

EARTH

By Mur Lafferty

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The Afterlife Series III

Earth, The Afterlife Series III

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This is a work of fiction. Resemblances to persons living or dead is coincidental.

To Jason "Colin" Adams.
Keeper of the Silver Bullet and multiple in-jokes.

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EARTH

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SNEAK PEEK AT WASTELAND

THE AFTERLIFE SERIES IV

CHAPTER ONE

There's a point when you're so cold that you're not cold anymore. That's usually the point where hypothermia is so bad that you just lie down in the warm snow and die. Unless you're like those Buddhist monks who can meditate in the mountains and stay warm in nothing but thin white robes.

Or you're a god and then it means that you've mastered some sort of mind over matter test. This is what Kate hoped anyway.

Kate sat meditating in a cave, out of the worst of the wind and snow. Since taking over, Kate had found heaven both efficiently organized and a nightmare of details. Although the power had been coming to her more easily as the time went on, she still felt as if she were the captain of a grand fleet but didn't know how to swim. She'd done some research on the Wastelands, and told Ganymede — to whom she'd given a job since he didn't know what to do after Zeus's death — to keep things in order for her, just for a little bit.

Mortals never realize their full potential. People stay locked into dead-end jobs, in loveless marriages, in cities they hate, and they never explore their passions or what they're capable of if they just change one little thing. This is why they say unemployment is a great thing to happen to some people, because it forces them to act and do something they wouldn't normally do.

Mortals actually have a great deal of power to touch the world around them, to drive their own lives; they just never do it. Kate was no different: she lived with her unrequited love for years and only really told him that she loved him when she was sure she could never be with him.

That would be Daniel, the current guardian of hell. At that moment, he was climbing the mountain Kate meditated on, coming to her with a problem. He shone like a beacon in her awareness.

But back to potential. Kate pondered the issue of potential as she'd been trying to get her brain wrapped around the concept of all this power. She no longer felt the cold.

She could teleport. And this afternoon she created life — which she immediately regretted, since the kitten reacted immediately to the cold, shivering in her hands. Details like this she would have to remember: if she's going to make life, she should do it where it might actually have a chance of survival.

She sighed as she heard Daniel's feet at the mouth of the cave. Her heart quickened and she grumbled at it to slow down. Not opening her eyes from her meditation, she said, "You know, it would be a lot easier to get over you if you didn't visit me."

With her eyes closed, Kate still knew everything about him, especially his exasperated scowl, which he wore as he surveyed her cave. "What the hell are you doing? All this godlike power and you're freezing your ass off on a mountain?"

Kate opened her eyes. "Do I look cold?"

He shook the snow out of his hair and came inside the cave. "Whatever. I need to talk to you."

Kate abandoned the petty attempts to keep him at arm's length and invited him to sit next to her, his goose down jacket poufing around him.

"We're supposed to be rebuilding the world, or at least putting our own afterlives back in order. What are you doing up here?"

If she told him, he would demand a demonstration, so she just showed him. She concentrated briefly, and the cave shimmered and disappeared, its craggy walls becoming the dark green walls of the apartment they'd shared when they'd been alive. It was completed with the broken television in the corner and the Dresden Dolls poster with the torn corner hung over the couch. Kate had always begged Daniel to frame it, but he'd never got around to it. She settled back in the cushy green secondhand couch they bought that always smelled a little bit like Doritos. "I've been practicing. There's not a lot I can do until I get the hang of this whole power thing."

Daniel looked around and whistled. "I stand corrected."

"So, what have you been working on?"

Daniel got very busy loosening his coat. "Look. My world is a little bit more chaotic, thanks very much. I haven't had the luxury to study."

"You're whining."

He finally met her eyes, glaring. "Why are you riding me, Kate?"

Kate sighed and looked at the floor. "Because it's easier than jumping into your

arms and begging you not to leave me again. Now, what you need?"

He was silent. Kate couldn't tell if the flush in his face was left over from the cold, or something else. After a moment he cleared his throat. "It's this weather — well, the weather you had before you brought us here."

"Snow?"

"In hell."

"It froze over?"

He laughed, bitterness tingeing the sound. "I guess so. I hadn't thought of that whole 'hell freezing over' thing, but I suppose that's what's going on. Every place I've been to has been icy. Once I figured out you were on this mountain, I thought it was your doing."

"Why would you think that? Daniel, I don't have control over hell, and this mountain is in the Wasteland. I just came out here to meditate. I can't control the Wasteland either."

He snorted. "Well, shit. Kate, if you're not controlling the weather here, and I can't control the weather in hell, what good is all this power we're supposed to have?"

She stood, and the apartment disappeared. They were back in the cave. Kate wore a knitted cap, a pink goose down jacket, and her backpack. She rooted around inside, handed Daniel a Traveler's necklace, and took one out for herself. "I guess we should go find out."

He finally smiled at her and slipped the chain around his neck. They walked outside and looked around. The mountains surrounding them were uniformly snowy and stormy, except for one. A peak stood apart from the others: an odd Technicolor mountain both could have sworn hadn't been there before. Its pink peaks rose above the gray trees, yellow rivers, and bright green and blue grass.

"Did you see that place on your way up?" she asked.

Daniel shook his head. "You?"

"No, I teleported here. I haven't looked outside much."

Daniel just looked at her.

"What? I told you I've been practicing! Stop glaring at me and let's get going."

The going was easy despite the weather and snowdrifts. Kate and Daniel half-walked, half-slid down the mountain. At the bottom, the snow still fell, but the wind

had died considerably, making it easier to talk.

Daniel inspected two metal rails that ran along the low hills. “Are these train tracks? I thought the Wasteland had no roads.”

“I thought the Wasteland had no rules,” Kate said. “I guess if a train comes by, we should catch it.”

Daniel rubbed his forehead over his missing eye. “You know, I have to admit I hate modern-day adventures. Odin’s knowledge is no use to me at all in this case.”

Kate touched the god who resided in her own mind and found that Hermes had little help here either. “I guess we have to rely on our own talents here.”

“Great. I’m King of the Underworld and I’m catching a train like a hobo because I don’t know anything better to do?”

Kate laughed. “King. Right. And weren’t you that great homeless advocate back in life?”

“Yeah, what’s your point?”

“Well, isn’t ‘hobo’ kind of rude?”

“That’s what they were! Hobo was the name for a vagrant who traveled from job to job. He doesn’t want to be tied down. He’s not lazy; he’s just fiercely independent. It’s not a mean term for homeless person. It had more weight during the day when you could get on a train, go to a new town, and get a job in a farm or a factory. Today — well, I mean, when we were alive — that was more difficult. I don’t think there were many hobos in our time.”

She caught sight of a lone figure walking through the snow toward them. “Well, speaking of hobos, we could ask that guy walking the tracks.”

Daniel squinted his good eye. “Dude, he’s not just walking the tracks; they’re disappearing behind him.”

As the man neared, each wooden slat, and a couple of feet of rail it was attached to, vanished after his feet touched it. He raised his hand as he neared Kate and Daniel, smiling through the stubble on his face and chewing on a cigar butt. His clothes were patched with brightly colored ragged pieces of cloth, and one of his shoes was missing part of the toe, revealing a filthy sock. His ragged brown fedora was pushed back on his head so Kate and Daniel could recognize a brand on his dark skin: the Greek letter Omega. The hobo removed his hat with a flourish and bowed. “Well H. bless my soul; I

didn't think I'd see anyone on this trip. Not many people make the trek these days.”

Kate extended her hand and the hobo took it. “I’m Kate, he’s Daniel, and we’re Travelers headed for that mountain over there.”

“Professor Omega, the final hobo, at your service.”

“The final hobo?” Daniel asked.

Professor Omega’s smile died. “You don't know your hobo lore, do you? I was destined to walk the earth from job to job until all of the hobos went home to the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Once all the hobos are home, I roll up the tracks and we live in paradise.”

Daniel smacked his hands together, his gloves making a *whap* sound. “Of course, the Big Rock Candy Mountain! Hobo Heaven!”

“But why is it out here? Why isn’t it linked up to the other heavens?” Kate asked.

“Since when have hobos been linked to regular society?” said Professor Omega.

“Are you a god or something? The God of the Hobos?” Daniel asked.

“I’m just the last. The Hobo God rules the Big Rock Candy Mountain.”

“Do you think you could take us to talk to him?” Kate asked.

“Not many people want to see the Hobo God, but he is wise above all hobos.”

Daniel laughed. “We could use some wisdom right about now.”

Professor Omega extended his hand in front of him. “Then walk in front of me. Once I pull up the tracks, you won't be able to get to the mountain.” They began walking, paying more attention to following the tracks than heading straight for the mountain.

“Kate, if you're supposed to be in charge of heaven, shouldn't you be the Hobo God?” Daniel whispered.

Kate snorted, but Daniel looked completely serious. “I’m not going to go around from heaven to heaven staging coups to oust the remaining gods. If they have enough power to keep their heavens working well, then I’m not going to bother them. Besides, we need this guy’s help, remember?”

“So speaking of god, how’s the whole “god” thing working out for you?” Daniel asked.

Kate watched her feet and wondered how much she should tell him. “I'm getting the hang of a couple of things.”

“Like?”

“I really don't think now is—” she began, but Professor Omega interrupted them.

“Here 'tis!”

Things seemed both closer and farther away in the Wasteland, and they had arrived at the Big Rock Candy Mountain without noticing. They stood at a plain train platform as Professor Omega finished cleaning up the tracks that allow the trains to turn around. He joined them on the platform and grinned, his stained teeth glinting in the sunlight. Here, it didn't snow at all. The sun shone merrily down on the trees, which resembled weeping willows with cigarettes as leaves. A brown stream ran down the mountain, and by the looks of some of the hobos reclining on the banks, it was safe to assume the stream held whiskey. In higher elevations, great outcroppings of milky quartz — or, as Kate realized, rock candy — jutted from the side of the mountain.

A fat bulldog ran up to them, barking with a muffled *braf*. Kate knelt to pet her, but quickly pulled her hand back. “What’s wrong with that dog?”

“Dogs have rubber teeth here,” Professor Omega said.

Daniel nodded. “And I guess that's why that cop over there has wooden legs?”

“Of course!”

Kate shook her head. “This is a very weird place.”

Daniel removed his cold weather gear. “No weirder than some of the other places we’ve been to.”

Kate shrugged and removed her own winter clothes. “Professor, it never snows here?”

“Not a flake.”

“So can you take us to the Hobo God now?”

Professor Omega’s deep voice resonated as he laughed. “Honey-pie, the last hobo has come home. Can you give me just a second to enjoy it?”

Kate blushed. “Crap, I’m sorry; sure, go ahead.”

Professor Omega stepped from the platform to the Technicolor-green grass and inhaled deeply. Kate wrinkled her nose; stale cigarette smoke and the scent of apple pie wafted through the air. Professor Omega bent down and put his long, withered fingers, the lighter side tinged yellow with nicotine, into the grass. Reality seemed to shift slightly around them, disorienting Kate, and she got the feeling that a door was closing

somewhere. Immediately, all of the hobos in the vicinity looked their way and broke into scattered muted applause with their fingerless gloves. Then they went back to their business.

Professor Omega smiled and said, “Ah, feels good to be home. Now I can take you to our God.”

Daniel looked around incredulously. “That was it?”

“Sure! Hobos don't stand on much ceremony. Now, the way to the holy shrine is a bit of climb, but we may be able to catch a train along the way. There's a station up ahead.” They followed him up a winding path made of soft black rocks that Kate assumed were licorice. She expected a hobo Willy Wonka, complete with a brightly colored, patched suit, chewing on a cigar and singing “The Candy Man” in a strangled Tom Waits voice.

Daniel spoke from behind her. “Finally; something other than walking. You'd think we could magic up some scooters or something.”

Kate stopped to pet another rubber-toothed dog (who was really quite friendly). “I think there's something traditional about walking. Vision quests, tests of the soul, that kind of thing. Do you think the exodus of Moses would have had as much power if they'd all just hopped into vans and headed out?”

A train station appeared at the end of the trail, its tin roof silver and gleaming in the sunlight. Professor Omega climbed the stairs to the platform, waving at the hobos waiting for the train.

“Here we are at station Alpha. Him who you seek here you seek is off the Omega station. The train will be here soon.” He turned to the other men and women on the platform. “Hobos! What's the good word?”

A man in tattered clothes argued with a woman who looked as if she were wearing a beekeeper's suit and gloves, carrying a mesh helmet. A second man watched them, looking bored.

The first man looked as if he had small nubs coming out of his forehead. “Jane, you're full of rancid pie. I never seen no sign of anything of the sort.”

The woman snorted. “Carl, that's because you don't leave the mountain. I have bees to tend, and bee heaven is just a hop, skip, and a jump down the tracks. And I tell you what I seen: there were some right unhappy folk in the first class car. Folk with

bigger horn than you got.”

“And how the hell did you get to the first class car?”

Professor Omega put up his hands. “Hobos, what is the problem?”

The men recognized Professor Omega and bowed. “Professor Omega, it is an honor. Jane here says she saw some unlikely folk in the first class car outside, that’s all.”

“Well, she may have, Carl. She did travel the rail more than you did. But keep your manners, ‘bos; we have some guests.”

He turned to them. “Kate, Daniel, these are Jane the Boxcar Beekeeper and Antlered Carl. That quiet one over there is known as Unnervingly Candid Nicky Thane.”

Kate shook hands all around. “Hi. Nice antlers, Carl.” When she shook hands with Unnervingly Candid Nicky Thane, he looked at her with uncomfortably light green eyes. “You know, you remind me of my niece. Pretty girl. Bad with money. Got evicted, tried the hobo life, ended up homeless. Incredible disappointment to me. And you,” he said, pointing at Daniel, “Your fly is open, boy.”

Kate cleared her throat. “Uh, charmed to meet you, sir.” Daniel turned around and fiddled with his pants. *Yeah. Real charming.*

Jane put her hand on Professor Omega's arm. “I’m tellin’ you, Professor, what I seen was true. There were some right unhappy people meeting in the first class car. Not people I seen there before.”

Professor Omega nodded. “I’m on my way to see H. I’ll mention it to him.” Jane opened her mouth and started pointing at Antlered Carl, but a ripping sound interrupted her. She, Carl, and Professor Omega stepped back, and Kate and Daniel followed suit as they saw the tear appear in the air in front of them.

It was similar to the time Daniel would split reality between hells when they traveled together, slicing his katana through dimensions to step between realms. A ragged, black hair appeared about six feet off the ground and slid downward, bleeding electric blue sparks. When it touched the train platform, a blue, fingerless-gloved hand appeared, followed by an arm, shoulder, and skull-capped head with olive skin and electric black eyes shining bug-like through his round goggles. He grinned at everyone and stepped through the tear. When he was fully on the platform, he passed his hand over the rip and it was gone. The man’s suit, which looked high-tech and expensive, still had the dirty, ragged stamp of the hobo on it, looking well-worn and old.

“Hello ‘bos! Did I miss it?”

Nicky slapped the hobo on the back. “You missed it, Bela. The fire, the destruction, and the fact that I stole your best pair of gloves before I died.”

Professor Omega frowned at the new arrival. “Bela. You arrived after The Last. I don’t appreciate that.”

Bela never lost his grin. “Professor! I died years ago! I arrived here before any of these hobos; jumping through dimension just means I can leave at any time! Ask H; he’ll tell you. It’s a technicality. I’ve been counted. You’re still the last hobo; I just went wandering. I did get to see a pretty amazing end of the world where I was, though!” He looked at Kate and Daniel, who, Kate assumed, stood out like middle-class Americans at the Ritz. “Hello! You aren’t hobos! Who’s this?”

Jane waved her heavy beekeeper glove at them. “Visitors. Forgot their names.”

Nicky snorted. “Yes, their terrible, plain names. John and Mary, or something.”

Bela bowed again. “Hello, plain people! I am Alternate Dimension Bela Boost! I just came from the end of the world in Dimension Blue! Fascinating people. Pity they’re all dead now. But their afterlife will likely be fascinating too, now that I think about it!”

Kate shook her head, trying to clear it and focus on the important things. “Jane, what were you saying about the angry people in first—” she began, but a loud train whistle interrupted her.

A sleek golden train slid up to the platform, belching smoke that smelled like pie. Kate and Daniel were apparently forgotten as the hobos scrambled onboard to jostle for the first-class car. Daniel started to follow, but Professor Omega took his arm and led him and Kate to a waiting boxcar down the line. He sang “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” for them as they rode along, looking at the landscape that matched the song perfectly. Daniel laughed at the parallels, but Kate kept her mind on Jane and her first-class companions. It didn’t take the train long to climb the mountain and arrive at Omega station. Apparently no hobos were waiting in any of the other stations.

Still humming, Professor Omega led them up a short mountain path to a leaning, abandoned-looking shack. In front of it sat a large, merrily bubbling fountain. In the center, a cement statue of a hobo leaned slightly over and vomited forth a brown frothy liquid. Tin cups had been hung on little hooks all around the fountain, so Daniel took one and sampled the mixture.

“Dr. Pepper?”

Professor Omega nodded. “*Diet* Dr. Pepper. H don't like the extra calories.”

“H?” Kate asked.

“That is his name. H.” Professor Omega knocked twice on the door, and it opened immediately to reveal a small man who looked not at all like a hobo. His carefully combed hair was neatly cut and framed his clean-shaven face. His round glasses showed no indication that they had ever been shoddily repaired. He wore an immaculate blue suit and a look of polite inquisitiveness on his face. On his forehead was a tattooed “H” with a sunburst around it. Upon seeing him, Professor Omega knelt.

“Yes?” H asked.

Eyes on the ground, Professor Omega said, “It is done, Father. The world has ended. All the hobos are home.”

“That is wonderful news. Today shall not be wasted.”

“Today shall — hey!” Professor Omega hissed at Kate and Daniel. “Follow him!”

Together, with Kate and Daniel stumbling along, they repeated the god’s words. “Today shall not be wasted.”

H noticed them at last. “And you have brought me guests? These don’t look like hobos, Professor.”

“They’ve come for your counsel. They’re deities from other realms.”

H assessed them, and then motioned them inside the house. The one-room shack had a neatly swept dirt floor and a sagging bed sitting against one wall. Opposite the bed sat a wood stove with tin pots sitting atop it. No other furniture adorned the room. H sat on the bed and then graciously offered the floor to his guests. Kate and Daniel sat as Professor Omega waited by the door.

Kate cleared her throat. She felt out of practice with addressing deities, which he bitterly recognized as ironic since she was now one of them. “Thank you for seeing us. We’re ... relatively new at this and still getting the hang of everything.”

“Clearly,” H said. “You could've called. I have a cell phone.”

Daniel’s eye grew wide. “You have a cell phone? No one gave us cell phones!”

Kate rolled her eyes, reached into her backpack, and then handed Daniel a cell phone. He scowled at her and said, “Well ... no one gave us a *phonebook*.”

“Pity,” the hobo god said.

“Anyway,” Daniel continued. “The problem is that hell and most of the Wasteland have literally frozen over. The only place that’s not frozen is here. So we came to talk to you.”

“That’s simple; I don’t allow this area to receive snow.”

“Yeah, but how?”

The pleasant man’s voice gained an edge. “Have you come here for deity lessons? Did you receive no training? Did you not hear my prayer: ‘Today shall not be wasted’?”

From the door, Professor Omega repeated, “Today shall not be wasted.”

“What does that even mean?” Daniel asked, his voice getting higher.

“It means that the day shall not be wasted,” H said, throwing his arms to the side as if to embrace them. Kate winced, expecting a godly show of power, but nothing came except for more admonishment from the god.

“It means that whether you’re riding the rails, or begging for a pie from a housewife, or getting temporary work as a farm hand, or sleeping under the stars, you are doing exactly what you should be doing at any one time. It means that only true hobos can be hobos, because they know not to waste, and you, sir, are no hobo, because you are wasting my time. It means that even if you do not know how to do something, like make it stop snowing, you will figure out how to do it without bothering another hobo who has his own day to not waste!” He sighed and regained composure within a second, smiling at them again. “Now, I bid you good luck. I have my own day to not waste, and I suggest you do not waste yours.”

A creak sounded behind them as Professor Omega opened the door. Light spilled into the room, and Kate nudged the stunned Daniel to get him up. They left H and Professor Omega to their days, which presumably would not be wasted, and made their long walk down the mountain in silence.

Stepping off the Big Rock Candy Mountain landed them immediately back into the snowy Wasteland, and Daniel swore, realizing his coat had been left on the train platform. With no train tracks connecting it to the rest of the afterlives, the Big Rock Candy Mountain shimmered and faded from view. They began walking, and Daniel shivered.

“What now?”

Kate shrugged, not affected by the weather. “Don’t waste the day, I guess.”

He grimaced. “Thanks. Big help.” Then he brightened. “Hey, you turned the Wasteland into a carnival a while ago; can *you* make it stop snowing?”

Kate sighed. “Probably, but I have my own shit to deal with, Daniel. I can't bail you out. You have powers; you've had them since the beginning, you just never believed it. When you got mad and had to bust shit up, you did great! Where did that wonderful clarity go? You seemed fine when I last saw you.”

“Yeah, I had clarity, but that was before all the responsibility got piled on my shoulders. It got real. It got scary. And I didn't have you around to help me keep my head.”

Kate stretched her fingers out to take his hands, but from behind them, a great roar echoed through the mountains. They jumped. Daniel grabbed Kate's hand and began pulling her along.

“Hey, have you wondered — because I have — what happened to the gods who perhaps didn't want to give up their roles as heads of hell?” The roar came again, closer this time. It sounded as if something was determined, angry, and very fast.

Kate picked up speed. “You mean some demons who might want revenge? Yeah. Hadn't crossed my mind till now... I wonder if these were the first-class passengers that the bee hobo was talking about. Are you up for fighting?” She reached behind her for her sword.

Daniel made a choking sound. “Kate, I can't control the weather. What makes you think I'd be any use with a goddess's katana? I'd cut my own foot off.”

“Fair enough; I can probably take whatever it is ... maybe. Let's try the easy way out first. Run.”

They ran, then, their feet pounding the snow on the path that wound through the foothills. The mountains soon faded into the distance. Sometimes it did pay to be God. Kate and Daniel never saw their monstrous pursuer, and when its roars ceased, they slowed down.

Kate put her hand on Daniel's shoulder. Neither of them panted from their run. “Hey, check it out.”

“What?”

“It stopped snowing.”

Daniel looked around, surprised. The sandy Wasteland was pleasantly warm.

“Huh. I guess I started angsty over something that was actually important.”

“Looks like you just needed some direction.”

“So the day wasn’t wasted.”

“Guess not. Are you okay to get back to work?”

“Yeah. I should probably start doing some research on who would be pissed at me for taking this job. What are you gonna do?”

Kate looked back toward the direction of the mountains. “Back to meditation, I guess. Although I need to get back to work soon, too.”

“I don’t think you should go back to the mountains ...”

“You may be right. Work, then. I’m probably ready.”

Daniel smiled at her, making her heart twist painfully. “Thanks, Kate. And hey —” He took her hand.

“Yeah?”

“I still-”

She didn’t let him finish. “Yeah. Me too. I’ll see you around.” She squeezed his hand and let it go.

Before she did anything she’d regret, or worse, that embarrassed her, Kate concentrated briefly, and then appeared in her study, which had been untouched since Yahweh left it. She smiled to herself, knowing she’d see Daniel again soon. They had the Earth to rebuild, and there was the matter of those demons. Regardless, the day would not be wasted.

CHAPTER TWO

Daniel looked around his office, his lip curling. Red-skinned demons, with curling horns and tails ending in perfect arrowhead points, worked tirelessly in cubicles, shuffling paperwork. A huge humanoid male, wearing caveman skins (Daniel had dubbed him “Fred Flintstone” in his head) walked the cube aisles threatening the workers with a whip.

"Why does this have to be my hell?"

No one answered him. They didn't acknowledge his arrival. But Fred did nod to him, making some sort of salute with his whip hand, causing the flaming tip to ignite a nearby stack of papers. Daniel rolled his eyes as the demons frantically tried to swat the flames out, Fred whipping them the entire time.

Shaking his head, Daniel returned to his office. This was a more acceptable sanctuary; he'd decorated it with old Clash posters and his own personal coffeemaker. Coffee was served in his office, but it was always the last inch of coffee in the pot, scorched and sludgy. The demons couldn't get enough of it.

Daniel collapsed on the cushioned couch in the corner.

When he stopped the snow in the Wasteland, he'd felt as if it were a natural function of his being, like when he'd torn through space with Izanami's katana, or when he'd been reborn from Anubis's mouth. All of those had felt as though that were what were supposed to happen, a natural progression. Why couldn't he do anything now?

Well, for one thing, he allowed, *Kate has Ganymede; she isn't alone.* Not to mention angels — intelligent advisers who were good to the core, sworn to help her every need. She had her own shit to deal with, he was certain, and maybe he wasn't looking hard enough.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. He needed helpers, advisers, someone the least bit competent. Two pops sounded from either side of his head and he opened his eyes. An angel version of himself hovered over his left shoulder, a devil version on the right. They looked exactly like him, down to the rag covering his eye, only they were

dressed in cheap Halloween costumes.

“You called, boss?” the devil asked.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Daniel said rubbing his eye. “I want a real advisor!”

The little versions of him disappeared and someone knocked at the door. Fully expecting Bugs Bunny, Daniel opened it, wincing. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw who stood there.

A small man watched him through nervous watery eyes; they bulged slightly from their sockets and thin hair hung into them. There were no devil horns, no fire leaking from his nose, and he didn't look as if he had a sliver of Daniel's conscience. In fact ... it looked as if he were utterly terrified.

“Well?” Daniel asked finally, when the little man didn't say anything.

The man jumped. “I — ah ... I'm Kevin. I'm your new assistant.”

“Oh, thank G — uh. — I mean it's great that you're here. Come in.”

Daniel let him in and flung himself onto the couch. Kevin perched like a frightened bird in an easy chair that had appeared nearby.

Then Daniel grinned at him. “You don't know how good it is to see you. I'm up to my eyes in clichés. What the hell is going on around here? It's like this place is stuck in the mid-twentieth century view of hell and we can't get out of it.”

Kevin's eyes darted nervously around as if he were looking for an exit. “Um ... well, the information I have is that previous management greatly enjoyed the whimsical depictions of him that appeared during that time. It was better than the screaming souls and entrails that had been drawn and written about before then.”

“I guess makes some sense. But I didn't really expect to see a cartoon out of my office door.”

“You could change it to anything you like,” ventured Kevin.

Daniel waved his hand, dismissing the thought. “I don't want to mess with the system until I understand it. But that's why you're here. So what's your story? Are you a damned soul?”

Kevin looked at the ground. Daniel wondered if he'd said something rude. “I was declared a heretic in 1480 and tortured to death by the Spanish Inquisition and sent to hell.”

Daniel made a disgusted sound. “Did you ever kill anyone? Rape? Steal?”

Kevin shook his head at all of these. Daniel briefly wondered if he would be able to tell if his assistant were lying. The knowledge he gained from Odin stirred briefly and said that he would.

Where the hell have all of you been? Daniel thought crossly.

He returned his focus to Kevin. “You suffered in hell for the past six hundred years because the Inquisition thought you were a witch?”

Still looking at the ground, Kevin nodded.

Daniel sighed, “All right, well, welcome to the job. I don’t think that you have a lot to fear here in terms of the whole torture thing. Unless administrative duties make you cringe.”

“I was a scribe for the monastery, before the Inquisition.” Kevin said. “I’m not a stranger to work.”

“How did you get branded a witch if you were already in a monastery?”

Kevin shrugged. “I believe some monks from the nearby city suggested that some people at monastery loved Christ the Lord more than others. I was deemed one of the ones who did not love enough.”

Daniel shook his head as the stories of the subsequent religious rivalries filled his head.. With his backup system apparently in place again, he relaxed. *Why had they been silent?*

“You must eventually learn to do this on your own,” whispered the voice of Izanami.

“Because I did so well on my own when I didn't have you guys. Good idea!”

Kevin showed no sign of surprise that Daniel would be talking to himself aloud. Daniel shook his head, hoping he was giving the gods within a good tumble, and sighed. “All right, first I want coffee. Not the kind of coffee you get in hell either. I want the kind of coffee Kate can get in heaven. Secondly, I guess I need to see a map of all the hells, and who has ruled them or rules them now.”

Kevin paused and Daniel raised an eyebrow. “I am unable to leave hell until I am absolved or given a passport.”

“If I absolve you, then you go to heaven, and I can't have an assistant,” Daniel said, thinking aloud. “I’ll need your help for a while.” He reached inside his shirt and removed

his Traveler's pendant, now in the shape of goat's head, and handed it to Kevin. "Take good care of it."

Kevin nodded and left the room.

Daniel stretched back on the couch. No wonder hell was in such bad shape if all the help he could count on were the damned souls and demons. *Who came up with this system?*

Maybe I can work something out with Kate for a work exchange program. Daniel put his arm over his eyes, sighing. *I'm becoming middle management, a corporate drone, something I railed against all my life.* Now he was stuck, for eternity, in a corporate atmosphere. His stomach rolled over again and he thought again about why ruling hell was his own personal hell. What was Kate up to? Was administration in heaven any easier? It probably had to do with bonbons and a seamlessly efficient system.

Daniel got up and paced about the office. In addition to his own Clash posters, there were framed "art" from those Successories people. Tacky posters of eagles and desert vistas hung from the walls, proclaiming that Daniel had only to apply himself to succeed, to soar, to rule. His mahogany desk was sparsely decorated with a blotter and a mug that said, "Number One Boss."

What the hell was a blotter anyway? And what did people use it for? Where is my computer? His mood growing increasingly foul, he finally glared at the eagle on the wall, incinerating it at a glance. This was ridiculous.

The room, including the Clash posters, was in flames by the time Kevin walked back into it, a to-go container of Starbucks in his hand. He didn't seem startled by Daniel's outburst; he just held the coffee away from the flames while Daniel pouted on the couch. Daniel eventually looked up and said, "Crappy first day, huh?"

"Seems to be that way, sir."

The office building itself remained untouched by Daniel's flames, and demons and angels with black wings still hunkered over uncomfortable-looking desks.

"What are they doing?" Daniel asked, pausing at a demon's desk to pour sugar into his coffee.

"Processing damned souls. With the end of the world it's been a lot harder to keep up."

“Why do we need to keep up, exactly? Can’t they just come down here and be flung into the pit of fire?”

Kevin shook his head, “Not if they’re Chinese and destined for the Plains of Ice. Each god of hell demands his or her rightful souls.”

Daniel became very still. “But I thought I was the god of hell. Hel left her realm; Hades is still imprisoned. The Adversary left me the deed.”

Kevin paused, looking as if he were thinking of a diplomatic way to answer. “That ... is ... not entirely true. Not all the gods gave up their posts, and ones who did are not gone, but merely not ruling. Others are ... I believe you could call them ‘middle management.’”

“So I rule them and they keep things moving?”

Kevin nodded.

Daniel plucked a file off the demon’s desk. It contained a dossier of a woman's life: her bio; her pictures; her list of sins, including theft; her religions — she belonged to three during her life. The details of her death: vaporized in the final war. A destination: Dis.

“So this demon deals with the Christian hell?”

“Oh no, sir, Christian hell is processed by every demon on this floor as well as the two below it. Muslims get the next two floors. Below that are the three to cover the Buddhists and every floor below that are the thousands of other smaller religions.”

Fascinating, isn't it? Odin asked wryly.

“When did you get a voice, old man?” Daniel asked.

When you finally got some power worth addressing.

Daniel shrugged. “So what exactly am I needed for, aside from burning down a shitty office?”

“The lords of hell are not docile creatures.” Kevin said. “They frequently push for dominance and ...”

A familiar roar that had never really left Daniel’s thoughts sounded, shattering the windows by the cubes to Daniel’s left.

Undaunted, Kevin nodded, “And there is the matter of the demons who resent your ascension.”

Daniel sighed. This was not the best first day on the job; he hadn’t even been able

to make a speech to his new employees.

“Did you get the map I asked for?”

Kevin nodded.

“And does fire hurt these guys?”

Kevin shook his head.

“Well, hell. The world’s already in chaos, it might as well be my chaos. I hate this building anyway.”

The demon roared again, shaking the building.

“Will fire hurt whatever that is?” Daniel asked hopefully.

Kevin shook his head again.

“Blast. Ah, well.” Daniel reached his back where Izanami’s katana appeared. He drew the black blade, concentrated briefly, and the room around him burst into flame. The files on the desks burned and the demon sat back from the flames, unperturbed. The building shook again and Daniel swung his blade, ripping through the air and opening a bleeding wound.

“After you,” he said, pushing Kevin through and following after. Whatever it was didn't follow. Daniel sighed with relief. “We’re really gonna have to figure out what that thing is and how to deal with it at some point.”

Not to mention the relative chaos you just plunged hell into, said the quiet voice of Anubis.

“Yeah. Yeah.”

CHAPTER THREE

Kate hunkered over the desk in her office, the one she still considered God's office even though he had left it to her, and looked at her own map. The map of the metaphysical made no sense. When she had wandered the roads as a Traveler, heaven had seemed laid out in an easily navigable geography, but apparently that had been her own perception. Instead of being on a two-dimensional XY grid, heaven had what seemed to be four dimensions, with a Z axis going up and down, and a W axis bisecting — and in some cases — actually surrounding some locations with others as if it were a hungry amoeba.

A knock sounded at the door and her head snapped up. "Goddammit! Can I never get a moment to concentrate here?"

The door opened and in came the young boy, Ganymede, who frowned at her. "You swore again, Goddess."

Kate ran her fingers through her tangled hair. "Look. He knew what he was getting into when He gave me the keys to this place. Just think of it as taking my own name in vain. I'm keeping myself humble. Now, what's up?"

"Another visitor has requested an audience."

"I am never going to get things back in order if I keep getting interrupted, Ganymede."

"This is a matter of some urgency, Goddess."

Kate groaned and rubbed her forehead where a headache threatened, but nodded.

Ganymede had spent eons serving Zeus, and had made it clear to Kate that he knew something about matters of state. Plus, he made excellent tea.

He bowed as an elderly woman entered the room, but she was no frail grandmother. She held a golden-winged helmet respectfully by her side, and her iron gray hair was braided and pinned to her head. Her golden armor, dented but clean, gleamed in the torchlight. A wicked long sword hung at her side, and a round iron shield at her back, and she nodded to Ganymede as he respectfully backed out of the room.

Kate accessed the divine knowledge in her mind, which included much that she had gotten from Daniel, and smiled when she realized whom she faced. She stood and walked across the room with wide strides. She grasped the woman's gauntleted forearm firmly.

"Skuld, it is an honor. I'm so glad to see that you survive Ragnarök."

The Valkyrie smiled, strength and energy making her seem younger than her years. "They're already talking about you, girl. The bards — those who are left — are already telling tales of your greatness. Your battles. Your loves."

Kate smiled weakly, a flush beginning in her cheeks, as usually happened when someone spoke to her about Daniel. Hermes snickered in her mind, reminding her that Daniel had not been her only lover in the afterlife. Daniel had warned her that Skuld didn't mince words, and Kate sighed inwardly with relief as Ganymede appeared unbidden with flagons of mead, and a tray of rich meats and bread. Kate offered a seat and a mug to Skuld.

After taking a long drink of the brew, Skuld drew a knife and began sawing away at a roast.

"I would like nothing better than for this to be a social call, girl. It is a goal of mine to teach you to knit. You can learn so much about a person by what they knit, you know. But there are other things to discuss. Odin would leap from Daniel's head and throttle me if I wasted any more time.

"You know about Ragnarök; of course you do. You're the Goddess. It was tasked to the Valkyries and the remaining Goddesses, those who had no prophecies, to clean up the men's messes and rebuild the world. My sisters are planting a new world tree. My sisters in arms are hunting the last of Loki's and hell's supporters, but there is the matter of the world to rebuild."

Kate swallowed her own mouthful of mead, feeling guilty. She'd known she and Daniel were supposed to rebuild the Earth, but the fact of their godhoods had been a little overwhelming.

"I wasn't aware that there was a time limit."

Skuld cast a sideways eye at Kate. Kate shrugged, irritated.

"I'm learning as I go, okay?"

Skuld drained her mug and stood. Kate followed suit, wondering if she had

offended her. The Valkyrie picked up her helmet and headed for the door. She paused, looked back at Kate, and said, "Are you coming?"

"Oh." Kate grabbed her backpack from its hook and scrambled after her.

* * * * *

Now this was the way to travel. Screw that walking stuff. Skuld was mounted on a heavy white war steed, and Kate on a thinner gray horse. They galloped over hills and sandy dunes and rocky terrain. They didn't stop, and Kate didn't ask where they were going. She'd never ridden a horse before, and was delighted with the sensation.

They pulled up on the edge of a sandy expanse, a Wasteland near a shadowy heaven of fans for a popular science fiction movie, who had adapted the film's religion for their own. Kate fought the urge to explore this sparsely populated — but seriously tempting — heaven of adventure, and focused on what Skuld was saying.

"I can't take you to see the actual solar system," Skuld said. "Only you have the power to do that, but I'm not sure you have wisdom right now, so I will show you here."

She reached out and plunged her hand into the sand, raising a golden orb.

"This is Sol, our Sun."

Planets followed her hand movements. Mercury, Venus, Mars, and the asteroid belt all moved through the sand in their orbits. An indentation formed between Venus and Mars, a small hole that didn't follow the other planets' movements.

"There is our Earth," Skuld said, pointing to the hole. "Destroyed in the physical sense, but also in the metaphysical sense. No gods are there, no people, no worshippers of any kind. It has left a void; it has left a hole."

Sand began slipping in to the hole faster and faster, increasing in diameter. Kate's stomach rolled over as the hole grew larger, encompassing Venus and Mars, and finally Mercury. As the edges of the hole began to eat away at the asteroid belt and the Sun, Kate threw up her hand and wiped the demonstration from the sand.

Skuld watched her.

"But if there's no life on those planets, why do we care if they die off? We can make a new Earth and it won't matter if there are other planets around it or not. What's the rush?"

Skuld spat into the sand. "Think, girl. There is the matter of balance. The physical must be balanced with the metaphysical. The world was begun and ended, and begun again over and over during an expanse of time that is so long that it has no name. If it is not renewed then, well, we don't know what will happen, but I for one do not want to find out."

Kate squatted on the sand, and Skuld's example rose again, the hole sucking sand into it.

"What's on the *other* side of that hole?"

* * * * *

Kate sat again on top of her mountain, meditating. She slowed her breathing, and after many hours her consciousness drifted up and out over the land, higher and higher through the atmosphere. She didn't know what she hovered above, since the Earth was gone, but with a thought she pushed herself to view the solar system from far away, from the vantage point of a god: just planets, seven of them, and a little orbiting hunk of debris about ninety-three million miles away from the Sun. But the physical was not what Skuld had been talking about. It was the metaphysical.

The power, and the gods, and the humans, and the worshiping, and the sacrifices. She concentrated again and saw the solar system from a different point of view. The Sun, she was surprised to see, was a god himself. Not ruling anything, but content to radiate his light and heat to the universe. The dead body of the Moon, a goddess, was also floating among the debris, and Kate mourned her. But the Earth — the Earth was indeed a black spot against a starry sky. A hole where there should be none. It was just as Skuld had said.

With a gasp, she opened her eyes. Daniel was beside her in the cave, grasping her forearm. Beyond him stood an earnest-looking young man with slightly bulging eyes and brown hair.

"Dammit! You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, but I've been calling your name for the past ten minutes. Where did you go?"

Kate rubbed her face, trying to calm her racing heart.

"I'll tell you in a minute. We've got some stuff to talk about. But you first. What's going on? What are you doing here?"

"Well, we have a problem, Kate."

Kate sighed. "No, Daniel. We have two."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Why did you have to make an old picnic table? That's all I'm saying," Daniel said, shifting uncomfortably on the wooden planks of the bench and flicking an ant off of his napkin.

Kate didn't pay attention to him, caught up in stirring gravy into her mashed potatoes. Finally, she smiled and said, "I was feeling nostalgic." They sat in a meadow at the foot of the Wasteland Daniel was beginning to think of as "Kate's Mountain." The snow was gone, thank goodness, and a warm breeze stirred the grass around them. Kate had magicked up a picnic table and some fried chicken and they sat together as if metaphysical bogeys were not breathing down their necks.

Daniel's eyes kept flitting to the horizon, even though Kevin reassured him that demons would not follow them to the Wasteland. Daniel told him of the Big Rock Candy Mountain incident and Kevin had simply said that the hobo heaven was not a Wasteland and therefore a loophole. Daniel didn't waste time wondering how a monk from the Spanish Inquisition knew what the word "loophole" meant.

Kevin politely stripped the fried skin off of his chicken and nibbled at the meat underneath and did not raise his eyes from the ground.

"You know what's been bothering me?" Kate asked, wiping chicken grease from her hands. "We experienced, or caused, the end of the world. Everyone died. Religions had prophecies fulfilled. And yet, there were some key elements that I'm not sure of: if they happened and what became of them. Like, well, the world ended but we could see that there was no big war between God and the Devil. They both seemed fine. There was no winner, just a war that killed everyone."

Daniel swallowed his mouthful of chicken. "And?"

"My point is, Ragnarök happened the way it was supposed to. But the biggest 'end of the world' story in present day..."

"Past day."

"Past day. Whatever. Fundamentalists rode their high horses talking about the

Rapture and how they were going to be lifted in the air and the rest of us were going to be eaten alive. There was this cranky bitch in line at Morton's grocery store once who was telling me how she was looking forward to flying. And then she looked at me all pity-filled saying I should give my life to Jesus before I got devoured by some big-ass demon."

Daniel smacked the table. "Jesus!"

"What?"

"No, no, the actual guy, Jesus Christ. Where is He? He was supposed to come back and lead the armies and win the war and rule the new world of peace."

Kate nodded slowly and pulled a book out of her backpack. "Yeah, He was supposed to come and raise all the dead who, strangely enough, were supposed to fight on the Devil's side. So Jesus gives Satan an army just to destroy it?"

"Well, God gave us Jesus so we could kill Him."

Kate frowned. "Well, it's a little simplistic of an explanation."

"Well, maybe the zombie army thing is a simple explanation, too."

"But did it happen? The Earth isn't back. Not yet, anyway. So where's Jesus?"

Daniel wadded up his napkin. "Oh man! If we're going to go on another hunt through miles of afterlife again to find someone, I'm going to be pissed. Wait," he interrupted himself. "He did come back. I know that much. I met the Wandering Jew and that Roman guy who slapped Christ and they said that the Second Coming had released them from their eternal lives and let them go to heaven."

"So where is He?" Kate wondered aloud.

Simultaneously, they looked at Kevin, who spoke as if he were from the twentieth century but ate as if he'd never experienced fried chicken before. He looked up and saw the two staring at him and then colored.

"Fess up, Kevin," Daniel said. "There's more that you're not telling us." The gods in both his and Kate's head, since they shared aspects of the same gods, had told them to look to the assistant for answers.

Kevin cleared his throat and glanced at Daniel, still refusing to look at Kate. "Right now, the metaphysical world is in a great deal of flux. Gods died and, um, some have been absorbed by the two of you. Some still exist. Anubis still judges souls. Izanami still controls her Underworld. And other gods are reborn."

Daniel cringed inwardly. "Heaven and hell are feeling much less like kingdoms and more like timeshares."

Kate crushed her napkin, opening her palm to reveal nothing. She waved her hand and the remains of their lunch went away. Daniel blinked and they were back in her office again. "God, would you please warn me before you do that again?"

"Hmm?" Kate asked, and then shook her head as if to clear it. "Oh, sorry."

"What's going on, Kate?" Daniel asked, suddenly feeling very out of the loop.

"Nothing. Sorry. Headache. I was just thinking it was time we stop worrying about the other gods. Let them deal with their own issues. We've got the Earth to rebuild."

Kate took Daniel into space and showed him the hole in the universe. It took longer than Daniel expected it to for him to calm his mind to expand his awareness to match hers, but he was finally able to. Kate's patience with him was supposed to help, he knew, but it just annoyed him. The aspect of Hermes he had taken on when he and Kate had made love pointed out to him that when Daniel had accepted his divinity, he was the calm one, while Kate was the angry, impatient one. But Daniel ignored him. He was still mad at Hermes.

Although he had no physical body, he could've sworn he gasped when he saw the solar system before him, the slowly growing black hole in their existence. He was also sure he could feel Kate's hand squeeze his own as she spoke inside his head. "It's bigger since the last time I was here."

"Where you think it goes?" he asked her.

"I don't know."

"Wanna find out?" He tried to make his tone playful, but she answered in quick seriousness.

"No."

And they were back in the Wasteland with Kevin watching over their bodies. Daniel gasped in shock. Kate stretched, wincing. "Yeah, it's not fun coming back, is it?" she said. Daniel shook his head, eyes wide.

"How are we going to deal with this, Kate? This is bigger than we are. I can't even deal with a monster in a world where I'm in charge."

"We'll deal. We have to." Kate frowned. "Hey, do you know what that monster thing is?"

“I meant to look it up, but then you dropped a little ‘we have to fix Earth now’ problem on me.”

“I wish you would stop whining,” Kate said, making room on her table for Kevin to spread out maps of hell.

“Hey, check it out! Is that where we were?” Daniel blurted, pointing to a charred spot on the map that was still warm.

“Oh yes, sir,” Kevin said. He pointed to other smoldering parts of the map. “These are fire hells.”

It later turned out that slick, cool parts of the map were ice hells. Daniel was reminded of the coolest *Dungeons & Dragons* map around, needing only little monsters to represent the demons that wanted to eviscerate him.

Maybe he didn't need those little monsters.

Seeming more relaxed than he had been since meeting Kate, Kevin pointed to the map. “From what you told me, this was your path through hell. You jumped from area to area, using Izanami’s sword, avoiding the maze of roads through hell. That was a smart move. Her Underworld, incidentally, is over here, near Dis.”

“Huh. Maybe we should go visit her and see how she’s doing,” said Daniel. He looked up briefly to see Kate staring at Kevin, her eyes intense. The assistant looked at the floor again. “Dude, don’t intimidate him,” Daniel said.

“Did you see the hole in the universe? Can we get to work, please?”

“Oh sure. You're not followed by a demon that wants to devour you.”

“Man, you’re selfish. Daniel, you're safe here. We’re surrounded by thousands of flame sword-wielding angels. We have a huge problem and we have to start working on it.” They stared at each other for a moment, tension making the air nearly crackle between them. Daniel was about to break the tension by cracking a joke, but Kate broke eye contact and walked through the door that should have led to the hall. Daniel followed, grumbling.

Daniel looked around the room and whistled. Instead of echoing, his little sound seemed to dissolve sadly nearby, as if it were too tired to even attempt to travel. Kate craned her head back. “When I was a kid, we visited NASA in Florida. And I remember them telling me that the room to build the shuttles was so big that it created its own atmosphere and had its own weather. Seemed like a good place to build things, so ...”

The white walls stretched away from them and up, like another dimension unto themselves. If Daniel stared too hard at them, he began to get queasy. He cleared his throat. "So, uh, where do we start?"

Kate reached into her pocket and pulled out a small gray kitten. "I created her with a thought in the mountains a while ago. Of course, she didn't appreciate that, since she's not really a snow-loving species, but I at least learned a lesson."

"Kate, we're not going to remake Earth piece by piece, are we? I don't know every species on Earth. We don't know all the geologic stuff or even anything about weather."

Kate sighed as the gods began to speak up in Daniel's head. "How did the world get created in the myths, Daniel? It wasn't God sitting around planning things, deciding on this religion or where noses should go on grasshoppers. The land, the people, the animals were all sneezed or spit or bled or shat out. It's all metaphysical. It doesn't need to be cataloged; we just need to do it."

Daniel made a face. "I am not shitting out the Earth. That's one of the nice things about divinity that I've managed to stop doing."

Kate grimaced. "Thanks for the 'too much information' moment. I'm just saying that our power is bigger than we are and we need to remember that and make use of it." She rubbed her head above her right eye. "I just wish I could think of the next step."

Daniel turned to ask Kevin for advice but he wasn't there. "Where's Kevin?"

"I didn't let him in. This for us to do and I'm not sure I trust you bringing a damned soul here."

"Oh, come on, Kate! What the hell do you expect me to do? I'm alone down there. You certainly aren't helping me. I had to turn to someone. Why are you busting my balls? What the hell did I do to you?"

Kate's voice was tense as she closed her eyes. "I really would love for you to tackle one of these problems without whining about it. Just one. Why don't you ask all those gods in your head? Mine sure as hell won't shut up. I can't be your mom. I can't hold your hand. I'm trying to deal with my own shit."

"I thought we were a team. We always supported each other. Why am I here if we're ..."

She finally met his eye, tears brimming. "If you don't know why, then I certainly can't tell you. Just get out of here. I'll deal with the world."

To hell with her. Or with him. Daniel opened the door to head back into the office and get Kevin when a noise made him stop. His senses had gotten better with divinity, but this was much bigger than simply keen hearing. Kate's tears had slipped from her eyes and fallen toward the concrete floor where they landed, not with a plop but with a gush. It sounded as if something had been set free. The roar that followed immediately thereafter had him scrambling back to grab Kate and pull her out of the way. But there was no point.

She stared transfixed as tears continued to roll down her face and land on the floor, where water swirled in a whirlpool, much more water than had come from her eyes. It grew exponentially with each tear that fell. Kate squinted and gasped in pain and she brought both hands to press her forehead. Daniel's stomach rolled over as blood dripped from her nose and mixed with the water, solidifying within the pool.

"Holy shit," Daniel said and ran forward in awe to support Kate as the blood flowed faster. He reached inside himself for Odin's healing skill, but the gods in his head stopped him.

Not yet, muttered the All-Father.

She's tougher than you think, advised Hermes.

Daniel remained by her side, holding her. She wept and bled and the world formed below her. Later, he would realize that it took very little time but it seemed an eternity as he watched his friend create this glorious thing in sorrow and pain.

Finally, she was done. The tears dried and the nosebleed stopped and Kate was finally able to remove her hands from her head. Panting, she stared at the hovering, churning sphere about twelve feet in diameter. Continents and islands passed by slowly as the sphere, the Earth, rotated.

Daniel took her in his arms and just held her gently. "That was amazing." She rested her head on his shoulder so she could still see what she created.

"It's a little small, isn't it?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Daniel had healed the nosebleed and the headache had ebbed. Kate figured she could have healed the damn thing herself (she had Odin within her too, after all) but her shell-shocked and numb mind would not focus. She was dimly aware of Daniel and Ganymede trying to rouse her, but she didn't care. The gods in her head were, for once, mercifully silent. She slept for a bit, woke, and then slept some more. After making sure she was all right, Daniel left, taking his sycophantic assistant with him. Kate was both sad for his departure and relieved to be left alone.

She found that she preferred to sit in the vast room and watch the Earth grow. It did not stop when she and Daniel left. Now, she guessed, it was the size of a small country, the room growing around it, and still growing. The landmasses were strangely different from the Earth that Kate remembered but still felt familiar, as she supposed any mother regarded her child as familiar. One huge landmass spanned both Northern and Southern hemispheres in a roughly circular shape. Small islands dotted the rest of the world. Kate was watching the world spin and grow when the door behind her slammed open. Heavy footsteps came up behind her.

"Hello, Skuld," Kate said.

Daniel's bitter voice came from behind Skuld. "Oh, sure, she'll talk to a Valkyrie."

A heavy gloved hand came down on her shoulder. "You done good, girl. Better than I expected. I figured you two would have done it together, but this is fine indeed."

"We did do it together," Kate said, not taking her eyes from the globe.

"Come. The world can do without you for a bit. We're going on a trip."

Kate followed Skuld docilely to the horses outside the gates of heaven and didn't complain as the Valkyrie lifted her into a saddle behind Daniel. She wrapped her arms around his chest and rested her head on his back. The horses cantered away from heaven and the rocking motion lulled her to sleep again. She awoke as the light faded. They were back in hell, or at the entrance. This was a bad thing, but Kate couldn't remember why. They paused at the mouth of the cave and Daniel lifted Kate off the back

of the horse.

"Take her to Izanami," Skuld ordered. "I will wait out here." Daniel nodded and took Kate's hand, and together they walked in Izanami's underworld. The cave held dry corpses lying propped against the walls and stuffed into alcoves.

"I love what she's done with the place," said Daniel. The cave got much wider and more heavily populated by rotting bodies as they traveled the downward-sloping floor. Eventually it opened into a huge throne room where Kazuko, Izanami's human form, waited for them, smiling. She went first to Daniel and hugged him, then turned to Kate.

"I heard what you've accomplished. I'm impressed, but I'm not surprised to see you are here. Come talk to me."

"But ..." Daniel said.

"This is for women to discuss, Daniel," Kazuko said, and led Kate to a doorway in the cave wall. The room on the other side gleamed with candlelight and the tapestried walls give a sense of warmth in this dank underground world. Kate sat on the tatami floor and accepted the tea Kazuko handed her.

"You cannot focus. You get too much of yourself, yes?" Kazuko said.

Kate sipped the tea, feeling some sense of comprehension return. "I didn't mean to do it that way. I didn't want to give birth over and over again, or do something gross with bile like Susanoo did." Kazuko frowned at the mention of her stepson, but Kate continued. "Daniel made me so mad that I just started crying. Then it happened."

Kazuko nodded. "Even as gods, we cannot control everything. Take me: I died in childbirth. My husband could not stop that. He killed my son. My son could not stop that. And Susanoo could not stop Daniel from freeing me, and my husband could not stop me from killing him once I found him. We are not all-powerful, despite the power we do have. Before I died I created the world, but after I was freed from my prison of death I was more powerful than ever."

Kate squinted at her. "Why?"

"I am no longer one woman. I am created of millions of tiny minds. I can split myself and learn two things, four things, a million things at once. I can send a spy with my full knowledge off to gather information. I can be aware of so much more but not be overwhelmed. I am here. I am with you, and I am with Daniel."

Kate stared at the prim woman sitting in front of her, knowing she was made up of

millions of flies in reality. “No offense, Kazuko, but I'm not too keen on dying, being devoured by maggots and being reborn as a fly god.”

Kazuko laughed, something Kate still wasn't used to hearing. “That is not your story, Kate. That was mine. You will have your own reawakening. Although many of our myths are parallel, we all have our own unique details.” She put her hand on Kate’s, still wrapped around the mug. “You will find your focus. You will find your perspective. Creation, birth, is one of the largest things that will ever happen to you. One does not simply wake up the next day and go on about her business. Ask any mother. Earth changes everything. The bards are already writing myths about you, Kate, but you need to wake up so that they can write more.”

“Hey, not that I'm not glad to see you, but why did we have to come here? Why didn't the part of you in my head say something?”

Kazuko smiled and stood, indicating the audience was over. “Perspective. You had to go on a quest, even if just a small one.”

Kate also got to her feet, still moving slowly. “I slept through most of that quest. Didn't seem to make much difference.”

Kazuko’s smile turned sad. “I did not say your quest was over.”

At that moment, Kate remembered why they didn't want to come to hell. The roar shook the candles from their holders and Kazuko waved her hand, putting out the fire. In the pitch black, Kate froze, her numb mind refusing to react.

“One last bit of help, then,” Kazuko whispered, and the sound of buzzing filled Kate’s ears. She fainted.

Kate blinked. Kazuko had carried her to the outside of the cave in the whirlwind of her flies. The millions of little legs set her down carefully and with a loud buzz she was gone. Daniel and Skuld stood with their backs to her, swords raised. Skuld looked like a woman who had casually survived Ragnarök, but Daniel’s eye was wide and his katana trembled a bit. Although he too had survived Ragnarök, Kate couldn’t blame him. The thing that had been chasing them, the thing that they’d been safe from unless they ventured back into hell, had finally caught up with them. It loomed on four twisted hooves above them, at least thirty feet tall, looking like a cross between a lion and a dog, with matted and patchy black fur and four yellow eyes peering from its face. Teeth stuck out of its mouth at all angles, and several of them had hapless bodies stuck between them

as if the creature had just eaten and hadn't flossed.

Kate walked up to Skuld and Daniel, wincing as the creature roared again and whipped its three tails back and forth. Blood dripped from its teeth. "Is this your bogey?" Kate asked. Her brain felt as if it were clouded by fog.

Daniel didn't look at her, but focused his eye on the monster. "It's a demon sent by Mephistopheles, one of the big lords in hell."

Kate cocked her head and looked up at the demon. "What you want?" she called. The demon raised its head to the sky and roared again.

"Don't bother talking to it, girl. We need to either stay and fight, or run, and we have to decide now," Skuld said.

"And it's pretty obvious what Mephistopheles wants," Daniel said. "He wants hell."

"Give it to him."

Daniel and Skuld stared at her. "I'm glad this visit has cleared your mind," he snapped.

"No, seriously. You've done nothing but complain since you got this job. You don't want it. He does. He clearly scares you. You don't want to fight him. You've been running since the beginning. Leave hell, give him the key, and I can find something for you to do in heaven. You'll be safe, you won't have to worry about responsibility, and you can stop running."

Daniel's jaw dropped, and Kate wondered if he were actually considering it. "Kate, I — I'm a god."

Kate reached behind her and pulled out her white sword. "Then act like it."

Daniel stared at her, his eye unblinking for a moment, and then he nodded.

"Ware!" shouted Skuld, and Daniel and Kate jumped aside as a great hoof came crashing down where they were. They scattered as the demon's head darted down to bite at them. Its jaws closed on Skuld's shield and it was thrown back, stumbling.

"Still got all those godlike powers? Kate asked, as the demon shook its head and roared again, broken teeth splitting with the power of its rage.

"I think so," Daniel said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Kagutsuchi. We're in Japan. It's only fitting that we invoke the fire god." She concentrated briefly and burst into flame, becoming a pillar of fire. She held out her left hand and a shield of flames formed around it. Her white sword remained untouched, its

power not affected by her will. Daniel paused for a moment, giving Kate enough time to run at the creature before he called out. She willed a blast of heat to flare from her shield, straight for the creature's abdomen, when Daniel finally yelled at her.

"Dammit Kate, that won't work. He's from hell!" Daniel's timing was good as the fire bounced off the demon's thick fur and it swiped a hoof at Kate. She tapped into Hermes's speed and easily ran out of the way, angling toward one of the standing legs and slicing her sword through the hamstring. Blood spurted and the demon howled again. Kate dashed out of the way and in an instant had hamstrung the other three feet. Its legs buckled and it toppled, making ground shake.

Kate came to a stop beside Daniel, who still held his katana uncertainly. The demon had fallen, thrashing in pain, with its head near Skuld. The Valkyrie took advantage of its proximity. She was on it in an instant, sticking her sword in its eye. It howled and shuddered, but the warrior pushed her sword deeper until it ceased its movement and died.

Daniel panted and looked at the massive corpse. "How are we going to get the hang of this god stuff?"

"I think we have to. This doesn't stop here. This was just a test," Kate said. "We have to figure out how to get control, and stop running, and stop getting sidetracked."

Skuld pulled her sword from the demon's eye and wiped off the gore. She jumped down from its head and looked grim. "I want to know how it found us," she said. "Izanami's protection should've kept us hidden. My protection should've kept us hidden."

Daniel shrugged. "He's been pretty much tuned to us any time we've been out of heaven."

Skuld frowned. "That was fast thinking, girl. Are you back with us now?"

Kate thought for a moment what Izanami had said about perspective, and slowly nodded. "I think so."

Kate cleaned her sword — the towel smoked when smeared with demon blood — and put it away. The three of them mounted up and walked slowly away from the demon, and didn't look around as the swarm that was Izanami came out to feed.

"Why didn't she help us? Daniel asked. "During the battle, I mean."

Kate shrugged and rested her head on his back again. "I guess it was for us to do

alone. And she did help, honestly.”

“What did you two talk about, anyway?”

Kate thought about their conversation and finally smiled, closing her eyes. “Girl talk.”

Daniel snorted but he didn't ask anything else. Kate was eager to get back to heaven and see how the Earth was faring, and that eagerness sparked the first flame of clear thought again. The demons wanted the Earth. Sure, they would like Daniel's control of hell, but mostly they wanted Earth. She lifted her head from Daniel's back and turned to look behind them. They'd exited Izanami's realm and were back on the main road to heaven. The horizon behind them, normally perpetually blue and sunny, had darkened with a red hue.

Kate reached out with her perception and felt the massing of thousands of bodies: gnarled, angry, burning bodies that had no right being in heaven. Kate made a choked noise, and Daniel and Skuld turned as well. They were silent and Kate realized they were looking at her. Heaven was her realm. She was in charge of its well-being, its administration, and its defense. The horizon darkened further. Kate reached into her backpack and took out a white dove, frowned at it, and then took out a hummingbird. She whispered to the small bird in her palm and sent it straight ahead toward heaven.

“We need to get back, prepare defenses. We've got to protect the Earth.”

Skuld and Daniel spurred their horses into gallops and Kate hung on. “Why can't we just teleport?” she murmured to herself.

“The quest,” came Izanami's voice in her mind. “The quest is as important as the battle.”

“Rules. Right.”

With the demons of hell behind them, the three sped for the gates of heaven, where forces already began to assemble and prepare for a siege.

CHAPTER SIX

It was supposed to be easier than this, Daniel thought as he paced Kate's study. He tried to ignore Odin as the god whispered to him. He and Kate shared the same advisors, they had the same goals, and still they argued. Skuld stood impassively by the fireplace and Kate sat cross-legged in a leather chair. They were discussing strategies.

"Can you get the Valkyries and get back here in time?" Kate asked.

Skuld frowned. "I don't know, honestly. The army was moving quickly. If we don't get back in time, we'll still have an advantage as we'll be flanking them."

Kate nodded once. "All right. Thank you. I'll be grateful for any aid."

Daniel stopped pacing. "I still say I should try to talk to them. Shouldn't they listen to me?"

"We need forces. Can you bring us more soldiers? Check the other heavens?" Kate asked.

"I might get better response from hell," he said.

Kate snorted. "I think your forces from hell are already on their way, Daniel. And I don't think you should give demons and damned souls free passage through heaven. Who knows what would happen in that case."

Daniel became very still, and embarrassed. "What would happen if a damned soul had free passage?"

Kate rubbed her forehead. "I don't know, Daniel. Is that really important? I'm just thinking it might be a bad idea to give the keys to the jail to the prisoners."

Daniel's insides were very cold. There was no way to get out of this.

"Kate."

She looked up, her face white. "Oh, Daniel, what did you do?"

He forced himself to meet her eyes. It had been easier to decapitate his mother. "Kevin, my assistant, has a Traveler's necklace."

"How did he get that?"

The admission was hard enough. There was no way Daniel was going to say

"coffee."

"I ... I needed him to run an errand for me as I remained in hell."

"And you didn't get it back from him."

"We were being chased, and ..." Daniel stopped, knowing he had no defense. Kate rose from her chair and left the room, not slamming the door, but leaving it open. Daniel took the invitation and followed her, ending up in the room where the Earth still turned.

The impossibility of that room still made Daniel's mind reel. He now had no idea if the Earth was big enough yet, because its size was incomprehensible. He assumed that it wasn't done growing, as Kate still kept it in the room.

She stood in front of it, watching as the main landmass came around into the light. Kate's light. She glowed in the presence of the Earth, illuminating it — their sun goddess. She did not look at Daniel. When she spoke, her voice was calm.

"You're not evil. You're not an asshole. You made a mistake." As she spoke the seas on the Earth began to swirl faster, ocean currents and clouds forming. Tiny flickers of lightning appeared in the clouds. "But it was a big one. Huge. I am not even sure we have a word for how big this is. I'm not angry, Daniel." The mountain range in the eastern half of the continent shifted slightly. "But it's a big enough mistake that I don't know what to do to fix it."

Daniel watched the Earth uneasily. Some of the mountains exploded then, spewing lava.

"Uh ... well, we do what we planned. Skuld's getting reinforcements, your angels are watching the gates, souls are safe in their houses."

Kate clenched her fist once, and Daniel gasped, as a fault line appeared in the western half, streaking diagonally southeast.

"No. I meant what to do about you. I don't know if I can have you around if you're going to fuck up like this again. Too much is at stake."

Daniel expected to feel hurt. To feel angry. But he was too much in awe of watching Kate calmly channel her rage at the Earth, splitting the continents. The fault line lengthened in both directions until, with a crack, it split in two.

It should have taken tens, or hundreds, of thousands of years for the Earth to go through the changes it suffered in a span of minutes. The sea boiled with the heat that the moving landmasses created, and the steam and releasing gases began obscuring the

landmasses. Daniel slowly backed up as Kate still watched the turmoil on the Earth. Kate hung her head.

"Just go."

Daniel turned, and ran.

Kate's headquarters had morphed gradually during her stay in heaven into an old castle, complete with towers and ramparts. The wrought-iron walls that surrounded heaven were even now replacing themselves with heavy stone. *Kate's divine will*, Daniel realized. He ran to the top of the outer rampart even as she completed it from the inside of the castle. He had no plan, but needed to assess the situation before acting. Because he clearly hadn't done anything like that up to now.

He sagged against the wall as angels flew to join him, staring grimly out toward the horizon. How did he become such a fuckup?

"Why are you not helping me?" he asked aloud.

You are not asking the right questions, Odin said.

"No, no, old man, I don't trust you. Anyone else? Hermes, how could you let me do that to Kate?"

Would you have listened if I'd warned you against it? came the wry answer.

"Anubis? Horus?"

The dry death god's voice was soft. *Are you accusing us, or asking for help?*

"I need help. I want help. Why can't you stop me from doing something stupid?"

That is not our job, Izanami said. *We are not your parents.*

"Okay, so what do I do now?"

Odin's voice was stronger in his head, providing him with battle plans, strategies and routes for escape. *But*, it concluded, *if you want to avoid all of that you can leave now.*

"Abandon Kate?"

No. Do as Skuld is doing. Get reinforcements.

"Who should I get? Who can help? Who *would* help me at this point?"

Odin spoke again, softer this time, as if he were growing tired. *You had three questions recently: how to bring back the Earth, what was chasing you and why, and the third question.*

Third question. Daniel closed his eye and tried to remember. Calm infused his

mind as the realization washed over him. "Oh ... right."

A small tug came on his robe. He opened his eye and looked around. Ganymede stood beside him, blonde curls looking drab now that heaven's sky was darkened.

"The Goddess has a message for you."

Daniel didn't dare hope, and realizing that he didn't dare hope, also realized that hope was all he had in the terms of Kate.

"Yes?"

"Leave now before the army gets here. She neither wants you injured, nor wants you here during the siege. She said to give you this, but not to read it until you have cleared the battlefield."

He handed Daniel a cream-colored envelope. Daniel nodded once, and peered out over the field one last time as he tucked the note into his robe.

The horizon was nearly pitch-black, and Daniel wondered if the demons brought the borders of hell with them as they trespassed. He remembered the metaphor of him not being evil, just being the bouncer at the club. He was a pretty shitty bouncer at this point. Neither was he evil, just damned near inept. The dark shapes of the demons had appeared to the naked eye now. Daniel reached into his own backpack and willed for binoculars, and was honestly surprised when they appeared in his hand. He peered at the edge, and gritted his teeth at what he saw.

Kevin, his nervous assistant — the poor-watery eyed guy whom Daniel had pitied — led the hordes of demons that ran, slithered, and flew. He didn't look like Kevin, however. His skin had turned considerably darker and his hands and feet were cloven. Horns jutted from his forehead, and he grinned with sharp teeth, riding a huge beetle with a horned carapace.

In fact, Daniel may not have recognized him at all except for his eyes, which remained slightly bulbous, and the fact that Daniel's Traveler's necklace hung shining around his neck. Daniel's insides twisted in shame again. He handed the binoculars to the angel beside him and asked, "Do you recognize the guy in the lead?"

The angel looked once through the binoculars, and then put them down.

"That is the Demon Lord, Mephistopheles."

Daniel nodded numbly. "Why couldn't I see that? You said I could tell if he were lying."

If he was nervous or upset at being wrong, Odin showed no sign of shame. *You would be able to tell if a damned soul were lying. Demon Lords have much stronger tricks at their disposal. Not only did he trick you, but he tricked all the angels in heaven.* Although, he added dryly, *giving him that necklace certainly helped.*

Daniel watched, stunned, as the hell that he had created edged closer to Kate's heaven.

"Sir, there isn't much time if you plan on getting away without fighting," Ganymede said nervously, which made Daniel feel somewhat better. Kate must not hate him entirely if she were still concerned with his well-being.

They were closing fast. It seemed that the demons moved faster now that they could be seen. Daniel began to panic. Skuld had taken the horses. Mephistopheles had cut off the road. How was he to get free?

I can help, whispered the usually silent Horus. *You are a god, after all. Act like one.*

Daniel gasped as power surged through his arms and legs. He went rigid as the marrow leaked from his bones, making them hollow, and pinpricks inflamed his skin as feathers sprouted. His skull elongated to form a beak, and his center of gravity moved forward. His clothes and boots and backpack folded into his body and he hopped up on the edge of the ramparts: a huge golden eagle. He spread his wings, trying to forget his fear of heights, and took off, allowing Horus's instincts to take over.

He soared high over the road, forgetting for a moment the army that headed toward heaven, toward Kate, and toward the new Earth. Flying was exquisite — freedom incarnate. Then the first arrow whizzed past him and he snapped out of his reverie and picked up speed, climbing in the sky to get out of the reach of their weaponry. More arrows and stones followed, and Daniel became aware of presences behind him.

Ah, crap. I forgot they had flying demons with them, he thought. At least seven demons of varying size were flying to catch up to him. Little, fast demons closed the gap quickly, presumably to entangle him until the bigger demons could catch up. With Horus advising him, Daniel abruptly folded his wings and pointed his head downward. The army below him dragged complicated weaponry with them; a large wooden construct that Daniel recognized as a trebuchet. The ropes and handles created a netlike mess, and Daniel angled himself toward it.

More arrows slipped past him in the air and in a stroke of luck one of his pursuers screamed and fell from the sky, skewered by friendly fire. They were closing in on his tail feathers and Daniel hesitated for a moment, then headed straight into the mess of wood and ropes that made the trebuchet. There was a small hole that looked too small for a pigeon, but Horus directed him there.

A clawed hand closed around his tail just as he folded his wings to his chest, winced, and slipped through the hole in the ropes. They scraped against his feathers, but his momentum carried him clear. He jerked back briefly, but was able to continue as his tail feathers stayed with the demon and momentum carried him past the end of the ranks of the demons.

He faltered in flight, unable to fly solidly without the stabilizing tail feathers, and landed painfully, human again, on his knees. He scrambled to his feet and ran, not looking behind him.

Daniel lay on his back in the middle of the familiar roundabout of heaven. The road had cracked and was weeping a black ooze. The sand in the center of the roundabout had gone black. He wondered where he would go. He wondered how she was doing. He reached into his robe where he'd stashed the note from her. He broke the seal and stared at it.

Come back to me. When this is over, no matter what happens, come back to me.

He read it three times, then held it in his hand tightly until it burst into flames. The fire didn't hurt. It more felt as if he were absorbing her words, imprinting them into his hand so he wouldn't forget her request. When the paper was gone, he slipped his hands under his head and stared at the sky, where the storm clouds gathered. Finally a plan began to form, and he sat up, picked a road, and then began walking.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the beginning was the Room and it was Empty. No winds blew and no rains poured. The Goddess came through the door and shed a tear at the lack of joy, and behold: The oceans were formed. A drop of blood brought the land and she watched over us as the young Earth turned.

While the Goddess had many lovers, we were her only children. When she was angry with one lover, the world split and changed. The Northern Continent was formed, and with it went the animals. The Southern Continent was formed and with it went the people. And the Western Islands were formed and with it went the monks, for monks were not people at all, but actually created from the drops of the goddess's blood. In the East formed the whirlpool that led to the Underworld.

The Goddess was troubled. She wanted her children to live together in peace and she wanted her monks to spread her word. So, she came to the world in the body of a woman, in disguise. First she visited the island of the monks. "Who here will take the word of the Goddess to the people?" she asked. The monks, who had built lovely temples and cities to her, laughed at her. "The uneducated do not deserve the word of the Goddess!"

She left the city, weeping. From her tears came warrior monks who knew their goals were not simply to worship her, but to spread her word of peace. They followed her. From a dream she once had, she constructed a ship and crossed the ocean with her monks, commanding that the island of monks never be visited again by any living being.

Without the aid of the Western monks to remind them, the people in the South had forgotten her and lived in squalor, destroying her land with poor farming and mining, treating their rich like kings and their poor like slaves. She wept again, and from her tears formed a hill, and on the hill a shining golden temple. The poor gathered around her as she sat in the muddy courtyard of the temple and formed ten people from mud: peasant monks who could teach the people about how to properly treat the Earth, respect the weather, and raise animals of aid and food.

“Who will carry the word of the Goddess through the land?” she called to the waiting throngs of poor. Seventeen men and women raised their hands while the rest avoided her eyes. She marked the seventeen as her disciples, and then left the temple populated by warrior monks and the peasant monks and took her disciples with her. They boarded her holy ship and went north to the land of the animals.

“This is my sanctuary,” she whispered, and the people flung themselves to the deck of the ship upon seeing the great birds and magical creatures. They were convinced they would be devoured, but the creatures left them alone, many of the more intelligent beasts recognizing the Goddess and bowing to her in deference. They ended up in a desert oasis where the goddess meditated and preached her message.

“Do not fear the darkness,” she said. “Do not fear the unknown. Trust in yourself and trust in your friends. The most enduring thing in the world is love, and if you can trust in that, then nothing will be lost.”

“But, Goddess,” they said, “we fear the Underworld and we fear death!”

She smiled softly. “Do you fear going to sleep at night? Do you fear waking up? Do not fear the change that death brings; if you have lived a life worth living you also needn’t fear the Underworld. What you need to fear is anyone who tries to tell you that I do not love you or that I have forsaken you. I do not know how long my time here will last, and when I leave, you must know in your heart that I love you and that I always will. Let that knowledge carry you and you will remain strong in times of adversity.”

The disciples nodded. On the thirty-fourth day, the skies darkened and the Goddess looked up into the Heavens. She summoned a great bird to carry her disciples back to the South and ascended into the Heavens, reminding them to be strong. The disciples returned home and began preaching the word of the Goddess. And in the times that followed — the dark times — it was her love that kept them alive, praying for her return.

* * * * *

Kate hovered in space near the Earth, making sure the hole she had plugged was well and truly filled. Her people were troubled, but she hoped she planted the seeds to make things better. She needed to do something about those haughty monks in the

West, but she couldn't bring herself to go all Old Testament on them. She returned to her office where mere seconds had passed since her leaving to set things up on the earth. Ganymede wrung his hands as he waited for her.

“Did he get out of here safely?” she asked. Ganymede nodded, “They nearly caught him, but he escaped. He’s free.”

“Good. Hopefully he'll be able to help us out.”

“Can we trust him, Goddess?”

Kate walked to the window in the hallway. It was little more than an arrow-slit. “I can trust his heart. I can't trust him not to make bad decisions, but he doesn't mean us harm. I know that.” She rubbed her head where it throbbed and Izanami retold the story of how she trusted her husband as well. Kate shushed the goddess. “What's going on outside?”

“They’ve surrounded us with siege engines. We expect an attack at any time.”

As if answering him, the castle shuddered and cries came up from the ramparts. Kate focused her will and repaired the wall that had crumbled against the attack, only to have her attention diverted by yet another attack. “And the residents?”

“Sequestered in the room you provided.”

“Okay. Have the ranking angels meet me in my office.”

The boy ran off. Kate trudged down the hall to her office, fortifying the walls of the fort, building them higher. The demons attacked with flaming pitch, coating her walls with stinking foulness, but still the walls held. The angels were there when she opened the door: Gabriel, Michael, Ruth, and Esther. They sat at her table and looked expectantly at her. She sighed, gathering her strength. “Has something like this ever happened in heaven?”

Michael shook his head. “Not since my creation, Goddess.”

“Great ...” mumbled Kate. “So, what are our options? They outnumber us, but it doesn't look like they can come in easily. And this isn't even like a real siege, is it?”

Ruth shifted uncomfortably. “No, there are no supply lines to cut off. Our sustenance comes from you, Goddess, not the roads they are blocking.”

Kate took the maps of heaven from the bookshelves and rolled them out onto the table. “But the new souls I just created can’t come in, can they?”

Gabriel looked stricken. “No.”

“Where are they going?”

“There is no way we can find out.”

“So much for omniscience,” Kate said. The angels stared at her. She frowned at them. “I thought that you were my advisors. Why can’t you give me any better info here?”

Esther spoke, her voice soft. “We are but extensions of you. When you are hesitant, we cannot act. When you are decisive, we are your fists.”

Kate’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding me. You mean I don’t actually have any real angels with free will?”

Michael nodded. “Angels have never had free will, not since the rebellion. We are but extensions of the Divine.”

“Great. I’m having an argument with myself. Get out. Go guard the walls. Slice up some demons with your swords. Can you manage that?”

The angels scrambled out of the room. Kate collapsed into a chair, rubbing her head. Another impact shook the castle and she repaired the damage, fortifying the walls as she did so. “How about you guys?” she asked. Hermes was at the forefront of her mind warm and glowing.

You are learning.

“Yeah, I’m learning that all this power is doing little good. I’m learning I’m really alone here. What about you guys? Are you all just bits of me, too?”

Odin’s voice was wry. *Oh no, dear, we are very much real. More than you know.*

“Then help me!”

Get the maps, Izanami advised, and remember that none of these places are honestly physical. Kate went back to her maps. She traced her finger over the strange, four-dimensional map again, wondering about the W-axis that touched each heaven, bisecting, penetrating, and sometimes just touching. Although the roundabout and all the heavenly roads, now black and burning on the maps, indicated that heaven was a clean wheel, the map indicated that heaven was a jumble, with some realms literally on top of each other. Kate frowned. She peered at the realm that lay below heaven. It was the heaven of the delusional: the true believers who are good, loving people, but whose beliefs didn’t fit anywhere else.

“The island of misfit toys ...” murmured Kate, running her finger through the map.

Reality shuddered briefly and then righted itself. She thought of the metaphysical and grinned. She routed around in her backpack and pulled out a silver cell phone, opened it, and then dialed one number. Four.

Perhaps you are getting the knack of this, Anubis whispered.

* * * * *

Ganymede, the only advisor she was sure wasn't an extension of herself, stood expectantly at her side as she rolled up the maps and gave him some instructions. "Make sure you have some bourbon ready before you go; I'll want to welcome our guests."

The boy was off in an instant. Kate paused a moment to allow herself a fond feeling for him. She'd miss him. She put the maps into a map case and swung it over her shoulder to rest by her sword. She looked around the office. There was nothing else here she'd need. A knock sounded at the door. She opened it. Her angels stood there, steadfast and confident. "I guess you are extensions of me," she said. They nodded. She handed them each a shining rope that streamed from her backpack. The pink rope went to Ruth, the black to Esther, the brown to Michael, and the green to Gabriel.

"Fly to the four directions of heaven. Right by the walls you'll find an anchoring bolt. Tie the string around the bolts and give the rope a tug. Then go back to the ramparts and keep up the defense."

The angels took flight in the hall and each flew to their directions, flying straight through the walls and taking the ropes with them. Soon, Kate's backpack had four ropes forming an "X" out of the top. Ganymede came back down the hall carrying a bottle of bourbon and two glasses with ice. As if waiting for that libation, the air beside Kate cracked and split, bleeding blue fire, and out stepped the grinning hobo: Alternate Dimension Bela Boost. Before his rift closed, however, he dragged through with him Jane the Boxcar Beekeeper.

Bela's futuristic uniform had gotten shabbier since Kate had last seen him, and was tinged with blue spots.

"Ahhhh, the Uninteresting Goddess! Hello!"

She smiled at them. "Bela, Jane, I'm glad you could make it. Would you like some bourbon?"

“There is nothing more I would like. Why have you asked my god to send me here?”

“I need help Bela, and I think only a hobo can do it.”

“Hobos are jacks of all trades, Goddess. But few put their trust in us. Why have you?”

Kate grinned ruefully. “I really don't have anywhere else to go.”

Bela clapped his hands. “Perfect! And what will you give us?”

Kate handed them glasses of bourbon as an answer. “And at the end there will be freshly baked pie.”

Bela stopped, his glass halfway to his lips. “Brackleberry pie from Dimension Blue?”

Kate hesitated. *Promise it to him. When this is over, you can make it happen,* Izanami hissed. Kate smiled. “Definitely.”

“Then I am your man. Whatever can I do for you?”

The black rope twitched and Kate went to inspect it. Then the other three ropes all twitched. “I’m going to give each of you a package. I want you to toss it on your back and protect it for me. Bela, Ganymede will stay with you and advise you. This package is quite precious, so I’m putting a lot of faith in you.”

Bela’s grin got wider; something Kate didn't know was possible. “No one notices a hobo! You are a wise woman.”

“The thing is, I need you to stay in this heaven. If you have a problem, just let me know.”

Jane had been silent up to now, sipping her bourbon. “And my job?”

Kate turned to the small woman. “You may go where you like and do what you like, just care for your package. That's all I ask. I'll be with you for the first part of the journey anyway.”

“I don't like brackleberry pie. I want key lime.”

“You've got it.”

She nodded and went back to her drink. Kate thanked them and went back to the ropes that were taut through the walls of her castle. She took two in each hand and took a deep breath. Right as she began to tense, Ganymede’s voice stopped her:

“Goddess, the leader of the enemy forces wishes to meet with you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Daniel had read "Lord of the Rings" as a teenager, trying to escape into the fantasy world of Frodo and Sam and away from his own hell of a mother devolving in a nut house. His friends complained that yeah, they loved the book but, man, those hobbits sure did walk a lot. They walked and walked. They were hot; they walked. They were thirsty; they walked. The ring got heavy; they walked. Sam dumped his cooking pans into a crevice; they walked.

These are the things that Daniel relished about the books. The walking said as much to him as the fighting did, maybe more. Just like life, it wasn't the short bursts of excitement that really brought you up or down, except for the last burst of excitement. It was the daily grind. Happiness and misery were mountains that had days upon days of little instances building them. Not one big car, or wedding, or death, or fire. Yes, when his mother murdered his sister it was a hot flare of agony that changed his life, but it was every day after that, dealing with life under that shadow, his father's depression, and forcing himself to get out of bed in the morning that had been the true difficulty.

In "The Lord of the Rings," walking illustrated that, even though the wars raged elsewhere, those heroes could stick a sword in an orc and be done, while Sam and Frodo still had to walk. This comforted Daniel. Sam and Frodo walked straight into hell and ended up changed, but overall okay. This made Daniel enjoy walking in life, not as a means of transport but just as a way to clear his head. Focus on either the good parts, or the bad parts.

Daniel walked. He didn't know where he was going but he trusted he'd go to the right spot. Either his companions would guide him, or those he sought would. It hadn't taken him long before he decided to leave the road and head off into a Wasteland. He didn't know how long he'd been walking. He had run at first, hoping to get this over with quickly, but Kagutsuchi and Hermes admonished him for using their god-given speed and told him he needed to walk this one. Time was fluid in heaven and hell, and hurrying wouldn't get him what he needed any faster.

The terrain didn't change much while they walked. Sand blew softly around his feet, created rippling dunes to his left and right. It caked at the edges of his mouth and eye, and he didn't wipe it away. Fatigue gnawed at his bones and he blinked, surprised. He wasn't supposed to get tired.

Rules are different here, boy, Odin said, *You're not so strong here. There may be bigger things than you.*

"Yeah, well everything's bigger than me lately, old man," Daniel said, licking his lips with a dry tongue.

You must be humble. You must release all pride, all sense of self-importance, all envy, Horus whispered.

Pride? Did he have any left? Daniel wondered where pride had tripped him up. Pride that he could handle hell and the problems that went with it? He definitely had been envious of Kate's appointment in heaven. He had thought that was the easy job. And here he was wandering in the desert, unharmed, while she fought a siege of demons that he had inadvertently created. *Include cowardice with that list, I guess,* he thought. He thought of the things he had done due to cowardice and dipped his head in shame. He'd had pride and envy, lust and rage, but his biggest flaw was that fear paralyzed him.

The sand blew harder, catching the tears on his face and drying them to a hard crust. The sand scoured his skin, finding its way to every orifice, including into the hole where his missing eye used to be.

Storm coming, Horus said, *seek shelter.*

"Seek shelter? Where the hell am I going to find shelter?!" Daniel yelled at the wind, his sobs coming harder. He got a mouthful of sand for the effort and choked. Daniel fell to his knees, willing to let the sand cover him, preserving him. Daniel, God of Cowards, the dead God of the Wastelands. He felt his hands moving of their own accord — Izanami? — and found a silk scarf in his backpack. The hands wrapped the scarf around his head twice, and he fell as she relinquished control. Before the sand covered him completely, his last thought was, *coward indeed.*

Daniel opened his eyes and blinked at the strange perspective. It took him a moment to realize that he was looking at the world through both eyes again. He touched his face. It was whole, with no scars from Horace's talons. It was clean too, no trace of sand.

"Am I dead?" he wondered aloud. He expected sardonic comments from Odin. Of course he was dead! But the old god was silent. All of the gods were, but he had no access to their knowledge, or their wisdom, or their power. Panic rose briefly. Maybe he had died again. But he relaxed and looked around him. He was lying on his back in the rich earth, wheat growing all around him. Beyond the gold of the wheat, the sky shone a forgiving blue. Daniel sat up, rubbing his hand over his healed face. How had he gotten here? He stood, his head rising over the grain. It spread in every direction, up and down hills, obscuring everything around him. About two hundred feet away a man also stood in the field, running his hands over the wheat, inspecting it. Daniel approached him.

"Excuse me."

The man looked up and smiled. "Yes, my son?"

"I, uh, well, I'm not exactly sure why I'm here. I was looking for someone, and there was this sandstorm, and well, then I was here."

The man watched him. He had a strong frame, blond hair and dark skin. His face was unlined, but still carried the hint of maturity and age. His dark brown eyes reminded Daniel of his father from the days before his life changed.

"I do not know who you're looking for, but you found me," he said.

"And you are?"

"I am a god who died, was resurrected, and then returned to the afterlife. I am prophesied to come again, to bring peace to the world. I ..."

"You're Jesus!" said Daniel, relieved.

The man smiled again. "I am Osiris."

The joy died in Daniel's throat. "Oh. But didn't Jesus ..." his voice trailed off.

"Indeed."

Daniel's face burned. What was he doing here if he was with the wrong guy? "So where do I go now?"

"I believe if you can't find what you're looking for, you keep looking. My body was cut up into many pieces and my wife found every one. Well, nearly." He frowned.

"But if you're supposed to bring back a world of peace what are you doing here?"

"Tending the wheat until it is time for harvest."

Daniel blinked at him and shook his head. "Whatever. Can you at least point me in the direction I need to go?"

Osiris pointed into the wheat — *or was it out of the wheat?* — and Daniel gave him a halfhearted wave, and started walking. Walking again. With wheat stretching out to the horizon, Daniel wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he was pretty sure the wheat had to end for him to find it. Although he was enjoying the sight of things with his new perspective, fatigue began to insinuate itself on him again and he took a break, sitting down and hiding in the stalks.

"Hi there!"

Daniel nearly screamed when he heard the voice of the woman sitting in the wheat right next to him. She hadn't been there before; Daniel would've seen the depression in the wheat. She had short, dirty blonde hair, a thin face and she grinned at him widely, her yellow eyes glinting in shadows.

"You scared me!"

She made a face of mock innocence. "What? Little ol' me? Impossible. Well, that's not true. It's very possible. Very likely. Something I'm very good at."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Oh, Daniel, I am your dream girl, your nightmare, your savior, and your biggest regret. I am also your guide." She grinned again, her body shifting to fill out a little. Her face became rounder, and her hair grew long and black. "Some once called me Scheherazade." She shifted again, her face elongating and hair sprouting. "Others called me Coyote," she said in a growling voice. "Raven. Anansi. Ishu. Eris. Hermes. Susanoo. Malice. Merlin. Loki." She changed shape faster, flipping through the faces, the animals of the trickster.

"Loki?" Daniel blurted, "You're dead! So is Hermes! And Susanoo! How can you be all of them?"

"I am the Trickster. I can help or betray, seduce, or spurn. I am freer than any other god to do what I will." She returned to her original form, looking like a girl Daniel had dated in college, albeit with yellow eyes. "I am also the messenger and the guide." She reached out and took Daniel's wrist, her grip much stronger than her small hands indicated. "Close your eyes." Daniel did so, realizing it would probably be pointless to argue.

The whisper of the wind through the wheat ceased, and he opened his eyes. They were in a small hut now, with no windows or doors — only a smoke hole in the roof. A

fire pit lit the darkness from the center of the room, casting odd shadows on Scheherazade's face as she sat opposite him.

"You seek Daniel. You seek a god. You seek answers. I'm here to guide you. Some call it meditation. Some call it a vision quest. Me, I just call it getting high." She tossed some herbs into the fire and the smoke thickened. Daniel coughed and slipped off his robe.

"I kind of thought this was already a vision quest. Aren't I really in a Wasteland still missing my eye?"

Her yellow eyes glinted. "You are on a vision quest. You are in a Wasteland. You are here with me. But you have a long way to go."

Daniel knelt by the fire pit. "Turtles all the way down, huh? All right." He quietened his mind and inhaled deeply. Kate, heaven, his parents, his sister, and even the quest fell away as the drug entered his mind and he was gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate would have liked to have the smugly superior feeling that she had never liked Kevin, never trusted him. Because something within her had known he was a deceiver; that he was evil and would betray Daniel. But no, she had to be honest with herself and just knew that she plain didn't like the little toady. There was no sense of malice in him — well, there was now. But at the time he just seemed nervous, sycophantic. Even now with his larger size, leathery skin, horns, and smug superiority, his bulbous eyes shone wetly and he blinked furiously.

Kate received him in a quickly fabricated sunroom, although the ravaged sky of heaven still showed nothing but black and red roiling clouds, and served him tea. Her four angels flanked him, flaming swords drawn. He paid them no mind, but fixed upon Kate with his watery gaze. She sipped her tea as he ignored his.

"Mephistopheles, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

He grinned, black sharp teeth making his mouth look more like a maw. When he spoke his voice had lost its nervousness and gained a cruel confidence. "You know what we are here for."

"But really, why do you want it? Daniel vacated hell. He never really wanted it in the first place. You certainly have enough metaphysical real estate as it is." She thought for a moment. "But taking an empty throne is not the same as conquest, is it? Usurpation. Glory. Better to violently take over in heaven than rule in hell because no one wanted the job?"

"As you say."

Kate watched the demon's skin grow more leathery even as they sat and wondered what his final form would be, if he would even settle on one.

You're wasting your time, Odin grumbled at her.

Saber rattling, Horus whispered.

"Your forces can't get in," she said. From behind Kevin, Ruth shifted nervously.

"And your souls can't get to you. We outnumber you. You can't hope to beat us.

Your allies are gone. Daniel fled hell and left it to my army. And now he has abandoned heaven."

Kate gritted her teeth and Michael's hand flexed on his sword.

He's trying to rattle you. Don't rise to it, Izanami said.

"And yet, even without my friends here, you still can't get it, except under a flag of truce," Kate said, not even hearing herself talk. Her mind whirled and she nearly laughed aloud with the possibility of her idea. Mephistopheles leapt up and brought a cloven hoof down his teacup, shattering it.

Kate willed her hand not shake as she carefully removed a sliver of china from her hair.

"I could kill you now," he said.

She stood to face him. "You would not last a second after raising a hand to me. You are protected under a truce, but the moment you break that truce, you are fair game and you're on my territory."

"Yours for only a short while longer. What happens to heaven after you die?"

"That's an interesting question," Kate said "I have no idea. Want to find out?" She stood and lightly stepped onto the coffee table between them and looked Mephistopheles in the eye. The four angels closed in on him, raising their swords. The Demon Lord clenched his fist and stood his ground, but she didn't flinch. He finally snarled and left the room. Ruth and Michael flanked him while the other angels stayed with Kate.

She collapsed back into her chair sighing raggedly. "What do you know? All those after-school specials were right. Bulimia doesn't pay and standing up to bullies works."

"What now, Goddess?"

"Oh, Gabriel. He will never see this coming. It's going to be awesome. And I mean that in the purest sense of the word."

Bela and Jane the Boxcar Beekeeper, entered the room, the bundle secured on Jane's back, her heavy gloves and big helmet. Kate could barely see her eyes through the mesh. "Key lime?" the hobo asked, her voice muffled.

"Two if you like," Kate answered.

Jane nodded again and Bela split reality and led her through it.

Kate watched them go, wondering if she were doing the right thing in deciding to

send Jane on her own. While they were gone, she took two hummingbirds from her backpack and whispered a message to each one. They zoomed off and Kate prayed they would both find their destinations. Lastly, she returned the four colored cords, still taut, still connecting the four corners of heaven.

"Which one of you will help me here?" she asked. To her surprise, each of the gods in her head leant his or her strength, and as she pulled the cord, heaven began to shrink and fold in on itself, pulling together like a folded pastry. She pulled and tweaked until her entire realm lay folded before her, with only castle walls and emptiness stretching out in front of her and Ganymede.

The angels still fought off the siege at the walls, with the demons on the outside, hopefully with no knowledge of what she was doing. She picked up heaven, wrapped it in a polka-dotted cloth, and tied it to the end of a stick.

Reality split again and Bela returned, alone. "I like what you've done with the place. Your name may be bland but you're getting more and more interesting."

Kate handed him the stick and he slung it over his shoulder.

"You'll protect it?"

Bela bowed to her, "For brackleberry pie I will do much more than this, lady. Come, you golden-haired child whose name I have already forgotten, let us journey together and get into trouble." Kate kicked some dust aside and revealed the trapdoor. She pulled it up and pointed to the ladder inside. "That should take you where you need to go. Be careful. Protect each other."

Bela descended the ladder, a weeping Ganymede going second. He looked at Kate and she touched his cheek tenderly. "Don't cry, kid. You'll be yelling at me for swearing again soon."

He nodded and followed the hobo.

"Goddess!" Came a shout from the ramparts, "The flying demons!"

Kate closed her eyes and concentrated. *God, it was so easy!* And an illusion formed around her: an image of heaven. A smaller, stronger keep within the walls that she apparently been changing and fortifying this whole time. At that moment, a group of flying demons crested the walls, screeching. Angels with frozen arrows shot at them, taking down several. Other angels took to the air, engaging the remaining demons.

Kate turned from the carnage. "Now what?"

You trust in those you gave tasks to. The hobos. The Valkyrie. And Daniel,
Izanami said.

Kate frowned. Daniel. He had messed up badly. Was he out trying to make things right? Or was he screwing up even worse? Could she count on him again? She felt slight shame at this thought, but then realized it was completely justified. What would he say when he found out what she had done to protect everything?

"Can you contact the other aspects of yourselves in Daniel's head?" she asked suddenly.

The gods did not answer at first. Kate had an odd feeling of watching a group of kids all shifting their weight and glancing at each other, none of them wanting to deliver the bad news about the broken window.

Hermes finally broke the silence. *We ... are not with Daniel.*

"Come again?"

When you and Daniel merged, all of the power that came with the gods he was hosting went to you. Daniel has nothing now. Izanami said.

"How is that even possible? I know he's talked to you guys and Ganymede told me he even took on Horus's shape to get out of the battlefield."

It takes a while to get a god out of your head, fully, unless he springs forth, fully formed, that is, Odin said. *Whispers and footprints will remain for a while but we are diminishing in his head and soon he will lose all remnants of us, if he hasn't already.*

"But what will he do then? He'll be all alone. He'll be powerless."

He is still a god. Anubis reminded her. *He has tools ready. He just needs to use them.*

"If he realizes you're not with them anymore and he knows I'm mad at him, then he'll be completely alone," she said.

Maybe that's what he needs, Hermes said.

"Maybe," Kate echoed.

Another blast shook the walls of heaven, the walls that surrounded nothing but an illusion of heaven, and Kate made her decision. She tossed her backpack onto her back, waved once to Ruth and opened a small wooden door that appeared in the walls. Tapping into Hermes's speed, she ran, passing the battlefield in a blink. She ran so fast, in fact, that the lumbering shape on the horizon that seemed to block out half the sky

was barely noted and quickly forgotten.

CHAPTER NINE

“There. Over there. See it?”

“Where?”

“Open your eyes.”

“Oh. Eyes.” It was still a novelty, having both working eyes. Not that there was much to see. A heavy fog hung around him, and he couldn't tell much except that he was standing on sandy, hard ground.

Daniel took a step forward and stumbled. He looked down past a long snout to see sandy colored fur and small paws. He twisted his neck around to see the small canine body, lithe and strong. He opened his mouth to ask a question but all that came out were a series of yips.

Another figure came out of the fog. Another coyote, this time a bitch. She opened her mouth and laughed at him, a series of hiccupping sounds. Her voice appeared in his mind. “What did you expect from a vision quest?”

“Now what?” Daniel asked, putting his nose to the ground and snuffling, seeking—well, he didn't know what. What did a divine savior smell like?

“We could seek Grandmother Earth, or maybe Tarantula. Beaver might talk to us.”

“So the guy I’m actually looking for isn't here?”

“They are no straight lines, Little God. There are no clear answers. You seek, and then you take what you find and do what you can with it.”

Daniel shrugged his small shoulders and sniffed at the ground again. Considering that he couldn't see past the fog, he trusted his nose, although he didn't know what to look for. “Seek something,” she had said. All right.

Everything smelled moldy, musty, old. He could smell himself, all canine and testosterone and new. Coyote smelled, too. Much like him, but her bitch hormones were nearly overwhelming. He shook himself. He remembered dog heaven all too well to make the same mistake twice, even if they were both in dog form now.

He turned from her and sniffed again and caught something. Something fresh and

hopeful. He barked once and ran into the fog, Coyote behind him.

“So, isn’t Coyote supposed to be male?” Daniel asked.

“Coyote is anything she wishes to be,” she answered. “What are you following?”

“Something. I don't know what.” As he ran, the fog slowly dissipated and he was in a forest. He lifted his head to make sure he wasn't in cat hell again, but he didn't see any frightened, hissing felines in the trees. And these trees were lush and green, not dry and spindly.

He caught a whiff of something else and once he found it, he wondered how he could have missed it. It was strong, hot, and delicious. He followed the new scent with Coyote on his heels, until he nearly ran into a rabbit as big as a horse. He barked in surprise as the rabbit turned a gleaming onyx eye on him.

“Coyote,” he said, his voice slow and velvety. “Who have you brought to me?”

“He calls himself Daniel. We’re on a quest. Could you kindly take you and your somewhat overwhelming scent elsewhere?”

The giant rabbit twitched its ears. “You trust *her* as a guide?” it asked him.

“I don't really have a choice,” he said, casting a quick look at Coyote, whose grinning mouth was open, panting. *Which is worse? A guide you can't trust or no guide at all?*

“Since you’re running in front of her, it doesn’t look like you need a guide.” The rabbit scratched at the ground, pulling moss and dirt into a rough ball and rolling it around.

“Who should I trust, then?” Daniel asked, watching the rabbit play with the dirt. “The only one I can trust in this weird-ass afterlife has been Kate. And, well, she's not here. So I'm up for suggestions.”

The rabbit continued to mess with the dirt, forming it into the rough shape of a human. “There is one other you can trust.”

Daniel snorted. “Great. More riddles.”

Driving past the overwhelming urge to taste this massive meal in front of him, Daniel left the bunny to his dirt and ran on, catching that scent again. He dashed ahead of coyote and broke free of the forest. A woman dressed in black stood in the road, wearing a fine dress and hat.

“Kate!” Daniel barked, running up to her, nearly delirious in his excitement.

Delirious in his desire to lick her, to jump on her, to let her know just how much he missed her.

She smiled at him as he ran up to her, but when he jumped up and put his paws on her, trying to lick her face, he stuck fast. His feet sank deep into her abdomen and his jaws into her chest.

“You’re kidding me,” he thought desperately as Kate’s body and face twisted. The more Daniel struggled, the more caught he was.

“Help me,” he begged Coyote.

But she laughed that hiccupping laugh again. She ran for him, her shoulder hitting his, driving him into the pitch. He sank in deeper with each attack until the pitch covered him entirely. His lungs burned, but his nose and mouth were plugged. He struggled once more and blacked out.

“Another turtle,” was his first thought as his consciousness returned. He still wasn’t breathing, but he remembered he didn’t necessarily need to. He floated in space, huge and powerful as planets circled around him. He could see Kate’s new Earth and swelled with warm love for it. The debris that had been created with the destruction of his home was gone now, and two moons now orbited the Earth. Nothing of the horror that he had seen before remained. Whatever was going on with him and Kate and their problems, the Earth was okay.

He turned his awareness to the rest of the universe, the millions of stars around him, and the warm blanket of black. The hugeness of it all dwarfed him, even as big as he was, and he wondered how many other gods were out there. How many suns and moons and heavens and hells? Was this something he and Kate should explore?

He chuckled to himself, sending sunspots glowing through him. Exploring was done. They had wars to fight, jobs to do. Wars. That’s right, there was a war going on. He wondered how Kate was doing.

A movement to the right caught his awareness. The stars were going out. Not in a winking, one at a time sort of way, but more like they were being covered by an oozing oil slick. The universe itself was being put out. Or devoured.

Faster than it should have happened, half the sky was turned to pitch black. And as the blackness neared him, his only thought was that he should protect the Earth. But what would Earth be without his heat and light? The last thought he had before the

shadow devoured him with its many, many teeth was, “What *was* on the other side of the Earth when it was destroyed?”

He stood outside a cave with a round stone blocking the entrance. Women sat outside, candles lighting up their somber faces, tears shining in the soft light.

“Is someone, uhh, in there?” he asked.

“My son,” said a woman of about forty-five.

“A boy?”

“A man grown,” she said, glaring at him.

“Does he need help? Is he trapped?” Daniel eyed the stone, unsure if he could move it.

“He is dead. He died five days ago by a traitor’s hand.”

Daniel bent his head. “I’m sorry to intrude on your grief. What was his name?”

“It would do you well to know it,” said a younger woman, setting her chin defiantly.

“His name was Jesus.”

Daniel sat down heavily on boulder by the cave, numb and tired. *Of course it was.*

He sat with the women for a while, trying to figure out what to do. Someone passed him a hunk of bread and some water, but he refused, encouraging them to eat instead. Something bothered his mind and he tried to grasp it.

“Wait a second,” he said, interrupting their vigil a second time. The older woman — *the Virgin Mary?* — glared at him. He pressed on. “How long did you say you’ve been out here?”

Another woman spoke up, fatigue coloring her voice. “He was crucified five days ago.”

“Jesus was supposed to rise after the third day.” Daniel said. “This is all wrong.” He reached to his side and found Izanami’s blade. He may not remember how fight with it, but he didn’t need a great skill to split the rock in front of him.

The women fell back screaming as the rock burst outward after Daniel’s first strike. A piece of debris hit him in the face, knocking him down. The pain blossomed in his head on the right side. Bright and red and familiar. In a moment of hysteria, he laughed, wondering about the myths they would tell about the god who could not keep his eye. He fell to his knees and screamed, but did not drown out the joyful cries of the women around him.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he looked up, blood turning the vision in his left eye, his only eye, red. He saw a figure standing above him in a white robe. Nearly retching with the pain, he moaned and said, “Kate?”

The figure smiled at him and he saw a man. Despair and pain overcame him and he passed out.

Daniel opened his eye and found himself in a cave, much like the cave where he had found Kate meditating before their trip to Hoboland. Someone was tying a strip of cloth around his head to cover bandages over his ruined eye. The pain had retreated, but he felt hot and disoriented.

“Where’s Kate? Who are you?” he mumbled.

“I am a God of Life. I was killed. I was resurrected and went into heaven,” his caregiver said. “I am Jesus Christ.”

Daniel squinted his eye. Osiris bent over him, securing the bandages.

“You’re Osiris.”

“I am. I am every Reborn God. Did you not meet the Trickster as one person?”

“Coyote. Yeah, she shoved me into a pitch mannequin. Didn't like her much.”

“She tested you. You passed.” The words sounded fuzzy in Daniel's ear.

His head began to throb deeply and he groaned. “Tested?”

“She tested your desire to mate with her. She tested your ability to stop from hunting Great Rabbit. She tested your ability to adapt.”

“Where's Kate?”

Osiris — Jesus — paused briefly, sat back, and sighed. “She has fled heaven. She has gotten away, and now she's ...” the room filled with a kinetic buzzing sound that stopped as abruptly as it started.

“I’m here.” Kate’s voice was calm, soothing.

Daniel smiled, relieved. He closed his eye. She put her hand on his shoulders. “God, what happened to you?”

“I had to find Jesus for you. He was trapped in a cave or something. I don't really remember.”

“And your face?”

“When I started the vision quest, I had my eye back, and then I lost it again.”

“Damn it, Daniel, you just can’t hold on to that, can you?” she said, her voice

amused but not hiding the worry.

“I’d lose my own head if it wasn’t attached,” he said grinning.

He felt her cool hand on his face and he smiled and relaxed. His Kate was here. He’d be okay. The fever began to die down and he slowly dozed off. As he drifted, he heard Osiris say, “Goddess, we have to talk.”

CHAPTER TEN

Yasha, the war hero, thrashed and groaned on her bed as the priest leaned over her. He spread soothing salve on her face that helped with the surface pain, but the chaos inside her head did not cease. The large cats the other side had trained for their evil purposes had taken her eye and she couldn't concentrate past the pain.

"You lost the left eye, like Daniel, Beloved of Kate," the priest soothed. "You are favored by him now."

Yasha bit back a retort. It would not do during a holy war to blaspheme against your own pantheon. They had been fighting for years, though, and there was no end in sight. They had the numbers and the discipline, but they fought on the northern continent, where the opposition had been training animals to fight alongside them.

Each soldier had at least one animal trained to fight, which made them more than doubly dangerous. The worst battles were when their priestesses, the beekeepers, got involved. They worshiped the goddess Jane, Keeper of Bees. And when their priestesses released full hives on the battlefield, the losses on Yasha's side were always devastating. The only saving grace was that bees were sacred to worshipers of Jane and it was rare that the bees entered battle.

Yasha had lost her lover, Penelope, to a bee sting. An archer who should have been safe from an enemy soldier, she was discovered to have an allergy to bees with one rogue sting causing her to asphyxiate on the field. Yasha had sworn to see the beekeeper priestesses die for this, but now she had lost an eye and a weaponless, armor-less priest was trying to tell her that it was okay because some god once lost his eye.

"Three times," the priest corrected her, mixing something in a bowl.

"Wha — ?"

"You said Daniel lost his eye once. He lost it thrice: once to free a trapped goddess and pay for his wisdom; once to get that wisdom back and heal another god; and lastly as a payment to find a god during a vision quest."

"Can you read my thoughts?" she asked.

“No,” the priest sounded amused. “I can hear your fevered ranting. Now take this and get some rest.” He held a piece of bread smeared with bitter paste to her mouth and she swallowed it with difficulty. He helped her take a sip of water and then settled back in his chair to watch her. Beside him, in a cage, a ruby-throated hummingbird sat on its perch and cocked its head at her.

* * * * *

“A hummingbird?” Daniel asked.

“Sure, I sent it to find you and then followed it. There’s another one looking for Skuld right now.”

Daniel laughed and shook his head.

Kate felt a stirring resentment. “I didn't have a lot of time to think,” she said.

He grinned at her. “I just think it’s awesome, that's all.”

She relaxed. He’d gone through an awful lot to get Jesus, or Osiris, or whatever his name was. The three of them rode on horses over a barren landscape. Kate wondered if Daniel had figured out where they were going, but he was still groggy from his injury.

Jesus certainly didn’t know where they were going. Her conversation with him had been sobering, but he seemed to be convinced that together they could turn everything around. They would need reinforcements, but he had no doubt they could find them.

In the dim dusk, a light flared in the distance, and Kate smiled. They’d arrived.

Daniel swayed on his horse, and Kate grabbed his shoulder and held him steady. Jesus pulled up beside them as they approached the campfire.

“Why are we here?” he asked.

“We’re meeting some friends with a package for me.”

“No, why are we meeting them in hell? Are they demons?”

“Do you see any demons? The place is empty.”

Jesus glanced around, his hands tightening on his reins.

Kate grinned, “Don't worry, Jesus. Heaven is wherever you are, right?”

They had reached the campfire. Ganymede, his golden curls drab in the dying light, tended it while Bela Boost cooked a sausage over the fire.

“Ah, all of the gods are together again,” he said. “But who is the new one?”

“Alternate Dimension Bela Boost, this is Jesus. Or Osiris. I’m not sure what he prefers to be called,” Kate said as they dismounted.

Jesus shook Bela’s hand, still looking around as if he'd rather be anywhere else.

“Do you have it?” Kate asked.

Bela handed over the bindle and she carefully unwrapped it. She looked up at the dazed Daniel and said to Jesus, “Hold him.”

Jesus took hold of Daniel’s shoulders as Kate pulled the colored cords on the package and Heaven unfolded around them.

Daniel staggered. “Holy shit!”

Jesus watched the buildings grow around him, his eyes narrowing. “You’re thinking of putting heaven in hell?”

“No, Jesus. I'm definitely going to put heaven in hell. There’s a difference. It's empty, I was able to get it here safely, I have you and more reinforcements are coming. Daniel is here, as a ruler of hell, to help me. It's the perfect scenario. If you have a better idea, I’d love to hear it.”

The Son of God stared at her, but didn't say anything more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To put Jesus more at rest, Kate held a dinner in the stone room deep within the castle with Bela, Jesus, her, and Daniel. Ganymede served them, grinning, happy to be back with Kate.

Bela smiled through blue smears on his face, with one empty pie plate in front of him. Ganymede quickly brought another one, a brackleberry pie, and he dug in. Jesus sipped at some clear broth while Daniel chowed down on a diner-type breakfast. Kate ate nothing.

“So who imprisoned you?” she asked Jesus.

“I was not imprisoned exactly. After the destruction of the Earth, I was weakened greatly by the loss of so many believers. Unlike other deities, I still thrived on the food and drink of worship. I decided to hide myself until someone believed in me enough to find me, which would give me the power to move on. So I sequestered myself deep, where only someone meditating could find me.”

“And Daniel’s eye?” Kate said, glancing at her friend. She tried to heal him, but it seemed to go more slowly than the last two times.

“I had nothing to do with that. That seems to be his fate.”

“Like Prometheus with the eagle eating his liver every day?” Kate asked.

“The same.”

“Well, let’s just hope he doesn’t get the eye back again, then.”

Daniel remained oblivious, tearing into his food as if he actually needed it. It was the most animated she had seen him in a while. He put down his knife and fork, dragged his napkin across his face, and smiled at them.

“So, I’ve got this great idea. Jesus is here, in heaven and hell at the same time. Kate and I haven’t been doing such an awesome job with the ruling of these places. Okay, okay, Kate’s been doing better than I have, but still. Now that you’re here and we’re obviously fucking everything up, why can’t we just leave the keys of both places to you? You’ll get your birthright, we’ll be free, everyone will be happy.”

Jesus opened his mouth once and closed it.

Kate hastened to speak before he did. “That’s an excellent idea. I’d be all for that, but let’s get the little matter of the war taken care of.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped. “But, but ... I thought you brought heaven here to protect it, so they couldn’t find it.”

“I did, but Mephistopheles is determined to get it, and he’ll figure it out eventually. It may be days or weeks, but we can’t assume he won’t find us. All he has to do is go to the roundabout in heaven and follow a new soul headed this way.”

Daniel jumped up, “Then what are we doing here? Let’s prepare for the fight! Where are the angels and the reinforcements? Where’s Skuld?”

Something tickled at the edge of Kate’s consciousness. Where *was* Skuld?

“Hang on, I’ll find out.” She closed her eyes and concentrated until she located the second hummingbird she had sent out.

She popped out of her banquet hall and teleported next to Skuld. She stood in a barn full of warhorses and Skuld saddled her own mount. She looked down at Kate. “Goddess, how goes the fight?”

“Not so good. Looks like we’re going to need you. Can you bring the Valkyries?”

Skuld tightened the gird on the saddle and frowned. She gestured to Kate to follow her through the grand barn and Kate realized with a sinking stomach that only Skuld’s horse was saddled. Skuld led her through the gilded barn doors and pointed to a grand fortress atop the hill. Torches flared and shone through the night, showing off the glory of Valhalla.

The Valkyrie pointed to the fortress, “There is your army. They feast and wait.”

“For?”

“For Odin to return to them.”

Kate clamped her jaw shut. She took a deep breath and said, “Odin is dead. His return is not prophesied.”

“But Baldur isn’t back, and his return is prophesied. So they are convinced Odin will return in his place.”

Odin chuckled dryly in Kate’s head. She thought for a moment and then spoke carefully. “Skuld, do you trust me?”

The Valkyrie turned and looked at her, really looked at her. Kate fixed her with a

calm stare.

The old woman smiled. "That I do, Goddess. For all your youth, your heart and your mind are in the right place."

Kate nearly laughed nervously, but she kept her poise. "Tell them Baldur has returned. Tell them Odin will return, but only on the Battlefield of Sol."

Skuld's brow furrowed, "I don't know where that is."

Kate smiled and touched Skuld's forehead, where a bright icon of the sun flared once and then died.

"It is wherever I am, Skuld. Tell them. Get them to come. If they don't, Ragnarök might as well have ended us all."

Skuld put her fingers on her forehead where Kate had touched her, "I will do it."

* * * * *

Kate returned to the hall where Jesus and Daniel were finishing their meals.

"The Norse are coming, but..." she said, looking at Jesus, "they want Baldur."

He nodded once and his features changed. He became taller, more broad-shouldered and blonde. "I have been waiting for them."

"Wait a minute," Daniel said. "If you're Osiris, Jesus, and Baldur, how are you going to stay here and rule, and go back to Valhalla with them? You're not backing down, are you?"

"It's all metaphysical, Daniel. This guy is the essence of the Reborn God. He can be any of them, all of them. And we'll likely need all of them."

They walked outside to stand on the new ramparts that surrounded heaven. The land surrounding the new home of heaven had begun to take on a more *whole* look,, and Kate thought she saw some grass poking through the ground.

In the dreary sky, four figures flew toward them. "That can't be good," Daniel said.

"No," Kate replied. "That means the Army is on its way."

"Hey, Kate, where's Earth?" Daniel asked.

"It's safe. Away from here. Jane the Boxcar Beekeeper has it. Now, we need to make sure that we still have hell," Kate said. "Daniel, can you create a hell for the demons defeated in battle?"

“You gave the Earth to a hobo?”

Kate slowly faced him. “Again, I ask, what should I have done otherwise?”

“But can you trust her?”

“I had to. If Mephistopheles even touches the metaphysical shadow of the earth, he gains control. The whole world goes to hell.”

Bela Boost appeared beside Daniel, grinning. “That is right, Dinner-Loving One Eye, no one suspects a hobo. But Kate, The Brackleberry Pie Provider, there is something you should know.”

Kate tore her eyes away from the angels that sped toward her. The southern horizon darkened as the army from hell neared, clued into her whereabouts. The northern horizon was dusty with the army from Valhalla. Kate’s head began to pound. Bela pointed to the east, where one lone figure trudged carrying a bindle over her shoulder. Jane the Boxcar Beekeeper was returning her package to Kate.

Kate rubbed her head. “Oh, that’s not good.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“What is going on, Ganymede?” Daniel asked through clenched teeth. “There’s something she’s not telling me.” They stood outside a small bathroom where Kate was currently vomiting. She hadn’t eaten anything during dinner, but she vomited as if she had been drinking an entire frat party. Ganymede wouldn’t meet his eyes; he stared at the door with his lips pursed.

“I do not know what is wrong with the Goddess, but it is a very bad time for it to be wrong.” As the armies and the hobo approached, Kate had reminded Daniel that they needed a hell, so he had left heaven by the southern exit and concentrated, making seven hells: three towers of torture, one field of black grain, and three pits containing fire, ice, and spiders.

“Spiders?” Baldur had asked.

“Can’t stand the things!” Daniel said, shuddering.

When he had returned to heaven, Kate’s four angel warriors had gone to escort Jane safely to the fortress, and Kate had locked herself in the bathroom to vomit in private. She now opened the door, pale and shaking, staring at the floor.

“I’m okay,” she mumbled.

“No you’re not! What’s going on?” Daniel shouted, grabbing her shoulders. Kate winced at his volume and held her hand to her head.

“Migraine,” she said. “Sometimes they get bad.”

“Then heal yourself! That’s one of the benefits of being dead, right? You don’t get sick anymore!” Hysteria was coloring Daniel’s voice now. Kate’s head raised and looked at him calmly.

“Daniel, I am fine. Please go help the angels with their preparation.” Daniel’s eye narrowed. He hadn’t heard the gods in his head since the vision quest, but he recognized that tone.

“Izanami, don’t do that. I want to talk to Kate.” The goddess did not deny her control over Kate’s body, but only smiled at him tightly. She sagged then, and Daniel

caught her. He held her close and she looked up at him.

“Hey,” he said softly, stroking her hair. “What's going on?” Her eyes were glassy as she looked up at him.

“I’m sorry, Daniel. I’m so sorry.”

“For what, being sick?”

“You know, right? You know I love you?” His throat closed and his heart pounded. This was not a real claim of love. This was a goodbye.

“Kate ...” She pulled him down to her and kissed him, a sweet, sad kiss, and then pushed away from him as her angel Ruth came down the hall, weeping.

“Dammit,” Kate whispered.

“Goddess, you must see what has happened. What they have brought, it is nothing I have ever seen before.” Kate bent suddenly and retched, her body convulsing with nothing else to vomit up. Daniel held onto her until she calmed, then supported her as they hurried to the castle walls. Daniel gasped as Kate struggled to raise her head to the new threat.

“Kate,” he whispered. “Are the souls safe?”

“They’re in a bunker deep down.” He lifted her chin so she could see, to comprehend, and was startled to see her face not register shock at all, but just stoic acceptance. Daniel could not comprehend what he saw, the size of it, the magnitude. The dark shape flashed with rainbow colors like an oil slick, and towered above the demon army, hovering like the sick child of a vulture and a skyscraper. Daniel could actually feel his brain attempting to force this ... thing ... into a shape or something he could understand, could place into a neat box of animal, vegetable, demon, or angel. All his mind could tell him was “BIG” and “BAD.”

“What IS that?” Kate’s head hung again.

“Remember that hole we saw? That metaphysical hole where the Earth was supposed to be?”

“That came out of there?”

“Yeah, I think Mephistopheles was trying to slow you down so this could get out. It's going to make him unstoppable unless we do something.”

“What can we do? You can’t even stand upright! The Norse are just sitting there! Your angels can’t hold that off and ... OH SHIT!” The shadow had descended on them,

and Daniel saw a flashing image of teeth, so many teeth. He screamed, and the shadow bounced off a dome made of thick crystal, making a bright ringing sound that both hurt his ears and was the sweetest sound in the world. Kate hadn't moved, but he had no doubt that she created it to protect them. Still, the shadow enveloped them, plunging heaven into complete darkness. Torches flared to life around them and Daniel held tightly to Kate, his complete faith in her unshaking even as another bound of retching shook her.

"Now what?" he whispered to Bela ... but the hobo wasn't there. He was sprinting to where Jane was guarded by Ruth and Gabriel. He snatched the bindle from her shoulder and pushed it into Ruth's surprised hands. The air split around him and he pulled her through, escaping. Kate hadn't turned to watch him, but she held out her hand, where Ruth put the bindle.

"She never got her pie ..." Kate's voice was thick, but still held a bit of amusement.

"You can pay her back when we done here." whispered Daniel, having no idea how they'd get out of this.

"We need to get the Norse involved. We need more gods." Kate looked at Jesus, who had been silent, and he nodded. She reached into her robe, and with trembling fingers, handed him the deed to heaven. Then she handed the Earth to Daniel. She straightened and smiled at him sadly. She began to stumble down the steps of the ramparts; Daniel went to help her, and in a blink Baldur was on the other side of her, supporting her shoulder. Jesus remained on the ramparts, looking up at the blackness and the winking eyes and the gnashing teeth. Kate led them weakly to a door in the walls.

"Is this a good idea, Kate?" Daniel asked.

"Trust me," she whispered. She opened the door to a curtain of black, inky fog. She held out her hand and a hole appeared. The creature screamed then, its pain reverberating through the crystal.

She shoved the bindle into his hands. "Stay here. Protect Earth, please," she said, and kissed him long and hard. He held her, crushing her to his chest, not understanding.

She broke off, and she and Baldur walked through the hole in the blackness. Daniel remained inside, holding the package with the metaphysical footprint of the Earth within. Baldur supported Kate as she lifted her head to the sky. Her face contorted in a

mask of agony, then ecstasy; a passion of sorts. Her forehead split open then, streaming hot light onto the dark battlefield.

“Sol,” whispered Daniel, terrified. “The sun ...” She screamed then, a sound of a thousand voices, all of them gods. The light intensified, and Baldur stepped away from her. Daniel shielded his eyes, and when the light subsided Kate had crumpled, and was surrounded by gods. These were not the gods Daniel had met. These were *Gods*. Izanami stood in her Kazuko form: taller, glowing, and armed. Hermes, Kagutsuchi, Anubis, Horus, and Odin also stood with her in glorious power. With one gesture of his arm, Odin had the entire Norse army screaming his name, and with another flick he commanded them to descend on the demon army that had been advancing onto heaven. The other gods ran alongside Baldur and Odin to join the fray, but Hermes stopped for a moment, looking down at Kate, and bent to kiss her hand. Then in a flash he was gone, running into battle.

They just left her lying there.

Daniel cried out her name and she didn't respond. He ran, his feet pounding on the new grass to fall next to her, kneeling. Her forehead was still split open, and blood poured free over her pale unmoving face. Her body was difficult to move as he pulled her into his lap, sobbing.

“Kate, Kate, baby, that was amazing. Kate — can you hear me, Kate ...” he sobbed. She didn't move. Bereft of healing powers — possibly any powers — he could only hold her and cry. The package holding Earth lay beside them, forgotten. Movement caught his eye as the Earth rolled away. He lunged for it — it had been her last wish to him — but the shadow was faster. It struck out with the pseudopod and grabbed the Earth; their fledgling planet was swallowed, disappearing into the darkness.

“No ...” he whispered in grief and horror, and didn't even think to flinch as the pseudopod struck out again, hitting him with such force. He held onto Kate, and together they flew through the air. He closed his eye and wished to die on impact, just finish this bullshit, this god stuff, this responsibility stuff, just follow Kate wherever dead gods went and be done. To rest.

He didn't die, though. He landed in soft sand and slid, still holding her body, down a tall dune. He came to rest and finally opened his eye. It was a Wasteland. The desert stretched around them, hot and gritty. Kate lay next to him, her limbs thrown away that

must've been uncomfortable ... if she had been alive. But as the sand caked in the gash on her forehead, and she failed to breathe, he had to accept it: she was not. Kate was dead. He had no idea what was going on with the battle for Heaven, Earth was lost, and he was exiled.

Daniel bent over his best friend's body and cried.

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Sneak Peek
at
Wasteland
The Afterlife Series IV

CHAPTER ONE

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“Oh come on, Daniel, we can’t do this every Saturday!”

“Sure we can. And we do.”

“Do you have any money?”

“No.”

“Wanna go hiking?”

“Sure!”

Daniel still didn’t know what to do. And this time he didn’t have Kate’s irritation and wit to drive him.

He still held her, blood making his tshirt tacky and stiff. He couldn’t put her down. He couldn’t let her go. He couldn’t accept the inevitable.

She would have laughed at his scattered thought process. What would Kate do in his position? What would Jesus do? Jesus was still in heaven, which was in hell, and he fought the creature that had slipped through the hole in the universe. The armies of heaven, alongside an army of gods and Norse heroes, had been making short work of the armies of hell. And that great beastie that had devoured Earth still enveloped Heaven.

He used to be a god. For that matter, so did Kate. The greatest gods in history had been in his head, advising him. He’d had Kate advising him. Now he had nothing.

Her dead weight made his legs cramp, and he shifted in the sand. He leaned over and took her head in his hands. Her head looked exactly as if something ancient and powerful had been stored inside her and she had been the unfortunate arachnid to the spider-hunting wasp. The gods had not been advisors; they’d been eggs waiting to be hatched out. Had they fed on her? Fed on her godly power until there was nothing left but Kate?

Her skin was split and caked with blood and sand. Smoothing the hair away from the wound, Daniel could see the hole in her skull where the gods had exited. He began to

cry again, his fingers tightening on her shoulders and bruising her skin. He didn't know why it had happened, but she was too big of a sacrifice to make.

How much had she known about her fate? She must have known, she wouldn't have apologized to him, would not have kissed him like that if she hadn't known. Is that what Jesus had talked to her about?

He needed answers. If only to quiet his mind. If only to get peace. Then maybe he could die too.

He lifted her, struggling in the sand, his feet slipping. He teetered to the left and then fell to one knee. He had nothing of the strength he once had. He was a tired, grief-stricken man, unable to do the simple thing of keeping his best friend with him.

He began to dig, then, his hands scraping sand aside furiously. At first the sand began to slide back into the hole as fast as he removed it, but eventually he got ahead of it and made progress. The sand wore away at his hands, wedging underneath his fingernails and leaving his skin raw.

His shoulders ached and his eye stung, but he eventually made a hole deep enough to slide her in. He stood for a minute, looking down at the swirling sand that had already begun to cover her. He leaned down close and kissed her dry lips. "I'll see you soon, one way or another."

Covering her prone body was not an issue. He pushed sand into the hole and then removed Izanami's katana from its sheath at his hip. He stuck it deeply into the sand by her grave, marking it. Removing his bloody tshirt, he tied it to the sword, a red marker to remind anyone what she had given.

If there was anyone left to remind.

* * * * *

He had forgotten what it was like to feel mortal. Even before he had begun taking on godlike powers – and he couldn't pinpoint when that was, exactly – the knowledge of being a dead soul had made it unnecessary to eat or drink. He breathed out of habit, and every once in a while his body decided it wanted to experience waste elimination, but pretty much he was a metaphysical being.

Even when he had lost his eye, he somehow knew it was a symbolic thing, and the

blood and humor that had gushed down his face were not actually real.

Now he was aware of his body, the large bag of organs and blood he had to carry with him. The thirst tore at his throat and his eye socket ached at best and screamed at the invasion of sand particles at worst. His lips cracked and bled, making his body lose precious moisture even faster.

He didn't care. Dying of thirst was not ideal, but what did it matter? He would either get his answers or die trying. It pleased him that he had only two choices here, and either one would be fine. He couldn't mess this one up. He tightened the bandage around his eye and trudged on.

"She made the ultimate sacrifice," Izanami said, her voice in a light tone, as if she were discussing the latest stock prices. "You should be proud of her."

Daniel turned his head. She stood there, shimmering, in her human form. "Are you real?"

"By now you should know to ask, 'What is real?'" came a voice behind him. Kagutsuchi, the fire god, blazing brighter than the sun overhead.

Daniel shielded his eye and winced. "I have no clue, honestly. I want to believe this is just a vision quest and I'll wake up at some point and be able to get a drink."

"It's not about you anymore, boy," Odin's gruff voice made him turn around yet again. The man glared at him from under his wide hat, his one eye boring into Daniel's. "It's not about Kate, either."

"The Earth has been enshrouded in darkness," Anubis said. The huge dog nearly gave shade in the lethal heat, except he too shimmered as a mirage. "It needs help."

"Let the gods deal with it. Isn't that what you are for?"

"Battle still rages in Heaven." This was Horus. "The Christ keeps the city safe, and the armies of heaven and hell battle outside. No one knows how to destroy the creature, however. Kate was the only one who wounded it."

"Kate is dead," Daniel said, his voice breaking in the new grief that felt as if it turned his bones to sludge.

"And you are alive. Kate depended on you. She loved you. She believed in you." This was Hermes now, his hand a very real pressure on Daniel's arm, his blue eyes not unkind as he forced Daniel to look at him.

"I don't have anything left!" Daniel wailed.

“Is that entirely true?” Hermes had gone; whoever had said this was hidden. The voice was sharp and female, and he finally looked down to see Coyote laughing at him. Before he could answer, she lunged for him, jaws open wide, and hit his chest, knocking him into the sand.

He lay there for a minute, listening to the sand shift around him like rain. He felt tired, so very tired. And he was clearly losing his mind. He rolled onto his side, curled into a ball, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

One drop. One drop of rain was enough to wake him, his skin sucking in the moisture almost immediately. More rain fell, dotting the tacky blood on his bare chest, wetting his cracked lips. He licked them, his swollen tongue greedily seeking water. Struggling to sit up, he looked around.

Dark, billowy clouds had obscured the sun, easing the oppressive heat. A line of lightning flickered in the sky, and Daniel blinked. Did it rain in the Wastelands?

He felt his face, seeking a whole eye, wondering if he was on another vision quest, but his bandage was still there, his socket still aching, his perception still off. Thunder rumbled and the rain fell harder now, matting his hair to his head. He pulled off his bandage and let the rain wash the sand and Kate’s blood off his body in pink rivulets. The sand and tears and blood all washed away, and for one perfect moment, he gloried in the cool storm.

He stood, feeling new strength. He wished for advice, guidance, anything. Even hallucinations of the gods that had previously annoyed him – he just didn’t want to be alone.

But what the hell. He didn’t want to be exiled here. He didn’t want to have lost his eye three freaking times. And he didn’t want Kate to be dead. There were lots of things he didn’t want.

Was I really a god? He wondered. Did I really have power that I never used for anything useful? I must have been the god of bad luck.

A whisper of the knowledge he’d gained from Odin brought the memory of Baldur to him. The beloved god had been protected from everything but mistletoe, and Loki had

tricked his brother Hod into throwing a mistletoe spear at him, killing him. Retribution for the slain god had been swift: Odin and a giantess had a son specifically to slay the poor patsy, who went down in history as the guy who killed Baldur.

Daniel looked around, wondering if anyone had been breeding with the express desire to kill him. Had he been responsible for Kate's death? He had no idea why the gods needed to ride around in a head for a while before rebirth. Maybe he and Kate shouldn't have made love. Maybe he shouldn't have been such a dumbass when he was in charge of hell. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

The sand was getting sludgy under his feet. He picked a random direction and began to walk.

The thoughts pulled at him and ached, but did not carry the fresh, painful grief this time. He walked through his memories with her, from their childhood, into adulthood, into the afterlife. One conversation lodged in his brain like popcorn in his teeth, refusing to leave until he actually gave it some attention.

They had been heading to see the movie *Edward Scissorhands* together; he had been driving. He'd just had a breakup, and had turned to Kate – again, he realized with shame – for someone to hang with. All he'd wanted to do was complain and feel sorry for himself, but she was trying to cheer him up.

"Look, dude, you'll find someone else. She didn't appreciate you, that much is clear," she'd said.

Daniel didn't say anything, he merely drove. Kate continued.

"You don't see it, do you? You don't see how fun and awesome and giving you are. And let's face it – you're not that bad on the eyes."

Now, with the current knowledge of the feelings she'd had for him, his memory put a slight blush to her face, but he wasn't sure if it had happened or not.

"If I'm so wonderful, why did she dump me?"

"Maybe she wasn't right for you," Kate had said softly.

"I don't know who is," he'd grumbled.

She'd looked at him then, pointedly. "Someone is. You'll find her."

His insides squirmed with shame at this, but the memory was bright and clear. He'd turned to her and said, "I know, Kate. Can we drop it?" The hurt had been clear on her face, but he'd brushed it aside, feeling that he had more of a right to be hurt than she

did.

She'd done that. Every time he'd had his heart broken, she'd been there to let him know that he was, indeed, worthy of love. He just hadn't realized she'd meant her love.

He had been giving, he could admit that. His father had put him in an after school youth group that had helped out at the homeless shelter, and he'd found actual pleasure in helping others. Still, he kept himself at arm's length from people, letting only Kate close because she was so damn persistent.

But every single positive thing he could determine about himself was eclipsed by five negatives. He was a coward. He couldn't let himself love anyone. He was lazy and went the easy way out.

Oh, and he'd destroyed heaven. And hell. And the Earth.

What had she seen in him?

The rain continued and he shivered, realizing he'd left his tee-shirt back with Kate. His bare chest prickled with the chill. He ran his hands through his sopping hair and remembered he had also left his bandage behind. There was no reason to feel self-conscious of his ruined face; there was no one around to see him.

Visibility was very low here; he squinted across the dune and saw what looked like a great tree growing out of the desolate land. He picked up his pace, sliding a bit on the wet sand, and approached it.

It was, indeed, a tree. It stood against the cloudy sky, leafless and daunting. A flicker caught his eye, two hummingbirds zoomed off a branch, circled his head, and then went to perch back on their branch. His eye followed them and he gasped.

A body hung from the branch, trussed up in ropes, swinging gently. Ruby-colored raindrops dripped from the toes of the hanging shoes. The hummingbirds kept vigil on the body.

"Kate," he whispered. He ran at the tree and began to climb, slipping on the bark and scraping his already raw hands. He missed his footing on a branch once and fell against the trunk, cutting a shallow gash in his side, but kept moving, scrabbling up the tree, eye fixed on the unmoving body of his friend.

When he finally reached the body, he gulped. They were up terribly high. The hummingbirds regarded him with their beady eyes, but made no attempt to help or hinder him. He hugged the branch and inched out across it, trying not to look down at

the ground while, at the same time, focusing on the ropes to try to loosen them.

He'd left the katana with Kate's body (or so he thought, cause it wasn't anywhere nearby that he could see). He had no other blade, and his tired, raw hands picked at the wet ropes ineffectually. With Kate's dead weight pulling the ropes taut, there was no way he could get her down. He couldn't give up, though.

"Come on," he said, and drew in breath fast when he heard the branch crack. "Oh no..." He picked at the ropes again, not even sure what he would do if he could untie her, except to let the body fall, but he had to get her down.

The branch cracked again and he lurched downward. The hummingbirds took flight and hovered near his head, watching him. He glared at them, rain dripping into his eye. "A little help here?"

The branch broke, and they fell.

* * * * *

He landed hard, knocking the wind from his lungs. Kate and the broken branch were gone; he was at the top of a hill with three crosses in front of him. Two were made from beams, one crudely made from two hefty tree branches. Kate hung, motionless, from the crude cross.

Daniel looked up at her, tears and rain blurring his vision. Weeping women surrounded him.

"What were their crimes?" he asked.

"Two were thieves. One saved us all from the demons of hell," one woman said, motioning the mourners to begin removing the dead woman from the cross.

"That she did," Daniel whispered. He moved to help them take Kate down, but a thundering sound caught his attention.

His eye widened as he saw the Roman soldiers on horseback, galloping toward them. The women screamed and hurried to get Kate's body down. One of them – he recognized her with a start as Mary from his vision quest – looked at him and said, "You must protect us while we take her body."

He barked a startled laugh. "You're kidding me, right?" He stood unarmed and half-naked in the rain as three soldiers neared, bloodlust in their eyes and their weapons

drawn.

Mary instructed the women to take Kate's body away. "She gave her life for all mankind. What have you given?"

Daniel shut his mouth with a snap and allowed himself one look at Kate's body, her wet face peaceful as she was borne away by the women who surrounded her. He turned, set his stance, and waited.

Time slowed; the haze in his eye caused by the rain seemed to lift; the scene presented itself to him with startling clarity. One soldier closed in on him, with two more behind. The soldier in front was smaller, lithe, and aimed his horse at Daniel. If the sword didn't get him, he'd be trampled underfoot. The others behind him by several lengths were burly fellows; each raised a crude short sword.

His muscles twitched as if remembering something. The horses neared, necks stretched out in full gallop. He waited, his arms relaxed at his side. The soldier leaned over and-

Daniel danced to his left, close enough for his right hand's fingertips to graze the chest of the thin man's horse. Once he'd made contact with the horse, he knew everything about it; it was slightly lame in the off fore, which was why it carried the lighter soldier. As the horse thundered by, Daniel's hand trailed down its side until he made contact with the soldier's shin.

He closed his hand tightly on the man's ankle, and yanked.

For a moment, he thought he was going to lose his grip, or that his arm would be wrenched from its shoulder. His muscles screamed as he grasped the wet leather of the man's boot, and for an instant, the man on the ground and the man on the horse had perfect equilibrium. Time resumed, then, and the man toppled from the horse, hard. There was a crunch, and he did not get up.

Daniel didn't pause to see if he had killed the man; he grabbed the man's sword from his scabbard and faced the two men on horseback. The sword was a clumsy piece of metal, an ugly tool, and it certainly was no katana, but it would do.

He took a practice swing, and winced at the feeling of weakness in his damaged muscles. This wouldn't do. Fight with a weakened arm or fight with his left arm? He couldn't take the burly men in a fair fight, not unarmored with an injured sword arm. But he'd taken skinny in a rather unfair fight.

And what was fair about crucifixion? It was brutal.

He could be brutal.

His skin prickled as the other men approached. He had to do something else about this. The rain came harder now, lowering visibility. The soldiers approached at a gallop, then slowed.

“Good work sir!” the one on the right called, as he neared.

“Went down like a whore, did he?” asked the other, laughing.

Daniel looked at the man lying on the road. He was shirtless, wearing blue jeans. Daniel felt a momentary sense of vertigo, then realized he was wearing the soldier’s garb.

“Should we go after them?” one asked, indicating the fleeing women.

“No,” Daniel said. “She’s dead. Let them cry over the body, it will do them no good.”

He smiled. “Now, dismount for further orders.”

#

He should have felt guiltier as he cleaned the blood off the sword. It was much easier to kill the Romans when they had assumed he was their superior than when they were bent on killing him. He looked at the departing women – they were barely visible through the rain, cresting a hill, carrying Kate’s body, and then they were gone.

He finished cleaning the blade on a piece of one of the guard’s jackets and then looked at it. Why did he care? He tossed the sword onto the pile of dead bodies at his feet, and as the blade went through the air, he caught an image of himself, actually himself: Daniel, reflected in the metal. When the sword clattered off the metal fastenings on the soldier’s shirt and onto the road, Daniel blinked.

And he was somewhere else.

* * * * *

Daniel stumbled backward and fell on his ass in the pebbly sand. This was not the fine sand of the wasteland, it was the hard desert floor of the American west. Rocks, scrub and cacti surrounded him, seeming to loom with the long shadows of the setting sun.

Coyotes also surrounded him. Not the one coyote, the bitch, who had taunted him; these were real animals, thin, ribs protruding, lips curled back. There had to be twenty or so, all growling, all hunched down. Coiled springs, ready to let go.

He looked around desperately to see if she were among them, the one coyote he could talk to, but he couldn't tell them apart. He scrambled to his feet. "Is this it?" he asked them. "Is this how it ends? After all that?"

One coyote threw back his head and howled, and the others followed suit. Daniel trembled as a wave of gooseflesh passed over him. He set his jaw. "If this is how it is, then come on. I'm ready."

He didn't run, and he didn't go down easily. They leapt as one, and he fought them, kicking and punching. But twenty coyotes against one man had a decided advantage, and Daniel's right arm was still sore from the battle with the Romans. Teeth closed on his right arm, his left. A snout drove into his belly, knocking him down, and he was lost. As they tore into him, his fleeting thought was relief. It was OK that he had lost; at least this time he had fought.

Then teeth that matched a pair of yellow eyes he thought he recognized closed on his throat and he knew no more.

* * * * *

Utter bliss. Complete and total bliss. He rested his head on her lap as she dozed in her easy chair in front of the fire. She had fallen asleep with her hand on his head, and he gazed up at her with total devotion.

His eyes began to droop with the heat of the fire and the feeling her nearby. But he was sitting up, and as his body tried to sleep he stumbled, his movements jolting him awake and rousing her.

She yawned and smiled at him.

"You did it."

Awareness flooded his head, and he fell back, in human form again, and gaped at her.

"Kate?"

She curled in the easy chair, looking relaxed and luxurious, and smiled at him. He

sat in his own chair and stared at her.

He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

She laughed at him. “Too many questions?”

He nodded. “Are you real? What happened?”

“You brought me back. You brought back the reborn god.”

“But how? I lost all that god stuff.”

“Yeah, but you were still you. You got me down off Ygdrasil. You kept me safe from the Romans. And you didn’t run from your own destiny.”

“My own...” Daniel looked down at his hands that had previously been paws. Coyote had been with him frequently. She had guided him, taunted him, and then, at the end, devoured him. He had killed the Romans through dexterity and trickery. He had shapechanged from coyote to man.

Kate laughed. “You’ll figure it out. You’re more clever than you realize, as soon as you start to believe in yourself.”

“So- where are we?”

Kate looked around at the tiny cabin that held only a fireplace and two chairs. “We are in the Wasteland.”

As if disagreeing with her, thunder boomed in the distance.

“I didn’t think it could storm in the Wasteland, but I don’t think we could be anywhere else,” Daniel said. “When we got here, you were dead and I am pretty sure I was exiled. I had trouble leaving the wasteland, anyway.”

It hit him, finally, what had happened, and he was on his feet, holding her tightly.

“This can’t be, I can’t be this lucky,” he said, stroking her hair.

She buried her face in his neck, her breath hot on him.

She smelled like wildness and musk as he kissed her. He blinked – kate didn’t smell like wildness and musk. She smiled at him, her eyes shifting to yellow.

He pushed her away from with a horrified cry, and the cabin – and the warmth – dissolved around him, leaving him in the storm, which had remained. He fell on the sand.

“Bitch. Trickster. I get it now. I get it. And I get that I spend entirely too much fucking time in the Wasteland on my hands and knees!”

He lurched to his feet, sobbing. This wasn’t Heaven, where his heart’s desire was

handed to him. This wasn't hell where he would be tortured forever – and there was some relief in that. This was the Wasteland, where a god would have to make things happen for himself.

His tears mixed with the rain as he walked with new determination. He knew the direction; he knew what he had to do. He knew who he was and what he was capable of doing.

Daniel, the newest trickster god, headed across the wasteland to the body of his best friend.

* * * * *

His sense of direction was now flawless. Kate's body, her real body that lay at the place where they had landed painfully in the Wasteland, flared like a beacon in his senses. The storm raged around him, but he ignored it.

He crested a soggy dune and blinked the rain out of his eye. The wasteland was nearly pitch black with the night storm, but in a flash of lightning, the world came into instant, strobe-light-like view. Beyond his dune lay a lush oasis, green-black in the storm; heavy grasses and flowers covered the ground while a huge tree in the center of the oasis shaded a small pond.

It hadn't been like that when he'd left, but this was the place. There was no question. In darkness again, he slid down the grassy hill and ran toward the tree.

The tree shielded him from the storm a bit. He placed his hand on the trunk and leaned his forehead against it.

"I've lost you three times. Once to reincarnation, once to bureaucracy, and now to death. No more. Not again. We're in the afterlife, Kate. When you die, the issue is not that you're gone, it's just where you've gone. I'll find you."

A thump sounded behind him and an instant later a hand fell on his shoulder. He turned and chanced a look at her. He raised his hand and stroked it carefully down the side of her head. Her hair was clean and perfect, her skull lacked the massive exit wound and she grinned up at him as his hands went to her face.

"You found me."

Daniel grabbed her shoulders tightly. "Are you real? This time are you real?"

She held her hands in front of her face and then touched her head where the gods had broken free. “I think so. What else would I be?”

“Something to trick me, something to hurt me. I don’t know. I just-“ he faltered.

She grinned at him again, and the lightning flashed and lit her brown eyes. It was dark again when she kissed him, but he finally knew it was her.

The reborn god and the trickster god held each other in exile, in the rain.