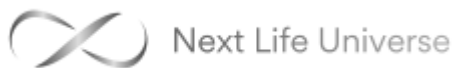


NEXT LIFE
AFTERWORLD



A NOVEL BY
JAMES G. ROBERTSON



Next Life Publishing LLC, KS

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In loving memory of J.R.D. A simple farmer and grandfather who always believed in me and whose work ethic inspired me to work to complete this book, knowing that I could do whatever I put my mind to as long as I was willing to work to see it through.

This book is written for the dreamers who question the world around them. For those that seek out answers to the unknown. For those that yearn for a time when humanity will work towards reconciling its differences; and for those that just want to escape the mundane world around them.

Preface

Before you get all excited and see that I've released a new book, I haven't. Though the third book (the second prequel story) is on the way (or perhaps it already is, depending on when you're first reading this)—this is the same book that started it all with a few changes. I've expanded the dialogue a bit, took out some unneeded modifiers, and fixed a few minor parts that I may have overlooked initially. However, this is mostly the same book.

The first time around, I was broke and entirely new to this. I only wanted to get the story out there. The great feedback I've received from the original has made me want to do this and give it the attention it deserves. Therefore, I've opted to have the cover redone from that bland doorway to something I hope catches more people's attention and lives up to the quality of the second and third covers. If you have one of the original paperback copies, congratulations, there's probably less than 100 out there. (Even less than that of the non-revised edition).

The reason I did this was simple: it needed to be done, at least in my opinion (and the opinion of those who gave me the red ribbon award). I've gone back through this book countless times and hired an editor to go through it as well. So hopefully the reading experience reflects that. Throughout the pages, I've added a few more details that will enable your imagination to become more immersed while reading. If you're wondering if this is the final copy, I wouldn't say so, but don't expect substantial additions in the coming years. As the great Stephen King put it:

“Until a writer either retires or dies, the work is not finished; it can always use another polish and a few more revisions.... How glad I am, Constant Reader, that we're both still here. Cool, isn't it?”

Well, at the very least, my story is still here. Maybe you're not a constant reader of mine, but a new reader, which the new cover

helped to grab your attention. If so, welcome. Enjoy the journey, enjoy the action, enjoy the sorrows—enjoy a look into the Next Life.

J.G.R 5/17/2021

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Prologue



I was like you once—oblivious to how the world works. What I’m going to tell those of you who will listen is the truth about our universe, the real truth. After all, the story of different gods has been told time and time again. The likes of Allah, or merely God, are the most recognized and worshiped at the beginning of this story.

Other than the Abrahamic religions, you’ve probably heard a few stories of the old gods, those who existed in a time before the new. These gods have had their holidays replaced by the new. An example of this being Odin and the rulers of Asgard; most people know of them from the Marvel Universe. If you are skeptical of this statement I urge you to look into the history of Christmas and Yule. Those who still doubt the validity of this statement should visit Norway around Christmas time.

Other renowned gods were those of the Greeks, including Zeus—the ruler of Olympus and his brothers and sisters. Some have undoubtedly heard the tales of their struggles that they persevered through with their father Cronus and the Titans. Then we have the ancient Egyptian gods. They may be less known overall, but it seems there has been a recent reemergence for them in pop culture. Of those, the most common names you’ve probably heard of are Anubis and Ra; however, are those all that you’ve heard of?

Surely there must be other gods out there. Perhaps you’ve heard of more obscure religions such as the Aztecs, Incas, or Mayans? What about the Native American beliefs from different tribes? Did only one of these gods create the world? The universe? Or is there

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a more in-depth story here? Maybe all these religions and prophets knew the truth, the absolute truth that has been buried. But what is the truth, you may ask?

Well, while each religion may seem separate, that isn't the entire story. While they may appear dissimilar, they share a singular purpose, utterly different from anything that the Gods led us to believe. The real purpose of these other religions was to help prepare us for what was ahead. The true gods have worked together to defend our universe, and even now, they fight together to keep it safe.

"Safe from what?" You ask. "These are the gods we are talking about."

Indeed they are, so let us imagine for a moment that maybe, with so many gods, there are some that no one has heard of; at least no living human has. Then imagine these gods are from a different universe. I don't mean galaxies, such as the Milky Way or Andromeda, but a universe independent of our own. This universe they're from is a place that we cannot see or reach, no matter how far we travel, another dimension, if you will. This isn't a time paradox of multiple Earths or different images of the same universe. No, these other universes are whole and complete in their own right and complexity.

These other gods created their own worlds how they saw fit, as ours had done. Those other gods, however, are not as forgiving or even as merciful as our own. That holds even truer now that they've directed their sights at our universe.

Sure, those that have watched over us may have created conflict and abandoned us, but at the end of it all, most seemed to have genuinely cared for us in doing so. You may rebuke that last part with talk of the violence that religion causes. For this, I wouldn't blame you.

For example, you have the Jewish people claiming the lands of Jerusalem for their own. This means that the Catholics and Christians of the world are in similar mindsets since they follow similar

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books, with most of the same rules prescribed. On the other hand, you have Islam that says the land belongs to their people. It's all bizarre when you compare their scriptures. They preach nearly the same thing, with a few slight differences in the message. Let's not even get into the countless holy wars that have been fought over the centuries.

So why then? For what purpose was this violence created through different yet very similar religions? These religions share several prophets, and one could argue that they worship the same god—yet, they fight for the same land; why is this? One cannot help but contemplate this enigmatic debacle. And if one dares to call the other fake or wrong, are they not, in the same sense, declaring that of their own? Many have and continue to make this critical error.

So what is the solution to this conundrum? The answer, while complicated, is also straightforward. It is all to prepare us for what's ahead. While our gods wished us to live peaceful lives, they also needed to breed warriors. The universe, *our* universe, needs soldiers and fighters. The ongoing struggle hasn't been a fight for life on Earth, but a battle for existence. For these other gods, they desire to make all bow down to them or be destroyed. This includes our gods and their creations. This includes you.



Part One



Afterworld





Chapter I



Beginning of the End

Drifting, falling through the sky, a young man opened his eyes to what seemed to be nothing more than a dream. The man had always dreamed lucidly. Sometimes, it was more vivid than others, but he still understood who he was and felt that his mind was making up stories once again.

This is some dream, the man thought. *It is a dream, isn't it?* He wondered, yet felt the fresh air hit his face as he fell through the cloudy sky.

This was nothing new for him. In most other dreams, he had felt severe pain, absolute pleasures and tasted the most divine dishes one could ask for. The difference between then and now is that there was always a slight blur. Even if it was the most vivid dream imaginable, there was still some aspect that looked or felt cloudy—and he'd usually awake from it with little trouble. That wasn't the case this time.

As his daze wore off, the man started becoming more aware of his surroundings and started slapping his cheeks in order to wake himself. To his dismay, this only made his cheeks more red and sore than they already were from the wind. He pinched his arms, but only felt the genuine sensation of doing so. While he had felt pain in his dreams, it had never been quite this literal and spot on with the actions.

“This is a dream, right?”

He, at last, realized that it wasn't, and for whatever reason, he was free falling through the sky.

What? What's going on! Why am I falling through the damn sky!

As the fear took its withering grip, his heart hammered. The man continued looking down. While the clouds were already obscuring his vision, the wind blasted his unprotected eyes. It made it near impossible for him to see at all. He squinted, forcing his eyes open and causing them to dry from the cool gale. He was now barely able to make out his surroundings.

There seemed to be a forest full of trees that were partially covered with snow to his north, but directly below him he was falling towards a substantial body of water.

He did not know where he was. The terrain was unrecognizable, and what he was seeing and feeling didn't match up. He breathed in oxygen-rich air even at the altitude he was at; this wasn't something one would expect when falling from tens of thousands of feet in the sky. The shoreline below covered with fresh snow didn't make sense to him as it wasn't cold even at this height. It felt closer to a spring night than a late fall or winter. It wasn't like it was leftover snow from a harsh blizzard in upstate New York either. No, the land was covered like there had been a fresh fall. One thing was evident, wherever he was, gravity was still in control.

I need to figure something out, and fast.

The decision was tough. The man needed to decide how and where he was going to land. He wondered if he should go for the snow-covered trees or the frothy water. Would the snow be deep and powdery enough to break his fall without breaking him in the process? Or, perhaps, he should bank his landing on the easier target: the water below and hope for the best.

I'm closer to the water, and at this rate, I can't be sure if I'll even make the trees. I haven't ever skydived in my life. What the hell am I supposed to do!

The only experience he had for skydiving, if you could call it that, was a short video he had seen online. He thought back to it, trying to remember something—anything.

Think, damn it. What is it you were supposed to do if your parachute failed?

“... If your parachute fails and somehow the backup fails, there is a slim, but possible chance you will survive. If you want proof, look no further than Vesna Vulovic, who survived falling over 33,000 feet. What you want to do is aim for the softest thing you can locate and relax your body as much as possible. This is so you can avoid as much damage to your internal organs as you can. Remember that tensing your body is likely to cause more stress and lead to further injuries. Needless to say, there isn't any guarantee that you will walk away if that happens, but let's hope it never comes to that.”

The video replayed in his head with the instructor, smirking, of all things.

I'm not even sure if I can make it to the coastline at this point. This is no joke. I don't have much time to have a debate with myself. I'll have to take my chances on the water and make a slight bend at the knees. If I go in feet first, I may be able to negate enough of the impact that my spleen doesn't rupture, and hopefully, I'll be able to move afterward.

He knew this was likely a frivolous endeavor, but this was all he could do. With the water closing in on him fast, he tried his best to relax; given the situation, it wasn't something he could easily do. The wind now seemed to pound his face even harder. As he approached ground level, the air was now oddly warm, and he would have thought it relaxing if not for the circumstances.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself as his arms were shaking from the stress. His stomach knotted as the fresh air entered, knowing it could be his last breath. He had done everything he could think of and it was now crash or swim.

Impact. There was a big splash, and everything faded to black.

2

You may be asking yourself how the man ended up falling from the sky. Or better yet, who is he? His name is Leon D. Michaels, an average twenty-four-year-old living at home with his dad. He worked a delivery service job while attending college, working towards his bachelor's degree. His life was ordinary until an average day turned out to be one that would start him down a road to an unknown destination.

It was spring, and Leon decided that after earning some paid vacation, he had better put it to good use. The coronavirus, or COVID-19, was also rampant, so he wanted to do something fun while keeping his distance. Being an avid camper, this was a perfect excuse to go on a brief camping trip on his grandparents' land. He packed his gear, making sure everything was prepped, and headed out there during spring break. He had offered his dad the chance to tag along, but having only recovered from a hip injury, he wasn't in the best shape. It made no difference to Leon either way. He greatly needed some time alone to relax and contemplate his life going forward.

His grandparents' place was less than an hour's drive from where he lived. Once there, he would have to hike a few miles to reach the location he and his grandpa used to camp. He left early in the morning on a Saturday and arrived fifty-six minutes later according to his truck's old clock, not that he completely trusted it.

Once he arrived, he began by taking out his gear from the back of his small black GMC Sonoma and getting his pack adjusted. On his way he came across certain bushes that he and his grandpa had always used as location markers. It wasn't as if the trek was perilous; it was pretty straightforward and primarily flat being in Kansas. The most significant danger was the coyotes. They'd usually only come out at night and were ordinarily more afraid of you than you'd be of them.

Monitoring his surroundings was just something his grandfather had taught him.

“Always take care and be safe rather than sorry. Create mental markers and be aware of your surroundings; utilize them when you need to. Not everywhere is going to be as tranquil and safe as home,” he would tell Leon.

About thirty minutes after starting his hike, he reached their old spot. The location was as he remembered it; beautiful and, most of all, relaxing. It was right next to a small pond and a stunning tree line that was full of life. Even that old patch of honeysuckles remained. The sun was steadily rising, but the nearby frogs continued to croak absentmindedly. He plucked a few small stems from the bush and put them between his teeth. He sucked on them while unpacking.

The sweet flower’s nectar hitting his tongue reminded him of when he was little. At one house he had used to live in, there was a honeysuckle bush right by the porch. One day, on a day much like this, it rubbed against the white siding. He watched as it swayed in the wind, and a couple of tiny horny toads peered from under it. He carefully approached them, and one even let him rub upon its delicate head. Its eyes blinked in appreciation as it began to fall asleep from the incredible sensation the boy gifted him with. Leon stopped only for a moment, and the toad scurried off out of sight. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen one of them in the wild. Kansas used to be filled with horny toads, but now they had either migrated or had been depleted. This was likely because of humans.

He put the memory to the back of his mind again as he finished setting up his tent. With it now built, and his fishing rod assembled, he cast his first line into the nearby pond. His grandpa loved to fish, but they never spent much time together when Leon was growing up. Living out of state for most of his life was hard on their relationship. It meant that the only time Leon ever got to see his grandpa was during the winter holidays.

It really is a wonderful evening, he thought, stretching out by the pond.

He remembered a phrase his grandpa would say on those rare occasions that he would get to spend time with him: “The sun burns bright, makes a man just right.” It was his grandfather’s mantra, and he would always repeat it when they were out on a beautiful day, doing chores or even relaxing in the breeze. Though they didn’t get to do much relaxing, as his grandfather was an extremely hard worker and was almost always busy. He had passed away a few years back, and Leon hadn’t been out here much since.

Now that he was back living in that small Kansas town, he wanted to enjoy it more. The most exciting thing that would ever happen there would be the local crazy guy trying to mow your lawn. Most people didn’t complain, as he was usually careful, and smiled while he pushed the mower from one yard to the next.

It seemed like everything was perfect for today. A cool mist-filled breeze danced as it greeted Leon’s dry face while the sun’s steady ascent warmed him to the core. He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt so relaxed.

The sensation was short-lived, as it wasn’t long after that the weather changed. Leon looked up as tiny droplets of rain hit his face, and the nearby clouds began to gather ominously. He was camping a few miles away from their old cabin, but figured that it would be best to ride the storm out. He didn’t want to get caught in the middle of nowhere if it turned bad. With this in mind, Leon double-checked that his tent stakes were hooked in tight. As he did, the light droplets changed into a savage flurry, and he rushed inside his tent.

The wind howled, and the heavens cracked with a thunderous roar. He had forgotten to pack his fishing pole up during the sudden changes, and the intense Kansas wind carried the rod, causing it to slam into the side of his tent. Leon peeked out and saw that it had hooked into the tent lining and began whirling all around, pounding

against the ground. The little worm that was struggling to hold on came loose and blew away as the wind continued to throw the pole in every direction.

The line snapped, and the pole flew away—slamming into a nearby tree where he heard it shatter.

Damn it! I just bought that pole.

Leon was usually a calm individual. Still, as things progressed, he knew he was in a dangerous situation. His heart thrashed against his chest as the pond flooded from the downpour. Outside of the small solace he had in his shelter, the clouds overhead were rotating.

“Well, that’s not good,” he said, as they kept spinning overhead.

This was a terrible sign in the tornado-prone state of Kansas. Though being a Kansas native, he was used to this, and even if the clouds were rotating, it didn’t mean something would come from it. Even so, with the way everything was happening, he knew he couldn’t continue to ride it out and had to leave.

As soon as he stepped out of the tent, a barrage of raindrops pelted him.

What a great time to go on vacation, he thought as he began running towards the far-off cabin.

The rainstorm continued to turn even more disastrous and, in terms of visibility, was now equivalent to a whiteout blizzard. Cold and merciless, it beat Leon and anything else that it came into contact with. He ran his hardest, trying to get to his grandparents’ cottage. Within minutes, he was soaking wet and shivering. His hat blew off as a powerful gust blasted him from the north, and the rain upon his face felt like tiny glass shards were cutting small layers of skin away. The meadows ahead had become like a swamp, but he couldn’t turn back. Submerging his shoes, he slogged through the trenched area.

The only thing Leon could think about was that old Bruce Lee quote:

“You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip, and it can crash. Become like water, my friend.”

He let out a chattering smile while he ran. He couldn't become water, but it sure felt like the rain was becoming a part of him.

There, in the distance, he could see it. The facade of his grandparents' raggedy cottage was in a cold, numbing distance. He was only about two minutes away from it now. He continued onward, feeling not only a numb sensation but also a strange tingle throughout his body.

Hopefully, things settle down, and I can get in there, start the fire up, and prevent myself from getting in a bad spot.

He thought he was getting too cold and that he might be getting hypothermia, but that wasn't it at all. The aberration became more intense, like a flash flood.

What the hell is going on?

As the question crossed his mind, all he saw was white. As soon as it was there, it was gone, and so was he.

3

Leon opened his eyes. Unable to see much in front of him as his eyes burned from the salty depths, he pushed them down and started swimming towards what he had hoped was the surface. Because of his diving classes in college, he knew a few things about being underwater. He blew out a little air to create air bubbles. Sure enough, he felt the bubbles go in the same direction that he was headed, and he knew he was moving towards the surface.

His lungs sweltered as he continued pushing and blowing out what little air remained as he rose to avoid decompression sickness. He continued as his lungs burned the entire way. He knew he was nearly there as he heard the surface waves intensify as they moved

about on his approach. At last, he broke through the warm salty reaches of the abyss. He coughed hard, gasping for air, taking a moment to recover before doing much else. After his lungs were clear, he took his time to look around and try to get his bearings.

It looks like I'm about half a mile off the shoreline. That's not too bad for some improbable last-minute preparation from someone who's never skydived. I also seem to be in one piece, which is pretty impressive, all things considered, Leon thought, while treading water.

He wasn't completely sure if he was alright, but he was conscious and able to move, which was good enough for him. He knew there was no way he would get out of this situation scot-free and that the adrenaline in his system was probably doing a lot to help keep him going, at least for now.

I'm sure I'll be feeling pain from the impact of the landing. If you could call it a landing. It's a miracle I'm in this good of shape. I need to hurry up and reach land before something goes wrong.

As he began swimming towards the coast, he noticed that the water cooled down ever so slightly. After reaching the shoreline, it felt as if he was swimming through the arctic waters.

"Fi..nn..nally land!"

He shivered while crawling ashore. His teeth continued to chatter as he glanced around. He stood up and wasn't able to see much of anything as he looked around. It was as he had seen from the sky—a substantial snow-covered forest next to what seemed to be an endless ocean. He had to decide; with nothing in sight, would he move along the coast or through the forest? There was no sign of anything significant on the shore when he was falling; no villages, buildings, nothing at all for miles.

He had seen nothing in the forest, either. However, he thought that the thicket of trees could conceal a vast amount of resources.

I'll go with the forest, Leon said to himself as he headed toward the immense dark forest ahead. As he first entered, it reminded him

of Lemon Park's nature trail in Pratt, Kansas. Leon and his friends from high school would often walk the paths at night—on the hunt for ghosts. He would sing them the *Ghostbusters!* theme song.

He smiled, remembering this as he hurried through the forest, moving as fast as he was able.

The owls that hooted overhead felt as though they were taunting him as he moved forward. His body was completely exhausted, and he was starting to feel at least a portion of the aftereffects of his fall. He guessed he had traveled about a quarter of a mile before he slowed.

He came to an area littered with broken trees. A small, deep crater in the middle of the area caught his gaze, but everything around was a mess. It was dark, but not enough to conceal the space ahead of him. With a clearing in the trees, he looked up. The clouds had cleared, and he noticed the moon... or was it moons?!

They were both now shown and illuminated in their complete entrancing glory. Oddly enough, Leon couldn't see any stars and..., out of the corner of his eye, he saw something he wished he hadn't—a corpse. The dead body belonging to a young Caucasian man was suspended high in the treetops with a symbol of a sword and a crown on his right arm. A tree branch had pierced the man's abdomen, holding him aloft. The body had recently rotted and the man's eyes were missing. As Leon continued his gaze, a Raven swooped down and joined another in picking the flesh clean. He guessed the man ended up that way from falling like he did.

He almost vomited, but knew that he had no idea where he was or when his next meal would be. Cringing, he forced it back down.

"I guess I'm the lucky one," he said softly while looking up once more at the man.

He heard something nearby, and after seeing the form of death in the tree, he didn't wait to find out what it was. He turned and ran—running until he could no longer feel anything at all. Tired, ex-

hausted, freezing, and in shock, he tried to recall how he got here and why?

What exactly happened to me? I was... camping? Then a storm broke out. None of this makes any damn sense.

It was all still fuzzy to him. While thinking and trying to remember, Leon stumbled across another small crater, hitting his head. His body could no longer take the stress it had been under, and he drifted into a state of unconsciousness.

4

“H... c... hear... ok?”

Disoriented, Leon steadily came back to his senses.

“Can you hear me? Are you ok?” a tender voice said, meeting his ears.

He opened his eyes, and the face of a cute girl appeared directly over him. Her eyes were wide open, peering back at him. They were not quite emerald green, but close. Her hair was strawberry blonde, hanging past her shoulders. Leon had guessed that the girl was around his age, or perhaps two or three years younger. As he opened his eyes, an expression of genuine relief and a smile came over her face. He stared back at her for a moment before he looked around.

The first thing he noticed was that he was in some sort of cabin. It only had a single door, and it looked as though it would lead to an area similar to the one he had passed out in. By the look of things, the cabin didn't seem to be built recently. The dilapidated one-room shelter had seen more than its share of use. There was rust on the metal sink and what looked to be termite damage on the window lining.

Secondly, he and the girl near him were not alone. An older man who appeared to be in his late forties to early fifties was on the other side of the room near an empty cobweb dusted bookshelf. His hair was not quite a gray color per se, but more towards a salt and pepper tone. He had a stocky build and seemed to have been through a lot;

this was discernible from the scuffs, scars, and overall the way he carried himself.

The third and probably most important thing he noticed was an intravenous line running from his arm to the girl's arm that was looking over him. He didn't know why the IV was there or what exactly it was being used for.

Leon reached for the line, but the young woman grabbed his hand

"Wait, you shouldn't pull that out. Not just yet," she told him.

"What's going on?" Leon asked her.

"It's as I expected, Vance. He's a fresh arrival."

The man looked back at the girl, a mixture of annoyance and regret on his face.

"What's your name, kid?" The man asked, approaching Leon.

"It's Leon."

"Well, Leon, I'm Vance," he said. The grim look that adorned his face was enough to make anyone feel that something was wrong. But when it came down to it, you knew even if you asked, there would be no answer. "And the one you've got to thank for saving your life, well, that would be Krysta."

"Saved my life?" Leon frowned. Sure, he had been through a lot, but he never felt that his life was in danger, at least not in the immediate sense.

"What do you mean saved my life? And why are you giving me a blood transfusion? How could you possibly know my blood type; there's no medical equipment here and no offense, but this place is less than adequate for anything of the sort."

"Damn freshie," Vance said with a repressed smile. "You should count your blessings that little miss Krysta and I found you when we did. You were passed out with a temperature well above a hundred, and you had three cracked ribs to boot. Gods know what else was wrong with you."

Leon looked in dismay while taking it all in. If he had been in shock and with the adrenaline in his system, then perhaps he could have overlooked the issues with his body. Still, a simple blood transfusion wouldn't be enough to fix those issues. On top of that, he didn't feel feverish, and his chest and ribs felt fine.

"That can't be true. I don't have a fever, and I certainly don't have any damn pain or broken ribs," Leon said, with a confidence that could have put a nursing lioness to shame.

"Freshies," Vance clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Always the same," he stared at Leon the same way someone would look at an ignorant child. "Do you know where you are, kid? Do you even know the country we're in?"

Before Leon could answer, Vance spoke again.

"No, you don't, and do you know why that is? It's because we're not even on Earth anymore!"

Leon stared blankly. He sat there, feeling distressed, and didn't understand what the man was talking about, but who was he to argue? After all, he fell out of the sky, and he saw more than one moon. All that he could do was to sit and listen to the man's words.

"Look, I don't mean to scare you. Let me explain a few things," Vance said, noticing the concern on Leon's face. "Foremost, we're not on Earth anymore. This place, well, it doesn't have any official name. You can call it *Earth two* for all I care. Whatever makes you feel at ease.

"Second, let me explain what this world is. Basically, if you die, your spirit is sent here. It's then imprinted with what you had done before you died, including the circumstances of your death. Finally, the third... well, it's basically the same point as the second, but the foremost important part is that if you are here, you're dead."

Dead, I'm dead? Leon thought, still foggy about what had happened on his grandparent's property. It wasn't the strangest thing he

had heard, and after falling from the sky in another world, it was at least a plausible explanation; if you wanted to call that plausible.

“If I am dead, then where are we?” Leon asked.

Vance looked at him, discouraged, knowing that what he had told him had to be hard to hear. “Listen, you’re ok now, but there are things I need to explain to you and not a lot of time to do it. So please, just listen.”

Leon nodded, noticing that Krysta had removed the IV. He was expecting an exit wound, but there was no wound or blood drip at all.

“Here’s the deal,” Vance said in an even more serious tone. “This world is like Earth in many ways, and in many others, it’s not. First, let me explain how Krysta saved you. When she was alive, doctors diagnosed her with cancer that later killed her. So long story short, because it was cancer that killed her, and cancer is a disease that manipulates your cells and body malevolently, she can now heal and cure people. Though, in her case, her aptitude for it isn’t enough to do it without her blood being in direct contact with someone.

“To put it simply, because a disease that damaged her killed her, the opposite in this life is true. She has learned to control what killed her, conquered it if you will, and thus gotten the ability to heal. From our knowledge, there is nothing to be done about what power you first receive. It all depends on the circumstances of your life and of your death.

“There are multiple conquests out there of different varieties. Say you died from old age. You could come to this world with your youth renewed in your prime. You could also get super-like strength, agility, and endurance from being killed in such a way because of the fragility of old age. Not everyone gets that lucky, of course. But everyone’s body here, regardless of what killed them, is more durable than that on Earth.”

Leon was even more confused. Yet, he allowed Vance to continue.

“There are others who are considerably normal and have relatively useless attributes carved into their spirit. For example, many have died from heart attacks of different sorts. Say, for example, someone ate too much junk food and died from heart disease that way. Then most would get nothing significant for it. Mostly, a person’s death seems to impact people much more than a person’s life. Though, on rare occasions, it’s the other way around from which they get their conquest. Think of posthumous military promotion for how conquests work. Soldiers struggle to gain rank while in the military. Still, if they die doing something heroic or impactful, the military may give them a few ranks in death that they were seeking in life.

“I died from a heart attack, but of a different kind. I had come from a family with hereditary heart disease, but like hell, was I going to let that stop me from doing what I enjoyed. So one day, I was out Snowboarding alone, and then, well, there are consequences for every action; I had a heart attack, and that’s how I ended up here. Usually, this wouldn’t mean much; however, I worked with what I was given and trained. I can now increase my heart rate and blood flow. Since I also died while under the effects of adrenaline, I can now release it whenever needed and feel no adverse effects. This allows me to not get worn out as quickly as most people because of the rate I can send oxygen to parts of my body. This gives me a pretty significant strength boost at the same time because of the adrenalin.”

Leon had enough of this. “You’re kidding me, right?” He looked at Vance as if he was clearly out of his mind after taking one too many magic mushrooms.

Vance, noticing this look, smirked and moved over to an old metal wood-burning stove in the cottage. “Come over here, kid.”

Leon hesitantly stood up and walked over to the older man.

“Lift it,” Vance told him, pointing at the stove.

Leon looked at the man as if he was crazy but indulged him in his request. He put his hands under the metal stove and tried with all his might to lift it, but it would not budge.

“Heavy, ain’t she?” The man smirked. He moved Leon to the side and lifted the stove with ease. He raised it over his head. Then, after a moment of holding it, the man sat it back down as if it was a small office chair.

Leon looked at Vance, awestruck. He wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t witnessed it firsthand.

“As I said, not everyone is like this. In fact, most people are normal. So kid, tell me, how did you make it here? And what led you to be in such an awful condition as we found you in?”

“Well... I’m not completely sure how I came to be in this position. I woke up falling from the sky and, well..., here I am.”

“The hell? How did you come to be falling from the damn sky? No wonder you were in that rough of shape,” Vance said.

“So, that’s not what happened to you and Krysta then?” *Was it just me who fell from the sky?* Leon wondered.

“No, we were just—,” Vance stopped. “This way, quickly,” he snapped.

Leon, bewildered, rushed after Vance and Krysta as they approached a decrepit old bookshelf. Vance pulled it out, revealing an opening behind it.

“Hurry, come on,” Krysta urged. Leon followed her into the opening. Vance pulled the bookshelf back into place before turning to face Leon.

“Let’s go,” Vance said. “Do you remember when I told you to be glad we found you? It’s because there are a lot less friendly people out there.”

5

Hurrying along, the small group traversed down the darkened, damp, rocky tunnel. Strange lights were flickering between the

cracks in the rock wall, while moss grew sporadically throughout the passageway. For a moment, the group was silent as they progressed. Soon enough, Leon broke that silence.

“So you said there are less friendly people; what exactly did you mean by that?”

“Well,” Vance said. “I’ll start by explaining a few more crucial details you probably haven’t noticed. But first, check under your right forearm.”

Leon turned his arm over. A black tattoo with a question mark stared back.

“What does it mean?” Krysta asked. “I’ve never seen one like this before.”

“A question, huh, now that is unfortunate,” Vance said. “Usually, there would be a different symbol there. Greek and Roman symbols are the most common. Do you remember what happened to you?” Vance asked.

Leon tried to remember, but all he could see was white. That didn’t comfort him, as he knew that more than likely that was his neurons firing off one last time before he bit the dust.

“I don’t really know.” Is all Leon could say.

“That makes sense, I guess,” Vance continued. “Since conquest ranks are based on conquering your death or advancing what you conquered in life, to not know it is to not know your new self.”

A loud boom came from behind, startling the group. Vance motioned them to move at a quicker pace.

“What was that?” Leon asked.

“That was the not-so-nice people,” Krysta replied.

“We should assume that they have found the entrance to this little shortcut of ours and proceed as fast as possible,” Vance told him.

“Who are these people? What do they want?” Leon asked nervously as they jogged forward.

Vance avoided his question.

“Back to your tattoo and to explain a bit more about conquests. As I have said before, Krysta has a healing conquest, which also is passive and cannot change in any shape or form. Look at her arm.”

Krysta, who was wearing a pink and black striped hoodie, rolled up the tattered sleeve on her right arm. Underneath it, there was the symbol Ω .

“What does that mean?” Leon asked, now looking at her arm.

“It means Omega Zero,” Krysta replied. “Which is the rank dedicated to all passive conquests. It means my conquest cannot increase in strength no matter what I do. Omega represents the lowest level of conquest. Since there is no number after it, it is assumed to be zero. That means you can’t improve it; the conquest will never change.”

“So it is what it is, basically? Nothing more, nothing less?”

“That would be correct,” Krysta replied. However, her voice and the grim expression on her face showed this annoyed her.

After moving through different tunnels that split in varying directions, they reached the end of one. Leon was exhausted, but the two beside him didn’t seem fazed one bit.

I’ve been studying too much lately, he thought to himself, noticing the difference in stamina between the three of them.

A door stood in front of them and was made of a crazy material that Leon was unfamiliar with. It had a turquoise and golden shimmer to it, with an almost aquatic glow.

“What is this?” Leon asked.

“You sure ask a lot of questions,” Vance replied with a brief smile. “This is what’s known as impervious *rock*. Though being more accurate, impervious *metal* would be a better name. One of the greatest scientific minds in this world developed it. That mind, combined with all the fresh materials of this world, it’s easy to see how something like this could exist.”

Vance picked up a nearby rock and threw it towards the metal structure. The rock bounced off the wall. Seconds later, it shook until it dissolved.

“It’s called impervious for a reason,” Vance smirked. “Lucky for us, we have a lookout on the other side.” He pushed a small button on the control pad near the metal door.

“Who is it? State your business,” a scratchy voice said from a nearby speaker. As soon as he asked, the speaker started floating. An attached camera with a wide lens and copper frame roamed over the group. “Vance and Krysta, eh, and who is the kid?”

“The kid’s a drainer,” Vance replied.

“Ok, ok, clearance granted. Though I have to say the king is not too happy with how late you are.”

Leon was wondering what he meant by drainer, and who was this king? Before he could ask, the impervious rock shook. It then turned to a translucent golden color, and Krysta walked through. He could still see her silhouette on the other side, but the liquid metal distorted it in a way like that of a shower door.

“Walk through it,” Vance said, motioning Leon forward.

After a moment’s hesitation, Leon cautiously approached the door and walked through to the other side. Vance followed, and the wall turned back to its original aquatic golden tone.

On the other side, it was far from anything he was expecting. In fact, it is something that, even with his crazy dreams, he would have probably never experienced. Scorched earth, lava pits, and even a snowy mountain range now filled his vision. One mountain looked like a volcano and had a castle connected to it. It was an overwhelming sight, and somewhat disconcerting.

“Welcome to Hell,” Vance told Leon, as that grim look returned to his face.

Leon gave him a half-smile until he felt a sharp pain. Then there was nothing.