

**WAR**

**By Mur Lafferty**

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**The Afterlife Series V**

War, The Afterlife Series V

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To Fiona- The best mad scientist I know.

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# CHAPTER ONE

Barris lay on the temple's roof, watching the sun go down with half-lidded eyes. His shirtless, bony chest rose and fell slowly as he contemplated the center of the sun. Such light would burn out a mortal's eyes, but Barris didn't fear the sun; it was the pure manifestation of his energy.

He turned his head and held a small ornate box to his ear. Thin fingers pried the lid off and he sucked in breath as pleasure overtook him. A small voice whispered in his ear. Overtaking the rudimentary government of Lathe would be a simple coup. What a fantastic idea. Lathe was the city of the mad, the city of the cast-offs, the city that lay literally under the floating city of Meridian. When you failed in Meridian, you ended up in Lathe. The scientists, the mad, and the ambitious — they still created in the shantytown.

The idea wasn't one of his favorites that he'd experienced, but it was a good one. He loved good ideas.

"You are pathetic," came a voice from behind him.

He grimaced. The voice belonged to Gamma. They'd both been imprisoned for thousands of years with his floor between them. He had discovered in the past few weeks that he preferred greatly the primitive communications of knocking on the floor to actually speaking with her.

"The battle with the pirates took a lot out of me," he said, hating the peevish sound of his own voice.

Her footsteps came closer until her leather boots ended up by his head. He kept staring at the sun.

"You didn't do anything during the battle but give Kate a bad idea, Barris. You —"

"I kept the sun in the sky! Imagine what would happen if I failed to do that for even one minute!" he said. He shifted his focus to her, the warrior messenger. She towered over him, strong and dark and imposing next to his pale, weak body. Revulsion for

himself replaced his dislike of her and he sat up with difficulty, sighing. “What do you want, anyway?”

“Kate wants to see us in the morning. There are plans to make about rescuing the other gods.”

He rubbed his hands over his face and through his limp blond hair. “Then I’ll see you in the morning. Leave me alone for now.”

She blew air out her nose and pursed her lips. “As you wish, sun god.” It sounded like an insult coming from her. She disappeared then, traveling, he assumed, by being attuned to weapons around the city and manifesting through them.

The gods had many ways to travel by magic. Barris had no powers. He walked and ate and shat. He may as well have been a human. Nearly all his energy was spent keeping the sun in the sky.

The only thing that gave him pleasure was to open ideas from the Idea Emporium in Lathe. He had an agreement with the proprietor, Professor Burns, who allowed him as many ideas as he liked as long as Barris blessed the business every now and then.

He never did anything with the ideas. But it felt so glorious to have them in his mind, whispering their potential to him. He had ideas now on how to become a scientist in the foothills outside Lathe, the hills of the forgotten and mad. He knew several key battle plans that would work against sky pirates who resided in the corrupt Dark north of Meridian. He now knew several ways to farm the chaos-riddled land under Meridian and Lathe. He was even pretty sure he knew how to move the floating city of Meridian if they ever needed to.

He closed his eyes and lay back on the roof to enjoy the slight remaining high from the idea. His self-revulsion was quickly replaced by a feeling of superiority. No one else had such brilliant ideas, and if he ever did anything with them, they would all — even the other gods — know he was a force to reckon with.

He was the sun, after all.

Barris the sun god slipped into sleep just as the sun slipped below the horizon west of the shining, floating city of Meridian.

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Fifteen minutes later, he woke up. His eyes had changed from watery blue to a gold that illuminated the rooftop. His muscles rippled as he sat up easily and stretched.

Barris's head was finally clear. Little paper and metal boxes lay strewn around the roof where he'd fallen asleep. He shook his head in disgust, remembering the intoxicating ideas and the high he'd felt. A sun god should have more self-pride. He vowed to lay off the ideas, to apply himself and become a needed member of Kate and Daniel's team. There were other gods who had been imprisoned like he had been. They needed freeing.

He stood and relished the feeling of strength coursing through him. The same thought as always went through his mind: if he felt so good with the sun down, why didn't he just take more of the sun's energy for himself?

Barris was many things, but ignorant about his own role in the world was not one of them. He smiled to himself, deciding to stay content with feeling god-like only fifty percent of the time, and stepped to the edge of the roof. He had only known the other gods in person for a couple of days, but he wasn't yet ready to reveal this part of himself to them. They might not understand.

His bare toes curled around the edge of the roof as wide fiery wings unfolded from his back. He inhaled deeply and stepped off.

Barris knew deep down that tomorrow he would not remember anything of this feeling, this power. The power, as well as the memory, would be channeled back into the rising sun. But he swore, this time, that he'd stop the idea usage.

The wind whipped through his hair and he grinned against the force of it, relishing the flight. He flew past an apartment building, tethered to the ground far below, catching the eye of a young boy who stared at him. His eyes flashed and he blessed the boy with power that Professor Burns would have given his entire business to receive. The boy would grow up to be a great leader of Meridian, he decided.

He swooped down below Meridian and surveyed Lathe, allowing them to receive some of his power: a treat that they never experienced during the day. He glided west then, over the ocean. He loved the waves, the water, so unlike himself. Dark and heavy, they were another world, but it also was a prison to another god. He'd told Kate and Daniel about the sea god, Ishmael, trapped beneath the waves; he assumed they

would be trying to free him soon. As beautiful as the ocean was, he feared venturing below it. It was not his element.

He surveyed the world as far as he could. He skirted the Dark place, the Wasteland north of Meridian and Lathe with its uncertainty storms and chaos energy seeping into the world, and flew over the mountains, blessing some of the madder scientists living — and experimenting — deeply inside. He remained tireless for hours but in the early morning, as his energy began to wane, he positioned himself over the water again, eagerly awaiting the Moon.

He knew her phases as he knew his own times to rise and set. It was time for her to peek out again, a sliver of silver glimmering on the horizon. He wanted to greet her, promise her that she would be rescued from her prison as he and the other gods, Gamma and Fabrique, the goddess of clockwork, had been. He would rescue the Moon and tell her everything he had thought about her since he first saw her glory outside his prison window.

The Moon rose, but she was smaller. He could feel her mass as smaller, her hold over the ocean not as strong. He hovered in place above the ocean and made another vow, to tell Kate and Daniel. He headed back to his perch atop his temple in Meridian and landed just as the sun's edge broke over the horizon.

Barris's head swam and he fell to his knees. He must have stood up in his sleep. He smacked his lips and grimaced at the taste. He struggled to his feet and squinted at the sun. Time for breakfast. And if he ate fast, he might have time to travel to Lathe to get another idea before the meeting with Kate and Daniel.

\* \* \* \* \*

The temple had nine floors: one each for Daniel, Cotton the moon goddess, Prosper the harvest god, Kate, Fabrique, the goddess of clockwork, Persi the goddess of dinosaurs, Ishmael the god of the sea, Gamma the warrior messenger, and Barris, the sun god. Kate had been busy modifying her floor of the temple to be a sort of home base of operations. The priestesses of the Reborn Goddess had balked at first, and then when they realized whom they were dealing with, fell to the floor in supplication. After the



tears were dried and Kate had reassured them all was well, they set about making the temple in the way their god wanted it.

Which essentially meant removing all the pews, bringing in a large round table, and setting up a coffee bar.

The head priestess, Ophelia, was clearly still agitated at removing the populace's ability to pray to Kate. She was not pacified by Kate's offer to meet with people directly to discuss things instead of just praying into the ether, because honestly she hadn't heard any prayers since waking up.

"I mean, I'm pretty powerful, but I am not getting a constant stream of prayers and requests beamed to my brain. I think meeting people might be the best way of going about things."

"But, my Lady, if the populace knows you are here, or knows any of them," she waved her hand at Daniel and the other gods milling about the coffee bar, "I fear we'll have a riot on our hands."

Kate looked out the window at the city of Meridian. "I see your point. But they won't be able to congregate, though. There's nowhere to stand."

"The Sidewalk will be jammed with people," the priestess said, indicating the central hub of the city that had gondola lines and zip lines to every building in the city. "The chaos and possible violence won't be here, but it'll be somewhere."

Kate raised her hands in surrender. "Fine, fine. Let us have this meeting and then we'll move somewhere else so people can pretend to pray and I won't hear it."

She hated it when logic got in the way of a good idea.

"I don't think gods are good at micromanaging, Kate," Daniel said, handing her a cup of coffee. "If you spend your time dealing with each prayer then you won't have any time for anything else, like this whole rescue thing we've got going on. I mean, look at Barris." He pointed to the milquetoast sun god who had slunk into the room, looking wide-eyed and a bit stoned. "He can see everything the sun sees. You'd think he'd constantly be up in arms about the injustices of the world, but he's not."

"Yes, but you're talking about Barris here, Daniel. He's not really what I would think of as a god to mold myself after."

Daniel shrugged. "Point taken. Still. We have some pretty big jobs to do. And if we can return these people's gods to them, then maybe more prayers will be answered."

She nodded absently and sipped her coffee.

The temples of the city were all in one building, stacked on top of one another in descending size. So the bottom level, Daniel's, was the biggest, and Barris's, the top, was the size of a small room. No one went to pray to Barris or Gamma, as the gods were actually there, imprisoned in the temples.

Kate's was the fourth one from the bottom. The roof was made of white gold and its interior was decorated sparsely with images of herself (a small part of her was gratified that the images made her look better than she did), statues, painting of her feeding the poor (which she had done once in her mortal life), and one of her gazing so longingly at a disinterested Daniel it made her blush. These people made up a lot of their religion, but they also knew things about her that were uncanny.

The other gods, the washed-out Barris, the crazy-haired Fabrique, and the tall, strong Gamma, sat at the round table. Daniel had insisted on the round table idea, liking the concept of King Arthur. Daniel and Kate were very aware, however, that the others viewed them as the king and queen of the gods, and looked to them. As they had created the world, and therefore the other gods, Kate could see their point, but still it felt like a level of responsibility that she and Daniel had screwed up in the past.

She dragged the heavy chair from the table and sat down. "Okay, Barris, you said that Persi is in the south, Ishmael is under the sea, Prosper is in Lathe and Cotton was in Dauphine." Her insides squirmed at this last one. Kate had razed Dauphine to the ground, not knowing a goddess was imprisoned there. She wondered what had happened to her.

Barris fiddled with a cardboard box lid. "Uh huh. Only Cotton isn't there anymore. Dauphine isn't there anymore."

"Yeah, we had to send a message," Daniel said. "We didn't know she was there at the time."

Fabrique nodded. "Maybe you set her free."

Kate stared at the table. "If that were the case, then Barris could find her, couldn't he?"

Barris nodded absently.

“Well, let’s work on the gods we know about,” Daniel said, slapping his hands on the table and waking Kate from her introspection. “Where are the maps of Meridian and Lathe?”

Fabrique pulled a map tube out of her tiny bag and pulled out two sheets — one was a clear plastic and one was paper. She unrolled the paper in the middle of the table. “This is Lathe,” she said, bending over it so her copper curls brushed the map. She then unrolled the plastic over the map of Lathe. A map was drawn in black ink and it took Kate only a moment to realize what it was. “And this is Meridian. So you can see where we are in relation to Lathe.”

“Very cool,” said Daniel. “So here’s your workshop, and here’s the Idea Emporium. So where’s this harvest god?”

“He’s not in Lathe proper,” Barris said, finally breaking out of his trance and addressing them. “He’s in the hills.”

Kate squirmed. “Isn’t that where the more crazy scientists go to try out their inventions?”

Fabrique nodded. “Smaller population there. I’ve been wanting to visit since I got free.”

“Speaking of which, we need to talk about something,” Kate said. “You were all under the impression that Daniel and I imprisoned you. I can only assume that the other gods will feel the same way. We need to be prepared.”

Gamma smiled grimly. “We’ll be fine, any attack they launch will be met with —”

“No, Gamma, what I mean is that we need to make sure we don’t hurt them,” Kate said.

“Oh.”

“So, what did imprison us?” asked Fabrique.

Kate sighed. “I am guessing it’s that black thing that threw us here in the first place. It’s imprisoning us, too; it’s just that our prison is much bigger than yours. We can’t leave this world.”

“Unless we go through the Dark,” Daniel added, pointing at the black areas north of Meridian and Lathe.

“Which I assume we’ll have to do at some point,” Kate said. She shuddered. She didn’t like the Dark. It was still Wasteland, full of potential, but tainted, chaotic

potential that seemed to ignore divinity. She knew it was the taint of the dark beast that enveloped heaven, and it — like many other things — needed to be cleansed.

“Why would the Dark want to imprison us?” Gamma asked.

“You can’t directly help the people in this world, so its influence gets to spread,” Daniel said. “You harbor resentment and anger toward us, which makes things difficult for us. Is that enough?”

“It worked,” Fabrique said, color dotting her freckled face. “I would have done some pretty terrible things to Daniel if the kid hadn’t been there.”

Daniel grimaced. Fabrique had imprisoned him easily when he had tried to free her. It was only the boy, James, who could persuade Fabrique to let Daniel plead his case.

“So the other gods will be pretty unhappy to see us. And clearly,” Gamma said, with a sense of disdain in her voice that Kate had never remembered in her as an old human woman, “we must use diplomacy instead of force.”

“That’s what James did with Fabrique; seemed to work then,” said Daniel, glaring at his empty cup of coffee. It refilled with his divine will and he looked pleased with himself.

Kate stared into her own coffee cup, which was, “as black as night and sweet as sin,” as the old folks liked to say.

But she was not omniscient. There was an awful lot she didn’t know. She was also not omnipotent; she could make worlds, but couldn’t heal the eye that her best friend had traded for godlike power. They could be exiled, banished, and imprisoned. Which left her feeling oddly vulnerable, even though she knew she could tap into considerable power.

She had to face it: she was afraid. The corrupt worship of Dauphine had been over the top and needed to be cleansed, Gomorrah-style. But she didn’t know what had happened to the goddess, or how to find her. She was afraid of what she would discover if they did.

“So what are we thinking? Hit the caves in the morning?” she asked.

“Why not now?” asked Daniel.

Kate shrugged. “There are some things I’d like to do in Meridian and Lathe first. Prepare. You know.”

Daniel cocked his head and looked at her, knowing there was more to it, but he let it go. She knew he'd ask her in private. "Whatever you say. I'll never turn down a visit to Lathe."

Fabrique nodded. "I'll be happy to get some supplies at the House of Mysteries."

Gamma frowned. "I'll be on the roof, then. If you need me, just draw your sword."

Kate stood. Barris sat in the chair beside her, fiddling with the little idea box lid again. "Barris, where will you be in the meantime?"

"Lathe," he muttered, not looking at her.

Kate nodded. "Well, uh, cool. Meet here at eight am, then. Daniel, can I talk to you before you head down to Lathe?"

Daniel nodded and they both headed to the head priestesses' office. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Obviously," he said, frowning.

"That moon goddess, Cotton. She was held in the city of Dauphine." Kate let the weight of her words hang in the air.

Daniel got it. "Crap. Do you think ...?"

"I don't know," Kate said. "I don't know if she's dead or she survived or what. But Barris can't find her. So we have to figure out what to do. If she survived, she's probably very, very angry with us."

"Rightly so," Daniel allowed. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to remind you that we probably have a problem on our hands."

He wrapped his arm around her waist and nuzzled her neck. "Don't worry about it. We'll handle it. How about we see Meridian and Lathe tonight, see the nightlife, hang out like old times?"

She let him hold her; she kissed him back, but inside she still felt cold.

## CHAPTER TWO

She stole a piece of the moon from the sky. Because she could.

Yes, it was spiteful, and yes, it was mean. But she took it because she could, because it was hers, and because the world would miss it.

Where once she had cared for the world, watching it through her prison window that waxed and waned, now she didn't give a shit about it. It held no joy for her. She didn't want to see the world, peeking as she could during the day or ruling over it during the night. She didn't want to flirt with the sun and wonder if he was as lonely as she was. She didn't want to have children wish on her or see patterns in her face.

Her face no longer held a gentle, soft glow. It had been burned when the city of Dauphine fell. The Goddess Kate had walked through the streets, sending fire to cleanse the city, killing innocent and evil alike. Some of the tethered airships had floated away in the night as their tethers burned, but her prison, the silver ship Luna, had caught fire when the tower port burned.

When night fell and the horror had ceased and the flames and cries of the victims had all died, she rose from the rubble. Her fingers touched the ruined mass that was her face and she cried. She cast about until she found a house where children had died, trapped inside. She used her will to meld their charred bones together to form one smooth mask to hide behind. She stumbled to a graveyard where the dead had been the only ones protected from the fire. There she knit a cloak from their hair to wrap around her charred nakedness.

Finally, clothed and properly hidden, she shook herself all over and transformed into a white crow smudged with blood and soot. She took to the sky and surveyed the world around her, the dead city of Dauphine and the surrounding countryside. In the air she could hear the whisperings of all of the lost souls with nowhere to go.

The moon hung like a scythe. To finalize her transformation, she would need a weapon. She reached up with her beak and plucked part of it from the sky. She landed lightly on the earth at the heart of Dauphine. She transformed back to human form and fixed the sharp crescent atop a leg bone where its ends glittered wickedly.

She turned her faceless mask to the charred remains of a temple that had been dedicated to the moon goddess, Cotton, someone she no longer was. She waved her scythe in a diagonal slashing motion, then walked through the threshold that used to hold a pearl door. She vanished from the earth, and behind her the lost and lonely souls streamed through behind her, joyously following her to her new realm.

The name “Morrigan” floated into her mind, and she grasped it and felt it was hers. She cradled it as her own, and sought to explore her underground home as the souls swirled around her.

Above Dauphine, where the moon hung, smaller and duller, a small void circled the orb. Even a small void can create a vacuum, and it began to attract interest from far away.

Morrigan didn’t know about this void; if she had known, she wouldn’t have cared. She had a new name, a new weapon, a new home, and most importantly, she had her freedom. The crows belonged to her, and she could learn more of what was going on above ground than she ever had as the moon.

Her ghosts fashioned her a throne of bones and she sat there, reveled in their adoration, and watched through the eyes of her animals above.

Her time would come. Morrigan would make those responsible answer for their crimes.

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Kate looked out of the temple window at the sunset peeking through the floating buildings, then at the mist gathered around the base of the buildings.

“What does Meridian do with their dead?” she asked suddenly. “Do you have vermin? Pets? Garbage collection?” The concept of living away from the ground felt completely alien to her.

A young acolyte, assigned to her for the afternoon, appeared at her elbow. With eyes fixed politely on the floor, she said, “We cremate our dead, My Lady. Different vermin breed in the buildings; one will have mice, others insects and still others rats. They usually come from pets. The bank has an infestation of hamsters, and the air market has geckos. Usually after vermin breeds to the point of trouble, either

exterminators are brought in, or humane trappers who then sell the vermin as pets, and the whole thing starts all over again.”

“You sound like you don’t approve,” Kate said, laughing.

The young woman grimaced. “I grew up in an apartment building with a guinea pig problem. Seeing one of those little beady eyes chomping on my cereal one morning made sure I never saw them as cute again.”

“Okay, so cute vermin. Or not so cute. What about garbage? Surely you don’t drop it on Lathe?”

The acolyte’s eyes grew wide and she forgot herself, looking Kate in the face. “Oh goodness no, that’s prohibited. It doesn’t mean some don’t do it, but they’re punished severely. We’re not sky pirates who dump flotsam and jetsam over the side. We have a handful of buildings that transform the garbage using some power harnessed from the probability storms.”

“And then what?” Kate asked.

Her face went slack and she dropped her eyes again. “Um, actually I don’t know.”

Kate grinned. “Once you throw it away, it isn’t your problem anymore? Yeah, we had that where I’m from. Don’t be ashamed. I’ll find out from someone. You’ll have to excuse me; this is all so new to me, living off the ground.”

“I have to excuse you?” the acolyte asked.

“Sure, I’m the new person here, I’m at risk of insulting your way of life.”

“But, Lady, you created us.”

Kate shrugged, careful not to destroy the woman’s faith. “That’s true, Daniel and I made the world happen, but you all made it what it is. Which is why we have little idea what’s going on.” She took the woman’s chin and forced it up, making her look her in the eyes. “Look, you won’t offend me if you look at me, or talk to me like anyone else. In fact, I’d prefer it. Can you try to do that? Please?”

The acolyte’s lip trembled and Kate realized she was scaring her. She let her go, and the woman said, “Yes, Lady.”

“What’s your name?”

“Meredith, Lady.”



“Well, then, Meredith, how do you feel about showing me around the city tonight? You can take me and Daniel out, and show us what folks do for fun around here. How does that sound?”

Meredith’s eyes grew round and she stammered something about being needed at the temple.

“My temple, right? The temple built to honor me? Do you think that sweeping the floor here will honor me than helping me understand Meridian better?” Kate hated to pull rank, but it was honestly ridiculous how the priestesses seemed to balk at any changes she wished to make at the temple.

“No, Lady. I mean, yes, Lady. I mean, when would you like to go?”

“Thank goodness,” Kate said. “We can go at sunset. Daniel’s checking out his temple; he should be back up soon. Please get me an acolyte’s robe so I can look like I’m from the temple too.”

She sighed and looked back out of the window. “God, I could use a drink. You guys have wine here, right?”

Meredith grinned over her shoulder at Kate, relaxing at last. “I know just the place.”

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Kate held the glass of wine up to her face, frowning at the thin, slightly bubbly green liquid inside.

“I don’t know what it is, but it’s green,” Daniel quoted in a bad Scottish accent, and Kate snorted at him.

She glanced over her glass at Meredith, who encouraged her with a grin. “Things grow differently in Lathe. That’s the finest wine that this area can grow. It’s called Cmar. Trust me.”

Kate put the glass to her lips, reminded herself that she was immortal, and then took a sip.

It didn’t taste green. Kate had always wondered why you didn’t see sparkling red wine. Maybe because it sucked? But this tasted like a fruity red wine with the heavy

tannins replaced with ... she couldn't place it. Something light and airy, something besides the bubbles, which left a tingle in her mouth long after she had swallowed.

"That's amazing," she said.

Meredith nodded happily. They sat at a table in the back of a bar that was on the bottom floor of a squat building near the outer edge of Meridian. The bar was called "Bottomless," and its walls and floor were made of glass so you could look down and see the swirling clouds and, every once in a while, a glimmer from Lathe, hundreds of feet below.

Kate had heard of restaurants on top of skyscrapers with amazing views, but this was a new experience. She bet it would be amazing during the day, but they only opened at sunset.

"There's plenty to see at night," said the bar owner, a tall man named Sam who was built like a refrigerator (and who was amused greatly at this). He was remarkably pale, more than most of the citizens of the world, nearly as pale as Kate and Daniel.

He didn't blink at Kate and Daniel, even though their skin was much like his, and Daniel's missing eye was hard to hide. He welcomed them with open arms and said that all priestesses of Kate were welcome there. Meredith greeted him by name and he hugged her, almost engulfing her with his bulk.

"I always love the priestesses of Kate," he said. "I feel they bring a little of the goddess's smile my way."

Kate grinned at him, wondering how much he really had ascertained. "I'm sure they do," she said.

He had seated them at a back table, where he said they could see the most of the wondrous things that went on during the evening below, and brought them a bottle of his best Cmar.

"So what are we looking for here? Or is it just the view?" Daniel asked, looking toward the mass of darkness that indicated the hills east of Lathe. Occasional bursts of light flickered from inside the caves.

"I'm not sure, exactly," Meredith admitted. "When I come I usually sit near the bar and chat with Sam. I rarely sit at the tables. I go to Lathe often enough on temple business; I don't need the view."

“There are always things to see in Lathe at night,” Sam said, bringing another bottle of Cmar without being asked.

“Like?” Daniel asked.

As if that was the invitation he was waiting for, Sam pulled up a chair, its feet sliding smoothly and noiselessly over the glass floor, and settled his bulk into it.

“Well, the scientists work more at night. The one who’ve lost their minds tend to be more nocturnal. Not sure why, maybe they feel more like animals, maybe they don’t like the sun anymore.”

Daniel chuckled. “Maybe they’ve met Barris.”

Kate glared at him. Openly admitting that they knew and disliked the sun god was not a good way of keeping a low profile, but Sam didn’t miss a beat.

“You might be onto something there. I had one man in here who had left Meridian in disgrace, but discovered something in Lathe that helped him make his riches back, so he returned to the city. But he was a changed man, very flashy. He told me at length how he hid from the sun and only came out in the dark, when the moon ruled the sky. He worshipped her, he said, and said he was working on a way to communicate with her.”

Meredith looked over the horizon. “You might want to look him up, then. Shouldn’t we have a waxing moon by now? It’s been a new moon for days.”

“The moon is gone?” Kate asked, her voice catching.

Sam scratched his chin. “Now that you mention it, it’s been clear since that last improbability storm and I haven’t seen a moon in the last few nights either.”

The chewing, horrific pain enveloped her as her prison aboard a stationary airship caught fire and plummeted. She had tried to keep the airship in the sky, but it was during the day, her weak time, and she was little more than mortal. It crashed into a temple dedicated to her — there was too much pain and chaos to note the irony — and she struggled toward a hole in the ship’s hull. The burning balloon then sank and covered the ship, and fire was everywhere.

Kate blinked her eyes, trying to clear the vision. Was it something she had imagined, or something that had actually happened? She knocked back the last of the green stuff in her glass with one gulp, the bubbling liquid reminding her not so much of nice tingles, but ...

“Careful, miss,” Sam said, pouring her another glass. “This stuff is strong. Best to be sipped.”

Kate blinked at him. It had been a long time since she had felt alcohol seep through her system. “And if you want to forget something?”

He laughed, a pleasing, friendly sound. “Then let me leave the cork out of the bottle for you.”

Daniel put his hand on her arm and squeezed. She didn’t meet his eye. If the moon was actually gone from the sky, they were going to have even bigger problems. As if they didn’t have enough.

Meredith glanced at Sam and shifted in her chair. “So, uh, what else did you want to know about Meridian?”

Kate appreciated the distraction and sipped at her wine, letting Daniel take this one.

“Anything, really. Where we come from, they didn’t have cities in the air, and the whole thing is just really strange to us.” He glanced down through the floor. “Really strange,” he repeated.

“I know what you mean,” Sam said. “I am from Leviathan City, the city under the waves. My people worshiped Ishmael, and the other gods were barely known, if at all. We worshiped the moon, as she moved the tides, and Persi, as she blessed the water creatures around us and kept the leviathan away. We didn’t believe in the other gods we had heard about from the rare above-ground visitors. Coming to Meridian was a shock to me to learn about the sun, and Kate and Daniel, and the others.”

They weren’t known in Leviathan City? This was news. “What brought you to Meridian, and what made you stay?” asked Kate.

“We were solitary for many years, but plague hit the city when I was a boy. My parents were a doctor and a scholar, so they were sent to Meridian to try to find a cure.”

Kate finished off her glass and looked at Sam unsteadily. “And did they?”

Sam looked down at Lathe, frowning. “They did. But the council of elders said that we had been tainted by the city in the air, and would not let us return home. We were allowed into the city long enough to deliver the information about the cure and remove our belongings, and then we were exiled.”

“Dude, that’s cold,” Daniel said.

Sam nodded and continued. “Minimal trade between the cities meant that my parents’ riches meant little outside, so we arrived in Lathe poor and homeless. The good thing about Lathe is they’ll take in anyone, so we found an abandoned house and my parents began their lives anew.”

“Leviathan City seems pretty intolerant of outsiders,” Kate said, glancing at Daniel. He nodded in silent agreement; rescuing the god Ishmael may not be as easy as they’d hoped.

“After the plague was, I assume, cured, my people shut off all connection with the outside world. My parents and I became the only citizens that we know of outside the city.”

“Why are they so intolerant?” Kate asked. “Surely they were grateful for the cure?”

Sam poured himself a glass of the green wine and knocked it back, much like Kate had. “People above ground were blasphemers,” he said flatly. “They did not worship Ishmael as we did; they had new gods to worship. When my parents gave their full reports about Lathe and Meridian, they saw only cities of sin and horror. Anyone who has touched the outside must be irrevocably tainted, and must not be allowed into Leviathan City.”

Sam snapped his head up, his eyes instantly regaining the sparkle they’d had when they’d entered his bar. “But! You are here to ask about Meridian, not Leviathan City, am I right?”

Kate poured more wine unsteadily into her glass. “We’re from, uh, the South, so we don’t know much about any city north of where we’re from, including Leviathan City. We want to know about everywhere, honestly. Thank you for your story, Sam, that can’t have been easy for you.”

He waved his hand in dismissal. “It happened so long ago it’s hardly forgotten,” he said, apparently forgetting the pain that had been scrawled on his face a minute before.

“Now, let me tell you of how I came from Lathe to Meridian. That is a much more interesting story.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I have to admit, it was a tough change moving to Lathe. Leviathan City is a strange place, but it’s not as strange as Lathe. Lathe is very dry.”

Daniel laughed. “That’s the big difference? The weather?”

Sam cleared his throat. “It is relevant. The diseases in a dry area are much different from the diseases in a wet one. Meridian had better physicians, but as my parents were poor, we ended up in Lathe, and my mother had to start from scratch. We looked different and talked different from everyone else.”

“I went to the strange establishment that stands for school in Lathe, where we were taught not so much reading and writing and math, but how to live in the world where the buildings will not stay on the ground, whales swim in the air instead of the ocean, and the entirety is built entirely of penniless castoffs from the city above. I learned basic tinkering and farming.”

He paused to wet his throat, and Kate said, “How can people farm in this soil?”

“The vegetables here are recalcitrant, odd things. They are fed not by water but by the improbability storms, so you may not get what you plant. But they do sustain people.”

“So how did you get to Meridian?” Kate asked.

“Remember when I said I learned some tinkering?” Sam asked. They nodded.

“Well, I invented a new way of getting grapes to do more or less what you want them to, and then fermented them to make sparkling wine.”

“So the Cmar is yours?” Kate asked, pouring herself another glass.

“It is indeed. So I sold some crates of wine to Meridian, some to Dauphine, and other cities. I made enough to buy this bar and retool it to have a glass floor so I could keep an eye on my vineyard. It’s on the hill over there.” He pointed into the darkness, north of the cities. Kate squinted drunkenly and willed herself to see through the darkness. She spotted a vineyard and a little building nestled into the hill; the winery, she assumed.

“And the rest is history,” Daniel concluded, draining his glass. “This is damn tasty stuff, Sam. I gotta tell you.”

Sam bowed his head. “Thank you. I’m very proud of it.”

“So what do people do in Lathe?” Kate asked. “I mean, you know, for fun?”

Daniel looked at her with a little smile, and she realized she was sounding pretty plastered. But to hell with it; it had been forever since she'd been drunk.

"There are bars such as mine, but with lesser vintages, of course," Sam said. "They have their own version of theater with clockwork actors and there are always the caves."

"The caves? Are there tours or something?" Daniel asked.

"No, it's more of a child-like dare that adults go through. The scientists who wish to be left alone go there, and often set traps."

"Traps," Daniel said, dumbstruck. "What, is this a D&D game?"

Sam looked at him blankly, and Daniel mumbled an apology. "The traps are often quite deadly, but you can often sell them to dealers in town if you can deactivate them safely. It's adventure, it's money, and there's a thriving trade. It makes the scientists cranky, though."

"I can imagine," Kate said. Her eyelids were growing heavy.

Daniel poked her in the ribs. "Come on, Kate. The night just started. Don't fall asleep on me."

She closed her eyes and willed some of the alcohol out of her system. "Whew. That was some good stuff, Sam. Thank you."

Sam stared at her, and she blushed, realizing that sobering up instantly was not something mortals did. He recovered quickly though, and thanked her for the compliment.

Sam returned to work and Meredith talked about the city, pointing out interesting buildings and describing the more entertaining parts of town. "Tomorrow, if you like, we can go to the market. There's always merchants there from Lathe and Meridian and all sorts of places."

"I'd love to, but we're heading to Lathe tomorrow. We have business there," Kate said, looking through the floor at the ground.

"Yeah, about that, Kate, we should talk about who is going. Is it just you, me and the other gods, or ..." Daniel trailed off as he realized she wasn't paying attention to him. "Kate?"

Kate got out of her chair and knelt on the floor. "What the hell is that?"

A golden streak bisected the darkness, shining up through the faint cloud cover, heading toward the hills.

Kate looked up at Meredith. “What is that?”

The woman had gone white. “I — I don’t know. I have never seen it before.”

“Sam!” Kate called over her shoulder. He was at her side in an instant. “What is that?” She pointed to the golden streak, which had been dodging in and out of the hills near Sam’s vineyard.

“I have no idea,” Sam said, staring. “Someone had mentioned something they saw the other night, something like a golden man, but I thought he was drunk.”

“We’re not drunk,” Kate said. She absently felt in her pocket for money and handed it to Meredith. “Is that enough for the wine?”

The acolyte choked out an affirmative when she saw how much Kate had given her, but Kate was already at the door, Daniel close behind.

The wind pulled at them as they stood on the stoop, the fog curling around their feet.

“What are you planning on doing?” Daniel asked her.

“Following it,” she said, and stepped out of the city.

Kate hadn’t gotten used to flying like a superhero; she had found it more comfortable to grow wings to catch the air. They always ripped her shirt, but she could mend that with a thought. The black wings sprang from her back as she fell, catching the wind and steering her toward the hill. She realized belatedly that she had just tipped their hand to Sam, who was inevitably watching, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Daniel joined her, having shape-changed into a one-eyed pterodactyl. The wind picked up and they struggled against it. Kate picked up speed, nearing the vineyards. The golden being still danced in and out of the hills, then shot toward them, skimming the ground, tearing up the ground in a fiery furrow behind it.

Kate and Daniel angled down to meet the being, but it didn’t stop. Closer, it looked like an angel made of fire, flying incredibly fast, leaving a line of fire in its wake.

“What is it doing?” Kate yelled to Daniel as they dove. The wind tore away her voice but she knew he heard her. He folded his wings and dropped, inspecting the angel’s work and leaving Kate alone to catch up.

As much as Kate worked her will to speed up to the angel, he stayed ahead of her. Just as she had decided to teleport in front of him to see if she could stop him — or at



least get a good look at him — when Daniel screeched at her. She understood immediately and brought herself up short.

They hadn't noticed the screaming wind around them, too intent on their prey. But there it was: an improbability storm tearing out of the Wasteland, with Meridian and Lathe in its path.

"Shit," she mumbled, watching the glowing, roiling clouds near.

With a thought, she sent her hummingbird companions, Huginn and Muninn, out of her robe pocket and away from her: Huginn after the angel, Muninn toward the temple to warn Meridian of the storm.

Daniel caught up with her and hovered beside her. He chirped once and flew toward the hills.

"Sure, great time to explore," she said. She cast one more eye at the swiftly departing angel and then followed Daniel.

The flames rose up high in front of the hills, burning straight from the dirt with no apparent fuel. They formed a barrier to anyone on foot, and Kate and Daniel stood before the ten-foot-high flames, Daniel having taken his own form again.

"What was he doing?" Daniel asked, reaching his hand out. He pulled it back quickly. "This shit is magical or something. It shouldn't feel hot to me."

"Not magic," Kate said. "That was a god."

"But who? I thought we knew everyone who was out?"

"I don't know," she said. "One of ours, maybe? Kagut-suchi?" She thought about the Japanese fire god that she and Daniel had freed back during their adventures in heaven, the one whose power had been so intense that his mother died of the burns she'd received in childbirth.

"But how? And why would he build a wall of flames here?" Daniel asked.

Kate brushed some wind-blown hair from her face. The storm was getting closer. "What's on the other side of this wall?"

"Hills. Caves."

"And tinkers," Kate said. The maddest of the mad were said to live in the caves outside Lathe, tunneling through the hills for more space to make their impossible machines.

“Wait a second, Kate,” Daniel said, putting his hand out to the flames again. He winced but kept it there. “The fire’s not moving.”

Kate turned to face the storm, strange lights coming from inside the glowing clouds, edging closer to the city, which had started to sway in its wake. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but is the fire protecting the caves from the storm?”

“Looks like.”

“And, uh, does it seem like a good idea to get behind the fire ourselves, as risking flying that close to the storm that likes to take gods’ power away seems stupid?”

“I’m with you there.”

They linked hands and flew high, over the flames, and landed at the opening of a cave. A dark brass door blocked the way. Kate and Daniel exchanged a look, and then knocked as the storm closed outside the flame wall.

## CHAPTER THREE

The door didn't budge. Kate frowned.

"Well, there's an improbability storm coming, a big scary thing just set fire to their front stoop, and now two gods want in. Can you blame them?" Daniel asked.

Kate snorted. "So, trickster god, get us inside."

He gave a devilish grin. "Oooh, I like it when you tell me what to do. Say please."

Kate giggled, feeling her face grow warm. "Stop it. This is serious."

"Yeah," he said, putting his hand on the door and closing his eyes. "But when it's serious is just the right time to be laughing. We need it. I get that now. Ah!" He drew back as the door gave a small click and swung silently open.

Kate walked past him, patting him on the butt. "Nicely done."

"So we're just going to waltz on in? And say what?" Daniel said, following her.

"We hear you have a harvest god kept captive, please free him," Kate suggested. She glowed faintly, illuminating the dark hallway.

"Sure. That'll work. I'm sure Prosper didn't think to just ask for his freedom."

"Do you have a better plan?" Kate asked.

"Well, as we don't even know if he is imprisoned here, I think it might be good to do some recon. Learn a little about this place. Like we did with Hermes and Hades."

Kate nodded, remembering how Hermes had spoken softly in her ear about how to properly trick Hades into giving back the souls he had stolen. "What do you have in mind?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate hadn't tried shape-changing before. That seemed to be Daniel's skill, and she didn't think it was something she needed to do. Still, it was relatively easy to disguise herself as a hummingbird and perch in the folds of Daniel's robe.

*What if I can't communicate with you?* she thought.

*Silly girl, we are always linked,* came his warm reply in her head. She relaxed, her tiny heartbeat slowing to a mere 250 beats per minute.

Daniel walked with confidence through the dark hallways. Kate's divine eyes could easily make out mosaics of different symbols, from birds to gears to whales to city landscapes covering the walls and floors. When Daniel reached a fork in the hallways, he chose the right — always the right.

He passed doors of wood, stone, metal, and one that looked as if it were made of cascading water. He paused outside the last one, and decided to go on.

*What are you looking for?*

*I won't know till I find it.*

*Want me to fly ahead and see?*

*Do you really want to be separated in the home of a mad scientist?*

*Well, we are gods.*

*...who are weakened when confronted with chaos energy.*

Kate snapped her tiny beak in frustration. She was usually the voice of reason having to hold Daniel back. Now that she was stealthy and swift, she thought she would be ideal to scout ahead and report back.

*Screw him, I don't need his permission,* she thought, but before she could let go, Daniel stopped in front of a door.

"Here," he whispered out loud.

The door was made of one long sheet of paper. A crumpled up ball stuck out of the middle, and Daniel grasped the ball and turned it.

The paper fluttered as it swung inward, and they entered a study.

Kate had to admit it looked a lot cozier than she would have expected a home inside a cave to look. A fire in a massive fireplace (where did the chimney go?) burned merrily in the far left corner of the room, with an easy chair vacant in front of it. It looked angled in the perfect "contemplate the fire" position, and Kate darted over to hover above the red leather chair and then settle atop the back.

On the wall directly in front of the doorway sat a large, brass box. It pinged thoughtfully to itself as if casually thinking about something. Largely square in shape, it was about four feet high with two pipes sticking out of the bottom left hand side and snaking around to the front topside. A small window held a blinking cursor.

Kate cocked her head and blinked at Daniel.

“Yeah, it is surprising to have such nice stuff in a place where boy scouts should be exploring,” he replied. “But what is this toy?”

He reached a finger out to stroke the bronze, but paused when a muffled voice from behind the machine said, “I wouldn’t.”

Daniel took a step back. “Hello?”

The owner of the voice popped up from behind the machine. He held a lit blowtorch and was wearing a welder’s helmet. He kept rising and Kate realized he must have been a good seven feet tall, and very thin.

He flipped up the mask with a hand encased in a heavy rubber glove. His face was boyish, and a black curl stuck to his sweaty forehead. He squinted at Daniel and flung his left hand around until his black glove went flying into the corner. He rooted around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses and struggled to put them on, all the while the blowtorch continuing to burn in his right hand.

Daniel raised both hands in a nonthreatening gesture. “I’m sorry, I was outside of Lathe when the improbability storm came and this was the closest shelter. Then this weird thing cut off any exit from the caves with a wall of fire —”

The man turned off the blowtorch and put it on the ceramic tile floor. He stepped out from behind the bronze box with long, slow steps.

“Wait, did you say a weird being?”

“Uh, yes,” said Daniel.

“Ahhh,” said the man. He bent over and tapped a fingernail on the window with the blinking cursor. “The paerhapsotron told me with 85% certainty that I would be visited by a god tonight. I guess that was it. You say he’s sealed us off?”

“A wall of fire ten feet high that seems to burn from the dirt,” Daniel said.

“Fascinating! So my paerhapsotron was right after all. And I’ve been fiddling with it all night.”

Daniel grinned. “Did it predict that you’d be doing that?”

The man blinked at him, not laughing. Daniel grimaced a little at his joke falling flat, and he coughed once. “I am Daniel.”

The scientist glanced at Daniel's patch and grinned. His mouth was very wide, and Kate found it friendly and overly enthusiastic, like a dog's. "I figured that, with the missing eye. Were you a victim of the barbaric practices of Dauphine?"

"Yes, that's it," Daniel said smoothly. "I've lost my faith in the gods; you can probably guess why." He held out his right hand.

The scientist stuck out his left hand and shook Daniel's awkwardly, as his right was still in the heavy glove. "I am Scott Von Rothelsgeschitmeirson. You are welcome in my home. I certainly would have broken in to someone else's home if I were being chased by a fiery being." He squinted. "Wait — did you say it was one being?"

Daniel nodded. "That's all I saw."

Scott leaned forward and tapped the machine again. "Damned device. I don't know why I created it. It never works."

"Why? What did it say?" Daniel asked.

"It told me two gods were coming tonight."

Daniel swallowed and glanced over at Kate, still perched on the back of the leather chair. She hoped she was small enough to escape notice.

"No matter!" Scott said. "Failure is just another step on the way to success, right?" He straightened and took his helmet off, dropping it beside the blowtorch. Keeping his right glove on, he strode from the room, beckoning Daniel to follow.

Kate took to wing and zoomed over to sit in the crook of Daniel's elbow.

*Uh, where are we going?*

*I have no idea. He wants us to follow.*

*So you're an atheist now?*

*Well, I had hoped it would bring up the subject of gods.*

Kate was about to mention the obvious fact that it didn't seem to work, but Scott surprised her.

"Curious," he said over his shoulder. "If you saw a fiery being raise a ten-foot wall of fire from the very dirt, how can you say you don't have faith in the gods? Wasn't that the work of a god?"

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know. I just know that any god who requires boys to lose eyes isn't one I'd want to follow. As for the other gods, I've never met one. I have no idea. Do you think it was a god? And if so, which one?"

Scott opened a plain wooden door that led to a kitchen with various devices, a long table, and a fire pit in the floor. A small chimney hole opened in the ceiling. On the far wall, a large smudge of soot surrounded a small concave impression.

“Well, that’s something we can discuss. Are you hungry?” Scott asked, poking a small device consisting mostly of small steel pipes and one gauge. It shuddered and coughed, then started to hum; the gauge rose slowly to hover around the middle range.

“Um, no, thank you. What is that thing?” Daniel asked.

“That’s the power source for this room. As long as it’s on and stable, everything else works.”

Kate looked down and realized the steel tubes ran down the table and across the floor, lying in little trails in the floor so they wouldn’t be tripped over. Each steel tube went to a different device — one looking like a refrigerator, one to an oven, and a third simply looked like a sink without any pipe indicating water going in or out.

“That’s amazing,” Daniel said.

“Thank you. It was difficult to build, as you can see.” Scott pointed to the hole in the wall. “But worth it in the long run. Now, about that being. Did it fly?”

“Yes,” Daniel said, accepting a chair to the table. He accepted the glass of water Scott handed him. “Very fast.”

“And was it on fire, or was it just making the fire?”

“Um, I couldn’t really tell,” Daniel said.

Scott nodded and pulled up a chair beside Daniel. “Well, for the past several nights I’ve seen a bright flying being coming from Meridian. It flies around then heads toward the sea. I can’t identify it. I know Dr. Larkin is planning on trapping it, but I doubt she can.”

“Does she think she can trap a god?” Daniel asked.

“Well, as you said, we don’t know it’s a god. But if you think my inventions are something special, you haven’t seen Drs. Larkin, Mayer or Lasica. They do some things that make me think what I’m doing is kids’ stuff.”

“Like what?”

For the first time Scott’s friendly face narrowed and he looked Daniel up and down. “What is it you do, friend? You don’t seem to be too likely to be a tinker, but I can’t give my colleagues’ secrets to a spy.”

“Dr. Von Rothelsgesh — er, Scott, I promise, I’m not here to steal anything,” Daniel began, but his host stopped him.

“It’s *mister*, and, it’s Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson,” Scott said bleakly. “I got kicked out of Meridian University during an improbability storm. I never got my doctorate.”

“They literally kicked you out? But improbability storms are deadly!” Daniel said.

Scott glared at Daniel. “Thanks. I found that out.”

Daniel blushed. “I just mean how could they do that? What was worth a death sentence in a university?”

Scott glared at the table. “I was caught cheating. I was kicked out, forced to ride the zip line to Lathe, where I have been exiled. I’ll never get a doctorate, never be called Professor Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson. Happy now?”

“I’m sorry, dude. Look, I didn’t do much with my life either. But things have gotten better since then.”

*Find out something about Prosper, Kate suggested. Change the subject!*

“So has Dr. Larkin ever captured a god before?” Daniel asked.

Scott shrugged. “She says she has. Said she stole a god from a farmer and kept him trapped for twenty years. Then she lost him in a card game.”

Daniel perked up. “Which god was this? And who won him?”

Scott grinned again. “Suddenly a believer, are you? She claimed he was Prosper, god of the harvest, but never let anyone in to see him. And some winemaker won it. I don’t know him, but he doesn’t live in the caves with us. He grows his grapes...”

Daniel stared at the wall, unfocused. “He grows them in a vineyard north of Lathe on a grassy hill.”

Scott perked up. “Yes! How did you know? You’re starting to sound like my paerhapsotron.”

Daniel rubbed his forehead above his missing eye. “I know because we were just talking to him. Aw, hell. I need to go.”

Daniel stood up. “Thanks for your hospitality and your information. In return I’ll give you a truth. Your paerhapsotron doesn’t need adjusting. It works just fine.” Without another word, he turned and ran out into the hall, Kate buzzing ahead of him.

“Wait! The improbability storm is still going on!” Scott yelled after them. “You could die out there!”



*True, but it's not probable,* Kate thought. She hovered near the door and let Daniel open it ...Straight into the eye of the improbability storm.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The storm's eye seemed to be about half a mile wide, with the wind swirling around them. Even though it was still dark, they could see the wind: solid here, gaseous there, even liquid and blue as it devoured the air around them.

Kate bounced around on the wind until she materialized as a human again, acolyte robe blowing out behind her. "How do we move through that?" Kate yelled.

"We're gods, right?" asked Daniel.

"No, dude, that won't work!" she replied, squinting through the spluttering flames. "Did you forget that our powers are at best unpredictable in this shit?"

Daniel grimaced. What was the point of being gods of this world if he didn't have any power when he needed it? He remembered a story Kate had told him one night after they'd made love; they'd discussed their godly limitations and Kate had said that in Greek myths, the Titans had stuffed the god Ares into an urn during a battle, where he stayed until the other gods let him out. She'd always wondered how a god didn't have the power to get out.

Daniel thought it had made for good narrative, but really, what god had omnipotence? All of the gods he'd met had had powers, sure. He and Kate had created whole worlds. But neither of them could heal his eye, which had been taken by a god. If other gods could mess with their powers (as someone clearly had with this wall of fire), then they were not omnipotent.

And what were these improbability storms but tools of chaos that pushed gods' powers to the edge of uselessness?

Something teased at Daniel's mind then, a whisper from Odin, a name. Something like "Gagap." He tried to chase the thought, find the information that the old god had left in his head, but it was gone as the scream of the storm drowned out all thought.

"Hang on!" Scott Von Rothelsgeschitmeirson came running down the hall, waving two black robes. They flapped behind him like wings.

Daniel took a step back from the hell outside the door and turned to meet the panting man.

“If you’re determined to go out in that, you’ll want these cloaks,” he panted. “I don’t know why you would want to, but if you do, you’ll have these.”

Kate glanced at the man, who calmly held out a robe to her. “How did you know to bring two?”

He grinned down at her. “The paerhapsotron told me.”

Kate snorted and accepted the robe. “What is it?” She glanced out at the roiling horror, which had started turning into billowy, black smoke that battered at the flames in front of them as if it were great fists.

“I call them Order Magnification Cloaks,” was Scott’s answer. Daniel looked at him blankly. “They’re designed to protect you from the improbability storms.”

Daniel ran his hands over the thick black wool. A power cell about the size of a D battery hung at the hem, spreading circuits through the cloak. “How do they do that?”

“I took some chaos energy and tamed it with my Order Magnifier. It resonates through the cloak, forcing any chaos surrounding it to actually charge the battery. As long as chaos forces are at work, the cloak gets stronger and stronger.” The scientist’s eyes were wide with delight.

“That doesn’t seem logical,” Daniel said, trying to remember the conservation of energy laws he’d learned in high school.

“Or probable,” Kate said, breaking her gaze from the storm. “We’ll take them.”

“Oh good!” Scott said. “Please, if you survive, let me know how they work, will you?”

Daniel paused with the robe poised over his head, ready to fall. “Wait — you haven’t tested them?”

Scott looked sheepish. “Well, no one will go into the storm to test it for me. And I certainly can’t go.”

Kate grimaced. “Of course you can’t.” She smoothed the black robe over her white acolyte robe and said, “How do we turn it on?”

Scott leaned over and switched both of their robes on, and they came to life, humming quietly around them. Daniel felt decidedly odd ... a little heavier, a little less confident. Which was strange, he figured, since the cloak was supposed to help keep him safe.

“Good luck!” said the scientist, beaming at them, his eyes wide through his glasses.

Daniel smiled at him and took Kate's hand. She frowned and opened her mouth, but then they stepped outside and any protest she had was lost in the screaming storm.

Whatever the flying creature had done to create the wall of fire had begun to weaken. The door slammed behind them, and Kate and Daniel stood and watched the storm batter at the fire in front of them.

"Now what?" Kate asked.

"Let's head north as far as we can. Stay on this side of the fire," Daniel said, squinting in the darkness.

The fire had begun to show holes, like a piece of paper licked by flames. They linked hands and ran, passing paths that led into the hills, presumably to more caves and more scientists. Their footing went from gravel to dirt to grass and back to gravel. Kate was pretty sure they passed a clockwork bird that stood on the top of a metal perch. She was further convinced that the bird swiveled its head to follow them, and it flapped its metal wings in alarm. But they were moving too fast to know for sure.

It dawned on her slowly that although they were running as hard as they could, they weren't making very good time. They both stumbled more than once in the darkness; at times their dashing felt more like plodding.

*The improbability storm. Of course.* It dampened their divinity; they may as well be mortal. She shivered. Right now mortal and alive was terrifying — of course, since she had died as a god, it was proof divinity meant little to nothing when something godlike wanted you dead.

Then the improbability storm broke through the wall of fire and drove all other thoughts from her mind.

Kate had never considered what colors would feel, smell, or sound like. Her sight left her as the storm enveloped them and she had a sense of being accosted by colors instead of wind. She closed her eyes and felt pink tickle at her cheeks, and green wind around her ankles like insistent vines. She heard blue moan softly near her, and a small burning taste of yellow forced itself past her lips to linger on her tongue. She sensed thousands of other shades whirling around her, but they ceased suddenly when Daniel pulled her hood over her head.

He pulled her head in to touch his forehead and gripped her shoulders. "Your hood slipped off. Are you okay?"

Grateful for sight again, she nodded. “Are we close?”

He sighed. “I am not sure. This storm is pretty damn big.”

“I can’t sense anything,” she said.

“I know. We just need to keep going. And keep that hood up.”

They linked hands again, with magenta burrs sticking to their exposed skin, and ran on.

The colors were only felt, not seen, but lighting flashed through the clouds, sometimes right in front of them, leaving behind a smell of sulfur and spots before their eyes. As bright spots blossomed in Kate’s eyes, images assaulted her.

She stumbled to a halt. Images of Daniel with his numerous ex-girlfriends. The image of her father, stony-faced, at her funeral, refusing to cry. The image of her grandmother in the hated nursing home, abused by an orderly because no one gave a damn about her anymore.

A duckling she had allowed to starve to death after Easter one year, forgotten in the wake of chocolate bunnies and jellybeans. The suicide of a boy whose depression began when she had laughed at his invitation to a dance.

All reminders that she was far from perfection; she was far from lovable. She felt Daniel pulling at her wrist, but the magenta burrs caused her to gasp and let go. He disappeared in a swirl of wind that tasted like regret.

Small gnomes, giggling and pudgy with tall red caps, fell out of a cloud and grabbed her hands and pulled. She resisted and watched her fingers stretch like putty. She blinked past the horror and realized this was the improbability storm attacking her from all sides. She didn’t have to stand for this. She was a god, and even if she didn’t have her power right now, she was still Kate, and that aspect of her being had gotten her out of more than one scrape.

She pulled her hands inside her cloak, and the extra tendrils of fingers broke off, causing her to gasp in pain. She didn’t look down at her hands; she’d be okay eventually. She needed to be inside the protection of the cloak. She took a deep breath and stepped forward into the mist.

The storm had abandoned the concept of colors as tangible things and had moved on to emotions. Her hood mostly protected her, but as she trudged forward, looking around for Daniel, she found herself lost in a haze of euphoria, despair, and guilt.

She stumbled over something dense and short and went sprawling. She lacerated her hand on a sharp stone and watched the blood well up.

*Great. Nothing good ever happens when I get cut.*

Her attention was distracted from the blood leaking from her hand to the stump she'd fallen over, which wasn't a stump at all but Daniel, crouched with his arms wrapped around his knees. He sobbed quietly, and Kate felt a cloud of grief around him.

She reached forward and put her arms around him. He mumbled something incoherent about, "—'s all going away."

Struggling with nothing more than her normal strength, she hauled him to his feet and murmured encouraging words to him as she forced him through the storm.

The storm had stopped accosting them directly, but Kate was still beset by strange visions. In one, a distraught man with only one arm and one leg yelled at an anthropomorphic penguin. In another, an air whale drifted through the storm, and then plummeted messily to the earth. A third had a high school crush of Kate's getting up the nerve to call and ask her out, but it was when she was on the phone with her best friend, and the busy signal discouraged him.

"He only got the nerve to ask me out once? That coward," muttered Kate.

Daniel continued to sob at her side, and she didn't know if her irritation was a false emotion caused by the storm or if it was real. Still.

"Hey, Daniel, chin up, dude, we have a job to do. Whatever the storm showed you, it was false. Not real. Fabricated. Let's move on, okay?" He wouldn't look at her. She gave him a little shake. "Daniel. Sweetie. I just saw a guy yelling at a penguin. This shit isn't real."

He finally looked up at her. She recoiled from his wide, red-rimmed eye. "What I saw was real. I know it was. It was heaven. And it wasn't good."

"What was going on?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but just yelled, "Look out!"

They ducked together, watching the blue-tinged net fly over their heads.

"That was real," Daniel said, sniffing.

"Agreed," Kate said. "Why is someone throwing nets at us?"

"I think it's safe to bet that while we figured out who Sam was, he probably figured out who we were."

Kate fingered the rich grass she realized they'd fallen on. "Oh. We're here." She rolled and got to her feet, but the darkness and wind didn't allow her to see anything around her.

"Listen, I'll go see if I can find Prosper. Can you handle Sam?" she asked.

"Jesus, why me?"

Kate sighed. "You're the trickster, dude. You can handle anyone. I'm not nearly as subversive as you are. You could trick him, reason with him, or just confuse him and lure him away. I don't know! All I know is he has one god imprisoned, so I'm betting he can catch another one, so we need to free Prosper and get out of here."

She kissed him briefly and ran in the direction she thought the caves might be. She had gotten pretty good at ignoring what the storm was throwing at her, be it gnomes or colors or grapevines wrapped around trellises at the perfect height to clothesline her ...

Oh. That was real.

\* \* \* \* \*

She came to with her head aching and her neck raw and sore. She sat up. How long had she been out? And — wait. Where was she?

She sat within a shallow cave about six feet deep and ten feet tall, clearly chipped out and man-made. She sprawled on the rocky floor amidst several tendrils of grape vines, some wrapped around her ankles. The vines seemed to originate from inside the cave and stretch out to the trellises. A lump of vines lay clumped in the corner. The storm still had hold of the outside, but had lessened to the point of odd gusts of wind. The horizon glowed slightly with light.

"God, how long was I out?" She asked, rubbing her head.

"Three hours," came a hiss from the other side of the room.

Kate jumped and swore as the sudden movement made her head ache more.

"Who's there?"

The lump in the opposite corner stirred, and the vines wrapped around Kate's legs tightened. She slid back until her back was against the wall, but the vines stayed firm around her ankles.

The lump in the corner continued to stir and almost unfolded, branching out and becoming man-shaped. The rough, round, barky base of one vine turned slowly, and two green eyes peered out. It smiled, then, showing roots and a mossy interior. Its tongue was a white root.

“Prosper, My Lady,” it said. “Your prisoner.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate stared at him. She wanted to look away, but she knew she had to face this grotesque mockery of divinity that had been utterly used and corrupted.

“Prosper. Shit. Listen. I didn’t do this to you. Daniel didn’t either. We had nothing to do with it.”

A vine waved as if an airy hand, waving away her protests. “I know that. I have been owned and passed around between farmers for hundreds of years. But you, you were the first jailer.”

Kate stumbled to her knees and started to crawl forward, eyes darting around at the shifting vines. “Listen, I was not the first. In my view, I’ve only been alive again for a couple of days. We didn’t imprison you, but we’re trying to free you. What can I do to help?”

She looked around helplessly. The vines all originated from the god’s body, and she didn’t want to think about what he had gone through to have those seeds implanted. She thought of the fine wine, the Cmar, that she had drunk, and her stomach turned over. No wonder it had been so good.

She slowly approached him, and he simply watched her. But when she reached out a hand to gingerly touch one of the thick vines growing from his chest, a smaller vine snaked out and wrapped around her wrist, keeping her away.

“Prosper, I’m just trying to help you. Can we cut the vines and get you out of here?”

More vines wrapped around her ankles and lifted her into the air. She struggled, annoyed at how her cloak and acolyte robe threatened to fall over her head. He held her in front of his warped and wooden face.

“These are my children. I give them life. Through me they are able to bear fruit. What kind of god of the harvest would I be if I allowed them to die?”



Kate gathered the cloak at her waist and held it tight. “Well, you’d be a free god, for one thing, not used for some lucky mortal’s wine business.”

He shook her and lifted her high, taking her outside the cave and high into the air. Kate could hear him yelling, but she was lifted too high to hear what he was saying.

She was too preoccupied with hanging upside down from the tentacle-like vines growing out of the god she was trying to rescue that it took her a moment to realize the improbability storm had passed, leaving a lovely morning on the green hilltop.

It also took her a moment to realize Daniel was nowhere to be found.

But the lack of storm also meant she had access to her powers again. She tried to will herself wings, trying to grow them as the enraged god took her higher and higher into the air.

Nothing happened.

“Shit.” What had changed? The storm was gone, she was unharmed; she shouldn’t be having problems.

But when Prosper dropped her, gravity felt very real.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luckily the wind in her face snapped her into quick thinking. She let go of the loaned cloak and let it slide over her head and off her arms.

Immediately wings burst from her back and she stopped her fall, swooping low over the ground and back up in the air, panting. No wonder the cloak had made her feel so sluggish. As it had repelled the worse of the improbability storm, it had been dampening her own divine power. That had some serious repercussions.

But the serious issue now had to do with Prosper and his inhuman screams.

Kate flew down and landed lightly on the ground, paling at what she saw.

The dropped cloak had landed directly to cover the main vines growing from Prosper’s cave to the vineyard’s trellises. Blocked from the divine influence of the god, the vines were wilting and shriveling, and one by one they snapped, causing Prosper to howl louder with each one.

Finally having her awareness returned to her, Kate caught the sound of a door opening. She turned and saw Sam, looking a lot less friendly and a lot more menacing, step out. He had a large wooden harpoon gun that was armed with a net.

“From one to three in one night; not bad!” he said, and aimed.

The final vine snapped under the cloak and Prosper’s screams turned to sobbing. Kate moved as fast as she could, zipping into the cave as the net crashed into the rocks behind her. She grabbed Prosper, who battered her arms weakly with his vines, and lifted him in a fireman’s carry.

One step outside the cave to let her wings stretch out and she was in the air, leaving Sam cursing behind her.

“Oh, would you shut the fuck up, for your own sake?” she said. “I just saved you from slavery.”

“My babies,” he wept.

“That was an accident, and I’m sorry about it,” she said as she climbed higher. “You dropped me and I had to either lose that cloak or break my neck. I didn’t mean to drop it on you.”

He didn’t answer. Kate sighed and glanced back once at the vineyard, shriveling in the morning sun, and bit her lip.

“I’ll be back, Daniel. I promise. I just have to get this crybaby back to his temple.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Meridian shone in the early morning light, the buildings glinting and swaying in the light wind. It seemed to have survived the improbability storm much better than Daniel had. Daniel, who currently sat in a cage like an animal, trapped in his coyote form.

When Kate had left him, he went for Sam, heading in the direction from where the net had come. He had tried, briefly, to manipulate some matter around him, but the cloak had stifled him. Unlike Kate, he figured it out right away and dropped it, braving the storm's dangers.

He slipped into coyote form, and immediately found himself somewhere else. He sat in a room full of coyotes, each representing a different trickster god. Hermes was a tail-wagging dark red coyote, Loki was closer to black, and watched him with no humor in his eyes. Daniel didn't recognize all of the gods there, but he could taste their power as similar to his own. He sat on a dais in the middle of the room, and they surrounded him.

*Am I on trial?*

Daniel whipped his head around, looking for an exit to the room. *Guys, I'd be glad to talk about this any other time than now, but it's not really a good time. I'm kinda trying to stop a guy who's hunting me. How's next week? Guys?*

The barks and howls that greeted him indicated that they were not on board with the next week plan.

Coyote, the original, paced in front of him, grinning. She opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment Daniel felt burning ropes surround him. The courtroom dissolved around him and he struggled under a blue net that surrounded him. He tried to shape-change but couldn't; he tried to bite the ropes and was rewarded with a burnt tongue. Whatever blue substance the net was laced with had not only incapacitated him, it was also draining his strength. He struggled and fell on his side, growling. He snarled at the grinning man who approached him as the storm whirled around them.

It was only as he lost consciousness that he realized that the storm didn't seem to be bugging Sam at all.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Trapped like a bad stray dog. I was even caught with a big net like on the cartoons. Sheesh.*

Daniel paced his cage as well as he could, which consisted of two steps in either direction. It looked like simple wood, about twice as high and long as he was. Something he should easily be able to break out of, but thin blue wire glowed from where it had been pressed into the wood, and he eyed it warily. As he was unable to use his shape-change ability here, it was pretty clear that whatever current ran through that wire carried the same power as the net.

*Why is it so easy to catch a god in this place? Either we're still really ineffective in the whole god department, or there are some pretty fucking amazing power sources.*

He'd thought only a god — Fabrique, goddess of clockwork, for instance — could create a device to trap a god. She had trapped him quite well when he had broken into her House of Mysteries. But apparently anyone good at tinkering could harness this stuff.

He sniffed at the wire and shook his head in disgust. It filled his canine nose with acrid, sharp, overwhelming smells. His mind filled with a sense of something very large distilled into something small and concentrated, a power with no rhyme or reason, a power like a storm, throwing tornadoes and lightning at one house and not another. But if you could harness and focus a storm's power, you'd be pretty damn difficult to stop.

Daniel wondered offhand if there were weather gods here.

The room beyond his cage was rather large. He guessed, with the vats and barrels that surrounded him, that he was in the winery. Beyond the smell of the wire, which now dominated his senses, he could faintly sense an alcoholic odor. On the far wall, up high, was a tiny window. That, plus the cool, heavy, dank air made him think he was in a basement.

*Of course, I could be in full sunlight on a roof and I couldn't get out of this cage.* He amended the thought with the realization that his friends could find him if he were in full sunlight; down here, no one could see him.

The urge to lie down and put his head on his paws and pout was a strong one. He couldn't break out, contact his friends, or hell, even form human words to talk himself out of this situation. Some trickster god.

*Oh, shut the fuck up.* He thought angrily. *You've done the feeling-sorry-for-yourself thing. Got you nowhere. You are a god, for Christ's sake. Screw Christ, actually. You're a god for YOUR sake!*

He remembered with a start the trickster gods that had distracted him sufficiently enough for Sam to get the net around him. Why had they done that? Had it actually been a trial? And how had they done that, if they were all back in heaven?

Coyote had led him through the Wasteland to learn about his power, making it possible for him to bring Kate back to life after her sacrifice to defend heaven. The trickster god clearly wasn't trapped, or if she was, she wasn't without power.

*Like me.*

He thought of what he had at his disposal. He paced the perimeter of the cage, sniffing at the floor, the bars, the joints between them, looking for a weakness. The bars were narrowly spaced; he could only shove his snout through, not the rest of his head.

No weakness found, he flopped down and put his head on his paws. But despair wasn't on his mind. He closed his eye and breathed deeply, attempting to hit a trance, some sort of state of being to get inspiration, bring Coyote back, even welcome back the trial.

The other tricksters remained absent and silent. But a plan began to form in his mind, a plan worthy of a trapped animal. The human part of Daniel winced and wondered at the logic of it, but the coyote part of him nodded in cold certainty.

He opened his eyes and regarded his left front paw. Daniel couldn't bring himself to do it, so he consciously retreated and allowed the animal part of him to settle down and begin to gnaw.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I really am not looking forward to being human again.*

Daniel lay on his right side, panting. His left paw lay beside him, gnawed clean off by his strong jaws. The bone had been the worst part, but he had broken it clearly, desire to be free stronger than the maelstrom of pain that engulfed his leg.

The animal had almost completely taken over, ignoring the pain to heave himself to three legs. He held the left leg high, blood still dripping. He took his paw in his jaws and flung it through the bars. It soared through them without touching and landed with a wet plot about six feet beyond the cage, slightly behind a wine vat. He lay down again, not minding the tacky blood on the floor of the cage that got in his thick coat. He could only hope now.

He was licking his wound when Sam finally came to visit him.

“One god is lost, one god is gained. I am not sure I made out good on that,” the big man said conversationally, not looking at Daniel. He checked on the vat closest to the door and adjusted a knob. “And I got the weak cripple. Do you know what we did with cripples in Leviathan City?”

Daniel didn’t pay attention to him, just kept licking. The wound had stopped bleeding, and it was more to comfort than clean.

“We tossed them out the airlock and watched them drown,” Sam continued, checking a figure on a clipboard. “You need strength to live under the sea, and the weak could have caused problems. It’s why my parents were exiled, see. I wanted three gods, and I’m stuck with the worst one. And you can’t even talk — by Ishmael’s lost foreskin; what happened here?”

He had finally looked in the cage and noticed Daniel lying in a pool of his own blood, licking his stump. Daniel regarded him calmly, then went back to licking.

“You idiot!” Sam raged, bringing both hands down on the cage in a mighty thump. “I really did get the worst god. You don’t even know enough to realize that chewing off a leg doesn’t get you anything in a cage like this! You’re thinking about a bear trap! Oh, you fool! Now my god is even more of a cripple! What am I going to do with you now?”

Daniel’s heart leapt. *Weak? Worst? Stupid?* Words that once would have hurt him now bolstered him. If Sam thought he was these things, he would underestimate Daniel. And that’s what Daniel wanted.

He opened his mouth and panted, giving a doggy smile with blood coating his muzzle.

Sam groaned and turned his back, holding his head in his hands. "I've lost Prosper, my vines are dead; what am I going to do?"

He stopped groaning and turned, his eyes narrowing as he regarded the cage. "You may be an idiot, but you're still made of godstuff."

Daniel forced himself to keep casually licking, but he didn't like the new focus in Sam's voice. "And there is godstuff all over the floor of that cage."

Daniel looked down at the blood that still coated the wooden floor of the cage. He realized Sam was right. His paw, his blood, maybe even his piss, were all divine, and would have power outside this divine-stultifying cage.

Sam ran from the room and returned with a wooden board. Blue wires ran around the board and connected to what looked like a battery case on one end, and the whole thing glowed. Daniel bared his teeth and backed into the corner of the cage.

"At least you know enough to stay away from this," Sam said, opening the door to the cage and inserting the board in first. Daniel would have to push against the board to get out, now, and he obediently held back.

With his left hand, he held Daniel at bay with the board, and with his right, he carefully mopped up Daniel's blood with a rag. "Got a scientist, Melissa Hutchins, who will know what to do with this," he said. "Powerful stuff, I'm sure."

He pulled the rag and the board out of the cage, slamming the door quickly, and sat back on his heels. His eyes narrowed again.

"Wait a moment. If you gnawed your foot off, where did it end up? Did you swallow it?"

*Crap*, thought Daniel.

The big man dropped the board and stood, stashing the rag in his back pocket. He looked on the floor around the cage and then further into the room. Daniel held his breath as Sam went behind the barrel where he'd thrown the paw.

Sam got to his hands and knees and pulled out the rag. Daniel whined low in his throat. Sam did something with the rag and put it back in his pocket.

“Well, broken god, I will see what I can do with this. But I will find that paw before I’m done. At worst, it looks like I might be able to cut you up and sell the parts to a tinker. You’ve got to be as powerful as chaos energy.”

With that he slammed the door, and Daniel heard a key turn in the lock.

*Now what?*

“What” turned out to be a movement that caught his eye. A shadow danced on the wall beyond the wine vats, the dark sibling to a sunbeam peeking through the trees. It took a humanoid form and skipped around the wall, playing with light, hiding, teasing, and having a grand time leaping in and out of shadows. It twisted and contorted, actually making a series of shadow puppets that had Daniel amused even as he was annoyed.

*Yeah. That’s definitely part of me.*

Daniel barked once, relieved, and wagged his tail. Let Sam think he was an idiot. His plan was working.

As the shadow cavorted, Daniel realized he had no control over it. It hadn’t been his idea for a piece of him to turn into a playful shadow; he hadn’t known what would happen.

*Odin knew there was power in the loss of a body part, he reflected. This has got to work.*

The shadow danced around the room until it got to the heavy wooden door. There it paused, then collapsed into a circle. It quivered for a moment as if gathering energy, then it burst from the wall and landed on the floor, a three-dimensional shadow, a dark imp that stood about six inches high.

Daniel limped to the door of his cage and stood expectantly. But the imp paid him no attention and instead pranced forward, still leaping and dancing, until it stood in front of the wine vat in the back corner of the room.

It paused briefly, then leapt up and slid underneath a seam as if it were a wide doorway. The vat shuddered on its stand and then rocked back and forth once. The faucet then flew off with incredible force and the green, bubbly wine spewed into the room.

The wine gushed toward Daniel’s cage, but had turned into a slow trickle by the time it lapped at the edge.



*What is it doing?*

The shadow imp had ridden the torrent out gleefully like a kid at a water park. It hit the floor, stood carefully, then skipped to the next vat, and then the next, forcing each to belch out its contents onto the floor. The hundreds of gallons of wine were creating a green, bubbly lake on the floor that rose steadily, getting into Daniel's cage at last and coating his paws in the wine.

The blood that still stained the wood floor mixed in with the wine, causing little black rivulets to swirl around Daniel's paws. It spread out like a spider web; instead of dissipating in the wine, it seemed to get stronger. It stretched out to the bars of the cage where it wrapped around, sliding up and out of the wine. Like the shadow imp, it sank into the wood and Daniel heard the distinct "BZZT" of an electrical short.

The effect was instantaneous. Daniel could feel his divine power returning to him, the dampening power of the weird blue wires no longer holding him back. He walked through the bars as if they were made of smoke, and shook himself. With a thought, he reclaimed his human form and staggered back as the pain of his bloody stump hit him. He stumbled back and fell into the wine.

The shadow that had been his severed paw was finishing draining the last of the Cmar wine. It staggered toward him, and through his red pain haze Daniel thought, *The thing is drunk!*

He stared at it dumbly as it leaned against his knee. His ruined arm rested on his thigh. The imp waved feebly at him and then flowed into his arm.

The pain ended immediately, and Daniel stared in wonder as his hand reformed, fingers flexing. After a moment, he couldn't even see the scar where he'd gnawed.

"Goddamn," he murmured, as the waves of pain were replaced by waves of drunkenness. "How much did my hand drink?"

With a bit of effort, still treating his new hand gingerly, he managed to get to his feet just as the door flew open, shoving a wave of green wine toward Daniel, which rebounded quickly and rushed out to soak Sam's boots.

The big man's face had time to register shock and fury at the draining of his last supply of wine, and then the escaped god, before Daniel narrowed his eye and flexed his divine, drunken will once again.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was not a triumphant entrance, but it certainly stopped everyone in their tracks.

Kate, Barris, Fabrique, and Gamma were talking intently to the head priestess, discussing the details of landscape below to determine a good way to search for Daniel. Barris didn't see him, but with the system of caves and Sam's winery, that wasn't a surprise.

"Look, I say we just go straight into the house," Gamma said. She stood while the others were seated, bouncing from foot to foot. She made Kate tired.

"If he had something to trap Daniel, who's to say he can't trap us?" Kate said. "The scientists down there create robes to squash our power; we might as well be mortal."

Fabrique pulled at a copper curl. "But that wasn't their goal, correct? The scientist created the robe to protect from the improbability storm. Did it do that?"

Kate shrugged. "For the most part."

"This implies that the power that we have as gods, and the power of the improbability storms, are the same energy."

Kate stared at her. "That's ... obvious. Why didn't we see it before? Why didn't you see it before? You are the one to work with the energy!"

The goddess stiffened. "When you're imprisoned for years and years, your mind turns to how to use energy to release yourself, not from where it comes."

"Well, if it's the same divine energy that we have, what god generates it?"

They were silent.

Kate slammed her hands on the table. "Well, that's just great."

"Can we focus on the task at hand?" Gamma asked. "Trading one god for another wasn't the deal. And why didn't you take us?"

Kate sighed. "I told you. We were trying to figure out who in the hell that flying fire guy was. No one around here has seen him before. Got caught in the improbability storm, then got the lead on Prosper." She ran a hand through her tangled hair. She really wanted a bath and a nap. "How is he, anyway?" she asked the priestess.

"His priests are looking after him. They were ... nonplussed to receive him."

“You didn’t answer my question.”

The woman didn’t look at Kate. “He is unwell. He is weeping, asking to be returned to captivity, and apparently in great pain. The high priest, Deacon Walthers, is feeding him wine to placate him.”

“Great,” she muttered. “Now he’ll be drunk *and* whiny.”

“I could stand a drink, but make it beer,” came a voice from the doorway.

Daniel stood there, covered in blood and a sticky green substance. He leaned against the doorway of the temple, holding a large urn in his arms.

Kate threw herself at him immediately. He dropped the urn to receive her, and staggered backward. “Are you okay? We were just trying to figure out how to rescue you? What happened?” she said into his ear.

He hugged her back tightly and then gently pushed her back. The urn had fallen over and was making muffled complaining noises.

“I’ll tell you everything in a bit. For now, I need to sit down. It was kind of hard to get him here.”

Kate looked closer at the jug, about half her height. It was massive, with white clay vineyards twining around it. It was sealed tightly. She smiled. “He’s in there? Like Ares?”

Daniel gave a tired smile. “I learned from the best.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate took his hand in hers, studying the wrist closely. “Are you serious? You chewed it off? There’s not even a scar!”

Daniel shrugged. “I know. I have no idea what happened. I didn’t even expect to get it back.”

She released his hand and looked at him. “But dude, why did you just wait on us? You had to know I was going to come back for you!”

They sat alone in the priestess’s office, Kate demanding to get the story from him first. Daniel’s eyes were hollow and he slumped in his chair, but he seemed fine physically. He stared at her.

“I — I don’t know. I guess it was pretty extreme, huh?”

“Daniel. You chewed your own fucking hand off.”

“I guess I didn’t know where you were. I didn’t know if he had you, too. And I was stuck in coyote form. My thinking got a little wild there for a bit.” He paused and stared at the wall, unfocused. “Or maybe I was given a test.”

He told her about the disconnect during the storm, when he was on trial in front of the other trickster gods.

“You think they orchestrated this?” Kate asked.

He shook his head slowly. “I wouldn’t say exactly that. I just mean that they were watching. And what god sits around and waits for people to rescue him?”

“What god chews his own hand off to get out of a cage?” she replied.

“I do,” he said.

She stared at him, and then blinked once. “I guess you do.”

“What happened with Prosper? Did you find him?”

Kate smacked herself in the forehead. “Crap, I totally forgot. Yeah, I got him. He’s not really in good shape. The whole orchard was growing out of him. He tried to kill me, and he might have done so if I hadn’t taken off that coat. But I got him back here. He’s in his temple now, and drunk, as far as I know.”

“Yeah, we need to talk about those coats,” Daniel said. “The coats and the cage Sam had me in and the vat Fabrique put me in. What the hell is that?”

Kate sighed and twisted her robe over her hands. “We determined it’s got to be another divine force. That’s the only way we could explain it.”

“But who?” Daniel asked. “I thought we knew all the gods here.”

“Clearly, we don’t,” Kate said. “There’s that flaming guy from last night, we have no idea about him. And then there’s whatever this chaos energy stuff is. People learned to harness it and now they can trap gods.”

Daniel stood up. “We need to bring the others in on this.”

“I gave them some time off. Barris wanted to visit Lathe and Fabrique went with him. I think we’ve earned some rest. Why don’t you get some rest?”

He smoothed the hair away from her face. “Just do me one favor?”

“Anything.”

He bit his lip momentarily. “Stay with me?”

She kissed him. “Of course.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Improbability storms were once described in Meridian as cries of joy from lovemaking gods. In Lathe they were more crudely described as godfucking. Regardless, Kate and Daniel did not force an improbability storm as their innocent, exhausted cuddling led to stroking, fumbling, undressing, pinching, giggling, biting, sweaty, loud activities. They had wrestled, each wanting the on-top position, and Daniel won, trapping her roughly beneath him, losing himself in passion that bordered on animalistic.

Kate moaned beneath him, his rough handling driving her to match his passion. She stopped trying to get the upper hand and accepted the frantic pleasure he offered her.

After their first time, they lay together, whispering things to each other, dozing, and wrapped around each other. Kate roused Daniel from light sleep, insisting to him with little nips that she wasn't quite done. The second time was slower, tenderer, and took much more time.

When they were done, the ground did not shake, but the temple swayed in the sky as if pushed by a very hard wind.

Kate pillowed her head on his shoulder. "I see what you mean," she said, panting. He stroked her hair. "What do you mean?"

"The animal. Coyote. That was different. And amazing."

"I haven't felt like that before. It was...primal. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Oh, hell no," she said, wrapping her naked legs around his. "You can do that any time."

"Good," he said. Her eyes closed, but his remained open, staring at the ceiling and wondering.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't know why you wanted to come with me," said Fabrique. "What does Lathe hold for you?"

“Oh, I don’t get to see it very often,” said Barris, looking around the main street of the city beneath Meridian. “It’s in Meridian’s shadow most of the day. I like to visit...” Something caught his eye and he trailed off.

Fabrique raised an eyebrow. “All right. I need to get some things from my house; do you want to come in?”

“I think I’ll do some shopping,” he said, starting forward without looking at her.

“There goes the source of all life,” the clockwork goddess said softly. “Help us all.”

She went back into her house, what was, until recently, her prison. She had only supplies to help during an airship battle with her, gathered swiftly upon their last exit from the house. Now she looked around and tried to figure out what she would need for air or water travel.

Air tanks, mechanical wings, jetpacks, swimming fins, laser weaponry that worked underwater...there was just too much. Even her modified bag could only hold so much.

She smiled slowly to herself. How had she not thought of this before? She gathered her tools, a disused chaos battery, and a sketchpad. She left everything else in her house and then went back outside, sat in the street, and began to sketch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Professor Burns’s Idea Emporium was changed since Barris had last seen it, but that was not a new thing. Every time he went into the store to buy a little box that contained an idea, he paid the proprietor in blessings. So every time he came back, Burns was a little richer, a little healthier, a little younger, and his shop was a little nicer.

Now it occupied a swaying two-story building made out of dark green glass. The pegs that tethered it to the ground — as the ground rejected anything built upon it — looked recently hammered in, so the building was new.

Professor Burns’s weathered face lit up as Barris walked through the Idea Emporium’s front door. “Ah! Your Excellency! Welcome back! It’s always an honor to see you!”

Barris’s lip trembled and a sheen of sweat glazed his forehead. He stared at Professor Burns with wide eyes and said, “I may be going on a trip soon. I need to stock up.”

The Professor inclined his head, nearly bird-like. “Understood, sir. Should you be in need of a weapon or military idea? Or perhaps...” he trailed off as if he knew what Barris needed.

Barris took another step forward, putting his shaking hands on the counter. Burns frowned.

“I — I don’t care. Just give me some.”

“Your Excellency, I am but a mortal, and —”

“I’ll take five. Give me three regular and two bad, or four bad and one regular. I don’t care.”

Burns choked and sputtered. “Five? Surely you don’t mean —”

The sun god’s eyes went wide. He shook his head; an irritating buzzing sound had begun to distract him. “F-five. Yes. I need five. Is that a problem? I can pay for it.” His watery blue eyes began to glow.

Burns’s eyes flitted to the green windows, where the morning sunlight had dimmed even more so than usual, being underneath the shadow of Meridian.

“No, of course not, Excellency,” he said smoothly, unlocking the display case in front of him. The light outside brightened a bit.

Barris shifted from foot to foot, wringing his hands, as Burns pointed with long fingers. “I might suggest a political idea, perhaps two war, and two bad?”

“Perfect, sure, whatever,” Barris said, willing his hands not to shake.

As Burns’s establishment and person had gotten fancier with the repeated blessings by the sun god, so had his ideas. Before they were contained within boxes, but now they consisted of carefully folded paper, cloth, or even metal. Most of the ideas were folded into the shape of something-dinosaurs were common — but he did keep the old favorite idea boxes around. Burns handed the god a piece of blue silk folded into the shape of a judge’s tunic, two tiny pterodactyls folded from hammered-thin sheets gold and silver, and two small wooden puzzle boxes.

Barris accepted them with shaking hands. He stashed the origami in pockets inside his robe, slipped one box into his breast pocket and turned away from Burns, hunching over the last one.

His fingers flew as they manipulated the puzzle box, the hidden catches and pressure panels no match for his eagerness and familiarity. Once open, he held it to his ear.

Developing trade relations with Leviathan City would be a simple matter of visiting them and bearing gifts. They are eager to hear from the cities above the air.

As the idea wormed its way into Barris's head, he let out a great gust of air he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. As he pondered the implications around the idea, he straightened and smiled and Professor Burns, who watched him, frowning.

"Thank you so much, Professor Burns," Barris said. "It's always a pleasure."

He turned and leapt lightly out of the front door, dropping the two feet down to the ground, and walked back toward Fabrique's House of Mysteries, whistling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Professor Burns pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the now-locked glass case. He walked quickly across the room and closed the door behind the sun god, locking it and putting up a TEMPORARILY CLOSED: USE YOUR IMAGINATION FOR 5 MINUTES sign.

Barris's blessings always came; Burns wasn't concerned that the god wouldn't pay. He had paid in odd ways — everything from the new building to the fact that he no longer woke up with his joints aching. But the most surprising result of the blessings was the upgrade to his Chaositron Idea Generator.

Burns previously would feed in small boxes, and the idea generator would place a vacuum-sealed trapped idea into the box, only to be released when the box was open. It was a brilliant piece of machinery, and Chaositron had given the professor a promotion and a hefty bonus. These are what he thought of as the glory days of Meridian.

Everything crashed when Chaositron had gone bankrupt soon after it started the idea business. Unfortunately, the idea generator created one very bad idea out of every ten good ones. They had no way of knowing which were good and which were bad, and after a particularly tragic airship crash connected directly to a bad idea that Chaositron sold the airship pilot, the company folded. Professor Burns's boss took "The quick trip to



Lathe” (how people in Meridian referred to suicidal jumpers), leaving Burns penniless with nothing but a corrupt idea generator.

Fortunately, people in Lathe are more open to machines that only sometimes work, and he was able to build a somewhat thriving idea business there. He became familiar enough with the machine to be able to identify the bad ideas, and sold them as novelties.

One thing he noticed as his business grew was that his customers seemed to be in two camps. Some of them came to honestly needed the ideas. They would purchase what they needed, use them, and only come back when they were stuck again in whatever they were working on.

Then there were the addicts.

Some people used ideas just for the thrill of the potential of it; the possibility was limitless and made them feel powerful. One addict likened it to being poised at the zip line in Meridian, about to let gravity sweep them down the line to Lathe. But they never actually took the step to fulfill the potential. They just went back for more ideas.

Burns had not seen anyone as addicted as the weak-willed sun god. Cutting him off had been a bad idea — the god’s wild eyes had begun to burn with a fierce light. If he could bless Burns so well, Burns was sure he could curse him just as easily.

Burns stood in front of his idea generator, upgraded by the divine blessing of the sun god to make more intricate ideas — even though it still produced bad ones. Burns rarely used the machine himself; he felt it was best to be the middleman. But this time he felt it was important.

The machine hummed to itself in the corner, small finger-like jointed rods whirled as they deftly folded another idea and dropped it into a basket.

Burns went and picked it up. Folded from a heavy linen cloth in the shape of a swan, the idea formed in his head as he shook it free of its shape.

Only the other gods can deal with one god’s problems.

Professor Burns sighed and dropped the idea linen into the used pile to be recycled later. He hadn’t been to Meridian since leaving it in disgrace years earlier. He guessed it was time to go home again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The kids in Meridian assumed that James was the luckiest kid around. He had lived a life of excitement, true. He had been placed as a hand on his mother's airship when her crew had either died with his father in a pirate attack, or died when they had escaped the fiery fall of Dauphine.

The escape from Dauphine had been very exciting, true. Terrifying, as well. What the other kids didn't know was that when they had fled in his mother's signature airship, the *Sheridan*, that two gods had stowed away aboard, taking control of the ship and ordering his mother, Alicia, to take them to Meridian, where his father had died.

James had had further adventure when he was appointed guide to the god Daniel when he visited Lathe for the first time and had to save him from the enraged goddess Fabrique. And then, as if that wasn't enough, he accompanied the gods into the Dark to fight air pirates.

And he was only ten.

James was lucky to call the god Daniel a friend. He was lucky to have the god's blessing on him as a reward for saving him. And he was lucky to be an able crewman on his mother's airship.

But the times when he missed his father, he didn't feel so lucky. And the times when he missed his home in Dauphine, and his friends. And the times when his stupid big sister, Sarah, tried to pull rank on him.

Sarah had done so this night. He had wanted to go into Meridian; he'd been so bored staying on the *Sheridan*, waiting for the gods to need transport somewhere. But Sarah said that they needed an able crewmember to be alert at all times, and tonight was his night. She got to go into the city with their mother to check on, oh, he didn't know. Or care. Supplies. Find out what the gods were up to. What did it matter?

The *Sheridan* docked at a tower in Meridian close to the central temple, but it still had to be on the outskirts of the floating city. If he looked over one side, he could look into the city. The city glittered in the twilight as people began turning their lights on.

The gondolas and lifts ferried people home to their gleaming tower apartments, or took them to restaurants and theaters. They went about their lives, living in the sky, with no idea what was going on around them, without realizing the gods were among them.

James didn't like looking over the city. He preferred to turn his back to it and stare over the barren land below, into the hills and the Dark. He hoped if he looked far enough into the dark, he would see where the moon had run off to and he could find her and convince her to come back.

Being able to watch the skies had been his favorite part about flying. He had spent his allowance on books about the heavens, learning about the constellations of Fenrir, the Diving Mother, the Big Rock Candy Mountain, and Kate's Heart. He had been amazed to meet Barris, the sun god, and was disappointed, to say the least.

He still hoped that they would meet Cotton, the moon goddess, and wondered why the moon had been gone these many days. The ground had rumbled when it had left, something he'd heard instead of felt, as he'd been in the air when it happened. The hint of ocean he could see to the west did not gleam as it once did, as the tides had ceased. He wondered how the animals were faring.

The moon had been his favorite, and he missed her terribly. She had waxed and waned like him — crushing blows and huge excitements, being treated like a kid and being given airship crewman responsibilities, getting to meet the gods who created you and then learning they had as many flaws as you did. Maybe more.

James sighed, longing for the moon, and stared into the Dark as night fell. A large, soot-smudged bird landed on the railing a couple of feet from him. It looked like a crow, only it was white. He frowned at it.

"Hi," he said. "What are you doing here?"

The crow opened its wicked beak and cawed once, loudly. James winced at the sound.

"You won't find any food here. My sister would kill me if she found me feeding the chicken gun ammo to a crow. Go away." He waved his hand half-heartedly at the bird.

The bird didn't spook, but just hopped about six inches toward him on the railing and cawed again.

James squinted at it. The bird cocked its head and ruffled its feathers. It fixed its eye on him, and he was astonished to see it wasn't beady and black, but white and luminous. Its eye actually glowed in the shadows.

"What ...?" asked James, still staring at the eye and relaxing against the airship railing.

The bird took another hop closer.

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy was gorgeous. Morrigan had not had much experience with men — she knew the sun was male, and had longed to meet him, as she was the sole person who could see his true form at night and reflect that beauty back onto the world. But she had never met him.

The lost souls in the underworld had flavors of male or female, but none had become a companion, a friend, or lover. The loneliness of captivity had been stifling to the goddess, but now that she had her freedom, the barriers raised by her disfigurement were maddening.

This boy, however, looked at her with curiosity. Interest. His eyes were a warm brown, bright and intelligent. His face was round, innocent, and complimented by a beautiful mouth. His skin was the dark brown commonly found in Dauphine, not Meridian, and she wondered where he had come from, why he lived on an airship, and why he seemed to hold himself with more confidence than other boys she'd seen.

This boy would understand her. This boy would listen. He would curl up in her lap during the day, and be her servant and right hand man at night. When he became a man, he would be her lover.

But first, to join her in her new home, he would have to die.

Morrigan let him watch her, captivated, for a moment more, and then she took flight, spiraling up and up, ignoring his pleas for her to return.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the sun dipped low, the rare rays touching the glass and metal buildings of Lathe, a voice groaned from behind inside a rubbish bin tethered to the rear of a grocer.

Sewer and trash issues were not discussed in Meridian and Lathe. Meridian residents paid a great amount of taxes that went toward the creation of machines to transport or transform their trash, and a year of tax revenue had gone toward the huge water cleansing building, where all waste water from the city ran through for purification. The waste collected was also transformed by some of the better tinkers. The upper-class snobs of Meridian joked that the waste was transformed into bricks that Lathe residents used to build, but no one really knew.

Barris knew, but he wasn't going to tell anyone. Secrets were all he had.

Well, secrets and a massive idea hangover.

He was planning on using one idea to take the edge off, and save the rest in case Daniel and Kate wanted to drag him off on another ridiculous rescue.

Unfortunately the second bad idea was, "To fully experience something it is best to consume all you can at once." That one blew his mind to the extent that he stumbled for the nearest place to hide to consume the other three ideas, and was out for the day. Now, with the great fireball that was the focus of all his power ebbing, he stood shakily in the bin, rotten vegetables dropping off him. He clutched his head, too full of ideas to comprehend any of them, and wondered what day it was.

The sun slipped below the horizon at that moment, and Barris transformed.

The lethargy, the drug, the weakness, the self loathing, the gnawing addiction, they all sloughed off Barris as he launched himself into the sky, the power from the sun returning to him in a rush that felt as if he'd been punched with something glorious.

He reflected that his earlier vow to lay off the ideas had apparently amounted to nothing. Apparently, indeed—he was still covered in refuse from the rubbish bin. He grimaced and concentrated briefly, his skin heating to hundreds of degrees to burn off the foulness.

Ash floated from his skin as he climbed higher, aiming for the underside of Meridian, dancing between the massive cables that anchored it to the ground that refused to let it rest upon it. Clouds always coalesced on the underside of the city, the moisture drawn to the mass of the buildings. Tendrils of cloud whirled around as he broke through them, his heat evaporating the water droplets immediately.

Barris paused underneath a tower on the outskirts of the city. He was tuned to all of the divine powers of the city: the founts of power that were Kate and Daniel, Fabrique and Prosper, both formerly imprisoned in Lathe, and Gamma, who had been imprisoned in the tower right below him for eons. But now there was a new presence, and he tried to remember what he had seen when his power had been stored in the sun.

There. Right above him. The power radiated strongly female, intense hatred, and seemed to — unlike the other gods in the world — to represent two things instead of one. Very curious.

Barris left the underside of Meridian and climbed higher, eager to meet this new goddess, to see if she was like him, unknown to the others, recently freed, and in love with her own power.

The nighttime lights of Meridian caught a flash of white, and Barris pursued. She was in the shape of a bird, a large white crow. Persi was the only other goddess he knew of who could fly, and she always did so in dinosaur form. Kate didn't shape-change. Gamma traveled via weapons, and Fabrique would sooner build a flying machine. Who was this woman?

She left the lights of Meridian and flew south, with Barris behind her. He quickly caught up with her, but she closed her wings and dropped, missile-like, and pulled up a hundred feet below him. He nearly pulled up in surprise, but grinned and followed.

She turned on a wing and headed west toward the ocean, climbing as she went. He put on a burst of speed and caught up with her.

He was faster than her, and she knew it, relying on quick changes of direction and altitude to evade him. He relished the game, his burning fingers nearly closing on sooty tail feathers more than once.

The crow glanced at him once, clearly irritated, and dove again, skimming the marshlands closer to the ocean. Barris had no problem following, and goutts of steam rose from the swamps as he neared the water.

At this point he didn't want to catch her; the chase was too much fun. He let her gain a bit of a lead, climbing again and heading southwest. He stayed under her, admiring her strength and speed. He just wanted to talk to her; why did she run away?

The ocean glittered under the moon as they neared, and Barris put on some speed to end up right under her. He shot upward, then, with the intention to catch her by surprise and grab her, make her talk to him.

His fingers closed around feathers, but feathers nearly as big as his hand. He plowed into the soft feathery breast of the crow, and her now-massive wings closed around him suddenly, trapping him.

He struggled against the prison, but feathers were everywhere and he couldn't move. He tried to increase his skin's temperature, to burn the crow, but she grabbed his leg with her talons and sank in deep. The hotter he got, the tighter she held him.

In his panic, he didn't realize if she held him in her wings and talons, she was no longer flying, and they hit the ocean with a massive splash and hissing steam. The crow flailed in the water, her talons dragging him under.

The dull, stifling feeling was nothing like he'd felt before, even during the day when his power had to go into the sun. His fire went out, the water clogged his pores, his eyes, his ears, his nose. He opened his mouth to scream and the water rushed in. Cold water seeped into his very bones, and he became only dimly aware that the crow had let him go, and was gone.

His waterlogged wings beat once under the waves, and then were stilled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morrigan did not know who he was, but her instinct had taken her to the ocean, one of the places where she felt her power most purely, as the water did her bidding. A creature of fire would not be happy in the water, she reasoned, and once she had shoved him under all of the fight had gone out of him.

But as she stood on the beach, water sloshing around her robe hem, she felt a great weakness strike her. She looked up at the moon for her validation, and the light began to fade.

That would be why she felt great strength even as the man had grown hotter and hotter in her grasp. She swore and tossed her mask aside, gripping the burned skin as she held her head, trying to will the dizziness away.

Why had the sun been so abysmally stupid as to fly over the water? Now with his power dying, he would doom not only himself, but also he would rob her of the power they shared, and the world itself would freeze.

Morrigan straightened, determined. She didn't much care for the sun god, but for her to continue existing, he had to continue existing. She set her teeth and concentrated.

The moon in the sky regained some of its luster, showing a waxing moon close to full. The water began to churn violently as she forced the tides to conform to her will. She had to do more than get him to the surface; he needed attending.

Leviathan City was nearby, and their submersibles patrolled the waterways. She had seen them frequently when hanging above the ocean, or when seen through the eyes of albino, deep-swimming fish. The rip tide Morrigan created caught one of the submersibles and dragged it to the floating body of the drowning sun god. She could feel the engines fighting as they tried to correct their course in the water, but she was too strong for them. She lifted the heavy submersible despite its efforts to stay deep, and presented the god to them.

The hatch opened and two pale faces peeked out, shouting in alarm. One woman with glittering hair and a bald man leapt out of the hatch and ran down the length of the sub to catch Barris's outstretched arms. They pulled the unmoving god into their sub, and Morrigan relaxed at last.

As for the goddess, she collapsed on the beach, utterly spent.

The sub did not dive yet, though. The two pale faces appeared again after dragging Barris to the ship's medic. They looked at each other and then at the glowing body.

"She would want us to take that one too," the man said.

"You reckon they're two of the same kind?" the woman asked.

"He's got wings. She's glowing and has a mask and a weapon. I know the heretics in the open air have their odd ways, but I hadn't heard they were like this. And one of them altered the tides, you can't tell me that was normal, Kayra Nhoj."

Kayra Nhoj nodded slowly. "One problem, though. She's on land."

The man blanched, as much as his pale skin let him. "She ... doesn't need to know. She'd want us to break the rules to get this one too."

Kayra Nhoj laughed, a short barking sound. "Dareth! Are you insane? You're willing to risk exile to test that?"



Dareth's eyes narrowed. "You'd report?"

Kayra Nhoj held up her hands. "Of course not; not me. But you know I can't stop anyone else from coming up and peeking out. And we'd have to lie about how we got her, keeping our stories straight." She turned from him back to the white beach that shimmered in the moonlight. She shuddered. "I wouldn't risk having to live here in the open for whatever that one will get us in glory."

Dareth pursed his lips and stared at the inert form. "I'm going for it. You can lick Ishmael's balls, I'm doing this."

"No, wait, it's too dangerous!" Kayra Nhoj said, grabbing for his arm. But they were both still damp from rescuing the winged man, and her hand slipped off and he scrambled out of the hatch and ran along the length of the sub before he dove in.

"The fool!" she whispered. She didn't want to see Dareth commit heresy by putting his feet on dry land, so she climbed back down the hatch to check on the winged man.

The medic was a young man with skin so pale it was almost translucent; his dark hair and eyes contrasted strongly. His out-of-water beauty often made Kayra Nhoj's breath catch in her throat. She composed herself by reminding herself of the rules against fraternizing with the crew.

The cot in the infirmary was soaked, water seemingly to pour out of the man as the doctor put pressure on his lungs and forced air into him to try to force the water out. But the water that came from him streamed from his pores, his ears, his nose, as well as his mouth.

"Ishmael's foreskin, but this godfucker is like a sponge," Doctor Isaac muttered as he compressed the man's chest. Water dripped off the cot and pooled on the floor. Kayra Nhoj smiled at the foul words coming from the doctor's mouth — it was always a thrilling shock to hear such language coming from a beautiful man — and knocked on the doorjamb.

Doctor Isaac looked up. "I don't know what you've got here, but it's not human."

Kayra Nhoj nodded. "Yeah, we got that much. Will he live?"

Doctor Isaac paused to pinch the man's nose and blow into his mouth. More water streamed from his skin, nose and ears. The doctor resumed pumping on his chest. "I have no fucking clue. He's like a sponge, which is not physiology I'm familiar with. But I

do know if he doesn't start breathing in a moment, he's not going to plant his seed in any winged women."

The man stiffened for a moment, then vomited a gout of water. Ignoring the mess, Isaac reached out and turned his head so he couldn't choke further, but pulled his hands back quickly, shaking them.

"The water is hot!" He stood back from the man, who had now begun to steam as he coughed up more water. Sweat immediately started to pop out on Kayra Nhoj's forehead as she backed out of the room, watching over the shorter doctor's head. Isaac just stood there, staring at the man, who had rolled over to better express the water from him.

The man finally opened his glowing eyes and flexed his wings, finding that they filled the room when he tried to expand them. He looked at them both and then slipped into unconsciousness.

The heat subsided. Doctor Isaac glanced at Kayra Nhoj and then said, "I think we need to let the captain know. And I think we need to get back home rather quickly. The Queen needs to know about this."

Kayra Nhoj grimaced. "The problem is, the captain is currently trying to secure another one of these creatures."

\* \* \* \* \*

Captain Dareth Kagar's confidence was waning as he swam toward the shore. While touching the sand under the ocean was not forbidden, getting out into the open air fully was. The other creature lay with the tide lapping at her.

The open-air world was so large! He looked around, grateful for the darkness to hide how much open space was around him. The ocean was so much bigger up here, and the sky was a nightmare of exposure. The moon, while the source of the tides and a minor deity to his people, was still a naked glaring orb. And the stars were pinpricks of fear, millions of eyes staring at him.

For their own safety and sanity, his people — even the submarine captains — were not permitted to surface during the day. The Queen said they could not comprehend the vastness, but Dareth had always wondered. If they exiled people, did they throw them

from their home and sentence them to madness? Or did the people learn to deal with all this space, this wind? Kayra Nhoj would say people could deal with it; they could deal with anything. He had chosen his first mate for her pragmatic common sense, which usually tethered his more radical ideas. She hadn't stopped him this time, though. But he was sure he'd be all right.

He knew he was splitting hairs, but Dareth reasoned that if he stayed with his feet wet the whole time, he would be safe from The Queen's wrath. Facing exile was one thing, but presenting Her with this creature could be worth the risk.

The tide was going out; Dareth's time was limited. He felt a wave push against his knees and took his chance. He lumbered through the surf, the open air giving a sense of loss and agoraphobia. Gasping and trying to focus only on the figure in front of him, and not the itching feeling between his shoulder blades that anything could come up behind him, he stood ankle-deep in water beside the body.

The shape beneath the rough robe implied female, but he could tell nothing more. The mask was fashioned from soot-stained bone. Curiosity shackled him for a moment, and instead of taking the body and dragging it into the ocean, he reached for the mask.

His fingers had time only to brush the mask before a bony hand shot up and trapped his wrist. He gasped and stepped backward, but she kept him in her grip. She sat up, seemingly not noticing her prey. He heard a muffled voice from behind the mask.

"So he lives. And is returning to power. That's something." The mask then turned to face him. It lacked any facial adornments, not even eyeholes, but Dareth could feel her eyes on him.

"Leviathan City citizen on land?" she asked. "How brave. What other brave things did you have planned, little brave man?"

"I- I- I-" Dareth struggled as he stammered, but her grip remained unchanged.

She chuckled. "You wanted two prizes. But I think your people will have enough to deal with when Barris returns full strength."

His own predicament forgotten momentarily, Dareth looked back toward his sub, floating silently off the shore. "B-Barris? That was Barris?"

"Yes. Your people just saved the life of the sun Himself. And if I am right, you're going to be in a world of trouble."

"Why?"

“Well. Your people will be. Not you. You’re coming with me.” She rose to her feet and picked up her weapon.

The strike was serpent-swift, and didn’t hurt at all. She must have missed. Dareth’s hand finally slipped from the deathly grip of the monster in front of him, and he tried to stumble back into the surf to return to his sub, and then home, but his feet no longer stood in the water. He had no feet.

Dareth’s spirit was quickly losing his corporeal form, and he flailed in panic, watching the wisp of his being dissolve.

The woman’s mask was cocked to the side, watching. Dareth’s last thought was to warn Leviathan City about the new monster in the open air, but his spirit blew away with a wisp of wind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morrigan looked with interest at her weapon. It was no longer as wicked as it had been, getting fatter as the moon waxed, but it had done its job of removing the man’s soul from his body. What she hadn’t expected was the shredding of the soul. The man had simply blown away with the night air, unlike her companions in the Underworld who managed to retain a bit of human form.

With one more glance at the submarine, and her enemy that she had to keep alive, she swung her weapon and split the air. The open, cracking wound beckoned her, and she returned home.

The boy, James, was back on her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate opened her eyes, awake immediately at the sound of screaming.

Daniel grunted under her. “What is that?”

“Prosper,” she said, sliding out of the huge bed the priestesses had provided them in her temple and pulling on her robe.

“He sounds like a bear,” Daniel said, sitting up.

“More like a very angry tree,” she said, cinching her belt. She tossed him a fresh robe and filled him in on the more gruesome details of Prosper’s existence.

“Dude. That’s harsh,” he said, shuddering.

“I know. And I don’t know if he is naturally like that or just has been like that because of what these people have done to him over the years. He wasn’t really up for a discussion on the subject.”

“What are his people like? Pious like yours? Rebellious like mine?”

Kate thought about the people who ran Prosper’s temple. “They’re farmers. They didn’t say much, don’t get surprised by much. They just kinda took him in and nodded to me. They said they knew how to take care of him.”

“Well, it was farmers who caught him to begin with, right?”

Kate groaned. “Farmers and tinkers, yeah. Shit. Let’s go.”

The scream resonated through the temple again, causing the walls to shudder. Kate and Daniel burst from the room to find her priestesses gathered together, whispering, their eyes wide.

“Anyone know what Prosper’s going on about?” Kate asked. They shook their heads quickly. She sighed. Her backpack lay on a chair next to her bedroom; she rummaged through till she found a dagger with a white hilt. “Gamma, I need you.”

The thin, muscled warrior goddess appeared in front of her, bowing.

“Gamma, Daniel and I are going to go to see Prosper now. I need you to find Barris and Fabrique. Get one of the priestesses to make sure that the *Sheridan*, the airship we arrived in, is ready to go today. Alicia is the captain. And, uh,” she looked at the slightly rocking urn in the corner, then at Daniel. “Have I forgotten anything?”

He sighed. “Have that loaded on the ship. If the guy inside manages to break out, kill him.”

Gamma smiled, her teeth glittering. “My pleasure, Daniel.”

Kate and Daniel headed for the door and to the stairs that wound around the temple exterior. “You sure that’s the best plan?”

“I’d rather have him nearby than out of sight. And if we’re going to put all the gods on one airship, wouldn’t we want him near the people who can handle him or not?”

“Point,” Kate said, squinting at the sunrise. She’d been to LA once and saw the sun rise through smog, beautiful and smudged, and decided this morning was reminiscent of that. “Does the sunrise look weird to you today?”

“Huh. Do we have smog here now?”

“That’s what I thought,” she said. “I hope this doesn’t mean —” Kate’s thought was interrupted by a tall, top-hatted man on the stairs below them.

“My Lord, My Lady!” he bowed in front of them, mustache twitching. “I have a matter to discuss with you, of some great importance.”

“Well, it’s not the best time,” Kate began.

“Oh, but it is very important,” he repeated.

“Hey, you’re that Professor Burns guy, aren’t you?” Daniel asked. “The Idea Emporium.”

Professor Burns smiled and bowed again. “I am honored to be remembered, sir.”

“Oh, right!” Kate said. “What’s wrong, Professor?”

Burns grimaced. “It’s about the sun god, Barris. I fear he is in real trouble.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate paced around the high priestess’s office, arms crossed. Daniel still stood behind the desk, his eye wide.

“Wait, wait. Barris is a junkie?”

Professor Burns sat in a chair facing the desk, his top hat in his lap. “Ideas can be addictive, especially if you don’t use them.”

“And Barris doesn’t do a goddamned thing,” Daniel said, rubbing his chin.

“I have only a few clients who have problems with this, and I do not usually interfere, but I realized this client’s addiction could harm others.”

“Yeah, like everyone else in the world. And the world,” Kate said. “Goddamn, Barris, can you fuck up any more? Really?”

Gamma stepped through the open door. “Apparently, he can,” she said through clenched teeth.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I looked in all the usual places I see him: On the temple roof, in Lathe, on the airship deck. I couldn’t find him anywhere. I attuned myself to every weapon I could touch, then, and found a place I’ve never visited. Leviathan City.”

Kate stopped her pacing. “How in the hell did he get there?”

“I don’t know. I saw him imprisoned by seven guards. He looks, well, weaker than usual.”

Kate felt her grip on reality slipping. “So he’s a junkie and he’s imprisoned under the ocean by a race of people who pretty much hate any god who’s not Ishmael or the moon. Anything else? Did he knock up a nobleman’s daughter while he was at it?”

“Not that I know of,” Gamma replied.

“There’s one more thing,” Professor Burns said.

Kate groaned.

“At his level of addiction, there’s going to be a nasty withdrawal coming soon,” Professor Burns said.

Prosper howled again, and the walls shook. Kate held her head in her hands. Wasn’t there something else to worry about? Like all of heaven and hell under siege? A big scary entity that killed her?

But she needed these gods on her side.

“Gamma. Get Fabrique and get the *Sheridan* ready. Daniel, go with Professor Burns back to his Emporium and try to figure out how to deal with this addiction and withdrawal and stuff. See if they have a clean needle program or something. And everyone —” She included Burns with a look. “Meet on the *Sheridan* by noon.”

Daniel smiled slightly. “What will you be doing?”

She sighed and stood up, smoothing her robes. “I have to deal with Prosper. He’s coming too.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate had briefly visited each of the temples during her stay there, but it always surprised her how different they all were, for being in the same building. Prosper's temple was the largest. Unlike Kate's, which was spacious, white and church-like (which frankly irritated her), Prosper's was more like a greenhouse mixed with a children's nature museum. The sun shone in through glass walls to create a greenhouse effect, and a wooden roof honored their god.

Within the temple, priests tended holy plants honoring their god. Vegetables, vines, flowers, grasses, trees (Kate was amused to see a grand bonsai collection), and even carnivorous plants grew from elaborately painted plots.

Kate choked as the humidity of the temple assailed her and took a moment to compose herself. One of the priests saw her standing in the doorway and approached her.

"Goddess, it is a sad day you grace us with your presence," he said, leaning his hoe against the glass wall."

"Is he really no better?" Kate asked, frowning.

The priest shrugged and wiped his hands on a dirty rag sticking from his back pocket. "We managed to get enough wine into him to calm him last night. But he has been in captivity too long; he doesn't know what to do now that he's free."

"Is his physical form any better? What was he supposed to be like before he was caught?"

The priest winced. "I admit we do not know. He's always been depicted as a god with bark-like skin and vines for hair. We do not know if that is his corrupted form or his natural."

"Take me to him."

Prosper's temple had no rooms, just areas separated by trellises and vines. The priests slept in a back area with an honest wooden floor. Prosper had been placed directly onto the dirt of a somewhat private area near a breathtaking orchid display.



Kate looked at the orchid roots and swore she could see them visibly growing, inspired by the proximity of the divine. Smart of the priests to put him near plants with roots that got moisture and nutrients from the air, and not the soil. Or the body of a god.

The plants all faced the god, who sat cross-legged on the dirt floor and glared at Kate. He didn't look much better. His skin still looked to be made of bark, and vines grew from his head where hair should be. His chest had healed where the vines had sprouted from him, at least, and Kate silently thanked the priests who had put a loincloth on him. She hadn't even realized he'd been naked when she'd rescued him.

All in all, he was much less craggy and chaotic than he'd been when she'd found them. Sadly, he didn't look much happier.

"Take me back."

She blinked, and then knelt in front of him to look into his golden eyes. "You...want to go back."

"Take me back. This is not my home; that was my home. You took me from my home."

Kate glanced up at the priest. "Prosper, these are your priests. They worship you. They are your people — if you're not home, then at least you're as close as you can be in your current state. They'll take care of you here."

He opened his mouth again, showing her his yellowed, fibrous teeth, and screamed again. She winced, but waited patiently until he stopped.

"Are you done?" she asked. He glared at her. The orchids began to shudder and strain as they grew, then, bursting from their pots. Thick, white roots sought Kate and began to wrap around her again.

"No," she said, willing her skin temperature to searing temperatures. The priest swore and fell backward as the orchid roots burst into flame. "Not this time, Prosper. I'm not as powerless here as I was there."

She stood, still white-hot, and put her hands on her hips. "This isn't going to be easy." She turned to the priest, who hovered at a safe distance, gripping a shovel. "Give him a robe, a large pot full of soil, and some seeds. He can choose which ones. Have him ready in ten minutes, or we're coming in to get him, ready or not?"

"Where are you taking me?" Prosper demanded.

Kate glanced back at him. “Does it matter? You seem to be happiest as a slave, so you’re going to do what we say.”

He pursed his lips, then blurted out, “And what if I don’t?”

Kate incinerated another orchid, this time with a glance. “I don’t want to hurt you, Prosper. But the things we’re trying to achieve are so much bigger than a petty god’s tantrums. You’ll help us. You have no choice.”

She strode out of the temple, not looking back. “Fucking gods,” she muttered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel whistled as he and Professor Burns entered the Idea Emporium. “I see you’ve made some changes.”

“The blessings of the sun god do much to help my business, I will admit,” he said, locking the door behind them.

He went over to a case and pulled out several small boxes and slipped them into the pockets of his purple waistcoat. “I take it where we’re going is dangerous?”

Daniel squatted in front of a display case, fascinated by the intricate origami. “Oh, did we not tell you? We’re going to Leviathan City to save Barris and Ishmael. We’ve not had the best of luck with people from there.” He straightened. “Well. We’ve only met one person from there, but it didn’t go very well.” He rubbed his wrist absently.

“Leviathan City?” Professor Burns turned white, but did not protest. “We’ll be needing diplomatic ideas, then.”

“Hey, I’ve wanted to ask you. Why do you sell the bad ideas? Why not just toss them?”

“You can’t destroy an idea,” Burns said, handing Daniel several small scrolls tied with red ribbon. “Someone will find it. This way I can tell people they’re bad, and sell them as novelties. If I throw them out, then they’re released into the world and you don’t know who’s going to get them and follow through.”

“Huh. I see your point. So what are we going to do about Barris? Are these for him?”

Burns looked surprised. “Goodness no, sir. These are for us. Battle ideas, diplomacy ideas, and culinary suggestions — in case the food in Leviathan City is unpalatable.”

Daniel laughed. “You think of everything.”

The tall man bowed. “It is my job. Now, for Barris, we need to get him to drink this.” He held up a crystal vial of blue liquid. It shone the same blue as the energy that had trapped Daniel, who involuntarily took a step backward.

“What is it?” Daniel asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“It’s a distillation of the energy that comes from the Dark. Since the ideas are formed from a chaos battery, then so does the antidote come from the same stuff.”

Daniel managed to laugh, a short barking sound. “Like how snake bite serum is made from snake venom?”

Burns pocketed the vial and smiled. “Something like that, yes. It’s rather strong, though, and could...damage him.”

Daniel grabbed his arm. “Whoa, wait. What do you mean? This is the sun we’re talking about. If we lose him, we are pretty much screwed. And by ‘we,’ I mean the whole planet.”

Burns nodded. “I understand that, but the damage will come mentally. He won’t be able to ever hold another idea. He won’t get the high from the ideas, but he won’t think for himself very well.”

Daniel frowned. “Is there no other way? Weaning gradually?”

“Normally, yes. But we would have to hope he’s getting his fix in Leviathan City of ideas. And I don’t like to brag, but I invented the Chaositron Idea Generator. It’s one-of-a-kind. If they have one in Leviathan City, I’ll frankly be shocked.” Burns closed the blinds down, darkening the interior of the shop. He pulled out a “CLOSED TO SAVE THE WORLD” sign from beneath the counter and replaced the sign on the door.

Daniel read the sign. “Is, uh, that a sign you have to use often?”

They exited the store. “Only once before,” Burns said, as he locked the door. “I like to be prepared.”

“Good idea,” Daniel muttered, wondering how they were going to prepare themselves for the tasks ahead. Allies were good. Allies not hopped up on weird drugs would be better, but they’d take what they could get.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate felt absurdly like a CEO being addressed by her nervous vice presidents.

Fabrique was first. She put her carpet bag on the conference table and opened it. “What I wanted was access to my house. I could make tools out of just about anything, but really I am more efficient with my tools. However, even though I’ve expanded the interior of this bag, I still don’t have enough room for everything I want. So I created a doorway.”

She pulled a flimsy series of linked brass tubes that reminded Kate of a weapon she’d seen in martial arts movies. When Fabrique removed it, it looked like a chain with large links, but when she got it out she shook it once, like airing out a towel, and it snapped into place to form a brass rectangle about three feet wide and five feet high, with a small square battery on the top right hand corner.

Fabrique flipped a switch on the battery and the brass rectangle began to hum, and the interior of the rectangle shimmered. The space beyond faded, and Kate saw what was clearly a workshop, littered with tools and wires.

“It’s still untested, but I think it will be useful if I need something my tools. Just pop over to my workshop for whatever we need.”

“Wow,” Kate said. “But, uh, untested?”

The sword across her back trembled, interrupting her, and she drew it. The divine energy that was Gamma poured out of the tip, and the warrior goddess faced her. “The *Sheridan* is prepped and ready to go. I took the liberty of loading the traitor into a locked room as Daniel requested. Captain Alicia has procured a submersible for the trip to Leviathan City.”

Kate blanched. How could she have forgotten that? She would have to remember to thank Alicia, captain of the *Sheridan*, for realizing that they’d need a way into Leviathan City. Kate was pretty sure she and Daniel could divinely worm their way in, but she didn’t like to assume, especially here.

“Good,” she said. Now can we test that doorway thing before we—”

“No time,” Daniel said, appearing in the doorway. Professor Burns followed him, combing his mustache with his hand. “We need to get there as soon as possible. Barris

needs us. When withdrawal sets in, that guy is going to be hurting. And the antidote isn't pretty."

Kate stood. She took a deep breath. "Okay, then I guess we're going. Let's go downstairs and get Prosper and then head out. Anyone need to pee or anything?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The one true goddess spoke to Sam, deep within the urn in which the broken false god had trapped him.

His back had been on fire, giving him a constant agony. The urn was stuffy. He trembled with the thought of the loss of Prosper, his vineyards, his casks of wine, and the second god he'd captured. He had no idea what the god wanted him for.

But now, deep within the urn, unable to move, barely able to breathe, he felt her presence.

"Goddess? Cotton?" He blinked and thought he saw a glowing orb in the complete blackness within the urn.

An amused, muffled voice answered him. "Not anymore. But no one has visited me before. Either they come to stay or don't come at all. Why are you on the border of life and death?"

"Am I dying? Or dreaming?"

"You would have to tell me, my child. Who are you?"

"My name is Sam, Goddess. I've been most horribly wronged by the false broken god Daniel."

She was silent. He whimpered. "Goddess? Are you there? Please don't leave me alone!"

"Daniel is not false. He's quite powerful. But you must have a great grudge against you if you hate him with such force."

"Yes, Goddess!" He began to weep. "He took everything from me, and then imprisoned me. I can't escape."

"Shh ... if you can pledge yourself to me, become my first priest, I can free you come nightfall."

His heart leaped. Was she serious? Would she give him such an honor? “Yes Goddess.”

“Good. When you get free, I will have a mission for you. Fulfill it and I will reward you. Fail or change your mind, and you will wish you’d stayed in the urn.”

“I would never turn from you, Goddess.”

“Wonderful. Now, my priest, listen ...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate and Daniel’s favor, along with Fabrique’s upgrades, had clearly benefited Alicia and the *Sheridan* just as Barris’s favor had benefited Professor Burns. Alicia and her children wore new clothing of tight-fitting brown leather, helmets, goggles, and warm jackets. On their backs, their jackets each held an intricate etched image of the *Sheridan*.

The ship itself glowed in the noonday sun, humming with its upgraded engine, touched by the goddess of clockwork and ingenuity herself. From the hull hung a small circular metal orb with portholes and propellers, tubes and mechanisms.

“What is this, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*?” Daniel whispered to Kate.

She shrugged. “It’s for everyone else. I think you, me and Gamma would be fine without.”

“How fast do you think she can get us there?”

Kate glanced at the emerging face of Fabrique, her copper curls tamed somewhat by her goggles, but still exploding from under her ears. She came up from down below and proudly reported to Alicia that the ship was ready to go.

“That’s her call,” Kate said, pointing. “I imagine we’ll probably be the fastest ship around. What’s the rush again?”

“We need to help Barris out. He’s in big trouble. Burns said he could wean him with ideas to get him off the junk, but if he goes into serious withdrawal, the only thing we can do is essentially wipe his mind of the ability to hold any thought in his head.”

Kate’s jaw hung open. “Are you serious? Won’t that kill him?”

Daniel shook his head. “No; he’ll still be a sun god, and supposedly still be able to keep the sun in the sky, but not much of a conversationalist. Ever.”

“Well, that’s just great. I guess we should get the hell out of here.”

They watched Alicia’s kids bustle about the ship, checking things. Her eldest child Sarah waved to the controller at the tower dock and he waved back, allowing them to cast off. The ship lurched once as the souped-up engines started, and then they were off.

The airship gradually gained speed, but Kate soon realized that was for safety. If it needed to, this zeppelin could turn faster than any ship of its kind, possibly defying the laws of physics. *Good to know.*

Alicia had the wheel and piloted according to Gamma’s coordinates, sending commands to her children, namely James, who manned the engine controls and Sarah, who held the chicken gun, a bazooka-like weapon that shot frozen chickens at air whales to distract them from damaging the ship. The younger kids were below deck.

Fabrique came to stand beside them. “I upgraded it as much as I dare. The pilot being mortal, and mortals aboard, I couldn’t make it any faster without putting them at risk.”

Kate pulled a windswept strand of hair out of her face and grinned. “I’m guessing your own airship is going to be something legendary.”

“Without a doubt,” the goddess said. Fabrique stuffed her hair into a helmet and put her goggles on again. She fixed her eyes on the horizon and the shimmering sea that approached quickly.

“I checked the submersible too,” she said. “It will easily take six. Seven if we have to.”

Kate counted on her fingers. “So that’s me, you two, and Gamma, and we need to leave room for Ishmael and Barris, and Burns. Alicia and crew will stay on the airship.”

“What about Prosper?” Daniel said, pointing at the miserable harvest god who sat against the back railing of the ship beside a heavy pot full of soil and a foul-smelling moss.

“Shit. I forgot about him. Well, we’ll need someone divine to protect the ship, I guess. We need Gamma with us.”

Daniel raised an eyebrow. “You really think he will do that?”

Kate frowned. “You’re right.” She gestured to Gamma, who stood with her arms clasped behind her back, facing the wind. “Gamma will need to think of something.”

She caught the warrior goddess's attention and told her the problem. Gamma nodded somberly. "I will tune myself to Alicia's boot knife. If they have any problems, she can tell me and I will know and be here immediately."

"I guess that will work. Good idea," Kate said.

"Anyone else feel like we're walking into a snake pit?" Daniel asked.

"Asps. Very dangerous," Kate said, and snickered. "Yeah, but what can we do?"

Daniel looked back at the pouting harvest god. "You know Kate, only we would make a world where all the gods were imprisoned. We have to save this world before we can save our original one."

She nodded. "We don't have a choice though. We need them." She and Gamma then went to talk to Alicia to inform her of the plans as the Sheridan entered the airspace over the ocean, heading toward Leviathan City.



## CHAPTER NINE

Barris was unsure of where he was. He just knew he was far, far away from where he should be. He last remembered the ideas and the rubbish bin. Now he was feeling nauseated and claustrophobic, sweat beading on his forehead, tossing from side to side in a small room with no furniture and no adornments except for a puddle of watery vomit in the corner, one he felt the need to add to every once in a while.

He thought he should get up and demand his freedom. Demand to know where he was. See if there was someone he could talk to. Either bargain his way out or flex his divine power and force his way out.

But he couldn't even sit up. And the general "gotta get out" feeling was the only coherent thought in his head.

There had to be some sort of mistake. Perhaps he was in a hospital. But didn't hospitals have beds? And people?

Barris lay on his back and stared at the green glass ceiling. The room was fairly large. Why did he feel so confined? Beyond the green glass seemed to be another ceiling, much higher up. Beyond that, so far away, a tiny disk that shimmered, nearly imperceptible. The sun.

Gods, beyond Kate and Daniel, who were older than time, had no oaths. No god would swear upon the genitals of other gods. And since they didn't excrete, they didn't have the same feelings of shame, disgust, and secret childhood delight regarding excrement, so they didn't even consider saying, "Shit." So when Barris realized he was trapped with millions of cubic feet of water between him and the open air, he blurted out, "turtle tits," and passed out again.

He awoke in a puddle of spittle and bile. Something buzzed in his ears and he shook his head, strings of ropy mucous sticking to the side of his face. He was going do something. What was it? He struggled to sit up and scoot himself over to prop himself up against the wall. The effort was monumental; He panted hard by the time he got upright.

His limbs shook. He wondered if the sensation was pain. He remembered water, then, slicing into his body through his pores like needles. It invaded everywhere, and he still felt its presence, unwanted, in his body. Had he drowned? How in the hell had he gotten to the ocean?

But more importantly, how was he going to get out? He could barely sit up straight. Moving beyond the room, finding his way out of the city, passing through that deadly water, it was all too much to consider.

Barris slumped to the side until he was wedged into the corner of the room. They wouldn't come looking for him. No one liked him. They just wanted him to keep the sun in the sky. They didn't care about him, his likes or his dislikes.

An idea he once had, involving innovation and independence, tickled his memory, and was gone. Barris leaned his head against the wall on his left and let the hot tears stream down his cheeks.

The door creaked open and two guards armed with spears walked in first. They were followed by a tall man who grinned down at Barris.

He stood tall and well-muscled, his blue-green skin blemish-free. His black hair hung to his shoulders, and he was naked except for a small loincloth, orange coral armbands, and a necklace made of woven seaweed and blue stones.

He spread his arms wide, orange coral armbands contrasting with his skin. "Barris, I didn't know you wanted to visit me so much that you'd kill yourself trying! Welcome to Leviathan City!"

Barris's eyes narrowed and he swallowed back tears. "Hello, Ishmael."

\* \* \* \* \*

Professor Burns removed his top hat and mopped his forehead in cool afternoon air. Daniel cocked his eyebrow.

"You doing okay, professor?"

"Certainly," the man stammered, not looking at him. "While where I'm going isn't the safest place ever, the company that I keep is unparalleled, so my safety is nigh insured, correct?"

Daniel thought of the various ways he and Kate had been kept from their power; power that had once grown worlds from nothing but blood and emotion.

“Absolutely,” he said, clapping Professor Burns’s shoulder.

Kate, Daniel, Professor Burns, Gamma, and Fabrique waved at Alicia and the sulking Prosper to go below deck to a small doorway. It opened to the hanging sub, and Daniel reached out and unscrewed the hatch. He climbed from the door through the hatch, calling behind him, “Don’t look down!”

Kate snorted at him and followed, then helped Professor Burns in. They settled into small seats bolted to the floor, Fabrique taking the controls.

“Strap yourselves in,” she said, flipping switches and squinting at gauges.

“All of us?” Daniel asked.

“Even you, trickster god,” she said. “You should know by now that you don’t really know what is going to happen around here, even if you are a god. And seatbelts are just a wise idea. What if you smash into poor Professor Burns here?”

The professor’s dark face had paled to an unsettling gray color and he gripped the edge of his seat as the sub lurched. They started to descend toward the water.

They bumped gently as they hit the water, and Fabrique lifted a lever that disengaged the sub from the airship. “And we’re away. I figure maybe ten minutes till we reach Leviathan City.”

The interior of the hatch grew dark as the only lights came from the console and the reflection of the headlamps of the sub as they submerged.

“Fabrique, you know the most about this energy that people use to trap gods. What can you tell me about it?” Kate asked.

“It’s the only kind of energy I can’t actively manipulate,” the goddess said, staring out the porthole in front of her. “I have to treat it as if I were an ordinary tinker. I always thought it kept me honest, making me work harder to make things.”

“And you never thought about why you, the goddess of devices, couldn’t master it?”

Fabrique glared over her shoulder momentarily. “Of course I did. But as I said, being trapped inside a house didn’t give me much ability to go out and research. And since my freedom I’ve been a little busy with other people’s projects to work on my own.”

Kate flushed and looked away from the irritated goddess. "I'm sorry. You're just the most likely person to understand it. It's dangerous and I want to know what it is."

Fabrique shrugged. "It's chaos energy, its origination is The Dark, what you call the Wasteland. It's what makes the area around Meridian and Lathe so volatile."

Daniel frowned as something teased his memory, something so large it was hard to fathom. He couldn't grasp it.

"But why does it counter divine power so well?" Kate asked, leaning forward.

"That much is easy," Fabrique said. "Gods are creatures of order. Even Daniel here has to rely on others' order so his own chaos will work. The thing that combats this order is chaos. Why do you think so many gods were imprisoned here? Here is where we are the least potent."

"Wonderful," Daniel said. "As much as I'd like to keep talking about how we're not all-powerful as we're heading into a hostile underwater city, shouldn't we come up with a plan? They don't like outsiders, and according to Sam, that includes outside gods. They have two of our own imprisoned there. What are we going to do?"

Gamma smiled, the green light shining off her teeth. Daniel shook his head. "No, we're not going to turn to slaughtering them right away. You can protect us, but you're not going to just blow the place up."

Gamma lost her smile and glared at him. "I was not there when Dauphine fell. Now that I'm with you, you're beyond city razing."

"Good lord, Gamma," Kate said. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of violence before we're done. Do you remember that we need you all to help us fight a war when we're done with all this rescuing?"

Gamma nodded stiffly. Daniel suppressed a grin. It was tempting to just set her free, but he knew they had to enter the city with their wits. A plan tickled his mind, and he looked around at his companions: the dark-faced Fabrique, Gamma, and Burns, and the lighter shades of his and Kate's skin. He grinned.

"I think I have an idea," he said. "Fabrique, can you make us some shackles from what you have in your bag? It would be best if they can look like they're powered by chaos energy, but aren't."

Kate gasped, as a large glowing dome appeared several hundred meters in front of them.

“And preferably fast, too,” Daniel added.

Fabrique kept her eyes on the portal as she rummaged around in her bag and tossed three pair of handcuffs to Daniel. Glowing blue wire ran through the hinges and he admired the craftsmanship.

He scratched his chin. “Oh, I’ll need some goggles to hide my eye, too.”

“What are you planning, Daniel?” asked Kate.

“If the Leviathan City people want to hunt gods, that’s what we’ll bring them. You and I are pale enough to pass for Leviathan City citizens; this can work.”

“How in the world can we pass for citizens when we don’t know much about these people, even their sub design?”

“Leave it to me; I have a plan,” he said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she muttered, but accepted the shackles and began sliding them around the wrists of their companions, leaving Fabrique one hand free so she could continue piloting the sub.

“How big is it?” Kate asked in a hushed voice, as the city loomed closer.

“No one knows exact size or population, but I can say with some confidence that there are seventeen thousand tinkers or craftsmen,” Fabrique said.

“And an army of thirty thousand,” Gamma said, her fists balled on her lap.

“Relax, Gamma,” Daniel said. “You can break out of those at any time.”

Her hands fell open on her lap and she took a deep breath.

Kate closed her eyes. “There are seventy thousand people there. Give or take.”

Professor Burns snapped out of his stupor. “That’s impossible! Meridian is the largest city in the world at fifty-five thousand!”

Kate shrugged. “That’s what I can sense. Sensing souls is kinda what I do.”

“Man. What are they going to do with all those people? Surely overcrowding is an issue. And they can’t exactly leave from what Sam said.”

“Doesn’t seem like we’re heading into a very happy city,” Kate said.

Daniel snorted. “And understatement of the year goes to...”

Gamma smiled at him again. “Have you reconsidered your previous comment about razing the city?”

“No, I haven’t,” Daniel said, watching the subs drift around the city like parasitic fish around a whale. “But I might.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Ishmael laughed, the sound assaulting Barris's ears. "A prisoner? What in the world gave you that idea?"

Barris managed to lift his eyes to the greenish god. Ishmael had ordered a table and chairs brought into them, along with tea and sandwiches. It was almost civilized, despite the vomit that still pooled on the floor.

"We were all imprisoned. Me, Gamma, Fabrique, Prosper. We assumed you were, too."

"The god of the sea, living underneath the waves in a glorious city, surrounded by worshipers? And you thought I was eager to leave?" Ishmael laughed again, the sound bouncing off the wall like waves. "Where in the world would I go that is better than here?"

Barris shuddered, still feeling horrible. It must have been the effects of the water in his system. "I don't know."

"Exactly. Now, they treat gods right here. They will take good care of you."

Barris stared at the table miserably. "But what do they want with me? How did they catch me? And why?"

Ishmael toyed with the blue stone on his necklace. "The report is a submersible surfaced by accident, they aren't sure why. They found you floating in the sea, about to drown. They saved you."

He leaned forward and looked appraisingly at Barris. "The crew is confused, though. We think it's a case of madness due to exposure to the air, or perhaps your proximity caused them to hallucinate, but the crew claims you were a winged creature of heat and flame. Not what you truly are. When they came home this morning, they seemed terribly confused to see you in their infirmary. But they knew they had someone special, and sent me to check you out."

"But what do they want with me?" Barris asked again.

Ishmael frowned briefly, looking far into the ocean. He returned shortly and smiled again. "You are a god, my friend! What city doesn't want you as a figurehead?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun, still quite warm and strong in the sky, slid closer to the horizon. Alicia was relaxing at the helm, keeping an eye on the wind, correcting from time to time. Sarah approached her mother, the chicken gun ready on her shoulder. Air whales were less of a threat at sundown than sunup, but she never took chances.

“Mother,” she asked, her eyes surveying the sea under them. “What happens if they don’t come back?”

Alicia frowned. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine they wouldn’t. They’re gods, after all.”

“Sometimes they seem nothing more than humans,” Sarah muttered.

“Hush your blasphemy, Sarah,” her mother said. “It is an honor to serve them. They’ve done so much for us.”

Sarah nodded. “Like burning down our home and stowing away on our airship and demanding we take them wherever they like?”

Alicia adjusted the helium valves. “That, and giving us notoriety, business prospects, and lodging in Meridian.”

“You said you’d never go back there, not since Daddy died.”

Alicia’s brown eyes fixed on the horizon. Sarah bit her lip, afraid she’d said too much. Alicia finally sighed and said, “It’s not a good idea to vow things you can’t control.”

“I just hope we get a chance to return to our lives at some point,” Sarah said.

“Honestly, I do too,” Alicia said. “But they’re gods, Sarah. What are we going to do? Deny them?”

Sarah shrugged. She glanced back at Prosper, still hunkered at the back of the ship beside his pot of moss. “I wish they hadn’t left him.”

“You and me both, honey. I wish James had some more caution.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fabrique, Gamma, and Professor Burns stood at the submersible hatch, waiting for Daniel to exit before they did. Kate would bring up the rear. Daniel blinked through his goggles. Whatever Fabrique had done to them was amazing. If focused correctly, he could see through walls. Another turn of a lens and he could easily view electrical currents. Best of all, a third flip of a lens gave him the illusion of having both eyes functioning. Fabrique said it was just fooling his good eye that he had his perspective back, but Daniel didn't care. His brain reveled in the feeling of two visual inputs.

Currently, he had it so he could see through the walls, and noted that the Leviathan City guards had gathered inside the airlock to intercept the strange submersible. He cursed himself for not thinking to disguise the obviously non-Leviathan City created submersible. But it was too late to fret about that now.

"This is totally not going to work," he muttered to himself as the airlock opened and eight muscular white warriors — five women and three men — stormed in with spears.

"Good idea," Kate said.

"It's all I could come up with," he said, then, louder, "We have returned with heretics! I think these might be of use to us! Our leaders will be so proud!"

Fabrique, Burns, and Gamma walked forward dutifully, showing their shackled hands.

The woman in front, wearing a padded tunic and green pants, raised her spear. "Who are you? Entry into Leviathan City is forbidden for all heretics from above."

"We're not heretics!" Daniel said. He thought the obvious comparing of skin color wouldn't outweigh clothing, accent, and submarine differences. "We just had some individuals we thought you would be interested in seeing. We are sure at least two of these are not human."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "The only one who can determine power is the Queen. She can decide."

The warriors behind her shuddered, two of them exchanging sidelong glances.

*This can't be good,* Daniel thought.

With a word from the woman, the warriors surrounded the gods, who allowed themselves to be herded into the underwater city.



\* \* \* \* \*

“We see the coolest places in the weirdest situations,” Kate whispered, craning her head back.

“Tell me about it. How many heavens and hells would have been cool to explore if we hadn’t been running from gods or looking for souls or, uh, running from other gods?” Daniel said, following her gaze.

The green dome glistened dully over them, showing black water beyond. The streets within the dome ran in circles, with smaller houses on the perimeter and larger buildings in the smaller concentric bands. Straight roads went toward the center like spokes in a wheel. Near the center were tall skyscrapers, which nearly touched the top of the dome. Most were created from glass of various opacities; the more private areas were made from black glass, shining slightly from interior lights.

In the center of the city, the tallest building actually seemed to be made out of the same glass as the dome, melding into the ceiling seamlessly. As they took a direct route toward the center, Kate realized they were heading toward the biggest building.

“Is that a temple to Ishmael?” she asked, pointing. She received a grunt from the man at her side, and he said nothing more.

“You should know that, shouldn’t you, if you were a native?” asked the woman, sneering.

“Oh, come on, if you saw through our clever trick, then why keep acting like you just figured us out?” Daniel said. Kate hid a smile. The fact that the guards had no idea who they were was still their strongest weapon. She could see Gamma’s ropy dark arms flexing in the shackles, eager to get out. She could probably destroy each guard simply by turning their weapons on them.

As they passed houses, pale, frightened faces peeked from windows: lighter glass set into opaque walls. When they met Kate’s eyes, they slid behind curtains. She smiled and openly waved at them.

“Leviathan City citizens are not permitted contact with heretics,” the woman said.

“What makes us heretics?” Daniel asked.

“Yeah, that’s a good question,” Kate said. “We never said Ishmael wasn’t a god, or Cotton wasn’t a goddess. Why hate us?”

“You worship the other gods,” the woman said, looking straight ahead. “Kate the false. Daniel the weak.”

Kate couldn't read Daniel's eye behind the goggles, but she knew he was looking at her. He gave a small, suppressed smile.

Unfortunately, the woman kept talking. “The minor gods are recognized here, but not worshiped on a high level as they are wrongly done on the outside. My people honor Gamma the warrior as a demigod, but she is not revered by anyone else. The tinkers honor Fabrique on holidays, and the farmers honor Prosper. Barris gives his power to our goddess, Cotton, so we acknowledge him, but no one is higher than Ishmael the sea and Cotton the moon.”

Gamma and Fabrique stiffened at the insults, but said nothing. Daniel made a big deal of counting on his fingers. “Wait, you only named eight gods. What about Persi, the goddess of dinosaurs?”

The guards did not answer. The buildings got taller and taller, and they finally approached the one in the center, a round building with no windows. Two guards stood at the door, but opened them when they saw the group approach.

“Five to see the Queen,” their head guard said.

The door guards' eyebrows shot up. “Five? But the King has already taken someone to visit,” one of them said.

“These are heretics; they cannot be trusted elsewhere,” she said. “It's possible the eight of us could already be tainted.”

One of the other guards swore softly and a ripple of panic went through them.

“You have less courage than Daniel's testicles!” the leader said. Daniel coughed, trying to hide an outburst of laughter.

The leader shoved them all through. They stumbled into the room, and she followed them, snarling, “I'll take them through myself!”

The interior showed the building was like a doughnut, with a small circular wall in the center of the room and holy symbols depicting a naked man, an erect phallus, and waves decorating the exterior wall. One more guard stood in front of double doors that looked like an elevator hatch.

The leader marched up to the startled looking guard. “Five to see the Queen. Do you have objection?”

The man was clearly a lower rank than the woman, as he trembled but did not look away from her angry eyes. “No, ma’am. Five to see the Queen!”

He pushed a button in the wall and clockwork snapped into motion, whirring and clicking. Fabrique cocked her head to the side and listened, then nodded. The elevator opened and the guard pushed five of them inside.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” asked Daniel.

The guard laughed. “One faces the Queen alone, heretic. Now’s the time you pray your meaningless gods are with you.”

Daniel shrugged as the doors closed. “Done.”

Kate stumbled as the elevator went into motion, but not up. It went down, into the rock.

Gamma flexed once more and her shackles fell from her wrists. “Great idea, Lord,” she said.

Daniel shrugged. “They don’t know who we are, and they’re intrigued enough to take us to the top. Or, uh, the bottom, as the case may be. I say we’re still doing okay.”

“This is an excellent elevator design,” Fabrique said. She listened briefly again and smiled. “Innovative use of springs. I approve.” The creaking outside the elevator ceased and their descent increased speed.

“Did you just bless them?” Daniel asked. “These people who don’t give a shit about us?”

Fabrique frowned at him. “They may not honor me with prayer, but they honor me with their inventions. I also wonder what keeps the dome’s air breathable.”

“Must be a kind of recycler,” Kate said.

They kept descending, Professor Burns looking more and more ill as they went below the ocean floor. “D-does anyone know how far under the city we are?” he asked in a papery voice.

Fabrique looked thoughtful. “At the rate we’re descending, and for how long we’ve been descending, I’d say about two hundred fifty feet so far.”

They lapsed into silence, Fabrique updating them from time to time with, “Three hundred... three fifty... four hundred...”

When she reached five hundred, Kate asked her to please stop. It turns out she didn’t need to, as the elevator stopped instead.

It opened into a cave dimly lit with torches. The air was surprisingly fresh, the cause of which became obvious when Fabrique zeroed in on a small generator that pumped fresh air into the cave and through vents in the cave wall and up the elevator shaft.

“It’s so small,” Fabrique said. “This is master-level work. There have to be others in the city, but this one can provide at least half of what they need.”

“Yeah, impressive, but why keep it in a cave below the sea floor?” Kate said.

“Dude, why keep their queen in a cave below the sea floor? Isn’t that who we’re here to see?”

“And the King,” Gamma said.

The cave looked simply like a cave, an odd pocket of air with a pool at the end opposite the elevator shaft. Kate figured it had to be like an S bend in a pipe, allowing one end to be dry and the other to hold water. In this case, the other end was the ocean and this end was a small pocket of fresh air.

The cave was dank and inhospitable, with no human luxuries.

Kate frowned. “I’m starting to think that ‘going to see the Queen’ means ‘tossing into a jail that’s impossible to escape from.’”

“I’m sure you could escape from it, My Lady. Myself, however ...” Burns trailed off.

“We’re not leaving you here, Professor,” Daniel said.

A voice at the edge of the pool called to them, calling from a shadowy alcove they hadn’t noticed. “More visitors to my Queen! How wonderful! Come and meet her!”

Daniel and Kate exchanged glances and moved tentatively forward. “Think it’s a trick?” she asked.

“I’m supposed to know those things. And I’m not sure,” he said.

As they approached the pool, a green man stepped out in front of them, welcoming them with open arms. “My friends! Welcome to Leviathan City! I did not expect so many divine visitors today! I am Ishmael, king of the city, god of the sea. I welcome you, Fabrique, Gamma, Kate, Daniel, and ...” he looked at Burns for a moment, frowning, “and human. We are awaiting the arrival of the Queen.”

Kate blinked stupidly. “We?” was the only thing she could think to say.

Ishmael gestured to the wall where Barris sat curled in a fetal position, back against the wall. Sweat dripped from him despite the dank air, and he shuddered.

“Barris, the sun god. He is feeling poorly from almost drowning. He’ll feel better soon. Everyone feels better once they meet the Queen.”

Daniel took a step back, his lip curling, doglike. “What’s up?” Kate whispered.

“His necklace. It’s got that energy on it. I can smell it now. Barris has one too.”

“That’s not good,” Kate said.

“And that’s not drowning he’s experiencing,” said Professor Burns, brightening now that he had a role. “He’s suffering withdrawal.”

“Hold up,” Daniel said. “Let’s see if we can get him out of here without nuking him first. How long does he have before he gets the DTs bad?”

Burns watched the sun god shudder and moan. “Not long.”

Kate laced her fingers together, thinking. She ignored the eager sea god bouncing from foot to foot. “Well. We have everything we need. Gamma? Can you escort Ishmael and Barris out of here? We’ll figure out how to get everyone out of here safely.”

Gamma stepped forward and put her hand on Ishmael’s arm. “Are you going to resist?”

“We have to wait. She’s almost here,” Ishmael said, and focused on the pool.

Daniel put Professor Burns behind him. “I have a bad feeling about this,” he said. “Why do I think the Queen isn’t human?”

A gray tentacle, dotted with pink suckers, rose lazily out of the water and probed the air. Ishmael took it in his hand and rubbed it on his cheek. It wrapped gently around his neck, and then again around his torso.

“Oh, she’s so much more than that,” Ishmael said, his eyes misty with adoration. “Why do you think we call this place Leviathan City?”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kate backed up, bumping into Daniel, who bumped into Burns. “Oh, shit,” she said.

Burns, finally, was looking as together as he always did. He was rummaging in his waistcoat.

“Is it really time to look for a smoke right now?” Kate asked.

“Fuck, is she Cthulhu or something?” Daniel said.

“No, no; I finally have an idea.” Burns held up one of the ideas he’d gotten from his shop.

“Oh, really? What’s it say?” Daniel said. “Don’t go see the Tentacle Queen?”

“No.” Burns paused. “It says to respect and listen to royalty. Our leaders know more than we give them credit for.”

Daniel stopped. “You’re kidding. Professor, that’s not a queen. It’s a tentacle.”

“It could be the Queen is on the other end. You don’t know.”

“So you really think we should just stand here and wait for... the rest of her to arrive?” Kate asked, staring at the tentacle that caressed Ishmael in a most distressing way.

“You’re gods. You can escape any time if things get troublesome, can you not? I’m the one in true danger, and I can wait to see what she has to tell us. Can’t you?”

Daniel bristled at the challenge, but Kate nodded. “You have a point. Although I really don’t think that thing can talk. We can wait it out.”

Daniel continued to back up, thought, and Kate raised an eyebrow. “Tentacled things freak me out,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Oh!” Kate said. “I had no idea.”

Daniel nodded, his face green in the torch light.

“Okay. I’ll see what she has to say. Or, uh, squish.”

“That’s not funny,” Daniel said.

Kate hid a smile behind the guise of rubbing her cheeks to steel herself. The water in the pool was churning now, and more tentacles had emerged, probing and tasting the air.

“Here she comes,” Ishmael said, his voice quiet and reverent. Gamma stood at the edge of the pool, defiant, and Barris huddled, oblivious to them all.

Kate swallowed and took a step back involuntarily as the green mass filled the room. The Queen looked like a cross between an octopus and a seahorse, with long tentacles encircling her torso. Only part of her surfaced; she filled the cave, at least twenty feet tall with her longest two tentacles looking to be around forty feet. She grunted low in her throat and eyed them all with pearly, cloudy eyes.

Gamma looked back at Kate, her eyes wide, just as Kate realized it too. Fabrique had been crouched beside Barris, rummaging in her bag for something, but now she looked up at the leviathan. Even Barris raised his head, sensing it.

Daniel was the one who said it. “Holy shit, Kate. That’s a goddess.”

The greenish gray monster burned with a divine light that all of the gods recognized. She reached a tentacle out to each of them, touching them lightly, recognizing them, too. Even Daniel allowed it, making only a small disgusted noise as she touched his shoulder.

“It’s not only a goddess,” Kate said, nodding. “It’s Persi.”

Daniel looked at Barris. “I thought you said she was in the south, trapped in a dinosaur’s body.”

Barris looked at Daniel through lidded, tired eyes. “She was in the south at the time. She swam north.”

“But you said a dino’s body!” Daniel said, gesturing at the bulk that was Persi. “We were thinking a stegosaurus or something! Not a huge leviathan!”

“A leviathan is a dinosaur,” Barris said, dropping his head to his knees again. He shuddered again.

Kate was reminded that he didn’t have a lot of time left, but the new wrinkle of Persi made things more complicated. All of the gods they needed were right here; if she could figure out how to get them all out of there, their total quest would be over and she and Daniel could finally focus on the siege on heaven.

Of course, a detoxing sun god and a zealous sea god who was in love with a tentacled monster (who happened to be a trapped goddess) didn't seem like easy sheep to herd.

"She's so beautiful, no?" Ishmael said.

"Oh, yes," Kate said, thinking fast. "Do you swim with her?"

Ishmael looked sad. "No, they don't permit me to. I can't get into the water this deep."

"Hey, wait," Daniel said. "You can't swim this deep? Aren't you the god of the sea?"

Ishmael stuck his chin out, defiant. "I am. You have no right to challenge me. We all have our limitations, even as gods."

"Not really when it concerns our area of expertise. Is there clockwork too deep for Fabrique to swim in?" Daniel asked.

The goddess looked at him, her eyebrows raised. "I'd never considered swimming in clockwork. I expect it would be too pointy."

Daniel waved his hand at her impatiently. "You know what I mean. When it comes to clockwork, you're the master. I have a hard time believing that there's water that a fish can conquer but the god of the sea can't. What's going on here?"

Ignoring Persi's groans and growls momentarily, Daniel walked up to get a closer look at the green man, who glared at him. Daniel reached out with his left hand and nearly touched Ishmael's necklace. He pulled his hand back quickly and growled deep in his throat. Kate took his arm and tugged on it.

"What's up, Daniel?" she asked.

"He can't swim because he's wearing one of those necklaces. They're controlling him."

Ishmael snorted. "Preposterous. I have worn this my whole existence."

"Uh huh," Kate said. "And how many times have you gone swimming?"

Daniel hesitated to reach out again, and Kate realized he was remembering his time in the cage as a coyote. She reached past him and grabbed the necklace, whipping it over Ishmael's head.

In the chaos that followed, Kate had trouble following the events. The first thing that happened was Ishmael seemed to explode in a torrent of water. Kate was blown



backward into Daniel and they both hit the cave wall. She scrambled to her feet, wiping her sopping hair out of her face to see Ishmael disappear into the pool and dive deep.

Barris screamed as he frantically batted at his arms to sluice off the water that hit him. If he'd drowned, he'd automatically be afraid of the water, but the movements were crazed, his eyes wide.

Persi bellowed and lashed out a tentacle grabbing wildly. Kate ducked, not realizing that put Daniel in her reach. The tentacle wrapped around him and he shrieked, lifted high into the air.

"Gamma!" yelled Kate, running forward. Sadly, it turned out that the warrior goddess was gone. Kate blinked in confusion, realizing that something had to have called her. And the only thing that could have called her would have been Alicia needing her back on the *Sheridan*.

"Shit." Kate said.

Burns was scrabbling with an idea, and as he opened it, Barris let out a howl. This one was not of panic or fear, but of insane longing. *Oh, right; great idea to bring cocaine to a narcotics anonymous meeting*, Kate thought as she watched Barris lunge for Burns.

"Chain the Queen; chain the Quee —" Burns managed to get out before the puny sun god tackled him, taking him down hard. Barris sat on the taller man, rifling through his clothes, grabbing at the ideas.

Fabrique ignored all of this and continued rummaging through her bag.

Kate figured the first thing to do would be to stop the rampaging leviathan. Burns seemed to have the right idea, but she had no chain. She looked around and then realized she still held the necklace she'd torn from Ishmael's neck. She could feel it sapping her energy and would have liked to drop it, but instead she threw it at Persi, who was hammering Daniel against the roof of the cave as he swore loudly.

The necklace settled around one of Persi's flailing tentacles, and the power-dampening effects were instantaneous. Instead of holding the shape-shifted form, she fell to the edge of the pool, a young girl swathed in seaweed, lying unconscious.

Daniel fell into an undignified heap and Kate rushed to his side. "I'm fine," he mumbled, the blood streaming from a cut on his brow already slowing. "What the hell happened?"

“I think we’ll have to figure that out later. There’s still a lot of shit going on. You handle Persi; I’ll take care of Barris.”

Daniel looked at the unconscious girl, her wet dreadlocks covering her face. He sighed. “I think I can take her.”

Kate ran over to Barris and Burns. Barris had ripped Burns’s coat off and the discarded ideas lay around him like used crack vials. He was giggling as he took his final prize, the blue vial, and uncorked it.

“Don’t let him,” Burns croaked, doubled up in pain. Barris was smaller, but junkies could apparently pack quite a punch when jonesing. “We can still —”

He stopped when Barris upended the idea addiction antidote to his mouth. The sun god sucked greedily at the contents of the bottle and then his eyes went vacant. His pupils dilated and he toppled over, still staring at the cave ceiling.

“Kate’s wrinkled nipples,” Burns said, sitting up and holding his head. Kate cocked an eyebrow at him. He looked down. “Sorry. Habit.”

She shrugged. “No problem.” She helped the old man to his feet, her touch healing his injuries as he stood.

Daniel picked up Persi — she didn’t look older than fifteen — and placed her beside Barris. “I don’t think we should call this one a win, Kate,” he said. “Two gods lost, two out of commission.”

Kate shook her head. “I don’t understand what happened.”

“It’s obvious,” Fabrique said, assembling her brass doorway. “He had never experienced power before. He was a sea god feeling his true power for the first time. He became rather drunk on it.”

“And the kid?” Daniel asked, pointing at Persi.

“Her power was keeping her trapped in the leviathan form. The necklace stopped that.”

“Huh.”

“And Gamma was clearly called back to the *Sheridan*,” Fabrique added, snapping the final corner onto the doorway.

“Right, I figured that.” Kate went to the edge of the pool and looked in. She was splashed with water again as Ishmael leaped out, exultant.

“The power! The thrill!” he said, grinning broadly at them. “Have you felt such glory?”

“Yeah. Every day,” Daniel said flatly. “I’m guessing this is your first time?”

“I always knew what I was, but I never knew what it felt like! This is glorious! It’s amazing! It’s —”

“Divine?” Daniel asked.

“Exactly!” Ishmael finally looked around the cave. “What happened here?”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Fabrique, can that door thingy take us back to The *Sheridan*?”

The goddess fixed goggles over her eyes and grinned. “Anywhere.”

“Then we’d better see what’s going on up there.”

Daniel picked up Persi and Kate lifted Barris’s slight form over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry. Fabrique turned on the doorway and it shimmered. Kate saw the form of the *Sheridan* wavering in front of them, and Fabrique walked through confidently.

Kate gave a glance at Daniel, who shrugged. “Can’t be any weirder than anything else we’ve done today.”

She looked at the grinning sea god and Professor Burns, who was picking up his tattered coat and tutting at it.

“Come on, Ishmael. We’re going to take you somewhere where you can learn all about your divinity. You hold onto Daniel, and Burns, you hold onto me. We’re not sure how this thing works,” she said.

With that the six of them entered the portal. There was a worrisome twanging sound.

And then they emerged far from the deck of the *Sheridan*.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The moment the sun went down, Morrigan made her move. She flew, unnoticed, over Prosper's bent head and landed lightly on the deck of the *Sheridan*. She opened the locked door to the captain's quarters, delighted to realize that no door holds back death.

The great urn that held Sam was rocking slightly as he struggled within. She passed her hand over it and it shattered, dumping the big man onto the floor.

He spasmed once, twice, trying to stifle groans as his limbs cramped with their new freedom of movement. He smelled of urine and anxiety. The cramps passed and he looked up, finally, at the glowing, masked goddess who stood over him.

"I renounce Ishmael and all others," he whispered. "You are my goddess, the only goddess. For all days."

Morrigan smiled behind her mask, feeling her burn scars pull. "Very good. Let me tell you of your first task."

He listened to her, his wide blue eyes reflecting her glow and his fanaticism. She gave him instructions and a long, wicked knife made of bone.

Morrigan decided that all of her priests would carry them.

Her instructions given, she turned back into the white crow and perched on Sam's shoulder.

"Anything for my goddess," he muttered, testing the edge of the blade with his thumb and sucking the blood from the fresh cut. "My life for her."

Morrigan nodded to herself. That would come, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

James paced below the deck, sick of taking care of his younger siblings who squabbled and shrieked as they played. He'd been chosen as the guide for a god, now he was a babysitter.

He kicked the door. His sister, Ursula, looked up at him. She was eight and saw the distance in their ages as a mere hurdle that separated otherwise equals. “What’s your problem, James?”

James cast a sullen eye at their siblings. Ursula’s twin, Samuel, and the toddler Kelly were swinging and laughing in a hammock. He thought about complaining but realized another argument might work better.

“I don’t know why I have to look after you guys when you’re just as good at watching Kelly as I am. And you definitely don’t need watching.”

He congratulated himself on being such a good negotiator, but he slumped in dismay as Ursula glared at him. “If I’m old enough to watch Kelly, I’m old enough to do whatever you’re doing. Let’s leave Samuel here to baby-sit; I’m coming with you.”

James muttered a curse he’d heard Sarah say once when their mother wasn’t listening. “If you go, Samuel will want to, as well.”

She snorted. “No, he just wants to play with Kelly. The more time he spends on deck, the more chances Mother has to find out he’s afraid of heights.”

James blinked. His brother hid this fear well. He sighed and nodded to Ursula; going out with her would be better than not going out at all. “OK, then; let’s go.”

“But where?” Ursula asked.

James shrugged. “Don’t know. Just anywhere that’s not here.”

They left Samuel and Kelly playing on the hammock and closed the door behind them. James held his finger to his lips, knowing his sister probably couldn’t see him in the dark hallway, but he crept up the ladder to the deck.

The kids weren’t usually allowed on the deck at night. If they were just docked, then sure, the family often spent time in the open air, but when on a mission the adults didn’t want to worry about the kids falling over the side in the dark.

*Which was ridiculous*, James reasoned. He’d grown up on the deck of an airship; why would someone think he’d be in danger at night?

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Sheridan*’s deck was dark, with one lantern lit at the helm where Sarah and Alicia watched the ghostly flickering lights coming from the deeply submerged

Leviathan City. Their backs were to him as Sam slipped out of the Captain's quarters and onto the deck.

The goddess left his shoulder and flew to perch on a cable. She watched him with glossy eyes.

He gratefully breathed in air that did not smell of his own stench and stretched his still-stiff muscles. The moon whispered to him, telling him what he needed to find, what he needed to do, and he adjusted his grip on the wicked knife.

The two women were not his target. Nor was the sullen, divine presence lurking at the rear deck. He frowned. Below deck, then?

The door behind him opened, and he jumped to the side, crouching, hoping the dark would mask him. Two small shapes crept out quietly.

"Gosh, it's dark!" one said.

"Well, sure," said the other, "It's nighttime, and they don't need to light the whole deck." The crow's talons tightened on his shoulder. He winced as one of them penetrated his flesh and blood dotted his filthy shirt.

*Understood, goddess,* he thought.

He gripped the knife tighter and stepped forward carefully. The children still had not seen him. They stood huddled, discussing their disobedience and what they realized were now limited options in their newly acquired freedom. The smooth back of the boy's neck seemed specifically lit by the holy light of the moon, and Sam took that as a specific target. He raised his knife.

\* \* \* \* \*

Prosper had filled his pot with foul-smelling moss mainly to annoy the other gods who conscripted him into this service, but also for its soporific qualities. Once it reached maturity — normally taking three or four years, but with his influence only minutes — the gas it emitted would serve as a drug to the humans. He could take the ship easily once they were asleep.

He knew he could easily win any fights with mere humans, but he'd seen that bitch Gamma, that lapdog, give the captain a knife with which to call her. He didn't know how

fast she could get to that before he took her down. He wouldn't be able to fight the other gods.

Prosper watched the deck, listening in on Alicia and Sarah's pointless conversation, vaguely aware of the children's movement below deck. When the man Sam came out of the Captain's quarters, he finally sat up, interested. This was new.

When the children came onto deck, and Sam raised his knife at them, that's when Prosper decided it would get really interesting. Perhaps the death of the boy would convince Alicia to take him back to Meridian, where he could return to his temple and figure out what to do next; where he should sow himself to create more children.

Sadly, the takeover of the ship wouldn't be that easy. The man made the mistake of shouting something unintelligible as he stepped forward, and the girl screamed, pulling her brother away. The knife whiffed through the air and Sam swore.

The children scrambled away, screaming for their mother, but in their panic moving instead toward Prosper. He concentrated on the pot of moss, and as the children neared, taking in great, panicked breaths, they slowed and looked around, confused. Prosper sent some tendrils of vines from his body — so difficult to do now, without the proper seeding — and wrapped them around the children's waists to keep them in place. They struggled briefly, crying out again, but the gas from the moss continued to sap their energy, and they slumped at last.

The gas, unfortunately, affected the would-be assassin, who ran after the children and into the dangerous circle of Prosper's power. Prosper thrust the children away from the gas and toward Sam, who recoiled as he realized what was happening.

"Do it," Prosper said. "Kill them."

Sam blinked and shook his head, but as he saw the unconscious boy hanging in front of him as an offering, he raised his knife again.

Before he could lower it to sever the boy's spinal cord, though, a loud BOOM sounded behind him and he was driven forward into James. He tumbled over the boy and rolled until he slammed into Prosper.

A frozen chicken skidded across the deck and over the side. Sarah stood beyond Prosper's gaseous cloud, her face set in concentration, now aiming the gun directly at Prosper's chest.

A little behind her, Alicia was removing the knife from her boot.

*I should have interfered earlier*, Prosper thought, and slowly got to his feet, drawing the children closer to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gamma didn't like leaving the cave with the others; she knew she'd be needed soon. But she had been bound to Alicia's knife, and so when called, she was forced to go.

*At least it may be something interesting, better than this diplomacy ridiculousness*, she thought. How she had itched to snap the necks of each of those bigoted guards, worshippers or not. They held gods captive, and therefore Gamma didn't think much of them.

She poured from the knife and expected to see Sam there, broken out, maybe harassing the captain. She'd slice him in half and be done with it, able to return to Leviathan City to help the others.

She was bemused to see a very different scene before her.

Sam writhed slowly at Prosper's feet, clutching his lower back. He took a deep, shuddering breath and passed out. Sarah, the warrior, was aiming her chicken gun at Prosper, who held two unconscious children in his tendrils. Alicia looked on with panic, arming herself with the knife she'd used to call Gamma.

"Don't be stupid," Gamma said. "You can't fight a god. I, however, can."

She felt the tension from weeks of using diplomacy instead of force snap inside her, and she grinned wildly and launched herself at the harvest god, whose golden eyes widened at her assault.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alicia sheathed the knife and ran forward, sliding it into Sarah's boot. "Watch that man; stay out of the gods' way," she said. "I'm going in for the children."

The gas surrounding Prosper looked like silver fog in the moonlight, and Sarah put a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Wait. You can't breathe that stuff. Can you smell it?"



Alicia took a breath and could taste the sickly sweetness on the air, a smell that enticed her to move forward and investigate its source. It tickled her brain and suggested that lying down for a quick nap really was the best idea of the evening.

She let Sarah pull her a few steps back, the gun still trained on Sam. But he wasn't moving; either Sarah had done enough damage to his back, possibly broken it, or the gas had put him down. Regardless, it didn't look as if he was a threat anymore.

But Prosper definitely was a threat. As Gamma charged forward for him, legs pumping like pistons, he lifted the children and held them over the side of the ship. Alicia screamed and ran forward, bumping into Sarah and causing her to discharge the chicken gun. Sarah's frozen chicken hit Prosper in the chest, so he didn't so much as drop the children as get pushed over the side with them just as Gamma reached him. Her momentum carried her over with him, and the four were gone, the children's screams cutting through the night.

Alicia reached the railing and screamed incomprehensibly after them, sobbing and retching. After a moment, she had inhaled enough of the gas that she slumped over, asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gamma did not like having to change her focus. But she was in this battle to save the children. As they fell through the sky, she grabbed knives from her sleeve and sliced through Prosper's vines. He bellowed and sent more vines at her, but she sliced through them as well and reached out to grab the children.

Her hand closed around Ursula's arm, but something flew past her, something white and huge, wrapping around James and forcing him toward the water even faster.

Gamma had only a moment to decide, and with regret, she tightened her grip on Ursula and focused on Alicia's knife, now, she realized, in Sarah's possession.

She appeared on the deck of the *Sheridan*, holding the hysterical child, and handed her to her shocked sister.

She hugged her sister tightly and then said, "James?"

Gamma pursed her lips. "I couldn't get him. I'm not sure what happened. Something interfered. I'm going back down."

She ran to the railing and vaulted over it, diving this time to catch up to the others, who had just hit the water with a massive splash.

*The boy could not have survived that*, she thought with regret, but continued her descent with determination. Prosper would pay.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were rules one followed; everyone knew there were rules. For the death goddess to outright kill her intended, that was crass; that was crude; that had no grace. But for her to arrange his death? That was something.

That bitch Gamma had almost interfered, but Morrigan followed the falling group in the form of a diving crow, and she hit the boy as Gamma tried to grab him. He screamed and grabbed at her soft feathers, but she then flew off and waited for him to land in his watery grave.

So attuned to him she was, she could hear each bone as it snapped when the boy hit the water at terminal velocity. He died instantly, his body causing a great plume of water to splash to almost her height. Prosper and Gamma followed very shortly after. When the water stilled again, he was gone, floating down to the depths of the ocean. She didn't see the other two gods.

She circled the water where they had fallen. As the sea started to churn under her, she caught sight of the small wisp exiting the water and floating vaguely south.

She dove again, wrapping her talons around it. Secure in her grasp, the soul fluttered passively as she flew south.

*Mine.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel looked around at the charred remains of the city. As he had been carrying a blinded boy out of the city of Dauphine when Kate had razed it, he hadn't seen the extent of the destruction. He whistled long and low.

She was very still at his side. "Why are we here?"

Daniel shrugged, adjusting the slight weight of the unconscious goddess on his shoulder. "No idea. Is Fabrique here?"

Professor Burns came to Kate's side. "Regardless of where we are, we seem to be safe, and I need to see the sun god. Please put him down."

Kate gently lowered Barris to the ashy street. His eyes were wide and glazed, and a thin line of drool ran down his chin.

"Shit," Kate said.

Burns nodded. "I'm afraid we're too late. I didn't think he would survive the antidote, but one can always hope."

Daniel felt a cold finger slide down his spine. "Will the sun rise tomorrow?"

Kate shrugged from where she kneeled by Barris. "If the sun were to go out, we'd start to freeze in eight minutes. Not to mention what losing the gravitational pull would do to us. Has it been eight minutes since he drank that stuff?"

Daniel shrugged. "Fabrique would know. Why isn't she here?"

Ishmael was in front of them, looking at the ruins with distaste. "Why did you bring me here? This is far from the sea!"

"We didn't mean to; we thought we were headed somewhere else. Something went wrong," Kate said through gritted teeth. Daniel looked at her sympathetically. The bubbly sea god was a lot to take when you were trying to think your way out of a problem.

Ishmael cocked his head, dog-like, and looked down at Barris, who wore the necklace he had recently been freed from.

"Well, if those necklaces stifle our power, then wouldn't they mess with a gadget made by Fabrique?" he asked.

Kate's mouth hung open and she stared at Ishmael, then Daniel. Daniel did the quick math — each of the six of them had been in contact with the blue necklaces, or with someone in contact with them, as they went through. Fabrique had gone through alone, and it had looked as if she had gone through to the *Sheridan*.

"Fuck a duck," he muttered. "That shit messes us up every time we touch it."

He reached down in disgust to grab Barris's necklace, but a shout from Ishmael made him stop. They all stood as a glowing white bird spiraled down from a soot-encrusted steeple.

"That's not an ordinary crow," Kate said, her voice strained.

Daniel put Persi gently down next to Barris. "What do you think it is?"

“I ... don’t know.”

He put his arm around Kate. “Then why are you so damn scared?”

She shoved him off. “I’m not scared.”

He stepped away, annoyed. “Could have fooled me.”

The crow landed atop a standing wall of a burned-out house. It cocked its head and looked at Kate and Daniel, hopping a little on its right foot to keep its balance as it clutched something diaphanous in its left.

“Oh no. No,” Kate said, taking a step back.

“What’s wrong?” Daniel asked, but the crow hopped from the roof then, its unnaturally large body morphing and twisting, stretching and darkening to form the shape of a diminutive person about five feet tall clad in a cloak of hair. A thin, wrinkled, blackened hand slipped the diaphanous thing inside her cloak.

The person clutched a scythe that glowed, its white blade winking, and wore a helmet or full mask. Daniel glanced back at Kate, who had gone white.

The person’s head cocked. Clearly, he or she could see Kate and Daniel.

She spoke — the voice proving quickly to be female — and all the hairs on Daniel’s neck stood up. “Kate and Daniel. My, my, how lucky for me.”

Ishmael frowned, counting on his hands. “I have known all my fellow gods upon sight. This one I don’t recognize. That’s odd, don’t you think?”

“There’s a lot about this that’s odd,” Daniel said. “You know us, madam, but we don’t know you, I’m sorry to say.”

She chuckled and took a step forward. Kate took another step backward. Daniel glanced at her, surprised to see such bald fear on her face.

“I was the face of the night, imprisoned by the first two gods, held on an airship. I waxed; I waned; I loved he whose power I reflected.” She jabbed the butt end of her weapon at Barris’s catatonic form.

“Cotton,” Daniel whispered, nodding.

She shook her head sharply. “Not anymore. I was imprisoned —”

“— in Dauphine,” Kate said, her hand covering her mouth.

The mask nodded. “Oh, yes, and when the holy fire came from the sky to cleanse the city, I was unable to escape my prison. I burned with the city. But I am a goddess and cannot die, so I transformed.”

“Did you ever wonder why we had no death god or goddess here? I wondered if it simply was that the underworld was waiting for me. I still control the moon, but Cotton is dead. I am Morrigan, goddess of death. I am Morrigan, goddess shaped by the Lady Kate’s wrath.”

She removed her mask and faced them, her blackened, wrinkled, burned skin stretched across her face, eyes sunken to black holes, nose gone. The lipless mouth grinned at them, and Professor Burns swore quietly behind them.

Ishmael gaped at her. “Put that back on, woman! You’ll scare the children!” he said. “Although I guess all the children are dead, and therefore have already seen you. Still, goodness, don’t you have any divine power to heal that?”

Daniel wanted to punch him for his inconsiderate innocence, but Morrigan, surprisingly, returned the mask to hide the hell that was her ruined face.

“My power holds the moon in the sky, it opens the underworld for people, and it haunts the dreams of those who carelessly destroy others without thinking of consequences.” The mask turned to face Kate again, who still stared at her.

The woman’s robe — *was it made of hair?* — twitched, and she pulled it aside. What emerged made Daniel want to vomit. A ghostly body stepped from under her robe, glowing slightly: a white, translucent version of James, his friend and Alicia’s son.

“My existence is not all pain and fear, though,” Morrigan said, stroking the boy’s head as he stared at her, unafraid. “Now that I have him, I am no longer alone.”

“No,” Daniel said, taking a step forward. “You bitch, you can’t have him. What did you do, kill him?”

“Of course not, there are rules, after all,” Morrigan said. “He died during a struggle between Prosper and Gamma. He fell overboard. He’s dead, and mine now.”

“No,” Daniel said again, but Morrigan raised her weapon between them.

“The one and only time I attacked someone with this, I shredded his soul. I don’t know what it will do to gods. Want to find out? I think I owe Kate a bit of chaos and pain.”

She stepped forward, and Daniel retreated to Kate’s side.

“Now’s the time you should grab that sword of yours,” he said to Kate, cursing himself for leaving his sword — the katana that had previously belonged to goddess Izanami — on the *Sheridan*.

He glanced at her. She was staring up at the moon, her mouth slightly open. He shook her shoulder. "Kate. Vengeful death god threatening us. Need to move here."

She pointed upward at the moon, and Daniel finally followed her glance. Suddenly, for the first time ever, he could see the dark halo around it, indicating the size the moon had once been before Morrigan took some of its power for her own. The void that remained was leaking; darkness oozed from the moon, slowly blotting out the stars.

Kate's eyes were wide as she stared at the sky. "Chaos," she whispered. A tear spilled down her cheek.

The scream of the wind sounded north of Dauphine, and Professor Burns spoke up from beside the catatonic gods. "Improbability storm!"

Morrigan turned her mask toward the approaching storm. "He comes; it's nearly time."

"I hate it when I don't know what's going on," Daniel said, pulling Kate away. "Ishmael, get Persi; I'll get Barris, and then we need to get the fuck out of here."

Morrigan lunged then, slicing the air between her and Kate, who still looked shell-shocked. Kate raised her hand automatically, without even focusing on Morrigan, and batted the blade down to bury itself into the swirling ashes at their feet.

The apparition that had once been James pulled at Morrigan's robe, his eyes fearful. Daniel could see his mouth moving, but he couldn't hear the talk of the dead. Morrigan looked at them once more, then split the air with her weapon and entered the underworld, the seam closing up behind her.

They were alone. Kate's shoulders slumped, but Daniel wouldn't let her fall.

"Do not fucking fall apart on me now. It's not fair, Kate. Shit's going down. I need you. We need to get these guys to safety. Think, Kate!"

"Persi and Barris need their necklaces removed," she said, staring at her hand, where a thin cut bled freely.

"Right!" Daniel said. "Then we can give them to Burns, and he'll be protected. Great thinking." He remembered how the chaos energy had protected them from the improbability storm, but it did more harm by dampening their own power.

"Draining away," she murmured.

“Ishmael, you are in charge of Persi. Carry her. Remove the necklace only if you have to, to keep her safe. You’re the only one who has a chance of controlling her if she goes all Cthulhu on us.”

“What is ‘Cthulhu’?” Ishmael said.

“Tentacles! Scary! Big! There’s no time for explanations; move!” Daniel said.

He knelt by Barris and felt a brief stab of pain as he realized the god really and truly was gone. He’d obliterated his own mind with Burns’s concentrated idea gunk. Poor bastard. He looked up briefly at the billowing clouds shining with a cold light: the improbability storm, seemingly targeting them. Wind pulled at his hair and he grimaced, knowing they couldn’t outrun the storm. He didn’t know how much he could do with two catatonic gods, an ineffective girlfriend, and one human.

“I don’t know how we’re going to get out of this one, Kate,” he whispered to himself, knowing she wouldn’t respond if he said it loud enough for her to hear.

*Oh, beloved, we will find a way. We always do,* came her voice in his head.

He looked up in surprise and saw that she had stood and was carefully ripping the fluttering hem of her robe to wrap around her bleeding hand. The cut had looked pretty deep, and dark blood stained the moonlit street.

“I think we should find shelter,” she said. “One of these buildings is better than nothing.”

Daniel’s relief was cool and refreshing, and with renewed strength he reached out and grabbed Barris’s necklace, pulling it off and tossing it to Professor Burns.

Barris disappeared and Daniel fell back, swearing at the burst of heat that engulfed him, but didn’t harm him. He blinked at looked up at the suddenly familiar fiery angel standing before them.

The man shook his head and looked around, taking in his surroundings and companions. He looked at the improbability storm, nearly upon them, and then raised his hands above his head. He grew, then, increasing mass and height till he was as tall as a house. He reached down, gathered them all in his burning arms, and lurched into the sky, flying straight up.

Below them, the ruined city of Dauphine crumbled under the weight of Chaos.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kate barely registered her surroundings as the angel grabbed her and the others and flew off. The only thing she could see was the chaos around her, and how stupid they'd been this whole time.

Daniel was yelling in alarm, Ishmael was shouting questions over the din of the storm, and Persi remained asleep. Professor Burns clutched the necklace, eyeing the flames that went out as they touched him.

As they flew over the clouds, northeast, Kate closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax. She refused to beat herself up by what she didn't know. The issue of Morrigan was directly her fault and she didn't know how to make that right. But she would come up with something. For now, she was just so tired.

The angel deposited them on a hilltop, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry," he said. "I would have gone farther but Professor Burns's necklace is draining me too much."

Burns stepped away quickly once he was put down. He stared at the angel with wide eyes. "I know you. I've seen you at night."

"We all have," Daniel said grimly, folding his arms.

"I haven't!" said Ishmael. "But where did Barris go?"

"You're Barris, aren't you?" asked Kate.

The angel nodded.

"But —" Daniel started, but Barris interrupted him.

"I am where the sun's power goes after it goes down. When the sun comes back up, I have to give the power back."

"Why did you never tell us this?" Daniel asked.

"Part of what I give up at night is the memory of who I am," Barris said, frowning. "I try to remember every time, maybe thinking I'll live my life differently if I know what awaits me at night. But I don't. As for why I never introduced myself to you as I am now, I wasn't ready. I wanted my freedom."

Kate waved her arms in frustration. “Why do people keep saying stuff like that? We didn’t imprison you in the first place, and we’re not imprisoning people now!”

“Prosper didn’t come with us of his free will,” Daniel said.

Kate whirled on him. “Et tu, Daniel?”

He put his hands up, palms out, placating her. “Hey, I believe in what we’re doing. But we are searching for the gods to help us fight a war, are we not?”

Kate hung her head. He was right. She’d been raising an army with no consideration on whether the gods would agree to fight. She glanced back up at Barris.

“So you know what you’re like during the day?” Kate asked.

Barris nodded. “I am fairly sure, yes. I am addicted to ideas and not worth much of anything.”

Daniel shared a stricken look with Kate. “Actually, you’re worse off than that. You kinda OD’d on ideas and ended up catatonic. We thought you were gone for good.”

Barris frowned and looked down, his blonde hair hanging into his face. “When I search within myself for the person I am during the day, he is gone.”

He shrugged briefly and smiled. “At least my nighttime form is still functioning.”

“As long as you don’t have one of those goddamned necklaces,” Daniel said, glaring at the hated jewelry in Burns’s hand. “I wish we knew what that was made of.”

Kate looked up at the moon again. The seeping blackness had slowed, probably because the improbability storm had eased up its attack on Dauphine.

“I know what it’s made of,” she said, looking south, watching the final colorful assault on Dauphine.

“What? How did you figure that out?” Daniel asked.

Kate closed her eyes and accessed the divine knowledge gifted from the gods she had met during their journeys. “You said it yourself. Chaos. Not the word, but the deity. Chaos was around before the universe, before the gods. It was first. Then the Universe came, and Order, and Chaos got chained. It stayed there just fine until the world ended. But when the metaphysical earth went away, it found an escape hatch. It wants power again, but it also wants to punish those who chained it.”

“So that’s the siege on heaven,” Daniel said.

Kate nodded. “It exiled us and keeps us here by infecting the Wasteland between us and heaven. It sends improbability storms at us. It somehow convinced the tinkers

here to impose order on it to use its energy. When Morrigan stole part of the moon, it had more room to seep directly into the world.”

She shook her head, holding her forehead. “It’s like it was right there in front of us the whole fucking time. I have no idea how we missed it.”

Daniel sat on the dry grass, sighing loudly, looking as tired as she felt. “We’re not omnipotent or omniscient. Aren’t we supposed to be?”

Kate shrugged. “We never have been before.”

“God. Poor James,” Daniel whispered.

Kate nodded. “Poor James, poor Alicia, poor Morrigan. All those poor bastards who got screwed for being part of our little crew, or just being touched by us.”

“We’re not very good at this, are we?” Daniel asked.

Burns blurted out a shocked noise, reminding Kate they weren’t alone. “How can you say that? You created us all! The whole world!”

Kate smiled sadly. “That was an accident.”

The professor frowned, but didn’t continue.

“So what now?” Daniel asked.

Kate thought of all the loose ends flailing around her. Alicia’s son, as Kate wondered if they could get him back from the underworld. Gamma and Prosper, wherever they were. Barris’s new form. Persi, the dinosaur goddess who had no control of her powers.

And heaven, the problem that she never let go far from her mind.

Ishmael folded his beefy arms in front of him. “I have a question,” he said softly. “Is what Morrigan said true? Did you kill Cotton?”

Kate looked him in the eye. “Cotton died when I destroyed the city, yes. I didn’t know she was there.”

He nodded slowly, and said nothing else.

“So?” Daniel said, his question still unanswered.

Kate rubbed her face. “We need to figure out what’s going on with everyone else. So I guess we need to get back to the *Sheridan*. Check on Alicia. See what’s going on between Prosper and Gamma. When we get all the gods we can together, we’ll figure out our next step.”

Daniel nodded. He looked at Barris. “Can you give us a lift back to the *Sheridan*?”

Barris looked at Burns and frowned. “I don’t know if I can get all the way there with him. The necklace, you see.”

“Fuck, if we never see that chaos stuff again it’ll be too soon for me,” Daniel said.

“I can carry him,” Kate said. “He won’t need it with me.”

Barris stretched to the sky again and grew, gathering Ishmael, Persi, and Daniel in his arms. They took off, climbing into the sky toward the moon, which now felt as if it watched them with a baleful eye.

She shook her head. “Lady?” Burns asked.

She smiled at him and willed her wings to spring from her back. “It’s very complicated; that’s all.”

Burns put his arm around her shoulder and she picked him up. “If I may offer an observation?” he asked as they followed the huge beacon that was Barris.

“Please,” Kate said.

Burns took a deep breath as if to steel himself. “You never did ask what the other gods wanted. You didn’t even ask if they wanted freedom. Prosper clearly did not. Ishmael did not, but is benefiting from it. Instead of freedom, you’ve chained Persi. The only gods happy with your interference are Gamma and Fabrique.”

“And I’ve never even asked them if they’re happy,” Kate admitted. “You’re right.”

“Before you fight your war, you have to make sure your soldiers are on your side,” Burns said.

She didn’t answer, but flew after Barris to reach the *Sheridan*, to confirm to Alicia that her son was dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel found Sarah sitting on the deck of the *Sheridan*, slumped and weeping. She cradled Ursula in her lap, who clung to her with white knuckles. Alicia and Samuel — Samuel? — lay unconscious in a thick cloud near the railing. She looked blearily up at the new arrivals and then back down at the deck. Fabrique, Gamma, and Prosper were nowhere to be seen.

His throat closed up when he thought about telling her the news, but he figured she already knew.

“What happened?” he finally managed to say.

Sarah sniffled and sighed. She told him, saying she only saw Prosper holding her siblings up for an unknown man to kill them with a knife. Her mother called Gamma, she readied the chicken gun, and the battle began.

“Is Alicia all right?” he asked.

Sarah shrugged. “I don’t know what that gas does to people. And I can’t go get her; I get sleepy if I get too close, even if I hold my breath.”

Barris walked into the cloud and picked up the unconscious woman. He pointed to Sam. “What about that one?”

Daniel felt bile rise in his mouth. “He caused all this. He’s a waste of humanity. If he’s not already dead, toss him overboard, he’s fucking trash.”

Barris touched him briefly. “He’s dead.”

Daniel laughed bitterly. “Then he really is trash. Toss him.”

Barris picked Sam up without ceremony and dropped him over the side. The resulting splash was not as satisfying as Daniel had hoped.

“Get rid of the pot while you’re at it,” Kate said from his side.

“When did you get here?” he asked.

“Shortly after you. I heard everything. Where is everyone else?”

“Prosper and Gamma are still in the sea. I don’t know if they live or not,” Sarah said, staring at the deck.

“Fabrique?”

“She arrived, looked around, and then went below deck. I don’t know why.”

*Gods*, Kate thought. “Sarah, we’re very sorry for what happened here. We’re going to make sure your mom is all right and then get the hell out of here. Can we count on you to fly us back to Meridian?”

Daniel wanted to back down from the anger in the young woman’s eyes. But she didn’t challenge them; she just nodded.

Kate looked at Daniel. “We need to find Gamma, if not Prosper as well.”

“We could just call Gamma back,” Daniel suggested.

Kate looked over the side where the sea still churned below them. “I don’t think she’d appreciate that. We could—” She stopped when the water gradually stilled below them.

“So, what happened?” Daniel whispered, but Sarah made a startled noise behind them. She tossed the knife away from her boot, and Gamma flowed through the blade and appeared. She was soaked and gasping, scratches and cuts all along her arms and legs. Her leather clothes were ripped to shreds and she bled freely from a cut on her forehead.

“Shit,” Daniel said, and ran to her side to heal her.

She pushed him away. “These are war wounds. They’re a matter of pride, Daniel. Leave them.”

“Are you all right? What happened?” Kate asked.

“I beat him. I think,” she said, standing straighter. She looked from Persi to Barris to Kate and said, “And clearly I missed something.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gamma hadn't been too worried about underwater combat. She was a warrior, and she fought where she was needed. But she had very little combat experience, only learning what she could from her worshipers.

However, divine power did a lot to bridge the gap, and despite the grief and guilt over the boy's death, she still hit the water with a sense of gleeful anticipation as she swam after the flailing harvest god.

Prosper clearly was not at home in the water. He wasn't Barris, though, with the water as his antithesis. He was the god of the harvest, but also the god of kelp, algae, and even coral reefs. He paddled a moment and looked around, his golden eyes glowing in the black water.

Gamma didn't wait for him to get his bearings. She swam forward and grabbed him around the waist, squeezing him. He jolted in surprise. Thorny vines erupted from his skin, slicing into her as they wrapped around her arms, but she kept squeezing. Finally he pried her off and flung her from him. He swam further down toward the sea floor, a drop-off that formed a fifty-foot trench. The water below the drop-off was black and murky, not touched by the lights from Leviathan City or the full moon, and Prosper headed there.

Gamma's eyes were quite good in low-light situations, but she wasn't sure she could find him in complete darkness. She dashed after him, cutting through the water with all her strength.

Prosper was maybe ten feet into the trench, disappearing from view, when she hit him again. They slammed into the trench wall, Gamma forcing his head into the barnacle- and coral-encrusted rock.

He bellowed as the barnacles cut his face deeply, and deep green blood bloomed in the water. It was nearly black except for the tendrils that floated upward and waved gently in the water, not diluting itself in the sea, but gaining shape and mass.

*Algae*, she thought, amazed, which allowed Prosper to place his hand on the wall and push himself off, cutting his hands deeply and causing more algae to drift into the water.

She shook her head and realized the water was not the best place to have this battle. If algae could exist floating in the sea, rootless, then Prosper was much more powerful here than she was. She grabbed the vines that still sprouted from his shoulders and torso and hauled upward, fighting for the surface.

Prosper had just realized what the algae meant as well, apparently. He sent more vines out to tangle her feet and drag her back down. He swam up with renewed strength, seemingly becoming stronger with the more algae he bled, and wrapped her tightly in the thorny vines. They cut into her skin and she bled only blood, it washing away as quickly as she bled.

Prosper forced her downward to the barnacled trench, slamming her into it and forcing cuts all over her body. Her leather shirt protected her for the most part but her bare arms and face opened every time a sharp barnacle met her skin.

She allowed the pain to fuel her and twisted her body, causing Prosper to force his own vines between her and the barnacles; with two more slams into the wall Gamma swam away, free.

She swam a few feet away and surveyed Prosper. He seemed to be in a cloud of algae now as his body still leaked. She recalled what Kate had said his greatest wish was: to be newly imprisoned. She nodded to herself.

She swam downward with renewed energy, slamming into him again, and their bodies plummeted to the sea floor at the edge of the trench, a gentle plume of sand wafting from their landing. Prosper struggled, but Gamma's bet paid off as his bare skin touched the ocean floor rich with bio matter and his emaciated and hungry body shot out tendrils from his back to root deep into the sand.

She expected him to continue to fight, to turn his efforts to freeing himself, but his eyes rolled back in his head in a perverse mask of sexual pleasure. He let go of her entirely then, and she swam back to survey the changes.

A rumble shook the water around her as Prosper dug himself deeper and began to change. His wounds opened as if something dreadful had pried each one open to force out more blood, and algae bloomed in the water, nearly obscuring his body. The algae



expanded more, forming a cloud, and Gamma had a nasty feeling that Prosper had become something she could no longer fight. A questing vine moved toward her and she swam upward and away, biting her lip against the retreat, but knowing it wasn't a real fight she was leaving. A warrior doesn't leave a battle. She does leave a pointless fight against something that is no longer an opponent.

Gamma fixated on a weapon aboard the *Sheridan* and disappeared from the ocean.

\* \* \* \* \*

Prosper had never felt such power, such life. First he had rooted deep in the ocean, but that was simply for stability, for a foundation — not for sustenance. The food came from the very water around him, and the more he bled, the stronger he became. He willed his wounds open, his blood to stream out, his interior to become his exterior, his bones ...

*By the three original gods, his bones. The calcium dissolved; there was no pain, only ecstasy as they turned from hard bones to delicate coral polyps, the algae streaming inside, outside, adding life to the already god-infused living sea wall. Prosper felt the earth itself in all its confused glory, the sea in its constant movement. So much stronger than air; so much less frightening than fire.*

This was where he belonged. This was safe. This was home.

Prosper's coral reef grew exponentially under the waves as the sea floor quaked.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm going to check it out," Daniel said.

"No, Daniel —" Kate said.

"We have to know," Daniel said. "He killed James; he could be down there doing god knows what."

Kate smiled. "True. We don't know. Just promise me you won't get into anything. Go down and look and come back. OK?"

Daniel nodded, kissed her briefly, and dove over the rail of the airship.

Daniel marveled at how his slight fear of heights still managed to hang on even though he was a deity. But he had to know — for James — so he dove off the zeppelin at the end of Gamma's story, needing to see the facts for himself.

He hit the water with a tidy splash and swam deep into the dark. He spotted the trench Gamma had mentioned and the massive reef beyond it. His eyes widened; it was bigger than a two-story house and clearly still growing, the coral blooming and reaching higher, algae wafting off the polyps and the marine life swimming close to inspect the new reef as it expanded. Near the top, two golden eyes gleamed, crusted lightly with calcium.

He shook his head slowly and then returned to the ship, willing himself dry as he flew back.

The humans had gone. Daniel guessed they were below deck, dealing with their shocks of the day. Alicia's weeping was audible.

"So, what happened?" Kate asked.

Daniel paused. "I think he's gotten what he's always wanted. He's turned into a coral reef."

Kate shook her head, and then pressed the heels of her hands against her forehead. "I can't believe this."

"I don't think he's going to bother us anymore," Daniel said. "He's turned into a huge immobile plant-animal thing. I'm not even sure I know what coral is."

"Well, now it's a huge harvest god, apparently," said Kate. "Gamma, are you all right?"

The goddess nodded stoically.

The door to below deck opened and Fabrique emerged. "I had to check on the engine. Apparently there's been excitement? Where did you go?"

Kate swallowed and told them about their unexpected detour, meeting Morrigan, and her realization that Chaos was behind the improbability storms.

"Wait," Ishmael said. "You left something out."

Kate looked at Fabrique and then Gamma. "I learned, to my great shame and horror that the goddess Morrigan came to be because I burned Dauphine to the ground, which killed Cotton the moon goddess and created Morrigan the death goddess. Many of you have blamed Daniel and me for your imprisonment, and I've denied it. Now I think

Chaos had a hand in making the world with us, creating the Dark, the improbability storms, and imprisoning the world's gods."

She took a deep breath. "But Morrigan blames me for her death. And she's right. And I'm probably to blame for James's death, since I forced Prosper here against his will. I screwed up."

The other gods didn't speak. Barris frowned, his sympathetic eyes showing pity. Ishmael looked rapidly at the faces of the other gods as if for guidance. Gamma folded her arms over her chest and stared with stony features.

It was Fabrique that surprised them all by striding forward, her curls bouncing, and reaching up to smack Kate in the face.

"We followed you because we didn't know anything else to do," she said, her fierce actions in sharp contrast to her calm voice. "But you used us and acted with no thought to consequences."

Daniel put his hand on Kate's shoulder, squeezing her as she turned her head to look at Fabrique. "You're right."

Fabrique looked at the other gods. "I think we need some time alone to discuss things. We can talk until daybreak when Barris will leave us. Meet us in Lathe, in the House of Mysteries. Then we'll decide our next step."

Kate nodded, then glanced at Daniel. "We should go."

They walked to the railing and looked at the descending moon as the zeppelin's modified engines purred to life.

"What are we going to do now?" Daniel asked.

"You have to see if you can get James back," Kate said, not looking at him.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "There are very few stories that say that heading into the Underworld for a soul is a good idea."

"We need to make things right. I don't want to be the person who just goes around breaking worlds. I want to get the hang of this, Daniel."

He felt a bit of his old resentment returning. "Then why don't you go?"

Kate faced him, and he saw with shock that she was holding back tears. "Because she hates me. With good reason. You have to be the one to do this."

He nodded, disliking the fact but admitting the logic was sound. "What will you do?"

“I have no idea,” Kate said.

Daniel grinned suddenly. “I know where you can get one.”

The stepped off the zeppelin together, Daniel flying south to Dauphine, Kate heading east to Lathe.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*Didn't work out for Orpheus, thought Daniel bitterly. Didn't work out for Izanagi. You go to the Underworld uninvited, you're in for a world of hurt.*

But Orpheus had gone to beg for his wife's life and screwed up when he turned around to make sure she was there, and Hades had told him not to. Izanagi had found his wife, the goddess Izanami who had died in childbirth, but she begged him not to look at her. He did, saw the rotting corpse with the maggots and beetles, and was horrified, and she chased him back to the world. These guys couldn't follow directions.

He had retrieved his katana, a gift from Izanami herself, and flown to Dauphine. When they had had visited earlier, it was creepy and dead. Now, alone, he felt the utter gloom and foreboding. He looked around at the burned corpses of the buildings, of his and Kate's own temples, and realized Kate might be right in that they were fucking up this whole god thing.

He went to the spot where he'd seen Morrigan disappear. When moving from purgatory to hell, he'd had the instinct to just split the air with his katana to move between realms; he tried that here. He swung the black blade in a diagonal slice and reality split, crackling at the seams. Keeping his sword out, he stepped through.

Daniel had visited several underworlds in his time as a dead soul and then as a god, and thought he'd be prepared for anything. And, as usual, he felt completely blindsided.

He entered a wooden room, much like a one-room cabin with no windows or furnishings, about two hundred feet square. The wall closed up behind him, and he realized the room had no door.

One candle sat on a stool in the center of the room, illuminating the transparent figure of a small boy. He looked at Daniel with baleful eyes.

"Huh. I didn't think it would be that easy," Daniel muttered to himself. "Hey, James," he said, louder. "Are you bait or something?"

“She put her here as her proxy, her messenger,” James said, his voice like a dropped tissue. “That is my role now. No longer your guide.”

Guilt stabbed deep. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, James. I’m here to bring you back, I’ll do anything.”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing you can do. I am dead. I’m under her power now.”

“Come on, isn’t there something I can do? I’m a god!” Daniel said, stepping forward.

James stepped back, putting his hand up. “Do not touch me, or she’ll call me back.”

Daniel drooped. “I’m so sorry, James. For everything. Is she ...” He was loathe to say the words, but he had to know. “Torturing you? Hurting you?”

The ghost shook his head. “No, Daniel. She’s very kind to me. If I serve her faithfully she’ll give me a corporeal body and I can rule the Underworld with her.”

“Uh, are you serious? She wanted a servant and boyfriend?” Daniel’s stomach twisted at the thought, but then remembered all the weird liaisons gods were said to have had, most obviously the small golden boy who served Zeus, Ganymede.

James nodded. “It’s not so bad. I understand a lot more now.”

“Huh, I didn’t have much expanded awareness when I died. But then again, I wasn’t houseboy to the death goddess, so I guess that has its perks.”

“I remember your quests, Daniel,” James said.

“What?” Daniel asked, completely flummoxed. “Um, okay, but what is your point?”

“I can help you. You need Morrigan for your goals. You don’t understand now, but you will. Kate will figure it out soon, and you will know how much she needs you. She hates Kate with a passion rivaled only by her love of me. I can get her to help you.”

“Wait, how do you know what Kate will figure out? And how can you get her to change her mind? And dude, that’s illegal in several states. Not that we’re in the States. But, damn, dude, that’s sick.”

“When I died, I’d been touched by three gods. That kind of power can be potent. I can get her to change her mind because her love for me is rivaled only by her hatred of Kate. Lastly, we have not been intimate. I have not proven myself to her yet.”

“Oh? What will that take?” Daniel asked.

James stared at him. “I must build a trap for a god.”

He reached out his ghostly fingers and pinched the candle out. Daniel stood in the darkness and watched the faintly glowing soul slip through the wall and away from him.

“Fuck.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The thing about being a god was that there was so much to understand. Daniel felt as if he were running to stay just a little bit behind everyone else. Now he had walked directly into a trap, and he was the trickster god, at that.

The whispery sounds of the souls slinked against the walls, and Daniel got a nasty feeling that they were surrounding him, like zombies, waiting to get through before they devoured him.

He tried his katana of course; it passed harmlessly through the walls as if made of smoke. He ground his teeth and paced. He did not like this whole capturing thing, and he didn't like being rescued. He paced until he hit his head on the wall, turned, and paced again, this time with his hands out.

A sound mocked him, past the souls outside, a high laughing sound. He rolled his eyes. *Coyote's here again to laugh at me for being such a shitty trickster god. Well, he thought, I'd rather fail at being Coyote than succeed at being Loki.*

But why was she judging him or laughing at him? He did his job as best he knew. His pacing continued at a greater rate. He began to judge the width of the cabin by step numbers and then by the sound of the echoes off the approaching wall.

He shook his head. Fuck Morrigan anyway. Fuck her, and Coyote, and James, and Sam, and everyone who wanted something from him. He was tired of it all. He paced and thought, paced and bared his teeth, paced and growled. Eventually he could barely walk two steps before he had to turn around, and when his shoulders brushed the roof of the cabin, he finally understood.

In coyote form — gargantuan, monstrous coyote form — Daniel threw his head back and howled. His nose crashed through the roof and he grew larger, shedding the splintered beams of the cabin as if they were toothpicks. He wasn't Loki. He wasn't Coyote. He was Daniel: unique, powerful, and angry.

The world outside the cabin was a vast gray desert, the light gray sand and ash shifting under his paws. The sky was a slate gray and showed only a full moon at her zenith.

Daniel paused briefly to smell the acrid scent of the souls around him until he detected a brief scent of James. He leaped over the tiny souls pawing at him and ran in the direction James had gone.

As he ran, his powerful body stretching out for maximum speed, he wondered if this was what Fenrir felt as he prepared for Ragnarök and Odin's demise. He didn't know what he would do to James and Morrigan when he found them, but he knew animals didn't plan much farther ahead than, "chase, catch, kill." He thought briefly of Odin in Fenrir's jaws, and flecks of drool the size of buckets of water flew from his jaws as he ran.

*No. We need her*, he thought, his human sensibilities trying to overcome base animal desires. A tall stone wall loomed in the distance, but Daniel's bulk was so great he leapt the wall with no problem.

A mansion made of red stone loomed higher than even Daniel, its wicked pointed towers looking ready to pierce the gray sky, and he wondered how he would break inside in his current form — with his current level of rage, he wasn't sure he could attain human form any time soon. But he spied Morrigan and James walking the perimeter of the wall, about thirty yards from him, their backs to him. With two bounds he was upon them.

Morrigan turned her faceless mask to him, and he couldn't tell if she was afraid, gleeful, expecting, or surprised. He reached down with his jaws and grabbed her, taking care, damnable care, not to crush her in his teeth. Before the ghost James could protest, he was away, leaping the walls again and running.

She didn't squirm, but lay quietly between his teeth. She carried the scent of burned flesh and hopeless souls, and the smell nearly overpowered him.

*Every Underworld has a river, and every Underworld has a path*, he thought, and began running again, searching for his path, taking the death goddess to Kate.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As Kate flew toward Meridian and Lathe, she pondered what she knew of Chaos.

She didn't know much, but she carried the knowledge of several gods within her. Too bad much of their knowledge had been useless in this entirely new world. But as for Chaos, not much had been said about it, only that it was massive, scary, and older than time. It had been chained with the creation of the world, and the four keys to its chains had been the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water.

Of course, there was no information about how four elements chained an ancient being older than gods. She had a brief image of throwing dirt clods and water balloons at the black mass that leaked into their world, and came up empty.

Still. There had to be something they could do. They were the ones who freed the beast; they had to put it back. She just wasn't sure how, though.

Kate was careful not to trail far behind the *Sheridan*, even though they headed for the same destination. She flew as fast as she could to outpace the airship, and arrived on the outskirts of Lathe far ahead of the other gods.

The gods had been shocked and horrified at her actions, and she couldn't blame them. She would have liked nothing more than to find a hole in the hills and hide there, but she had a job to do, and she was going to do it even if she had to venture into the Dark and face Chaos herself.

After this was over, she would try to make things right. Or she'd find that hole.

She walked into Lathe, her wings disappearing under her robe. Nothing stirred in the middle of the night, except for the occasional flare from scientists' homes in the hills. Kate headed toward the center of the town where the marketplace stood.

Professor Burns's Idea Emporium held the only light in the dark town. Surprised, she peeked into the open door. The professor stood there, calmly dusting the cases of ideas. "Lady Kate. I thought you might drop by," he said. "Come in."

"I'm confused. How did you get here?" Kate asked, entering the store and closing the door behind her.

“The Lady Fabrique used another one of her doors. We all went to our destinations ahead of the *Sheridan*. All but Persi, who stayed aboard the airship for obvious reasons.”

Kate winced when she thought of the last time chaos energy messed with divine travel. “Right. So they’re up in Meridian?”

“Yes, meeting about you. I asked to come home, as I expected you might need some guidance. Was I wrong?”

Kate smiled ruefully. “No. But haven’t I asked enough of you, too?”

The old man pursed his lips and gave the spotless counter one more determined wipe. “I seem to recall approaching you when I discovered a problem. Part of this whole mess could be attributed to me, after all, as I encouraged the sun god’s addiction. Although none of us knew what he would be like during the evening, I still doubt he will be of any use during the day, which could be inconvenient. Besides...” A ghost of a smile passed his lips. “I enjoy the adventure.”

Kate laughed. “I’m not sure I do, honestly. But what can I give you for your trouble? I would like to think that I’m done demanding things from people.”

He looked at her directly, startling her with his intensity. “Protect my home. Protect Lathe.”

“Uh, okay,” Kate said. “Why, exactly? It’s not like it’s in danger.”

Burns laughed suddenly, a bitter sound in the dead silence of the night. “We are a city that floats, Kate. We lie in the shadow of a much larger floating city. We’re frequently struck by improbability storms. Half of our inhabitants are mad, the other half are disgraced, and the third half are homeless.” He caught her raised eyebrow at the math involved. “Yes, Lathe is an odd city. We have three halves.”

Kate closed her eyes. Yes, she could probably do that. She opened them. “Done. It’s protected as much as I can protect it, anyway.”

Burns smiled. “Then the store is yours.” He opened his arms wide.

“Whoa, wait, I didn’t ask for the store. I just wanted some guidance. One, maybe two ideas.”

Burns smiled. “Thank you, Lady, for not following the path of the sun god. Please, take your pick, then.”

Kate took three: one diplomatic, one logistical, and a battle idea. She slipped them into her robe. “Thank you, Professor.”

He bowed to her. “It has been my honor to serve you, Lady. Any time you need anything, you are welcome to call on me.”

She smiled and walked outside. As she wandered the labyrinthine streets of Lathe, she unwrapped the logistical idea — one of the old-fashioned cedar idea boxes — and held it to her ear.

Symbols are often stronger than the things they are based on. Kate frowned. That wasn’t an idea. It was a fortune cookie. She shook the box to see if it would then spit out her lucky numbers or how to say “cow” in Chinese, but there was nothing else. She sighed. *Damned elusive ideas.*

The light started to touch the horizon, and Kate sighed. Barris would be reverting to his catatonic state soon. She would be judged at the temple. Then, probably, she and Daniel would head into the Dark alone. She looked up at the shadow that was the floating Meridian. It loomed, and she wondered if they were up there, discussing her fate, or the fate of her world, somewhere they neither knew nor cared about.

Facing them felt like going to the principal’s office, or her boss’s office. The office of someone who had the power to do terrible things to her.

She steeled herself. She was a god. One of the first. She did the damage; she could take the heat for it.

\* \* \* \* \*

She walked up to the House of Mysteries just as the sun appeared over the hills. Fabrique let her in without looking at her.

As she’d feared, Barris lay slumped in the corner, again in his small, comatose form. He really was half dead. The other gods were seated on stools around her workstation. Fabrique joined Gamma and Ishmael at the table.

The small goddess cleared her throat. “With Persi incapacitated and Prosper deciding to become a coral reef instead of a god, and you and Daniel not getting votes, and Morrigan not available, we were left with four to vote. It was difficult coming up with a proper decision on what to do with you.”

“Clearly, we can’t have a god slayer among us,” Fabrique continued. “But some leeway was given due to the fact that you did free us from our prisons that we do believe

you had no hand in creating. We also understand that this ‘Chaos’ you mention causes us more threat than you do.”

She paused, and Ishmael spoke up. “We have decided to help you with your war. Barris and Ishmael will accompany you to the Dark. But when you are done, you are to go back home. We do not want the goddess Kate in this world any longer.”

“Exile,” Kate said, the word tasting like ash in her mouth. But returning to heaven had been her goal all along, hadn’t it? “What about Daniel?”

“Daniel wasn’t involved with the razing of Dauphine,” Fabrique said. “Therefore he is free to stay — or leave — as he chooses.”

“I’m going with her,” said Daniel from the doorway. He stood there, his hair wild as if blown by a strong wind.

Kate smiled, trying not to let the sheer volume of relief show on her face, but the smile faded when she saw the figure standing behind Daniel.

Daniel stepped into the room. “We have one more person helping us.” He moved aside and presented the cloaked, masked death goddess to the room.

She gripped her scythe tightly and said, “I understand we have an ancient god to kill?”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Alicia and Sarah politely refused the gods' request for an airship. Kate knew they could have demanded, but she didn't feel right doing that. They'd asked enough of the grieving family, and Daniel had apparently failed in his quest to get James.

"She won't give him back; he's the only thing she won't negotiate on. I figured I'd make her join us by force, but once she heard what we were trying to do, she was all for it," he said. "But James, she picked him specially and won't let him go. I don't know what else to do."

"I guess we worry about that afterward," Kate said.

"Afterward, we're exiled, Kate," Daniel said, his hand on her arm. Neither said the words, "... if we survive it," but it hung between them like a dangling sword. Kate didn't much like the idea of hanging in the underworld with Morrigan.

The death goddess completely ignored her and took orders — or suggestions — only from Daniel. Kate shrugged. *As long as she does what we need.*

The group of gods talked for most of the day on strategy, with the gods asking Kate and Daniel for whatever details they could give about Chaos.

When Kate had mentioned the four elements, Fabrique perked up. "What did you say they were? Earth, Air, Fire, and Water?"

Kate nodded. "Yeah. Another group of people where we come from thought there were five elements. They didn't include Air, but added Wood and Metal."

Fabrique waved her off. "There are four major cities on this continent. Leviathan City is under the water. Dauphine was destroyed in a fire. Meridian is in the air. And Lathe, while not technically on the Earth, sure is close to it."

Kate froze. She stared at Fabrique. What had the idea said? Symbols are often stronger than the things they are based on. She looked around the room. The gods were nodding thoughtfully.

Ishmael was the god of the sea. Water. Barris was the god of the sun. Fire. Morrigan was the goddess of death and the underworld. Earth. Who was air? She looked

at each in turn, and then realized that she herself, as reborn goddess who flew, was probably closest to air. The others, they couldn't be extraneous — what were they?

She nodded to herself. Prosper had been wood, of course. Either Fabrique or Gamma could be metal. As the Chinese had considered it, metal corresponded with weapons as well as tools, so she decided Gamma was metal.

That left Persi, Fabrique, and Daniel. They were out of elements. Daniel rubbed his wrist thoughtfully, the one he'd gnawed off. He'd told her how he'd unconsciously turned into a coyote again and taken off with Morrigan, and she wondered how much of his power he really controlled.

Fabrique tinkered with a device as the gods quietly conversed about what the elemental cities could mean. The tiny gears and springs fit together perfectly and the realization hit Kate like a fist. "Order. Chaos. And the poor bastard living things that are caught up in it all," she whispered.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"We all have a role to play. The elements. Ishmael is water. Barris is fire. Prosper is wood. Morrigan is earth. I'm air. Gamma is metal. Fabrique corresponds with order, balancing chaos, which is reflected in our trickster god."

Daniel thought briefly. "That makes a certain sense. But you left out Persi," he pointed to the still-unconscious girl.

"I'm not sure. But it seems pretty logical that she represents the poor living things that get caught up in all of this divine warfare," Kate suggested.

"All right. But what do we do with this information? We don't have Prosper, and Persi can't fight," Gamma said, arms still crossed. This had been the first time she had spoken since hearing about Kate's actions in Dauphine.

Kate frowned. "I don't know. But I do know it's important."

"Has anyone figured out how we're all getting into the Dark? Do we commandeer another zeppelin?" Daniel asked.

"Nope," Fabrique said. She closed the back of the device she was working on. "This is another doorway. I've put in a stopgap to protect it from chaos energy. It can take us to the Dark. From there we can fly."

"Not all of us can fly," Gamma said, and Kate was relieved to find the warrior goddess's stony glare fixated on someone else for a change.

Fabrique grinned and pulled a blanket off a lump in the corner.

“Oh, shit. A jetpack!” Daniel said. “I want one!”

“We can’t leave till Barris wakes up,” Fabrique said. “I can build two more of these today for you and Ishmael.”

“Then I guess we’re set,” Kate said. At sundown the seven of them would head into the Dark to confront Chaos. And at the end of the war: The lovely choice between death and exile.

*However, she realized, it’s unlikely a choice will be involved there.*

\* \* \* \* \*

They left Persi with her confused priests. Daniel grinned as he realized how much of a mind-blowing situation all of these temple workers were in with their gods suddenly coming “home.” After a quick word with Prosper’s priests to let them know that their god was, ah, otherwise occupied, they were ready to go.

Gamma had clothed herself from neck to feet in supple, thin leather that, Daniel realized after touching her sleeve, was surprisingly strong. Two swords crossed on her back and five daggers were sheathed and strapped to each leg. More weapons nestled into her sleeve, cozy against her forearm. Daniel wondered how a knife would help against Chaos, but he really didn’t know how any of them would attack it. They were gods, though, and he had to remember that.

Fabrique went for a heavy red leather duster lined with several pockets. She refused to show Kate and Daniel what she had hidden in the pockets, and Daniel wondered if they were pockets at all. Her curls were squashed under a pair of brass goggles with glowing red lenses. Her dark skin contrasted well with the red jacket, and black boots completed her ensemble. The leather duster was weighted at the bottom so it wouldn’t flap when the jetpack strapped to her back — a device so amazing Daniel would have readily given up his ability to shape-change if that meant he would get one.

Ishmael remained nearly naked except for his loincloth and coral armbands, refusing to wear anything to protect himself.

Kate, Daniel, Barris, and Morrigan remained as they were. With the exception of Barris, each god carried their weapon of choice. From the interior of Fabrique’s House

of Mysteries, they watched as the tinker goddess activated a recently-finished wrist gauntlet. A ray of purple light splashed against the obsidian wall, growing to the size of the circular doorway. It rippled, but remained purple and opaque. Daniel looked at Fabrique, his eyebrow raised.

“It’s perfectly safe,” she said. “I will go first if you like.”

Daniel heard the challenge in her voice and shook his head. He put an experimental finger against the purple ripples and his arm went right through. He stepped through, his whole body vibrating with the power of her gauntlet, and ended up in the foothills about ten miles north of Meridian. The city shone in the distance, a gorgeous impossibility, swaying gently.

The air shimmered and he stepped aside quickly as Kate came out.

“Think they’re gonna ditch us?” he asked, but Barris came through right after them, shaking his wings and glaring at the portal as if it offended him. Ishmael, Morrigan, and Fabrique soon followed. As Fabrique stepped through, the portal snapped shut with a sound that reminded Daniel of a television being forcibly turned off.

“Wait, how did you get through? And where’s Gamma?” Daniel demanded. “Did she ditch us?”

Fabrique looked at him coolly and pulled a small jeweled dagger from an inside pocket, and Gamma flowed out of it and appeared in front of them. She handed Fabrique the gauntlet and Daniel relaxed.

“Okay then,” he said. “Let’s do this thing.”

The last time they had gone into the Dark they had been aboard the *Sheridan*, under attack from two modified warships, the *Ferus* and the *Fera*. The ships had been piloted by air pirates, tattooed thieves who lived in — and were driven mad by — the Dark.

*By Chaos*, Daniel reminded himself.

Fabrique, Gamma, and Ishmael fired up their jetpacks, Gamma a little unsteady, Ishmael looking as if he’d steer into a hill any moment. The others took wing, Daniel as a pterodactyl and Morrigan as a white crow. There was a path (*Who made that, anyway?*) through the hills to the Dark, but it was easier just to fly over.



Barris made a small, surprised sound as Morrigan took flight, and he slowed and watched her climb ahead of him. Daniel flew next to him and cocked his head.

Barris caught the question. “That was the crow I followed when I got caught in the ocean. I knew she was divine but I didn’t make the connection.”

*Oh. Damn, but Morrigan caused a lot of trouble.* Daniel wondered uncomfortably if he should have brought her along. But she fit Kate’s elements theory, so she would probably be needed.

*If she doesn’t try to kill us all.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate hung back and let the other gods fly ahead of her. She tried to keep a respectful distance when not giving orders; the others, save Daniel, clearly didn’t want to be around her. The shame twisted in her like a snake, but she had a job to do. And regardless of their fate, she’d never see them again anyway.

The hills on the Meridian side were deep green in the light of the waning moon, but as they moved into the Dark, Morrigan’s power was diminished and faded. The hills were black, the sand was black, and the sky starless. The others landed at the foot of the rocky hills and Kate followed suit, feeling the prickles along her awareness that something wasn’t quite right with her power.

Ahead of them, down the hill, lay the camp of the airship pirates. Bunkers lined the perimeter to shoot down any airship that pursued the pirates home, and past that — more darkness.

“I think some of us should scout ahead,” Daniel was saying as she landed. “Figure out how many are in that camp, if they’re armed, you know.”

“They’re armed,” Gamma said. “Well armed.”

“Well, if we fly over, we’re sitting ducks. Or some metaphor that works in this situation,” Daniel said. “But going on foot feels so ... mortal.”

“We might as well be mortal here,” Fabrique said, adjusting her goggles. “Gamma, why don’t you and Daniel scout ahead?”

Daniel looked at the warrior goddess and shrugged. They headed off and became mere silhouettes approaching the camp.

Barris approached Kate. She glanced up at him apprehensively. None of the other gods had showed interest in communicating with her. “Lady Kate, a word, please?”

“Uh, sure,” she said, and they stepped back into the hills. Fabrique fiddled with a gadget while Ishmael fretted and watched Gamma and Daniel. Only Morrigan watched her and Barris retreat.

“I want to apologize for the decisions of my fellows,” he said. “I never wanted you exiled. It is unfair; gods make decisions daily that affect the mortal plane and lives are lost. None of us know if one of our fellows could be damaged because of it. Look at me; I caused great damage due to my addiction.”

Kate grimaced. “Thanks. It’s still hard to reconcile you as Barris. And it wasn’t really your decision, you know. You seem a totally different person at night.”

“I am the same person, only with the power of the sun returned to me. In the few weeks I’ve had since freed from my cage, I’ve only brushed the potential of my abilities.” He chuckled ruefully. “Although I have learned to keep away from water.”

“And ideas. You’re learning,” Kate said. “I do have a question. That Chaos necklace thing squashed all of our abilities nearly completely. But all it did was affect your change, not the sun itself. Why is that?”

Barris held out his hand, palm up. Flames dripped from his hand like water off an Olympic swimmer. Above his palm floated a tiny sun. It nearly hurt to look at, and Kate worried its brightness would alert the camp to their whereabouts. She dragged him behind a hill.

“Impressive, but let’s not get ourselves killed, okay?” she asked.

“Kate, I am the sun. I have the power to keep multiple spherical objects in orbit around me: planets, moons, and asteroids. I pull far away comets into me. My heat is such that it can warm you from millions of miles away. I am the center of the solar system. It is without ego that I remind you that even though you made the world, and likely me, and Ishmael controls the water, which is life, and Prosper controls the harvest, which is food, and Fabrique controls the industry, which is human intelligence, and Persi controls the animals, which balance humans, and Morrigan controls the shape of the earth and the tides — and now death — and Gamma controls the warrior nature, which provides the conflict that moves, creates, and destroys nations. And Daniel, who provides the foil for us all — none are as powerful as the sun, which holds all of this

together. My power can be dampened, but not removed, or the solar system falls into disarray. We're not talking just this world here, Kate; we're talking about all worlds."

Kate thought about the first world they created, the one completely enshrouded in Chaos, and wondered where it was in the solar system. "What about —"

"Your other world lies in perfect orbit opposite this one. The astronomers of this world haven't yet determined its existence. The sun is always between the two planets."

"Is there a sun god there?"

"No gods live on a planet ruled by Chaos."

Kate bit her lip and tried not to dwell on how much she and Daniel had mucked things up. "I understand, I think."

"I am young, Kate. Self-aware only since you freed me. I am frightened of this Chaos beast, amazed at the beauty of the world, and confused by the actions and attitude of she who shares my power." He gazed at Morrigan with a look that was somewhere between sadness and longing. "But one thing I do understand is recognizing power within others. And you don't tap into half the power you have. What are you afraid of?"

Kate gaped at him. She felt the power stir inside her, impatient, despite the dampening effect of the Dark. "Are you kidding me? Look what I've done. Destroyed cities; killed a goddess; I have created two worlds and lost one, almost both of them, to Chaos. I am completely inept at this job. The more power I use, the more I mess things up."

Barris frowned at her sadly. His fiery wings drooped. "Is that all you've seen you've accomplished? Really?"

Kate shrugged. "Where I'm from, there was once a man, a leader, called Mussolini. He did some horrible, things. But people said he always made the trains run on time. Sometimes the things that you do that are bad can't be eclipsed by the good that you do."

She left him, frowning at her, behind the hill, and went back toward the others.

They were gone, running toward the camp, which had opened fire on Daniel and Gamma.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was dour, no fun to be around, and clearly wanted them out of this world, but Daniel had to admit that Gamma was handy to have during a fight.

As they silently skirted the perimeter of the camp, keeping close to the rocky foothills nearby, she pointed to a turret whose guns had moved from aiming at any aerial trespassers to tracking them. Her calm voice floated over her shoulder. "They've seen us. They're targeting with one of their guns."

Almost immediately after she uttered the words, the rocks above Daniel's head exploded as projectiles penetrated them. Daniel thought at first that they were regular bullets, but fire dripped down the rock onto them, and they ran for the safety of a boulder.

Daniel's heart surged with panic. "Shit! What do we do?" he asked as Gamma pushed his head down behind the rock. More projectiles hit the rock in front of him, and fire dripped down, seemingly seeking him. He skirted back from it while still trying to stay covered.

She touched the molten drop with her index finger, and instead of flowing toward Daniel, it crept obediently into her palm like a pet mouse. "You stay calm and do what I tell you." He nodded. "It is a very bad idea to attack a goddess of war," she said, almost conversationally. "Imagine trying to drown Ishmael or leaving Barris out in the sun to dehydrate. Can't happen."

"Yes, but they can still shoot me," Daniel reminded her, but she was no longer there.

"Dammit!"

He winced as the gun fired again, but no more molten buddies came looking for Daniel. He chanced a look over the boulder and found the turret had instead targeted another turret and had fired repeatedly at it, melting it. The screams of the pirates inside floated over to his ears, and then the gun went off again.

Gamma had traveled through the gun to the inside of the turret. She must be really pissed about that fight with Prosper, that fight that Daniel thought of as Gamma's Vietnam.

He relaxed and only noticed at the last minute that as Gamma blasted the turrets, one by one, another one targeted her. "Gamma! Nine o'clock!" he yelled, hoping she understood.

The turret began to swing around, but the targeting gun went off, melting the turret and causing the gun to explode. Daniel ducked behind the rock as more molten bullets rained down on him. A couple landed on his back and he expected the searing pain to begin, but he was hit with a stream of water that knocked him over, putting out the smoldering fire.

"Damn, Aquaman, thanks a lot," he sputtered, seeing Ishmael looking much less flighty and much more focused about twenty yards away, firing a stream of water into the burning turret. It hissed and went out, the misshapen metal warped and black.

Kate ran up to him. "Are you okay?"

He nodded and spat out some water. "I never thought Aquaman was much of a hero, but he's about my favorite person right now," he said.

Kate smiled. "What kind of ammo are they using to cause metal to melt like that?" Do you think Gamma has something to do with it," she said, ducking behind the rock with him.

"Probably," Daniel said. "Do you think she got out of there in time?"

The turret that shot up Gamma's gun turned to the camp and began firing as sky pirates ran around, screaming and heading for their airships.

"Yeah, I think so," she said. "She's buying us time; let's go."

As the six of them dashed past the camp, Gamma continued firing the flaming bullets at the pirates, targeting the airships now, causing their giant balloons to melt and catch fire.

Daniel was so caught up in watching the pirate ships burn that he didn't notice the large group of pirates running out of the camp on foot, screaming and brandishing weapons. They had the same living black tattoos that crawled across their skin, the taint of Chaos.

"Crap," Kate said, but the other gods ran forward. Ishmael knocked two women back into the camp with his firehouse-like attack, and Fabrique shot one with a ray gun type-weapon. The ray entered the man's left side and exited the back. He stopped and gaped at the smoldering hole in his shirt, then crumpled.

Twelve more pirates challenged them, drawing pistols and ray guns. Daniel and Kate readied their swords, but Barris gestured and a wall of fire encircled the pirates just as they fired. The bullets incinerated before reaching the gods. Morrigan walked forward with purpose, turned her emotionless mask toward Barris. While Daniel had no idea what was going behind that, Barris clearly did. He let the wall fall in one place, and Morrigan stripped off her mask and walked inside. The wall went back up.

The pirates' screams broke through the flames. Two tried to jump through to escape the death goddess, but fell flat once they passed through the sun god's fire, and did not get up.

After the screams subsided, Barris let the flames fall and Morrigan stood surrounded by ten men and women, all dead with no wounds.

"Damn, what did she do?" Daniel whispered.

Kate shrugged.

"Are you a little annoyed they're getting all the glory?" Daniel asked as they ran past the bodies.

"Not really," Kate said. "I think we'll have plenty of chance to fight when we get to — the end."

She had hesitated, and Daniel sensed she didn't want to say his name. *Its name. Whatever. Did Chaos have a gender?*

Gamma continued to blast away at the buildings and airships at the pirate camp and the rest of the gods ran on. A black dune rose about half a mile past the camp. They crested it and took a moment to collect themselves.

"Thank you for the help," Kate said, but they all either stared at her with stony faces or avoided her gaze. All except Barris, who nodded graciously.

Daniel felt his katana shake, so he drew it and Gamma materialized, glowing and grinning.

"I have never had so much fun," Gamma said. She stretched and flexed, like a cat, and Daniel thought she was actually bigger, with tighter muscles. The extra battle energy had to be doing it.

"So, what's next?" she asked eagerly, looking at Daniel. "Let's face this beast."

"I don't remember," he admitted. "All I remember is 'deeper into the Dark.'"

Kate touched Daniel's arm and drew him away from the gods, who were discussing the battle with relish. She pointed at the ground. "Daniel. Look."

Black rivulets, darker than the black sand, slithered past them and away from the pirate camp.

"What is that?" Kate asked.

Daniel looked at the camp, and then back down at the moving, snake-like lines in the ground. "I'm not sure, but I think that might be their tattoos."

"Seriously? How is that possible?"

"It's possible if that wasn't actually ink," Daniel said. He watched them slide deeper into the Dark.

"Shit. You think that's actually parts of Chaos?"

"Would it be any weirder than anything else that's happened here?" he asked.

She shrugged. "You're right. Let's go." She turned back toward the others.

He reached out and grabbed her arm on impulse. "Listen. We don't know what's going to happen there. We're fighting this big blob that royally kicked our asses last time, in a place where we can't trust our powers. Something could —"

She glared at him, setting her jaw. "Listen to me, Daniel. You'd better not be doing a, 'We may die, so, I love you,' speech. I'm not saying goodbye to you. We're linked; don't get you that? You and me, puzzle pieces. We click. Once locked together, we're not going to be apart. Nothing's been able to separate us for long before, not even that." She pointed into the Dark. "So if you say goodbye to me, I'm going to punch you."

He grinned at her and smoothed her hair back from her face. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just wanted to tell you that you look lovely today. That's all."

She kissed him, not a peck, and not a long, drowning kiss. It was a firm kiss, a refusal to be the last kiss, a kiss of ownership.

He remembered a time back when they were mortal, so long ago, it seemed, when she had been angry with him for not emailing all summer when his dad took him on a trip.

He looked at her, his eyes wide in shock. "Kate, you're my best friend. Always. If I went away to Saturn for ten years, I would be sure that when I came back, you'd still be my best friend. This kind of friendship doesn't change. You're my favorite person in the world."

She'd pouted a bit more, but eventually warmed to him again, sure in his affection, if not romantic love, for her.

"So tell me about the guy you met over the summer and explain to me why he's good enough to date my best friend," he'd said then, digging into their standard Saturday night sundae at the local deli.

He realized that even back then, he knew he'd be spending the rest of his days with this woman.

She tugged on his hand. "Come on," she said. "Apparently, we have some tattoos to follow home."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The words echoed in Kate's head, the voice a whisper of her former lover, Hermes:  
"Verily at the first Chaos came to be," said Hesiod. Ovid had much more to say:

*Before the seas and this terrestrial ball,  
And Heaven's high canopy, that covers all,  
One was the face of Nature, if a face:  
Rather a rude and indigested mass:  
A lifeless lump, unfashioned, and unframed  
Of jarring seeds: and justly Chaos nam'd.*

All of their problems, since the beginning, were caused by Chaos getting free. The missing souls in heaven. Daniel losing control of hell. The siege on heaven. The corruption of their first world. And now, its power was leaking into the second world, imprisoning gods and dampening their divine power.

It had grown. No more did the armies of heaven and hell battle it. Chaos still covered heaven's dome, unable to get in, but no one was able to get out, either. The vast plains of hell where Kate had hidden heaven were empty. Kate wondered what had happened to the armies. *Were they dead? Devoured? Deserted?*

It leaked its influence past the metaphysical plane and into the physical, and Kate could feel its power draining her. She shook her head. Barris was right. She'd been afraid of using her power, probably since razing Dauphine. They'd been torturing boys, blinding them in the name of Daniel, and she'd lost it. Then, terrified of her power, she'd dampened it.

"This is the moment where we're supposed to say something dramatic and mighty, right?" whispered Daniel. "And all I can think of is, 'Holy shit.'"

"Apt words," she muttered. *It was certainly holy. And certainly shit.*

"That is our enemy? That is our god?" Gamma asked.

"Doesn't look like much," Ishmael said, looking very pleased with himself.

Daniel coughed. “You blew back some pirates, Aquaman. This is a bit different. Don’t get cocky. This thing knocked Kate and me into another dimension, and apparently had enough influence on creating this world to imprison the seven of you. You going to hit it with your firehouse?”

Ishmael stiffened. “You said you needed an elemental attack.”

Kate chewed her lip. “I don’t know how literal it is. Those Greek poets were all about metaphor. I guess the four of us should go in and attack, the others backing us up. Barris and Ishmael go in first — fire and water being opposites — then Morrigan and I will attack.”

The gods nodded, but Morrigan just stared at Chaos, her mask hiding any thoughts. Kate looked at her. “Are you up to this?”

The mask turned toward her and she tried not to shiver. “Are you?” Morrigan asked.

Kate gritted her teeth and wings burst forth from her back. She reached back for her sword, thinking, *this should really be a bow, an air weapon*. Her hand closed around a supple bow, and she smiled. *That’s more like it*.

Morrigan changed into a crow, flying toward the pulsing dome. Kate took wing herself, skirting around, notching an arrow into her bow. This felt ridiculous, but she had no other thoughts. Morrigan circled Chaos from the other side and landed short of the dome.

Up close, Chaos was a roiling mass of nothing, a horrific lump of oily sludge, a black that looked as if you could fall into it. Kate blinked to keep it from pulling her in, and continued flying around the perimeter. She caught sight of Morrigan and shouted, “Now!”

The death goddess’s scythe was out and she swiped at Chaos just as Kate let loose an arrow, pumping her divine energy into it as it left.

The arrow sank into Chaos and disappeared, and she saw no damage from Morrigan’s attack.

No damage, but Chaos clearly awakened. Pseudopods extended in all directions, making it look like an angry squid. One of them swiped at Kate, but she dodged it, picking up speed. She saw three try to encircle Morrigan, but she changed into a small

crow, dexterously dodging the oily whips and rising high in the air to head back to the others. She and Kate landed at the same time.

“That went well,” Kate said dryly. “Anyone got a plan B?”

Barris nodded. “Ishmael and I can spread our attacks over a wide range. You two can attack specific places. Do we know of a weak spot: A head? A heart?”

Kate waved at it. “It’s a big blob! You find a weak point.”

“We should all go in together,” Barris suggested. “Ishmael and I will hit it together; you and Morrigan strike different spots.”

Kate nodded, and the four attacked again.

Chaos was awake now, its pseudopods waving wildly. Kate flew low, looking for any sort of weakness. *How did you find a weakness in a big black blob of silly putty?* She dodged another swipe and then she realized the attacks were different this time. Chaos seemed to be flailing about wildly, not attacking with knowledge or craft.

*Of course, she thought wryly. It’s Chaos.*

She flew higher than the other gods, Morrigan landing and slicing through pseudopods as Kate lobbed arrows at the mass. Then Barris and Ishmael, the latter lifted high by a geyser of water from the dry earth, both sent vast amounts of fire and water to wash over Chaos.

Great gouts of steam rose from it, and Kate increased her arrow volley.

Chaos screamed, the unholy screech echoing in her ears and mind. The pseudopods flailed again, wilder this time.

“I can’t believe it; it’s working,” Kate whispered. She laughed aloud. “Guys, it’s working! Keep it up!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel watched the battle, rubbing his hands together. Gamma growled beside him. Fabrique stood patiently.

“Can’t we go in and help?” Daniel said.

“He is right,” Gamma said.

Fabrique shook her head. “You know what they said. They will let us know when they need us. We wait here.”

“Come on, we can’t hurt! More people helping will be better, not worse!” His hands opened and closed. Kate whipped around like a hummingbird, sending streaks of silver at the squirming god, its horrible screeches shaking the ground.

“I said no, and I meant it,” Fabrique said. Her voice had an edge that Daniel had never heard, not even when she was enraged at Kate. He looked over at her and saw black lines appear over her dark skin. Her eyes lost their intelligent spark and she grinned at him. “I think we can take them ourselves. After you, that is.”

Gamma stood on his blind side. Daniel decided not to waste time looking to see if Chaos had his little tattoo snakes under her skin as well. In an instant, his katana was in his hand and behind him, blocking her attack.

*Great. Warrior goddess. Trying to kill me. I told them I should be fighting Chaos. I might have a better chance with it.*

He took a quick whirl to the left and stepped back, better to get the two goddesses in front of him. Fabrique was calmly looking through her pockets, the tattoos moving over her face. Gamma’s tattoos made lines on her face, coating it in deep black except for a wide horizontal line that left her eyes exposed. She looked at Daniel’s sword and grinned.

“A sword? Against me?” She held her own sword, a wicked long sword with a wavy blade, held at her side, not even trying to defend herself. Daniel stepped forward, katana high, hoping his connection to his sword, given from the death goddess Izanami, would give him some sort of edge.

Gamma’s hand shot out and closed over the blade. She threw her head back as the blade disappeared, absorbed into her. She looked at him and her eyes glowed silver.

“Lovely sword. Thank you.”

“Hey! I liked that sword,” Daniel said, and threw the hilt at her. She dodged it easily and lunged for him, knives drawn.

Fighting her wouldn’t work, he realized, and he took the shape of a small pterodactyl, flying up and out of Gamma’s reach. Her blade nicked his left wing and he screeched in pain, a sound drowned out by another one of Chaos’s bellows.

*Come on, Kate! Kill that thing before Gamma and Fabrique get into the fight,* he thought, wheeling toward the battle.

*Fuck!* A pinkish ray whizzed past him, narrowly missing him. Fabrique had apparently found what she was looking for. *This is no good; I gotta keep them away from Kate*, he thought. He turned on his wingtip, his left wing dripping blood, and then came up with an idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chaos was shrinking. Kate's divine arrows were limitless, and the other three worked at their attacks tirelessly. Who knew it would be this easy?

Every once in a while, she would check on the other three, and see Morrigan's mask tilted up toward her as her death scythe sliced squirming pseudopods from Chaos. She tried not to think anything of it as she loosed the arrows.

A glimmer appeared in the midst of Chaos's bulk — the Dome of Heaven! It really was shrinking. Kate called more encouragement to the gods and focused on attacking the shrinking mass around the revealed part of the dome.

Laughing, she imagined getting free of this, and going home. Wherever that would be, they would get there. She and Daniel would be free of this war.

The laughter was driven from her throat as she was hit with a pseudopod and tumbled wildly through the air. Pain coursed through her body as her delicate wings shattered. If it had been a human's attack, she could have healed instantly, but Chaos was about as far from human as you could get. She soared through the air and landed hard, breaking her left ankle and right wrist as she rolled. She could barely register the pain in her limbs as her entire world narrowed to the overwhelming agony in her back.

She skidded to a stop and lay stunned. Sight threatened to leave her as black blossoms appeared in her view. She blinked as a masked face appeared above her.

"Morrigan. Help me. Get Daniel." Kate whispered.

"The one who made me. Unmade at my feet. And your lover brought me right to you. I didn't have to do anything," Morrigan said. She gripped her scythe, and Kate was pretty sure she was grinning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel hoped his idea would work. Fabrique kept firing her weird pink weapon at him, and he felt an odd tingling as she fired it, and faltered in mid-air. *The bitch made a weapon with chaos energy*, he realized in shock. *And she thinks we can't be trusted?*

Daniel soared in low, the fight with Chaos behind him and the two corrupted gods in front of him. Maybe if Fabrique missed him, she'd at least hit Chaos. He wheeled and turned, concentrating hard to make up for the lost mobility in his left wing. He got close enough to see Gamma's grin as she held two knives and waited for him.

*This is really going to hurt*, he thought, and forced himself to change from the pterodactyl to coyote, the massive canine that had stolen Morrigan from the Underworld. He rolled and skidded to a stop on three legs, holding the fourth high. With the shape-change, his cut wing turned into a nearly severed paw, gushing blood. He neatly clipped the last bit of skin from the paw and picked it up. He tossed it at the goddesses, and it transformed in midair into the shadow imp that had saved him.

*My own little bit of Chaos. How do you like that?*

The wounded coyote backed up and watched as Gamma tried to slice the imp open with her knives, confusion scrawled over her face as she slipped right through him.

Fabrique aimed for the imp with her gun, and again, it went through it, hitting Gamma on the other side. The warrior goddess went down, and didn't move, looking paralyzed rather than dead.

Fabrique's eyes grew wide behind her goggles and she backed up, dropping her weapon. Her hands went to her pockets as she looked for anything else to help her as the imp danced closer. She screamed once as it grew and leapt on her, engulfing her.

Daniel wondered through his pain-hazed mind what it would do to her, but turned his head at Kate's scream.

Morrigan stood over Kate, her scythe raised. There was no way Daniel could make it there in time.

He began to run, hobbled on three paws, leaking blood from the fourth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate didn't know what the scythe would do to her. It had cut her at Dauphine, and the wound still leaked blood many hours later. That didn't bode well.

She still faced her death with open eyes. She was completely guilty and didn't blame Morrigan for her hatred. She took a deep breath as the scythe raised.

A blinding flash filled her vision and she blinked, only to find it, — and Morrigan — gone. She turned her head to face Chaos and saw Barris and Morrigan barreling toward it, too fast to stop, Morrigan squirming in Barris's grasp.

Chaos reached out to embrace them, and then they were swallowed.

Chaos rippled as if it were a pond full of ink, then it began to shimmer. It bellowed once more, and if Kate had been able to cover her ears, she would have.

Then it exploded outward in a flurry of glittering shards, forged crystalline godstuff falling around them.

A coyote as big as a house ran up to her, whining. It stood over her, shielding her from the falling debris. "We did it," she said, smiling at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel's canine self had fierce loyalty to the woman he shielded, but his sensitive ears still picked up a rumbling from behind them. From their world, Meridian.

Kate was smiling, her poor shattered body bent in many places. She was alive, still divine, but so broken he didn't know what could heal the damage done by Chaos.

Another rumble. And then something occurred to Daniel.

Chaos had had a hand in making the world, in imprisoning the gods, in forging the xenophobia of Leviathan City, in fueling mad tinkers' experiments, and in sowing the ground around Meridian and Lathe with enough energy to keep the buildings afloat.

*Fuck*, he thought. He reached down and picked Kate up in his jaws as gently as possible and ran back toward the physical plane.

Behind him, heaven glittered gloriously, and the gates began to slide open.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel loped as fast as his three paws could carry him. He felt Kate try to touch his mind, inquisitive and pain-wracked, but she withdrew at his own pain-riddled animal mind.

He cleared the hills with three bounds and ran towards Meridian, where his fears were already realized.

He remembered astronomy from high school, how the moon not only moved the tides but also gave the Earth its slightly oblong shape. Without the moon, it would return to being round. Which would likely cause earthquakes.

But with Chaos gone...they hadn't thought about what effect that would have on the world.

Meridian was falling.

Several of its supporting cables snapped as it listed north, as if seeking the energy it once had in abundance.

Kate finally understood. From Daniel's jaws, she cried out in horror as the whole city fell the several hundred feet from where it had rested so comfortably. Buildings crashed into each other, debris and dust rising into the air, the lights going out.

Daniel tried to block out the screams of the people as they fell, realizing their fate. He was unable to help them.

The rumbles continued far longer, and cracks appeared in the ground around him; Daniel tried to dodge as well as he could. Finally, he realized Kate was screaming at him to put her down.

He gently deposited her onto the plain in an area that hadn't been cracked. He became human again and swooned briefly as the pain returned. He dropped to his knees beside her as she stared at Meridian, tears running down her face.

"I didn't know; I didn't think," she babbled.

"I know, I know," he said, watching the gentle light from Meridian illuminate the rubble and dust from Meridian. "I wonder if anyone survived."

"Why are there earthquakes?" she asked.

"No moon. Morrigan is gone. No lunar tides, no oblong Earth."

"So if Chaos is gone, and Morrigan is gone ..."

Daniel stared at her, the horror making him forget his pain momentarily. "Oh, god."

"Eight minutes. It takes eight minutes for the sun to reach us, for the heat and light and gravity and everything, right? Without it we just freeze," she said.

He nodded. "And drift off into space."



“What are we going to do?”

He shrugged. “What can we do?”

She thought for a moment, and then took his good hand with hers. “Daniel. We’ve always sucked at this god thing. Did you ever think of getting out?”

He smiled sadly at her. “Every goddamned day.”

“I think we should go for new jobs. Barris seemed to think we were wasted here anyway. Too much potential. I would really like to do some good for a change.” She coughed, and blood showed up on her lips. Daniel realized she had broken ribs and a punctured lung.

She smiled. “Besides, I’m not sure how much longer I’d live here like this anyway. Chaos fucked my shit up pretty good.”

He smiled and kissed her gently. “There’s my delicate flower. You think we can do this?”

“If we don’t, we spin off into space and freeze. If we try and fail, we spin off into space and freeze. If we try and succeed, we don’t.”

“I love your logic,” he said.

“I love you,” she answered.

They linked hands and closed their eyes, touching the parts within themselves that they had been so afraid of. Power surged forth at their calling. Internally, they united it all, his anger and trickery, her compassion and strength, and divvied it up between them.

*I’m going to miss you,* he thought.

She scoffed at him. *We’ll never be apart now.*

They focused on the metaphysical plane and found the holes left by Barris and Morrigan, gaping wide, already bleeding. Daniel and Kate took deep breaths, and their physical forms, their pain, their fears — all disappeared.

Daniel had never felt such bliss, such power, as he appeared in the sky over Meridian. The earth groaned again as gravity forced it back to its shape, and he shone down on the devastation. If he could have, he would have wept at the sight of Meridian’s ruins, and he noticed life subs from Leviathan City emerging from the sea.

*Earthquakes must have torn open the dome,* he thought sadly. *I hope enough get out.*

He cast his sight out, past the devastation, past all the things in the world he could see at once: The other cities, the other continents: places he and Kate had never been.

*Oh, Kate. What a world we made.*

Dawn's light began to peek over the horizon. *I can't wait to see it*, she said. *You should see the other side of the world.*

Right before he slid behind the hills, he caught sight of her, and she had never been more glorious. *You're beautiful*, he thought.

*So are you.*

*We made a big mess, but we did the job*, he thought.

*They'll rebuild.*

*If anything, we're a damned stubborn race.*

He could hear her laughter and smiled to himself. God of hell, exile, trickster, now moon. He was done changing jobs.

A sliver of power remained unclaimed, and he sent a question to Kate. She answered with enthusiasm, and he sent it back to the world. It wasn't much; it couldn't make things right. But it was enough to make a difference. Eventually.

His link with her was stronger than ever. The connection was more than physical, more than mental, more even than the link they'd had as gods. It was all-encompassing.

*You were right*, he thought. *This is about as forever as you can get.*

*You're my moon*, she replied.

And as Daniel set over the horizon, a new day dawned, with the new sun shining brightly.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## 1, The Month of Scampering, Year 15

I'm fifteen today, so say the priests anyway. They've made me start this journal; they want to chronicle everyone's lives past fifteen now.

I was born on the day of The Great Cataclysm. The day that five gods died in a great battle and the sun and moon disappeared from the sky. So say the priests, anyway. Two babies were found outside the rubble of Meridian, the city that fell. We had nothing but diapers and blankets, and we each held a piece of smoky crystal in our fists. We were taken in by a surviving priestess, who named me Kate after one of the dead gods. Daniel was named for another.

No one knows what happened during the war that caused the cataclysm. Gods fought. Lots and lots of people died. Two cities fell — Meridian and Leviathan City. Tons of refugees overwhelmed Lathe, which apparently was fine. One man says it was because of Kate's blessing, but whatever.

Rebuilding has been going on for years. Meridian is rising again, only on the ground this time. No one wants to rebuild Leviathan City, as it's close to that coral reef where all those ships keep sinking.

I'm not much of a historian. The priestesses of the Rising Sun want me to follow in their footsteps, but I've been spending more time at the Idea Emporium. The owner is pretty young, just a couple years older than me, but she does a great job of getting you ideas, if you can afford them.

Her brother's name is James. He is somewhat of an enigma; he won't talk about the cataclysm at all, and gets very somber and quiet when you ask him. I've learned not to. He's started an organization of sorts in Lathe, and the way I understand it they try to figure out what the rogue gods — the ones that didn't die — have been up to since the cataclysm. Priestess Meredith calls them blasphemous, but I want to find out what

they're about. You don't get found as a newborn on the day that tons of gods die and think it's a coincidence. I want to know where I come from.

James says he's still looking for people, and may have room for us in a couple of years. He's shooting for thirty-three members. Some older friends of ours from Lathe, Hutch and Wallace, are thinking of joining up this year. I hope they'll tell me what it's all about.

Daniel? What should I say about him? He's my best friend. We've been raised together. We used to go behind the temple when it was still being built and try to figure out if we were special. If we had powers. Daniel split his lip and I broke my arm during one of our divine tests. We kinda stopped after that. But we do almost everything together.

I can't imagine life without him.

Wait. Daniel's here, reminding me we need to go clean up the temple before the setting of the sun rituals. Tonight Daniel and I have our early birthday dinner with the temple. Tomorrow we go help with the building of a new temple in New Meridian.

It's a strange life, but a good one. I can't imagine anything else.

Kate

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**Sneak Peek**  
**at**  
**Stones**  
**The Afterlife Series VI**

## PROLOGUE

Adam-

I don't trust your using of the gargoyle to hide messages. I know we're the only ones who come up here, but it still doesn't feel safe.

I guess it's all we have left.

Amadeus is starting to worry me. The Games seemed to be a good idea to give us something to focus on besides scavenging in Meridian, but last night he said they have another purpose.

He wants to find the dead gods. And he wants to do that by sending the winners of the games into the wastelands.

Then I found out what happened to Marissa and Kevin. They didn't fall. Or rather, it wasn't an accident. Amadeus says they went willingly. He "sent" them. But they're not here to tell us if he's lying, are they?

I asked Amadeus that if Marissa and Kevin are already in the wastelands looking for the dead gods, why does Amadeus need more of us to go? He said said the Games make it a ritual, make it meaningful. Marissa and Kevin weren't worthy, and so he has to send more of us who are worthy.

Amadeus expects me to participate in the Games. And I can't away run to Lathe - to you - did you know he's started guarding the roads to the city?

I guess I am scared. I hate to admit it, but I am.

Is he making you participate?

I wish we could talk in person. I miss you.

Julie

J-

I miss you too. But Amadeus says I have to be alone - preparation, you know. He's still letting me go for my runs in the morning, but he has Timothy trail me. Timothy is afraid of heights, so I'm able to get up here while he waits for me at the bottom.

And I'm not getting ready for the Games; it's worse than that. He's already decided I'm going. He wants to fix my race. That's why I'm alone, studying the old texts of Barris, Kate, Daniel, and Morrigan. He only lets me out to run before the dawn, then I come straight back. After the Games, when he anoints the winners, I'll be there.

I had a thought, though. What if the dead gods left remains here on earth? The battlefield to the north has been declared sacred land since the fall, but I think that's a lie to keep us away from the pirates.

That said, the pirates or priestesses could have cleaned it out during their early pilgrimages. But I wish we could go there before we go through the Games. Amadeus says it's a holy journey. I just call it death.

What I ask him is how does he know the gods are dead in the first place? Just because they used to live among us doesn't mean they aren't active in the afterlife. I ask him how we are supposed to bring them back, since we'll be dead too. And we're not as strong as the gods. If they are having trouble coming back, what can a bunch of kids do to help them, right?

A-



Adam-

I can't believe you're going to die and you are so calm about it. I'm scared to participate in the Games, scared to win, more scared of Amadeus if it's obvious I am not trying to win.

He's dangerous. They follow him so blindly. Never underestimate the power of the person who controls the food, I guess.

If you're going, though, I'm going with you. I can't be here without you. No one else is wise to Amadeus, I'd be utterly alone.

Adam, we're not even going to see our 18th birthday. Does that make you sad?

Julie

J-

I'd never ask you to go over with me. But if I had to choose someone to go with, it would be you. Remember what we learned from the old god, Barris: at the highest point of weakness is when we find our strength.

Don't be afraid. If we go together, we can be stronger. And if we can find the dead gods, perhaps they can help us deal with Amadeus.

How is your training going?

A-

J-

You're gone, and Amadeus won't tell me where you went but I don't think he knows either. It's two days before the Games, and he's furious. Where are you? Did you leave without me?

A-

Adam-

I'm so sorry. You probably have heard I'm back by now, but I wanted to tell you the truth of where I went, who knows what lies Amadeus is telling about me. I told Amadeus I went to Lathe by way of the fields so I could avoid his sentry. But I went north.

I wanted to test your theory about the sacred lands. I walked to the wastelands to find the battlefield of the gods.

It's amazing. The pirates' bunkers are there, nearly buried in sand. No one is there, no pirates, no priestesses, no scavengers. What have the priestesses and Amadeus been spreading these lies for? They really want to keep us out of this area.

The sand is black. It's a poison place, a scary place. The ground gets darker and darker as you go north, until the battlefield.

Where the gods fought is obvious. In the middle of all the black sand, it's white, like it's been scoured clean. It's amazing. It does feel like hallowed ground. A perfect circle the size of Meridian, a shining disk in the sea of black sand. But there was nothing there aside from the sand. I'm sorry to ruin your hopes.

I did bring back two pouches of the sand. Yours should be hanging on the gargoyle's ear. I hope it hasn't fallen. I'm wearing mine around my neck--I thought if the ground is hallowed, then it can't hurt to have a blessing with us, can it? Not if we're going to the other side soon?

I will see you at the games. And then we will finally be together.

Julie

J-

Thank you for the sand, but the pouch must have fallen. The sand spilled out everywhere, in the gargoyle's lap, on the spire, and down in the ruins, I guess. I grabbed what little I could, but it's pretty much gone. I can't believe you made it to the battlefield and back in a day! I'll wear mine tomorrow, but if Amadeus finds out what this is, then we're both sunk. Keep it safe. I will finally see you tomorrow at the Games.

A-

Adam-

I lost. I can't believe I lost. I was ahead in the final race through Meridian, and Penny caught me at the destroyed temple and tripped me.

I crawled up to our spot, this spire next to the gargoyle. I can't go to the finish line and admit my defeat, can't watch you leave me. I'm sorry I'm weak.

Gods, you won't even get this. I can see them down there, I can see you at the finish line, looking for me. You and Penny will stand there with Amadeus smearing that foul machine oil on your forehead. Will you remember me in the other world? Will you look hard for the gods? Will you be married to her as Amadeus marries you together in life?

i don't see how I can fight Amadeus without you. I know I didn't win the Games, and I know I am not blessed by Amadeus, but I can control my destiny. All I need to do is step off this spire and I join you.

Will I have the courage? It's easy to allow someone else to hold the knife, as Amadeus is holding it now. You don't need to do anything but let him take you over to the other side.

He takes Penny first. You were right, he's done this before. Such a clean strike, straight to the heart. She falls. I can't see your face, but you're still, brave, waiting.

Run, Adam. You can outrun him, you can run, we can go north and hide in the pirates' bunkers. We can fight him.

And now you're gone.

I think you saw me. I thought our eyes met before you fell. Probably dreaming on my part.

You belong to the afterlife, now, and, according to Amadeus, you belong to Penny. You belong to the quest. But I can't let you go, not now. All

I need is one step. One step is nothing. One step is barely a thought. One step is no gift to give you, but I have nothing else to give right now.

I will see you soon.

Julie

I'm so sorry, Adam. I can't. I'm leaving this letter here, and not coming back.

J-

She let me say this much before I crossed over. I love you. Don't come after me. Live. Find something, someone. Beat Amadeus. Keep that sand safe around your neck.

I love you.

A



***AFTER THE GREAT RETURN  
AND THE RAISING OF MERIDIAN  
THESE LETTERS WERE FOUND.***

***THOSE WHO WITNESSED WHAT HAPPENED  
AND REMEMBERED THESE TEENS  
CONFIRMED THESE HOLY RELICS.***

***WE KEEP IT AT THE  
MERIDIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND RELIGION  
SO THAT WE WILL NEVER  
FORGET THEIR SACRIFICE.***

***PLEASE FIND THE OTHER EXHIBITS  
AS TO WHAT HAPPENED  
WHEN THE CHILDREN RACED  
AND DIED  
AND THE WORLD RETURNED.***

***KATE AND DANIEL'S BLESSINGS TO YOU  
AND JULIE  
AND ADAM  
AND MARCUS\****

***\*MARCUS IS REFERENCED IN OTHER RELICS.  
SEEK THE STONES.***