" Sulei asked, growing ever concerned.

"I mean, from other deities."

"Don't worry, I drew a line of lamb's blood over the entrance," Gil said. "Nothing's getting in here."

"The other three acolytes, were they... anything like that one?"

"No, the first three were quite different. I hadn't seen anything like them before. It would be quite difficult to describe them, really. But they were obedient and followed God's will, so..."

His excited expression suddenly dropped as he looked upon the horizon.

"What's wrong?" Sulei asked.

Gil's eyes glowed faintly as he projected his sight across the sea. Whatever his astral vision saw on the other side was filling him with great terror. His lip quivered and he clutched his lyre tightly.

"No..." Gil said in astonishment, "Not this! Why is God letting this happen?"

Sulei shook him. "What's happening in Egypt? Are the dead walking?"

"I'm sorry," Gil said, standing up. "I need to go. I need to stop this."

"Stop what? What's the Angel of Death doing?"

Gilgamesh pushed Sulei out of the way and leapt out the cave entrance down the mountainside. Almost immediately, a shining armor appeared over him and his lyre transformed into a gleaming sword. Like a bird on the wind, he caught himself in mid-fall and soared off towards the light in the distance.

As this happened, the other three woke up and hurried to Sulei's side. Clearly they didn't have any similar gifts or they would have flown after their comrade.

"What's happening?" Dumuzid asked.

"It's the fourth acolyte," Sulei said. "Something hasn't gone to plan."

Suduri dropped to her knees and started praying. Enkidu was quick to follow.

Dumuzid gazed upon the horizon and felt cold shivers running through his spine. He may not have carried the gift of flight, but he felt something sinister all the same.

"What do you sense?" Suduri asked.

"The angel has gone mad," Dumuzid said. "It hunts the living. It shatters their souls."

"Then it is the will of God!" Enkidu exclaimed.

Dumuzid shook his head, frozen in terror. "There is no will guiding its hand. This is a creature that *doesn't answer to God*."

Sulei stared into the distance. He could only imagine the horrors that lay beyond the horizon. From the moment he laid eyes on the 'angel', he knew something was wrong. An angel's presence is masked in an air of righteousness, but this creature's nature was foreign to him. He knew this was more than just divine intervention. The Creator had unleashed a weapon with the intent to control it and somehow failed.

Had God planned to fail? Sulei wondered.

Was this why He summoned the Zodiac?

What is it? Where did it come from?

And what kind of thing doesn't answer to God?

Sulei didn't stick around to find out.

As the others waited for their comrade to return, Sulei grabbed some provisions and left without their notice. With that creature on the loose, his survival instinct told him it was best to put some distance between himself and Egypt as quickly as possible.

As for the fate of Gilgamesh, well... it's just as I said.

I plan for happy endings.

2. When Bad Things Happen

It was ten minutes until Hunter's Tavern opened when the water pipe finally ruptured.

Nigel Hunter stood ankle deep in cold water and carefully scanned the pipes in the boiler room ceiling with his flashlight for any further damage. His brother, Jesse, stood not too far away and humbly watched Nigel perform his inspection. Surrounding them were Jesse's belongings: his clothes, his bed, his video games, his movies, his empty pizza boxes, his comic books, his television, his bean bag chair, and his crystal sword, Excalibur II... all either adrift, submerged, or soaking wet. Surprisingly, the boiler was still in working condition.

Nigel re-assessed the damage and asked, "How long was that pipe dripping?"

"Since March," Jesse said hesitantly.

"March last month, or March last year?"

"The second one."

"So the pipe's been dripping since before Pandora attacked Halifax?"

"Yeah," Jesse admitted. "I did put a bucket down."

"I could have had that fixed in an hour, you know," Nigel said. "I'm going to need half a day just to get the water running again. That doesn't begin to account for all the

water damage on the walls. Thank goodness we have a concrete floor down here.”

“Do you think we can salvage my Playstation?” Jesse asked.

“You mean that black box under the water?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesse, your Playstation is *finito*.”

Jesse silently mourned his *Dragon Age* save-games.

“So what are we going to do about water tonight?” Jesse asked. “It’s the playoffs. This place is going to be swamped. People will want drinks. People will want to wash their hands. People will want to flush.”

Normally, this wouldn’t have been a problem. Before last Christmas, Nigel’s spouse, Trisha, and their waitress, Patti, could have taken care of the bar while Nigel made a run to the depot for parts. A few hours would be all he’d need to get things running again. Unfortunately, Patti was on vacation in China and Trisha, having been named an ‘unsung prophet’ by the gods after the Battle of Ragnarök, had been whisked away on a diplomatic mission to another galaxy.

No matter how many times Nigel revisited that idea in his mind, it still sounded strange.

Trisha was in outer space with the gods.

Granted, it was where she wanted to be. For the longest time, she kept herself busy in this bar, but her ambitions went beyond cooking chicken wings and mixing drinks. When she stepped up to plate and helped the gods and Titans work together at the Battle of Ragnarök, it had opened up a new door of opportunity which unfortunately meant Jesse and Nigel were left to run the bar.

Nigel and Jesse’s skills were going to waste as well. They were nine thousand year-old battle-hardened Aemon warriors, forged from the fires of Heaven and Hell, whose

reason for existing ended after defeating the demon sorceress Pandora last summer. Since then, they'd been venerated as heroes by ancients, immortals, and deities alike, but turned down every quest and holy crusade that came their way. It wasn't until after the Battle of Ragnarök when the gods decided to take most of their people off-world that things finally quieted down.

And now they were ankle-deep in cold water.

"The bathroom plumbing is fine," Nigel said as he finished investigating. "This rupture just means the bar and kitchen won't be getting any water."

"Then we'll just serve tap water from the bathroom."

"Or, better idea, you run a couple blocks down to the store and buy a few cases of bottled water."

"Does that mean I get to drive your truck?"

"It means you *run*," Nigel repeated sternly.

"You do realize it's raining, right?"

"I realize you'll have to get your feet wet, yes," Nigel said as he kicked some water at Jesse. "Now hop to it. We'll make this work."

The ruptured pipe was just the beginning.

AC/DC blared on the jukebox as customers poured from the streets of downtown Halifax to watch the hockey game. It was a full house tonight. Within ten minutes of opening, Nigel counted at least thirty university students, ten office workers, and twenty seniors. With all the seating full, Nigel had to set up a fold-out table on the stage at the far end of the tavern just to accommodate the overflow.

Nigel then hurried to attend everything at once. Tending to the bar, tending to the kitchen, tending to the patrons... he'd seen Patti multi-task like this on several occasions without so much as breaking a sweat. She'd even pulled

off the same magic while telemarketing on the side. She was a machine when it came to waitressing.

But then fire happened.

Nigel didn't even see how the fire began. All he knew was that he'd left a pan of Trisha's patented honey-garlic wings on the burner, stepped out for twenty seconds, and returned to a stove-top inferno. Forged from the fires of Heaven and Hell, Nigel took no issue with putting out the flames with his bare hands. What he did take issue with was that he'd have to microwave everything now.

While he was attending to the flames, however, complaints about the bathroom made their way to the bar. Nigel feared that another pipe had ruptured, but the truth was far worse: this was a clean-up job of the third degree. The game had barely started and the patrons were already exhibiting the worst of after-party behaviour.

To make matters worse, Nigel couldn't find the mop.

One group complained about not getting their drinks yet.

Then one of the teams scored, causing one of the other tables to accidentally knock over their glasses cheering.

Nigel couldn't find the broom to sweep up the broken glass.

And then the microwave caught fire.

And then one group began mixing their own drinks at the bar while he was in the kitchen.

And then the fold-out table collapsed on the stage.

This all happened during the game's first period.

Upon his return, Jesse was quite surprised the bar had descended into absolute anarchy in his absence. He placed the cases of bottled water on the bar and immediately made for the hotspot of chaos: the washroom.

Finding the mop behind the washroom door, he quickly made the facilities serviceable again.

The madness ceased as the brothers worked in sync to get the bar back under control. Jesse took care of the broken glass as Nigel mixed and served the drinks. Jesse set up tables and chairs for new patrons while Nigel kicked out the rowdier ones. Neither could solve the problem of the stove-top catching fire, so they simply turned on the stove's fan and barbecued wings over the flames.

Soon, everyone was happily watching the game and enjoying themselves without complaint.

Watching his brother perform under pressure, Nigel developed a newfound respect for Jesse. For the nine thousand years they'd known each other, Jesse had always been the child of the two. That all changed with the arrival of a girl named Christine whom Jesse took a liking to. After defeating the demon sorceress together, Jesse and Christine traveled the world until circumstances forced them to part ways. Since then, Jesse wasn't as easily distracted by childlike pursuits. He was wiser and more responsible than before. He was developing his own sense of discipline.

As the game reached the end of the third period, with both teams tied and the patrons heavily invested in the outcome, Jesse and Nigel took a breather to meet at the bar. They engaged in a friendly game of Quarters where they took turns bouncing coins into an empty plastic cup.

"Bathroom clean?" Nigel asked, bouncing in one coin.

"Check. Kitchen not on fire?" Jesse asked, bouncing in another.

"Check. All tables accounted for?"

"Check. Any more broken glasses?"

"None," Nigel breathed a sigh of relief as another quarter landed in the cup. "I think we might come out of this alive."

“Good teamwork, bro,” Jesse said as he raised a fist to bump Nigel’s. Nigel missed the gesture and left Jesse hanging.

“Good enough,” Nigel said. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“I’m sure you could have--”

“No,” Nigel said, “Jesse, I *really* couldn’t have done this without you. It was pure chaos; more than I could handle.”

“It was nothing, really.”

“It was, Jess,” Nigel said, trying to collect his thoughts. “It’s good to know that we can work together without being under the threat of demons or Titans. It’s good to know that I can count on you.”

Jesse felt like that was a double-sided compliment. He’d always considered himself reliable, but from Nigel’s perspective, he’d always been off in his own world. He wasn’t used to Nigel being this open about his feelings, so he took it at face value.

Nigel bounced his last quarter into the cup before speaking again.

“We’re selling the bar,” he said suddenly.

Jesse’s aim faltered as he looked Nigel in the eye. Nigel was being sincere.

“Come again?” Jesse asked.

“Someone made a good offer,” Nigel explained. “They want to turn the bar into a cajun restaurant with an upstairs laundromat. I spoke with Trish last week and... we’re both okay with it.”

“But why would you agree to that?” Jesse asked.

“Why are we even running a bar to begin with?” Nigel asked. “We started this business to hide from Pandora. That’s history now. It’s not like I can run this bar forever.”

“Being immortal means you *can* run it forever!”

"I have to move on sometime," Nigel said. "To be honest, this bar was always Trisha's passion, and even she's moving on. It feels like the end of an era."

"What about money?"

"We've been saving up quite a lot, actually," Nigel said.

"Mostly from investments. Stocks are surprisingly easy to play once you've watched a few empires rise and fall. We have enough saved to retire to a nice apartment in the shade. For a few decades, at least."

Jesse felt disheartened. "But we've been through so much with this bar."

"In the grand scheme of things, it's just a building," Nigel said. "Like you said, we've been through a lot. Maybe too much. Sometimes giving up the smaller things in life is the best way to move on from that."

"I suppose," Jesse said. In the past year, Nigel had definitely been through a lot. Starting from when Pandora attacked the city, to when a man named Solomon came forward as Nigel's "father", used him to wage war on the gods and stole back the power of the Zodiac Knight. Still, even though Pandora was locked up in Hell and Solomon was trapped in the Void, nothing was the same anymore. "It's your shot," Nigel said.

He didn't feel his heart in the shot, but Jesse took careful aim with his quarter and threw it. It bounced off the bar and rolled edge-first around the rim of the cup. Before it could fall in, however, Nigel bounced a dime off the bar and knocked the quarter off the cup.

"I win," Nigel grinned.

"That was cheating!" Jesse exclaimed.

"You're just upset because that was a great shot."

"That was a great shot," Jesse admitted, "but it doesn't make the bar situation any better."

"If it makes you feel better," Nigel said, "we can resume your training after work."

"I don't know if I'm up for more swordplay so soon after last weekend."

"I meant we could get back on that other thing."

"Shape-shifting?"

"No, the *other* thing."

Jesse eyes lit up as he realized what Nigel was suggesting. "Do you really think I'm ready for it again so soon?"

"I've been watching you. I think you're ready this time."

Nigel was proud of his brother's sudden interest in resuming his Fire-Blood training, though it did come at a great cost. The winter before, Jesse had been trapped in the shadowy realm of R'Lyeh and sold part of his soul to escape. Part of that price included his friend Christine's memory of him. The last time Jesse had met with her was in Vancouver four months ago. He swore himself to secrecy over what he'd learned then, but had since developed a great resolve to master his Fire-Blood abilities.

"Let's do it," Jesse said.

There was one minute left in the game's final period.

Just then, a sharp pain shot through Nigel's heart.

He collapsed behind the bar, out of sight from the other patrons, clutching his chest. Jesse hurried behind to help him.

Nigel's life flashed before his eyes.

Nine thousand years all at once.

Wandering through deserts. Hiding in sand. Building shelters in the mountains.

Being attacked by demons. Cities falling. People shrieking in terror.

Atlantis. Ubar. Sodom and Gomorrah. So many other cities gone.

At once, he felt a full nine thousand years of repressed guilt hit him in the chest.

He stopped breathing.

Of course, he didn't need to breathe, but the shock of it all made him forget to.

Every life he'd ever sacrificed to protect the world had just been in his heart.

"Nigel, are you with me?" Jesse asked as he snapped his fingers in front of Nigel's face.

"Yeah... yeah, I'm with you."

"What was that?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know," Nigel said, still shaking from the guilt bomb.

"I've never felt that before."

"Can you stand?"

Nigel stood warily. His senses were back to normal. The pain was gone.

"Something like that doesn't happen naturally," he said.

"It's a sign... or a message."

"But from who?"

"...From someone on the other side."

The lights flickered.

The televisions turned off in the middle of a breakaway.

A blackout bathed the entire bar in darkness to many disappointed groans.

3. Friends on the Other Side

“Urobach!” Nigel shouted into the keyhole of Pandora’s Box, “Answer me!”

Ignoring the pleas of the customers to turn the power back on, Nigel had hurried upstairs to his studio apartment. On his piano rested a souvenir from his last battle with Pandora: a locked-from-the-inside, toaster-sized wooden box which acted as a gateway to Hell. Through its keyhole, he could occasionally receive messages from the demon of Hell’s Fire, a surly old behemoth named Urobach. He’d never been able to shout a message through the keyhole, but now seemed like an important time to try.

Downstairs, Jesse found the fusebox in the kitchen and reset the breaker. First the lights came on, then the televisions. Jesse was quick to set them back to the sports network only to find the game had gone into overtime. Once he settled a few bills, Jesse hurried upstairs to check on his brother’s situation.

It was strange enough to see a Fire-Blood warrior experience any kind of crippling pain; it was another to see one shouting at a box.

“Nigel, what are you doing?”

“Something’s going on in Hell,” Nigel said. “Our hearts and memories are projected from the fire down there, meaning whatever happens to the fire, happens to us.”

"But it only happened to you!"

"You're not as connected as I am," Nigel said, reminding Jesse of his self-inflicted amnesia from almost nineteen years back. "Most of my memories are still intact. I can feel the rivers of Hell in my heart and they're anything but steady."

"Well, what are we supposed to do about that?"

"I need you to do me a favour, Jess. I need you to kill me."

"I'm not killing you right now," Jesse said. "The game's gone into overtime and things are about to get rowdy."

"It'll be for a second," Nigel insisted. "I need you to send me to Hell so I can check with Urobach. I promise I'll be right back."

"Oh, no, you're not getting out of work," Jesse said. "What if something *is* wrong and you get trapped in that box? I don't want to close up by myself while you're stuck in Hell."

"We can't ignore what happened."

"Then get someone else to look into it."

"Like who?"

Jesse reached into his pocket, pulled out his cell phone and threw it to Nigel.

"I've got Hades, God of the Underworld, on there," Jesse said as he returned back downstairs. "Why don't you ask him?"

Nigel tried exactly that.

Unfortunately, it wasn't Hades who answered.

They'd met Hades last Christmas, back when he was working the HR department in Asgard. After Ragnarök, Hades was one of the few gods to stay behind on Earth. He was currently living in New York City, running his own private investigator firm. Needless to say, Nigel wasn't pleased when an unwanted voice answered Hades' phone. "Underworld Investigations; you got Vladdy," a man with a thick European accent spoke.

Nigel immediately recognized the voice of Vladimir Tsepish, the vampire bounty hunter who had relentlessly pursued Jesse and Nigel for several centuries. He'd proven himself a useful ally during their battles with Solomon, but that didn't make his presence any more tolerable.

"Vladimir, what are you doing answering Hades' phone?"

"This is a business line and I work here," he said. "Who may I ask is calling?"

"Forget it," Nigel said, trying to avoid any conversation.

"Just put Hades on the phone."

"I know this voice," Vladimir said with a smile, "This is my old Fire-Blood friend, Naveen! How are you doing, man?"

"Just put Hades on the..." There was a shrill female scream on Vladimir's side. Nigel's eyebrows furrowed with concern. "Are you killing people right now?"

"Oh, no, no, no, I'm on season 4 of *Sex and the City*,"

Vladimir said, turning it down. "God, I love this show. You just heard Carrie getting startled by a squirrel."

One of Nigel's concerns about vampires was catching them in the middle of a kill. Trisha was always good about keeping her prey alive, but other vampires weren't as considerate. Nigel knew for a fact that Vladimir was one of those vampires. He pressed himself to ignore Vladimir's existence and turned to the subject at hand.

"Where is Hades? I need his help."

"He's out of town," Vladimir replied. "But if you need help tracking someone down, I'm your man. Hades didn't just hire me to feed the cat, you know. I'll just throw on some pants and..."

"I need information about what's happening in Hell."

"Okay, so maybe I'm not your man," Vladimir said. "Hades, he'll not be back for a while. He's gone off-world for a summit meeting with the other gods."

“What kind of summit meeting?”

“Far be it I know,” Vladimir said. “Gods are a crazy sort. Even Hades seemed distant this last week. I’ve been taking over all his cases. Then again, everyone’s been on edge since the blackout.”

“Which blackout?”

“Just some screwy off-world thing,” Hades said. “A week ago, all the gods lost their powers at once. It only lasted five seconds, but they flipped out something fierce.”

“And that’s what the summit meeting is about?”

“Damned if I know; I just work here. You should call your old lady if you want to know more. She’s probably at the heart of that fiasco.”

“Right...” Nigel trailed off.

“Hey, Naveen, we should hang out sometime,” Vladimir joked. “I could chase you and your brother around for old time’s sake.”

“And we could drop-kick you into that moat in Prague again.”

“It was a lovely swim, as I recall.”

Nigel hung up on Vladimir. Vladimir resumed his marathon. Nigel immediately set about dialing Trisha’s number. The last time he’d heard from her, she was negotiating a territorial dispute between the Huastec and Olmec gods somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy. A long-distance call would have been pricey if their provider hadn’t been offering a “30 Minutes Free Long Distance Anywhere” deal this month.

The phone rang, but no one answered.

Trisha’s number was still working, but after several tries and leaving a few messages, Nigel gave up trying to reach her.

Panic began to set in. First the flashbacks, then the blackout, now this.

The pain in Nigel's heart gave way to an empty void.

A Void, he thought. The empty space between time and space.

Only two beings were powerful enough to tamper with the gods, the afterlife, and his long-distance calls at once. One of those things created the universe, and the other thing was trapped in the Void.

If it were possible to escape, could 'he' be responsible?

Or was Solomon still a prisoner in the darkness?

Nigel tried to imagine Solomon's demise. He tried to picture how a man with half the power of God got trapped in the Void by a twenty-something slacker from California. He tried to imagine how Solomon could escape. Could he manifest himself outside the Void? Could he tear open a hole in reality? As the carbon-copy creation of the old sorcerer, Nigel instinctively knew how Solomon thought, but lacked the common knowledge to back up any viable theories.

If Solomon escaped, would he come after us first, or would he work his way down from the top?

Would he have another grand scheme? Would he play us all like chess pieces again?

Or am I just being paranoid?

Maybe everything's unrelated and I'm just jumping to conclusions.

Trisha would call it something was wrong.

Nigel felt his hand shaking. It didn't normally do that, but it was shaking nonetheless. His fire-forged nerves were shot like the water pipe in the basement.

Much like Solomon, he didn't like being kept in the dark.

4. The Last Zodiac

Over ten thousand miles to the east, three young people trudged through a coniferous forest at the edge of the Tianshan mountains. The first was a tall Chinese man in white robes with three braided ponytails. The second was a short woman, also Chinese, with purple-streaked hair, nose rings, and a tiger-striped tank top. The third, lagging behind, was a red-haired American boy in a *Foo Fighters* T-shirt. worn out from the over-sized travel pack he carried. All three of them spoke Mandarin:

“Ourselves have arrived not exist strawberry?” asked the American boy.

“Try again, honey,” the young lady said. “A little slower and without ‘strawberry’.”

The boy did a little rephrasing. “*Are we there yet?*”

“Not much farther, young Ptolemy,” the braided gentleman said. “Soon, we will arrive and our journey will truly begin.” Ptolemy collapsed under the weight of his pack and curled up on the dirt. The woman stepped over towards him and politely kicked his chest.

“Patti, go on without me,” Ptolemy begged. “I’ll just ticket broom and die here.”

Patti plopped down in the dirt next to him. She was used to being on her feet all day. Ptolemy was used to sitting in his

beanbag chair in front of his X-Box. An outdoorsman, he was not.

"Tired already, Ptom?" Patti asked, poking his nose. "It's only been thirty miles since the bus stop."

"Maybe this was a big mistake," Ptolemy said. "Let's just go back to Beijing. We'll elephant more karaoke with the Immortals."

"Vacation's over, goof-ball," Patti said. "We didn't come this far for you to nap in the dirt."

Ptolemy wasn't accustomed to feeling weak or tired.

Before Solomon stole back his Zodiac powers, Ptolemy had already mastered the art of Zodiac strength at a young age along with a couple other bells and whistles. To be without his strength at this junction only strengthened his animosity towards Solomon.

But now something was coming. Ptolemy had known about it for three months. He'd been summoned to service and sworn to secrecy by the Immortals. A Day of Reckoning was at hand, and only himself and few others knew anything about it.

"We must not keep the Master waiting," their guide reminded them.

"Just a few minutes, Wu Tang," Ptolemy asked, trying to catch his breath.

Wu Tang was the Ninth Chinese Immortal and had accompanied them throughout their stay in China. He first met Patti during the battle for Halifax, when he psychically possessed her body to use it as a magical conduit. The second time they met was in the city of Atlantis, but he had been possessing a Pomeranian at the time. Now they finally got to meet in the flesh. Ptolemy was slightly disappointed to find he was a very normal-looking person and not a magic talking dragon as he had hoped. From touring the Forbidden City to visiting Patti's parents to

partying with the other eighty-nine Immortals, he was their silent shadow until they agreed it was time to undertake Ptolemy's pilgrimage.

Ptolemy opened his water bottle and quenched his thirst. He smiled sweetly at Patti before saying in English, "This one time in L.A., me and my friends decided to hike up to the big Hollywood sign. One guy named Jerrod wanted to sit in one of the O's and howl his letter phonetically to the whole neighborhood like a wolf."

"This was a decision made after two in the morning, right?"

"We were riding a late night gamer's high," Ptolemy explained. "Anyway, we get to the sign, start climbing the hill and, I kid you not, there is this big-ass Rottweiler right on the trail. And Jerrod completely changes his mind and says 'Forget the O, I'm going to ride that dog.'"

"And?"

"And what? The dog kicked his ass and humped his leg for five minutes."

"So did you guys ever get to the sign?" she asked.

"Nah. That thing with the Rottweiler was golden enough." There was a pause before she said, "Ptolemy?"

"Yeah?"

"That story was awesome."

"I'm glad somebody thinks so. Help me up."

She grabbed his hand and helped him to his feet. He stumbled about before removing his backpack.

"Much better," he said, switching back to Mandarin.

"Leave your backpack here," Wu Tang suggested. "You will have no use for it once we're at the Cave."

"But it's got all my stuff in it..."

"Leave it. You won't be able to make the jump with it anyway."

"Jump?" Ptolemy asked. "What jump?"

"Follow me," he said. "It's just this way."

As they followed him into the thick vegetation, the mountains loomed ever higher overhead. The air grew colder and Patti regretted going bare-armed. Ptolemy never realized how much he took his powers for granted until he found himself feeling the adverse effects of the weather. It was a completely new and uncomfortable feeling for him.

The sound of running water could be heard.

They follow an ancient trail through the bush until they happened upon a large cliff face in the mountain. A small river ran along its base with a beautiful majestic waterfall rising up before them. At the edge of the river bank was a small stone outcropping that seemed to point towards the falls.

"We have arrived," Wu Tang said. "The Master awaits inside."

"Inside where?" Ptolemy asked.

Wu Tang gestured to the waterfall. It didn't take Ptolemy long to piece together that there was a cave on the other side of it.

"I jump *there*?" he asked. Wu Tang nodded. "It's too far. And there's a big waterfall in the way. Did I mention I hate water?"

"Be swift and let your spirit carry you across the waves."

"What if I fall?"

"If your heart is true, you will fly."

"I meant, will you save me if I don't?"

"I will try," Wu Tang said. "But not without being ashamed of you."

"Are you two coming?"

"The Waterfall Cave is a holy sanctuary," Wu Tang said.

"Only disciples of enlightenment must enter its halls. We will wait outside while you undertake your trials."

“Pft, yeah, right,” Patti said in English. She pointed Ptolemy at the cave, slapped his rear end and said, “Just go on in. We’ll see you inside.”

“Mashed potato tuna,” Ptolemy uttered. No one was sure what he was trying to say at that point, but it didn’t sound enthusiastic.

He reared up and dashed towards the stone outcropping. He must have been crazy for doing this, he realized. As he leapt off the outcropping towards the waterfall, his foot slipped and he awkwardly flailed across the river. He fell through the waterfall and his chest collided against a ledge. His hands scrambled for anything to hold onto as the water rained upon him. He found some footing and quickly climbed the ledge into a cave behind the falls. Soaking wet, he laid on his back to catch his breath.

As he did so, a wooden tapping could be heard approaching him through the darkness of the cave.

A small figure emerged sporting a wooden walking staff. Ptolemy couldn’t believe his eyes as he saw it, but then realized it wasn’t too strange compared to some of the other things he’d seen lately. The figure wore a red bathrobe, stood just over three feet tall, and was covered with thick golden fur. It had a blue face, button-black eyes, a curly tail and a long grey, curly beard.

“A monkey...?” Ptolemy asked.

The monkey bopped Ptolemy on his head with the staff and said in perfect English, “The only monkey I see is you. From here on out, you may call me Master. Now, follow me.”

Ptolemy never said no to a talking monkey before. He got to his feet and followed his new ‘Master’ into the next room.

5. Hall of the Waterfall Cave

The monkey strode through the halls of the Waterfall Cave with the utmost sense of discipline. As they entered the main hall, Ptolemy was greeted to the sight of enormous pillars rising over hundreds of men in red robes, all of whom were kneeling and praying towards a choir of candles near the back. He noticed a pattern among the men, in which one covered his eyes, the next would cover his ears, and the third covered his mouth. The pattern repeated throughout the crowd.

“Change!” the monkey ordered, stomping the ground with his staff. Every man immediately covered the next part of their anatomy in the pattern.

They passed through the hall, stepped past the candles, and entered a doorway which took them into the backroom.

“The Fates told me you’d be coming,” the monkey said.

“Normally, I wouldn’t accept new students, but with the Day fast approaching, exceptions must be made. Please, close the door.” Ptolemy obliged. The interior of the room was a messy collection of weapons and antiques strewn about the room on tables and in piles. Vases, swords, lion statues and piles of gold basked in the candlelight. The monkey hopped onto a table and helped himself to a bowl of nuts. It would have been adorable if the monkey wasn’t such a hard-ass.

“So... you’re the Master?” Ptolemy inquired.

“I’m a Master,” the monkey replied. “You may call me Master Sun.”

“And you’re a monkey.”

“Does this surprise you? Are you not familiar with the legend?”

“I’m American.”

“Typical,” Master Sun groaned. He immediately leapt over to a nearby table and grabbed a small tome from a pile of books. He threw it to Ptolemy. The book was a familiar title called “*Journey to the West*”. Ptolemy’s eyes lit up at the sight of it.

“I’ve heard of this book!” he exclaimed. “There’s a bunch of Stephen Chow movies about it!”

“It’s an ancient Chinese legend that chronicles my rise and fall from power,” Master Sun said. “I was once a simple simian who sought knowledge and power. But I delved too deeply into the forbidden arts. When I waged war on Heaven, Buddha served punishment by trapping me beneath a mountain for five hundred years. Soon, I was released into the service of my old master who taught me the ways of humility, discipline, and respect through our journey of eighty-one trials. Now, I pass on his training to others like myself.”

“You mean other seekers of truth?”

“I mean other fools,” Master Sun said as he wandered around the room. “It’s been a long time since a Zodiac Knight has come our way. Normally, the Greeks or the Babylonians would scoop them up for training. Always with the western astrology, those nincompoops. True power is derived from the Chinese Zodiac. Not some outdated horoscope nonsense. Honestly, who match-makes a ram with a lion? Now a horse and a tiger - *there’s* a match made in Heaven!”

Master Sun swept his staff towards Ptolemy. It magically extended to reach across the room and hit him in the ankles. Ptolemy yelped in pain.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"No reflexes... weak calves..." Master Sun sighed. "It's enough they send me a Knight without powers, but one without experience as well. How are you supposed to unlock the next level of your training if you lack basic discipline?"

"I have plenty of discipline," Ptolemy said. "Go ahead. Hit me again."

Master Sun rapped him sharply from across the room on his arms, knees, and head. Ptolemy winced in pain and tried his best to fend it off without complaint, after which he stood tall.

"Thank you, sir," he said calmly. "May I have another?"

Master Sun grinned smugly.

"Perhaps there is some heart to you," he said. "You're a young man of the information age, it seems. You study discipline through the worship of film and comic books, do you not? Under whom did you study?"

"Poseidon and Nigel Hunter," Ptolemy replied. "The latter being more effective."

"Yes, I heard about the sea god's teaching method,"

Master Sun said. "Too many pine cones for my taste. I prefer throwing wild animals at my students, personally. But that will not help in your case. The deadline for the Day is upon us and you cannot afford to waste time trying to recover your earthly gifts. Solomon has already taken those particular powers from you."

"So what powers am I supposed to learn?"

"A Zodiac Knight is master of Heaven and Earth," Master Sun spoke as he approached Ptolemy. "In the absence of

your earthly training, we must skip directly to the end of the line. Your heavenly powers must awaken."

"How?"

"You and I must go on a journey."

He stopped in his tracks at the sound of a wet crunch.

Both Ptolemy and Master Sun glanced off to the west wall to see Patti sitting on a table snacking from a bowl of peaches.

"Don't mind me," she said. "Didn't want to wait outside."

Master Sun's eyes widened. "What are you eating?"

"Peaches. They're really good."

"Those are the Peaches of Immortality cultivated from the orchards of Heaven!" Master Sun exclaimed in disbelief. "A single bite extends your life by an entire year!"

Patti looked at the peach in her hand in complete surprise.

Then she shrugged and took another bite. Master Sun quickly swiped the peach from her hand from across the room with his extending staff.

Wu Tang rushed through the door and dropped to both knees in despair. "So sorry, Master! She entered the Waterfall when I wasn't looking! I will accept my punishment!"

"Stand up, Wu Tang."

"I beg your forgiveness!"

"I said, *stand up!*"

Wu Tang quickly stood. He grabbed Patti by the arm to lead her out but she pushed him away and reached for another peach.

"Enough, both of you!" Master Sun shouted as Patti began eating another peach. "Just leave her be, Wu Tang. And stop groveling. You look like a pig in the mud."

Master Sun gestured for Ptolemy to follow him up a stone staircase in the back of this room. They arrived at a small, circular room with a single doorway built into the wall. Patti

and Wu Tang followed. The doorway was adorned with a golden frame and a wooden double-door configuration. The Chinese symbol for immortality was carved in gold across both doors.

"To begin your training, we must seek the Buddha," Master Sun said. "To find his sanctuary, we must enter the spirit world and pass beyond the gates of Heaven to the eternal bliss of Nirvana. For most, this journey would take decades, but I've made many a journey into Heaven through this little shortcut of mine."

"Question, are there bathrooms in the spirit world?" Patti asked.

"This is Ptolemy's journey, not yours," Sun snapped at her. "Yeah, but I'm probably coming anyway."

"And it is a legitimate question," Ptolemy said. "Are there bathrooms?"

"Enough tomfoolery!" Sun exclaimed. "Ptolemy and I must travel together. Wu Tang, you will mind the girl until our return!"

"Or until he isn't watching," Patti said.

Sun grunted and turned to the doorway. With both hands on the handles, he prepared to open the gateway to Heaven.

"Time is running short," he said. "Is your soul prepared, Ptolemy?"

"It's ready, Master," he replied.

"Very well. Behold, the glory of Heaven!"

Master Sun opened the gates of Heaven and all four of them beheld the glory within.

Their expressions of awe turned to dismay as they looked upon the horror of something else entirely.

Master Sun quickly slammed the doors.

"W-was that Heaven?" Ptolemy asked, quite shaken.

"That couldn't be... could it?" Master Sun stammered.

Patti took a bite from her peach and asked, "Is Heaven normally on fire?"

"Master, I fear it might be too late," Wu Tang said. "It seems the Day has come too soon."

"This changes nothing," Sun said. "We must seek another path to the Buddha immediately. Summon the council. Gather our finest warriors."

Their finest warriors began screaming in the other room. Sun brandished his staff while Wu Tang produced long blades from his sleeves. The two of them rushed down the stairs into the treasure hold. They stopped and held their ground as the screaming suddenly stopped.

The smell of the death filled the room. Neither man nor monkey sensed any signs of life from the temple entrance. A slow metal grinding could be heard against the stone floor in the first room.

Ptolemy and Patti hurried after them.

"Master, what's happening?" Ptolemy asked.

"Stay back," Sun said, his heart racing. Whatever was attacking the temple had just defeated a hundred of his finest warriors in seconds.

A figure was moving through the columns into the hold. Sun and Wu Tang slowly backed up against the stairs as the presence approached.

Through the shadows of the columns, amidst the flickering candlelight, they saw the long metal blade of a scythe dragging a trail of blood across the floor. The dark, robed figure carrying it stopped in the shadows to assess its prey. It didn't speak a word.

"What is it?" Ptolemy asked.

"Maybe it's just here for the peaches," Patti said.

The creature raised an arm. A quivering white appendage pointed directly at Ptolemy.

Ptolemy gulped and said, "It's definitely not here for the peaches."

Without a moment's notice, the creature swept towards them brandishing its scythe. Wu Tang and Master Sun raced to confront it.

After a quiet, but furious battle, the Waterfall Cave fell silent.

6. Search and Destroy

In the the shadow realm of R'Lyeh, three blind women sat upon a hill of string in a candlelit chamber. Their fingers traveled along the strings, the fates of all beings feeding into their minds. With access to this forbidden knowledge, they did what came naturally to them. They gossiped about it.

"Ooh, looks like Josh left Hannah at the altar!" one said.

"How scandalous!" another said. "Does she know he's secretly in love with her best friend yet?"

"No, she doesn't find out about Sheena until next season," the third said, reading some other strings. "Winter, to be exact."

They heard the sound of metal scraping against the stone floor nearby.

"Was that one of you?" the first asked.

"I didn't hear anything," the second said. "I was too distracted by this steamy string I found. This whole Josh/Sheena thing gets pretty hot. I'm totally shipping Josheena."

Schwing!

"Wait, I heard something too!" the third realized. "Was that you?"

"Was that me what?" the second asked.

Schwish!

There was no reply.

“Girls?” the second asked, growing more concerned. “Girls, you really need to say something.”

Still, there was silence.

The second woman quickly fumbled through her strings to get some idea of what was going on. Her shaking hands happened upon her own personal string. In a cold sweat, she read the string to see what fate was in store for herself.

It was at its end.

* * *

In the heart of the sun was the luminous divine realm of Alfheim. And within that luminous realm was a city of fire. And within that city of fire was a massage parlor. And within that massage parlor was the former King of the Gods, Odin.

Odin laid his face down on his All-Seeing Massage Chair wearing nothing but a towel as lady Light Elves tended to him. The sensation of their brightly burning fingers pressing against his divine back muscles was a unique, satisfying experience that would have destroyed lesser beings.

“You have a call, sir,” an elf said as she entered the room.

“Zeus wants to know why you’re late to the summit.”

“Tell Zeus he can kiss my well-relaxed ass,” Odin said.

“I’m sure he’ll destroy me over the phone if I do.”

“Fine, pass me the phone.”

Schwish! Schwing! Schwaw!

Odin heard the phone fall to the ground and burn up instantly.

The prickly hands of the Light Elves vanished from his back.

"Are you okay back there?" Odin asked.
Here, in the heart of sun, the air was growing cold.
A boney hand crawled up his back.
Fearfully, he conjured the power of the All-Seeing
Massage Chair to gaze upon his visitor.
In his mind's eye, he saw a flash of metal... and then
nothing.

* * *

"It's already begun," Christine Marx said into the phone.
"The Ancients are disappearing."
"Are you sure?" a male voice on the other end asked.
"My contact on the other side just sent word," Christine
said. "The souls of deities and immortals alike are crossing
over."
"What about Marduk and Hyperion? Have they returned
with the you-know-what?"
"They didn't make it," Christine said. "Whatever killed them,
it won't be long before it comes for us."
"What should I do then?"
"Stay low, but get word to Trish if you can," Christine said.
"If it finds out about the summit, the gods will be sitting
ducks."
"I was just on my way there," the voice said. "I'll let you
know once I..."
There was a pause. Christine grew concerned. "Hermes?"
"It can teleport," he replied. "It's in the room with me. I think
it's coming for you next. I have to go."
"Hermes?" her voice began to panic.
Hermes hung up.
Christine put away her phone and looked out her hotel
window at Seattle below her. The night had fallen and the
shining Space Needle was towering over the city.

She should have been safe here. The gods had informed her of thirteen wandering dead-zones across the planet where omnipotence didn't work. One of those dead-zones was currently over Seattle. Another was over Melbourne, where Hermes had just been.

She didn't have time to wonder if Hermes had made it out alive. All she knew was that she had to run.

Throwing on her pink jacket and some jeans, she grabbed her backpack and hurried from her room. She made a break for the elevator at the end of the hall.

The elevator doors opened. Christine came to a grinding halt and her heart rate hit its peak.

She could feel its presence coming for her.

The lights in the hallway dimmed just as she caught sight of a long crescent blade through the opening elevator door.

She ran back the other way.

The thing moved fast. It blinked forward several feet at a time. There was no escape.

The elevators at the other end of the hall opened. A silver projectile rang past Christine's ear and struck the creature in the face. It recoiled and emitted a high-pitched shrill.

A young woman with long silver hair, a hunter's bow and an old Grecian hunter's dress raced out of the elevator and took Christine by the arm. With a quick side-thrust, she kicked down the door to one of the empty guest rooms and pulled Christine inside.

"I don't understand!" the woman said as they entered the room. "I had the perimeter secured!"

"It doesn't matter, Artemis," Christine exclaimed. "We need to get out of here!"

"But the others haven't returned yet."

"The others are already dead."

Artemis contemplated everything they'd been working towards and her heart sank. She couldn't believe it was

ending like this. Her heart searched for another way, but only one dreadful solution presented itself.

"You have to go alone," Artemis said to Christine, reaching into her dress pocket and pulling out some brown, leafy herbs. "Quick, place these under your tongue. No time for questions."

Christine took the herbs and put them in her mouth. They were sage-like in taste, but more bitter. She began to feel her body tingle with their magical energy.

"What is this?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

"It's not the safest way to travel, but there's a fifty-fifty chance you might make it there alive." Artemis took off her quiver and handed both it and her bow to Christine. "It's a better chance than we have against this creature. Here, take my weapon."

"Wait - you expect me to go after it *myself*?"

"Yes. And whatever happens on the other side: don't stop moving and don't hesitate to shoot first."

"But I don't know how to fire a bow!"

"You'll learn quickly," Artemis said. "Now go!"

Without warning, Artemis shoved Christine into a mirrored closet door. Before Christine could protest, she felt herself slip through the mirror as if it were water. She vanished from the room, leaving nothing behind but a ripple in the glass.

Artemis brandished her hunting knife.

She heard the bony clatter of her attacker's feet slowly approaching the room, the metal of its blade dragging along the floor as it walked. It sensed her presence. It was biding its time.

Artemis let her hearing take over as she sensed its movements. It could pop into the room at a moment's notice. She couldn't let it catch her off-guard or sneak up behind her.

Artemis didn't plan on surviving this encounter. Whatever happened, she could only hope to hold the thing off as long as it took for Christine to safely reach her destination.

That is, providing she made it there at all.

The creature stopped moving outside in the hall.

Artemis braced herself for battle.

The creature's presence outside the doorway thickened the air with tension.

Both were waiting for one another to make their move.

The night went dead silent.

Schwish!

A second later, Artemis' knife hit the floor.

She never saw it coming.

7. Nectar of the Gods

Rain rapped against the window as Jesse shut off the 'OPEN' sign.

The stoves were off, the bathrooms washed, and the floors swept. All that was left to do was make sure the back door was locked.

The game had ended with only half the bar feeling happy about the outcome. It was rather standard for whenever a home team wasn't playing. The upside was that the crowd didn't completely destroy the bar after it was over.

It was going on two in the morning and Nigel had already gone around back to start up his truck. He'd come down from the studio earlier looking as if he'd seen a ghost. He tended to the bar well enough throughout the night, but something was clearly off about the way he carried himself. Jesse wanted to pry for further details, but felt Nigel needed space to organize his thoughts.

As Jesse stepped behind the stage and checked the locks on the alleyway door, he heard a low moaning. Hidden in the shadows behind some empty liquor boxes was a large hulking man who appeared to be passed out. Jesse felt he'd seen him around the bar earlier tonight and wondered if he wandered back here after the game.

"Hey, you can't be in here!" Jesse said.

“Just another moment, officers,” the man slurred. “I think I found my happy place.”

Jesse recognized that voice.

“Oh, god, no” he said, “it’s you.”

* * *

Nigel shook off the rain as he came back inside through the back of the kitchen. He emerged from behind the bar and shouted for Jesse.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Nigel, get back here!” Jesse called from one of the booths. Nigel hurried over to find Jesse sitting at a booth, giving a jug of water to a large, muscular man with a heavy red tan. The man was bald with a thin black jawline beard, a yellow sweater, and black sweatpants. He looked barely able to sit up straight as he chugged the water. Nigel’s face went flush at the sight of him.

“Surtur?” he asked.

“Hey,” the Lord of the Fire Jotunn waved sloppily. “You guys mix a mean mimosa. And what happened to that cute waitress who used to work here? Why’d I get stuck tipping *this* schmuck?”

Both Jesse and Nigel had seen him drinking with a rowdy group of college guys during the night, but they didn’t get a close look at him until now. He was shorter than they remembered, and was covered in significantly less fire.

This was how Surtur appeared when he wanted to mingle with humans and not terrorize them from thirty stories up.

“Surtur, what are you doing here?” Nigel asked.

He was quick to answer. “I was crashing this kegger up in Dartmouth, see, and some of the guys wanted to go to a bar to watch the game. So I was like, ‘I know this place with a really cute waitress...’”

"Patti's not here," Jesse interrupted.

"You think I don't know that?" Surtur asked. "Gawd, you guys made me look like an idiot in front of my new friends... Where are my friends anyway?"

"I mean why are you on Earth?" Nigel asked. "I thought the Titans left the planet when the gods did."

"Oh, that," Surtur grumbled drunkenly. "You know what? Screw those guys. First Sinmara kicks me out of the house after one week of crashing on her couch, then Zeus doesn't invite me to that stupid summit after the blackout and... and..."

Surtur's rant went south as he began to nod off. Nigel slapped him around until he woke.

"What blackout, Surtur?" Nigel asked. "Jesse, what's he been drinking?"

"Bourbon, mostly," Jesse said.

"...with a little pinch of ambrosia," Surtur said happily as he woke up. "Nectar of the gods!"

"Surtur, you were saying?" Nigel said.

"Right, so Sinmara kicks me out of the house. Granted, I didn't live there and she's dating Baron Samedi now..."

"Tell me about the blackout!"

"Oh, that," Surtur stumbled. "Now THAT was intense. It's like there was some electromagnetic pulse wave thing rippling through the universe. First the gods lost their powers and me and the rest of the Titans were laughing ourselves stupid watching them squirm around like screaming babies. But then WE lost our powers and it was like an H-bomb had gone off. It was like the entire universe had come to a screeching halt and we were its cushion."

"Just the gods and Titans?" Nigel asked. "What about the demigods?"

"Don't know about them," Surtur said. "We higher races are more sensitive to universal happenstances."

"What about the summit meeting?"

"Pfft, forget that," Surtur said. "Zeus was all 'Surtur, you get the hell out of my chair and off my planet. This is important business and we don't have time to put up with your divine greatness.'"

"Did he really say that?"

"Replace '*divine greatness*' with '*lack of pants*,' and it's the same general thing," Surtur said. "So I was all 'Whatever, Zeus. You gods sit up here in your golden palace and circle-worship each other 'til the cows come home. I'm heading back to a planet where I get respect. And hot waitresses. And... gawd, I miss Sinmara.'"

Surtur rested his head on the table as if he were ready to pass out.

"Be honest, guys," Surtur sighed, "If I hadn't tried to destroy Halifax last Christmas... you guys would hang with me, right?"

"Do you have any idea what could have caused the blackout?" Nigel asked.

"Not a clue," Surtur said, "But if you want to talk sources, you should try praying to the big Kahuna. A blast like that would be like ripples to a lesser deity, but to an angel, we're talking Ground Zero."

Jesse and Nigel exchanged glances. Immediately, Nigel noticed a twitch of concern in Jesse's eye, as if he knew something about it.

"Jesse...?" Nigel asked. "You wouldn't happen to know what he's talking about, would you?"

Jesse caught himself. "No. I mean, not really, but..."

"You know something."

"I know something, yes," Jesse admitted. This seemed very much in touch with what Christine might have been warning him about. "But you know I can't say anything about it."

Nigel began putting the pieces together and agreed.

"Maybe we should get on with your training."

"What about Surtur?"

They looked at the Fire Giant who appeared despondent in his booth. Neither trusted him alone in the tavern with all the drinks behind the bar.

"We take him with us," Nigel said.

Surtur smiled a crooked smile.

8. The Demon Within

To train a demon is tricky business, especially when it's inside you. Once a demon takes hold, its first instinct is to feed. It doesn't respond to threats or pleas of mercy. If you are in its path, you are neither a foe nor an obstacle; you are lunch.

Being half-demon is part of an Aemon's nature. Once an Aemon tastes blood, their inner demon springs forward and nothing can supposedly stop it until it burns through its fuel. This is why, if you absolutely need to call upon the demon, it's important to do so in a place far from living things. That way, there's less chance it'll refill itself on a stray snack.

For Nigel, this meant an abandoned warehouse near the shipping yards.

"Why so close to the city?" Surtur asked as they entered the musty old building.

Nigel closed the doors, blocking out the rain, and said, "Forests were too dangerous. Our first night out, Jesse ate a squirrel and wouldn't come down from his demon high for two whole minutes."

"How did you stop him?"

"I have my ways," Nigel said as he pulled a vial from his pocket. Inside was a small amount of dark, red liquid.

"Ram's blood, the most powerful magic suppressant. It's

much easier for me to control my demon when I'm on this. Jesse's getting fish blood, however. He'll need the extra kick if he's to develop the instinct."

Jesse stood in the center of the empty warehouse as Nigel turned on the lights and asked, "Are you sure Surtur should be here? What if I eat him? I could destroy the whole city on the blood of a Titan."

"He's a big boy; he's handled demons before," Nigel said, reminding Surtur of their last scuffle together. "But first, let's review your basics. Show me your strength."

Surtur watched in surprise as Jesse, without question, threw a punch into the concrete floor. The ground cracked and Jesse's arm burned brightly beneath the skin as his body repaired itself. Only then did Surtur notice several other similar cracks around Jesse's feet. He'd been practicing.

"How did he do that?" Surtur asked.

"Our bodies are made of physical fire," Nigel said. "We can briefly redistribute that fire through our bones and muscles for quick adrenal strikes."

"Why not be strong all the time?"

"It would make us top-heavy," Nigel said. "Our hearts project a finite amount of fire at a time. We can't add more to our bodies without taking it from somewhere else."

"So what else can you do?"

"Jesse, show him a new face," Nigel requested.

Jesse stood tall, closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Upon inhaling, his entire body went up in flames. He didn't scream, however painful it was. As the flames dwindled down, the image of Jesse was replaced with a shorter, lankier version of Surtur. Even his clothes had magically changed to match Surtur's yellow sweater. The Fire Giant's doppelganger smiled dumbly at him. Surtur himself felt pleased as most deities do when statues are erected in

their likeness. Jesse breathed deeply again and Surtur watched as the Fire-Blood was again engulfed in flames, only reappear as his old self.

“Ha ha, amazing!” Surtur exclaimed. “I mean, I can do that too, but to see lesser beings do it is adorable!”

“Good, Jesse,” Nigel said, “Though you’re missing your eyebrows.”

Jesse concentrated on his missing eyebrows and they reappeared in a puff of flame.

“Want to see anything else?” Jesse asked.

“Die and come back to life!” Surtur exclaimed.

“We’ll avoid dying tonight,” Nigel said, still worried about Surtur’s warning of a universal H-bomb and whatever effect it might have had on Hell. “For now, Jesse, review what we know about your demon.”

“My demon cannot be controlled.”

“Correct.”

“It cannot be reasoned with.”

“Correct.”

“It cannot be stopped.”

“So what happens to you when you become the demon?” Nigel asked.

“I go dark,” Jesse said. “I sense little.”

“And it’s what little you have to work with that becomes your strength.” Nigel turned to Surtur and said, “You might want to hide behind that empty barrel over there.”

A lone metal oil barrel sat in the corner of the room.

“Will that protect me?” he asked.

“It will for about a second longer than standing out in the open.”

Surtur hurried over to the barrel and shrank down behind it. He’d seen a demon in action before and had no intent on risking another confrontation. Still, he couldn’t bring himself

to run away either. Watching two Aemons train was a rare opportunity.

Jesse held aloft a small vial of fish-blood and uncapped it.

"What do you do when you turn?" Nigel asked.

"I don't fight it," Jesse said. "I guide it."

"Your first instinct will be to go after Surtur," Nigel said, "I want you to make it come after me instead."

"Wait, what?" Surtur asked. "I thought I was here to watch! You're using me as bait?"

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," Nigel said.

"I thought you two could turn into angels!" Surtur protested.

"Why not practice doing that?"

"Becoming an angel uses up soul energy," Nigel said. "We each only have a second's worth left, which isn't enough to practice with. It's better to train our demon halves."

"Are you sure about this?" Jesse asked.

"I am," Nigel calmly said.

Jesse had already brought the blood to his lips. His nostrils flared as he caught its scent. Surtur cowered even lower.

Nigel's reaction didn't change.

Jesse swallowed the blood.

Immediately, Jesse dropped the vial and fell to his hands and knees. His veins went black. His eyes went red. His skin grew thorns. His arms bulged and his teeth sharpened. His entire body shook violently as his dark side came forth.

His black eyes darted towards Surtur's location. The smell of Titan blood was in the air.

"Go for Nigel!" Jesse thought. *"Go for Nigel!"*

"But Titan blood so much sweeter!" His demon argued.

"Nigel blood better! Nigel blood tastes like cookies!"

"No smell blood on Aemon!" His demon hissed, *"Want Titan!"*

"You will eat Nigel and you will like it!" Jesse commanded it in a panic.

"Bored now!"

The demon pounced towards Surtur.

Nigel popped the cap on his own vial.

Surtur's first instinct was to throw the barrel at Jesse. With a slash of his claws, the demon tore it into scraps. Surtur's next instinct was to fly. Fire burst beneath Surtur's feet as he used his powers to launch himself up and over Jesse like a rocket. Still high on ambrosia, he crashed head-first into the ceiling and bounced off the rafters. Surtur slammed into the concrete and scrambled for his bearings as Jesse spun around, coming after him again.

"Titan has spirit!" Jesse's demon thought, *"Meat will be much sweeter!"*

"No! Spirit bad! Go eat Nigel! Go eat the floor! Go eat that barrel! Eat anything else!"

"You lie! You not want to eat Titan!"

"I totally do!" Jesse thought, *"But let's not and say we did!"*

"Not listening anymore!"

The demon dug its claws into Surtur's leg and prepared to chow down on its prey. Surtur hollered but couldn't pull away from its grasp. Jesse's fangs came forward.

Then his entire body fell away.

Demon Jesse was pinned on his back. Demon Nigel sat over him, holding down the demon by the neck with one hand and holding its two hands together with the other. It struggled under his strength, never giving up the fight. Demon Nigel calmly kept Demon Jesse secure until it saw the blood fade from its veins. The fangs, claws and thorns disappeared and Jesse became normal again, no longer under the blood's influence.

Demon Nigel stood up, still a demon, and carefully suppressed the blood, driving his pointed extremities back

inside his body. His blood-red eyes turned white and he helped his brother up.

"What did you do wrong?" he asked Jesse.

"I tried to guide it."

"You tried to order it around," Nigel said. "Doesn't work like that. If the demon tells you what it wants, don't try to change its mind. Play to its hunger."

"But it didn't want to eat you," Jesse said.

"You could offer me up as an appetizer," Nigel suggested.

"You could tell it that my heart would make the Titan taste better, or that killing me would make a hundred more Titans appear. The demon wants to feed, but it will second-guess itself if it has to choose between a snack or a buffet. You want to bend the demon, not break it."

"I also told it to eat the floor."

"That was dumb."

"I know."

"Guys, are we done?" Surtur asked from the floor. His wounds had healed but he still looked fearful that Jesse and Nigel weren't finished with him yet.

"We're done for tonight," Nigel said. "It's not safe to call a demon back so soon after depriving it of a meal. They tend to get... more persistent."

"Whew," Surtur breathed a sigh of relief as he got to his feet. "Hey, do you guys have a place I can crash tonight?" The two brothers looked to each other and shrugged unevenly. They hadn't planned on taking in a Titan for the night, but neither felt right letting him wander the streets high on fear and ambrosia.

Jesse replied, "We've got a flooded basement if you don't mind water-beds."

* * *

As the three of them headed back to the truck, Nigel felt a tug in his heart. The tug drew his eyes to the sky where he spied a faint light coming in through the clouds. A bright spark emerged and delicately fell upon the city.

He motioned for the other two to stop walking and watch. They both peered up at the falling spark, not sure what to make of it. It was too slow for a comet and too ethereal to be manmade. Even Surtur didn't recognize it as a construct of the gods.

"What is it?" Jesse asked.

They watched as the spark fell and vanished somewhere in the peninsula, not too far from the tavern. When it landed, Nigel felt it in his heart. It was in a place very familiar to him.

"We need to go after it," Nigel said. "Something like that doesn't land there for no reason."

"Why, where'd it land?" Surtur asked.

"On Citadel Hill," Nigel said. "Exactly where Pandora was destroyed."

9. Return to Citadel Hill

The rain continued to pour as their truck plowed through the vacant streets of downtown Halifax. A wake of rainwater washed over the pavement onto the sidewalk as they made their way to the remains of the hilly green fortress in the downtown peninsula. They fast approached the site of the fallen star.

Nigel's knuckles turned white on the wheel as Jesse rode shotgun. Surtur leaned in from the backseat to get a better look at the hill they were approaching. It didn't appear too remarkable.

"Are you sure it landed there?" he asked. "What's so important about this hill?"

"It's where we defeated Pandora last year," Nigel said.

"And yes, I can feel something's here."

Jesse had to ask, "How do you mean you *feel* it?"

"It's the same feeling I got earlier tonight," Nigel said.

"Something's crossing over from the other side and it's trying to get my attention."

"But you said that was a message from Hell," Jesse said.

"This thing fell from the sky."

"Heaven and Hell don't exist in any specific direction,"

Nigel explained. "A portal to Hell could be in an airplane bathroom just as easily as you could find Heaven in a

gopher hole. Not that it's easy to find either one, but neither strictly exists in the sky or underground."

"What do we do when we find it?" Surtur asked.

"We either take it home, talk to it, or destroy it," Nigel said.

"Be warned, anything that crosses over from the other side probably isn't here to say hi."

Driving to the top of the hill, he parked on the street near the entrance. The grass was wet and muddy as they hiked towards the drawbridge that led into the fort.

The fort was a massive star-shaped structure at the hill's summit. A ditch surrounded its stone walls with a single drawbridge leading through its arched gateway. The preservation board had seen fit to restore the fort to its Victorian period quality, a time when the city was under threat of invasion from the French and Acadians. While the Citadel had never come under attack until last year by a demon sorceress, it remained one of the city's more popular tourist attractions with its daily military demonstrations, army museum and bagpipe parties.

They trudged over the drawbridge and arrived at its closed gates. Jesse hadn't been through these gates since they first moved to Halifax. The last time he was here, a demonized Nigel had just thrown him through several high-rises and the fort simply became a convenient landing spot.

"It's locked," Jesse said as he gestured towards the gate.

Nigel turned to their tag-along and asked, "Surtur, can you get us in?"

"Sure thing," Surtur said as he rolled up his sleeves and marched towards the gate. Before he could smash it in, however, Nigel grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

"I meant jump us over the wall."

"You sure? My way's more fun."

A few moments later, Surtur was convinced not to destroy the historical landmark and leapt over the walls of the fortress with Jesse and Nigel in his arms. All three hundred pounds of him landed inside the fort's courtyard, leaving two Surtur-sized footprints in the stone.

Nigel got to his feet and scanned the courtyard. Pillars, archways, doorways and windows lined the inner bastion walls. The courtyard itself was largely empty, save for the large, square cavalier building in the center which housed the army museum. Aside from some antique cannons and a couple benches, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Surtur, fed up with being wet in the rain, turned up his core temperature. His body glowed and Jesse and Nigel could feel the heat coming off him. The rain turned to steam at his touch, emanating a loud hissing noise.

"Do you have to do that now?" Nigel asked.

"You Fire-Bloods should try it," Surtur said. "Nothing beats a nice steam in the rain."

"Our fire is more inconvenient than incendiary."

"Then what's the point of being a Fire-Blood if you can't set things on fire?"

Before he could come up with a reply, Nigel spotted a small pile of rubble scattered behind the right side of the cavalier building. Had Surtur not been glowing, he might have missed it entirely.

"Over there," he pointed.

They began their steady march across the courtyard.

"I don't like this," Jesse said. "I should have brought my sword."

"We've come this far," Nigel said. "I have to know what fell here."

"What's the worry?" Surtur asked. "We're two Fire-Bloods and a Titan. Even if the thing is hostile, we can give it a run for its money."

As they approached the cavalier building, Nigel felt a cold presence wash over him. His eyes detected movement through the rain to his left. Something was passing through the archways.

"To be honest," Nigel said, "I'm more worried that whatever fell was already running from something else."

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"Eyes left," Nigel said. "We have company."

They looked to their left in time to see a dark figure in the rain vanish from sight.

"What was that?" Jesse asked.

"It's behind us now," Nigel said. "Into the museum! Quickly!"

Even Surtur didn't argue. Whatever was moving around them wasn't stopping. Any time they tried to steal a glimpse of it, their guest was already vanishing and reappearing elsewhere in the rain.

They ran forward and broke down the door to the army museum just as the thing reappeared where they were standing. They heard the scraping of metal against the ground as it swiped at them through the rain and then vanished again. The three held their ground inside the door and observed the courtyard from inside the building, unsure as to whether it was worth hiding behind anything at all.

The figure was moving quickly. Teleporting from spot to spot across the courtyard, the strange figure slashed through the rain with a crescent-shaped blade. It was difficult to get a bead on what it was, but it didn't seem to be paying much attention to them.

"If it's hunting us, it's not very good," Jesse said.

Immediately, the figure stopped moving and turned their way. Nigel cupped his hand over Jesse's mouth. His eyes ventured to a nearby wall where an antique rifle was

mounted. It didn't fire, but he gathered it would make a good bludgeon if necessary.

Wait for it to make its move, he thought.

The figure slowly marched towards the building through the rain, seemingly unfocused as it began to trail off to the right. It stopped and looked around as if it were waiting for something. Then it slashed about with its blade, once again searching aimlessly in the rain.

Blind? Nigel thought.

Surtur grinned, "It doesn't see us."

The creature locked in on them at once and teleported forward several feet in their direction. Nigel pulled them both back away from the door as a blade slashed through the entrance. Dust and debris exploded from the stone walls as their attacker ripped through the building. Then, through the dust, the figure stopped its approach and backed away.

It let out a frustrated shriek and vanished from sight.

The coldness disappeared from the air.

All three men were frozen in terror.

"Can we whisper?" Surtur asked cautiously.

Nothing attacked them.

"We can whisper," Nigel said.

"What was that?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know," Surtur said, "but a demon doesn't seem bad by comparison."

"What do you think it was, Nigel?"

Nigel couldn't answer. In nine thousands years, he'd seen a lot of scary things. He'd seen teleporting monsters in Babylon. He'd seen crescent-shaped blades in Constantinople. He'd even heard unearthly shrieks in the forests of Germany. But all together, it formed something new that he had no point of reference for. It didn't move

like any being he'd ever seen. It didn't even lead with its shoulders.

Did it even have shoulders? he asked himself, unsure of the answer.

"Maybe it was a banshee," Jesse said. "You know, like an Irish ghost. That would explain the scream."

"Or maybe it was another Shadow-Blood," Surtur suggested.

"It didn't find what it was looking for," Nigel said, stepping out the door. "It'll be back."

"Then let's get out of here while we can," Surtur said.

"Not yet," Nigel said as he exited the museum and walked around the building. "We haven't found what fell."

"You mean that creature isn't the only thing here?" Jesse asked.

"No," Nigel said. "It came looking for the same thing we were."

He marched around the backside of the cavalier building and saw the crater.

It had landed exactly in the same spot Pandora had been destroyed.

As Nigel approached the crater, a feeling of trepidation built up inside him. The river of fire was calling. It wanted him to find this.

Three feet down inside the crater, lying in a puddle of mud, there was an unconscious body.

It was a woman in a black dress.

It was Pandora.

10. Rising Fires

Kill her now, was Nigel's first thought.

It would be easy. He could do it with a knife from the museum. He could get Surtur to conjure up a fireball and blast her to smithereens. Even drowning her in the puddle seemed feasible. Whatever happened, the important thing was to do it before she woke up, lest the nine thousand year nightmare begin again.

"Jesse, run inside the museum and grab me a knife."

"Wha - why?" Jesse stammered.

"To kill her, of course," Nigel said. "I don't know how she escaped from Hell, but we need to send her back as quickly as possible."

"She just got here and you want to kill her?" Jesse asked.

"Why not find out why she's here?"

Surtur chimed in, "Am I missing something?"

Nigel turned to the Fire Giant and said, "Surtur, fireball this woman *now*."

"I don't know how Aemon etiquette works, but Titans don't go around setting unconscious women on fire," Surtur said.

"There's no sport in it."

"She's not a woman, she's a murderous psychopath," Nigel explained. "Don't you see? This is what those warnings were about! All the signs led us here and now we have a chance to destroy Pandora before she rises again!"

"This is Pandora?" Surtur squinted his eyes at the sleeping woman. "I always thought she'd be green with a crooked nose."

"I'd have to disagree," Jesse said as he examined the crater. "I think those warnings mean something else and Pandora's another piece of a bigger picture. How else do you explain the thing that was hunting us?"

"I can't... I just..." Nigel wrestled with the possibilities at hand, "Can we discuss this while I roll her face-first into the mud?"

"She needs our help!" Jesse insisted.

"She needs to be destroyed!"

Surtur shoved Nigel aside as he approached the crater, leaned down and hoisted Pandora over his shoulder. "I'm with the scrawny one. Demon sorceresses don't fall out of the sky all the time, and I'm getting sick and tired of all this rain. Now let's get out of here before..."

A spotlight shone down from the sky and illuminated the center of the courtyard. The three of them quickly pulled back behind the cavalier building. They peered out from behind to see something new fall out of the sky and land feet first in the spotlight.

Then another fell.

And another.

They were armed soldiers.

Nigel couldn't identify who they were from this angle or where they were dropping from since he couldn't hear a helicopter. All he could make out was heavy body armour, assault rifles, and tactical helmets.

"A SWAT team?" Jesse whispered.

After a dozen more dropped down, one made several silent sweeping gestures with his arm. The others responded by spreading throughout the courtyard and vanishing into the darkness. Their movements were eerily

flawless and precise. The soldiers were in perfect sync with one another. There was nothing else unusual about their movement. As far as Nigel could tell, they carried themselves like humans.

Soon, the soldiers were scaling the walls and searching the perimeter of the courtyard with their rifle-mounted flashlights. In a minute tops, they'd come around the cavalier building and find Nigel with the others.

The three of them cowered into a group huddle. The sound of the rain muffled their conversation.

"Changed my mind," Nigel said. "We're taking Pandora back to the bar."

"Who are these guys?" Jesse asked.

"I think they're human," Nigel said. "Maybe immortals from the way they fell out of the sky. Either way, I'm not getting a friendly vibe."

"Do you think they're friends with that banshee thing we saw a minute ago?"

"Like a back-up team?" Nigel guessed. "It's possible."

Surtur chimed in. "Want me to smash them?"

"Not just yet," Nigel said as he fished his keyring out of his jeans pocket and handed it to his brother. "For now, I need you to hop the back wall with Jesse and Pandora and get around to the truck. Jesse, I'm letting you drive, but don't get cocky about it."

Jesse's hands trembled with excitement as Nigel handed him the keys.

"They'll see me in the air," Surtur said.

"Yeah, Surtur's like a big flare when he's jumping," Jesse reminded him. "And what about you?"

"I'll be with you shortly after I do one little thing," Nigel said as he eyed the glow of one of the approaching soldiers' searchlights. "Surtur, I think it's safe to say we'll need a

small distraction, preferably of the fire variety. How are you with giving people hot-feet?"

"Pft," Surtur scoffed, "I can do better than that."

* * *

A soldier crept slowly across the top of the wall outlining the fort as he scanned the perimeter. They knew someone was here, hiding in the rain. It would only be moments before they were found. The target would not be lost. Behind him, another soldier watched his back, while ten other soldiers were scattered throughout the fort.

Down below, he thought he caught sight of a trail of rubble near the cavalier building. Before he could report it, however, there was a slight yelp of pain. All the searchlights immediately spun around to a single soldier near the barracks who was bouncing on one foot as if he'd just stepped on something either very sharp or *very hot*. He bumped into an old antique cannon and caused one of its wheels to break, causing the cannon to fall over and land on the ground with a heavy thud.

He apologetically composed himself as the other eleven soldiers assessed the incident. Then something happened that should not have happened. The antique cannon, which was clearly sealed and should not have been loaded, unexpectedly fired directly into the cavalier building.

Then something else happened that should not have happened: all the weapons in the cavalier building began firing off at once. Then things began exploding, which was strange because nothing in the museum should have been capable of blowing up or going off. The army museum became a blazing light-show of smoke and gunfire in the heart of the fort.

Watching from atop the wall, the first soldier felt a sharp blow to the back of his neck. As he collapsed, he looked up and saw Nigel bearing down on him. Nigel seized his rifle, rushed towards another distracted guard and, with a hefty swing of the weapon, knocked the second soldier flat on his back.

Nigel knelt down and removed the soldier's helmet. He was young man with a military crew-cut, a strong jaw and dark, red eyes. Nigel didn't recognize him at all. A quick search of the soldier's person didn't reveal anything else. No dog tags, no identification, not even an insignia. Surtur and Jesse were already over the wall with Pandora. Nigel wasn't going to waste anymore time with these two and Surtur's exploding museum wasn't going to explode all night.

Nigel was then trapped in a headlock from behind. The first soldier was wide awake and very angry. He tried to shout for the others soldiers, but Nigel quickly rammed the back of his head into the soldier's mouth.

Then the second soldier woke up unexpectedly and made a grab for Nigel. Nigel quickly jammed his forearm into the soldier's face to muffle his yells.

After a brief struggle, Nigel's foot slipped in a puddle of water and all three of them fell over the side of the wall into the exterior moat.

They fell several meters, landed in the muddy ditch and broke free of one another. Nigel thought he was first to his feet, but the other two stood up quickly and produced military-grade combat knives. Both came at Nigel, simultaneously striking at his heart with exactly the same moves. Nigel moved aside, allowing them to strike each other's hands, but neither flinched in pain.

Nigel stepped forward, grabbed the unmasked man by the wrist and flipped him into the mud, taking his knife in the

process. The masked soldier grazed Nigel's forearm with his knife. Nigel's skin burned as his inner fire immediately repaired the damage. Nigel shoulder-checked his opponent, knocked the knife from his hand and delivered a roundhouse kick to the head, breaking his nose and dislodging the helmet.

In the moment to follow, Nigel found the answer he was looking for.

Both guards got to their feet and put up their dukes. With both their helmets removed, Nigel saw them for who they were. They had the exact same face. The one whose face he'd broken had already repaired itself, a fiery light burning under the bridge of his nose.

So that's who I'm dealing with, he realized.

After that revelation, the fight became much easier.

* * *

Near the entrance of the fort, Jesse and Surtur sat the in truck. A sleeping Pandora was loudly snoring on Surtur's shoulder in the backseat as the Titan mentally concentrated on the inner workings of his exploding museum light-show.

"I didn't know they kept live ammo in there," Jesse said.

"They don't," Surtur replied. "I'm just really good at making things explode."

"Could you always do that?"

"I could set the world on fire if I wanted to," Surtur smiled.

As the gunfire died down, Jesse saw movement out the corner of his eye. There was a figure climbing out of the ditch near the drawbridge, covered in mud and carrying a combat knife and assault rifle.

"It's Nigel!" Jesse exclaimed.

Nigel raced around to the passenger side, opened the door, and climbed into the cabin. He set the rifle and knife on the floor.

"Did they see you?" Surtur asked.

"If they didn't, they'll soon notice two of their own are missing," Nigel said. "Floor it, Jesse."

As they raced off down the hill and back into the downtown sector, Jesse kept one eye in the rear-view mirror to make sure they weren't being followed. Surtur's little distraction seemed to work, and also probably woke up the entire sleeping populace.

"So did you find out who they are?" Jesse asked.

"I did," Nigel said. "And I think there's more where they came from."

"Why, what are they?" Surtur asked.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Nigel said. "Just your everyday Fire-Bloods."

11. Paradise Lost

“How can they be Fire-Bloods?” Jesse asked they navigated the downtown streets in the rain. “I thought the Creator destroyed Solomon’s notes. I thought the magic to create Fire-Bloods was lost.”

“Evidently not,” Nigel said. “This might explain the pain I felt earlier. If somebody’s drawing from the rivers of Hell to create a Fire-Blood army...”

The truck stopped in the middle of turning through an intersection. Immediately, Jesse began backing up. He parked on the side of the road and turned off the headlights.

A block down the street, nestled between two office buildings, was Hunter’s Tavern basking in the same light from the sky they’d seen at the fort. Just outside the bar, they saw several Fire-Blood soldiers standing guard.

“I guess we’re not going home tonight,” Jesse said.

“What would they want with your bar?” Surtur asked.

“My money’s on them waiting for us to show up with Pandora,” Nigel said. “Unless it’s Pandora’s Box they’re looking for.”

“Of course!” Jesse realized. “That box is a direct line out of Hell for a Fire-Blood!”

"Not to mention we have the Flaming Sword of Uriel in there," Nigel said. "That's two weapons of mass destruction about to fall into the wrong hands."

Jesse sighed. "We really should get a safety deposit box."

"I need to get in there," Nigel said as he grabbed the assault rifle from the floor. "Jesse, Surtur, you two stay parked. I'm going in through the back."

"Hey, I'm coming with you," Surtur said. "I can squish a few Fire-Bloods easily."

"I said stay in the truck," Nigel repeated. "If they haven't found the box and sword already, I'll be in and out with them in a few minutes."

"What if they see you?"

"Got it covered," Nigel said.

Nigel suddenly burst into flames and transformed before their eyes. He was now wearing the face of a hardened military man with a crewcut. Even his clothes had transformed to match the body armour of the soldiers.

"If you're not careful, they're going to know you're not one of their own," Surtur said.

"Monkey see, monkey do," Nigel said as he stepped out of the vehicle and raced off into a nearby alleyway.

Nobody was watching the back.

Nigel unlocked the kitchen door and slipped inside to find two soldiers digging through his freezer and pantry. He heeded them no attention as they diligently searched for something. Nigel stepped into the bar area only to find several more soldiers tearing apart his booths, going through his cooler, and disassembling the televisions. He tried to maintain his composure and act as if he belonged among them.

As he prepared to hurry upstairs, something caught his eye.

At the end of the room, the brick wall above the stage was turning a grotesque shade of crimson red. Something was passing through the brick.

Nigel watched in horror as the wall bled. Blood flowed through the brick as if being strained and poured onto the stage. Then the pool of blood on-stage began to rise and a shape formed from it.

First there was a head, very sleek and feminine, but almost feline in nature. Then a torso rose out of the blood. It too, was that of a woman, with slender arms and an athletic bosom. Nigel expected legs to come next, but instead witnessed a second torso rise up behind her, like that of a horse. Finally, four cloven legs emerged and the creature of blood stepped forward. Blood-red battle armour shaped over her body, and four yellow lights opened where her eyes should be. She was almost ten feet tall as she walked elegantly forward, still an oozing mass of blood, leaving no trail of it in her path.

The other soldiers didn't react to her presence. Nigel took a cue from them and pretended to rifle through his stock as the blood-red lioness-centaur proceeded through the tavern.

Music blared from the jukebox.

Nigel glared through his peripherals at another unexpected sight. Playing with the jukebox was a slender man-shaped figure in bright purple spandex and puffy white collars around his neck and wrists. What was especially different about him was not the fact that he was floating in mid-air, but that his skin and internal organs were almost entirely invisible. All Nigel saw through him was a bright blue nervous system outlining his head and limbs.

What are these things? he asked himself.

The man-shaped figure let out a delighted squeal as he listened to Freddie Mercury sing "*Killer Queen*" over the jukebox.

"I love it, I love it, I love it!" he shouted through his invisible mouth. "So much sound! So much energy! Whoo-hoo-hoo! Oh, so rich! Bored now. Another!"

With just an invisible glare, the being willed the music to change. Now it was playing "*Round and Round*" by Ratt. "I like this one too," he said. "What do you think of Ratt? Should I be Ratt?"

The blood lioness spoke with a harsh, liquidy tone. "It doesn't matter what you call yourself in this world."

The invisible man caused the jukebox to flip back and forth through various artists faster than he could hear their songs. "Presley, Joplin, Leppard, Starship, Hammer... Devo? Devo!"

The tavern filled with the music of Devo's "*Through Being Cool*" and the figure squealed ecstatically as he drifted through the air, basking in the music. The lioness watched him, quite annoyed.

"Blessed be Devo!" he exclaimed. "So many layers of harmony! So many secret songs! Play it in ten different directions and there's a recipe for perfect cheese!"

This guy is crazier than Pandora, Nigel thought, impossible as that was.

"So you're Devo now?" the lioness asked.

"Yes, and you," he said, swimming around her upper torso, "you can be... Abdul. Paula Adbul. I believe she is regarded as a goddess to these people."

"Do not name me after a goddess," she growled. "The deities of this world are fragile and weak. There's no pleasure in carrying one's name."

"Yeesh, I'm just trying to lighten things up," Devo moaned.

"I really want us to have themed names for a change. Like

a music group or famous painters! You know what? You pick the theme. Just name yourself anything.”

“Dominion,” she spoke.

“No, no, you can’t do that,” Devo said. “That’s already your name.”

“Dominion.”

“Also, it starts with a D. My new name already starts with a D. We can’t have two D’s in the group.”

“I am she who is Dominion.”

“So lame,” Devo sighed.

“So filthy,” cackled an empty voice at the entrance of the tavern.

Once Nigel heard the voice, cold air filled the room.

At the entrance stood the figure they’d met on Citadel Hill, clad in black robes and carrying a large crescent blade atop a scythe.

Only now, without the rain or darkness to mask its presence, Nigel saw it for what it really was.

The creature was, without question, the Grim Reaper.

It began to walk forward, only to skip ahead several feet as if it had already grown bored of walking before taking its first step. As it appeared at the bar to greet Devo and Dominion, Nigel saw its face under its cloak. From a distance, it looked like a white skull, but up close, it was something far more unsettling. Hundreds of tiny, crawling vertebrae were lined up in place of a face to form an eyeless, mouthless mask. The very sight of it made Nigel’s skin crawl.

“Oh, hey, Sammy!” Devo said. “Good to see you, bro!

Listen, I’ve been working on our new names and I think I’ve got a few for you. Originally, I was leaning towards Ozzy or Manson, but I think you’re more of a Sammy Davis or a Sammy Hagar. Definitely a Sammy...”

The Reaper glared at Devo. Devo silenced himself immediately as the Reaper growled.

"Or just Samael," Devo said. "Whatever works for you."

"Look at this world," Samael wheezed, swiping a clothed limb through the air. "It's filthy. Too much substance! Do you see this filthy substance? It's everywhere! What is it?"

"I believe it's air, sir."

"There's too much of it!" Samael said. "And out there! There's something else! It keeps falling from above! It blinds me! I cannot work like this! Too many marks are getting away!"

"You mean the rain," Dominion said.

Samael glanced around the tavern, apparently unsure as to what was what. It was almost as if he couldn't tell the difference between walls and air. He leaned down toward the bar and brought his face within an inch of its wooden surface, barely a foot away from where Nigel was crouching.

"Look at this disgusting substance," he said. "Look at it. It's *aging*. It's literally rotting before our eyes. What kind of sick Creator designs a world like this?"

"That's just a side-effect of *time*, I'm afraid," Devo explained. "It's nasty, but you'll get used to it."

Samael looked around the room and shook his head in frustration. "Dominion, have your men returned to us yet?"

"Not yet, sir," she said. "They're searching the hill for the mark."

"And have you found the other ones here?" he asked.

"No sign of them."

"Unbelievable," Samael sneered. "Can't find the prophet, can't find the sorceress, can't find the Aemons, can't find half the bloody gods..."

"Did you figure out where that summit was, sir?" Devo said.

"Of course not. All the gods speak of it, but none speak of where it is."

"You could always try interrogating one of them."

"Too much work; easier to just kill them," Samael grunted.

"Has the Creator left us any instructions yet?"

"Has He ever?"

"Then we'll just carry on without His intervention," Samael said, glaring upwards. He vanished from his spot and a loud thud upstairs indicated he had reappeared in Nigel's studio. Devo followed, drifting up through the ceiling like a ghost, while Dominion washed up the stairs like a river of blood. Once he was sure he wasn't being watched, Nigel hurried after them.

His room had been torn apart. The bed was in shambles. The closets were ripped apart. His weapons locker had been broken into with guns and swords scattered all over the floor. His piano had been *broken into pieces*.

His eyes searched the room for Pandora's Box only to find one of the soldiers was already presenting it to the Reaper.

"We found this," the soldier said. "We believe it to be a portal from Hell."

Samael took it in his robes and inspected the small unremarkable wooden box.

"Interesting," he said. "There's no time on it. There's no age. It is... beautiful... and yet... so disgusting."

Without so much as a drumroll, the indestructible box became dust in his cloaked hands. He wiped the dust of Pandora's Box from his robes and didn't give it another thought.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Just this," the soldier said, presenting him a sheathed sword.

Nigel recognized that sword. It was the legendary Flaming Sword of Uriel, the very weapon Nigel had taken from Odin

and used to help end the Battle of Ragnarök last Christmas.

Samael slowly removed the sword from its sheath. The fire of the blade blinded everyone in the room who wasn't a freakish monster.

"Another useless bauble," he muttered. "Disgusting."

Before he could turn it into dust, however, Dominion took it from his grasp. She removed the blade and twirled it about, its heat threatening to set the room ablaze.

"Very quaint," she said. "Very modest in its design. I would very much like to carry it."

"As you will," Samael muttered.

So much for Pandora's Box AND the Sword, Nigel grumbled half-heartedly.

"*You shouldn't be here*," he heard a voice inside his head said. It sounded like Devo's voice, only the spandex-clad invisible man didn't seem to be looking in Nigel's direction.

"*What...? Who is...?*"

"*Take what you need and leave immediately*," Devo's voice said. "*My comrades won't be patient for much longer.*"

"*How much longer?*" Nigel tried to ask back, uncertain as to Devo's intentions.

Dominion's eyes perked up and she raised a finger to her ear area as if listening to an incoming bluetooth message. For a moment, Nigel feared she might be hearing his thoughts as well.

"The soldiers are reporting from the fortress," she said to Samael. "The sorceress has fled and a pair of our Fire-Bloods are reported missing."

Samael turned to Devo and said, "Return to the Garden and forge more warriors. If the sorceress is free, we must ready a legion against her."

"Yes, sir!" Devo said as he began to float through the ceiling. Before he was halfway through, he swiftly glided

back down and said, “Oh, and I was just thinking about having two D names in the group. I might be cool with it if maybe we all have D names. You know, like Death, Dominion, Darryl and Devo. Darryl pending, of course. Whaddya think?”

Dominion menacingly unsheathed the Flaming Sword as if to say, “Our patience is wearing thin.”

“You’re busy; I got it,” Devo said as he ascended through the ceiling again. “We’ll talk later.”

“Three minutes,” Devo thought to him. *“Be out of this city in three minutes.”*

Nigel wasn’t sure what Devo’s game was, but he found himself hurrying down the stairs.

Before he left, however, he wondered if there was anything else worth taking before he fled. Everything seemingly dear to him was upstairs in his room, guarded by the Grim Reaper. Chances are he’d have to leave this tavern empty-handed. But then he asked himself what his brother would take. He was drawn to the door behind the stage leading to Jesse’s flooded basement.

Downstairs, a few more Fire-Blood soldiers were digging through the water and checking the walls for hidden caches. They’d scrapped together a small pile of Jesse’s belongings upon which sat Jesse’s crystal sword in its wooden sheath. It wasn’t a particularly important item outside of its practical/decorative uses, but it had been with the two brothers for centuries.

Once he was sure none of the soldiers were watching, he helped himself to Excalibur II and carried it back up the stairs.

The ceiling above the bar turned blood-red. Dominion was passing through the floor and coming back downstairs. Samael had already teleported down in front of the entrance with his back to Nigel. Nigel passed into the

kitchen and steadily made his way to the exit with the sword in check.

As he left, he heard Samael speak:

“Searching down here is fruitless,” he said. “We’ve much better things to do. Send word to the Fourth and prepare to rapture the city.”

Dominion skeptically asked, “The *whole* city, sir?”

“Unless Solomon says otherwise, we have a duty to fulfill.”

“Very well.” Dominion then spoke into her invisible headset. “We’re finished. Take everything.”

Solomon, crossed Nigel’s mind as he darted out the back door and raced down the alley.

12. Escape from Halifax

Jesse saw him in flames as Nigel emerged from the alleyway, abandoning his disguise so his brother would recognize him.

"There you are!" Jesse exclaimed as Nigel rushed into the truck. "Where did...?"

"No time for questions," Nigel said as he dumped the sword on the floor. "Drive!"

"Drive where?"

"Out of the city!" he said. "As fast as you can!"

Jesse obliged. He shifted into gear and roared down the street.

"What about the Box?" he asked, "Did you get the Sword?"

"I got *your* sword," Nigel replied, gesturing to the sheathed weapon. "The other was taken. The box is dust."

"Dust?" Jesse asked. "What do you mean Pandora's Box is dust?"

"The Grim Reaper destroyed it."

"And by Grim Reaper, you mean...?"

"I mean Solomon is back, he's building a Fire-Blood army, and he's working with the Grim Reaper."

"As in, *Solomon-Solomon*?" Jesse asked. "Maybe there's another Solomon?"

"Just drive!" Nigel insisted as they splashed through a puddle.

Surtur peered out the window and saw a bright light piercing the clouds above the city. It was slowly descending upon them.

"Hey, guys, there's this thing happening," he said. "I don't think it's good."

"We're not going fast enough!" Nigel insisted.

"It's a twenty minute drive out of the city from here!" Jesse exclaimed. "I can't go any faster!"

"Guys," Surtur moaned, watching out the back window, "The harbour's flying."

Nigel looked in the side-view mirror. Through it, he could see ocean rising beyond the high-rises. Boats and bridges were being lifted into the light and slowly devoured by the sky. Buildings at the water's edge were next to go as the entire sleeping city was carefully consumed.

"Nigel, what's going on?" Jesse asked. "Why's the city not on the ground anymore?"

"Because it's getting raptured."

"What - as in, *the Rapture*?" Jesse asked. "The whole *Book of Revelations*/people getting sucked into Heaven deal?"

"Something like that!"

"But the Rapture is a Heaven thing!" Jesse exclaimed as he kept his foot to the pedal, trying to stay ahead of the light. "Why is Heaven sucking up Halifax?!"

"It's getting closer!" Surtur shouted as a city block got lifted into the air.

Through the rising infrastructure, he caught a small glimpse of Hunter's Tavern coming off the pavement. It floated up into the sky and vanished into the light.

"And it ate your bar," Surtur said. "Sorry."

The truck struggled to stay on the road as it hydroplaned across the streets.

The pavement behind them was cracking apart.

The Rapture was right on their heels.

"We're not going to make it," Jesse uttered.

Then something magical happened.

His hands clasped the steering wheel tightly. His seat reclined. The roof opened.

The engine roared to life.

All around him, Nigel's truck was transforming. The front extended and an air intake rose up through the hood. The roof vanished and the cabin lowered. The backseat swallowed Surtur who vanished into the trunk. Jesse and Nigel couldn't tell from where they were sitting, but the truck had just turned into a black 1970 Plymouth Barracuda.

Two slender arms draped over their shoulders and a mane of black hair crept forward from the back-seat. The two boys were greeted by a pair of incredibly crazy eyes.

"Miss me?" Pandora asked.

Two rocket boosters underneath the car ignited. Coupled with the NOS system and the steroid-enhanced hedgehog running on its wheel inside the engine, the car jetted off through the city at mach speed. Water sprayed five stories off the pavement in its wake. Jesse and Nigel were pinned against their seats. Jesse was unable to let go of the steering wheel.

As they approached a sharp turn, Jesse felt himself veer wildly to the left. The car skidded ninety degrees and flipped off the road. Both boys screamed as the car somersaulted through the air, crashed through the large glass window of an office building four stories up, flew out the other side and landed on the roof of a smaller building. They drove off the roof, landed on the street and continued without slowing.

The light was picking up speed. Halifax was almost fully engulfed now.

As they reached the city limits in record time, Jesse felt himself braking to a halt. The car drifted to a stop, performing a full one-eighty in the middle of the highway. They found themselves facing the oncoming light. "Jesse, get us out of here!" Nigel exclaimed, but Jesse was frozen in place.

Pandora continued smiling and put on some 3-D glasses as she watched the light of Heaven descend upon them. Halifax slowly vanished into the sky.

The street cracked and pavement continued rising up to the nose of their car where it stopped.

The light disappeared.

What little pavement had been airborne simply dropped back to Earth.

The Rapture was over.

Jesse and Nigel's mouths hung open, their expressions frozen in shock.

All that remained of Halifax was a vast wasteland by the sea.

"Well, now!" Pandora exclaimed. "That was exciting!"

"It's gone..." Nigel said. "All gone..."

"That's life, dearie," Pandora massaged his shoulders and sang with her cockney accent. "One minute you're having cheese and crackers with the King of France, the next your regional municipality is being sucked into oblivion. But whatcha gonna do, eh?"

Surtur banged on the inside of the trunk shouting "Let me out of here!"

"Keep your knickers on!" Pandora yelled. "You're ruining the moment!"

But Nigel was first to snap as he threw open the car door and ran to the edge of the wasteland where he dropped to his knees, his face still frozen in shock. Jesse soon joined him.

Nigel took a few deep breaths before addressing his brother.

"You were right," he said.

"About what?"

"That Pandora's not the one we should be worried about."

Pandora waved from the car while Surtur continued to pound on the trunk. Nigel stood to face her, but she seemed unfazed by his defiant stance.

"But come hell or high water," Nigel said, "she's going to answer some damn questions."

"Interrogation time?" Jesse asked.

"Interrogation time."

13. The Mad Messenger

Pandora didn't break easily.

She didn't break at all.

In fact, she promptly asked for McDonald's food first, so they spent the next hour looking for an all-night outlet.

Naturally, they let Surtur out of the trunk, but most of the the night was spent in silence as they drove. They traveled as far as the New Brunswick border before they finally found an open restaurant in Sacksville. Soon after getting her take-out, Pandora then requested a shower.

At this point, Nigel knew she was fooling around with them. As a sorceress who could turn his truck into a rocket-powered sports car, she could clearly provide these conveniences for herself. Yet if they didn't, they'd never get the answers they sought.

Soon, the four found themselves in a motel room just off the highway from Sacksville. It was fortunate that they could rent out a room this early in the morning, but it was once again completely unnecessary as none of them ever needed rest. As soon as they arrived, Pandora immediately dashed for the bathroom and turned on the shower. The rest of them didn't care about getting clean as driving in the rain had long since washed the mud from their filthy clothes. All they cared about now was getting dry.

Jesse sat on one of the twin beds and eagerly flipped through the channels in search of news.

"There's nothing on Halifax," he said. "A whole city disappears and nobody's reporting it."

"It's five in the morning," Nigel said, helping himself to a cigarette by the window. "Anybody who would've reported it is still asleep."

Surtur sat at the table eating his Happy Meal. "So who are these guys anyway?"

"You said there were three of them, right?" Jesse asked.

"Three were in the bar," Nigel said. "They mentioned a fourth."

"Four, and one of them is Death," Jesse thought aloud.

"Did any of them happen to have horses?"

"The woman was half-horse. I'm not sure about the others, but you never know. I gather we're on the same page about them?"

"Yeah," Jesse nodded, "They're the Four Horsemen."

"Who's that?" Surtur asked.

"Don't tell me you don't know who the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' are," Nigel said. "Death, Disease, War, and Famine. They're the harbingers of the world's end according to Christian belief."

"I spent two thousand years believing I was the harbinger of Earth's destruction," Surtur said. "Never paid much attention to those other prophecies."

"But where do they come from?" Jesse asked. "And how does Solomon tie into all this?"

Nigel stared out the window at the rain and couldn't help but ask himself the same question. In the aftermath of Ragnarök, this was all happening too soon. It couldn't be a coincidence. Their actions in that battle had to have led to this outcome somehow.

“Solomon spent nine thousand years planning his revenge,” Nigel said. “What if getting trapped in the Void was part of that plan? What if his game isn’t over? What if he’s not being discreet anymore?”

They heard the shower turn off. Moments later, Pandora came bouncing out the bathroom wearing bright pink pajamas with a towel wrapped around her head. She sat down on the bed next to Jesse with her legs crossed like a little kid. After helping herself to a Big Mac, she snatched away the remote. Soon, she was engrossed in an old black-and-white Betty Boop cartoon as she happily munched away at her hamburger.

“Pandora, turn off the TV,” Nigel said. “We need to talk.” “Can’t talk, darling,” Pandora said, pieces of lettuce flying out of her mouth. “Cartoons.”

“What kind of channel still plays these old things?” Jesse asked to nobody.

Nigel stood up, marched over to the television, and unplugged it. The cartoon continued to play.

“You can’t be serious,” Nigel grumbled. “Pandora, we don’t have time for this! How did you get out of Hell and why are the Four Horsemen after you?”

“Such a grumpy grouch!” Betty Boop shouted at Nigel from the television with her high-pitched squeal. Nigel spun around to face a potato-headed flapper girl with big eyes on the television screen. “A big, strong man like you should be a lot nicer to ladies!”

“No, I’m not doing this,” Nigel said. “I’m not talking to a cartoon character.”

Pandora waved him away from the screen, “Then would you mind not blocking the view?”

“I think he doth protest too much!” Betty Boop squealed. Nigel sighed and addressed Betty. “Betty, do you know what’s happening?”

"There's a lot of mischief and mayhem going on up in Heaven," Betty said. "My friend here came to you for help!" "And now Halifax is gone," Nigel said. "If she's in trouble, why come to us? Give me one reason why we shouldn't send her back to Hell."

"Because you're a gentleman, Naveen," Betty said.

"Besides, it's as plain as the nose on her face that it wouldn't just be Pandora you're sending back."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," and with that, Betty did a little dance, singing, "Boop-oo-de-doop... boop!"

Upon saying "boop", Betty reached out of the TV and booped Nigel in the nose. Nigel glared at Pandora who stuck her tongue out at him. It was covered in chewed bits of food.

"Too subtle?" Pandora asked. "Maybe not *on the nose* enough?"

"That's it," Nigel stood up straight. "You start making sense or I'll..."

"Nigel - wait!" Jesse exclaimed as he finally saw it.

Right in front of his face was something on the front of her face. It was small, but on the tip of Pandora's nose was a little birthmark in the shape of a circle with two wings.

"An angel's sigil," Jesse realized. Nigel hurried over and took a closer look. Pandora quietly enjoyed all the attention. Jesse began to speak, "Boop-oo-de-doop..."

"...boop," Nigel finished as he poked Pandora in the nose.

The sigil lit up. Her eyes shone a bright, beautiful light.

Jesse and Nigel backed away as Pandora floated off the bed, her arms spread out like wings. Surtur quickly closed the curtains and watched the magic unfold.

"Pandora?" Nigel asked.

She looked down upon him and spoke in a different, non-British voice that echoed through the light, "Where am I? What happened? Who are you?"

"Who are we?" Nigel repeated the question. "Who are *you*?"

The person in Pandora's flying body looked at her own hands. She quickly felt up her own body, trying to determine whom she was. A moment later, she figured it out.

"Oh, no, no, no," she said in disbelief. "Pandora, what have you done? I'm in the middle of a war right now! I can't be in two places at once! I need to go back! I need to..."

Just then, she recognized the two brothers.

"Naveen? Jezebuul?"

"Do we know you?" Jesse asked.

"Oh, goodness, it's been so long. So very, very long."

The voice chilled Nigel to the bone. He shivered as he looked her in the eyes and carefully asked, with cautious optimism, "...Nione?"

"It is I," she said.

"Mom?" Jesse reiterated, hope in his voice.

"What are you doing in Pandora's body?" Nigel asked.

"This is terrible," she said. "This means everything's gone wrong. Pandora promised she wouldn't intervene unless... but no. She wasn't supposed to bring *you* into this."

"We're already neck-deep. Mind explaining?"

"I haven't much time," Nione said. "My sons, Heaven is under attack. The fires of Heaven and Hell have been stolen and are being used to create to an infinite army of Fire-Bloods, ablaze with demon energy. They've torn through our armies and closed the Pearly Gates. Heaven burns as we fight them."

"And what about Solomon?"

"The spirit of Solomon has somehow passed from the Void. He met with the Creator and challenged Him to an Aeonomega. The Creator accepted and was defeated. Now the spirit of Solomon sits upon the Throne of Glory."

Jesse spoke up, "Solomon is *God* now?!"

"How did he do it?" Nigel asked.

"I don't know, but his power is weak. When you first released his soul, you broke the Fifth Seal. Through his actions on the Throne, he reacquired the first Four and unleashed the Horsemen to act as his right hand. He controls Heaven now, but to gain full power and truly become the next Creator, he requires the Seventh Seal. We sent a team to find it before he does, but if Pandora's here, it means they've failed. I means... I don't want to think about what it means."

"So you helped Pandora escape Hell?" Jesse asked.

"No... she was never trapped," Nione said. "In death, Pandora's abilities have grown. She's become a force that can freely move between realms. She's here of her own accord."

"Wonderful," Nigel groaned sarcastically. "She's been upgraded."

"Nione, do you have any idea why the Horsemen would take the entire city of Halifax?" Jesse asked.

"No ideas at all, I'm afraid. I didn't even know the Horsemen were real until recently. It's been an absolute mess up here. The Fire-Bloods keep coming and the Creator's nowhere to be seen."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Jesse asked.

"No, you shouldn't," Nione quickly replied. "But then Pandora came to you. But then again, Christine said no. But yes, you could.... no. Maybe."

"Christine?" Jesse's ears perked up. "She was chasing the Seventh Seal too?"

"I've said too much," Nione said. "Listen, I might regret saying this, but if you want to live, you need to stay with Pandora. Anything she asks, do it. She might be our last hope for recovering the Seventh Seal."

"But where is it?"

"You will find the map to the Seventh Seal..." Nione began to speak, but then trailed off.

"Where?!"

Pandora's eyes stopped glowing and she fell onto the bed. She bounced merrily on the spring mattress, giggling.

"Nione!" Nigel shouted, grabbing Pandora by the shoulder and relentlessly poking her nose. "Where's the Seventh Seal? How do we get to you?"

"Oh, my!" Pandora said in her best Southern belle accent.

"Get your hands off me! I do declare, Mr. Hunter, you can be so insatiable at times!"

"Ask her about Christine," Jesse said. "Where is she? Is she alive?"

"Pandora, we need to speak with Nione again!"

"Nione is not available at the moment," Pandora said in a nasally voice, "But if you want to leave your name and number, please leave a message at the beep. Beep!"

Nigel sighed and released the sorceress. Pandora continued staring blankly as Nigel came to grips with what had just happened.

"Who's Nione?" Surtur asked.

"She was Pandora's apprentice nine thousand years ago," Jesse said. "She helped create us. She raised us. And now she's in trouble. Everyone's in trouble."

"Pandora, do you have any idea where the Seal is?" Nigel asked.

"What Seal?" she asked.

"The *Seventh* one," Nigel said. "Do you know where the *Seventh Seal* is?"

"No, dearie," she shook her head. "Haven't the foggiest."

"Do you at least know anything about Christine?" Jesse asked.

"Nope."

Nigel felt frustrated. "Didn't Nione leave you *any* instructions?"

Pandora replied by playing a short, out-of-tune song on a plastic kazoo.

On that note, Nigel went outside for another smoke.

14. Heavy Rain

Nigel lay on the hood of their Plymouth Barracuda in the parking lot. The cigarette felt damp and lifeless in his hands as he stared skyward into the thunderless rainy sky. At this point, being cold, wet and miserable outside was preferable to spending one more minute with Pandora. At the very least, he was thankful that she hadn't magically popped up to keep him company.

Jesse appeared, however, and laid down on the wet hood next to him.

"She's gone back to watching cartoons," Jesse said. "And by cartoons, I mean she's staring at a blank wall and describing it to Surtur."

"What's happening, Jess?" Nigel asked. "How are we somehow in the middle of it again? Why does somebody up there *hate* us?"

"Do you think we're being punished?"

"Our home is gone, Solomon is God and we're babysitting Pandora. How isn't this punishment?"

"Well, you know... it's been nine thousand years. I bet we stepped on a lot of toes to build up some bad karma."

"We didn't," Nigel insisted. "For nine millennia, we fought, we ran, and we hid. We're survivalists. We are as boring as Ancients can get. This last year has honestly been more eventful than the rest of our entire life."

"Destroying lots of ancient cities wasn't eventful?" Jesse asked.

The guilt Nigel had felt back at the bar crept over him once more. The sounds of screaming filled his ears. He thought back to all the cities that had fallen because he and Jesse had chosen to hide in them. In all cases, the blame always came back to the same person.

"It was Pandora," Nigel said. "Every time."

"You always talk about our life like nothing happened," Jesse said. "But you once said I took my own head off trying to rid myself of the guilt. So did nothing really happen, or did you just trick yourself into forgetting?"

Nigel thought back to the river of fire. Deep in the pits of Hell, everything he ever was burned eternally. Every memory he ever repressed hid in those flames, awaiting his final return. He'd always taken care to remember the major events in his life, but smaller details, even his own feelings, could have trickled away down there.

Of course, now that the Horsemen somehow possessed those flames, remorse was slowly rising in his heart. He could now hear the cries of a thousand souls that had been screaming for his blood.

"I don't think Pandora is here to help," he said. "She doesn't have a plan or even a clue."

"Then how are we supposed to start looking for the Seventh Seal?" Jesse asked.

"We don't," Nigel said, collecting himself. "I don't even think that was Nione we were speaking to."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know for a fact that was an angel possession we just saw," Nigel said. "Nione can't be an angel. That's not how it works when you die. Human souls don't simply transform into deities."

"Do you think Pandora was impersonating Nione?"

"It's possible, but that possession was too genuine," Nigel said. "I think somebody else is pulling the strings and Pandora's in on it."

"So we're being messed with again?" Jesse asked. "If so, I really don't want to play another one of Solomon's games. He tricked me into breaking one Seal. I'm not going to break another one just because he name-drops Christine."

"We don't even know if Solomon is really back. Anybody could be running this apocalypse. For all we know, Pandora *is* the mastermind."

"It could be another Shadow-Blood. Or maybe Solomon had a master of his own. Or maybe it's the Devil!"

"Exactly. So instead of blindly following Pandora nowhere, let's just focus on the facts."

"Right," Jesse started counting off his fingers. "Fire-Blood soldiers, Halifax got sucked into the sky, and you have chest cramps."

"Then there's the Horsemen," Nigel said. "The Reaper... the one they call Samael. I know his name from the Bible. He's the Angel of Death. The Destroyer of Worlds. In the tavern, he was talking about hunting down marks. Prophets, immortals, sorceresses - he talks about assassinating Ancients like it's part of his job description."

"So he's hunting down deities and..." Jesse's voice trailed off as he realized where this line of conversation was going. "You said Trish was helming a summit meeting for the gods, right?"

"Yes, but I haven't been able to reach her."

"Samael is at least a Second Age assassin," Jesse said. "If he finds them, they won't stand a chance."

"Then we just have to get there first and warn them."

"But we don't even know where it is!"

"I do; Zeus kicked me out of it," they heard Surtur say. Both brothers sat up to see the Titan listening in on their

conversation. Surtur had escaped outside for a short breather. His tolerance for Pandora reached its end when she started performing the entire second season of *The Walking Dead* with paper-bag puppets.

"Can you take us there?" Nigel asked.

"Well, it's off-world and I sort of hitched a ride back to this planet," Surtur said. "Not exactly sure where to get another spaceship at this hour."

"But we have to get there," Jesse said. "Trisha's life is in danger. Do you think maybe Pandora could turn our car into a spaceship?"

"She could, but with our luck, she'd turn it into a submarine and send it to Tibet," Nigel said as he pulled out his phone and began dialing a number. "We need to find a way off-world quickly if we're going to stay ahead of the Reaper."

"Who are you calling?"

"The one guy I least want to talk to," Nigel said. "Hopefully, we won't interrupt his *Sex and the City* marathon."

Part II: The End of Worlds

15. The Haunting Grounds

Christine pushed through the brown fog, her heart racing. The screaming wind howled at her back. She leapt over the roots of an enormous cedar tree and nestled up against the bark to catch her breath. She clutched Artemis' bow with sweaty palms. The quiver of arrows poked into the back of her neck.

The air was rigid. It was difficult to breathe.

She'd heard stories of Hell from her deity friends and a first-hand account of it from Nigel, but this was nothing like Hell. Hell was a place to punish the wicked; it had an agenda. Hell could be reasoned with. Wherever Artemis had sent her had no agenda. It was a cold, cruel, maddening cesspool.

And there were things in the fog.

Christine took an arrow from the quiver and awkwardly nocked it into the bow. As Artemis had told her, now was a good time to learn to use it.

She stood up and took aim into the surrounding fog.

Through the dust, there was light, as if the sun were setting in all directions. For all the light, however, she saw nothing to shoot at.

Her finger slipped and the arrow flew a few short feet. It hit the ground and vanished, only to reappear in her quiver.

She quickly nocked another arrow and tried again, doing her best to keep it steady.

It's all on me, she reminded herself. *Artemis said it was a fifty-fifty chance I've even get here alive. I can't quit now.* She felt her phone vibrate. This caused her to lose her grip again and watch the arrow sail a few feet further. She quickly answered the phone.

"Hello?" she asked.

Nigel's voice could be heard through the static,

"Christine... fzzz... and... fzzz... hear me?"

"Nigel, I hear you!" she said, a weight lifting off her chest.

"Artemis sent me through a mirror and I'm in this place..."

"Fzzz... can you hear....fzzzz?" he asked.

Then it cut out.

Impressed that she had any service at all, she redialed.

The phone was answered.

"Nigel?"

A hoarse, whispery voice seeped through the phone into her ear, *"Surrender your soul."*

She cursed as she quickly hung up. The voice had shocked her to the core and her nerves went numb at the sound of it. The last thing she needed in this realm was to be possessed by some phone-jacking ghost.

She pocketed the phone and reloaded her bow again, grateful that she hadn't been attacked yet.

Something was now moving quickly through the fog.

She took aim with her back against the tree and waited.

As she peered into the twilight of the fog, three ghostly figures began to approach her. She let loose an arrow, but it passed through the middle one without it so much as flinching. She quickly prepared another arrow, but eased up as the figures approached.

They were the transparent spirits of three elderly woman of varying size, each blind. They drifted towards Christine moaning incoherently. The nearer they drew, the more she heard them speak.

"She is here."

"She is hunted."

"She is scared."

"Forgive us, Our Blessed Lady!"

"We cast you into this fate!"

"We've made you into this!"

"He will come for you!"

"Stay with us! Be safe in this wretched place!"

"Become one of us!"

"One of us!"

The faces of the three old women twisted into grotesque shapes as they lunged at her. Christine swung at them with the bow. The three old women dispersed into the mist. "God, I hate this place," Christine said as she reloaded. Something growled in the fog. Something solid. Something angry.

She took a deep breath and let loose another arrow. It disappeared into the fog and hit its target. Whatever growled fell over with a heavy thud.

She carefully marched forward.

From here on out, no one was coming to save her. She had to brave this realm alone and do whatever it took to find the Seventh Seal. The fate of the universe depended on it.

Anything that dared face her in this place was going to die.

16. Morning Light

Jesse woke up.

He shouldn't have been sleeping. He couldn't sleep at all. He especially shouldn't have been sleeping in the back of a moving vehicle. He didn't even remember getting into it or them departing. And where were they anyway?

As he lifted off his blanket, he was struck with a sharp burning sensation all over his skin. He ignited into flames and rushed to cover himself.

"Sunlight?" he asked as the fire dissipated. "Guys, what happened? How'd I get here?"

"Pandora put you under a sleeping spell," Nigel said from the front passenger seat, also hiding under a blanket.

"Why?" Jesse asked.

"So she could draw on your face."

Jesse raised his blanket enough to check the rearview mirror. His face was covered in Sharpie marker. Instead of drawing genitals however, Pandora had written down Metacritic reviews of *"The Matrix Reloaded"* on his forehead. She had also doodled a few hearts and butterflies on his cheeks as well, along with an exceptionally crude picture of dog doo.

"I drew the dog doo," Surtur said, next to Jesse.

Jesse peered out from under his covering to look around.

Pandora was in the driver's seat wearing Daisy Duke

shorts, oversized novelty sunglasses and a lemon print halter top. There was desert in all directions and a clear blue sky overhead. The heat was sweltering as they approached the low skyline of a city. Off to his left, Jesse perceived several pointed mounds in the distance. They looked like pyramids.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Cairo," Nigel said.

"How long have we been driving?"

"Half an hour."

"But this is on the other side of the world!"

"Pandora's driving."

"But how did we get across the ocean?"

"Pandora's driving."

"And why, pray tell, are we in Cairo?"

"I called up Vladimir and got him to dig up some info from Hades' rolodex," Nigel said. "Apparently all the gods' spaceports are shut down during the summit, but he referred us to a god who still hasn't left the planet yet. He's supposed to have a condo around here."

"And a spaceship?"

"Something like that."

"And explain again why we're letting Pandora drive us to Cairo when she easily has the power to take us to the summit?"

Pandora replied by once again playing the kazoo.

"That's why," Nigel said.

"Your girlfriend's trapped in Hell," Surtur blurted out.

"What?" Jesse snapped to attention, almost catching himself in the sunlight again.

"Surtur, could you be little less tactful?" Nigel asked.

"Christine's in Hell!" Surtur said. "The boy has a right to know!"

"She's not in Hell, she's in another realm," Nigel explained.

"I tried calling all our friends. Ptolemy, Patti, Magnus, Poseidon, even Christine. Nobody answered except her, and she's apparently stuck somewhere with a mirror."

"It's an evil place," Pandora smiled. "She'll go mad if it doesn't kill her first."

Jesse let out a silent scream. "Do you know where she is?" The kazoo replied.

"Pandora, you're not helping," Nigel said. "Listen, Jess. We'll rescue her, but first we need to meet with this guy. If the Reaper hasn't gotten to him first, he might be our only chance at saving anyone."

"Hmmp, fine," Jesse said as he crossed his arms and pouted.

Nigel turned to Pandora and said sternly, "I don't want anymore trouble from you. No magic, no mischief, and no killing anyone unless otherwise specified. Got it?"

"Can I do this?" Pandora asked as she pointed at the pyramids. They immediately exploded into thousands of pieces.

"No, that is exactly what not to do!" Nigel yelled. "Now put them back!"

Pandora scowled as she snapped her fingers. The pieces of the pyramids immediately flew back together and reformed as if nothing happened. The sight of it reminded Nigel of something that had crossed his mind on the drive in.

"That's something else," Nigel said to Jesse. "Try not to get hurt."

"Because the Box was destroyed?"

"Not just that," Nigel said. "Nione said the Fires of Hell were stolen. During my fight at the fort last night, one of the Fire-Bloods grazed me. I healed, but something seemed off. I felt incomplete."

“You mean you didn’t regenerate properly?”

“I think our connection to Hell has been severed,” Nigel said. “The fire in our bodies might be all we have left. So if we get into any fights, try to keep the flesh wounds to a minimum.”

“What if I lose my head?”

Nigel shrugged. “Don’t lose your head.”

Surtur began drawing more dog poo on Jesse’s face.

17. Old Rivalries

Bzzzzzzzzzz.

Seconds passed.

Bzzzzzzzzzz.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Osiris?” Nigel asked into the intercom. “My name is Nigel Hunter. I heard through Hades that you’re the guy to talk to about going off-world?”

“And who are the other three with you?”

“There’s my brother, Jesse, there’s Surtur, Lord of the Fire Giants, and then there’s Pandora. She’s a demon sorceress.”

“I see.” After a few moments, he said, *“Come on up.”*

The door to the complex buzzed. The four of them entered and took the elevator to the twentieth story penthouse.

“Isn’t Osiris supposed to be the Egyptian God of Death?” Jesse asked.

“He’s a God of the Afterlife,” Nigel answered.

“So how’s he supposed to get us off-planet?”

“We’ll find out.”

They arrived at the top floor and knocked on the only door. The white door opened to reveal a smaller, rotund man with a charming demeanor and a short celebrity haircut in a bathrobe. He assessed his guests carefully.

"Huh, you weren't kidding," he said as he eyed Pandora.

"You got her on loan from the Devil or something?"

"It's complicated," Nigel said.

"Complicated doesn't cut it," he said as he ushered them into his domicile. "After you. Just remove your shoes there and uh, Surtur, your boots can stay outside."

"My boots stay on," he growled as he stepped past, ever the proper guest.

"Yeah, whatever," Osiris grumbled. "Just track in sand."

Jesse came in, gestured to his Sharpie-covered face and asked "Mind if I use your washroom? I can't shape-shift this stuff off."

"Go right ahead," Osiris said, admiring Surtur's detailed drawings of dog poo. "First door on your right. Don't use the vanity towels."

As Pandora entered, she winked at Osiris, tossed her hair and gave him her hand. "Ah, master Osiris, you are a handsome, lovely beast, aren't you? I am such a huge fan of your passion plays. I always carry an extra roll of toilet paper should I happen upon a midnight showing!"

"Enchante, mademoiselle," Osiris said he kissed her hand.

"You can mummify me any day!"

"I might take you up on that!" Pandora giggled as she danced into the den and threw herself on the couch.

Jesse finished wiping off his face with the vanity towels and perused Osiris' condo. It was at least two thousand square feet with two bedrooms and bathrooms with a massive den. Osiris liked to decorate with a few cliched Egyptian artifacts: obelisks, Shabti figures, etc., but also had a few classic movie posters mounted on the walls. He was clearly a fan of old MGM monster movies, as "*The Mummy*," "*The Wolfman*," and "*Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein*" adorned his walls. The view overlooked the city, thankfully out of the sun's exposure.

Osiris himself seemed unusual to Jesse. Gods, by their nature, could look like anyone they wanted, but generally stuck with a standard appearance after a few centuries. Usually, they made themselves resemble people they admire. To Jesse, his friend Poseidon always looked a little like Jeff Bridges, while the all-father Odin leaned more towards Sir Ian McKellan. Osiris, on the other hand, reminded Jesse of the stand-up comedian Patton Oswalt.

"Mind if I make myself comfortable?" Osiris asked.

"Go ahead," Nigel said.

Osiris' skin immediately turned a lively shade of green. He stepped over to a bedroom door and opened it. A small dog rushed out and began circling Jesse, yapping excitedly. It looked like a silky brown mophead with the tiny face of an alligator.

"Ammit, heel!" Osiris shouted. The small dog sat down quickly with its tail wagging. Osiris threw it a doggy treat. Ammit snapped it up quickly with his alligator jaws before hopping on the couch and laying down.

"Nice dog," Jesse said. "Part Manchester?"

"Australian Silky terrier," Osiris said, "with a little bit of Caiman."

"Sorry to rush you, but you do know why we're here?" Nigel asked.

"I'd gather it'd have to do with the disappearance of a city?" Osiris asked.

"You heard about it?" Nigel asked.

"No more than five minutes ago on the news," Osiris said.

"Los Angeles, Vancouver, Athens, London, New York... cities like those don't just disappear without people noticing."

"What about Halifax?"

"Oh, that's gone too?" he asked. "This is shaping up to be an exciting news day! So what was it? Nukes? Asteroids? Aliens?"

"It's the Rapture," Nigel said. "Heaven's at war and God's Throne has been usurped."

"Ooooh," Osiris scrunched up his face. "You sure about that?"

"Three of the Four Horsemen were in my bar earlier," Nigel said. "One of them's hunting gods."

"Wait, you met the Horsemen?" he asked. "What are they like?"

"They're neither gods, Titans, demons, nor angels," Nigel said. "Not even the so-called 'Angel' of Death. Each one is its own unique creature."

"So the rumors are true," Osiris mumbled. "Many speculated the Horsemen could be either hybrid deities or early human prototypes. Personally, I always believed they were real; I just never knew how to classify them."

"We can classify them later," Nigel said. "Right now, we need to get to the summit and warn everybody."

"Augh, that summit," Osiris shook his head in disbelief. "If the Rapture's happening, this is the worst possible time for it."

"What's the summit about anyway?" Jesse asked.

"Well, it's not so much a summit anymore as it is an election," Osiris said. "After the debacle that was Ragnarök and last week's blackout, Odin's rule has been less than popular. So last week, he stepped down from being king and declared the job as up for grabs."

"Oh, god, no," Nigel face-palmed. "Let me guess, everyone went for it."

"Imagine hundreds of angry gods in one place all wanting to be king," Osiris said. "With all the bad blood that's been brewing, it's not a pretty sight."

"I thought Poseidon was next in line for the job," Jesse said.

"As was Thor, Quetzalcoatl and myself, but I opted out of that mess," Osiris explained. "Even the Titans are getting involved. Unfortunately, after many riots and much name-calling, it's come down to an ancient rivalry between two gods and their supporters."

"Which two?"

"Well, like you said, Poseidon has the biggest claim to the title, which means..."

"Zeus has thrown his name back in the ring," Nigel realized. "He's going for a second term as King."

Jesse knew his friend Poseidon wasn't strictly on speaking terms with his brothers, Zeus and Hades, but never bothered to ask why. "Is there some ancient feud going on between them?"

"Putting it mildly, yes," Nigel said. "When Zeus and his brothers defeated their father, Kronos, in the first Titan War, there was a dispute over their inheritance. Zeus ended up dividing mastery over the sky, sea and underworld between himself and his brothers. At the time, Poseidon and Hades thought they were getting a raw deal with Zeus putting himself on top."

"So they're fighting over land rights?"

"It goes beyond that," Osiris explained. "They tried to overthrow Zeus together, but Zeus manipulated Hades and turned him against Poseidon. Then Poseidon turned Zeus against Hades. It was *'Game of Thrones'* for a while as they tried to seize each other's domains, but things got complicated once Zeus brought humans into the mix."

"He enforced worship and sucked humanity dry, something neither of his brothers had the guts to do," Nigel explained to Jesse. "While Poseidon tried to compete by gaining

followers diplomatically, Hades retreated from the fight. By that time, Zeus was too powerful for either of them.”

“And he wants to be the King again?” Jesse asked.

“Zeus wants to bring the gods back to Earth and return the world to a Silver Age dictatorship,” Osiris said. “Poseidon wants them to stay the course in the stars and leave humanity alone. Naturally, with the blackout having everyone’s pants in a twist, Zeus now has many supporters.”

“Didn’t he learn anything from Odin’s takeover?” Jesse asked.

“He hasn’t been to Earth in hundreds of years,” Osiris said.

“When it comes to leadership, Zeus is still stuck in his primeval ways.”

“And where does Trish fit into all this if she isn’t Odin’s consultant anymore?” Nigel asked.

“The unsung prophet? I imagine she and Athena would be moderating the event.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s the wild west out there,” Osiris said. “I don’t know everything that’s happening off-world.”

“We’re running short on time,” Jesse said. “Osiris, can you get us to the summit?”

“Absolutely, yeah,” Osiris said. “In fact, I’d better head out too if the Horsemen are sucking up major cities. Just give me a minute to pack some stuff.”

“So where’s your ship?” Jesse asked.

“No ship,” Osiris said as he ran off to pack some clothes.

“We’re taking a shortcut.”

“A shortcut through where?”

“Through my laundry closet.”

18. The Laundry Closet

Sand.

That was the first and only word that came to Jesse's mind as he looked upon the interior of Osiris' tiny laundry closet. Inside was a vast canyon of sand that stretched on for miles.

Sand steps led down to a sand plateau overlooking a river of sand. From there, great sand cliffs rose up to meet the sandy sky with its sandy sun, sandy stars, and its sandy clouds.

The five of them walked down the steps together, Osiris now in his sports coat, carrying both his suitcase and Ammit in a doggy carrier. Pandora bounded forward ecstatically and, with a snap of her fingers, changed into a stylish, 1920's one-piece bathing suit. She plopped down in the sand and began building a sand castle.

As long as she's behaving, Nigel thought.

"This is the Duat," Osiris told them. "If you ever see a bright light at the end of a tunnel, this is it. It's the realm between life and death. The conduit between nether-worlds and spirit realms. Only from here can a mortal being physically travel to the afterlife."

"But we don't want to go the afterlife, we want to go..."
Jesse stammered, "Surtur, where is that summit being held anyways?"

"Mt. Olympus," he said.

"Mt. Olympus is in Greece!" Jesse exclaimed. "We don't need to go off-world for that!"

"You mean Olympus Mons, don't you?" Nigel asked.

"The one on Mars," Surtur nodded. "Biggest mountain in the solar system."

"Okay, so we need to go to Mars," Jesse said. "How does the afterlife help?"

Osiris explained, "Throughout human history, people have formed their own beliefs about life after death. What the Duat does is channel souls to the appropriate spirit realm based on those beliefs."

"So there's an infinite amount of spirit realms then," Jesse said.

"Nope," Osiris shook his head. "Only nine."

"Really?"

"Most life-after-death theories are pretty much the same," Osiris continued explaining. "The Ninth Afterlife, for example, follows the 'Eternal Reward' belief where you'll find Heaven. A lot of modern religions and philosophies share space in that afterlife. Then there's the Seventh Afterlife, Nirvana, which covers all the reincarnation faiths. And if you're a man of the sea who fancies a pint of grog, you can always head on down to Davy Jones' Locker in the Sixth."

"Which one's the First?" Jesse asked.

"That would be the Spirit Plane," Osiris said. "A nice place to visit, but dreadfully dull if you're not into the whole 'seeking truth' thing. The list of realms goes on, but we can go over those later."

"And how does this link us to Mars?"

"Mars is an afterlife," Nigel said.

"Come again?"

“Some cultures used to, or still, believe that the stars in the heavens were literal Heavens,” Nigel said. “Mars and Venus in particular were big ones back in the day.”

“Any belief that sets your soul among the stars puts you in the third afterlife,” Osiris said, “The Cosmic Hereafter, or as I like to call it, the *Lion King Afterlife*.”

Osiris stepped up to the edge of the plateau and took something out of his suitcase. It was a short, white ceramic crook with small dials along the shaft. He tweaked the dials and waved the crook over the river of sand. Immediately the sand waves parted and sand cliffs fell. The ground rumbled and the landscape transformed before their eyes. Enormous stairway-laden spires of sand rose from the ground. The river fell away, transforming into an even larger cavern of stairways. Stairways upon stairways surrounded them and, in the chaos of the Duat’s transformation, Pandora’s sand castle fell down.

A small sand-based computer console rose from the ground at Osiris’ feet. He began typing instructions into its hieroglyphics-based keyboard.

“I’m going to map out the quickest path to Olympus,” he explained. “Navigating spirit realms is a lot like sorting laundry. In the machine, clothes shift around and get lost in one another, so the path to finding that missing sock isn’t always straightforward. There’s a lot of detours involved.”

“We don’t have time for detours,” Nigel reminded him.

“Trust me, a detour or two is usually the best case scenario,” Osiris said. “It’s next to impossible to ever find a matching pair of socks side by side in the wash.”

He hit the enter key. All around them, they saw glowing ankh symbols appear at the tops and bottoms of stairways. Hundreds more appeared on the walls, floors and ceilings across the landscape of the Duat. One even appeared on the sun.

"Each of these doors represents a pathway to Olympus," Osiris said, "with some pathways sinfully longer than others."

"And which one's the shortest?" Nigel asked.

"Concentrated paths through the afterlife usually smell of thyme and chamomile."

"So we...?"

"Open every door and start sniffing."

The next twenty minutes were gruelling as Jesse, Nigel, Surtur, and Osiris scurried all over the Duat, opening ankhs and taking in the various scents. Pandora had different priorities as she rebuilt her sand castle.

At first, Jesse was surprised that these mystical symbols swung open like doors, but the novelty wore off as the first several doors he inspected all led to scentless voids of nothingness. Eventually, he ran into doors that opened into zen gardens and arctic wastelands, and even happened across the scent of strawberries and pina coladas, but nothing quite like thyme or chamomile.

At the top of one spire, he shouted to Surtur who was inspecting the ankh on the sun. "Hey, Surtur, what does thyme and chamomile smell like anyway?"

"Beats me," he said, "Like spices or some crap. I'm just trying to look busy."

Jesse opened another ankh on the floor by his feet. The music of a loud mariachi band exploded through the portal. Inside, Jesse saw hundreds of skeletons in traditional Mexican party attire dancing and feasting in a black velvet landscape. It smelled more of candied pumpkin than spices, however.

"Ah, that afterlife's one of my favourites!" Osiris shouted from the base of the spire. "*La Tierra de Los Muertos!* A never-ending fiesta! A great place to take the missus on the weekend!"

Jesse closed up the ankh as memories of traveling with Christine crossed his mind. The pain of her memory loss still cut deep and now she was trapped alone in another realm. He vaguely recalled Nigel mentioning mirrors and a thought crossed his mind.

“Osiris, are there any spirit realms you can get to using mirrors?” he asked.

“One too many,” the god replied. “But mirror travel has been illegal for centuries due to its risk factor. Even with the right ingredient, you could miss your destination entirely.”

“What kind of ingredient?”

“Just a special herb that Odin outlawed centuries ago,” Osiris explained. “Put it under your tongue and mirror travel could take you almost anywhere, but it’s too unreliable a practice for even the gods. We’re better off sniffing doors.”

“Huh,” Jesse mumbled as he logged that information away. Several more minutes passed. Nigel was getting infuriated with how many smells he was going through. None of them seemed right.

Finally, he opened one ankh that led into a stone hallway. A dry citrusy, pine-like aroma hit him, stronger than anything else he smelled thus far. He hadn’t smelled it in a long time, but it was definitely recognizable as frankincense.

“Why thyme and chamomile?” Nigel called out to Osiris.

“Because they’re common herbs used in the ancient burial process,” Osiris said. “The smell of them sticks to the afterlife.”

“Did they ever use frankincense?” Nigel asked.

Osiris paused before answering, “Yes! Definitely, yes!”

“I hit a big pocket of frankincense over here,” Nigel said.

“You should come check it out.”

"On my way!" Osiris yelled.

* * *

Unaware of Nigel's discovery, Jesse found himself wandering another sandy corridor, fed up with checking all these doors. He happened upon Surtur who was taking a break and smoking a thick cigar.

"I don't know about you, but my nose is sick and tired of this," Jesse said as he leaned up against the wall with Surtur.

"Smoke?" Surtur offered his cigar. Jesse politely refused.

"Your mind's on the girl, isn't it?"

"It's that obvious?"

"To be honest, I couldn't care less about saving everyone at that summit," Surtur said. "Things go south, both the gods and Hunter's woman can handle themselves. But the disappearance of your girlfriend intrigues me. I think Osiris might be onto something with that mirror thing."

"He said it was illegal."

"Just means he's a sissy," Surtur said. "Want to give it a crack?"

"You know how to do mirror travel?"

Surtur inhaled deeply from his cigar and breathed out a steady stream of fire onto the opposing wall. The sand instantly superheated into a large molten stain. Surtur willed away the heat, and fine-tuned the cooling process, forcing the sand to form into a highly-reflective silver surface.

He took Jesse's hand and tapped some of the cigar's ashes into his palm. Jesse cringed momentarily as it burned, but Surtur held his arm steady as to not spill anything.

"What is this? Jesse asked.

"The ashes of the Serbian Raskovnik plant have magical properties," Surtur said. "If you put it under your tongue, you can walk through any mirror."

"Osiris said this herb was outlawed. Why do you have it?"

"Medicinal purposes, of course," Surtur said as he smoked a little more.

"And this'll help us find Christine?"

"If you concentrate hard enough, there's a fifty-fifty chance it'll send you to your girl."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Hey, fortune favours the brave, buddy," Surtur said as he finished his cigar and put it out in the sand. He slipped what was left of the butt into Jesse's coat pocket. "Just put it under your tongue and I'll hold onto you while you peek through the mirror. You know, just in case it sucks you in. If it doesn't work, just take a little more and try again. It'll be our little secret."

Jesse looked at the burnt ashes in his hand and wondered what he had to lose. If Surtur, the man who was drawing dog poo on his face an hour ago, was being sincere, it would only be for a second. He braced himself for the horrible taste and put the ashes under his tongue. Then he stepped forward and carefully approached Surtur's makeshift mirror. Surtur followed and held on to Jesse's hoodie. With a deep breath, Jesse pressed his face into the mirror.

It was like water.

His face passed through the mirror and he opened his eyes. Disappointment fell upon him as he realized Christine wasn't on the other side. Instead, what he saw were more stars.

"Nothing," Jesse said to the mirror's surface. "Pull me back."

Surtur didn't respond.

“Surtur?”

“What are you doing?” he heard Nigel shout. “Leave him alone!”

“Wait!” Surtur exclaimed, “It’s not what it looks--”

Suddenly, it sounded like a scuffle was happening on the other side of the mirror. Jesse tried to pull himself back through, but his face was stuck. Then Surtur released him and Jesse fell forward through the looking glass.

A second hand grabbed onto his arm, but it was too late. Jesse passed through the mirror and dragged a very surprised Nigel along with him. Together, the two brothers fell into the stars below.

19. Through the Looking Glass

They hit the stars with the splash.

When they came to their senses, Jesse and Nigel were sitting in a wet bog, having fallen twenty feet. High above, a serene night sky was reflecting onto the water below.

"Nigel, what are you doing?" Jesse asked as he stood up and wiped mud from his pants.

"Surtur was shoving you into a mirror!"

"He was keeping me from falling into it!"

"It doesn't matter; we have to go back," Nigel said, standing up. "We found the path."

"Jesse, Nigel, are you okay?" Osiris' voice called from above. Nigel tried to pinpoint the source of the voice, but the mirror surface wasn't visible on this side.

"We're fine," Jesse said. "We landed in a swamp."

"Sorry I dropped you," Surtur called out. "Your brother tackled me."

"I was trying to save him!" Nigel protested.

"This swamp, can you describe it to me?" Osiris asked.

Nigel looked around. "Very marsh-like. Night time. Lots of trees growing out of the swamp, some with smiling faces. Lily pads, fog, carved stones... there's some druid writing on them. And now will-o-wisps are rising out of the water." Jesse saw them too. Colourful sprites of light were appearing all around them, drifting through the air.

"How many moons?" Osiris asked.

Nigel looked around. There was a smaller moon orbiting a larger one, and a third on the horizon. "Three by my count."

"Sounds like the fourth afterlife," Osiris said. "I think you're near one of the Blessed Isles. Probably Avalon."

"Can you get us out?" Jesse asked.

"Mirror travel isn't a two-way trip," Osiris said. "I'll recalibrate the Duat and find a different path to come pick you up."

"How long will that take?" Nigel asked.

"About as long as it did before," Osiris said as he took off.

"Just get to dry land and find one of the faerie shrines as soon as possible. I'll meet you there."

"Beautiful," Nigel uttered. "Stuck here for another hour."

"At least it's pretty," Jesse said as he swatted at the will-o-wisps dancing around his head. "Could do with less of these annoying things, though."

"You're swatting at the souls of dead children."

Jesse recoiled in horror.

Nigel began trudging through the bog towards a mass of heavily-forested land in the distance. Jesse trudged after him through the thick mud. Crickets and frogs in the distance serenaded their trudging.

"What kind of afterlife is this anyway?" Jesse asked.

"Paganism *au naturel*," Nigel said. "Ancient druids believed that you when you died, your spirit returned to nature and became part of the Earth."

"And they picked their eternal reward to be a swamp?"

"Swamps *are* naturally thriving ecosystems."

"I swear, if I trip over any dead bodies in the water..."

"What are you doing down here anyway?" Nigel asked.

"Why was your face in a mirror?"

"I thought I could find Christine."

"We talked about this," Nigel said. "No detours until we find Trish."

"Aren't we already in enough of a detour? What about helping Pandora find the Seventh Seal?"

"I thought we agreed that was an obvious trap," Nigel said.

"Besides, Pandora's upstairs building a sand castle."

"In any case," Jesse said, "I owe it to Christine to try. It's my fault she's even part of this."

"We'll find her, Jesse," Nigel said. "But we can't run off half-cocked without all the facts. Just like your training, you have to bend your demon, not break it. We'll find Christine, but the Angel of Death's coming for Trisha. So let's start there and work our way around."

"But we will find Christine, right?"

"First opportunity we get."

"Promise?"

"Promise," Nigel said, certain that he'd eventually regret saying it.

A low rumbling could be heard far off behind them. Every instinct in Nigel's body told him to run, but he couldn't help stopping to see what it was. In the distance, they saw movement on the horizon. The still water at their feet began to rise. The will-o-wisps vanished back into the swamp.

"What is it?" Jesse asked.

Nigel carefully honed his senses, trying to determine what was coming. It felt familiar, but not malevolent. It felt big, but not entirely natural. His instincts took over.

"Run," he said, forcing himself to hurry through the muddy waters. Jesse didn't argue.

The two brothers sloshed through the bog. As the mud swallowed their shoes, Nigel ordered Jesse to leave them behind. In a moment's hesitation, Jesse looked back at what was coming.

It was a tidal wave, half a mile high.

Nigel was surprised to see Jesse dart past him, more spring in his step.

A brief glance over his own shoulder helped Nigel pick up the pace as well.

The wave washed over the swamp. Trees and rocks were engulfed in its flood.

Dry land was only a dozen feet away for them. Even if they made it into the forest, however, there was no escaping the wave. It was seconds upon them.

They heard the rumble of the wave closing in on them. The water rose to their waists. A powerful undertow threatened to sweep them away.

That's when the fat lady sang.

20. Isle of the Blessed

The wave collapsed peacefully into the swamp.

No damage was done in its wake.

The will-o-wisps rose out of the waters and continued dancing as if nothing happened.

Jesse and Nigel found themselves face-down in the mud at the edge of the island. Once certain they were alive, they looked up at the mysterious figure who'd appeared from nowhere to sing to the wave.

She was a moderately heavy-set woman in purple yoga pants and an undersized tank top. Her purple hair was tied back in a ponytail and an iPod was tucked into her bra.

With a mean look in her eye, she reluctantly dropped their shoes at their feet. The shoes were mud-free.

"You dropped something," she said as she removed her earbuds and turned off her iPod.

The brothers cautiously got to their feet and reclaimed their shoes.

"Thanks," Nigel said, "Miss...?"

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asked.

"No," Jesse said. "We fell out of a mirror and..."

"Unbelievable," she groaned. With a wave of her hand, she conjured two laminated cards out of thin air and promptly clipped them onto their shirts. With another wave of her hand, the mud flew off their clothes, back into the swamp. Nigel inspected his card. "A visitor's pass?"

"Who sent you here?" she asked menacingly.

"Nobody sent us here; it was a mistake," Jesse explained as he put on his shoes. "Osiris was helping us get to Mars and..."

"Osiris?" she curled her lip at the name. "That idiot knows better. You can't send the living into the afterlife without a visitor's pass. Not even Fire-Bloods."

"You know who we are?"

"Of course; you reek of holy hellfire," she said. "You know that big tidal wave? That was our afterlife trying to eject you. If it weren't for me, you would have been swept clear to the Void by now."

They heard the approaching sounds of hooves.

Immediately, the word *Horsemen* ran through Nigel's mind until, through the trees behind the woman, they saw spectral forms moving towards them. Carrying banners and clad in medieval armour, a troop of ghostly knights dashed out of the trees riding invisible horses. Behind them, their phantom squires banged spectral coconuts together to create the sounds of hooves.

Wearing a king's crown, their leader approached the lady. He dismounted from his invisible steed, dropped to one knee and bowed in reverence to her glory. "M'Lady, we searched the area and found no sign of the intruders."

"I found them, Arthur," she said. "You can call off the search."

"Shall we execute the insolent knaves?"

"That won't be necessary," she replied. "You and your knights go frolic. Go protect the golden apples in the orchard. Do whatever you do when I'm not looking."

"Verily well, m'lady," Arthur said as he mounted his invisible horse. "Come, fellow knights! The Lady has no further use of our service! We ride to Camelot! Tally-ho!"

As the spirits dispersed, Jesse leaned past the woman to watch them ride into the woods.

"Was that King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table?" he asked.

"Unfortunately," the woman said. "Not exactly Pagan material, they've been stuck in limbo between afterlives for a few centuries. Half the time, they don't even know they're dead. I've been bugging Heaven to come pick them up, but there's fat chance of that happening with the world's end around the corner."

"Sorry, but we're in a hurry," Nigel said. "Could you direct us to the nearest faerie shrine?"

"Tell you what, I'll walk you to one," she said as she started into the forest. "Haven't had a living visitor down here in ages. Makes the whole 'guardian' gig a little lonely at times."

They followed the woman deeper into the island. It was a beautiful lush garden paradise in the night, untouched by decay or human deforestation. The only sign of development were the enormous Stonehenge-like rock formations looming over the treetops.

"So what business does Osiris have?" she asked.

"He's just helping us out," Jesse said. "We're sort of on a mission to save the world."

"Ah, one of those," she nodded. "Probably the real deal too. I send Arthur and the boys on several fake 'world-saving' quests a week just to keep them busy. They know it isn't real, but they love defeating simulated sorcerers and looting dungeons nonetheless. Lancelot's become a bit of a 'crafting' nut."

"They called you 'the Lady'?"

"The Lady of the Lake', full title if you want to be formal," she said. "Viviane, if you want to be informal. Nobody ever wants to be informal around here."

Jesse's ears perked up at her name and he unslung his sword from over his shoulder. "Are you the same 'Lady of the Lake' who gave King Arthur the sword of Excalibur in the old legends?"

"No, that was my ugly, younger sister, Niniane," she said. "I had an Excalibur sword of my own, but lost it on my last trip to Earth."

"Whaaa...?" Nigel's jaw dropped slightly at the sound of this familiar story.

Jesse unsheathed his sword. The crystal blade glistened in the realm's starlight, catching Viviane's attention immediately. "Is this your sword?"

"Oh, my god, I can't believe it!" she exclaimed. For a moment, she hesitated at its authenticity, but once she took it in her hands, there was no question. "This is it! This is the second Excalibur! Where did you find it?"

"Hey!" Nigel shouted. "No - stop! Don't do this!"

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"You can't be real, can you?" Nigel asked Viviane. "You're just the regular Lady of the Lake, right? And this is just a regular sword we found in Poland?"

Viviane slapped her forehead. "Poland: that's where I lost it! Man, one date with a Leshy and your crap can end up anywhere!"

"Then you're the Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister, and this is Excalibur II, isn't it?" Jesse asked.

"Damn right, I'm the hotter, older sister," Viviane proudly shook her large behind. "You've got a eye for quality, my man! Not like my creepy, toothpick sister."

"And this is seriously your sword?" Nigel asked, grabbing it from Viviane and holding it aloft so she could see it clearly.

"That is most definitely my sword."

"This is a trick of the faeries, isn't it?" Nigel asked. "I made up a phoney, baloney sarcastic backstory about this sword, and you're telling me it's all real?"

Jesse said to Nigel as he took back his weapon. "We're on a mission to rescue Trisha from Mars while God's been kidnapped by the Grim Reaper. Where exactly do things stop being real?"

"But a *hotter, older* sister?" Nigel insisted. "I literally thought I made that up. Next you'll be telling me Flying Spaghetti Monsters are real."

"You don't know about those either?" she asked. "The Creator keeps a whole herd of them up in Heaven. Or at least He used to. It's been total anarchy up there lately." As she mentioned Heaven, Jesse could almost swear he saw a glimmer of light extend from her shoulders. The glimmer looked suspiciously like angel wings.

"Are you from Heaven?" he asked.

"Not originally," she explained. "My sister and I were raised by a lake in England where we practiced the magical arts. When we passed, we spent a little time up in Heaven and even earned some wings. But alas, the call of the lake was too strong. So the Creator asked us to watch over this afterlife."

The mention of wings piqued Nigel's interest. "When you say you earned your wings, you don't mean you became an angel, do you?"

"Not a pure-blood angel, but an honorary one," she said.

"All the privileges, none of the power."

"So what are the odds that a long-dead loved one can reappear in someone else's body claiming to be an angel?"

"Possible, but I'd call shenanigans on most cases," Viviane said. "Did it recently happen to you?"

"The Demon Sorceress Pandora was channeling our old mentor."

"Wait, Pandora's alive?" Viviane exclaimed. "I haven't seen her in ages! How is the old girl? Does she still do cow-tipping?"

"She's building a sand castle."

"Sounds about right."

They pressed on through the forest and happened upon the center of the island. Stepping into the Avalon's heart was like walking into a lush oil painting. The green foliage grew over an enormous Stonehenge-like circle of stones, over which poured a small waterfall into a tiny lake. Young, lady-like figures of pure water happily frolicked at the lake's shore until Viviane arrived. The shy water nymphs promptly dove into the water at the sight of the two boys. Around the skirts of the stone circle was a promenade of will-o-wisps and bizarre, spectral creatures gathering to mingle. Many looked like anthropomorphic versions of local vegetation or woodland critters. Some happily chatted, others were more competitive, engaging in games like volleyball or chess.

"Don't mind the nature spirits," Viviane said. "They love hanging around the faerie shrine."

"So when I say Pandora is channeling an angel, should I be worried?" Nigel asked.

"As in, is she pulling a scam on you?" Viviane asked.

"Heck no. Or well, yes, you should be worried, but for completely different reasons. Pandora's not a scam artist. If she wants something, she takes it."

"But when Solomon surfaced last Christmas..."

"Let me stop you there," Viviane interrupted. "Solomon is the ultimate scam artist. He's a dishonest trickster who's well past his prime and couldn't hold down a friend to save his life. Pandora, on the other hand, is a home-girl. She may be crazy and prone to murder, but you always know where she stands."

"How could anybody know where they stand with Pandora?" Jesse asked.

"You ever hang with her?" Viviane replied. "It's not just me and Pandora who go way back. She's got gal-pals and hook-ups across history. Just ask Cleopatra or Charlemagne. The point is: she's nuts, but she's dependable. You don't need to trust Pandora; she needs to trust *you*."

Nigel spoke up, "But if there *is* a game at play..."

"You're thinking of Solomon again!" Viviane motioned for Nigel to shut up and gestured to the promenade of nature spirits. Among them were a possum and a tiny weeping willow playing chess at a table. "You see that? That's what you're afraid of. A delicate game of well-calculated strategy. I heard about what Solomon did last Christmas, and I assure you that if Pandora had been involved, things would've played out much differently."

"And why's that?"

"Because Pandora's game is *dodgeball*."

Viviane summoned a volleyball away from one group of nature spirits. With a quick swing, she hurled it at the chess table, knocking over the board and ruining the game. The possum and willow spirits angrily chattered at her.

Jesse smiled. "That actually makes me feel a whole lot better."

As the two spirits picked up their game, Viviane summoned the volleyball and knocked the board over again just to accentuate her point. "So if Pandora wants you on her team, show a little respect."

Before Nigel could argue, a light opened up at the edge of the stone circle opposite the lake. The three of them looked to see a glowing door-sized ankh appeared on the

side of a druid stone. It swung open to reveal Osiris and Surtur peering inside.

"Thank goodness you're alive!" Osiris exclaimed as he produced a pair of laminated cards. "I forgot to mention you need visitor passes when you're down here!"

"Already taken care of, Osiris," Viviane said.

Surtur showed off his own pass and waved them in. "Come on! We found the door to Olympus through this same gate! It's just down this hallway!"

"Is Pandora with you?" Nigel asked.

Osiris checked over his shoulder to confirm. "No, she kind of just wandered off."

"Where to?"

"Damned if I know. We didn't put a bell on her."

"Don't worry about Pandora," Viviane said to Nigel. "When it's time, she'll find you."

Jesse looked to Vivianne and said, "I guess this is where we part ways. Thanks for the help."

He then offered his sword back to her, but she motioned it away.

"Keep the sword," she said. "Just be sure to tell Pandora to come back and see me after you're done. In fact, hang on - let me do you an extra."

She gestured to the lake. A single sword rose from its depths, glistening in the light of the will-o-wisps. The surroundings spirits began chanting a deep hymn as the sword passed through the air and planted itself in a rock at Jesse and Nigel's feet. It was a near-perfect replica of their own sword.

"It's the first Excalibur," she said. "When the two blades are together, their crystal becomes somewhat of an all-seeing eye. Hopefully, it'll help you in whatever quest Pandora has lined up."

Jesse turned to Nigel and asked, "Should we?"

"We've always had the one sword," he replied. "Can't pass up a matching set. You want it?"

"Take it; it's all yours."

"Hurry, before my sister notices it's missing," Viviane prompted them.

Jesse turned to her and spoke in the hammiest manner possible, "Our fair Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister, it will be our divine pleasure to accept your gift. Please allow my brother to taketh thy sword from yonder stone."

"Yeah, okay."

With that, Nigel grabbed the handle of the sword and gave it a gentle tug.

The sword remained trapped in the stone.

He gave it a few hard yanks. It didn't budge.

"Sometimes you have to jiggle it," Viviane said.

He jiggled and twisted the crystal blade around in the stone until it finally came loose. One of the spirits came forth with a wooden sheath which Nigel slid the sword into and clipped around his belt.

"You should hurry," Osiris called out to him. "We found something you should see."

"Thanks, m'Lady," Nigel said as he picked up the pace and hurried into the ankh portal with Jesse. Jesse gratefully bowed to her before leaving and mouthed, "Thanks for the swords!"

The ankh closed up and the visitors vanished from Avalon, leaving the Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister alone on the shores.

Feeling overwhelmed for the day, she put back in her earbuds, turned on some Nicki Minaj, and summoned King Arthur to go fetch her some ice cream.

With the end of the world around the corner, now was as good a time as any to binge.

21. The Warrior's Hall

A god, a Titan and two Fire-Bloods marched down a long stone balcony atop a castle wall, with only a single blood-red moon to light the night sky. The roaring sounds of swordplay emanated from down below. Jesse rushed to the parapet to see what was taking place.

Beneath them, he witnessed an incredible spectacle. A great battle was taking place across an infinite stone wasteland with millions of ghostly spirits engaged in combat. Vikings, pirates, samurais, knights, cowboys, gladiators, cavemen, green berets, and other warriors from across history were facing their enemies on the field of battle. High above them, armoured women on winged horses soared over the plains. The women supervised the massacre and occasionally dove down to pluck fallen spirits from the battlefield.

"Should I ask?" Jesse inquired.

"Fifth Afterlife, Valhalla," Osiris said. "It's the Warrior's Afterlife, an eternal battlefield for those who believe the greatest virtue is a worthy fight. They fight, they fall, they get collected by the Valkyries, then they eat and drink until they feel better and go back for more fighting."

"So it's an eternal ass-kicking?"

“Well, traffic here’s been pretty quiet these last couple centuries, but it’s really picking up again thanks to video games. They hold some pretty good *Starcraft* tournaments downstairs if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“You said the gate to Olympus was here,” Nigel reminded him.

“We’re on our way there now,” Osiris explained. “It’s just inside the great hall.”

From the balcony, they entered the castle and followed Osiris through a maze of corridors. Golden shields adorned the walls of Valhalla and beautifully carved wooden columns rose to the ceiling where the rafters were made from spear shafts. As confusing as the halls were to navigate, they’d barely seen the tip of the iceberg when it came to the enormity of the castle. Not that they’d be around long enough for the grand tour, of course.

They took a few more turns and marched into the grand hall, a massive banquet chamber that housed hundreds of long tables, each with their own inset barbecue grills. The chamber echoed with laughter and song from the thousands of spirits who partook in the eternal feast of beer and wild boar. The four of them carefully made their way through the hall, seemingly unnoticed by the ghosts in here. Perhaps they were too caught up in their own debauchery to notice them, or perhaps the living simply weren’t an uncommon sight in these halls.

“Hate to be the caterers for this party,” Jesse noted.

“Hate to be the dish washer,” Surtur laughed as he snatched a mug of beer off a table, chugged it down and hurled it into a nearby fire-pit. The spirit whom he snatched the drink from stood up and took an angry, drunken swipe at Surtur, only to pass through him and land face-first on the floor. Surtur walked over the inebriated spirit bellowing, “Now these are my kind of people!”

"Where's the gateway?" Nigel asked Osiris.

"At the end of the hall," Osiris said, "but first I need to show you something. Some new arrivals."

"New arrivals?" Nigel asked as Osiris led him around a few tables. With the Reaper on the loose, he could only imagine who'd been sent down here. He perused the tables, looking for familiar faces, but only spotted a few long-dead warriors like Attila the Hun and Hannibal Barca. They arrived at the quietest table at the end of the hall. The spirits here appeared lost and despondent as they stared at their food and muttered unintelligible ramblings.

As Nigel approached one of them, a haunting sense of familiarity crept up on him. The spirit was an older man with a beard, clad in gold armour. He picked at his food with a spoon, but couldn't seem to separate the tomatoes from the potatoes.

"Textures are all wrong," he complained. "To-may-to or po-tah-to? Fruit or vegetable? Cannot mash it. Cannot cover in gravy and call it poutine."

Nigel knelt down next to the man and addressed him.

"Odin?"

Odin's ghostly visage turned to Nigel and smiled like a sweet, forgetful old man. "Baldur, is that you, my boy? You're look so much like your mother."

He tried to paw at Nigel's face, but his fingers slipped through Nigel's cheeks instead. Odin didn't seem to notice and began rambling about a recipe for deer poutine.

"What's wrong with him?" Nigel asked Osiris. "Is this normal for new arrivals?"

"No," Osiris said. "If anything, the King of the Gods should be at the master's table. A god's mind doesn't break like this upon death."

Surtur looked at his old foe, but he felt no desire to gloat. Seeing Odin in this state, he felt only pity instead. "This

isn't right. A warrior like him deserves a better death than this."

Jesse glanced out across the table for other familiar faces. Many of the ghosts were blurry to his eyes, but one stuck out. It was a female figure at the other end of the table with silver hair. Jesse hurried over to see her.

"Swans in a pond," she sang as she mixed her beer with a nacho. "Dandelions windy, shadows in the night, and we all fall down..."

"Artemis, can you see me?" Jesse asked. "Do you know me?"

She looked at Jesse with unfamiliarity and scowled. "You look like... a drip. That's what you are. A drip of water. Water is wretched."

"She doesn't remember me," Jesse said to the others.

"She's supposed to be the greatest hunter in history. How did the Reaper get her and not us?"

"You got lucky," a voice from above them said. They looked up to see a spirit in bronze Greek battle armor sitting in the rafters, polishing his sword and smoking a cigar. He stood up and hopped down to meet with them. As soon as they saw his face and crewcut, they almost leapt into action against him, but thought better for it. Nigel looked upon the spirit's face. It was the same gruff face that the Fire-Bloods who invaded Halifax all bore. Nigel inquired, "You're not the spirit of one of those Fire-Bloods, are you?"

"No," he replied in a deep, guttural voice. "I'm the template they're using to make them. The name's Ares, God of War."

"Your mind's intact!" Osiris exclaimed.

"I'm not fully dead yet," Ares replied. "I just didn't have the misfortune of meeting the Reaper's blade like the others did."

"If you're not dead, why are you a ghost?" Surtur asked.
"It's my own fault for letting down my guard," he explained.
"I was out in Ursa Minor with my unit, saving a colony from an alien infestation of blood-sucking spider-squirrels when the Horsemen arrived. Before I knew what was happening, my men were dead and one of the Horsemen put me to sleep. Now my spirit resides here while the Reaper keeps my body alive to forge an army from my likeness."

"No wonder they put up such a good fight," Nigel realized.
"They made an army of Fire-Bloods from a war god. All your combat instincts carry over, so there's no training necessary."

"But why does the Reaper need a Fire-Blood army?" Jesse asked.

"You mean for besides the obvious war on Heaven?" Ares asked. "It's a good question. I've seen the Reaper kill. He could single-handedly destroy everyone in Heaven himself if he so desired, but he doesn't. He needs a Fire-Blood army to do his dirtier work. It's for this reason I believe he has a vulnerability that can be exploited."

"He can't see, right?" Surtur asked.

"Oh, no, he sees, but I think he sees too well," Ares said.

"A light breeze is as visible to him as a sandstorm is to us."

"That would explain why he couldn't find us in the rain,"

Nigel said. "In my tavern, he was complaining about the world having too much substance for him to kill properly."

"So we blow on him if he attacks?" Jesse asked.

"We won't give him a chance," Nigel said. "Osiris, where's the gate?"

"By that fireplace," Osiris pointed out. Not too far away was another ankh gate glowing on the stone wall. Had he not pointed it out, they would've mistaken it for a trick of the firelight. "It'll take you straight to the top of Olympus Mons."

"Let's not waste time then," Nigel said. "Thanks for the warning, Ares."

"Are you guys heading to Heaven anytime soon?" he asked.

"Fraid not."

"If you do happen to find my body, could you put it out of its misery?" he asked. "I can't join in any battles here until I'm officially dead."

"Don't worry, Ares, it'll be my honour to destroy you," Surtur said as he tried to pat Ares on the shoulder. "We will return soon."

As they stepped past the table, Jesse heard the word "Christine" drift through the air. He spun around to see Artemis' ghost looking directly at him from her spot on the table.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Her Blessed Lady," she whispered. "You seek her."

"Yes!" Jesse exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"I sent her away," Artemis said. "She is... in the second afterlife."

Osiris quickly stepped forward and said, "That afterlife was forever closed off."

"She is there," Artemis said as he stared back down at her drink. "She will finish her work. She must, before the Horsemen find her."

"Why are Horsemen even looking for her?" Jesse asked.

"The Seal will be their undoing," Artemis said. "It has to be."

"She's looking for the Seventh Seal alone?"

"My berries grow old in the winter's cold..." she mumbled before drifting off into deliriousness again. "Where's my bow? Has anyone seen my bow?"

"We have to go after her," Jesse said to the others. "You know what? We'll split up. You go all go to Olympus and I'll go and..."

"Jesse, we don't have access to that afterlife," Osiris said.

"No one's believed in it for thousands of years."

"Artemis got her in there, we can get her out."

"Through mirror travel," Osiris reminded him. "You just tried that and wound up in a swamp. Try it again and you might not be so lucky."

"It's worth the risk."

"Go help your brother," Osiris gestured to Nigel. "I'll stay behind, look for Pandora, and do some research. If there's a chance I can get you to Christine, I will. But until then, keep your head on."

"Don't do anything foolish, Jesse," Nigel said. "I promised you we'll get her back. Just hold out a little longer."

Jesse reluctantly agreed to hold off, but certainly didn't like it.

Surtur opened the ankh to a sizzling blast of scented chamomile. Before jumping through, he called out to the others, "We're here! Last one to Mars is a rotten horse kebab!"

Osiris handed his crook to Nigel and said, "When you're ready to leave, find the nearest laundry room and use this key to get back to the Duat. I'll try to meet you there."

"Got it," Nigel nodded. "Ready to go, Jesse?"

"The sooner the better," he said as he marched off towards the ankh.

They parted ways with Osiris and Ares, rejoined Surtur and, with the closing of the ankh, said goodbye to Valhalla as they set foot on the surface of the red planet.

22. Another World

Jesse fell to his knees, gasping for air.

The ground was coarse. The sky was black and red. The air was dry and thin in Jesse's lungs as he forced himself to breathe.

Get back to the portal, he thought as he struggled to turn around and climb back through the ankh. This train of thought was interrupted by Nigel who promptly slammed the ankh shut. Jesse watched the door vanish from sight, leaving only the thin air behind.

"Stop horsing around, Jesse," Nigel said, his voice sounding about half an octave lower and slightly garbled as if he were Donald Duck. "You don't breathe, remember?"

Jesse let himself relax and allowed the thin air to fill his chest. He breathed in and breathed out until he felt more accustomed to the new atmosphere. Then he allowed himself to stop breathing because it was simply an Earth habit that he didn't need to do here. Carefully, he got back to his feet.

Surtur laughed, his voice sounding perfectly normal, "Always fun to see a rookie have a panic attack on another planet."

Jesse stood up to examine his surroundings. Far, far below him, the orange desert wasteland of Mars went on forever.

He was amazed he could see this far until he realized he was maybe twenty miles high looking down the side of a mountain that seemed to descend at a very low profile, disappearing into the horizon.

He tried to take it in, but the shock was almost too much for him.

He was standing on another planet.

"Overwhelmed?" Nigel asked, seemingly unfazed at the sight.

"We're on Mars," Jesse said in his own, high-pitched garbled voice. "How fantastic is that? I... listen to my voice!"

"It's the thin, carbon-dioxide heavy air," Nigel said. "We're on a mountain that extends beyond the atmosphere."

"How can you be so nonchalant about this?" Jesse asked.

"Don't you get it? We're on Mars!"

"Jess, we've been to Avalon, Valhalla, and the Duat in the last couple hours," Nigel said. "All things considered, a dead planet is the least interesting place we've visited today."

Jesse spun around, expecting to see another massive vista, but was let down when there was nothing but a long, plateau-like incline leading into the misty sky.

"I thought we were on top of a mountain," Jesse said as he looked at the ongoing stretch of wasteland in both directions.

"Only halfway," Surtur said as he gestured uphill. "Olympus Mons is a shield volcano the size of France. We're only eleven miles up with the summit being three hundred miles in that direction."

"And we have to walk to that?"

"Don't worry," Surtur said, marching up the mountain. "I know a shortcut."

They followed him for nearly ten minutes until a small, car-sized contraption appeared in the distance, hidden in the dusty wind. They approached it to discover it was a bright red trolley on rails, like a large roller coaster car. Surtur sat in the back seat while Jesse and Nigel cautiously took the front.

"Welcome to Olympus Mons," a computerized voice said from the trolley's comm system. "Please select your destination."

"Karzak crater," Surtur said. "Take us to the Parthenon."

"Please keep your arms and legs inside the tram at all times," the voice said. "Preparing for departure in three... two... "

"Nigel, where's the handrails?" Jesse asked, searching for something hold onto.

"...one."

The tram burst into breakneck speed on a dime, roaring up the rails across the mountain cap. Had Surtur not been sitting in the backseat ready to catch them, both brothers would have fallen out upon take-off.

Soon, they flew through a dust cloud and emerged on the outskirts of an enormous crater, fifteen miles wide. The closer they moved towards it, the more they saw the outline of a city within. They passed through whatever magic was shielding the city from view and found their cart flying off the rails into the heart of an ancient Greek city on Mars.

The sight of the city was breath-taking and enormous in scope. It was like traveling back to ancient Athens in its prime, long before the ravages of time wore away its colour. Temples, homes, marketplaces, statues, a coliseum and amphitheatre - everything was here without the pretense of being modernized. In other words, no billboards or neon lights. The closest modern convenience

this city had was the tram they were riding in on and a few Starbucks outlets. Otherwise, the civilian deities kept to the streets and didn't clutter the sky as they did during last year's takeover of Halifax.

"Now approaching the Parthenon," the voice said. "Please wait until the tram has come to a complete stop and thank you for riding Air Hermes Tramways."

The tram floated up to the top of a hill in the city's center where a great temple stood atop mighty stone columns. It looked exactly like the Parthenon back in Earth's Athens, except that its size was considerably much larger.

Hundreds of deities gathered around as if a convention were taking place. The tram pulled up in front of the Parthenon and gracefully landed, allowing Jesse, Nigel and Surtur to get off the ride. The moment they left, the tram flew away and presumably returned to where they once found it.

Nigel took in the sight of the Parthenon, but didn't dwell on it. Only now did he realize the crowd was a picket line, with gods and Titans holding placards that read 'End the Monarchy' and 'Zeus is no use!' As they approached, they heard someone in the back of the crowd shout "Come at me, bro!" before they were set upon by the Parthenon's security guards.

"What's going on here?" Jesse asked one of the gods.

The god with the 'no use' placard was a long-haired hippy with a tie-died T-shirt who boldly shouted, "Zeus is no king of ours! While we were in diapers on Earth, he's been living it up in another galaxy - and now he has the gall to come back and enforce our servitude? We didn't elect Zeus! We didn't elect Odin! We didn't elect any 'King of the Gods'! We demand the right to rule as... uh... what did we call it?"

A nearby Titan replied, "An ochlocracy!"

"Yeah! We want to be an ochlocracy!"

"Are Poseidon and Zeus inside right now?" Jesse asked.

"Oh, yeah - they're upstairs duking it out with the rest of the council," the hippy said. "I tell you, these divine elections are a joke! If we don't protest now, the so-called 'King' is just gonna be the idiot who brought the loudest group of friends."

A truck driver god ran by, firing a rifle into the air and shouting, "Zeus rules! Silver Age forever, baby! Whoo!"

"Zeus is a barbarian fascist!" the hippy shouted at him.

"Poseidon's a dolphin-ridin' sissy-boy!"

"Don't make me hit you with my sign!"

"Come at me, bro!"

As the protesters wailed on each other with their placards, Nigel pushed through the crowd towards the stairs. The other two followed into the ancient temple. Nigel was all too determined to find Trisha and get her off this planet as quickly as possible.

"Nigel, wait up!" Jesse shouted as they struggled through the crowd. At the moment, this crowd seemed like any other crowd of people. Everyone was dressed formally in suits or robes, and none of the deities were showing off their powers by turning into giant elephants. It was incredibly different from how the deities used to behave back on Earth. The only thing that didn't change was how much they argued.

The inside of the Parthenon was a sight to behold. At least three times the size of the original Parthenon back on Earth, the entire structure rested upon rows of great marble columns while a sculpted frieze of ancient Greek images ran along the walls. In the center of the room was an enormous ivory sculpture of a woman in robes carrying a shield in one hand and an owl in the other. Nigel

would've recognized it as a statue of Athena had he not been preoccupied.

"Trisha!" Nigel shouted at the top of his lungs, "Trisha, where are you?"

In his confusion, he bumped into a large man bearing a huge red, braided beard. The large man looked down on him and shouted, "Watch where you're going!"

"So sorry," Nigel said as he tried to get around him.

"Hey, I know you!" the man said, grabbing Nigel by the shoulder. "You're that Fire-Blood fellow, ain't ya? The fallen prophet, right?"

"Yes, and if you don't mind..."

"Not so fast, you're gonna get yourself in trouble running around like that," the god said, looking down on Nigel.

"This ain't a safe place for a Fire-Blood like you. A lot of people are still sore after that nonsense you pulled on Earth."

"What about the nonsense he pulled saving all of your asses, Thor?" Surtur asked as he and Jesse approached the situation. "If I recall, you were mostly dead throughout Ragnarök."

"You!" Thor exclaimed, drawing his hammer from seemingly nowhere. "Lord of the Fire Jotunn, Zeus has banished you from this place!"

"And now I'm back; what are ya gonna do? Cry about it?"

"I will smite you across this planet's surface!" Thor protested.

"Come at me, bro!" Surtur taunted him with open arms. Before any fight could break out, a muscular, mostly-naked man in a speedo with a large ember-embroidered beard stepped out of the crowd between them. He wore a small sticker on his bare chest reading, "Hello, my name is *ATLAS, VOLUNTEER.*"

“Break it up!” he said, “Thor, put away Mjolnir. And Surtur, Atlas is confused. You were meant to be banished from this summit after urinating in Zeus’ desk.”

“That urination only looks bad out of context!” Surtur protested.

“Guys, guys!” Jesse shouted as he hurried to greet Atlas.

“Nigel and I don’t have a lot of time. We need to find Trisha. And Zeus. And Poseidon. In fact, Atlas, can you just take us to all the important people?”

“Oh, hey, little guys,” Atlas said, looking down on them.

“Atlas didn’t see you down there.”

“Nobody can see the council while they’re in session!” Thor said.

“This is an emergency,” Nigel insisted. “We need to speak with Zeus immediately.”

“Everybody wants to see Zeus,” Atlas said, “But Atlas can make a special exception for you. How important is this, exactly?”

“The universe is ending.”

“That is pretty important, yup,” Atlas said. “Atlas will have to check with his supervisor.”

“Damn it, Atlas, can you get us in or do I have to start more riots?” Surtur asked.

“No more riots are necessary,” Atlas said. “Atlas will take you to the chamber. But Zeus won’t be happy to see you. Zeus is never happy.”

“Zeus can kiss my ass.”

Atlas turned to the red-bearded thunder god. “Thor, friend, can you cover for Atlas?”

“It will be my honour,” Thor said as he held his hammer aloft. From across the room, he heard two more gods bellowing “Come at me, bro!” and immediately hurried off towards them.

“Follow Atlas!” the Earth Titan beckoned as he pushed through the crowd and led the others towards the back chamber of the Parthenon. Beyond that chamber, he led Jesse, Nigel and Surtur up a flight of stone steps towards the rafters where there was a whole other floor built into the ceiling. At the top of the stairs was a large round, bank vault-type door made of a light pink stone. He gave it a quick tug to make sure it wasn’t locked. The stone seemed to burn at his touch.

“They’re right through here,” he said to Nigel. “Atlas cannot progress further as the room is sealed off with ram-stone to keep protesters out.”

“Thanks, Atlas,” Nigel said.

Jesse quickly spoke up, “Hey, Nigel, what about the rest of the gods?”

“Oh, right,” Nigel realized. “Atlas, just a heads-up, but you should evacuate this place.”

“Why would deities need to evacuate?” he asked.

“Remember all the nonsense with the Shadow-Blood last Christmas?”

“Yeah...”

“Something worse is coming here.”

“Duly noted,” Atlas said. “Atlas will see about relocating the crowd.”

They thanked Atlas for the help and prepared to enter the council chamber. Nigel’s fingers trembled as he turned the latch and gently opened the door.

Then, without warning, they looked into the eyes of a mad god.

The wrath of his thunder fell upon them.

23. Council of Terror

Jesse and Nigel would've certainly been destroyed if Surtur hadn't stepped forward to take the brunt of the blast. He held his ground as a bolt of lightning struck him flat in the chest. He sustained no signs of damage other than a large smoking spot where he'd been hit.

Deep inside the chamber, they saw a great, burly man in purple robes with a heavy white beard clasping a bolt of lightning. He prepared to throw another blast out the door when he was promptly tackled by someone else. The tackle was followed by a tidal wave, a burst of smoke, and a flock of pigeons.

"Stay behind me," Surtur said as he led the way into the room. The two brothers stayed behind their tank as they entered the Parthenon's main council chamber. It would have been a lovely forum with its elegant war table and bas relief flooring had the council of gods and Titans not been duking it out Old Testament-style. They saw their Aztec friend, Quetzalcoatl casting a rain of snakes down upon a falcon-headed Egyptian god who replied in turn with a plague of sparrows. Their friend, Poseidon, was smashing Hades against the wall with a giant hand made of sea water while Hades quietly waited it out. Then the big guy, Zeus himself in his fancy purple robes, hurled a bolt of lightning at a heavily-armoured woman wielding a

broadsword. Throughout the room several other deities were locked in equally-confusing combat.

"Why are they fighting?" Jesse asked.

"Don't worry, this is how gods and Titans traditionally choose leaders," Surtur said. "Think of it like a debate, but with more ass-kicking."

As Surtur said this, a blast of icy wind fell upon him. He stepped aside as an icy blue behemoth of a man dive-bombed the spot he was standing. Surtur quickly stomp-kicked his opponent into the wall. "Back off, Ymir!" he shouted. "I'm not even part of the damn council. Go help Andraste knock Zeus' teeth out or something."

Nigel scanned the room, his heart racing as he wondered where Trisha could be.

Then he heard the whistle.

All the deities in the room immediately stopped fighting and stood at ease. Poseidon dropped Hades who fell to the floor with a splash.

From behind the safety of Zeus' council chair, two women stood up. The first, a blonde in royal blue robes with thick-rimmed glasses, was unquestionably the Greek war goddess, Athena, judging from her resemblance to the statue downstairs. The other one made Nigel's Fire-Blood heart skip a beat, almost causing him to blink out of existence.

Her raven black hair had been cut short. Her smooth caramel skin positively glowed. Her thick lips and piercing black eyes sang to Nigel. He fell into a standing coma just looking at her.

Trisha adjusted her loose-fitting green council robes as she lowered her whistle. She hadn't yet caught sight of Nigel as she looked upon Zeus, Andraste and the other deities.

"All right," she said. "Time's up. Zeus, have you and Andraste reached a consensus?"

"This council is a farce," the Celtic warrior goddess said from within her armour. "Zeus demands allegiance, but there's no love of freedom in his heart. He's far too set in his tired, old ways."

"A Deus Ex Machina has always been the best solution," Zeus said. "Brainwash a few billion humans, implement a good old-fashioned theocracy, and bask in their worship for a few centuries until this crisis blows over! What's so wrong about *that*?"

"Andraste, did you try casting any compassion spells on Zeus?" Trisha asked.

"No, she spent the last ten minutes hitting me with a broadsword," Zeus growled.

"What about you, Zeus?" Trisha asked. "Was that ten minutes of lightning or enlightenment?"

"It was definitely lightning," Andraste snapped.

"Poseidon, Hades?" Trisha asked them. "Did you resolve anything?"

"We've reached an agreement," Poseidon said.

Hades squeezed water out of his black beard and reluctantly said, "I switch my support over to Poseidon."

"Hades, that's the fifth time you switched sides," Trisha said. "If you don't stop flip-flopping, we could be here all night."

"We've already been here all night," Hades complained. "I was promised this would only be an hour. Vladimir's probably finished *'Sex and the City'* without me."

"How about the rest of you?" Trisha asked the room. "Any developments?"

"I could use about ten more minutes of council,"

Quetzalcoatl said. "Horus and I still haven't sorted out the minutes from the last meeting."

"And I haven't hit anybody yet," a large winged God of Darkness complained.

About fourteen other gods and Titans agreed they needed more time to fight.

"All right, I want everybody to switch up partners," Trisha said. "Andraste, I want you to team up with Poseidon and help him battle Czernobog over those 'going green' issues he brought up earlier. Shango, you help Quetzalcoatl with the minutes while Ymir butts heads with Zeus over the logistics of revoking the Titan pact. And Horus, try to use less pigeons and more doves. Pigeons are just nasty."

"What about me?" Hades asked.

"Hades, take five, and come back next round," she said.

"Anything you want to add, Athena?"

"I think you got it covered," she said. "As a minor nit-pick, I'd like to see Krindel get a little more involved. I don't feel we've heard enough from him."

A dwarf Titan in a white beard with a red winter coat crawled out from under the table and complained loudly. "I thought we were supposed to get ten minutes for lunch."

"No lunch until this issue is resolved," Athena said.

"Krindel, pair up with Ymir. Revoking the ancient pact is the whole reason any of you Titans are here and more of you need to speak up about it."

"What's the point?" Krindel mumbled. "Zeus has held our full power prisoner since the first Aeonomega. We're better off just supporting Poseidon. At least he can be reasoned with."

Ymir moaned an icy agreement.

"The rest of you," Trisha said, "I want to see a good clean fight. Resume battle in five... four..."

"Trisha!" Nigel shouted from across the room.

Trisha's head spun toward the council chamber entrance. Nigel finally snapped out of his coma and raced past the round table towards her.

"Nigel? What are you...?"

Without so much as a word, Nigel swept her off her feet with an embrace and kissed her passionately. Her surprise turned to mush as she relaxed into the kiss with all the council members watching. After a few moments, he put her down.

"...doing here?" she asked, still surprised.

Nigel was dumbstruck at the sight of her. "Well, there was a... and then a... but then we... and Jesse... with lots of sand... I got a sword and... god, I've missed you."

"I missed you too, but... who's minding the bar?"

"Enough!" Zeus shouted. "This debate's gone on long enough! There will be no further colonization and no more talk of human rights! The blackout is a sign that we must return to Earth and claim what is ours! We must stay strong or the gods will perish!"

"The blackout targeted deities directly," Poseidon said. "It was a sign that we need to stay low and go into hiding. Hades agrees with me, right?"

"I'll agree with anything you say as long as I don't have to fight Zeus again," Hades said.

Athena whispered something into Trisha's ear. Trisha nodded accordingly. "Poseidon, you still have to win over forty percent of the council's supporters to claim a minority rule."

"How am I supposed to do that when all of Zeus' supporters have been off-world for half a century?"

Poseidon asked. "Anybody who was there at Ragnarök knows! Gods and Titans fought together to bring down a Shadow-Blood! Putting ourselves back at the top of the pecking order will undo all the progress we've made."

"If there's been so much progress, why didn't more Titan supporters show up?" Zeus asked.

"Because you keep having them removed," Andraste claimed.

"Father, need I remind you that your Deus Ex Machina requires a majority approval from the council," Athena said.

"It could be all for nothing if you don't compromise with other gods now."

"Oh, I'll get my approval," Zeus growled. "You'll see. When Odin gets here..."

"He won't," Nigel said. "Odin's dead."

Every head in the room turned to face him.

"Dead?" Trisha asked. "But..."

"We saw his ghost on the way in," Nigel said. "There's something coming. For all of you. This election of yours has to wait because you all need to get out of here now."

Zeus laughed, "Leave now? On the eve of change? And who exactly are you again?"

"Zeus, you idiot, this is Nigel Hunter," Poseidon said. "The one who slayed the Shadow-Blood."

"Oh, right, that supposed thing," Zeus rolled his eyes.

"Sorry I was off-world when that happened. I heard the stories, though. Wasn't too impressed. Your battle against Typhon sounded especially underwhelming. Back in the day when I fought Typhon, it was pay-per-view material."

Athena sneered at him. "Father, hear him out."

"Fine, whatever, honey," he said, slouching in his chair.

Jesse stepped up to the plate. He spoke loudly so the entire chamber could hear him. "Solomon is back and he's overthrown the Creator. He's unleashed the Four Horsemen to find the Seventh Seal. Earth's cities are getting raptured and the Angel of Death is coming after all of you."

Many whispers and concerned murmurs spread through the room.

"The Creator was overthrown?" Hades asked, trying to process this. "Was *that* the cause of the blackout?"

“Solomon attacked Heaven with an army of Fire-Bloods,” Nigel said. “That blackout will be nothing compared to what happens if he finds the Seventh Seal.”

“Are you sure?” Trisha asked.

“We received a message from Heaven itself,” Nigel said, carefully omitting the part about Pandora. “We don’t have much time. It’s not safe to be here.”

“The Angel of Death!” Zeus laughed. “Coming for us? Back in our prime, we held off an onslaught of Shadow-Bloods from atop Mt. Olympus, and that mountain was as a treehouse compared to the impenetrable fortress that is Olympus Mons!”

“We just rode into your impenetrable fortress on a trolley,” Jesse pointed out.

“This city is lined with ram-stone marble,” Zeus said.

“Higher beings cannot penetrate the walls. So lock the doors, load the Tartarus cannons, and we will blast that Angel of Death clear out of the sky.”

“I personally vouch for these two,” Surtur said. “I saw the Reaper with my own eyes, and I saw what they did to your children, Zeus. Artemis and Ares are in Valhalla as we speak.”

“What?” Poseidon uttered, his thoughts on his niece and nephew.

Athena’s eyes lit up with shock at the news of her siblings.

“No!”

Zeus’ expression furrowed, but remained stern as steel. “I see no evidence of these claims. I do not know the two of you, plus you have a Fire Giant in your company who personally desecrated my office just yesterday.”

“And I’ll do it again,” Surtur leered.

“Then I’ll vouch for them,” Poseidon said. “If they say we’re in danger, we should gather up our people and take them to safety.”

"I second that," Hades said.

"The Fire-Bloods can be trusted," Quetzalcoatl spoke up.

"Are we in agreement?"

A small show of hands rose up around the room, including votes from Athena, Vishnu, Andraste and a couple of Titans. Nigel's face sunk at how few there were. Not as many deities in this room had been present at the Battle of Ragnarök and had never met Jesse and Nigel beforehand. Many others stood undecided.

"Might I present another option?" Zeus asked the room.

"This entire summit, I've been pitching a Deus Ex Machina to reclaim the Earth. I propose that, with a majority council's support, we initiate an Ex Machina under my command to instead eliminate this threat. All in favour?"

A small gathering of hands raised in Zeus' power.

"Nobody trust him!" Poseidon exclaimed. "He's trying to steal this election!"

"It's about the survival of our people."

"You don't get it," Nigel said. "This Angel, Samael, he isn't like anything you've ever faced. An Ex Machina won't be enough to stop him. If he finds this place, we'll all dead."

Suddenly, a couple more undecided gods raised their hands in support of Zeus. Many others followed. Nigel had only made it worse by raising the stakes. More than half the room was in favour.

"You need one more vote," Athena said.

"Then it's almost decided," Zeus said. "Should the Angel of Death arrive, I trust we'll gather the necessary votes to turn the tides. Those undecided, why not vote now and get it over with?"

"*Get out of there!*" Devo's voice shouted into Nigel's mind. Nigel almost collapsed under the strain as if the voice had fell upon him like a bag of bricks. Trish and Jesse hurried

to help him up. Silence fell upon the room as all the gods and Titans had their eyes trained on him.

"It's... it's a warning," Nigel said.

"He found the city!" Devo said. *"Get out while you still can!"*

Nigel reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out Osiris' crook. He looked to Trisha and Athena and said, "We need to get to a laundry room."

"Huh?" they both replied, very confused.

The sounds of screaming could be heard from down below. The council members reacted fearfully as they felt the panic of the downstairs crowd shaking the foundation. Chaos spread throughout the Parthenon.

"It's too late," Jesse said.

Zeus looked around the room with a sly grin and said, "We can put an end to this immediately. We just need one more vote. Anyone?"

No one immediately raised their hand.

But many were considering it.

Nigel's eyes wandered from god to Titan and vice versa in search of the one undecided who was ready to throw it all away. Then, out the corner of his eye, he found him.

Hades, the ever-neutral, was hesitantly lifting his hand.

A moment later, someone died.

24. Dancing with Death

Krindel stared down at the crescent-shaped blade protruding through the front of his chest. He barely had a moment to register it before he collapsed into a pile of gold dust.

The blade itself had penetrated the floor. The Reaper was still down below. He pulled his scythe from the stone ceiling and continued his massacre.

“Stand your ground!” Zeus said, brandishing his lightning bolt. Poseidon was quick to summon his double-ended trident as the other deities prepared for battle as well. They carefully maneuvered around the room, trying not to get skewered through the floor like Krindel. Trish and Nigel held each other tight as they looked for a way out, but realized the stairwell was a one-way trip towards their enemy.

“We need substance,” Nigel said. “Fog. We need to fog up the room. Poseidon, can you manage that?”

“On it,” Poseidon said as he conjured up a ball of sea water from his flask and scattered it across the room. The water formed into tiny droplets that swarmed around the council chamber and spread until it became a light swirling fog.

“It’s too thin; he’s going to see us in this fog,” one of the Titans said.

"Not the way he sees," Nigel said. "Just keep your voices down and your movements to a minimum."

As he said this, the screaming downstairs stopped.

The fog grew colder.

How many died? Nigel wondered. *Did Atlas evacuate anyone in time?*

The blade stuck through the ram-stone floor, hitting no one. With a quick yank, the blade vanished again, only to reappear as the Reaper struck through the floor a second time to no avail. After a few unsuccessful strikes, the blade disappeared.

They heard the clattering footsteps of the Reaper slowly ascend the stairwell, their only exit.

Nigel prayed the fog was enough.

The Reaper's tall dark figure soon appeared at the entrance of the council chamber. He looked into the fog and tried to measure where everyone was. Samael let out a few frustrated groans before he stepped away from the door and vanished down the staircase.

"Give him a minute," Nigel whispered to the others. "Let him leave first."

They waited until they heard no more clattering throughout the Parthenon.

The Reaper had left the building.

Jesse let out a light chuckle, "So... *'Don't Fear the Reaper'*, am I right?"

"You've been running from that thing this whole time?"

Trisha asked.

"Trisha, there's something you should know," Nigel said.

"That thing kind of raptured our bar into Heaven."

"The whole bar? Like, jukebox and everything?"

"Well, the whole city," Nigel said. "But, yeah, our bar is gone. Jukebox included."

"...What an ass!"

"Can we resume the vote?" Zeus asked. "I'd like to kill that thing now."

"This meeting is over, father," Athena said. "That thing cut through ram-stone as if it were styrofoam. It is certainly no Angel nor any deity I know of."

"But we can destroy it!"

"No, it is beyond our magic," she said. "We must leave immediately."

"Osiris gave me a key to the Duat," Nigel said. "Is there a laundry room around here?"

"This city doesn't have laundry rooms," Poseidon said.

"Ancient Greek-themed, remember?"

"Give that here," Horus, the falcon-headed god said as he swiped the crook and inspected the dials. "I can reconfigure these hieroglyphics to open something other than a laundry room."

"There's an armoury near here," Athena said. "Would that suffice?"

Before he could answer, the building shook. Everyone steadied themselves before it shook again.

"It's still here," Nigel realized what was happening: the Reaper was chopping down the building.

The columns of the Parthenon collapsed on one side and the entire roof caved in. The council chamber swept over, the ram-stone marble cracking under its own weight.

Deities fell over each other. Nigel held onto Trisha, using his body to cushion her as they fell. The room came apart and they spilled out across the Martian dirt, rubble from the building falling over them.

They barely had a moment to stand before Horus let out a falcon's cry. The Reaper stood over him with his blade sunk into Horus' back. Horus dropped the crook and dissolved into silver dust.

"Dust storm!" Nigel shouted. "Quickly!"

Quetzalcoatl stood up and quickly summoned a huge gust of wind. The Martian dust flew off the ground and encircled them in a thick, swirling storm. Nigel pushed Trisha away and dived forward as the Reaper took a swing at them and missed. Scrambling towards where Horus had been killed, Nigel grabbed the crook. He had no idea if Horus had calibrated it properly, but it was a chance he had to take. The Reaper took a few extra blind swings, teleporting at random through the dust and managing to strike down five other gods and Titans. Nigel had seen them in the council chamber, but didn't know their names. They respectively collapsed into silver and gold dust, leaving the Reaper angrier as he failed to strike down anyone else in the dust storm.

Nigel spotted Jesse and Trisha on the other side of the Reaper, both keeping their heads down. He was sure Zeus and his brothers were in here, along with Athena, Quetzalcoatl and Surtur, but didn't see them.

Samael looked about and cackled. "You call it '*substance*' as I do. You were there, weren't you? The one in the *rain*. Perhaps the one who laughed? Where did you hide the sorceress, Fire-Blood?"

"Don't answer him," Devo's voice said. *"Don't tell him anything."*

"Why are you helping?" Nigel asked. *"I thought you were on their side."*

"I am, but it's complicated. Just keep your head low and when you get the chance, go down."

"Down to where?"

"Into the mountain. Horus undid the settings on the crook, but it should be able to open a door down there."

"But which door?"

Devo didn't answer.

Nigel looked at the crook and tried to read the hieroglyphics. He had a vague understanding of the language, but it wasn't enough to make sense of them. All he could make out from the dials was the symbol for cleanliness next to the one for godliness. This did not help. Nigel watched as a figure crept up behind Samael. Before he could shout a warning, Andraste pounced upon the Reaper and brought her broadsword down upon his vertebra-laden skull. His entire body crumpled under the weight of her attack and he was crushed into the ground, just a black robe and a scythe.

"She.... did it?" Nigel wondered.

Nope. Before Andraste could even think of gloating, the scythe swung up and, with a single slash, reduced her to silver dust. The black robe reformed itself back into its original shape as if the goddess' attack were but a minor inconvenience.

"I weary of this game," Samael said, "I knew I should have brought some of those pesky Fire-Bloods. If my opponent is still alive, my congratulations go out to you.

Unfortunately, I've more pressing matters to attend to. Someone else will have to deal with whomever is left. Farewell."

With that, he touched his scythe to the ground. A sharp ringing sounded through the dirt moments before he vanished.

"Now would be a good time to run," Devo said.

"Why? What did his scythe do?"

"It controls life and death. He summoned reinforcements."

"Fire-Bloods?"

A pause later, Devo said, *"He's left the planet. Go!"*

Taking the chance, Nigel stood up and ran to the others as they got to their feet. He spit out dust and called out to everyone. Soon, Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Athena, Surtur,

and Quetzalcoatl came to his side. Quetzalcoatl kept the storm up.

"We need to go down into the mountain," Nigel said.

"But the armoury is over this way," Athena reminded him.

"Horus didn't calibrate the crook in time and unless one of us can make sense of these hieroglyphics..."

"Why down?" Jesse asked.

"Just trust me. Down is our only way out."

They felt the ground shake beneath their feet.

"I think something down is coming up," Hades said.

"Let's get off this hill," Trisha said.

As they turned to flee, something erupted from the ground behind them. Zeus was first to act as he cast a lightning bolt in its direction. Whatever had surfaced exploded on contact. All that remained was a smoldering crater and a pile of bones.

"Ha, they've got nothing on me," Zeus smirked.

Trisha nudged Athena, "I need a gun."

"Why?" she asked.

"I've played enough video games to know how this turns out," she answered. With a gesture, Athena summoned a shotgun out of thin air and handed it to Trisha. Trisha took aim at another patch of dirt as something began to come through.

She fired.

Nothing but bones and dust.

She and Zeus took turns striking at the things rising at their feet, but whatever it was kept coming. Jesse and Nigel drew their swords and prepared for battle.

"More bones," Trisha said as she looked upon the scattered fragments of her target. "I think he raised an army of skeletons. We're smack-dab in the middle of a Martian zombie apocalypse!"

Jesse noted the awesome idea for a band name, but had to ask, "Did Mars actually have life?"

"A long time ago," Athena said, "but the natives weren't civilized. Nor were they technically human...ish."

"What were they?" Nigel asked.

Hades felt something rising beneath his feet. His voice quivered as he said. "We're about to find out."

The ground burst open, throwing everyone back. Even Zeus missed an easy target as he fell on his rear. They pulled themselves together as the dust cleared and a creature rose from the Martian soil.

Before them stood an enormous fossilized bird-hipped skeleton, three stories tall. It stood on two rear legs with four smaller forearms, a long tail, and a huge bird-shaped skull filled with rows of dagger-like teeth. Behind it, a pack of similar skeletons rose, only five feet tall each. They were soon joined by a giraffe-shaped giant, a horned-faced beast, and many other prehistoric monstrosities.

Jesse's mouth dropped at the sight of the undead creatures. He'd just discovered an even better band name.

"Martian zombie dinosaurs."

25. The Best Thing Ever

Martian Zombie Dinosaurs.

In nine thousand years, Nigel Hunter never imagined it would come to this.

The group's first order of business was to panic and scramble as the fossilized remains of these monsters sprouted from the soil. Soon, the creatures were trampling marketplaces and overrunning temples, destroying everything in their path. All the group could do was head downhill, deeper into the city as chaos reigned behind them.

Zeus took aim at the leader, the Martiansaurus Rex, and let loose a bolt of lightning. The beast recoiled at the strike, but the bolt barely singed its skull. Zeus shouted in frustration, "Something is wrong with my lightning!"

"They're fueled by First Age magic," Athena tried to explain as they weaved through the streets. "None of our powers will work on them!"

A long-necked brontosaurus lunged forward and snapped at Hades, barely missing him by inches. He could feel the First Age magic tingle at his neck as the teeth snapped.

"And don't let them bite you!" Athena said.

"Then how do we fight back?" Hades asked.

At that moment, the skeleton of a velociraptor (or its Martian equivalent) leapt off the roof of a nearby shop

towards them. Trisha cocked her shotgun, stopped to take aim, and blasted it into smithereens. Its bone fragments rained over them as they ran. She emptied the shells from her magical gun and hurried alongside the others as it automatically reloaded, shouting, "Brute force works pretty well!"

Surtur grabbed a nearby statue of Zeus, took a hefty swing and hurled it at one of the lumbering long-necked giants chasing them. The statue broke through the base of its neck vertebrae, causing the upper half of its neck to fall over and crush a nearby forum. Despite its missing head, the body continued stampeding.

"Don't go for the heads," Surtur said. "The big brontosaurus don't need one!"

"Diplodocus!" Jesse corrected him.

"What?"

"It's more of a Martian diplodocus than a brontosaur," Jesse said, pointing at the body, "See the double-beamed chevron bones in the tail? Those are very specific to the diplodocid family."

"Jesse, what makes you the dinosaur expert?" Nigel asked, slicing through an oncoming raptor.

"IMAX, Discovery Channel, and Raptor Cop marathons," Jesse said. "Trust me, what you know about ancient history, I know about prehistoric."

"Boys, I don't think this is relevant at the moment!" Trisha yelled.

"It could be!" Athena said, "The average length of a full grown diplodocus' tail is thirty feet, right?"

"Forty-five, but that's Earth's counterpart," Jesse said.

Athena called to Hades and pointed at a specific point in the ground between them and the stampede. "I need a sinkhole right there!"

Hades snapped his fingers, causing a bit of the road to cave in behind them. The diplodocus stepped into the sinkhole, throwing off its balance and causing it to swing violently to the left. Its forty-five foot tail swung around, knocking several of the larger dinosaur skeletons off balance and crushing them into the side of a restaurant, including the larger predator.

‘Got the T-Rex!’ Poseidon exclaimed.

“It’s more like a *Metriacanthosaurus*,” Jesse pointed out.

Their celebration was short-lived as they looked ahead down the road to see a second stampede of skeletons.

Dozens of six-legged dinosaurs with shielded heads, each bearing three facial horns, were barreling down on them.

“Let me guess, they aren’t *triceratops*?” Nigel asked.

“No, those are definitely like *triceratops*,” Jesse said.

“Hold on, we’re going up and over,” Surtur said as he grabbed Jesse and Nigel by the collars. Athena scooped up Trisha as she and Surtur leapt over the stampede and ran across the dinosaurs’ backs. Zeus, Poseidon, and Quetzalcoatl met the stampede head-on, taking every triceratops by the horns and causing a multi-dinosaur pile-up in the streets of Athens. Hades dove under the ground and plowed a trench towards the stampede, causing several of the creatures to fall through the street. The stampede behind them collided with this one and bones went flying.

Running along their backs, Surtur lost his footing and dropped Jesse and Nigel as he slipped beneath the dinosaurs’ trampling feet. The two Fire-Bloods grabbed onto the horns of a triceratops, causing it to veer off course, crash through a brick wall, and tumble down a flight of seats into the Athens amphitheatre. Like lemmings, several other dinosaurs followed after them.

The triceratops broke into pieces as it landed at the bottom of the circular open-air theatre. Jesse and Nigel scrambled to make sure they hadn't lost their swords and quickly fought off a couple of velociraptors before hopping on the stage and claiming refuge behind the curtains. They watched as dozens of other dinosaurs came crashing into the theatre and started cascading down the rows of seats. Zeus, Poseidon and Quetzalcoatl battled with the worst of them.

Zeus clung to the side of a Metriacanthosaurus' head. Poseidon swung a Stegosaur by the tail into an oncoming Ouranosaurus. Quetzalcoatl pile-driven an Anklyosaur. Hades rode a Lambeosaurus. Athena flew around on the back of a Pteranodon with Trisha, who continued to unload shotgun shells into the mess.

"I think we got most of the raptors," Nigel said.

"Deinonychus," Jesse corrected him. "Don't let *Jurassic Park* fool you. Raptors are really teeny."

"Whatever; it's not important."

"It's very important if you want to be president of the Raptor Cop fan-club."

Nigel searched his mind for a way out. Devo had said to go down, but that was half a city back. He made sure he still had the crook and found it hooked around his belt in one piece. The dials hadn't been changed.

Suddenly, the floor opened at his feet. A trap door behind the stage shifted open and a bald, bronze head popped up. It was Atlas.

"Whoa, did Atlas miss the best thing ever?" he asked as he watched the chaos unfolding in the amphitheatre.

"Atlas, you're alive!" Nigel exclaimed.

"Atlas saved as many as he could, but it was not enough," he sighed. "Thor took off with the rest in one of the shuttles but everyone else in the city is gone."

"We'll avenge them, but first we need to get down somewhere," Nigel said. "Are there any doors you know of underground?"

"Of course!" he said, "There's a whole underground bunker under the city! Plus some utility rooms and a janitor's closet."

Nigel looked at the crook again and smiled. The hieroglyphics he recognized suddenly made sense. "It's cleanliness next to godliness! Atlas can you take us to the janitor's closet?"

"The bunker's safer..."

"The closet is our way out."

"What about them?" Jesse asked, gesturing to the others who were still caught in the dinosaur skirmish.

Nigel racked his brain trying to think an extraction plan. Atlas looked on and wondered the same thing. He raised a hand as if to make a point, then took it back. Then he made it again.

"How quickly do you need to get downstairs?" he asked.

"Very quickly," Nigel said.

"Right," Atlas nodded. "Atlas can make that happen, but it will not be a pleasant experience."

"Do what it takes."

"Atlas complies," he said as he cracked his knuckles and disappeared into the trapdoor.

A few moments later, the ground began to quiver. The stage cracked around them.

They didn't know what Atlas was doing down there, but a few moments later, an enormous fissure opened up from the stage to the seats, swallowing the entire amphitheatre. Dinosaurs and people alike were swept up in rubble as the fissure grew, collapsing the city block into the heart of the mountain.

Bones and debris crashed along the fissure walls. Everyone fell screaming into the abyss that Atlas had opened. New Athens was caving in behind them. Jesse and Nigel furiously flapped their arms, trying to drift away from the snapping jaws of an angry Ceratosaurus as its skull became dislodged during the fall and bounced recklessly off the red Martian walls. Before it could bite into them, Athena flew past on her Pteranodon allowing Trisha to nab her two boys out of the air.

They fast approached the bottom of the chasm which opened into a ruptured metal corridor. The Pteranodon skidded along the floor and fell to pieces. The four of them stood up in time to run away from the landslide of bones and marble debris that was raining from above.

The chasm opened up into a long underground hallway that Atlas had conveniently led them to. At the far end of the hallway was a single door: the janitor's closet. Crook in hand, Nigel made a mad dash for the door. Jesse stayed behind a little to make sure the others were coming. Sure enough, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades burst from the pile of dinosaur bones and amphitheatre debris. Quetzalcoatl followed shortly with Atlas as they grappled with an angry Triceratops whose head somehow wound up on top of the Metriacanthosaurus' body. Atlas forced the dinosaur head-first into the walls and shouted for everybody to head for the closet.

Jesse did his headcount and asked, "Where's Surtur?" "We can't go back for him," Quetzalcoatl said, "The city is caving in!"

Sure enough, more buildings were coming down. Jesse hurried with the others to the end of the hallway. As they ran, the center of the hallway began to collapse. Strain caused the ceiling to come down between them and the closet. Atlas threw himself under the collapsing ceiling and

took the weight of the mountain on his shoulders. Jesse turned to help him, but Atlas shouted, "Go!"

Nigel waved his crook in front of the janitor's closet. The door opened to reveal a swirling vortex of sand that led back to the Duat. The vortex quickly formed a thyme-scented passageway leading to Osiris who was busy at the Duat's controls. A moment later, he noticed them and hurried to the portal. "You made it!"

"Go!" Nigel ushered everyone through the gate. Zeus was first to muscle his way past everyone, followed by Trisha, Athena, and Hades. Nigel handed the crook off to Trisha who passed it to Osiris. Poseidon and Quetzalcoatl stood at the gate, looking back to Atlas who was still holding up the mountain.

"Run for it!" Poseidon shouted to him. "You can make it!" No, Nigel thought, looking at the stability of the ceiling, *There's not enough time.*

"You go on without Atlas," Atlas said as he made himself comfortable, "Atlas is a mighty Earth Titan. He will figure a way out of this and meet you on the other side."

"But that's not Earth you're holding up!" Poseidon exclaimed.

"Yes," Atlas sadly realized as his knees began to buckle.

"Atlas is aware this may not end well for Atlas."

Behind the Titan, Jesse noted movement among the bones in the collapsing city. Three Deinonychus skeletons formed together and darted down the hallway, targeting Atlas.

Jesse tried to shout a warning, but it wasn't needed as the three Deinonychuses were immediately smashed by incoming debris thrown by none other than Surtur. Surtur came storming out of the landslide and rushed directly at Atlas.

"Comin' at you, bro!" he shouted. With a mighty shoulder-check, he shoved Atlas out the way, throwing the Titan

across the hall and through the closet door. Before the ceiling could fall, Surtur stood up and caught it on his own shoulders. The weight of Olympus Mons was slightly more than he expected. His veins bulged from the incredible pressure.

Everyone stared in surprise as Surtur regained his composure and stood defiantly against the weight of the mountain. Behind him, two more deinonychuses appeared and lunged at him.

“Run, you idiots!” he yelled as the creatures sunk their First Age teeth and claws into his neck and legs.

His body turned to gold dust and disappeared into the ether.

The ceiling caved in.

First Poseidon, then Jesse, then Quetzalcoatl, and then finally Nigel leapt through the portal.

The hallway was destroyed. The connection with the Duat was torn apart.

Nigel watched as Quetzalcoatl safely landed in the Duat, but it was too late for himself.

The two spirit realms separated with Nigel caught in the middle. He fell away from the Duat and drifted into a white emptiness where the realms split at the seams.

Without hesitation, Jesse leapt from the Duat and held onto his brother.

Nobody was holding onto Jesse.

Nigel’s last thoughts as he fell were with Trisha who watched the two of them vanish into the empty white space. There was no sound. There was only surprise and then nothing.

The portal closed and they were gone.

26. Dreamtime

“So glad we can finally talk.”

Nigel stood on a soft, white powdery surface. Fog drifted around his ankles as he tried to get his bearings. He looked around, but saw only an infinity of stars rippling like water in the sunless sky. It took some time for his eyes to adjust to the strangeness of this place before he saw the totem poles in the distance and a court of kangaroos bouncing through the plains alongside a herd of bison. He then found the voice that had spoken. Sitting in the white powder was the invisible Horseman, Devo, now wearing yellow spandex with skin that was slightly less transparent. He looked upon Nigel with admiration.

“That was quite a show upstairs,” he said calmly, not the eccentric nutcase he presented himself as in the bar.

“When I said to head down, I certainly didn’t have that in mind.”

“Where did you bring me?” Nigel asked.

“I didn’t bring you anywhere,” he said. “You slipped into Dreamtime, which is sort of an anti-Void. Some refer to it as the Spirit Plane, the first afterlife. An eternal place for seekers of truth and enlightenment.”

“Did you see my brother land down here?”

“He’s resting comfortably; I just thought we should talk first, one on one.”

"You're not with the other Horseman, are you?"

Devo chuckled and said, "I'm not even one of the four. Granted, I am part of one of them, but... we don't see eye to eye. The one you think of as Devo is the one you should look out for. I'm more like his subconsciousness."

"You're a split-personality," Nigel said. "Can all the Horsemen do that?"

Devo shook his head. "The Four Horsemen are uniquely different. Don't think of them in terms of a single race. Don't even think of them as First Age. They're deities from a past universe. We're talking Zero Age if you care to know the food chain."

"A past universe...?"

"You know the beginning of all creation?" Devo asked.

"The whole 'Let be there light' thing? That marked the destruction of one universe and the creation of another. Here, let make it simple..."

He swished his hand over the mist and conjured up the image of an hourglass through the fog. Nigel watched as the misty sand flowed through the glass, which flipped over to begin another cycle.

"This is how the Creator's Plan works," Devo explained.

"He makes a universe with some ultimate goal in mind, and when that Plan reaches its end after about fourteen billion years, give or take, he flips the universe over to start again. All existence is destroyed time and time again, but sometimes remnants find their way through the cracks."

"And the Four Horsemen are those remnants."

"Not just remnants, but failed experiments," Devo went on.

"Dominion, Propagation, Consumption, and Obliteration, or as you'd call them..."

"War, Plague, Famine and Death."

"Four programs designed to terminate existence," Devo said. "One to command, another to analyze. A third to

deconstruct, and a last to cleanse all impurities in the system.”

“And you’re... the analyzer?”

“Yes,” Devo said. “Propagation analyzes the universe through experimentation and compiles an efficient strategy to delete it. To the Creator’s credit, the Horsemen were a sound idea. Apocalypses were messy business, and existence had to be purified before another Plan could be set in motion. But His creations were smart. The Horsemen survived the end of worlds and, come the next universe, became immune to the Creator’s power. Soon, regardless of the Creator’s wishes, they purified the universe whenever they felt it had fallen too far out of balance.”

”So how did the Creator keep them in line?”

“The first Four Seals,” Devo explained. “Just as Solomon’s soul was once bound to a stone from his past, the Horsemen’s souls were bound to relics from their old universe. They became docile and the Creator put them to work, occasionally letting them off the leash as part of an experiment. The Tenth Plague of Egypt comes to mind as one of those experiments gone awry.”

“Where’s the Creator been keeping the Horsemen?”

“Performing menial labour in His own personal Fortress of Solitude, the House of Glory,” Devo said. “Their existence was kept hidden, even to most angels. Obliteration was keeper of the Creator’s secret garden while Dominion and Consumption were respectively keepers of the sacred weapons and forbidden relics.”

“And you?”

He cleared his invisible throat. “I was a... keeper of time. An archivist of fate, as it were.”

“You mean like the actual Fates, or... you’re not who I think you are, are you?”

“Say what you mean.”

"Were you the one the Fates made a deal with for Christine's memory?" Nigel asked.

Devo nodded. "I am the Fates' supplier, yes. I weave the threads of time."

"This is why you talk to me and not Jesse."

"I never intended to give her visions," Devo said. "That was an unforeseen side effect brought on by a higher power, but I was nonetheless the Devil with whom your brother made a pact. What happened to her is just as much my fault."

"Can her mind be restored?"

"I'm afraid it's out of everyone's hands but her own. Her visions were a gift from the Creator, after all. They are meant to guide her somewhere."

"And I take it you don't know where that is?"

"The less the Horsemen know about her whereabouts, the better."

"So what exactly are the Horsemen trying to do?"

"When Solomon overthrew the Creator, he returned the four Seals to them. Right now, they're simply performing the duty they were designed for."

"Does that include stealing Halifax?"

"The Rapture isn't supposed to be like that," Devo explained. "At the end times, we're meant to save all righteous souls, but without the Creator's input, we have no sense of righteousness. No point of reference in this universe. We end up taking everything."

"You're taking every city in the world to Heaven?"

"Yes, and we're running out of room quickly."

"I need more info on the Horsemen," Nigel said. "I need to know what we're up against."

"Propogation," Devo explained. "Disease, consumerism, overpopulation, information. His psychokinetic talents allow

him to over-create anything to the point where it implodes in on itself so he can acquire the data he needs. In this case, he's using the war god to build Dominion's Fire-Blood army."

"And Dominion's job is to ravage Heaven with them."

"She's a persuasive one," he said. "Other than the Horsemen, anyone she touches becomes part of her collective. Their will becomes hers."

Nigel tried to sum up his observations, "And Death has a scythe that controls life and death. And he sees everything. And he teleports for some reason."

"Death, as well, does not have a filter. Instead of reaping the wicked, he's reaping everyone from the top down. At the moment, he's obsessed with finding the powerful one you call Pandora, but once she and the other Ancients are gone, he'll move on to the mortal souls."

"What about the fourth one? Consumption."

"He's a brutish type," Devo said. "I believe Devo's refers to Consumption as 'Darryl' in this universe, but his primary instinct is to collect everything. He's the one who devoured the fires of Heaven and Hell for the Fire-Blood army. He even devoured all cities and brought them to Heaven. I imagine now he's searching for the Seventh Seal. Those are the four, and you'll need to defeat them all to reach Solomon."

"Defeat them? But how? And what about you?"

"I am but a forgotten dream," Devo said. "I am the ignored conscience who bears the burden of my other half's actions. At the cost of my own existence, I will see to it that the Horsemen never reach the end of this cycle."

"Then tell me how to defeat them."

"Each bears a relic," he said. "The Four Seals are unbroken, but if you find a way to break them, it'll damage their programming. They'll become incompatible with this

universe. My relic is a diamond you'll see in my other half's head. Seek out the others and find their relics. I'm afraid I don't know much else beyond that. I only get glimpses of your world; not the whole picture."

"And what about Solomon? Is it true that he sits on God's Throne?"

"I haven't seen him with my own eyes, but I feel him. He's still weak. With his body trapped in the Void, his mind's not all there."

"How could he cross over from the Void? How could he even defeat God?"

"Crossing over is simple for a strong-willed Zodiac Knight gifted with astral projection," Devo admitted. "But to defeat God? I wouldn't know. There's no telling what he's sacrificed to come as far as he did. But the mere fact that he's letting the Horsemen carry on as they are is a sign that perhaps even he is in trouble. If you cross his path, I don't know what you'll find, but it's certain to test you."

"I should probably get going then," Nigel said.

"I'll awaken your brother for you," the Horseman's subconscious said. "Take him and head towards that bright star in the distance. It's time you resumed your mission and found that Seventh Seal. I believe someone you know is in that direction."

"Can you speak to other people?" Nigel asked.

"Some," he said. "Your mind is more open than others, but I'll find a way to deliver a message to your friends and tell them you're safe."

"Just make sure the Reaper doesn't find them," Nigel said.

"Were it that easy, I could have saved everyone on Mars," he said as he faded away. "Don't worry. I'll find a way to keep them on their toes."

Uncertain if he could trust anything Devo told him, he simply said, "Thanks."

“Oh, and Nigel?”

“What?”

“This road you’re on... I should warn you now,” Devo said.

“There is no going back. Only forward.”

With that, the Horseman was gone.

Nigel heard a faint groaning. He looked not too far away and saw Jesse getting to his feet, looking rather disheveled.

“Did we die?” he asked. “Is this some new place we go when it happens?”

“Come on, Jesse,” Nigel said as he collected his sword from the ground. “We need to go follow a star. I’ll explain on the way.”

27. The Path to Enlightenment

"Whoa," Jesse said as he tried to take in Nigel's story. "So we have a Horseman on our side?"

"We have a Horseman's subconscious on our side," Nigel said. "The real one will still probably try to kill us."

"And he didn't say anything about how we could help Christine?"

"He pretty much said it's in God's hands."

"Great!" Jesse exclaimed excitedly. "We just need to find God!"

"After we find Pandora, the Seventh Seal, the Horsemen's relics, and Christine herself."

"So what are we expecting to find at this star?" Jesse asked as they trudged across the spirit plane. Off in the distance was a glowing star that didn't ripple with the rest of the sky.

"No idea," Nigel said. "I gave the crook to Trisha before we separated, so it better not be a door."

"Will she be okay?"

"She'll be fine. With luck, they'll lie low and we won't lose anyone else."

"It just makes me so mad," Jesse said, kicking at the white powder. "We didn't have to lose Surtur like that. Or those other gods and Titans. What if the Reaper found them

because he was following us? What if it's our fault because of what happened with Solomon?"

"Don't think like that," Nigel said. "We've blamed ourselves for enough of Pandora's destruction in the past. If you want to make things right, you move on and stop punishing yourself."

Nigel and Jesse felt their legs get swept out from beneath them. They face-planted in the white powder and spat it up as they got to their knees.

"Who are you?" a small, broken voice demanded.

Standing not too far away from them was a small figure holding a long staff. As it approached, they saw it was wearing tiny battle robes and was covered in hair.

Jesse squealed, "Monkey! Nigel, it's a monkey!"

"I can see that."

"First Martian zombie dinosaurs - now a monkey!" Jesse cried happily.

The old Monkey King rapped Jesse on the head, his staff extending to make the reach. Jesse winced in pain and rubbed his head.

"You're not with the one called Solomon, are you?" the Monkey King asked.

"We aren't," Nigel said.

"You have Solomon's eyes," the monkey said. "I saw his eyes acting through the assassin's blade."

"It's a long story," Nigel said. "We're following that star. Do you know where it leads?"

The Monkey King looked up at the tiny light in the sky and said, "That is not a star. That's a strange glowing thing we found that hovers over the spirit pit."

"The *what now?*"

"If you're following the star, you've come to the right place," the Monkey King said as he led them towards the glowing thing. As they approached, they saw the outline of a ridge

in the fog and heard the sound of growling beyond the ridge. They saw the familiar outline of a woman sitting on the ridge, snacking on what appeared to be a bag of cashews.

Jesse was first to call out, "Patti!"

The woman spun around, then excitedly stood up at the sight of them. She raced across the spirit plane and dived into Jesse's arms embracing him tightly and crushing his spine. She planted a few kisses on his forehead, then hopped off and hurried to do the same to Nigel who was better prepared for it.

"I can't believe you found us!" she squealed. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Us? What are you doing here?" Nigel asked, very bewildered.

Patti hopped down and paced around them as she explained, "Okay, so Ptolemy, Wu Tang and I came to see the Monkey King, right? But then there was this weird dude with a scythe who was probably the Grim Reaper - *because things like that are real* - and there was this awesome fight and a portal opened and we walked over a back of a giant rainbow-coloured snake, met a talking cabbage, and now we're here!"

Nigel didn't process this story as well as he hoped he would.

"You escaped the Reaper too?" Jesse asked.

"I squeezed peach juice right his face and kicked his ass!"

Patti said. "Well, the boys did most of the work, but..." She trailed off, her excitement cutting short. She'd just stepped on a touchy subject.

"Where's Wu Tang and Ptolemy?" Nigel asked.

"Wu Tang didn't make it," the Monkey King said solemnly.

"As I opened a portal to the Spirit Plane, he bravely gave his life so we could escape."

"It seems there's a lot of that going around lately," Nigel said as he thought back to Valhalla and wondered if Wu Tang had been one of the broken spirits sitting at Odin's table. At the very least, Surtur had escaped the Reaper's blade, but Nigel wondered if any of the blade's magic had worked its way into the claws that took Surtur's life. Was he a broken spirit as well?

"And Ptolemy?" Jesse asked.

Patti gestured for them to follow. She led them to the spirit pit.

Looking over the edge, they saw a small pit that went down about twenty feet. In the center was a round stone platform. A pit of snakes encircled it. Standing atop the stone was a red-haired boy in a T-shirt who was having a shouting match with a polar bear. They exchanged growls and firmly stood each other's ground.

"Do I want to know what's going on?" Nigel asked.

"It's a trial of endurance," the Monkey King explained.

"Ptolemy must stand against Nanook the Polar Bear God for a full hour without stepping out of place."

"Why?" Jesse asked.

"If he is to see the Buddha, he must pass the Eighty-One Trials," the Monkey King continued. "We were going to bypass this requirement, but the Reaper's arrival, along with Heaven currently being out of service, forced our hand."

"Why is he seeing the Buddha?" Nigel asked.

"To get his powers back," Patti said.

"And how many trials has he completed?" Jesse asked.

"Forty-one," Patti replied. "Most of them have been simple zen questions with no answer like '*What's the sound of the colour five?*' or morality tests where he has to choose between a sword or the truth. And spoiler alert, the answer is *truth*. I tell ya, Ptolemy's been nailing these tests."

"I still can't believe he passed the first test instantly," the Monkey King shook his head in disbelief.

"You mean Nanook's riddle?" Patti asked. "Hey, Jesse, if a bear tells you to '*Speak, friend, and we shall begin*,' how do you answer?"

"I say '*friend*,'" Jesse replied. "Lord of the Rings 101."

"Exactly!" Patti exclaimed as she looked to the Monkey King. "No offense, but you people in the spirit world really need to update your tests."

"Nobody ever mentioned this," Nigel thought aloud.

"Hmmm?" Jesse asked.

"The Zodiac Knight getting his powers back seems like our best chance at beating Solomon," Nigel said. "So what's all this nonsense with the Seventh Seal? Why are we only hearing about this now? And why don't you have more people protecting you?"

"We all have our purpose," the Monkey King said. "Young Ptolemy's been preparing for this day for quite a while. The Creator guides him true. I suspect you've been on your journey quite some time as well."

"Since yesterday."

"Oh," the Monkey said, surprised. "Sounds like you're late in the game."

"What game?"

"Did Lady Christine not tell you?"

"What about Christine?" Jesse asked.

"She came up with this idea," Patti said. "She used her future vision to think up a dozen quests for saving the universe, and ours involves Ptolemy yelling at a polar bear. Didn't she give you one?"

"We didn't get a quest from *Christine*," Nigel mumbled. He had to get one from Pandora instead. "Are you telling me that for the last week, Christine's been on a mission from God, and she's asking everyone for help but us?"

"Last few months, actually," she said. "Same deal as when we kept the Atlantis thing a secret."

"Unbelievable," Nigel growled.

Jesse seemed unfazed. "Maybe Christine didn't ask us because she already foresaw that we'd be here at this exact time to find out?"

"I'm just fed up with the secrets," Nigel said. "And you should be too because apparently Christine's at the heart of this. Whatever the Creator's planning has already put her in mortal danger."

"ROAR!" Nanook shouted at Ptolemy.

"ROAR!" Ptolemy shouted back.

"Then where do we go from here?" Jesse asked.

"Nione mentioned a map to the Seventh Seal," Nigel said.

"We should find Pandora and start there."

"Did you say you're looking for Pandora?" the Monkey King asked.

"It's a long story, but..."

"Because she's right over there."

The Monkey gestured off into the distance near a group of kangaroos. From here, they could clearly see the outline of Pandora as she ran from kangaroo to kangaroo, kicking each one in the testes. They screeched and hollered at her, but she carried on, as if expecting different results each time.

"Has she been there the whole time?" Nigel asked.

"Kind of," Patti said. "She flew in an hour ago riding a Federation starship made of sand. Ptolemy thought God was showing up in the form of the *Star Trek* cast, but it was just Pandora looking for kangaroos."

Jesse punched Nigel's arm. "I told you she could make a spaceship!"

Nigel looked back at Ptolemy and said to Patti, "We need to go see her. Will you guys be fine on your own?"

"I think so," she said. "Ptolemy's been handling these trials pretty well, and Monkey boy over here's sharp with a stick."
"Good," Nigel said. "Patti, you take care while we're gone. We'll see you again soon and... you know what? Just take an extended vacation. I doubt we're going back to work anytime soon."

Nigel took one last look at Ptolemy. His former apprentice didn't even so much as lose his focus, though there were hints he was aware of Nigel's presence. One couldn't tell from how ridiculous he looked right now, but the kid had come a long way since their training time together.

"What's wrong?" Patti asked.

"Nothing," Nigel said. "Seemed like I saw a ghost just now."

"We've seen a lot of ghosts today," Jesse said.

"Do you really have to leave?" Patti asked.

"Yeah," Nigel said. "Looks like we have to go poke a sorceress in the nose."

28. Bound to Chaos

They didn't bother with questions, complaints, or greetings as they approached Pandora. The sorceress was too preoccupied with her task at hand to heed them any notice, and it wasn't until they were three feet away that she finally spoke.

"Ah, good, you're here," she said. "I'm certain one of these boomers is full of candy, so we'll need to divide and conquer. Little Jezebuul, you kick the seven over there in the nuts, including the buffalo. Don't worry - it's not animal cruelty if..."

"Boop," Nigel said as he poked her in the nose.

It worked this time.

Her eyes and body glowed and her arms spread like wings as she drifted off the powdery ground. The kangaroos were frightened off at the sight and vanished into the mists. She hovered in the air for a moment before speaking to the two boys.

"Sorry about that," Nione said. "I got cut off last time. We are at war up here after all."

She looked around, quite confused before asking, "Are we in the Spirit Plane?"

"It's par for the day," Nigel said. "Nione, we need the rest of your message."

"Of course," she said. "As I was saying, the Pearly Gates are closed and Solomon has taken over..."

"You were at the part about the Seventh Seal," Nigel said.

"The Seventh Seal is a relic that binds the soul of the Creator himself," she explained. "An artifact like that, if broken, would undo the ties between realities and unshackle the Creator's power from the rest of the universe. Breaking it is the only way to free Him from Solomon."

"And it's where, exactly?"

"It had to be entrusted to one of the Creator's most loyal servants out of Heaven, a man known only as the Nighthawk."

"And where do we find the Nighthawk?" Jesse asked.

"You must journey beyond the depths of the dark abyss," she explained. "Originally, the god Marduk and the Titan Hyperion volunteered for the task, but the Reaper got to them first. You'll have to travel beyond the Ninth Circle of Hell, but you'll never find your way beyond there without a map."

"And that's where?" Nigel asked.

"The map to the Seal rests within Pandora."

Nigel and Jesse exchanged concerned looks before Nigel replied. "I think we should address the elephant in the room: Pandora's been absolutely useless."

"Come again?"

"What were you thinking, sending her? She doesn't know where the Seal is! She barely knows what's going on half the time!"

"Firstly, I didn't send her; she sent herself," Nione said.

"Second of all, the Nighthawk is an old friend of hers. She *must* know how to find him!"

"But how do we get her to take us there? In case you haven't noticed, she's currently preoccupied with marsupial genitalia!"

"I have a thought about that," Nione said, "but you won't like it."

"Just say it."

"You can't order Pandora around, but you can try having her order *you* around."

"If Pandora ordered us around, we'd spend the whole day building snowmen out of cotton candy."

"Well, she must've come to you with a purpose," Nione explained. "When the chaos demons served under her, she always kept them busy chasing you. So... maybe before she becomes compliant, you have to swear your loyalty to her?"

"I'm sorry... swear loyalty? To Pandora?" Nigel asked.

"Yes, I know it sounds crazy," Nione explained. "But she's a sorceress; taking an oath could bind you to her. It could help you find the Seventh Seal."

Jesse and Nigel's eyes met as they wondered what might happen were Pandora to have complete mastery over them. In a way, Jesse was eager to find out. Nigel was not.

"I don't know what else to tell you at this time," she said.

"We've done everything we could stop the apocalypse and failed. The fate of all rests on you."

"No, it doesn't," Nigel said. "We've met Ptolemy. We know there's other groups in on a much grander scheme."

"He still lives?" she replied. "Then maybe there is hope, We were supposed to be at the final stage of God's Great Plan, but it's a delicate machine. After fourteen billion years, Solomon's arrival threw a wrench into the works. With God gone, we can only try to salvage what we can."

"Have you heard from God at all?"

"No. None of us know how Solomon beat Him, or what became of Him."

"Then how could we hope to beat Solomon?"

"That's where Ptolemy comes in," Nione said. "We'll do what we can to handle Solomon on our end. Just find the Seal and keep it safe from the Horsemen. There's still a chance as long as Solomon doesn't get his hands on it." Before Nigel could answer, Nione's eyes stopped glowing and Pandora's body settled to the ground.

"Good luck, my sons," Nione's voice said before the glint in her eye disappeared.

Pandora's eyes twisted and widened as her madness set back in.

"That was unexpected," she said. "Sorry about that. Must have been my lunch burrito. Eating the paper plates always give me gas."

Nigel deliberated on his next move. He knew what he had to do, but he wasn't sure how Pandora would react when he did it. How would a pledge of loyalty shape their already-volatile dynamic?

"What do you think, Jess?" Nigel asked his brother.

"Viviane said we could trust her," Jesse said.

"But do we trust Viviane?" Nigel asked, second-guessing his shiny new gift-sword.

"We trust Magnus and Osiris," Jesse said. "Pandora's pretty cozy with both of them. I don't know, Nige - maybe Nione's right. Maybe we're the ones who have to take a leap of faith."

"But bonding ourselves to a *complete psychopath*?"

He gestured to Pandora who was standing directly over his shoulder, wearing her scary smile and eagerly hanging on their every word. Her eyes constantly darted between the two boys without a single blink.

"Pandora," Nigel asked, "I'll ask you again, do you know where the Seventh Seal is?"

"Nope," she replied.

"All right... do you know where the *Nighthawk* is?"

"Yep."

"Would you take us to him?"

Pandora replied by playing a trombone in Nigel's face.

Nigel turned to his brother. "You want to pledge allegiance to *that*?"

"She came to us," Jesse said. "It's time we found out why."

With that, he got down on one knee, planted his sword in the ground and bowed his head towards Pandora. He spoke the following words off the top of his head,

"Pandora, Sorceress of Demons, Harbinger of Madness. I, the Aemon Jezebuul, pledge my loyal service to you in your quest for the Seventh Seal, through fire and ice, wrongfulness and right, and then... something... something... Green Lantern's light?"

Pandora peered at him and cocked her head with peculiarity. Then she glanced at Nigel, her head movements very much like those of a pigeon, as if expecting something similar from him.

Nigel took a deep breath, rolled his eyes and got down on one knee. He averted his eyes and said, with as little enthusiasm as possible, "What Jesse said."

Pandora furrowed her eyebrows in contemplation of this unusual behavior. She appeared to be putting far more thought into it than would be expected of a woman who kicks kangaroo testicles for candy. Finally, she nodded and said, "Yes... yes... I see now. My boys, are you prepared for the responsibilities of such a pledge?"

"Yes," was Jesse's reply.

"Mostly," was Nigel's.

“Very well,” she said. “There is a small matter we must attend to then.”

“And that is?” Jesse asked.

Nigel expected to hear her say something along the lines of “We need to disguise ourselves as birthday cakes” or “We must put barn owls on our feet and perform the traditional Hungarian whoopie cushion dance!” Instead, Pandora casually put her hands on their shoulders, made sad, puppy dog eyes and said, “You must become one with the Chaos.”

The two boys felt a sharp burn sear through their shoulders. They howled in pain as it crept into their very beings and ripped through their bodies.

Pandora let out a maddening laugh as she fell forward, pushing the boys backwards into the powdery ground. The powder gave way as they fell through a tear in reality and left the Spirit Plane.

29. Ashoka's Hell

Veins turning black.

Fire burning through every cell.

It was worse than the blood rage Nigel felt in his demon form.

His body twisted into grotesque shapes. His mind screamed with terror.

What have we done?

The air was falling past very quickly. He felt a cold chill as he passed through a cloud. Upon coming out the other side, he thought he caught a glimpse of the nightcast Earth below. Small lights dotted what cities were left and Nigel could swear they were falling towards India. Not that geographical location mattered since their inevitable collision with the ground would make short work of them. Nigel muscled his way through the pain to look for Jesse. His brother was falling not too far too way, writhing in equally painful agony. Pandora, on the other hand, was enjoying the fall while practicing her Teppanyaki cooking maneuvers on a large flat-iron grill for a delighted group of pelicans.

The pain entered his heart. The burning sensation was so intense, his senses shut off from overload. He was now falling blind, deaf and numb towards the ground which was almost upon them.

Maybe I won't feel the end, he thought as he closed his eyes. Deep down, however, he knew Pandora wouldn't let it end like this.

The ground rose to meet them.

They hit solid stone.

And kept falling.

Nigel's limp body fell over rafters, broke through rotten old flooring, and tumbled down several flights of stone steps.

As his sight returned, he felt little pain as he found himself falling past ornamental wall displays and indoor gardens.

He was plummeting through the ruins of an old, unkempt palace like a ragdoll and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Fortunately, the basement floor had final say in that matter.

Nigel lay on his back, disoriented. Moments later, Jesse fell down the basement stairs to join him.

In the old days, a fall like that might have been survivable with the steel-encased hearts Nione had given them.

Without those casings, however, Nigel couldn't imagine how they survived such a violent fall without the direct intervention of Pandora. What had she done to them?

Nigel didn't feel top-heavy, so she certainly didn't restore their hearts.

Pandora came dancing down the stairs in her black dress and waved at them to stand.

"Wake up, sleepyheads!" she beckoned in a sing-song voice. "We've work to do!"

Nigel tried to get his bearings, but was distracted by the iron maidens, stretching racks, and various torture devices strewn throughout the basement. A cauldron was tipped over from the furnace and a puddle of molten copper had solidified over the blood-stained floor. The sight of it triggered intense flashbacks to public executions he'd

witnessed several centuries earlier that almost made him sick to his stomach.

Jesse stood up and yelled infuriatingly. He turned to face Pandora with an uncharacteristic gleam of anger in his eye, shouting "Next time somebody pledges an oath to you, don't drop their asses twenty thousand feet through a brick floor!"

"Hmmm," Pandora wondered aloud as she looked to Nigel, "and how do you feel, darling?"

"I just want to get out of here," he said cautiously.

"Ah, good, excellent," she said as she stepped deeper into the torture chamber and start playing on an old contraption Nigel recognized as a breaking wheel.

Nigel inspected himself carefully. Something was definitely wrong. After nine thousand years, he knew the weight and integrity of his own body too well. Now he was feeling lighter. His muscles twitched nervously. Even his mind played tricks as the shadows in the room seemed to be staring back at him.

Jesse was experiencing a similar experience, only he felt more frustrated with his changes. He didn't like the tingling sensation in his body. He didn't like how his face felt warmer. Somehow, everything in the room bothered him to no end.

Then he and Nigel looked each other in the eyes. A misty darkness swam across their irises.

Nigel had seen eyes like these before.

"We're chaos demons," he realized.

Jesse turned to Pandora and shouted, "You turned us into chaos demons?!"

"I grabbed a few from Hell on my way out," she said as she spun around on the wheel. "Thought they might come in handy. The two of you were looking rather fragile."

"You just infected us with demons!" Jesse screamed as he kicked a nearby skull into the fireplace. "That just makes me so... so... oh, my god - I'm the rage demon, aren't I? You infected me with the same demon that Christine killed?"

"I thought you might appreciate that one," Pandora smiled. "Now only true love can kill you; isn't that sweet? Well, true love or the Reaper anyway."

"You didn't infect me with... not with the..." Nigel was feeling a cold sense of dread building up in his chest. "I'm the bloody fear demon, aren't I?"

Pandora hopped off the wheel. "Surprise!"

"Why did you infect me with the easiest one to kill?"

"Sentimental value, dear," Pandora said. "Fear demons come and go, but by George, they're just so exciting!"

"Of course they are; fear demons eat their hosts if we don't stay afraid!" Nigel exclaimed. "You've literally made me allergic to bravery!"

"Then be afraid, darling," Pandora said, seductively approaching them like a snake. She popped on a pair of sunglasses and grinned. "Be very, very afraid, because you're rolling with Auntie Pandora now."

She spun around and, with a wave of her arms, caused the back of the room to split apart. The floor opened at the seams revealing a pathway into a fiery inferno. Nigel took a step back in fear while Jesse sneered with annoyance.

She summoned them to the edge of the pit and swooned with ecstasy. Looking in, they gazed into a Metropolis-sized realm of layered circles that gradually descended into an icy darkness. From this vantage point, they saw the dark River Styx surrounding the first circle, and layer upon layer of various tortures and punishments descending through the other themed circles. What looked like ants were the billions of souls either trapped or passing through

this fiery nether-realm. Halfway to the bottom, they saw the great wall of the Fortress of Dis where Pandora had once been kept prisoner. It was the classic vision of Hell made real. The only thing missing from this picture was the fire. The light was there, but the fires of Hell had completely disappeared.

Pandora looked upon the torture chamber and said, "Seventeen hundred years ago, King Ashoka of the Maurya Empire devised a torture chamber so deliciously evil that, as legends goes, Ashoka had visited Hell itself to perfect its design. In reality, all he had to do was look under the floor and take notes."

"They called this room Ashoka's Hell," Nigel recalled from a few ancient legends he once heard. "I've heard enough stories about it. I guess Ashoka landed himself some prime real estate."

Jesse peered through the nine circles of Hell and was inspired to take out his sword and hold it aloft so he view the realm through its crystal. At first, he didn't see anything. Then Nigel did the same with his own sword and something became visible at the bottom of the realm. A small glowing pulse of blue light could be seen through their blades.

"That's it," Nigel said. "That's the magic Viviane told us about it. The Seal's that way."

"We're going down there," Jesse said. "Looks like a hell of a gauntlet, though. I'm counting exactly six hundred and sixty-five archdemons, five thousand and thirty seven points of injury, eight hundred and twelve living abominations, and approximately forty million hostile souls, not counting the few billion who could snap at a moment's notice. I should also mention there's no sign of the Horsemen, Lucifer, or his army of fallen angels."

Nigel peered over at his brother, quite alarmed. Not only might those numbers have been accurate, but Jesse almost seemed to relish the thought of going down here. He had to ask, "Jesse, is there something you want to talk about?"

"Yeah, I think my rage demon is a little bit *Rain Man* when it comes to violence," Jesse said. "Incidentally, while my survival rate down there is marked at 99.8 percent, yours is at a rough twenty."

"Good to know," Nigel said. "So be honest, Pandora, if you knew where to go all along, why did you need to come to Earth to find us?"

"I didn't *need* to, darling," she smiled. "I just like to watch my boys dance."

"Dance? What do you...?"

With that, she grabbed the back of their collars and hurled both Fire-Bloods into the inferno.

"We're going up against the Devil, boys!" she shouted as she swan-dived after them. "Let's give him Hell!"

30. The Gauntlet

It's difficult to fathom the size of Hell until you've been there.

The pit itself, has a very simple structure: nine descending circles of brimstone, all layered like an inverted wedding cake. One could probably doodle a fair estimate of its shape on a napkin and get it right. The size, however, requires multiple points of reference since everything in the realm is deceptively off-scale.

For instance, the seventh circle of Hell is guarded by a giant minotaur whose size could be estimated at twenty stories. But were you to put him next to a twenty-story high-rise, his size would then be estimated at forty stories. And if you were to put him next to the forty-story wall of Dis, he'd only be large enough to fit through its five-story entrance. Overall, measuring the size of Hell is a headache-inducing nightmare best left untouched.

Whether you're escaping from or breaking into it, you'll never know how many months it'll take you to travel from point A to point B.

Unless you're with Pandora, whereas the trip will take only minutes.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," the sign said as Jesse and Nigel fell past. It might as well have read "Dead men tell no tales" as the two boys landed face-first in the

vestibule at the edge of the River Styx. Before they could properly get to their feet, Pandora landed behind them with the force of a bomb that sent the ground at their feet rippling. The shock wave hurled them towards the River Styx, their feet begging to stay on the ground.

Moments away from being plunged into the river's treacherous depths, both boys leapt off the shore, higher than they'd ever jumped before. They soared across the River Styx on leg-power alone, flailing helplessly, yet amazed at their new demon strength.

One jump wasn't enough as they fell towards the middle of the river, only to land on the deck of a large ship ferrying hundreds of passenger souls. The impact of their landing forced the ferry deeper into the river, creating a tidal wave and forcing the acidic water to flood over the deck and burn through the new arrivals. Jesse and Nigel leapt off the ferry in time as it sank to the bottom of the River Styx, taking hundreds of screaming souls with it.

Falling safely onto the opposite shore, they were delighted to find they'd landed on a patch of nice soft grass. A nearby sign read "Asphodel Meadows Time Share" and several apartment complexes were situated nearby. The spirits of Pontius Pilate, Aristotle, and Dante Alighieri were nearby, enjoying a friendly game of boche ball.

"Apparently we can jump across rivers now," Nigel said, trying to rationalize what had just happened. He looked at his surroundings and said, "You know, this part of Hell doesn't look too bad."

"We're still in the first circle," Jesse said. "It gets worse lower down."

"Then maybe we should take it slow and think this through before..."

A low thundering could be heard coming in from the river behind them. They paused from their respite to investigate.

As it turned out, the tidal wave they created sinking the ferry was heading straight for the shore.

Nigel quickly altered his plan, "...or we just run."

They ran.

Very quickly too, one might add.

Their demon energy pushed their panic to the next level as they raced across the meadows at breakneck speed, the tidal wave barreling down over the first circle. Every soul in the wave's path was instantly dissolved. The two brothers raced towards the edge of the circle. There, they saw what appeared to be a waystation with thousands of souls lining up to be judged by an enormous snake-man with a crown whose body was wrapped around a stone tower. The snake-man looked up at the oncoming tidal wave and hissed.

"Get out of the way!" Nigel shouted, frantically waving his arms at the crowd.

As the wave bore down on them, both brothers leapt again, flying high into the stone tower and snapping it off its base as they crashed into its walls. The tower slowly tipped over with the snake-man clinging for dear life. The wave washed over the edge of the first circle, taking thousands of sinners with it. The tower plummeted off the edge into the second circle and crashed through the roofs of several buildings, the river trickling down around them.

Again, they survived.

They gave the dust a moment to settle as they crawled out of the tower's stone remains. Nigel was very impressed that he'd just survived a several story fall and been crushed by a hundred tons of stone without so much as a crushed toe. Jesse rolled some larger stones aside as he and Nigel climbed down into a pile of bras and silk pillows. They'd landed in what appeared to be the lobby of a two-star hotel/brothel of sorts. Several voluptuous women with

forked tongues wearing revealing lingerie gathered around, startled to see a tower in the middle of their nice lobby. Several of the punished souls here, who'd been tied up and were being tortured with assorted adult toys, were also quite startled.

"Hey, how's it going, ladies?" Jesse waved politely.

Several horned guards armed with spears appeared on the balconies overhead. They were yelling incoherently at the intruders who'd just ruined their favourite brothel. The giant snake-man clambered over the broken roof and pointed at the two brothers, shouting "They're with the demon sorceress! Stop them!"

"Yes, Lord Minos!" one of the guards shouted from a nearby balcony. Many leapt from the balconies and descended on the Fire-Bloods with their spears. The demon dominatrixes rushed at the brothers with pillows and whips. Jesse raised his sword to fight until Nigel grabbed his arm and told him to run. Jesse reluctantly agreed as they hurried out of the lobby and raced into the streets of a fancy red light district.

"We could've take those guys!" Jesse blurted out as they took a turn down an alley to avoid a blood orgy blocking the road.

"That's the demon talking," Nigel said, hopping over a discarded mechanical bull. "You need to focus that rage and help get us out of here!"

"Right!" Jesse said as they turned down another alley and faced a brick wall. Instead of turning around, however, Jesse shouted, "Take this, you stupid wall!" and charged right through it. They found themselves running through several other hotel lobbies as Jesse continued breaking down walls, interrupting mass castrations and adult video shoots. Nigel checked behind them to see a small army of archdemons in hot pursuit.

As they exited onto another street, Nigel caught a sign that read: "Now Exiting Lust; ← Limbo, Gluttony →"

"Take a right!" Nigel said. They turned down another street towards an escalator heading down.

Without regard for the souls on the escalator, Jesse and Nigel slid several stories down the rubber railings, knocking many lustful and gluttonous souls off as they went.

"Sorry!" Nigel shouted as he continued to bowl the spirits over. "Sorry again!"

They hopped off the escalator just as the archdemons released the hounds. Several tiny three-headed dobermans came charging down the escalator after them. The brothers hurried off across the third circle, which turned out to be a great field of buffet tables. Some hungry souls were chained down, inches out of reach from delicious casseroles and scalloped potatoes. Others were being force-fed rancid three-bean salad and stale bread by the local demons.

Nigel carefully darted over the tables grabbing sausages as he ran and hurling them back at the dogs, hoping they'd take the bait. Jesse smashed through everything in his path, overturning dessert trays, scattering pickled beets, and ruining perfectly good breaded pork. His foot snapped through the chains of some tortured souls, freeing them. As the souls ran amuck, the dogs scattered to collect them. Somewhere between the buffet tables and the salad bar, Jesse and Nigel missed the elevator reading "This way to Greed", fell off the third circle and plunged into the fourth. They fell through the glass ceiling of a casino and landed on a craps table, conveniently ruining some soul's perfect dice throw.

"Snake eyes!" the dealer shouted. "House wins! Everyone loses!"

Again, they found themselves on the run as the casino's angry gamblers took chase. The brothers dodged and weaved through a maze of rigged slot machines. Eventually, they took refuge behind a blackjack table, momentarily losing their pursuers.

"Just like old times!" they heard Pandora sing. They peered over the edge of the table to see the sorceress in a red vest and bow tie dealing cards to the surrounding souls.

"This is nothing like old times!" Nigel snapped.

"Come now, I thought you'd like being Chaos for a change," she said as she drew twenty-one and took everyone's chips. "All those years running from it; don't tell me you aren't enjoying yourselves."

"Ruining Hell *is* kind of fun," Jesse said.

"We're not down here to have fun!" Nigel insisted.

"I beg to disagree," Pandora chuckled. "This is the most fun I've had in ages!"

"There they are!" someone shouted. "Get them!"

Once again, the boys ran.

The next few moments were a blur.

At some point, Nigel vaguely recalled leaping off a balcony into an arena where two demon actors were putting on a jousting act for the tourists. Nigel didn't quite remember the events to follow, as things got very messy down there, but what's important is that he and Jesse eventually wound up riding a horse out of that casino. Also, Jesse found a sombrero somewhere. It was a very eventful two minutes. Nigel swung his jousting lance to clear the streets as they galloped through a low-income neighborhood where once-wealthy businessmen, corrupt rulers, and bad celebrity tippers were begging for change. In his frantic lance-

swinging, Nigel accidentally wound up skewering most of them.

“Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!” Nigel kept apologizing as he ran through four of the King Henries.

“One hundred points! Two hundred! Four hundred! Eight!” Jesse laughed as he tallied up Nigel’s jousting score.

As they neared the edge of the circle, Nigel got the tip of the lance caught on a large chunk of fool’s gold. The impact catapulted him off the horse with Jesse hanging on tight. They flew over the fourth edge and fell towards the fifth circle deep below where the Fortress of Dis encircled the parameter. They crash landed along the fortress’ roof and fell against the parapet.

High above, they saw the archdemons standing at the edge of the fourth circle. They were looking down at the brothers, but did not pursue. Quietly, they all backed off.

“Check it out,” Jesse said. “They gave up.”

“Or this area’s off-limits,” Nigel said as he got up and looked over the edge towards the center of the realm.

Down below, the last four circles of Hell appeared to be abandoned. The circle for Heresy was a barren wasteland covered in flaming tombs. The circle for Violence was devoid of its bloody rivers and forests of thorns. The muddy malebolge of the Fraud circle was dried up. The bottom level was just a frozen lake. No wandering souls or archdemons could be seen.

Nigel raised his sword and peered through the crystal. The pulsing blue light he’d seen from above was still present under the frozen lake. The question was how to get through there.

“The lower levels have been wiped clean,” Nigel said. “I think the Horsemen have been through here.”

“Do you think they found the Seventh Seal?”

"It's still down there," Nigel said. "We just need to get through that ice."

The fortress shook.

The stones beneath their feet rattled as the wall of the fortress began to lean forward, as if pressed upon by an outside force. Their section of the Dis Fortress was bending inwards, tilting over the sixth level. Stones cracked and strained as the wall broke apart from the rest of the fortress. The two brothers hurried back across the roof and held onto the parapet. Jesse drove his fingers into the stone and clung tightly. Nigel cracked the stone he was holding and fell, barely grabbing onto the seat of Jesse's pants in time. After ninety degrees, the forty-story fortress wall stopped tipping over with the two of them dangling precariously over the sixth circle.

"You okay down there?" Jesse asked as his pants slipped down.

"I'm staring up your ass-crack over a field of flaming tombs," Nigel replied.

"In other words, you're in Hell."

"This is how I'm going to die, isn't it?"

Jesse began to climb back up over the parapet, when the fortress shook again, almost causing him to lose his grip. He pulled his chest over the edge of the wall and came upon a monstrous sight at the base of it.

A body like yellow gelatinous bile.

A face like a bullfrog.

A wardrobe like Tim McGraw.

And a big gold belt buckle.

He stood thirty feet tall with one cowboy boot on the broken wall, keeping it from falling over the edge. Words like *plump*, *corpulent*, and *big-boned* couldn't begin to describe the morbid obesity of his body as it split through the seams of his black button-down shirt and leather pants.

He brushed off his cowboy hat, licked his lips and stared down Jesse with hunger in his eyes. Nigel climbed up over Jesse in time to see the sight for himself.

"So you two boys is the ones giving ol' Death a run for his money," the Horseman scoffed, his voice echoing across the wall. "An' I reckon you're helping the sorceress find the Seventh Seal too, am I right?"

"You're not the Famine Horseman, are you?" Jesse called out.

The big guy rubbed his huge belly and joked, "Don't I look like the starvin' type?"

"Darryl, I presume?" Nigel called out.

"Darryl? Ha! Sure, why not?" the big blob laughed, dollops of acid dripping from his massive mouth, "I take it you've met Devo. A nice boy, but he ain't all there at times. But I guess you could say he and I are the fun ones. We like to enjoy a bit of the universe before destroying any of it."

He took another step up on the wall. He might have been big, but to pin down an entire section of a forty-story wall implied a weight not to be trifled with.

"I remember seeing you two on the run when I was inhalin' Halifax," he said. "I even remember inhalin' some of yo' memories when they sent me to collect the river. You seem like nice boys, so what, pray tell, brings you all the way down here?"

They didn't answer.

"You think I'm digging you for info on the Seventh Seal?" Darryl explained. "The others may have sent me down here to find it, but I'm in no rush. Food, gamblin', women - swallow up the nastier lower levels and Hell's my kind of place. But then you two come waltzin' into this realm and start tearin' things up. Rule goes that if you find the Seal, I'm out of a job. And a man's gotta protect his own, am I right?"

"Wait - you ate the lower levels?" Jesse asked.

"What can I say, I'm a growing boy," he said. "Even ate all the fire down here. Sorry if that inconvenienced you any, what with you being Fire-Bloods and all."

"What did you do with Urobach?" Nigel asked.

Darryl chuckled and rubbed his belly. "The big fellow? He put up a little fight when I swallowed the fires of Hell, but I find he goes down smooth and does wonders for heartburn."

Jesse didn't know Urobach well, but his fire-blood boiled at the thought of this monstrosity eating anybody he knew.

He leaned in and whispered to Nigel, "When I say go, drop to the lower circle and make a run for it. I'll hold him off."

"You'll have to push me," Nigel said. "I think I'm involuntarily paralyzed with fear right now."

"Hey, don't interrupt me!" Darryl shouted. With a mighty inhale, he opened his enormous bullfrog-shaped mouth and created a massive power vacuum across the wall.

Jesse and Nigel were pulled off the top of the wall along with hundreds of bricks and dragged across the stones towards the hungry Horseman. Darryl swallowed several of the tumbling stones before closing his mouth and ending the vacuum. By then, Jesse and Nigel had been dragged twenty stories towards him. He was much more intimidating at this distance.

Darryl chewed up the rubble he'd just inhaled, swished it around in his cheeks, swallowed it, digested it, then coughed it back up into his hand. The stone rubble had been fused together into the shape of a perfectly-formed, fully-polished, two-story boomerang. With a grin, he looked down upon the boys and said, "I don't know what it takes to kill the likes of you, but I'd wager you wouldn't agree with my stomach. So how about we just settle this like men? On the count of three, draw."

"We'd love to," Nigel said as he unsheathed his weapon.

"But as you can clearly see, we brought swords to a boomerang fight."

"Three," Darryl said as he flung his boomerang. The enormous stone projectile spun wildly towards the two brothers and missed by a hair as they dropped flat against the wall. The boomerang went spinning out across the great pit before arcing back around towards them.

Jesse didn't see the boomerang coming as he stupidly stood up to gloat.

"You missed!"

The tree-sized boomerang struck him from behind. Jesse became wrapped around the weapon as it flew back towards Darryl, who skillfully caught it with the Fire-Blood clinging to its one end. Jesse frantically let himself fall off the boomerang only to get snatched in mid-air.

Darryl held up Jesse in one fist and squeezed tightly.

Jesse winced as Darryl's bile-like hands burned at his skin.

With all his strength, Jesse couldn't break free.

Then Darryl stumbled.

One of his legs fell out from beneath him and he fell on his side with a powerful thud, dropping Jesse in the process.

Jesse looked back see Nigel reaching out with one hand and pulling back on an invisible string. Darryl's other leg fell out from beneath him. It took Jesse a moment to realize Nigel was accessing one of his special demon abilities by controlling the Horseman's shadows, a technique Vladimir had used against them in the past. The enormous blob's full-body shadow squirmed under Nigel's power as he commanded it to attack its host.

Jesse raced back across the wall to meet with his brother while Darryl struggled to stand.

"Quick, throw him away!" Jesse shouted.

"He's pinning down this wall," Nigel said.

"Then drop the whole thing!"

"That is *not* a great plan!"

"Enough! Forget indigestion, I'll just eat ya anyway!" Darryl shouted as he faced forward and opened his mouth to inhale again. Nigel pressed his shadows tighter against the monster's mouth, trying to close it to no avail. The bullfrog mouth opened wide and he inhaled.

At that moment, a shrieking wail emanated from the circle above them.

Pandora leapt down through the air carrying, in her possession, an over-sized, yet fully functional, novelty war hammer. She brought it down hard through the center of Darryl's body, causing him to split and splatter across the fifth circle like a water balloon of yellow bile.

The wall tipped over and fell with all three of them on it.

Jesse and Nigel held on tight as the great stone wall crashed top-first into the circle of Heresy.

Smash!

Then it tipped over again, flattening them against the ground as it toppled over the entire circle and fell over the next edge into the circle of Violence. The whole time, Pandora was playfully skipping across the tumbling wall. All three were pulled along for the ride.

Crash!

The wall fell over into the eighth circle, then took its time dangling over the edge before finally surrendering to gravity. All forty stories of wall plummeted towards the ninth circle of Hell colliding with the frozen lake below, taking Jesse, Nigel and Pandora with it. The ice gave way, swallowing the wall with everyone on it. The lake promptly froze behind them, sealing all within in its icy depths.

Up above, Darryl's blobby bits and pieces found one another. It took a minute or so before his goo reassembled his usual corpulent self. He stood up buck-naked, coughed

up a new hat, and hobbled over to the edge of the fifth circle where he leered down at the frozen lake below. "All good things must come to an end," he sighed to himself as he shook his head sadly. "Time to bring in the gang."

31. Pandæmonium

Tink!

A peanut bounced off a horn on the metal helmet. The leathery face behind the visor didn't flinch.

Tink! Again!

The armoured, bat-winged sentry stood guard with his halberd and withstood the barrage of peanuts. Humiliating as this was, he only had to endure it once or twice a day before the peanut-flinger got bored. As long as he maintained his composure and held vigil over the bunker's secret entrance, nothing could break his spirit.

The Destroyer endures, he thought to himself. *The Destroyer is a rock against the tides.*

Tink!

The Devil went by many names: Satan, Iblis, Mara, Beelzebub, the Morning Star, and The Beast to name a few. Here in Hell, many simply referred to him as Lucifer, or *The Boss*. He was a reasonably handsome blonde man with his slicked back hair, chiseled features, and two smoothly polished horns protruding from his forehead. His wardrobe of choice was a fluffy red Snuggie with an opening in the back that made room for his drooping crow-like wings.

He took another peanut from his bag, took careful aim, and flicked it at the sentry's helmet. The peanut bounced off the inside of the visor and fell into the armour.

Lucifer smiled and laughed, "Aah, yeah!"

"Well flicked, sir," the sentry spoke.

At the far end of the long palace hallway, a second sentry appeared, smaller in size. He moved with a sense of urgency.

"My Prince!" he called out. "A matter requires your presence!"

"Can it wait, Turyal?" Lucifer asked. "I'm flicking peanuts at Abaddon."

"We picked up something in the monitoring room," Turyal said. "The Fire-Bloods; they're here!"

Lucifer shoved his peanut bag into Abaddon's hand and hastily marched off down the hall to meet with Turyal.

Together, they ventured off through the maze-like corridors of the Pandæmonium Palace, yet another one of those over-sized, temple-like super-structures that all deities just seem to love living in. Much like anyone in the modern age, Lucifer had upgraded his palace with modern conveniences like indoor plumbing, adjustable lighting, and an intercom system that piped in Brazilian bossa nova.

Moving past dozens of other sentries, They found their way to a large room full of hundreds of tiny CRT screens where three sentries were anxiously monitoring the activities within Hell. One of those screens was getting a lot of attention.

"What's the commotion about?" Lucifer asked.

Turyal gestured to the monitor. Through it, they saw what appeared to be a section of the fortress wall broken off from the rest and balancing over the edge of the fifth circle. There was a skirmish going on between the Famine Horseman and two young men.

Lucifer leaned in and squinted at the monitor. He immediately recognized the two men, but looked wary of their implications. "There's no sign of Pandora, is there? She didn't come back, did she?"

Turyal shook his head. "No, sir, but..."

Pandora then appeared and splattered the Horseman with her giant war hammer.

"...never mind."

"Get the other sentries on high alert," Lucifer said.

"Whatever happens, she doesn't get in here."

Before Turyal could respond, however, they watched the wall fall over the edge and begin its gradual descent through the lower circles, like a forty-story domino toppling out of control. After a couple of drops, they watched the wall precariously balance at the edge of the malebolge on the eighth circle. Lucifer felt a lump in his throat.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no..." he stuttered as he watched the wall slowly spill off the edge and fall towards the frozen lake. He darted from the room and raced down the hallway towards his throne room, screaming at the top of his lungs to every sentry in sight, "Death from above! Brace yourselves!"

The Palace of Pandæmonium shook violently. The walls and ceilings cracked around him.

Lucifer threw open the double-doors to his throne room in time to see a pouring flood from the ceiling flash-freeze before his eyes. The great hall before him was covered in ice, with a massive chunk of fortress wall jutting through the ceiling, leaving his tacky gold-and-iron throne untouched. Below the wall, two confused men could be seen among the ice. Lucifer scanned the room carefully for Pandora as he and a small envoy of demon sentries entered the hall.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing crashing a wall through my house?" he asked.

"I thought we fell into a lake," Jesse said.

"My palace is *under* the lake!" Lucifer exclaimed. "I moved it here to keep it away from that lousy Horseman. The question is, what are you two doing here? And, more importantly, where's Pandora?"

"Over here, darling," Pandora's voice rang out.

Lucifer's attention swept back to his throne where he saw a lovely woman in a black dress draped over its armrests. She stretched and yawned as she made herself comfortable.

"Get out of my chair!" Lucifer shouted. "You're not the King of Hell!"

"But I could be," she winked. "I could be King and you could be my Queen!"

"No, that's not how it works! Now get out!"

Pandora licked the throne, thereby making it hers.

Lucifer didn't even bother summoning his guards to attention. He knew full well Pandora's capabilities and didn't want to risk destroying the rest of his palace trying to reclaim his favourite seat. He'd just have to ride this out.

"Un-bloody-believable," he muttered. "It's bad enough that you simply walked out of Hell when you felt like it. Now I have to worry about you coming back in."

"You're not the Devil, by any chance, are you?" Jesse asked as he approached Lucifer.

"Are the horns and red Snuggie not a dead giveaway?" Lucifer asked sarcastically.

Jesse immediately punched him across the jaw. Lucifer let out a yelp and clenched his mouth in pain. His sentries began to advance on Jesse, but Lucifer motioned them stop.

"Jesse, what are you doing?" Nigel asked.

"I'm punching the Devil!" Jesse said proudly.

"What did he ever do to you?"

Jesse didn't understand the problem. "But... but he's *the Devil!*"

"Stop punching the Devil and come help me," Nigel said as he scanned the room with his sword, searching for the Seal and completely ignoring the presence of Lucifer and his minions. Through the crystal blade, nothing appeared to be concrete. Everything was shrouded in a blue fog, but nothing stood out. Jesse unsheathed his weapon and searched the room as well.

Lucifer was getting angsty. He shouted, "You three need to leave this palace immediately!"

"No can do, Beelzebub," Nigel said, exploring the room's parameter. "We're not leaving until we find what we're looking for."

"How dare you disobey me?" he yelled at the brothers. "I am the Evil One! The Father of Lies! The Fiery Serpent! The frikkin' Prince of Darkness, and you're in *my* domain!"

"Are you sure I can't hit him?" Jesse asked Nigel.

"Keep your pants on, Lucy, we'll be out of here as soon as we can," Nigel said to Lucifer. "Just keep your goons out of our way, or Pandora will turn this palace into a three-ring circus."

"I'm in more of a rodeo mood, myself," Pandora said.

"Fine, whatever!" Lucifer said, throwing his hands up in disgust. "I've no power left anyway. So just invade my home. Help yourself to my mini-bar. Shove me in a closet for all I care."

"Don't tempt me," Jesse said.

"Why don't you have power?" Nigel asked.

"A century's worth of false worship can cripple any deity," Lucifer said. "Frikkin' jazz ruined me, what with every good Christian calling it *devil music*. Then AC/DC fans started

wearing devil horns at concerts, mocking my name and sapping my power. I tell you, heavy metal was the worst thing to happen to me since the Charlie Daniels Band.” Nigel lowered his blade and looked to the downtrodden Dark Prince. Lucifer was slowly shuffling his way out of the throne room.

“Hey, Lucy,” Nigel called to him. “If you want us out of here, we need to find something.”

“Let me guess,” he said. “The Seventh Seal?”

“Do you know where it is?” Nigel asked. “Our swords led us here, but they’re not aiming at anything in general. The Seventh Seal wouldn’t happen to be this entire palace, would it?”

Lucifer chuckled. “No, Pandæmonium is only about four hundred years old. The Seal itself... are you sure you want to find it?”

“The sooner the better.”

“And you’re here on whose authority, exactly? Certainly not God’s. Perhaps one of his emissaries?”

“A friend,” Jesse said, careful not to divulge too much information to the Devil.

“Someone close,” Lucifer nodded. “An angel who probably spoke through, I don’t know... the *King of Hell* over there?” Pandora was happily playing *Angry Birds* on her phone.

“What do you know about it?” Nigel asked.

“A little too much.” Lucifer snapped his fingers and a mini-bar emerged from one of the walls. He stepped over to pour himself a glass of apple cider. He offered some to the brothers, but they quickly refused. He downed his glass and said, “Let me tell you boys a story.”

“I was one of the seraphim. That’s the highest level angel you can be. It took me millions of years to climb through Heaven’s ranks just so I could earn my six wings and serve in the House of Glory. Do you know what it’s like to kiss

ass for millions of years? Because I do. But damn it, I got up there. I was God's favoured."

"Next thing I know, He's introducing us to these new things He made called humans. And granted, humans are cute at first. They keep needing to eat, sleep and poop. So I ask the Creator if I can have one for a pet and He says, 'Nope, you're going to bow before them.'"

"Is this story going somewhere?" Nigel asked.

"Trust me, there's a payoff," Lucifer said. "Now let me remind you that the first humans were no different than your average ape. They were stupid, poop-flinging neanderthals. I bowed at first to humour Him, but soon, all angels were bowing before the pooping humans."

"God was humiliating us for some hidden purpose, so I lead the others in revolt. And guess what? God throws the fight. We challenged Him to 'Rock, Paper, Scissors' and He chose banana."

"What beats banana?" Jesse asked.

"Everything!" Lucifer exclaimed. "Next thing we know, my followers and I are sent to Earth, Pandora shows up and lands us in Hell, and God writes it off as part of His Master Plan! He *planned* to ruin our lives!"

"What does this have to do with anything?" Jesse asked.

"The point is, I've seen angels running scared," Lucifer said. "We make bad decisions and play into God's sick, twisted game. Everyone lives under some terrible preconceived notion that they have a purpose. Belief in that idea is what's driving the universe toward destruction. And rather than admit His mistakes, God just lets these bad things happen."

"We're not here on behalf of God," Nigel said.

"No, you're here on behalf of those who are," Lucifer explained. "I bet you haven't even thought about what you'll do with the Seventh Seal when you find it. Were you

expecting further instructions by that point, perhaps? This whole mess started because hoodie boy over here broken one Seal. What's to stop him from breaking another?"

"Hey!" Jesse shouted, grabbing Lucifer by the collar. "I don't care if angels are messing with us or not. I've got friends in danger. I can't calculate the exact probability of their survival rate from here, but yours is dropping into the single digits. There's demon rage inside me that estimates I can behead every one of your sentries in nine seconds and skewer you through your own mini-bar in one if you don't stop wasting our time."

"Jesse, don't..." Nigel spoke.

"Tell us where the Seventh Seal is!"

Lucifer smirked. "The Seventh Seal won't save anyone you love."

Jesse snapped. His blade shone as the sentries raised their halberds to defend. He moved through the room with effortless speed and, within nine seconds, thirteen horned heads hit the ground. Lucifer found himself pinned against his mini-bar with Jesse's blade against his throat and dark fire in his eyes. The sentries' bodies crawled around on the ground, searching for their heads.

"This is why God kicked you out," Jesse said. "You're a coward. After millions of years in His service, He favoured you and you still doubted Him."

"Whoa, easy on the fire and brimstone!" Lucifer said. "If you're going to skewer me in one second then just do it. Otherwise..."

"Lucifer, you're out of milk," a voice spoke from the hall's entrance. Everyone saw a man-shaped multicoloured blob enter the room. The blob finished off the carton from which it was drinking and wiped the milk from his chin. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you had company."

"No worries," Lucifer said, Jesse's blade still at his throat. "I was just telling these two about the Great Plan."

"Yeah, it's a fantastic Plan," the blob said unenthusiastically. "A real winner. I think everybody will be impressed when it's done."

"I was also telling them about how the Creator planned to lose His powers to a schmuck like Solomon, culminating in the universe's undignified end."

"Sounds about right. Better to go out with a whimper than bang, I always say." The blob flipped over his milk carton. A few drops landed on the floor. "There's the last of the milk. If you give me some change, I could run out and grab more."

"Hell's under attack right now," Lucifer gestured to the collapsed ceiling. "Talk to Abaddon. He might have some in the employee's lounge."

"All right," the blob said. Before he left, he glanced at the others. Jesse and Nigel seemed bewildered at his arrival. Pandora seemed indifferent. He inspected the bodies strewn across the floor and said, "Somebody should really clean those up."

Before anyone could say anything, the strange blob shuffled out of the room. Jesse released Lucifer and ran to the door with Nigel to watch it disappear down the hallway. The blob's arrival and exit was surprisingly unremarkable and remarkable at once.

"Who was that?" Nigel asked.

"That, my friends, is the pay-off," Lucifer said. "That is the former shell of a being who could do no wrong."

"No," Jesse said, vaguely remembering the Creator as a giant robot dinosaur. "That's not Him. It couldn't be."

"It's the Creator's omnipotence," Lucifer explained. "He showed up the other night asking if he could crash on my couch. Now he haunts my halls, raids my fridge and

watches *Jeopardy* reruns in the lounge. He's yet to tell me what happened to the actual Creator Himself."

"He didn't even capitalize his pronouns," Jesse realized somehow.

"Solomon has deprived him of that luxury," Lucifer said. "All that remains of Him is that blob-shaped fragment."

The Creator's omnipresence reminded Jesse of the shattered souls he'd met in Valhalla. Only instead of going mad, the Creator simply curled up on a couch somewhere and waited for the world to end.

"We should talk to him," Jesse said.

"You can try," Lucifer said. "But the guy's pretty convinced everything's going as planned. It's the worst case of denial I've ever seen. I asked him if my fallen angels could be freed from this infernal pit so that we may fight for Heaven. He simply rolled over and took a nap."

"You still care about Him, don't you?" Nigel asked.

"We all do," Lucifer said. "There's nothing more we want than to get back in His good graces. But at this rate, what can we do other than offer His omnipotence a place to stay?"

"There are those who still believe in Him," Nigel said. "Help us help them. Maybe you could restore a little of your lost honour along the way."

"If only it were that easy," Lucifer sighed. "But you were right, Jezebuul. I am a coward. If my final judgment's at hand, I mustn't let it end this way."

"So you'll help us?" Jesse asked.

"If you take Pandora out of here, then yes."

"Hear that, Pandora?" Jesse called. "I think we've got an exit."

Pandora replied by turning on a blender and making pineapple smoothies.

“Pandæmonium distorts the blessed magic on your swords,” Lucifer said. “We’ll need to leave the palace if you’re to find the Seal. Follow me.”

32. Highway From Hell

By the time they arrived in Lucifer's garage, Pandora was already there waiting for them, sitting in the back seat of her pimped-out Barracuda. How she managed to import her car from its parking spot in Cairo to the garage of Lucifer's palace was on nobody's mind. This was just the kind of thing people had grown to expect from her. Lucifer flipped a switch and opened the garage door. It exited into a vast stormy wasteland without rain. Lightning struck down across the brown landscape as a single long highway stretched on for infinity. The smell of frankincense permeated the garage.

"You have a Highway from Hell?" Jesse asked. "I thought you weren't an AC/DC fan."

"It's a *Highway to the Danger Zone*," Lucifer said. "I've a soft spot for Kenny Loggins."

"Where exactly *does* this lead?" Nigel asked.

"To the one place worse than Hell," Lucifer said. "The Sumerian afterlife."

"What's so bad about it?" Jesse asked.

"The ancient Sumerians had a very bleak outlook on death," Lucifer explained. "Their idea of an eternal reward was a neverending nightmare where their spirits carried on to haunt the living."

"Sounds kind of cool."

“Did I mention they’re completely mindless?” Lucifer asked. “The souls you’ll see at the end of that road will never have a second chance. They feast on the living. They thrive on festering into abominations. Anyone or anything deemed too unsettling for Hell is shipped away there, to the Second Afterlife, Kurnugia.”

“Second afterlife?” Jesse’s ears perked up. “Christine’s down there!”

Nigel checked the light on his sword. It was pointing directly down that road.

“Then we haven’t a moment to lose,” he said as he climbed into the car and started the engine.

“Come with us,” Jesse said to Lucifer as he climbed into the passenger seat. “We could use a hand.”

“I’m trapped here,” Lucifer said. “By laws of the Aeonomega, my people are bound to this realm. Were we not, perhaps we might seek to avenge our old comrades in Heaven, but setting you on this path will have to suffice.” The palace shook again. Something was coming in from up top.

“The Horseman,” Jesse said. “He’s coming after us.”

A cold air passed through them. Nigel shivered. “And he’s not alone.”

“We’ll distract them,” Lucifer said, hurrying back inside.

“Get to Kurnugia and find the Seventh Seal. Don’t let them get their hands on it!”

Nigel floored the accelerator and the car sped off down the highway, leaving the Devil in their dust.

The highway expanse was already a very unsettling place as they drove towards the storm. There was lightning, but no thunder. Wind didn’t rush past the vehicle. They occasionally drove past signs of abandoned civilization, like a gas station or diners surrounded by deserted semi-

trailers. It was as if lost parts of the outside world were somehow finding their way down here.

Jesse checked his sword and noticed a new light appearing in the crystal. A purple light appeared to the left of the blue one. He quickly checked Nigel's sword and found his brother's didn't register the purple light.

"My sword's picking up something that your sword isn't," Jesse said.

"Keep an eye on it," Nigel said. "Let me know if starts flanking us."

Pandora looked behind them and smiled. As Lucifer's palace became a dot in the distance, clouds of dust began to form on the horizon. She turned to the other two and said, "You mustn't be afraid to drive a little faster, darling." "If I drive faster, the chaos demon will consume my heart." "If you don't," she said, "*they*'ll consume you."

Nigel checked his rearview mirror. Four clouds were fast approaching over the wasteland.

"Is it the Horsemen?" Jesse asked.

"Yep," Nigel replied, driving a little faster. "All four of them." Death, brandishing his scythe, rode a skeletal steed beneath his cloak.

Dominion galloped along on all fours, waving the Flaming Sword and shouting a battle cry.

Devo floated along in mid-air, riding an invisible horse.

Darryl had swallowed up several machine parts and coughed up a tiny motorcycle to ride on. Having lost a lot of body mass from Pandora's attack, he was only about four stories tall now, but that still seemed a little much for the tiny bike he was riding. He pulled another homemade boomerang from his mouth and targeted the car.

Behind, hundreds of Fire-Blood soldiers followed in their jeeps, tanks, and Apache helicopters.

Things were about to get real.

"We're not talking our way out this one, are we?" Jesse asked.

"Do we ever?" Nigel replied.

Through the side-view mirror, Nigel saw Death repeatedly teleport towards them, several feet at a time. Steering sharply, he sent the car into a three-sixty spin across the highway, kicking up as much dust as possible. Jesse held on tight. Pandora calmly painted her nails. Death appeared inches away beside the vehicle, swung through the dust, and sliced through the driver's side door. At the same moment, Nigel swung his sword at the Reaper, but instead of slicing through the cloak, the sword impacted like a club. Like a bean bag chair getting punched, Death folded in around the sword and his horse stumbled off the side of the road.

From the right side of the vehicle, Dominion galloped in tight and swift. She swung at Jesse who ducked under the blade as it seared through his seat. He slashed out at the lioness, but his sword passed through her blood-like body as if it were mud. Before she could attack again, Jesse sliced through her wrist. Her hand didn't come off, but the Flaming Sword was dropped. Jesse quickly nabbed it by the handle with his other hand and shoved both swords through her chest. She laughed it off by grabbing the Flaming Sword by its blade and pulling it out, lifting Jesse out of the passenger seat in doing so. Jesse dangled above the car holding onto the Sword's handle and slashed furiously at her arm with his other sword.

"Any help would be appreciated!" Jesse shouted to Pandora who was still painting her nails.

"You're doing fine, dear," she casually replied without looking.

Nigel kicked open the passenger side door from across the seat. The door swung open and tripped Dominion. She

stumbled, taking the Sword with her, but dropping Jesse back in the car.

"Soldiers, to arms!" she shouted to her army, "Don't let them get away!"

Checking his rearview mirror, Nigel saw the Fire-Blood army advance. The Apache helicopters were arming their missiles. The tanks were checking their targets.

"Jesse, take the wheel," Nigel said as he hopped out of the driver's seat and crawled over the backseat. Jesse slid over to drive. Nigel stepped out onto the trunk of the car, maintaining his balance and focused his demon energy on the incoming projectiles. The tanks and helicopters fired at once. Nigel reached out through the shadows, seized as many shells and missiles as he could and scattered them across the wasteland, blowing up the scenery in a spectacular light show. A missile that he missed, he quickly deflected with his blade, sending it into a nearby gas station. The gas station exploded, throwing deserted vehicles high into the air where one of them collided with a helicopter.

"Ooh, *nice one!*" he heard Devo's subconscious speak in his mind.

"Now is not the time!" Nigel said as he continued deflecting shells.

"Yeah, but, uh, some new information came up and I think it's really, really important."

"Make it quick!"

"You know this Seventh Seal you're looking for? Whatever you do, don't let Pandora get her hands on it."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't let the Horsemen get it either, but especially don't let Pandora. You realize what happens if it's broken, right?"

"All reality breaks down."

"And whoever breaks it, becomes the next Creator."

Nigel paused but a moment to take in this new information. Until now, he'd been under the assumption that Solomon sought the Seventh Seal as an ingredient for his ascension. Now the desire for this thing made a lot more sense.

A shell exploded next to their vehicle.

"Get your head in the game!" Jesse shouted to Nigel who took that as a cue to continue deflecting projectiles.

"Do whatever it takes to keep Pandora away from the Seal," Devo said. "Oh, and just a heads-up - my body's about to throw some trucks at you."

"It can do that?"

"Yup! Adios!"

Nigel looked ahead to see a field of abandoned eighteen-wheelers rev to life. Way behind their vehicle, Nigel saw Devo waving his fingers through the air as if commanding a series of puppets. Several big rigs pulled up on the highway on a collision course with their car.

Jesse shouted, "Nigel, we've got trucks!"

Pandora finished painting her nails and looked up to see the oncoming vehicles. She cleared her throat and said to the boys, "You should really do something about that."

"Feel free to lend a hand!" Nigel said as he hurried over to the front of the car and climbed onto the hood. He closed his eyes, focused on the trucks' shadows and kept sweeping them off the road. The trucks slipped and crashed into the dirt as their car plowed through the fleet. For a while, the plan worked, until one of them slid the wrong way and jackknifed across the road. Nigel desperately tried to sweep it away, but its tires were wedged against the pavement. They were heading for a collision.

"Oh, bloody hell," Pandora sighed. "A girl's gotta do everything herself."

As they approached the trailer, Pandora snapped her fingers and somersaulted the car through the air. Nigel held onto the windshield as they soared over the trailer and landed on the other side, wheels first and still going. Moments later, Darryl threw the trailer aside and closed in on them with his gaping mouth wide open. More trucks were coming, but weren't traveling as closely together. Jesse switched between lanes, dodging them easily. Darryl met Devo's trucks face-on, but quickly devoured them as if his mouth were a black hole. He hurled his boomerang across the highway, grazing their car. Dominion's soldiers continued firing upon them. Death was quickly gaining speed. More trucks were now coming up from behind. Nigel desperately tried to control their shadows, but the Horsemen were adapting to his tricks. "You two, keep driving," Pandora said as she stood up, quite disappointed. "Looks like this needs a woman's touch."

With that, she leapt off the car onto the side of a passing truck. She snatched some snow chains from beside its wheel well, climbed onto the trailer and leapt off the front of the truck, soaring high over Darryl. As she flew, she cast some magic upon her snow chains that helped unravel them into a long sturdy chain. She landed gracefully on the pavement, planted her feet, and shoulder-checked the first eighteen-wheeler that drove into her. The colliding truck flipped over instantly. As it flew, she whipped her chain around the hitch between the truck and trailer. Then, with a hefty swing, she yanked the truck out of the air, swung it around and hurled it towards Darryl. The hungry Horseman was met with the unpleasant surprise of being flattened from behind by a big trailer. As before, he splattered across the highway.

Dominion's helicopters rained fury upon her. Holding onto both ends of the chain, Pandora leapt onto the incoming missiles and gracefully danced across them, using them as stepping stones through the air. As she neared one helicopter, she tossed one end of the chain into its blades. The helicopter fell, firing missiles in all directions as it spiraled out of control. She then threw the other end of the chain into a different helicopter's blade to the same effect. Both helicopters fell with Pandora dangling between them. She landed on top of the Fire-Blood army, swinging the out-of-control helicopters around like wrecking balls. She used her helicopter nunchucks to flip over jeeps, tanks, and even a few extra helicopters. Everything that crossed her path exploded so fantastically that even Nigel felt a little aroused watching her in action. By then, she had well caught the attention of Death, Dominion and Devo who descended upon her with absolute fury. Pandora prepped her chains and met the other three Horsemen head-on.

One by one, the trucks on the highway died as Devo's attention was now concentrated elsewhere. Jesse and Nigel drove past them and made a clear dash into the storm. A looming fog could be seen in the distance. Jesse checked his sword again. The purple light was now veering off to the left, away from the blue one. Somehow, something inside the sword was speaking to him. He could almost hear a voice from that light... calling for him. He looked ahead. The highway conveniently split. "We need to turn left," Jesse said. "But the Seventh Seal is straight ahead," Nigel reminded him. "It's Christine," Jesse said. "The sword is guiding us to her. We have to--."

His thought was cut off as a scythe slashed down through his door. Jesse screamed in pain as it slashed through his right arm. He held up his fiery stump and watched it regenerate in a burst of flame. The event left him weakened.

The Reaper raced directly at them again. Nigel swerved to keep him in their dust.

“Turn left!” Jesse yelled.

“We have to go straight!” Nigel said.

“You promised!” Jesse insisted.

They drove past the turn-off. Jesse watched the purple light fade from his sword. He looked at his brother with despair in his eyes and said, “She’s gone.”

That lump in his throat came back. Nigel gritted his teeth and said, “Damn my life.”

He turned sharply on the road. The Reaper crashed into their car and flipped over them. For a moment, Jesse caught a glimpse of what was underneath the robe and was more startled by Death’s true appearance than by the blade passing by his face.

Nigel hit the accelerator again and drove off-road into the wastelands, making a beeline for the turn-off. The Reaper stumbled back to his feet and teleported back in their direction, slashing furiously through the dust. Nigel pulled up onto the other road, bringing the car back up to speed.

“There? You happy?” he asked.

“A bit more, yes, thank you,” Jesse said as he looked through his sword and saw the purple light reappear.

“You’re a good brother.”

Then they saw it.

The end of the road.

Where they thought they saw the road disappear into the horizon was actually the road disappearing off the side of a cliff into a vast chasm of brown fog.

Death slashed at their tires and took out their bumper and tail lights.

"I hope you're right about this," Nigel said as he kept up the speed. "Hold on tight."

They hit the end of the road. The car soared off the pavement. After several lingering moments of drifting through dead air, they disappeared into the brown fog.

The Reaper's horse skid to a halt at the edge of the chasm. He peered into the fog and his bones rattled disdainfully. He could see nothing through its thickness. He didn't even hear the car hit bottom.

Quietly, he turned around and returned down the highway. There was still the Pandora problem to deal with.

33. Lost and Found

It wasn't the crash that hurt.

It was stepping out of the car, discovering they'd landed in the leafless branches of a mile-tall cedar tree, and plummeting to its roots shortly after.

Nigel found himself draped over one of the tree's roots with his face firmly embedded in a knothole. He found his sword stuck in the ground nearby and used it to steady himself back to his feet. He looked around for his brother who was nowhere to be seen.

"Jesse?" he called out. There was no answer.

The air was thick and stale. The sounds of screams were on the wind, but carried too slowly to be threatening. Shadows darted through the brown fog against the ring of sunsets.

He looked through his crystal sword and saw a distant blue light through the fog. There was no sign of the purple light Jesse had mentioned. If he couldn't find Jesse soon, he'd have to head to the Seventh Seal himself and hope Jesse had the sense to meet him there.

He heard the sound of an androgynous scream in the fog, followed by the cry of a beast. Then there were another few screams, followed by more.

I hate this place already.

As he turned to the tree, he was pounced upon by a Jesse-shaped figure. The figure pinned him to the ground with its sword to his neck. Jesse growled at his brother.

"Jesse! Stop! It's me!" Nigel said.

"Prove it!" Jesse said. "Say something only the real Nigel would say!"

"Get off me, you idiot," Nigel said as he pushed his brother off and casually stood up.

Jesse assessed this turnabout and nodded, "Okay, maybe you're him."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just got attacked by two other Nigels in the fog," Jesse said. "One turned into a ghost and made a scary face. The other turned into a hairy fang monster with spikes."

"Well, I'm neither of those."

Jesse's eyes widened with fear, "If you're the real Nigel... why are you four inches taller?"

"I'm not taller, you're shorter," Nigel said. "Do you remember when I said we're disconnected from the fires of Hell? Back in the car, you regenerated your missing hand using the rest of your body."

"So the more damage I take, the shorter I get?"

"Apparently so."

Jesse looked through his sword and scanned the horizon looking for the purple light. The fog scattered the light along his blade, making pinpointing Christine impossible. He located one direction that seemed brighter than the others and said, "She might be this way."

"Lead on," Nigel said as they headed into the fog.

"Just keep your head up," Jesse said. "It's like a Japanese horror movie in here."

Nigel looked up and spotted an enormous shape looming in the trees above them. It was an enormous wooden ship that had been wrapped up in thick branches for thousands

of years. The ship appeared to be built in measurements of cubits and there were certainly more of them hanging in the trees off in the distance.

"Arks," Nigel said, "from the Great Deluge."

"You mean that's the famous Noah's Ark?" Jesse asked.

"No, it's just a regular ark. During the floods, everyone had one."

"So what is it doing here?"

"I imagine a lot of abandoned things end up in this place," Nigel said, searching for the odd rundown shack or Chevrolet Nova. "If Christine is down here, she might have holed up in one of them to survive."

"She's alive, I know it," Jesse said. "Once we find her, we'll regroup with Pandora at the Seventh Seal and..."

"Jesse, I need to tell you something."

"About what?"

"I've been speaking with Devo again," Nigel said. "He wanted to warn us about letting Pandora near the Seventh Seal. Do you know what it's supposed to do?"

"It's supposed to tear down barriers between worlds, right?"

"And whoever breaks it will become the next Creator."

"But we weren't going to break it," Jesse said. "Were we? I thought the plan was to keep it away from Solomon until Ptolemy can defeat him."

"I don't know what Christine's plan was for stopping the apocalypse," Nigel said. "But I don't think we can trust anyone with that Seal. Especially not Pandora."

"Well... would Pandora becoming God really be such a bad thing?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Hear me out," Jesse said. "She's magic, somewhat omnipotent, enormously cryptic, and she's the type who's eerily at ease with letting bad things happen to good

people. Would her being God be any different from the norm?"

"Jesse, she's our arch-enemy and I won't give her the satisfaction of becoming God as well."

"But what if we can't protect the Seal? What if it comes down to someone breaking it?"

"Then I'll do it," Nigel said. "I'll take on the burden."

"You?" Jesse laughed. "Why do you get to be God? Why can't I be God?"

"What's wrong with me being God?"

"Well, for starters, you're too serious to be God," Jesse said. "With you running the universe, we wouldn't have any double rainbows or duck-billed platypuses. You'd be too busy running checks and balances on the standard of living."

"I'd be a just and accountable God," Nigel said. "My platform stands on full transparency. Everyone gets fair warning before being hit by a tsunami or apocalypse."

"And what would Trish think about you becoming God?" Jesse asked, "As if you weren't incorrigible enough."

"Well, why should you become God?" Nigel asked. "You wouldn't even be arsed to fix that leak in the basement. You'd be too busy turning police officers into ninja lizards and making it rain cupcakes."

"And all disease would be replaced with musical numbers," Jesse pointed out.

"Maybe neither of us is cut out to be God," Nigel said. "Or maybe we're just being corralled again."

"How so?"

"It's the same thing that happened in R'Lyeh," Nigel said.

"You were the only one who could break Solomon's Seal, and he played against our fears to make it happen. What if the Seventh Seal isn't even real? What if we're being led into another trap?"

"Can we take that risk?" Jesse asked. "Nione wouldn't lie to us, would she?"

"Any number of things we've seen on our journey could easily be faked by a higher power," Nigel reminded him.

"For all we know, this could be a dream or a hallucination."

"Or a virtual reality program."

"I say we forget the Seventh Seal."

"Nigel...?"

"I never wanted to start on this road and I certainly don't want to meet its end," Nigel said. "Instead of risk playing into another stupid game, how about we just find Christine and get out of here?"

"I can get behind that."

"Finally, we agree on something."

"For the record," Jesse said. "I would be awesome as God and Christine would totally support me."

"If she remembers you."

"She will eventually," Jesse said. "From what I've seen, nothing in this universe is permanent. We're going to come out the other side just fine. We'll have our bar back, everybody who died will live again, and Christine and I will once again be best friends."

That's when Christine shot him.

34. The Best Laid Plans

The arrow protruding from his chest would normally have killed Jesse.

In fact, even as a rage demon who could only be killed by love, Jesse imagined only Christine might be able to kill him. It was heart-breaking to later learn that she fired the arrow and that he survived it. He pulled the arrow from his chest, shrinking a few millimetres as he healed, and looked at the moon-silver arrowhead. He'd seen it before.

"This belongs to Artemis," he said.

Nigel quickly covered his own heart and shouted into the fog, "Christine? Are you out there?"

No reply.

Then they saw a shadow move through the sunset.

A bear-like beast covered in eyes came barreling out of the fog. Both Jesse and Nigel prepared to defend themselves as it stormed upon them and then collapsed dead at their feet. Three arrows were in the back of its head.

They looked into the fog again and saw a thin, female form approaching them. Her pink jacket was filthy. Her face was wrapped in old cloth to protect from the dust. Her eyes were filled with distrust and anger. With Artemis' quiver slung over her shoulder, she carried Artemis' bow and took careful aim as she approached them.

"Speak," she said to them. "Who are you?"

"It's us!" Jesse exclaimed, his heart lifting, "Jesse and Nigel! We're here to save you!"

"Heard that before," she said as she prepared to fire again.

"Wait, wait, wait," Nigel said, waving his arms. He desperately tried to think of something he and Christine might have had in common. "After Jesse died, you found me drinking in the graveyard and you drew a picture of me as a grumpy bunny."

"Heard that too," she said as she aimed her arrow at Nigel.

"And you spirits got something wrong. The brothers only have one sword between them, not two."

The spirits here have been preying on her memories. Nigel realized.

There only was one thing he could do. He'd have to fight past the arrows and take the bow from her.

Fortunately, Jesse made things easier.

"Remember me, Christine?" he said hastily. "We rode planes together and ordered funny drinks! And remember the pigeon stealing my chocolate bar?"

"Jesse, she doesn't remember you at all!" Nigel yelled.

"She might remember *something!*"

"She literally has *Jesse amnesia!*"

"No, she told me herself that I was in her vision of the future," Jesse said. "I asked you to train me because she foresaw me as a demon killing her."

"What?! When did this happen?"

"Last time I saw her in Vancouver," Jesse said. "She told me I was not supposed to tell you."

"Uh... guys?" she mumbled as her attention was divided between the two brothers.

"Jesse, I warned you about stuff like this!" Nigel said. "The next time a prophecy says you're destined to kill someone, talk to an adult!"

"I keep my promises!"

"Yeah, like you keep your leaky basements."

"Okay, stop!" Christine shouted as she lowered her bow and gave a faint smile. "I'm pretty sure you're not spirits now."

"You are?"

"They've been riding my ass since I got here," she said.

"I've never seen them ride each other's."

"Ah, good, brotherly quarrels win again," Jesse said.

She rushed past Jesse and threw her arms around Nigel. Jesse watched despondently as she fondly embraced his brother, not even casting a glance his direction. "I can't believe you guys made it down here. A degree in the arts really doesn't prepare a girl for this."

"How did you survive?"

"Damned if I know," she said. "I haven't slept in almost two days! Artemis gave me her bow, pushed me through a mirror, and I've been shooting at everything that moves since then."

"Thanks for that," Jesse said, showing her the arrow she fired through his heart.

"Oh, crap, I'm so sorry about that," she said as she moved towards him and took the arrow back. "The spirits here tend to look like people I know and it becomes pretty easy to shoot a familiar face. It didn't cause anything permanent, did it? I don't know how these magic arrows work."

"I lost a bit off the top but I'm fine."

Then she unexpectedly hugged him. She wasn't hugging him as fondly as she did Nigel, but it was an appreciative hug nonetheless. The hug even seemed a little sympathetic.

"I'm so sorry about what happened between us," she said.

"It must have been eating you alive. But I need to know, did you ever get that demon thing under control?"

"I've been working on it," Jesse said. "Actually, I've been getting a lot of practice these last couple hours. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been chasing us and Pandora infused us with chaos demons to get us down here, so..."

She pulled away. "Pandora is here?"

"She's topside keeping the Four Horsemen distracted," Nigel said. "Somehow, I don't think they'll stop her, so we need to leave before she finds us."

"But what is she doing here?" Christine asked. "She's not in any of my visions. If she's here, then that means maybe my plans haven't failed after all."

"Come again?"

"I have to confess something," she said. "I've been working closely with a small group of Ancients these last months. In my visions, I see the events leading up to the apocalypse. Solomon's exile from the Void, the rise of the Four Horsemen, the forging of the Fire-Blood army, and the recovery of the Seventh Seal were the four critical keypoints. If we stopped even one of those things from happening, this whole apocalypse could end."

"How did you plan to stop any of those?" Nigel asked.

"First we sent a group to forge a new Seal and keep Solomon in the Void," Christine explained. "But that didn't work and he squeezed out anyway. Then we sent another group to find the Horsemen's relics. Couldn't even find the Horsemen. Someone suggested assassinating Ares along with all the other war gods. That plan didn't even get off the ground. Finally, two volunteered to go after the Seventh Seal and that's when everything blew up in our face."

"That's what you've been up to these past few months?"

Nigel asked. "And you didn't think of asking us for help?"

"I had to make sure you were training Jesse," she explained. "He was a complication we couldn't afford to

have on the wrong side. Same thing with Ptolemy. I had him sent to get special training.”

“Yeah, we ran into him,” Jesse said. “What about Nione? How did she get pulled into this?”

“You’ve met her?” she exclaimed. “She’s still alive?”

Before Jesse could answer, a hand took her by the shoulder. She turned to look into the glowing eyes of Pandora. Without needing anyone to press her nose, Nione had once again taken control. Her voice echoed through the fog as she spoke.

“I’m still alive,” she smiled. “I trust you’ve been well?”

“Oh, thank god,” Christine exhaled a sigh of relief. “What kept you?”

“The war in Heaven’s been keeping me busy,” Nione said.

“Fortunately, Pandora escaped from Hell and has been channeling my spirit. Without her, the three of us wouldn’t have found you.”

“Nione, what happened with the Horsemen?” Nigel asked.

“I can’t imagine what Pandora did with them,” she said. “It couldn’t be pretty.”

“What about the others?” Christine asked. “Did anyone else make it? Hermes? Artemis?”

“Everyone’s fallen,” Nione replied. “Only the Zodiac Knight is left.”

“And Heaven?”

“Many angels have disappeared,” Nione said. “The Fire-Blood army is growing faster than we can destroy it.”

Christine cursed under her breath. “Then we have to find the Seal. We’re the last ones who can do it.”

“We don’t have a choice at this point,” Nione said. “We have to face the Nighthawk.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“I thought Pandora would,” Nione said, “but she insists on letting the boys lead the way. Their swords have been

infused with blessed magic; they should be able to guide us to him.”

“Um, sorry, but can we say something?” Jesse asked.

Nione turned to him. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, Nigel and I have been talking and... we’re not going to do this anymore,” he said. “We’re leaving. This whole Seventh Seal business sounds sketchy.”

“What?” Christine exclaimed. “But... why?”

“Well, what are we going to do when we find it?” Nigel asked. “Take it on the run?”

“That’s what you did with the key to Pandora’s Box!” Nione said. “You kept it safe for nine thousand years!”

Nigel argued, “But Pandora wasn’t in a rush to find it. The Horsemen have been going ballistic on our tails all day! I think more harm would come from us *leading* them to the Seal.”

“Besides, are we sure it’s safe to let Pandora near that thing?” Jesse asked. “You do realize what happens if someone breaks it, right?”

“We won’t accomplish anything by running away,” Nione said.

“Guys, if you have the means to lead us to the Seal, then please do it,” Christine begged. “Otherwise, just give us your swords and we’ll do it ourselves.”

Nigel clutched his weapon’s handle. His fear demon scratched at his heart as he defied Christine and Nione.

“Nobody is finding that Seal. We’re all going home.”

Christine and Nione exchanged concerned looks. Nigel could tell the two of them had come a long way for this and wouldn’t be easily swayed. He and Jesse had to do everything it took to convince them that foul play was afoot. Instead, Nione took matters into her own hands.

“I wish it didn’t have to come to this,” Nione said. “My boys, *please take us to the Seventh Seal.*”

"But..." Nigel choked out, "...but..."

Nigel felt every urge to resist. He wanted to scream and shout at Nione. He wanted to take everyone and run. Instead, he felt his oath to the sorceress cast a spell over his will. His eyes glossed over to his sword and he raised it into the light. With it, he searched for the Seal. Jesse did the same.

"What have you done?" Christine asked.

"Too many have died; we can't let another plan fail," Nione said.

"But you're... controlling them?"

"I didn't want to!" Nione anxiously said. "Please forgive me. I just want to keep everyone alive."

"There," Jesse pointed out in the distance.

"Follow us," Nigel said with no choice.

They followed the light into the fog.

Christine paused to contemplate what had just happened before she and Nione followed after them. She seemed less than thrilled at Nione's dirty trick.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Christine said.

"So do I."

35. Into the Ziggurat

Some say free will is an illusion.

The very notion that our choices are predestined by a higher intelligence is considered laughable to many a freethinker. Why live your life through the teachings of an ancient book or outdated dogma? Why not expand your horizons and make your own choices? And yet if the notion of freethinking was, in itself, predestined as well, would any person have ever made an independent choice to begin with?

These are the things that ran through Nigel's mind as he and Jesse guided Pandora and Christine through the fog. Until now, he'd only been driven by the prospect of saving Trisha and defeating Solomon. Once he learned, however, that the cost of carrying out that final task was too great, it had been too late. He was now bound under the influence of a sorceress, possessed by a demon, and was traipsing through a place that even the Devil had deemed too extreme for his own tastes.

Nione and Christine didn't speak to each other throughout the journey. Christine understood Nione's actions, but wasn't any less approving of them. Even Nione felt terrible about what she had done to two people she'd cared for so deeply. Every part of her wanted to release them, but she

knew the stakes were too high. She could only pray they'd forgive her when it was all over.

The women carefully crossed the wastes, their bodyguards dispatching of any hostile spirits or beasts that emerged from the fog. Some spirits came in the form of their friends, others as their enemies. Some appeared as familiar faces from television and film. No one truly knows horror until the screaming face of Jay Leno comes for their soul.

In the distance, they perceived the outline of a great tower. With a large, round base, the tower spiraled towards the sky, almost hundreds of stories tall. As they approached, the fog thinned and they could see the tower disappear into the clouds above. In a way, its size reminded Nigel and Jesse of the Shadow-Blood they'd battled during Ragnarök.

Scanning the tower with their blades, Nigel and Jesse saw their blue lights converge on one of the higher floors, above the cloud line.

"We've got a hell of a climb ahead," he said. "Why does this thing look familiar?"

"It's the Tower of Babel," Nione said. "In a past time, King Nimrod of Shinar had his people build it so that he could ascend into the sky and conquer Heaven. But God smote it down and here it stands as the Ziggurat of Kurnugia - the tower at the end of existence. The farthest place the Four Horsemen would ever look for the Seventh Seal."

"And what about the Nighthawk fellow we're supposed to meet?" Jesse asked as they approached the tower's entrance. "What kind of person lives in a realm like this?"

"By reputation, the Nighthawk is a kind man," Nione explained. "It's his disciples we should be wary of. They're protective."

Through the gate into the lower level of the great stone tower, they found themselves in the dark ruins of the

ziggurat. A long staircase spiraled along the inner wall towards the next floor.

At once, all the torches lit, illuminating the ruins.

"Well," Jesse said suspiciously, "that wasn't ominous."

"I did that," Nione said.

"Oh, right. I keep forgetting everyone is magic."

They carefully ascended through the tower, torches on the walls lighting as they passed. The first few floors were barren, scavenged by others who'd passed through this place. As they carried on, small signs of battle were present. Ancient blood stains, cracked shields, and broken spears littered the corners of rooms. The ghosts of the realm moaned outside the windows, as if some ancient magic prevented them from entering.

Time passed, and about twenty stories up, they entered what appeared to be a library. Thousands upon thousands of books were organized on hundreds of maze-like shelves placed throughout the room. They carefully made their way around the shelves, suspecting this as a likely place for an ambush.

As they explored, Jesse noted the books on the shelves. Many he couldn't read, but his demon instincts drew his eye towards the many historical records of wars that had taken place prior to the tower's collapse. He even spotted a few fighting and strategy guides, including some first edition scrolls of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

Nigel, on the other hand, recognized every book in the library and then some. There were not only regional records dating back thousands of years, but there were many first drafts and modern artifacts pertaining to religious texts like the twenty-four books of the Tanakh, the manuscript of the Qu'ran, and the golden plates of the Mormon faith.

"Think it's abandoned?" Jesse asked.

“Check the books; not dusty enough,” Nigel said as they ascended to the next floor. “Someone’s been cleaning.” After several more floors of books, the fortieth took them by surprise.

They entered a great hall that certainly looked lived in. A large stone fireplace was lit while a chandelier hung overhead. There were couches, chairs, and potted plants, making it an exceptionally cozy room given the dilapidated state of the tower.

Most odd were the oil paintings hanging throughout the room. One depicted four people standing around a 1950’s gas station. Another were those same four people working in a garage. And yet another had those same people playing poker while another had them playing pool. The four people were three dark-haired men and a gorgeous blonde in the prime of their youths. There were other paintings as well, dating back beyond the 1900’s where they were prospectors during the California gold rush, guests in the castle of Ferdinand II, and gladiators in ancient Rome.

The one that most caught Nigel’s attention was a painting of those same four people sitting around a 1940’s downtown diner. He recognized it as a variant painting called *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, where the painting’s four original people had been replaced with Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Humphrey Bogart - whom Nigel now realized were the same four people in every one of these paintings. The original name of that diner painting was...

“*Nighthawks*,” he spoke.

The attack came from the chandelier above.

Nigel raised his sword to defend against a wild man wrapped in dark clothes and armed with a pair of hooked swords. He pushed his attacker away in time to defend

against a back attack from an older man in black robes armed with two round shields.

“Christine, hit the deck!” Jesse shouted as he rushed forward to fight the man with the hooked swords. “We’ve got ninjas!”

Nione prepared to cast some magic when a grappling hook wrapped around her arm, pulled her back and threw her across the room. She landed on one of the couches. A female ninja twirling two grappling hooks came at her from nowhere. Nione swiftly dodged her swings, but couldn’t concentrate long enough to throw any magic back. Her powers weren’t at their strongest when she was busy possessing Pandora.

Nigel’s attacker repeatedly slammed his shields against Nigel, driving him into the wall. Nigel couldn’t put his finger on why he felt so weak until he took into account that he was now a demon. If the ninjas’ weapons were made of Tartarus steel and coated in ram’s blood, he’d be at a distinct disadvantage.

Realizing he might be outmatched, Nigel pulled one of the heavier paintings from the wall and swung the frame at his attacker, hoping to put distance between the two of them. Jesse, meanwhile, lost three fingers and got kicked into the fireplace. The fire didn’t damage him, but he did lose another two centimetres restoring his fingers. The ninja’s blades burned as he stabbed into the fireplace, grazing Jesse’s limbs. To escape, he pushed past the ninja, took a running jump off a couch, grabbed onto the chandelier and swung recklessly around the room with no plan beyond that.

As he swung, Nione saw an opportunity, and set the chandelier’s rope ablaze. The large metal ornament fell with Jesse on it and landed on her opponent’s grappling hooks. The female ninja pulled one free in time, but the

hook flew backwards and knocked the hooked swords from her ally's hands.

As this was going on, Nigel successfully managed to smash the oil painting over his opponent's head and trip him over an ottoman. The three ninjas quickly got to their feet and regrouped, preparing for a second round.

Then a voice shouted from above, "That's enough!"

They all looked to the top of the stairs to see a young man with black hair and a curled lip in a white polo standing over them. He looked suspiciously like the Elvis impersonator in all the paintings. The man seemed very upset as he looked at the fallen chandelier and his broken painting. The painting depicted himself and his friends performing a lederhosen dance-off.

"Aw, man," he said. "You ruined the Oktoberfest painting. I liked that one. It was pretty."

"Gil, these are demons!" the wild scrappy ninja insisted.

"Help us destroy them!"

"Enkidu, you fool, these are our guests," the Elvis impersonator said. "No need for theatrics, friends, but I'll grant you points for putting on ninja costumes."

Jesse, Nigel, Christine, and Nione watched as the three ninjas removed their masks to reveal themselves as the other three members in the paintings. The old gentlemen resembled Humphrey Bogart, the younger was James Dean, and the blonde looked exactly like Marilyn Monroe.

"Holy crap," Christine said with a grin. "You guys are... are... are you really them?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" their leader laughed as he descended the stairwell. "Name's Gilgamesh; friends call me Gil."

"Gilgamesh?" Nigel asked as he looked upon the man's familiar face. "You wouldn't happen to be the same

Gilgamesh we met camping on Mt. Sinai a few thousands years back, would you?"

"Have we met?" he asked.

"We were passing through and your merry band brought us in for drinks," Nigel said. "I remember now - you had front row seats for the Ten Plagues of Egypt!"

Suduri spoke up, "Yes! I remember these two now! That strange man was looking for them!"

"That Sulei creep?" Enkidu said. "You're right. And hey, wasn't that was the night we...?"

His words trailed off as memories of the Death Angel resurfaced. He hadn't thought about it in quite some time, but it did seem odd that the man who would be Solomon had been there the night Gilgamesh died. What's more, these two unrelated travelers had now resurfaced after all these years.

"Small world," Jesse said.

"So... how've you been?" Nigel asked.

"We've done all right," Gilgamesh said. "Once, every century or so, my friends and I return to the surface. We've had our share of adventures. I've been a few kings. We live fast and die young. Though I should probably ask, what's with the whole 'being demons' thing? You certainly weren't such beings the last time we met. Your negative vibes set off our spirit alarms."

"Pandora turned us into her minions," Jesse said. "I don't think we're necessarily evil, though I do want to kill everything. Which, I guess, is pretty evil."

"Ah, yes, Pandora," Gilgamesh smiled as he finally recognized her. "It's been a long time, beautiful. Breaking plenty of hearts this century?"

"I'm afraid only Pandora's body is here at the moment," Nione said. "I am an emissary from Heaven, here on important business."

"That's disappointing. Pandora always threw the finest soirees."

"Are you people gods?" Christine asked. "Immortals?"

"Oh, no, no, me, Suduri, Dumuzid and Enkidu, we're... uh... we're dead," Gilgamesh explained. "As a doornail, I might add. It's just that the circumstances of our deaths were a little unusual. We descended to our nuthouse of an afterlife, but the weapon that killed us kept our marbles in check."

"You died at the hands of the Angel of Death," Nione said.

"You fell under the blade of his scythe."

"Bingo," Gilgamesh snapped his fingers. "I was just an ordinary man with an extraordinary gift. One day, the Creator asked me to defend Egypt against the scourge of the Death Angel. I didn't make it. And my friends here, well, they came to avenge me, only to meet the same fates."

"This realm is made to shatter souls like the Reaper's blade," Suduri said, "But when our spirits arrived, already in pieces, it put us back together instead."

"We're trapped here, but our sanity is still intact," Dumuzid said. "Instead of haunting the living once a century, we can instead use that time to live happily among them."

"Otherwise, we're the sentinels of this tower," Gilgamesh said. "We're the guardians of the Seventh Seal."

"Then you know why we're here," Nigel said.

"It's the only reason anyone would seek this tower out," Gilgamesh said, looking to Nione. "Were you followed?"

"I believe Pandora successfully lost the Horsemen on her way here," she replied.

"They're still coming," Dumuzid said, his eyes wandering. He looked to Nione and said, "They're in Kurnugia. They're following your trail."

"I told you we shouldn't have come here," Nigel said.

"Please," Christine insisted to Gilgamesh. "You need to let us take the Seal. I've seen the future and they'll come for it regardless. Our only hope of stopping them is to take it somewhere safe."

"It was safe here until you arrived," Enkidu snarled.

"Easy, Enkidu," Gilgamesh said. "I know it's not policy to give the Seventh Seal away to everyone who asks for it, but there's sincerity in her eyes. She's seen what the Horsemen can do."

"So you'll help us?" she asked.

"The four of us can't take the Seal from this tower," Gilgamesh said. "If we were to give it to you, where would you take it?"

Christine didn't have an answer.

Nione wanted to say "The Void" or some other difficult-to-reach location, but she was at a loss on how to reach such a place.

Finally, Nigel answered, "We'll bury it."

"We will?" Jesse asked.

"You're surrounded by a desert wasteland," Nigel said. "In my experience, if you can pick any random patch of dirt and bury something, people could walk right over it for years at a time."

"Yes, and we don't need years!" Christine exclaimed. "We just need to keep it hidden long enough for our friend to finish his training. Then he can defeat and Horseman and..."

Gilgamesh interrupted her. "You're telling me that you've come all this way for the Seventh Seal, just so you can take it outside and bury it in the backyard?"

"I like it," Dumuzid said. "It's simple in its execution."

"If the Horsemen are coming, we can't risk leaving it upstairs anyway," Suduri said.

"I can't believe you guys are actually considering this," Enkidu said. "After thousands of years of guarding the Seal, we're just going to throw it in the sand?"

"That's exactly what we'll do," Gilgamesh said. "The three of you stay down here and hold the line. I'll take our guests upstairs and make arrangements."

"So we're going ahead with the burying plan?" Jesse asked as he followed Nione and Christine up the stairs after Gilgamesh.

"Looks like it," Nigel replied.

Nione turned back to Nigel. Her voice echoed with regret.

"Thank you for helping us. I know I shouldn't have forced you to take us here, but..."

"Let's just grab the Seal and get out," Nigel said scornfully.

"Please, don't be angry."

"Do I have a choice? At the very least, you've proven me wrong on one front."

"And what's that?" she asked.

"Pandora's not the half of you I'm worried about anymore."

"Step lively, kids," Gilgamesh said as he lead them up the stairs. "Time's a-wastin'!"

36. Lights Out

The group followed Gilgamesh up through the stairs. For Jesse and Nigel, it felt like a slow march down death row. They had no idea where they were being taken or what was in store for them. All they knew was that Nione's will kept them on a leash. Even if they changed their mind about burying the Seventh Seal, there was no running away from this.

"Where do all these Seals come from anyway?" Jesse asked Gilgamesh, breaking up the silence.

"Seals are covenants forged by God," he explained. "He created them to give a physical presence to His laws. That way, should His Great Plan ever be compromised, humanity would have access to failsafes."

"Could anyone make them?" Jesse asked.

"Yes, but it takes an incredible sacrifice," Gilgamesh said.

"Smaller Seals have been unknowingly forged throughout history by deities and mortals alike. Whether you're a soldier throwing himself upon a grenade or a father giving up his dreams of stardom to support a family, the possibilities of First Age magic can be open to anyone. The bigger the sacrifice, the stronger the Seal."

"A friend of ours died on Mars," Jesse said. "He was eaten by zombie dinosaurs and crushed under a mountain trying to save us. Do you think he got his own Seal?"

Gilgamesh shrugged as if the circumstances of Surtur's death weren't that surprising. "It's always possible. Sometimes Seals live on in other people. For all you know, his sacrifice could have granted you the luck you needed to get as far as you did. You don't always get to choose how magic works."

They arrived in a large study that looked like both a writer's workshop and an enormous trophy room. Several ornamental statues and antiques were scattered throughout the room, including an old printing press, a star-covered wizard's hat, and a giant head from Easter Island. One of the more notable possessions was a vintage Gibson J-200 guitar in a glass case over Gilgamesh's writing desk.

There was a discernible lack of brown fog outside the open-air window. Jesse hurried over to look outside. At some point, they'd traveled so high that they went above the cloud cover. Outside was sea of stars, as if they'd just climbed the stairs into outer space. In clear view, Jesse saw the Earth, sitting serenely among the cosmos.

"We're in space!" he shouted to the others. "I can see the Earth!"

"How does it look?" Nigel asked.

"About the same as it always does."

Nigel came to the window to see it for himself. The Earth still looked the same, but something seemed different about it. As he looked into the Earth's shadow, he noticed something missing.

"The lights have been going out," Gilgamesh said. "One by one, Earth's cities have vanished. Every human life has disappeared. I trust this is the Horsemen's doing."

"There's nothing left," Nigel realized. He went back to that moment when Devo told him there'd be no going back. In

his heart, he felt there'd be at least something to return to, but didn't realize how far gone it all was.

"Boys, give me a hand with this," Gilgamesh said as he lifted some books off a large golden chest against the wall. Nigel and Jesse helped him move it into the center of the room. The surface of the chest tingled maliciously at their touch as if it were identifying them and sparing their lives. "Please tell me this is the Lost Ark of the Covenant," Jesse said.

"My friend, this is *the* Lost Ark of the Covenant," Gilgamesh replied.

Jesse squealed with joy as the *Indiana Jones* theme song got stuck in his head.

"Are you going to open that?" Christine asked warily.

"Don't worry," Gilgamesh grinned. "I promise it won't melt your face off."

The three men worked together to lift the gold lid. Even for two demons, the lid seemed abnormally heavy. They dropped it to the floor and looked inside the chest. Inside was a single slab of stone.

"I believe this is what you're looking for," Gilgamesh said as he reached inside and pulled out the old stone tablet. "The last covenant made between God and man, forged from the rock of Mt. Sinai, with the power of the Creator sealed within."

The Seventh Seal was carved with ancient Hebrew lettering. The edges were seared as if it had been carved out of a mountainside by divine fire. On it was written:
Thou shalt not stand on the left side of escalators.
Thou shalt not get all up in other people's grills.
Thou shalt not bother people wearing headphones.
Thou shalt always be free to wear sunscreen.
Thou shalt thank God it's Friday.

"What is this?" Jesse asked.

"It's the other five commandments that Moses dropped," Gilgamesh said. "God thought the world wasn't ready for these ones yet, so He made the tablet into the Seventh Seal and asked our spirits to protect it until this day would come."

Nigel scrunched his face up at the commandments. "These are absurd."

"And yet they could've made the world a much better place."

"Sometimes little things make the biggest difference," Nione said.

They felt the tower shake below.

"The Horsemen have arrived," Nione said. "Is there a another way out of this tower, Gilgamesh?"

"I was hoping you guys would just jump out the window," he said as he handed the tablet to Christine.

Down below, they heard the crashes and cries of the other Nighthawks as the Horsemen engaged them. Gilgamesh forced himself to turn a blind eye and stay here with the others. Now was not the time to cave in to emotion.

"He's right, we have to jump," Nione said. "Nigel, you carry Christine. The four of us need to get as far from here as possible."

As Nigel scooped Christine up in his arms, his mind wandered to the planet outside. Even if they managed to hide the Seal and escape the Horsemen, where would they go? How long would it take before everyone made things right in Heaven? Would Ptolemy succeed in defeating Solomon? Would everything go back to the way it was?

There is no going back.

Just as they were about to take a running leap through the window, they were interrupted.

Devo floated through the floor.

Dominion poured in from the window.

Darryl broke through the ceiling.
Death appeared out of thin air and struck at Christine.
Gilgamesh was quick to rush forward and grab the handle of the scythe before the blade could touch her. The Reaper's strength was immense, but having tussled with him once before, Gilgamesh knew he could handle it.
Jesse turned to attack the others while Nione raised a magic barrier around Christine and Nigel. Dominion's Flaming Sword fell upon the barrier, shattering it in a single blow. Darryl picked up the Easter Island head and struck Jesse across the room with it. Devo, with a flick of his wrists, raised Nione into the air, threw Pandora's body into the Lost Ark and slammed the lid tight on her.
"The demon sorceress has been contained!" he proclaimed.
"Hey, that's my job!" Darryl argued as he threw a printing press at Devo, hitting Jesse instead by mistake.
Dominion swung her blade at Nigel again. Nigel threw Christine aside as the weapon came down between them.
"Surrender the Seal!" she hissed.
The tablet cradled in her arms, Christine backed up against the wall. Around the room, she saw Gilgamesh struggling with the Reaper, Dominion lashing out at Nigel, and Jesse getting caught in a fight between two quarreling Horsemen. Whatever magic was keeping the Lost Ark shut was keeping Nione, or even Pandora, from rising up to help.
Nione shouted from within, demanding to be let out.
Cornered in the top of a tower at the end of existence, Christine didn't see any way out of this.
Until she considered the unthinkable.
Raising the tablet above her head, she shouted, "I'll break it!"
All the Horsemen froze to look at her. Nigel was on his back with Dominion standing over him. Jesse was pressed

against the wall by Devo while Darryl prepared to hit him with a Jamaican bobsled. Gilgamesh was suspended off the ground, dangling from the handle of the Reaper's blade.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'll break the Seventh Seal."

"You aren't prepared for that much power," Dominion said, her blade at Nigel's heart. "The universe would be destroyed and you would gain *nothing*."

"Oh, I think I could handle it," she chuckled nervously.

"Ever heard of a vengeful God? Just wait 'til you see me."

"You're a Fate," Devo reminded her. "You've seen what happens when that things breaks."

"As have you. So let us walk. Now."

The Horsemen paused to consider this new turn of events. Personally, they had no loyalty to Solomon and didn't care who became the next Creator. But their duty to the apocalypse always came first. If the Seal shattered now, the universe would end before it was purified. That, they could never allow.

"Samael," Dominion spoke to her comrade, "Stop her."

The Angel of Death dropped his scythe with Gilgamesh on it and teleported towards Christine in the blink of an eye. Startled, Christine dropped the Seal.

The Reaper lunged to catch it.

Gilgamesh plunged the scythe into the back of the Reaper's cloak, pinning him back.

The Seventh Seal shattered at Christine's feet.

Everything in the room went still and silent.

"Oops," she said.

"Christine, what have you done?" Nigel mouthed.

Moments later, the worst came to pass.

Christine's body glowed and an excruciating pain built up inside her. She fell to her knees crying as something within felt ready to explode.

Jesse shouted at her as he broke free of Devo's grasp and ran to her. "Christine!"

She began to vibrate until she was nothing but a blur.

Then the room began to vibrate at well.

An outside force was riding in. The Horsemen instinctively evacuated the room, escaping through the floor and windows.

Jesse, Nigel and Gilgamesh ducked as an enormous white spectre swept in through the room, overthrowing furniture and antiques. It came straight for Christine and pinned her against the wall.

"No!" it shouted. *"It can't be you! It has to be me!"*

"Solomon?" Nigel realized as the spectre took on a more familiar shape. He looked like an older version of Nigel with long hair, a beard, and tattered robes. With both hands pressed against Christine's neck, he desperately tried to latch onto the power entering her body.

Suddenly, Nigel and the others were all pinned against the floor, walls and ceiling. The wrath of an angry god filled the room as Solomon concentrated his all on containing Christine. The young girl's energy repelled his presence.

Both struggled against one another.

"Give me the power!" Solomon cried. *"Do it before it destroys you!"*

Christine screamed in pain, but didn't give in to his demands.

Around them, the stone walls began to separate. Cabinets broke into splinters. Books exploded off the shelves. The Ark of the Covenant slowly rumbled across the vibrating floor with Pandora banging on the inside, demanding to be let out.

Nigel, pressed up against the window, turned his head momentarily to look upon the Earth.

The planet was coming apart at the seams. Volcanoes erupted across the world at once. Oceans swept across continents. Clouds were swirling into hurricanes. Christine struggled to speak through her pain. "I set out to do one thing, and that's stopping you!"

"Foolish girl! I won't let you do this! That power is mine and mine alone!"

"Try and take it!"

The last thing Jesse saw was Christine and Solomon exploding into pure light.

The last thing Nigel saw was the Earth exploding.

All reality collapsed.

Then, as the storm subsided, the universe as we know it ended with but a whimper.

Part III. Destroyers of the Universe

37. Revelations

Sacrifice a little to save a lot.

Perhaps the meaning of those words are relative to how much you intend on saving. For example, how much are you really saving if your concept of 'sacrificing a little' involves the destruction of the entire universe? It's a question that very few are qualified to answer, let alone have had firsthand experience with.

Nigel felt like somebody had pulled existence out from under his feet, pushed him down a flight of dimensions and made him land face-first on the laws of physics.

He tried to get up.

Or get down.

It was all relative at this point.

Any attempt at orienting himself was ill-fated.

The sky, or maybe the ground, was a swirling purple miasma of prime numbers. In another 'direction' was a flowing golden river of unwritten blog posts. In a third point of interest was a giant wedding cake made from a lawyer's office in Mexico City with a topping of clown's tears. And if Nigel were to turn his head slightly more to the not-not-left, he'd see a cat on a bicycle wearing a diaper.

Finally, he saw something that made sense: the city of Asgard. It was sitting in the middle of a circular rainbow which was more or less accurate. But then it quickly

vanished and was replaced with an alleyway behind a Thai restaurant. Then that vanished and was replaced with the interior of a soda can where a bald eagle was playing a ukelele.

Nigel started walking towards nothing in general. The universe seemed to acknowledge this, in spite of there being no visible floor. He was permitted to travel blindly in one obscure direction. Or maybe he walked in place while everything else moved around him.

He tried to envision his surroundings as something more coherent. Were this anything like Hell, it would conform to his thoughts. Sadly, the broken universe was playing by new rules now. The harder he thought about finding his brother, the more the universe decided that every shadow should be shaped like a toaster. Nigel saw his own toaster-shaped shadow drifting along the colourful sounds of the walls. It smelled like Thursday.

Just then, his feet sank into the air. Nigel began trudging through nothingness like it were quicksand. The universe rose up to slap him in the face and he fell backwards into melted candle wax.

He found himself sitting in a small cafe, enjoying a bagel and a green tea latte. He was sitting with two women; one was Christine and the other was an older woman who bore a slight resemblance, possibly her mother.

"I wish you didn't have to do this," her mother said. "The others said they have it under control."

"I'll only be gone a couple weeks, mom," Christine explained. "I'm the one with the visions. I need to stay at the center of things in case anything goes wrong."

"But Nione said so herself, there's a big chance it's already too late."

"It's still the best chance any of us have," Christine said as she vanished from sight.

Nigel found himself standing on the bottom of an ocean. Then he was at the edge of a desert, watching a lone coyote chase after a roadrunner.

He saw Christine's mother in the kitchen. Her eyes were glowing with heavenly light as she dialed a number on the phone.

"Christine, it's Nione," she said urgently as if she were leaving a message. "The Angel of Death has left Heaven and is sending immortal souls through the veil. He's already gotten to Marduk and Hyperion. Contact Hermes as soon as you can and tell him it's time to warn the other gods. I need to go help with the war effort, so I'm releasing your mother. Take Artemis and do whatever it takes to find the Seventh Seal. Good luck."

The universe swept past Nigel again. He kept his eyes peeled, but more visions passed by. He saw the Reaper strike down the former King of the Gods, Marduk, in a public bathroom. He saw the Hunger Horseman inhale the fires of Hell along with Urobach. He saw Ares' body covered in vines and tied up in a tree as Devo summoned Fire-Blood demons from his body. He saw Dominion leading her army against Heaven's forces. Luminous angels clashed with raging demons through the clouds. Paradise was set ablaze.

Through it all, he saw a withered old man on a throne. The old man looked like himself, but aged tremendously. He was a transparent spirit overlooking a large boulder that sat in a crater in the middle of the throne room.

Nigel watched the image move in reverse as Solomon sat up from the throne and walked backwards past the boulder. The boulder slowly rose into the air, the floor repairing itself as it did. Static covered the scene as backwards voices warbled through the room. Finally, time moved forward again and Nigel heard the voices clearly.

“...such a vain request,” I sighed. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather settle down here in Heaven after such an arduous life? You’re very welcome to join us. It’s quite nice and the Sunday brunch buffet is to die for.”

“I don’t need Your charity!” Solomon snapped. “I’ve escaped both the Void and the depths of Pandora’s Box to reach You! Now, for all the suffering You’ve wrought on mankind, I demand justice!”

“You know I’m all about the justice, My son,” I said, “but this ritual is intended for deities. Men are not meant to partake in such nonsense.”

“Men shall and will,” Solomon sneered. “Man has already paid for the sins of the gods. Now it’s man’s turn to turn the tides. I challenge You to the ancient rites of Aeonomega! Either grant me this boon or destroy me now!”

“And how would you challenge Me?” I asked. “You’re hardly equipped to fight your Creator. Perhaps you’d enjoy a game of chess? Yahtzee? Mario Kart?”

“I challenge your infallibility,” Solomon said. “If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, then He can perform any task. But if man can name a task He can’t perform, then man is proven greater than God. Am I right?”

“Not by a long shot, but I’ll indulge you since I’m in a good mood.”

“Then I name a task,” Solomon said. “If you perform it, I will concede and return my Zodiac powers to the ether so the cycle may continue. But if You fail to perform it, You must return my life, all my powers included.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “In fact, how about I up the ante? If I fail, you can have *all* My power.”

“...Are you serious?”

“But if I win, instead of giving back your power, you bake Me cookies.”

“Deal.”

"Very well," I spoke. "Name your challenge."

"I put forth an old theological argument," Solomon said. "I challenge You to create a stone so heavy that You cannot lift it."

"I totally could."

"Prove it."

Nigel heard the sound of a heavy boulder smashing into the floor.

"See?" I said as I strained to raise it from the ground. "I cannot lift this."

"You could be faking it," Solomon said. "Make the stone lighter and raise it higher before making it too heavy to carry."

Nigel heard a pause and a groan before hearing the boulder smash into the floor once again.

"I've done as you've challenged; I cannot lift the stone," I said. "Therefore, I win."

"Not so fast," Solomon said. "I'm still not convinced. Why don't you raise the boulder over your head before making it heavier?"

"If I do, I'll drop it and be forever trapped beneath."

"If You're forever trapped beneath a boulder, certainly that'll be proof enough of Your power."

"Well played, Solomon," I said as I shrank the boulder down and raised it over My head. "But after this, I expect you to keep your part of the bargain and bake those cookies."

"You have my word," Solomon smiled.

Nigel heard a loud smash through the static, followed by the merry whistling of Solomon as he jauntily made his way to the Throne. Just as he planned, he'd lost the Aeonomega, but kept his powers *and* vacated the Throne. With the Creator incapacitated, he figured someone would have to fill in. Now all that was left to do was bake some

cookies and recruit some loyal henchmen to defend his seat.

Nigel then found himself on a tray of chocolate chip cookies as Solomon's spirit placed them in the oven. He closed the door and Nigel was immersed in darkness.

There was a knock.

Lucifer answered it. A multi-coloured humanoid blob stood at the door carrying a suitcase.

"What happened to you?" Lucifer asked his unexpected visitor.

"I'm stuck under a giant boulder right now," his visitor answered. "Mind if the rest of me crashes on your couch?" Lucifer seemed flummoxed at the request, but graciously invited the blob in.

"Thanks," the blob replied. "Got any milk?"

The vignette ended there.

These visions had been very informative thus far, but still didn't provide answers to where Christine or Jesse had vanished to.

Finally, he was about to receive his answer.

The darkness washed aside as if a whale were coming up for air. Only instead of a whale, it was an enormous 300-cubit wooden ark. The bow of the ship slammed into Nigel, taking him on a cosmic journey through the shattered remains of the universe. He carefully stood up on the side of the hull, the ship becoming a source of gravity, and watched the universe open up around him. He saw the afterlives in disarray. The Isle of the Blessed was underwater. The halls of Valhalla were sinking into the sands of the Duat. Mars was crashing into Hell.

Earth was in pieces.

He walked up the side of the ship and climbed over the railing so he could stand on the deck and find a sense of 'up'.

Instead, he found his brother.

Jesse sat in a lawn chair just outside the ship's cabin, a citrusy umbrella drink in one hand and a book in the other.

He glanced up at Nigel and gave a friendly wave.

"Hey, you made it!" he exclaimed. He offered his drink and asked, "Mojito?"

38. Mojitos in Space

“What the hell,” Nigel said bluntly, “are you doing?”

“Catching up on some reading,” Jesse said. “I saw you drifting around out there a few days ago, but you seemed to be stuck in some weird slow-motion time bubble. The Ark’s been circling you, so I figured I’d wait until you walked in front of it.”

“You didn’t think of coming to get me?” Nigel asked.

“Have you seen out there?” Jesse said. “Man, I’d rather stay on the ship, do some reading, and watch the random movies that the universe keeps playing. Also, mojitos. The universe just keeps putting mojitos in my hand. See? You have one too.”

Nigel checked and was assuredly holding a drink with limes in it.

He asked Jesse, “You said I was out there for days? It felt like minutes.”

“Did you see the same visions I did?”

“I saw Christine plotting something,” Nigel said, “and I saw how Solomon trapped God.”

“Ah, cool, I saw those ones too,” Jesse said. “If you ask me, I think God let Solomon trick him. It seemed like a pretty obvious setup. Did you see that vision with Trisha?”

“No,” Nigel said. “Where is she?”

"Don't worry. She knows where we are and she's on her way."

"Wonderful," Nigel said. "The universe is destroyed, but at least we'll be together as a family."

"The universe is only broken, not destroyed," Jesse said.

"It still functions in three spatial dimensions along a fourth-dimensional axis. But now we have the ability to observe six other spatial dimensions passing through one another. If one were to follow the appropriate strings of now-visible gravity, one could literally go anywhere they want in time and space."

Nigel's jaw went slack at this explanation. "And you know this... how?"

"I told you, I've been doing some demon speed-reading," Jesse said, showing off his pile of books which including the works of Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, and Oprah Winfrey. There were also several religious texts and comic books squeezed in there. Only just now did Nigel notice what Jesse was reading.

"Is that the Qu'ran?"

"It has a lot about string theory if you read between the lines," Jesse said. "Same thing with the Torah, Vedas, and Tao Te Ching. You know how they say the Bible has all the answers? Well, you kind of have to exist in ten dimensions and squint a little, but the story of the Last Supper is pretty much a cheat sheet for *Street Fighter 2*."

"Okay, nerd." With all of existence swirling around them, Nigel couldn't yet grasp how Jesse was dealing with this oddity so comfortably. Then again, given his brother's nature, maybe this is how everything already looked in Jesse's head. "You realize we still have to deal with the whole Christine-is-God thing, right?"

"Yeah, we'll get on that," Jesse said. "I'm not too worried. I think Solomon tried to absorb her, but she's a tough girl. We'll sort it out when we eventually go save her."

"I wish I had your optimism," Nigel said. "Have you seen anyone else around here?"

"Not in the ether, but Gilgamesh is below deck if you want to see him," Jesse said as he resumed his reading and enjoyed his mojito.

Below deck was musty. One would think that time would have rotted away more of the ark, but the lack of moisture in Kurnugia kept it impressively intact. The interior was dilapidated in parts, but was still structurally sound. As he descended the creaking stairs, he found some old blankets and a few more books in one of many animal stalls throughout the ship.

In the darkness of the hull, Nigel spotted a light. He called out, "Gilgamesh? Is that you?"

"I'm so sorry," a woman's voice echoed through the hull. Nigel should have been taken back by it, but he knew to whom he spoke.

"Nione again," he muttered, getting fed up with her cryptic visits. "You know, for somebody I've missed for nine thousand years, you're really wearing out your welcome." Gilgamesh stepped through the darkness, his eyes glowing blue from the spirit of Nione residing within. As he approached, a different blue glow began to envelope his body. In this broken universe, the spirit inside could finally emerge. A young woman with very dark skin and braided hair stood in his place, wearing the same polo shirt. Her eyes stopped glowing and Nigel saw eyes that he hadn't seen in nine thousand years. She looked as she did when she was only twenty. She tried to smile, but a sadness held back the corners of her lips.

"I'm not making a great impression as a mother, am I?" she asked.

"Let's see; you tricked us into swearing an oath to Pandora, you forced us to find the Seventh Seal, and now the universe is in pieces while Solomon and Christine fight to become God."

"That's about it," she sighed. "I screwed up big time."

"I expected this from Solomon or Pandora, but you?"

"What am I supposed to say?" she asked. "You and Jesse are the ones who backed out on us!"

"We've been down that path before! We didn't know who to trust!"

"I didn't know either!" Nione insisted. "With the Creator missing, Heaven under attack, and Pandora pulling me back into the picture, I panicked. My job was to help coordinate Christine's efforts, not to formulate a master contingency plan in case all Hell broke loose. I didn't know how far any of this would go."

"So you weren't conspiring against us from the beginning?"

"I could never do that," she said sadly. "I didn't even want you involved. After nine thousand years, I didn't know if I could face you both."

Nigel heard her choke back a sob. Once again, he felt like a jerk.

"Why couldn't you face us?"

"Do you know what I've been doing for nine thousand years in Heaven?" she asked. "I've spent my entire afterlife training to become a guardian angel. I wanted to help you and Jesse, but time and time again, I failed to earn my wings. Every time Pandora destroyed another city, that was on me for not being there for you."

"You can't blame yourself for that," Nigel protested. "Jesse and I were at fault for not being more careful."

"When they sent me to help Christine, I thought I'd finally done something right," she said. "I couldn't afford to screw up again. Not this time."

"Look, I'm sorry. You didn't mess up, you just... we *both* made bad calls. Us against the apocalypse? This is out of anybody's league."

"I still could have done better."

"Nobody's judging you," Nigel said. "If you want somebody to blame, just look at the guy who let the Four Horsemen off the leash."

"Or the crazy sorceress who's locked in the Ark of the Covenant somewhere."

"If we're lucky, they stored her away in a big warehouse," Nigel mused.

"Did you just make an *Indiana Jones* joke?"

"Yes, but don't tell Jesse."

Her smile finally crept through.

"You're so different from the Naveen I remember."

"No," Nigel admitted. "I'm still as hard-headed as ever."

"Then maybe a little of me rubbed off on you."

Sometimes, Nigel forgot she was only about fifteen years older than him. It was nice talking to somebody his own age who wasn't trying to kill him or get him to watch *Raptor Cop* movies.

"I guess age and experience don't make anything easier," he said.

"Maybe we're all just kids with too many years packed on," she chuckled.

"It's kind of a relief knowing the end of the universe wasn't really planned," Nigel said. "Better we blow it up by accident than give someone the satisfaction of doing it on purpose."

"Maybe the Creator intended this to happen," she said.

"There could still be a purpose."

"Nah," Nigel scoffed. "I saw what happened to the Creator. Unless part of His Plan involved getting trapped under a big rock, all bets are off."

"It's true I don't always understand His Plan."

"Then why invest so much in it?"

"Because Heaven isn't the Eternal Reward some claim it to be," she explained. "He created it as a living, breathing world of its own with as much love as it has corruption. It's a place that, even after death, never lets us forget what it means to be human. We follow not out of blind servitude but because He gave us things worth fighting for."

"Then you don't advocate His Plan; just his intentions."

"I believe there's a deeper meaning behind the best and worst of everything," she said. "As long as there are unknowns, there's always another road to follow."

"So what do you think we should do?"

"Heaven's the last place in the universe that's still intact," she said. "There's a tempest raging in the House of Glory and the Fire-Blood army continues to overwhelm us. I know it's a tall order, but if you can send any help our way, it would be greatly appreciated."

Her image flickered. Something was pulling her away from Gilgamesh's body.

"Do you have to go?" Nigel asked.

"No," she said sadly. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I think I died a few minutes ago."

Nigel couldn't believe his ears.

"What do you mean you died?" Nigel asked. "How can you die if you're already an angel?"

"I was as good as gone hours ago," she confessed. "They swarmed my team. Killed us a hundred times over until we stopped getting up. I've used the last of my dying power just to speak with you."

"But you're in Heaven! Wouldn't you just come back?"

"I'm not sure where we go after the afterlife," she said, "but I thought I'd let you know in case you come looking for me. I won't be here anymore."

Nigel couldn't bring himself to say goodbye.

Nione understood completely.

"Thanks for listening," she said.

The image of Nione vanished, leaving only Gilgamesh standing in her place.

Jesse was coming down the stairs.

"Was that Nione?" he asked. "Did you do a heart-to-heart with her too?"

"Yeah," Nigel said solemnly.

"Is she going to keep doing this?" Gilgamesh asked. "I don't think I'm a fan of being Heaven's carrier pigeon."

"No, she's gone," Nigel said. "It's just us now."

"So what do we do?" Jesse asked.

Nigel looked to his brother and asked, "What's your heart always been telling you?"

"To save Christine."

"And mine's been telling me to keep your ass alive since the day I was born."

"Which means...?"

"We're going to Heaven," Nigel said. "Once Trisha and the gods get here, we're storming the Pearly Gates."

"That's a mighty big task, boys," Gilgamesh said. "Now that Nione's gone, maybe I should share a little something with you."

He unstrapped his guitar from around his back and handed it to Nigel. Nigel looked at the Gibson J-200, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"What is this?" he asked.

"The Seventh Seal was the covenant of God's law," Gilgamesh explained. "It didn't control order nor God's balance of the universe."

"But when Christine broke it..."

"She didn't break the *Seventh* Seal," Gilgamesh said. "That was a deception on my part. In truth, I guarded two Seals. The one Christine broke was the Sixth. You, my friend, hold the Seventh."

Nigel looked over the J-200 but didn't sense anything out of the ordinary about it.

"I carried those strings since the Angel of Death descended on Egypt," Gilgamesh said. "God imbued my music with His law. If broken, all decrees made under His name become forfeit."

Nigel suddenly felt the weight of what he was carrying.

"This will undo every Aeonomega."

"Solomon's putting up a fight, but he's still weak."

Gilgamesh said. "For now, he needs his army, which means we need ours."

"But this won't just restore every deity to full power," Nigel realized. "You're talking about releasing Lucifer's forces from the pit!"

"To save Heaven, one must be ready to unleash Hell," Gilgamesh said. "There's an army of fallen angels down there awaiting the call to arms. You need only break their bonds."

"Why us then?" Jesse asked. "Why don't you break it?"

"Because, unfortunately, risky business comes with breaking it."

"More risky than releasing *the Devil*?"

"God's word made all creation," Gilgamesh explained.

"Imagine that if the Sixth Seal was the safety, then the Seventh is the trigger."

"In other words, breaking this will *officially* destroy the universe," Nigel said.

"Why would we want to do that?" Jesse asked.

"Because the universe is an hourglass," Nigel remembered Devo telling him. "Once it's finished, the Creator starts anew. We just need to make sure Christine's the one running the show. She can set everything straight again!" "Not that you wouldn't have a window of time to save her," Gilgamesh said. "Twenty-nine minutes. That's how long it'll take before the universe finishes collapsing. That's how long you'd have to find Christine and rid her of Solomon." "Then we should only break the Seal at the last possible second," Jesse said.

"Precisely."

A loud foghorn could be heard from outside.

"There's your ride," Gilgamesh said. "I wanna wish best of luck to both of you."

"You're not coming with us?" Jesse asked.

"Friend, I'm just a simple spirit in a strange universe," he said. "I'm still bound to my own afterlife, part of which resides in this ark. So you go on ahead, do me proud, and don't worry your heads about me. I've got my old friends to look for and you've got bigger fish to fry."

"Thanks, Gilgamesh," Nigel said.

Jesse saluted him. "Hail to the King."

Leaving Gilgamesh behind, Nigel threw the guitar strap over his shoulder with his sword and followed Jesse to the upper deck. There, they beared witness to an incredible sight, even more so than the broken universe around them. Spaceships. Exactly one million spaceships.

Some were like Earth's battleships or space shuttles. Other seemed to have stepped out of assorted science-fiction stories. Some looked like flying cities, others were built as islands. There were oil tanker ships, aircraft carrier ships, pirate ships, monster truck ships, ferris wheel ships, pointy triangle ships, backhoe ships, giant robot ships, ships with tentacles, ships with boxing gloves, ships with vacuum

cleaners, ships covered in spheres, ships covered in trees, ships covered in bees, and ships that resembled food items with tiny satellite dishes attached.

Jesse laughed triumphantly as he looked upon this massive fleet that had surrounded them.

A giant space whale rose up in front of the ark, letting out a loud, hollow whale moan as if to say “*hellooooooooo*”. There was armour mounted all over its body with a yacht-style command center on its back. Along its side read the words: *PSS Pequod*, with a caricature of Poseidon dressed as *Popeye* next to it. Above that, they saw dozens of people at the railing.

At the forefront of them was Trisha, standing alongside Poseidon in his skipper’s hat

She called out to them, “Ahoy, maties! All aboard?”

Nigel smiled. “Damn right.”

39. From Hell's Heart

"You want us to attack Heaven?" Poseidon reiterated as they stood around the conference table of the command center atop an enormous flying blue whale.

Others shared the concern. Athena and Osiris were here, along with Charlie Magnus and several of his Paladin Soldiers. They'd called in representatives from other ships as well. Zeus arrived with Thor, Quetzalcoatl and an entourage of Thunderbirds from his wooden space-plane, the *Spruce Zeus*. Hades had rode in on the great island-ship, *Avalon*, flown by the ghosts of King Arthur's knights with Viviane at the helm. Atlas appeared via the *Naglfar*, a schooner made of toenails and piloted by Captain Hrym who led a small army of Frost and Fire Giants. Finally, there was Lido Da Vido, an Italian demigod inventor whose ship, the *Verrocchio*, was an electric blue Renaissance-style techno-glider made of virtual polygons. He marched onto the command deck with a small group of jackal-headed Egyptian guards at his side.

It had taken some explaining for those who immediately sensed that Jesse and Nigel had become demons. Particularly, Trisha was concerned when she saw Nigel's pure black irises and worried he might be an imposter. Once they were all reminded of Pandora's involvement,

however, they decided to let it go. All things considered, having a pair of demons on their side was a plus.

"You've clearly got the firepower for it," Nigel said, gesturing to the one million surrounding ships as they flew through the turbulent cosmos.

"These aren't our ships," Poseidon said. "We ran into a few fleets before finding you, but not on this scale. They just happened to arrive when we did."

"Then what happened after we separated?" Jesse asked.

"Osiris was leading us back through the Isle of the Blessed when we ran into the Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister," Trisha said. "She relayed a message from Charlie Magnus. She wanted us to get ahold of some ships, take refuge around the Proxima Centauri star, and continue relaying the same message to other deities until we received further instructions. Soon, other Ancients started showing up."

"We've been in orbit ever since," Poseidon said.

"Until the universe fell apart, that is," Hades said. "We lost all contact with Earth."

"Earth is gone," Nigel said. "It was destroyed when the last Seal shattered."

"Believe us, we know," Trisha said. "Shortly after finding out, we began seeing visions. We saw you and Jesse adrift. We knew where to find you."

"And it seems we weren't the only ones to get that message," Athena said, looking to the surrounding fleet.

"Was this fleet one of Christine's back-up plans?" Jesse asked.

"In fact, it was not the will of Her Blessed Lady that we be here," Magnus said. "My men and I were visited by a different emissary. She asked us to seek out as many Ancients as possible, use their ships to evacuate the universe, and spread the word to others."

"She?" Nigel inquired.

"Why, none other than the lovely Mistress of Madness herself," Magnus grinned.

"Remember when Pandora wandered off earlier?" Osiris asked. "This is what she was up to."

"Each of my men told five friends, who told five friends of their own," Magnus said. "A few hours later, we somehow came up with enough ships to rally survivors from across the cosmos."

"Intergalactic networking," Jesse grinned. "Pandora nailed it."

"That can't be right," Nigel said. "By her standards, that plan almost sounds sane."

"Except that we're riding a whale through outer space as a result."

"I stand corrected."

"Beg pardon, this is preposterous!" Zeus scoffed. "Do we not hear ourselves? Attack Heaven! Risk the destruction of the universe! And with the help of the Devil, no less! This is not how things are done!"

"We don't exactly have a choice, Zeus," Poseidon said.

"We certainly do!" he replied. "I mean, why risk certain death for the Creator's mistake? From what I hear, He was beaten fair and square by this Solomon fellow! A man like that deserves our respect, not our vengeance! Why, we could take the survivors, set sail for another world and begin anew, stronger than before with Solomon as our new God! It would be as if nothing's changed!"

"It's you who does not hear himself," Quetzalcoatl said.

"Solomon was responsible for the deaths of our people! You were there when the Reaper came for us!"

"Then what of the Titans?" Zeus asked. "I won the first Titan War! I earned the right to withhold their power! Even

if we win this battle, restoring them will put my people at a disadvantage!”

“In this fight, our duty is to all existence,” Thor said. “We cannot let ourselves get hung up on past squabbles.”

Zeus shook his head and said, “I stand in the company of fools.”

“Regardless, Nigel’s right,” Trisha said. “We need to help Christine defeat Solomon and we’re going to need every ship in this fleet to do it - yours included.”

“Then you may take what you need from me,” Zeus said dismally, “but only after my daughter approves of a plan.”

“And unfortunately, we don’t have enough intel to plan a strike of this magnitude,” Athena said.

“But we have enough ships to surround Heaven and attack them from every angle,” Trisha pointed out.

With a wave of her hand over the table, a holographic display of Heaven appeared. It was shaped like a ring made of nine circles. Each circle contained its own cities, forests, mountains and lakes. One circle contained an enormous barred gate, while the circle at the far end of the ring was home to a great palace where Solomon and Christine presumably were. The rings were connected by a single river that encircled around the realm.

“Look at this,” Athena said. “As long as the Pearly Gates are closed, the rest of Heaven is surrounded by a First Age force field. That’s where Dominion will rally her forces. And need I remind you that her Fire-Blood army is fully demonized?”

“They’re Fire-Bloods,” Trisha said. “Demon or not, just go for the heart.”

“You think Heaven’s army didn’t do that?” Athena asked.

“Even if we send Lucifer’s forces after them, Solomon has them in infinite supply. With enough numbers, that many

Fire-Blood demons will tear through our ships like tissue paper.”

“Then we push through the ranks, open the Pearly Gates, and get to their source,” Trisha said.

“And what exactly is their source?”

“Might I cut in?” Nigel asked. “When I was wandering out there, I saw a brief vision of Ares tied up in a garden. I know for a fact that he’s the source of all these Fire-Bloods.”

“That’s probably the Garden of Eden,” Osiris said. “Check the third circle.”

Trisha swept the holograms around and centered in on the third circle. In the center of the display appeared to be a walled-off tropical conservatory. “So we get inside there and free Ares, cutting off their supply of soldiers.”

“And what of the Horsemen?” Athena asked. “None of us stand a chance against Zero Age deities.”

“Not entirely true,” Nigel said. “I’ve been in contact with the subconscious of one of them who wanted to help. He said the Creator kept them at bay by sealing their souls inside four relics. The Horsemen carry those relics. If we find and break the four Seals, the Horsemen should become vulnerable.”

“It’s just a question of getting our hands on those relics,” Poseidon said. “The Reaper moves with lightning speed.”

“And Dominion controls anyone she touches,” Jesse said.

“Then there’s Darryl, and you don’t want to get anywhere near his mouth.”

“What about the fourth?” Athena asked.

“Devo has psychokinetic abilities,” Nigel said, “but if you can slip past his notice, his Seal is a diamond inside his head.”

“Can we make a plan out of any of this?” Poseidon asked.

It took much deliberation before Athena said, "Yes. Our chances are slim, but it's possible. I just need some time to iron out the details."

"It's going to take a lot of organizing," Trish said. "A lot of ships will need to be brought up to speed. Lido, do you think you can set up a communication network with the rest of the fleet?"

"Si, signora," Lido said as he brought up a holographic keyboard on the table and began typing away. "Give Lido a few minutes and a million ships will be at your call."

"So, Zeus," Nigel asked. "Are you with us, or are we going to face a repeat of what happened on Mars?"

Zeus sighed as he turned to his brothers and asked.

"Poseidon, Hades, are you two truly willing to die for this cause?"

"I live in the company of miracle workers," Poseidon said. "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

"And I've nothing else going on tonight," Hades said.

"You can hide in the past all you like, Zeus," Nigel said, "but it doesn't change the fact that the end is coming. If we don't meet it head-on, it'll find us."

Zeus paused before speaking. He didn't like the plan, but he hated being left out even more.

"Then we'll meet it."

* * *

The meeting carried on for another hour or so as Trisha and Athena worked out the details of the attack. They then had Lido delegate people to communicate with the other ships, who in turn assigned delegates to communicate with even more ships. It became tired and tedious work waiting for the ships to relay information back and forth. Jesse and

Nigel soon grew weary of it and wandered off after they finished filling everyone else in on what they'd learned. They found a nice spot on the whale's nose to lay down on and watched the stars go by. The whale sang merrily as it swam through space.

"Why do I feel like we'll be doing all the work once we attack?" Jesse asked.

"That's generally the norm," Nigel said as some of the stars turned into candy. "Everything always centers around us for some reason."

"Even when we're not in on the plan."

"Or perhaps we're just arrogant that way," Nigel said.

"Maybe everybody else's life is just as interesting as ours, but we're never going to hear about it."

"I think I should write a book when this is all over," Jesse said. "A three-part saga about two brothers running a bar in Halifax who fight off demons and other forces of the universe. And it'll have everybody we know in it."

"And what would you call this book?" Nigel asked.

"Pandora's Prerogative: A Jesse and Nigel Super Sleuth Mystery."

"I think we do a lot less mystery-solving and a lot more destroying of public property."

"My version will have mysteries," Jesse said. "Like how in the first book, all the demons are smoke and mirror effects created by the real estate developer, Laptop Guy, and his secret accomplice, Patti."

"You realize that'll ruin the twist in your second book, right?"

"Nah, I'll just rewrite everything once I get there," Jesse said. "Writing's easy. It's just words on paper."

"Good luck with that, then."

"You believe we're going to make it out of this, right?" Jesse asked.

"We're going to meet our Maker," Nigel said. "I don't plan beyond that."

"You don't want to get your bar back? Go back to Halifax?"

"You know I was going to sell it."

"What about Trish? What about your music?"

"People say you should never talk about what you're going to do after the war," Nigel said, "because those are the things you'll never do again."

"They're also the things we need to know about you,"

Jesse said. "How else are we supposed to live on if we don't share our dreams?"

"Fine," Nigel sighed. "If I make it out of this, I'm selling the bar, adopting a family, and focusing on my music career. I'll release an album of lost historical classics."

"I can see that," Jesse said, "and I promise I will do exactly that for you if you don't make it out alive. And you promise you'll write my trilogy, plus the companion novels.

Agreed?"

"I'm not helping with your stupid books."

"You really should. Otherwise, most of the second book will just be me aimlessly wandering in the dark."

"Okay, fine. If you don't survive, I promise I'll write our autobiography," Nigel said.

"A trilogy, or it won't get optioned for film."

"Autobiography or nothing."

"I guess that'll work," Jesse said. "But get Peter Jackson on it. He can make three movies out of anything."

"Why is a book so important to you?"

"For all the time we've spent on Earth, how much did we ever really put into it?" Jesse asked. "Did we ever invent something? Write a symphony? Program an app?"

"We made it possible for others to."

"Maybe, but still," Jesse sighed, "it'd be nice to give back something with our name on it. That's what your music is

really all about, isn't it? Your little way of saying '*Nigel was here*'?"

"Sure, if the universe ever gets back to normal."

"Ptolemy will come through for us," Jesse said. "We just to have to keep fighting until then."

"Do you still believe Christine can be saved?"

"She's been carrying a huge weight for the last few months," Jesse said. "If she can hold out a little longer, we'll get her back. I know it."

Trisha hovered over them, standing on the rubbery surface of the whale's nose. She appeared upside down from their positions and dangled a six-pack of Heineken beer over their heads.

"Courtesy of Poseidon," she said. "Thirsty?"

"Join us," Nigel said.

"The fleet has agreed; we'll be breaching Heaven's gate in forty minutes," she said as she stepped around to their side and plopped down on the whale's nose next to Nigel.

"This could be a one-way trip, so everyone's heading off to their own ships to tie up personal matters."

She took a couple cans off the six-pack and tossed them to the boys before lying back on the whale's nose cradling the other four cans. She breathed deeply and stared at the colourful sea of cosmic irregularities overhead.

"So it's just us?" Nigel asked.

"Just us and Poseidon at the helm, thank god," she replied.

"I think I've had enough of moderating god squabbles.

Stress relief, it's not. If we're heading to our deaths, I just want to get good and drunk."

"I thought booze takes forever to hit vampires," Jesse said.

"Hence why I'm shotgunning," Trisha replied as she masterfully punctured the side of a can with her thumbnail, popped the top and quickly inhaled its contents. She did it

twice more, the boys watching in awe. All these years she spent as a bartender were really showing.

"Don't get too drunk," Nigel said. "We're going to war in a bit."

"Pft, I've never fired a gun sober in my life."

"Is this so?" Nigel tried to understand. "What about that time last year you sniped Pandora's key out of Vladimir's hand?"

She shrugged. "I was aiming for his head."

"You never cease to amaze me, honey."

"Listen, if things ever go back to the way they were," she said, pausing to shotgun her fourth beer, "I'm done with this crap. I'm coming back to Earth, we're selling that bar, and I'm going to spend the next several decades blissfully zoned out on the couch. Don't even let me think twice about revisiting outer space. Every other damned planet is a desert anyway."

"Sounds like a plan," Jesse said.

"You two, you're my anchors," she said listfully. "I don't care if you're made of fire, possessed by demons, or keeping attracting monsters - I'll take your crap over anyone else's any day of the week."

"Trish, how are you drunk already?" Nigel asked.

"I had a couple during the meeting," she admitted. "Don't judge me."

"I love you, honey."

"You know, Poseidon lent me one of his cabins below deck," she said with a smile.

"It's been a while," Nigel said. "I could go for a little R&R if you're aren't too busy."

Trisha blushed and sat up. She ran her finger along his arm and said, "You read my mind. Meet me in the you-know-where in you-know-when for a little you-know-what. Don't be late and don't come early."

"Never do," Nigel smiled.

As she walked off, Jesse asked, "What was *that* all about?"

"I'll tell you when you're older, kid."

"Ohhh, gotcha," Jesse realized. "Ew."

The whale sang happily.

40. The Great Sage

One could tell a whole other story about what Ptolemy had been through these past couple of days. From his standoff against Nanook the Polar Bear God, to the incessant riddles, to a variety of other tasks and dilemmas. But for the full story, one would have to step back in time a few months earlier to the day he opened a letter of invitation from the Chinese Immortals.

At first, it seemed like a godsend. The prospect of studying under the Chinese Zodiac seemed like a feasible means to recovering his powers. Sadly, it went beyond simply that.

"I won't do it!" Ptolemy shouted into the phone.

He then handed the phone to Patti who translated his words into Mandarin and shouted them right back.

Patti's studio apartment was more or less as cluttered as her mind. Every hobby and class she'd ever taken up was right out in the open: her books on philosophy and art appreciation, her half-assed clay sculptures, her broken homemade furniture, her dead bonsai tree, and countless unfinished poems (most of which either didn't rhyme or gradually devolved into grocery lists) were strewn throughout the room. The only thing she was surprisingly good at was keeping her sink full of dishes and hanging her dirty laundry wherever it looked nice.

While he was still in town, she invited Ptolemy over to discuss the contents of the letter and provide her services as a translator to the Immortals. Over the phone, they were all taking turns making their arguments for Ptolemy's training.

"They say 'Dark times are coming and you're our last hope,'" Patti translated.

"What else is new?" Ptolemy asked. "I thought it was going to be another training session. How would they feel if they were in my place?"

Patti asked and found out. "They said they'd absolutely do it in your place."

"They'd voluntarily *die*?"

"Nobody said anything about dying."

"They mentioned sacrifice."

"They said it was a possible sacrifice; they haven't undergone the pilgrimage themselves."

"I've seen movies; I know how this turns out," Ptolemy said. "It's the classic monomyth. I'll go on an amazing mystical journey and, to acquire the ultimate power, somehow either myself or someone I love will have to die."

"In what movie does that happen?"

"Uh, hello? All of them!" Ptolemy exclaimed.

"Even *Bridget Jones' Diary*?"

"Yes, but a lot more figuratively. In serious quests like this one, it's always literal."

Patti continued to translate. "They don't know enough to guarantee you won't *not die*."

"That's reassuring."

"They also say you were chosen because you have a strange gift," she continued translating. "Because in time, you'll understand what needs to be done, and why no one else can do it."

"I've had my moment in the sun already," Ptolemy said. "I don't need this too."

Patti relayed the information, had a brief shouting match with the Immortals and promptly hung up on them. "Gawd, they're so annoying."

"The nerve of those guys," Ptolemy complained. "Acting as if sacrificing myself isn't a big deal. I understand it's for the greater good, but they don't have to be rude about it."

"Totally agree with you," Patti said. "You don't drop a bomb like that on someone without having all the facts. I guess Immortals don't look at sacrifice the same way we do."

Ptolemy swept back his spiky hair and sighed. "I'm sorry to put you through that."

"No worries," she said. "I'm still getting used to this whole 'Ancients' deal again."

"How is your memory anyway?"

"No memories, but I get gut feelings," she said. "Like when you told me one of my employers is a vampire and it didn't seem weird."

"Or when you spent a good part of last year playing video games in Atlantis?"

"It sounds like something I'd do."

"Does... anything else seem *not-weird*?" Ptolemy asked, a little hope in his tone. He winked at Patti in case he was being too subtle.

She smiled and laughed. "I have a few other feelings too, but I don't think it's fair to take me up on those just yet."

"No, no, of course not," Ptolemy said. "Total gentleman over here."

"It's not like Christine and Jesse's problem," she explained. "I lost my memories along with the rest of the world, but at least I still recognize friends without having doom prophecies about them."

"So you're not completely repulsed by me?"

"Ptolemy, I'll level with you: you're cute, but you know way too much about me."

"Is it a deal-breaking amount?"

"As in, we probably had our fun and you already got what you wanted," she said. "You don't have to obsess over rekindling anything. You can move on to someone else. It's okay. I'm a big girl."

"But I don't want to move on to someone else."

"Then you'd better be patient with me," she said. Then, with a sly grin, she added, "Also, buy me lots of dinner. Preferably sushi tonight."

"It sounds like you're insinuating something."

"It means I have a gut feeling."

Ptolemy's heart nearly skipped a beat.

She changed the topic. "So anyway, that pretty much covered everything in their letter. If you ever need to call them again, just let me know."

"Don't worry about it," Ptolemy said. "I think I'm done with them."

* * *

In one month's time, Ptolemy called them back.

In that time, he didn't even go back to California. He stayed in Nigel's basement with Jesse, listening to leaky water drip into the bucket every night. Jesse showed him around for a couple of days and introduced him to a lot of homeless people, but it was Patti who ultimately kept him from leaving town. She took him to party with her nerdier friends, watched him dance awkwardly at her favourite clubs, and had him occasionally carry her back home (whilst getting vomited on a few times.)

Be it the dancing, the laughs, or the hard liquor, it had taken Patti exactly one week before those gut feelings

were a thing of the past and they were making new memories together.

The next few weeks in Halifax were some of Ptolemy's happiest. He worked in the tavern's kitchen, flirted with their waitress, and learned piano from Nigel. Ptolemy would rarely get to bed until seven in the morning, having spent all night with Patti watching movies, playing games, or engaging in other particular activities. It was a nice reprieve from school, and one that eventually eased him into making a huge, life-changing decision.

"Call the Immortals," he said to Patti one morning.

"But why?" she asked in surprise.

"Because they're right," he said. "It'll have to be me."

"But what about all that stuff you said about sacrifice?"

Ptolemy had been thinking about that very carefully and had come to a decision.

"I promise you it'll never come to that," he said. "Now I know what has to be done. But I do have a favour to ask of you."

He didn't even need to ask. A few minutes later, Patti put in her leave of absence.

First there was the meeting in Beijing. They reacquainted with their friend Wu Tang who introduced them to the other Immortals. Patti was all too happy to once again be Ptolemy's personal translator. They rented out a hotel and spent the next month discussing the logistics of Ptolemy's quest, downing beer shots and singing karaoke.

In that time, Ptolemy was surprised to learn that the one who'd been pulling the Immortals' strings was none other than Christine. He learned a fair many things about her plans than he ever wished to know.

Then came the sight-seeing. They followed the crowds through the Forbidden Kingdom. They followed crowds through Tiananmen Square. They followed the crowds

over the Great Wall of China. They spent several hours in traffic holding their bladders.

Before long, they were in the Hall of the Monkey King, under attack by the Reaper. Ptolemy's promise was short-lived as Wu Tang sacrificed himself to help them escape into the Spirit Plane. Then a few other acquaintances they met along the way sacrificed themselves as well. It was a very traumatizing experience and one that Ptolemy had sadly feared could come to pass. They eventually met up with Nanook the Polar Bear god and began the trials.

As Ptolemy finished combing the last of the matts out of Nanook's polar bear fur, the great bear stood up and said, "You have passed the eightieth trial, young Ptolemy. Now, there is but one trial left. Is your soul prepared?"

"It's prepared well enough," Ptolemy replied.

With a swipe of his paw, Nanook cast aside the misty grounds of the Spirit Plane. The powdery floor rose into a long spiral staircase that ascended into the stars.

"This will take you to the realm of Nirvana," Nanook explained. "Be advised that meeting Buddha is one of the most holiest of experiences. You must go alone."

Patti was already two-thirds of the way up. Nanook shouted at her to come back down, but she was already well on her way to meeting Buddha.

"Or we can all go and try to keep quiet," the Monkey King suggested.

"Fine, whatever, throw tradition to the wind," Nanook grunted. "The whole universe is falling apart anyway."

The Monkey King stood at Ptolemy's side as he began his ascent and left Nanook behind. Having fulfilled his role, the polar bear god wandered aimlessly into the fields to find a good spot for watching the end of the universe.

As they climbed, the Monkey King said, "Ptolemy, you've been a far finer pupil than I ever was to my master. Your

former teachers served you well. But there is yet the final task, and this is one I've never looked forward to."

"Same here," Ptolemy said. "In the movies, build-up like this always amounts to the same thing."

"But you can't face this one like the other trials," the Monkey King explained. "If it is what I fear it is, you must face it with pure wisdom."

The stars swirled over their heads. Light distorted and physics went awry. Something strange was happening to the universe beyond their plane. They passed through a barrier where their bodies temporarily became constellations before reconstituting higher up. They stepped into a cosmic purple vortex of stars and lotus flowers. Here, the souls of the dead ascended from a great glowing well into a supernova where they reincarnated back into the land of the living.

They had reached the realm of Nirvana.

Patti was already there, taking pictures on her phone.

At the far end of this realm, there sat an enormous, jolly round man in a golden robe whose legs were crossed on a giant lotus flower. He looked across at Ptolemy and the others and smiled.

"Sun Wukong, you return at last."

The Monkey King bowed in reverence to Buddha. Ptolemy followed suit. Patti waved hello to the enlightened one.

"Great Sage, the universe is under attack," the Monkey King spoke. "Heaven burns and the Horsemen hunt the Ancients while a false Creator sits on the throne. The Zodiac Knight Ptolemy requires the activation of his heavenly powers to defeat him."

"And you've completed the trials?" he asked Ptolemy.

"I've completed the first eighty," he replied.

"Eighty-one trials marks perfection," Buddha said serenely.

"You've come far, Ptolemy. The Creator chose you well, for

only someone with a mind for pop culture tropes could pass the trials as you did.”

“I think you made them easy on purpose,” Ptolemy said.

“That I did,” Buddha replied. “The greatest trial of all is yet to come. You know what it is, don’t you?”

Ptolemy took a deep breath and said, “Please don’t tell me I have to die.”

“Casting off the mortal coil is your last step towards true enlightenment,” Buddha explained. “The previous eighty trials were but cleansers. The true challenge is not facing death, but accepting it. Do you embrace your destiny wholeheartedly and without question?”

“Hold on, time out!” Patti shouted. “How is Ptolemy supposed to get his powers back if he’s dead?”

“Striking him down only makes him stronger,” Buddha explained. “He was once a master of the Earth. To prove he is worthy of Heaven’s unequalled power, he cannot belong to the other.”

“Here’s a better idea: just give him the powers without killing him,” she said. “Or better yet, if you’re so powerful, why aren’t you fighting Solomon?”

Buddha cast a doubtful eye towards the Monkey King. “Is she one of your pupils?”

“I’m sorry, Lord Buddha,” the King said. “She doesn’t understand how we do things.”

“Like hell I don’t!” she blurted out. “In case you haven’t noticed, the universe is falling apart and we’re running short on afterlives.”

Ptolemy put a hand on her shoulder to console her. “It’s all right, Patti. I just want to ask him some things.”

Buddha reminded him. “You must accept *without question*.”

“Which is why I’ll ask *questions*,” Ptolemy said. Buddha seemed satisfied with this response. “First off, *will it hurt?*”

"You won't even know it when it happens," Buddha said.

"You simply drink from the well of enlightenment and rest takes care of itself."

"And what kind of powers will I get in return?"

"You will gain absolutely *nothing*, yet *everything*," Buddha replied. "Used wisely, this gift is the most powerful thing in the known universe. Such a power may only be used to bring balance to existence; nothing more and nothing less."

"But I still get to watch movies and play video games?"

"Of course," Buddha said, understanding completely that movies and video games were as important as food and water. He gestured to a black-and-white television in the corner of Nirvana. His own Atari 2600 and VCR were hooked up to it. There was even a pile of old Archie comics sitting nearby. "But we're always a few generations behind up here."

Ptolemy didn't like the idea of waiting a few decades to catch up on all the next-gen technologies, but he understood that some sacrifices had to be made.

"And how much of me stays behind?" Ptolemy asked.

"When I die, does it mean I lose my entire identity? Or am I still sort of a spirit/god/angel thing who can visit Patti on the weekends? I'm not sure how death works with you deities."

Buddha seemed slightly annoyed. "Ptolemy, do you want pure enlightenment or not?"

"I do, but I don't want my soul to end up as some faceless non-corporeal gas cloud, okay? Up until the last year, I've had virtually no life. If I'm dying, I need to make sure who I became isn't lost in vain."

There was a silence as Buddha prepared his next words.

"You've come to an end of a long road," he said. "With existence hanging in the balance, you must understand that there is no return for any of you. You either move forward now or remain forever lost."

Ptolemy sighed. "Then I refuse."

"Are you certain of that?" Buddha asked. "The universe is about to end anyway."

Patti affectionately held Ptolemy's hand. "He is."

"There's nothing to be gained from another death,"

Ptolemy said. "I promised her it wouldn't come to that."

"Very well," Buddha said. "You've passed the test."

Patti's eyes lit up. "What?"

Ptolemy smirked.

Buddha laughed. "Smart kid. I thought I had you."

"So I figured out the test?" Ptolemy asked.

"One of the rules of Buddhism is to never accept blindly,"

Buddha explained. "I saw you in the physical world. You asked questions and meditated on answers before agreeing to the journey. I had to make sure you retained that wisdom as it is essential for your final transformation."

"So if he accepted death, he would have failed?" Patti asked.

"Of course," Buddha said. "Enlightenment comes from living."

Patti hit Ptolemy in the arm before hugging him. "You jerk. You could have said something."

"For a while, I kept thinking sacrifice," Ptolemy said, "but then I remembered that in a lot of other movies, power comes from believing in yourself. I figured that was a good trope to gamble on."

"And from within yourself your power will come," Buddha said. "The spirits of hundreds of Zodiac Knights live on through you. It is time to draw upon their strength."

"So does he acquire his powers now?" the Monkey King asked.

"Totally yes," Buddha said. "Things have gotten real on the outside, so we'll actually need to speed things along. Let me just find a transcendence stick..."

As Buddha searched in his tree for an appropriate stick, Patti looked to Ptolemy with admiration in her eyes.

"You did it," she said.

"I didn't do it alone," Ptolemy said. "Thanks for everything."

"Just make me one more promise."

"Anything."

"If this transcension turns you into a giant Space Buddha," she said. "I want to ride on your shoulder."

Ptolemy looked to the Monkey King and asked, "Is that feasible?"

The Monkey King shrugged.

There was a sudden shudder throughout Nirvana that took everyone by surprise. Even Buddha was startled.

The glowing gravity well and the supernova vanished, along with all the reincarnating souls.

"That's not right," the Monkey King said as he approached the edge of the well and looked into a featureless pit. "I thought the portal was eternal!"

"It is." Buddha stood up as the purple cosmic juices faded to grey and a mysterious snowfall set into the realm. He suddenly felt very weak.

His serene voice turned to angst. "Who dares interrupt the Eighty-First trial?"

An hollow, female laugh filled the realm.

"Is this part of the test?" Ptolemy asked.

"No," Buddha said warily. "We've been discovered."

"By who?"

The stairway that brought them here vanished. The Monkey King hurried over to find it and immediately ran face-first into an invisible wall. He quickly ran his elongating staff against the edges of the realm and discovered the whole thing was encased in a force field. He struck the wall a few times to no avail.

"I can't place the magic," he said, feeling weakened as well. "Something on the outside is sapping power from the realm. It's not natural."

"Is it the Horsemen?" Ptolemy asked.

"I don't even think it's Solomon," the King said, growing fearful. "Whatever it is, it's powerful. It's... it's a new form of chaos magic."

Ptolemy's face went flush. "Oh, no, no, no..."

"It's not Pandora again, is it?" asked Patti.

"It's worse," Buddha realized.

As he looked beyond the borders of Nirvana, he could make out the faint silhouette of five great pillars surrounding his realm. Those pillars were enormous fingers. The realm was sitting in the palm of a gigantic hand. High above that was a woman's face leering down at them with an evil leer. Everyone else saw it too.

The face was Christine's. The eyes were someone else's. The entity's giant fingers closed around the realm, bathing them in darkness.

"What just happened?" Patti asked.

As she spoke, both Buddha and the Monkey King faded from sight, horrified expressions on their faces as they vanished. Patti and Ptolemy called into the darkness after them, but no one answered. The two of them were completely alone in this barren realm with only a barely-visible peach tree and an Atari 2600 for company. The force field shimmered as if someone had just turned a key and locked it.

"I think Solomon caught up with us," Ptolemy realized.

"But that thing had Christine's face! What does it mean?"

"It means," Ptolemy said, "that the others are on their own now."

41. Kingdom Come

“Solomon knows you’re coming.”

Relaxed a moment before, Nigel’s eyes shot open with surprise as Devo’s voice entered his mind. His shock took Trisha by surprise as well. She lifted her head from his bare chest and rolled over onto the mattress before asking, “What’s wrong, Nigel?”

“You won’t make it past the gate,” Devo continued. *“The Horsemen have returned to Heaven. They’re waiting for you.”*

“Leave us alone,” Nigel said, stroking his forehead. “This is private time.”

“Are gods spying on us?” Trisha asked, anger welling up in her voice as she pulled her blanket higher to cover up.

“Poseidon said this room was safe!”

“No, no, it’s the Horseman,” Nigel said. “He’s says the others know we’re coming.”

“Damn it,” she cursed. “We’re never going to catch a break, are we?”

“Death will meet you at the Gate,” Devo said. *“Your trump card will not be enough.”*

Nigel eyed the guitar sitting by the cabin door and his heart sank.

“You know about the Seventh Seal?” Nigel asked.

Trisha felt left out. “What’s going on, Nigel?”

"I've been listening in," Devo said. "You'll need to break the Seal just to breach the Gate. If you do that, you won't have enough time to even reach Solomon. The Horsemen will see to that. You'll have destroyed the universe for nothing!"

"Then what do you think we should do?"

"Run! Hide! Fight the Horsemen another day!"

"Now, listen here!" Nigel snapped. "You were wrong about Pandora and you're wrong about this! We're getting into Heaven, we're kicking some Horseman ass, and we're taking Solomon off that throne!"

"And how will you face the Horsemen? Even if you find their relics, nothing of this universe can destroy them."

"Are you going to help us or not?"

"I'm telling you to flee while you can."

"We're through running. Get out of my head."

The Horseman didn't reply.

His presence vanished.

"Nigel...?" Trisha asked again.

Before he could say anything, they heard a blast from the whale's blowhole. It sounded like a foghorn, summoning everybody to the bridge.

"Get dressed," Nigel said. "We've got Heaven to save."

Standing around the command deck of the whale were rows of Paladin soldiers. Flying alongside the *Pequod* were the *Naglfar*, *Avalon*, *Verrocchio*, and *Spruce Zeus* in close proximity, each with their own captains standing at the helm. The armies of Paladins, Thunderbirds, Titans, Jackal-Headed Sentries, and Knights of the Round Table stood by the ready, armed for battle with guns, swords, spears, and hammers. Other ships flew nearby with their own respective armies of deities and mortals on standby.

As Nigel ascended the stairs carrying the guitar and his sword, he saw Athena was busy having a short spat with Jesse.

"It'll cheer everybody up!" Jesse exclaimed.

"You are not giving an inspirational speech!" Athena claimed. "It's overdone and tacky!"

"The troops will love it," Jesse insisted. "I've got the whole thing memorized in my head! Come on, just give me one minute! It'll be better than *Braveheart*, I swear!"

"Take five, Jess," Trisha said as she turned to Athena, "What's our ETA?"

"We're hitting Heaven's shore in five minutes," Athena said as she pointed out across the fractured cosmos to what appeared to be a miniature starlit galaxy in the distance. Far away, Heaven shone like the sun, with rings of light and cloudy mist pouring from its center. Upon approach, many had to avert their eyes from its blaze. It was difficult to make out any details through the shine.

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

"A thousand ships will storm the Gate," Athena said. "Our five ships will spearhead the charge."

"The *Pequod* will be our operations center," Poseidon said.

"The Titans aboard the *Naglfar* have agreed to run defense while the Thunderbirds provide cover-fire. Meanwhile, Lido's ship will use his anti-Age tech support teams to debuff Solomon's troops while Vivianne casts healing magic on our units."

"Once we breach the Gate, the fleet will move in!" Charlie Magnus exclaimed. "Solomon will have nowhere to hide!"

"You should know the Horsemen will be expecting us," Nigel said.

"And we'll be expecting them," Athena said. "Our foremost priority, however, is dealing with the Fire-Bloods. If they try to intercept us before we reach the shores..."

"Don't worry," Nigel said. "Fire-Blood demons don't fly."

"Arrrr, come in, Pequod," a pirate voice said over the intercom, *"We be detecting incoming movement from Heaven. Please be advising, over."*

"This is Poseidon, Hyrm," he replied into the intercom.

"How much movement are you detecting?"

"Me hearties say there be about a thousand on their way," he answered. *"Maybe more!"*

Before Poseidon could reply, something swept past their ships, flew into the fleet, and landed against a large tubular ship. Within seconds, the huge ship was torn in half by a small horned man in army gear. Hundreds of gods poured from its hull and were set upon by the Fire-Blood demon. Moments later, several other Fire-Blood demons flew past their ships and attacked others in the fleet.

"I thought you said they couldn't fly," Jesse said.

"They can't, but they sure as hell can jump," Nigel answered.

"We're under attack!" Athena called back. "Run interference now!"

"Aye-aye, cap'n!" Hyrm said. Several Titans and Thunderbirds leapt from their ships and soared off ahead of the fleet towards Heaven's light. As they flew towards their targets, the Titans unleashed furious storms of fire and ice from their hands while the Thunderbirds fired lightning into the incoming Fire-Blood army. They disappeared into the blinding light.

A moment later, screams could be heard.

The fleet entered the fray.

Fire, ice, and lightning filled the air.

Titans and demons grappled through the cosmos. The Fire-Bloods, unable to fly normally, slashed at their opponents and leapt off their bodies towards other targets. In spite of staying behind the Titans, Thunderbirds were

just as easily getting cut down in heavy numbers. Several other ships from the fleet were dispatching their own armies as well. Squadrons of gargoyles, pegasus cavaliers, and jetpack troopers flew into the fiasco to combat the oncoming threat. *Avalon*'s magic did its best to heal everyone while Lido's ship emitted targeted anti-Age rays at the enemy. Neither seemed to be having much of an effect.

"There's too many!" Athena exclaimed.

The battle swarmed around them. The Fire-Bloods were arriving by the hundreds. For every one that fell, more came. Everyone aboard the *Pequod* hid behind the command console as the whale did its best to swim around the oncoming threat.

There was no end to them.

And then they saw Death.

The Horseman was riding his skeletal steed through the air, teleporting from one target to another and putting his blade through every random soldier he came across.

There was no logic or pattern to his movements. Whatever appeared in his path died.

"They're getting slaughtered out there!" Hades called over the intercom.

"We cannot stand idly by as this happens!" Thor shouted.

"Atlas can't stand it!" the Titan shouted. *"Atlas is going to help them!"*

"No, all of you, stay with your ships!" Athena shouted. "We need you on Heaven's shore!"

"We're not going to make it to the shore," Poseidon said, looking to Nigel. "Not without a miracle."

Nigel knew what had to be done, but it was too soon.

"If I break the Seal now, we may not have the time we need to reach Solomon."

"If you don't, we're not even reaching the Pearly Gates," Athena replied.

"But why wouldn't we reach Solomon in time?" Jesse asked. "I think we could do it if we hurry."

"Because of the Horsemen," Nigel said. "We'll be walking into their trap."

"Then we defeat the Horsemen, just like the plan," Poseidon said.

"It's not that easy!" Nigel insisted. "Devo told me nothing of this universe can break their relics!"

"Then why don't we find something from their universe that can?" Jesse suggested.

"Because..." Nigel paused. It sounded like an idiotic answer, but as soon as Jesse said it, the obvious hit Nigel like a ton of bricks.

It was a long shot, but possible.

He gazed into the skies and saw Death cutting down ships and deities one after the other. Nigel could only wonder if the Reaper was still blind in these fractured skies, or if the void of space made him more dangerous than ever.

"Death's scythe," Nigel said.

"But how do we get it?" Trisha asked.

"I'll work that out," Nigel said. He looked to Jesse and said, "Whatever happens, get the others to the Garden of Eden. Find Ares. Bring down that army at all costs."

"Why?" Jesse asked. "Where are you going?"

Nigel unslung the guitar from over his back and held it upside-down by its neck.

"Send word to the fleet and get them in position," he said.

"From here on out, this universe only has twenty-nine minutes left."

"Whoa, hold it!" Poseidon exclaimed. "Shouldn't we wait until we're closer?"

“Death waits for no man,” Nigel said as he swung the guitar with all his might.
The guitar shattered against the floor of the command deck.
In a still silence to follow, nothing happened.
And then everything happened.

42. Death from Above

It's far more difficult to visualize a broken universe than a collapsing one.

A broken universe requires one to imagine ten overlapping dimensions of colours, realities, timelines, physics and smells all happening at once. The mind-boggling possibilities of what you could imagine are endless. As a result, it's much easier to describe such a universe by saying something absurd like "it looks like alphabet soup, except it's made of rainbows and all the pasta bits are ocelots and coffee mugs."

To visualize a collapsing universe is a different matter. In such a case, simply imagine the aforementioned alphabet soup, and then imagine it going down. Not down in any number of infinite directions, of course. Simply down, as if its gravity were below your own feet. If you can picture that, then you can picture what everyone might have felt as the fleet, armies, and Heaven were all simultaneously sucked downwards toward oblivion.

Their approach on Heaven was still steady. The universe outside the battlefield whisked by at a fast rate, slowly contracting into an infinite singularity.

"Ahhhh, what's going on over there?" Atlas shouted over the comm. *"Atlas is feeling funny over here!"*

Poseidon, Osiris and Athena felt it as well. Their bodies glowed as they felt energy lifting from their bodies. Their excess power was being returned to the Titans. They should have felt weaker, but only seemed to stand up straighter as a result.

They couldn't see it happen immediately, but the death-counts between demons and Titans was decreasingly significantly. As the Fire and Frost Giants battled their foes, their skin became harder. Their muscles were tighter. Their elemental magic was hitting its peak. The Fire-Blood demons were now facing a much stronger threat.

Then the next big miracle happened.

From behind the fleet opened a massive glowing crack in space. Its light rivaled that of Heaven's. Its size could have engulfed the fleet itself.

Out flew an army from within.

Clad in spiked battle armor, flying on wings of black feathers, came Lucifer's army of fallen angels. The dark legion soared past the fleet and descended on the Fire-Bloods with a vengeance. With swords and halberds, they began pressing the onslaught back, though many Fire-Bloods continued to get through their blockade.

Finally, riding atop an enormous, winged, seven-headed purple dragon came Lucifer. With blonde hair, black wings and carrying a morning star, he stormed into battle screaming and laughing, "Daddy, we're coming home!"

Death's blade found him anticlimactically fast.

Lucifer's expression froze in shock as the Reaper pulled the scythe from his chest. The Devil dropped his weapon and toppled off the dragon's back, plummeting into the collapsing cosmos. Without a second thought, Death galloped off to find someone new to kill.

As Lucifer's dragon flew on without him, Nigel raced to the edge of the command deck and hopped the railing. He

turned back to Jesse and shouted, “Don’t forget what I told you!”

“Get to the Garden of Eden, save Ares,” Jesse reiterated.

Nigel threw his sword to Trisha and shouted, “Good luck!”

He then leapt off the whale into the fracas below.

Trisha was quick to shout after him, but he’d already landed on Lucifer’s dragon. Pulling on the reigns, Nigel flew the seven-headed beast ahead of the whale ship and charged off into battle.

He felt his fear demon within deliberate whether this was an act of courage or an act of fear. By all rights, he’d been far too proactive and his demon had given him too much lee-way. If he showed even the slightest hint of cockiness, it was ready to consume him. He had to chance that his fear of the universe’s end was the only thing keeping him alive at this point.

Death’s movements were erratic. Chasing him would be next to impossible. He would appear in one place for a few seconds, make a kill, then reappear elsewhere. Every time it happened, Nigel had to search frantically to see where the Reaper had moved. The Horseman could just as easily appear behind him as anybody else.

Suddenly, there was an opening.

As Death struck down a Thunderbird, a Frost Giant quickly flew up and grabbed ahold of him from behind. The Reaper struggled to free himself from the freshly-empowered Titan, his arms bending at strange angles to strike at his foe.

Nigel targeted him and snapped the reigns. The dragon heads took this as a cue to cough up high-velocity fireballs in Death’s direction. The Frost Giant, who saw them coming, released the Reaper in time as the fireballs exploded upon impact.

Nigel let his instincts guide him in the moments to follow.

His instincts were correct, as the Reaper immediately

teleported onto the dragon's back behind him. Before it could strike, Nigel had already turned around and gotten in close to avoid the blade. He grabbed onto the handle and tried to wrestle it from the Horseman's grip. Even with his demon strength, even trying to control Death's shadows, it was no use. The Reaper was too strong.

The blade slashed out. The dragon cried as the base of one of its necks was severed from its body. Then another. Then another. The now-four-headed dragon swerved out of control, crashing against every Fire-Blood, Titan and Thunderbird that got in its path.

Then the rest of the universe showed up.

So caught up in fighting the Reaper, Nigel hadn't anticipated the dangers of a rapidly collapsing universe. With space quickly compressing in on itself, matter from across the cosmos was tearing past. Comets and moons were rocketing downwards through the fleet, taking out soldiers and ships by the hundreds. Then entire gas giants appeared. Miles away, Nigel saw the Great Red Spot of what appeared to be the planet Jupiter descending past Heaven.

Existence warped around him.

The Reaper teleported both the dragon and Nigel directly into Jupiter's path. They descended into the heart of the forty-thousand mile wide hurricane of Jupiter's Red Spot. The crimson winds whipped past them at four hundred miles an hour. They felt the crushing pressure of the planet's gravity. The panicking dragon ignited the surrounding air. They fell like a fireball, burning through the planet's atmosphere.

Nigel forced a punch through the winds, striking Death repeatedly in the head. The tiny vertebrae of Death's face merely crumpled like paper and reformed as soon as Nigel pulled back. Finally, Nigel grabbed onto Death's robes and

tried to pull them off. Jupiter's winds assisted in shredding them from Death's person.

What Nigel saw, he hadn't expected.

Until now, he'd imagined arms and legs. Maybe even a hipbone or rib cage. But there wasn't even a horse. Death was nothing more than one long strand of tiny white vertebrae that had bent and shaped itself into a skeleton form like an unraveled coat hanger. Even his horse was part of his own body. Nigel watched as the horse legs unbent themselves into tentacles and lashed out in self-defense.

They hit a burst of wind that knocked them off the dragon's back. Nigel clung onto Death's scythe and held on tight as they spiraled out of control through the hurricane. In the madness, Nigel spotted a single glint of metal dangling on a chain from what appeared to be Death's neck.

It was a single bronze coin.

It had to be the Seal!

Nigel hastily snatched it off the Horseman's necklace.

The Horseman panicked and everything warped again as he teleported.

They were in the dead of space now. Jupiter was off in the distance. Heaven and the fleet were but a distant light.

Asteroids rained around them as Nigel fought with the heavily-aggravated string of bones. Nigel could only liken the experience to wrestling an armful of cobras as he tumbled through the coldness. As a Fire-Blood, he would have felt space's crippling effects, but as a demon, the lack of air and heat was barely noticeable.

As Nigel struck at the Reaper's right side again, they teleported several feet to his left. He struck again from the left and they teleported several more feet in other direction. In its anger, the Reaper had left itself maneuverable.

Another planet fell past. It was a great green gas giant with blue stripes and a enormous rings of dust and ice. It could have easily been mistaken for Saturn, but had clearly fallen out of another solar system. Nigel decided to call it Saturn anyway.

With a few well-placed strikes, Nigel forced the Reaper to teleport into Saturn's rings. They collided against a passing chunk of ice and separated, each drifting off through the dusty particles of the rings. The surrounding air became heavy with icy grey fog. Visibility was reduced to almost nothing for both of them.

Nigel fell against a large floating rock and steadied himself. Looking around, he found Death had vanished in the fog. He was once again being hunted. He made sure he was still carrying Death's coin and stayed quiet as his tiny asteroid drifted through Saturn's orbit.

Death's voice rattled through soundless space, "Here we play again. A forever returning thorn in my side. That is what you are. Very commendable that you live so long. I don't say this often, but I'd quite like to know you. Have you perhaps a name?"

Nigel didn't answer. He was trying to get a bead on Death's position in the rings, wondering how the Reaper formed vocal cords with its vertebrae.

"I should imagine you wouldn't give yourself away so easily," the Reaper said. "You hide in the rain. You hide in the dirt. You hide in the fog. But when you stand to fight, you are just as petty as every other wretched god or rat in this universe. How do you stand the mediocrity of this existence? Why should you fight to save it?"

Again, no answer.

"Don't pretend you haven't been warned about the end," he said. "They've preached our coming for untold centuries. You should be welcoming us! We've been your salvation

time and time again, and yet mongrels like yourself are so pathetically ungrateful for our service. You see us as monsters, but we are the heralds of your existence. Your universe wouldn't be if we hadn't destroyed the last one. What gives you the right to deny the next?"

Death swept a chunk of ice from his path and teleported from stone to stone, angrily driving his blade through anything he touched. Again and again, he struck, shattering ice and stone. The rings of Saturn continued on silently.

If Death had a heartbeat, it would be racing at this point. He was feeling less like a hunter and more like the prey. He grew weary of this game, but there was little else he could do to win it. There were no Fire-Bloods to command and no dead to raise. It was just the two of them and he wouldn't let this one get away a third time.

Nigel's voice spoke through the fog. "I think you know why."

Death immediately teleported in the direction of the voice and struck into an asteroid. Nigel wasn't there. The Fire-Blood was on the move.

His voice spoke again. Death paused to listen. "Something like you hasn't existed in a long time. How many universes has it been since your first? Were rocks different back then? Did time flow another direction? Was love even a thing? What would you give to know what you're looking at anymore?"

Death snapped forward, slicing through the air and missing Nigel again. Wherever he was, he was quick. Death settled on a drifting block of ice and heard Nigel's voice resonate through the air again. The collapsing universe was making it impossible to hear his voice from any one direction. He tried to look through the ice, but to him, all he saw was meaningless shapes and pointless colours.

"Don't pretend to know me!" Death shouted. "I've seen countless creations! The ugliness of this one isn't even worth saving!"

"I used to think you were blind," Nigel said, "but it's truth you can't see, isn't it? Even when you pick me out of a crowd, you refuse to accept I'm any different than that rock floating five feet in front of your face."

"You *are* just as worthless."

"Some days, sure," Nigel said. "But for today... I am that rock."

The Reaper lashed out at the rock. His blade struck something different.

His bones shivered.

Pain seared his nerves.

His grip on the scythe felt slippery.

He recognized the colour white.

The ice in the air glittered.

He saw the rock he'd struck. It was brown. It was smooth. It was... still repulsive, but completely different from the ice.

"What did you do?" he croaked. He then saw a small bronze, piece of metal at the end of his scythe.

A single coin had been split in two.

"How's the universe look now?" Nigel asked.

Death spun around to see a bipedal flesh creature in dark garments standing atop a floating block of ice. He couldn't grasp what it was until it moved. This had been his prey all along. It actually looked different from other things.

"Still repulsive," he growled. He pulled his scythe from the broken Seal and prepared to strike at Nigel. Now that he saw his prey clearly, this would make things all the easier. Nigel leapt off the ice towards him, ready to take on the Reaper barehanded.

Death struck.

43. At Heaven's Gate

"Brace for impact!" Poseidon shouted from the helm. Poseidon steered the *Pequod* through the shooting stars, veering around the battles as they pierced Heaven's light and bore down on the Pearly Gates. The whale sang loudly, begging everyone to get out of their way.

"Poseidon, you're going to get us all killed!" Trisha shouted as she, the others and all of Magnus' men clung to the railings for dear life.

Poseidon laughed like a pirate, "Give the scurvy scallywags no quarter! There be whales here!"

Ramming a blue whale into a giant pair of wrought-iron gates hadn't been anyone's first plan. In fact, flying the *Pequod* into a secure First Age barrier was a surefire recipe for whale soup. But being connected telepathically to all forms of marine life, Poseidon could sense the *Pequod's* persistence. They were going to make a grand entrance and she wanted to be the one who kicked down the door. Poseidon couldn't deprive her of that, so he threw caution to the wind and prayed Heaven wasn't whale-proof.

It wasn't.

The *Pequod* barreled through the courtyard. All two hundred tons of the marine mammal collided with the Gates with a deafening smash. The two doors flew open, breaking off their hinges, and flattening several unsuspecting Fire-Bloods on the other side. The whale stormed through and descended to the clouds below to land.

The inner courtyard was already swarming with Fire-Blood sentries, ready to attack. Fortunately, as the *Pequod* settled to land, the four other lead ships arrived. With them, deity reinforcements flooded the courtyard. Thunderbirds, Jackals, and Titans soared through the air, overwhelming the Fire-Bloods in seconds.

The *Pequod* safely landed. Jesse and the others were pleased to discover the ground beneath the clouds was solid. As the reinforcements cleared out any stragglers, Jesse looked upon Heaven in all its glory. It was exactly as he should have expected. There were white, fluffy clouds, roads paved in gold, and every raptured city from Earth littered across its landscape. To the north, they saw Hong Kong, Paris, and Moscow. To the east, Las Vegas, Rio De Janeiro and Melbourne. To the west, Berlin, Johannesburg and New Delhi. Thousands of other towns and cities could be seen piled atop each other in every direction, as if somebody had mown them down like grass and scattered their buildings across the realm.

Across Heaven's landscape, the battle continued. Glowing angels and blazing Fire-Bloods were still warring. Many of the larger angels were gargantuan four-faced behemoths with six wings who stomped across the realm. They were accompanied by enormous angel battle-mechs. The Fire-Bloods seemingly appeared out of the clouds, hundreds at a time, attempting to topple the giants.

"Things must be bad if they're breaking out the Metatrons," Osiris said as he watched a battle-mech keel over and explode in the distance.

Athena was speaking into her Bluetooth headset to the other ships, "The Gates are open, the force field is down! Descend into Heaven and clear us a path to Solomon!"

“The other circles are still compromised,” a voice on the other end said. *“There’s too many Fire-Bloods covering the perimeter. They’re ripping us apart!”*

“Then maintain a defensive position until further instructions,” Athena said. “Send any stray ships around to our position to help us fortify.”

As Jesse looked about, he saw they were in what appeared to be a trainyard. Among the clouds, he saw abandoned boxcars, a ticket office, and an old water tower. Something about it seemed familiar, as if he’d been here before long ago. They were on the outskirts of another Earth city, but Jesse didn’t have time to think about it long. A small legion of Fire-Bloods (with small being in the low thousands) were approaching the trainyard, firing their assault rifles.

Immediately, Magnus’ Paladin army descended from the whale. Guns blazing, they returned fire. The Paladins drew the Fire-Bloods’ attention away from the whale and took cover behind whatever they could find, from steel oil drums to cement blockades.

Everyone else jumped into action as well. Jesse and Trisha slid down the *Pequod*’s blubbery side and ducked behind a small tool shed. Zeus flew from his ship, raining lightning strikes upon the field. Poseidon, with his trident, leapt off his whale and sliced through anyone who came close. Lido fired from a mounted turret atop his ship. Quetzalcoatl was in the thick of it, crushing hearts with his quarterstaff. Thor was quick to rally with him, hammering away at their foes. Atlas and the other Titans plowed through the crowds like stampeding bulls. Lucifer’s minions soared overhead to flank their attackers. King Arthur’s knights did absolutely nothing helpful because, even in Heaven, they were just noncorporeal spectres.

“How much time left?” Trisha asked.

"Twenty-five minutes," Jesse replied.

"Jesse, I need your eyes," Trisha said as she peered around the toolshed and inspected the battlefield. "What are we dealing with and how do we stop it?"

Jesse carefully scanned Heaven, but didn't like their odds.

"You want precise numbers?" he asked.

"Round them off."

"I can only see as far as the first five circles," he said, "but there's at least five billion of them out there."

"Five billion?!"

"Heaven's a big place," Jesse said. "A lot of them are arriving from Manhattan in the third circle, but there's a second grouping to the east. Cut through Melbourne, take a shortcut around Baghdad, and you'll find Dominion just off Panama City in the fifth circle."

"So Manhattan is where the Fire-Bloods are coming from?"

"Could be London. It's hard to tell from this distance."

"Then we need to split up," Trisha said. "Nigel asked you to take care of Devo in the third circle. If you can take a small strike team in, we can mount a defense here."

"I don't think small will cut it," Athena said as she rolled into cover alongside them with two rifles and handed one to Trisha. "Jesse, take my father and a group of Titans into the heart of Manhattan. Get my brother out of there."

"Do I have to bring Zeus?" Jesse asked. "I'm calculating a significant margin of error if he comes along."

"I know he's an ass, but my father will do whatever it takes to save Ares. Trust me on this."

"He's my nephew too," Poseidon said as he cut through nearby soldiers. "Count me in."

"We'll all go." Hades stepped up as well. "If we're heading into Manhattan, you'll need my help getting around."

"Then let's do it," Jesse said. "Poseidon, grab Zeus and tell Atlas we'll need a division of about twenty willing Titans

and a ship. We need to book it if we're going to reach the Garden of Eden in time. Everyone else will hold down the fort here."

Nobody argued.

As Jesse ran off, Trisha cradled Nigel's sword in her hands, but thought against using it. Now was not the time for heroics. Instead, she picked up a rifle from the ground and helped Athena return fire.

Twenty-four minutes now, she thought. Make every second count.

44. Big City Bro-Down

Much like Hell, Heaven was one of those deceptively huge places. Perhaps it was because of its lack of a horizon, or perhaps it was the distortions in the space/time continuum, but the farther Jesse and the others traveled, the more it seemed like they were running out of time.

Riding in a flying pirate ship made of toenails, Jesse and Atlas led an army of nineteen Frost Giants through the war-ridden skies. Zeus and Poseidon manned the cannons, fueling them with their own magical abilities as they blasted any demon who came too close. Hades, with nary a weapon to his name, kept his head low. Moving at breakneck speed across the spirit realm, they soared over New Delhi which crossed over into the second circle. They flew past a burning Rome and made a beeline for Manhattan in the distance. As Jesse mentally checked his inner clock, he found they'd only lost a couple of minutes in transit.

"We might actually make it in time," he said to Hyrm.

"The *Naglfar* rides the winds of victory, matey," Hyrm boasted. "We be making port in da Five Boroughs 'fore ye know it, be sure!"

The cannons fired as a group of Fire-Bloods tried to board the starboard side. The gods and Titans were quick to dispatch of them.

"That one was mine!" Poseidon argued as Zeus shot another Fire-Blood.

"I didn't see your name on it!" Zeus shouted.

“Stop arguing or, so help me, I’ll turn this strike team around and *nobody* gets to save the universe!” Jesse called back to them.

As they flew, they saw a glorious winged figure fly up beside them. It was one of Heaven’s angels, clad in golden battle armour and carrying a spear.

“Ahoy, maties!” he shouted. “Hades, long time no see!” Hades, apparently having met this angel in the distant past, called back, “Raphael, you’re still alive!”

“Raphael?” Jesse ears perked up. “You’re my favourite Ninja Turtle!”

“I can’t be here long,” Raphael said. “A group of prophets and myself are evacuating people from the cities to Heaven’s bunker. Jesus wanted me to pass along a message that he spotted two of the Horsemen in Manhattan. One of them has set up shop in the Garden of Eden, directly in the heart of Central Park.”

“By the art museum?” Hades asked.

“By the lake,” Raphael replied. “If you’re heading to the Garden, don’t fly over the Villages. One of the Horsemen is in that area. They’ll definitely see you coming.”

“So we should go around?”

“Take the east side; I’ll have the angels draw their forces towards Jersey.”

“Thanks, Raph!” Jesse shouted as the angel soared away and returned to the battlefield.

They slowed down as they approached lower Manhattan. The now-deserted city was nestled against a heavenly mountain on its west side, with what appeared to be the city of London, England, sloppily dropped over its eastern borders. Several residential homes and businesses were stacked upon the city’s tall buildings, with London’s Westminster Bridge draped over Roosevelt Island where the tower of Big Ben stood. They passed over the Statue of

Liberty, now partially submerged in the clouds, and flew across Battery Park. With all the newly-made craters in the grass and up-turned pavement, the park had seen better days.

"The East and West Village pretty much cover the main route to Central Park," Hades said. "We'll have to follow the river around to 86 St."

"Are you mad?" Zeus asked. "We're running low on time and we'll be facing the Horsemen anyway! Let's cut straight through!"

"We don't want to face both Horsemen at once," Poseidon said.

"Tell that to our entourage of Titans!" Zeus bellowed. "I'm certain these boys are ready for a tussle! Am I right? Come on! Let's get rough!"

The Frost Giants growled at Zeus. Atlas leered at him and shook his head disapprovingly.

"Was it something I said?" Zeus asked.

"Zeus, remember your promise about not starting trouble?" Jesse asked.

"I don't remember using the word 'promise'."

"If you want to see your son alive again, we're going around," Jesse said. "Otherwise, we need you to zip it."

"I was king!" Zeus argued. "Doesn't that carry any weight around here?"

"I'm your older brother," Hades said. "Does that carry any weight?"

"Not a lot."

"Then no," Hades said. "It's the end of the universe and nobody cares. So suck it up, princess. We've got a job to do."

Zeus fell silent as they began traveling around Manhattan's east side. Fire-Bloods could be seen patrolling rooftops, so the *Naglfar* slowed to a crawl as Hyrm did his best to

navigate these treacherous waters. Eventually, they flew into a passing cloud. While this did well to keep them from being spotted, it also meant they couldn't spot anyone coming. Jesse's demon senses didn't work very well when he couldn't see the danger. They had to be on their guard more than ever.

Eighteen minutes, Jesse thought to himself. Save Ares, defeat the Horsemen, find Solomon. Seriously running out of time here.

As they traveled, Jesse noticed Zeus hanging out by the ship's aft, mumbling to himself. Poseidon quietly confided to Jesse in a hushed tone. "Don't be too hard on him. He may be an idiot, but that's an army of his son we're fighting."

With their overly-complicated family trees, Jesse forgot how many of his god friends were closely related. He wondered how Zeus felt slaughtering so many copies of his own offspring. "Do you think he'll be okay?"

"Will any of us?" Poseidon asked. "His heart isn't always in the right place, but he's far from the worst of us."

"Think he'll still run for re-election after this?"

"He ran because he believed his people needed him. I don't think he'll delude himself a second time. Still, we should keep an eye on him."

Through the clouds, they heard the sounds of steel groaning and glass breaking. The stress of having one city scattered over another was taking its toll on Manhattan's infrastructure.

Off the portside, they heard something loud marching through the streets.

"I don't think the detour is going to help," Jesse said.

"Battle stations?"

"Yes."

But before anyone could be called to arms, Hyrm shouted, "All hands brace for impact!"

They expected Fire-Bloods, the Horsemen, or even one of Heaven's Metatrons to come lumbering into their path. Instead, a different giant shape swung towards them through the fog. It was the antenna spire of the Empire State Building.

"Hard to starboard!" Jesse shouted, but it was too late. The spire of the skyscraper ripped through the hull of the *Naglfar*, tearing the ship in half. Toenail clippings scattered as the crew fell overboard. Jesse struggled to hold onto the mast, but eventually gave up and let himself fall into the clouds.

"Arrr, abandon ship!" Hyrm yelled as he took a swan dive off the bridge.

Fortunately, everyone on the team was either capable of flight or not easily bothered by long falls. They skydived into the city, the Titans gathering to form a defense parameter.

"Stay on your guard!" Atlas ordered them.

"Everybody, change of plans!" Jesse shouted as he and the other deities fell. "Head straight for the Garden! Don't look back!"

Before they could land, Fire-Blood soldiers were already leaping out of apartment windows and latching onto the Frost Giants. Two of the Titans were killed immediately, exploding into gold dust as the demons tore into their hearts without mercy. While the other Titans wrestled with their attackers, Jesse drew his sword and slashed through a Fire-Blood as it tried to maul Hades in mid-fall.

The street came up fast.

The Titans pressed the Fire-Bloods under their feet and crushed them into the pavement as they landed, creating several craters. The three gods, meanwhile, landing

gracely next to them. Jesse fell flat on his face. Not too far away, the remains of the *Naglfar* collided with an apartment complex. Hyrm removed his pirate hat and said a silent prayer as his toenail ship fell to pieces and landed in the East River.

"Davy Jones' Locker claims another fine lass," he sighed. They found themselves in the heart of an intersection. Apartment buildings stretched on in all four directions while a broken billboard lay across one of the streets. Abandoned vehicles were everywhere.

"32nd St," Hades said. "The fog must've thrown us off-course. It's still a bit of a run from here."

"I don't like this," Poseidon said. "The Horsemen know we're here."

"They all know we're here," Jesse said, his demon senses flaring up. He felt eyes and ears fall upon their enemies from all directions.

As Jesse turned to look for the fallen skyscraper that destroyed their ship, he spied a man in black running down the street towards them screaming. His greasy black hair and pale skin looked familiar. He looked like he'd been through Hell since the Rapture.

Hades recognized him at once. "Vladimir? Is that you?"

Vladimir frantically waved them on. "Run, you idiots! Run!"

"Wait, what's going on? Where have you---?"

"No more questions! Just run!"

Vladimir zipped past everyone without so much as a hello.

"Funny," Hades said. "He's never that active around the office."

Jesse shrugged. "In all the excitement, I forgot he was still here."

Behind them, they then saw what Vladimir had been running from. An enormous yellow mass stepped out from behind a building, the street quaking as it walked, the top

half of the Empire State Building resting over its shoulder like a baseball bat. Jesse recognized its over-sized cowboy boots and leather chaps. His heart sank at the sight of it.

"The Horseman!" he exclaimed.

"I told you this would happen," Zeus said, but Jesse was already a block away. Hades, Poseidon and the remaining Titans were quick on his heels.

Darryl didn't say a word as he lunged towards Zeus, his enormous belly flopping over the streets, his massive mouth wide open, ready for the kill. The ground shook. Bricks fell from buildings. Windows shattered. Zeus stood paralyzed at the sight of the monstrous Horseman.

As Darryl came down upon him, the street burst open at his feet. The ground launched itself towards Darryl, a great pillar of cement striking him in the chest. Darryl dropped his skyscraper and stumbled backward. Atlas rushed past Zeus, using his earthly powers to summon the pavement off the street and launch as much of it as he could at the Horseman.

The Frost Giants followed, growing up to four stories each, unloading a massive blizzard in Darryl's face. Darryl coughed and gagged as he inhaled their sub-zero arctic winds, coming down with an extreme case of brainfreeze. The Titans continued to unleash the cold, covering the Horseman with a thick layer of ice.

Atlas hurried back and grabbed Zeus, shouting, "Run!"

The other Titans didn't stand to wait either. They charged after Atlas as Darryl broke free, picked up his skyscraper and continued his pursuit.

As they ran, Titans grabbed the bases of apartment buildings and tore down the walls, desperately trying to block Darryl's path. The Horseman burst through several stories of concrete and brick, not even slowed by the superstructures collapsing upon his head. He lunged

forward again and scooped one Titan off the street, and then another. Each found themselves screaming as they disappeared into his enormous mouth. The others picked up and hurled cars, streetlights and benches in his direction to no avail.

Darryl opened wide and inhaled deeply. Several Frost Giants fell off their feet and went flailing into his gaping vortex of a maw.

“Quick, maties, we be going this way!” Hyrm called to the remaining Titans. He hurried down an alley trying to lead Darryl away from Jesse and the gods. The good news was that Darryl took the bait. The bad news is that Darryl cut them off on the other side. With one bite, he snatched them all off the street, devouring them whole.

Hyrm died, shouting, “Damn yer eyes, wretched jellyfish!” Darryl laughed and let out a small burp as he set out to hunt down the others.

Then he was promptly smacked in the head with the Chrysler Building.

At the far end of the street, Atlas had taken it upon himself to cast discretion to the wind, growing to the size of a large highrise. Wielding the Chrysler building by its base like a club, he taunted Darryl. At that moment, several Fire-Bloods appeared on rooftops to join the fight.

“Leave him be!” Darryl ordered the Fire-Bloods as he regained his composure. He brushed off his hat and puffed himself up, growing several stories by the second to match Atlas’ height. Throwing his weight around, he cleared out some buildings, giving himself room to maneuver as he swung the Empire State Building around. With a heave, he brought it over his head and struck at Atlas. Atlas blocked the attack using the Chrysler building.

“You’ve got spirit,” Darryl laughed. “There’s certainly no shortage of that in this universe.”

"You've eaten a lot of people Atlas likes," Atlas said, "and your buddies are no better."

"Do you honestly think you can beat me?"

"All signs point to no, but Atlas doesn't care," he said. "As long as Atlas keeps you busy a little longer."

"How noble," Darryl said. "Sacrificing yourself for your friends. Gonna be a big damn hero!"

"Atlas tried to be one earlier, but a friend named Surtur beat him to it," Atlas said, swinging the Chrysler building back at Darryl who evaded it. "Gonna get it right this time!"

"Then come on, Sally Mae," Darryl said as he pointed the Empire State Building at his opponent. "Let's dance."

Atlas didn't waste words as he took up his weapon and charged toward his opponent.

Several city blocks were destroyed in the skyscraper fight to follow.

45. Smoke Break

It was a losing battle.

They had a million ships' worth of reinforcements and it still wasn't enough.

The Fire-Bloods kept coming.

It wasn't just their own foot soldiers falling anymore. Trisha knew by name were being picked off one by one.

Thor's moment in the sun was over. In the many minutes to follow, he was overwhelmed. If Jesse had been there, he would have said it took exactly seven thousand, nine hundred and fourteen Fire-Bloods to pin him down. All that remained was his hammer in a pile of silver dust.

Lido's ship was targeted early on. The Italian demigod died setting his ship to self-destruct as it was overrun by enemies. The ensuing blast wiped out an entire wave of Fire-Bloods.

Viviane's fate followed soon after. The Lady of the Lake's hotter, older sister didn't go down easily as she used her last remaining magic to give the ghosts of King Arthur's knights substance. They defended their Lady to the last, cutting down hundreds of Fire-Bloods before one arrived in an Apache helicopter and launched an aerial assault against Avalon.

Quetzalcoatl's fate was unknown. He was last seen running off towards Mexico City to go help with an

evacuation. With Dominion in that direction, however, nobody expected him to return.

Still, more reinforcement ships arrived, delivering small armies of Slavic gods, Inuit Titans, and the US Marines. Harrier jets roared overhead and Titans atop woolly mammoths rampaged across Heaven's plains to quell the enemy forces. Their assistance helped relieve the pressure, but it still wasn't enough.

Trisha and Athena barricaded themselves inside the train station. Rifles in hand, they continued firing at the enemy through the windows until too many of their own people got caught in their crosshairs. They eased off to take a breather.

"I can't believe these things still have ammo," Trisha said as she inspected her weapon.

"An archangel delivered them from Heaven's armoury," Athena said. "See? There's an angel sigil on the side. Infinite ammo."

"Heaven *has guns*?"

"It has an army, doesn't?" Athena said as she took out a lighter and lit a rolled-up piece of paper. She took a drag and let it sit before exhaling.

"Are you smoking pot?" Trisha asked.

"Are you shooting drunk?"

"Where'd you get the joint?"

"Want some?" Athena offered.

"Hell yes," Trisha said as she accepted and gave the reefer a couple of tokes.

"Getting high in Heaven," Athena smiled as she took her joint back. "If that's not a great way to end the universe, what is?"

"The universe won't end," Trisha said. "We'll beat the Horsemen, we'll beat Solomon. God will reclaim His Throne. Everything will go back to normal."

"I wish I had your optimism," Athena said. "But let's be honest: even if we survive this battle, the universe is down to its last few minutes. Life's literally too short to waste on false hope."

"The Creator's Plan has brought us this far. Why would it fail now?"

"Because nobody ever thinks the Creator plans to fail."

"And is that your professional goddess wisdom?"

"You're so lucky not to be a god," Athena said. "I envy you, I really do. With our limited omniscience, we tend to see the unseen in blurry shades of grey. As least you have the luxury of only seeing what's in front of your face."

"Oh, yeah, lucky me not being a god," Trisha said sarcastically. "Just can't eat garlic, can't use silverware, can't enter a church..."

"That didn't stop you from exploring the stars."

"Not without a lot of sunscreen. Don't envy the vampire thing too much."

"If God has a Plan, then you are what you are for a reason," Athena said.

"Being a Nosferatu isn't exactly a useful thing during the universe's end."

"We should find out. Turn me into a vampire."

"I don't think it works on gods."

"Go ahead," Athena said, baring her neck. "Bite me. End of the universe. See what I care."

"I almost exploded drinking the blood of a Titan once," Trisha chuckled. "I don't think the silver blood of a goddess would fare me any better."

Athena sighed and lowered her joint. She turned to Trisha with a disheartened look and asked, "If we get out of this, you're not coming back with me, are you?"

"The gods have had their fill of me as a diplomat," Trisha said. "And I think I've had my fill of them."

"We could take some vacation time off," Athena said. "Just wander the cosmos. Have a girls' month off. I know a good bar in Alpha Centauri where doing shots includes getting fired out of a cannon."

"Sounds like fun," Trisha said. "Drop me a line when we get out of this."

"If we do."

"When we do."

Athena smiled sarcastically. "I hate it when you do that."

"I know."

Then Athena closed her eyes, leaned forward, and kissed Trisha on the lips, taking her by surprise. Trisha stared stunned at the goddess.

"Don't mind me," Athena said casually. "Spur of the moment. End of the universe. Just a check off my bucket list."

"I... uh..."

The awkwardness was cut short when they realized two men had broken through the train station wall fighting. Charlie Magnus and a Fire-Blood warrior were on the ground together staring at the two women.

"Beg pardon, m'ladies," Charlie said. "Are we interrupting anything?"

"Um, you're not," Trisha hesitated.

"Ah, good," Charlie said as he plunged his knife into the Fire-Blood's heart. The warrior vanished in a puff of flame.

"I should inform you that a large army of Neptunian Samurai Fish have arrived. Shall I send them to the frontlines?"

Before either could answer, a figure appeared in the broken wall behind Charles. It raised a spear aimed directly at his head.

"Charlie, look out!" Trisha shouted.

The spear came down. Charles didn't have a moment to react.

The Fire-Blood gagged and wheezed as a curved blade suddenly pierced its chest.

In a dash of flame, the Fire-Blood disappeared and dropped its spear at Charles' feet. Standing in the light of the broken wall was a dark, buff figure wielding what appeared to be a scythe.

"...Nigel?" Trisha asked hopefully.

The figure entered the room. What they'd mistaken for manly muscles was a fabulous fur coat. What they'd mistaken for a scythe was a hockey stick. And whom they'd mistaken for Nigel was...

"Hello, Charles, darling," Pandora grinned at her former lover. She set aside her stick, helped him up and dusted off his shoulders. A big dumb grin crept across his face at the sight of her. "It seems you've started the party without me."

Trisha's mouth was agape at the sight of her. She'd heard about Pandora's return from Nigel, but hadn't actually seen her firsthand until now. Pandora turned to the two women, eyed the joint and happily plopped down next to them.

Athena awkwardly offered her the smoke. "Care for a...?"

Pandora snatched the joint from Athena's hand and promptly ate it.

"Don't mind if I do," she said. "So, are you two ladies hosting tonight's gala?"

Trisha stammered. "Uh...."

"Didn't I feed you fish tacos once?"

"...yes."

"I thought you looked familiar," she said. "Charles, be a dear and hang my coat."

She tossed her coat to Charles who stood smitten with her.

"The boys said you were trapped in the Lost Ark," Athena said.

"I was," she said. "The Horsemen even coated it in solid diamond, quantum-locked it in time, and cast it into a black hole in another dimension just to keep me from escaping."

"But you're here."

"Darling, you don't date the great Houdini for a few days without learning a few tricks."

"Are you here to help us fight?" Trisha asked.

"Well, that wouldn't be fair to the other team now, would it?" she said. "Sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I'm just passing through. I've much bigger fish to fry. And I imagine you must be on your way as well."

"On my way where?"

"It's the end of the universe," Pandora reminded her. "We all need to be somewhere. I just never imagined you'd wait it out in a trainyard while your boys are out there. My, those two have been a merry handful."

"Excuse us, but who are you to say where we belong?" Athena asked.

"Don't be gruff, sweetie," Pandora scoffed. "You're exactly where *you* want to be."

Athena fished another joint from her pocket and agreed.

"No arguing there."

With that, Pandora stood up and jaunted over to the exit. She glanced out at the battlefield, grabbing her hockey stick. She sighed and said, "Looks like my work is cut out for me tonight. Don't wait up, darlings."

With that, she vanished into the light. Trisha carefully stood up, slightly shaking from the encounter.

"Isn't she something else?" Charles smiled.

"She's all right," Athena shrugged as she lit up another smoke.

Trisha grabbed her gun and headed for the door. "Charlie, do we have any fast ships I can borrow?"

"Well, the Marines are refueling a helicopter out by the whale, but..."

"Trish, you can't be serious about going out there!" Athena spoke up. "The skies are a no-fly zone! You'll be torn to pieces."

"Then I'll chance it," Trisha said. "Pandora was right; I'm not where I want to be. Not when my boys are in trouble." With that, she disappeared through the door.

"She won't last five minutes out there!" Athena said as she got to her feet and hurried after her.

Magnus stopped her at the door. "You wisdom deities are always lacking in faith. If it's the will of Creator, she'll make it."

"And if she dies?"

"Sooner than the rest of us," Magnus said. "Let her follow her heart and see what happens."

Athena took a drag and wondered how many other people she'd never see again who were off following their hearts.

At this point, they were fighting a losing battle. Even if everyone stayed, they wouldn't make a difference.

Off in the distance, Pandora happily skated off through the clouds, smacking Fire-Bloods around like hockey pucks and shoulder-checking their tanks. Many legions chased after the sorceress, thankfully giving Athena's army more breathing room.

"Do you think Pandora being here will change anything?" Athena asked.

"Let me put it this way," Magnus chuckled. "Things are about to get a whole lot better or a whole lot worse."

46. Into the Garden

Fifteen minutes, Jesse thought as they entered Central Park. As they raced through the streets, Jesse resisted every urge to turn around and watch the awesome skyscraper fight going on between Darryl and Atlas. Poseidon had no qualms with watching, though he did trail behind the others a little more.

At some point, they lost track of Vladimir again. The vampire had likely been on the run since the Rapture and hadn't been included in the evacuations for one reason or another. Jesse could only guess that Vladimir had become very good at running and hiding these last several hours. He wished him the best, even though in actuality, their former vampire nemesis had taken a detour down a dark alley where one of the Fire-Bloods ironically surprised him with fangs to the jugular.

Jesse and the three gods crossed a green hill and found themselves at the edge of a large domed conservatory. Within was a thick, tropical jungle. It appeared out of place in the middle of Central Park, but considering somebody had blatantly dropped a city on top of it, the Garden of Eden was very well intact.

There was no time for discretion. They entered the conservatory and lay witness to the wonders within. It was surprisingly tacky.

First, they were greeted by animatronic wax dummies of Adam and Eve.

Then they looked upon several exhibits of stuffed animals behind velvet rope, including a few dinosaurs that had clearly been present six thousand years ago.

They arrived at a small lake with a tourist boat at the dock. A little animatronic bundle of flying spaghetti with meatball eyes wearing a Rastacap was mounted on a post. It greeted them as they arrived. It spoke with a poor-quality, pre-recorded Jamaican accent.

“Hello, friends, my name is Alfredo the Rockin’ Rastafarian Pastafarian! Welcome to Eden, the Cradle of Civilization! Come join us on a magical, musical boat ride as we journey through the jungle and explore--”

Zeus broke the animatronic spaghetti off its post and hurled it into the lake.

“We don’t have time for that,” he grumbled.

They walked deeper into the Garden. Pools of glistening water, lovely flower beds and amazing palm trees highlighted the Garden’s natural beauty, only to be occasionally ruined by a singing quartet of animatronic Dutch children.

As they came around a bend of trees, they found themselves at the heart of a lagoon. An artificial waterfall cascaded off a nearby cliff face, a flock of birds flittered by, and at the edge of the lake was a large tree draped in vines. Dangling from those vines, wrapped in ram-steel bonds, was Ares, God of War. His air of fatigue and hopelessness aside, he appeared no different than all the Fire-Bloods they’d been fighting.

Also hanging from the tree were two glowing orbs, one shining a bright holy yellow and the other an infernal red. Before anyone could say anything, they heard Ares groan in pain. Something harsh surged through his body. The

orbs glimmered and a burst of fire shot down from them, converging in front of the tree. The fire took the form of a man. It stood up, gradually taking on the form of Ares himself. Before it could finish, however, Jesse drew his sword and slew it through the heart. The Fire-Blood vanished before it could attack.

A slow clapping could be heard behind them.

Devo, in his shiny purple spandex, sat atop a palm tree and applauded their efforts.

"So you've made it!" he cheered. "You have no idea how thrilled I am to have guests! Death and Dominion have been working me like a dog!"

"Release my son, Horseman!" Zeus shouted as he charged up a thunderbolt in one hand.

"Temper, temper!" Devo scolded him as he floated off the tree and drifted over the garden. "I hope you four realize I'm the reasonable one of the bunch. There's no need for violence. You want your kid? Bam - you've got him!"

With a snap of his invisible fingers, Devo released the bonds on Ares. He slipped through the vines and fell to the grass below, drained of energy. Zeus rushed over to help him stand.

"What's the catch?" Poseidon asked.

"No catch at all," Devo said. "I've been churning out millions of these guys an hour. With, what, thirteen minutes left? How many more could I possibly need? So go on. Take him. Enjoy the rest of the universe. Hell, I'll fix him right up for you if you want."

With a snap of his fingers, Devo conjured up energy within Ares. The god began coming around, breathing steadier. Zeus was cautiously optimistic about his son's improving health, but Jesse knew better.

"Stop it, Devo!" he shouted.

“What, stop helping?” he asked. “But you’ve come such a long way and I’ve so much to give. Why, I wouldn’t dream of sending you to face Solomon when you’re so dreadfully underpowered. Zeus, you could use a little more lightning. Hades, you’re always settling for the Underworld when you could be ruler of death. And Poseidon, are Earth’s oceans *really* enough for you?”

“Silence!” Poseidon shouted, firing a blast of water at the Horseman from his trident. The jetspray grazed past Devo’s head as he floated away. They watched as Devo’s clothing turned transparent as well. The invisible man became but a voice in the air around them.

“And both Ares and our Fire-Blood guests have so much room for rage,” Devo said. “All of you truly deserve to reach...”

The music of Queen swam through the conservatory.

The song was a techno-remix of *Don’t Stop Me Now*.

“...your potential.”

Zeus’ back arched as electricity coursed through his body. He fell away from his son and writhed in pain as excess lightning erupted from his pores.

Poseidon then underwent the same transformation. He fell to his knees, his body coursing with the power of the ocean currents. It was a terrifying sensation as he was now feeling the oceans from other worlds enter his body. Their swirling energies drove him blind with madness.

Jesse and Ares simultaneously felt their wrath boil within. Berserker rage was taking over for the chaos demon and war god. Both crawled on their hands, looking for an outlet to unleash their anger, but Devo’s invisibility only gave them each other.

At once, both Jesse and Ares went for each other’s throats.

A tempest brewed around the garden. The air swirled as water rose from the lake and spun around the conservatory, creating a mini-monsoon. Rain and lightning shredded through the trees as Zeus and Poseidon struggled to keep their increasing powers under control. For Poseidon, all he saw were confusing nightmares of sea monsters and whirlpools in his eyes. For Zeus, it was a solid, painful light that was burning hotter and hotter every second.

"Oops, I did it again," Devo sighed. "Always overdoing it. Always killing my friends with kindness."

As it continued, the surrounding plants began to absorb the surrounding water at an alarming rate. Trees trunks bent over from the weight of the excess moisture. As this happened, Jesse and Ares found themselves turning redder with rage. Zeus was turning full-white, his fingertips becoming electricity. Poseidon's arms were melting off his body into sea water.

"Ooh, sorry, did I forget to mention the exploding part?" Devo asked. "A little side-effect, I'm afraid. I'm not too concerned about the Fire-Blood, but you three gods may or may not go nuclear in about a minute."

"Four gods," Hades said, as he snuck up behind the source of the voice. A hand reached through Devo's transparent head and grabbed onto a small diamond nestled in the core of his nervous system. Devo hollered as he was pulled backwards.

"Augh!" Devo screamed as he struggled. "Forgot about you! But why aren't you exploding?!"

"Want not, explode not," Hades said as he tried to pull the diamond out of Devo's head. "It helps to be a neutral party."

"Then clearly I've been filling you with the wrong goods," Devo said. The invisible Horseman swept around and

grabbed Hades by the throat. He lifted him into the air. Hades fought to free himself. "Greed? Madness? Fear? Come on, buddy, you've gotta have a catalyst in you somewhere. Show me what you need!"

"Eat this!" Hades said as he threw a handful of dirt in Devo's invisible face. The dirt clung, exposing the Horseman's gruesome, twisted face. It was like staring into a goblin's death mask.

Devo spat and chuckled. "Cockiness. I always miss that one. Doesn't pack a big punch, but it lights up quick."

Hades screamed as Devo's power coursed through him. His pores glowed. His inner confidence steadily rose with his body heat. The more invincible Hades felt, the more Devo laughed. His courage bordered on nuclear, causing his innards to boil.

"Do it now!" Hades shouted.

"Do what?" Devo asked.

An airborne trident pierced Devo's body. He shrieked as it was immediately struck by a blast of lightning. He struggled to free himself from it, but his grasp on Hades was making him too tangible. He tried to release the god, but the lightning forced his hand to stay closed around Hades' throat.

Poseidon and Zeus stood side by side, each emitting a steady-stream of power from their hands into the trident. Devo's infinite power was flowing through them and right back into himself. There was no breaking the loop.

In his distraction, he'd not only allowed Zeus and Poseidon to get an advantage, but had given Jesse and Ares some slack as well. They were still gradually reaching critical mass, but had a little more control over their actions now.

Ares grabbed Jesse by the back of the shirt. With a hearty thrust, he tossed the Fire-Blood in Devo's direction. Jesse flew over the stream of energy and slashed at the invisible

head with his sword. The sword connected with the diamond, cutting it free. Devo shouted in protest as his head non-fatally split open and his Seal fell out.

Hades grinned before exploding into dust.

Jesse fell to the ground and gathered the diamond. He turned to see Devo still struggling with the energy-loop he'd created. He tore the trident from his torso, but his fingers were still tightly wrapped around it.

"Stop it!" he shouted. "Stop what you're doing right now or we'll all explode!"

"So be it!" Zeus shouted.

"This one's for Hades!" Poseidon screamed, unleashing more ocean energy in Devo's direction. The merging of Zeus' thunder and Poseidon's storms were too much for even Devo to bear.

Jesse debated what to do with the Seal. There had to be something around here that could destroy it. He tried chopping it with his sword to no avail.

"That's not going to work," Ares said. "You need one of their weapons."

"Well, where's Devo's weapon?"

"I don't think he has one."

Suddenly, the entrance side of the conservatory exploded outwardly, pieces of the dome and garden momentarily getting sucked into a dark vortex. Jesse thought that Heaven had collided with a black hole until he saw Darryl standing outside with his big bullfrog face. He was inhaling the Garden of Eden into his enormous belly. Here, Darryl was much smaller than he'd been when they'd left him with Atlas, but now he looked ready to march into what was left of the conservatory and eat them all.

"Dinner's on!" he shouted as he inhaled several palm trees at once.

With another sharp inhale, he pulled Zeus and Poseidon off their feet. Both scrambled to dig their fingers into the dirt and hold on tight. In their panic, they dropped their attack and Devo quickly flew away free.

"Beautiful, Darryl!" Devo declared. "I knew I liked you!" Darryl's inhale continued. Ares wrapped his arms around the great tree. Jesse drove his sword into the ground and held on tight to the handle. Water from the lake and leaves from the trees stormed past into the Horseman's gaping maw. Even Devo seemed a little worried.

"Easy there, Darryl, you don't want to give yourself indigestion."

"Ah'll 'ake i' easy when 'ese 'as'ards are in 'y 'elly!" Darryl bellowed through his inhales, missing several consonants in the process.

Zeus and Poseidon slowly dragged themselves across the grass towards Jesse. Jesse tried to extend his reach to them, but the vacuum was too great to risk letting go of the sword. Their fingertips slipped past his grasp. He even tried to lengthen his arm through Fire-Blood shifting, but only grew more brittle in trying.

"You have to hold on!" Jesse shouted to them.

The two gods looked to each other. They saw their end in each other's eyes. The power was still swelling up inside them. They didn't have much longer.

"Throw us the Seal!" Poseidon shouted to him. "We'll do the rest!"

"I won't let you!"

"You must!" Zeus said. "We haven't much time!"

"Quickly, Jesse!" Poseidon shouted. "Before we stop agreeing for a change!"

Jesse's fingers, clasped around the diamond, loosened. He reluctantly threw the diamond in their direction just as they let go and fell backwards into Darryl's mouth.

"No, no, no, no!" Devo screamed as he flew in afterwards. His hands reached for where he thought he saw the Seal, but instead, all he got was stuck in the vacuum. Both he, Zeus and Poseidon grabbed onto Darryl's lower lip as they fell into his mouth, their feet dangling above the black hole at the back of his throat.

It wasn't until now that Devo realized that Jesse hadn't thrown the Seal at all. It was still in Jesse's hand.

"You ass!" Devo shouted. "Darryl, stop with the inhale! I'm in your mouth!"

"Don't leave yet," Poseidon said to him. "The fun part's just begun."

"Will this hurt, brother?" Zeus asked.

"It tried it once; it's pretty painful, but brief," Poseidon said as he shone a bright, burning blue.

"Then I'll see you on the other side," Zeus said, shining pure white.

"You mean the *other*, other side."

"Let's just blow up already!" Zeus said as he let go.

He and Poseidon flew into Darryl's mouth and promptly disappeared.

A moment later, from deep within Darryl's guts, they exploded with the force of a nuclear explosion.

Darryl's body expanded. His mouth was a sea of light. He belched and screamed as his innards boiled. Jesse could tell Darryl was giving it his all not to come apart at the seams, and wondered if Devo was faring any better inside his mouth.

The sheer force of the blast finally caused Darryl to stumble and catch his breath. Devo raggedly flopped out of his jaw and collapsed on the ground, stunned before the giant blob.

Jesse fumbled in his pockets for anything. A candy bar, spare change, some pocket lint - anything he could use to buy them time before Daryll's next inhale.

Then he found something. It was a cigar stub.

It was Surtur's cigar stub, still containing some Raskovnik herb.

Looking up, Jesse spotted a barely intact section of mirrored ceiling hanging over Darryl.

Inspiration struck.

As the giant mouth began to open once more, Jesse threw the cigar stub into it.

Then he planted his feet and quickly hurled his sword skywards. It struck the ceiling, shattering the mirror into pieces.

The Raskovnik herb began to take effect. Darryl's body glimmered and tingled as he suddenly became magically sensitive to what was coming next.

The shards of mirror fell upon him, each piece acting as a portal and distributing bits and pieces of his body through to other realms. At once, nearly nine-tenths of the Horseman were randomly scattered across the cosmos. All that remained of him were several yellow puddles, a cowboy hat, and a golden belt buckle amidst the broken glass.

Jesse and Ares sighed a breath of relief, though they still felt their inner rage brewing up inside.

The invisible horseman lay on his front, his lower half taken from him by one of the mirrors. A crawling stump of a head and torso, he awkwardly moved towards Jesse with his two remaining limbs. His head shook erratically as if he couldn't focus on anything. He laughed, he cursed, he moaned, and he cried with several voices at once.

As Devo approached, Jesse made sure he still had the Seal in hand, only to discover he'd dropped it. Devo laughed as he snatched it from the ground.

"You poor presumptuous fool," he said scornfully, before switching between several different tones, his multiple personalities each trying to speak at once. "*You thiNK you've wOn? We're above PETTY deaths like this; you take us aPArt, we put ourselves back TOGETHer. All you've done IS playEd your LasT card - we CANNOT be beaten.*"

"Unless your brother killed the Reaper, took his weapon and found his way back here," Devo's subconscious spoke aloud.

Devo's body seemed surprised to hear that voice. "But hE couLdn't! He's too fAr away; he WouLn't knOW where to finD us!"

"He could if I showed him the way."

Devo suddenly caught on to the betrayal of his own subconscious. "You MOthefu--"

A crescent blade swooped down from behind and cut through Devo's hand, shattering the diamond within. As Devo spun around to meet his attacker, the blade fell again, passing through his neck. Nigel stood behind him, a few inches shorter with his clothes in tatters. He swung the Reaper's blade one more time for good measure. Devo's body evaporated into the air, his screams fading like a whisper.

"Thank you," his other half spoke as he vanished.

Jesse stood up, relieved to see his brother. Devo's power vanished from his body and he no longer felt ready to explode.

"Took you long enough," he said. "Did the Reaper give you any trouble?"

"Nah," Nigel shook his head. "These things aren't so tough once you break their Seals. Death became so clumsy, he fell on his own blade fighting me."

"My team didn't make it," Jesse said solemnly. "Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Atlas... each of them died buying us time."

Nigel nodded accordingly. "It won't be in vain. Is there anything we need before we go?"

They looked down and saw the yellow globs of Darryl slowly start merging back together. Jesse came forward and took the scythe from Nigel.

"I'll handle this," he said as he approached the center of the broken glass where the yellow goop was converging around Darryl's hat.

Jesse took a swing and cut through the hat.

Nothing happened. The goop still kept moving.

"Try his belt buckle," Nigel said, pointing at the golden trinket near Jesse's feet. Jesse took a step back and slashed at it. It took a couple swings and misses, but the belt buckle finally split in half.

Darryl's globs stopped moving. They settled into the dirt, evaporated, and left behind a dark, grimy residue.

"Three down, one to go," Jesse said, tossing the scythe back to Nigel. "What now?"

"How much time do we have left?" Nigel asked.

"About eleven minutes."

"Then we have to bring down the army," Ares said. They looked to the tired war god who was leaning by the tree. In his hands were cradled the the two glowing orbs that had been hanging from the vines.

"I thought we just did," Nigel said.

Ares lowered his collar to reveal the bloody red handprint of Dominion upon his shoulder. "Every Fire-Blood he made carries her imprint. She controls them through me."

“So what are you...?”

Ares tightened his grip on the orbs. The glass cracked under stress.

“These contain the Fires of Heaven and Hell,” he said.

“When these go, it’s going to take out a better chunk of the Third Circle... and me with it.”

“Your father gave up a lot to come save you.”

“And now I’ll repay the favour.”

Nigel sighed but didn’t argue. “Thank you, Ares.”

“How fast can you two run?” he asked.

“Surprisingly.”

“Then start running,” Ares said, pressing tighter on the orbs. “In ten seconds, I’m blowing this place to Kingdom Come.”

“Aren’t we already in Kingdom Come?” Jesse asked.

“Nine seconds.”

Nigel took Jesse by the arm and hustled him out the conservatory.

With demon speed, the two brothers raced out of Central Park towards the Westminster Bridge.

In the ruins of Eden, the god of war made his last stand, free to do what he did best.

47. A Burning Heart

Still alive and holding, Trisha thought as her pilot skillfully evaded another angel and Fire-Blood battling in mid-air.
We might make it after all.

“Approaching Manhattan, miss,” the male pilot in the Marines uniform said. “Any specific place you want to be dropped off?”

Trisha nodded from the passenger seat. “Central Park. Thank you very much, uh...”

“Eric.”

“Thanks, Eric,” Trisha said. “Are you a demigod?”

“Human, m’am,” he said. “Tuscaloosa, born and raised.”

“Wow, an actual human,” Trisha smiled. “Haven’t met one in a while. Kind of refreshing. I’m guessing this is still all new to you.”

“I’ve always believed in God,” Eric said. “I just never imagined I’d be helping Him fight a war in Heaven this weekend, let alone doing it alongside a vampire, a Greek goddess, and an 8th-century king of France.”

“You’re handling it very well so far.”

“The US Marines are trained to handle anything,” Eric said.

“Though a huge part of me is secretly wishing this is dream.”

“We should be so lucky,” Trisha said. “You know, Eric, there may not be a lot of time left in the universe, but

thanks. You have no idea how much I appreciate you flying me out here.”

“Don’t sweat it,” he said. “I’ll fight an army of werewolves if it helps me get back to my wife and kids.”

“Don’t worry. Those aren’t real.”

“What - werewolves aren’t real?”

“Nope.”

“But everything else is?”

“Yep.”

“Makes sense.”

Their conversation was cut short by a large blast of light from Central Park. They shielded their eyes from what at first appeared to be a nuclear explosion, until they realized there was no mushroom cloud, and that whatever had exploded was spreading out across the city at an alarming rate.

“What the hell is...?” Eric’s words stumbled as he watched what appeared to be rolling fire burn its way across the city in all directions, spewing from Central Park like water from a hydrant. “Is that lava? What am I looking at?”

Trisha’s heart raced, her eyes darting across the city in panic. As the fire spread across the districts, buildings went up in flames. The bases of skyscrapers melted, causing their upper halves to tip over and collapse in the sea of fire below. Her eyes traveled to the east, following the fire towards what appeared to be London. The fire burned across London like hot butter and into a great canal from which flowed Heaven’s river. The fire poured into the canal’s waters and spread out downriver.

As the fire settled, New York and London looked like they’d just been buried under a sea of lava. Trisha couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Surviving cars and skyscrapers floated along the liquid fire into the canal where they drifted downstream towards the distant circles.

Athena's voice came over the radio. "*Something's happening to the Fire-Bloods!*"

Trisha picked it up and called back, "Have they stopped fighting?"

"*They're still fighting, but their tactics are out of sync,*" she said. "*I think we can push them back!*"

"Good, keep me in the loop," Trisha said. "We're going to look for survivors."

"*Magnus wants you to watch out,*" Athena said. "*His men spotted something big and red heading your way.*"

"A Horseman?"

"*Likely.*"

"There!" Eric exclaimed. He pointed out across the river of fire to several structures floating in the flames. Where he was pointing, Trisha saw many brick buildings and burning cars, but there was also a distinctive landmark among the debris.

Floating on its side was the tower of Big Ben, and upon its great clock face lay two figures.

"Holy crap, it's Jesse *and* Nigel," Trisha said as she unbuckled and climbed into the back. "Get us over them. I'll lower a rope."

Eric wasted no time maneuvering the helicopter into position. He closed the distance quickly while Trisha unraveled a braided cable from a compartment in the back. She hooked up the cable's D-ring to the fuselage and held on tight as Eric brought them close.

Jesse and Nigel must have spotted them as well, because they were frantically waving their arms from the clock tower.

Then Trisha spied something red out the corner of her eye. On the other side of canal, galloping along the river at a brisk pace was a large crimson creature. It almost appeared like a female centaur to her eyes with its horse-

like body and Amazonian torso. It carried a burning blade that look exactly like the Flaming Sword Nigel kept in his studio.

"Damn it," she cursed. "Bring us in, Eric! We're getting them out of there!"

As they hovered over the tower, Trisha threw the cable. It cascaded out of the helicopter and landed on the tower's side. The two boys grabbed hold, one of them holding onto a large scythe, and quickly ascended towards Trisha. Dominion bounded from the canal's edge and leapt across the river of fire. Like skipping across rocks on a pond, she swiftly hopped over floating cars and buildings towards them. She leapt for the cable and grabbed onto the end with one hand, pulling the whole helicopter down with her unexpected weight. She landed on Big Ben and, with a furious swing, sent the helicopter spiraling. Jesse and Nigel fell from the cable and landed on Big Ben's face once more.

As Eric struggled to bring the helicopter under control, he found they'd left the London area and were now heading into Tokyo. Up ahead, he found himself on a collision course with a large white suspension bridge. Before he could maneuver out of its path, the helicopter's blades struck the bridge's cables. One of the blades snapped free, sending the helicopter plummeting out of the air. As it crash-landed on and skidded across the bridge, Nigel saw Trisha make a death-defying leap onto the pavement. Down below, Dominion approached Jesse and Nigel, twirling her sword playfully. She eyed Death's blade with retribution in her glowing yellow eyes.

"Not many can challenge the Reaper and win," she said. "How did you do it? Poison his bone marrow? Break his spine? Beat the ninny at chess?"

"He got cocky," Nigel said, brandishing the blade, "just like your friends."

"Propagation and Consumption were reckless and destined to destroy one another," Dominion said. "Unlike you and I, they lacked honour. They lacked purpose. They lacked a sense of art."

"You take away people's free will," Nigel said. "You call that honour?"

"I call it the status quo," she said. "Those under my touch live free under my command, just as you live under the Creator's. I supplant one illusion of free will for another. That is the code of conquest."

"And what of Ares?" Nigel asked. "You had him under your control and he still destroyed your precious army."

"No conquest is without its differences."

"Then you won't be surprised when I cut you to ribbons," Nigel said.

Dominion's sword came down. Her whole body dashed forward with its swing. Before Nigel could react, she gracefully slashed the scythe out of his hands with a near-perfect samurai strike. By near-perfect, it meant that Nigel had been fortunate enough to see only the tip of his nose get severed in the attack as he narrowly avoided the Sword. His weapon sailed across the river and planted itself in the hood of a burning Ford Fiesta.

"Duck!" Jesse shouted. Ripping the minute hand from Big Ben's face, he swung the large piece of iron at Dominion. Nigel ducked and watched as it passed through her bloody body like a knife through water. She lunged with the Flaming Sword. Nigel rolled out of the way and leapt off Big Ben in time. Jesse deflected her attack with the clock hand, watching the blade slice off several feet of iron in the process.

Nigel landed on a post office and made another jump to the Fiesta where he ripped the blade out of the car. The fire splashed against the car and grazed his arm. He winced as the fire burned part of his skin off, as if to reclaim him. He turned and watched as Jesse was unsuccessfully keeping the Horsewoman at bay. "Don't let her touch you!" Nigel shouted as he made his way back to Big Ben.

He came down on Dominion with the scythe and cut straight through her body. Again, the scythe passed right through her. She slashed at him. Their two magic blades flashed with sparks as they collided. Nigel carefully danced about, doing his best to stay out of her reach. Jesse kept stabbing at her with the clock hand.

She must have a Seal on her somewhere! Nigel thought as he looked over her slimy blood-red body. Everything about her was liquid in nature. If the Seal was on her person, she could easily be moving it through her own blood. For a moment, Nigel was reminded of his battle with the Shadow-Blood and how much trouble they had extracting Vladimir and the Titans from its watery body.

Jesse threw away the clock hand and jammed his fingers in under the clock face's iron frame. He hoisted up the twenty-three foot stained-glass frame and, instead of throwing it like a disc, ran towards Dominion holding it like a shield.

"Nigel, heads up!" Jesse shouted. Nigel dropped flat as Jesse ran over him and hit Dominion head-on with the clock dial. Taken by surprise, she splashed against its surface, the Flaming Sword slicing through the glass over Jesse's head. Jesse lifted and threw both the clock and Dominion into the river of fire.

"Think that killed her?" Jesse asked.

"Would we be so lucky?" Nigel asked as he got to his feet.

"Come on, we need to get to Trish."

Suddenly, a bloody hand darted out of the fire and grabbed onto Jesse's leg. He hollered as Dominion crawled out of the flames undamaged, leaving her bloody handprint on Jesse's ankle. Nigel slashed at her wrist, but the damage was done.

The blood infused into Jesse's body. He felt overwhelmed with not just rage, but a new sense of respect for carnage. His transformation wasn't even violent as it had been during their training. Spikes, claws, and fangs grew upon his person as naturally as one might sweat. There was no inner struggle. Just a sense of peace with the madness around him.

He turned to his brother, his eyes blazing red.

Deep inside, Jesse knew this was what Christine had seen in her visions. Here, atop the River of Fire, his teeth and claws would bring an end to everything.

And he felt perfectly fine with that.

"Jesse, no..." Nigel said, backing away.

"We were responsible for so much tragedy in our lives,"

Jesse's voice growled. "Cities, cultures, lives, all fallen! You allowed it to happen!"

"Your brother sees things my way now," Dominion said.

"His illusion of you as a righteous man is now broken. He sees you for the monster you are."

"Jesse, don't listen to her!" Nigel said, but Jesse was already upon him. Nigel fell to his back as Jesse pinned him with his claws. The scythe's handle was pressed against Nigel's throat. Nigel's own strength was useless against Jesse's. He could only resist for so long.

"We are not meant to live peaceful lives," Jesse said. "You and I deserve nothing for our crimes!"

"You don't know what you're saying!"

"I know this much," Jesse said as Dominion came up behind them. "Should we live, we belong in the service of those who take responsibility for their atrocities. You will join us or you will die."

"He does not get to choose," Dominion said as she reached for Nigel.

Something fell upon her.

Dominion toppled as Trisha leapt from the bridge above and fell upon her back armed with Nigel's crystal sword. She twisted the blade through Dominion's torso, but was easily thrown off onto the tower's brickwork. As she got up, she saw she was covered in Dominion's blood as well.

"Trisha..." Nigel croaked. His heart sank as he saw her becoming overwhelmed with its power.

"Another recruit," Dominion sighed. "Perhaps you can be a little more persuasive."

But Trisha's transformation was a little different from Jesse's. She began to keel over, her eyes and pores glowing erratically. She held her shaking forearm and kept her fist clenched around the sword handle. She slowly calmed down and looked to Dominion, fury in her eyes, weapon in hand.

"You have no idea what you've just done, have you?" she asked, licking the blood off her lips and baring her fangs. Dominion seemed perplexed at this turn of events. "I order you to lower your weapon, soldier."

Trisha faltered, but held onto her sword. She looked to the Horsewoman and said, "You first."

Dominion was surprised to find herself almost complying.

"How are you...?"

Trisha lunged forward, driving her blade through Dominion's arm. The Flaming Sword became dislodged and flipped through the air. Trisha performed a superhuman backflip over Dominion and caught the flying

weapon *by its blade*. Showing no signs of pain, she tossed her crystal sword to the ground and laid the Flaming Sword across her palms.

With a sharp head-butt, Trisha split the blade of the Flaming Sword in two.

She then cast both halves of the weapon into the river where it vanished from sight.

“That’s impossible!” Dominion exclaimed.

Again, Trisha didn’t speak as she rushed the Horsewoman. She plunged both hands through Dominion’s chest and pulled her off her feet, throwing her partway into the river. Dominion splashed around, trying to bend and squish her way out of Trisha’s grasp to no avail. She splashed fire onto Trisha’s face, but it slid off the vampire’s face like water off a duck’s back.

As she wrestled with Trisha, Dominion shouted, “Minion! Kill the Fire-Blood and come help me!”

“Yes, commander!” Jesse said, his fangs lunging at Nigel’s heart. His limbs immobilized, in a last desperate attempt to save his own life, Nigel wrangled Jesse’s shadow and used it to hold him at bay. Jesse’s fangs snapped millimetres from Nigel’s chest.

“Don’t do this!” Nigel said.

“You must die!” Jesse protested.

“Then don’t it right away,” Nigel said. “Remember your training!”

“My... training?”

“You’ll serve her better if...”

Something inside Jesse’s mind sparked up. He lunged at Nigel, breaking through the shadow grip. Only instead of striking his chest, he bit into Nigel’s arm. Nigel howled in pain, but it was better than dying. Jesse lifted Nigel off his feet and locked his arms in place. He got behind his brother, his teeth sinking into Nigel’s collarbone.

"What are you doing?" Dominion shrieked as Trisha kept her pinned down. "Kill him!"

"With pleasure," Jesse said. "But I thought perhaps you'd like to see him suffer?"

"No, just kill him!"

"Are you sure? I could take him apart piece by piece. He'd shrink down and become very tiny. I think you might enjoy it."

"Why aren't you listening?" Dominion said as Trisha kept pushing her head under the fire. "If you're not going to kill him, then get your ass over here and get her off me!"

"I will eventually kill him and come help you," Jesse said sincerely. "I just want to be sure you are completely satisfied."

"You annoying imbecile! Why are you so incessantly difficult?"

"Welcome to my world," Nigel joked.

Trisha plunged her hand into Dominion's body again and found something. She pulled out what appeared to be a pair of dog-tags on a chain.

"Found them!" she shouted.

"No, give those back!" Dominion screamed.

As Dominion reached for them, however, Trisha took the chain with both hands and ripped it apart. Her Seal broken, Dominion screeched with pain and desperately struggled to climb out of the fire. Trisha stood up, marched over to Nigel and took the scythe from him.

"Do you mind if I take this, Jesse?" she asked.

"No, it's fine," Jesse said. "As long as it pleases my commander."

"It does not!" Dominion said as she slowly stood, half of her body limp and dripping into the river. "Do not allow her to take the scythe!"

"She won't, my commander," Jesse said. "Not until she says the magic word."

"Please?" Trisha asked.

"All yours," Jesse said as he allowed Nigel to drop it into her hands.

Trisha turned to Dominion who hobbled slowly towards her.

"You're not one of us," Dominion said. "You should be following *my* orders. You were practically bathed in my blood!"

Trisha touched the tip of the blade to Dominion's chest. The Horsewoman stopped in her tracks.

"Release Jesse from your control," Trisha said.

Dominion looked upon Trisha inquisitively, and slowly began to have a firm understanding of how she just met her own end. The Horsewoman slowly reached out, grabbed the top of the blade, and pulled herself through it. The scythe's magic permeated her core and her blood-like body turned a bluish-purple hue. Trisha quickly pulled back, but it was too late. The Horsewoman fell to her knees, melting into a puddle.

Jesse shook his head free of cobwebs and released Nigel. His spikes and pointy-bits retreated into his body.

Dominion's puddle spoke to Trisha and chuckled, "We aren't dissimilar, you and I, both ready to fall on our blades for love. Your gift burns bright, but swiftly. You are the death I deserve."

The puddle fell silent on the limestone bricks.

Trisha stood over her remains, wielding the scythe, and slowly handed it back to Nigel. He placed a hand on her shoulder and asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Trisha replied.

“What did she mean?” Jesse asked as he gathered both Excaliburs. “Why were you the death she deserves? And how did you get so strong?”

Big Ben shook abruptly.

The clock tower had landed against a dock.

They turned to find they’d traveled downstream quickly, past two other circles, and arrived at the edge of a small city shrouded in fog.

The tower began to sink. The three of them took this as a cue to step out on the docks, leaving the river of fire behind them. They made their way to end of the docks and onto the cloudy streets.

Five minutes, Jesse thought as he stared into the sky. The stars and planets that had once been rushing past the realm were just an empty black void now. He wondered if the universe was only biding its time at the edge of its collapse. Taking time dilation into account, the last few seconds of existence might have stretched out over the last several minutes.

Trisha’s legs gave out. Nigel caught her as she stumbled and fell.

“Trisha, what’s happening?” Nigel asked.

“It’s my fault,” she said. “I knew what would happen when I took on her blood.”

“You took on her powers, didn’t you?” Nigel asked.

“I got to be a Zero Age deity,” she half-heartedly laughed.

“I was the freaking Fifth Horseman. How cool was that?”

“How did you know you could do that?” Nigel asked.

“I drank the blood of a Frost Giant once,” Trisha said.

“Wasn’t my best plan, but I took on the strength of a Titan for a short while. I thought maybe I could have a taste of her blood and...”

She coughed and stumbled again. Ash was coming out of her mouth.

"No, Trish!" Nigel held her. "Hold on! We'll get you help!"
"It's too late," she said. "I held onto that power longer than I should've."

"Just breathe slowly," Jesse said. "Five more minutes and the universe will end anyway. You don't want to miss that, right?"

"You know there's only one way out of this," Trisha said, her eyes going grey and her hair slowly turning to dust. "Make sure Solomon isn't on the Throne when it ends. Do it now. Don't wait for me to die. Don't even look back."

"I'll not leaving you," Nigel said, his eyes welling up.

"After a hell of a year, you're still stubborn," she smiled. She looked to the river. More debris was floating past. Big Ben had already sunk, and now pieces of the white bridge her helicopter had crashed on were floating by. The wreck of the helicopter itself could be seen among the flotsam. Sitting atop it was a single pilot, trapped on the flaming river, waiting out the rest of time. He waved reluctantly to the shore.

"Hey, look at that," she chuckled. "Eric made it."

"Who's Eric?" Jesse asked.

She didn't answer.

"Trisha? Say something!" Nigel voice quivered as he shook her lightly.

She exhaled.

Trisha's body slowly turned to ash in Nigel's arms.

The soft heavenly winds took her remains and carried them into the fog, down a long, familiar street that had once been old fishing villages. The fog parted to reveal the high-rises and businesses further down the road.

Trisha had brought them to the end of Heaven.

They had arrived in Halifax.

48. Broken Glass

There was no sound in the city.

There was no life.

There was no going back.

In the fourteen billion years since I created the universe, the Ninth Circle of Heaven had been My home. I set up a lovely residence here. It was a great ivory palace of spires and gems, complete with hot tubs, laser tag, and indoor kart racing because, face it, when one carries the title of 'Almighty', nobody expects them to be humble. The palace could be spotted from three circles away, glistening in the heavenly flames, welcoming everyone to stop by. My doors were locked to no one.

Yet when a single city was dropped on My doorstep, the glory of My realm took a backseat to the importance of a small tavern in the heart of this city's downtown peninsula.

My palace sat empty. My Throne was dragged from the main hall and relocated to this small domicile.

I felt nothing but sadness for he who was to be My successor.

There was no love in his heart, nor was there hate.

There was just an empty longing for something he'd forgotten.

* * *

The sign on the sidewalk outside read: *Tonight Only: The End of Eternity ft. The Great Solomon.*

Jesse was less than half a foot shorter from when his journey began. He spied through one of his crystal blades and saw a single blue light focus on the door to their tavern.

Nigel took a swing at the sign with his scythe and split it in half. There was no thought to his actions. His broken heart led every choice from here on out.

Together, they kicked down the door.

Off-key scales of music rang from within the tavern's darkness.

"He's playing my piano," Nigel growled.

They entered.

At once, the tavern lit up. The room had been stretched and warped in every direction. Every bottle behind the bar was broken. Every booth had been torn apart. Even the floor had been smashed open revealing the flooded basement below. Scattered throughout were small glass orbs, resembling snow-globes, piled in corners like dirty laundry. There must have been hundreds of them.

At the far end of the tavern sat a woman in a pink top atop a busted ivory chair on the stage. She was desperately trying to play "*Pop Goes the World*" by Men Without Hats, but it seemed becoming the Supreme Being did little for her musical talent.

She spoke, seemingly drunk and listless in her manner, "You came. I was hoping you would. It's been so lonely. I've been trying to watch you, but... I see too much. I see too little. I see...bubbles... and bunnies."

"Christine?" Jesse asked hopefully.

The woman turned. It was indeed her, but the eyes were wrong. Jesse had seen enough possessions to know that

Solomon was in the driver's seat. She grinned unevenly at the two of them.

"Welcome to my nightmare," Solomon said through her voice.

Jesse brandished his swords. "Release Christine at once!"

"There is no release," the being said, twitching erratically.

"There is no redemption. No justice at the end of this long, long road. Only nightmares."

This wasn't the Solomon either of the boys knew. Nigel approached him cautiously, aware that he was facing something potentially more powerful than the Creator. All the rage he'd felt over Trisha subsided as he looked upon this sad excuse of a being. The war they'd been fighting against an evil mastermind was just an illusion. This creature was barely master of its own mind.

"Solomon," Nigel addressed him carefully, "do you know what you've done?"

"I saw the key turn," he replied, his eyes darting around the room as if he were addressing a stadium of people. "The door unlocked. Someone was coming into my house. Many were coming into my house. So they became bubbles.

Bubbles everywhere."

Jesse looked at the glass snow-globes that littered the floors and booths. Solomon even kept a few on top of the piano, just as Nigel once kept the Sphinx. He knelt down and picked one up. Inside, he saw a miniature, and very confused, Metatron robot. Nigel looked in another one and saw the banquet halls of Valhalla rioting in panic. A third revealed the Monkey King, desperately throwing himself against the glass, trying to escape.

"What have you done to them?" Jesse asked.

"No intruders allowed," Solomon giggled. "Not until after the nightmare is complete. Until then, one by one, all is bubbles."

With that, Solomon raised a hand and conjured another glass orb out of thin air. Inside, they saw snow falling and a very bewildered handful of people. Upon closer inspection, Jesse recognized them as Athena, Charlie Magnus, and a few Paladin soldiers. Solomon let the glass orb slip from Christine's fingers. The orb bounced off the stage, sustaining a minor crack, and came to rest against another pile of slightly-cracked orbs. Nigel worried that if any of these orbs were like the snow-globe he kept the Sphinx in, this bar could blow sky high at a moment's notice.

"You're sealing away anyone who's a threat," Nigel realized. "What did you do with Ptolemy?"

"They want me gone, so I make them gone," he sang.

"Wanted to make you gone, but the heart would not allow it. The heart beats strong for you."

Jesse looked to Nigel. "I think he's lost his marbles."

"He's talking about Christine," Nigel explained. "She's still in control."

"Well, we have less than two minutes," Jesse said to Nigel.

"Any ideas on how to separate them?"

Nigel looked at the scythe in his hands and wondered if it would have any effect on this strange, new Christine/Solomon hybrid. The being twitched violently as the two personalities within assessed their guests.

"You wouldn't break the heart," Solomon said, guessing Nigel's intention. "Kill the head and the heart dies."

"If Solomon dies, so does Christine," was Jesse's best guess at interpretation.

"I don't think we have a choice," Nigel said.

"But a promise was made!" Solomon snapped. The air rippled away from the entity's body, rolling orbs across the floor and taking the two Fire-Bloods by surprise. "Save the heart at any cost. Unless one were to take my Throne. One such as you!"

Solomon pointed Christine's finger at Jesse. Jesse was thrown across the room and over the bar, landing on broken bottles. With another gesture, Solomon threw Nigel into the corner of the ceiling, pinning him and the scythe against some decorative sports banners.

"That's the deception, isn't it?" Solomon asked Nigel. "Kill the whole and place the lesser on the Throne! Restore the heart! This is your mind, is it not?"

"What's he talking about?" Jesse asked.

"He thinks you're the one after his Throne," Nigel said, struggling against the power. "He knows that if you become the Creator, you'll bring back Christine."

"Neither worthy!" Solomon yelled, casting more force against the two brothers. The air in the tavern swirled violently. Orbs rolled from corner to corner, some falling into the flooded basement and splashing into the water.

"This universe so broken. These faces screaming. All scream for you! There will be no forgiveness; see them for the pain you caused! Let the heart see you for the monsters you are."

Visions of thousands of people screaming filled both Jesse and Nigel's minds. For Nigel, they were the same visions he'd seen when the River of Fire had been taken. They were the same souls who'd died because of them. Jesse recognized the visions too through his vaguest of memories. Oddly enough, neither brother found themselves buckling under the guilt as they were force-fed the fates of these people.

Solomon urged them to suffer by pushing more thoughts into their minds, but it wasn't having the effect he wanted. Inside, Christine felt nothing different for the two of them. She still maintained control.

Jesse and Nigel had been all over the afterlife this past day. Even in the worst of places, they hadn't seen any of

these screaming souls. In fact, it seemed these nightmares were more their own than anyone else's. The worst thing they felt was revisiting the tragedies of today, and that embodied the pain of love more than guilt.

Trisha had given her life to bring them here. They couldn't abandon that now.

"Why does the heart still want your life?" Solomon asked bewildered. "No death, no suffering, not even bubbles. Cannot see beyond!"

"Because these people you're showing us," Nigel told Solomon. "They've all moved on."

"They're only nightmares," Jesse said. "Nothing else."

"No, no, no, no, no... not else," Solomon exclaimed. "*Else* is nothing. *Is* is everything. There *is* pain and suffering. All is mine to bear! Will correct everything!"

"Be reasonable!" Nigel insisted. "Do you really want to create a universe centered around your own self-loathing?"

"There's no reasoning with him," a lady's voice spoke from the bar's entrance.

Solomon loosened his grip on the boys and stood transfixed on Pandora in the doorway. Nigel breathed easier, but still clung to the ceiling. Jesse carefully took up his swords again.

"At ease, soldier," she said to Jesse, her voice steadier than normal. She stepped into the bar and carefully made her way towards Solomon. Solomon backed away, terrified at her presence.

"Stay back!" he cried. "Witch isn't welcome!"

As she approached, Nigel noticed a distinct change in Pandora's eyes. They appeared warm and focused as opposed to terrifyingly insane. Even her stride had a little less bounce. Pandora crossed the tavern floor as Solomon carefully crept away from her.

Solomon stumbled backwards against the stage. Pandora leaned down to help. There was sadness in her eyes as she looked upon her old master. It was a sadness he once knew long ago.

"Azalea?" he asked.

"Sulei, what have you done?" she asked as she held his hand. "After so many years, look what you've done to these people. To this poor girl. You're better than this."

"Faceless inquisitions; damages done," he muttered more incoherently than ever. "Wake not the underlying stars!"

"We ourselves made a promise long ago," she said. "Do you remember?"

"Promises broken. Broken like glass."

"Say it, just once more."

Solomon closed Christine's eyes and forced himself to focus. Ancient words danced on the tip of his tongue as he tried to remember.

"To be greater than the Heavens," he spoke.

"When I was a little girl, I had no home or family to my name," she said. "I didn't even have a name. You promised me more than I could ever dream of. But look around you. Is this what you promised? Are we truly greater than the Heavens?"

"B-Betrayal," Solomon stuttered. "Azalea cast into darkness. Creator allowed Chaos to corrupt. Azalea forsaken."

"What happened to me never fell on you," Pandora promised. "You did what you could to save me. I'll never forget that. But you need to let it go."

Solomon's breathing relaxed. "Universe still broken."

"And madness doesn't suit you, Sulei," she spoke. "That's my job. Yours is one of the most brilliant minds this world has ever seen. It is the order to my anarchy. But order alone does not make a universe."

She placed her hand on Christine's head and felt the turmoil inside.

"Two voices," Solomon whispered.

"Both seeing the future through different eyes," Pandora said. "No wonder you're so fractured. May I?"

Pandora carefully massaged Christine's temples, concentrating on the personalities trapped within. The internal struggle should have been as clear as black and white, but came across more like brownish-blue against greenish-purple. Carefully, she began building mental walls, dividing the colours. The end result wasn't black and white, but pink and grey would have to do.

Through Christine's eyes, Solomon warmly regarded the sorceress. "Thank you, Azalea. I see now what has to be done."

"Are you in a well-enough mind?"

"Yes," Solomon said clearly. "Did I really just try to trap everything in bubbles?"

"Don't worry; I'm certain it made perfect sense at the time."

"We can still live up to our promise," Solomon said. "But I understand that I mustn't do this alone. The universe cannot stand on half a foundation. It needs both of us."

"And what of the girl?"

"We still need her," Solomon said. "But she can be restored. Everything can be restored."

"Then we'll take the Throne together and see what happens."

Solomon nodded. "It's the only way."

He released his control over Jesse and Nigel. Nigel tumbled to the floor while Jesse crawled out from behind the bar.

Pandora turned to them and said, "Everything will be fine from here. Thank you, boys."

"Forty seconds," Jesse said. "If you're going to do something, do it now."

"We will," Pandora said. "And don't worry. We'll put everything back the way it was."

Suddenly, her body lurched. Blood dripped from her mouth.

Pandora dropped to her knees, horror in her eyes, and uttered, "Oh, bubbles."

She fell face-first onto the floor dead with a bloody hole in her back.

Christine stood up behind her, Solomon's eyes leering as he held up a human heart encased in a glass orb.

"Her idea was good in theory," he said coldly.

"You son of a..." Jesse dashed across the room at him, but was slapped against the wall by an unseen force. Nigel was thrown against another wall as well.

"Pandora's performed a great service," Solomon smiled as he stepped over his former pupil's body. "The girl no longer resists me."

"Her name is Christine!" Jesse yelled.

"She was Christine," he said, "But she's made her sacrifice."

"And I'm making mine," Jesse said as he peeled himself off the wall and dropped his swords. He lunged at Solomon shouting, "Take this!"

Jesse quickly pressed both of his hands against Solomon's sternum. White light pulsed from his palms and an unexpected force knocked him backwards. Solomon rolled and tumbled across the floor into the stage.

As he stood up, he felt lighter. A brief look at his hand revealed a transparent old man's hand - his own. He was in his astral form once more. Where he'd been standing before still stood Christine, completely Solomon-free.

"I'm me again!" Christine exclaimed.

"No!" Solomon shouted, his spirit making a mad dash across the floor. As he ran, Nigel raced forward with the scythe and swept at the spirit's leg, causing Solomon to trip on the blade. Part of Solomon's ghostly foot grazed off as he leapt back into Christine's body. She was once again possessed.

"Jesse, how did you do that?" Nigel asked as he backed away from his foe.

"The little fool used up the last second of his soul," Solomon said, bearing down on Jesse. "Wasted it on a momentary miracle, didn't you? Well, I hope that one measly second was worth it."

Jesse grinned. "It was a split-second, dumbass."

Jesse repeated the same gesture, pressing his palms against the sternum. Solomon was again exorcised from Christine's body. Nigel took a swing at his spirit, but only sliced a chip off his shoulder as the spirit evaded his blade. Solomon dodged and weaved his way past Nigel again, successfully reclaiming Christine's body.

Before Jesse could repeat his trick, Solomon forced them both back. Nigel was thrown into a booth while Jesse fell into the basement.

The bar began to rattle and shake.

The ceiling splintered and came apart.

Solomon grinned menacingly and said, "Time's up."

He summoned his Throne back to the stage and sat upon it, gazing into the dark void of the sky as the upper floor of the bar was torn off by an invisible turbulent force. The entire realm was collapsing around them.

Power surged off his body. The walls cracked. The floor came apart. The walls, booths, bathroom, and kitchen were stripped away. All that remained was the lounge, the basement and the stage where Solomon sat upon his Throne.

Solomon took a deep breath and said, "Let there be light."
"Let there be pipe!" Jesse shouted, leaping from the basement and carrying a broken water pipe. He hurled it over Solomon's head, missing him completely. Instead the pipe collided with the glass orbs atop the piano, shattering them. Nigel and Jesse took shelter under a booth as the orbs exploded, throwing Solomon off his Throne. The bar was ripped apart. All existence disappeared. Jesse's act had unknowingly saved the universe in a way he never imagined. With one of those orbs broken, time suddenly stopped at the edge of existence. A new force rose to greet them. Solomon's true nightmare had returned. The force rising to meet him wasn't his destiny, it was his ruin. Ptolemy had arrived.

49. The End of Eternity

“About freakin’ time!” Nigel shouted.

“What’s going on?” Solomon shouted as he got to his feet.

“Who’s there?”

The force lifting them from below appeared to be a large, translucent cupped surface. It glowed brightly, lifting them high above the Void until they were in the upper reaches of the remaining universe as it collapsed. Time was stretched out in all directions as stars and planets now appeared elongated and out-of-focus.

They were frozen in time at the last split-second of the universe.

Jesse patted the soft ground and felt the strange contours of its surface. Tiny cuts and scars ran across it, almost as if he were standing on a living thing. As he examined his surroundings, he saw five great sausage-shaped pillars rise up around him. He realized at once where they were standing. “It’s a giant hand.”

High above them, they saw a great face staring down upon them.

Like a glowing ghost in the cosmos, Ptolemy held the three of them in the center of his palm.

“It’s you?” Solomon shouted. “No! It’s impossible! I sealed you away!”

"And Jesse broke us out!" Patti shouted from atop Ptolemy's shoulder, waving around a transcension stick she found. "Now, Solomon, prepare to face the wrath of Mega-Giant Space Buddha!"

"Hey, guys," Ptolemy waved at them with his other hand.

"You have no power over me!" Solomon said as he leapt out of Ptolemy's palm towards his face. With a great strike, he punched a crater into Ptolemy's chin, then fell back into the palm to admire his handiwork. Only instead of seeing a large cosmic scar across Ptolemy's chin, he saw a tiny scratch at the tip of Ptolemy's enormous thumb. Solomon screwed up his face and said, "That's not right."

"Try again," Ptolemy requested.

Solomon leapt out the palm again, soared into the sky, grabbed onto a passing supernova, and brought it down upon Ptolemy's head. Then he flew off to a passing asteroid to assess the situation from afar... only to find he was still in Ptolemy's hand. And the supernova he'd thrown had only left a tiny mark on the ground at his own feet.

"Want to try jumping out of my hand again?" Ptolemy asked. "It's pretty secure."

"This is impossible!" Solomon shouted. "I'm the new Almighty! *Nothing* is greater than my power!"

"And I control the power of *Nothing*," Ptolemy pointed out.

"Just as Christine planned."

"Bloody hell," Solomon said to himself. He wondered if Christine would respond at this point, but she remained silent. "Clever girl."

"Squish him, Ptolemy!" Patti shouted.

"Is this what it all comes down to?" Solomon asked. "A cold-blooded execution?"

"Sorry, no can do," Ptolemy said. "Rules."

"What rules?" Jesse asked.

"I can't just kill the guy," Ptolemy said. "This battle pretty much determines who gets to rule the universe. What kind of Buddha would I be if I picked sides? Being the master of Nothing is all about balance. Yin and yang and all that."

Solomon let out a laugh. "So let me get this straight: you've remastered your powers, but you can't even use them?"

"I could, but not to whoop your sorry butt," Ptolemy said. "I think those two can handle it."

Solomon looked back to Jesse and Nigel who were anxiously awaiting to once again knock him out of Christine's body. He suddenly felt like he'd been flanked on a universal scale.

"Then why would you bother at all?" he asked.

"Like I said, balance," Ptolemy explained. "Right now, a Zodiac Knight versus a pair of Chaos Aemons is a little one-sided. We need to set some ground rules."

"You mean like an Aeonomega?" Nigel asked.

"With me as the Referee," Ptolemy replied. "In the spirit of the universe's end, I hereby declare a battle to the death between all of you. Whoever wins gets to name the next ruler of the universe. Of course, we'll level out the playing field."

Solomon suddenly felt himself get heavier. A looming sense of fear grew within him. Tiny magic shackles appeared on his wrists.

"What is this?" he asked. "You're shackling me?!"

"I'm going to set you somewhere between Fifth and Sixth age," Ptolemy said. "A little less than a Zeus, but more than a Hercules. Also, I'm going to give you a magic spear."

A long iron spear appeared in Solomon's hand.

"I don't believe this!" Solomon exclaimed. "You're bringing me down to their level!"

"Pft, don't be ridiculous," Ptolemy chuckled. "When I said this fight was one-sided, you were the one in trouble. Now, as for you two..."

Jesse and Nigel found shackles upon their wrists as well.

"No more demon powers for you," Ptolemy said. "No super-strength, no shadow tricks, no rageaholic math-bending - just two brothers, a scythe, and a couple swords. Sound good?"

"Wait - you're *weakening* us?" Nigel asked. "I thought you were on our side!"

"I'm just making things fair."

Solomon complained. "So this is what the Great Plan's been leading up to? The three of us fighting in a fool's palm? The Creator's idea of a joke?"

"Just shut up and fight already!" Patti shouted.

As Solomon and Patti had a shouting match, Jesse whispered to Nigel, "Are we really going to have to kill Christine just to get to him?"

"No," Nigel said. "We won't give Solomon that satisfaction. We'll use your spirit jolt trick to evict him. Make him vulnerable on the outside."

"So same thing we did in the tavern?"

"We'll switch it up," Nigel whispered. "I'll knock him out of her body, you take him down."

Solomon called back to them, "I can hear you, you know."

"On three," Jesse said. "One... two..."

Before he could finish, Nigel lunged forward, threw the scythe back to Jesse, and slid under Solomon's spear, going between his legs. He quickly spun around and pressed his palms against Solomon's back, sacrificing a split-second of his soul against him. A jolt of light kicked Solomon's spirit out of Christine's body. Solomon's spirit stumbled forwards towards Jesse... who was still trying to pick up the scythe while holding onto his swords.

"Get him now!" Nigel shouted.

"Hang on," Jesse said as he fumbled with the scythe. "The handle on this thing's slippery!"

Solomon wasted no time racing back into Christine's body. Christine barely had a moment to assess her surroundings before Solomon leapt back inside her body. He lashed out at Nigel who quickly evaded the spear.

"Damn it, Jesse!" Nigel shouted. "I just wasted a piece of my soul on that!"

"I said on the count of three!" Jesse argued as he dropped his swords and picked up the scythe. "Not two! I wasn't ready!"

The spear slashed across Nigel's leg.

"Sorry about this, Christine," Jesse said as he ran up behind Solomon, ducked under the swinging spear, and kicked him in Christine's hip. A jolt of light came out, knocking Solomon from the body again towards Nigel.

"Catch!" Jesse shouted as he threw the scythe to Nigel. Unfortunately, it was too late. Solomon quickly got back inside Christine and skewered Jesse with his spear. Barely missing the heart, he swung the Fire-Blood across Ptolemy's palm. Jesse awkwardly fell against the index finger.

"Great, now I wasted a piece of *my* soul!" Jesse complained.

"You were supposed to throw me the scythe *then* knock him out!"

"It's not my fault we didn't cover this in training!"

"It's not my fault I didn't anticipate playing a cosmic game of monkey-in-the-middle!"

Nigel was then caught off-guard as Solomon grabbed one of their swords from the ground and threw it at Nigel's foot. The blade pierced his shoe and pinned him to the ground. Solomon then flipped the other sword off the ground with

his spear and roundhouse-kicked it towards Nigel. It skewered his other leg, making movement impossible. With Nigel immobilized, Solomon hurried to attack the unarmed Jesse.

Nigel quickly pulled the sword from his leg and hurled it at Solomon, grazing the calf. Solomon stumbled at Jesse's feet. Jesse saw Christine's face wince in pain.

"Don't hurt Christine!" Jesse shouted.

"Hit him now!" Nigel called back.

"Oh, right," Jesse realized as he placed his palms against Christine's forehead and jolted her again. Solomon's spirit went flying out towards Nigel, who took a swipe at him with the scythe. He grazed a large part of the spirit's torso as Solomon tried to dodge. Solomon scrambled away as Nigel kept swinging and gradually chipped more bits and pieces of spirit residue from Solomon's person. Slowly, Nigel could see Solomon becoming more transparent. He was using up his own spirit energy to remain stable.

"Hell of a plan you had," Jesse said as he helped Christine stand.

She quickly put her hand on the wound to hold the bleeding. "Okay, so it wasn't perfect. But you gotta admit; my plan led us somewhere pretty cool. And we're figuring it out, right?"

"Wrong!" Solomon shouted as he reclaimed Christine's body. He quickly grabbed Jesse and threw him into Nigel's path. Nigel tried to raise his scythe in time to avoid Jesse, but wound up slicing through his brother's leg. Jesse's lower leg came off and regenerated, but he lost half a foot in height as the rest of his body compensated to rebuild him.

Solomon was busy healing as well. Back in control of Christine's body, he was able to instantly heal his leg wound. He then grabbed his spear and parried Nigel's

scythe. The two exchanged blows, skillfully keeping each other at bay. Solomon was learning now. He wasn't about to let Nigel get within arm's reach.

"You've gone soft, Naveen," Solomon chuckled as he fought. "Sacrifice the girl and you could cut me down so easily."

"I vowed to save her," Nigel said. "The universe won't end on a broken promise."

Jesse hurried over and back-flipped off Nigel's shoulders, landing on the other side of Solomon. He performed another sacrifice attack, pulsing energy from his palms against Christine's back.

Only this time, the soul didn't come out. Solomon stumbled past Nigel and laughed.

"You call that a miracle?"

Jesse couldn't believe it. Whatever was left of his soul wasn't strong enough to create another miracle. Both his and Nigel's surprised reactions gave Solomon the moment he needed to slip out of reach. He hurried away to put some distance between them.

"I can't do it anymore," Jesse said. "I'm all out of soul."

"No, you must have a little left," Nigel said. "Remember what Osiris said. Your soul's the only thing keeping you together. Just let me handle the sacrifices. You hit him with the scythe."

"You've seen me with that thing. I can't hit him worth a crap."

"Well, we don't have a choice."

Jesse looked to Solomon who was taunting them from across Ptolemy's palm. He was getting quicker. He knew how much energy the brothers had left, and how much damage each one could take at this point. Both brothers had taken several blows and lost a lot of fire. Jesse stood barely under five feet now, with his wounds now drawing

fire from within, causing him great internal pain. Even Nigel was starting to feel brittle. Both were on the verge of collapse.

"He's counting on you to make the sacrifice," Jesse said.

"He doesn't need to watch both of us as closely anymore."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm in his blind spot," Jesse said. "Do you remember what Gilgamesh told us?"

"About what?"

"About Seals."

Nigel felt a cold chill run over him.

"Jesse, whatever you're thinking..."

"I'm thinking you should hold onto that scythe," Jesse said, "because I'm going in."

Nigel grabbed his arm. "Don't be stupid."

"Being stupid is the whole reason I'm here," Jesse said as he pulled away and darted towards Solomon.

Solomon thrust his spear, striking Jesse in the shoulder.

Jesse tore his shoulder away from the shaft, ducked as Solomon slashed the spear's other end around, and grabbed onto the back of Christine's neck.

Solomon sneered, "You wouldn't."

"*You* wouldn't," Jesse said as he closed his eyes and let his soul take over.

With that, Nigel watched Jesse's nine thousand years in the universe come to an end. A cold emptiness passed through him as his brother's body gently evaporated into painless flames and a light passed through his hand into Christine's body. Ptolemy could only look on inquisitively, wondering whether this was a victory before contemplating the weight of Jesse's sacrifice.

The weight was explosive.

Christine fell to her knees as Solomon's spirit was thrown towards Nigel.

Nigel swung the scythe, slicing through the spirit's neck. Solomon tumbled across the celestial palm, his ghostly head dangling by the stump of his neck. He promptly reattached it, only to get slashed at from behind by Nigel. Without saying a word, Nigel continued to swing at the spirit and reap Solomon's energy. Solomon grew more transparent by the second. Christine watched in awe as Nigel didn't give Solomon an inch.

"Yeah, get him!" Patti shouted. "Kick his ass!"

"Now, Nigel," Solomon said as he tried to back away.

"Don't forget who created you! Don't forget who made you-
-augh!"

Another gash through his spirit form. Solomon fell away in pain. Every second being attacked, he could feel himself slipping back into the Void.

Desperately, he raced past Nigel and made a beeline for Christine. Only this time, something seemed off. Christine leered at his oncoming spirit as if he were a leaf on the wind. There was no fear in her eyes.

His spirit hit a wall as it tried to repossess her. He bounced off her body and crashed to the ground, paralyzed with shock.

"How...?" he choked.

"Jesse didn't just sacrifice himself to kick you out," Nigel said as he beared down on Solomon. "His last gift was a Seal to *keep* you out."

Solomon looked between Christine and Nigel and sighed. Especially with the giant Space Buddha looming overhead, he felt like this was the moment he should have surrendered. He was literally looking at what was left of the entire universe and all of it was against him. And of course, it was for this reason that he didn't surrender.

Solomon shot forward and dived towards the center of Nigel's chest. Passing through his body, he clung onto

Nigel's soul and held on. With the chaos demon inside, it was a tight squeeze, but Solomon managed it. Nigel cringed as he wrestled with Solomon's spirit commandeering his body. He felt his own spirit slowly lose ground against this intruder. He dropped the scythe at his feet and clutched at his chest.

"So much nicer in here!" Solomon's voice said through Nigel's.

Nigel felt himself lose control of his arms, then his legs, then finally his mind. Soon, he didn't even choose what to look at. Lights, sounds, thoughts, words... Solomon's world was becoming his.

Solomon stood up in Nigel's body and breathed deep. His new body felt like home.

He stood defiantly against Ptolemy and raised his arms victoriously.

"Game, set, and match," he said to the Space Buddha.

"What do your precious Aeonomega rules say about that?"

Ptolemy looked to Patti and asked, "What do you think?"

"I just see Nigel's body," Patti said. "I think that means Nigel wins."

"That's one argument, sure, but you have to take Solomon's mind into account," Ptolemy said. "It's Nigel's body, but someone else is at the wheel. I'd lean towards Solomon winning."

"That's dumb. I want Nigel to win."

"I know, but we've gotta be fair about this Patti."

"You stated this was a deathmatch," Patti said. "I see two people in front of me, both alive."

"True that. Maybe we should call it a draw then if no one's going to do any killing?"

"A draw?" Solomon protested. "That's ridiculous! I'm the clear winner here!"

"But you're not the last person standing," Ptolemy said. "No half-measures. Either call it a draw or finish the job."

"That would mean killing myself!"

"Who said anything about killing *yourself*?" Ptolemy asked.

"Yeah," Patti spoke up. "I literally meant there were two people still standing."

Solomon's eyes widened with surprise.

They widened even more when he realized he'd dropped the scythe in his fight to possess Nigel.

They widened even further when he noticed the scythe was gone.

He spun around to face the furious eyes of Christine.

Death's blade was held aloft in her arms.

Solomon quickly summoned up all the strength he had to go after her, but his right leg didn't respond. He stumbled to one knee while his left hand suddenly seized his other forearm, throwing him off-balance. He struggled to get to his feet, but his body was caving in on itself. Even his own spirit couldn't escape. His veins turned black and his vision clouded over. A malevolent force was devouring him from the inside.

It was then that he remembered his new body hosted a starving fear demon.

And Nigel was finally letting it feast.

Crippled in pain, Solomon looked up at Christine who raised the blade high above her head. For a moment, he didn't believe she'd strike Nigel with that weapon, but the look in her eyes said otherwise. She knew Nigel would want her to do this.

"Don't do it," Solomon begged. "You've been in my mind! You've seen my thoughts! You know what's in store for the universe if I don't become God!"

"You destroyed the universe."

“And if you kill me, it’ll be for naught!” Solomon insisted.
“You think God loves you? You think He’ll reward your loyalty? He won’t change the universe back to the way it was! He’ll just consider it a failed experiment and move on. But I have a plan...”
“I’ve seen your plan in action,” Christine said. “It doesn’t work.”
“But you’ve seen the future; you can help me change it,” Solomon said, weakness in his words. “We can work together. We have a chance to build a world without injustice. A place where God’s love isn’t a lie. Please, just let me correct that one mistake.”
“Love’s never been a mistake, Solomon,” Christine said, a tone in her pity in her voice.
With the last of his strength, Solomon lunged at her.
The blade descended.
As the blade descended, the universe came to an end.
As the universe ended, darkness rose.
As darkness rose, silence fell.

50. The Great Plan

“Let there be light,” I said.

There was light.

The curtains rose on a live studio audience of exactly one hundred trillion and two civilized beings from across the universe. Everyone who had ever lived, mortals and immortals alike, were in attendance in a vast field of bleachers nestled in an eternal white landscape. Every one of them was wearing a white Snuggie.

At first, Nigel felt like he’d just woken up from a very bizarre dream. Surrounded by people on all sides, he found he was also dressed in a similar white Snuggie. It was quite comfortable. The air was sweet and the sounds of joy could be heard from all around. He also no longer felt the intimidating presence of the fear demon. But this newfound discovery paled to his next.

Standing directly to his left, in a similar white Snuggie, was Trisha smiling warmly.

At that moment, it didn’t matter to Nigel if any of this was real or not. He and Trish were all over each other without words. The surrounding one hundred trillion and two spectators were just white noise to them.

“I thought I lost you,” he said.

“You never did,” she said. “We’ve been watching the whole thing from here.”

She gestured into the sky. Thousands of jumbotron screens hovered over them, showing them replays and highlights from throughout the day. Many depicted the epic inter-deity battles in Heaven, while others focused on more human-oriented activities. On one, Nigel saw a nurse performing CPR on a fallen angel. On another, a helicopter rescue team was evacuating people from Mexico City while Quetzalcoatl dueled with Dominion.

"I think someone put those up to entertain us while we wait," Trisha said. "Everyone who died has been following the whole apocalypse from here."

"How long *have* you been here?" Nigel asked.

"About ten minutes," Trisha said. "The seats were half-full when I arrived, but they really filled up after the universe stopped collapsing."

A man shook Nigel's shoulder. Nigel turned to see a portly man in a baseball cap eating a hot dog. The man congratulated him. "Dude, nice job! That last fight was *sweet!*"

He gestured to one of the jumbotrons which was showing a replay of Nigel and Jesse's fight against Solomon. He couldn't believe his eyes. Could this whole apocalypse have been some sick, inter-dimensional reality show?

"Where's Jesse?" Nigel asked, looking around. To his right, he saw an unfamiliar Spanish couple with their two kids. In the seats below, he saw a small militia of eighteenth-century British soldiers. The closest he saw to a familiar face was the Egyptian god Horus sitting several rows down having an animated conversation with the 80's pop-rock trio of Susanna Hoffs and the Peterson sisters.

"Haven't seen him yet," Trisha said, looking around.

"He sacrificed the last of his soul to stop Solomon," Nigel said. "Without it, he's gone. What if he didn't cross over?"

"I'm sure they let him have a new one," Trisha said. "You worry too much. He's probably with Christine, or maybe some of those weird homeless friends of his. I really don't know what Jesse's social life is like."

"But where are we?" Nigel asked. "How did we get here?"

"Stop worrying so much; I think the show's about to begin," Trisha said. "Have a hot dog."

Nigel then noticed a vegan hot dog covered in sauerkraut magically appear in his hand. He took a few bites. It was pretty good.

The Jumbotrons then vanished as the lights dimmed.

A small white podium appeared at the bottom of the bleachers with a spotlight on it. Thanks to whatever magic brought everyone here, the podium looked as close to everyone in the back as it did to the front.

I casually strode up the podium and checked the microphone levels. To everyone, I looked like a strange shapeless, multi-coloured blob.

"Check, hello, welcome?" I said. "Can everybody hear me?"

Everyone in existence said "Yes."

"All right, I'm currently speaking to every one of you in every possible language," I said. "Before we begin, I need all one hundred trillion and two of you to decide on a form for Me."

Everyone in the universe had a short discussion. Thirty seconds later, it was unanimously agreed that I should look like Bob Marley dressed in Michael Jackson's white suit from the *Smooth Criminal* music video. Somewhere in the crowd, Christine managed to sneak bunny ears onto My fedora. Soon, I was clad in white garbs with dreadlocks draped over My shoulders. I ran yellow, green, and red stripes down My sleeves for good measure.

“Ah, good, Bunny Bob Michael Marley,” I said. “One of My favourites.”

I cleared My throat and checked My notes before speaking again.

“Now then; welcome to the end of the universe! It’s been an exciting fourteen billion years, but by golly, we’ve done it! And you guys did a fantastic job with the apocalypse, I kid you not! Every single one of you. For example...”

I singled out Helena Bakersfield, a single mother from Chicago, Illinois, in the crowd.

“Helena, your actions saving those children from that burning school bus back in 1976 allowed those children to grow up and help lead the evacuations of Honolulu, Madrid, and Johannesburg.”

I then gestured to a large green, ogre-like being in bloody armour.

“And Kragthara the Eviscerator,” I said, “Three thousand years ago, you conquered the planet Gragra in the Pleiades cluster. Thanks to your genocides, lustful lifestyle, and inappropriate dealings with livestock, you inspired future generations to be nothing like you, and enabled them to help build half the fleet that defended Heaven.”

There a light smattering of applause.

I pointed at a young man in the front row.

“And how can I forget Jonathan Arthur Ptolemy?” I said.

“Jon, your lifetime spent watching movies and playing video games made it possible for you to turn into a giant Space Buddha and bring balance to the universe.”

“Where are we?” one person out of a hundred trillion and two asked.

“Very good question!” I pointed to him. “You are all currently in *Other Heaven*.”

“There’s an *Other Heaven*?” Osiris exclaimed from the third row, his head figuratively exploding.

“Yes, this is where you go if you die in the afterlife,” I explained. “This is the Heaven that acts a waystation to the next universe.”

Most of the people present seemed confused.

“Let me explain,” I continued. “I started this great universe with a dream. A dream to use the magic of free will and turn it into the most fantastic, delicate piece of cosmic machinery to culminate in what will ultimately be My greatest masterpiece. You see: everything that occurs in the universe, from black holes swallowing galaxies to butterflies flapping wings, from thoughts and fears to choice and consequence, all represent a Rube-Goldberg device that runs over the course of fourteen billion years.” Nigel heard Poseidon call out from somewhere, “You mean like one of those things on Youtube where dominos fall over and push a ball into a bucket?”

“Yes, or the thing that feeds the dog from the beginning of *Back to the Future*,” I said, trusting that everybody had seen the movie already. “Everything you say or do affects the nature of the universe, gradually programming it for its final form. And now My Great Plan has reached its end. The Horsemen have been defeated, the Seals have been broken, and all of your religious prophecies have been fulfilled. All that remains is the payoff.”

There was heavy murmuring among the crowd.

“That’s right, ladies and gentlemen,” I said. “Tonight, the ultimate answer to the ultimate question *will be revealed!*”

“Is it forty-two?” about three million people asked.

“No, but everyone who said that is getting a free towel after the show.”

“Excuse me!” Nigel suddenly shouted as he stood up.

“Sorry, but I was under the impression that my brother and I just risked our asses to keep Solomon off Your Throne. A Throne that You practically gift-wrapped for him!”

“Yes, that was all part of the Plan,” I said. “You’ll see where I’m going with this.”

“No, You let Yourself get trapped under a rock,” Nigel irritatingly contested. “Don’t tell me that was part of Your Plan! Not to mention Pandora! And Ragnarök! You allowed so much tragedy to happen to this world! How do You account for that?”

“Nigel, please sit down.”

“*¡Sientate!*” shouted the Spanish mother sitting next to Nigel as she slapped him in the arm.

Embarrassed, Nigel reluctantly sat down.

A few other people throughout the crowd, including Viviane, the Monkey King, and a mentally restored Odin also had their share of complaints, but were promptly silenced by everyone who wanted to see where this was going.

“Now before we begin,” I said, “there’s a few special thanks I want to throw out. Firstly, I just want to acknowledge My old friend Lucifer in the front seat there. Lucifer, we’ve had our falling out, but you really pulled through in the end. And I just wanted to let you know that I forgive you for that whole rebellion thing. Just don’t do it again. Learn to love the humans.”

“Oh, thank you, m’Lord!” Lucifer cried tears of joy.

“And is Nione here?” I said, scanning the crowd. “Ah, there she is. My friends, Nione has been an angel-in-training for nine thousand years and possibly has one of the worst records on file. But tonight, she learned that being a guardian angel also means looking out for yourself. And so I’m happy to announce the last graduating angel of this universe! Nione, you’ve got your wings!”

“Oh, my God!” Nione squealed from higher up in the bleachers. All of her angel friends patted her on the back as she sprouted two shiny new wings.

I continued, "And of course, special thanks go out to My bros. Gilgamesh, Moses, Zoroaster, Osiris, Atlas, Stephen Hawking, you guys are wonderful."

A band started playing over My thank you speech, but I quickly muted them.

"Lastly, I've got a very special woman here tonight," I said.

"She's had a rough go of it. Her part in tonight was never part of My Plan, but through the prophecies and possessions, she's the one who stepped up to make everything possible. So please, give a big hand to the one, the only, Paaaaaaaandora!"

Nigel expected to hear "Christine", but was taken by surprise as the demon sorceress got a standing ovation. Pandora marched up to the podium in her finest, most revealing, awards gown. I stepped aside as she got on the mike. She was practically on the verge of tears.

"I don't know what to say," she cried. "One time, I threw a cat at a bus. The cat bounced off and ran away. And I chased it. And it went into someone's yard, and I don't know what happened next but I think I took someone's child to Argentina for the rest of the afternoon. We didn't speak the language, so we just found more cats and threw them at more buses. Thank you."

I handed her a kleenex. She blew her nose and hurried back to her seat. I resumed My post.

"Pandora, folks," I smiled. "Love her or hate her, she's something else."

Nigel was stewing in his seat. This ridiculous ceremony was eating away at him. Where was Jesse and Christine in all this? Where did Solomon go? Who was going to become the next Creator? As he looked down at the bottom row, he saw Charlie Magnus scoop Pandora off her feet and spin her around happily. Pandora raised her arms and let loose a barrage of fireworks into the air, most of

which exploded into the shapes of Lucky Charm marshmallows and images of David Schwimmer's face. David Schwimmer himself pointed and laughed about two rows up.

"This isn't right," Nigel mumbled. "It can't end on such a ludicrous note. What about everything we've been through?"

"The whole universe doesn't revolve around us, sweetheart," Trisha said. "Just take it easy and let's see where this is going."

"And now the moment you've been waiting for!" I announced, gesturing off into the light behind everyone. Everyone turned to see what appeared to be an incoming dark cloud in the horizon. "All that remains of the universe, like sands through an hourglass! Let the next Big Bang begin!"

"Dark matter?" Trisha inquired.

"A lot of dark matter," Nigel said as he cowered a little. What they were looking at was probably billions of light-years large and was moving at an incredible speed. The air trembled around them as the sea of dark matter came surging in.

"Keep your eye on the birdie!" I shouted.

Nigel's heart pumped to life.

He felt he was young again. Young, naive, and unknowing of the world.

The dark matter swarmed overhead, but instead of being an enormous terrible thing, it was quite the opposite. Nigel felt it was feeding him. It was teaching him. All history poured into his mind at once. In a second, he relived his first thousand years. Journeys through the desert, campfires with Nione, sword training with Jesse - he felt it all. Even the worst of it. The destruction of cities flashed before his eyes and he was once again ridden with waves

of guilt. Nine thousand years passed as the cloud rushed over.

Then something unexpected happened.

The most terrible moments of his life branched out. He followed the lives of those he'd wronged. Those who survived the horrific disasters brought on by Pandora carried on. He relived their years, and then the years of their children and grandchildren. He experienced their highs and lows. Their loves and laughter. Their fondest moments became his and carried on echoing through the centuries.

He finally saw the Plan at work. For every negative action, there were a hundred positive reactions. But those reactions were so intimate and personal, they'd go unseen in the grander scheme of things. No city fell without a hundred colonies rising in its stead. For every atrocity, there were a hundred justices. For every death, a hundred others were saved. Sometimes thousands.

The one constant was the overwhelming feeling of love. So much care and beauty had been put into this Plan.

Throughout human history, the kindness outweighed the suffering. No death had ever been in vain.

It was too much to watch. Nigel lowered his gaze and looked to everyone else. Likewise, they stared into the sky with their mouths agape, not saying a word as they witnessed the theory of everything take form.

The billion light-year cloud of dark matter finished sweeping over them.

Almost immediately, everyone fell to their knees crying tears of joy.

They had finally seen their place in the universe.

They were not insignificant.

Every single one of them had made so many differences without ever knowing it.

"Here it comes!" I shouted.

They all watched as the cloud vanished into the distance, tightened into a singularity, and disappeared.

Then a new universe emerged, filled with stars, worlds, and so many other beautiful things. But most importantly, this new universe was shaped *exactly* like a... bear?!

"No!" I exclaimed. "That's not right! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! Noooooooooo!"

"What's wrong?" Ptolemy asked.

"It's a bear," I cried. "It's not supposed to be a bear. It's supposed to be a monkey."

"...So?"

"It was a bear last time!" I complained as I fished into My jacket and pulled out My clipboard. I quickly flipped through My checklist and found everything had been in order. "I don't know what went wrong!"

"It's still very nice," Nigel heard Athena call.

"Wasted!" I screamed. "Fourteen billion years *wasted* on another stupid bear!"

The assembly of one hundred trillion and two people felt very uncomfortable as I threw a five year-old temper tantrum in front of them.

"Hey, God?" Nigel shouted. "Are you trying to tell us that your Great Plan culminates in a bear-shaped universe? *That* was the payoff?"

"It was supposed to be a monkey," I sulked.

Nigel suppressed the urge to explode with rage. Instead, he calmly left his seat and descended the bleachers. He made his way to the podium and placed his hand on My shoulder.

"God, you don't have to try so hard," he explained. "When that universe flew overhead, it was the most remarkable thing I'd ever seen. There was just so much beauty in Your creation."

"That?" I asked. "That was just pre-Bang residue. The monkey was supposed to be the surprise."

"The monkey isn't important," Nigel said. "Everything in-between - I get it now. You just showed us the meaning of our lives and beyond. For the first time ever... I don't regret anything."

"So you liked the *residue*?" I asked.

"It was incredible."

"It was magnificent!" Thor exclaimed.

"A pure work of art!" shouted George Washington Carver.

"*Fantastisk!*" proclaimed Ingvold from Sweden.

"It explained so much," Nigel said. "I don't even feel angry. I'm just relieved."

"I suppose I should lead with that next time then," I realized.

I looked around at everyone in existence but couldn't make heads nor tails of this strange turn of events. Perhaps this was because I failed to make the monkey? The citizens of the last universe loved the bear. Then again, the last universe didn't have pain or suffering. I'd have to bring the residue into the lab and perform tests at a later time.

"Hey, God?" Nigel asked.

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I love everybody!" Zeus shouted.

"And I love you, brother!" Hades and Poseidon called out.

"Group hug!" Surtur shouted as he emerged from his seat and ran about collecting people for a record-breaker.

Everybody in the universe broke out into hugs and laughter. So enthralled with their place in the universe, they completely forgot about the horror they'd been through these past twenty-four hours.

I pulled Myself together as Ptolemy, Patti and several Ancients gathered around me. I greeted many familiar faces who had been prominent in the events surrounding Halifax.

Ptolemy was first to say, "The bear is lovely."

"Yes, I suppose it'll have to do," I said. "But now I need a new Plan. One can't just have a universe sitting there doing nothing. I suppose I could try for the monkey again, but I really should build a new Heaven..."

"Can I suggest something?" Trisha asked.

"Please."

"Could you maybe put us all back in the new universe?"

Trisha asked, "as in, exactly right back where we were before the apocalypse even happened, but without any of the apocalypse?"

"You mean you want Me to take this shiny new universe and rebuild it exactly as it was, with all your friends and family intact?"

"That would be great, thanks."

I looked upon the sparkling new universe with a deep longing. There was so much potential to be had. It could be a place where fire burned cold and jazz has gravity. The dominant species could be octopus people with pencil sharpeners on their heads. I could really have fun with this place. Was there any merit to rebuilding it exactly as it was?

"I could do it," I said, "but there has to be changes. I think the problem before was magic. Gods, Titans, angels, demons... they over-complicate an already delicate formula."

"So you'd take them out?" Nigel asked.

"But how can that work?" I asked Myself. "Religious worship is essential to cultural evolution. I can't just take deities out of the equation."

"Humans don't need to see gods to believe in them," Trisha said. "Leave it up to faith and humanity will find its way."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "I mean, the one thing bugging Me about the last universe was all the deities. None of you ever seem to work properly! You don't adhere to aging, don't follow the laws of physics, some of you turn into bulls and seduce women..."

"Just the one time!" Zeus exclaimed.

"Are you saying we're broken?" Athena asked.

"That's exactly what you are," I said. "You're glitches. But humans follow every rule. They sleep, they poop, they bleed, they have reflections... I'm going to do it. This new universe: everyone is mortal!"

"You mean I have to be a stinkin' human?" Krindel asked.

"Or you could stay in the new Heaven and help clean up," I said. "Not that it matters to me. Once things are set in motion, I won't be the Creator anymore."

"Who will?" Trisha asked.

I looked to Ptolemy. The boy was already prepared for My proposition.

"I thought Christine was supposed to choose the next Creator," Nigel argued.

"She did," I explained. "She took it out of her own hands, made a few recommendations, and left it up to Me."

"But where is Christine?" Nigel asked. "And Jesse for that matter? Did he make it?"

"They're somewhere in the crowd, I'd imagine," I said.

"Jesse earned another soul when he sacrificed himself, so yes, he made it. As for Christine, she was very specific about not wanting to be in the spotlight. Her memories are fully restored, so I guess she and Jesse were a little eager for quality time."

In the year he'd known her, Nigel often forgot that Christine was once a shy, invisible girl. It made sense that she'd refuse to be at the head of this ceremony. Old habits die hard after all.

"Jonathan Arthur Ptolemy," I said to the young boy, "Pupil of the Sea God, the Fire-Blood, and the Monkey King. In the last year, I've seen you grow from a lazy college punk to a lazy hero to a lazy Space Buddha. But accomplishments have nothing to do with running the universe. You need to display the same level of neutrality you showed in facing Solomon. Can I count on you to be the same lazy, easily distracted, surrealist that you've always been?"

"I think so."

"I'm not kidding. If you see injustice happening, you can't just hit it with a pillar of fire."

"What if I really want to?"

"Then it'll end up in the Bible and you'll have to explain yourself later."

"Then I hereby vow to use my powers wisely and..."

"There's no vow," I said. "Just say okay."

"Okay."

Patti took Ptolemy by the hands and kissed him to celebrate. The crowd cheered them on, happy for Ptolemy's promotion.

"Good job, kid," Poseidon gave him a thumbs up.

"Thanks, everyone," Ptolemy replied. "I promise I'll try to keep the bad things to a minimum."

"So proud of you!" Patti exclaimed, pinching his cheeks.

"Patti, you've been with me this whole time," Ptolemy said.

"When you go back to Earth, I promise I'll find a way to come see you everyday."

"Screw that," she said. "I'm staying."

"But you can't stay!" Ptolemy exclaimed. "This is the afterlife! You're the most life-loving person I've ever met! You have to go back to Earth!"

"Uh, hello? Forget that. I'd be dating God. That pretty much makes me Queen of the Universe."

"But what about...?"

"Don't try to talk me out of it," Patti said. "And for the record, I expect you to create a nice summer home for us in Malibu with a penthouse suite for when my parents come to visit. I'm talking royal treatment for all eternity."

Ptolemy smiled softly. "You realize it'll take ten billion years alone just to recreate the Earth, right?"

Patti shrugged. "I'm sure you can do it in seven days."

"You can do it in six and take the seventh off," I said.

"Being Me has its perks."

"So what happens now?" Nigel asked as he looked out at the trillions of people engaging in mass hugs.

"Well, there's a grace period before the next universe starts," I said. "My part in this is done. I think I'll wander off and slowly let Ptolemy absorb My essence. Ptolemy, can I trust you to handle everything from here on out?"

"Maybe?"

"Good answer," I said as I stepped off the podium and began wandering off into the white nothingness.

"Hey, how do I start?" Ptolemy called out.

"Just figure out who's staying and going," I said. "The rest will come naturally when I'm gone."

With that, I left them to their own devices and faded away from Other Heaven to enjoy My last fleeting moments of being Me.

Ptolemy assessed his new situation and agreed.

"Then it's time to say our goodbyes," he said to everyone.

They looked despondent. Ptolemy reassessed his plan.

"But not without an end-of-the-world party," he followed up.

Moods lightened immediately.

Osiris set off to find all the party animals from the Eight Afterlife.

This was going to be one heck of a shindig.

51. How Nine Thousand Years End

The sound of a Mariachi band could be heard echoing across eternity as one hundred trillion and two people celebrated the beginning of a brand new universe. Racial tension, class warfare, familial feuds, religious rivalries; none of it mattered at this junction. With so much love in the air, everyone made the most of the party in their own special way without feeling discriminated against by other party-goers. Sinners and saints were mingling without complication. It went without saying that *Other Heaven* was arguably the most convenient thing ever.

And what a party they had. Every god capable of conjuring up buffet tables and kegs laid them out across the expanse. There were dance-offs, piñatas, parades, karaoke contests, and bumper cars. Vladimir Tsepish even brought board games and potato salad somehow. Family members reunited with their lost loved ones, and devoted followers finally got to meet their favourite angels and deities. If you were a celebrity, you were certain to hand out a lot of autographs. And if you were one of the three alien races present, you were likely to be overwhelmed by all the humans wanting pictures taken with you.

As the party continued, the realm began to transform into something more tangible. Hills rolled over the whiteness, and a stream of crystal water could be seen winding its way towards the new universe. Ptolemy was slowly

inheriting his power, exercising new ways to use it, and it all began with giving Other Heaven a makeover.

At the top of one of those hills sat Jesse and Christine as they watched over the party below. The boy in his red hoodie and Christine in her pink blouse looked as if they'd never parted ways.

Jesse pointed to the crowd below. "Check out Artemis." Down below, Artemis was alive and kicking, having let her hair down as she engaged in a breakdancing contest against Vincent Van Gogh.

"Oh, yeah?" Christine said. "Check out Surtur."

A heavily-inebriated Surtur rode an Oktoberfest parade float through the crowd singing "*Twist and Shout*" into a microphone while Athena and Viviane sat at his feet sharing a doobie.

"I gotta admit; you cleaned up my mess pretty good," Jesse said.

"You cleaned up mine pretty good too."

When Jesse found her with her memory completely intact, there wasn't an awkward moment to follow. No apologies or silences; just a simple "How's it going?" Without missing a beat, they were the same goofy duo they were before that fateful incident with the plane last Christmas. Not that they didn't retain a few life lessons along the way, of course.

"It never did come down to my teeth and claws tearing apart the universe," Jesse noted.

"I might have oversold that part," she admitted. "All I wanted was to remember you. I guess if I tried harder, I could've foreseen the Horsemen a little sooner."

"Do you still have visions?"

"They were memories, not visions," she said, "and no. I'm back to factory settings."

Jesse briefly glanced through the crowd, wondering if he could spot the Fates. If they were here, they were partying way off on the other side of the realm. It was just as well. He didn't want to dampen the mood by registering a complaint.

"Some of the gods are talking about going back to Earth," Jesse said. "Poseidon, Quetzalcoatl, Thor... they each want a shot at a mortal life. Same with Artemis, though I think she just wants to live out her dream of someday being killed by a wild animal."

"I could picture Poseidon retired in Jamaica," Christine imagined. "Relaxing on the beach with a piña colada and a bikini supermodel wife."

"A bunch of the others want to stay, though," Jesse said.

"Zeus, Hades, Odin, Vladimir... pretty much all the Titans. They're loving it up here too much. I wonder how different the world will be without them."

"It won't," Christine said. "It'll just go back to the way things were before Pandora arrived."

"But will we?"

Before Christine could answer, they heard Nigel shout,

"There you two troublemakers are!"

Climbing the hill was Nigel and Trisha with Ptolemy and Patti at their side. Ptolemy was covered in beads and face paint, with his free "*The Answer is 42*" towel draped over his shoulders. Patti was shamelessly walking around in her underwear, wearing a sombrero and drinking straight vodka. She was Queen of the Universe now, and she was going to enjoy it.

"Missed you two at the assembly," Trisha said.

"Eh, didn't much feel like getting in the way of the show," Jesse said. "Out of a hundred trillion and two people, enough of our own friends were already interrupting too much."

"Yeah, you guys hogged God to yourselves after it was over," Christine said. "The poor Pope couldn't even get close to say hi."

"Good to see you back to normal," Nigel said to Christine. "I hope Solomon didn't give you too trouble after we were gone."

"He begged for mercy, if you can believe it," she said.

"What an ass."

"What was it like, having that creepy old man in your body?" Patti inappropriately asked. "Whenever Wu Tang possessed me, he just went on eating binges."

"You know what's weird?" Christine said as she thought about it. "The whole time he was in my body, he didn't once look in a mirror. He didn't think of me as a person. He didn't even think of himself as a person. For all the brilliance Pandora lavished upon him, he was more delusional than anything."

"Has anyone seen him since we got here?" Trisha asked.

"Oh, yeah, he's over there," Ptolemy said, pointing outside the crowd. Off in the distance, an old man was curled up on the ground with his hands over his ears, doing his best to ignore the party. "I was sitting next to him at the show. The poor guy hasn't said a word since we arrived."

"Should we talk to him?" Jesse asked.

"Only if you want any closure," Ptolemy suggested.

"No, I'm good."

"Me too," Nigel said. He'd said his piece with Solomon ages ago and had no intention of coming up with any new one-liners.

"A lot of the angels want to keep him around," Ptolemy said. "They think he'll make a good practice subject for guardian angel training. And who knows? It took nine thousand years to drive him nuts. Maybe a few million years of therapy will set him straight."

One of the angels flew past to greet Ptolemy. "Lord Ptolemy, the preparations you requested are almost complete. In a few short moments, the ship will be ready at the docks as soon as the docks are ready."

"Great, Michael," Ptolemy said. "Gather up everyone who's leaving and we'll rendez-vous in ten minutes."

Michael saluted his new Lord and promptly flew away.

"Are we rallying for departure?" Nigel asked.

"Just everyone who's leaving," Ptolemy said. "I take it you're going?"

"Well, Trish and I have been talking and..." Nigel took a deep breath. "If we're getting a second chance at life, then we want a shot at raising a real family."

Jesse's eyes lit up. "Hey, congratulations! So I get to be an uncle?"

"Do you really have to go back to Earth for that?" Patti asked. "You're already in Heaven. Why not start a family here and spoil the kid?"

"Tempting, but we think a child could benefit from life's nonsense," Trisha said.

"Plus Trish and I have years of tropical vacations to catch up on," Nigel added.

"Then I wish you the best in having a child," Ptolemy said..

"We were hoping you could *guarantee* us one."

Ptolemy smiled. "I think we can squeeze in a kid or two."

"At least one girl? Trisha asked. "His eyes, my nose?"

"This isn't a Build-A-Kid workshop."

"Doesn't hurt to ask."

* * *

When I asked Ptolemy to oversee the departures, I should've known his nerd instincts would guide him. First he got the angels to craft a river, then a dock. Then finally,

he got the people at Weta Digital to design an enormous version of the sailboat from the end of *"Return of the King"* that was large enough to hold a few million people. The ship lost its elegance due to its scale, but it would have to do.

Ptolemy graciously shook hands with every departee as they boarded the ship. His powers growing exponentially by the second, he was able to project himself into multiple dimensions and go through all the people in minutes rather than years. So many people were eager to resume their life on Earth, as were many deities who just wanted to experience mortality for a change. One man with OCD only wanted to return to see if he'd left his bedroom light on. When he found out it wasn't an immediate two-way trip, he promptly hurried off the docks.

After Ptolemy finished his formalities, he turned to his friends who waited for him at the edge of the docks. Nigel, Trisha, Jesse and Christine were there, along with many gods, Titans and demigods who wanted to see them off.

"This is it," he said. "I'm really going to miss you guys. It's gonna be almost another fourteen billion years before you're even born."

Nigel wasn't shy about giving the young man a hug. "We'll miss you too."

"Wait, wait, wait! Don't get on the boat yet!" they heard a woman shout.

Looking up, they saw Nione fly down to the docks with her new wings. She looked tired and partied out, with spilled wine on her Snuggie and cheese puffs in her hair.

"Nione, about time you showed up," Nigel said. "We were looking all over for you."

"Sorry; I'm the last guardian graduate of the universe," she shrugged sheepishly. "Kind of a big deal."

"The wings look good," Jesse said.

"They really get in the way a lot," she said. "It's gonna take some getting used to. Who'd have thought all I needed was a little humility just to earn them?"

"So what's next for you?" Nigel asked.

"Oh, just working my way up the ranks, you know?" she said. "They already got me supervising Lucifer. With luck, I'll someday be on Earth supervising you two."

"Drop us a line when that happens."

"Sort of against the rules, but... yeah, why not?" she smiled. She took both boys into her arms and embraced them fondly. It had been a long, long time since she last done this, and would be much longer before she ever did it again.

"Best of luck with the new Heaven," Jesse said. "And don't let Pandora give you too much trouble."

This whole time, Pandora had been out on the river, water-skiing behind Charlie Magnus' shiny new speedboat and using sharks as water-skis. The crowd on the docks cheered as she went up a ramp and jumped over Henry Winkler in the water.

"Don't worry about her," Nione said. "As soon as we get a new Hell built, she's gone."

"Is she being exiled to the pit?" Nigel asked.

"No, she volunteered to be its new ruler."

The crowd cheered again as the shark jumped over Pandora wearing Henry Winkler as water-skis.

Nigel smirked. "Somehow, I can't imagine a better person for the job."

The round of goodbyes carried on until it was time to board. Nigel, Trisha, Jesse and Christine started up the gangplank. Poseidon waited for them at the top.

Suddenly, Jesse spoke up, "Nigel, we need to tell you something."

"Then tell me on the ship."

"We're not going back," Christine said.

Nigel and Trisha stopped in their tracks. An air of sadness creeping in, they turned to address the couple.

"What do you mean you aren't going back?" Trisha asked.

"We had a long talk," Jesse explained. "Christine here, she's been a Fate. She's seen the future. Traveled to other dimensions."

"*Literally* been to the end of the universe," Christine added.

"And in all fairness, my road hasn't been any less stellar," Jesse said. "Now here we are at the dawn of creation and... it's been all so amazing that we kind of want to keep going."

"But what about your mother?" Trisha asked Christine.

"She's staying too," Christine said. "The whole family is up here, in fact. So really, it kind of works out."

"But does it work out for you, Jesse?" Nigel said. "On Earth, you'll be human. Don't you want to experience that with us? We'll be a real family together."

"You're cut out to be human," Jesse said. "Me, I'm just some death-prone idiot who'll probably chase a chicken into traffic. I won't last a week back there. But up here, Christine and I can do all the stupid things we ever dreamed of."

"Plus I think I can talk Ptolemy into letting me oversee the creation of an all-bunny planet," Christine chimed in. "It will be my greatest masterpiece."

"Not to mention I'd feel bad leaving Nione behind again," Jesse continued. "I like to think I've always made a good angel. I'm kind of eager to join her and do the whole 'guardian' thing."

"The short of it is," Christine wrapped up, "on Earth we've had our fun. But it's up here where we'd like to make a difference now."

"But it'll be a lifetime before we see you again," Trisha explained, "and fourteen billion years before you see us." "Yeah," Jesse realized as he took in the ridiculous amount of time. "Or maybe even six days. We're not sure how time will flow. But we'll try to fill it with video games and pajama parties so we don't grow up too much, for your sakes." Nigel understood their feelings, but every part of him still wanted to drag them along. For the past several hours, all the dreams he had about being human featured these two prominently in their lives. From raising children to growing old, he imagined his own brother would be there. As he contemplated what to say, Trisha stepped past to hug Jesse and Christine, her eyes already welling up. She didn't say anything at all. Her embrace firmly communicated how much she would miss them. "Promise you'll call," Nigel finally said. "We'll figure out how to drop a line," Jesse said. "In the meantime, just go live your lives. We'll see you again someday." Nigel's heart grew ever heavier. "So this is how nine thousand years end." "I guess so. Ever imagine it would end like this?" "To be honest, this is the best case scenario," Nigel said. "Then thanks for putting up with me all these years." "Thanks for putting up with me." "...Bro-hug?" Jesse offered. Nigel didn't hesitate to "bro-hug".

* * *

In the passing moments, the ship set sail. Both brothers watched each other fade from view as the ship drifted away into the new universe, and their tale drew to an end.

Ancients and mortals alike became one with everything. Ptolemy began time once more, and He felt all existence spring to life.

He also noticed that His pronouns were now capitalized. Strange new instincts took hold. In His mind, He saw a grand vision for things to come. He looked upon the cosmos which lay before Him and immediately saw the steps it would take to form the Milky Way galaxy. Several more steps formed in His mind about how to create Earth, give it life and pave the way for mankind. Many other ideas came to mind about creating other worlds and civilizations, but Earth would be His priority for now.

It shouldn't be too hard, He thought. Smash a couple stars together there, launch an ice planet through a black hole, and the rest is a snap.

A very tedious snap.

It was going to be a long fourteen billion years.

Epilogue

“Daddy! Daddy! Look!” a little girl cried, “This is you!”
As Nigel received his Americano coffee over the counter, he looked to the little girl pulling a CD case from a display near the cash register. She was about five years of age with cinnamon skin and curly black hair. She rushed over to Nigel and showed him the CD, which showed the dark silhouette of a man sitting on a beach in front of a fiery sunset. The title of the CD read *“Songs of the Assyrian Seas: A Piano Compilation of Lost Music through the Ages”*.

“Yes, honey, that’s daddy, now put it back,” Nigel calmly said as he replaced the CD in its display.

The young Arabian woman behind the counter looked at Nigel with a sense of familiarity. She asked, “Excuse me, but are you Nigel Hunter?”

“I am,” he replied.

“I bought your album last week,” she said. “I’m a huge history nerd and your music is just... it’s amazing. Even my teacher can’t stop talking about it. You must have done so much research to put it all together.”

“It helps to know your history.”

“Daddy was there!” the girl exclaimed.

The woman behind the counter laughed, "Of course he was! And what's your name?"

"Nisha!" the little girl shouted.

"Well, Nisha," the woman said as she handed a cup of orange juice and a wrapped pastry over the counter, "Have a cookie on me, if that's okay with your daddy."

Nisha scowled as she looked to her dad for approval.

Finally he said, "Go ahead."

The little girl quickly snatched the cookie and began gobbling it up.

"She has your eyes," the woman said.

"No, just my stubbornness."

"Can I ask," the woman said, "how much of your music was authentic? Like, did you fill in any gaps? Because there's no known record of the last three tracks anywhere."

"I fill in some gaps on Tracks 2 and 6," Nigel said. "I didn't remember those ones note-for-note. As for the last three tracks, those are personal additions of mine."

"I was wondering about those," she said. "*Requiem for the Sun* and *Five Years Buried* are beautiful, but too modern. And *Jezebuul's Song* sounds like a eulogy. Who was he?"

"He was my brother," Nigel said.

"He's in Heaven now," Nisha said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she answered. "When did he die?"

Nisha corrected her. "He didn't die."

"...What?"

Before Nigel could correct his daughter, Trisha came into the coffee shop and addressed them, "What's taking so long in here?"

"Mommy!" Nisha shouted as she rushed into Trisha's arms, covering her with crumbs.

"Sorry, honey," Nigel said, as he scooped up the orange juice. "Just chatting it up with a fan."

"Chat it up later," Trisha said. "We gotta go."

Nigel waved good-bye to the counter girl and followed the other two out to his truck.

* * *

"The book store's already opened," Trisha mumbled as she checked her watch.

When they'd first returned to Earth, it had all seemed like a long dream. The attacks in Halifax, the gods and Titans, the war in Heaven... there was no record of any of it. Life had carried on. Even the history of their own lives had been changed. Everything Nigel and Trisha originally knew about their own pasts was now accredited to their ancestors.

There wasn't even an adjustment curve with becoming human. Sleeping, needing to eat, staying fit and the assorted aches and pains felt completely natural to them. Nigel's return to being human included the diabetes he'd once experienced a few months prior, but none of the other maladies fortunately. The only thing that really surprised either of them was when Trisha found her first grey hair. With that, time had suddenly become an important commodity in their lives and she was forever obsessed with checking her watch.

"You're not scheduled for another hour," Nigel said as he carefully navigated the busy streets.

"I still want to make a good impression by being early."

"They're fans; they'll line up all night to meet you."

"No, they'd line up all night to meet J.K. Rowling," Trisha replied. "I'm a local author who sold thirty books on Amazon. I need to get my name out there."

"You don't *need* to do anything," Nigel said. "Besides, you were happier with catering. Why not go back to that?"

"Because I *do* need to do this," she said as she looked at the book in her hands. She sighed. In all fairness, *The Saga of the Fire-Bloods* had developed a modest following, and she certainly couldn't wait to write the more self-involved sequel where she becomes Queen of the Gods, but she felt guilty about selling their life story as young adult fiction. "Like you said, it's what he what he would've wanted."

As she pondered, the truck passed a familiar, old building. The sign over the door read "*Long John Silver's Long John Laundromat*". Seeing this sight made her heart sink deeper.

"Did we do the right thing, selling the tavern, I mean?" Trisha sighed.

"The bar was another life," Nigel said. "I felt less right holding onto it without him around."

"Same here. He probably would've wanted it to become a pirate-themed laundromat."

"Daddy, are you talking about Uncle Jesse again?" Nisha asked from the backseat, cradling her orange juice. Nigel smiled fondly at her through his rear-view mirror and said, "Yes, honey."

"I want to meet him."

"And I'm sure he'd love to meet you," Nigel said.

"What's he like?"

Trisha turned to her daughter and said, "He was a big goofball, just like you. He loved your mommy and daddy, but he had a very special love for someone else. And when it was his time to say good-bye, he followed his heart."

"Can we see him?"

"Someday. Not too soon, hopefully," Trisha said.

Nigel spoke, "She's too young to understand, you realize?"

"She should know who her uncle was."

"I just mean... oh, no."

Nigel's train of thought was distracted as his truck came to a stop in the middle of the John A. MacDonald bridge. In another reality, Nigel remembered battling a group of demons in this spot for the fate of the world. Of course, that was only the second worst thing that could happen here. The first was bumper-to-bumper traffic as a tow-truck cleared a collision up ahead.

"Unbelievable," Trisha groaned.

"You can walk if you want," Nigel suggested.

"Forget it; just turn on the AC."

As they sat back and let their worries wash over them, Nigel ruminated on his life thus far.

A beautiful wife, as officially evidenced by the ring on her finger.

A beautiful daughter, a wonderful reward he'd give Heaven up for any day.

An apartment downtown. An album on the shelves. His own family doctor. His own gym membership. A small group of friends who came over to play cards with them on the weekend. Not a paranoid thought in his head.

He hadn't seen any sign of his old friends in five years. No former deity ever came to Halifax just to say hi. The gods' stories returned to myth and legend, and their religions stayed in the hearts of the faithful. And in their fourteen billion years in Heaven, Jesse and Christine hadn't even found a way to relay a message. Nigel had checked in with a few families some years back to follow up on their human friends, but the Patti, Ptolemy, and Christine who lived in this universe were completely different people with completely different lives.

Things were different, but nothing felt empty.

Nigel no longer missed the battle.

He was now a man with a future, living in an ideal universe where he could make his own magic.

Just the way he liked it.

As they waited, a loud, thundering eruption could be heard from across the bay, near the inlet of the Atlantic Ocean.

An enormous shadow loomed over Halifax. Many other motorists got out of their cars to see what strange object had just fallen into the sea. Metallic joints groaned as a great behemoth rose from the waters. It was humanoid in shape, over a hundred stories high, with great muscular limbs and six wings of celestial steel.

As Nigel tried to process this sight, the machine raised one hand and cast a holy light into the sky that enveloped the city within a magical dome of light. Across this dome, hundreds of faces appeared, each bearing the likeness of a chiseled man with glorious blonde hair. His eyes burned red and he spoke,

“People of Halifax, your judgment is at hand! Those who kneel to the Almighty do it without conviction! Those who don’t are in contempt! You have all been deemed unworthy to worship in His glory!”

“Lucifer...?” Nigel gasped as he got out of his truck.

Before Lucifer could speak again, however, a giant woman rose up from behind the giant robot, grabbed it by the neck, and choke-slammed it into the water, shaking the city. Trisha rushed to get Nisha out of the vehicle.

“Pandora?” Nigel continued, wondering if he came down with heat stroke.

“Hello, darlings!” the giant woman in the black dress called out to the bridge. “Don’t mind us! Just sorting out a small coup d’etat. Nothing to see here! Move along!”

Nigel almost protested, but flashes of light appeared above them. Five helmeted figures clad in coloured battlesuits soared out of the sky toward the bridge. With pinpoint accuracy, they gracefully landed feet-first by Nigel’s truck.

Their leader, dressed in red and carrying a crystal sword,

was shouting into his wrist communicator with a familiar voice.

"We've got eyes on the target," he said. "Lucifer's hijacked a Metatron; the Queen of Hell's shoving handfuls of fish into his exhaust pipes. We are in a populated area, please advise."

"Copy that," a familiar female voice on the other end said. "Please stand by."

Nigel rushed forward and pulled the helmet off the sentry. Jesse turned around and smiled. "Hey, bro. Fourteen billion years just fly, don't they?"

His brother almost choked up, "Jesse, what are you--? Why is--?"

"So you know the whole 'no more magic' thing?" Jesse asked. "Well... Ptolemy's Great Plan kind of went awry. Now Lucifer's waging war again, can you believe it? Don't answer that; it's rhetorical. But, hey, you look good!"

"I... wha?"

Jesse patted Nigel's belly. "Put on a few pounds, I see. Looks like Trish had the baby, you got the weight. Speaking of Trish - hey, girl! Read your book; loved it. Could have used a lot less hyphenations."

"Hey," she waved with uncertainty. She was too distracted by the giant robot/woman battle in the ocean to focus on Jesse being back.

Jesse found a little girl wrapped around his leg and smiled at her. "And you're the famous Nisha?"

"Uncle Jesse?" she asked hopefully.

"In the flesh," he said. "Incidentally, God knows about the crayon pictures you drew on the wall and tried to cover up."

"He does?" she asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He thinks you're a very good artist."

"Jess, what's going on?" Nigel asked. "This better not be another apocalypse."

"Oh, no, no, no - that's not scheduled for another couple million years," Jesse said. "Heaven ran into a few complications and Ptolemy simply sent his best people to fix it."

The yellow sentry then revealed herself as Nione.

The black sentry revealed himself as Surtur, now with a moustache.

The blue one revealed himself as early 20th century novelist, Ernest Hemingway.

And the pink sentry revealed herself as Christine, armed with Artemis' bow.

Nigel stumbled for words, desperately wanting an explanation.

"We'll explain later," Christine said, her eyes smiling at her old friends. "Trust me, it's a very long story."

"Almighty Power Angels, come in," Patti's voice came up over the comm again. "We've got clearance. Penetrate the outer armor, defeat Lucifer's six generals, and remove the Aiwass Amulet from around his neck. Ptolemy can do the rest. He's sending an extra flight-suit your way."

"That's a negative on the flight-suit; we are all flight-ready,"

Jesse replied. Nigel watched as Jesse sprouted two very real angel wings to emphasis his point. Christine, Surtur, Nione, and Ernest Hemingway sprouted wings as well.

"The flight-suit isn't for you five," Patti mentioned.

Jesse looked to Nigel and grinned. "I think you just got enlisted."

"Me? I'm not going out there," Nigel said. "I'm a family man now. I've got low blood sugar. I'm not fighting a giant robot."

"Come on, it'll be fun. We've got your back."

"No. Besides, we've got a book signing to attend."

"It'll impress the kid."

"Not a chance."

As Nigel tried to turn away, Christine stood before him, holding his old sword, still in its wooden sheath. She politely offered it to him. He paused at the sight of it. He looked to Nione and the others who nodded approvingly. He looked down to Nisha, her face bright as day. Even Trisha shrugged as if to say, "Boys will be boys." "We won't be here all day," Jesse said. "We beat the thing, Ptolemy will fix any damage and drinks are on me. So what do you say, brother?"

High in the sky, a fighter jet descended from the Heavens in the shape of a phoenix. Its golden wings glistened in the sun as it soared over the bridge. The jet ejected a small package - a glowing golden orb of light that spiraled down towards Nigel's location and attached itself to his back. A golden suit of battle armour appeared over his body, and two metal angel wings emerged from his back.

Nigel gave himself a once-over. The celestial gold fit very comfortably and was light as a feather.

He figured his ideal universe would have to wait.

He took his sheathed blade from Christine and turned to his brother.

"So we defeat Lucifer and that's it?" Nigel asked. "Nothing else?"

"Well, there's that, plus Lord Xenu plotting an alien invasion. And a time-travel caper involving the Cult of the Cave Bear. And there's speculation that Pandora might have an evil twin. But Lucifer's the big deal at the moment." Nigel turned to the ocean. Up ahead, Lucifer and Pandora came to blows, tossing aside ships in their wake. Pandora laughed gleefully as she piggy-backed on the giant robot. Lucifer shouted with impatient rage.

"So how about it?" Jesse asked. "One more for the road?" Nigel unsheathed his crystal blade. The sunlight shined off its untarnished fourteen billion year-old surface. As he

lifted his gaze to the fight, ethereal flames sprouted from his golden wings.

“One more round,” he smiled to his brother, the fire’s light glistening in his eyes. “Let’s show the Devil how we do things downtown.”

Ancients' Royale III: Destroyers of the Universe
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