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A Song for Eurydice

A THESIS

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for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

By

Sarah Paige Berling Hofrichter

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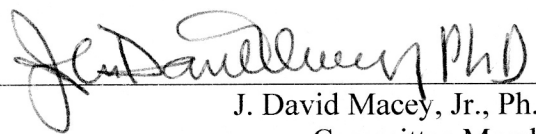
A Song for Eurydice

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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By 
James Daro, MFA
Committee Chairperson

 Ph.D.
J. David Macey, Jr., Ph.D.
Committee Member

 Ph.D.
Allen Rice, Ph.D.
Committee Member

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Sarah Paige Berling Hofrichter

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DIRECTOR OF THESIS: James Daro, MFA

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A SONG FOR EURYDICE tells the tale of the human refugees living in the desert wasteland of Terra Arcturus, hundreds of light-years from their obliterated home, Old Earth. The story follows Captain Orion Andersen of the former Scandinavian Kingdoms of Northern Europe (SKONE), whose arrival on Terra Arcturus has effectively curtailed further military advancement; his murdered girlfriend, Niki Alsecco, whose death reveals more complex political twists than surface tensions would suggest; and the distant gods of Orion and Niki's ancestors, upon whom Orion calls when battle with Rhialt, the chief deity of the native Nessians, appears imminent.

The story is told from the point of view of a nameless Scribe in service to the Judges, who, in the absence of God-of-Old, determine the eternal fates of their human charges. With political unrest straining relations amongst the Judges, the Scribe finds that telling the tale of Orion and Niki could be the key to saving the remaining human refugees from eternal damnation.

A SONG FOR EURYDICE asks the question, "Who determines what is real?" It explores the relationship between reality and madness; religion and science; and history and the future. This novel seeks to show the futility of describing subjective experience as objective truth through use of metaphor.

Ultimately, the novel decides, reality exists only in your head. It is what you choose to do with that knowledge that determines who you are.

A Song for Eurydice

PART ONE
TERRA ARCTURUS

Behold the Invocation.

Hail, O God, Lord Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. As He was in the Beginning, so is He now and so shall He ever be. Worlds without number, worlds without end.

All things must end.

Behold the Intimation.

Hail, O Children of God, who from dust born, to dust return. Hail, O Sons of Adam, who wander the myriad Edens circling in Heaven's luminous sky. Hail, O Daughters of Eve, who tame the New Earth and all Her Creatures, forging Paradise from Despair. Hail, O Sin, Mother to Mankind, Progenitor of Progress, Herlequin of Hell. Hail, O Death, O War, O Plague, O Famine: Hail to Mankind's foregone Destiny, written in the Book of Life, pages torn from the Tree of Knowledge.

Well met, Immutable Fortune.

Behold the Interpolation.

Hail, O Grateful Vicissitude, the Lord no longer with thee.

The Lord no longer with us.

The Lord, no longer.

CHAPTER ONE

On the day that she died, Orion Andersen sat in his favorite pub, drinking the pisswater that passed for beer on this backward planet, and wishing she'd never existed.

The beer was derived from the sour berries found on every single damn bush in this city, it seemed like, and it left a bad taste in his mouth. But it was better, he knew, than the liquor served in most bars - derived from a sharp-bladed cactus he had never bothered to learn the name of. Everything about Terra Arcturus disgusted him. Niki was only the icing on this molding cake.

He stared at the mirror behind the bar where, if this had been a civilized place, images of naked women or sports scores would appear. Instead, Orion saw himself as he was sure the bartender saw him: just another miserable soldier with an unacceptable haircut and red-rimmed eyes. And the uniform, of course. He hated that fucking uniform.

"'Ey," Orion said, clumsily snapping his fingers. "Need 'nother beer."

The bartender spat on the ground. That was another thing Orion hated about Arcturus: these hillbillies had no sense of hygiene.

"I serve you no more beer," the bartender said, crossing his arms.

The accents on this little planet were difficult for him to decipher, but he could understand the basics: he was being cut off.

What is his name? You can reason with a man if you can use his first name.

"Jereshi," Orion mumbled. That's right. With the J's pronounced like Y's because that's how the natives spoke. The post-pissers were hopeless when it came to speaking Sapiens, and over time, the humans fell into their lazy speech patterns. Pathetic.

"What do you want? I tell you, no more beer for soldier scum. You must leave. Pay first."

"Jereshi," Orion pleaded, "I'm not drunk. Really. Just one more?"

"No."

Fuck it. He could piss better beer, and probably would once he got home. No, he wouldn't go home, he decided. He would go somewhere else, to wait off the beer sweats and clear his mind. Maybe then he could reason with Niki.

As he reached into his pocket to grab money he had never cared to differentiate, a rough hand clamped onto his shoulder.

Oh God the Nessians the fucking Nessians I killed them God no I killed them what are they doing here I killed them when I got to Arcturus and they're back and they want revenge and...

Wait I did kill them I remember the ship fell apart screams over the intercom the ship fell into orbit but...

What about ghosts don't those primitives believe in ghosts goblins what if they really do exist only here on this God-forsaken planet and...

Christ. How do I fight a ghost?

He scrambled for his gun and spun around in his chair. Hopelessly tangled, he fell to the floor in a defensive crouch, preparing for the worst.

"Hey, Rion," Thompkins said from up above. "You look a little drunk."

The tension left Orion so quickly that his bladder let go. Damn it. It was just Thompkins. He debated spilling some beer on himself to cover the urine stain - Thompkins would never let him live down the fact that he wet himself.

"Help me up, asshole," Orion said, holding out a hand. Thompkins grabbed it and hauled him to his feet.

"No more drinks," the bartender insisted. "We are closed now. Go away."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Orion as he tossed a half dozen small coins on the bar. The small ones were worth less than the big ones, but he couldn't say how much, and he couldn't say he cared. If it wasn't enough, the bartender would let him know.

Thompkins kept a steel grip on Orion's upper arm, though Orion was certain he wouldn't fall again. Thompkins was a very different breed of animal from the Nessians. "Let's get you home, soldier," his friend said.

A third shadow fell into step with them as they walked into the bright desert sunlight. James. He should have figured. Wherever Thompkins went, James went with him, and vice-versa. The two were inseparable, and it was an open secret that they were lovers.

"The nightmares again?" James rumbled from Orion's left. "You got real defensive awful fast."

No mention of the urine still soaking Orion's pants. No mention of the gasping for air or the panic he had felt. Just a question. James was good like that.

"Yeah," he said.

"They bother me too, sometimes," James replied. "Just gotta struggle through, you know? It gets better."

Orion shrugged. No point in talking about it. The dreams didn't bother him too much anymore, but dreams were one thing, the Nessians who still haunted the streets something else.

"I hate this planet," he said, segueing away from the dreams. "Too bright, too dry, too backwards."

"It ain't so bad once you get used to it," James said.

Orion said nothing.

"You and Niki fighting again?" Thompkins asked through clenched teeth as he guided Orion around the potholes and into the shade whenever it presented itself.

Orion rolled his eyes. "Yeah."

"What's going on?"

"She's cheating on me."

Thompkins laughed. "Yeah, sure she is."

"Are you positive?" James asked.

"Well, I haven't caught her at it, if that's what you're asking."

"It is."

"Then no."

"Hell of an accusation to make," James rumbled.

"I wasn't going to turn her in. Just leave her."

Thompkins was no longer laughing. "Wait. You're serious?"

Orion glared at him and said nothing.

"And so you decided that getting drunk on terrible beer and being thrown out of a bar was an acceptable solution?" Thompkins asked, shaking his head.

"Goddamn suns," Orion said instead. His head hurt. His eyes hurt. His stomach hurt. Every soldier here knew that drinking the beer was a bad idea, only led to pain and sweating the toxins out of your system, but it was the only drink in town. Unless you counted the hard stuff. Even the soldiers wouldn't touch the hard stuff.

"The suns are as bright as the women are dim," Thompkins said, that same shit-eating grin on his face.

"Ain't that the truth," muttered Orion.

The fight this morning hadn't been about the sex - or the lack thereof - or his being away so often, or any of the other myriad things they often fought about. No, the fight this morning had been about Jensa, Niki's Nessian handmaid. It wasn't that Jensa had done anything wrong; its presence just made Orion uncomfortable. As long as Jensa lived there, Orion would be forced to relive his brief part in the war.

God knows, he had tried to explain it. He had tried to explain about the silent destruction of the enemy ships, the screaming of the females and the wailing of the children over the intercom. He had tried to make clear the horror of watching living beings immolate in the atmosphere of their home planet as their

ships crashed to the surface. He had tried to gently tell her that, when they were defeated, the Nessians were no longer "the enemy," just the losing side. He had never wanted to watch them die.

She had stared at him, and he'd known that she wasn't listening. That look on her face only appeared when she was tuning him out. So he had put his foot down. Jensa had to go. He would find a suitable replacement family for it - he didn't want the poor thing begging - but he would not have it in the house any longer.

Things had only gone downhill from there.

But he couldn't explain that to these two. James would understand too much, and Thompkins wouldn't understand at all. It was something he would have to deal with on his own.

He could feel the beer sweats coming on, and the gut-clenching nausea that came with them. There really was no good reason to drink the beer, except that drugs would get a soldier bounced from the military faster than he could spit. Sobriety was not an option, either, though, so beer it was.

"I might puke," he mumbled, stumbling along the dirt road between Thompkins, who still held his arm in an iron grip, and James, who ambled beside him peacefully. "Watch your shoes."

"Rion," Thompkins spat, "if you puke on my shoes, I swear to God..."

"Holy shit," James murmured.

Thompson, and by extension, Orion, stopped dead. Pulling his gaze from the dust beneath his feet, Orion found himself staring at his tiny house. Investigators and soldiers swarmed over the neglected yard, running, saluting, examining, and speaking in low,

intense tones.

"Niki," he whispered, anger forgotten.

"Stay here, Rion," Thompkins said, shoving his friend towards James, who caught him and held him steady.

"Deep breaths," James said. "Everything's fine. Deep breaths."

Orion stared the house, which looked so peaceful, drawing breaths so deep that his lungs ached. Niki. Oh, God, Niki. Deep breaths. Deeper. Deeper.

"Hey." James shook him. "You're hyperventilating. Keep your head, soldier."

Suddenly, Orion couldn't stand it anymore. He shrugged James' arm away and stumbled towards the house, ignoring everything except his front door. Ignoring everything except the way his heart hammered in his throat, choking him.

The front door loomed large and intimidating, and Orion hesitated before stepping through. He had to know. She could still be alive. She could still be okay. He would never find out unless he manned up and went inside. He took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Blood. Blood everywhere. Splashed on the walls, soaking the sandstone floors, a cloying, fetid stench that coated the air with death. The beer overwhelmed him, then, and he threw up in his front hall.

"Goddamn it, Rion, I told you to wait outside," Thompkins snapped.

Orion brushed past him to his living room, where Niki's corpse

lay curled on the floor, a crumpled red mess. He couldn't tear his eyes away from hers, wide and unseeing though they were. They had flecks of green in them. He'd never noticed that before.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"We don't know, sir. We're starting an investigation -"

"Where's Jensa?"

"Who?"

"The Nessian," Orion replied.

"She's in her room. She was too upset to cooperate. We had the doc give her a sedative."

"It did this." He couldn't stop staring. "Jensa did."

"Sir, you're in shock and we have no evidence -"

"I'm telling you, it did this!" Orion yelled, tearing his gaze at last from his dead lover. "It knew what I did during the war."

"The... war?" The soldier's look was blank.

"Yes."

"Sir, it was war. People died on both sides. I'm sure -"

"This is its revenge. Piece of shit."

"Not necessarily -"

"It did this."

The soldier gave him an unconvinced shrug and said, "We will look into this, but right now..."

"I want to speak to her," Orion said, his voice very quiet.

"I don't think -"

"Now." Without another word, he stormed down the hall to the slave's tiny room.

Jensa sat on her bed, staring at her wall, hands folded

tightly in her lap. Silent tears streamed down her face, though the sedative kept her from sobbing.

Orion stared in disgust at the slave. He had shared hearth and home with this for the past two years. He had fed it when it was hungry, watered it when it was thirsty, doctored it when it was ill. Orion's hands itched to wrap themselves around its pale throat.

Jensa looked up at Orion as he entered the room, her black eyes wide and unseeing, yet always, always weeping. Her pale hair, usually kept so tidy, hung in disarray around her heart-shaped face. Her hands, which had always had too many fingers for Orion's comfort, twisted in her lap. Her ears, pert when she was happy, lowered when she was angry, drooped now, nearly hidden in her long hair. Her muscular tail twitched fitfully and her teeth, small and sharp, were clenched together in grief.

"Jensa," Orion said, trying to keep his voice calm. He failed.

"Master." Jensa's voice quavered, though whether it was guilt or fear of Orion's wrath, he didn't know. He didn't care.

"Who did this?"

"I am not aware," Jensa said, and a fresh set of tears began their trek down her pale, pale face.

"You saw no one?"

"No one."

"Where were you when it happened?" His hands were balled into fists again. He didn't remember making them that way.

"I cleaned the kitchen. Mistress Niki insisted."

"And what happened next?"

"She screamed and I ran, but there was no one there."

Orion backhanded the slave then and didn't realize it until it screamed and his fellow soldiers pinned his arms back.

"You lie!" Orion shouted.

"I true! I true!" Jensa sobbed, her feeble grasp of Sapiens lost in her fear.

Orion struggled to break free and managed to kick Jensa. He felt a satisfying crunch as his boot broke her foot. The little slave screamed again, scrambling away from her enraged owner.

"Get him out of here!" Thompkins yelled, forcing his way into the room. Two soldiers dragged Orion away from the hysterical Nessian.

"Fuck you!" Orion shouted at no one in particular, shrugging the men off of him. But he left.

When he got back to his living room, the body was gone. The blood was still there, still giving off its overpowering stench. But he couldn't vomit anymore. He couldn't do anything except stare at the floor, where the body had just now lain.

Soaking the sandstone with its blood.

CHAPTER TWO

I am not omniscient, though I know much that Man cannot know.
I am not omnipotent, though I wield more power than Man dares dream.
I am not omnibenevolent, for I was once Man.

I do not sit in judgment of the humans; it is not my place. My place is to record the decisions of the Judges, write down for the ages those who are allowed to rest and those who are cursed to forever wander Terra Arcturus. I am a Scribe, nothing more.

There are five Judges who oversee the five dichotomies of human behavior, which can create or destroy a life: faithfulness and zealotry; love and obsession; justice and vigilantism; trust and naiveté; and caution and prejudice. Each human God-of-Old Created is guilty of these extremes. And by their records will they move on beyond the veil, or fail to.

I am a Scribe for the Judge of justice and vigilantism. Her name was Nora, when she lived. When she died, she became nameless, and after the Uprising, after she became a Judge, she took the name Themis. She believes that there is a just way to do everything and that she must be the one who metes out that justice.

This morning, she received a visitor: the Father-god of the Nessians. I am unable to pronounce his proper name, as I was born with human speech organs, but a close bastardization would be Rhialt. The Nessians believe in Rhialt and his divine family and worship them as perfection personified. Much like God-of-Old, Rhialt is considered all-powerful and incapable of error.

I disagree.

He came to my Themis this morning, and begged her attention. As her Scribe, I of course, sat in on the meeting, lest something of import pass unrecorded. I did not participate in the conversation - that would be inappropriate - but I listened, and I learned, and what I learned gave me pause.

"Themis," Rhialt said, his pale face elongating with the unfamiliar name, his long fingers stroking his own skin. "I am told you are the goddess of Justice."

"Not goddess," my Judge replied. "The Themis of antiquity was, but I am merely a mortal who has been given immortal power."

"You believe in Justice, though?"

"I do."

"A great injustice has been done to my people, as you, I'm sure, are aware. Where once they roamed this system, free from fear, they are now enslaved to your race or relegated to the frigid moon Vituperavi."

"I have seen."

"I seek to correct this." Rhialt ceased stroking his skin and leaned forward in his seat. "Will you aid me?"

My Themis stared at him. Her eyes, which were a pale blue when she lived, had faded to a deep brown and her hair, which had been blonde when she was young, had turned white over the years. She was a striking figure who commanded respect. But Rhialt was her equal.

Finally, she said, "Will I betray my people?"

"I do not know. What would you consider betrayal?"

"Will I murder my charges for the sake of Justice?"

"I think not."

"Convince me that it is in my best interests to aid you."

Rhialt bowed his head and a slight smile played across his dark lips. "You seek power."

"All humans seek power."

"You seek power over your peers."

My Themis said naught.

"You are human. You have power over your charges, but I am a god. I have power over you. I can give you this power, if you will aid me."

My Themis leaned back in her chair. "I will become a god?"

"No." Rhialt shook his bulbous head, the ubiquitous light shining sickly off his scalp. "I cannot make you a god. But I can give you more power than you have ever dreamed of possessing."

"What will you require me to do with this power?"

"You may do with it what you wish. But I know you seek to be the sole Judge over your humans. Justice is the greatest goal in life, is it not?"

My Themis said naught.

"Please think about it," Rhialt purred, bowing from the waist. "I will await your response."

"How shall I contact you?" My Themis asked, biting her lip. I had never seen her look so unsure.

"I will contact you. Good day."

And he disappeared. My Themis continued to stare at the wall. I quietly left her to her musings. It was not my place to interfere.

I am merely a Scribe, after all.

* * *

I sit in my apartments, contemplating the only view allowed to

me outside my window: Terra Arcturus.

Terra Arcturus sits in the middle of the Solaris Ex system. It is the only inhabitable planet in the system. Vituperavi, the moon that orbits Arcturus' neighbor, Terra Cremata, is considered habitable from a purely scientific standpoint, though its only inhabitants are Nessian refugees.

The system is a binary system, with the primary star being a blue giant and its companion star a cooler red dwarf. Terra Arcturus sits in a S-type orbit around the blue star, which the natives have named Bolwaki - the Nessian term for "blue god."

Arcturus is considered a desert planet. According to prominent Nessian mythology, the water in the freshwater oceans dried up several thousand years ago, when Bolwaki and Dunwaki, the red dwarf star, moved anomalously close to one another. Afterward, the only water left was in rivers and streams and underground lakes. Fabulous tales aside, it is the very real job of many Nessian slaves to mine for water.

Although it is considered a desert planet, Terra Arcturus has ice beneath its poles. These poles freeze and melt in response to the proximity of Dunwaki, the red dwarf star. Dunwaki and Bolwaki approach each other every 150 Arcturan years. During these periods, the Nessians traditionally hide out in caves and wait for the heat and aridity to pass. There is water underground, after all, for those who know where to look, and patience, their gods teach, is the highest virtue. They have waited for cooler weather for up to ten years in recent centuries.

The humans, however, have not been on Terra Arcturus long

enough to experience the proximal influence of Dunwaki. They do not know about the caves or the added heat of Dunwaki or about the vengeful nature of the god who is (roughly) called Rhialt.

The Nessians are counting on this.

* * *

I am aware of factions amongst the Judges. None trusts another. All believe that their motives are the only correct ones. But I observe and say nothing, for it is not my place.

My Themis sits in her study all day; I do not see her until she prepares for bed. I bring her tea with milk and honey and leave her presence. She has not said a word to me once this day.

I briefly ponder what she will decide. Judging is much too difficult for mere humans - even humans as powerful as the Judges. Though they replace God-of-Old, they cannot *be* God-of-Old. They do not have the power, the wit, the wisdom, the might, the benevolence, the thought, the creativity. Because they lack these simple and necessary attributes, they must work together to approximate what He did without effort.

Though I am not as wise as my Themis, I am far from ignorant. I know that, if Rhialt has offered this power to one Judge, he will offer it to all. So the question becomes: who will win this battle of wills? Who will remain faithful to God-of-Old and Judge the humans as He would have Judged them; and who will seek out this new power?

I wish I could say for certain that my Themis will remain

faithful, but I shall not lie. I do not know.

* * *

Humans came to the Solaris Ex system quite by accident seventy-five Arcturan years ago. Following the chaos of the Impact Event and the destruction of more than half of their fleet, the refugees from Scandinavian Kingdom of Northern Europe were ill-prepared when they finally escaped Old Earth. Their few remaining ships, packed with third-rate scientists and their families - myself included - contained the last of the Northmen trapped on Old Earth.

It had taken the Earth-based astronomers almost a hundred years to find Gliese 482c, hiding behind its sun. Once it was discovered, though, and determined to be a "Goldilocks planet," the appropriate humans were selected and on the next ship off-planet. We never arrived. Good fortune alone landed us whole and safe and utterly bewildered on Terra Arcturus.

The Nessians, on the other hand, have lived in this system for thousands of years. Having rediscovered space flight, the Nessians had only recently visited Vituperavi, the moon of Terra Cremata, when we arrived, bedraggled.

Though our relationship with each other was initially peaceful, the situation fell apart and horrifying battles ensued, with us, the space-faring refugees, being the clear victors. God-of-Old and Rhialt watched, unable to interfere, unable to look away. They did not speak to each other, but neither did they wage war on each other. They are and were wise and knew that, though they could

Create, ultimately, they could not control their Creation. That was when God-of-Old went away, never to return.

* * *

The meeting this morning exposes a tension I have seldom felt in my many, many years as a Scribe. I have seen minor wars fought between this Judge and that, over issues large and small. I have seen alliances made and broken, sometimes within mere days. But although the Judges do not trust each other, though they each feel that they would do better on their own, they have always been able to put aside their most pressing differences for the sake of their humans.

It appears that that time has passed.

I sit in the back of the room with the other Scribes and watch the Judges discuss the next season. Because they are so few, and the humans on Terra Arcturus are so many, they must Judge in "seasons." When a human dies, they go to hell, which is not the same Hell that the humans on Old Earth created millennia ago. This hell is merely a waiting room, where the souls are corralled, like cattle in a pen. It is true that pain exists in this hell, but only if the deceased bring it on themselves. Otherwise, the only real concern is ennui.

The term "seasons" is facetious, of course. Terra Arcturus' only season is "Cytherean Summer." The Judges have a strange sense of humor.

Every 341 Arcturan days - twelve months back on Old Earth, by

our physicists' most recent estimates - the Judges hold sessions to determine the fate of their charges. Each soul is weighed on a scale against the soul of a saint. We Scribes have never been told which saint, or if it is the same soul from season to season; we are there to record the decisions, nothing more.

The next season approaches. From today, it is only three Arcturan weeks hence. But that does not concern me this morning. What concerns me is how the Judges are relating to each other.

My Themis, my Judge of Justice, is cool and aloof, as she always is. She watches with a calm eye as Selene insults Asclepios over the failings of one political leader and his consequent Judgment. Hermes, like my Themis, sits on the sidelines and says nothing, although he has a smile on his face that I do not trust. And Hephaistos stokes the fire between Selene and Asclepios, baiting them whenever it looks like the argument might die down.

I am certain now that the others have been given the same offer my Themis has been given. I do not know how I feel about this.

I carefully watch the other Scribes, to see how they react. Their faces are neutral, with the exception of Hephaistos' Scribe, whose malevolent smile lights up his face. For the first time in my afterlife, I am grateful that we Scribes have no names; it is much more difficult to hate someone for whom you have no name.

"Enough!" my Themis shouts from her seat at the round table. "We go nowhere with this bickering. If we cannot reconcile, we will adjourn."

Selene stops mid-sentence and slowly turns her elfin face

towards my Themis. "You do not rule us, Themis. We will adjourn when we wish to adjourn."

I cannot tell whether Selene speaks with the royal "we" or if she speaks for all Judges. My Themis does not appear to care.

"There is no purpose to sitting here whilst you and Asclepios argue over the Revered Father's fate. He is dead and has been Judged; we need discuss it no further."

Selene appears to think about this and Hephaistos steps in to say: "There is naught to discuss today, in any case. The season approaches and we are prepared. We have Judged many of the dead and many more have yet to come; we will not learn aught new by meeting this day."

"Is it decided?" my Themis asks.

Nods from all except Hermes, who stares at the ground, a frown on his thin face.

"Then we are adjourned."

As is proper, the Judges leave the room before the Scribes. We who are left look at each other and say nothing.

There is nothing to be said.

CHAPTER THREE

Orion spent the next week drunk. The beer wasn't strong enough anymore; he had turned to the hard stuff. Most people just called it Lilith's Child. He'd drunk so much of it, he knew the name of the cactus from which it was derived. Corpus Magnum. The Big Body. So called, he presumed, because if you drank enough of it, you yourself would turn into a corpse. But he kept drinking.

It caused vivid hallucinations. He didn't mind. It kept reality at bay. Much easier to deal with Nessians invading his living room, landing their ships in (what passed for) his yard, hiding in his closet. Much easier than knowing that his last connection to the world was dead. Much easier than knowing that he hadn't protected her.

James and Thompkins stopped checking on him three days earlier. Orion barely remembered it. He had been more distracted by the way their faces kept melting, blurring from human to something else entirely. Looking at them made him want to throw up. So he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they were gone. He hadn't seen them since.

The liquor had other undesirable side effects, besides the hallucinations. His bowels turned to water and pretty soon, his house stank of shit. He couldn't keep food down, but that was okay, because he didn't need to eat; he just needed to keep drinking. He ran a fever and the chills kept him up late into the night. All of this was worth it, though. Every fucking second of it.

When he met Freki, Orion thought nothing of it. What was one more hallucination?

Bright sunlight poured through his picture window, throwing into sharp relief the disarray of his house. Orion sat on his shit-stained couch, wearing nothing but a pair of befouled undershorts, the ever-present bottle of Lilith in his right hand. His stomach rumbled, but he wasn't sure whether it was because he was hungry or because he wasn't going to make it to the bathroom again.

I ought to try to clean myself up.

That was the first coherent thought he'd had that day. Hell, that week. He looked at it with mild interest and watched it pass him by.

No. Too much effort. Better to sit here and slowly decay than to try to rejoin the world of the living.

He wondered, briefly, why he was so upset. They'd been fighting every day for the two weeks leading up to her death. She'd been cheating on him. She'd insisted on keeping her pet Nessian around. Things had been falling apart. But none of that seemed to matter once he walked into his house and found her mutilated body.

Security. Even with all their problems, she had represented security. Someone to come home to. A possible future for himself. Children. Marriage. An end to the PTSD nightmares. All of which disappeared with her.

"Orion," a voice growled.

His eyes fluttered open.

"Orion."

"What." Not a question. He wasn't afraid or curious. Just annoyed.

"Come see me."

"Who?"

A shape appeared in front of him. A snake. No bigger than a garden snake, and no more dangerous. Yet his heart began to race.

"I am called Freki." The words were not Sapiens. They were not any language Orion had ever heard before. Yet he could understand them. He shrugged this thought aside.

"Freki, huh?"

"Yes."

"And what do you want from me?" Orion struggled to keep his voice calm and even. He could crush this thing with his boot. There was no reason in the world for it to terrify him the way it did.

"I have something you desire."

The snake's voice emphasized the sibilants, and Orion's ears began to ring. He cringed away from the sound.

"What?"

"Come to me and you shall see."

"I won't come unless you tell me what you have."

"Who."

Orion shook his head, ignoring the sound of water flowing between his ears with the movement. He'd gotten used to that sensation days ago. "I don't understand."

"Not what. Who."

The snake's word began to filter through the haze. Who. Niki. This snake had access to Niki. This snake could bring Niki back. All Orion had to do was visit him, Freki. And if Freki didn't give Niki back... well, he was just a small snake, after all.

"Where can I find you?"

"I am the guardian between worlds."

"What does that mean?" Orion snapped.

The snake faded from sight, leaving Orion far too sober.

It was like waking from a dream. He saw his house for the first time. He smelled himself for the first time. He ran his hand across his chin. He hadn't shaved in, what, a week? He was, in a

word, disgusting.

Orion unsteadily stood up and stumbled his way to the lavatory, where he promptly threw up for fifteen minutes. Then he showered. Presentable once more, he set about cleaning up his house.

* * *

"You look rough," James said, keeping his distance from Orion. They met at a cafe, where Orion gingerly sipped strong coffee, brewed from roasted nuts. It probably wasn't caffeinated but Orion didn't care: cleaning his house had cleared his mind, and he had one hell of a headache.

"I feel rough."

"Have you made funeral arrangements yet?"

Orion stared at him. Funeral arrangements? What would be the point? He could get Niki back. The serpent said so. He kept this to himself and shook his head instead.

James looked away. Without facing Orion, he said, "You were given emergency leave to get things in order. You spent the entire time drunk. You have to go back on duty tomorrow, you know that, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, what, are you just going to leave the arrangements to her parents? That would be a really shitty thing for you to do."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" James looked at him with a combination of rage and

confusion on his face. "They're living on *pension*, Orion. They barely make enough to *get by*. You make more in one month than they make in a year, and you want to know *why*? You're an asshole."

Maybe it would be okay to explain it to James. Maybe he would understand. "I can get her back."

James laughed unpleasantly. "No. You can't."

"I can. Freki told me."

"Who the hell is Freki?"

Orion stopped, at a loss for words. There was really no way to explain who Freki was. Finally, struggling to recall the exact words of the serpent, he said, "*Se weard betweenan eardum.*"

James turned his head and spat. "We're done here, Rion. You're drunk and I'm leaving."

Orion looked at him, surprised. "No, I'm not. That's exactly what he said. The guardian between worlds."

"That's not what you said."

Orion blinked. "What do you mean?"

"You were speaking nonsense. Anyway, the Sapiens translation is just as useless. 'Guardian between worlds?' What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm...not sure," Orion admitted.

"No, and that's exactly my point. How can you find this guy to get Niki back if you don't even know where he lives?"

"Not a guy, *per se*," Orion mumbled.

"What? What does *that* mean?"

"He's, well, more of a snake."

James clenched his hands into fists so hard that his knuckles

turned white. Orion thought that maybe he wasn't supposed to notice that, but he did. Now that he was sober, very little escaped him.

"He said that if I went to him, he could give me Niki back."

A blinding pain had Orion flat on the ground, James standing over him, red in the face. Orion's ears rang. Stars flashed in his vision. Something wet dripped from his nose. He touched it gently. Blood. His fingers came back covered in blood. The same color as Niki's, but different from Jensa's. You could really tell the nature of a person by the color of the blood.

James was yelling at him, but Orion couldn't make sense of the words. He shook his head.

"... a fucking *snake* told you that you could get her back. It wasn't a snake, you idiot. It was a hallucination. You were high as a goddamn kite and you imagined this. You need to get your shit in order, Orion, or you're going to find yourself out of the Force and on the streets, mining for water with those blue-blooded bastards." And he walked away.

Orion laid back on the ground, staring up at the white-blue sky, Bolwaki burning brightly into his retinas. The ringing in his ears grew louder and he began very seriously to consider whether he had brain damage. James was a big guy. Big guys hit hard.

"Freki, huh?" a stranger said from above him. Orion couldn't see him because of the suns, but he could tell that the person speaking was a man. The stranger's voice was deep and gravelly, the voice of someone who has spent an entire life dedicated to smoking the haba weed. Then the suns disappeared behind a very deeply lined, sun-darkened face. "I can help you."

"Who the hell are you?" Orion croaked.

"I am a priest. My name is Sunashi, but most people call me Ashi. I have served our Betters for many, many years."

"The Judges have only been in power for sixty-eight," Orion said, trying to sit up. His head spun and he gently lay back down.

"Before them," Ashi continued, as if Orion had never spoken, "I worshipped the Old God. But Freki... Freki has been serving Man ever since he began walking upright."

"What is Freki?" Orion asked.

"Freki is..." Ashi looked around him, as if he suddenly realized they were in public, where anyone could hear them. "Let's find someplace more private. The wrong ears... Can you walk?"

Orion tried one last time to sit up. The world spun and he thought he would throw up, but he was sitting. Ashi reached down a hand, and Orion gratefully grabbed it.

"Thanks," Orion said.

"I live down the street," Ashi offered, leading the way.

Orion's legs felt weak, like he hadn't used them in many months. His stomach rolled and bright spots danced in his vision. Why the hell had James hit him? He'd never seen his friend lose his temper like that.

Ashi's house was small and muddy, with two filthy windows facing the thoroughfare. The door hung at an angle in its frame and Ashi had to kick it closed, but the inside was blessedly cool. Dark and cool. Just what Orion needed.

"Have a seat," Ashi said, pointing vaguely at a stained couch near one of the windows. "I'm going to get us some water."

Mining for water with those blue-blooded bastards.

Why was the Nessians' blood a different color from his? Orion had never been very good at biology. He'd heard somewhere that human blood started out blue but turned red with oxygenation. Was that really true? He seemed to remember hearing elsewhere that, no, human blood was always red and it just appeared blue due to x, y, or z reason.

But Nessians, their blood stayed blue. Did they breathe the way humans breathed? Everything back on Old Earth breathed, to one extent or another. Well, all right, there were some species of viruses and bacteria that didn't need oxygen, but fuck them. Even fish breathed. And cats, which the Nessians most closely resembled, were mammals. Mammals, to Orion's limited knowledge, required oxygen, no exceptions. So what was with the blue blood?

"Hey. You okay?"

Orion turned his head slowly to look at Ashi. His neck felt tight and he wondered if he had whiplash. "Yeah. Just thinking. Freki?"

Ashi eased himself into an overstuffed chair opposite Orion and leaned back with a sigh. "Freki."

"What is he?"

"He is, as he said, the guardian between the worlds."

"I have no idea what that means."

Ashi rubbed his eyes. "What happens when you die, Orion?"

Orion blinked. "How did you know my name?"

"Your friend said it. Now. What happens when you die?"

"You're judged."

"Before that."

"I... I don't understand the question."

"After you bite the proverbial dust, but before you stand before the Judges, what happens to your soul?"

"I have no fucking clue."

Ashi leaned forward, his hands clasped on his knees. In the muddy sunlight, Orion could see the grey in the man's dark hair. Even as he watched, though, the lines on his face seemed to disappear. His eyes changed from almost black to a clear green. His hair faded to pale blonde. Orion blinked and no, the old man sat in front of him, lined and dark as ever.

"What are you?" Orion whispered.

"I am a servant."

Wrong question, then. "How old are you?"

"I am as old as my tongue and older than my teeth."

Wrong again.

"Are you human?"

Ashi sighed again. "Ah. That's the crux of the matter, isn't it? These lines between human and Nessian, Judge and human, God and Judge. They're all lines drawn in the sand. They don't mean anything."

Orion just looked at him.

"No, I am not human. I serve Rhialt, the Father-god of the Nessians. I am, how do you say, a Scribe to his needs. I help him when it is not feasible for him to appear himself."

Orion closed his eyes. His head ached and he couldn't understand what Ashi was telling him. *I knew I shouldn't have*

stopped drinking.

"You said you served the Judges and the God-Of-Old," he said, his eyes still closed.

"No, I said I served our Betters and the Old God. You interpreted my words from there."

"Well, that could be said about damn near anything," Orion said, frustrated. "Just speak plainly. Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am Ashi, Scribe to Rhialt. I serve Rhialt who, for the nonce, serves your Judges, specifically the Judge Themis. When it is no longer convenient for him, he will part ways with your Judges and all will be well."

Orion didn't know what that meant but decided not to pursue that line of thought. "Let me see you as you are."

"You wouldn't like it."

"Do it anyway, damn you."

"Open your eyes."

Orion opened them and found himself watching, once again, as the man in front of him changed. His skin faded from a deep, sunburnt brown to a translucent white. His eyes shifted to a clear green once more, the color of the limes they gave Orion to keep the scurvy at bay on the long voyage here. His hair lengthened and faded, til it was as pale as Bolwaki, dancing in the distant sky. The lines disappeared from his face and now he had no age. He could have been Orion's peer, or he could have been Orion's grandfather. What did it matter? When all was said and done, he was looking at a fucking Nessian.

"I have to go," Orion said, standing up.

"Your hatred precedes your logic, Orion," the Nessian in front of him said, looking up at him with those eerie eyes.

"I don't hate you," Orion said, too quickly.

"That's true," Ashi said, inclining his head. "You hate what you become when you think of us. You hate that you obeyed direct orders. You hate your memories. You don't hate me. You hate what I represent."

"What do you want?" Orion whispered.

"Sit down."

"No."

"Then stand, it makes no difference. I have information about Freki."

"The guardian between worlds."

Ashi nodded. "What happens when you die?"

"I don't know."

"Sit down and we can discuss it."

Keeping an eye on the Nessian, lest he make any sudden moves, Orion sat back down. "Talk."

"When you die, you arrive in a waiting room, filled with other recently departed souls. You can see the living world, but you cannot interact with it. Any attempts to do so bring excruciating pain. However, there are some intrepid souls who try. But first, they must sneak past Freki."

"Who is he?"

"He sits at the gates of hell, where the dead go when they die. He allows new souls in, but old souls cannot escape, except by

trickery. They never escape for long. Freki always finds them."

"He said he had something I desired. Did he mean Niki?"

"Freki does not visit mortals. He is bound to hell."

"I assure you, he showed up in my goddamn living room, promising me Niki."

"It was not Freki."

Orion's heart sank. "It was a hallucination?"

"No. It was me."

Orion stared at him. "You? Why would you...?"

"I have an errand for you and it was the only way I could think to contact you."

"Why me?"

"Rhialt asked for you specifically."

None of this made any sense. "I have to go."

"I tell you the truth, Orion. You can get Niki back. But first you must face Freki."

"Face him how?"

"If you slay him, Niki will be free. You can have her back."

This couldn't be right. There had to be something he was missing. But... Niki. He could have her back...

"How do I kill him?"

"You can't just walk in there and shoot him, if that's what you're asking. First, you have to reconnoiter."

"I have to die?" No way. No fucking way. He would heartily miss Niki, but there was no way in the world he was willing to die for her. That kind of bullshit only happened in videologs. This was the real world. *Where men turn into aliens and gods are more*

than nightmares.

"No," Ashi said. "There are ways to vacation in hell without becoming a citizen."

"What's the catch?"

"It is very easy to want to stay in hell once you arrive. If you stay for too long, you really will die and you'll be trapped there."

"Until I get Judged."

"Right."

"Which happens when, exactly?"

"Every 341 days. Plus or minus a few hours."

Orion said nothing, just looked at him.

Ashi cleared his throat. "About three weeks, in other words. Niki will be judged at that time. If you want her back, you must visit hell and kill Freki before that happens."

"Will I be able to die when I fight Freki? Since I won't be dead in the real world?"

"Yes. The dead can only die once, but you, as you said, will not be dead. If you are killed in the fight, your body here will die as well."

"You said my gun wouldn't kill him."

"That is correct."

"Then how do I...?"

"There is a specific weapon, a sword, that is used by the Judges to keep Freki at bay. It is the only weapon that can harm him. It is the only weapon that can bind him."

"A sword?" he snorted. Swords fell out of common use

centuries ago because they were useless as weapons. But this one could kill a beast of hell? Right.

"Yes. It goes by the title *Nægling*, after a famous sword on Old Earth, or so I understand it. It was forged by the God-Of-Old before He disappeared."

"God-Of-Old knew about Freki?"

"As I said, the serpent has been around for a very, very long time."

Orion's brow furrowed. "How do I get to hell?"

"Drugs. Specifically, the *juno* seed. It's very difficult to obtain and very expensive on the black market."

"Where does it grow?"

"In the northern arctic region of Terra Arcturus. It is a staple food of the Jaoni."

"Those freaky bear-cat things?"

"Bear-cat?" Ashi looked politely puzzled.

"Big animal, furry, lots of teeth and claws and anger management issues?"

Ashi smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. "Yes, that would be the one."

"Fuck that. How much does it cost on the black market?"

"More than you make in ten years."

Orion sat back, stunned. "So, let me get this straight. You expect me to take time off of work, go north to the *arctic*, risk pissing off a Jaoni, get some of these seeds, crush them up and *then* I get the joy of visiting hell and fighting this Freki *thing*, which I'm still not sure what it even *looks* like, all for the sake of a

woman who was cheating on me?" Orion spat a laugh. "I'll take the Lilith, thanks."

"Is it the thought of dying that unmans you, or the thought of facing the woman you left to die?"

"Go to hell," Orion spat, turning to leave.

"Besides," Ashi continued, ignoring Orion, "by killing Freki, you aid your Judges. Consider the benefits of that for a moment."

Orion narrowed his eyes. "The Judges have this sword, they can kill it themselves, if they need to."

"Ah. I see my error. I said *Judges*, plural. Really, it would only benefit one Judge. The Judge of Justice. Themis."

"Really," Orion said, unimpressed. "And why would she need *my* help?"

Ashi shook his head. "I don't ask questions. Themis has been keeping an eye on you and she suggested you to me. Clearly, she can't go after Freki herself. She has to put on appearances of being united with the other Judges. But she knows more about the future than they do. She knows which way the wind blows. She wants to be sheltered when that wind becomes a hurricane."

"And I'm supposed to help her, huh?" Orion smiled ruefully. "What hurricane?"

Ashi closed his lips and said nothing.

"Fine. Whatever. Sure, sign me up. The worst that can happen is just that I'll die."

Ashi said nothing.

"Right?"

"Sure. I'll agree to that."

"Don't give me that bullshit. What exactly are the consequences of failure here?"

"Let's speak in hypotheticals here, since you're not going to fail. If, hypothetically, you were to fail, you would, hypothetically, seriously upset the Judges. They would, in this purely fantastic reimagining of reality, be understandably upset that one of their number tried to save her own skin and so would, most likely, kill her. This would leave the imaginarily dead you with only four Judges to Judge your soul. And if this ridiculous thing were to come to pass, you would most likely not be Judged fairly. Which would mean that you would, er, be damned."

Ashi smiled apologetically and added, "Very few perks to being a messenger to powerful people, I'm afraid."

"Damned?" Orion asked, glaring at the Nessian. "What does that mean? *Not* hypothetically."

Ashi showed his teeth in a display of discomfort. "Er, well, best case scenario is that you'll be forced to wander Terra Arcturus for all eternity."

"And worst case scenario?"

"You'll go the way of Prometheus, with Freki feasting on your liver, day in and day out."

"My *liver*?"

"Yes. You humans have some... interesting... ways of punishing people. I mean, it's *possible* that you could just be forced to push a boulder up an impossibly large hill day after day and when you reach the top, it rolls back down and crushes you. *Ad infinitum.*"

"Uh..."

"Or you could just be placed in a river, with food immediately above you and water all around."

"That doesn't sound too bad -"

"But when you get hungry, the food will move away from you and when you get thirsty, the water will evaporate." Ashi shot a sharp glance at Orion. "You have no children, I hope?"

"Er, no -"

"Good. That's that possibility eliminated, then."

The Nessian seemed honestly relieved, which did nothing to ease Orion's anxiety.

"The last thing I can think of is just tedious, really," Ashi continued. "You might just have to transfer water from one well to another, with an urn that has holes all over."

"Oh, is that it?" Orion rolled his eyes.

"But none of that is going to happen, you see."

"Oh, really? Does your Scribing give you the ability to see the future? Because otherwise, this Themis bitch is just going to have to deal with her problems without my help."

Ashi laughed, the sound of birds in flight filling the room.

"Oh no, I can't see the future. I can't even see what Freki looks like. According to Themis, it's a beast of some sort, but who knows with these Judges? It could be anything."

"And you want me to risk all this for...what?"

The look on Ashi's face turned serious. "All in the name of true love, my friend."

CHAPTER FOUR

There was a poem back on Old Earth that told the tale of Man's descent into madness and while I am bringing my Themis her tea, it plays over and over in my head.

From whence came hateful Sanity?

The far-flung sight of Oracle

Whose mind, contriving miracles

Leads further into Vanity?

My hand shakes as it holds the delicate teacup. I am destroyed by emotion, emotion that I cannot understand. Fear is part of it. I recognize that. I do not know which side my Judge has chosen in this silent battle. Will she aid the Nessian god? Will she be true to her humans? Will she ever tell me what she has decided?

But beyond fear, there is a deep sense of dread. I am no prophet, simply a Scribe. I write what is, not what will be. The lives of the Judges must be preserved on paper, if not in reality. But the humans... their lives are equally fascinating, and much shorter. Sometimes, I write their stories as well. It amuses me. It would not amuse my Themis. She does not know I do this.

Fair Hera's gifts from high Mount fly

Deceitful, her maternal gaze -

And steeds unseen bring sunlit days

While Furies in the shadows lie.

"Thank you," my Themis says, her low voice distant. She stares out her window at the billions of stars and galaxies within her view. She can change what appears outside her window based on what she wishes to watch. She is contemplative tonight, it seems. She wishes to be alone with her thoughts. Still, I do not leave.

She turns to me. "Is there something else?"

"I... no. Good night." I turn to go. If I voice my doubts, she will surely take them as a criticism of her abilities, but if I keep silent, I can suffer alone.

"No. Speak." Her voice rings fully in the dim light, filling her apartments.

I do not turn to face her. With one hand on the door handle, I speak to the floor. "I believe that Rhialt has offered similar power to the other Judges, and I am concerned about what this will mean for the humans."

Silence greets this statement. I worry that I have overstepped my boundaries.

Finally, she says, "He has offered the same power to the other Judges, it is true. And each and every one of them has declined to help him."

My breath stops. *Declined?* I was so sure...

"But I am the only one who knows this. They do not know what decision the others have made."

"How -" I stop. It is not my place to ask questions.

"I have my ways." I still do not face her, but I can hear a

smile on her lips. This reassures me.

"This is good information. Thank you, Themis."

"Sleep well, Scribe."

I close the door softly behind me.

* * *

Night falls on Terra Arcturus and the gas and electric lights blaze across the horizon. Down there, humans are loving, fucking, sleeping, studying, drinking, crying, laughing, and living. No matter what they are doing right that moment, they are all of them living.

And Freyja's bitters lend no ease

Though hopeful mother's thrust her gift.

The senses dull instead of lift

To bring the madman to his knees.

The Greeks held a powerful influence over the humans of Old Earth. Even when the humans were fleeing the destroyed ruins of what Old Earth had become, they still praised the philosophy and religion and mathematics of the old Greeks. Even as the world decayed, the humans revered their past. Most of them.

It amazes me that even on so distant a planet as Terra Arcturus, in a remote corner of a neighboring galaxy, the past holds such power over the humans. It appears that the stasis doesn't remove the need for history, just the need for nutrition. Even today, tonight, as I sit on my window seat and watch the humans, they tell tales of the way life used to be.

Your granddaddy proposed to me on a ferris wheel.

A what?

A ferris wheel. It's like...

Seriously, dude, you think the beer here sucks, you should have seen the way it was where I lived back on Old Earth.

Nothing can beat this shit. It's awful.

No, really, they wouldn't even put in all the alcohol in the beer. It was like drinking liquor-flavored piss.

Where the fuck did you live?

We must bow to worship the God-Of-Old.

Why must we bow?

To show that we are subservient.

Why are we subservient?

Because the God-Of-Old was the All-Powerful One, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

And Hell.

What?

And Hell.

Over and over again, I hear these tales, told by men and women

who can barely remember their home world through the fog the stasis leaves behind.

My vision is not as clogged as theirs. I can remember Old Earth more clearly; a Scribe must be able to remember everything.

But why cure that which is not ill?

The sights he sees exist as fact

And lead him logically to act

Though unknown Reason guides his will.

It was slow, at first. We survived the impact and thought ourselves victorious. We had beaten Mother Universe, after all. We did not consider the distant past. A mistake that the humans on Terra Arcturus work hard not to repeat.

Why was Venus' diurnal cycle the same length as a year on Earth? Why does Mars have two misshapen moons and not a spherical one, like our Luna? What anomaly disrupted Jupiter's Red Spot for months during the twenty-first century? These are the questions we should have asked ourselves, pre-Impact. Instead, we focused on eradicating the lung infections caused by the ubiquitous dust; we focused on rebuilding housing where earthquakes beyond measure ripped the Earth apart; we focused on the nuclear winters and food and warmth and roaming cannibal tribes.

We sacrificed the important on the altar of the urgent.

* * *

By the time our scientists discovered the Impact trajectory, it was too late for too many of us. Those with money evacuated to

Mars, not yet fully terraformed, where life was not as pleasant as on Earth, but ostensibly much safer. Those who could not afford to leave fortified their homes and prepared for the worst: illness, despair, and political upheaval. The world fell apart.

For Oðin's wisdom shows him mad

Through loss of eye, his sight expands

And views he now the distant lands

From Mimir's well; his mind is glad.

In their government bunkers, hidden on their remote mountains, their deep deserts, their tropical islands, their sub-arctic hideaways, scientists fought the barrier of time to seek out just *one more place* for humankind to escape to. One more chance. And they got it.

They got many chances, to be truthful.

Those who were considered valuable were those who were mechanically inclined. They went to the first available Goldilocks planet: Lux. Lux sat in the nearby Alpha Centauri system, maneuvering a complicated dance amongst its three stars. We did not know it at the time, but Lux would not survive the next five hundred years; the gravitational forces of its three stars would tear it to shreds.

Next went those whose intelligence lay in other areas, who could be taught to farm in situations utterly extraterrestrial, who could be taught to repair a malfunctioning computer, who could be taught to pilot a shuttle. They went a little further, to Auron, a

small green planet about twenty-four light-years away from Old Earth. Halfway there, the stasis chambers malfunctioned. Only three crewmembers survived. The last videolog from that expedition showed their haggard faces, wan from starvation and depression. The message was upbeat, in its own morbid way, discussing the need for alternative sunlight, as the sun Aeron orbited was too weak to sustain farmland. Even as they begged for assistance, they laughed. They were dying and they were prepared.

And so it went. Ship after ship, filled with refugees, heading for truncated futures on distant planets. I suppose it is a miracle that we on Terra Arcturus have survived as long as we have.

And Heracles, by Hera's hand

Gains knowledge beyond mankind's lot -

The Lord of Hell, his Hall of Rot-

Returns relieved to Motherland.

The journey was long, much longer than it should have been. In our haste, we had miscalculated our trajectory and had begun to wander through the blackness of empty space. We were given limes and told to eat them. Then we climbed into our stasis chambers. We slept for fifteen dilated years - the longest years of my shortened life.

At the end of the journey, we awoke to find that a quarter of the ship's passengers did not survive. They were the old and sickly; they were not expected to survive, to be blunt. The rest of us, the young, the somewhat capable, the dregs of our former humanity, faced a planet entirely unlike the one we had left so many

years ago. Whereas Old Earth had been made up primarily of water, Terra Arcturus gifted us with sand and cracked soil from horizon to horizon. The plant life was dangerous and reeked of poison, the binary stars made for almost unbearable heat, and the planet already housed a race of beings who were less-than-willing to give up their most prized possession - their home.

It would not be until my death and the subsequent Uprising that I would see the fallout from those wars.

Events in Mind are no less true

Than those that Science can express

(Which, measured, may create distress)

Yet both delight in knowledge new.

And all, I mourn, all could have been avoided if we had simply regarded our past with the same piety that the humans do now. We could not have recreated the magnetosphere. We were not that advanced. But we could have been looking for other homes long before the Impact. We could have been more prepared.

We should have been more prepared.

* * *

Sleep does not come easily to me now. It is neither necessary nor comfortable. I did not realize, when I lived, how much I relied on the ability to dream. Sometimes I did not recall the dreams, but they were always there, playing in the background of my unconscious.

Now, I do not dream. It is not a matter of not remembering my dreams; there is a distinct absence that feels like a hole in my memory. I sleep, I rest, I wake, and I feel a burning nausea where once I recalled my dreams. So I choose not to sleep.

Bolwaki, in his blue-tinged glory, rises over Terra Arcturus and bathes the desert landscape in a pale light reminiscent of its pale native inhabitants. I rise from my window seat, where I have spent my entire evening, and go to make my Themis her morning tea.

I find her where I left her last night, sitting in her armchair, looking out at the cosmos. I am not the only one to forego sleeping.

"Thank you," she murmurs, hands cupping the china as if it is the sole source of warmth in her universe.

I bow and prepare to leave.

"Scribe, stay a moment, if you would."

I say nothing, just look at her. She will speak in her own time.

But he did not. He led the way upward, back toward the day. But upon the threshold, he could not bear the thought of leaving her down there.

She says nothing for several minutes. Then she puts down her teacup and looks me in the eye. The intensity of her gaze takes my breath away. I am suddenly aware of how dire the situation with the Nessian god is.

"I need to know that, should the worst happen, you will stand

by me," she says quietly.

"The worst?" I repeat, uncertain.

"Should it come to another war, another uprising, another replacement, I need to know that you will support me."

I do not have to consider my answer. "I will."

Her frame goes limp, as though she had doubted the answer I would give.

"I am faithful to you alone, Themis," I continue.

She nods and says nothing. After a moment, I bow again and I leave her presence.

I am not prepared for the other Scribe, who waits for me outside my Themis' apartments. It is improper for a Scribe to visit a part of the Establishment not belonging to his or her Judge.

"We must talk," she says, her voice low and rapid. She begins to walk down a long marble hallway, with cold sculptures of dead philosophers lining the walls.

"Why?" I ask, following her against my better judgment.

"Surely you're aware of the bargain Rhialt made with our Judges?"

"I am."

"It will not end well." She begins to talk with her hands, a habit I find distracting. "We must know who will agree to help and who will not. The answer could mean the destruction of humanity, Scribe."

"I am aware, but we are not privileged to know such decisions," I lie.

"We must give ourselves the privilege!" she hisses, stopping in the hallway. We are surrounded by silence and dead men. The thought makes me anxious.

"We will overstep..."

"To hell with the boundaries!" she snaps. "Think of it. Our humans are in danger from this monstrous god. We can save them by determining who will aid him and who will stand in his path."

"And do what with the information?" I cannot keep the contempt out of my voice. "Are you proposing we stage our own mutiny? Remove the offending Judges from power? Become Judges ourselves? That way lies failure."

"Do you have another idea?" Her anger, far from being spent, is stoked to a frenzy. Her voice gets louder and I begin to fear that our conversation will be discovered.

"I do," I say to calm her.

"Tell me."

And so with Madness will I bide

With Delphic Insight as my guide.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next several days passed in a haze of forgotten memories. Sure, Orion still met with his commanding officers, did the

requisite paperwork, issued the necessary reprimands...for all intents and purposes, it appeared that he was doing his job.

His mind, however, was elsewhere.

The first night he saw her, she was drunk on the berry beer. The music playing in the background - a strange, melancholy tune derived from Nessian love songs - seemed to irritate her.

"Change the music!" she yelled, her words slurring together.

The bartender ignored her.

"Change the fucking music!"

No response. So Niki - he didn't know her name yet, but he would learn it very soon - went over to what passed for a jukebox and, grabbing a nearby chair, smashed its interface to splinters. The melancholy tune faded and died.

She wanted kids. She wanted kids so badly. Orion had always put it off. "Next year," he would say. "Wait 'til I get this next promotion." And she waited.

She had a twin sister, but they hadn't spoken in years. Occasionally, when Orion and Niki visited her parents, they would pull up a recent videolog of Natti and her husband and four children. Orion always resented this.

Being a desert planet, Terra Arcturus had no definable continents, just one large landmass, meaning Niki and Natti spend their entire adult lives mere hours from each other. Even so, they

hadn't seen each other since their last fight, which had been about Niki's pregnancy scare. That was eight years ago.

She loved to dance. She wasn't very good at it, but that never stopped her. If the right music - fast-paced, with an easily definable tune - played in a bar or a bazaar or anywhere, really, she would stop and dance. Sometimes she only danced for a few seconds; other times, she danced through the entire song.

Her hips swayed against the beat, her arms flailed epileptically, and her feet did nothing more interesting than shuffle in place. But somehow, it still captivated Orion. He would stand back and watch as she worked through her dancing fit and then they would continue whatever it was they were doing. It was endearing.

Orion couldn't control himself when the memories hit him. He often stared into space or, worse, wept. Whispers began to circulate through the Force. Orion was feeble-minded now. A total pussy. His girlfriend bit the dust and he couldn't handle it. Did you hear? She was cheating on him, too. Goddamn, was that boy whipped. He needed to take medical leave, get his shit in order. But he wasted his last leave - spent the entire time drunk on Lilith, the way I heard it. No matter - he was a danger to himself at this point. He needed to get himself together. What a damn disgrace.

And other whispers that had nothing to do with Orion, yet

stayed in his mind regardless. Hot. It's going to get very hot. Hotter than it is now? Oh, yeah. Is that even possible? That's what the science team is saying. Why is this the first we're hearing of this? Fucking science team. We'll get through. Remember Lux? Remember Tau Chi? Remember... ?

Ashi, Orion realized. Ashi could fix this.

"Andersen, in my office, please."

It was two days after his visit to that Nessian fucker. He hadn't touched a drop of liquor - not even the beer - and Ashi's words burned holes in his head. He could not unhear the promises the Nessian had made him. *All I have to do is eat the seed and kill the beast. All I want is to have her back.*

Orion shut the door behind him with a click. "Sir?"

"Sit down, Andersen."

Orion sat.

"How long have you been on-planet, Andersen?"

"Six local years, seven local months, sir."

"And you came straight from Earth?"

"No, sir. I was stationed in Lux. I was told to bring my men fourteen dilated years ago."

"Twenty-one local years. Right in the middle of the first Insurrection." The commanding officer nodded.

"Yes, sir. I arrived towards the tail end of the second Insurrection." The screams of the females. The burning bodies. The

crackle of fire over the intercom. The eventual, utter silence.

"You were awarded a medal of honor, Andersen."

"Yes, sir."

"But the troop psychiatrist says you only barely squeaked past your psych evaluation."

"... Yes, sir."

His CO sighed. "I'm putting you on mandatory medical leave until further notice. Your pay will be reduced by 40%. You will see Dr. Amanti three times a week for the next three weeks. Once he has decided that you are fit to return to duty, your pay will be reinstated. Am I understood?"

Orion stared at him. This was his chance. Get Niki back. How long could it take to go to Hell? He could leave in the morning, be back by supper, and still make his mandatory appointments with the shrink.

Finally, he said, "Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

Orion left the office, his head clear for the first time since his visit to Ashi. He had a plan. He just needed a little help.

* * *

"I'm sorry," Ashi said, "but I cannot help you."

Orion blinked. Surely he had misunderstood. "No, no. I just

need help getting to the Arctic and figuring out how to get past the Jaoni. You don't have to come with me. I just need a hint. Something."

"I understood what you said and I repeat: I cannot help you."

"Why the fuck not?"

"My orders were to explain the mission to you. Once you decided to accept or decline the mission, my duty was finished."

"So, basically what you're saying is that you're unwilling to work overtime."

"I do not answer to you, human. I answer to Rhialt and Rhialt alone."

"Oh-ho, so now we're getting back to the racist bullshit of 'human' and 'Nessian.'"

Ashi simply looked at him.

Orion ground his teeth. After a silence that felt much longer than it lasted, Orion said, "Fine. Fuck you. What does this stupid seed look like?"

Without a word, Ashi went to his meager bookshelf and pulled down a brown, cracked, leather book. The page fell open as if it was expected. A picture of a tall, spindly tree with needles fluttered in the slight breeze that blew through Ashi's open window.

"This is the turbine tree," Ashi began.

Orion chuckled. "Is that a Nessian word?"

Ashi sighed. "Yes. Why?"

"It's just... humans have an identical word. A turbine produces electrical power. What does 'turbine' mean in Nessian?"

"Something similar." Ashi smiled. "A turbine is the core through which power flows. Power of the gods and of the devils and of nature herself."

Orion shook his head, still chuckling.

"In any case," Ashi continued, "this is the turbine tree. The tree holds little spheres and in the center of these spheres are the seeds. You must be very careful with the spheres, which we call 'koine', because though they look common, they contain sharp blades that can slice through skin and sinew as easily as a knife through warm butter."

Orion stopped laughing abruptly. "Koine? Really?"

"What is it now, Orion?"

"Hit me."

"Excuse me?"

"Hit me."

"Have you been drinking again?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

Ashi shrugged and punched him in the mouth. Orion stumbled backwards and grabbed at a chair to keep from falling. His head rang and ached. Good. He wasn't high. This wasn't a dream.

"Care to explain what that was about?" Ashi asked, bemused.

"We also have a human word, 'koine,' which means 'common

tongue.' "

"I see. Are you quite finished?"

"I hope so." Orion spat blood onto the dirt floor. Upon seeing Ashi's disgusted look, he ducked his head. "Sorry."

"There is a trick to calming the Jaoni, so they do not attack you when you enter their domain."

"Oh?"

"The smoke of the haba weed will calm them to sleep, at which point you can carefully grab the koine."

"The haba weed? Isn't that -"

"Hallucinogenic? Yes. That's why I said 'carefully.' Many a better man than you has been lost to the Jaoni because of the haba."

Orion shuddered. He could only imagine.

"So. Good luck." And with that, Ashi pushed him to the front door and through it, then closed the door firmly behind him.

"Thank you," Orion said quietly and began his walk home.

CHAPTER SIX

My plan is infinitely fallible. It could fail at any of its millions of joints. I am aware of this and yet I still plan to follow through with it. The first step is to play the part of spy.

Rhialt has scheduled another meeting with my Themis this morning. As Scribe, I, of course, sit in on this meeting. But this time, my notes are not only for my Judge's perusal. I shall share

them with the Scribe of the Judge Selene, who visited me so unexpectedly just yesterday. It seems like much longer.

"What has Orion Andersen decided?" my Themis asks Rhialt. I hear a hint of impatience in her voice.

Orion Andersen. That name is familiar to me, though I cannot immediately place it. I enjoy my voyeuristic observation of the lives of the mortals down below, but I rarely put names to their faces. I wish to watch them as characters in a videolog, not as living, breathing creatures. It hurts less that way, when they die.

"He will go," Rhialt purrs.

"And your Scribe will assist him?"

"As far as necessary, but no further. It is of the utmost importance that he do this on his own."

Do what? I am confused. I listen more closely. My Themis is speaking with this queer god as though they were familiars. Does this mean...? I shake my head. It is not possible.

"It is very important that this human not die while assisting you," my Themis says urgently.

Assisting you. It is possible, and it has happened. My heart aches, a deep pain that makes it difficult to breathe. My Themis, the woman whom I adore above all others, has betrayed me.

Will you stand by me?

I will.

I cannot. I will not. My duty is to my humans, my species, my home. I cannot forsake that, not even for my Judge, my Themis.

"I will not deny that there is a distinct possibility he may die," Rhialt says slowly. "There is only so much preparation that can be made. However, you assured me that he was a skilled warrior and, as such, he should have little difficulty killing the beast."

"It is not the beast I am concerned about. It is the desire to remain in Hell."

Rhialt shakes his head. "There is nothing I can do about this."

"Damn it, that is not good enough!" My Themis slams her hand down on her desk. I jump, surprised. This action is quite uncharacteristic of her.

"I am afraid," Rhialt says, smiling in a way I do not trust, "that it is too late for 'good enough.' He has agreed to the mission and now the onus is on him to survive."

My Themis glares at him. "You mean to tell me that you can get him down to hell but you cannot protect him once he is there? I find that hard to believe."

Rhialt simply smiles at her.

"Get out. Do not return."

"I have not tricked you, Themis, contrary to what you believe," Rhialt says softly.

"I disagree."

"If I were to interfere, imagine how it would permanently damage the human. To be ripped away from his love in hell. It would be painful, but the pain would not be all physical."

"Get out."

Rhialt rises to his impossible height and bows from the waist.

"I will await your message."

"You will wait for a while."

Rhialt fades from view and my Themis rests her forehead in her hands. "What have I done?" she whispers.

I believe she has forgotten I am here. I rise to my feet and prepare to leave. When she does not say anything or, indeed, look up from her inner torment, I quietly leave the room. The door clicks shut behind me.

* * *

Selene's Scribe awaits me outside Themis' study. I do not wish to speak to her, but with my Judge's treason, I have no choice.

"What have you learned?" I ask, heading off any questions for the time being. I begin to walk down the hall of dead men, passing burning sconces and cold stone busts.

"Selene has declined the monster's request." The Scribe appears relieved at this news. Her face, already pale, does not now seem so sickly. Her red-blond hair does not seem as wilted. I wish I felt half as well as she looked.

"Did you find out aught else about the other Judges?" I ask, hoping to divert any questions of my own Judge. I pray - to a God who no longer lives - that she is not the only Judge to succumb to the offer of power. She is human - a human with exorbitant amounts

of power, power beyond her ability to wield it, but human all the same. She will make mistakes, as do we all. Please, do not let her mistake kill her. Do not let her mistake kill my humans. Please.

"Hephaistos rejected the monster, as well, but in his own, er, pleasant manner," the Scribe says, her mouth twisting sourly around the words.

I cannot help but smile, imagining the interaction between the strange, tailed god and our Judge who enjoyed the ambrosia of his position too much. Although Hephaistos is an unpleasant character, he is strong in his resolve - one of the reasons he achieved his position during the Uprising.

"Asclepios," the Scribe continues, "also turned down the monster's offer, but according to his Scribe, he did consider the offer seriously."

"You learned this information from the other Scribes?"

The Scribe smirks. "How else did you think I would obtain it?"

I simply shake my head. "Please continue."

"Hermes has not made a decision, but with the monster visiting every couple of days, it appears that he, too, will reject the offer."

"Why?"

"Hermes is not a patient man," the Scribe says. This is true. "He prefers to think the situation over in his own time, in his own way. He does not appreciate the pressure this *god* puts on him."

I understand her disdain at using the word "god" with any other being than God-Of-Old, but calling Rhialt a monster shows the same sort of speciocentrism that I always abhorred in my fellow humans when I lived. I choose to ignore it for the nonce.

"Why do the other Scribes not join us?" I ask, looking around as if they might be hiding behind a pillar. Once I realize what I am doing, I feel foolish. Surely, they would not spy on me and this Scribe in the way we were, shamefully, spying on our very own Judges.

"Once our plan is more refined, they will join us. They wish to watch what happens to us before they risk themselves." At this, her look turns wry. I can hear what she is thinking as clearly as if she has said it aloud. *Cowards*. I cannot help but agree.

"What has Themis decided?" the Scribe asks, tossing her hair over her shoulder, an impatient gesture.

My stomach rolls and I swallow back vomit. I do not want to think about the betrayal Themis has placed upon me. I have no choice. "She aids Rhialt."

The Scribe's eyes widen before she realizes how much this must hurt me. She regains her composure. "You are certain?"

"I am."

"What must be done to stop her?"

"I know not."

"What has the monster asked of her?"

Orion Andersen. The name hits me like Chevsky-Jones hit

Earth. I know that name because he is one of the humans I have watched since he arrived on Terra Arcturus. A soldier. An airman, to be exact. He fought the Nessians. His lover was murdered. I know him. I know now why they have chosen him.

"Scribe!" the Scribe snaps, reminding me of her presence.

"The human Orion Andersen."

"Who?"

"A soldier down on the planet. The god asked for a suitable candidate to go down to Hell."

"Don't call that beast a god. It is nothing of the sort."

I shrug.

"Why does this... *thing* want a human to go down to Hell while still living?" the Scribe muses, annoyance apparently forgotten.

"I know not, but I can find out."

The Scribe gives me a suspicious look. "How?"

"I will contact you once I have more information," I respond and walk away, ignoring the stares of the ice cold men, judging me as mortals who do not know the weight suddenly laid upon my shoulders, judging me as I will wish to be Judged once this nightmare is over.

I return to my apartments, shut and lock the door, and sit upon my window seat.

* * *

There is a tale back on Old Earth of a love so great that it gave birth to humanity.

There is a tale back on Old Earth of a love so great that it changed Old Earth's rotation around Sol.

There is a tale back on Old Earth of a love so great that even Thanatos had no power over it.

But Old Earth is gone, replaced by Chaos and Death and the sullen fires of Hell.

Only memory of Her virtues now remains.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Orion glared at the blood congealing on his leg.

"Fuck!"

He looked around at the landscape surrounding him, barren and dead. Even for a desert planet, there was little life. Not a tree or cactus or weed to be seen. Just miles and miles of cracked red earth. *Sharp* cracked red earth.

Orion was prepared to admit that he might not have entirely been prepared for this journey.

He glanced back at the Rover and sighed. That asshole Ashi had warned him against using it once he got past the sand dunes.

"Use your feet for the last half of the journey," Ashi said,

his face very serious. "The Jaoni have very sensitive paws and they can sense the vibrations of a traveling Rover from two miles away. They will know about you long before you know about them."

Orion rolled at the pale alien. "Jesus Christ. Anything else?"

"The Jaoni is not the most dangerous creature in the Arctic."

"Wait, what?"

"Other animals, subterranean animals, live in the arctic desert. Animals that make the Jaoni look like kittens."

"Can you give me anything other than that?" Orion asked through gritted teeth.

"Just that if you run into one of them, don't move. It can only see objects that move. You will want to run. You will most likely piss your pants. Whatever happens, though, don't run. Don't move. If it can't see you, it won't attack you. Simple as that."

"Thanks, asshole," Orion said, staring around him at the stark landscape. For the arctic part of a planet - a part of the planet so distant that it had taken him three days driving, morning to night, to arrive - it certainly wasn't cold. Just... deserted. Empty. Dead. He might be willing to admit that it was a little cooler, but the stillness overrode any noticeable climate change.

Orion gave a longing look to the Rover, then looked down at his bleeding knee. The ground was treacherous. His foot had caught in a crack and he'd gone down, cutting himself on another crack. It would be exhausting to walk with his head down, constantly gauging

his next step. And how many days would it take him walking to get to a turbine tree? Three? Seven? Ten? A solid week?

His mind made up, Orion jogged back to the Rover and hopped in the driver's seat. The vehicle had no doors or windows, just a wind screen, and when he was driving through the desert, going a cool seventy miles per hour, the air felt just right. With a grin, he started up the engine and restarted his journey over the cracked landscape.

The Jaoni can sense vibrations on the ground.

Fuck the Jaoni. Surely they can't outrun a Rover. Fastest animal on Old Earth couldn't outrun a Rover.

What about the unnamed monster that lives beneath the ground?

What are you thinking, you dumb shit? Are there going to be giant worms just waiting to devour me?

Maybe.

No. No, there's not. Because giant worms are impossible. Same with giant spiders and giant scorpions and giant insects in general. Gravity would demolish them at that size. Their own mass would kill them. So, no, there are no fucking giant earthworms hiding out in hidden caves beneath the surface, just waiting for unwary passersby. That's stupid.

His inner logic had nothing to say to that.

What's more, I've already missed my first appointment with the shrink. I might get court-martialed. I might lose my job. I might be homeless in a couple of weeks. So, really, the idea of some

hidden monster lying in wait in some mythical subterranean shelter isn't at the top of my list of concerns. I can outrun it. My to-do list includes getting these seeds, getting the fuck back to Nalagan, keeping my ass from getting canned, and killing some other monster. That's it. Get your head together, soldier. You're not a fucking child.

You can't outrun it. The voice dwindled and died in the wind.

Orion laughed for the sheer, unholy joy of the adventure. He cackled until his eyes ran. He was losing his mind. He could feel it disappearing, piece by piece. And the best part was, he didn't care.

The suns beat down on him, Bolwaki from directly overhead, Dunwaki from near the eastern horizon. Whatever change in climate had occurred over the last three thousand miles, it was marginal. Sweat beaded on his forehead and was destroyed by the dry winds rushing past him. Mirages of the white blue sky shimmered on the horizon, promising water in amounts that this part of the planet had surely never seen. Maybe farther north, where the ice poles still nominally existed beneath the surface, but not here.

Shrubbery began to appear, dotting the vista here and there. The short, sparse bushes boasted vibrant orange berries, berries that promised a slow death squatting amongst their branches. Then came the cacti. Long winding ropes of spiked green plant matter criss-crossed the path Orion had chosen to take. Trying to walk around that shit would have been a fucking nightmare. He never thought he would miss the yuccas of Old Earth, which were sharp as

hell, but self-contained.

Finally, after an hour of cactus and shrubbery, a tree appeared on the horizon, rising out of the shimmering white-blue mirage. Ashi had not said anything about any other kind of tree growing this far north, so it had to be a turbine tree. Orion coaxed a little more speed out of the Rover, praying he would not have to refuel amongst the sprawling cactus. At least let him get back to the dunes. At least let him get that far. His fuel gauge read at one-quarter.

The land flowed beneath his wheels like water down the Amazon rapids, but the tree remained tiny and nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding mirage. Suddenly, two other, smaller dots appeared, growing larger rather more quickly.

"What the -"

The shapes were running full tilt, right at him.

"Shit."

Closer now. Close enough that he could see the rounded ears, the rough brown and grey fur, the long cat-like tails.

Orion glanced down at his fuel gauge. Somewhere between E and one-quarter.

Close enough now that he could see Bolwaki gleaming off their teeth, sharp as an ax but with much finer precision. Close enough now that he could see the puffs of dust rising behind each footfall. He felt his scrotum shrink. Back in Nalagan, amongst the soldiers, Jaoni were a joke. *Hey, Spock kept a Jaoni as a pet. Are you more*

of a badass than Spock? Here, face-to-face, they were a fucking nightmare of teeth and claws and carnivorous terror.

Fuck it.

He pressed the pedal to the floor, squeezing as much speed out of the Rover as he could. The frame shook in a way that wasn't entirely healthy, but she just had to hold together long enough to get him past the two Jaoni galloping towards him. He gritted his teeth.

There it was, a space between the two beasts. Space enough for the Rover to get through, if just barely. He had no other choice. Turning at this speed would send the Rover flying engine over bumper and then he'd be fucked so hard he'd never even know it. Gripping the steering wheel as tightly as he dared, Orion made straight for that gap.

The Jaoni swerved around the Rover and kept running, hell-bent on something Orion could not see. He glanced in his mirror and could only see the dust settling behind him. He certainly hadn't noticed anything large enough to be tasty on his way here. But Jaoni could sense vibration, after all.

He laughed. *That* was what he'd been afraid of? Those beasts were pussycats, running from the big scary four-wheeler. They'd never seen anything like his Rover before. The Nessians weren't the most technologically advanced species in this corner of the universe. All it had taken was a little rumbling and they'd gone off running. Still, cockiness aside, and in a way he would never admit to anyone living, the relief made him lightheaded. He

swallowed some water and shook his head, refocusing on the target at hand.

At last, the tree began to grow in his line of vision. He could see the bladed leaves, the knotted bark, the unusually gnarled roots. As he got closer, he could see the discarded bones of the Jaonis' prior meals. Large bones. Maybe he had underestimated the Jaoni. Just a little.

A fetid smell permeated the area and he gagged. Ashi had warned him that the turbine tree had a pungent odor but this... this was something worse.

What could be worse than angry Jaonis?

Giant spiders.

Be logical.

Giant fucking spiders.

Logic aside, Orion parked the Rover as gently as he could and tiptoed his way to the tree. There was not a breath of air, nothing to dissipate the scent of rot hanging over the area. Sweat that had evaporated while cruising in the Rover now trickled down his face, leaving rivulets in the dust caked there.

As trees go, aside from being armed to the nines, the turbine tree was nothing special. It stood at the same height as an average elm tree. Its leaves, though poisonous and bladed, were still green. It provided a marginal amount of shade, more than the bushes, less than a real tree would have. But this was not a tree you fucked with lightly. The leaves were sharp enough to cut, the

waxy sheen coated everything that touched it, and the koine balls, if mishandled, could effectively rip him from groin to sternum.

Orion had never once been nervous around a plant, until now.

Keeping his eye on the tree, lest it do something underhanded, Orion pulled his knife from his pocket and flipped it open. Good. Now they were on the same footing.

A koine ball hung nearby at eye level, surrounded by leaves.

The trick to getting a koine ball is to remove its defenses, Ashi's voice said in the back of his mind. *You will need to remove the leaves and any bark that guards it.*

Bark?

It is as rough as leather, and it contains billions of microscopic parasites. They enter the bloodstream through the tiniest of cuts - from, say, a turbine leaf, for example. Once they are there, they will multiply to the point that blood flow will be cut off from vital body parts. Your hand may need to be amputated. Or your arm. You may die, if it constricts the blood flow to your heart.

And the cure is?

Ashi had laughed. *There is no cure. You can beg for a merciful death from a Nessian doctor, who can numb you into the next life, but that is about it. If you're lucky, you will be an amputee. If you're not...*

Orion reached into his back pocket and grabbed the leather gloves stuffed there. These gloves had not blinked when faced with

a laser box cutter and a drunken Orion. They could handle a fucking tree. He pulled them on, an insolent grin lighting up his face. *Bite me. I dare you.*

He reached up - carefully, oh so carefully - and grabbed the branch at its barest point. Taking his knife, he began to hack through the knotted wood. If he could just cut off this part, he could surgically remove everything else at his leisure.

He sawed until his arm began to hurt. His fingers became stiff. And the tree's leaves fluttered in a breeze Orion couldn't feel, laughing at his pathetic efforts.

He dropped his arm and massaged it. Bolwaki sat much lower in the sky, and Dunwaki had fallen to the northwestern horizon. What passed for evening on this god-forsaken planet drew closer.

Suddenly, with the murderous tree before him and the smell of death surrounding him, Orion realized he did not want to spend the night out here.

He grabbed the branch with both hands and pulled down. The tree bent with his efforts and did not break. Heedlessly, now, panic beginning to settle in, Orion cut the leaves from around the koine sphere. One fluttered too close to his face and a searing pain flashed across his cheek.

"Fuck!"

The last of the leaves gone, he sliced at the bark, throwing bits of it into the air, but he didn't care, the sun was setting and the stench of rot was getting worse and *what had died to create that smell* and he had his gloves so he didn't need to worry about

parasites but he did have to worry about that fucking smell and whatever it was that caused it and...

The koine fell harmlessly into his hand and opened, spilling six small seeds into his palm.

He took the small vial he had brought for this express purpose out of his shirt pocket and dumped the seeds into it. Once it was closed, he jogged back to the Rover and started it. The engine pattered before eventually roaring to life.

I can see why the Nessian priests make getting these seeds a goddamned rite of passage.

Turning the headlamp on, he spun around and raced in the opposite direction from the tree. Evil loomed there and night was falling.

The ground shuddered beneath the Rover, shaking Orion to his core. Terra Arcturus was no stranger to the occasional earthquake, but this was much closer to the surface. This was something worse. This was what created the smell. He instinctively knew this.

"Come on, come on," Orion prayed, pressing the pedal harder, as if by willing it, the Rover would exceed its maximum speed capacity.

The engine began to whine. The needle pointed to E. The ground shook. So did Orion.

The Rover died. The head lamp flickered and dimmed to nothingness. Bolwaki's dying rays cast a bitter blue glow on the landscape before sinking beneath the horizon. Dunwaki winked

secretively at him and followed suit.

Sweat dripped from his face, soaking his work shirt, though the desert chill permeated the air. His hands shook. Fuel. He just needed fuel. He jumped down from his seat and nearly fell. Water legs. It happened to even the staunchest of soldiers. That fear so deep that it removed your ability to move, to think, to act.

"Not now, soldier," Orion said through chattering teeth. His ears rang in the silence that surrounded him.

The ground heaved beneath him and he flew into the air before landing hard on his back. His ribs felt cracked and there was a large weight sitting on his chest. Gasping for air, he tried to sit up.

Rot. Decay. Death.

The stench was back. It had followed him.

A loud crack, as of a peal of nearby thunder, shattered the silence and Orion yelled. His pants were wet.

A dark shadow reared up against the starlight, huge, taller than the turbine tree. Orion froze. He stared at it. He could make out horns along the thing's skull and down its tail. He heard, rather than saw, a long serpentine tongue flit between its teeth, tasting the air. Two back legs, big enough to support an elephant, shuffled back and forth, while its front limbs clawed at the ground, searching for... something.

You will want to run. You will most likely piss your pants. Whatever happens, though, don't run. Don't move. If it can't see

you, it won't attack you. Simple as that.

Orion stared up at the huge nameless beast and it dawned on him. This thing fed on the Jaoni. His stupid-ass little Rover hadn't scared the beasts. This motherfucker had. Jaoni were big animals - bear-sized cat creatures. Those bones weren't the Jaoni's meals - they were the Jaoni. If they had the sense to be afraid of this thing, Orion needed to have the sense not to move. He couldn't help the shaking, though.

The beast reared on its hind legs and roared, a sound that made Orion think of a rhinoceros giving birth. Fury and hunger and pain echoed in that awful noise, and Orion knew that it prophesied his immediate future. Nearby scrubs rustled in the shockwave of the sound and Orion thought his ears might bleed. But he still didn't move.

A second, quieter roar responded from some distance away. Orion's teeth began to chatter in earnest. *Two of them? There's fucking two of them? What is this, the goddamned Ark?*

A hunting pair. That's what it had to be. The clawed feet scabbled at the cracked earth, just ten feet from where Orion cowered. If that thing got any closer, Orion wouldn't *have* to move for it to find him. It would crush him where he lay, soaking in his own piss.

The ground vibrated with footsteps coming nearer. *Please. Oh, please.* The beast's mate roared in frustration. The beast returned the sentiment by swinging its head from side to side and snuffling.

Another earthquake shook Orion's faith in his survival skills as the pair began to dig back into their subterranean home. After a while, he couldn't tell where the earth's shivering ended and his began. The beasts disappeared from view, and nothing remained but tremors to show that they had ever been there. The Jaoni Orion had seen, perhaps. The ground grew quiet. The stars sparkled down on the silent.

Orion heard something crying. *Oh, God, please let there not be a baby beast. Mama bears kill when their babies are threatened. Oh, God, please...*

Then he realized that he was making the sound. He was crying and soaked in piss and sweat and tears but gloriously, gloriously alive. Shaking, he climbed to his feet and stumbled weakly to the Rover. Fuel. He just needed some fuel. After several tries, he managed to get the top off the reserve.

When the jug was empty, he sat there and stared at the sky.

Told you it wasn't fucking giant spiders.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I leave Orion Andersen's mind, feeling a little shaken myself. I was fortunate, when I lived, never to have encountered such a beast, but then, I hadn't been a soldier, either. I was a third-rate scientist for my government, sent from Old Earth in its final

days in hopes that I might do humankind some sort of good on a foreign planet. And maybe I would have, had I survived.

I sit here, trying to gather my thoughts as I watch Bolwaki rise over Terra Arcturus. I have been watching Orion's life - through Orion's eyes, of course; I am not omniscient, as I have said - ever since he entered the domain of the Judges. Something drew to me him and draws me still. I do not believe in divine intervention - how can one believe in aught divine, when God-of-Old is no more? - but I do believe it was more than chance that brought this rude, crude human into my purview.

I sometimes wonder what happens to the humans trapped outside of the Judges' scope. Does each settlement have its own version of our Judges? Do the humans simply cease to exist? Worse yet, do they remain trapped in hell?

I have no time to contemplate. I must bring Themis her morning tea and await any orders she may have for me. She has not had any orders for me these last several days, since Rhialt first visited her. Under normal circumstances, I would welcome the opportunity to write my secret histories of the humans who live down below.

These are not normal circumstances. This breaks my heart.

When I enter her apartments, Themis returns her window screen to black, but not before I have seen what she watches.

Orion's empty house.

Perhaps she does not know it, but Orion has not been in his house in three days, ever since he undertook the suicide mission

from which I have just returned. If he meets no more obstacles, it will be another three days before he arrives back home.

A permanent frown appears to have taken residence between Themis's eyebrows. She does not know where Orion is. Perhaps she does not care to enter his mind and find out. It may be easier for her to claim ignorance than to be fully aware of the damage she has done.

She also does not know that I am a voyeur, watching the humans live their mundane lives, living through their eyes. It is a taboo that I cannot help but violate. Best that she does not find out.

"I need you to do something, Scribe," she says, wrapping her hands tightly around the proffered tea. "I need you to watch a particular human for me. Two, in fact."

I bow and listen.

"There is a human soldier named Orion Andersen living in Nalagan who has caught my interest, but I cannot seem to find him. Please watch him and report to me daily what he does."

"And the second?" I ask, after she falls silent.

"His dead lover, Niki Alsecco."

"If she is dead..." I say slowly.

"Then she is in hell," Themis finished.

I stare at her before realizing that this is exactly the opportunity myself and the other Scribes need. Permission to spy on the humans. Permission to visit the dead down in hell.

I bow once more. "Of course, Themis."

"You may leave."

And so I do.

* * *

I tell my history now, so that you, whoever you are, may understand my choices, and the truth of why I must make them:

Nessian legend holds that Terra Arcturus was once a planet very similar to Old Earth. It had oceans and rivers and green landscape as far as the eye could see. But when their sun gods, in their curiosity, came too close to the planet, the oceans dried up, leaving only sparse rivers and streams. The water shortage on Terra Arcturus means that hydrological cycle cannot be completed. Instead, death and drought rule unchallenged.

I have never seen any evidence to support these stories, but faith is a realizing as science, under the right circumstances. My existence alone justifies that.

Lakes lie hidden underground, as I have previously mentioned, lakes and streams and, some believe, an ocean. A frequently cited fable tells of a cave so large, it holds an entire ocean of fresh water, just waiting to be discovered. There is no such cavern, of course, just as there was no El Dorado.

Sometimes, when I look at Terra Arcturus, I feel homesick for Old Earth, destroyed as it was. I miss the mountains and the grass and the clouds. Arcturus lacks clouds.

We knew the Impact was coming, of course. We were not so

inward-looking as that. But we were as helpless as if we had been. A massive economic collapse followed by the rise and fall of a "benevolent regime" had left the world weakened and teetering on the brink of another war. What money was available went towards everything except space exploration. What need had we of that? All of our problems lived on Earth.

When the Impact did occur, the world slid off the edge and into war. While humans were drowning in salt-water rain, or suffocating from rampant cases of pneumoconiosis, or fleeing the starving cannibal hordes - while the humans were doing all of this, just to survive until tomorrow - the governments of the people were taking land and killing foreigners. Perhaps they thought that, once the rains dissipated, once the sick died off, once the ash cleared and the sun shone once more - that their little nations would be the better for it. Perhaps they thought that land they gained now would be land they owned after the disaster ended.

Or perhaps they thought that global disaster heralded the best time to settle old disputes.

I lived in an apartment in the midwestern United States, and I remember well when the rains started. The comet, Chevsky-Jones, did not calve when it reached Earth's atmosphere. A dense comet the size of Lake Michigan, it hit the Pacific Ocean at 12:32 a.m.

Hawaii vanished in an instant, followed not long thereafter by the other South Pacific Islands. Australia and New Zealand suffered catastrophic tsunamis and the San Andreas Fault in California released, creating earthquakes that could be felt as far away as

Texas. The parts of California that survived Nereus did not survive Poseidon. I never met a survivor from the West Coast.

Japan did not fare much better. The shock waves and earthquakes leveled those high buildings, which were then soon drowned by the ensuing tsunamis and rain.

Where I was, though, I felt a tremor, like that of a passing train. My dishes rattled in their cupboards, but nothing else happened. I thought - excuse my naiveté: youth breeds hope, hope breeds fools - I thought that perhaps my city had been spared the brunt of the damage. I thought that the worst trouble I would face would be the hordes of people invading my "safe" city. I was in Oklahoma, after all. So far from all the damage. What harm could possibly befall me?

Not long after the Impact, the fault lines in central Oklahoma - only discovered in the past hundred years - erupted in a frenzy of activity. My apartment swayed, though I was on the ground floor, and the building next to me collapsed. These quakes were nothing compared to the California's destruction, but they proved to me that my city was not safe.

Then began the rain. Slowly, at first. A drizzle. Then more violently. By the end of the second week post-Impact, the man-made lakes in Oklahoma had flooded and streets were impassable. The morning my dog, Agamemnon, swam to my bed, I knew that I must leave.

Travel, as I said, was nearly impossible. The only way to get anywhere was by boat, and Oklahoma was not a state renowned for its boating opportunities. The water reached my knees by the time I had

gathered my absolute necessities - including Agamemnon - and I knew that the first several miles of my trip would have to be on foot.

Step by slogging step I walked the main streets of Oklahoma City, carrying my cocker spaniel, who shivered in my arms. I feared that he would die of exposure before I could get him somewhere safe. I feared the same fate for myself.

When the canoe drifted past me, I thought I must have been hallucinating. It bumped me as it passed, and I threw Agamemnon into it before grabbing hold of it and following suit.

I did not hear the shouts of the owner as he tried to run after us. I did hear the gunshot. I ducked and covered Agamemnon. The water gained speed and I saw the man staring after us, hopeless, in the rain.

One man's misery is another man's glory.

Agamemnon died of hypothermia later that week. There was no place for me to bury him. I found the driest place I could - an abandoned second story apartment - and I left him on the owner's bed, with dried flowers - remnants of the previous owner's wife, perhaps - near his head.

Nothing that I see as Orion will ever compare to the pain I felt when Agamemnon died. His pain is his, and mine is mine. I will not take on his pain in addition to my own.

It is on days like these, when I watch the suffering of the humans and Nessians down on Arcturus, that I miss scratching him behind the ears and feel his reassuring reality.

And it is days like these, when I look at the endless future I am mired in, that I wish I had lain down beside him and died myself.

CHAPTER NINE

Orion made it as far as the town of Gemima before the rover died. Neither his curses, nor his beatings, nor his pleading would induce life back into the vehicle. It was gone and he was trapped.

He looked around at him carefully. It was soon after dusk, but there were relatively few lamps shining outside the hovels that lined the crooked, dusty streets. Either this was a town of early sleepers or the town was so bloody backwards that light technology hadn't made its way here yet. Neither case boded well for the stranded Orion.

Glancing back at the direction from which he'd come, he shrugged off his anxiety and started walking down the street, searching for an inn or a bar or *something* that smacked of civilization. Gemima had no human inhabitants that he knew of, but maybe he could find a sympathetic Nessian.

"Hsst!"

The sound came from his right and, feigning nonchalance, he casually turned that direction. A grubby face poked out of an unlighted doorframe, looking up and down the street as though an armed patrol might be coming any minute. *Who knows?* thought Orion. *Maybe there is.* Figuring he had nothing to lose, he strolled over

to the doorway.

An equally grubby hand grabbed him and yanked him into the hovel before carefully closing the door. The room was dim and smelled of rotten eggs. Orion couldn't see any particular features about the man, but he thought the man was rather short for a Nessian.

"Watch yer eyes," muttered the man, lighting a lamp. The brief flare blinded Orion, and he choked on the oily smoke.

Once he could breathe again, he cautiously opened his eyes, and found himself staring at the short, rotund form of a greasy, dirty, stinking human.

Eh. Better than the other.

"Have ter be careful, yeh see," the man said quietly, glancing about as though the walls had ears. "They ken hear us anywhere. Always watchin', they are. Always."

"Who are you?" Orion asked, unconsciously adopting the same low tone.

The man looked startled at the question. "Me? I'm nobody. I'm a messenger. I'm supposed to messenge yeh. Do yeh know who Rhialt is?"

Orion's eyes narrowed. "I do. Why?"

"He's the one I'm messenging fer, yeh see. He's got a message fer yeh. He tol' me ter tell yeh, 'Now is the time.'"

Orion stared at him. "The time for what?"

The man shrugged. "I dunno. He didn' tell me, like. He jus'

said ter give yeh the message. I figgered yeh'd know what ter do with it once yeh had it."

Resisting the urge to grind his teeth in frustration, Orion stared at the little man, trying to determine whether that really was all there was to the message. But no, the man appeared anxious and fidgety, as though his purpose had been served. His constant glaring around the room, at things Orion couldn't see, made Orion nervous.

"Who are you?" he asked the little man again.

"They call me Roddie. Can't 'member my birth name. Long time ago, that. I messenge here an' there, doin' as Rhialt tells me, yeh see. I work fer him," he added proudly.

"I see," Orion said, flexing his hands by his side. "Do you follow Rhialt instead of the Judges?"

Even though he had guessed what the answer would be, it still shocked him when the little man bobbed his head.

"Yeh have to understand," Roddie said wisely, "the Judges are jus' humans. They have no real power. They was never gods, so they was never *meant* to Judge. They jus' took the oppertun'ty when it was offert. They was never *meant* to replace God-of-Old."

"And so you'd rather worship a god who's always been a god, regardless of which species he belongs to." Orion couldn't help it; he started grinding his teeth.

"Yep," Roddie said, smiling at how quickly Orion appeared to have cottoned on. "If'n it came down to't, I reckon Rhialt would

win any fight 'tween the two, if yeh understand my meaning."

"But it will not come to that," Orion said, certain.

Roddie blinked up at him. "It's already started."

* * *

Now is the time. What the fuck was that supposed to mean? The time to get the hell out of Dodge? It didn't take a fucking genius to figure that one out. Problem was, his rover had mysteriously died right on the outskirts of town. Funny that. Right as this asshole of a god had a message for him. Go figure.

Or perhaps now was the time to begin a mass slaying of the Nessians. Scour Terra Arcturus of the competition so that humanity could really *thrive*. Niki -

The air caught in his throat. Niki. Taking deep, painful breaths, Orion waited til he was back at the rover before seriously thinking about her.

He had never told her he loved her. He hadn't thought he'd needed to. She should have known. Did that have anything to do with their fighting? Was she really just looking for reassurance? Reassurance that she meant something more to him than a good lay? Reassurance that she was something more than a small-planet hick?

She'd grown secretive over the last few months of her life. Orion had been certain that she was cheating on him, and he didn't care. His stomach did a slow roll. All right, that wasn't quite

true. He *told* himself he didn't care. The fact of the matter was, he picked fights with her, trying to draw the truth out of her. And every time he did it, he could see how much it hurt her. That only spurred him to greater depths.

And then she died. She died, never hearing the words "I love you" from his lips. How could she have known how he felt, when all he ever did was berate her? How could she...

Orion bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. Man up. Keep it together.

Oh, fuck it all, anyway. A single tear slipped down one cheek, followed soon by a second, then a third. They dripped down to the gypsum sand beneath his boots, small silt lakes amidst a desert of despair.

She had this way of laughing that was infectious. She often sang off-key as she did the household chores. She twisted her hair around her finger when she got nervous. Towards the end, she was twisting her hair a lot in his presence.

He would give anything to tuck a piece of that dark hair behind her ear and kiss her on the forehead. "It's okay," he'd say. "I love you," he'd say.

"Where are you?" he whispered, choking on a sob. "Where did you go?"

There was no response. He was truly alone.

Now is the time.

His breath hitched and caught. He understood. Now is the

time to travel down to Hell. Now is the time to rescue Niki. Now is the time to repair all the mistakes he made.

Frantically digging through his bag, Orion tried to remember what Ashi had said about making the trip. All he had to do was eat the friggin' seeds, right? He didn't need to say any magic words, light a candle, pray, none of that nonsense, right?

Aha. His hand bumped the little vial in the dark bag, and he grabbed it triumphantly. By now, the few lights that had shown in Gemima had been smothered. The only light Orion had was starlight, and those stars twinkled down at him merrily. *It will be a grand adventure, they seemed to say. Just avoid the local cuisine, eh?*

But these were not pomegranate seeds. Just koine. Without ceremony, he popped the seeds into his mouth and chewed. And chewed. They would not dissolve. The crunchy outer shells had a bitter taste, as of arsenic, but he refused to spit them out. The more he chewed, the stronger the taste become, until he was gagging.

He swallowed, feeling the sharp shards of shells scratching him on the way down. He looked around him. Nothing had changed. The stars still twinkled in the sky, perhaps throwing off slightly more light, but otherwise unchanged. The ground still glowed faintly under the stars, and his tear-lakes had evaporated.

A sudden thought occurred to him and he lay down on the sand, staring up at the sky.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star," he murmured.

And they were. He didn't recognize any of them, and there were not enough astronomers on Terra Arcturus to take the time to

name them. They were nameless balls of gas, millions or billions of miles away, perhaps dead already.

Are we stars, then? he wondered. When we die, does our light continue to burn, through those who loved us? Or does even that light die out, and all we're left with is a husk, of iron or bone? It makes no matter. We never return to our former glory.

But he would. He would slay the beast, release Niki from the bonds of death, and return victorious once more to the realm of the living, a hero.

The stars grew brighter, and they pulsed with a message. Orion strained his ears, trying to hear it. *Wait, they said. The time will come. Sleep. Listen.*

Seemed like an awful lot of commands from a bunch of burning gas, but he complied, closing his eyes. He felt his body sinking into the sand, but he was not worried about suffocating. He would be just fine.

With the last vestiges of consciousness, he remembered the sword. He needed the sword. Ashi said...

His breathing became slow and even. Then shallower. And eventually, it stopped altogether.

PART TWO

ACHERON

Sing, O Muse, the rage of battles lost;

Doomed from Word, O Holiness Invok'd

The House of Death, with wailing souls subsumed.

The bodies brave and craven - carrion

For beasts of plane unearthly, planet strange.

The Will of God be done.

Begin, O Muse, with Hades' hall so filled

With Men awaiting Judgment, mortal-found;

And of the Warden, Freki, show us Truth:

For who shall guard the Guardian of Hell?

And who destroy Established Justice false?

CHAPTER TEN

Day and night didn't matter, where she was. She sat in a cave - very *Platonic*, she thought wryly - where the only light was orange and dim. A large gate, apparently unguarded, stood towards the

front of the cavern, but only darkness lay beyond it. A faint light, the size of a night-bug, occasionally shone in that darkness, but there came such a feeling of fear and horror from that light that none dared go near it.

It didn't take long for Niki to grow bored with her surroundings. The cave, while large, could not comfortably hold the number of dead people milling about inside it. One of the first things she'd done, once she'd come to terms with the fact that she was actually dead, had been to explore her new surroundings. Orion might have tormented her because of her limited view of the universe, but she was not stupid; merely uneducated. And even then, her lack of education did not extend to all things - just his brand of politics. She prided herself on being an amateur scientist.

There appeared to be no end to the cave. One could simply walk forever, if one so chose, but why would one want to? There was nothing back there. The ceiling remained a steady height, the dim light continued to shine from everywhere and nowhere, and the feeling of feeling nothing at all never went away.

One time, not too long after Niki arrived in Hell, she started walking. She crossed the river, which was neither wet nor cold, and began to walk. She could still hear the susurrus of whispered voices behind her, gently mingling with the slow trickle of the river. She thought that might have been a trick of the cave's acoustics, and so thought nothing of it. She walked until her feet would have begun to hurt, had she lived. She walked until her eyes blurred. Yet, when she turned around, the river sat right there, and the hordes of dead individuals sat on the other side.

She could not escape.

"What's beyond the mouth?" she asked an elderly lady once.

The lady sat on a stone bench, her back leaned against the wall, her eyes closed.

"Mouth of what?" she grumbled.

"The cave."

"Freki. If you're smart, you'll stay away."

"What is Freki?"

The woman chuckled and rose and walked away.

"You'll figure it out," the woman said as she wandered across the foyer to another, less occupied, bench.

And fuck you, too, Niki thought, crossing her arms. She waited as long as her patience would allow, but no one approached her. For a cave with so many souls, people certainly did their best to maintain their personal space.

With an exasperated sigh, she climbed to her feet and headed for the mouth of the cavern.

The night-bug light glowed out there, blinking in and out of existence. A steady, light breeze sounded across the opening, like a child blowing across the top of a full ale bottle. But other than that, nothing. There was nothing out there.

So why did her chest tighten, as though her torso was being slowly squeezed? Why did her breath come short and shallow, as though she were at risk of suffocating? What made her so damn afraid?

It takes balls to head straight towards what scares you, Orion had boasted.

Oh, honey, Niki thought, disgusted. If only you knew the shit I've faced.

And then, one day, it killed her.

Shaking her head, she pushed her physical discomforts aside and took her first step out of the cave.

Again, nothing happened. Nothing except her anxiety grew, grew so that she could no longer ignore it. She took deep breaths, mindful of counting the seconds in and out. Just keep breathing.

Another step. A ringing in her ears. Her breathing began to hurt. Her pulse pounded in her neck and fingertips, and she started to seriously fear that her heart might explode.

Idiot, you're already dead. What's going to happen, you're going to have a heart attack and die the Second Death? Don't be stupid, you know that's not how it works.

Especially not now.

Yet another step. The night-bug light grew larger, and didn't move. It had a dark spot in its center, she saw now, but she couldn't make out what it was. Night-bugs up on Terra Arcturus grew dark spots when they began to die. Niki hoped, irrationally, that that wasn't the fate for this creature. It was lonely, like her; because it had survived in this black, silent place, perhaps she could, too.

The wind grew louder, then softer, then louder again. She

felt nothing on her skin or through her hair, though. Well, she wouldn't, would she? She would never feel anything again.

Louder. Softer. Louder. Softer. An interruption, like a gun report. Louder, again.

What the -?

Oh. Shit.

Breathing.

Something was breathing.

Something very *large* was breathing.

The night-bug flickered out of existence, only to return immediately.

Not a night-bug.

An eye.

An eye with a cat-like slit in the center.

This thing wasn't at risk of dying; she was, though.

And Niki was suddenly very, very sure that she could die a second death. And a third, and a fourth.

She swallowed hard and backed up, always keeping her eye on the not-night-bug. Keep your breathing shallow, girl. Don't lose eye contact. Don't make any sudden moves. It's no Jaoni, but something worse. Don't make it mad.

Something bumped up against her back and she let out a startled, involuntary gasp. The night-bug's friends woke at the sound, and all eyes were focused on her.

All one, two, three, four... goddamn... a whole lot of eyes were focused on her.

She held her breath, but still only heard the one set of lungs, breathing immense amounts of air in and out. Did all these eyes belong to that one creature? Was this Freki? How many heads did one creature need, for God's sake?

Keeping her focus on the many-headed thing, she began to sidle along the wall, praying that the entrance was somewhere nearby. She'd only taken three steps outside, damn it. Where was the entrance? Where was safety?

The wall remained solid behind her. Her grasping hands felt nothing but crumbling sandstone. Niki risked a glance behind her and nearly wept. Nothing. There was no orange light, no susurrus of other human beings, no whisper of running water. Just her, the darkness, and a dozen or so glowing eyes.

"Please," she whispered. "Please."

She knew that her god could no longer hear her where she was. He didn't travel this far. But she felt braver now, even without his help.

The night-bugs rose slowly into the air, until they looked down at her from a great height. Heavy thuds, as of the footfalls of a giant beast, approached her.

Niki bit her lip to keep her teeth from chattering.

Who are you? the thing asked.

"N-Niki Alsecco," she responded.

Why have you left the Cave? it asked curiously. Niki was certain she could hear the capitalization of the word "cave."

"I wanted to know what you are," she said, looking up at the eyes. She no longer shook. It wasn't that she had suddenly become fearless; it was that she grew numb to the fear. She'd already died once - horribly, at that - how much worse could it be to be eaten alive by this... whatever it was?

I am Freki, Guardian of Hell.

"Against what?"

It is not my duty to keep beings out of Hell; it is my duty to keep beings in Hell.

"Show me your face," she demanded, somewhat recklessly. She felt certain that this creature was no Gorgon, prepared to turn her to stone. She just wanted to know. Better the enemy you know.

A brief light flared from the sky - well, what would have been the sky, were this place not what it was - and Niki found herself staring at an enormous beast, its head brushing the edge of nothingness, its legs thick enough to crush Nalagan without noticing. It really did have multiple heads, she noted clinically - nine, in fact. A holy number, if she dared to think that way, though nothing about this creature was holy.

The light flashed off now and she was left with a glaring after-image and the pale view of eighteen yellow eyes.

I hunger for human flesh. Frequently. Leave, and be spared. Your courage is most commendable.

Courage? She quickly stifled the hysterics threatening her, and she turned to leave. The entrance to the cave - or the Cave - sat there, as though it had never disappeared. She sidled along the wall, still keeping her gaze on those wavering eyes, until she felt the safety and fearlessness of the Cave behind her.

Be warned, Niki Alsecco, the thing growled, showing thousands of murderous teeth. It laid its many heads on its front paws and fixed all eighteen luminous eyes on her. *I feed often.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I had to commend Niki's courage, as well. I had never seen Freki before - heard many tales, from the Judges who'd spent time with the beast, but never seen it myself - and my still heart pounded painfully upon seeing it for the first time. Because I was Niki, as well as my nameless self, I knew her heart had pounded, as well. However, my first instinct, upon seeing it, was to run and hide. Hers was to confront it. Courage, indeed.

I pause to wonder what she meant by thinking her god "did not travel this far." Her god does not travel anywhere. He has not in many years.

I stop pacing in the middle of my living room, staring at the wall behind my couch. Could God-of-Old be in Hell? I had not seen Him...

Nobody knows what He looks like, of course. A Being as magnificent as that could not be looked upon by mortal eyes. It would surely lead to madness.

Does God-of-Old have a soul, like the creatures He created? When God dies, what afterlife does He go to? Is there one for deities? Did He create one for Himself, just in case He did not survive His Creation?

"Man and Woman were made in His image." So we were always taught. Was this similarity merely physical, or did it exist to the core of our Being? Where God-of-Old had eyes, so do we; where God-of-Old had a conscience and a soul, we do as well?

Except that I have not seen Him in all my time assisting the Judges.

The Son did not look god-like, either.

And there is merit in this thought. Perhaps, God-of-Old died, and went to Hell, because, clearly, He was not available to Judge His own Creations, much less Himself. And so He went through Hell, just like His Creations, and came before us, and was Judged - as a man.

I cannot take a deep breath. Could we have misJudged? If so, what would be the consequences of such a misstep? If God-of-Old were peacefully resting, as He would be if we Judged His life to have been well-lived, then He would ultimately cease to exist. And if He ceased to exist, it stands to reason that we, His Creation, would immediately follow suit.

But if He were still wandering, if we had misJudged, then... He would be doomed to wander for all eternity, wander a planet He did not even create. Powerless to do anything except curse us.

Powerless... that should be a comfort to me, but it is not.

The Creator is powerless before His Creation.

I shake my head and begin pacing again, willing myself to think of aught else.

While inside Niki's consciousness, I caught flashing glimpses of her slave, Jensa. I saw the empathy and devotion each had for the other, far beyond the usual roles of Master-Slave relationships. Her disjointed thoughts completed my own inadvertent research on the Nessians, who, really, are just as fascinating as humans. Just as lovingly made.

I collapse on the couch and draw a pen and pad of paper towards me. I begin to doodle, drawing various shapes, my eyes glazing over. I allow my mind to wander, and it naturally wanders to the beautifully plain brown planet floating in my window: to its uncertain history, its unsettling geological makeup, its recent invasions and wars. A planet utterly unearthly, yet so similar as to make me weep.

A knock sounds on my door, and I pause in my recollections. I rub my hand as I walk to answer the knock, and I think that, perhaps, an interruption is necessary. If I think too much about my disapproval of the early refugees, I may eventually speak of it. That would be...unfortunate.

Selene's Scribe brushes past me as I open the door. Her face is white - much paler than usual - and her eyes are red.

"What is it?" I ask, automatically moving to make tea. She sits on the couch, where I sat just moments before, but she does not notice the doodles on the table - including various medical drawings

of Nessian anatomy. I cannot move them without bringing attention to them, so I continue to boil water and hope that she does not grow curious.

It appears unlikely that she will do this, though. Something has disturbed her.

"Scribe!" I say, more sharply than I intended. "What has happened?"

She swallows and then whispers, "Selene has found out."

"Found out what?" I ask. I know the answer. I need only her confirmation.

"She has found out about the treason of Themis. She questioned me... vigorously. I was not able to tell her much, thank the Old One, but she was displeased by what she did find out. She is..." The Scribe stops speaking, unable to continue.

I do not need to hear anything further. Selene is going to the other Judges, and they will cast out Themis, cast her into Hell, which sits beneath the more mundane hell of humanity, where Niki waits.

"What about me?" I ask, voiceless.

The Scribe looks up at me and her eyes are wet. "You are just as culpable, my friend. They will, of course, give you a chance to defend yourself. But if you show your loyalty to Themis..."

"I will be cast out, as well." I take a deep breath.

I need to know that, should the worst happen, you will stand by me.

When I had made the vow, I did not know what she was involved with. When I learned, I separated myself from her, mentally at least. I made myself different. But neither she, nor the other Judges, knew that.

"What am I to do?" I whispered, sitting down quite suddenly.

"You must disavow your association with her," the Scribe says, fierce as a mother Nessian guarding -

No!

They are not my people.

I am human.

By the curse of God-of-Old, I am human.

May He protect my soul.

I still know not why Rhialt has killed Orion Andersen. I still know not why Rhialt seeks to destroy Freki. I know so little. But I am human. I must side with my species.

"I will disavow her."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The hell of this place, Niki thought, grinding her teeth, is that I can see the real world. It's right fucking there. But I can't touch it. I can't visit it. It's there to torment me.

She sat on a bench against a wall of the cavern, idly swinging her legs back and forth, watching the other souls from the corner of

her eyes. Here sat an old couple, holding hands and talking quietly; there lay an old man on the ground, covering his eyes with his arm and snoring. It was useless to try to start a conversation with one of the young souls - they were the angriest of everyone trapped here.

Most of the young souls were soldiers, but not anybody she knew. To be fair, Terra Arcturus was crawling with the bastards. Her family had been one of the first to inhabit the planet, some seventy-five years ago; she was considered a native, much like the Nessians. Born and raised there, doomed to die there.

She clenched her small hands into fists. It all would have been fine, if the soldiers could just have kept their goddamned opinions to themselves. But no, they couldn't leave well enough alone. They had to prove their dominance. Never mind the fact that it was by the grace of the Nessians that they were allowed to settle Terra Arcturus in the first place. Never mind the fact that the humans were the aggressors. Never mind the *fucking fact* that the Nessians had enough trouble of their own, without adding ungrateful, murderous houseguests to the list.

Leave it to the outsiders to go and fuck everything up. She despised and resented every bit of military presence she found in Nalagan.

And then she had fallen in love with a soldier. Had had thoughts of marrying him, having children with him, settling him down.

Her mother wept when Niki had introduced her to Orion. Her

father had refused to meet him at all. And Orion could tell that he wasn't welcome. She rather thought that hurt his feelings, which he then hid with a growing sense of bravado, which in turn hurt her. And so it began.

It ended with her bleeding to death on their living room floor.

She didn't know who killed her. The voice was familiar, of course - some ridiculous proportion of murder victims were acquainted with their murderers. She'd read that somewhere.

She knew the voice, but couldn't place it. The mask, her last fading vision, gave her no help. Wait, was it a mask? She was having trouble remembering. The mask wasn't frivolous, she was fairly certain. More like a...gas mask? Something that soldiers and scientists wore on planets with an unidentified atmospheric makeup, to keep them breathing.

She remembered the way her blood sprayed his mask with the first cut.

She remembered being held from behind, her arms pinned behind her back.

Sweet God, had there been *two* of them?

There must have been.

Jesus.

They asked her questions. All sorts of questions. Where do you go when you die? I don't know. And she didn't. She'd been so scared that she couldn't remember. They hit her. They hurt her.

And she still couldn't remember. Then they cut her. She began to pray, but she couldn't remember what she said. Prayer was second nature to her. She didn't care whom she prayed to - anyone who would end her pain.

She must have prayed to the right god, because the next few minutes, which were extremely painful, ended very quickly.

And now she was here.

The entrance to the Cave shimmered and a new soul stumbled in. He looked around, lost and confused. Most new souls were. Then he spotted her, and his face lit up.

His hair was different. His face had more lines, and his skin sat tight against his cheekbones. But it was he.

"Orion!"

She didn't remember flying across the chamber to him, but in the next moment, she was in his arms and he was shaking - was he laughing or crying? - and she grasped him as though he would disappear the second she let go and he mumbled something into her hair that she couldn't understand.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, worrying for a moment about *why* he was here. Well, clearly, he was dead. No need to worry any further about that. Couldn't change it, after all.

"I came to rescue you," he murmured into her hair.

"Rescue me?" she asked, pulling slightly away from him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can bring you back to the real world," he said. He

wore a ridiculous and proud smile, and she wondered - briefly, uncharitably - if he had perhaps overdosed his way into hell. Clearly, he wasn't right in the head.

"No, you can't," she said softly, and disengaged herself from his arms. "Come sit down."

He followed her, gazing around the room with a look of disbelief written on his face.

She sat down on her rock bench and, after a second's hesitation, he followed suit.

"I'm going to bring you to the real world again," he said stubbornly.

"Baby," she said, "you can't. You're dead."

Orion smiled triumphantly. "Actually, I'm not. This priest for the Nessian god told me about some seeds -"

"The junco seeds," Niki murmured.

Orion turned to stare at her. "How do you know about them?"

Niki shook her head, suddenly very weary. "It doesn't matter. I assume you followed his advice and ate the seeds."

"Well, yeah..." Orion said, looking uncertain for the first time. "It's going to wear off, so I need to kill Freki before that happens."

"Oh, love," Niki whispered, and began to weep.

"Hey, hey," Orion said, alarmed. "Don't do that. I'm going to fix it. See? I need to get Nægling and then I can kill him and

we can go back up to the real world and..."

"My love," she murmured, "it was all a lie. The junco seeds aren't psychoactives, they're mortifacients. They help you die."

"I'm not dead!" he said loudly, his voice echoing around the Cave. The old man sleeping on the floor snorted himself awake and looked over.

"Hush, love, yes, you are."

"But Ashi said -"

"Ashi lied to you. Rhialt has his own ends in mind, always."

"What purpose did I serve that bastard by dying?" Orion asked, his tone angry but his face resigned. Clearly, he believed her. She wondered if he blamed her.

Niki shook her head. She noticed that people were still staring, including the old man on the floor. It made her uncomfortable.

"I don't know."

"Well. Shit," Orion said, slumping down on the bench as though the strings holding him up had been cut.

"Yeah. Shit."

A shadow, really just a faint blurring of the faint light that surrounded the Cave, fell over them. Niki looked up.

"I'm sorry for waking you," she said politely.

"Nægling." The old man's fingers twisted in and around themselves restlessly. "You said Nægling."

"I did, yes," Orion said, giving him a wary glance. "What of it?"

"Nægling is the Killer," the old man muttered. "Nægling resurrects the dead. It is so! It is so!"

Orion and Niki exchanged a look, questioning the sanity of the old man.

"Do you know where Nægling is, old man?" Orion asked - quite patiently, Niki thought.

"Oh, sure!" The old man's face brightened. "Come with me!" And he toddled off.

With another glance at each other, Niki and Orion followed him.

"Acheron, Acheron, it rhymes with Nyx," the old man sang happily.

He led them to the river and knelt beside it.

"In here!" he announced.

Orion stepped to the bank and reached his hand in. Niki wondered what he thought of the lack of sensation. It didn't appear to bother him too much, and after a moment's determined search, he drew out a sword.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," Orion muttered.

The old man drew himself up straight and a clarity reached his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Gotta keep up appearances," he said quietly to Orion and

Niki.

"Appearances?" Niki shook her head against the buffeting sensation, that a million futures were colliding with her at once, that she was a Geiger-counter of possibilities.

"Them," he said, with a jerk of his head towards the other souls gathered in the Cave. "They think I'm the Senile Old Man. Gotta keep up appearances."

Orion just shook his head.

"And...why are you...you...with us?" Proper pronouns escaped her, just now.

"You know Nægling," the old man replied simply. "Do you have a plan?"

"Er, well, kill the beast, I guess."

The old man rolled his eyes. "Brilliant. Millions of years of evolution led to *this*." He snorted. "Do you even know the sort of beast you propose so blithely to slaughter?"

Orion shrugged, clearly uncomfortable, and said nothing.

Niki spoke up. "I do."

Orion blinked at her. "Well?"

"He's a wolf."

"And?"

"And?" Niki repeated, confused.

"Big wolf, small wolf, direwolf, or cub? Details are kind of important," he replied, irritated.

Niki cocked an eyebrow at him and paused before responding. "His size...it changes, depending on your perspective. At times, he's large enough to swallow the suns, but when you look back at him, he's no more than a spaniel. When I first saw him, I thought he could crush Nalagan with one paw, but thinking back on him, that seems unlikely. Also, he has nine heads," she added as an afterthought.

Orion grunted impatiently and turned to the Old Man. "Maybe you can explain more and babble less?"

Niki glared at him.

The Old Man shrugged. "She's right."

"Great, fine. I take it you have a better plan." It wasn't a question; it was an assertion of inevitability. Niki watched Orion with interest, to see how he reacted to this new alpha male.

"It takes skill and reconnoitering and intelligence. You can't just go up to Freki and stab him and bam, you're done. Got it, kid? You gotta to plan this out."

"Are you offering to help me?" Orion asked, disbelief writ large across his face.

The old man snorted again. "Of course."

"Oh."

"Who are you?" Niki asked, trying desperately to keep a grip on reality, which shifted and dodged her attempts with startling regularity.

"Pick a name," the old man said. "It's probably the right

one."

"Bob! Great to meet you," Orion said, holding out a hand to shake. "Let's get started."

Niki watched the two of them cross the river to the deserted shore on the other side, heads together, planning.

Men.

Fuck this.

"Wait!" she shouted and splashed after them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I cannot bear the look of her face, seared into my memory, accusing me of the treachery I know I committed. I sit in the library, which has been mostly abandoned these last sixty years, trying to avoid my own thoughts and emotions. My heart thuds, a heavy painful beat, like the galloping of large beasts of prey, like-

Freki.

I shake my head and peruse the dusty shelves, reading titles in the history section to keep myself from thinking dangerous thoughts.

The Iliad.

Poetics.

Cyclops.

Malleus Maleficarum.

The Holy Bible.

The Holy Qu'ran.

The Torah.

The Republic.

The Odyssey.

The Aeneiad.

The Shining.

American Gods.

The Raven.

The Thornbirds.

The Volsungasaga.

The Nibelungenlied.

The Edda, Prose.

The Edda, Poetic.

Le Morte d'Arthur.

Tao Te Ching.

A Brief History of Kanewaki and Her People.

I stop, staring at this book, this one of thousands. This might be the only Nessian book translated to Sapiens. This might be the Nessians' only attempt at connecting to the humans on, well, a very *human* level.

I hesitate to pull the book down from the shelf. Being caught reading this particular book would be ring a death knell on my

credibility as a human ally. I would be seen as siding with The Enemy, and would likely go the same way as Themis.

The pack of wolves return at that thought, and I bite my tongue to keep the bile from rising to the back of my throat. Sentenced to eternal wandering, in a place far beneath hell. Once upon a time, that place had been called Tartarus. Now, though, it is unnamed. If one does not name a fear, one can pretend that it does not exist.

The Tartarus of Old Earth held the worst of the Greeks who had been damned, as well as several Titans - huge proto-humans, lacking in mental agility, but making up for it with pure physical strength. They were nightmares in their own right.

I do not know what horrors this unnamed place holds now, but they must be terrible for the Judges to send one of their own there for the unspeakable crime of treason.

She can, of course, escape, if she is brave enough. She must outwit the creatures in that place and find her way to hell, where she will eventually be Judged in her own right. I do not know if she is brave enough, though.

The hell with it. I pull the book down and wipe the dust from its cover. The cover is plain, though the Nessians clearly tried to entice their human visitors by gilding the lettering. I look around, just to ensure I am alone.

I am not. Selene's Scribe walks towards me, relief coloring her face. Perhaps she has been searching for me.

"There you are," she says, slightly breathless. "The Judges

require - what are you doing?"

I have tucked the book into the pocket inside the wide bell-sleeve of my robe and am looking at the shelves with much more interest than I really feel.

"Have you noticed how so many of the great works of Old Earth being with the article 'the'?" I ask, blurting the first question that comes to mind.

She shakes her head quickly, disregarding the thought. "No. Why does it matter?"

"It just seems to me that humans have this urge to single people and events out as special. Humans want to feel special," I add quietly.

"That is good, truly, but the Judges - "

"There is no work called 'An Iliad' or 'A Raven.' These artists have picked out *specific* stories to relate, because, to the artist, they are the most important stories." I look her right in the eye. "Why? What makes these stories so special?"

"I am sure I do not know -"

"What part of *our* lives will the artists consider important enough to relate?" I continue, ruthlessly. "Any of it? None of it? When we are gone, will anyone remember us?"

She blinks at me. "What makes you think that you will not be around to relate the stories yourself?"

I simply stare at her. After a moment, she nods. "You see that even Judges can be Judged, and who are you compared to they?"

"Exactly. What if one day the Judges are feeling particularly rabid and they decide that *I* am a traitor?"

"Are you?"

"You tell me."

She puffs her cheeks out in exasperation. "Do you deny that Themis betrayed us? Betrayed our humans?"

"No, but it is a thin line. She sympathized with their god enough to assist him. What will be considered betrayal next? An interest in the Nessians? Compassion for their plight? Learning the intimate details of their history? What?"

"You speak nonsense," the Scribe says, but she sounds nervous. "The Judges -"

"Fuck the Judges," I say, suddenly angry. "They can bide their time."

"Scribe..." she says urgently, glancing around.

"Unless they call upon me to tell me that I have been elevated to the position of Judge, I am going to sit here and read my book." I look at her. "You can stay or go. I do not care."

Her eyes pass quickly from me to the bookshelf to my hands, which now hold the Nessian book.

"Do not do this foolish thing," she begs quietly. "You will come to the same end."

"Let them come," I say, and, settling down upon a worn cloth couch, open my book. I hear a brief sob and then nothing but silence for a long time.

When the Judges come for me, I go quietly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Do you ever feel like someone is watching you?" Niki asked Orion, as they sat arm-in-arm on the quiet side of the river.

"Every fucking day," he responded, stretching. "I figure it's a holdover from the war."

"I feel it, too, though," she said, twitching her shoulders as though someone were staring into her back. "I wasn't in the war."

"Well," Orion said lazily, laying down on the grass and pulling her down with him. "What does it feel like, exactly?"

Niki tapped her forehead impatiently with her fingers, eyes tightly closed, tucked comfortably into his chest. "It feels like...okay. It's like this: I'm just puttering around, doing my own thing, listening to you and Bob or thinking about Old Earth or *whatever*, all right? And then there will be this one random thought that intrudes, and *that thought was never mine*. Somebody else had that thought and put it in my head. It's like...there's someone else in there."

Orion sighed and rolled up onto one elbow, looking at her seriously. "Are you saying you're hearing voices?"

"No! Not quite. It's like -"

<<*She can sense me*>>

"Yes, exactly!" she said triumphantly, looking at him.

Orion gave her a confused look. "Exactly, what?"

"Exactly, I can sense him."

"Him, who?"

"The person in my head."

"It's a 'he,' is it?" Orion said, aiming for levity; his concern was apparent on his face, though.

"Have I ever used the word 'levity' around you?" Niki demanded.

Orion shook his head slowly. "No...do you even know what it means?"

"If I had to guess by the context, it means humor," she said. "But that's exactly my point. Why would the word 'levity' suddenly pop into my head?"

"I...don't know. What do you mean by context, though?" Orion's brow drew down to an alarming angle. Clearly, he thought she was mad.

"I'm not mad," she insisted. "Look, when I was just talking to you a minute ago, you made some smart-ass comment, and the thought popped into my head that you were seriously concerned about my mental well-being, but you were trying to cover it with 'levity.'"

"Tell me more about this guy in your head," Orion said instead.

She puffed out her cheeks in thought, then stopped as she caught herself doing it. "I don't know how to explain it," she said

slowly. "For the longest time, when I was down here...okay, for example, once, during the first several days here, I left the Cave, and yes, it's a capital C, to find out what Freki was."

"You did *what*?" Orion gasped.

"Listen to me, love," she said urgently. "That's not the point. The point is the narration of what was going on in my head - I've never done that before, so it couldn't have been me."

"What kind of narration?" he asked.

"Christ. Let me think."

Several moments passed as Orion watched Niki think. It couldn't be, could it? Had she gone mad, being trapped down here? Could he truly love a madwoman? He scrutinized her face, trying to find any telltale signs of psychosis, but he could see nothing. Personally, he'd rather be dead than mad, and it didn't seem fair that his future might involve both.

"Jesus," he gasped. "Like that?"

"Like what?"

"I just...I was watching you and something in my head said...well...that I'd rather be dead than mad."

"Would you?"

"Well, yes, but I never actually considered it until that part of my mind said that."

"Who the hell are you?" Niki demands of the empty Cave wall, climbing angrily to her feet.

Silence.

"Fuck that. You're not silent. Who the hell are you?"

<<I am a Scribe. I have been sentenced to Tartarus>>

"Scribe? Tartarus?" Orion demands. "Are you with that post-pisser, Rhialt?"

<<I write the histories of the Judges and some humans. Like you>>

"Why us?" Niki asks, slowly sitting down again. "Stop that, will you? I'm perfectly aware of what I'm doing."

"I can hear him, too," Orion mutters. "Jesus Christ, how long have you been there?"

<<I have been watching you, Orion, since you arrived on Terra Arcturus. I have only recently been sent to watch you, Niki>>

"Why?"

<<Rhialt>>

Niki gasps and Orion

<<I apologize. I am used to dictating what I sense>>

"No problem," Niki says weakly.

<<What does his name mean to you, Niki>>

"I thought you could figure it out while I was praying," she says.

"What?" Orion asks. "What the hell is going on?"

"I..."

"Pray? To whom? God is dead, Niki."

There is a brief pause.

"Rhialt," she says quietly.

"What about him?"

<<I believe you understand now, Orion. I do>>

"Holy shit," he whispers, the truth dawning on him. "No. You..."

<<It is true. What I am not certain of is why Niki kept it a secret>>

Niki laughs. "As though I could be open about it. I was surrounded by xenophobes."

<<One of whom killed you>>

"Do you know who it was, Scribe?" Orion demands.

<<I do not. I was not watching Niki when it happened; I have only been with her since she arrived in Hell>>

"Do you know who it was?" Orion asks Niki sharply. "Damn it, that was not sharp."

"I do not," Niki whispers.

Orion sits down suddenly.

<<Orion, there are ways around this. We can>>

"Why the hell are you watching us, anyway?"

<<My Judge, Themis, agreed to assist Rhialt in his quest for justice for his people>>

"Justice? What do you mean, *justice*?" Orion asks, grinding his teeth. "What, can you hear my thoughts, too? Goddamn right, I'm grinding my teeth. Since you know so fucking much, what sort of 'justice' do they need? Answer me!"

"Please, not this argument again," Niki whispers, nearly in tears. "Not again."

<<I must remain silent on that point, until we can meet in person>>

"Why the fuck are you laughing?" Orion shouts.

<<Because none of us is a corporeal being anymore. We cannot meet in person, as matters stand>>

"Yeah, that's a real hoot right there."

"Where will we find you, Scribe?" Niki asks, wiping her eyes.

<<I am being sent to Tartarus, or its equivalent, which exists beneath Hell. Once I am free from there, I will find you in hell. We must speak>>

"You'd better be ready to explain yourself. Are you going to get out of our damned heads?" Orion asks, furious.

<<Of necessity, yes. Orion, this is vital: do not kill Freki until I meet with you. Absolutely avoid it>>

"Why the hell should I?" he seethes. "What does that even mean, seethe?" He clenched and unclenched his fists. "Stop that! Look, asshole, I'm here for Niki. Once Bob is ready -"

<<Yes, Bob. I have an idea of what he truly is>>

"Not a senile old man."

<<Indeed. Orion, I will be in Hell in a matter of days. Do not, I repeat, do not kill Freki until I am able to meet with you>>

"I need a damn good reason why not, right about now."

<<Rhialt has a plan that I am attempting to work out. I need just a few more days. Please, give me that>>

"In exchange for what?"

<<My silence in your mind>>

Orion ground his teeth, and spat. "Fine. Three days. That's it. Hear me? Three fucking days. Am I clear?"

<<I understand>>

"Fine, then get the hell out of here. Give us some peace."

Niki nods, weeping silently, her face buried in her hands.

<<Three days. Goodbye>>

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

If I am honest with myself, I am terrified. Tartarus is a place of punishment so severe that the Judges have seldom used it when Judging the humans. It is said to be inhabited by monsters of every variety, and that the only way to escape...

Well, we would see the truth of matters in mere moments, would we not?

In front of the remaining Judges, I open the door between

worlds and step through, affecting bravery. I will not let them know how scared I am.

I hear one of the Judges - who, I do not know - say, "May the beasts of Hell feast on your corpse."

That is the last thing I hear for a long time.

The door opens up on a blackness so complete that the light from the establishment does not touch it. I walk in and feel, rather than hear, the door behind me close and disappear. With nowhere to turn, I continue forward, slowly.

The silence surrounding me is as thick as the darkness. I cannot hear even the ringing in my ears that accompanies mundane silence. *This is death*, I think. *This is the silence of infinity*.

I hold my hands in front of me, lest I run headfirst into an obstacle. But as far as I can tell, Tartarus is a vast waste, empty of company monstrous and otherwise.

I walk forward for a very long time and encounter nothing. For a panicked moment, I worry that I am not moving at all, like Niki in hell. Eventually, though, a dim red light appears on the horizon. Eager, and now able to see the overwhelming emptiness of the landscape surrounding me, I hurry forward.

The light is reflected magma, running in a wide river, which slices the landscape in twain. On this side sit glassy basaltic rocks, sharp enough to cut my hands when I lean against them. On the opposite side sit glassy basaltic rocks, with water flowing down them in a small waterfall. The water turns to steam when it hits the magma, and the resulting sulfuric acid burns my eyes.

I need not approach the river to feel the heat. I need no further evidence that I can feel pain here, in this Hell beneath hell. I do not know what would happen if I were to die here, immolating in a torrent of molten rock, or suffocating on the fumes. Carefully, to avoid reinjuring myself on the glassy rocks, I step back from the river and begin to walk alongside it.

I briefly wonder what has become of Themis, before returning to the problem at hand.

There will be no bridge. Why would there be? To have assistance would defeat the purpose of the punishment. Yet I must cross this river. Where there is water, there must be a source, and that source may mean the exit is nearby - my escape. In the old Greek stories, to get to Hades, the dead traveled across the river Acheron in the boat of Charon, whose fees were paid by the mourners of the recently deceased in the form of coins on their eyelids. I see no boats, no bridges, indeed, nothing except the red glow of the river.

Shaking my head, I turn upstream and begin to walk. I can still hear naught, though I can feel the steam from the water disappearing behind me. Surely, that should make a hissing sound. But no, silence is my only companion. I hope that my deafness is only shock.

As I clamber up the side of the depression left by the river, I feel it. An earthquake. Some subtle shifting of the ground. It continues for several moments before finally subsiding. I pick the glass shards from my palms and continue.

My feet slide on the myriad tiny rocks. I curse loudly and fluently, though of course, I hear nothing. It feels good, so I continue, reveling in the action, silent to me though it is.

The rumbling starts again and I stop dead, suddenly nervous, recalling the creatures that had nearly devoured Orion. Surely, to say something was "from Hell" does not actually mean from *hell*? Surely, they are just subterranean creatures? Surely...surely...

The rumbling stops and I let out a deep breath. The beasts that Orion saw were not mythological in nature; in fact, they were very alien, and were most likely original inhabitants of Terra Arcturus. There is no way they can be part of the very Earth-based Tartarus. Right? Right. Stop panicking, you fool.

I start walking again, much more slowly this time, peering into the deep darkness that surrounds me, trying to see what makes the ground heave so. But the river blinds me and all else is emptiness. If things keep on this way, I will not see the monster making the earth shake until I run into it. I wipe the sweat from my face and keep walking.

Nothing happens for a long time. The river seems endless, stretching onward to either horizon, gurgling in its slow, quiet way.

Gurgling. I stop, just to make certain that...yes. I can hear it. I can hear it! My hearing has returned, thanks be to...well...

So overjoyed am I at the return of sound that I do not notice the weeping and groaning for several minutes. A roar of anguish

rips the dense air apart and the ground heaves beneath my feet, throwing me onto razor sharp rocks.

"Damn it!" I hiss, lying flat to ride out this latest bout of shaking. I can feel tiny slices in my abdomen and my legs and my much-abused hands. Soon, the ground quiets.

The ground quiets, but the air does not. Agonized weeping comes from just ahead of me, and a soft susurrus of compassionate whispers accompanies it.

"They cannot..." the voice groans. I cannot hear the rest of the conversation from where I stand and so I walk forward.

I crest a small hill and come upon a peculiar sight that fills me with pity. Tied between three rocks lies a man, writhing in pain, and a woman who holds a bowl over his face. Something, from far above us near the ceiling of this Hell, drips into the bowl. The bowl, I see, is nearly full.

"Please, my love," the man moans. "Do not remove the bowl."

"It will splash on your face, my heart. I must."

The man sobs and the woman stands up and runs to the nearby river, dumping the contents into its magma flow, eliciting a sinister hiss. The dripping from the ceiling lands on the man's unprotected face and he screams and pulls at his fetters and the earth shakes once more. The woman, stumbling as she rushes back to the man, falls to her knees at his head and thrusts the bowl over his face. The earth quiets.

"May I help somehow?" I ask, climbing to my feet. The woman

gasps and spins around to face me. The man does not appear to notice.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" she demands.

"I am a Scribe to the Judges," I say. "I have been condemned to this place for assisting the god Rhialt. Who are you? Where is this?"

The woman darts a glance at the man, whose eyes are tightly shut.

"My love," she whispers. "Someone has come to help."

The man laughs, then coughs deep in his chest. "Help! Ha. Is this stranger Svartalfen? Does he possess the magic of the Muspels? I thought not."

"I am a mere human," I say, crouching near his head, "and perhaps I cannot remove your fetters, but perhaps I can kill what causes you pain."

The man shifts, tugging gently at his fetters, and the earth rumbles once more.

"You have no notion who I am, yet you would help me?" the man asks, squinting one eye at me.

"I would, yes."

"And do you wish to know who I am?"

"It will make no difference in whether I will help you."

The man chuckles and clears his throat painfully. "I am called Loki or Loptr or Hvedrungr, son of the Jotunn Farbauti,

foster-brother to the one who tied me here and left me to suffer. This good woman is my wife, Sigyn, goddess of the Æsir and bearer of my children, whose remains you see binding me."

I stare at him. He answered my question, yet I remain ignorant.

"What cruel brother placed you in this hell?" I ask, striving for the cadence of his own speech. Perhaps it will make communication easier.

"It is he who is called Oðin One-Eye, All-Father of the Æsir. This is not Hel," he adds.

"No?" I ask. I am hardly paying attention, as I stare at the ceiling, trying to see what drips onto this man's face.

"No," he grunts. "Hel is peaceful, full of the dead. Only men go to Hel when they die, and I am no man. No, this must be Muspelheim."

"Must it?" I murmur. It seems that there is a rope hanging from the ceiling. Has it perhaps accumulated moisture from the air and now drips sulfuric acid on his face?

"Yes, it must. Muspelheim holds the realm of fire. I need no further proof than the river of fire which flows behind me."

"I see." There is nothing nearby on which to climb to cut down this rope, and the ceiling is much too high for me to reach by myself.

"He was unjustly punished, my lord," the woman - Sigyn? - says to me.

"Was he?" I lack tools with which to snag the rope, as well. I am growing frustrated and return to the conversation at hand.

"What was he punished for?"

"For the death of the god Baldr, whose end he engineered through the blind god, Hodr. My husband, he does what is necessary to bring about change, but Baldr...Baldr was well-loved." She sniffs in contempt.

I shake my head, utterly lost. "There is no god but God-of-Old, who by His own hand exists no longer."

It is their turn to stare. "The Æsir and Vanir number in the hundreds, my lord," the woman whispers.

"Are you Nessian gods?" I ask, figuring it out. No wonder I have never heard of them, if they belong to Rhialt's pantheon.

"Nessian?" Sigyn and Loki exchanged a baffled glance, and I can hear their thoughts quite plainly: *This man is mad.*

"You are not the gods of Terra Arcturus?" I ask, suddenly hopeless.

Loki's lined face brightens. "We are the gods of Asgard, who helped to build the realm of Miðgard from the corpse of the giant Ymir. We interact with the men of Miðgard, as suits our needs. Is your land, this Terra Arcturus, part of Miðgard?"

I shake my head. I do not know. But it does not matter whether these gods are gods of humans or of Nessians or of an entirely unheard of race of aliens. This god is still in pain and I have still promised to help him.

"Do you know what is dripping from the ceiling?" I ask.

"Venom from a snake that hangs suspended there," Sigyn says softly.

A snake. Not a rope. Idiot.

"What are the names of your followers? From which lands do they hail?" I ask suddenly.

"Their lands hold many names. Among these stands Sverige."

Sverige. I sit back on my haunches and think quickly. What country on Old Earth would have a name like that? Was it a country on Old Earth at all? Nothing comes to mind. I do not know who these gods are, and because of that, I do not know where I am, and that is a thought that makes me want to weep. I am not in Tartarus.

Where have the Judges sent me?

"I will help you," I say again. "I must find something with which to kill the snake. I will be back."

Loki or Loptr or Hvedrungr smiles lopsidedly and says, "But of course. I will be here."

I stumble to my feet and begin to run, the same direction I was heading before I came upon the two unfortunate gods. Soon, his cries fade in the distance and I am left with only the sound of my own heavy breathing.

The landscape grows hilly as I run and soon I stop, gasping for air. As I stand there, my hands on my knees, I hear singing, as of a large group of people. It is a crude song, and as I get closer, I can make out the lyrics.

My brother lies over the river

My sister lies over the sea

My father lay over my mother

And that is how I came to be!

The singers are some distance away, a trick of the acoustics of this cave, but I finally find a large party of drunken men and women, celebrating along the bank of the river.

"Hail!" one of them shouts upon seeing me. "Join us!"

I nod and, walking forward, accept a wooden cup of whatever it is they are drinking. It tastes of apples and alcohol.

"Where have you come from?" a ruddy-faced man asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulder - to keep his balance, I suspect.

"Old Earth, originally. The establishment of the Judges, most recently."

The man belches and turns to his peers. "This one belongs to the Judges!"

Several people laugh and someone from the crowd shouts, "Those fools who took over for Yahweh?"

Hissing sounds in the crowd and the person who shouted mumbles an apology.

"It is so," I say. "Who are you?"

The crowd bursts into laughter and cups are refilled.

"I am Belial!"

"And I am Mammon!"

"Beelzebub!"

"Mulciber!"

"Moloch!"

"Sin!"

"And I am Satan."

This last voice silences the joviality. The crowd parts and through it walks a tall man, handsomely nondescript.

"What brings you to my festivities?" Satan asks me.

"There are gods, back there," I say, pointing. "They need help."

"Gods?" Satan muses. "Surely, you mean angels."

"No, I mean *gods*. Of...well...I don't really know who. I think they're human gods, though."

"What interest have I in helping these...*gods*?" Satan asks, smiling at me.

I answer before I know what I am saying. "I have been told that there is a path from this place to the realm of the living. These gods and I are undertaking that journey and if you assist us, we would welcome your company."

Lies, all of it lies. Who am I to try to deceive the Deceiver? What will stop him from throwing me into the river and resuming his party?

But he stares at me, rubbing his hands. Finally, he says, "I will assist you. What manner of trouble are these *gods* in?"

I explain the nature of the problem and he chuckles. "This is an easy fix. Snakes are gullible creatures, naïve, if you will. Moloch! An apple!"

One of the demons brings forth an apple and places it in Satan's hand.

"Let us go," Satan says, motioning for me to lead.

I had thought that only Satan would accompany me, but his entire legion of demons follows behind me, making crude jokes and laughing very loudly. The closer we get to the bound god, though, the more we can hear his cries of anguish and the more the ground shakes.

"Surely, he is a fearsome god," one of the demons - Belial? - snorts.

"You cannot make the ground shake," Sin points out.

We crest the final hill and come upon Loki, temporarily without Sigyn, screaming obscenities that only he can understand.

"What nature of beast is this?" Satan whispers, stopping well short of the weeping god.

"He is a god," I say, grabbing his elbow and dragging him forward.

Sigyn runs back and replaces the bowl over her beloved's face.

"What is this?" she asks, staring at Satan. "What manner of creature have you brought here?"

"I am Satan," he replies, as though this should answer the question.

It does not.

"And I am Sigyn, wife of Loki. What manner of creature are you?"

Satan's eyes widen in surprise. "Why, I am the lord of Hell."

"Hel is the ruler of Hel," Loki mutters. "No matter. Will you assist me?"

"Ah, yes."

Satan stands over Loki's prostrate body and raises the apple towards the ceiling. Hissing and rattling, the snake slowly descends from its perch and latches on to the apple. With a practiced grab, Satan snatches the snake and wraps it around his neck.

"By all the gods..." Loki weeps.

"Thank you," Sigyn whispers, eyes closed in weary relief.

"Thank you."

Satan smiles a fox grin. "It is no trouble. What must we do about your fetters, though? Surely you cannot leave here without removing them?"

"Leave here?" Loki asks, shocked. "Why should I do such a thing?"

"The end of the world is upon us," I murmur, mostly to myself. And then the truth of the matter becomes plain.

"The end of the world is upon us!" I say again, more loudly. "He seeks to bring about chaos, by separating the Judges. He seeks Justice by his own hands!"

"Chaos?" Loki says, looking interested. "I am adept at creating chaos."

"Chaos?" Satan repeats. "I revel in chaos."

"Chaos," I say firmly. "The god Rhialt seeks chaos, and we must give it to him."

"Why?" asks Beelzebub, wary. "What is it to us what this *god* wants?"

I smile, pleased at finally having found an answer. Rhialt sought chaos and confusion so that he could perfect his plans for Justice within it.

That was one possible outcome. There was yet another.

"If we can create Chaos, we can recreate the world in our image."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It does not take very long for my assembled gods and demons to begin to question both my sanity and my leadership skills. And what is worse, I know I cannot explain to them *how* I know how to escape, because they know nothing outside themselves.

So, instead, to take their minds off the interminable journey and, perhaps, to prevent them from murdering me where I stand, I ask them how souls arrive in Hell. Laid-back philosophical discussions have yet to lead to bloodbaths. "Laid-back" being the key phrase, of course.

Satan snorts. "The souls practically bring themselves here. The Old Dead Bastard set a lot of rules on the prize of Heaven, and

nobody could meet it, really. A wink here, a nudge there, and they're mine."

He looks back over his shoulder at his assembled demons. "I don't think they mind it too much."

Murmurs of agreement and a single raucous whoop of drunkenness.

"Do you not know the nine worlds, human?" Loki asks quietly, leading Sigyn along the riverbank.

"I am afraid that I do not."

He sighs and mutters something to the effect of, "To witness such days."

"I would be glad to learn, though," I add.

He chuckles and says, "It is very simple. In the boughs of the great tree Yggdrasil sit nine worlds. They are Svartalfheim, of the dwarves; Alfheim, of the elves; Miðgard, of men; Muspelheim, which you see surrounding us; Niflheim, of the Ice Giants; Jotunnheim, from whence I come; Vanaheim, of the Vanir, who are not the Æsir; Helheim, of the inglorious dead; and Asgard, of the gods."

"What does it mean, 'inglorious dead'?" I ask, curious. The Judges had never used such terminology; dead was dead, so far as they were concerned.

Loki shoots me a dirty glance and rolls his eyes towards his wife, who shakes her head in dismay.

"It means, fool," he says, "one who does not die well."

I laugh to annoy him, if I am going to be honest. His answers

are not answers; they shed no light on the conversation.

"Dead is dead," I say, parroting the Judges' stance.

"You are a fool," Sigyn hisses. "Dead is not dead. There are the dead who go to Helheim, to wither away in obscurity, and there are the dead who go to Valhalla or Folkvangr, to prepare for Ragnarok. Know you nothing?"

"Apparently."

"How did you die, then, man?" Loki asks, sliding on the rocks. Sigyn catches his arm and he smiles at her.

"Illness. Plague, to be precise."

"Ah," he says, nodding.

"Did you not think to sacrifice to Freyja?" Sigyn asks, disapprovingly. "She is a great healer."

I breathe in deeply through my nose and, once I am calm, answer. "To be fair, madam, I do not know who Freyja is. I do not know who you are."

"Then you deserve to rot in obscurity," she observes, "because Freyja is the greatest of goddesses."

I simply shake my head.

"What are we searching for?" Satan asks, sidling up alongside me. "Or for whom?"

"We are searching for a boat across this river. According to the legends with which I am familiar -" I raise my voice for Sigyn's benefit - "there will be a ferry across the river which will lead us

back to the realm of the living. Well, the not-quite-so-dead."

"And what do your *legends* call this river?" Sin asks from behind me, not quite sneering.

"They call it the River Acheron," I answer calmly. "The ferryman is Charon."

"Sounds pagan to me," mutters one of the demons - Mulciber? I cannot tell.

"Well, it is."

Startled murmurs from the Hellish throng.

"What means this thing, 'pagan'?" Loki asks, bemused.

"It means to believe in false gods," Satan says quietly.

I stare at him. This man - well, angel, really - fought to bring down the one god with whom he disagreed, and likely celebrated that god's death. And now he criticizes belief in false gods?

I say as much to him.

"It is one thing to rail against what exists, because it is not the right or just path," he explains. "It is another thing entirely, a foolish thing, to deny that what exists *does* exist. I am real, am I not? I stand before you, as real as this river. There is one who created me, and though he was unjust, he was the only true god. I know this. All other gods are imitations, and poor ones, at that."

"Be cautious with your words, human," Sigyn hisses.

"I am no human," Satan replies, glaring at the goddess.

"You are certainly no god."

"Neither are you."

Loki stands up straighter and turns to face Satan. "We are Æsir, gods to the mortals, who worship us. No man would worship you. To say that we are not gods is to cast aspersions on the whole of reality, which is the truly foolish thing."

I hasten to interrupt. "I think there are entire civilizations' worth of pantheons that we do not know. That does not make them less real, or less powerful. It simply makes them unknown."

Satan barks laughter. "And what is our goal? Ruling the world?"

"Not quite," I say. "We must free the dead so that a foreign god cannot control our humans. Because they are *our* humans, whether they know of our existence or not." I do not add that, perhaps, they are *not* Loki's and Sigyn's humans, but they make no sounds of disagreement, so I continue.

"We cannot let them fall into the hands of an alien god who would enslave or destroy them. It is our duty as deities to aid them now, and fight amongst ourselves later."

I pause, taken aback at my own words. I am no deity, no more than the Judges are. Yet I have just included myself in the same company as these, well, *gods*. Hubris kills; fortunately, I am already dead.

"And what is the plan once we have caused sufficient chaos to

distract this other god?" Loki asks, stopping to stare up the river. There is no ferry in sight and it seems like walking is taking us nowhere very quickly.

I shake my head. "I do not know. Truly. But calm heads will prevail, and we must continue searching for Charon."

"You say that this is the River Acheron," says Loki, "but you are mistaken. It is clearly the River Ifing, whose bridge Great Thor protects from the sons of Svarang. We need not search for a ferry that does not exist; we must merely find the bridge."

I sigh. It does not matter what the river is called, whose mythology it belongs to, or how we cross it. In the interest of keeping peace, though, I do not disagree.

"Lead on," I say instead.

"I will travel faster on four legs," Loki says. He kisses Sigyn and walks ahead a short way.

"What does he -" I begin.

"Watch," Sigyn murmurs.

And I watch in horror, in fascination, as Loki crouches close to the ground, his eyes closed in concentration. His hair, long already, grows longer, and his face protrudes. His eyes slide to either side of his head and his trunk grows thicker. His digits disappear and are replaced by hooves, while his appendages simultaneously lengthen and grow thinner. And then, where once stood a god, now stands a horse.

"Safe travels, my love," Sigyn calls, and finds a seat on a

nearby rock.

At a loss, I follow her example. After much grumbling, so do Satan and his assembled demons. And we wait.

Sigyn hears the hoof-beats before we do and, putting her weaving back inside the basket she carries, she stands and faces the direction in which Loki departed.

Loki picks his way carefully over the strewn rocks and makes his way to Sigyn's side, where he nuzzles her. She smiles and strokes his mane.

"He has found it," she says, turning her attention to us. "We shall follow him to the bridge, which will lead us back to the land of Miðgard."

"We shall, shall we?" sneers one of the demons.

"Hush," Satan says, still staring at the transformed god. I can see calculations dancing in his eyes, but I know not the tune. I cannot worry about that now.

Sigyn, with surprising skill, climbs atop her husband, and the pair leads the way down the riverbank. Shaking my head in wonder, I follow. I know that Satan and his horde will follow, as well. This place is dull, compared to what awaits them.

It is no little journey, but we exist in a place outside of time, and so no time at all passes before we arrive at the promised bridge.

It is built of granite, or so it appears, and gleams sickly in

the orange light of the river. The other side appears identical to the side on which we stand, but Sigyn looks on the bridge with such an expression of ecstasy that I wonder if, maybe, it is all an illusion.

With no hesitation, Loki, bearing his wife upon his back, begins to cross the bridge. I look over my shoulder at Satan, who is glowering at the bridge, and, shrugging, I follow the two gods.

"This was not here before," Satan hisses, catching up to me. "I know this place better than anyone. This bridge is false, a trick of this false god. It will collapse at any moment."

I shake my head. "I think not. I think it did not exist for you, but that it is real for these gods, and therefore it now exists in this place."

I look over the river and I see a man standing beside a wooden boat, implausibly whole, distinctly lacking in flames. I chuckle, awed, and raise a hand in greeting. The man, who stares at us without expression, raises his hand also and then turns away. The next moment, he is in the boat, crossing the river alongside us.

"The thing is," I say, walking once more, "it does not matter what this river is called. Is it Acheron, Ifing, Tigris or Euphrates? Is it something else altogether? Does the river actually exist or are we creating it in our minds right now, just as this bridge exists because Loki and Sigyn believe it does? What about your demons? What if you are truly alone and they exist because you stubbornly will them into life?"

"Nothing exists except as we create it. But the Nessian god

poses a real threat to our humans. We did not create Terra Arcturus and perhaps no one did. Not God-of-Old, not Rhialt. Perhaps physics created it and biology peopled it and those people created the gods who ruled over it. Who can say? Reality is a spider web, and consciousness is the spider patiently awaiting its dinner. We simply do what we can to exert control over the reality we face, and the reality we face right now is the approaching extinction of our humans."

Satan stops and watches the boat cross the river, and sighs.

"Then lead on," he says quietly.

I do not hear the footsteps of the demons behind us anymore and I know, without turning, that they never existed in the first place.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It is an illusion, after all. The land on the other side of the bridge is green and cool and everything the Hell beneath hell was not. I see no Great Thor, but I do see an inconspicuous door, left ajar, light beaming through the crack. Satan glances behind him at the river, then gazes at the door, thoughtfully. Loki, human once more, grasps Sigyn's hand and does the same.

I hear a muffled thump and turn to find the ferryman climbing out of his little boat. He strides across the high grass, his eyes on me. I wonder briefly, and a little uneasily, if he cannot see the other gods who stand with me.

"A great battle approaches," the man says without preamble. I cannot see his face; the hood of his cloak is pulled up over his head, hiding it in shadows. His voice is low, gravelly, even, and reminds me of a bullfrog's croak.

"I know," I say.

"You will need assistance."

"Yes," I say, gesturing to Loki, Sigyn, and Satan. "These three have offered to help."

The man turns his head to stare at the three gods. "Who are you?" he demands.

"I am Loki, or Loptr, or Hvedrungr, son of the Jotunn Farbauti. This is my faithful wife, Sigyn, whose name means 'ever true.'"

"I'm Satan," the devil says, holding out his hand to shake.

The man just looks at him. At last, it seems like he reaches a decision and raises skeletal hands to remove the hood from his head. A skull stares at the gods with gaping eye sockets.

"I am Charon, the Ferryman."

Satan looks at me. "So you were right."

"About some things." I turn to Charon. "You said you would aid us. How?"

"Where did you find these creatures?"

"Here. Well, there. Across the river, I mean."

"To whom do they belong?"

"Er, well, that is a difficult question to answer."

"We are our own people," Satan responds coldly.

Charon ignores him, his eye sockets glaring at me.

"They are old gods, much as my gods are. Loki and Sigyn are from the far North, and Satan is of the Abrahamics," he says. "I am not a fool, human. Who is their leader? Surely such miscreants as these are not the leaders of their pantheons."

"Ah, well, yes. Erm, Satan's leader is, well, dead. Suicide, you see. And Loki is not on the, er, best of terms with his leader, seeing as how his leader imprisoned him here and tortured him."

Charon snorts. "So this is your great army, human? Three outcasts? You will never succeed."

"All we seek to do is create enough chaos that Rhialt cannot win."

"Kaos. I know her well. It would be a benefit to have her and her daughters aid you, yes?"

"Er...excuse me?" I am certain I have misunderstood. That, or I am not nearly as familiar with other deities as I once thought.

Charon sighs impatiently. "Kaos. The primeval goddess, who creates the air we breathe. Her daughters, Nyx, Erebus, Aither, and Hemera, who control -"

"Night, Darkness, Light, and Day," Satan interjects. "Yes, that would be most provident."

"Surely, you cannot possibly mean that you believe goddesses control the available light in a room?" I ask, incredulous. "Surely

you know about stars and albedo and photons? Science?"

Satan smiles, a tad ruefully. "Just because science can explain it does not mean that the gods do not control it. I have been blamed for millennia for things that have a perfectly suitable *scientific* explanation - chemical imbalances in the brain, earthquakes, Chevsky-Jones. And who is to say that they are wrong to blame me?"

I spin to face Loki. "And you? What does your kind believe about evil and disturbance?"

Loki smiles wolfishly. I can almost see the pointed incisors. "I am the creator of evil and disturbance, so far as my kin are concerned."

Sigyn frowns as she looks at him. "You are not evil, my love. You are the creator of necessary change."

"And disturbance?" he says, grinning down at her.

"Well..."

"Boredom does not suit me," Loki says, turning to me. "I create...situations, and then I solve them. Sometimes, the gods do not find my creations as entertaining as I do."

I chuckle. "Tell me some stories while we walk."

I started towards the door in the wall, which has not seemed to get much closer the more I have walked. Loki hurries to catch up to me.

"There is the tale of the giant whom the gods hired to build a fortress. In return, the giant asked for the hand of the goddess

Freyja, as well as the sun and the moon. The gods did not want to pay this price, and so they asked for my assistance. So I, in turn, changed myself into a mare, to draw off the giant's horse, Svaðilfari, who was his only aid. The giant did not complete the work in time and so was not paid. I subsequently gave birth to the All-Father's horse, Sleipnir."

"And whose idea was it to pay the giant with a goddess and the sun and the moon?" I wonder.

"Well...it was mine," Loki admits. "As I said, boredom does not suit me."

I shake my head, bemused. Then a thought occurs to me.

"How many deities live in this place?" I ask Charon, who is walking steadily towards the door that approaches most slowly. A trick of the light, perhaps. Or a trick of Hell. Either way, I am beginning to grow impatient.

"Many and more," Charon responds. "Deities from around the world. Greek and Norse and Christian and Babylonian and Egyptian and East Asian. They come here because they do not find an easy life above."

"Will they help us?"

Charon shook his head. "I do not know. In order to ask, we would need to find them, and you have seen yourself how very large this place is."

I look at Satan and Loki and Sigyn, who have passed me and are gaining distance ahead of us. "I seem to have found several in the

short time I've been here."

"Time does not exist here."

"I cannot have been here for very long," I argue.

Charon shrugs, but says nothing.

"How long have I been here?" I demand.

"As I said, time does not exist here."

"Yes, but it damn well exists up above," I snap.

"Do you have an appointment you cannot miss?" Charon asks, and had he had lips, I swear he would have been smiling.

"Actually, I do."

"You have likely missed it, in that case," Charon says indifferently.

"Damn!"

Muttering to myself, I stride ahead of Charon, who keeps his steady pace, without a care in the world.

If I have missed my appointment with Orion and Niki, then likely, Freki is already dead. If he is dead, then the souls of the undead have likely begun to overflow into the world of the living, creating mass confusion and...

Oh.

I snort, then begin to laugh, loud, pealing laughter. I bend over, trapped in hysterics, unable to breathe, unable to stop laughing. Satan and Loki and Sigyn stop and stare at me.

"What has happened to him?" Loki mutters.

"Likely, he has lost his mind," Satan replies, unconcerned.

I collapse on the ground, elbows hooked around my knees, as I try to regain composure. The occasional giggle still escapes, though, and tears stream from my eyes.

At last, I have calmed enough to speak. "Freki is dead," I say. "Our work is done before we have even arrived."

"Freki?" Loki mutters, his brow furrowed. "Surely not."

Satan steps forward, his eyes narrowed. "Then what do we do?"

I chuckle and shake my head. "I have no fucking idea."

"I do," Charon says, approaching. "Come, we are almost there."

* * *

The Cave known as hell is empty, as I suspected it would be. The soft whisper of running water is the only echoing sound in the vast hall.

"Where has everyone gone?" Satan whispers.

"They've escaped," I reply quietly. "Back to the living world."

"How?"

"He killed the Guardian of the Cave, Freki."

"Who?"

"Orion Andersen."

"Why?"

"To rescue his lover, who was murdered."

"So what do we do now?" Loki asks, looking around the Cave, bored.

Boredom does not suit me, he said. Well, we will see what can be done to remedy that.

Charon turns slowly, staring at the Cave, fascinated. Finally, he looks at me and says, "Can you find the human?"

"I...I do not know."

"Try."

I close my eyes and probe the land above, seeking Orion or Niki or, really, any human. I hear the Judges' last curse in my head: *You will never enter another human's mind again*. But then, they had also said they were sending me to Tartarus, a distinctly Greek version of Hell, and that is not where I ended up. The Judges are not God-of-Old, after all. They make mistakes.

I sense a bright light, amidst a million dimmer ones, and I follow it. I can hear whispers from that light.

It'll be okay, Niki...

What do we do now?

I'll think of something.

But -

Trust me. I'll think of something.

Ha. Found them. I concentrate harder, trying to enter Orion's mind, but there is a wall, as solid as a sunbeam, but as

strong as a will. I push against it, seeking a weakness, searching for a crack, or a way over the wall.

He's back.

Who?

That Scribe bastard.

But he said -

I knew we couldn't trust him.

Are you sure?

"Where are you?" I murmur.

What does it matter to you?

"Who is he talking to?" Satan asks, dimly. I can barely hear him.

"We need to coordinate," I whisper. "Please let me in, so I can know what you have been doing."

Why don't you just ask me?

"Because I need to see."

You're a damn voyeur is what you are.

"I'm trying to save your ungrateful species, Orion," I growl.

From what? What are you talking about?

"Rhialt is planning something. Let. Me. In!"

Not a chance.

Orion...

Niki, don't tell me you agree with this psychopath.

You don't know Rhialt. He is...ambitious.

What does that mean, ambitious?

He...he wants freedom for his people. At any cost.

And you chose to follow him.

He was real. Niki's voice is very faint.

Yeah, a real bastard.

Orion...

Scribe, you there? He sounds resigned, angry.

"I am here."

Get in here, find us, then get the hell out.

"We need to plan."

I agree. We are at the crossroads north of Nalagan. A large group of...us...is here. We will wait for you.

"Thank you, Orion."

Yeah, yeah.

His voice fades from my mind and I open my eyes. "I have permission to see what has been happening. He, and the other spirits, are located north of Nalagan, at the crossroads that lead to the Arctic. We will meet them there."

Loki gives me an odd look. "You do not have the appearance of a Volva. You are too ugly by half."

I grin. "Thank you."

"What has happened?" Sigyn asks impatiently.

"I am about to find out. You may want to sit down. This could take awhile."

Loki rolls his eyes and he and Sigyn head to a bench along the wall. Satan stares at me, his arms crossed, a thoughtful frown creasing his brow. Charon also stares, but his skeletal face reveals no emotions.

"All right," I mutter, and sit down on the ground. "What have you been up to, Orion?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Where is he?" Orion growled, pacing the riverbank of the Cave restlessly.

Niki shrugged helplessly. "Perhaps he got tied up somewhere."

"Three days, he said. *Three days*. I have waited four, and I will be damned if I'll wait another."

Niki looked up at him, her face wan. "Do you and Bob have a plan?"

Orion stopped pacing and looked at her, really *looked* at her. She was unhappy. Scared, maybe. Restless, like him. He sighed and dropped to the sand beside her. He peered over his knees at her, leaning forward.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

She fiddled with her hair for a second, then looked him straight in the eye. The look was frank, and frankly angry. It startled him. He blinked.

"I want to help."

Orion took a deep breath. "Help. How?"

She clenched her small hands into fists and rested them on the sand. "I don't know! But you and Bob have been planning and plotting non-stop and leaving me completely out of it. I won't lose you again, Orion. I won't."

"You aren't going to -"

"You don't know that!" she shouted. "You're going up against this beast with a sword that some homeless old man gave you on the orders of the god who killed you in the first place! Do you ever stop to think things through, or are you so caught up in 'following orders' that you will walk blindly into trap after trap? There's no one to save you this time, Orion. Your buddies aren't here."

Orion stared at her, hurt. Following orders, was it? "And who, exactly, was it that made Terra Arcturus survivable for humanity? Who made sure you were safe from the Nessians? Those idiots who were just 'following orders'!"

"The Nessians weren't a threat until you came along!" Niki screeched. "Humans and Nessians were getting along just fine until you 'idiots,' as you put it, decided to enslave them! Slavery would make anyone a bit tetchy!"

"They were planning, Niki. They were planning to overthrow the human government and retake the planet. They were going to enslave you, unless we got to them first!"

"Oh, really?" she spat. "That's funny, because they were

showing us every fucking kindness up until then. They taught us where to find water, and how to farm, and they helped us rebuild our freakin' shuttles, after they'd been atmo'ed. Must have been really damn clever, those Nessians."

"What would you know?" Orion said, disgusted. "You were just a civvie."

She shot to her feet and stood, yelling down at him. "I would know because I fucking *lived here*, Orion. I *saw* the interactions with my own two eyes. I lived with these people and worked with them and watched them do business with my parents. They never *once* made a violent overture towards us. That was all on us."

"You're getting a lot of these stories from your parents, Niki. You certainly haven't been living with the Nessians for the past seventy-five years."

"We enslaved them twenty years ago, when I was nine years old. I can certainly remember enough of my early childhood to remember how they treated a child."

"That's exactly my point!" Orion shouted, getting to his feet, too. "You *wouldn't* know what things were like, because you were a *child*. Everyone is kind to children, even people who are plotting to kill those children."

"What would you know about it?" Niki sneered. "All you ever learned about it, you learned from the military. All you know how to do is follow orders. Thinking for yourself isn't one of your many redeeming qualities, is it?"

Orion's hand twitched, but he stopped himself from slapping

her. Barely. "That military," he said, in a low voice, "that military that you so despise - gave you a roof over your head, food to eat, help around the house, and protected you from an open revolt. The least you could do is show some damn respect."

Niki threw her hands up in the air and turned away from him. "We're talking past each other. Until you can understand that the military put us in this exact position that you and I are standing in right this instant, we will get nowhere in this conversation."

Orion ground his teeth. Muttering angrily, he stormed over to the wall of the Cave and punched it. Again. And again. He couldn't feel any pain, but calm was returning. Slowly. Breathing heavily, he walked back to Niki, who was watching him with dispassionate eyes.

"You're right. We're talking past each other. I did what I thought was best, which *happened to be* following orders. Following orders is what I have been trained to do, and damn it, I'm going to do it."

"Surely, you can see that Rhialt has nothing good in mind for you?" Niki pleaded.

Orion snorted. "Sure. But then, in my estimation, none of those blue-blooded fucks ever have. No, I'm going to kill Freki because, damn it, I need to kill something."

"We won't be brought back to life," Niki said quietly.

"I know. But at least we won't be trapped down here."

"What are we going to do once we escape here? This is the only

place the Judges will Judge us from. You know that."

Orion spat. "Fuck the Judges. They're not gods, they have no power over us. We," he said, pointing first at himself, then Niki, "we are free agents. We can do whatever the hell we want, with no consequences. We can change the world, or destroy it. We have power now, Niki. Power. You see? This is *our* time, and the only way we're going to be able to take advantage of it is if we kill that...wolf...thing."

"I want to help," she repeated stubbornly.

"I know." He sighed. "Let's talk to Bob. He will have a plan."

"You're putting an awful lot of faith in a homeless man," Niki muttered.

"A homeless man with a *sword*," Orion corrected.

"Oh, right. How could I forget?"

* * *

Bob did, in fact, have a plan.

"We will need a distraction," the old man said, smiling gummily. "You can provide it."

"And what will *you* be doing?" Orion asked, with a pointed look at Bob.

"Oh, you know, this and that," Bob replied, waving his hand

vaguely.

"No, actually, I don't know. Why don't you tell me - us? In great detail."

Bob sighed and ran a wrinkled hand through his thinning white hair. "I can't really help you all that much, to be honest," he said. "It's outside of my purview. Breaks the rules. If this is going to work, it's got to be done by you. And your lovely wife, of course," he added, with a sparkling smile in Niki's direction.

"She's not -" Orion began.

"Why can't you help? What rules?" Niki interrupted.

"I really can't get into it right now," Bob said, sidling along the Cave wall, as though to escape the conversation.

Orion put his hand out, effectively trapping the old man, who rose to his full height, indignant.

"I can't help you, Orion," Bob said. "Please move."

"Where will you be while I'm - we're off, killing the beast?" Orion demanded, not moving.

"I will be watching."

"And what happens if one of us dies?"

"I will mourn you."

"But you won't help."

"It is against the rules."

Niki sighed and rubbed her face. "You will have to explain these damn rules to us, and soon, but right now, we've got enough to

be worrying about." She turned to Orion. "Let's go."

Orion glared at the old man for a moment longer, then turned to follow Niki with a snarl. "Fucking coward," he muttered.

"I don't think so," Niki said quietly, looking over her shoulder. Bob watched after them, a look she couldn't quite decipher dancing in his dark eyes. "I think he really can't help us."

Orion took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "The Scribe said something about Bob not being what he appears to be. What did he mean, do you think?"

Niki shook her head, carefully crossing the river. "I don't know. But I think Bob might be playing by rules that are bigger than you and I."

Orion snorted. "Cosmic rules, huh? Saint George and the Wolf? Christ's Harrowing of Hell?"

"Maybe," Niki said indifferently. "Or maybe he's just mad."

"Thought definitely occurred to me," Orion muttered.

The spirits moved around them, whispering to each other, staring at them as they passed, but making no move to interfere.

"You think they know what we're about to do?" Orion murmured, putting his hand on Niki's lower back.

"Not a chance."

"Good."

He stopped by the mouth of the Cave and looked at her. Her

face was pale and her lips trembled, but that stubborn look was still there.

"Good luck," he whispered, and kissed her gently. "I'll be right behind you."

She nodded firmly and walked into the enveloping blackness.

The night-bugs were waiting for her. The deep bellows-like sighing whistled through her hair. She swallowed and took a shuddering breath.

So we meet again, Niki Alsecco.

"I-I-yes," she stammered.

Why have you come?

"I - I have questions," she said.

I warned you what would happen if we were to meet again.

"Yes."

Was your question so important, then?

"Yes."

The night-bugs disappeared, then reappeared simultaneously, nearly blinding her.

Then ask.

"Who - who created you?" she whispered.

A foolish question, but a question we will answer. I exist because you fear me. I am the doubt that lies in your deepest dreams.

"I don't understand."

Existence is created at the moment of the conception of thought.

"Thought?"

Cogito ergo sum.

"I'm sorry?"

A familiar philosophy from Old Earth. Know you it?

"I...no."

Why are you here, Niki Alsecco? Why have you come to the Cave, when your beliefs and your prayers go not to the Judges?

"I...I don't know."

Are you really here?

"I think so."

But you cannot know for sure, can you?

"I suppose not, but I still don't understand."

You have come to kill me, have you not?

Niki swallowed and didn't reply.

What gain could you possibly receive from my death?

"F-freedom."

A deep rumbling sound, like the approach of a rampaging herd of Jaoni, reverberated through the emptiness surrounding her. After a minute, she realized that Freki was laughing.

Freedom, dear child? Liberty in death - a popular phrase amongst the old humans. But you are already dead, are you not? So

what could you possibly wish to be free from?

"The - the Cave."

The rumbling again.

You have but days until your Judgment. No, freedom is not your true goal. Your true goal is to serve your god, Rhialt, and he has bid you come to kill me. Have you considered why?

Niki said nothing, merely shook. She dared not cast her eyes about, searching for Orion, but she prayed that he had, indeed, followed her out here.

You know Rhialt better than most humans, Niki Alsecco. You know that he has his own goals in mind, always. How would my death - or better yet, my disappearance - aid him? What would happen if I were not to guard the gates of hell?

"The souls...they..." She could not speak. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably and she worried that she might bite her tongue.

Yes. Yes. The souls could escape. But they would not resurrect. Ah, yes, you see that. So what good would come to Rhialt with having hundreds of spirits roaming the surface of Terra Arcturus?

Niki shook her head, tears rolling down her face.

Exactly, Niki Alsecco. Chaos. He would be free to destroy the humans. And this is your wish?

"N-no..."

Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. You seek not freedom for yourself or

your husband. You seek freedom for the Nessian slaves. I understand now.

Niki sobbed silently, awaiting the final attack from the monstrous wolf who faced her. Waited to feel his fangs sink into her face and carry her down his gullet.

What would happen to the humans if the Nessians were free, Niki Alsecco?

She shook her head and wiped her eyes. Her hand trembled.

They may be destroyed. Is this something you can live with?

"I...I am not alive," she whispered.

The darkness vibrated with subterranean laughter.

Very wise and very true.

Silence enveloped the darkness, and one by one, the night-bugs flashed out of existence.

Then, out of the emptiness, a final, fading thought came to her.

I will help you, Niki Alsecco. Your heart is true, if misguided. You will know where to find me when it is time.

And the last night-bug winked out and she was left with a sense of empty completion. Looking up, she could see the familiar stars of Terra Arcturus. Her legs failed her, then, and she collapsed to the ground, weeping silently.

"Niki!" A muffled shout came to her through the thick Cave wall.

"Here," she whispered. Clearing her throat, she tried again.
"Here!"

A sound like the pounding of hammers on stone echoed in the still darkness and soon, slivers of light shone through the cracks. Exhausted, she could not lift herself to help. She just watched, bemused.

With a final thud, the wall burst outward and Orion ran through the rubble, sword swinging.

"Where is he?" Orion demanded. "Where's Freki?"

"What happened to the entrance?" Niki asked, bewildered. Her voice was hoarse, and she had to repeat herself in order to be heard.

"It sealed up the second you went through it," Orion replied roughly. "I thought for sure you were dead. Where is Freki, Niki?"

"He's...gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, *gone*?" Orion stalked about the empty plain, sword held at the ready, though there was no threat to be seen.

"He said he was going to help us and then, he disappeared."

"Wolves don't just *disappear*," Orion snarled.

"We only exist because we think we exist," she replied, mostly to herself. Orion did not seem to hear.

"Fine," he muttered. "Fine. It's gone, at least. We can go now." He looked at her, pale and shaking against the Cave wall.

"You okay?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to say anything. She tried to stand and managed to, by clinging to the wall.

"Good. Let's get Bob and get the hell out of here."

"I'll...I'll wait here," she said faintly, and sat down again abruptly.

"Okay, fine. I'll be right back."

She listened to his retreating footsteps, soon overshadowed by the surprised whispers of the newly-liberated souls. As she stared at the stars glistening in the sky, she felt one soul, then two, then a dozen more, timidly step out of the Cave and, when nothing attacked them, run across the vast plain, returning to the realm of the living. Only as guests, though. No longer resident.

The stars really were quite beautiful, she thought, staring up at them. Her eyelids began to droop.

You will know where to find me, Freki had promised.

Yes, she thought. *Yes, I will.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Orion stomped across the plain, not caring one way or the other whether Niki and Bob were following. Damn it, *he* was supposed to kill Freki, and Niki had taken care of it all on her own!

She wouldn't even tell him what she had done. All she would say, over and over again, was that he had offered to help and then

had disappeared. It may have been the truth, so far as she was concerned. But the dog could have been lying, too. There was no telling.

And Bob. What the hell was that about? Niki had slipped through the entrance to the Cave and a thick stone wall had immediately appeared, separating him from his woman. He'd had the fucking sword! He'd pounded on the wall, trying to break through.

Bob had gripped him hard by the shoulder and spun him around. "Give it time, Orion," Bob had said quietly. "This is for the better. Truly."

"Better? She could be killed!"

"She could be, yes. But she won't be."

Orion had stared at him, suspicious. "You seem to know an awful lot about this thing, Bob."

"I've had the...pleasure of working with Freki in the past." But Bob wouldn't say anything further.

Then Orion had managed to break the wall down, just in time to see Niki having a panic attack and the beast gone.

"Damn it!" he muttered. He put his hand on his belt, to reassure himself that he was, in fact, still armed, and was not entirely surprised to find the sword gone.

"Damn it," he said again, much more quietly.

He could hear Niki and Bob talking in low voices behind him. Good. At least they were following.

"What did the Scribe mean?" Niki asked, her voice floating

over the waving grass to Orion.

"About what?" Bob replied.

"He said that he had his theories about you, but he wouldn't elaborate."

"Ah." Bob was silent for a few minutes. "It's probably best to let him tell you what he thinks."

"You have an idea, though, don't you?"

"I do, yes. But I want to hear what he thinks, first."

Orion shook his head irritably and walked faster, outpacing their conversation.

Bob had worked with the monster before, had he? So maybe he wasn't just an old, dead man. Maybe there was something more to him, as Niki had suggested. "Playing by bigger rules" she had said. Cosmic rules? She hadn't answered. Maybe Orion was closer to the truth than he had originally thought.

The plain came to an abrupt end at a cliff face. Orion stood at the edge and stared down at the thousands of lights below him. Nalagan. Funny, he'd never noticed a massive cliff hanging over the east end of the city before. But then, he wouldn't, would he? He'd never been a part of the spiritual world before right now, either. Clearly, the cliff only existed for the dead. Otherwise, this part of town would be just as flat, dry, and lifeless as the rest of Nalagan. The rest of Terra Arcturus.

"Isn't it pretty?" Niki whispered, coming up behind him. "All the torches and electric lights. Look, you can even see the sunset

shining off the solar panels. I've never gotten to see Nalagan like this before." She smiled.

"That's because this cliff doesn't exist," Orion replied, not caring how harsh he sounded. He had neither the time nor the patience for flights of fancy right now. He wanted to leave Bob behind and begin his new, everlasting life, with Niki beside him. He thrust aside the thought that he might not be able to tolerate her for the rest of eternity. He'd died for her, hadn't he? Surely, that had to mean something.

"What are you going to do now?" Bob asked, standing on Orion's other side. "You've got nothing but time on your hands."

"I'm going to get the hell away from everyone else. I'm sick unto death of other people." He gave Bob a sharp look.

Bob appeared not to notice. "That's certainly one avenue open to you. Of course, Rhialt is out there, just biding his time."

"What does that matter to me?" Orion snapped.

"Freki..." Niki paused. "Freki mentioned Rhialt, too. He wants to help the humans, love."

"Who does? Freki? Why would he care what happened to the humans?"

Bob whistled a tuneless song and looked at the sky.

"Have something to say, old man?" Orion demanded.

Bob looked at him, eyes wide. "Me? No, nothing at all. Why?"

Orion snorted and turned back to look at Niki, who was

frowning in Bob's direction.

"You're not one of us, are you?" Niki asked softly.

Bob's head turned so quickly that his neck popped. He smiled suddenly, like a flashbulb, on and off. His eyes crinkled in glee.

"No. And yes."

"What does that *mean*?" Niki asked plaintively.

"The Scribe understands. He will explain it all to you. I cannot. Rules, you see. I cannot directly interfere. However, should you...humans...figure everything out, well, then, I haven't done much, have I?"

"You gave us Nægling."

Bob laughed, a delighted sound. "I did, didn't I? But did you use it?"

"No." Orion bit the word off at the end.

"So, I'll repeat the question," Bob said, waving a wrinkled arm over the expanse of Nalagan below them. "What will you do now?"

"You want us to help fight Rhialt, don't you?" Orion asked, resigned.

"It would be in everyone's best interests," Bob said. Orion noticed that he didn't answer the question.

"I...I want to know who killed me," Niki said quietly. "Is there some way to find that out?"

"You, my dear, are a spirit. You can go anywhere without notice."

Again, not answering the question. Orion ground his teeth.

Niki smiled but didn't say anything.

Orion growled and spat. "If we're going to help you fight this Nessian god, what do we need to do first?"

"Help *me*?" Bob asked, feigning surprise.

"Don't hand me that bullshit," Orion snarled. "Yes, help you. Clearly, you are integral to this battle in some way. What do we need to do?"

Bob looked at him silently for several minutes. His face revealed nothing, but Orion thought - uneasily, if he was going to be honest - that Bob could read him like a book. Bob knew his beginning, middle, and end, and was prepared to use that knowledge to his advantage.

Then, suddenly, that feeling was gone, replaced with an odd sense of lightheadedness that left Orion blinking dazedly in the starlight.

"We need to gather as many forces as are willing to help us," Bob said, very serious. "We need to plan an attack."

Orion laughed, a quick, breathy sound full of disbelief. They were going to do it. It was a foregone conclusion. Battle on an invisible plane, between invisible people. A battle that nobody would appreciate.

May the best species win.

"It's not as bad as all that," Bob said, giving Orion one of those deep, penetrating looks. "It's a matter of Justice. That's

all."

* * *

Nalagan was alive and well. People hurried through the darkened streets, bumping into each other, excusing themselves, trying to get home to dinner and some respite from the heat. They gave each other suspicious glances when someone passed too closely, and some of them covered their faces with handkerchiefs, though there was no dust in the air. Orion hardly noticed.

None of the humans looked at Orion, Niki, or Bob as they went through the motions of living. Or, rather, the humans looked *through* them, because, clearly, they weren't members of the same plane.

"This. This is power," Orion murmured, stepping directly in front of a ragged woman, carrying an armload of grubby tubers. She walked right through him, then stopped, and looked around in confusion. Not finding what had disturbed her, she shivered and nearly ran down the street to her muddy hovel on the corner. A tuber fell from her arms and lay in the road, forgotten.

"She sensed us, didn't she?" Orion asked Bob quietly.

"She could tell something wasn't right, yes," Bob replied. "She doesn't know what and she will never be able to put it into words. She felt that prick of anxiety, when you know for a fact that you are not alone, but you don't know where the other person is. You're familiar with that feeling, of course."

Orion narrowed his eyes at Bob, but didn't reply.

"Where are we going?" Niki asked, looking around warily.

"To the crossroads north of the city," Bob said. "There are two roads there: one leads into the city, and one leads northeast, towards the north pole."

"North pole?" Niki asked, her brow furrowed. "Isn't that a ways off?"

"About three days by Rover," Orion muttered.

Niki raised her eyebrows at him.

"How do you think I died?" Orion asked impatiently.

"No, you took the koine seeds. I just didn't know that you had gone to the pole to get them."

"That's the only place they grow," Orion said. "I don't want to talk about it."

Niki gave him a strange look, but dropped the subject. Instead, she turned to Bob and asked, "So who are we meeting at this crossroads?"

"Anyone I can convince to join us," Bob replied, distracted. "I must leave you here. I will join you there in..." He tapped his fingers. "Twelve hours. Go."

Without a further word, Bob pushed past them and disappeared into the thinning throng of humans lining the wide, dusty streets. Orion and Niki looked at each other and shrugged.

"I guess we should listen to him," Niki said, heading for a

nearby alleyway.

"Hold on," Orion said, grabbing her by the elbow. "I want to drop by Thompkins' place first."

Niki blinked at him, surprised. "Why?"

"I just want to know if they ever found anything out about your...death," he finished lamely.

"O-okay," Niki said, looking up and down the street. "Which way do we go?"

"Follow me."

Thompkins and James lived on a quiet side-street a couple of blocks from the city market. The lane was as dusty as any other, but the houses, while still made of mud, were in better condition. Thompkins' house even had some flowering weeds to decorate the yard.

The only light that shone in the house came from a candle in the living room. It flickered and fluttered, casting an intermittent glow through the thin curtains. It was the only light on the street; the other houses appeared abandoned or forgotten.

"Stay here," Orion whispered to Niki, before strolling down to the window. He looked back and saw Niki standing at the edge of the yard, her face pale beneath the glow of the moon. He smiled at her, but she didn't appear to see.

He stopped himself from knocking on the door, because they wouldn't hear that, would they? Would he even be able to open the door? Or should he just try to walk through it?

He put his hand on the doorknob, which felt reassuringly real.

It twisted beneath his fingers and the door creaked open.

"What's that?" James asked, his voice breathless. Orion realized, with a guilty start, that he may have entered the house at an intimate - or inappropriate - time.

Thompkins cleared his throat. "Just the door. Stay here, love. I'll get it."

Orion stepped over the threshold and waited in the dark hallway. Thompkins appeared around the corner, naked as the day he was born. He stopped, staring at the open door, then shook his head and closed it firmly.

"I thought you locked the door, babe," he called, returning to the living room.

"I did."

Thompkins stopped in the doorway and looked uneasily back at the front door, and Orion. Then he shook himself, like a dog shaking off water, and sat back down on the couch. Orion followed.

Clearly, the mood was gone. Neither James nor Thompkins appeared to be interested in sex anymore. James' copper hair was a bit longer than standard military uniform dictated and Thompkins was apparently trying to grow a moustache. The look didn't suit him.

"Faulty latch," Thompkins said, attempting a smile.

"Ah," James said, staring down at his hands.

"Hey, don't be like that," Thompkins said, putting one of his hands over both of James'.

"Sorry. I just - sorry." James stood up suddenly. "I'm

going to bed. Good night." Without sparing a glance at Thompkins, he walked across the room to the bedroom and shut the door firmly.

Thompkins sighed. "Damn it."

"Love is hard," Orion said, without much pity. He didn't expect Thompkins to be able to hear him.

Thompkins' head jerked up, looking around the room wildly. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he closed his eyes and rubbed them.

"Gotta do something about that," he murmured. He opened his eyes suddenly. "If Andersen hadn't...damn it."

"If Andersen hadn't what?" Orion demanded.

Thompkins froze. "Who's there?"

"Can you hear me?" Orion murmured.

Beads of sweat popped up on Thompkins' forehead and he looked pale in the dim candlelight.

"Get a grip, Thompkins," he muttered to himself. "Ain't no ghosties and ghoulies haunting you." He shook his head. "Gotta stop drinking."

Orion looked around the room and saw a desk, with paper scattered across it, held down by empty beer bottles. He picked up a sheet and snatched a pencil, relieved to find that he could, in fact, hold onto these physical objects. He thought for a moment, then wrote a brief message. He set the pencil down and folded the paper up carefully, before placing it on the table in front of Thompkins.

Thompkins stared at the paper as though it were poisonous. With trembling fingers, he reached out and unfolded it. His eyes danced across the page, two times, then three, and he closed his eyes and whispered a prayer.

"Orion?" he croaked.

Orion said nothing.

Cursing, Thompkins picked up a pen and wrote a quick response, then tossed the paper and the pen onto the table and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

"Babe?" Orion heard James say sleepily.

"It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

Some rustling of the bedclothes and then silence. Orion picked up the paper, read it, pocketed it and walked back out to Niki.

"Did you find out anything?" Niki asked, hurrying to keep up with Orion's agitated gait.

"Not much," he replied. "Let's get going."

But the paper crinkled in his pocket, its words ringing in his head.

Who killed Niki?

And the response:

This principle is old

But true as Fate

Kings may love treason

But the traitor hate.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I take a deep breath and slowly open my eyes. Charon is gone. I look around stiffly - my neck is tight from not having moved for hours. Satan sits propped up against one of the walls, his hands carelessly dangling between his propped-up knees, his head leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed. He lets out an annoyed sigh.

I climb to my feet, looking around for Loki and Sigyn. I see them huddled together on the far side of the river, whispering to each other. Figuring that Satan would be going nowhere, I walk over to them.

They stop whispering as I approach. Loki looks up at me, suspicious. Sigyn refuses to acknowledge me.

"I know where the humans are," I say, offering a smile.

They return my smile with stoic, stony looks.

"How does that help us?" Loki sneers.

I blink. Something has changed since I entered Orion's and Niki's minds. It has not changed for the better.

"Well, we will need the help of the human spirits in order to mount an attack on Rhialt...is everything okay?"

Loki snarls and, climbing to his feet, storms away. Sigyn finally deigns to look at me.

"The Æsir have noticed that he is no longer bound in Muspelheim."

I stare at her, frantically decoding the message. The Æsir were their fellow gods...Muspelheim was their version of hell, or something similar...Loki was being punished, but I couldn't remember why.

Realizing I should say something, I stammer, "Uh, that's bad, right?"

Sigyn snorts and tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Yes, human. It is bad. They will be searching for him now."

"I...see," I lie. "And what would they do if they found him?"

"I do not know," she says, looking at me frankly. "They cannot kill him, for they know the role he is to play during Ragnarok. Every god must play his part, for Fate has already been revealed. But they may seek to hasten Ragnarok, in order to be rid of him."

"Can they do that?" I ask, surprised.

Sigyn rolls her eyes. "There is nothing that is impossible unto them. They would simply need to attack the Muspels and that would begin it."

"Could these Æsir be convinced to aid us in our attack on Rhialt?"

Sigyn laughs bitterly. "I doubt it. Of course, you can try, human."

"Uh, okay. And where would I find these gods?"

"Foolish questions," says a dry voice behind me. I turn to see Charon making his slow, deliberate way towards us. "You do not need to seek the gods; the gods will find you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, oh. And I have brought reinforcements," he adds, stepping aside to reveal an odd assortment of four gods.

I stare at them, unsure what to say. There is a tall goddess - much taller than mortal men - and muscular, flat-chested, with pale blue eyes and a large tattoo of an idealized tiger on her forearm. There is a likewise tall and muscular god, covered in scars, and carrying an axe as though he knew how to use it. The third god looks, well, useless, if I am going to be honest. He is a dwarf, deformed, with a bulging brow and crooked teeth. I determine that he is no warrior. The last god looks more human than the others. His hair is tied back severely and he does not look at his surroundings so much as glare at them. I can hear him muttering beneath his breath and wonder, just for a moment, whether he is mad.

"Ah," I say, for the sake of saying *something*, "that's great. Splendid. Ah...who are they?"

Eight eyes focus on me, with expressions ranging from amusement to disbelief. The goddess stands forth first.

"I am Freyja, ruler of Folkvangr, where go the valiant dead."

The male version of her steps forward next, smiling as he looks at her from the corner of his eye. "And I am Freyr, lord of battle and protector of farms. I am also Freyja's most beloved twin brother," he adds, grinning insolently at the blonde woman.

Freyja rolls her eyes but does not reply.

The dwarf comes forward next. "I am Andvari," he says, smiling genially. "You are correct: I am no warrior. But every warrior needs weapons, yes? Technology is the warrior's greatest tool."

Freyr snorts and Freyja's mouth quirks in a barely contained smile.

"Technology, he says," Freyr mutters. "His best-known invention is a Ring of Power that kills all who wear it. Hardly a potent battle weapon."

I look at Andvari again, re-evaluating my opinion of him.

"Well," the dwarf says mildly, "most people love power and fear death. The ring provides both."

"Time, little dwarf, is of the essence amongst soldiers. Your little ring kills one man at a time, over a period of years. What use is that, I ask?"

"I am sure Sigurð would be happy to discuss that with you," the dwarf said, grinning.

Staving off divine bloodshed, I interrupt, "And who are you?"

The last god, who appears more human, does not appear to hear. His muttering becomes louder, though, and I can make out his words.

"Dip the baby in the blood. No, water. No, fire. Ah, hell with it anyway. Climbing the mountain. Long way to fall. Burn the ships. Burn the horses. Burn the women. Burn the baby. No! Drown the baby so it cannot die. Yes, that is the way of it. Damn

you, father!"

I turn my shocked gaze from this spectacle to the other gods, who appear both bored and ashamed by their companion's antics.

"Er, is he all right?" I say, feeling obligated to ask the foolish question.

"Brilliant fighter, Sigurð is -"

"Loose in the head, but -"

"God enough as makes no matter -"

"Berserker."

That last voice comes from behind me and I turn to see Loki, staring with fervent interest at this mad god-man.

"I'm sorry?" I say politely.

"Berserker. These people are my kin - most unfortunately, I assure you - and this man is a berserker. He does not wear the traditional garb, but that is only a tale, in any case."

Andvari clears his throat and spits on the ground at Loki's feet. Loki raises his eyebrows at the dwarf in mild surprise.

"Have we met?"

"Oh!" the dwarf spits. "Have we *met*, he asks? Tell me, O Sly One, Thou Brother-Slayer, who was the dwarf called Otr?"

Loki's half-smile does not reach his eyes. "I am sure I am not acquainted with the myriad svartalphen. Was he your kin?"

"My...kin? My kin! You murdered him, you bastard, right in front of his family!" The dwarf's eyes nearly pop from their

sockets in his rage. I worry for a moment that I am about to witness the death of a dwarf - a *dwarf!* - and I wrack my brain for any sort of CPR or life-guarding techniques I may have learned back on Old Earth. Nothing comes to mind.

Loki, too, appears surprised at the dwarf's fury. He takes an involuntary step back. "I am afraid I do not recall the incident.

"Ah-hah," I interject quickly. "Why don't we go meet the humans, shall we? I know they are waiting for us."

All of the gods turn to stare at me, as though they have forgotten I am there. Andvari, however, glares at Loki, sputtering and gnashing his teeth.

"Why would we need the help of *humans?*" Andvari asks, bewildered, finally taking his gaze from Loki, who is watching the dwarf nervously from the corner of his eye.

"Every little bit helps?" I suggest.

Freyja snorts and begins to walk towards the entrance of the Cave. "All right. We will meet with them."

Freyr hurries to catch up to her. Andvari grunts and begins to limp after him. Sigurð, however, continues to stare at the wall, muttering nonsense. A bit of drool drips from his lip and hangs precipitously over his shirt.

"I, er, I am not sure what to do with him," I admit to Charon, who has remained impassive during the entire argument.

To my surprise, Loki steps up and grabs Sigurð by the arm. "I will watch over him. He is one of my own."

"Er, well, he's mad, you see..."

"He is a berserker," Loki says with finality and begins to walk after the other gods, Sigyn close behind.

Satan snorts himself awake and, muttering curses, stumbles to his feet and follows.

"Well," I say. "That happened."

"We will need more aid," Charon says.

"That's what Bob said."

"Then we will have more aid."

"Whatever happened Nyx and Kaos and all those other gods?"

Charon had left to obtain gods of ethereality and returned with gods bearing spears, jewelry, and a mad gleam in their eyes.

Charon shrugs. "They say they cannot interfere. These humans are not their humans."

I stare at him. "Okay...what do you mean, 'more aid'? Surely, one Nessian god is not equal to seven human gods?"

Charon shakes his head, and though there are no emotions on his skeletal face, I feel that he is disappointed.

"Of course, it is not just Rhialt we are facing, is it?" he says, as though to a child. "It is all of the Nessians, and humans, who follow him. And those mortals have information we do not, about Terra Arcturus, about the water caves, about the suns and their proximity, about the history of the planet and the solar system, about the Nessian military. We are not mounting a single attack on a metaphysical plane against one god. We are embarking on a series

of battles on both the metaphysical and the physical planes, against tens of thousands of angry natives *and* one god. Worse yet, we are going against them blind, deaf, and mute. We are walking into a war in complete darkness, with insufficient weapons and ignorant warriors. Yes, we will need more aid."

I close my eyes and whisper something. Maybe a prayer? I really do not know. I grip the edge of my robe, strangling it between my fingers, and struggle to keep standing. Too much. All of this, it is too much.

Then I feel it. The hard, worn edge of a book. I shove my hand into my pocket and rub my fingers along it. It is. I really did bring it. I smile and swallow my hysterics.

I abruptly sit down and hold my head between my knees, breathing deeply and trying not to giggle.

"You have gone mad, human?" Charon inquires.

"No," I say, a giggle slipping out. "No. I have the answers. Look!"

I pull out the book. *A Brief History of Kanewaki and Her People.*

"Where did you get this?" Charon asks quietly, turning it over in his hands.

"The Library in the Establishment."

"Establishment."

"Where the humans of Terra Arcturus were Judged, until very recently."

"And you were one of these Judges?"

"No. Just a Scribe."

Charon opens the book and slowly flips through the pages. Then he slams it shut and hands it back to me.

"This is invaluable. Have you read it?"

"Most of it."

"Study it. Make plans with it. This may save the lives of the humans."

I nod and carefully replace the book in my pocket. Charon begins to walk away, but in the direction opposite of the entrance to the Cave.

"Where are you going?" I call out.

"As I said, we will need more aid. I will find Bob and as many gods as I can. Keep an eye on the Æsir - they are a bit...impetuous. I will meet all of you at the crossroads."

And without another word, he disappears, as though he had never been there.

I shake my head and laugh silently.

The Judges asked me dozens of questions before they condemned me to Tartarus. Questions about treason and humans and other gods. They never once asked me about books I may have read or philosophies I may have held. It hadn't occurred to me before, but their silence on questions of that ilk meant something.

"Thank you, Scribe," I whisper, wiping my eyes on my sleeve.

I climb to my feet, brush imaginary dirt from my robes, and hurry to catch up to the irascible gods I have been charged to keep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I find them as they enter the city of Nalagan. Satan, who has long kept company with God-of-Old, is the only deity in attendance who does not appear impressed, shocked, or concerned. He stands on the dirt road in the twilight, staring around at the dilapidated mud houses and the people hurrying towards them, and shrugs. *Honey, I'm home*, he seems to be thinking.

Freyja and Freyr, too, stop and stare around. Their eyes are wide and astonished, and both, apparently not realizing they are doing so, reach for their weapons. Freyja sniffs the air and her face hardens.

Andvari walks up to the nearest hovel and runs his finger down the mud, then licks it. He seems to have been expecting whatever it was he tasted, because he nods to himself, then wipes his hand on his shirt.

Sigurð gazes ahead with eyes glazed over. His mumbling is indecipherable, but seeing that most of it is nonsense anyway, I do not consider this to be a problem.

Loki grips Sigyn's hand hard and the two of them step cautiously forward, peering around the corners of the buildings, as

though waiting for an attack. They keep glancing nervously at Freyr, who completely ignores them. Family dinners in Asgard must be interesting.

The Nessians, I know from my research, eat whatever meat is available - they are very similar to Earth-based felines, after all. In the current political and economic climes, however, "meat" generally consists of insect stew, or maybe a stray rodent. The humans, decidedly more omnivorous, have acquiesced to a mostly vegetarian diet, although grumblings could be heard amongst some of the more physically active populaces.

"What is this place, human?" Loki hisses, darting back around the house, furtive as a mouse in an eagle's nest. Sigyn stumbles to a stop next to him and glares at me, as though I have lured them into a trap.

"This is Terra Arcturus," I explain.

Loki shakes his head, very like the horse he so recently was. "That does not answer the question. Is this a part of Miðgard?"

"Ah, no." I assume that Miðgard was Earth, and only Earth. This decidedly did not fit. Unless...was Miðgard a strictly *spiritual* location, like Heaven or the Establishment? Was it simply the realm in which humans lived?

"Maybe," I amend. "I do not know."

Loki opens his mouth to argue, but Sigyn interrupts him. "Where are all the trees, human?"

I blink at her, then look around. Of course, she is right.

Trees? There have not been trees on Terra Arcturus since the Proximity - a term I learned from the book I now carry in my pocket. Trees were once thought to cover the beaches and banks of the oceans and rivers, for that was how the Nessians hunted. They climbed the trees, the branches of which hung well over the water, and dangling by their tails, they fished. The fish often sought the shade of the trees, thinking it was safer than being out in the strong sunlight. But when the oceans disappeared, the trees died and turned to dust and blew away.

Or so the stories say.

The goddess has a point, though: the only tree I know of now is the turbine tree that provided the seeds that killed Orion. Somehow, I doubt this is what Sigyn is referring to.

I hold out my hands helplessly. "They died."

She narrows her eyes. "Died?"

I am rescued - in a sense - from having to respond to her suspicions by Freyja whispering, "Where are the oceans? What is this place?"

I sigh and raise my voice for all of the assembled to hear. I grow tired of repeating myself.

"This is not Old Earth. This is Terra Arcturus. Nobody lives on Old Earth anymore. It was destroyed. We live here now. On this planet, there is no water, there are no trees, there are no boats or swords or churches or temples. This planet is nothing like Old Earth."

I lower my voice to a mutter. "The sooner you can accept that, the sooner we can get to work."

"Why are we here, then, human?" Freyr demands. "This is not our place."

I roll my eyes, but a quick glance at the sword on his hip keeps the most sarcastic comments from leaving my lips. "I was under the impression that your place, as *gods*, was wherever your humans were. Your humans are here."

"They do not remember you, though," Satan volunteers, with something like glee in his face. I shoot him a sharp glance.

Freyja spares him a look, then returns to me. "Is what the little man says true?"

Satan stands up straight, but before he can protest, I answer. "I do not know. Everyone has different beliefs."

"A very politic answer," Loki murmurs.

"We must rendezvous with the humans," I say, trying to shoo them forward. "Let us keep moving."

Satan shrugs and begins to walk, and Loki and Sigyn follow. Sigurð moves only when Loki tugs on his arm, but follows the others. Andvari hesitates, then shrugs, and says, "Eh, why not?"

Freyja and Freyr, however, do not move. "What do we owe humans who do not even properly worship us?"

At this, I lose my temper. "For God's sake, you are not alone in this! Nobody has worshiped any god properly in hundreds of years! You all exist in history books and myths. Even Satan and

God-of-Old were not real to the majority of people. Everyone professed a nominal belief, but *worship?*" I laugh.

Freyr's fingers twitch, but Freyja grips him by the upper arm and jerks her head towards the other gods. With a rude gesture in my direction, he follows her.

I stand there for a moment, watching them walk ahead, and I shake my head. This is worse than herding cats.

"Loki!" I hear Freyja call out.

He stops and watches her, clearly uneasy.

"Why are you helping the humans? You escaped Muspelheim - somehow - so why not flee before the All-Father's wrath?"

Loki grins and relaxes. "Oh, this is just a side venture. I am more interested in creating chaos."

I hurry to catch up. The last thing I need is for these gods to get it into their heads that the real enemy is each other, instead of Rhialt.

"Chaos?" Freyja says, blinking.

"Oh, yes. It is what I am best at, as you are well aware. It is why the human rescued me."

Freyja shakes her head slowly and walks away. Loki shrugs and the gods continue walking.

I rush to the front of the line to lead them. The humans would be safer with rampaging herds of Lisketi - a distant relative of the Jaoni that preferred the mountains - than they are with these gods and their tantrums.

Our small group of superhumans walks down the deserted, dusty streets. The houses on either side of the road are shoddily built, at best, with some walls leaning at dangerous angles and roofing shingles hanging on by a wish. The windows have no glass, which I have never understood - there is sand aplenty on this planet - instead, they are covered with shutters. These measures have little effect in keeping insects out of the houses, though, and with the noticeable lack of birds, the insects rule unchecked.

The marketplace is eerie when empty, the sandstone stalls gazing emptily at the silent street before them. Written on the walls of nearby buildings are advertisements of sales and new items and services. One reads, "Jakul will repair your roof!" Another shouts, "Fruit from Urania! Worm-free!" A third one states, "Seeking rifle. Will pay high money!"

Once past the marketplace, we turn north. The houses grow sparse here; instead, the streets are crowded with embroidery shops, tailors, weaponsmiths, cartwrights, fuel shops, and clothing boutiques for the more wealthy citizens.

Human civilization, it seems to me, has regressed significantly since arriving on Terra Arcturus. Once, we stood at the forefront of technological innovation. We could create anything our hearts desired, simply by programming it. We could travel our system, mine other planets, vaporize entire cities. We could speak to each other, instantaneously, with the touch of a few buttons. Privacy had ceased to exist, and we reveled in its disappearance. There were no longer any such things as "secrets," and we called it a win for civilization. A person's entire history was available for

total recall, at will. We could travel around Old Earth in a matter of hours, by floating in high-speed metal birds, tens of thousands of feet above the surface of the planet. We invented new forms of life, new *building blocks* of life, and we eradicated - almost to extinction - any form of life that could cause us harm. Literature became available worldwide, with only months between conception and delivery. Most of it was garbage, but several works changed policies and politics and empowered people previously silenced.

All of it had been a sham, though. None of it mattered. Once we were threatened by destruction irreversible, we reverted to our old ways. Communication was turned against us once more. Extinguished diseases became biological warfare agents. Literature became propaganda. Systems that had once been used to create artificial organs were once again used to create weapons. Space-flight, beyond our meager grasp of the asteroid belt, was thrust aside.

When Chevsky-Jones hit, we saw true humanity. And true humanity was greedy and destructive. True humanity focused on the self instead of the community. True humanity thought that if one could not have something, none should have it.

Chevsky-Jones was the first honest mirror we'd ever had thrust in our faces.

And so why does it surprise me now to find that we have reverted to medieval technology? With the rare exceptions of Rovers and atmospheric space machines and guns, our existence now is not unlike what it was on Old Earth 1400 years ago.

I look behind me at the bewildered gods, who stare around them as though their humans were, in fact, aliens, and I realize that, while the surface of the planet is strange to them, they are familiar with this kind of civilization. They, too, hail from technologically empty times.

A high chain-link fence rises to my right, guarding the military base. Impressive stone facades face us, assuring us of their might and ability. If I strain, I can hear the chants of the soldiers as they go through their physical training. *We are here*, they are saying. *We are watching*.

Before Chevsky-Jones hit, we worshiped technology and the freedom and lack of individuality it promised. It was a god we could believe in because we thought we had control over it. But ultimately, it was a weak god, a false god, who took everything and gave us no protection in return.

As I turn my gaze from the enormous stone building, I begin to see that humans, as a species, do learn from their mistakes. We stopped worshiping a god who could give us no protection, and turned our gaze to more mortal gods, who could. They were harsh and they were efficient, but we, as a dying species, could trust them to guard ruthlessly and efficiently our best interests, even if we did not understand what those interests were at the time.

I walk faster. I curse our nature, which leads us to believe in a higher power. There are no gods but us, I want to say. We create them as fits our needs. And then, when they are no longer helpful, we rail against them, never stopping to consider whether

they existed in the first place.

Who created technology? Who created the military? Who created the gods and the goddesses and the demons? Who created sin? Who created evil? Who created good? Who created history? Who created stories? Who created?

We did. We created the means to destroy ourselves. We created everything we put faith in. We created faith. We created the gods who walk behind me now, staring in wariness, brought back from the dead, from oblivion, to help a civilization who hasn't had need of them for hundreds of years.

But they are just an edifice. They exist because we call them into existence. And once they have served their purpose, they will return to obscurity.

Because ultimately, we will save ourselves or damn ourselves, without divine intervention.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It does not take me long to find Orion, standing off to one side, looking at the other shadows with an ill-concealed look of disdain.

"How did you convince them to come with you?" I ask, curious, as I walk up to him.

He shrugs impatiently. "I didn't. They just arrived here,

when I did."

I raise my eyebrows at him, but say nothing.

"It's true," he says defensively. "Go ask them."

So I do.

"I don't know," a long-faced older woman says, wrapping her arms around herself tightly. "I heard it from somewhere - go to the crossroads, like, you understand. I didn't have anywhere else to go, so..."

"The wolf, he whispered it in mah ear," says a broad, red-headed fellow, his eyes dancing about joyfully. I cannot place his brogue. "He says to come here, ye ken, and to be gettin' ready for a great clishmaclaver." He smiles broadly through his rusty beard. "Are ye ready, lad? A great battle is comin', with a great bloody wolf at the heid of it."

"The old man, he say to come," says a small, dark-haired woman, her thick accent betraying her as a "native" Terra-Arcturan. "So, I come. What else do I do, I ask? There is nobody to mourn me and I must do something. Why not follow?"

Bob. It has to be Bob. Bob and Freki. I must admit, if only to myself, that Freki's interest in this battle has taken me by surprise. In the Establishment, we Scribes had always been told that Freki had been impressed into service, and would do anything to escape. But now, with escape imminent, Freki walks away with the promise to return at the "heid" of the army.

I shake my head and dismiss it as a useless mystery.

"Scribe! Hey, Scribe!"

I turn to see Orion pushing through the crowd towards me. He grabs my arm and drags me off to the side.

"I've been meaning to ask you, why me? Why did Rhialt pick me?"

I look at him. Tall, lean, his dark hair an unruly mop atop his head. His eyes, no longer red from drink and drugs, are a startling teal, and they look at me with ferocity and...fear?

"I do not know," I reply, shaking my head. "Rhialt did not explain his need for a warrior, and Themis did not explain her reason for choosing you."

"That's not good enough," he says quietly, gripping my wrist.

I wriggle it loose. "I really cannot say, Orion. It could just be that you were available."

Orion snorts. "Available, huh? I'm not the only damn soldier on this planet, you know."

"No," I agree, stepping away from him. "But you were, perhaps, the only one whose life was going to hell, anyway."

Orion blinks, taken aback. "How do you mean?"

I just look at him. "I must find Bob."

"Scribe," Orion says, reaching for my arm, but not touching it. His tone has taken on a pleading note. "Please. Why did I die?"

I take a deep breath and look him in the eye. He looks young,

now, and lost. It takes me a moment to realize that, when he died, he was two weeks away from his thirtieth birthday. He *is* young. Niki, at about the same age, is even younger, because she lacks the experiences that have aged Orion.

With his defenses down, he looks vulnerable, and I pity him.

"Do you know the story of Orpheus and Eurydice?" I finally say.

He shakes his head.

"Very well," I say, preparing myself for a long lecture. "It is the story -"

"Give me the abbreviated version, please."

I half-smile and say, "Man loses wife. Man goes down to Hell to rescue wife. Ruler of Hell, in this case, Hades, agrees, on one condition - he must lead wife back to surface without looking back at her. Man agrees and leads the way. Makes it to surface but then looks back. Wife is lost forever. The end."

Orion's mouth hangs open. He shuts it quickly and says, "That's fucked up."

"Those are the Greeks," I agree.

"What does it have to do with me and Niki, though?"

"Think about it, Orion," I snap, losing my patience. "Niki was dead, you were pining, you were given a chance to rescue her, you took it."

"So..." he says slowly. "I was chosen because Niki had just died? I mean, there had to have been a lot of soldiers with dead

girlfriends at the time...right?"

"Apparently not. Now, I must find Bob."

Orion gives me a hard look and then jerks his head. "This way."

We find Bob lying on his back in the sand, gazing contentedly at the sky.

"Hullo," Bob says, not looking at us.

"We need to talk," I say, motioning Orion to stay put.

"All right. Go."

"You are not a human, are you?"

Bob smiles. "Nope."

"What are you?"

"That's cheating."

"Cheating?" I raise my eyebrows at Orion, who rolls his eyes.

"Bob says there are some rules he can't break. He can't help defeat Freki, he can't tell us who he is. A whole load of other nonsense."

"Whose rules?" I ask.

"Cosmic," Orion and Bob say together; Orion says it sarcastically, Bob in all seriousness.

I let out an annoyed breath. "If we guess who you are, though, you will tell us?"

"Oh, sure." Bob scratched his chest and stretched.

"Not human," I murmur, staring at Bob. I can feel Orion's eyes on me. "Deity."

Bob says nothing.

"To be quite honest, Bob," I say, pacing back and forth near his head, "one of the things I was very concerned about before getting kicked out of the Establishment was what happened to God-of-Old when He killed Himself."

Bob grunts, disinterested.

"I was thinking, everybody who dies, *everybody*, goes down to hell, to await Judgment. But where would God-of-Old go? Would He go down there, too? Would He simply disappear?"

"But then it occurred to me. If He had disappeared permanently, there would be no hell, there would be no Freki, there would be no need for Judges or Judgment or anything of that nature. Because, with His death, the idea of sin also dies. Is that not true?"

Bob shrugs.

"So, the fact that there was an Establishment, and the fact that the Judges *did* have power, and the bloody fact that Freki was still guarding hell...God-of-Old did not commit suicide."

Orion gapes at me. "What are you talking about? He died. That's why the Judges came into power in the first place. That's why Niki..." He cuts himself off, unable to finish the thought.

"Behold the Invocation," I murmur, reciting the well-known text. "Hail, O God, Lord Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth."

"Yeah, and?" Orion says.

"If He Created Most, then what He Created would have disappeared with Him at His death, right?"

Orion's face, pallid in the moonlight, takes on a greenish tinge.

"Which means..." I begin.

"That it was all a ruse," Orion whispers.

"So where would God-of-Old have gone?" I ask. "If He were going to take a vacation, where would He go? He has the infinite universes at His disposal, does He not?"

"But no," I say softly. "He would not want to be far from His Creation, His pet humans. Although they have sorely disappointed Him and wounded Him, He, being the Father figure, would still seek to help them, would He not?"

Bob slowly sits up and watches me, appraises me, a slight smile on his weathered face.

"So He would go amongst them," I continue, staring at the old man. "He would see what life was truly like for a human. He saw the poverty and the power struggles and the racism and xenophobia. But He could see all that from His heavenly cloud. So He walked amongst us and saw how we loved each other and fucked each other and grew families with each other. He saw how we used the pattern-recognition system He gifted us with to create brilliant engineering. He watched as we adapted and grew and fell down and rose up again.

"He watched as our oldest sins - hatred, jealousy, rage - competed with our greatest virtues - love, compassion, selflessness. He watched as our sins overcame our virtues and then He wanted to see more. So He posed as a dead man and went down to hell."

Bob laughs and rubs his hand over his face. "And then what? Why did He do that?"

"He was curious to see how He Himself would be Judged," I say, a small smile on my own face. "Vanity belongs to all creatures, great and small, after all."

Orion's eyes were wide. I could see all the way around his iris. "So, you're telling me that Bob..." He cannot finish the thought.

"I did say you could call me whatever you wished, my boy, and the name would probably be right," Bob says, grinning and rising to his feet.

"I...uh...so, what do I call you now?" Orion stammers, staring at the old man, as though unsure about his existence.

Bob shrugs. "Bob is fine."

Orion swallows heavily. "Please, you have to understand, Niki-"

"I have no plans to punish her," Bob says, patting Orion's arm reassuringly. Orion flinches and Bob, smiling ruefully, removes his hand. "How could she have known, after all?"

"But - but she -"

"I am not worrying about it, and neither should you," Bob

says, with finality. "We've got much bigger problems on our plate."

I nod. "Rhialt. We need -"

"A battle plan," Bob finishes. "Yes. But first, we need an army. We have..." He counts the souls shifting around us quickly. "We have about 600 potential soldiers here, plus seven gods. Oh! Hold that thought!" He pauses. "Nine gods."

I turn around and see Charon walking forward with three heavily armed deities, glaring at their surroundings.

"They did not wish to come," Charon says, looking sideways at the gods.

Bob smiled genially at them. "Welcome, Oðin All-Father. Welcome, Thor Thunder-Maker."

Oðin, an old man like Bob, though much more formidable in appearance, plants his staff firmly in the ground. "Who are you and why are we here?"

"I am Bob, the All-Father of the Christians. You are here, at my request, to save our humans."

Thor stares around the desert night, a frown line creasing his brows. "This is not Miðgard."

"A matter for the philosophers, I am sure," Bob says smoothly. "Our enemy is a foreign god who wishes to enslave our humans."

"You are a foreign god," Oðin says, baring his teeth.

Bob inclines his head. "Yes, but *I* am at least still a god of the humans. This god has never before seen humans, and still he wishes to enslave them."

Freyja, who arrived at the same time as Charon, puts a warning hand on Oðin's tense shoulder and looks calmly at Bob. "Who is this god? What is this place?"

"The god is called Rhialt, and he is the god of the native people of this planet, Terra Arcturus - the Nessians. Please, Charon," Bob says, motioning to the skeletal figure, "Will you get the others? We must have a meeting of the commanders."

"We have not said we will help you, *Bob*," Thor says, spitting the name.

"No," Bob agrees. "But I think you will. It will be a great battle, and if there is one thing I know about the Northmen, they love a good battle."

Oðin frowns at him, thinking. "Other gods, you say? What other gods?"

The sound of sliding sand greets his question, and the other gods come into view. Freyr stares at the newcomers, then grins. Andvari fiddles with something in his thick hands. Satan stands off to one side, his arms crossed, his attitude haughty. Sigyn approaches cautiously, awaiting a war-cry from the new arrivals. Loki refuses to look at them; instead, he leads Sigurð by the arm. Sigurð, for his part, has stopped babbling and is instead simply drooling.

"Loki!" Thor roars, jerking his warhammer from his belt.

Freyja stands in his way, holding him back. "Thor!" she hisses. "Hear out this queer god." Thor struggles against her. "Listen to me! He may help us!"

With a final dirty look in Loki's direction, Thor tears his arm from Freyja's grasp and turns his back on the other gods.

"Welcome, all of you," Bob says above the noise. "There was a saying back on Old Earth: 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' That is what we must be to each other. We have old quarrels..." he cast an eye around the deities, who were, in turn, casting suspicious glances at their neighbors, "...but we have a common purpose."

"You would not have come if you did not believe the protection of our humans to be of the utmost importance. Am I correct?"

Silence.

"Am I correct?" Bob repeats, more loudly.

Begrudging nods and half-hearted shrugs.

"The humans have protected themselves for many hundreds of years," Andvari says, tinkering with the machinery in his hands. "Why should they need us now?"

"We have received no sacrifices from these humans," Freyja says.

Bob quirks an eyebrow and grins. "And they thought I was a figment of their collective imagination," he says. "But does that matter? We have been charged to guard them, and guard them, we must."

"They have gotten themselves in this situation," Thor rumbles. "They have angered this foreign god. They should save themselves."

"A fine sentiment, Thor," Bob says. "But when the great giant almost stole Freyja and the sun and the moon from under the Æsir's nose, did you not need help?"

Oðin narrows his eyes at Bob, but Bob has already moved on.

"When Brisिंगamen was stolen, did you not assist each other?"

Thor blushes and Loki grins at him over the heads of the other gods.

"And you, Satan," Bob says, smiling fondly at the outcast figure. "Did you and I not spend many hours, discussing the humans, their strengths and weaknesses? Did we not, once, lay wages on their decisions?"

Satan stands up slowly and stares at Bob. "Surely...you are dead!"

Bob holds up a warding hand. "No, but there is no time for that now." He looks at everyone gathered. "When we have been weak, we sought assistance. Our humans are weak, but they are also without guidance. They have had no true gods in their lives for many generations. It is your argument that it is right to let them suffer. I say, no. We cannot. We must help them, and trust them to know who supports them.

"We must be better than the humans. We must lead them, and in this case, we must lead them to battle."

Bob stares around at each face.

"Will you join us?"

Silence descends on the group and I worry that the gods will

decide that this battle is not worth the effort and will simply disappear. But then Satan shrugs and walks forward. Bob smiles at him, and Satan pulls him into a bear hug.

"I am glad you are not dead," Satan says gruffly.

Oðin and Thor glance at each other, eyebrows cocked, and Freyja nods.

"It has been a long time since I have fought in battle," Oðin says.

Andvari finally brings his eyes up to Bob and shrugs. "As I said, I'm not much of a warrior, but I have some inventions that may come in handy."

Freyr steps forward. "Freyja and I will lead them to victory," he announces, glancing at his twin, who smiles at him.

Sigyn ducks her head timidly. "I will not fight. I am no warrior."

"But I will," Loki says, staring straight at Oðin, daring him to disagree. "Oh, and my berserker here will come with me." Sigurð nods and mumbles.

"We will face each other later," Oðin says to Loki ominously. "Until then, welcome, brother."

Loki eyes him with distrust, but then nods his head brusquely. "I thank you."

I step forward. "I was...I am not a warrior," I say, hesitant. "But I am a scholar, and perhaps..."

"I can find a use for you," Bob says, smiling at me. "The

suns are almost here. We will need water."

I blink at him, but say nothing. Does he truly believe in this fairy tale of an underground ocean?

Orion and Niki come forth, holding hands tightly. "I was a soldier here. I know the terrain. I know the people. Niki, she knows the other god and she understands the Nessians from their own viewpoint. If we can be of help..."

"Yes," Bob says. "Yes."

Andvari plops down in the sand. "Great. Now that that is all settled, where do we begin?"

I pull the book out of my pocket.

"With Terra Arcturus."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Forcing gods to work together who do not like or trust each other is as fruitless a battle as, well, trying to convince Orion that the Nessians may, in fact, have a reason to be upset with their enslavement.

After Bob persuaded the assorted gods to assist him, he vanished, essentially leaving me in charge of corralling them and trying to come up with a viable battle plan.

Fortunately, I have Orion's reluctant help with this.

"Okay," he sighs, rolling open a map and pinning it down on the sand with some scavenged rocks.

"Where did you get this?" I ask, surprised.

He shoots me an impatient look. "Lifted it from the base. Turns out, sneaking in and out of military buildings is a lot easier if you don't technically exist."

I blink at him. "You do not exist?"

He presses his fingers into his chest and arms, giving me a pointed look. "I'm corporeal, but nobody can see me. Can something exist if you can't see it? No."

I am not willing to concede that point. "What about wind?"

"What?" Orion's fingers twitch, as though he is focusing on not strangling me in order to get on with the planning.

"You cannot see wind. You can see the effect of the wind - dust devils, for example - but you cannot see the wind itself."

"Yeah, fine, and I'm sure the wind would be able to sneak into the military base as easily as I did. Can we get on with this?"

I shrug and squat down next to the map.

Terra Arcturus is one large landmass, much like Old Mars was. In fact, exactly like Old Mars was. Old Mars once had an ocean, like Terra Arcturus, in theory. Like Old Earth. They, too, dried up, leaving a red husk, with thin crusts of ice on the poles and small veins of water under the surface.

The analogy hits a dead-end with the existence of the Nessians, though. Humanity was a Class 6 species, which meant that we procreated quickly; we adapted easily; we thrived in most climates; we possessed advanced technology; and we had a widely

variable diet. Nessians, on the other hand, received an ad hoc classification of 6b, because, although they had Class 6 biology and technology, they simply did not reproduce in great numbers.

I stare at the map, frowning, thinking. There is no evidence that the Nessians intend to enslave the humans; so far as I know, they only want to regain their lost land. There is no question, however, that Rhialt plans to do exactly that, and turn the humans into slaves. So I suppose it really depends on how religious the Nessian army is.

Orion is pointing to Urania and muttering beneath his breath. Niki looks over his shoulder, pretending to understand what he is pointing at and what he is saying. Finally, he looks up at me, a frown wrinkling his forehead.

"What exactly are we facing here?"

I shake my head and sink slowly to sit on the ground. "Well, that is the problem. The Nessians have an army on Vituperavi, awaiting a signal. How much -"

"They have a *what?*" Orion shouts, looking alarmed.

"An army. The Nessians have an army and have had one since the second Insurrection, when you arrived."

"Why the hell didn't we know about this?"

I shrug. "You were busy with the rebels, I imagine. Has the Force left Terra Arcturus in the last several years?"

"No. No, damn it. We didn't see any reason to."

I keep my face carefully expressionless as I continue to

answer his original question. "The army is not the main concern, at this point. What we should really be concerned about is how much influence Rhialt has on his followers."

Orion snorts, a sound devoid of humor. "No, we shouldn't worry about the army. It's not like they're the main enemy or anything. No, we should worry about a god, who may lead his sheep against us."

I cock an eyebrow at him. "You are not familiar with the history of Old Earth, are you?"

Orion's face hardens. "What good would that do?"

"Much of Old Earth's history is covered in blood, because of gods."

Orion rolls his eyes. "What does any of that have to do with us?"

I sigh. "A great deal. If Rhialt leads the attack against the humans, the Nessians - and humans who follow him - will go to much greater lengths to win."

"We have our own gods leading our side," Orion points out. "So our side will likewise go to extremes."

I shake my head. "It is not the same," I insist. "The people who worship Rhialt have actively done so for many generations. Our gods were raised from the dead to fulfill a role they have not held in hundreds of years. They are gods, but they do not have the same power that Rhialt does. Do not make that mistake."

Orion bit off whatever he wants to say and shrugs irritably.

"Fine. What else do you know?"

"The suns are coming closer now," I say, looking at the horizon, where Dunwaki hides. "They do that every 150 years or so, you understand. When they do, the Nessians traditionally hide in their caves and wait til it passes."

Niki looks up at me, confused. "Why?"

"It becomes unbearably hot and water is even harder to find than it is now, whether you can believe that or no. The caves offer cool protection and water."

"What about the humans? What will they do when the suns get too close?" Orion demands.

I smile sadly. "I imagine that is part of the Nessians' plan. Well, Rhialt's plan, really. Surely you have noticed how much hotter it has been these last few months? It will only get worse. Dunwaki will be at its closest approach in a matter of days. Humans can withstand the heat for a short time, but they will not be able to survive long without the Nessians mining for water. And the Nessians will not mine for it any longer."

"Because they will be going to the caves," Niki says softly.

"Exactly. They will leave in droves for their hidden caves, and the humans will be left to fend for themselves. While they are thus incapacitated, the Nessian army will make its move. If it all goes well, there will be little bloodshed." I hesitate.

"But?" Orion prompts.

"But if Rhialt is leading the strike, then the humans will be

enslaved."

"Damn it," Orion seethes. "How are we supposed to fight someone we can't even see?"

"Can't you?" I ask.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You are a spirit," I point out. "You can see things the mortals cannot. Such as those gods," I say, nodding my head in the direction of the most recent bouts of argument.

"So..."

"So you must lead as many of the dead humans as you can against Rhialt, under the leadership of yourself and the gods. But we must also convince the living, breathing human army to stand against the living, breathing Nessian army."

"Ah." Orion lets his breath out. He looks much older than his twenty-nine years.

I slowly rise to my feet. "I must go. We can do nothing about the battle until Dunwaki is here and the Nessians make their move. The best you can do is approach the military and get their support. When Rhialt makes himself known, we can fight."

"Wait. How do you know so much about what the Nessians will do?" Orion asks suspiciously.

"You are not the only mortals I watched from the Establishment," I say simply. I turn and begin to walk.

According to the book that lies heavy in my pocket, the myth of the underground ocean has some truth to it. Finding it and

leading the human refugees to it is my job. I have mere days before the battle is supposed to begin.

* * *

"To the red rise of the Mother City lies Nuntia, where the giver of life flows. Follow the red rise until it sets two times. On the second setting will be a tree, unlike any other tree on Kanewaki. Its leaves are as green as our fathers' fish, and without poison. The tree is the marker. Head blue rise from this tree for two more settings. Here are the mountains. Here is life."

These are the words of the anonymous author of my guidebook. "Red rise" means the direction in which Dunwaki rises, east-northeast. The book mentions fish, which have never been seen on Terra Arcturus, as far as I can tell, but I know the story behind that, too.

To head "blue rise" is, in turn, to follow the direction in which Bolwaki rises, which is east-southeast. There will I find the mountains, unnamed on any Nessian map, named Kea Mons by the human geologists, presumably because, on the maps, the mountain rises slowly but nonetheless owns the landscape. And somewhere in the Kean mountains lies this cave with the underground ocean.

I shrug. No point in putting it off til later. Being dead, I feel no need for rest or water or food. With time running short, as I feel it is, I can continue through the night, accelerate my pace, reach the mountains in half that time - assuming I can keep faithful in my directions.

* * *

The stories say that once, Kanewaki was as blue as the sky above. Land dotted the planet, here a small continent, there an archipelago, and over here a small island chain. Trees flourished on these sparse bits of dry land, spreading over the dirt like a virus. But it was a welcome virus. It sheltered the Nessian people from the hot sun, especially during the deep approach of Dunwaki. Water was abundant, then. During those hot, hot years, Nessians hid beneath the sheltering trees and fished as their fathers had taught them to fish, and they were content.

The Nessian people believe that Rhialt put them on Kanewaki exactly as they are. All animals on Kanewaki have always been exactly as they are. This notion is exemplified in the perfect way that the Nessian people were adapted to Kanewaki's environment. Their strong, thick tails allowed them to dangle from the branches of the trees, to lure the fish from the water. The trees developed thick branches that could hold root in the shifting tides. The fish changed color depending on the amount of light shining upon them. The birds ate the seeds from the trees, but also scattered them, creating more trees. The insects kept the ecosystem from collapsing. All was perfect.

The stories tell us that when the water dried up, the trees died, the birds fled, the bugs reigned, and everything fell into chaos. But it was not until many, many years later, when our visitors arrived, that we saw that Rhialt's promised Time of Trial

had arrived. If we successfully completed his test, we, as a species, would once again flourish. The water which lies hidden in Nuntia would spring forth to cover the planet once more. The trees would return, and with it, harmony. Ecological perfection. But these promises did not tell us how to pass his test. And so we failed.

Now, we are slaves. We own nothing. We have no water to drink, no trees to relax beneath, no fish to hunt. We do not own our family homes, or our clothes, or our souls. We mine water for those to whom we once gave it freely. If Rhialt is punishing us for any crime, it is the crime of compassion. And we are paying dearly for it.

Or perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps this is the Trial, this period of slavery and humiliation. Perhaps, once we have served our sentence, we will be allowed back into the Paradise our foremothers once knew. The Paradise our forefathers harvested.

Must we simply bide? Will there be a sign? Will we ever know harmony again?

Or does Rhialt lie? Is Rhialt a lie? Do we break our backs for a promise given by a shadow who disappeared with our trees? Is all for naught?

I must say, I do not know. I know neither the beginning of our story, nor the end. I can only pen my small part of it and hope that the future can interpret it.

Those are the final pages of the book, written by an anonymous Nessian around the time that I died. I am the future who must

interpret her words. I wish I could give comfort to her, tell her that great trials lead to great triumphs and that her god, who is most assuredly real, will lead her people there.

But that comfort would be a lie. Because in human history, at least, not all great trials end happily. Some of them wither away, covered in blood, with no resolution. Her god, like many of ours, will cut the veins of her people, bleed them out onto the soil, and claim the sickly fruit that grows from it as the triumph of the heroes. What one side sees as murder, the other side sees as sacrifice. And gods, no matter whose they are, love sacrifice.

Her words, so bleak, so hopeless, ring true. And I will not deny her that truth. I will not deny her people that truth..

I wish, not for the first time, that this was, indeed, a war in which we could subdue the enemy without fighting, as Lao Tzu urged. But Rhialt will not be placated, and he will rile his followers until they will not be placated, either. And the humans, who love conflict as they love their own mothers, will not stand idly by and allow themselves to be trampled. And so the cycle continues.

I continue walking, one foot in front of the other, and to distract myself, I find Orion's mind.

Slipping into it cautiously, like a hot bath, I relax and watch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Orion gritted his teeth and growled. Useless. All of it, useless. He was a soldier, an airman, in the *real world*. How the hell was he supposed to lead people in a fight against something he'd never been able to see before? Pointless.

And yet...

"Damn it," he muttered. He looked at Niki, who was frowning down at the map as though she had a clue how to read it. "Can you bring the gods to me?"

She shook herself and nodded. "Yeah, sure."

He watched her walk away, her boyish hips swaying as she climbed the small sand dunes. Would she have ever been able to give him children? It wasn't something he'd ever thought about before, but now that it was impossible, he found himself wondering.

Pointless.

The gods and goddesses wandered over, refusing to look at each other, and refusing to acknowledge that they had no clue what to do. As far as they were concerned, Orion thought, they were here of their own volition, and damn anyone who said otherwise.

Gods they may be, but he'd never had such an unruly group of enlisted soldiers in his entire life.

They surrounded him as he knelt before the stolen map, glaring down at him from inhuman heights. He rose to his feet and brushed the sand off his knees, pretending that he had all the time in the world. If he was to be their commander, he couldn't let them know

how uncomfortable they made him.

"We need a plan of action," he said. Straightforward was the best way to go. "I need to know what you each excel at, so I know where to put you."

Some of the gods appeared surprised at this, and sneaked looks at the other gods, to see how they took this announcement. Others, though, appeared unimpressed and merely stared at him.

"Look," Orion said, striving for patience, "I realize this is not an ideal situation for *any* of us. But you're here, and I assume you volunteered to be here, so we need to figure this shit out so we can all go home. Wherever that is," he added under his breath.

Loki stepped forward, looking so impertinent that Orion had to hide a smile. "I find that I am excellent at creating confusion. And," he added, with a leer at Oðin, who stood stone-faced, "cleaning up after others."

"Only because you make the mess in the first place," Freyja snorted.

Loki shrugged and grinned, accepting her assessment.

Orion nodded. "Okay, good." He could surely find a way to use confusion to his advantage. Most likely. Hopefully.

"We who reign in Asgard are great warriors," Oðin said, with only a hint of bragging. "However, in addition, I know the secrets of the runes, and can use them to our advantage."

"Runes. Right." Orion squinted at him. Oðin was old, with a long grey beard and a slouched grey hat, which had clearly seen

better days. The old man stood tall, though, unencumbered by the usual aches and pains of old age. He carried a staff, nearly as tall as he was, though Orion wasn't sure why - Oðin didn't use it for walking, so far as he could tell.

"The runes are magic," Thor murmured out of the side of his mouth to Orion.

"Oh! Right." He gave Thor a grateful look and the big man nodded solemnly.

"Huginn and Munin can also aid us, I think," Oðin added, as an afterthought.

"Er..."

"Thought and Memory," Thor muttered, clearing his throat to hide the sound. "His ravens. Reconnaissance."

Orion could have kissed the big man but settled, instead, for a relieved smile. Thor winked.

"I, son of Oðin and Jord," Thor said loudly, "with the help of Mjolnir, control the lightning." He stroked the large, anchor-shaped hammer that hung in a holster on his side.

"Ah...great. Great," Orion said. He glanced up at the sky, which was lightening towards dawn, the stars winking out of existence one by one. Lightning, huh? Well, if it could be managed, it would go a long way towards scaring the bejeezus out of the living humans. Maybe they'd help fight, if they were scared enough.

"Do not worry, human," Thor said gruffly, as though he had

read Orion's mind. "Lightning can be created anywhere, even in a place as dead as this." He looked around with a grimace.

Orion nodded. "Okay. Good. Yeah." He hoped his face didn't show how lost he was.

"Great. And, you, Freyja?" Orion asked hesitantly. "Will you aid him?"

Freyja smiled at her twin. "But of course."

"If you can show me the technology that the enemy will use," Andvari offered, "I can make it useless."

"Oh? Okay." Orion smiled, a bit uncertain. Technology? Did the Nessians even have technology worth tampering with?

"Water finders," Niki whispered. "Various gadgets. And their ships, obviously."

Orion nodded in her direction, distracted. "Thanks," he whispered.

"I might be of best use to, er, Bob, over here," Satan said, a sarcastic smile planted on his face. He leered at the congenial old man, standing off to one side.

Bob looked him up and down and grinned. "I can find some use for you, I'm sure."

"And what will you be doing, Bob?" Orion asked, feeling ridiculous. Who was he to ask *Bob* what he was going to be doing?

"Well, someone needs to talk to Rhialt, I am thinking," Bob replied casually. "I'm sure Satan and I can handle that."

Orion nodded, unsure how to respond to that. "And, er, Sigurð? Will you be -"

"I would like to keep my pet human near me, if that is all right with you?" Loki said, with a glance towards Freyr and Freyja.

Freyja shrugged. "Matters not to me. Freyr?"

"He is no pet," Freyr sneered, "but yes, he may help you."

"I thank you most profusely," Loki replied, with an ironic bow in his direction.

Orion looked around him at the group of gods staring just as expectantly back at him, and he took a deep breath.

"According to the Scribe, we have only a few days to get everything ready," he began. "At that point, once more according to the Scribe, the suns will be at closest proximity, beginning the war. It will begin," he added, seeing the confused looks, "because the Nessians are counting on the humans being unprepared for the shift in temperature and water levels. That's what the Scribe is doing right now. He's finding the water. In the meantime, we prepare the humans.

"So, here is what I need from you," Orion said, growing firmer. "Bob, Satan, I need you to go see what Rhialt is doing. *Don't* engage him - we just need information right now."

Bob and Satan raised a cynical eyebrow at each other, then nodded. Putting their heads together, they began to walk away from the group.

"Freyja and Freyr, I need you to go to the humans - dead ones,

living ones, doesn't matter - and see how many you can get to join up in your army. The Scribe says that this battle will be just as ethereal as it will be real, so get as many as you can." He grimaced. "The dead ones will probably be scattered about, because people are dying all the time and now they have nowhere to go. May I suggest you split up? Nalagan has a huge human population, but Urania, just up the road, is comprised entirely of humans."

Freyja turned before he was finished and whistled. Freyr wandered off in the opposite direction. By the time he had disappeared from view, a large carriage rolled into view, led by - Orion blinked, and blinked again, but no, it really was - cats. Cats the size of Bengal tigers, but appearing as harmless as Jenny, his childhood pet. With a final word to Oðin and Thor, and an amused look at Loki, Freyja rode off towards Nalagan.

"Um, okay, great. Andvari, you're going to go with Niki - yes, Niki, I'll need your help, too," he said, interrupting Niki's objection, "and you're going to disable or recalibrate the Nessian weapons. Can't do much about the ships until they actually arrive, but when they do, I'll need you there, too."

"What about the water finders?" Niki asked, resigned. Her eye held a glint that he couldn't decipher and didn't have the time to figure out just now.

"Well, they already know where to find the water, right?"

"Yes, but that water will be gone by the time the suns get here."

"If we destroy the water finders, will the Nessians die of

dehydration?"

"Well, yes -"

"That's why we won't be destroying them."

Niki gaped at him. "Orion, they're the enemy -"

Orion looked at her, very hard, trying to make her see, as he'd never been able to make her see while living. "They're not 'the enemy,' love. They haven't been 'the enemy' since they lost. They're on the opposite side, but most of them aren't fighting." He paused. "Have you ever seen a man die of thirst?"

She shook her head, mute.

"He swells up, his joints and tongue. He gets nasty headaches. Stops peeing. Gets real weak and ends up shitting himself cos he can't make it to the toilet in time. By the time he dies, he's got a fever high enough to cook his brain, he's having seizures, and his heart is ready to explode. Sometimes, it does."

He looked at her, making sure she understood, then said quietly, "It's very unpleasant, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Let them keep their little water finders. If they're going to die, let them die quickly."

She swallowed hard and nodded.

"Good," he said, wiping the memory off his hands onto his pants. "Get to it."

Thor, Oðin, and Loki with his pet human still stood there, watching him patiently. Orion sighed.

"You three would be excellent candidates for scaring the shit

out of the humans."

Loki smiled, a slow, wicked smile.

"That will only be useful if we could scare them into *helping* us," Orion added, staring at Loki.

Loki continued to smile.

"It will also require some prevarication on your parts," Orion said, looking from one god to the next. "I hope that doesn't conflict with your morals?"

Loki giggled. Thor, with an amused look Loki's way, shook his head. Oðin simply stared at Orion.

"Good," Orion said, rubbing his hands together. "Oðin, you're going to need your ravens, er..."

"Huginn and Munin," Oðin supplied, his gaze turning thoughtful.

"Thanks, yes, Huginn and Munin, to see what's going on, in detail, if they can. You're going to use that information to make an appearance to the living humans, if that's possible, as God-of-Old."

Oðin smiled grimly. "I can appear to the humans in any guise, and have done, many times. Which god is God-of-Old?"

Orion puffed out his cheeks in thought. "To be quick about it, he's the most recent deity to be followed by a large number of humans."

Oðin nodded, accepting his forgotten place amongst the ancient deities. Or perhaps, just accepting his role as master illusionist.

"One thing God-of-Old was well-known for was thunder and lightning," Orion continued, this time looking at Thor. "In the videologs, whenever God-of-Old gave a revelation, it was accompanied by a lightning storm. Can you...?"

Thor shrugged his gigantic shoulders. "I imagine you will need me to hide in a corner while Oðin All-Father is, er, prophesying?"

"That would be great," Orion said. "And Loki..."

Loki's excitement was nearly palpable.

"In the stories of God-of-Old, he had an adversary who liked to create trouble. Lots of trouble," Orion added, smiling at the look of anticipation on the smaller god's face. "Satan, as a matter of fact."

Loki blinked. "*That* Satan?" he asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the now disappeared figure.

Orion nodded. "Yup. Stories get exaggerated along the way, wouldn't you agree?"

Loki's mouth curled upward in an ironic smile. "You might say."

"So I need you to create havoc. Lots of it. Don't hurt anybody, but the more confusion you can create, the better. Monsters. Monsters are always good."

Loki's eyes shone in excitement.

Orion turned to Oðin. "That's one of the 'issues' you're going to address. Satan is clearly ready to take over the town, and

why should he be ready to do that?" Orion smiled, getting excited himself about the depth of this plan. "Because he knows that there's an attack coming, and he wants the humans to be unprepared. So you have come, Oðin God-of-Old, to create peace and lead the humans to victory."

"And Loki?" Oðin said, giving a sideways look to the smaller god. "What am I to do with him?"

"Er, don't hurt him," Orion said quickly. "He's on your side, remember. He's just pretending to be against you. Right?" Orion glared at Loki.

"Right, right," Loki said, clearly not paying attention.

"Loki has committed a terrible crime," Oðin growled. "He murdered my son, Baldr, and -"

"That's supposed to lead to your end-of-the-world battle, right?" Orion said, trying to remember what the Scribe had told him.

"Yes," Oðin replied gruffly.

"This is not that battle," Orion said firmly. "It would seriously fuck up the way *your* battle is supposed to go if he were to die early, right?"

Thor put a calming hand on his father's shoulder. "Now is not the time for revenge."

Oðin glared at Thor with his one good eye.

"He is doing what he does best," Thor insisted. "Stirring up trouble. He will pay for his crimes, All-Father, but at the time that the Volva appointed. This is not that time."

Oðin wrenched his shoulder away from his larger son's grasp. "He is my false brother," Oðin muttered. "But I will wait."

Orion's shoulders sagged in relief. "Good. Thank you. Thank you."

"Let us go," Thor suggested, looking at Oðin, Loki, and Sigurð. "Plenty of time to stir up trouble, eh, Uncle?" He winked at Loki.

Loki grinned. "Yes."

And the quartet wandered off towards the town, Loki and his pet on one side of Thor, Oðin standing well away from the group on the other side.

"God, I hope they don't kill each other," Orion murmured, then shook his head.

Realizing he was alone, he ran his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. In the distance, he could hear Freyr shouting at the human souls on the other side of the sand dune. The other gods were, presumably, doing as he had asked. And he? He had the hardest job of them all, he thought.

With a brief glance towards the east, where Dunwaki was sleepily rising, he began to walk back to Nalagan. The air was warm, even this early, and he felt a brief stab of pity for the humans who still wore mortal suits in this weather.

Dunwaki - the red god. Red, the color of anger, of blood - well, human blood - of passion. Passion, Orion read once, used to just be a speech given when someone had died. The Passion of the

Christ, he had read, God-of-Old's human son, had had nothing to do with emotions; it had everything to do with the after-effects of his death. The word changed over time, but the original meaning was appropriate now, wasn't it?

Passion. He hoped it wouldn't be a speech over him, Niki, or any of these gods who so thoroughly annoyed him.

Shaking his head, he marched into Nalagan, into battle with his former superiors.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dunwaki had cleared the horizon and Bolwaki was following suit by the time Orion arrived at the base. He stood outside the gates - iron bars, brought from Old Earth, for reasons above Orion's paygrade - and looked at the squat, intimidating sandstone building.

Long shadows reached towards him, as though they were trying to grab him, smuggle him inside, make him one of theirs once again. Orion's lips twitched, not quite a smile, but an acknowledgement of the debt the military thought he owed, a debt that didn't exist.

You are one of us, the blank windows intoned. *Come, join your brothers.*

And sisters, Orion thought cynically.

Yes, them, too, the windows admitted. *Come back to us. What barrier is death, after all?*

It's a hell of a barrier, and one not crossed lightly.

Shifting his shoulders, uncomfortable with the knowing looks that the windows gave him, he opened the gate and walked through it.

Dry sand crunched beneath his sandals, and for a brief moment, Orion was glad that he had died in civvies. His shirt was coarse cotton, his pants loose and airy, and his sandals were designed to make walking in the desert easier. Had he been in uniform, he was certain it be much too easy for them to claim him as one of their own, refused to let him return to Niki and his renegade gods.

Glad, too, because he wouldn't feel insubordinate if he led people to war against the Force's wishes.

The door opened reluctantly, as it always did, unwilling to move due to the large amount of sand caught in its hinges. Orion shoved it until it laboriously gave way. The hallway, with its ceramic tile floors, was dark. Electricity was solar-powered, and nobody was around yet to turn on the lights.

Orion shrugged. Very well, then. He went through the building, turning lights on in every room, pausing in this office or that to rifle through the papers sitting unguarded atop desks. Memoranda regarding other pods of humans on far-flung planets, where the Force on Terra Arcturus could do little good, even could they arrive in time to help. Page after page of expense reports. Orion grimaced to see that the major expenses of holding a base on Terra Arcturus were water, food, and bail from jail, in that order. Slaves mined for the water, of course, but it was humans who sold it, and some of those merchants were little better than thieves.

Of titillating interest, but little practical use, were the

love letters stashed in the Commander's desk drawer, written to him by a high-ranking politician from Old Earth - likely why the Commander had been sent here in the first place: far-flung, out of the way, little danger aside from the most recent Insurrection - which he arrived well after, anyway - and he'd be the highest ranking officer in this part of the galaxy. Orion smirked; this token of adoration seemed a bit bitter to him. Maybe the affair had gone sour?

He sorted through the rest of the Commander's paperwork, which was substantial, but found nothing of interest, nothing that pointed to an existing military threat one moon over. Orion scrubbed a hand through his hair. Maybe they really didn't know.

The last office he came to was the first office in the hallway, the secretary's. A little man named Olivier. Olivier was a quiet, hard-working soldier, with a nose slightly too big for his face, and eyes that constantly squinted through the round spectacles seated on the edge of that nose. Orion didn't know a whole lot about him - he kept to himself, spoke only when spoken to, never raised an opinion of his own; was, in fact, the perfect soldier. As such, Orion, and many others, hardly recognized his existence.

The usual bits of correspondence littered his desk: message requests, receipts, memos to be issued to the soldiers, and so forth. Orion felt under the edge of the desk, not really expecting to find anything hidden.

His fingers felt the edge of an envelope, sticking through a crevice in the desk. He opened the main drawer, but could find no

envelopes.

"Ha," he muttered, pulling the drawer out all the way. Reaching his arm into the hole, he felt a square bit of wood give way. He pulled this out, carefully, grabbed the envelope, replaced the hidden door, replaced the drawer itself, and went over to the corner chair to read what he had found.

It was written in the Nessian language.

"God damn," Orion growled. He didn't know a single damn person who could read the language, either. He couldn't exactly force Olivier to reveal its contents, and Olivier wouldn't incriminate himself anyway. He felt certain that he held, in his hand, proof that the Nessian army was planning an attack, and he couldn't do a damn thing with it.

Orion stood and began to pace. The letter could very well be nothing. But why was it written in Nessian? Olivier could be a secret follower of Rhialt. Wouldn't that be akin to treason, with the impending attack? The Force might not know about the attack. But surely Olivier would, if he was a follower of Rhialt?

It could just be a receipt for services done. Then why was it written in Nessian? Nessians knew better than to write in their own pidgin language. Could be an ignorant little bastard. Or it could be a secret code, designed to relay information without the bulk of the Force knowing about it.

Why was it hidden? If it was innocent, like a bill of lading, Olivier'd have had no reason to hide it. It could just be a religious tract. Remember what happened to Niki.

Orion grunted. He didn't need to think about that right about now.

The Force kept a linguist on hand in order to interpret intercepted communications. Could he maybe have her interpret this?

He'd have to track her down, and he was already facing an uphill battle on a glass slope in the rain, trying to make the Commander listen to him. Hell, the Commander couldn't even see him. It would have to be a conversation held completely via writing.

"Who the hell left the damn lights on?" a voice roared down the hallway. Well, well. Speak of the devil.

"Olivier!" the Commander shouted, his heavy footfalls descending upon the secretary's office. Orion waited.

The Commander shoved his head into the room. He was not a tall man, but he was a broad one, with a thick grey moustache that bristled with each stentorian breath. His head jerked around, looking for Olivier.

"Goddamn fop," the Commander said, storming back to his office. Orion could hear him cursing the entire way back up the hallway.

Looking uncertainly at the paper he held crushed in his hand, Orion shrugged and slipped out into the hallway after the Commander. The thicker man was storming his way down the hall to his own office, his fingers twitching in anger. Orion followed him.

Once in his office, the Commander sat down very deliberately in his cushioned chair - one of the few luxuries in the Spartan

room. He glanced towards the door, where Orion stood unnoticed, and with a grunt, reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a square bottle filled with amber liquid. Orion felt his mouth drop open. Whisky. Honest-to-God *whisky*, possibly the last fucking bottle in the universe. How long had the bastard had it? Was there any more?

Orion snorted, recalling his recent less-than-living status and realizing that, even if the Commander was sitting on an entire horde of the stuff, it would do Orion no good. He wouldn't be able to taste it; his days of inebriety were long past.

Still, he eyed it with envy.

The Commander poured two fingers into a tumbler and sipped at it, eyes closed. Through wooden shutters, Orion could see the slanted morning sunlight, and he thought, with wry amusement, that the Commander must have been having a hell of a time lately, if he considered it acceptable to be drinking whisky before lunch.

Orion sidled into the room and sat down in the chair across the desk from the Commander. The man didn't notice, his eyes still closed in bliss. The paper crinkled in Orion's pocket, and he reached towards the papers sitting on the Commander's desk. Plucking a pen from the holder, he began to scribble his note.

The scratching of the pen must have been what alerted him, because the Commander made a choking sound, like the whisky had gone down the wrong tube. Glancing up at him, Orion saw that the Commander's face was pale and he was staring at the pen in horror. Orion snorted and went back to writing.

The pen flew from his fingers and Orion looked up, surprised.

The Commander was now looking at his own hand, as though to make sure it was still attached to his arm. Confirming that it was, he snatched the unfinished note up and, holding it gingerly, began to read it.

Orion raised an eyebrow at him. The changes on the Commander's face were really quite amusing. He mouthed the words as he read, his eyes growing wider, his face vacillating between pallid horror and puce rage, the whisky sitting at his elbow, utterly forgotten.

Shrugging, feeling not a little mischievous, Orion picked up the glass and smelled it. He could smell the faint hint of liquor, as though the whisky were just a memory and not sloshing right beneath his nose. He dipped his tongue into the glass, but could taste nothing. He had expected it; that didn't mean he wasn't disappointed.

The Commander put the note down and now stared at the apparently floating glass with an expression approaching indignation.

"Hey, now! Give that here!" he said, grabbing the glass from Orion's hand.

Orion let it go suddenly, regarding with a mixture of amusement and regret the amber stain on the Commander's white shirt.

"Damn!" the man hissed, dabbing at it with a napkin pulled from beneath some papers.

Orion sat back down and merely watched him.

"Who the hell are you?" the Commander demanded of the space somewhere to Orion's right.

Orion plucked the sheet of paper from beneath the Commander's nose and wrote his name.

Orion Andersen.

The Commander took the paper back and blinked at the name. Then he blinked again. "Andersen?" he asked. The tone in his voice wasn't quite fear, nor was it disbelief. More like...confusion.

Orion leaned back in his chair as realization dawned on him. The Force didn't know he was dead. AWOL, maybe, but not dead.

He thought back to the confrontation he'd had with Thompkins. The man hadn't appeared surprised to be asked by a ghost - the term made Orion's mouth twitch in amusement - about the death of Orion's lover. Nor did he seem terribly surprised by the idea that that ghost might be Orion. Which made him wonder if Thompkins knew about his death before the rest of the Force did. And if so, how?

"Andersen?" the Commander said again, this time looking around as though to address Orion.

Orion stood and walked around to stand beside the Commander. He placed a hand on the man's shoulder, not sure how much good it would do, but figuring it was worth a shot.

Goosebumps shivered up the man's flesh where Orion's hand touched it and the Commander flinched. Then, straightening his uniform unnecessarily - Orion smiled to see him recovering his dignity - he reached a groping hand towards Orion's. It landed on

Orion's fingers.

He couldn't feel the Commander's hand any more than the Commander could truly feel his. But the Commander knew that Orion was there, and that was what was important.

"Why are you dead, Andersen?" the Commander asked wearily, still facing the chair on the other side of his desk.

Hardly the most important question, but Orion grabbed the pen and paper and answered it, as briefly and factually as possible. He summed it up in one word.

"Suicide?" the Commander said aloud, surprised. "Why, for God's sake?"

Oh, boy. That one could take awhile to answer, and he had neither the time nor the inclination to get into his sordid history with Rhialt. So he again wrote one word.

"Niki," the Commander mused. "Your girlfriend? Yes, of course," he said, answering his own question. "A shame, to be sure."

Orion tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk, watching the Commander think over the new information. The man had the slow, ponderous gaze of a cow chewing its cud, and Orion wanted nothing more to shake him into action. He chuckled without humor. Right, because that would do a lot of good. So he just watched.

The Commander stabbed his finger at Orion's note. "How do you know about this Nessian army, Andersen?"

Orion could hear the unasked question beneath the surface.

*How did you gain access to information the rest of us don't have?
And further beneath that, Are you a goddamn traitor, Andersen?*

Orion plucked both pen and paper from his grasp and wrote the abbreviated version of everything that had happened: his suicide, hell, the Scribe, the collaboration of the gods. But mostly, the Scribe and his helpful, vague knowledge.

The Commander read the paper and set it down with a sigh. He rubbed his eyes, as though he had a headache.

"Scribe? Gods? You really expect me to believe these fairy tales, Andersen?"

Orion scowled and scribbled, *You're talking to a ghost.*

The Commander opened his eyes, saw that, and laughed. "Yeah, okay. Let's say, for a minute, that you're really here and I'm not just drunk. How would this Scribe know so much, and where the hell did you manage to procure gods?"

Orion tapped the pen against his teeth, thinking. To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure about the state of things, himself. But he couldn't really show that to the Commander, lest he lose his only momentum. So, where he didn't know the truth, he made shit up.

The Scribe can enter people's minds. I'd be surprised if he couldn't enter Nessian minds, too. He passed his knowledge onto his particular Judge, which was seen as treason. They were both sent to Hell - he called it Tartarus - and he managed to escape. He found some of the gods in Hell - Tartarus - and others joined him later.

"Hell, huh?" the Commander snorted. "An appropriate place for

the heathens. Why should they be bothered to help you, though?"

Orion threw up his hands in frustration. Fucking bastard, needing answers to everything, couldn't take anything on faith...

Grumbling, he dashed out a brief answer: *They consider us under their protection.*

The Commander's mouth curled up in an ironic smile.

"Protection. Sure. Then why do they need our help?"

We need you to fight the physical enemies - the Nessian army. We will take care of the civilians and Rhialt.

"Oh? And how will you take care of the civilians, pray tell, if they can't even see you?"

They can't see me, he wrote, underlining the last word three times. *But humans have been seeing gods for millennia.*

The Commander nibbled on the cuticle to his finger, then realized what he was doing and stopped. He curled and uncurled his fists several times, then took a deep breath.

"Fine. I'll need any information you've got, Andersen."

Finally. About damn time. With relief, he flipped the page over, and furiously wrote all the information he had: the proximity of the suns; the systematic withdrawal of the Nessian slaves, who would appear as runaways; the Scribe looking for water for the human refugees; and the approximate size and nature of the Nessian army. Then, as an afterthought, he took the Secretary's paper from his pocket and placed it on top of the information.

The Commander grunted as he picked up the Nessian text,

scanning it. Apparently, he could read it. His eyes grew wider, then narrowed angrily.

"Where the hell did you find this, Andersen?" he asked, his voice very low.

Secretary's desk.

"Do you know what it is?"

No.

"It's basically the Nessian version of the Book of Revelation. This is the way their world ends," he murmured to himself. "But with a bang, not a whimper."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I close my eyes and breathe a sigh of relief at the promise of military aid. That would prove invaluable.

Opening my eyes, I see much of the same that I have been seeing for the last two days: desert. Dry, broken ground, untainted by sand, unblemished by bush, tree, or body of water. The suns blaze down on me, creating the effect of snow-blindness on the blank terrain. I smile wryly as I consider how lucky I am to not be experiencing the heat of the suns, just the light.

There is nothing to do, nothing to think of as I walk. No, I admit, that is not entirely true. There is much to think of, but nothing I *wish* to think of - not my friend, the Scribe, who risked much (but not all, I think bitterly) to keep knowledge of my book a secret; not the fate of Themis; not the uncertainty of my own

future.

As I walk, putting one foot ahead of the other, I begin to wonder whether my ability to see perspectives applies to deities, as well. As deities, they are well above my own station, but if my theories about the creation of the deities holds true, then they do not actually exist. Which would mean I would not be able to see from their perspective.

I smile, a quick jerk of the lips, as I realize that the only way to test my theory is, well, to *test* my theory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Satan looked over at Bob - Bob, what a joke! How had he ended up with a name as ridiculous as *that*? - and smiled, grateful, once again, to find that the god was, in fact, alive. Not only alive, it seemed, but kicking, too.

Satan caught Bob looking at him from the corner of his eye and dropped his gaze.

"Still don't believe it, huh?" Bob asked, straight-faced.

"Uh, yeah. Not really."

"If I can't kill you - or any of the assorted angels, demons, and monsters who share this plane with us - why on Earth would I be able to kill myself?" Bob mused.

"Greatest scam in the world," Satan admitted, unable to keep a note of admiration from his voice.

"Ah, now," Bob said casually. "Don't like that term, 'scam.' Implies that what I did was for personal gain. 'Profit' instead of 'prophet.'" He grinned. "Get it?"

Satan groaned obligingly, then got serious. "So, why then? Pretty big ruse for nothing, if you intended to reappear on the world's stage in time to save the day." He could hear the bitterness in his tone, but right now, he didn't really care all that much.

"Save the day?" Bob asked, surprised. "When have I ever 'saved the day'?"

"Guess you never listened to your own PR," Satan muttered. "You're - well, you were - like Superman, but less alien."

Bob's lips quirked into a quick smile, just as quickly lost. "No, not a superhero. Just like you're not a supervillain. Right? You've never listened to your own PR, have you?"

Satan snorted. "Not hardly. I could only wish for half the powers they've given me. I could rule the fucking world, if I could do as much as they said I did. Not," he added with a sidelong glance at Bob, "that it would have done me much good, mind."

"No, of course not," Bob replied blandly.

"So, why did you do it?" Satan repeated. His fingers twitched at his side and he had to bite his tongue to keep from saying what he really wanted to say. *How could you do it, old man? How could you go off and play a trick like that on me? We've been friends for, quite literally, forever, and you go off and fake your own death without letting me in on the secret? Just leave me sitting*

down there, surrounded by demons I invented, trying to ease the fucking loneliness of knowing my oldest friend is dead. How could you do it?

And then, the darker thought beneath the anger: *I bet you let the other angels in on it.*

Bob kept his gaze forward and his face blank. Satan wouldn't have been able to tell what the old man was thinking; he had never been able to do so, as a matter of fact. Bob kept his own damn counsel.

Oh. Huh. If Bob kept his own counsel, then maybe the other angels *didn't* know. Maybe Jesus and all the little archangels were just as in the dark as he, Satan, was. And if that were so...then he, Satan, actually had a hand up on the competition, because he knew Bob was alive when they didn't.

His shoulders relaxed, coming to this realization. And Bob smiled, seeing it.

"I have my reasons," Bob said. "Most important of which is this battle we have coming up."

Satan blinked at that. "Wait, what?"

"You saw everything that happened, right?" Bob asked quietly, looking down at the ground as they walked. "You saw the way they acted when they got here? Like not a damn thing mattered except what they wanted? They were acting like children!"

"Well, yes," Satan said slowly. "Because they are children."

"I didn't raise them to be that way, and you didn't raise them

to be that way - in spite of how hard they tried to lay that at your feet," Bob added, smiling briefly. "They became that way on their own."

"I guess..."

"But nominally, at least, they still listed me as 'Father figure,' someone who should be listened to. Ha," Bob said cynically. "They haven't listened to me in millennia. But, do you know the human saying, 'Actions speak louder than words?'"

Satan nodded. "Also, 'speak softly and carry a big stick.'"

"Well, so it was. I disappeared for awhile, went off and twiddled and tweaked situations here and there, and now I've come for my 'triumphant' return," he said, with a look of distaste at the dead land surrounding them.

"Situations, huh?" Satan said, raising an eyebrow at Bob.

Bob looked back at him innocently.

Satan snorted. "Fine," he said. "Keep your secrets. I take it you know how to get to Rhialt's palace?"

"Oh, yes," Bob replied.

"Great. Lead on."

"Gotta get to the temple first."

"Temple?" Satan barked a laugh. "Since when have you ever needed a *temple* to get what you wanted?"

"Rhialt doesn't play by the same rules the other - human - gods do. Did. Do." He shook his head at the futility of finding

the proper verb tense. "If we're going to get anywhere with him, we have to play by his rules."

"Didn't that human bastard - Orion, was it? - tell us not to engage this Rhialt? We couldn't announce our arrival more loudly if we played bagpipes, going via temple."

Bob shrugged and grinned. "Surely, you're not afraid of a little challenge?"

Satan looked at him, affronted. "Let it never be said that I ever turned down a wager from you, Old Man."

"So far as I know, it isn't."

* * *

The temple stood on the 'blue rise' side of Nalagan, technically outside the city. A rough stretch of cracked land sat between the broad, tan building and the nearest building in town: a bar. Appropriate, Satan thought.

The building was very wide and rose to a height of two average Nessian males. This had something to do with their version of scripture, Bob explained to Satan's half-listening ear. Something to do with the supposed size of Rhialt himself, as well as various feats that were enacted as a standard part of worship.

There were no doors on the front of the building, just a large, dark entry. Standing outside the temple, Satan could not see anything inside. According to Bob, that was intentional, as well, reminding the Nessianians of the mystery of birth. Bob entered without

hesitation and Satan, taking a deep breath, followed.

It was empty. The stone floor hadn't been swept since the last sandstorm, apparently, because piles of sand stood in the corners of the room and granules crunched beneath his feet. An ancient wooden table stood against one wall, looking for all the world as though a neglectful parent had abandoned it. Satan whistled through his teeth at the sight of it: wood hadn't been seen on Terra Arcturus in nearly a thousand years. Ropes hung from the ceiling - no doubt used in the mysterious worship services. But the place looked unused, and Satan said as much.

Bob gave him a cynical look. "Do you think the humans would really let their slaves worship?"

"Ah."

"Anyway," Bob said briskly, "what we need is against that wall."

"The...table?"

"Mm-hmm. The reason it's considered sacred is that wood is a gift from Rhialt - all the more precious since the gift has been revoked, you see. But we can use it to get to Rhialt's version of heaven."

"Well, wouldn't any wood be able to do that?" Satan asked logically. Wood was wood, so far as he could see, and using wood that had an identifiably religious history seemed to be courting unnecessary trouble. Contrary to popular belief, he wasn't a big fan of getting into unnecessary trouble.

Bob shrugged, a mischievous look on his face. "I'm sure. But this'll be more fun. Don't tell me you're scared."

Satan looked at his friend, eyebrow cocked. "Me? You kidding?"

Bob began to cluck like a chicken.

"Oh, for - come on, *Old Man*, if we're going to do this, let's do it and be done with it!"

"'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly,' huh?" Bob said, grinning.

"Yeah, and that bit about 'If the assassination could trammel up the consequence, and catch with his surcease success,' too. If this 'might be the be-all and the end-all here,' then best we get to it, eh?" Satan said with a smirk. He knew his literature as well as Bob did - better, maybe, due to all the free time he'd had lately. Let the Old Man try to prove otherwise.

Bob grunted in amusement and said, "Well, all right, then."

Pushing aside some minor trepidations, Satan followed his friend to the altar.

Bridegroom, indeed.

* * *

I blink and shake my head, momentarily blinded by the brilliant light that had just enveloped Satan and Bob. A loud buzzing rings in my ears, as though I have just thrust my head into a hornets' nest, and shaking my head does nothing to dispel the feeling.

Finally, after several minutes, the buzzing dies out and the spots dancing before my eyes fade away and I am left with the bright double sunlight of Dunwaki and Bolwaki, standing directly overhead, on either side of me. I look around, trying to determine which direction I have just come from. Nothing. There is nothing to show where I have been or where I was going. The ground beneath my feet is hard-packed, cracked earth, where not even the heaviest footstep shows through. There are no bushes, depressions, landmarks of any sort from which I could gain my bearings. I briefly look upwards, note that the suns are at their apex, and cursing, sit down helplessly. I cannot continue my journey until I know which direction I must head, and I will not know *that* until the suns begin to set.

This being the final day that I follow Dunwaki's path, I know now that I will be late in arriving at the mythical tree the book promised. *If it is even still standing.* I shake my head roughly. If I begin thinking like that, everything will be lost.

Are you sure you are not lost, Scribe? the sneering voice in my head asks.

I take a deep breath, let it out, and take another, keeping my eyes closed. Then, as I let it out, I again seek Satan's mind.

* * *

Rhialt's palace was...pretty bare, in Satan's estimation. Lots of space, to be sure, but nearly nothing inside that space. The walls were marble, ice cold and passionless, and the long

hallway in which they now stood boasted several crystal windows through which bright ambiguous light flooded, and two marble benches - in case someone became so exhausted that they would risk a freezer burn on their ass, Satan thought, glancing at a bench in disdain.

A small fireplace was placed in the wall opposite the benches, as though offering a pitiful caveat to the iciness of its surroundings. There was no fire in the fireplace.

As he and Bob walked slowly down the long hallway, Satan - who hadn't felt cold in so many years, he thought he'd forgotten the sensation - shivered. The entire palace seemed like a winter wonderland, without the wonder. As he passed a frosted window, he glanced outside. Snow. There was fucking snow on the ground. Terra Arcturus hadn't seen snow in over a thousand years, if it had ever seen it. What was this god playing at?

Bob snorted as he, too, glanced out the window, then rolled his eyes at Satan. "Always want what we can't have, huh?" he murmured.

Satan shrugged. The hallway was long and monotonous. Every hundred feet or so stood a bench, opposite a cold fireplace, and then nothing else. After several minutes of this nonsense, Satan began to wonder whether they weren't on some kind of treadmill. He said as much to Bob.

Bob laughed quietly. "Well, yes and no. We're looking for an anomaly, something that doesn't fit in with everything else. Once we find that, we'll know that the illusion is at an end."

Anomaly. Right. Grumbling beneath his breath, Satan began

glaring at everything in the blank hallway, daring it to be different. But nothing. He sighed and began counting his footsteps, trying to keep his patience in check.

Eighty-nine, ninety, ninety-one...

Wait. He stopped and stared at the bench that sat so innocuously to his left. He touched it. It was just as cold as the rest of the marble in the hallway, just as real. But it shouldn't have been there.

Bob stopped ahead of him, apparently realizing that he was now alone. He looked back at Satan and raised an eyebrow.

"The benches come every hundred feet," Satan explained.
"Exactly one hundred."

Bob just looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

"This one came at 91 feet."

Bob's other eyebrow joined his curious one. "Oh?"

"Anomaly, do you think?"

"Possibly, possibly," Bob murmured, but he was grinning.
"Good work."

Feeling accomplished, Satan risked the freezer burn and sat down on the bench, watching his friend as he hummed tunelessly and touched the wall. Bob looked over his shoulder at Satan, then looked again at the wall.

"Fireplace," he muttered. "There's no fireplace."

"It's up there," Satan replied, pointing.

The fireplace stood where the bench would have stood, had things remained orderly. Groaning, he stood up and walked over to it. It looked the same as every other damn fireplace in this hall, with the exception that one of the white bricks lining the bottom stuck out, not enough to notice - unless you were looking for it.

Satan pointed wordlessly at it, and Bob nodded and knelt down beside it. With a definitive shove, he pushed the brick into alignment with the others and a large fire erupted into the pit.

"Interesting," Satan said, staring at the flames. They were hot, which meant, he thought, that they were real. Bob, apparently disagreed, and, getting down on his hands and knees, crawled into the fire.

"What the -! What are you doing?" Satan hissed. But Bob had disappeared.

He glanced up and down the hallway, but it was empty. He could hear the faint gravelly sound of ice pellets hitting the windows - the storm was apparently in full force now. Lowering himself to his haunches, Satan stared at the flames, feeling the blisters rising on his hands.

"Fucking gods," he muttered and crawled after Bob.

It wasn't like he was afraid of fire. After being trapped in Tartarus for all those many years, heat couldn't scare him. And he couldn't die. Not technically. But he could still feel pain. It was never debilitating or life-threatening - he was not mortal, after all - but it was unpleasant and Satan, as a rule, avoided things that were unpleasant.

Fortunately, the fire was not all that hot, once he was in it. Apparently, the heat had been a ruse, to warn people away from the door hidden inside the flames.

On the other side of the flames was a bright light. It was not the light of albedo, where sunlight reflected off the snow so brilliantly that it could blind you. This was the healthy sunlight of a spring day, complete with an astounding array of colors and scents. Satan had scarcely climbed to his feet before he was nearly jerked off them again.

"Hsst!" Bob whispered, his hand clamped over Satan's mouth. Satan nodded and Bob dropped his hand.

"This is the real palace," Bob murmured. "We have to be careful here - every single creature in this place was created by Rhialt, and follows his orders. Not unlike Hell and your demons, eh?"

Satan shot him a dirty look but didn't say anything.

"Or my angels," Bob added fairly. "Or the various trolls, giants, flying horses, water demons, snake monsters, what have you, from whatever religion you'd like to use. Point is, we have to step lightly."

"And carry a big stick?" Satan suggested with a smirk.

"Couldn't hurt. Got one on you?"

Satan shook his head.

"Ah, well. Let's get going." And Bob marched off across the grass, leaving Satan staring after him. For all his talk of

wariness, the Old Man was certainly acting brazenly.

With a deep sigh, Satan followed, his gaze darting everywhere, trying to find the hidden threat Bob had promised. *Somebody* had to keep an eye on the Old Man; why not him?

The air smelled fresh, fecund, but faint. As though he had caught the memory of a scent, instead of the scent itself. The clean scent of flowers, the dark scent of freshly-tilled earth, the slightly sweet scent of rotting leaves - and over it all, the faintest hint of damp. An ocean was nearby. Wishful thinking, indeed.

As though to validate his opinion that he was looking at a memory of life, instead of life itself, Satan realized that he could not hear the wind that shook the leaves and bent the grass; he could not hear the breaking of the waves that created the briny scent. He could hear them in his head, but not outside it. He clenched his jaw. This place made him uneasy.

Bob, however, appeared unimpressed by his surroundings. He looked around curiously, but not cautiously. Maybe, Satan thought, if the setting was in the memory, the creatures were there, too, and couldn't hurt them.

Still, he kept an eye out, just in case.

At the far side of the park sat a marble palace, with double-sided marble stairs leading to the balcony in front of the entrance. The doors, Satan saw, were made of wood and stood at twice the average height of a Nessian - somewhere around twelve feet. Not a coincidence, then.

Standing in front of the staircase, Bob looked up at the building with a slight frown. He tapped his foot as he thought. As Satan walked up to stand beside him, Bob looked at him and smiled wryly.

"Well, we can go through the front door, but I don't know what's on the other side," he said without preamble, answering the questions Satan hadn't had time to ask. "We can't climb marble and there are no windows at ground level. Thoughts?"

"Does Rhialt have a devil character, someone who stands in opposition to him?" Satan asked slowly.

Bob shook his head. "Not in the popular mythology. Once upon a time he did, though."

"What did he look like?"

"What makes you think it's a 'he'?" Bob asked, grinning.

"She, then."

"Like a Nessian, but in negatives. You might add a perfume of sulfur, while you're at it," he said, winking.

Satan gave him a cold look. His shape-shifting abilities were necessarily limited, because the religion that feared him made it a point to show him as a man. Early on, he could take on animal shapes - snake was popular, of course - but as the religion grew, changed, fractured, and exploded, his role had become more and more concrete: that of Man.

He hadn't even attempted a proper shifting of shape in many years. The last time he tried it was just to make sure he still

could. Like a man who had been bed-ridden for months and for whom walking was strenuous exercise, so was changing from a bipedal hominid to an appendage-less reptile.

The change wouldn't be so drastic this time, of course. Nessians, who so greatly resembled Old Earth cats, were essentially bipedal hominids with tails. What would have resulted had orangutans and Bengal tigers had had an opportunity to make their illicit love real, perhaps. Satan snorted. He'd be just fine, as long as he could still think foolish thoughts.

He closed his eyes and focused on his shape, as it stood now. He was a man of average height, by modern standards, though a bloody giant by ancient standards; he kept his hair long and clubbed back, and the color was typically white, because it was too much trouble to try to pick a shade; his eyes were brown, because that was the genetic preference for much of Old Earth and who was he to argue with genetic preferences?; his skin was pale brown, which led to him being pronounced as a member of every single race on Old Earth - a deeply tanned Caucasian, an average Latino or Middle Easterner; a pale African; a typical southeast Asian; in other words, very efficient. His teeth were in good shape, his fingers long and delicate, his limbs lean. Able to blend in with any crowd, should he so choose. He usually didn't.

Nessians were of a height with him, and had a similar number of appendages, but that was where the similarities ended. He frowned, thinking of the differences. Pale skin, milky white, caused by the thick ozone layer; thick, saurian tail, less like an orangutan's than he had originally thought, though just as

versatile; too damn many fingers, too long, too thin - useless for any heavy duty work, he would have said, had he not seen the sheer amount of heavy lifting the miners did, day in and day out; hair a very pale color, very fine, never cut on pain of expulsion from the tribe; feet more like pads, with claws traditionally kept short as a mark of respect for society; thick leg muscles, used for walking, climbing, and fighting; and frail, elfin ears, with a 180 degree turning radius, to hear any sounds within a half mile. The males had a small penis, kept sheathed and hidden in the thick hair between their legs, rarely making an appearance unless the biological urge struck - not unlike an Old Earth canine. The females had a vagina, similarly hidden in the thick hair, and had larger nipples on their chests, though no breasts to speak of. Human females had evolved large breasts as a shorthand to their sex; Nessian females had no need for such evolution.

Satan could feel the shift in his musculature as his arms grew leaner while his legs grew thicker; the distance growing between his eye sockets and his nose drawing inward; his ears sliding upwards on his head, gaining the ability to turn towards the nearest sound; the thick, rending growth from his tailbone as the tail protruded, balancing him and forcing him to lean forward a little; the tightening of his Sigurð' tendon, drawing his feet onto their balls, and the quick rip of flesh as the claws extruded through his toes; the faint itching as his nipples expanded, though their sensitivity disappeared; the unpleasant tingling as his genitals withered away and became internal; and the tickling of thin fur covering his body, prepared to rise to full height should any predator approach.

Finally, he inverted his coloring, his final appearance that of a negative photo of a Nessian female. He couldn't pull off the sulfur perfume, but that didn't matter, really, because sulfur was more associated with a human Hell, anyway.

Bob looked at him, appraising. A smile tugged at his lips and he nodded. "Looking good."

Satan opened his mouth to reply sarcastically and discovered that his tongue had become much smaller and his palate much higher, giving him, essentially, a speech impediment.

"Thahnk ya," he said awkwardly, sarcasm utterly lost.

Bob shook his head, grinning. "Get you going, then."

Nodding stiffly, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, Satan walked to the front door and pushed it open. He deeply hoped that no one would attack him until he was more comfortable in this body, but the entryway, lit by sunlight flowing in through dozens of windows, appeared to be empty.

He turned around to tell Bob that the coast was clear when something hit him on the back of the head.

He crumpled to his knees, his thin, untrained arms unable to hold up his weight. Another hit to the head, a bright flash of light behind the eyes, the rolling sound of incoming thunder, and darkness, cool, blessed darkness.

PART THREE

BILRÖST

Listen, I beg, O Holiest race

Ye Sons of Man, who dwell Below

The Will of the Valfather bids me tell

Tales of battle long forgotten

I remember yet the giants of yore

Who built the ramparts around Old Earth

Nine worlds there were, and numberless more

And the Tree with mighty roots held All...

Then sought the gods their assembly seats

The holy ones, and council held

Who shall fight for Heimdall's Sons?

And who protect our withered past?...

The war I remember, the last in the world

When gods without number darkened the suns...

All this I tell, Valfather's command,

And now I must ask...

Would you yet know more?

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Oðin sat in the tavern, invisible to everyone around him, watching as the humans ate, drank, gambled, and casually swore. He took a deep drink from the mead at his elbow, brought with him from Valhalla, on the off-chance that the humans here did not have access to such a nectar.

He snorted and shook his head, putting the cup down. The humans had fallen far since his rule some 1600 years previous. The ale they drank with such passion would not have been served to babes in Old Scandinavia. The liquor that a few seemed to enjoy smelled like a privy pit that had been left to ferment. He was glad for his forethought.

The room was dark, lit only by a small solar-powered light on each table. The sun was still high in the sky, though; Oðin could see chinks of light sneaking through the cracks around the door. Even in the gloom, Oðin could read the expressions on the faces of the other men and women in the room - a deep sense of apathy hung over everything.

This will not do.

He took another drink, waiting patiently for his fellow conspirators to join him. Conversations around him were dull, lifeless, as though the topic didn't really matter so long as they were talking.

Oðin tapped his fingers on the table, then whispered, "Why so oppressed?"

The men at the table near him jerked upright, like the strings holding them up had been tightened.

"Who you callin' oppressed?" a man, his face covered in a wiry beard, asked his tablemates.

"Didn' say nuffin'," the man next to him said. He had a lisp and when he grimaced in Beard's direction, Oðin could see that several of his teeth were missing.

"No, I 'eard you," Beard insisted. "You said 'Why so oppressed?' Don' lie."

The third man at the table, who head gleamed baldly in the dim light, snorted into his ale. "You're 'earin' fings now, mate."

"Wot's it even mean, 'oppressed'?" Lisp asked.

Oðin rolled his eyes and refilled his cup. This could take awhile.

"I fink it means somefink like 'downtrodden,'" offered Beard.

"Oho! Downtrodden, is i'? Where you pullin' a word like dat from, eh?" Baldy snickered.

"I' is! I' means, like, de man is spi'in' on you, like," Beard said stubbornly.

"Oh," Baldy said, eyebrows raised in mock concern. "An' is de man spi'in' on you, den? You, who's go' an 'ouse an' a wife and money to drink wif? Are you downtrodden?"

"'Ey! You were de one who ast me, not de udder way around, mate," Beard muttered mutinously.

"I didn' ask you nuffink," Baldy said, returning to his drink. "Like I said, you's hearin' fings."

"I am," Lisp said quietly. "Downtrodden, I mean. De guv'min' sen' me 'ere and lef' me 'ere ta ro'. Dey make all sor's of overtures, like, abou' how dey're going ta make life be'er, bu' I'm still stuck 'ere, ain' I, wif a job I 'ate and de Nessians lookin' a' me like why ain' I doin' nuffin'? I 'ate i'."

"Nessians," Beard said mournfully. "'At's de crux o' i', innit? 'Slike dat book, you know, de one abou' the guv'min' takin' over everyfink an' we always been at war wif de Nessians and dey always been de enemy and we gots ta keep our guard up, aye?"

Then he lowered his voice. "An' wot abou' them people as been ge'in' sick, like? I 'eard people is dyin'. Dey say its plague."

Baldy snorted and choked on his ale. "Since when you been readin' books, mate? An' besides, every bleedin' year people is sayin' dat de plague is back. Don' mean i' is, now, do i'?"

Beard peered drunkenly down his nose at his friend. "I seen de 'ouses where people *died*. I seen de marks. Can' pretend like dem marks don' exis'."

Lisp interrupted before the conversation could devolve into a

fistfight. "Bu' 'at's wot I'm sayin', aye? Like, de guv'min's go' us so scairt of de Nessians 'at dey fink we won' no'ice de way dey's trea'in' us. Dey go' us so scairt dat we fink dere's enemies everywhere. If i' ain' de plague, it's de Nessians or de sky or somefink."

"I ain' scairt o' nuffink," Baldy said darkly, putting down his ale. "No' aliens, no' de guv'min', no' *plague*, nuffink. Le' any man try ta say diff'ren', like."

Beard and Lisp quickly shook their heads. "Ain' wot we sayin' a' all, mate. All we's sayin' is, de guv'min' go' us down, like, and dey don' expec' us ta do nuffink abou' i'. Roll o'er an' die like dogs. Easier, I expec'."

"And are youse?" Baldy said, looking at his two friends very seriously. "Are youse going ta do somefink abou' i'?"

"Aye, I am," Lisp said firmly.

"Oh, an' wot's dat, den?" Baldy jeered. "You going ta burn down da mili'ary 'alls, wif de soldiers still in? Kill de Commander and take o'er yourself, is i'? No, you can' do nuffink."

"No' by 'isself, 'e can'," Beard interjected. "Bu' if 'e 'ad 'elp...well, den, aye, maybe 'e could."

Baldy pushed back from his table suddenly. "If you two fools wan' to kill yourselves, den I can' stop ye. Bu' I ain' goin' down wif youse. I'm goin' 'ome. Don' talk ta me again 'til ye go' your 'eads on straigh'. Or you're dead," he added fairly. He tossed two coins on the table and left the inn.

Beard and Lisp stared at each other.

"Where do we star', like?" Lisp asked helplessly.

"A leader is coming," Oðin murmured around his cup. "Wait for the signal."

"An' wot's de signal, den?" Beard asked Lisp indignantly.

Lisp shook his head, staring around, frightened. "I didn' say dat, mate."

"You 'eard i', too?"

"Aye, I did."

"He will come with thunder and lightning," Oðin intoned.

"Bearing ravens on his shoulders. Be ready."

Beard, white-faced, licked his lips and darted a glance at Lisp. Lisp nodded, and they gulped down the rest of their drinks and ran out of the inn.

Oðin chuckled to himself. They would do the work of gathering spectators, so that all he, Thor, and Loki - he grimaced at the thought of his wayward adopted brother - so that all they would have to do would be to show up and put on a hell of a show.

A flutter of wings announced the return of his ravens and tension he hadn't noticed eased from his shoulders, immediately replaced by the heavy, comforting weight of Huginn on his right and Munin on his left.

"What news?" he murmured, stroking Huginn's head gently.

The world was not what he expected, seeing it as he could

through his ravens' eyes. As he watched the stark desert pass by beneath him, lines from a poem sang in his ears: "This is the dead land/this is cactus land..." But there were no cacti that he could see. Nothing, in fact, lived down there, on that cracked, dry, bald pate of a planet. Nothing but the warring sapient species.

Not true, his birds insisted. Bugs and all manner of creeping things lived on the surface and just beneath the surface, food to feed an entire army of birds. Oðin smiled to himself.

To the far north lived ursine creatures - terrifying, his birds confirmed - but herbivores for all that. Then the bones? Those are the bones of the ursine creature itself, the birds explained. They are meat for another fear, a monster that lives well beneath the surface, that only appears when vibrations are felt on the dirt. And its name? Regrettably unknown. Would you yet know more?

In the far north, there is a tree, the only tree in the whole world. What place have you brought us to where nothing imitates great Yggdrasil, they demand. A pale reflection is better than this, they say. Go on. This tree is a violent tree, that kills all who touch it. It is not a worthy tree. Would you yet know more?

Towns, small - villages, really - few in number, clustered around Nalagan. There is one town, Gemima, that is inhabited only by Nessians. Angry Nessians? Yes, but not militantly so. How so, then? The kind to celebrate the victory hard-won by another's death. Explained with disgust. Would you yet know more?

Oðin nodded.

Urania - that is where Freyr is now - yes, yes - is filled with humans, but peaceful humans, useless for what we need - humans are not naturally peaceful - these are. Freyja will not find many warriors amongst them. Would you yet know more?

To the south lies the fourth town, the last town, that we could find upon this disgraceful planet - this is no Miðgard - Miðgard is the only Miðgard - yes, yes - and it is called Hymaen.

Oðin started. Hymen?

Not quite, no. Hymaen - but yes, perhaps related - that would mean - yes, yes - the old gods came with them - how odd - yes, yes, very odd - but Hymaen is a refuge - ooh, refuge, good word - thank you - where escaped Nessians can live in peace with escaped humans.

Escaped? From what?

I do not know - nor do I - but although they are peaceful they are not stupid - no, no - they have sentries at all hours and they watch the road to the north - as though they are awaiting something - a battle, perhaps - no, an invasion - oh, yes, very good - thank you - and are prepared to protect their home in such a case.

And the humans don't know of this place?

The birds cawed hysterically.

They do not know half of what they do not know - ignorance runs rampant on this not-Miðgard - you are well-read, what did that creature say? - Lord, what fools these mortals be! - yes, yes, that was it - they are woefully unaware of the hundreds of people - or Nessians - thank you, or Nessians - or plants or animals that could

kill them - terribly ignorant - and they do not understand their new solar system - criminal! - I agree! - and so the suns are arriving and they are going to burn the humans out - unless they find water - is that what that little man was doing? - I believe it was.

Little man?

Yes, yes, he was all alone and walking east - roughly east - yes, thank you - and he had a book with him - like a map - yes, but without pictures and when he spoke, he spoke of water.

The birds laughed again.

Oðin sat back in his chair. "That must be the Scribe," he murmured.

Yes, yes, he did not have a name - not that we heard - and we hear all.

Oðin nodded, content. "Very good, very good. Thank you, my friends." He patted them on their silky black heads. "Go, feast. I, er, don't know where you might find newly dead -"

The town is full of them - of course, of course - but also, the gates of hell - yes, just what I was thinking - very good - piles of bodies - still good, even now - yes, yes -

And, still conversing back and forth, they flew off and disappeared. Oðin took a deep breath. Very good. When he was finished with his rabbleroising, he would send Freyja south to - Hymaen, was it? - to try to recruit.

And that was interesting, now, wasn't it? A town named for an Old Earth god. Not a well-known god, no, but a god all the same. A

god of compassion and partnership. Where did that town come from? And did the name mean that the worship still occurred?

Not necessarily. Urania, to the northwest of Nalagan, was also named after a god, though it was settled - entirely - by Bob's ilk. The name was just a reflection on where they came from - in this case, the sky.

He supposed he couldn't blame them. How could they possibly understand Ymir, the giant whose cadaver created the world - *all* worlds, really - when the sky had no clouds to prove his brains, the land held no seas to prove his blood? As well believe in fairies or other such foolishness.

He frowned and tapped his fingers on the table again, beginning to grow impatient. Loki and Thor were very late.

* * *

"What did you do that for?" Thor roared, holding a cupped hand over his bloody nose, staring at Loki in bewilderment.

"Just trying to get you riled up," Loki said, bouncing eagerly from one foot to the next. Sigurð giggled from his place, squatting on the ground, watching the two gods with delight.

"Why, for gods' sake?"

"Because," Loki replied, as though explaining this to a child, "we need a *really good* storm."

"And you think that hitting me will produce that, do you?"

Loki flashed a grin. "Couldn't hurt."

"Yeah, we'll see if you still think that in a minute," Thor said darkly.

They stood out in the desert, Nalagan just a lump on the horizon, the suns slowly sinking towards the west. It was hot as Muspelheim, but Loki couldn't really tell. Everything in the mortal world came to him as a memory of sensation. Should a man work up the gumption to stab him - highly unlikely - he would feel it as the memory of being stabbed, and it would be just as harmless. Of course, the memories were no fun to contemplate - he was not *mad*, after all - but he had survived. As evidenced by Thor's leaking nose.

"You didn't bring me out here to make me kill you," Thor said, his voice striving for patience. "So why are we out here?"

Loki had noted, with some interest, that the longer they stayed around the humans, the more their language changed to reflect that. It really was fascinating. He glanced at Sigurð, who was drawing what looked to be like spears in the dirt. Clearly, they could talk around him without risking anything getting passed on before its time. The human, as he was right now, could hardly be considered observant.

"Well, honestly, I just wanted to talk to you," he said, collapsing to the ground in a cross-legged stance. He looked up at his foster nephew. "'Bout this whole Ragnarok thing."

Thor's face darkened as he looked down at the smaller god. "And you think that hitting me in the face was a good precursor to that conversation, do you?"

Loki casually pulled Sigurð down to the ground with him. The demi-human sat down placidly, chewing on something. Loki didn't really want to think of what.

"Well, no," Loki admitted. "I did it to remind you of why you hate me."

Thor raised a ruddy eyebrow. "Oh?"

Loki just looked at him.

"I hate you because you killed my brother."

"I had a reason."

"Jealousy."

"No," Loki said, shaking his head. "That's a lazy answer. Why would I be jealous?"

"He was adored; you were detested."

Loki barked a laugh. "And since when has that ever bothered me?"

Thor frowned at him, troubled. "Then why?"

"Because if he didn't die, then Ragnarok would never come and the world would never improve. He was the first step and nobody wanted to take it because he was so *beloved*." He said the last word with a sneer. Well, the murder wasn't entirely out of jealousy, in any event.

"Why would you wish to hurry Ragnarok?" Thor asked, still looking troubled. "Everyone will die, ourselves included."

"And what happens after?"

"The world is reborn," Thor said slowly.

"And so is everyone else."

Thor stared at the ground, blinking as he thought this through. Loki could see the thoughts as they whistled past his face. Thor could hate him for his immediate actions, but he couldn't deny the long-term benefits.

"I'm not the only one to hate you," Thor said softly, looking Loki in the face. "You know that."

Loki half-smiled. "Yeah, well."

"You came to Aegis' hall, remember? When we were all feasting. You insisted on being included. But then you insulted everyone there. It was a big game to you."

"I remember. The flyting," Loki said, still smiling.

"You made us angry."

"I know. And if you think about it, you know why I did it, too."

Thor frowned, plucking at the hem of his shirt absentmindedly. "You wanted us to hate you," he murmured.

Loki nodded. "How much harder would everyone have taken it if it had been Heimdall or Bragi or *yourself* who killed Baldr? You would have been seen as a traitor, but they wouldn't be able to reconcile that idea with how much they love you."

Thor glared at him. "If it had been me or Heimdall or Bragi, Baldr wouldn't have died."

"And the world would continue to rot," Loki said, pointing at Thor to emphasize his words. "If the world has to change, and a god has to die to change it, then wouldn't it be easier for everyone if the god who instigated said change - myself - was universally loathed?"

Thor blinked and sat down beside Loki. "Ah."

Loki nodded and drew figures in the dirt with his finger.

"But Ragnarok is pre-destined," Thor said. "We already know who is going to die and how. We can't change that."

"Can't we?" Loki said quietly.

Thor shook his head.

"Ragnarok occurs when the Muspels invade Asgard and ignite the world," Loki explained. "What if the gods could join together and fight them off? What if we didn't turn on each other?"

"Miðgard would still burn."

Loki brushed that aside. "It has to happen. That's not important. But if we gods could become allies, then maybe we wouldn't have to die. We wouldn't have to be reborn because we will have already sufficiently changed."

Thor looked up at the sky, which had deepened to an indigo blue. "You just said that Ragnarok had to happen so we could be reborn, just better."

"Why should rebirth include death?"

Thor froze. Loki waited.

"Oh," Thor breathed.

"Yes," Loki said.

Thor shook his head in amazement, his shoulders shaking in silent mirth. "Cunning. Very cunning."

Loki took an ironic bow.

"So what purpose did hitting me serve?"

"Nothing, really," Loki replied. "Just seemed like a good idea at the time."

Thor's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Also, if you and your father are going to beat the shit out of me tonight, I want to have deserved it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Of all the untrainable apes that had ever walked Old Earth, this group of milquetoast, whey-faced dead men and women were the absolute worst.

Freyr spat on the ground and stalked away. This was useless, a Sisyphean battle up a glass slope in the fucking rain. Preparing these fools for battle would be like trying to get the Britons to fight their own damn wars. And, oh, hell, *leading* them into battle? He would rather remove his own eyeball.

What had that Scribe been thinking? Just waltzing in, assuming that the humans would even *want* to fight for this gods-forsaken, dead planet; thinking that, *of course*, since he'd shown

up, he'd be *happy* to try to train them.

"Tchah!" Freyr grumbled.

This Scribe had a lot to answer for.

Once he was finally out of hearing range of the ambling fools, he sat down. The ground was hot, but he couldn't really feel it - more like the memory of sitting on burning sand than actually feeling the burning sand itself - and he forced himself to take deep breaths and *think*.

He picked up a handful of sand and watched as it trickled through his fingers, tiny bits of crystal and mica flashing in the sinking sunlight. The suns both sat to his right, the blue one nearer to the horizon than the red one. He shook his head, imagining Sunnas's reaction to having to work overtime, driving *two* chariots to illuminate a planet that would truly have benefitted by being kept in the dark.

He knew Freyja, his beloved twin, was doing just fine training *her* humans. No doubt she would lead them over those hills any minute now, triumphant in her war-making skills. He could not fault her, but he could certainly envy her.

He flung the sand away from him, annoyed once more.

But what was he supposed to *do*, if these humans didn't see a point to fighting? He couldn't very well *force* them - threats were useless against the already-dead. They wouldn't listen to reason, because they had nothing to gain by fighting. Some of them were willing to fight, of course, but the others...

He had only one other idea, which was to explain that, if their side should lose, they would lose any chance they had of going on to an afterlife. The befuddled sheep kept wandering around, murmuring to each other - what's happening? where are we? what's going on? - but refused to take responsibility for the bloody outcome.

He rose to his feet and wiped the sand away from his legs. Well, he was no Roman, to be sure - he'd rather debate with a sword than in a forum - but he would be *damned* if he let his sister outdo him in this most simple of tasks.

With a determined grunt, he started to walk towards Urania. Maybe they'd be more helpful.

* * *

The dead humans wandered Nalagan alongside the living ones, apparently unaware that they were, in fact, dead. They paused to talk to neighbors who couldn't see them, confused at the brusque responses they received; they tried to negotiate prices on vegetables that they could have easily stolen; they walked side-by-side with their living relatives, clearly not recognizing the reason for the mourning garb.

In fact...Freyja stared around her, catching glimpses of faces here and there...there seemed to be many more dead than could be accounted for naturally. Many of the faces she saw, both living and dead, were pale, with the bruised eyes of sleepless nights and the painful gaits of lesions or growths in intimate areas.

She'd seen plague back on Old Earth, of course. It looked different every time, but it also looked the same. Whether the victim had pock-marks covering his body or black, bulbous growths on his neck and armpits; whether he vomited blood or shat himself to death; whether his passing was peaceful or pain-wracked...plague looked the same every time.

The dead victims were not worth examining; whatever symptoms they had shown would be troubling them no longer. But the living victims, the walking carriers...she needed a closer look.

As she walked down the streets, she saw that some of the houses had a yellow X chalked over the front door, and that the living humans gave these houses a wide berth. Of course. What better way to avoid plague than to avoid the victims? They didn't realize that the victims were everywhere, of course, but at least they recognized some problem.

She and the other commanders - including that damnable Scribe - had been alone in the desert for almost two days. She thought she'd smelled something putrid when they had first entered the city, but shoved it out of her thoughts. She also hadn't noticed the yellow X's on her way through town the first time, which didn't mean anything, necessarily, but it could also mean that this disease was both fast and virulent. And there was no way to really stop it, without quarantining the entire town.

She caught sight of a Nessian slave, sidling past his human masters with a wary look on his face. She grabbed his arm and dragged him down a side street, expending the energy necessary to

become visible. This was an emergency.

"A *dhiabh!*" he cursed, more out of fear than anger, she thought. "Who are you?"

Freyja ignored the question. "When did plague arrive?"

The Nessian slowly blinked his large, deep green eyes at her, considering the question, perhaps.

"It comes and it goes," he replied.

She took a deep breath, trying to control her impatience.

"Yes, and when did it arrive *this* time?"

"Two days past," he said. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter," she snapped, thinking quickly. "Has this plague occurred before, while the humans lived here?"

He simply looked at her. His tail swished back and forth, but he showed no other signs of uneasiness.

She cursed fluently in her native language and said, "I am one of the human deities. Answer me, man! Much depends on it!"

"It does, doesn't it?" he responded, in no apparent hurry.

"Knowledge is a wonderful anti-pyretic, is it not?"

"What the hell does that mean?" Freyja demanded. "What fever? Is that a symptom of the virus?"

He shrugged and looked over his shoulder, clearly wanting to get back to his errands.

Freyja grabbed the front of his smock and shook him. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do - the thought of throttling him

briefly entered her mind - but he knew something, damn him, and she needed to know what.

He did not appear shocked or afraid at her rough handling. He'd experienced it before. What was death when justice was so near at hand? She saw each of these thoughts flitter across his face, leaving calm complacency behind. She let go, as though his touch had burned her.

Plague, on Old Earth, was often considered a curse sent by the gods. Perhaps here, too. But which gods?

"Do you suffer any symptoms?" she asked urgently.

The slave shook his head, a small half-smile showing sharp teeth. "It is not one of ours."

"The humans brought it with them?"

"But of course. They brought everything with them, didn't they? I believe the human saying is, 'Enough rope to strangle by'?"

"'Enough rope to hang themselves,'" Freyja replied absently. Pretty clever, she had to admit. Knock down the human population by a significant percentage before attacking. But clearly, the virus had to have been lying in wait *somewhere*.

She turned to stare at him. The Nessian smiled.

"You suffer no symptoms," she said quietly. "But I am most willing to believe you can carry the virus."

The smile widened into a feral grin, showing gleaming, carnivorous teeth. The Nessian's tail had stopped moving and his ears stood up straight, unreactive to passing sounds.

"How?" she whispered. "Tell me that, at least!"

"Do you know how we slaves are treated?" he asked conversationally, smile gone now. "We are in charge of a human's entire day, from morning meal to bedtime. If we falter, we are beaten. If we refuse to learn, we are starved. Our children, who are naturally few to begin with, are sold into slavery from their mothers' breasts, where we never see them again. We gambled everything we had, and we lost."

Freyja stared at him, willing him to answer her.

"Disease dissemination is so varied," he continued, waving a many-fingered hand, apparently unconcerned. "Some people are cursed by words, others by contact, still others by death. But we have seen this plague before. Yes, we have," he said softly to himself. The unseeing look the creature aimed at the humans ignoring him made Freyja wonder which plague he was talking about.

With a shake of his head, he smiled brightly. "It's the water." And he turned away from her and walked back into the crowd, lost in seconds.

Water. *Water*. The one substance the humans could not live without was the one substance they could not get access to. Not safely.

Clever. Cruel, evil...but clever.

Images flashed in her mind: blood running down cobblestone streets. People collapsing in her temples, coughing up chunks of lung, weeping tears of blood. The scent of shit in every corner of Uppsala. A city of ghosts.

"Shit," she sighed, forcing herself back to the present.
Eliminating the threat was the first course of action.

The humans have an active military.

Perfect. And as for the healthy humans...would they believe, much less follow, a woman? Her own people had admired her as Oðin's equal, but she was learning, more every minute, just how unlike her people these humans were.

She clenched her fists, fighting to control the urge to punch something very hard. She could only do what she could do, and she had a limited amount of time in which to do it.

Cursing fluently, she released her corporeality and stepped back out into the crowded streets, heading for the military base, keeping an eye out for her wayward kin.

* * *

Dark thoughts swirl in Freyja's mind and I escape it, breathless and gasping. Surely, she wouldn't. Not this goddess, a goddess of healing.

A goddess of war.

War leads people to do terrible things. More and more, I see that gods - created through the sheer will of their believers - are more human than I thought, or they realize.

Speaking to her mind would be a fatal mistake, and I have now little desire to reenter, knowing the blackness that dwells there.

Who knew the gods are mad, too?

* * *

Urania was a town of useless men and women who wouldn't know which end of an axe to hold. Freyr had spent precious energy making himself visible and powerful, trying to coax these sunburnt toads into following him into battle, and he had nothing to show for it except empty streets filled with fearful eyes peering out through the shutter frames.

He growled low in his throat. They must have heard him; those few souls brave enough to sneak looks through the cracks in the windows suddenly disappeared, leaving him with utter, irritating silence.

Well, damn.

He strode down one of the three main roads in the small town, glaring around at his surroundings, daring someone to grow a pair of testicles big enough to discuss war with him. He was met with blank walls and blowing dust.

Spitting some dust from his mouth, Freyr thought back to the (admittedly short) conversation he'd had with the nominal mayor of the town, trying to find some hopeful strands that he could use to his advantage.

"We're peaceful folk, here, sir," the mayor, a thick woman with skin the color and consistency of faded horse leather, explained. She stood in front of her townspeople, guarding them against this unknown intruder, which Freyr found both endearing and obnoxious.

"It's well that you are peaceful," Freyr said patiently. "But those who mean you harm are not. Will you not stand against them?"

"We don't get involved in none of their quarrels, and they leave us be in peace," the mayor insisted, blowing straw-colored hair away from her eyes.

"None of *whose* quarrels?" Freyr asked.

"Them that live in Nalagan. We let them alone some twenty years gone, now, and we ain't never bothered them none. We expect them to do the same for us, understand?"

"This is not a matter of the Nalagans attacking you, you foolish child," Freyr snapped, losing his patience. "It is a matter of the Nessians bringing down an army on your ignorant heads, wiping you out or enslaving you. Do you understand?"

The woman, of no great height to begin with, stood up as straight as she could. "I ain't a child and I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head. We ain't gonna fight in your battles, and that's that."

Freyr made to walk towards the crowd and demand their obedience, but they scattered like beetles before sunlight at his first move. By the time he'd gotten around the stout little mayor, the streets were empty, with nothing but chaotic footprints in the dust to show that anyone had ever been there.

He turned back to the mayor, who faced him, standing unnaturally straight, her leathery skin the color of dry clay. Freyr realized that the woman was afraid of him. He didn't know whether he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it, or skewer the

woman on the spot to prove the stupid cow's fears valid.

In the end, he did neither. "You cannot just stand by and allow your race to be slaughtered," Freyr pleaded in a low voice. "Surely you can see that?"

The woman's shoulders eased slightly. "To be honest, I can't see as how my race has done me any favors."

Freyr blinked at that, surprised. "I don't understand," he said slowly.

The woman snorted, showing a mouth missing some very important teeth. "Look around here," she said, waving her arm at the desolate surroundings. "It ain't much, is it? And it's all I got. My daddy got dumped on this hellhole seventy-five years gone, and we been left to fend for ourselves that entire time."

"What about your soldiers -"

"Ha!" The woman spat on the ground at Freyr's feet. "Unless they're startin' trouble, they ain't worth nothing. It's why we're all the way out here in the first place, ain't it? 'Cause the military couldn't do nothin' without starting trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" Freyr pressed.

The woman raised a pale eyebrow at him. "You ain't from around here, are you? Have you met the local folk, the Nessians?"

Freyr nodded, figuring that while he hadn't - yet - met any, he would soon enough.

"It was like every other colonization story in history, wunnit?" the woman asked rhetorically. "Foreigners land on distant

shores, meet with friendly and helpful natives who help them learn to survive. Then, later, them colonists figure that the natives - being so helpful and all, you see - would make good slaves. And so passes the whirligig of time," she finished bitterly.

"You disapproved of the enslavement?" Freyr said.

"It wasn't right!" the woman insisted. "They was our saviors and for us to turn around on 'em and do that? No, it ain't right."

"And so you moved out here," Freyr said, nodding his head at the bleak surroundings.

The woman laughed cynically. "Yeah. Ain't it wonderful? No, all I gots to say is that if them Nessians are planning to get their comeuppance for what was done to 'em, good for them."

She nodded brusquely and walked down the street, disappearing around a corner, leaving Freyr alone and extremely frustrated.

He began the long walk back toward Nalagan, thinking furiously. He couldn't really imagine...well, actually, yes, he could. His own brother-in-arms, Loki, was doing the exact same thing, for similar reasons and with similarly catastrophic results. Wasn't he?

He stood up and angrily tied back the golden hair that had floated across his face. What was he supposed to do now?

* * *

Does he suspect what his sister is capable of? Does he know how she will circumvent his hard work?

Would he believe me if I told him?

Helpless, I watch the Volva's memory unfold.

The war I remember, the last in the world...

* * *

Freyja found them as the sun was going down. From the corner of her eye, she saw a large man with bright red hair duck into a small tavern with no name. Thor. And the smaller man sneaking in behind him had to be Loki. Oh, and there was Sigurð, looking around at everything with the scrutiny of a soft-minded idiot.

Well, that was good, then.

Her meeting with Orion had not gone as well as could be hoped. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to help - a large number of the Nalagans were his friends, acquaintances, and fellow soldiers. The problem was convincing the Commander to do anything about it.

Freyja had caught up to Orion as he was leaving the base.

"Hey! Wait!" she shouted, running to catch him up. He stopped and looked up at her, frowning as he did so. Orion was relatively tall, for a human, but he had nothing on her height, and she could see that that bothered him.

"Plague," she said briefly. "Nalagan is full of plague."

"Which one?" he demanded.

She gave him an annoyed look. "I am hardly familiar with the

diseases of your kind."

Kill the disease at its source.

"What are the symptoms?" he insisted.

She threw up her hands. "I don't know! It looks like some sort of tenderness in the groin - swelling, maybe? - fever. You know, standard fare."

"Shit," Orion hissed, looking past Freyja toward the town. "How's it being spread?"

"The slaves are putting in the water."

"They're doing *what*?" Orion roared.

Freyja just looked at him. Either he would see her solution, or he wouldn't.

"Christ on a stick," he muttered, running his hand through his hair abstractedly. "Christ on a motherfucking - we gotta warn them."

"No, we have to destroy it," Freyja said. "You need to tell the military to quarantine the town. No one enters; no one leaves."

"Quarantine? How?" He looked at her suspiciously.

"Block off all roads into and out of the city," she said promptly.

"That's well and good for preventing the plague from spreading to other cities. What about the poor bastards trapped *in* the city, though, with those murdering..." The rest of the sentence was lost in a growl.

"No one, Orion. I mean it."

Orion raised his eyebrow at her. "I heard you the first time, but now I'm curious why."

"Because I said so. Your race depends on it."

He continued to look at her.

"I am considered a great healer," she reminded him.

"Oh, I remember. But I've also seen my fair share of war. Healers have no place there."

She refused to reply.

"Right," Orion sighed. "Well. We can only do so much. Stay here while I go talk to the Commander again."

"Ha," Freyja scoffed. "I'm coming with you."

Orion shrugged and walked back towards the giant, bland edifice, Freyja close on his heels.

She watched him as he walked. He maintained a military mien: his back was straight, his eyes looking forward, arms swinging *just so*, face kept carefully neutral. She could have pointed him out as a soldier in a crowd of a hundred men, in spite of his shaggy hair and scruffy beard.

He walked with the kind of grace she used to see in snow leopards. Arrogant, almost, yet quite unconscious of it. He was at the top of the food chain, and he didn't expect that to change. Except, of course, now he and his entire race were at risk of extinction. She could sympathize with his rage, to be sure, but more important, with his desire to kill something.

The building was dim, compared to the blinding sunlight outside. Freyja blinked several times until her eyes adjusted. They stood in a long hallway, with ceramic tiles on the floor and doorways lining the walls. Orion strode down the hall to the very last door on the right, looking for all the world as though he owned the place.

He walked into the office and stood in front of the desk. Sitting at the desk was a stout man, wide through the shoulders, with close cut grey hair. As she came around the desk to stand next to Orion, she saw that the man's face was dominated by a large, bushy moustache. His eyes and mouth seemed to disappear beneath the absolute *presence* of his facial hair. Her mouth quirked in an aborted smile.

Orion snatched a piece of paper off the desk and began to scribble furiously. The Commander watched the pen move, eyes narrowed in concentration. As soon as it paused, before Orion could set it down, the Commander grabbed the piece of paper and read it, his eyes dancing over the text.

"Plague?" the Commander murmured. "And - oh, for fuck's sake!" He slammed his hand down on the desk, hard enough to tear the paper.

He glared at a point somewhere six inches to the right of Freyja. "The Nessians? Those...blue-blooded, inbred post-pissers are..."

He appeared to be at a loss for words, so enraged was he. His face turned a fierce puce color, which made his moustache stand out

comically in contrast. He sounded like he was choking, and Freyja made a move to pound him on the back.

Orion touched her arm and shook his head. "Just wait," he mouthed.

After several moments, the color faded from the Commander's face, his breathing became easier, and the torrent of words that had become jammed in his throat finally pulled free.

"Blue-blooded, inbred, scaly, cave-dwelling, shit-sniffing...post-pissers! Poisoning the water? How? With what?"

Orion looked at her, clearly at a loss for how to explain. And to be quite honest, she couldn't answer that question herself. The Nessians were carriers, true, but they could contaminate the water in any number of ways.

"How is the disease spread?" she asked Orion in a low voice. "Bodily fluids? Air? Sexual contact?"

Orion blinked, surprised at the question. "I'm...not quite sure. It seems likely to be bodily fluids, though, right? Households are full of such things."

"Fine. Then maybe the Nessians are spitting in the water supplies. Urinating in them. Bleeding in them. Something. Not enough that the humans could taste anything, mind, but enough to get the virus in."

Orion looked ill at the thought and took a fresh sheet of paper with a shaking hand. He dashed out Freyja's hypothesis and handed it back to the Commander.

"That's...disgusting," the Commander said, making a face. Then he seemed to recall the dignity of his office, because his face became stony once more.

"You're wanting us to quarantine the city?" he asked the chair to the left of Orion. "That's not going to do squat. We have to eradicate the disease at its source."

Orion took in a quick breath and shot a glance at Freyja. She kept her face still. She did not disagree.

He snatched the paper from the Commander's surprised hands and explained the fallacy of that thinking. The Commander snatched it right back and then lowered it.

"Unfortunately, Andersen, I am in charge here, not you. We will cure the infection at its source. Dismissed."

Orion stood there, stiff-lipped and pale with fury. His hands twitched and Freyja briefly wondered what would happen if he snapped and tried to strangle his commanding officer. But then he nodded and stormed from the office, Freyja in his wake.

"Goddamn fool," Orion muttered. "Can't see the forest for the trees."

Freyja walked silently beside him. Her mind was peaceful and blank. A welcome reprieve.

"What, got nothing to say?" Orion demanded. "All this time, I get to hear about how you people have perfected the art of war, and now you're silent? Help me, damn you!"

"When I first met you," Freyja said, "you seemed to me to be a

stubborn ass. I would hate to see you prove me wrong at this late juncture. You must do what is best in your mind and for your soul. I will do the same."

And with that she turned and strode off.

And now she sat in a dark public house - growing darker as the fading sunlight ceased breaking through the chinks in the windows and doorframes - and found herself trying to convince her stubborn brothers-in-arms what needed to be done.

"All-Father, there is plague here. We must convince the humans to avoid the water. Rather, you must. I doubt they would listen to me," she finished bitterly.

"What is this, Freyja?" Thor asked, confused, his voice deep in his chest. "You are a great healer."

"I am," Freyja replied. This was no time for false modesty. "But I can do nothing for humans who insist on infecting themselves."

Kill the weed at its roots.

"And who is contaminating the water?" Loki asked quietly, his eyes gleaming oddly in the dim light. Sigurð giggled quietly, but went silent when Loki raised a calming hand.

"The slaves. The Nessians." Now wouldn't that be interesting? She looked at him thoughtfully, considering.

"So we tell the humans not to drink the water, and then what? The Nessians will continue to poison it, and the humans will now just die of thirst. It seems you are trading a quick, brutal death

for a slow one." Loki raised his eyebrows at her over his cup as he drank. Sigurð reached for the cup, and Loki handed it over.

Freyja smiled at him and he blinked. Then he nodded, smiling grimly. Oh, interesting, indeed. Crowded battles made for strange bedfellows.

"She may have a point," Thor said to Oðin, apparently missing this interchange. "Separate the slaves from the humans. We don't have to kill them, necessarily, but if they're separated, they can do less damage."

Oðin nodded, frowning into his cup. "They will need to go somewhere."

"We can take them to their mines," Loki suggested, his tone muted. "Keeping them there, though..." He snatched the cup back from Sigurð's hands, before the idiot could spill anything.

"We will need a guard of some sort," Oðin murmured, staring at the light reflecting off his cup. "But none of us can be spared."

"What about Freki?" Freyja asked. The answer, so simple, so hidden, appeared. With one last quick look at Loki, she stood up, banging her knee on the edge of the table.

The gods looked at her, surprised. Mostly.

"I can find a guard, if you can gather the Nessians," she said, gathering her things.

Loki flashed a small smile, though it was not a pleasant smile at all. "Where and when shall we meet you?"

"The human army will be invading the city after dark, I'm sure

of it," she said, thinking back on her conversation with the Commander. "You must get the Nessians out of the city and on their way to their mines by then."

"Do you know where their mines are, Goddess?" Thor asked.

"Ah, no," she admitted. "But they will."

"And you honestly believe they will follow us?" Thor asked politely. Probably thought she was mad.

"It depends on how you convince them, now, doesn't it?" She smiled sweetly at him. "I must go. I will meet you at the western edge of the city at midnight."

Sweeping them a deep, ironic bow, she turned and left. She could feel their bemused stares following her into the evening.

The human woman - Niki, yes? - was with Andvari. And the little goblin would be wherever his tinkering could be of most use and least distraction.

Blinking in the orange light of early sunset, she turned right and began to walk towards a well-guarded armory she saw on the outskirts of the base. Guards meant nothing, of course - they couldn't see her, after all. But if there were weapons to be fooled with, Andvari would be there, laughing his fool head off.

Gods, she hated this planet.

* * *

And so it ends, I think sadly.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Andvari gazed in undisguised lust at the rows upon rows of weapons technology. Most of it was small, hand-held stuff. Stuff he'd never seen used before, true, but it didn't take a genius to figure it out, either. But parked at the back of the warehouse, hidden beneath sand-colored tarps, lay the truly impressive stuff. The ships.

He had never, in his long immortal life, imagined ships such as these. The ships he knew well and loved had sailed salt waters - lovely, shallow-bottomed ships - the height of maritime maneuverability. But these...words could not express their beauty, even as he pondered their uses.

Sleek, they were, like a carefully tended cat. They measured some thirteen cubits long, with a slightly bulbous helm, made of - he tapped the material - glass, maybe, though he'd never seen so much of it at one time. Still, it wasn't as stony as the glass he was familiar with, nothing like obsidian. It had a bit of yield to it that he couldn't quite place.

Inside the helm, he could see a single chair in front of a row of...mechanics...that he assumed flew the ship. Levers here, buttons there - a truly vast array. Along the outside of the ship, beneath the wings, sat two elongated cylinders, ending in a preposterously tiny hole. He pointed at it and raised an eyebrow at Niki, who stood, staring wide-eyed at the mass array of destruction

surrounding them.

"Oh, that? Solid-state laser. Very accurate over long distances."

Nodding as though he understood, Andvari continued walking around the ship, dragging his fingers along its beautiful silver hull. Near the aft end of the ship was written: "Archer." He looked to Niki, who saw the writing, blanched, and stepped backward.

"What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

"That's...that's Orion's ship," she whispered. "The ships all have nicknames of their pilots, you understand? Orion was the Archer because of the constellation."

She pointed to the other ships in the land-harbor; they, too, had names written on them: Bear Cub, Malcontent, Dipper. Names that meant nothing to him, but which apparently were tokens of affection amongst the men who sailed them.

"They don't burn the ships of the deceased?" Andvari asked.

Niki shook her head.

"Where do these sail?" he asked, looking under the bellies of the ships. Perhaps they sailed the sand dunes, which were similar enough to waves, perhaps...but sand dunes were few and far between, so far as he could see.

"They don't sail, they fly."

"Fly?" Andvari looked up at the ceiling of the land harbor.

"In the sky?"

"Well, yes," Niki replied impatiently. "Where else?"

"How do they..." His face split in a grin. This. This was a discovery he'd been awaiting for many, many years. Something useful he could take back to Svartalfheim.

Niki waved her hand dismissively at the question. "Sound waves, I think. Something they figured out centuries ago. You don't want to be too close to a departing ship, because it'll make you sick."

He caught the word "wave" and supposed that these ships were not too different from the longships he was familiar with. But to sail through the air! Marvelous, simply marvelous.

"How do they stay in the air?" he asked, gazing in envy at the machines, all the more beautiful for their mysteries.

Niki clicked her tongue in annoyance. "They're not meant for atmospheric travel. Low and medium orbit only. Very possibly interplanetary visits, but that would sap their power, I think. And I'm pretty sure they use electrodynamic tethers for that. Look, we can we just get started? Please? This place creeps me out."

Reluctantly, Andvari turned away from the *wundorscip* and walked towards the towering shelves of handheld weapons.

"These belong to the humans," he said, halfway between a question and a statement.

"Well, yes," Niki admitted. "I was thinking of adjusting Orion's plans a little bit."

Andvari cocked an eyebrow at her. "Go on."

"We fix the weapons - and the ships - so that they're not

fully functional. Set to stun, instead of kill, if you understand me."

He didn't, but waved her on.

She rolled her eyes. "Basically, instead of sending a missile, it'll send the shockwave, as though the missile had simply misfired. Shooting blanks.

"Anyway, once we've fixed the handhelds, we'll remove the solid-state gain medium from the laser and create a small space where the nitrogen gas from the atmosphere can be filtered in instead. That'll make the lasers useless."

Andvari blinked at her, surprised by her wealth of knowledge, and utterly, utterly lost.

"It won't keep the ships from leaving atmo," she admitted, "but it'll prevent them from being deadly. Or at least weaponized."

She bit her lip, frowning. Shaking her head, she muttered, "Surely, they wouldn't be stupid enough to kamikaze their ships. They can't replace them."

Andvari cleared his throat and she looked at him, her eyes still clouded with doubt. "Why are we destroying your own people's weapons?" he asked politely.

Her face brightened at that. "Oh, that's easy. We're going to distribute half of the handhelds to the Nessians."

Andvari shook his head, certain he'd misheard. "We're going to...what? Excuse me?"

"Hand out the weapons to the Nessians."

"Why?"

"Because they have none."

"But you told Orion -"

"White lie. I wanted to nullify as many of the weapons as I could. And for the Nessians, even if they're not fully functional, the placebo might help more of them survive. That," she added practically, "and the fact that the other side won't have fully functional weapons, either."

"And what about the army that is in hiding? Won't their weapons be functional?"

Niki shrugged irritably. "Well, yes, most likely. But hopefully the situation will be resolved by then."

"And if it isn't?" Andvari pressed.

She looked at him. "This is going to take awhile. Let's get started."

* * *

I stumble, blinded by others' emotions. Hate, lust, rage, hope, despair, shame, guilt, glory.

The tree stands some distance behind me, and on the distant horizon I can see the faint purple outlines of mountains. I am close. I may be able to help. Even as I think it, I realize that I am being dishonest with myself.

Help whom?

The humans -

And what about the slaves?

They have the caves to protect them -

Folly, and you know it. What about when the army arrives?

Well, Niki -

The humans will be obliterated. Nalagan is dead. The other colonies refuse to fight. So how and who will you help with this fruitless journey?

I don't know.

Yes, you do.

I brush the swarming voices aside and focus on my feet.

So many details, so many things that could go wrong. Well, logically, what would be the ideal outcome? Eternal peace, glory, hallelujah? How likely do you think *that* is, Scribe? Maybe not peace eternal, but a return to coexistence? Would that be possible?

Rhialt would need to call off his army, the humans would need to accept the presence of the Nessian, three generations would need to pass, at which point harmony could - possibly - ensue.

It will never happen. The humans who survive the approaching onslaught will be enslaved. The irony tastes like blood in my mouth. Those who refused to oppress will now have the sins of their brothers visited upon them.

Have you figured it out yet?

In the end, I can only save myself.

God help the humans.

* * *

Pain pulsed in nauseating bursts of light behind Satan's eyes. A thick goo dripped down his neck - probably the blood of this body. Cracking open an eye, he saw that he lay curled into fetal position, his hands - the Nessian ones, with the ridiculous number of fingers - and feet bound in front of him. There was apparently a window behind him, because light that was entirely too bright to be natural sliced the floor in front of him, making his eyes water.

"Jesus...Christ," he groaned, struggling to sit up. His head swam and spots danced before his eyes. "Shit."

"Not words one typically hears from a Nessian," a laconic voice murmured from near the window, hidden in the shadow.

"Yeah, there's a reason for that," Satan grunted. "Who the hell are you?"

"A better question, perhaps, would be, who are you?"

Satan snorted and closed his eyes against the sharp pain that stabbed the base of his skull.

"Well, you've already figured out I'm not a Nessian. So you have the advantage on me, sir."

The voice hummed in amusement. "I have never met anyone who could so perfectly copy them, though. You have a gift, sir."

Satan bared his sharp, deadly teeth in the merest imitation of a smile. "Thanks. Care to untie me?"

"I think not," the voice said delicately. "Not yet."

The voice stepped out from the shadows and walked around Satan, examining him. It was a Nessian, of course - that wasn't what caught Satan by surprise. It was the sheer *size* of the bastard. The creature's tail, even thicker and more muscular than his own image, could have easily enfolded Satan in its grasp and snapped him in half. Satan swallowed the bile in the back of his throat.

The creature's hands, the size of dinner plates, ended in those too many fingers, which, in turn, ended in claws much more dangerous for having been filed. His feet, at the base of legs thick as small tree trunks, could have easily knocked a hole in a sturdy wooden door.

"You are not human," the creature mused. "And their god is dead, you know. That is what caused this whole mess in the first place."

Satan grunted.

"So what are you?"

Without warning, he kicked Satan in the stomach with those thick, powerful legs. Satan gagged, desperate for air, finding none. Black spots danced in his vision and his ears rang like church bells. The faintly iron smell of blood drifted to him and he gagged again.

"Well, whatever you are, you certainly respond like a Nessian."

The creature dropped to its haunches in front of him. Satan could hear a high-pitched wheeze coming from his mouth every time he tried to inhale. But at least he was breathing.

"You are not alone. We saw someone run away after we captured you. Who was he?"

Satan smiled at the creature and spat at its feet. The saliva was tinged blue.

The creature nodded, as though it had expected this response. "I see. Well, we will find your friend, to be sure. You, however, will remain my guest until we have learned all of your secrets, mm?"

Stepping gingerly over Satan's body, the creature picked up a large club from near the window. Satan tensed, awaiting the blow, but it didn't come. Instead, the creature smashed out the panes from the window. Still carrying the club, he stepped back over Satan and headed towards the door.

"Nessians, you see, have absolutely no tolerance for cold. And it will be very cold tonight." He smiled unpleasantly. "Perhaps, when you begin to feel shock set in, you will be more willing to talk."

Singing softly to himself, the creature left the room, bolting the door behind him.

There were not enough invectives in the world to throw at the creature, and so Satan merely sat there, fuming, until he could calm down enough to think.

So, the Old Man had escaped, had he? And gone...where? For

that matter, why should he bother to stay in this form? He'd be much nimbler in his own, smaller human frame. He closed his eyes and concentrated on what it felt like to be human.

The change came hard, harder than it should have, but it came. With agonizing slowness, he felt the tail shrivel and return to the base of his spine. He felt the odd numbness that came with the dissolution of extraneous bones, ligaments, and tendons. His legs grew straighter, but weaker; his arms shorter, but stronger. His head returned to its vaguely spherical shape, and his ears slid down to where they belonged, losing their ability to follow sounds quite as acutely. A welcome loss, for all that.

It took mere moments for him to undo the ropes and then he stood, in a stone room, lightly furnished, the pale orange light of early sunset drifting in through the broken window. The creature was right; it was starting to get cold. Satan, who felt only the merest memory of ice, shivered. He had to find Bob. Now.

He strode over to the window and looked out. The ground lay some dozens of feet below him, carpeted by nothing except granite, or whatever rock these people had on their fucked up planet. He didn't remember seeing any volcanoes, but that -

Stop. Focus. Step one: get out of here.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Yes, he could change forms, over and over again, perpetually morphing to escape notice. That took energy, and he had a limited amount of that. If he became too exhausted, he would be useless, weak, practically mortal. Much easier to kill, at any rate. And recuperation took a

not-insignificant amount of time, a resource that lay strewn about in uncertain amounts at the moment. No, best to stay as he was, which meant that escaping through the window was out.

He walked over to the door and peered through the crack. It appeared that the only thing barring his exit was, in fact, a thick wooden bar, laid heavily in the cross-guard of the door.

He looked around and saw a thick piece of glass, about a cubit in length. He picked it up carefully and wedged it between the door and its frame, just beneath the bar. With a sudden jerk upwards, the bar came free of its hold and clattered noisily to the ground.

Shoving the door open with his shoulder, Satan darted into the hallway and glanced around. Nobody came rushing at the sound. No guards yelled at him, no thugs beat him. The hallway was thick with silence.

Maintaining his hold on the glass - the only weapon he had - he slid around the corner and found a staircase. Upwards would lead more deeply into the castle, downwards would lead to freedom. But where the hell was Bob?

If the creature could be trusted - and it couldn't - Bob was supposedly nowhere to be found. Which could simply mean that the bastard held Bob captive somewhere and was trying to correlate the stories.

Or Bob really could have escaped, and could be trying to find a way to save him, Satan, even now, in which case, heading back to the forest would be the best bet.

He cursed under his breath. He couldn't just leave the Old

Man, on the off-chance that he *had* been taken. And if he hadn't...

Look, one problem at a time, all right?

Heartily regretting that first bet, that first bond of friendship, Satan slowly, quietly began to climb the stairs; hoping, even as he cursed Bob and everything the Old Man had ever done, that he wasn't too late.

* * *

Too late, I giggle to myself. *It is all too late.*

* * *

"So," Loki said, not looking up from pouring out another cup of cider. "How does this affect our plans?"

Oðin tapped his long, worn fingers on the tabletop impatiently, glaring at the tavern door, through which Freyja had left so recently.

Thor belched and set down his cup. "It seems to me that our original reason for being here was to save the humans from certain destruction. Am I right?"

Loki raised one shoulder. "Sure. Go on."

"So, does it really matter from which corner that destruction comes? Whether it's plague or war or angry fire giants?"

Oðin made a sound deep in his throat and stopped tapping his

fingers. "We are not healers. We are not made to sit by the convalescent and feed them broth and milk. We are warriors. We are made to fight."

"It may still come to that," Loki suggested, his eyes looking at Oðin frankly over the rim of his cup.

Oðin gave his adopted brother a dirty look, but the bastard had a point. Any attempt to keep these queer aliens from killing the children of Heimdall could end in bloodshed. Yet...

The sluggard believes he shall live forever

If the fight he faces not;

But age shall not grant him the gift of peace,

Though spears may spare his life.

"I have sent...messengers...to warn the humans of our arrival," Oðin said instead. "They are expecting us. And while we try to squeeze courage from cowards, Loki, you must gather the Nessians and lead them away."

"Me?" Loki asked, blinking in surprise.

Oðin nodded. "Why not? You have a way of beguiling our enemies," he said, his mouth twisting on the word. Loki didn't always use this ability to everyone's benefit.

"Yes, and...?" the smaller god said, looking skeptical.

"So put it to good use."

Thor turned to scrutinize his uncle. The smaller god sat there, picking at the tabletop, his brow furrowed. Oðin just

watched. Loki's hair, a deep blonde, stood up in wild tangles around his head; shadows hid his eyes, green and angry, obscuring whatever thoughts might be trapped in that strange little mind of his; his tongue, so adept at both wit and manipulation, stuck out of a corner of his mouth.

When Loki finally looked up, he stared straight into the older god's eyes. Oðin saw a sense of resolution there, a firmness of decision, as well as...something else. Something dark. The faint smile on Loki's face did nothing to ease this impression; in fact, only deepened it. But he nodded, and that's all Oðin really needed right now. He could handle any sort of mutiny the smaller god might raise...after they were gone from this hellish place and back in Asgard.

Loki darted a look at Thor, whose face cleared, acknowledging something.

What was that about?

"Good. Get you gone, then," he said, nodding towards the door. "Sunna is nearly vanished."

Loki stood up, drained his cup, and bowed most ironically in Oðin's direction. "Your wish, command, et cetera," he said, his mouth curling up into that same unsettling smile. And then he was gone.

"We will need to watch him," Oðin murmured, staring at the closed door. He rubbed his forehead and sighed. His head was beginning to throb.

He opened his eye and stared at his one remaining son. "Are

you ready?"

Thor grinned, his teeth showing through his rusty beard. "It will be a pleasure."

"Good." Oðin stood up as well, ignoring - as much as he could - the creaking in his joints and the ache in his bones. The longer he existed, the harder it was for him to leave Asgard. There used to be a time...

He ushered Thor through the door ahead of him, and glancing one last time at the dim tavern, pulled his grey cloak close around him and stepped into the desert twilight.

* * *

What's the difference between a murderer and a god?

I wait in silence for a punch line that never arrives.

* * *

"Niki!"

Niki looked up from her work, surprised by the tone as much as the voice.

"Here!" she called, standing up from her seat on the hard ground. Her tailbone tingled as blood rushed to her backside.

The tall goddess, the one with the bright hair - Christ, what had been her name? - strode into the darkening warehouse, looking

for all the world like a madwoman on a mission. Her hair, which had been intricately braided when last Niki saw her, was escaping in bunches, flying around her angular face like a...a...

Fury?

She had no idea where the idea had come from, but she had to acknowledge that the term fit.

"What is it?" she asked, gun held loosely by her side. It was mostly harmless. It just needed a few more minutes.

"The wolf," the goddess said. "You know where he is?"

"Freki?" Niki asked, surprised. "Well, no, but -"

"But you can call him, right?"

"I can..." Niki replied slowly. "Why, though? The battle isn't supposed to start for -"

"Damn the battle!" the goddess yelled. "If we can't separate the Nessians from the humans, there will be no one left alive to fight - on either side!"

Niki blinked at the goddess. Something had changed, that much was clear. But what could possibly have made her so anxious? She knelt close to the ground, still keeping her eyes on the gigantic woman, to set the gun down. If this goddess should attack, the gun wouldn't be of much use; she would need to use her bare hands to defend herself.

"Okay," she said, holding her hands up in a conciliatory fashion. "What happened?"

The goddess angrily blew some stray hairs away from her face.

"Plague," she said briefly. "The slaves are poisoning their masters with plague."

Niki gaped at her. She swallowed heavily, closing her mouth, certain she had misunderstood. Her Nessians, they weren't monsters. They wouldn't...they would never...

"How?" she croaked.

"The water supply. We need to separate the slaves and the humans, immediately."

Niki nodded, feeling numb. It couldn't be the way she said, but that didn't matter. What mattered was what the humans thought. Facts, she knew from personal experience, are often inconvenient in the face of panic.

"Okay, so you need me to get Freki to...what?" Niki asked.

"He must guard the slaves, keep them in their mines."

"All right," she nodded. "Okay. Let me just..."

And she wandered away, down the dark aisles created by the rows upon rows of weapons, rising high towards the ceiling on either side of her. Separating the Nessians might save them...but would there be any humans left in Nalagan to fight?

Would it be so bad if there were not?

She smacked herself in the forehead with a closed fist. Stop. Don't think like that. She took a deep, shaky breath, and closed her eyes, thinking as hard as she could about Freki - and only Freki.

The wolf showed up surprisingly easily. He sat, curled into a

loose ball, floating against the dark red background of her eyelids.

So soon, Niki Alsecco?

So soon, she replied silently. We need you to -

Guard the Nessians. I know.

How -

The wolf snorted, a strange sound from such a large creature. Wisps of fog erupted from his huge nostrils.

Where shall I go?

I, uh, it would probably be best if you would follow the goddess...

Not knowing her name, Niki thought as firmly as she could of all the details of the goddess, whom she could hear pacing back and forth behind her.

Ah. The Asynja. Very good, very good. Yes, I will follow her.

Thank you -

Niki Alsecco, the battle is here. Are you prepared?

Here? Niki, shocked, nearly opened her eyes, just to verify that she was still, in fact, alone. Squeezing them shut - just to avoid the temptation - she focused on the wolf, sitting so laconically behind her eyelids.

I thought we still had several days! Even in her head, her voice sounded plaintive. She hated that.

Even the best-laid plans are laid to waste in the face of the

interference of the gods. Freki sounded distinctly amused. Niki couldn't see anything funny about the situation.

What do I do?

You must follow through with your plans, Freki said, suddenly serious. *Distribute the weapons, then hide. You are no soldier, and you can die. One can always die again.*

She didn't understand what he meant, but didn't have the time to stop to ponder it, either. *Will you follow her, the goddess - Freyja! That's her name.*

I will, of course. Tell her to call me when she is ready. I am prepared.

Thanks. She needed to say something else, something stronger than that. *Uh, take care, will you?*

The wolf's lips curled in what looked like a smile. *You, as well, Niki Alsecco.* And he evaporated.

She opened her eyes, blinking in the darkness. The barest hint of light filtered through cracks in the siding in the walls. Walking carefully, she returned to where Freyja stood, pacing anxiously, cursing under her breath. Her gait had changed during Niki's conversation with Freki, as though she carried an invisible weight. Her hand clenched and unclenched, as though reaching for a weapon that was not there.

The goddess stopped as soon as she saw Niki. "Well?"

"He said that he will follow you. He said that you need only to call him when you are ready for him."

Freyja nodded brusquely. "Excellent. You and the dwarf had best stay out of the way."

Niki nodded meekly. "Of course. Good luck."

"Luck?" Freyja asked, looking at her sharply. "Why do we need luck? Have you heard something, human?"

"Freki said that the battle is beginning. Immediately. So...yeah, good luck."

She glared at Niki suspiciously and walked away without another word..

Andvari came to stand beside Niki. "Well, that went well, didn't it?"

Niki sighed and shook her head. "We're out of time. We have to get these out to the Nessians, now. Shit," she murmured, looking at the other half of the warehouse they weren't able to fix.

Andvari raised his eyebrows at her, waiting.

"Split it as evenly as you can between useful and useless, okay? There should be some canvas bags in the back corner." She waved in a vague direction. "Go. I'll do what I can for the lasers while you're doing that."

Andvari bowed ironically and hurried off, thumping occasionally into objects unseen in the growing darkness.

Muttering, Niki hurried off towards the nearest ship, which happened to be Orion's. She took a deep breath to steady herself, then climbed into the cockpit, through the entrance beneath the ship.

It still smelled like him. That musk that reminded her of sagebrush bushes and dust and, hidden beneath all that, clean sweat. She breathed in deeply, reveling in the scent, which had disappeared by the time they'd been reunited in hell. Ghosts don't smell, she thought.

She touched a small lamp, urging it to give off what meager light it could. Solid-state lasers, while not the most delicate of instruments, still required a careful hand. Once there was enough light that she could see her own photo on Orion's instrument panel, she ducked back down the hatch and went to the weapons, housed beneath the wings of the ship.

The gain medium for solid-state lasers hadn't changed in the last three hundred years, since they were put into common usage. The weapon still used rare earth elements - made even rarer, she thought, by the fact that Earth no longer existed, and as such, probably ought to be saved. Just in case.

By the time she got the cover off the port side laser encasement, she was sweating and her hands were slippery. It took three tries before she successfully removed the crystal gain medium. Curious, she stared at it. It looked like standard silicate glass, except tinged green. She would never have been able to pick it out of a lineup of other glasses, but fortunately, that wasn't in her job description. She carefully tucked it into her pocket and replaced the cover. If she had time, she'd worry about finding a replacement medium.

The other cover came off more easily, and she had the glass in

her pocket and the cover replaced in no time. Which, it turned out, was exactly how much time she had left.

"Why is there a light on?" an annoyed male voice asked from the direction of the entrance.

Shit. She looked around quickly, trying to find Andvari amongst the shifting shadows, and then gave up, duck-walking backwards away from Orion's ship.

"It's Andersen's ship, sir."

"That's wonderful, Private," the first voice answered sarcastically. "But it doesn't answer the initial question. *Why* is it on?"

"I'll go check it out, sir," the Private volunteered.

"Good. You do that."

Niki heard confident, booted feet heading straight towards her and held her breath, before realizing that she was safe. Fighting her instincts, she stood up and faced the soldier.

He was young, several years younger than herself. His face had the unnatural paleness of a man born on Terra Arcturus, sheltered by its unnaturally thick ozone layer. His eyes belied his confident stride, though, darting around nervously. He drew his sidearm, something designed to be non-fatal, and side-stepped the ship, looking for an intruder, looking for *her*. She smiled.

Although he passed within spitting distance of her, the Private noticed nothing. He climbed into the cockpit and turned off the light, throwing the entire warehouse into utter darkness for a

brief moment, until the Captain turned on the overheads.

Niki sucked in her breath between her teeth, shielding her eyes against the relative brilliance.

"There's nothing, sir," the Private reported.

"Certainly between your ears, Private," the Captain sneered, staring around the warehouse warily. "Lights haven't achieved sentience, last I checked. Keep an eye out."

The Private nodded importantly. "Yes, sir."

Something poked Niki in the side and she looked down. Andvari stood there, grinning, two large canvas bags bulging in his arms.

"We'll need to be careful," she said, nodding her head towards the soldiers. "I don't know if they'll be able to see the bags."

Andvari nodded and wiped his sweaty brow on his shoulder.

They waited until the soldiers were deep in the shelf caves before sidling around the ship and towards the entrance. As they pushed the door open into full night, Niki heard the captain curse.

"Someone's stolen our goddamn weapons!"

"Only half, sir," the Private offered helpfully.

"You idiot -"

The door slammed behind them and Niki and Andvari took off running towards Nalagan, the bags clattering against their legs.

* * *

O, what tangled webs we weave

*When first we practice to betray
Defenseless souls who, to us, pray
And lead to death, that sweet reprieve.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The mountains rise thousands of feet above me, standing behind their volcanic foothills. Pink and grey granite lies strewn on the ground hither and thither, smashed against the smooth grey basalt. It makes sense, and I have to acknowledge it - all planets begin with magma that cools and hardens. Some of it remains beneath the surface, constantly churning away, creating an area of magnetic interference in the atmosphere. This, of course, was not the case for Old Mars, and Terra Arcturus seems to be more similar to Old Mars than Old Earth.

I shake my head, raising my gaze from the shattered history of Terra Arcturus, searching for anything that could be called a cave.

Bolwaki lies hidden behind the crest of the mountains, limning the rocks with thick green light. Dunwaki perches at the tip of the highest peak, surveying its kingdom for the last time.

I bite my lip as I realize that, yes, this *is* the last time that the kingdom of Terra Arcturus will be looked upon so peacefully. I stare at Dunwaki until my eyes water, and once it has disappeared, I return to searching the myriad crannies and folds of the mountain in front of me.

There had to be something, some clue, in the journal that I

missed. I can search these mountains for weeks before I am able to find anything. And I have...only...

I stumble over to a nearby shelf of granite and sit down heavily. Through the thick grey light of imminent dusk, I stare at the volcanic glass beneath my feet, seeing nothing except the memories I have just left behind.

It does not matter whether or not I find the Ocean. By the time I have discovered it - if, indeed, I ever do - I will still have several days' travel to return to Nalagan, at which point the war will be over. It does not matter whether Oðin, Loki, and Thor succeed in separating the Nessians and the humans; or whether Niki's plan to sabotage the weapons keeps the death tolls lower than they otherwise would be; or whether Freyr manages to create a functional army in the few hours he has left. The whole battle is over before it has begun; neither side will give up until the other side is exterminated or enslaved. The humans have the weapons, the training, and the sheer bloody-minded fear; the Nessians have the knowledge of the planet, control of the plague, and the panicked desperation either to kill or be killed.

Anything our small tribe of misplaced deities can accomplish will ultimately be overwhelmed by fear, or by desperation. Ten years from now, when both the Blue and Red Gods have returned to a safe viewing distance from Terra Arcturus, all they will see will be blood-soaked dust and the ashes of dead civilizations.

And Freki's words ring in my ears: *One can always die again.* The Secunda Mors the ancient Church always warned about. Except,

according to Freki, there could be Tertia Mors and beyond. My first death - caused by the very same plague that is even now slaughtering the humans in Nalagan - had been drawn out and exquisitely painful. To be physically capable of suffering that over...and over...

I shudder and blink away tears. It was not supposed to be like this. Status quo, where people died and were Judged and went on to whatever afterlife they deserved...it was simple, lyrical, and rational. And what are the Judges doing now? Do they sit up there and watch as their empire falls to ruins? Do they fight amongst themselves, even as they did while I was around to see it? Have they successfully banished each other to Tartarus, a coup upon a coup, until the Establishment, which now stands empty, decays into dust? Or have they simply murdered each other, like the Roman emperors of old?

Whatever they are doing, I think they will not be involving themselves in this battle.

I rub my hands together, trying to ease the chill running through them. I can do nothing to assist the gods or the humans or the Nessians or the dead. But perhaps, when the dust has settled, I can lead whatever few survive to the Ocean, to find peace and respite.

I turn around and stare at the huge rock face. Then, picking a likely starting point, I begin to climb.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Freyr stormed away from the milling pack of humans, having finally given up. Not even Tyr could convince these children to fight for their own freedom.

He threw himself down in the sand and lay back on his elbows, ostensibly staring at the oncoming night, taking deep, calming breaths. Here and there, bright pinpricks of light - distant suns, he assumed - began to poke through the fabric of the sky.

The light faded from the pale orange of early sunset, to a deeper brown, to the blue-black of isolated night. The sky glistened with millions of stars and a pale glow on the eastern horizon heralded a rising moon.

Freyr had nearly regained his calm when he saw it. A single star, almost directly above them, traveled lazily from side to side, growing larger, then smaller, then larger again.

"What the hell?" he whispered. He slowly climbed to his feet, keeping his gaze on the sky.

Whatever the light was, it boded ill for him and his kin. This much he knew. He started to walk toward Nalagan, keeping an eye on the floating light.

He heard a faint cry behind him and, tearing his gaze from the bizarre star, he saw Sigyn, staring at the city, her face pale. Where had she been hiding? Freyr wondered.

The woman shouted again and Freyr could just barely make out the words.

Come home!

Freyr turned away from her and her heartbreaking cries. *It's what we all want, isn't it?*

* * *

"I's 'im!" Beard whispered to his friend, elbowing him into silence. Oðin stood on a garden wall, outside a large building with a sign that said, "JUSTICE OF THE PEACE." The garden behind him was dead, and by all appearances had been that way for quite some time. Loose, pale brown dirt blew around his ankles as he stepped in it.

On top of this wall, visible for the first time, Oðin looked around at the remaining inhabitants of Nalagan and sighed. Beard and Lisp, for all their vehemence, hadn't been able to procure a large enough audience to warrant the kind of show that he, Thor, and Loki were prepared to put on. He set his jaw and began to speak, his voice carrying much further than mere physics would suggest.

"Behold! For I am the Lord, your God!" he intoned, raising his staff high into the air. Both Beard and Lisp's mouths fell open, shock and delight writ large across their faces. The few people still in the streets, hurrying towards home, stopped and stared. Shutters up and down the alley cracked open to look. Very good.

"On the third day, He rose from the dead. Is it not so?" Oðin demanded, glaring from person to person. Unwilling nods here and there.

One brave or reckless soul shouted, "It's been more'n three days!"

"Metaphors, man!" Oðin bellowed. "Everything is metaphor! I was dead and I am returned." A subtle hand gesture and Thor, who

remained invisible, raised his hammer to the sky.

Nothing happened. A gust of wind blew dirt and debris down the street and the onlookers, getting restless, began to move towards home once more. Oðin glared at Thor, whose face was screwed up in deep concentration.

The wind grew stronger. Signs hanging from shops in the market creaked angrily on unoiled hinges, adding to the occasional slam of unlocked shutters.

"Thor..." Oðin growled from the side of his mouth.

A faint light began to glow directly above them, growing brighter with each passing second. The humans, interested once more, stopped and pointed up. Their hair stood tall on their heads, crackling with static electricity.

The flash of lightning seared Oðin's eyeballs and over the paralyzing crash of thunder, he could hear the humans shouting in alarm. He blinked rapidly, staring nearsightedly at the nearby sounds of rampaging feet, cries of dismay, and overall panic.

They were blind. Of course, they were blind. It was not a permanent blindness, but likely this generation had never seen lightning, had never heard thunder, and they were understandably terrified of the phenomena.

Raising his voice to be heard above both the tumult and the temporary deafness, Oðin shouted, "For so I give you signs of My power!"

The running feet stumbled and came to a stop. Wide, unseeing

eyes blinked at him. Both Beard and Lisp, eyes watering, came forward, hands stretched before them.

"'e said 'e was comin'!" Beard yelled to his fellow humans. "De great leader 'as returned!"

"And to vhere vill he be leading us, fool?" returned an angry male voice.

"War is at hand," Oðin said. He could see now. The humans looked at him, half-disbelieving, half-hopeful. Once they had looked at him like that. But not in many, many years.

"Your brethren are dead," he continued. "Plague, it is said. Plague is the first sign of the oncoming war. The invasion will begin soon. You must fight together, or die alone."

"We's dyin' anyways," a nasal woman said from a nearby window. "Don't really matter none whether we's dyin' by plague or war, do it?"

"Plagues can be healed!" Oðin roared. "Wars can be avoided! But you must do it as one!"

"Listen to 'im!" Lisp shouted, climbing up onto the wall next to Oðin. "'e's 'ere to 'elp!"

A rock sailed past Lisp's ear and the small man's hands clenched into fists.

Oðin grasped his staff tightly, prepared to lead the sheep to battle, whether they wanted it or not.

* * *

"Quickly, now. Quickly!"

Loki pushed and shoved and harried and hurried as many Nessian slaves as he could find, leading them down the street to the edge of town where, hopefully, Freyja would be waiting for them. The Nessians, alarmed but orderly, followed him with minimal noise. They hadn't questioned who he was, *what* he was, why he was leading them, where he was leading them, or to what end they were being led. They simply followed. Sigurð, who didn't talk much, turned out to be a great slave-herder.

A slight, human figure stepped into the street ahead of Loki and he pulled up short. It was the human woman, Niki. Without looking at him, she walked down the line, handing the Nessians something from a canvas bag that she dragged alongside her. Whatever it was, the Nessians looked at it with distrust and confusion.

"What are you doing?" Loki hissed, grabbing her by her upper arm. Sigurð came to stand beside him, aware that something wasn't right, but not quite sure *what*.

She twisted out of his grip and stared at him. "Loki, right?"

Loki grunted.

"Nicely done. You look the part. But I'm not going to let them die."

"You're *not*, you little idiot," Loki snapped. "We're taking them away from the danger."

She shook her head firmly. "They will not make it. The

battle is coming."

Loki breathed deeply, quelling the urge to strangle the sense out of her - assuming these hands were capable of such destruction, weak as they were. "The battle will not be here for many days yet," he said patiently, as though she were an errant child.

"No," she said. "The wolf -"

"Wolf?"

"Freki," she said, exasperated. "The Nessians are here. Or, at least, they're on their way. They need to be armed." She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the milling slaves.

"And what about *your* people?" Loki asked quietly, tilting his head to look at her. An idiot, she was not. Intriguing, though...

The woman made a rude noise. "I'm not worried about them. Look, get out of my way, will you? They can't just be slaughtered!"

She shoved past him, continuing down the line, thrusting weapons into the unsuspecting hands of the pale, bewildered slaves. Some of them turned the weapons over in their hands - hands with far too many fingers - their expressions distrustful, but hopeful, too. Some of them stared after the woman, odd looks on their faces.

One of them called out to her. The language had no words that Loki could discern. It trilled, musical, birdsong over a brook. The woman stiffened and slowly looked back at the slave.

It repeated the question - Loki assumed it was a question - and waited, its face a mask of wariness.

The woman hesitantly responded in the same language, made more

clumsy by her thick human tongue. This was less the sound of birdsong and falling water, and more the sound of a bird of prey snatching fish from the river. But clearly the slave understood, because its - his? - face cleared and he nodded to her respectfully. Then he turned to face the rest of the Nessians, speaking in that odd language at length. While he spoke, Niki finished emptying the bag. Then she came to stand beside Loki.

"Freyja is waiting at the edge of town," she said quietly. "Some of the weapons work, some of them don't. It's all a placebo, you understand? But if they feel like they *can* fight, then maybe they won't lie down and die."

Without another word, she walked off, dragging the canvas bag behind her in the dirt. Loki stared after her, impressed, and confused by his admiration.

"Wait! Hu - Niki!" he called out. She turned, her face expressionless. "Please watch for my wife."

She nodded and, turning a corner, disappeared.

Sigurð stood stock still, staring at the wall over Loki's left shoulder. With a gentle tug, Loki got the human moving again, and the Nessians followed suit, less humble, but no less quiet.

Freyja was, indeed, waiting for them, her face impassive. Her fingers twitched against her robe, but she was otherwise calm.

* * *

Bob sat, apparently at ease, in the large, warm study of the

Nessian god, Rhialt. Satan caught sight of him through a crack in the door. The Old Man appeared unhurt. He simply sat there, waiting for something.

Satan hesitated. If he attracted Bob's attention, would that help their situation or harm it? Was Rhialt in the office with him? The way Bob stared across the room, nodding occasionally, made Satan think that, yes, the Old Man was having a conversation with the queer, cat-like god. Satan eased back, listening, waiting for his chance.

"Of course," Bob said dismissively. "You clearly cannot be thinking..."

With a shock, Satan realized that the sound he took to be birds trapped in a cage was actually the god's native language. Bob, however, spoke a human tongue that Satan could understand.

"No, no, no," Bob said, his voice reassuring. "I didn't mean that at all. I just need to know that he will not be harmed."

The birds twittered and chirruped.

"Good. It would not do, otherwise. It has been many years - ah, well, you will not care about that. Still, he is my friend, and I will not have him harmed." Bob's voice became steely.

Now the birds took on an anxious, conciliatory tone.

"Very good," Bob said. "Very good."

An interrogatory chirp.

"Of course not. He believes we're spying -"

A sharp squawk.

"No, that's not what I said," Bob said, irritated. "Yes, he can change shapes, but he is fully human, I assure you."

A long series of twitters and song.

"Okay, maybe not *human*. But not *Nessian*."

Bob glanced at the open door and Satan snatched his head back.

"He is not stupid," Bob continued, staring at the door. Satan wondered whether his friend knew that he was waiting just outside.

"He will, even now, be attempting escape."

A babbling laugh, like water over stones.

"Well, yes," the Old Man admitted. "We have the same goal, you and I. How we go about achieving it, though -"

A crack, like thin ice under too much pressure.

"You will do as you must, of course, as will I."

A fluttering sound, as of wings in flight.

"Good. Very good. I will stay here, of course, and await your reports."

Bob shot a sharp glance at the door, and Satan understood. The Old Man *had* known he was there. The entire conversation was for his benefit.

Rising quietly to his feet, Satan turned and fled down the stairs, taking them two at a time, feeling the memory of cold stone beneath his feet, feeling the memory of painful air rushing in and out of his lungs, running without caring whether he was noticed.

That last look Bob had given him had been a message in itself.

"You are correct. Now go."

And he did.

* * *

Freyr stumbled to a stop in the city square. Oðin All-Father stood above a crowd full of humans, shouting, his staff waving angrily over their heads. The humans, too, shouted, demanding answers, throwing insults, prepared to fight this grey-robed god.

Freyr shook his head. "Gods, what fools these mortals be," he murmured.

A faint scent rose on the wind, sweet with putrescence. Early rot. The city was haunted by death. He looked carefully at the humans, gathered so angrily in front of Oðin. They were pale, in a way that the unusual atmosphere of this planet couldn't account for. Their skin had a yellowish tinge that he knew meant infection of the liver. The way some of them stood told him that several of them had swelling in their groins.

Fierce, for all that they were dying.

A flash of light in the dim shadows behind Oðin. Thor stood, legs spread, Mjolnir held ready - prepared to fight those he had sworn to protect.

Mjolnir could not fight plague. These humans were already dead; they just hadn't accepted it yet.

He shook his head, horrified. *This is a city of ghosts.*

He turned away, to stare at the living wraiths, fighting so

urgently against their mortality, prepared to take anyone that they could down with them.

* * *

I sit at the mouth of the cave, panting. The cool, damp air behind me tells me that I have found the Ocean. For all the good it does the world I have left behind.

I close my eyes and think of my fellow Scribes, of the Judges who have been left to rule. I do not seek their minds, but flashes of violence come to me anyway. The door leading to Tartarus, thrown wide open, the Judges fighting amongst themselves, falling in or being flung in, left to wander or die or go mad as they see fit. The Scribes, watching in horror, crouched in corners like children with abusive parents. Silence. Spackles of blood on marble floors. A howling from deep within Tartarus.

I shiver and open my eyes. There is no time. Time, which has always seemed infinite to me, has shrunk to a point of light, flickering in the howling winds of chaos, threatening to go out.

I have one option left.

● * *

<<Orion>>

Orion, who has been left behind, staring at the departing forms of his friends, looks startled at being addressed from within his own mind.

"Oh, Jesus Christ on a piece of toast. I thought you said you were going to get out..."

<<There is no time. The plans have fallen apart. You must>>

"I did my part, Scribe," Orion says through gritted teeth. "I did every damn thing you asked of me."

<<Nalagan is dead, Orion. The Nessians are coming from their hiding place on the moon. Bob is hiding with Rhialt. There is only one chance left and it must be you>>

Orion blinks, shocked. "So...everything we've been working towards...?"

<<Hell in a handbasket. Your ship is still in the hangar. You must try to reason with the Nessians, on Vituperavi>>

"I don't know if the electrodynamic tethers will get me that far," he murmurs, curling and uncurling his fists. "Stop that, will you? I do it when I need to think; I don't need you to narrate it."

<<Apologies. As for the tethers>>

"They're meant to be used with planetary magnetism," Orion explains, his mind elsewhere. "Yeah, I'm thinking, asshole. Work with me. Arcturus' magnetosphere is so weak, though, that I don't think my ship would be useful for very long just in orbit, much less between planets."

<<What about the stellar magnetic field created by Bolwaki>>

Orion freezes and his mouth drops open. He shuts it with a snap. "Thanks," he says sourly. "Bolwaki...it might be possible..."

*/The star has enough surface convection to get you to
Vituperavi, I believe. Terra Cremata/*

"Probably has enough of a magnetosphere to - maybe - get me home," Orion says doubtfully. He then shakes his head. "If it were done..."

/Then 'twere well it were done quickly/

"Exactly." He starts to walk, with purpose, for the first time in many months.

"Is that true?" he asks.

/It is/

"Huh," he says. "What do you know?"

The hangar lies on the other side of the administration building, hidden behind the massive sandstone edifice that houses the Commander's office. Its doors hang ajar and when one side of the entryway bangs open in an unfelt wind, a dark void appears, daunting in its silence.

"Great," Orion mutters. "Thanks for *that* imagery."

He takes a deep breath and marches towards the waiting blackness.

"Well, what do I have to be afraid of?" he asks reasonably. "I'm already dead, aren't I?"

I refuse to respond.

"Aren't I?" he repeats, glaring at the darkness as though it had threatened him.

<<You are dead, yes. But with strange aeons>>

"Even death may die," Orion whispers. "Good Christ."

<<I didn't know you read>>

"I'm a soldier, not an idiot."

The door continues to slam against the wall, though no dust rises from the ground beneath our feet.

"That's damn eerie," Orion murmurs.

There is no argument.

He enters the hangar, which rings hollow in its emptiness. A low howling emanates from a far corner, the wailing of souls subsumed. The Judges' souls, perhaps.

"Judges?" Orion says quietly. "Where do they come into this?"

<<There was an uprising. They're all...effectively...dead>>

"Strange aeons, indeed," Orion muses, walking slowly towards his waiting ship.

The howling grows in intensity, but Orion ignores it. His ship - god, how long had it been since he'd flown? Really *flown*? - sits there, waiting for him like a patient lover. He runs his hands over it, growing familiar with it once more. At last, he smiles and sighs.

"You're mostly right, Scribe," he says. "It's an awful lot of romantic bullshit, but you're mostly right."

<<What am I wrong about>>

"No such thing as a patient lover," he says with a grin before

climbing into the cockpit. "I assume you're coming with me."

<<*Of course*>>

He rests his hands carefully over the control panel. His fingers know each switch and button like his own body. He needn't think of anything at all; it's second nature.

After he checks the electrodynamic tether - there are no holes or visible wires, he is proud to note - he buckles himself into the bucket seat, and begins the start sequence.

"Normally, we have someone tow the ship," he explains. "In an emergency, though, the battery pack can be used to roll it to open ground - provided open ground isn't too far away. Battery pack is limited."

A sharp whirring sound comes from beneath his seat - the battery pack -

"No, actually, that is the battery pack *fan*," Orion corrects. "Battery makes no sound."

The battery pack *fan* spins into action and with a deep groan, the ship begins to pull forward, slowly and inexorably.

"Fancy ten-dollar word you got there," he drawls under his breath.

<<*I have several*>>

The moon is nearly risen by the time Orion's ship - bearing the name "Archer" on its wing - finally makes it out of doors. Grateful, Orion hits the sequence of buttons, and leans back.

"How much of this is your hearing and how much is mine?" Orion

wonders.

<<I am not sure. What>>

A deep bass sound, lower even than when Chevsky-Jones rent Old Earth into pieces, comes from beneath the ship. Orion grins, long familiar with the sound.

<<God in Heaven>>

"Do you know the science behind it?" he shouts, looking blissfully at the sky, which approaches with the inevitability of Ragnarok.

<<I do not>>

"The sound shoves the atoms out of the way fast enough that the ship rises."

<<Sounds suspicious>>

"Science, my friend."

The atmosphere thins and the sound withers away, leaving silence and immense pressure. But silence

"Silence is good," Orion finishes. "Silence is blessed."

Then, the ship escapes the atmosphere and the pressure disappears. Terra Arcturus, a rough brown jewel, glows peacefully below him. He glances down at it, then removes his harness and grabs the electrodynamic cable.

A small piece of it already hangs beneath the ship, dangling like algae from a whale's mouth.

"Interesting imagery," Orion muses, feeding the line

patiently.

It takes mere moments for the full extent of the tether to be floating beneath the ship. Orion swims to the battery pack and turns it on.

"This will electrify the tether," he explains. "Electricity and magnetism are closely related. But you knew that."

<<*I did*>>

"And now we wait."

And with this declaration, he straps himself back into his chair, leans his head back, and closes his eyes.

Silence reigns, a calming void of everything.

Orion cracks open one eye. "Scribe? Don't do that. This'll take a few minutes. Will you please - I need to know what's going on with others. If you would?"

<<*Of course*>>

I drift away, allowing him to enjoy the first peace he has felt since leaving Earth those many years ago.

* * *

Loki watches Freyja lead her thin, pale, heavily-tailed chickadees to their waiting coop, mindful of Niki's warning. Sigurð stares after Freyja, a frown sitting deep between his brows.

"They will not survive," the man says, quite clearly. Loki looks at him in shock.

"Of course they will," he replies. "That's where Freyja is taking them - to hide."

Sigurð shakes his head, far longer than necessary. "No, no, no," he sings. "So long ago - well before my time, but in the midst of yours - her city was ruined by plague. They died in the thousands. Coughing up blood. Black blood on her altar. Never forget a thing like that. No, and she won't either."

Loki stares at him, a feeling of deep horror rising. "Are you saying *Freyja* -"

"Gods are vengeance, gods are hate," Sigurð chanted, dancing anxiously from one foot to the other. "Gods destroy what they create."

"Oh," Loki whispered, staring as the last elongated head disappears from sight, its ears twitching nervously. "Oh, no."

Thin wails pierce the desert night sky. Brief flashes of light. Then moaning. Then nothing.

Loki looks at Sigurð, who has begun to chew the insides of his cheeks. He backs away from the human slowly, and when Sigurð doesn't appear to notice, Loki turns and runs away, back towards -

* * *

Thor, his red hair gleaming in the flickering firelight, has been ready to defend his father for the last hour. But the humans do nothing except rail and shout and curse and weep. They are not fighters, he realizes. They are mere mortals.

Freyja appears at his side, from nowhere. "They are dead," she murmurs into his ear. "They are all diseased."

"Then what are we doing here?" he grunts. "We should be on the battlefield."

"I do not know where that battlefield is," she replies simply. She pats him on the arm and walks into the crowd, unseen. She lays her hand on the people she passes, and they realize that they will not live long enough to hear Odin out. One by one, they sit down on the ground and gaze up at the All Father with fever-glazed eyes.

Loki runs into the city square and vomits.

* * *

Freyr catches up to Freyja as she leaves the city. Her face is unnaturally calm, and it is unsettling.

"What is it?" he asks, his voice low.

She smiles at him, her gaze distant. "It is time to go," she replies. "Where is Andvari?"

"With the human woman."

From behind them, they hear the sound of sand rolling beneath shod feet. Niki glares at Freyja in undisguised hatred. Andvari notices nothing.

"You evil bitch," Niki says, her voice low with fury. "You have no idea what you've done."

"I have saved your wretched species," Freyja replies

dismissively. "Plagues are evil. I am not."

"They were *slaves!*"

"They were murderers."

"And so are you."

Andvari watches this interchange with wide eyes. He looks at Freyr, who shakes his head and turns to Freyja.

"Tell me you didn't," he pleads.

Freyja scoffs. "Are you telling me that Freyr, the God of Battle himself, is unmanned by the thought of death?"

"Death is one thing, sister," he says, striving to keep his voice even. "Murdering prisoners of war is another. We, too, were once hostages. Remember you not?"

Freyja makes a rude noise and begins to walk away.

"You will wait, Goddess," Freyr says in an awful tone.

Andvari, only coming up to his hip, stands beside broken Freyr. The dwarf carries a weapon and his countenance is grim.

Freyja turns and raises an eyebrow, disbelieving. "Oh, are we to turn on each other now? Has the Sly One poisoned your minds against me?"

"You will answer for your crimes," Freyr said, his voice cold.

From the corner of his eye, he sees Niki melt away into the darkness.

* * *

"Loki," Sif gasps, stumbling through the close city streets. The smell of death surrounds her. He cannot die, though. She tells herself this over and over again. He is a god. He cannot die. The Volva has already said when his time would be, and it is not now. It cannot be now. The Muspels have not invaded.

She stares around her, making certain that, indeed, there are no fire giants nearby. No giants. Just the cloying scent of decay.

She turns a corner and she finds him.

* * *

The fire is deceptively hot, just as it was the first time. But Satan does not hesitate to walk through it. The smoke fills his lungs and he coughs and gasps for air. The other side of the tunnel does not appear. His skin is beginning to blister. He begins to run, falling over unseen objects - bodies, perhaps - rising again, running, stumbling, falling.

He cannot die. He is a god. Of sorts. Bob would not let him die. Bob. His friend.

A deep chuckle comes from the flames, but it is not the chuckle of the flames. That huge, cat-like body appears above him, staring down at him, smiling over sharp teeth.

"Bob would not let you die," the creature - Rhialt - crooned. "Of course he would not. He is your friend.

"Friendship is the biggest weakness of your kind," Rhialt says, the smile vanishing. "Do not worry, though. Wherever gods go

when they die, your friend Bob will soon join you."

The figure melts away and Satan stares in horror at the flames, as they consume his body and then his mind.

* * *

Orion manages to land on Vituperavi, which orbits Terra Cremata, but just barely. He does not have enough battery power to make it back to Terra Arcturus without the help of the Nessians. He hopes he lives long enough to ask for that aid.

But more than that, he is disturbed by the strange warning light that flickered intermittently on his trip to the moon. The light indicated that his lasers may have malfunctioned. That is odd, because he has not touched them since the last Insurrection.

Vituperavi's atmosphere is very thin, but survivable for brief periods of time. He pulls on a warm jacket and steps off the ship, his hands held high.

"I have no weapons," he announces in his human tongue, realizing that, oh god, he really does have no weapons. The lasers...

The Nessians, who are in the process of loading their ships and preparing their own weapons, stop to stare at him. Sharp teeth glisten over wide, pale lips. They do not trust him, but he did not expect them to.

He tries again, pulling from the deep recesses of memory what few words he has in their native tongue. With a deep, shuddering

breath, he realizes he has only the one phrase. He thinks briefly, and with love, of Niki, and then addresses the Nessian who appears to lead this army.

"I come in peace."

END