

AFTERWORLD



Book One in the Next Life Series



A NOVEL BY
JAMES G. ROBERTSON



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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 so 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 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 revise 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 my second and third book 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, the action, the sorrows—enjoy a look into the Next Life.

J.G.R 5/12/2022

Contents

Prologue

Part One - Afterworld

Chapter I

The Beginning of the End • 2

Chapter II

The Ruse • 21

Chapter III

The Snow Leopard's Tale • 27

Chapter IV

The World's Hierarchy • 30

Chapter V

Defeat & Reunion • 54

Chapter VI

Memories • 62

Chapter VII

Dark Energy • 103

Chapter VIII

Hope's Ubiquity • 137

Chapter IX

The Unlikely Mentor • 158

Part Two - The Need to Struggle and Lie

Chapter X

Trials • 177

Chapter XI

The Journey of Fate • 221

Chapter XII

The Dead Zone • 241

Chapter XIII

Human Tenacity • 261

Epilogue



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. 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 are the gods who 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 what I say should visit Norway around Christmas time.

Other renowned gods you may know of include those of the Greeks, composed of Zeus—the ruler of Olympus and his brothers and sisters. Some have undoubtedly heard the tales of the struggles 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 the gods that you've heard of?

Surely there must be other gods out there that you're unfamiliar with. Perhaps you've heard of the more obscure religions such as that of the Aztecs, Incas, or Mayans? What about the beliefs of those

JAMES G. ROBERTSON

from the different Native American tribes? Did only one of these gods create the world? The universe? Or is there a more in-depth story here? Perhaps there's an absolute truth that the prophets have buried from the vast majority. But what is the truth?

Well, while each religion may seem separate, that isn't the entire story. While they may appear dissimilar on the surface, they share a singular purpose, utterly different from anything that the Gods have led us to believe. The purpose of these religions was to help prepare us for what was ahead. The true gods have worked together to defend our universe, fighting 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. 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. Let's not even get into the countless holy wars that have been fought over the centuries. So for this, I wouldn't blame you.

AFTERWORLD

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 books, with most of the same rules prescribed. You also have those that follow the teachings of Islam say 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.

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 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 desire nothing more than 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 once again making up stories.

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 became 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 then 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!

The man continued looking down. With the clouds obscuring his vision and the wind blasting his eyes, it was near impossible for him to see at all. As the fear took its withering grip, his heart hammered. He squinted, forcing his eyes open and causing them to dry from the cool gale. He could barely 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 didn't 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 made little sense to him. Even at this height, it wasn't cold, and was 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 to him: 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. This is crazy, but I don't have the time to have a debate with myself. I'll have to take my chances on the water. I'll need to 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.



Chapter II



The Ruse

Leon opened his eyes to what felt like Déjà vu. The heated earth greeted his face as he sat up, dusting off what looked like a mixture of dirt and ashes. He rubbed the back of his head, which was still sore from getting hit, and a tender old man approached him.

“Are you ok, son?”

“What the hell happened?” he asked. A puzzled expression creased his still dusted face.

“Well, where to begin?” The old man pondered. “Well, you see... you’ve been captured by a pair of hunters.”

“A pair of what?”

“Hunters,” the old man said again. “They’re a group of people who collect weaker targets and bring them back here. New arrivals, such as yourself, by the looks of your clothes, are the easiest prey. No one wears clothes like that here without some sort of insignia on them. Similar, yes, but it’s not like they’re wearing designer brands or anything that spectacular. Usually, someone will wear clothing to associate them with which domain they are a part of. So freshies, or fresh arrivals, are easy to spot and easy targets,” the old man finished.

Leon’s thoughts returned to Vance and Krysta. They had regular clothes on, but it must have been a ruse to blend in and avoid being asked questions by their prey. After all, they were hunters, at least according to this man he was now sharing a cage with. He looked around. There were others here as well. They looked more meager

than the old man—dispirited. There were other occupied cages near him, all in the middle of a town-like camp. Their bars ran up, down, and across like that of checkerboard fencing. They looked like they were made of the same material that he walked through earlier.

Impervious rock, was it? Leon thought to himself as he moved his hand around through the ash and dirt before finding a small pebble. He tossed it at the bars. The results were the same as before: it bounced off and dissolved, breaking apart.

“What are they going to do with us?”

The old man looked at him drearily. “Well, it all depends on who’s paying for you and what you have to offer. You see, to gain power in this world, you must first conquer what killed you. Everyone is immortal to the point that they won’t age. You must, of course, still consume energy from a food source. Similar to how a vampire must drink blood. That’s the basics of how your body works in this world. You can, however, be killed by unnatural causes, and your soul will be reincarnated here, but you will retain everything.

“If you die to someone else, however, and they wish to take your conquest, they can do so by replacing their own, as it is their right for conquering you. Of course, if this happens, you don’t just die. Your soul is essentially absorbed by the one who conquers you. The same is true if they wish to use your soul to *feed* their own conquest, which then helps increase their strength without time or training.”

“What are you talking about?” Leon asked, puzzled.

“It’s hard to digest, I know, especially if you’ve only arrived in this world. It can be a lot to digest. How long have you been here?”

“Well...,” Leon couldn’t tell if it was still night or dusk. He didn’t know how the day and night system worked in this world or if there even *was* one. “No more than a day, I figure.”

“I see. Well, I’m sorry you’re in this position. At least in my experience, it doesn’t get much better for us any way you cut it. There are also a lot worse places than this that you could have ended up in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you see—” the old man began but was cut off as a section of the bars turned into the golden material that Leon had walked through before.

Two men entered, wearing identical uniforms with the symbol of a prestigious-looking snow leopard standing above a volcano. One of them was Vance.

“Your time is up, Trytho,” the unknown man said. “Someone paid a hefty amount for your conquest. Which one is Trytho again?”

“That one,” Vance said, pointing to the old man. Again, he had a saddened look upon his face—one of almost complete defeat.

The other man grabbed Trytho.

At first, the old man struggled, but soon stopped when he realized he couldn't break free of the guard's grasp.

The second guard handed him to Vance, who led Trytho outside.

Leon tried to follow but was launched back by the immeasurable strength of the other guard.

“Vance, what's going on? What are you doing?” Leon asked, almost desperately.

The other guard laughed. “You're such a fool if you haven't figured it out by now. Listen, your fate was sealed from the time you came into this world. I can't kill you, but if you're not going to behave, well...” he licked his lips and smiled. Only the man's green rotting teeth could be seen through his helmet, but radiated such pleasure. “I don't think they would miss a few pieces of you here and there.”

“That's enough, Enzo, let's go,” Vance said sternly, noticing the other guard's temperament.

Enzo continued to grin before backing out of the cage. As the bars turned back to their aquatic state, he smiled at Leon. With his right hand, he made a scissoring motion over the fingers of his left.

The two guards dragged their captive towards another man that had come through the colossal front gate and into the kingdom's inner territory. This newcomer wasn't wearing the same type of uniform as Vance and Enzo. He had a somewhat similar attire, but the symbol that Leon could just make out was a skeleton hand holding up a skull with a rose blooming from the top.

"This is what you've paid for, an Upsilon III user. Would you like to have him transported or—" Vance was interrupted.

"I thought we agreed upon a Sigma V; what is this!" the man said with disgust. After a moment's pause, he must have decided it would work fine. "Very well, it will have to do. You need to at least prove the conquest is the same as promised."

Vance stepped over and pulled out what had looked like a small knife made of solid gold. He plunged it into his own leg and then pulled it out. "The blade is good, yes?" he asked as his blood dripped from it.

The man, looking in a bit of shock, merely nodded.

Vance then lunged toward Trytho's head with the blade. It broke on impact.

"Excellent, yes, this will work out fine." said the mysterious newcomer. "It's a shame that such a conquest was wasted on someone such as yourself." He aimed an evil smirk toward Trytho.

The old man remained silent.

"Is it ok if I collect here? I'm just too excited to get my hands on his conquest! I'll pay you a disposal fee if it's a problem."

"Go ahead; that won't be necessary," Enzo told him.

The man pulled out a standard-looking Glock and moved towards Trytho.

"Don't worry, kid," Trytho yelled to Leon. "You may get lucky and end up with a useful conquest or mediocre one and only be bought for slavery instead of—"

His words were cut off as they stuffed the gun into his mouth. In an instant, the mysterious man pulled the trigger. The bullet seemed to work as intended. Parts of the old man's brain mixed with fluids fell from his mouth and seeped from his eyes, but the bullet didn't penetrate the outer skin. Leon gagged in the cage. This time, he couldn't hold it back and threw up.

What happened next seemed strange to him. The man who shot Trytho grabbed his arm and whispered something under his breath. The symbol of what appeared to be Psi IV dissipated from his right forearm, and a translucent light from Trytho's arm shot up to the other man's forearm. In an instant burning manner, the Upsilon III that had been on Trytho's arm seared onto the other man.

"You sick fuck. Why the hell did you do that!" Leon yelled at the men standing by Trytho's body.

"Didn't you notice? I had to kill him. No, I *wanted* to kill him!" The buyer said with an almost euphoric look. "And do you know why?" He pulled the gun out once more and shot himself in the head. The bullet bounced off and rolled over towards the cage. It looked as though it had been crushed.

"Isn't it marvelous? Someone will do the same to you soon, but don't worry, it shouldn't hurt too much. You have witnessed how fast it can be," he said, as he laughed horrifically.

He replaced the gun before turning to the two guards. "I'll be on my way, gentlemen. It was a pleasure doing business with you. I'll be sure to let others know about your *customer satisfaction*."

He laughed again as he took his leave through the gate.

Trytho's corpse remained untouched until the man left. Then a few guards carried it off.

Is this what's going to happen to me? Leon thought to himself as he began wondering why he was brought to such a strange place. *And for what purpose?*

After what seemed to be near an hour later, a couple of men brought some food to the prisoners; they each got their own helping of some mucky stew, bread, and water. Not having eaten for what felt like an eternity, Leon didn't question it and devoured every bite. Tired, he drifted off to the comfort of his sleep.



Chapter III

The Snow Leopard's Tale

There once was a man who loved to climb. His dream in this world was to reach every sky. One day he and his companions climbed the treacherous mountain known as K2 the *Godwin-Austen*. Many had done so before, and many had succeeded, while many others had failed. They knew the risks going into it. Knowing full well that one in five people die attempting the climb. Even so, they decided they would reach this mountain's sky and make history a final time. For this journey, they gathered their gear like any other climb, had a few drinks, and slept through the night.

They awoke early that morning to start their historic journey. The climb was going great. They were halfway there, and the men decided to celebrate. They packed up and continued once more, but little did they know a whiteout was in store. Wind with such a fierce coldness, they felt it to the bone. The snow it tossed around felt no better, I know.

It came out of nowhere. The men knew they couldn't set up camp. With the snow up to their waist, they would have to be content. They persevered onward, knowing the risks they would continue to face. Slammed left and right, tossed around like rag dolls with snow up to their waist. When all hope seemed lost and their fate all but sealed, the man leading his brethren found a haven embedded in the mountain's hill.

A cave? he thought to himself. *What are the chances?*

Unquestioning, he proceeded with prances.

As he reached this cave, his salvation, or so he thought, not too far off in the distance, the sound of rumbling echoed. A sound that caused his heart to almost stop. An avalanche was coming. His companion behind him had made it, but what of the other two friends? Were they going to stave it? Although they weren't that far behind, they would need to pick up the pace or be swallowed up by the white demon plummeting their way.

He could barely see the third man through the whiteout of a storm, struggling and fighting with all of his might. They pulled the rope tight, trying to give the man a helping hand. The third man was only twenty feet behind, not ready to bend. Then, in a flash, it came roaring. The white demon swallowed him whole, and that was the end of that man's story.

2

The nylon rope snapped in half like a piece of loose threading, and the other two climbers attached to that thread were gone—no happy ending. The man and his remaining companion waited for the rumbling to stop—left alone to mourn in the secluded hollow. They were trapped in the cave they thought would be their refuge, only to find that there was no escape from this snowy chapter. After trying to dig through the snow, they found themselves trapped by the cave's rocks.

"Perhaps there was an alternative way?" they thought.

After regaining their composure, the men walked deeper into the cave, checking it together. It seemed endless. The two men traveled together until, at last, it broke into two separate tunnels in which they agreed to part ways. Each would check out a different path and then yell back if they found an escape.

3

About five minutes after the men separated, the first had heard what sounded like his companion's screams in the distance.

“Are you ok?” he called out. “John?”

John could not respond. He was barely alive after being attacked by snow leopards that caught him by surprise.

“John!”

The only response came in the form of his own echo. He pulled out the knife he had sheathed on his ankle and backtracked to where they had split up.

The man proceeded down the other path of the cave until he heard a chewing sound. As he kept going, the sound grew louder, and he overheard purring. The man thought he was delusional; either that or John was playing a joke on him as he was prone to do.

“John!” he cried out one last time.

He was now afraid. His chilled glands released what felt like a frosted sweat as he ran. Rounding the corner, cold eyes met him. Two grown snow leopards and three baby cubs stared at him. The white fur surrounding their mouth was bleached red with blood. It dripped from their fangs back onto the body of his dear friend John, who feebly coughed up blood.

It stunned the man for a moment as one leopard pounced. He evaded, and with his knife in hand, gutted the animal. A moment later, the second one jumped. This time, he could not dodge, but he turned to his side to protect his vital organs. It sliced his left arm, but with that sacrifice, he finished the leopard off.

The cubs were scared, crying over their now-dead parents. The man had seen no purpose in slaying them. They were no threat to him. Instead, he slumped down, cold and alone. Broken, he looked at his friend, slipping away.

“Rest easy, John,” the man said with tear-filled eyes. He plunged his knife into John’s heart and closed his friend’s eyes. From there, the man bandaged his arm. Now alone in a wintry hell with no salvation. He was trapped in the icy grasp of K2’s mountains.



Chapter IV



The World's Hierarchy

From a strange dream on a mountaintop, to the wind howling over a wheat field as the heavens roared—this is what Leon was now looking at with such vividness. His grandparents' cabin was in the distance, and he tried to approach it. But as hard as he tried, he made no progress.

Leon gave up and stood there, trying to process what his subconscious was trying to tell him. Everything faded at once as a freezing sensation woke him. He opened his eyes.

Why's it so cold? Still drowsy, he looked around and noticed he was no longer in the cage. He was now held against a rock wall. Something had frozen his wrists and ankles to a cliff side of a big luxurious room.

"Awake, are we?"

He looked at the man in front of him, wrapped in a fur coat. It wasn't any fur coat; it was a coat made from a snow leopard.

"You had quite the dream, didn't you?" the man said.

Having come around from his daze, it was a voice that Leon recognized, but not one he was familiar with. The man was dark-skinned with broad shoulders and of medium stature. Leon had never seen the man's face before, but the complexion and build matched what he had seen in his dream.

"It's you, you're—" he realized he didn't know the man's name.

“You don’t have to know my name. Nor do you have to know what it is I do. You may refer to me as anything you wish. The most popular name I’ve gathered is the *Frozen King*. You see, I have a quota to keep like everyone else. I have people I need to protect, you not being one of them. Therefore, I need you to remember what happened to you when you died. If not, well, I can’t get the maximum amount from you to put towards the quota. Wasting our precious resources on you isn’t in my interests,” the king said as he paced back and forth a while before sitting in a nearby chair.

“What could you possibly be so afraid of that you’re willing to kill innocent people for?”

“People? Ah yes,” the Frozen King responded with a sullen smile. “You mean the drainers. They are nothing more than resources. In your past life you had deer and quail hunted—the drainers are the same to me and mine. A long time ago, I saw them as you are seeing them now. But, well, that, as they say, is a story that has come and gone. The light of humanity has been extinguished, and the gods... Well, never mind that. It matters not. What’s the best way to explain this to you?” He thought for a moment and then walked closer to Leon as a wicked expression came across his face.

“Say, did you like your stew? I bet you loved it; have you ever had anything like it? Perhaps it reminded you of swine? Yes, it’s quite close to that except for the meat being more mature, a few decades perhaps.” The king smiled, but seemed crestfallen at the same time. Almost as if he was suffering from an internal struggle, one which Leon couldn’t understand.

“You know I would have never tried it before, but then I was forced to. To stay alive for a bit longer. I left out this bit from the dream I showed you. The dream was only a memory of mine. You remember it all, yes? The mountain and the leopards?”

Reluctantly, Leon nodded.

“And what do you think happened, Leon? After I found no way out, that is.”

“I don’t kn—” he was cut off.

“I still had a few of my supplies left. Not much, mind you, but enough. When I ran out of food, the first thing I tried eating was the Leopards. That sustained me for a time, but it was making me sick. The Leopards were diseased. With what, I do not know. I didn’t have firewood, so I burned what supplies I had to keep warm. I was starving and freezing, so I only had one option—I ate him.”

“You ate him?”

“Yes, I ate John to preserve my own being. Hoping to last even a bit longer until rescue came. I ate him for as long as I could. I eventually ran out of stuff to burn to keep warm. Next, I ran out of gas for the little stove I had packed and could no longer cook. His body became completely frozen. After my pointless struggle and perseverance, I froze to death and ended up here.”

Leon gagged, realizing exactly what was in that stew the night before. It was human remains, and likely those of Trytho, the man that had been friendly to him as he awoke.

“Are you kidding me?” Leon gasped. “I can understand perhaps given the situation you were in, but even now?”

“Silence!” the king yelled thunderously. The surrounding air became a bone-chilling frost. “You know nothing about this world. Do you think it’s just us? We do what we must to survive.”

“My king,” a man Leon didn’t notice that was in a darkened corner uttered. “It’s ill luck to speak of such things. We all know what you and the people have been through. Do not let this man tamper with your resolve.”

The king hesitated for a moment. “You’re quite right. Perform the memory reclamation immediately,” he said before taking his leave.

Leon tried to break free; however, his frozen cuffs would not budge, no matter how much force he applied.

“Do not worry,” the mysterious man told him. His face was wrapped in cloth, and he wore clothes that made him look like a desert nomad. “It will all be over soon.”

The man unwrapped his hand. Scarred and mangled, he brought it towards Leon and placed it across his face.

All Leon saw was a bright light.

2

Flashes of images went through Leon’s mind like a violent tsunami, and then it stopped. Everything rushed back to him in an instant. He remembered the feeling before he fell from the sky, the sensation before death. Everything made sense to him now. The numbness he felt wasn’t from being tired or sick. It was from him being shocked, or in this case, electrocuted. He had been struck by lightning. He fell over, blacked out, and died in that stormy, flooded trench. His eyes opened, and the man removed his scarred hand from Leon’s face.

“It’s done, my king,” the man loudly declared.

What had seemed like an instant to Leon had to have been much longer. How much longer, he didn’t know, but the Frozen King was much further away than when he had first seen that bright light. This time, he had a young toddler with him.

“Excellent,” he replied. “There, there,” he turned, soothing the child who had been whining.

The scarred man walked away, and the Frozen King approached Leon again. This time, with the child in tow and a hint of anticipation upon his face.

“So, do you remember what killed you now?”

Leon didn’t reply. He simply stared at the man in both pity and disgust.

“No matter. Dane will tell me everything you saw. What is important is what your conquest rank is.”

Still holding the child with one arm, the king used his other to grab Leon's hand with a terrifyingly icy grip. One of the frozen cuffs loosened on his arm, enough so the king could turn it palm side up, revealing his forearm. The cuff then tightened its firm grip upon him once more so that his conquest could be seen.

Leon glanced at the king's forearm. It was adorned with a V and something that looked like an upside-down V. According to what Vance had said, it looked as though the king was a lambda five ΛV .

"My, my, my," said the king. "It seems you're a rare case, my young drainer. Dane, come here." He turned to the scarred man. "What did you see? What killed this young man?"

"Well, it seems lightning struck our young guest."

"I see. He must have a strong conquest affinity to be starting at this rank, rare indeed."

Leon looked down and saw that his wrist had the mark $\ominus I$.

"Rare?" Leon repeated, looking between the two in puzzlement.

At that moment, Krysta appeared around the corner.

"Hello, my child," the king said.

"I couldn't help but overhear you, papa," Krysta replied. "You said if I helped bring in another good conquest that I could have it for my own."

"I did say that, my dear Krysta. But unfortunately, this one I cannot give you. This one, well, Leon has to be turned over, and he will gain us a reprieve from our quota for at least a few years."

The cheerful look on Krysta's face turned to pure malevolence. Was this the same girl that Leon had stared up at in that cabin? Even if that was an act, this was the face of a different individual.

"You told me I could have the next one. You told me it was mine. So let me gut this worthless drainer and add his body to the pile of dead, rotting corpses that are used for food!"

This startled the young child, and he cried. The surrounding air became frosted. Nay, the atmosphere itself changed. Leon looked up

as snow fell. He considered the peculiarity of snow falling above the boiling lava pits within the room. One could only describe it as looking like volcanic ash falling from the sky after a violent eruption.

The Frozen King glanced toward the girl ferociously. "Know your place and leave."

This caused the girl's expression to change from malevolence to fear. She did as she was told without another word.

"There, there, it'll be ok," the king said to the young child. "You're going to become strong like daddy, aren't you? Maybe even stronger still."

The skies cleared, and the young boy stopped crying and smiled.

"Dane," the king said. "Contact a collector. It seems, boy, you are Theta one."

3

Guards moved Leon off the side of the rough volcanic mountain and placed in impervious manacles. They led him out of the chamber and down a vast hallway. On his way outside, they ushered him through a magnificent hall that seemed to be where people would come to gather; though it didn't seem as if they had used it in some time from the looks of it.

They left the manacles on him as they tossed him back into the same cell where he had met Trytho. The others were still there, but it was quieter this time. Leon had tried to speak with others in the cell, but they said nothing.

"Does anyone know what a collector is?"

It took a bit, but he got his answer; however, the answer came from Vance, who had been placed to guard the cell as an extra precaution.

He said one word in a stoic tone: "Death."

Leon was left to ponder what Vance meant. He didn't want to have a discussion with someone who had tricked him into captivity. As he waited for what was to come, someone again delivered the

stew. This time, he dared not eat it. He couldn't bring himself to tell the others. Most of them looked to be on the verge of starvation. He ate the bread and drank the water that it came with. It wasn't much, but at least it was something.

More time had passed, and Vance had gone to talk with a few of the other guards and the Frozen King. He came back and spoke to Leon.

"Listen, Leon," it was the first time Vance had called him by his name since their introduction. "What you're going to see, what you're going to experience, well... I'm sorry it has to be this way."

Those words confused Leon. *If Vance is sorry, then why was he doing this? What is **making** him do this? What could be happening in this world?*

"Help us escape," Leon said.

Vance looked at him with a somber expression. "I can't kid. My responsibility is to look out for the people here. There are things out of my control. Hell, they're out of humanity's control. You'll understand soon enough, even if it breaks you."

4

After a few days of waiting, the gate where the previous buyer had emerged opened once more. Leon watched as both the Frozen King and his advisor, Dane, approached the gate. The pair and everyone else fell to their knees in anticipation of what was to come.

Why is the king kneeling? Leon wondered while frowning.

The answer to that question stepped through the gate. This time, it was not a man; it wasn't even human at all. What came through was exactly as Vance had described, who was on his knees in front of the cage. What came through was Death.

5

Leon dropped to his knees. Not to please what came through, but because his fear overwhelmed him. The being that walked

through the door was nothing like he had ever imagined, even in his wildest nightmares.

The being was enormous. It had to be at least eight feet tall, wearing what seemed to be some kind of purple robe concealing most of its body. That mattered little, as what Leon could see was already terrifying enough. It had eyes alright, but each eye socket had not one but two eyeballs. They were stacked almost like a figure eight but would twist and rotate to give the creature its desired point of view. There were four sockets in total. Two were more minor to the side, similar to that of a beaver. The other two were closer to the center of its head, like that of a human or ape, only these were about three times as big. Its irises were pitch-black and the pupils themselves were glowing with a dark purplish tint that complemented its robe. The sclera in each socket disgusted Leon. It wrapped tightly around the eyes and looked like a pestilent flesh that had rotted—re-growing as the eyes moved about.

Upon seeing this, Leon thought they perhaps used this as a mechanic, similar to how humans blink, but of course, this was conjecture.

Beyond the eyes, things were even more terrifying. The being had no nose. In its place was a protruding section that was scaly, yet almost filmy, slick skin. The worst part was its mouth, which took up the bottom half of the face. When it opened, it looked like a bottomless pit of death, an eternal black hole. The entrance was littered with different layers of teeth, similar to a shark. The teeth didn't seem to be made of bone or enamel; instead, they were dark and barely visible. When looking into the depths of the creature's mouth, it seemed as if they were composed of pure energy or matter from a distant star.

The only part of the being's body that wasn't hidden under the robe was its hands. They were like a human's, but with a few stark differences. They contained thirteen fingers each. Each arm had five scaly fingered hands made of the same-looking material as on its face.

They also had a more durable hand on top of it that was larger with eight additional fingers.

Leon watched as the creature's face showed great pleasure while looking at the terrified subjects on their knees. After it seemed satisfied it approached the Frozen King.

"Stannnnnd," it said with an almost growling tone. Its *nose* pulsed as it spoke. "Why have thou summoned me?"

The Frozen King and his subjects stood, while Leon remained on his knees.

The king spoke in a respectful tone, "Oh great being, I have summoned you here today to bring a reprieve to my people."

"Annnnd, what has thou to give inn returnn?" The creature demanded. "If you have summoned me here with nno inntentionnn of providinnng a sufficiennt trade, I shall take whomever I deem nnnecessary."

"My subjects came across a high-quality conquest. With your benevolence, I would only ask you for five years of reprieve," the king said with his head still bowed.

"I see, and this personn with the conquest, where are they nnnow?"

The Frozen King, who now seemed much more like a frozen commoner, pointed towards Leon. The being did not scare the king to the point of shaking. No, it seemed he was more afraid to offend the creature that was before him. In an instant, the monstrosity sped towards the cage, stopping in front of the bars.

"This onne. I see, nno, nnnno, I feel it. You will have your reprieve." In a sickening tone that was almost a yell, it said: "Two years, nnot five!" All the while, it continued to look at Leon with delight.

"Sir, that's not..." Dane started to argue, but the Frozen King cut him off with a cold, solemn glare.

"Thank you," the king said to the monster. "Thank you for your generosity. Vance, get the boy out."

Vance, who was a bulky man himself, looked almost minuscule next to the creature. He opened the gate and moved to grab Leon.

“Sorry, kid.”

“Bringing him this way,” the creature demanded.

Vance grabbed Leon, helping him up before leading him to the gate.

“Let’s go kid,” Vance whispered. “You saw how fast it can move. Don’t make this any worse than it has to be for both of us.”

“Why don’t you fight back?” Leon asked Vance, with the creature now a few meters ahead. “Surely, with everyone here, you guys could take it down. I’ve felt the aura of the Frozen King’s power, and I’ve seen your strength first hand. So why not fight together and avoid this subservient way of living?”

Vance said nothing, only offering a somber expression.

Soon after, they arrived at the gate where a strange-looking carriage awaited. Leon stared in horror. It was not horses that pulled it, but humans.

“Put him innn there,” the creature growled.

Vance led Leon inside the back of the carriage while the creature went over to speak with the Frozen King. Vance looked at Leon and saw the despair in his eyes as he was chaining him down beside the barred window.

“You don’t understand, kid, you just got here. This fight hasn’t been going on for a few years, not even a few centuries. It has been happening for more than a few millennia. We tried to fight back, but in the end, we lost. Our universe lost.”

“The universe?” Leon didn’t understand what he meant.

“We could probably take this guy down, sure. I could probably take him on my own, not without difficulty, but it’s possible. Hell, humanity could probably fight if it was only them. The problem is they’re not at the top of the food chain, kid. As powerful as it, or they are, they were created mortal beings the same as you and me. At least

they were born that way. The major problem is their gods. Our gods did their best to protect our universe, but in the end, they failed. Few of the divine may still be out there that haven't fallen, but why do you think this place is such a shit hole? Our gods, our protectors, they lost, kid. *We* lost."

Leon looked more confused. "We lost?"

"Listen, kid, every person with a high conquest is either a subject like the Frozen King trying to protect those close to them or they're hunted down. They left Earth on its own for a couple of reasons. First, our gods hid and protected the entrance well. Even after some witches were tortured for centuries, they wouldn't give up the location. Second, the dark universe's gods don't see any threat leaving it how it is. Earth still functions to produce conquest users for the pleasure of those belonging to the dark universe. They don't have an invested interest in finding the entrance, *for now*, but that only continues to be true if we keep them happy. People here are even used for a small profit between humans, as you saw with Trytho earlier. They..., no, *we* trade people as resources to benefit our own. It's hell, kid, but it allows us to survive in a world where it wouldn't otherwise be possible."

Leon didn't know what to think. *Witches? Other universes and gods? Our gods were defeated?*

In the distance, they heard a shriek from Krysta. Then a sound that would change Leon's fate once more: the sound of a crying child.

6

While Vance was talking to Leon in the carriage, a discussion had occurred. By asking a single question, the Frozen King had made a terrible misjudgment. One that would lead to a totally different outcome than the king had initially perceived.

"Is there anything I can do for you before you leave?" The king asked.

The creature pondered for a moment before realizing he wanted something for the road ahead. “There is something you can do. You can bring me something to eat.”

The king knew what this meant. These creatures were born for a purpose. That purpose was to help take over our universe. The *Hydronic* Universe, as they called it. The Gods knew the weakness of all creatures, and that weakness was sustenance. Any living creature would do almost anything to get its next meal. These creatures were no exception. What better army could you create than an army that feeds off of the living of your enemy?

“Certainly. We have many selections. Take your pick.”

The creature went over to the cages and gazed through the holding cells. The selections did not satisfy the beast at all. “These are not suitable meals. These are frail, pathetic souls, and most of them are ragged.”

It was true. Though these prisoners may have once been youthful and vibrant, most were near death.

“No, I think I will have something else.” The creature looked around fiercely and fixated its gaze on Krysta. “I will have this one.”

Krysta looked at the beast in horror. “PAPA!” She screamed.

The king cringed as he watched the creature move swiftly over to her and take hold.

It picked her up by her waist, staring with its devilish eyes into hers. Krysta continued to scream, struggling in its fierce grasp. The beast opened its mouth wide, its rows of teeth glinting in anticipation. Suddenly, it stopped. It looked around as the noise came again. The creature dropped her, leaving her paralyzed with fear, shaking in a puddle of her own urine. The beast had heard the cries of the king’s son.

“VEAL?!” the creature said in a passionate frenzy. “WHAT A RARITY. YOU DIDN’T TELL ME YOU HAD A CHILD HERE!”

The beast looked around, frantic and gleeful, its mouth wide open. Its *teeth* were going in all different directions. Its saliva, or what seemed to be the equivalent, dropped out of its mouth, steaming and bubbling where it laid. It was much thicker than any normal saliva and similar to a slimy goop, closer to a boiling pudding. The creature looked around urgently until it pinpointed the sound of the child.

One of the king’s nurses had brought it out to get some fresh air, unaware of what was happening.

The creature dashed toward the king’s son.

This time, however, the king did not sit idly by. He moved with a devilish speed of his own, gliding in front of the creature on a path of ice.

“I’m sorry,” the king said calmly. “The child is not an option.”

The creature looked at him in disbelief. “What do you meannn not annn optionnnn?!” it said, hissing at him with vitriol. “Get out of my way, or far worse will befall you annnd the whole useless lot of you, Snnnow Leopard.”

“I cannot. We built the terms of our relationship on the condition that my child would be spared. It was decreed in the contract of our subjugation.”

The creature’s eyes flared with anger and annoyance at the king’s response. “Very well,” it said, calming down. “Show me this decree annnd I may spare the child.”

“Dane,” the king ordered.

The creature’s body and tone had said it all; it didn’t give a damn what anyone had declared. The child would be his.

Dane returned with the decree of their subjugation and read. “This decree shall place the Snow Leopard’s kingdom as a vassalage to the true universe’s rule.

The terms of the agreement are as follows:

- The Snow Leopard’s kingdom must provide necessary sustenance and tributes as required by the Gods of the true universe.
- If servitude in whatever way is needed, the vassals must oblige immediately.
- The kingdom must turn over any mighty conquest humans found immediately upon apprehension.
- They must turn in any found traitors or conspirators against the true universe.
- They must give any information about the whereabouts of any remaining false gods to the True Universe.

In return for service of their continued loyal patronage, the vassalage will gain two distinct benefits.

- The Snow Leopard’s kingdom will be spared from catastrophic harm.
- At the king’s request, his child may be allowed to serve and help the king in the future—continuing to serve the true universe’s needs.

Signed, **Valentine**”

The creature moved to Dane and grabbed the flimsy decree made from human skin and scribed in blood. He looked it over and smiled.

“I recognnnize that this decree and signnature are valid, however,” the creature said, with an insidious grin, “the child is rightfully minne. This decree evenn connfirms as much.”

The king had a confused expression on his face. Before he could interject, the creature continued.

“You see, point onnne is inn my favor. *Must* provide nnecessary sustennnace. Poinnt two is also innn my favor, *whatever way* is nneeded. Finnnally, for the conditionn listed on the request, let us read that, shall we?” The creature then gave a burst of shrill laughter as it read:

“At the request of the kinng, his child *may* be allowed to serve. So you see, **King**, the child *may* be allowed to live, but inn this case I demannnd that child is nneeded as sustennnace and therefore it is rightfully minne.”

The creature didn’t intend to honor the intent behind the contract, and instead had decided to play loosely with the meaning of the words.

The king pulled Dane closer and whispered something in his ear. The man scurried away as the king stared directly into the creature’s hideous eyes. “I see how you would think that. Though, my son is mine. If you try to take him, you will die.”

“Take my son back to his room,” he directed the nurse behind him.

The nurse turned with haste and returned to the castle.

“You foolish little creatures nnever learnn. I will take that as a declaratiionnn of betrayal!” The creature’s eyes let off a fierce aura as they stared back at the king.

Dane had made his way to Vance who was now concerned due to his movement and voice. “The negotiations have broken down.”

Vance’s facial expression changed from sorrow to someone on high alert. “You don’t mean?”

“Yes,” Dane answered cryptically. “The collector has asked for the one thing the king is unwilling to give, his and his late wife’s son.”

“What’s the order?” Vance asked.

“Containment.”

This confirmed what Vance had suspected. He knew what this meant as the top-ranking officials had discussed it in private

“So, the king really wants to kill this collector and cover it up? That means...” Vance paused for a moment and looked at Leon.

“Yes...” Dane said once more. “He told me he would handle the creature. You are to get Enzo to help you handle the containment phase of the other drainers after you deal with Leon.”

“Sorry, kid,” Vance said, looking back at Leon. “It’s nothing personal, but everyone who isn’t a part of the kingdom has to die and their conquest consumed, so they don’t reincarnate. It’s the only way we can ensure the safety of everyone here.”

As he had said that, there was a loud booming noise that came from where the king was. The fight had begun.

“I’ll make it quick, kid. At least it’ll be better than what you would’ve had to go through.” Vance reached for Leon’s neck, but someone thwarted him by grabbing his arm instead.

“Containment, you say? My, my, that is a peculiar idea indeed. Wouldn’t you say, Leon?”

Leon looked up and saw what appeared to be an ordinary man coming out of the shadows. Ordinary, of course, apart from his misty violet eyes.

“I mean, sure, it’s a fine idea. Don’t get me wrong. If they had any idea of our protocols, it might have even worked. Well, not that the knowledge of our protocols would have helped them, but if we didn’t have our protocols, then perhaps it would have been successful. Yes! You know, I think they could have succeeded if that were the case!”

“Who in the hell are you?” Vance roared as he pulled back his arm.

“Well, that won’t do,” the mysterious man said. “I’m going to need you to be quiet while I talk.”

“Like I’ll—” Vance started but stopped, or rather could not continue, now fixed in place.

“I will answer your question, despite your insolent tone. You can call me Remmy. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

A boom came from the king’s direction, and when they heard the being’s name in front of them, the color had drained from both Vance and Dane’s features. All the while, Leon sat there, stunned.

“Well, it certainly seems *you two* know who I am, and that’s quite alright! Quite alright indeed, but it seems this Leon boy here doesn’t have a clue. No, not a clue! It would be just plain rude to keep this a secret between ourselves! I suppose, Leon, that you could call me a *true* demigod. Dem eye god? Demigod. Whatever the case, that’s not to be confused with your false gods, no-no. You see, I am the son of one of the true gods and a human, nonetheless. Ohhh, the one that most here call the dark creator. So you see, we’re at least a bit more similar than that creature fighting the king there. What these two may not know, and I don’t mind sharing, is the circumstances surrounding my birth.”

Leon didn’t know why this person, demigod, or whatever he was, had decided to tell him any of this.

“It twas really more of an experiment for my father than anything. He wanted to see if a human could produce an offspring for him, and to his surprise, it worked. My mother, oh, my mother, was beautiful. She had bright red hair, lovely kind eyes, and anytime she cried, oh how those tears brought out the color in them. She did considerably well nursing me, I’m told. After that, she was no longer needed, so my father took her away and began to feed me himself.

“For a few years, he fed me one thing only, *to get the taste*. The taste for humanity that is! Of course, I didn’t want to, but it was made relatively clear that I would either eat you humans or die my-

self. After all, I was a god's son, so I had to eat what they ate. Of course, that meant those delicious human souls made of pure energy. And to tell you the truth, I much preferred the taste of the fresh flesh and souls to milk; it's much better, this much I know.

"Once I learned to absorb souls, oh my GOD, they are *so good*. It's like sipping on delicious Indian rice pudding. So sweet and succulent, so refreshing. The true nectar of your gods, I say!" Remmy said this with no reserve as the look of euphoria continued to pour across his face.

The fight is still going on in the background between the king and the collector, so why is Remmy sitting here so calmly? Where did this person, god, or whatever he was come from? One moment there was nothing, and the next, he was right here telling all of us his entire life story after silencing Vance. What's going on?

Leon was confused, and rightfully so. None of this seemed to make sense to Dane or Vance, let alone Leon, who was clueless about most things in this world. Still, this strange event continued.

"Ki—" Dane turned his head yelling, but before he could finish, Remmy put his finger to his lips—quieting him and stopping him in the same manner that he had Vance.

"Not now," Remmy said. "Where's the fun in that? Sit there like good little snacks and enjoy the fight. Isn't it marvelous to watch and enjoy things in leisure!"

A moment later, he asked a peculiar question that caught them all off guard.

"Would you like some popcorn?" He asked this rather seriously, and they all looked at him in dismay. "No? Just me? Ok, very well."

Remmy held out his hand and with a smile his other arm vanished as it reached deep, pulling popcorn from what seemed like an invisible bag.

"You know, you humans don't get a lot of things right, but most will agree that popcorn is a delicious invention. I only know about

it from the memories of some humans. After learning about it, I had someone teach me how to create it before I devoured them. I think I've perfected it. Anyway, let's all enjoy this fight and proceed from there, shall we?"

8

To get the entire picture, we must look back roughly five minutes earlier when the king whispered in Dane's ear.

"Go to Vance. Tell him containment is active. I'll handle things here."

With that, Dane began working his way over to the carriage.

The king then replied to the creature's demand for his son. "I see how you would think that. Though, my son is mine. If you try to take him, you will die."

The creature's eyes let off a fierce aura as they stared back at the king. "You foolish little creatures nnever learnn. I will take that as a declaratiionnn of betrayal, and we will enjoy all of you instead."

The atmosphere changed almost instantly to that of a frozen tundra. The boiling lava pits next to the king slowed to a calm, almost molasses texture.

"Everyone stay back. I'll handle this," the king declared. With that, the Frozen King struck hard and fast, pushing the creature with both of his arms. The towering beast was knocked back, and its robe frozen at the point of impact. Twin frosty handprints had branded the creature's skin.

The creature yelled as it tore the rest of the robe off before pounding its chest. Its scaly, smaller hands that weren't meant for combat were absorbed into its large, hardened exterior. The slimy body went through an almost instant change. What was once a creature with a softer surface grew fast into a beast with not only muscle, but one with an armored exterior that complemented its colossal stature.

The king attacked again. This time drawing a sword made of impervious metal before striking the creature's body. A series of attacks pushed it back, chipping away ever so slightly at its robust exterior.

After a few moments, the creature let out a booming sound. Then, out of nowhere, it grabbed not one but two large, double-sided, double-edged halberds from the air itself. What had looked like elbows before now lifted, and two five-fingered hands appeared. This allowed the creature to wield and handle these monstrous weapons with a frightening level of stability and grace.

The king and the being clashed, man vs. monster. The king's sword struck the top half of one halberd as the second swung towards him. He dodged it, barely able to keep his head.

Shit, what is this? The king thought, slightly panicked.

The king's sword slid down to the halberd's rod, creating sparks before he could contain it in place. He didn't have time to rest as the other immediately swung up at him like a pendulum.

The king launched himself backward, barely dodging by causing cold, steam-like pressure to form around his legs.

The creature smiled. "You seem surprised, your majesty," it said insidiously.

It wasn't wrong. The king knew these creatures were fierce, sure, but he had never seen one of the collectors to be this formidable.

What's going on? The king asked himself. "I am a bit surprised," he said. "You're weaker than you first seemed, my dear friend."

The creature cackled. "You cannot put on a brave face for your dear subjects, but you cannot fool me, Snnow Leopard."

The king wasn't sure if he could defeat this collector. A typical collector was more of a businessman than anything else. This one was something different entirely. It was a real fighter, yet why was he here? For what purpose?

What's taking Vance and Enzo so long? He glanced towards the carriage, noticing they were standing there frozen. The back of the

carriage now faced the front gate. *Why are Vance and Dane standing beside Leon as if nothing is happening? What's going...*, then he noticed. He saw a man sitting there in the front, smiling and speaking to them while casually eating popcorn. He didn't know what the situation was, but he knew it wasn't normal.

The man smiled at the king and waved ecstatically.

He knew there could be only one explanation for this and why this fight was a lot harder than he had expected. He wasn't facing a collector, and that man over there wasn't a man, but some sort of god.

If that's a god, then what's in front of me now isn't a collector but a godly guardian.

Most of the creatures looked identical. The crucial difference between a guardian and collector was that they taught the guardians one thing only—how to fight.

9

Damn it all, perhaps I can defeat and take down this damn monster, but how am I going to protect everyone in the process? Beyond that, there is a slim chance in hell I can defeat who I think that is over there. I'm not positive, but it only makes sense; that is one of the greater beings of the dark universe.

The Snow Leopard's kingdom had lost most of its warriors in the old wars. The formidable few that had survived had left before the subjection. There was only one option the king saw; he gave the signal to the men at the guard post.

"RUN!" the king yelled.

A guard blew the loud horn in the watchtower, and a booming echo rang throughout the kingdom. The people and most of the kingdom's guards scattered.

"My, my, this won't do," Remmy said in an almost disappointing tone. "There's no fun if this is how things shake out. This won't do at all!" The popcorn he had been eating vanished in the air, and he

disappeared into the shadows. In almost an instant, he reappeared in a more central location. He raised his hand in the air and clasped it. Everyone stopped, save for the king. Those few who were outside of that seemingly arbitrary distance could still move about and continued their escape.

“What are you boys doing?” Remmy said with an unequivocal tone of command. “We can’t let our audience disappear like this; they have to watch this wonderful show to its conclusion!”

With that, more guardians materialized out of the nothing and grabbed those still trying to escape. Two of the guards fought back. One of them was Enzo. A strength that once seemed immeasurable to Leon must have felt like nothing to the guardian that now had a hold of them. Both of the guards swung their swords mightily. Both blades broke in half across the guardian’s durable armored exterior.

Without hesitation, the guardian bit one of their heads off and chewed on it like gum. It held Enzo close to its mouth so that he could hear the other man’s skull cracking. The cartilage snapping with each bite, the torturing of the guard that was still alive, along with the taste of the man’s head had seemed to please the creature completely.

“And what do you think *you’re* doing?” Remmy said with a disappointing look. “We can’t have an audience if you eat them all!”

The guardian dropped the dead man’s body. Blood flowed out from where his head had been. It then began to spit out what remained of his head until Remmy motioned to it that it was fine. It put Enzo down and kept a firm hold of him by the shoulder. The man’s face was full of terror, trembling.

“No one else is to kill any of these lovely audience members,” he said before eyeing the congregation. “However, if any of you try to escape, I might recant that declaration.”

“Take me and let them go,” the king said as he looked around at what seemed like checkmate at this point. In his mind, there would be no escaping. Their defeat was assured.

“Oh my, good sir, you seem to be misunderstanding something here,” Remmy said comically. “I’m not here to interfere with this fight, neither are those around. It’s just that, well, it was getting interesting, you see. I don’t want anything to prevent it from reaching its splendid climax!”

“What game are you playing!”

“Don’t mistrust me so easily! There are no tricks. No, no trick, indeed! I’ll even make you a deal. If you can defeat your opponent, I will grant you clemency. Moreover, I will grant you your original request for five years’ reprieve for the lovely Theta that you have procured. To sweeten the deal, I will allow your son 100 percent protection from future requests for sustenance. No loopholes or ambiguous words to put him at risk in the future. I guarantee it.”

The king looked at Remmy in disbelief. This deal seemed too good to be true, which he knew nine times out of ten usually meant it was. While the fight itself would not be undemanding, there had to be some sort of catch or punishment for basically committing treason. Perhaps there was no catch, but what was the alternative if he somehow lost?

“And if I lose?”

“Well, we *must* award the victor!” Remmy said. “There will also have to be *some* punishment for conspiring to kill an envoy. I think it’s fair to say two things will happen if you lose, my dear king. You’ve been good, otherwise, until today. Your kingdom has provided all that has been asked, and it’s not like I can’t relate to your struggle. I know it’s a hard situation for you,” Remmy said, giving him a pouting face. “Ahhh, with that being said, the first thing, instead of the request for five years of reprieve, you will, of course, be given none.”

“And the second?” The king asked with caution.

“As originally requested, your son will be fed to my dear guardian over there, and you will be given a front-row seat to watch it happen.”

“You’re too kinnnd, my lord,” the guardian said, letting out a peal of hideous laughter.

“I think these terms are more than fair,” Remmy boasted. “However, you must not kill the king, only incapacitate him. As I’ve said before, this kingdom will be allowed to continue to serve, and it can’t serve without its king after all.”

The king sat there stunned, having come to terms with what was at stake. He sat up, ready with a renewed fervor in his eyes. He wasn’t in a position that he could refuse these terms and had to go all-in for his son’s sake.

“You both agree to these terms, I assume?” Remmy asked. He then yelled out in his seemingly typical grandeur style: “Well then, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, let this fight continue!”



Chapter V



Defeat & Reunion

During the grand fighting spectacle that Remmy had orchestrated for his own solace of entertainment, Leon remained chained to the carriage but realized that he could move. He began searching for a way to escape, but with the chains as solid as they were and with no obvious way to unlock them, he was at an impasse. Vance and Dane, on the other hand, remained frozen in place, unable to do much more than blink.

Great, Leon thought to himself. Go on a camping trip. Oh, it'll be so fun, he let out a sigh and tried to calm himself. Alright, relax. Pull yourself together. There's got to be some way out of this. No matter who wins or who loses, I'm shit out of luck and thrown to the wayside.

In the distance, the king had summoned what seemed to be snow leopard sculptures made of ice. They moved around seemingly of their own free will—attacking the guardian together with the king. This seemed to be enough to put him on a more equal footing with the creature. One of the ice leopards charged at it and pounced, going for its throat. It was the same as what Leon had seen from the leopards in the king's memory.

While the sculpted animals got in a few hits on the guardian, it dealt with them quickly enough by slicing them into tiny bits. The creature's brutal strength and graceful handling of the halberds were now on full display.

I've got to figure something out, Leon thought. Apparently, I have powers, but how in the hell am I supposed to use them?

This question continued to bug him as he struggled to spark something inside of him that could allow for escape. Alas, it wasn't as easy as flipping a circuit breaker to power it on, or perhaps it was, but it didn't help if he had no idea where that switch was located.

They probably think I'm crazy. Leon thought he had probably made a face that looked as though he was constipated while trying to get something to happen; and that Dane and Vance were perhaps wondering what the hell he was doing. Though in reality, while they were a bit confused, both of them were more worried about what was going on outside.

From what I've learned, powers manifest in different ways, and even if my death was the same as someone else's, there's no telling if my conquest will work in the same way. So how am I supposed to figure this out?

While trying to activate his conquest, a bright light flashed across his eyes. It reminded him of when a shiny surface would reflect the sun's light and blind him. A moment later, it happened again. Leon looked around, searching only to come up with nothing. It wasn't until the third time that he finally saw it. High in the upper levels of the snowy volcanic mountains, there was a person in a cloak. The light was being reflected from the person's blade, but it was the quick burst of intense light coming from their palm that was causing the reflection. They otherwise mostly hid it from sight by claspings their hand around it in the same way one might do when trying to block a lighter from the wind.

Why is this person signaling to me? Could they be an ally? Leon thought, still trying to escape.

Moments later, the cloaked individual nodded and vanished from sight in the ever-intensifying blizzard.

No one else had seemed to notice it as they were fixated on the fight, that, or the giant creatures keeping them captive. Even if Dane or Vance had somehow noticed, it's not like they could say or do anything about it.

Remmy himself was wholly immersed in the fight. With metal clashing and grit shining, he seemed to be delighted with it all. He became so overjoyed in the process that, in a moment of awe, he had launched part of his new batch of popcorn into the air.

"What's wrong king?" the guardian taunted. "Had enough yet?"

The king was becoming tired and began losing ground in this duel. His breathing became more erratic as he was succumbing to exhaustion. The king was fatigued but wasn't out of tricks yet. He struck the ground with his blade, and a solid sheet of ice quickly began making its way towards the guardian.

Unable to dodge, the ice-covered the creature and froze it, leaving the guardian unable to move.

The king grabbed his blade and approached the frozen monster as its whole exterior iced over. He hit the guardian's outer coat repeatedly with his sword. The creature's surface seemed unyielding despite the brunt force of the king's attack.

Away from the fight, it looked as though the cloaked figure had already made it down the mountainside. They silently approached the carriage from the shadows and slipped inside with Leon.

Perhaps it's someone else? Leon thought, unsure of how someone could make it down that fast.

Either way, it didn't matter to Leon. The figure poured something on his chains, causing them to corrode and crack. Now that he could move freely, he rubbed his wrists.

"Who are you?" He whispered softly.

The cloaked figure said no words and motioned for him to follow.

Leon had been burned before following someone who had seemed to have saved him from a terrible predicament. This time, though, his only other option was to stay here and see what horrible fate awaited him at the end of the carriage ride. He chose to follow the cloaked figure to the other side of the carriage. The humans that had once been chained to pull it were now free.

On the other side, the Frozen King had dropped his guard and got too close to the frozen guardian. After breaking a chunk of its armored exterior and impaling it with his sword, the guardian broke through the ice, dropped one halberd, and grabbed the king by the throat.

“Bravo, bravo! Magnificent!” Remy yelled ecstatically. The other guardians grunted and hollered in unison.

“Yield you weak, pathetic humannn,” it said.

“I’ll never stop fighting to protect my son, you filthy creature,” the king said in defiance.

“You’ve lost. Admit defeat.”

“What do we do?” One of the cloaked men said to the other, who had only now appeared around the corner.

“You mean the others in the cages?” He responded.

“Aye, what I’m talking about.”

“Well...,” the second man paused. “I don’t think it’s a smart move to approach them. Getting this one out was risky enough,” he said while looking at Leon.

“Do we just leave them? And what about your old friend Clayven over there?”

“Well, it’s not like I don’t want to help him; however, he chose his own path. Not only him, no, most of the people here chose their own way. What I don’t like is leaving those in the cages, as that wasn’t a personal choice. Tsk,” he said with great annoyance, alluding to those Leon had been confined with initially. “I know you want to

fight Ragnarr, but I don't think we have enough to do it. We weren't expecting Remmy to be a part of this."

"Who are you guys?" Leon asked abruptly.

The unknown man looked at him. "We are humanity's last hope—the resistance."

2

Leon looked them over, not knowing what to think of them. They seemed more trustworthy than the others that had offered to *help* him before, but was this true? The first man had foggy grey eyes with a thick dirty blonde lumberjack's beard. He looked to be about five-foot-six, and on his lips, hidden under the beard, were what looked like burn scars. The other man was only a few inches shorter than Leon, who was six-foot-four. They had dark, almost black hair and piercing blue eyes.

"Should we call in the reinforcements? I know it's risky, but these innocents.... What in Odin's name have they all been through to look so meager?" The first man continued.

The man with blue eyes sat there, looking dismayed at the distant shells of humans in the cages.

"We could, Ragnarr. The problem, however, as I'm sure you already know, is that this isn't a regular battalion in front of us. These are all godly guardians, and while they don't look like the cream of the crop, they're still formidable. That's not to say we couldn't take them. But do you think we could do so while we protect those in the cages, the hostages, and fend off Remmy in the process? I see little chance of it happening without some consequence."

Leon felt terrible about the others in the cages. While none of them were as talkative or open as Trytho had been, he couldn't help but feel it was from the torment they had endured. If he had been through this in only a few days, he couldn't imagine what these poor souls had been through.

"What if you use me as bait?" Leon interjected.

They both looked at him curiously.

“It seems to me, for whatever reason, I’m highly valued.” He continued. “So if you use me as bait, couldn’t you distract them enough to get the others out of there?”

They thought it over for a moment.

“It could work,” replied Ragnarr, his eyes fixed on Leon.

The other man took longer to think it over.

“You’re right; it could work, but if it doesn’t, then all of this is for nothing. We also put him in danger and have the chance of losing a priority target and conquest user. Not to mention, I doubt he’d be enough to distract all the other guardians. We’ve been tracking him since he arrived, Ragnarr. It’s risky enough given where we are and what we’re doing; it’s only a matter of time before they notice that he’s gone from the carriage.”

I wonder if these are the others that had chased us into that cave behind that bookshelf? Leon thought to himself.

“You’re our priority in this. As much as I hate it, I think we must—”

Leon jumped in, “Don’t you think saving those in the cages is worth the risk? You said it yourself; they didn’t choose this.”

“Correct,” the man said. “But I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“I never asked you to. I’ve been in this world for only a few days and I’m disgusted by nearly everything I’ve seen. People selling each other, others killing whomever they want, with no remorse for what they’ve done. And worst of all, turning those corpses into food for those in the cages. It’s all sickening.”

The man looked at Leon in revulsion.

“He’s been feeding them, humans? Have things really gotten so bad for Clayven to fall this far?”

Leon paused for a moment before continuing.

“Something about him seemed to be disparaged. Like he convinced himself it was ok, as long as it was for survival, but even so.”

“I didn’t know things had gotten to this point.” He replied in a way that made it sound as though he had failed. After pondering for a moment, he had decided. “Alright, let’s do it, Ragnarr. Let’s put on a grand spectacle to distract all the guardians and save those in the cages. If possible, perhaps I can even save my old friend Clayven.”

3

While they had their discussion, the king didn’t seem to fare well at all.

“I will not surrender,” he said once more, looking at the disgusting creature.

The guardian, still laughing, asked: “Remmy am I nnot the winnner of this connntest? I could crush this pathetic kinnngs throat at annny time if I chose to do so.”

Remmy pondered for a moment then replied with a smile: “Curious, curious. It seems my dear friend you are in quite the bind, more so than you realize. I’m quite sorry, but you have lost this, though; you fought well indeed!”

The guardian laughed ecstatically. “You see kinnng, your child is minnne,”

Remmy interjected: “Oh no no no, on the contrary, you see the king has bested you. It’s hands down his win, I’m afraid.”

The guardian looked confused, and the king sensed it.

“Confused, are we?” He smiled and grabbed the guardian’s arm. With little effort, he pried its large hand from his neck. It cracked, and small pieces of his exterior flaked away as he moved it.

“Have you ever heard of black ice? It’s a term on Earth that we use for ice that can be dangerous, yet it’s almost invisible. Even though it is thin and frail, it can cause quite a bit of damage if you’re not careful. That’s what has happened to you. If this were a normal match and you were allowed to kill me, I’m afraid I’m not enough to beat you as is. That’s not how it worked out, though, is it?”

The guardian lost its balance and control of its motor functions, making a loud thump as it dropped to its knees.

“I slowly, invisibly ended you. The moment I penetrated your shell, my cold frost seeped its way inside and has been spreading like cancer, freezing your insides. I believe it has reached your synapses by now, and well.”

The guardian started cracking like a severe case of dry skin. It fell apart, piece by piece. It tried to speak but could form nothing coherent. “Ahkragluh,” this was the only sound that made it out.

“I told you, you would die if you tried to take my son,” the king took his sword from where it had been stuck in the guardian and sliced up through its thick, frozen skull with little effort at all. The crackling sound of slicing through the frozen flesh, bone, and other material along the way was satisfying to both the king and Remmy. The racket of Remmy clapping and cheering was like that of a madman.

“What a wonderful performance! Wonderful, wonderful!”

At that moment, someone else began clapping. Remmy looked up to see a cloaked man with Leon by his side.

“Good job Clayven, I didn’t think you’d pull it off. I guess you haven’t lost everything yet, have you?”

The king knew who it was before he even looked. It was his old ally, as well as rival and mentor. It was a man who had been here for much longer than he had. A man who had slain a dragon in his previous life. One man who had left the kingdom to form the resistance with others after the tides of the battle turned for the worst. The man was Dobrynya Nikitich.



Chapter VI



Memories

During the fight between the king and the guardian, the three men had been talking. Dobrynya, Ragnarr, and Leon had come up with a simple plan; play to the vices of Remmy.

“Who is this intriguing gentleman, and furthermore, **why is my precious Leon unchained?**” Remmy asked, reinforcing the final bit of that sentence with the utmost malice.

“Who, me?” Dobrynya replied. “I’m an old friend of Clayven’s,” he said while motioning in the Frozen King’s direction. “As to why Leon is free, well, that’s because he’s part of humanity, and that makes him part of my responsibility to look after.”

You could tell that this particularly annoyed Remmy, though he was primarily able to keep his calm, eccentric persona.

“I see, I see. So he’s *your* responsibility, you say? You didn’t *truly* answer the first part of my question. So I’ll ask once more: just whoooooo, arrrrrrrrrrrre, youu?”

“Me? I’m no one. Not any longer, anyway. I used to be a knight. I used to be a tutor. Now I’m simply someone trying to survive and pave a path for others to live in this dystopian world we call home. While I know this may not be the answer you’re looking for, it’s the most honest answer that I can give. Well, that and I’m currently one of the four generals of the resistance. Although from this situation, I’m sure you suspected something of the sort.”

“Ahhh, yes, yes. That is something I am deeply excited to hear. Although, I’m not sure why you’d be so forthcoming with that information. Do you not understand the situation that you’re in?”

Remmy stretched his arms out wide in a grandiose fashion and looked around as if to say this area was his and his alone. Indicating to the foolish man in front of him that he had a multitude of godly guardians at his beck and call. He raised one hand from his side; at the same time, the other fell. Following this, Remmy clenched his raised fist, and this time, even Leon felt something.

Leon became groggy with his movements and even in his breaths. It was as if someone had slowed the surrounding time, or at least his own time. This feeling led him to lean on the nearby shack, feeling too ill to maintain his balance.

“Go on now, get him, get him,” Remmy said excitedly, nodding to a couple of nearby guardians. “And don’t you dare harm my poor little Leon!”

The two obeyed and did a transformation similar to that of the fallen guardian. One was slightly taller than the eight-foot behemoth that Clayven had taken down previously. The taller one summoned a black crystallized long sword from the nothing. The other drew what could only be described as two strange-looking shields fused with swords. This created the effect of holding a shield and having a blade at one end so that they could use it for both attack and defense.

Dobrynya clumsily stepped away from Leon while the two of them charged simultaneously at the off-balanced general. They both reached him at the same time, but hesitated to attack.

“Do you know what can pierce armor without the need to break it?” Dobrynya asked, rather calmly.

As soon as the words left his mouth, both guardians shrieked in agony, stumbling around him.

“Let me answer that for you, as you two seem to be incapable of doing so. Heat,” Dobrynya said, smiling. “Do you know what hap-

pens when the temperature is so high that the *armor* you have boils? Generally, the insides begin to swelter. Not instantly, mind you, but over time. Now, what do you imagine happens when that armor is a part of you?”

The guardians continued to whine in agony, screeching, clawing at themselves. It was almost as if they were trying to tear their souls away from their bodies.

“You burn,” Dobrynya said as he drew a sword from his back that had been hidden under his cloak. It was a great longsword. As soon as he pulled it out, it became lit, surrounded by a blue flame. With it, he sliced through both of them with no more effort than someone running their hand through water.

The guardians’ insides sizzled shortly before blowing up in a violent explosion.

“*Is this because of their biological makeup?*” Leon didn’t know, but he thought they had to be made in part of raw energy from what he had seen from the inside of their mouths. He went from leaning to crouching, and then sitting against the wall. He had an uneasy feeling about things, not how he felt physically, but because he could only watch and listen to what was happening. Being unable to help didn’t sit well with him at all.

“You didn’t think that would work on me, did you?” Dobrynya asked, looking at Remmy, who now seemed almost dumbfounded. “Now maybe I gave a groggy appearance, but I mean, you can’t blame me, can you? I had to move so as to not catch your, how did you put it? *Precious Leon* in an unfortunate blaze.”

“Why that is true, isn’t it,” Remmy replied while only slightly taken aback by what had happened. “My, my, I suppose it’s best not to underestimate you, my dear sir. No, no, it’s not like I thought that would work if you were telling the truth, that is. I did have to assess that, though, as you see, I needed to make sure it wasn’t one of those little lies you humans tell so frivolously.”

“Do you want to hear a story?” Dobrynya asked as the cooled lava pits began to sizzle and boil once more. Some of the lava was now bouncing out over the sides.

Remmy replied by doing a slight bow with the hand he had clenched facing his chest. The other hand reached out, palm facing up towards Dobrynya as if to say that he would be delighted and the floor was his.

“Do you know why this place is a volcano covered in snow, of all things? Before your father took over and ended the war, when it was only your siblings fighting our gods, this was my kingdom to watch over—my land. Clayven, the current king, was a fresh individual whom I had come to look over. He may have made this his kingdom, but it is still my land.”

It's almost time, Ragnarr thought.

While all of this was taking place, he had slowly broken through the cages and released the prisoners. That is, those that still had the will to leave and fight. Some were entirely beyond help, and while they weren't interfering with the escape of the others, they could be seen as already gone. He could tell Dobrynya was getting ready as well. The temperature kept rising, and the lava along with it.

Dobrynya continued, “When I knew Clayven, he wasn't anything like the man I see before me now. He wasn't perfect, and it's understandable knowing the circumstances that he faced that had brought him here. He did used to have a sense of justice, though. Tell me, Clayven, did losing Riza twist you this much?”

The Frozen King couldn't understand what Dobrynya was talking about. It had been a long time since that name was spoken to him—the name of his wife, who had died during the height of the war.

“Have you really been feeding the people here the corpses of your fellow man!”

This was unspoken to the majority here. For it wasn't only the slaves and captives that had been eating other humans; it was the entire so-called *Kingdom*. While once it may have been great, it was now nothing more than a deserted outpost, at least in Dobrynya's eyes.

Remmy sensed drama and did what he could to fuel it. All of this drama, of course, pleased him. It was a dramatic sight for someone to see that was on the outside, someone who had no ties with the people. He released his grip over the people enough to where they could talk.

The ones by the guardians had already begun chattering as others joined in. Some cried, yelling out in confusion. Others gagged, sickened by that which had been sustaining them for these past years. Some had an idea of what had been happening, but it's not something you would bring up.

There weren't many animals around here, and the decree of the royals limited hunting. The royals were the humans favored by the dark gods and given their blessing. Some even liked human meat themselves, but having a supply of different varieties of beings would give them a more luxurious life. This kept the unfavored humans in line.

Leon couldn't help but think back to history class. It was nearly identical to the tactic used by the US government in the middle of the 19th century to keep the Native Americans in check. Attacking the bison population allowed them to create an unstable food source for the Natives, which enabled them to manipulate and control them in many different ways. They were allowed to live but were clearly at the mercy of those around them, while food shortages served well to keep them weak and prevent further rebellions.

This time it was most of humanity, minus a select few, that were being manipulated and kept weak. You may not die from old age, but you would eventually fall and fade away if you didn't eat. Only to be

reborn and live through this helpless process again. Much like some prisoners here were on the verge of doing. The king was, of course, given a small stipend of food for the kingdom. Still, it was clearly not enough to sustain everyone sufficiently.

“Dobrynya,” Clayven said in a forlorn tone of voice. “I failed. You were right. We should have gone with you. I’ve tried everything and failed time and time again. I’ve betrayed my own, slaughtered countless, turned over many others. You know, though, it wasn’t only I who failed. You failed us as much.”

“I failed?” Dobrynya asked sincerely.

“This may cause problems going into the future for the kingdom, but I need you to know the truth. I knew after you left and the kingdom became subjugated what it would mean for us; I knew how much we would have to sink. So I sent out scouts trying to locate someone in the resistance. This was in vain. The war had just ended; there was no sign of the resistance, and for good reason. I know it was not stable yet, and if they had found it, I’m sure nothing good could come of it. Yet, still, I searched until one day I didn’t. And then—” The king lost his words and clenched at his forehead, allowing his AV to show from his arm. It was as if he was trying to remember something but couldn’t.

“You fool,” Dobrynya said gently with a saddened expression.

Enough time had passed, which allowed for Ragnar to get the others out of the cages without notice. The buildings between them played a significant role by obstructing everyone’s view to a degree. A snake passed by Dobrynya, and he knew it was time.

The guardians were close to the citizens but were not holding on to any of them since Remmy had told them he may change his mind at sparing them should any try to escape.

“I understand, Clayven,” Dobrynya said. “For your son’s sake and your people’s sake, I will free you.”

Magma, from deep below the crust of the kingdom, rose in multiple spots. It caught a few of the guardians off guard and melted the outer exteriors of those that weren't prepared or quick enough to dodge. The open lava pit that was near Clayven and Remmy shot up. Dobrynya controlled it with ease, sending a massive gush of magma towards Remmy. This was enough to force him to move and break his concentrated hold on those around him, allowing the people to move and retreat.

"If you want to escape this hellhole, run towards the gate, now!" Dobrynya yelled with an explosive voice while rushing towards Remmy; his sword arched, ready to strike him down.

The citizens, guards, and about every human there ran as fast as they could toward the gate. Dane, on the other hand, started heading toward the king, and Vance followed suit.

"I need to release him, Vance. I need to release our king."

Vance didn't know what Dane was speaking of, only to assume he meant to rescue him. "I got it. Let's go get him and fast," Vance said.

Some guardians that weren't liquidated headed in their direction. Vance pulled out some impervious metal knuckles as one of the lower-ranked guardians rushed him. He was able to keep it at bay while Dane tended to the king. Seconds later, about five other guardians were swarming them.

"I guess we die together," Vance said, smiling with his fists still up in a boxing stance.

"None of us will die today," Dane replied. With that, he placed his hand upon the king and said a few words, "John, Kevin, Yang, white demon, Riza."

Something sparked from within the king, and memories that had been suppressed flooded his mind. A single tear ran down the king's face until it froze over. The block that had been long placed

upon him had been removed. He was now thinking more clearly and like himself than he had been in a long time.

The king's atmosphere changed; around his body. It was so cold that Vance and Dane instantly felt a rush of calm air radiate from within this lava-induced, heated kingdom. His hair had become speckled white as the five guardians had reached them. At that moment, the king swiftly took his sword and struck one of the guard's heads, causing it to fragment in an instant. Everything that had been connected to it was frozen stiff.

The other four guardians were put on edge and hesitated after what they had witnessed. One tried to throw a spear at the king, but it only turned into an icy powder as he blocked it with his sword.

Without hesitation, the king gave his sword to Dane. "I don't need this," he said. The king approached the guardians with nothing but his bare hands.

He ended two of the weaker ones almost immediately, turning them into nothing more than ice sculptures before they splintered and broke apart.

"Thetas," is all the king said.

Another one approached with what seemed to be ferocious speed and strength.

With a simple push from one hand, the king blocked it and sent the guardian flying back.

It knew it stood no chance and took this moment to retreat. After it began running towards a different target, it collapsed to its knees and began cracking, as the one he had fought earlier in his duel had done. This one, however, exploded in a purple, snowy cloud seconds after it collapsed. The final one approached the king.

"You are nnnnothing," it hissed.

The king created two icy daggers from the air's moisture as the guardian jolted towards him, slamming into him. The king only smiled.

“You were stronger than your fellows, and for that, I showed you mercy.” The king dropped his icicle-like daggers, now covered in a purplish-black fluid from the guardian’s insides.

The guardian didn’t know what happened as it stood there for a moment before collapsing with a loud thud; it was dead before it touched the ground.

The king’s forearm showed once more, and Vance was confused by what he saw. It wasn’t a lambda five that was showing—it was a ΔV.

“You see, Vance,” Dane said. “Our king hasn’t been a lambda for a long time. Our king is nothing less than a Delta.”

The white demon’s sleep was over and had awoken once more from within the Frozen King.

2

Explosions and a plethora of screams shook the kingdom at its core, while the heat of battle echoed throughout the inner kingdom’s walls. Dobrynya launched a powerful blast that sounded like a rocket towards Remmy as more guardians charged the Frozen King.

During the commotion, Leon had moved towards the castle. He knew he could be more helpful than running away or playing the role of bait. He was told while planning with Ragnarr and Dobrynya not to be reckless. Still, he had seen enough and felt that he couldn’t sit back any longer, remaining feckless with everything going on.

He ran past a few guardians along the way to the castle, ducking and dodging, hiding behind anything available to him. The dust of battle filled the air like a smoky fog, and the smell of blood started mixing in. Leon took advantage of the dust, debris, and inner structures to get past his enemies undetected.

“Be aware of your surroundings. Utilize them when you need to,” he subconsciously executed what his grandfather taught him at a young age.

It worked out for him, and he almost made it to the castle undetected until one guardian took notice. The creature rushed towards him with an enormous blade; now, a few feet away, it had him. Right before it reached him, a guard could intervene at the last second, holding it off.

“Go, get out of here,” she told him.

Not everyone had been as fortunate as he was, and the guardians had already mercilessly slaughtered a lot.

I have to at least save the kid, he thought to himself, still rushing towards the castle even after being saved. If the king’s son’s crib was any indication, he had a basic idea of where the child would be.

If I don’t, then who will?

He knew everyone was busy. The king couldn’t get to his son with so many guardians rushing him, and Ragnarr was doing his best to protect everyone he could.

If I were the nurse, I would likely have taken him back to the king’s room to be in a familiar setting to keep him as calm as possible while everything was taking place. I hope that’s the case, or I may not find him in time.

While Leon had been a bit dazed on his way back to the prison cell, but he wasn’t so out of it to not notice where he was walking. The fundamental problem he faced was getting the kid to safety. Leon finally reached the castle relatively unscathed and entered. Once inside, he passed through the inner hall before entering the hallway that led towards the king’s chamber where he was held previously. As Leon got closer, what he heard was something he rather wished hadn’t.

With each step closer to the room, the sounds became more profound: crunching, chewing, and even some slurping were heard. That, along with the sound of a child crying, was met by a vociferous rebuttal.

“You will pay for this!” the voice of a woman decried.

“Donnnn’t be so dramatic,” a voice that sounded similar to that of the guardian the king had fought replied. Its growling echo was combined with that of someone with their mouthful. “He chose his fate by tryinnng to get innnn the way of me annnnd that veal over there. After I’m donne here with this mannn, I shall ennjy that child as well. Would you perhaps like to joinnn them?” The guardian asked while it continued chomping through the skin and bones of some unfortunate soul.

Leon made it to the door and peeked around the corner. What he saw was worse than what he had heard. The guardian was eating one of the castle guards while a couple of others lay dead nearby. Their heads were torn from their bodies, and blood splattered across the nearby crib, which was only about ten feet away. The nurse and king’s child sat near it helplessly, watching what was happening in front of them. The situation couldn’t look any worse; that was until Leon noticed the cruelest aspect of it all—the guard that the guardian was eating was still alive.

It appeared the guard was in some sort of paralysis and still felt everything that was happening to him. Leon thought this was the case because of the way the man’s muscles twitched while his eyes moved back and forth. The guardian took another bite, ripping off what remained of the man’s right arm.

Blood splattered all across the guardian and the floor, causing the creature to use its long, sleek tongue to clean its face. It was a grim situation, and it was likely that the face of this hideous creature consuming him would be the last thing the man would ever see.

The guard, who could not move, noticed Leon and locked eyes with him. They told him one thing, “Kill me.” He wanted Leon to end him from this suffering rather than save him.

“I thinnk it’s time we ennd this, donnn’t you?” The guardian asked, looking at the guard. “You knnnnow, it’s rare that we guardianns are givenn our ownnn selectionnn of meals that we

consume. Usually, we are only allowed to eat what the gods deem necessary for us. The exception to this rule is during an incursion, like this, or during wartime. So you see, it's been awhile since I've been allowed to consume a valiant being such as yourself. Your conquest is far beyond what I am usually given to eat. So for that, I thank you."

Leon looked around to figure out what he could do.

Something, anything, he thought.

He knew that he would have to do something unconventional. He stood no chance against the guardian in front of him, but things took a turn for the worse before he came up with any strategy.

The guardian opened up the man's mouth and his own mouth, causing a violent wave of energy to erupt. The intense wave streamed from the man's mouth and into the guardian's.

The guard's muscles rapidly twitched until whatever had been paralyzing him was made null or had run its course. He let out a terrible scream of agony, unable to cope with what was happening to him until a moment later, he laid there still. His body, or what remained of it, disintegrated and turned into dust.

The guardian stood up. Its demeanor had changed significantly as it shivered and turned to an almost charcoal black color. "FINALLY!" It exclaimed. "After so long, I have ascended to this level."

The child continued to cry while the nurse sat silently shaking.

I have to act fast, or there's no telling what this damn thing will do next, Leon thought to himself. He saw a bucket in the nearby kitchen and grabbed it. He threw it past him towards the main hall where he had come from.

"WHO'S THERE?" The guardian roared.

It jolted towards the magnificent hall from where Leon had come earlier at tremendous speed. Leon caught a momentary glimpse of it while it dashed past the kitchen and down the hallway, and for some reason, it was smiling. Once it rounded the corner,

Leon made a dash for it. He arrived in front of the nurse and the king's child a moment later.

"Hurry, move now," he directed her.

Still startled, she gripped the child and headed towards the door.

Leon noticed a dagger hanging on the wall nearby in the king's chambers and grabbed it.

You never know.

The nurse made her way through the door, and Leon was directly behind her. They hurried down the hall in the opposite direction of the guardian and rounded a corner. They kept going until they had a vague sense of security, believing that they were safe, at least for now.

The nurse was somehow able to quiet the young child with a pacifier. This kept him from screaming and crying while they moved deeper into the castle.

"Is there a way out back here?" Leon asked the nurse.

"The...re... is," she stammered, "But it's to..wards the fighting outside."

It wasn't optimal, but Leon didn't see how it could be any worse than being trapped in what felt like the Minotaur's labyrinth, alone with the nurse and boy. Their best chance at survival was to escape the castle and head towards the king and the resistance fighters.

They moved forward through a hallway towards the back end of the castle. There was a rich history here with art, paintings, armors, and other peculiar crafts throughout it. One thing that caught Leon's attention was a faded picture of Dobrynya, the Frozen King, and others gathered around an enormous table in a dining hall. There was also a more recent portrait here of the king, with his child and of a woman he hadn't seen anywhere else.

The woman was beautiful, pale, with freckles and fiery red hair. Her green eyes were likened to that of a pine tree that you might see towards the end of fall. In the portrait, she wore a plain yet elegant turquoise dress and pearl earrings. What he noticed last was the pin

that she had tied her hair up with; the symbol was like what Leon had seen on the guards earlier but without the snow leopard.

“Who is this?” Leon asked the nurse while she continued to comfort the king’s child.

“That’s the king’s late wife, Riza,” she said, much calmer now as the baby drifted off to sleep. “I don’t know not much about her, as little of her is ever said or discussed among people. The king hasn’t even mentioned her once since I’ve been here.”

That’s odd, Leon thought to himself.

He continued to look around the place curiously as they moved through the hall. It differed greatly from anywhere he had ever been before. After all, they didn’t have castles in the states, let alone Kansas. Beyond the many memories, objects, and secrets this place held, he noticed a faint amount of electricity here. It didn’t seem like much, but at least the castle had some lighting that wasn’t candlelit. It was the only place he’d seen anything powered, other than the floating camera speaker at the guard station in the cave.

Once Leon rounded the next corner, that feeling of relief was stripped away in an instant. What he was left with was the feeling of despair. For as soon as he turned the corner, he was met with a sinister presence of doom.

3

Around the corner, Leon was met with the blackened guardian bending down, breathing upon his neck.

“Hello, Leon,” it said with an overall intelligently toned voice. Its warm, sticky breath felt as though it was radiating energy on his upper body.

Leon jumped back on the defensive. As he got a better look at what the guardian had become from consuming the guard, a wave of horror came over him.

The creature’s eyes had changed to look like a white dwarf; this was a stark contrast from the purplish color that Leon had seen in

them previously. Overall, its skin looked much sleeker and lighter now. A contorted-looking nose protruded from where only a thick skin was before. Its skin tone had changed into a dark charcoal color. Around its facial structure and muscles, pale-gray shading was now present, giving it depth to its complexion. Near where eyebrows would be expected, crystalized horns took shape that were both nearly six inches long. While the guardian had somehow managed to look more sinister than the others, it also seemed oddly more human.

Has he been here waiting for me? For us? Leon thought to himself, unsure how he had heard nothing from this gigantic creature as he approached. *But how did it know we would be here?*

“Go, get out of here,” Leon told the nurse, who was only a few feet behind him.

She didn’t hesitate to move this time and carried the toddler while running in the direction they had come. The hallway was long, but she was making great pace as Leon continued to stand there, blocking the way of the threat.

“It doesn’t matter what you try to do. I will have that child. They can’t escape from me, for I can always see them,” the guardian declared. “You can’t stop the inevitable outcome, boy.”

Leon looked behind him. The nurse had already gone a far distance down the hall and had reached the corner. He turned his attention back to the guardian, yet it paid him no mind. It appeared the creature was still watching and tracking the two of them through the wall.

Is this how it found us? he wondered.

“I cannot kill you due to my orders, but I don’t have to be nice either,” it said as it approached.

This only annoyed Leon. He had heard this already in essence, from Enzo, who had threatened him in multiple ways while he was caged.

“You don’t frighten me,” he said, but this wasn’t entirely true. Even as the words left his lips, his body was shaking.

The guardian towering over him laughed. Next, it diverted its attention yet again to the wall; still, it tracked the nurse and child.

If Leon was going to do anything, it was now or never. He jumped up with the dagger in his right hand and swung his body to the left, hoping to slice at least most of its eyes in one stroke.

The guardian was fast, too fast. It took notice of him as soon as it heard his muscles shift; it was alerted to his intentions. As Leon began his jump, the guardian ducked down. Leon had swung the dagger, missing it completely, and the guardian, in turn, gave him a solid punch to the ribs. The force of the strike sent him flying through the air until he crashed into the nearby wall. He was now at the base of the king and his family’s portrait.

He coughed as a small amount of blood came spilling from his mouth.

Leon wasn’t sure, but the pain felt like the guardian had broken multiple ribs in that single strike. His breath became dull, making it seem even more likely that at least one of his lungs had been punctured. It looked down at him before snorting and starting after the nurse.

“Wait, you bastard,” Leon wheezed. The pain was immense.

The guardian ignored him and continued onward.

Pushing further, struggling, and pulling himself up by grabbing onto a nearby stone shelf, he regained his footing, using the wall as support.

“I said wait, goddamn you,” he yelled again. The pain brought tears to his eyes. *If I don’t stop it here, they won’t get out of this.*

The guardian looked back at him before it started dashing towards the archway towards them. It was at the arch, roughly twenty yards in front of him at the end of the hall after only a few seconds passed.

With no time to waste, he took the dagger that was still in hand, and with all of his might, threw it at the guardian. The blade flew fast and true. Its unbelievable speed made it impossible for the guardian to avoid getting hit. The blade pierced the armored hide of its hand that it swung up to protect its face, sending the guardian tumbling with only the hilt of the dagger protruding.

While the guardian succeeded in stopping the blade, it wasn't without consequence; the wound around the blade's edge sizzled. A purplish fluid from within the guardian's hand had begun to pop like a pestilence. It grunted in pain as it stood, turning its full attention to Leon.

"You dare attack *me!*" The guardian bellowed. "You insolent little hydronic. We were given orders to take you alive, but now?" It grabbed the dagger and ripped it from its hand. The fluid on the blade had hardened into a dark, almost black substance. It looked as though it had been crystallized, or more precisely, it seemed to be fulgurated as the creature hurled it to the ground.

The guardian and Leon were both surprised. How did he pierce the creature when the king was having so much trouble with a weaker guardian? How did he throw it as fast as he did? Could he have tapped into his conquest? It didn't matter. He knew he was all but finished. He could hardly move and was feeling dreadful. While he may have actually delayed the creature long enough to save the king's child, he had no path for escape or plan to get out of this himself. So, in earnest, he did all he could and smiled.

The guardian approached Leon, speaking in an unfamiliar language that was filled with rage. The whole situation had pissed it off to an extent it couldn't control.

“Fosento malatey fucuol,” it growled. It grabbed a long sleek looking mace from the nothing made of some sort of black diamond material. The creature dragged it across the floor as it approached.

Leon couldn't bear to move or even stand any longer. He slumped against the nearby wall, sliding down until he was sitting there. He watched the guardian as it approached—the blades of the mace cut through the carpet and sparked on the stone floor like a grinder.

When the guardian had made it to him, it looked down at him with hatred, relentless, unwavering hatred. Leon, in pain, could only maintain his smile as he closed his eyes, ready for the end.

Seeing only darkness, he felt something crawling across him, or rather slither. He opened his eyes, only to find that the guardian was still there, looking down on him. The giant mace was in the air about to crush him, but the curious sight of a viper crawling across Leon caused the guardian to hesitate, if only for a moment.

Showing no fear, the viper then bared its fangs at the creature and hissed.

“Another useless and defiant hydronic creation ready to die,” the guardian laughed.

It had started to swing at the pair of them until it heard a strange whistling sound approach.

“Fweet, Fweet, Fweet, Fweet,” the sound forced the guardian to jump back. Right as it did, an ax aligned with where the guardian's head was a moment ago flew by and lodged itself in the vast support beam now in-between the guardian and Leon.

“You did well, lad,” a familiar voice said. “You didn't listen as you should have, but you did well, nonetheless.” Ragnarr had come from the entry that the nurse had run through and approached the guardian.

The viper had already slithered off and went to Ragnarr, who bent to tickle the creature's throat with his index finger; afterward,

it continued on. Ragnarr continued to approach them while the guardian watched, almost stunned at the chain of events taking place. Soon after, another familiar person appeared around the corner, only this time it was less welcomed.

“Go fix him up while I handle things here, and maybe I’ll consider it penance for what you’ve done to various others; understood?”

Ragnarr was speaking to Krysta, who had followed him around the corner. She had a much more solemn demeanor than Leon had previously seen.

“Handle things here? You think a puny hydronic like you stands even the slightest chance of doing anything against me!” The guardian didn’t care about Leon for the time being. It put its attention towards the two in front of it.

“I was wondering what souls I heard come crawling into the castle here. I was about to come and kill you before claiming that child for myself when this dumb human intervened,” the guardian said, pointing its mace at Leon.

“Power makes the weak blind and the strong weak,” Ragnarr said casually. “You think because you have gained power, you have somehow become immune to defeat? That because relatively, you were stronger than *most* of us ‘Hydronics’ before, that you are now invincible? You are but a child in the way you see the world, but I suppose that is the way of the dark universe.”

“The true universe, you insolent fool,” the guardian said, scowling at Ragnarr.

“You should step away; I think he’s about to blow his cap. Go on now,” Ragnarr almost whispered to Krysta. She moved to the side of the wall towards where Leon was sitting and waited until Ragnarr moved forward before she headed towards Leon.

“True universe? That’s an objective phrase that you and your gods have come up with. My universe still exists. We still exist. How

is my universe false again?” Ragnarr challenged the thinking of the guardian, still moving towards it.

“What kind of universe has no gods!”

“True, our gods are mostly gone. How many are still out there? This is a question many of us wonder about daily. But are they completely gone? They may have been defeated, yet, we live on. Do they not live on through us as those who have fallen do as well? We strive every day to make their memories mean something. We live and die using the knowledge we have obtained through the many studies and hardships of ourselves and others. There are those of us who ignore the teachings and wisdom of others—that is true. But we give even the fools freewill to live and die as they see fit. Can you honestly say the same? You, a species created for nothing more than a tool of war?”

The guardian had no response. Before, it would have given no thought to its existence, yet now that it had evolved in such a way, it had become able to process things more than face value. Was it a tool with no will of its own? A pawn with no use other than to follow orders?

While overthinking things and listening to Ragnarr’s talk, the guardian had lost focus. Ragnarr had not only been able to get close to the guardian, but he had grabbed his ax that was thrown earlier. Upon realization of what was happening, the guardian swung its mace fast at Ragnarr.

Swiftly, he dodged to the right and then retaliated, swinging the ax at the guardian’s head. He missed its temple by no more than an inch and instead grazed its cheek. The two fought intensely, yet it appeared Ragnarr had the upper hand in the battle and was enjoying the fight.

With the guardian distracted, Krysta had made her way over to Leon. When she got next to him, he considered grabbing a piece of

rubble nearby to fend her off, but he couldn't muster the strength. She started the IV drip from her vein to his.

"I thought you were going to 'gut me'? That's what you told your father, wasn't it?" Leon said, still wheezing slightly.

She laughed as she stared at him coldly, yet vigilant of what was happening only a few yards away.

"My father? You think the Frozen King is my father? Why do you think I'm helping you now? Does it make sense that he would leave me to die and yet throw everything else away for his son? The only reason he has been looking after me is that I think subconsciously, I remind him somewhat of his dead wife."

Leon looked at the portrait above them and then back at her. He noticed she did indeed have similarities to the girl in the picture. It wasn't an exact match, but the hair was about the same length, though it was strawberry blonde instead of fiery red. She also had a more fierce color of green eyes than his wife did, but with the freckles they both shared, he saw a slight similarity.

"And you're right. I wanted to kill you for your conquest. In all honesty, I still could now if I wanted to; however, getting accepted into the city of Salutis is more significant for my survival. Now that you've solved the mystery, maybe you can see how this will offer me much more protection than what the Frozen King, along with your conquest, could ever hope to do.

"I never want to experience what I felt again today. The helplessness, the fear, the smell of that pungent stench of death encompassing my head. I made a deal with Ragnarr to help. By doing so, they will give me protection like anyone else."

Krysta was obviously traumatized by what had happened to her, of what almost became of her earlier. The creature had her dead to rights, and no one would have lifted a finger to save her. She was still frightened by how she had almost been consumed headfirst by the original guardian the king had defeated only for his son's sake. She

was only to be ironically saved by that same child's cry who started this whole crazy mess. Had he never cried, she would have been dead and gone.

Leon said nothing else. He continued to rest and watch as she was healing him.

Ragnarr and the guardian continued to fight against one another. Blow after blow, it seemed as if they weren't even close to being on equal footing. The guardian had not landed a single shot on Ragnarr, yet the opposite was true. Ragnarr had landed multiple abrasions on the monstrous being, grazing it time and time again, slicing through its tough exterior.

With one quick, mighty blow, the guardian slammed its mace into Ragnarr, forcing him to block with his ax. Even so, the force threw him into a nearby wall, causing a thin gash to appear on his head. It seemed that this could be the turning point for the guardian, and it charged at Ragnarr, but something was wrong.

Ragnarr smiled, watching the guardian stumble.

"What's the meaning of this?" The guardian asked, his movements groggy.

"Ah, it's about time. You're pretty resilient, you know that?" Ragnarr said while wiping the droplets of blood from his forehead.

The guardian looked on with wide eyes.

"You clearly aren't sure what's going on, so let me explain. I'm quite experienced with venom, you see. I died at the fangs of hundreds of venomous snakes only to be reborn in this Hellworld, which I originally thought to be Valhalla, or possibly even heaven. Neither of the two ended up being true. My full name, creature, is Ragnarr Loðbrók, the man-made into a legend by being dropped into a pit of snakes. So you see, my conquest has a lot to do with my death, and what's slowing you now is nothing more than a small taste of venom that my body was filled with before my final moments on Earth."

Leon was starting to feel better and had a slight chuckle. Krysta gave him an odd look, but he couldn't help himself. Leon had always enjoyed the Vikings television show put on the air by the History channel and remembered the scene where Ragnarr was caged before being cast into a pit of snakes. The show was never the same without him, but before Ragnarr had mentioned this, he didn't even think it would be *that* Ragnarr.

"I see," the guardian smiled. "Venom, if that's all this is, then I have nothing to worry about."

The guardian stood there and inhaled, letting out a frightful sound as it did. Its eyes grew brighter than Leon had seen from the creatures previously. The light was so bright that he couldn't bear to look into its eyes. It was worse than that of a torch's arc. With it, the creature's demeanor changed, and then suddenly it coughed up a greenish-purple goopy-looking pus ball. It was similar to what Leon witnessed earlier; however, this time, it was more rigid, like a steaming warm tar rather than a pudding.

"I've acknowledged your strength, Ragnarr, but you are nowhere close to being able to take me down. You are foolish to think that a small dose of venom from a puny serpent will end me."

"I see," Ragnarr said. "So it's true then, you've become a beta. It's been too many years since I've last seen one. Perhaps I was taking things too lightly."

The creature looked intrigued. "You must have been one of the survivors from the previous great war then, yes?" It asked, curious.

"That's correct. I was here during the great turmoil and have been for many millennia in this Hellworld. Unfortunately for you, that means I have had a great deal of experience dealing with your lot. While the poison from a *puny* serpent may not be enough, the poison of the giant serpent has never failed in taking one of you down."

With that said, Ragnarr charged into the creature with speeds more significant than anything he had shown to them before. His

movements were like that of a charmed snake. He was swerving in and out, ducking, popping up and down. He was doing everything in his power to throw off the guardian.

It swung a forceful blow with its eyes lit up, but this time it missed him by his body's width.

While charging in, Ragnarr had already begun to swing his ax for what looked like an overhead strike. This was only meant to trick the creature.

Since it was merely expecting him to swing his ax and strike, once the ax had gotten to the precipice, the guardian jolted backward. It thought that it was safe and well outside of the strike zone. Unfortunately for it, Ragnarr jumped and released the axe, making it fly. The ax flew with a powerful force that the creature could not dodge in time. It then slammed into the monster's stomach, lodging itself deep inside.

The guardian was about to try again to hit him back, but it was too late. Ragnarr had already charged forward, jumping upon the creature, making it impossible for it to properly swing. Ragnarr landed upon the hilt of the ax, using it as a platform. Now looking at it face to face, he breathed upon it, or more accurately spat a venomous mist upon it. The spray had gotten into its eyes, and the guardian dropped its mace, clasping both hands to its face. Blinded, it tried to grab Ragnarr, but he had already retreated.

The venom continued to spread and burn through its eyes and face prolifically. This time it seemed to be a potent acidic venom.

"You think this will stop me?" The creature shrieked at him. The pain caused its voice to tremble. "I already told you venom from your puny little serpents won't cut it." The beast stood still and took in a deep breath like before, emitting another hideous sound.

Ragnarr didn't seem to be in a rush to stop it and instead stood and watched, leaning against a pillar. Leon stood up. Krysta removed

the IV, and with a single drop of her blood, closed the hole in his vein.

“What have you done?!” the guardian screamed. Something was different this time, and the creature knew it. Unlike last time, there was nothing to purify itself of the venom launched upon its face.

“Power makes the weak blind, and the strong weak,” Ragnarr said once more to the guardian. “In this case, I’ve made you blind and weak. Unfortunately for you, this isn’t ordinary venom. This is the venom of a great serpent that I slew to win the heart of one of my wives. It’s so potent that even impervious metal will instantly degrade after coming in contact with it. Thus, I had to apply that to you directly.”

“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you all and that child,” the guardian declared. It charged blindly, trying to pinpoint Ragnarr’s location by the sound of his voice alone.

Ragnarr avoided him and instead kicked the hilt of the ax to push the blade a little further into its stomach. The guardian moaned, letting out a fury of screams and curses at him. Ragnarr remained calm while looking at what he must have thought of as a pitiful creature.

The guardian continued to moan, flailing around erratically as the venom continued to burn and seep in deeper.

Ragnarr rushed the creature, pulling his ax from deep within its stomach. Purple fluid covered the blade. The opening left from the ax was secreting the same liquid at an abnormally slow speed for such a deep wound. It appeared the creature was regenerating at the same time.

This didn’t matter. Once Ragnarr had withdrawn his ax, he jumped at the guardian with an enormous force, spitting venom upon its neck midair as one would see from a spitting cobra. With the armored hide weakened by the toxin, he sliced through it with all his might, cutting and tearing its flesh away. The creature was nearly

decapitated. Only a thin layer of hide now connected its head to its nape.

The guardian fell over. The slow pace of the liquid coming from its stomach instantly sped up and became more profound. Even more liquid poured out of its neck. It laid on its belly, angled a little from one of its arms, propping it up. Its head was bent over its back like someone wearing a hoodie without utilizing the hood.

Leon saw the creature's neurons throughout its body—the different branches going throughout its shell. Some of them were still glowing and pulsing, but slowly faded until stopping altogether.

"It's dead," Ragnarr proclaimed as he tossed his ax to the side. It was no longer useful to him. It had corroded and cracked from the venom as soon as it had come into contact with the creature's neck, just as Leon's manacles had done.

Leon stood motionless. The creature didn't move, nor did it make any of its hideous sounds. It was indeed dead, and reluctantly Leon had to admit he was saved once more.

4

Looking around at what was once a quaint, quiet hallway in the back of the castle was now almost completely destroyed. The elegant foyer that existed to showcase past events and treasured memories was now a demolished mess. Glass and debris filled the place, along with the now-dead guardian's body. A few things were left untouched, such as the portrait on the wall above. Mostly, however, things were broken, shattered, or distorted in one way or another. Even the once-pristine center carpet was ruined by the guardian's mace.

Ragnarr began walking towards the exit of the hall. After a moment, he motioned to both Leon and Krysta to follow him.

Together, they made their way behind him, neither uttering a word. Leon was still surprised, and honestly impressed at how effortlessly Ragnarr had dealt with the guardian.

“I told you I didn’t need your help,” Ragnarr said randomly, as if speaking to someone who wasn’t there. “There would have been no thrill to it if I’d let you have your way.”

Krysta and Leon looked at each other, confused, but individually they chose to ignore the sudden outburst.

Ragnarr picked up the dagger at the archway and looked at it, inspecting the hardened fluid on its upper half. With Leon right behind him now, he turned and handed it to him, handle first.

“This is yours, I assume?”

It wasn’t technically Leon’s dagger, but he thought he had earned it by using it in the fashion he did. He grabbed it from Ragnarr, then beat it on a nearby wall to knock off some of the hardened fluid.

“Thanks,” Leon said. He was still disappointed in himself since he had once again been pretty much helpless. After taking possession of it, he cut a long piece out of the nearby silky carpet to wrap it in before sliding it between his belt and cargo pants.

After a moment, Ragnarr pushed a button on what seemed to be a metal bracelet. The symbol on the bracelet looked like the sun, which Leon had not seen since he had arrived here. It flashed at a slow pace, from orange to black and back to orange again. Finally, the icon ceased its flashing, and the sun transformed from a solid black engraving into a glowing bright orange one.

“This is Ragnarr. What’s the status outside?” He waited a moment, then a reply came in without interference.

“The situation is contained. You’re free to proceed and exit with the targets in tow. Again, you’re clear to exit with the rescues,” the voice said.

“Got it, we’ll be there in about five,” he said as he spoke into the bracelet. He pushed the button once more, causing it to turn back to its solid black color before he began heading down the hallways that Leon had traveled with the king’s son and the nurse.

Both Leon and Krysta followed close behind. Leon decided it would be as good a time as any to get a few answers.

“What’s with the tech?”

For the most part, what he had seen seemed to be 20th century, but this was different; it was modern. Hell, he thought it could be even more advanced than anything he was used to. He’d heard nothing so clear before. Even cell phones had their limits. This made it sound like the person he was speaking with was right next to him. It would take a lot more than a forge and small lab to create this; no, they would need advanced tools and facilities for this kind of tech.

“You’ll see once we get to Salutis,” Ragnarri replied. Shortly after, he noticed an unsatisfied look on Leon’s face and decided to elaborate.

“Just because things look grim here, and truthfully they are most places, that doesn’t mean they are grim everywhere.”

It still wasn’t a perfect answer, but it gave him a little more insight into what he could expect going forward.

If this tech exists, and it’s truly the afterlife, then wouldn’t that mean all the greatest scientific minds that had once lived Einstein, Newton, and others might be here continuing their theories and improving upon the technology that had been on Earth? In that regard, wouldn’t that mean this Salutis isn’t much different from our modern world to a certain extent? Leon thought to himself.

“Well, let me ask you this then; if this is the afterlife, doesn’t that mean the best scientific minds from Earth exist within this realm and still retain their knowledge? If so, wouldn’t that mean they’ve been able to expand on their designs and inventions even after death?” he asked with an intrigued excitement.

“I know little about science, lad. What I know is you keep your knowledge and can improve yourself. I’m sure you remember almost everything from your previous life, as do I. Salutis is a city where many of the surviving great minds of humanity live.

“Combat, for example, there are many fighting techniques. Some that I had never even heard of before coming here. Others brought many more after I had been here for quite some time. There are trainers all over the city for this. Some are scientists that teach people their theories. Others mentor and train those that wish to learn combat to defend themselves and humanity. Some fight, some support, everyone contributes and helps in one way or the next. Even if it’s only sweeping the street, people pitch in and help each other.

“It’s humanity brought together for the purpose of survival. Everyone here had died at some point; the only exception to that rule is the veals. This means that most don’t want to experience death again. Knowing that if one of those malevolent creatures consumes your soul, it could be permanent, or even if some human lays claim to it through conquest. That makes most people here helpful if only for the fact that they want to survive.”

Leon hesitated a moment, confused. “Veal? You don’t mean the king’s child, do you?”

“That’s who I’m referring to, lad. Don’t misunderstand me. I know veal means young calf on Earth, and the *youthful* part is right. However, veal is an acronym here. What it means is valuable energy among the living. People cannot create life after death; we are not gods.

“The exception to this rule is that a living female can create life from a dead man’s seed. The witches’ clan are the messengers of the gods on Earth. They used to come here all the time, but mostly, they have stopped coming for obvious reasons. Therefore, no human life is born here any longer. Riza, Clayven’s fallen wife, was one of the last known humans to conceive a child here.”

Leon looked much more assured now, and things were coming together, at least more than they had been.

“Now, let me tell you why the life of a veal is so important to the demons of the dark.”

Leon thought he must have meant the guardians and gods of the dark universe.

“While our souls are food for them and enhance their own power, the soul of a living human is a much higher concentration of energy than that of a dead soul. The living soul has the energy of life and what a person needs to transition to the afterlife, this Hellworld.

“Those more familiar with the stories from the gods have said that the living soul has the energy worth about ten thousand years in this Hellworld. While we don’t age, a living soul and body do, but the time spent here is equal to one-hundredth of the time on Earth. This means that for every hundred years a living soul spends here, it is only one year that their soul and body age.

“So by this, you can at least get a vague idea of how much energy it must contain. From that first breath, when the soul is formed within the body, it loses a bit of energy each day. Thus, the younger the person, the more vitality it has.”

They had now reached the king’s room. Ragnarr looked around the corner inside the room and, with a mild shout, hollered: “You can come out now.”

From behind the bed, the nurse stood up with the child sound asleep in her arms.

“You left them here!” Leon said, shocked.

“I had to. It was leave them here, or you die. We already told you that you’re the priority in this case. They were safer in here than out in that conflict.”

Leon didn’t like his answer but could understand the reasoning.

“Why am I the priority?”

“You’ll find out more in *Salutis*, lad.”

This answer was unsatisfactory to say the least. Still, Leon let it go and figured he’d eventually learn what he wanted to know when things weren’t so chaotic.

They continued down the hallway, where Leon had thrown the bucket to distract the now dead guardian. It was still there, lying untouched as they reached the magnificent hall. While some places within the castle had seen considerable damage, this place looked the same as the first time he had seen it. The drapes were still intact, and the chairs, where presumably the king would take requests, were all still in place. It was a fair bit warmer than when he first visited, but everything remained unscathed.

Everything in the room was the same, but the door that led outside the castle now seemed different to him this time. The last time he went through it, he was leaving in manacles, and now, he was exiting as someone who had both rescued someone and been saved himself.

5

Ragnarr opened the door. What had once been principally dirt and ash was now a fiery, molten graveyard. Burnt, contorted, and soulless bodies of both guardians and humans alike littered the inner kingdom's grounds. There were both new and old faces around. The fresh faces wore the same type of cloaks that both Ragnarr and Dobrynya were wearing. It appeared they were keeping watch, but a few of them were gathering the corpses of their fallen comrades. Afterward, they loaded them up into the nearby wagon. It seemed odd to Leon, who was watching the process from afar.

“Those who still have their conquest intact will be reincarnated within the next hour to a couple of days. That is why they are checking each of their forearms,” Ragnarr said, having deciphered Leon’s look of confusion.

A gust of wind came through shortly after, which removed much of the lingering smoke obscuring their view. Immediately, both Leon and Krysta had noticed one thing in particular that made much of this stunning and chaotic scene seem almost insignificant; a massive

creature towered over everything else ahead of them, beside the now busted gate.

The beast had four claws upon each of its legs and arms, though talons would be a more appropriate term. Their curvature would easily allow it to grab something or someone unexpectedly. Each talon glistened in the light of the nearby flames. Though dark, each one gave a frighteningly intense reflection of the nearby scenery. Leon couldn't help but think that the last thing one might see before they died was their own terrified reflection in the creature's massive talons.

Its body was enormous and at least equivalent to that of a two-story house. It had large wings that were embedded within its back, and its skin shimmered in the moonlight. In the reflection, there was a strong resemblance to the color of an eclipse. The way it stood gave it a preeminent stature, and behind it, there were not one, not two, but **seven** long, powerful tails that slashed around like whips. Each end seemed to be as sharp as the dagger that Leon had tucked into his belt.

The most terrifying part of it was its *heads*. It had three of them—all terribly nefarious looking. The pair of eyes on each head were about the size of a human fist, and they looked like a mix between a cat and a snake's eye. Its teeth were all large and jagged, which allowed them to fill every corner of its mouth. The most outlandish thing about it was its breathing. It was odd enough that as it breathed, smoke would come from its mouths and nostrils, but the most peculiar feature about it was the different actions of each head. The one to Leon's left would do the inhaling, while the head on the far right would do most of the exhaling. This made him wonder what the job of the head in the middle was

The noble beast flapped its wings once and let out a frightful gust of wind. This fed the more massive flames, but simultaneously, it put out the smaller embers; it was like someone had blown out the can-

dles on a birthday cake made of death and destruction. After seeing this display, it was easy to see that its wings were even more enormous than they had initially looked. They had to be at least as long as the circumference of his body, if not larger.

Both Krysta and Leon didn't know how to react, but seeing as Ragnarr was still calm, the beast must have posed no immediate threat. Not only that, but after closer inspection next to it, Dobrynya and Clayven were both standing there, staring down at something under the beast's right arm.

After a moment, Ragnarr leaned over to both of them and spoke softly: "Let us head that way. The beast you are seeing is the dragon known as Zmey Gorynych. He belongs to Dobrynya. You have nothing to fear from it, as long as you mind your manners. Although it is under Dobrynya's control, it is still a prideful creature and has been known to lash out at those who offend it."

Neither of them said anything and moved toward the scene in front of them.

The Frozen King, or Clayven, as it turned out was his name, was battle-worn but overall looking healthy. He noticed them first and, at the sight of his son, whispered something to Dobrynya, who nodded. Clayven patted Dobrynya's back and headed over immediately.

"Raven," he said while moving towards them. "Is he ok? Is my son ok?" He was moving fast towards them while still holding his left shoulder with his right arm.

They were about thirty yards away when Ragnarr decided it would be best if they waited where they were for a moment. He directed them to do so, and they obeyed without question, still taking in the scene in front of them. Clayven and Ragnarr passed each other as one headed towards Dobrynya and the other towards his only child.

"He's fine, my king," the nurse said. "Raven is fine."

When they met, the king brushed the petite child's head with his hand and gave him a kiss on his forehead. The child yawned, smiling at the sight of his father. The Frozen King's entire persona seemed to be different. One might have mistaken him for his twin brother had he had one. The man in front of Leon was not cruel, nor was he hateful at all. This was a loving father who was glad to see his child.

"Where is Bradley?" Clayven asked.

"Sire, while your son and myself are unharmed," she paused. "...Bradley was consumed by one of those creatures. The only reason we're alive is because of the bravery of this young man here," she said, directing the king's attention to Leon.

The king approached with a somber expression. Once he was in front of him, he grabbed his hand and squeezed. There was a chill to his grasp, but it had a sense of warmth and caring that was unexpected.

"Thank you, Leon. Thank you for putting yourself in danger for the sake of my son. I could not have asked you to do that, especially after how I had treated you earlier. I don't expect you to anytime soon, but I hope you will forgive me one day. If there is anything I can do for you in the future, please don't hesitate to ask. I owe you more than I could ever hope to repay."

"It's alright," Leon said in return. "I needed to do the right thing. While I don't understand or necessarily agree with everything you've done, I'm sure that you had your reasons."

Ragnarr, in the distance, motioned Leon over to where he and Dobrynya were. Krysta remained near the king under his close observation while Leon moved forward.

As he approached, he heard the distinct sound of that overly eccentric voice from earlier.

Given the situation, the voice was surprisingly not any less idiosyncratic than it had been before Leon had gone inside the castle.

There was a crazy amount of laughter, which made it appear they were on the brink of insanity. If they had any sanity to begin with.

“HAHAHAHA. Oh my, oh my, what more can I say? I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it! This is fantastic! Who would have thought that I, a *demigod*, would be beaten by a human! No, no, no, I was told, warned even to be wary of you alphas. HAHAHA—I can’t; no, no, this is exhilarating! The most surprising part to top it all off is that you have a fucking **DRAGON!**”

Remmy continued to laugh hysterically while trying to speak. “Oh my—this, this is amazing. This is fantastic. This is the *epic climax* I was hoping for! You humans are astounding! To think that the king could fake his conquest level like that by manipulating his own memories. Suppressing his training, among other precious memories, to turn him into the *Frozen King*! Allowing himself to succumb to such ruthless behavior towards his fellow man. How could he have lived with himself in that situation if he had remembered everything about his wife and all the memories they shared while at the same time throwing away others like they were nothing?

“My, my. I suppose it’s the only thing he could have done given the circumstances. For both his sanity and the fact that he would have been under much stricter observation since most theta or above are consumed immediately. I wonder what he’s thinking now. He must feel pretty awful!

“Though I do wonder what is going to happen to him when he gets to your base? All those deaths he was the cause of and the souls he helped to condemn. What will all the people say about it? You’re his friend, so maybe you can see past it, but do you think it will be the same once you get him to your little cave, or whatever it is you rebels live in? My, what a will to live all to protect his son. To do such horrible things and to throw away those precious memories and his humanity! What a thrill!”

As soon as Leon had made it there, Remmy had taken notice immediately, and with his mutilated face, smiled up at him. What Leon saw of Remmy was now far different from the being who had seemed to have had everything in his clutches not so long ago. Now he looked like a beaten and dying dog rather than any sort of god.

They cut his hands off, and the dragon had him pinned to the ground in a small pit of fire, roasting him like a marshmallow while clenching his body tightly. Its talons from one of its vast hands had pierced Remmy at multiple angles. His flesh was burning faster than he seemed to regenerate, and most of his clothes had been burnt off entirely. What hadn't burnt off was already so far into its process that it may as well have been. His blood was a thick mixture of silver ichor and human blood that steadily dripped from the large punctures where the talons had pierced.

"If it isn't my precious Leon—have you come to see me off? I'm sorry we didn't get to have our dinner date. It seems plans have changed!" A couple of his teeth were missing, and many others shattered. Those that were still partially intact were smiling at him while covered in a slaver of slime.

"Do not speak to the boy," a loud voice echoed from above. A long neck extended down to the tiny demigod Remmy and growled fire. **"Another word to him, and I'll end you. Focus on answering my master's questions, or I'll burn you more."** It was Zmey Gorynych, the dragon. Its middle head spoke to Remmy at a heated distance of only a meter.

"Burn me more, you say? HAHahaha. I don't think you can burn me much more, dragon. I'm already burning in this fire-pit you created yourself!"

You could tell this pissed Zmey off. Its first head, which did the inhaling, took a long deep breath. It was indeed meant to bring out enough fire to burn an entire village, but right before he let him have it, Dobrynya stopped him.

“That’s enough, Zmey.”

The creature blasted smoke out of his third mouth like a power plant chimney, blowing it all in Remmy’s face. This proved to only obscure the ragged demigod’s vision. Instead of blasting him with a devastating hellfire, it merely made him choke.

“So tell me, Remmy, how did you come to seek Leon? Why did you come along on a—as Clayven described it—‘simple pick up and delivery run’?” Dobrynya asked with an intense glare.

Cough, Cough. “Why...” **COUGH,** “you,” **COUGH,** “ask? You think Leon was sought after for some special purpose, is that it?” Remmy laughed.

“While he is adorable, my alpha friend, you have it all wrong. This is how all of our high-level conquest pickups work. We have a system to make sure that those high-level conquest users are taken out immediately when reported. This is so that they don’t one day become a problem, like yourself.

“I mean sure, for the normal quotas that we make each individual subjugated colony collect for us each month, we only send a lower-ranked worker. Sometimes, a few are needed. That, of course, is dependent on the quota that the colony has for those pickups. These workers are a dime a dozen, as are the souls that they collect. The souls are important, but not irreplaceable. Beneficial for sustenance, energy intake, and pleasure, but a lowly soul such as those can be found nearly anywhere at any time.”

“Explain yourself,” Dobrynya said.

“Well, if you insist,” Remmy said smiling. “What happens is we make each kingdom give us what we think is fair. For instance, this tiny little castle and village contributed fifty human souls a month. That may seem like a lot now, but in reality, it’s not. While there are many kingdoms, and they compete for the same souls, we’ve found that on average, there are usually about fifteen hundred new souls each day. That means as long as the colony, kingdom, or whatever ti-

tle that little deposit of humans that work for us likes to be called makes its quota—we allow them to use the overstock for whatever they want. Be it trading for money, their sick and twisted games, or perhaps even perverted pleasure that they make these new souls provide for them. It matters not to us.

“You humans seem to have learned envy, lust, greed, and gluttony all on your own. Perhaps due to your gods’ lack of guidance. They wiped their hands of you many times over, and in turn, created your wrath and self-pride. They left you there to die, to fight amongst yourselves for no other reason than to produce warriors—only for you to fight and die again, here. This has led some of you to hate your gods. Even after learning what has happened and of our attack on your universe, some of you still abandon them. Those who choose this come to us of their own volition so that they can continue to be who they were born to be, savages.

“I can’t blame them, and I don’t think you should either, as it’s only natural. To continue being who they were on Earth and live with the same leisure they had become used to, and why not? Your gods have all but lost. So why should they continue to fight their war when they can follow us? The teachings may be a bit different, but the concept is the same. Humans were always made to follow. Why should that have to change because the rules and gods did?

“You weren’t all nice and friendly on Earth, so why try and pretend to be here? I’ve heard the stories of crafts shooting down families at weddings and school buses on orders from your leaders. So why should things change now? For what reason? Do you blame us for both the failures of your gods and for your own? I guess it matters not.”

They all looked at Remmy while he continued to smile and cough. His time was running out, and he was about on his last wind.

“So now that I’ve told you the essence of my story, I’m curious to know why two alphas—generals, for that matter, were after Leon in the first place?”

“It’s none of your business, cretin,” Ragnarr said.

Remmy looked at Ragnarr with a questionable disposition.

“Cretin?” Remmy chuckled. “I must take minor offense to that. While I may be a bit deformed now, I’m far from unintelligent or unaware of how you humans think. I suppose that you’re not going to answer me, though?”

“I suppose not.” Dobrynya responded.

“That’s fine, but might I add one tiny little thing? While you lot are powerful, keep in mind I am probably the weakest of my family. A dark demigod born from a human witch is, while a unique combination, not at all who you have to worry about in terms of combat. In fact, I’ll tell you what many do not know. I am not the weakest demigod of the true universe—I am the *only* demigod from the true universe. I am the youngest of my siblings, who are far beyond my inconsequential lifespan of a couple of hundred years.

“My siblings, though created directly by my father, are still what you would consider full-fledged gods. They, of course, also had a closer relationship with him as they lived beside him and were given great responsibility here. It was they, who, for countless centuries, laid waste to your gods before he entered the fray. Even the guardians I had with me lack the skill and power compared to those who follow my siblings; they aren’t even in the same league. I was the outcast, and I do have a bit of pity for you as such, which is why I tell you these things. Do not mistake my gesture of goodwill for being frightened of death. For at the end of the day, we are all at the mercy of my father.”

He continued on, looking weaker as each moment passed. His cough persisted but now much more feeble. He knew his time was about to expire, as did those around him.

“You are probably about as strong as most of my siblings with the dragon; not all, but most, I will indeed give you that,” Remmy said while looking at Dobrynya. “Have you ever contemplated how you would fare if my father were to return to this realm instead of residing in ours? While I will not beg for my life and I do not expect mercy, know what will follow my death will be a test for humanity. One that you may not survive.

“The system we have set up now is, in large part, due to my own insistence. What do you think will happen once one of my father’s children die, particularly the one who had a significant role in the status quo system as it is now?” he asked, looking at each of them deeply as his bleeding slowed. “I’ve said all I can say and taught you much, but I don’t think it will do you any good, and I predict the fight will be bland and one-sided, nevertheless. Who knows? Maybe I’m wrong about you humans. Perhaps you’ve come to rival the gods themselves.

“Now, I must say goodbye to humanity! Farewell popcorn! Farewell, to you all. My time is up, and the curtain has to be drawn. End me now, and may your own shows go on.”

They could tell he was about to slip away and had said much more than any of them had expected. Whether it was all truthful was one thing, but he seemed sincere in his own unique way.

“Go ahead, Zmey,” Dobrynya told the dragon.

With that, the creature lifted the barely living Remmy’s body in the air and opened his hand. The talons swiftly sliced through the demigod’s body, cutting what was left of the mangled mess into three distinct chunks of meat. Blood and ichor sprayed everywhere in a fine mist of death. Each of the dragon’s heads grabbed one of the falling pieces of meat. It had an unsettling pleasure upon its faces as it chomped upon the semi-divine being. A moment later, it swallowed, and a big gulp could be heard with an odd echo as each head swal-

lowed simultaneously. Each head seemed overly satisfied with their fill.

“If that is all, then I will be resting until the time is right to feast again,” the dragon said. The third head burped out ashes of Remmy’s remains. The other two glared at it before a beam of light shot from the dragon to Dobrynya’s necklace.

The necklace itself was made of dragon stone. It wasn’t noticeable beforehand, as it had been hidden under his shirt and cloak. Afterward, the stone glowed a bright black, white, and red. With both the dragon and the demigod gone, only ashes, embers, and the silence of unanswered questions remained.



Chapter VII



Dark Energy

It had been centuries since humanity had last bested someone this important to the dark universe, but this was no time for celebration—it was time to retreat and a time to plan. The one demigod was now dead, but the fight was not over, and each one of them knew it. Remmy had said a few things in his final moments—some were perhaps lies, and they wouldn't know until they could confirm them. The understood truth of the matter was that they were all at the mercy of his father.

Beneath the two otherworldly moons, a weighted silence clung to them like a freshly knitted spider web. However, if they didn't act fast, that web would soon ensnare them, and ferocious spiders would quickly make their way to the feast.

A series of dark beams began shooting up towards the sky as far as the eye could see. Leon didn't know what this meant, but Dobrynya had. He swiftly moved to the gate, running and slicing through the carriage that had held Leon captive. The carriage had only glowed for a brief instant, but dissipated into a small earnest smolder after being cut in half.

“We should move. This may have delayed the dark gods, but I'm not sure if it will throw them off of us for long,” Dobrynya said, speaking to the surrounding group.

“Come on, you heard him, let's get moving,” Ragnarr yelled in agreement so that Clayven and the others further away could hear.

Most didn't know what was happening, but it seemed evident that it wasn't a good thing.

They gathered past the gate, and both Ragnarr and Dobrynya took the front. The middle was mixed with those freed from the carriage, along with the prisoners and inhabitants of the stronghold. A couple of strong resistance fighters were also in the center. They pulled a wagon of the dead that still had their conquest mark intact—both of the resistance fighters and the Snow Leopard's kingdom. The remaining resistance fighters that were alive had taken care to be in the rearguard.

“Hopefully, that's all,” one of them said, speaking to Ragnarr.

Ragnarr nodded. He understood the time constraints that prevented them from double-checking and being completely thorough, though he didn't like it. Leon counted that about fifty people in total made up the midsection besides that of the dead. He wondered how many others had died in this battle to secure his safety and the safety of those that had made it out.

This being the first time Leon had been outside since his capture, the surrounding area wasn't anything he had expected. While the air held a pang of sadness for those lost, it was fresher and crisper than the dusty burning mess they had left behind. Leon did his best to ignore the sorrowful aspect and was thankful that he and so many others had made it at all.

In the distance ahead, there were hillsides, mountains to his right, and to his left the magnificent forest from which he came.

I don't like you, but I can't say I'm not at least somewhat pleased to see you, he thought, admiring the vast woodland that had given him his first glimpse of death in this world.

The forest was mostly a delightful sight this time around, given that he was not lost within its dark myriad. Altogether, the landscape was astonishingly beautiful and diverse. Further up ahead, there were more humans with the resistance; where all of them had come from,

he was unsure. If it wasn't for the ominous beams in the background, the surrounding scenery would have been a hopeful one.

"That doesn't look good," Leon said, watching in the distance where tall, dark cumulonimbus clouds gathered and the dark beams continued to rise.

"It's not good, not good one bit," Clayven said.

This didn't help Leon feel any better, and he and the others continued watching the dark omen gathering in the distance.

2

As the group made it a few feet past the smoldering carriage outside the gate, Clayven handed Raven back to the nurse. He then headed to the back behind the rear guard, and his coiled hair turned from a dark black to a deep white snowy color. The skin on his arms and neck frosted and converted to a cold, deep purple as he raised both hands and swiped in front of him, creating an X with his arms.

He continued to hold this position with both arms stretched out, palms facing forward. Snow fell from the nearby mountains, pummeling the already broken stronghold. More snow piled on. While the vast amount was from the frozen canyons, some came falling chaotically from the sky. It seemed like a raging blizzard to everyone watching, but nothing was happening behind where Clayven stood. The air itself, while cooler, was nothing close to a blizzard-inducing temperature. Leon thought he had seen some real doozies as far as blizzards went from his days in upstate New York, but this took the cake.

Perhaps this explains the snow that covered the ground near the coast when I first fell into this world. That would explain why things were so warm except on the coast.

With one last gesture of his hands, Clayven pulled his arms back apart and settled them towards his sides. What was once a burning, dilapidated stronghold was now a giant snow-covered tundra—one that would surely bury the carriage and everything in that direction for a long time.

Dobrynya approached Clayven and put his arm on his shoulder, looking him in the eyes.

“I know that was hard for you. Those precious treasures and pictures will be lost, but we carry them on in our memories. *Raven* carries her legacy,” Dobrynya said, looking towards the child.

“I must do what I can to make amends and to protect us as we leave,” Clayven replied with a sundered smile.

They both retook their positions, and Clayven grabbed his son once more.

“Let’s move,” Dobrynya commanded.

The group continued down a winding road as the dark beams continued to radiate. The illuminating rays furthest away from them dissipated, while more appeared closer to the group.

“What are they?” Leon asked. He could tell many others had the same question on their minds.

Dobrynya looked over at him.

“This happens when a dark god dies. It wasn’t as spectacular or as grand as this in the great war, but with the new dichotomy, things have changed. The land and objects that Remmy had bound himself to in the past are falling from his claim. The further the binding was from him when he died, the quicker it dissipates and becomes unbound.

“This means where we are now will soon be unclaimed by any of the gods. It also means that the others know Remmy has died. It means that those beams will come closer and closer until the last thing he was near that was bound to him shoots the final beam.

“I don’t mean to alarm anyone, but it is only a matter of time until the gods find out where he died. They will torture and kill whoever they catch nearby until they it’s sorted out. That is why I destroyed the carriage. By destroying it, I also destroyed its seal and bind. If I had not done so, it would have given an almost exact location. That is also why Zmey ate Remmy before he completely died. If not, then

the same sort of energy would have shot up instantly, albeit more intense than what you see now.”

“So is that why Clayven buried the kingdom?” Leon asked, somewhat understanding the concept of how things were playing out now.

“That’s correct. While it may not prevent it completely, we hope it will at least slow down the process. We still haven’t been able to find the markings, or any indications of what allows them to bind a kingdom or territory as their own. We don’t have any idea how they do this. It’s one answer Remmy refused to give me before we brought you over.”

The group hurried along as the loud, enigmatic noise of the beams continued to get louder and closer by the minute. They knew it was only a matter of time before it would be upon them. After traveling along the road, it started to rain. The dirt had been damp before, but it soon became soft and muddy. They were directed to a nearby hillside that they needed to climb to make it to safety, according to Dobrynya. The ground of the hill seemed even more unstable than that of the road.

Most were having trouble climbing up, and for about every two feet they gained, they would lose another. Clayven was one exception. He walked straight up at record speed with his son in his arms. He froze the ground below his feet, and like velcro tape, he would peel one of his shoes from the surface while the next would stay frozen in place, providing strong stability. The ice left behind would crackle as the rain hit it—as if it was being put into a glass of water.

Dobrynya seemed to have little trouble either. Where he stepped, the ground would become dry and flaky as if the earth had seen a severe drought. This, of course, didn’t last long, and the rain shortly filled it up again with the ground, drinking every drop.

Ragnarr smiled. He was nearly lying on the ground and seemed to enjoy the challenge of climbing up the muddy slope.

“Is that all ye got?!” He yelled while clawing his way up.

Looking up in the distance, Leon could tell that the beams were within only a few miles of them and the storm showed no signs of letting up. Only a few had made it up the hill while most were still struggling.

Come on, you’ve got this, Leon told himself, exhausted from everything he had been through. He had been luckier than most, and the shoes he had on were still the same from when he had gone to his grandparents’ land. His hiking boots had materialized with him in this new, strange world.

“Damn it!” He groaned as he fell face-first into the mud sliding a few feet back.

“You alright, kid?” Vance asked, chuckling behind him with the nurse on his shoulders.

“Fantastic.”

Even though things weren’t smooth sailing, Leon was one of the first who had crested the hillside after the two alphas and Clayven.

“Wow. Now that’s something else,” he said as he peered at the top of the hill.

The view in front of Leon was astounding. His vision was filled with a giant field of vibrant flowers blowing in the wind. It was orchids mostly, but they were mixed in with a wide variety of primroses. The colors were some of the most stunning blues, whites, and oranges that he had ever seen. One color, in particular, caught his eye; it was a beautiful shade of peachy orange. If it wasn’t for the background of thunderheads and the eerie black beams, then this would have been a picture-perfect view.

Looking closer, Leon could see there was something odd about the flowers. Some were blowing away from him—others were blowing towards him, and even more blowing in totally different directions. He looked scrupulously, and there were a couple of points

where this resonated from. There, the flowers didn't seem to get as wet as they blew more chaotically than those near him.

"Let's go lads. We ain't got all day, ye hear?" Ragnarr yelled down the hill. He pushed the button on his bracelet with the sun insignia that he had used to communicate earlier. This caused it to once again appear solid orange, and then, a few seconds later, it returned to its solid black shading.

What happened next was incredible. Something, or rather two somethings, shimmered from the points of the strange airflow. Two aircraft appeared that looked like a mix between a b2 stealth bomber and a v-22 osprey. They had no propellers but were instead elevated by a powerful air propulsion system. While the stealth system itself was impressive—the most remarkable feature was how silent they both were. Leon could hear no engines at all. This made it impossible to tell the difference between the two aircraft creating their own, albeit substantial airflow, and a natural breeze.

The back hatch of one of the aircraft opened, and Ragnarr went in it. With an odd, almost black light radiating from the craft's interior, you could see on the back of his cloak the etched design of a fading sun. Less than a minute later, he and another member from the resistance returned with spare cloaks. The lady approached Leon and gave him one, and they also gave him a bracelet similar to the one Ragnarr was wearing.

"Put these on now, and take neither of them off until we are in Salutis," she told him.

He didn't know what the meaning of this was, but he could tell there was some purpose for it. He thought it was better not to argue, but instead abide in this case.

Most of the resistance members were helping others up the muddy terrain while a few focused on pulling up the wagon of their dead. They also carried those who had been weakened in prison by the inadequate rations.

A few had made it up now, and they were given the same instructions as Leon regarding the cloak and bracelet. Clayven was given a set and made sure his son was wrapped within a robe. Vance, Dane, and even Krysta had made it up as well. Each was given their own set, including the nurse who Vance had carried up.

EEEEEEE, a powerful dark beam shot up, screaming at them from nearby. This time, however, it differed from the rest. It had white and red energies mixed in with the dark that were so prevalent in the others. It was close by in the direction from which they had come. Despite their best efforts, it seems the last seal had broken. A dark beam blasted up from the Snow Leopard's kingdom.

3

Thunder continued to rumble throughout the sky—though it was unclear if it was from the storm itself or if it had something to do with those powerful beams of energy. Dobrynya looked upon it, and a visible concern appeared on the general's face that seemed out of character to Leon.

“Ragnarr, take those who have made it up into one of the aircraft and set it to stealth. I don't know how long we have, but since not everyone is hidden, this could be catastrophic,” Dobrynya told his fellow general.

All but the final beam coming from the Snow Leopard's kingdom had vanished from the skies. Ragnarr led Leon, Clayven, and all the others who had made it up onto the aircraft from where he had gotten the cloaks. Other than Dobrynya and the woman who had been handing out the cloaks, only those still climbing and helping remained outside—which was still a little more than half of the group.

After everyone that had made it up was inside, the aircraft's door made a quiet sound as it closed tightly behind them, sealing them in. The inside of the aircraft was much more extensive and spacious than one might assume from the outside.

“Sit anywhere you like,” Ragnarr directed them. “But try not to move around too much. Things will soon be translucent.”

“Translucent?” Leon didn’t understand what he meant. Then again, he didn’t understand or know what to expect from a lot of what was happening. He sat in one of the side chairs while pondering and waiting to see what would happen next.

This chair is actually comfortable, he thought as he sat down. It was a strange thought to have, but given he hadn’t been anywhere comfortable since he was here, he didn’t feel too terrible for thinking about it.

There were seated rows on each side of the plane, like in a traditional military craft. There were also other seats in the center, similar to the inside of a civilian airplane. After everyone had taken their seat, the lights dimmed, and Ragnarr approached the helm of the aircraft.

“Hope, have you connected to my fragment?” Ragnarr asked. He waited with no response. “Damn it, Hope, respond!”

After a moment, a voice greeted him, “You know that isn’t proper etiquette, General Loðbrók,” a sweet English voice replied.

The voice reminded Leon of a librarian from his college. Not exactly the same, but apart from the British charm, a similar tone nonetheless.

“I don’t have time for your damn routines, Hope. Connect to my fragment and be done with it. Begin stealth immediately with a crystalline phase so I can see what’s going on out there. Then scan for other energies,” Ragnarr said.

Overhead, little lights in the interior flickered and sparkled before they began gathering near Ragnarr. The next thing Leon saw, to his surprise, was a woman who appeared next to him out of nowhere. She did indeed look like a librarian—that, or perhaps an intelligence officer, was more appropriate. She adjusted her glasses before looking

at Ragnarr with a visibly angry face, as if to let him know the feeling was mutual.

“I’ve already cloaked the SFT. However, because of the influx of dark energy around us, my scanners, while already active, will have a hard time picking up any additional signals further out. As for your bracelet, I have already scanned it and connected to its fragment, thus verifying your identity. Though I would appreciate it if you would be more polite.”

After a brief pause, Ragnarr conceded. “Would you please initiate the translucent phase?”

“It would be my pleasure,” she said.

Everything in the inner compartment of the aircraft, except for the seats and floor, became clear. It reminded Leon of the impervious metal that he had first walked through, but this was much more transparent, as if the aircraft was not there at all. The sound from the outside became comprehensible and they could hear everything that was going on, including the pitter-patter of rain on the roof of the SFT.

“What’s an SFT, and who are you?” Leon asked the woman after her sudden appearance out of the blue.

Hope giggled at him as she made her way over. Her heels clicked across the metal floor with every step. She looked at him for a moment.

“SFT stands for *Stealth Fighter Transport*. As to who I am, well—my name is Hope. I’m an artificial intelligence program that was created to help protect humanity. My name actually means *Human’s Omniscient Protection Executive*, or Hope.”

Leon was shocked. The technology here was actually far superior to Earth’s. He wasn’t alone in his amazement. Many of the others had also seemed impressed with the aircraft and the AI. Most of these people were probably about as new to this place as he was. Furthermore, when you consider the technology of the Snow Leopard’s

kingdom, the surprise of those that had been here longer also made sense.

Leon had a lot of questions and a lot on his mind, but was unsure where to begin.

“Take your time,” she said before she made her way back over to Ragnarr, who was looking at the dash at the helm.

Outside, many were still struggling to get up the hillside; it was at this time that Dobrynya had decided to take drastic measures.

“Move!” He yelled, having everyone move to the side and brought out his sword. *Hopefully, this doesn't bring unwanted attention, but I have no choice.*

After everyone was out of the way and at a safe distance, he slashed the air in front of him, causing a flash burn that scorched the ground ahead. The powerful flame swept down the hill, firing the clay-ridden soil from the summit to the base. This created a hard, dry surface for those who were struggling to proceed. It was still hot, but the rain was now rapidly pelting it and cooling it down by removing what flames remained.

The clouds continued to rumble. Everyone was now making it up rather quickly and was given a cloak and bracelet before being loaded into the other SFT.

“There's been a distinct spike in dark energy nearby, Ragnarr,” Hope said.

“How much of a spike? Could it be the final beam giving one last burst before extinguishing?”

“That's doubtful....” she said, looking around in the air in different directions. “Wait, there is more than one—there are two—no, make that three. I'm detecting three distinctly different energy signals besides that of the beam. Hang on, according to my sensors, they're....”

Mid-sentence, there were rumbles in the atmosphere, followed by three distinct booms from outside that sounded like lightning strikes. "... right on top of us," Hope finished.

Outside, two craters had appeared nearby. Mud had flown everywhere, briefly obscuring the vision of everyone who was trying to peer into them to figure out what it was. One crater was positioned between the other aircraft and Dobrynya. In contrast, the other had appeared at the edge of the hill.

Shortly after the booms, screaming could be heard further down the hill. They heard one man in the distance, barely audible.

"No, please, please don't!" he yelled before no more words followed.

Only the sounds of blasts preceded. As for the craters in front of them, Leon could see nothing. He looked around, but the rain had become heavy and difficult to see through.

"Let me out, Hope," Ragnarr said. Moving towards the back of the aircraft.

"You know I can't do that. If I open up the hatch, then saving *all* the lives aboard this SFT will go from an eighty percent chance down to around five percent. You would need the authorization of at least two other generals to override this protocol."

"Get me a connection to HQ now!"

4

As Dobrynya drew his sword, they could see the look of worry encompassing his face from the SFT, while the screams continued to roar. From within the other aircraft, more cries were heard. Even more high-frequency blasts similar to those coming from down the hill came from within the SFT. Dobrynya was stuck deciding between the two sounds of distress before deciding to head toward the aircraft to protect it.

He was about to board the aircraft's ramp when he was forced to jump back. Something had thrown a three-pronged hooked chain at

him from the top of the SFT. It was at least twice the size of a tank chain and thrown by an odd-looking creature. While it had missed him, it skewered the woman that had given Leon a cloak and a couple of others that had yet to get onto the SFT.

The creature had big pointed ears about the length of a man's forearm—they were about as wide as a thigh. It was covered in hair and had an incommensurable nose that looked almost like coral. The nose was pointed and contorted so that if it were to be split, it wouldn't be anywhere near equilateral. Its eyes were dark and beady. The creature had giant, devilish wings attached to its forearms. It looked like a mix between a bat and gorilla; its stature resembled the latter.

It was looking right at Dobrynya, waving one of its sleek, twisted fingers back and forth. It pulled its chain back, ripping the three apart that it had pierced seconds earlier. Their bodies and organs soared everywhere in front of Dobrynya and towards the SFT.

"The other transport is lost," Hope told Ragnarr.

"Lost? Hope, what do you mean, lost! Bring up the image."

She held her hand open, and it brought up a 3D image of the inside of an SFT that looked like the one Leon was now in. In it, there were dead bodies—mutilated, defiled, dead bodies. Blood and guts were splattered across the interior. Some of the 3D images presented were red from blood being flung way up across the image capturing devices.

The few resistance fighters that remained alive inside were towards the helm. They were continuing to protect a small group of ex-prisoners. The group was seen to be shooting high-tech weapons that admitted the high-frequency sound. The blasts of energy were flying at a hideous creature.

This thing—whatever it was, looked like a shadow. It appeared one moment and then vanished into the ship's shadows, dodging all the beams of energy thrown at it. The being had no characteristics

that could be distinguished. It was as if someone drew a person and forgot to detail their traits beyond a basic outline.

One cloaked individual was hiding behind a chair to the side, and after the creature passed by, they tried to tackle it. Her body vanished within it. The shadow whose face had no features before now looked like a contorted version of the woman who had jumped at it. The woman's eyes were getting wide, like she was being asphyxiated. A few seconds later, the shadow expanded. Blood shot from it as the shadow normalized. The woman's face vanished, and her cold, soulless body fell from within.

"What the hell is that?" Ragnarr asked her.

Hope stopped projecting the image as the shadow creature reached the helm of the other SFT. The screams and fighting from inside the aircraft had ceased as the shadow consumed every soul aboard.

"I'm not sure. Whatever it is, it isn't in my database," Hope responded.

A last cry of agony came from the side of the hill. One man that had been pulling the carts of the dead raced up the hillside alone with terror etched on his face.

Dobrynya headed that way until he saw a hand grab the man's shoulder.

The man tried to pry it off, but was unsuccessful. Seconds later, another hand penetrated the man's abdomen. He let out a terrible scream as his whole body radiated white light. Only silence and tiny drops of blood befell the field of flowers as the cloaked man's body fell limp. His right arm hung over the hillcrest, revealing that his conquest rank was gone. The man's eyes had been burned from his skull in an instant. The final being appeared from the hardened trail from behind.

“That’s a shame,” a voice said while moving forward from the crest of the hill. “That’s why you have to remove the eyes first, or they are wasted like that.”

The being that had crested the hill was tossing up five round eyes, all different shades and colors in its hand. Upon first glance, it looked a lot more human than the shadow creature and gorilla-bat close by. As it got closer, Leon could tell while its body was similar to that of a human, there were stark differences elsewhere.

Its face was round—a bit oval, like you’d expect from a human’s face. Their eyes were in the usual spot as well, yet its face was caved in the center. It was as if a baseball bat had hit it one too many times. There were no clothes on its body, so everyone could see all of its features. It was pale and slender, yet it was well-built—its muscles prominent. The strangest part was its hair, or rather lack of. Not as if it was shaved, but as if none had ever grown in the first place.

It tossed one eyeball high in the air. The storm pelted its face as it looked up. Then it split open at the center of its nose as the eyeball fell. Those around only saw the inside for a moment, long enough to see multiple layers of small razor-sharp teeth.

Dobrynya watched as both halves of its face moved up and down, grinding the eyeball rather than chewing. It did that with two more at the same time. Each eye popped as it crushed them inside the creature’s face. It opened up once more, enough to do a quick suction of air to allow it to swallow them.

It stopped eight feet away from Dobrynya and smirked. Or was it frowning? It was indiscernible.

“Well, look what we have here! If it isn’t my old friend Dobrynya. It’s been what? One, maybe two years?” The flat-faced being hooked the remaining eyeballs through fishhook-like earrings he wore. Its mouth didn’t open, and its nasal voice came through its nose.

“I think it’s been more than a few hundred of those human years since they’ve been defeated,” the gorilla-bat interjected with a deep, screeching voice.

“Over a hundred years? I guess you’re right; these humans’ lifespans are so limited and inconsequential that time seems so vast to them. I consumed thirteen souls down that hill. While it gave me much pleasure, ask yourself, what was the purpose of their existence?”

“Fooodood,” the shadow creature moaned.

“I guess you’re right; *that* is about the purpose of a human. It’s the purpose of all things in this hydronic universe. They are *our* food. They are inconsequential and have no destiny other than to become our food; or anything else we desire.

“Back to the matter at hand. I am assuming it was you who did away with our disgusting half brother, wasn’t it? Not that any of us here care. Truth be told, the only reason we came here is to split up the territory. His was this insignificant coastal region, but we three have a claim since it borders ours. Well, two really, since we both manage our brother here. He isn’t one to think past his next meal.

“We also have to rid it of any disobedient humans that would cause us further trouble in the future. It seems the rumors about you may have turned out to be at least somewhat true. General of the resistance? I mean, we’ll find out more, as that’s the only reason you’re alive. But it seems, Dobrynya, that you humans have been quite busy lately. For example, I didn’t even notice those wearing those black cloaks until I saw them in front of me. We only detected about a couple dozen souls before we landed.”

“Yes, there were about twenty or so that we detected, which were of no great significance. We only came because of our glutinous brother there, and a sudden strong flame within this storm which caught our eye,” the gorilla-bat said, directing his look towards the shadow.

“Foood,” the shadow moaned again.

Is this a new god, or perhaps one we haven't seen before? Dobrynya thought to himself, looking at the shadow.

“Yes, yes, quiet down, you. You can wait to eat more souls. You've had plenty,” the flat-faced being told the shadow.

The shadow looked a bit depressed at that statement. At least, as much as a featureless shadow could look.

“As I was saying, there were so many more of you down here. Also, where did this levitating transport come from? How did you humans build such a thing under our constant observation?”

“Then there is the question of these energy weapons,” he pointed towards a gun-like weapon that was strapped around the dead resistance fighter. “While they may not have had much of an impact on us, they could have surely done significant damage to our guardians. There are so many questions. That reminds me, where is our brother's body?”

Dobrynya looked at him and then around, trying to contemplate a strategy against three gods alone.

Perhaps I should have had Ragnarr stay out, Dobrynya thought. Between myself, Ragnarr, and Zmey, with others providing support, maybe there would be at least some hope of defeating these three.

He knew Ragnarr was probably inside, asking for Hope to open up at this very moment. He also knew she wouldn't allow them to open the hatch without one of the other generals' approval to form a majority, and that was unlikely. As it was now, it would be challenging even with the ace up his sleeve, or rather the dragon around his neck, to escape these three. He had seen at least one of these beings—the flat-faced god in the great war before. He knew how ruthless a warrior he was and had seen him defeat many humans and even a few gods.

In the distance, the final beam waned and the intense dark energy faded until it was no more. Dobrynya knew he couldn't take these

three on alone, no matter how hard he tried. With the intense beams now dissipated completely, he knew there was at least a chance to make something happen.

He brought his hand up to his forehead and rubbed it. He whispered into the comms. “Ragnarr, I’ll stall them for as long as I can. We both know there is little chance that I can beat them, even with Zmey. It’s up to you to make something happen.”

“What was that?” The flat-face snorted?

“Oh, it’s nothing. You three have just really pissed me off. Taking lives that don’t belong to you, for your own satisfaction. I guess it’s about time someone teaches you about the consequences of your actions.”

His face and posture became solemn, and he drew his sword. Steam rose around him as the rain continued to fall. The bright blue flame appeared to encompass his sword once more.

The three gods smiled, intrigued—ready for what was to come next.

5

Ragnarr looked anxious as the comms between him and Dobrynya went silent. “We have to act fast, Hope. Can the other SFT still fly, and are its weapons functional?”

“While the interior is a bit damaged, the overall functionality of the craft is still intact. This includes the weapons, shields, engines, and propulsion systems. Why do you ask?”

“While I know you won’t allow me to use this craft or open the hatch to go help, there should be no issue with you using that craft to lure at least one of those creatures away; or to attack them, correct?”

“I’m not sure how effective it would be in combat against these gods, but yes. My other fragment can pilot it to at least distract or provide a semblance of cover for Dobrynya.”

“Ok, good. I want you to project yourself wearing a soul cloak inside that SFT. Then fly that craft so that they believe there to be at

least one soul aboard it. Hopefully, this will cause at least one of them to chase and keep them distracted. Put the full power in the SFT's defenses and engines for speed and maneuverability. There should be no problem keeping them barely out of reach, based on the speed at which the SFT travels. Whatever is left, transfer to weapons and fire accordingly. Understood?"

"Understood," Hope replied. "Though, even if we draw one of those three away, the chances of Dobrynya making it out aren't guaranteed. Even with Zmey he's still going against Flat-Face, who I'm sure you know has killed many alphas before. Not to mention, his fragment won't be able to do much to help him since we're out of the energy radius of Salutis. He used most of his stored power fighting Remmy earlier."

"I know. This is why I need you to patch me through to command now. I assume with the beams gone, all interference should also be halted, correct?"

"I've already been working on synchronizing, General. One moment. It seems that won't be necessary," Hope replied with a smile. "My mainframe in Salutis already received the distress we tried to send earlier and had already forwarded it to those at HQ. They are connecting now."

A projection separate from Hope gathered towards the back of the aircraft, and a lady with a milk chocolate skin tone appeared. Her hair was in a beehive weave and had attractive features, from her perfect complexion to the piercing brown color of her eyes. The strangest thing about her was a boa constrictor that she had hanging from her neck.

"Just wha's happenin' dere?" the woman asked in a thick New Orleans accent. "We've been round 'er waitin' fo news of ya mission. Can ya explain wha's goin'on?"

“Well,” Ragnarr began, “we’re in a bad spot, Marie. Everything has gotten much more complicated than we originally expected. We ended up liberating the village instead of a simple extraction.”

“Wha dya mean dat ya liberated da village? Ya was suppose ta jus’ rescue ’em, o’ buy ’em from whoeva had captured ’em.”

“Look, I know it’s completely different from what we discussed, but he attracted the eye of Remmy. We had to improvise. Anyway, we don’t have time for that. We ended up killing Remmy. Now, flat-face, some shadow god I’ve never seen before, and that gorilla-bat fucker are all out there together encompassing Dobrynya. He had me come in this SFT with half the group as the beams were getting closer to us. Of course I agreed in order to protect the objective and those that survived the previous fight. The only problem is that he’s stuck out there now with no backup. Everyone else that you don’t see here is dead.”

Marie waited a moment, looking around at the ragtag group of individuals. Some guards from the camp, a few prisoners, and other civilians. There were only a handful of resistance fighters mixed in compared to what they had come with. She didn’t seem happy at all with what she was seeing.

“Well, dya have a plan or not?” she asked bluntly. “Ya know much as I dat we can’t afford ta lose Dobrynya. So wha’ ya gon’ do?”

“I’ve come up with a plan with Hope that can effectively distract one, maybe two if we’re lucky. Past that, I think it would be best if we override Hope’s protocols. With two of the three out of the way, surely we could—”

Hope interrupted Ragnarr.

“I advise against that action. It’s true. We could distract up to two of the gods. I think the probability of the aircraft keeping them occupied long enough for this group to take flat-face down and flee is slim. It’s not even a guarantee that we would succeed. I would give them about a thirty percent chance even with Clayven on the defen-

sive and Zmey's help for everyone on this aircraft to live through that conflict at this range."

"Is there nothing we can do?" Clayven asked, scowling towards the outside where his old friend and mentor had created a blue flame on the ground to dissuade the surrounding gods. He didn't know how Hope knew of him, but seeing how they had intel from even some gods in the great war, he guessed they had files on known humans as well.

"Likewise," she continued, ignoring Clayven. "If you were thinking of flying this aircraft to a safe distance, and then exiting to head back and provide support—there is a ninety-five percent chance, according to the calculations from all current data, that the other two would have grounded the other SFT, and learned it was a ruse *before* you even made it there. This would prove to be no better and potentially worse than the current situation. That's not accounting for unknown variables such as the dark creator.

"With the death of one of his sons, the likelihood of the dark creator to make an appearance soon has risen drastically. This is something I cannot account for, but that could happen at any time. Taking those unknown factors into account, if we do that, there would be a high probability of losing both Dobrynya and Ragnarr here."

Ragnarr wasn't having it.

"I don't care what your statistics say, Hope. We can do this. What other option do we have? Abandon Dobrynya?"

"Essentially, yes. If we can distract the shadow and gorilla-bat, we essentially give Dobrynya an escape route. All previous war files, encounters, and sightings from the resistance suggest that flat-face cannot fly. He was likely flying with the help of another.

"As long as Dobrynya keeps his cloak on, his soul cannot be detected. Thus, with the cloud cover, there is an eighty percent chance of escape. While not ideal, I think this is the best course of action. Anything more could escalate this to the point of a full-blown war

outside of resistance territory, which is something that we are not ready for. You know as much as I do that it would be catastrophic for humanity.”

“You said you could get the attention of one, *maybe* two. Now you’re saying you’ll be able to get both, Hope?” Ragnarr looked stunned at her plan.

“I believe so. After analyzing the situation further, if I use the temper of the gorilla-bat against them, along with the shadow’s seemingly gluttonous hunger, it’s likely. While it’s still not guaranteed, it is the outcome that gives everyone here the highest chance of survival.”

The logistics and what she said didn’t help to comfort him at all. Marie, on the other hand, seemed more collected and pragmatic about the situation. She was talking to someone else on the side, and they reached a decision. Outside, Dobrynya barely dodged the chain from the gorilla-bat god by sliding back on the muddy surface.

“Is as Hope say. We do dis ‘er an hope fo da bes’. Das da decision we’ve agreed to ‘ere,” Marie said, knowing it would upset Ragnarr.

“Odin’s sake. If that’s what you all have decided, then fine. I can see where you’re coming from, but damn it all. Let’s get on with it then. They’ve been taking their sweet time toying with him, but I doubt it’ll last much longer,” Ragnarr said as he moved towards the helm and took a seat.

Marie nodded and vanished from the craft.

Leon and the rest of the group sat quietly. They sat watching outside as Ragnarr spoke into his comm bracelet to alert Dobrynya to the plan.

“Dobrynya, when you see the opening we’re going to provide, you need to escape with Zmey as fast as you can. This is what the others decided. As much as I hate it, I’m sure you understand it as much as I do....” He paused with a solemn expression on his face. “Don’t die on us.”

6

Shortly after Ragnarr's last message, the three gods had begun their true assault on Dobrynya. The shadow blasted Dobrynya a few times. He ended up avoiding most of them or deflecting the blasts with his sword, but one grazed his wrist, which caused his bracelet to be destroyed. As he was now left with no way to further communicate, all he could do was trust what Ragnarr had said and have faith that they would come through.

As the gorilla-bat was about to throw his chain again, they heard a voice from within the bloodied SFT. Panting, they screamed, "You'll pay for this!" the girl said as the shields of the craft turned on with max power.

Dobrynya and all three gods looked over to see a girl in a blood-soaked cloak dash to get into the pilot's seat. The aircraft's thrusters kicked into gear as it moved off the ground. Its engines blew warm air back at the group as it rose further from the blood-drenched field of flowers. The other SFT, unbeknownst to the three gods, had simultaneously lifted off, and they flew in opposite directions.

The shadow was the first to chase the decoy SFT as it roared "FOOOOOOOOOOOOD."

The gorilla-bat seemed keener on staying with Dobrynya and turned its attention back to him, which would cause the plan to fail.

"You don't think it's worth your time to pay attention to me, is that it?" Hope said as she charged the Ion beam that was on the SFT and targeted the animal-like god.

The SFT shot the gorilla-bat at full power. They went flying past flat-face and tumbled down the hill. Its body was forced through trees and corpses until it hit the base of the range. A screeching yell came from the bottom of the hill as it flew upward, madly chasing the SFT.

As the aircraft headed in opposite directions, Leon was unsure of how this might play out. He was curious to see how fast these gods

could be and pondered for a moment before standing up and heading towards Hope. They turned the translucent imagery on the SFT off after they withdrew from the field, so he wasn't able to guess how fast they might be going.

"Say, Hope, do you think they'll be able to catch the other SFT? How fast are they compared to the speed of the SFT?"

"That's an interesting question. The gods we have records of are fast, but they are not so fast that the SFT can't outpace them *if* it wanted to; it could leave them behind without hesitation. They, of course, do not know this, and that is how we want to keep it. We estimated the gods whose speeds we know of to fly at a fair rate of around 3,000 mph.

"You might think this is fast because of your current level of knowledge based on your time on Earth. For example, you may think of something like the B-747 aircraft, which has a max speed of around 600mph. So in your mind, it may seem fast to be five times that. In reality—that is relatively slow—even in 2010, a US government aircraft designated H-TV2 Falcon could go around thirteen thousand mph. The technology here has had a lot longer to accumulate. Though it has had as little time to be tested as much as we would have liked. Still, we have progressed substantially. SFTs can travel around fifty thousand mph with no impact on the passengers.

"Assuming the shadow is no different, all that's going to happen now between the other SFT and the gods is a game of cat and mouse. My other fragment has to keep the SFT just out of reach of the gods. This should keep them interested while ensuring they don't catch up or catch on and become disinterested in the chase. In the meantime, the SFT we are traveling in is currently going near the max speed or 50,354 mph."

"Well..." he began, intrigued by this new knowledge, "I suppose I have a few more questions now."

"Go on." Hope chirped.

“First, how big around is this world? Second, won’t they hear a sonic boom? Finally, do you think humanity has a chance against these gods that even our own gods couldn’t match?”

Hope looked at Leon oddly. “Around? The world is flat, didn’t you know?”

Leon looked at her stunned, one of his eyebrows raised in a mannerism that said: *You can’t be serious.*

After a moment, Hope smiled.

“Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. I recently learned about *The Flat Earth Society* and felt the need to lighten the mood with a joke. For an honest answer, this hell world, or Afterworld, as most have come to call it, has a circumference of 552,784 miles. To help you picture this, it is roughly twice the size of the planet Jupiter in your solar system.

“For your second question, the SFT was built to nullify the effects of the sonic boom. A small energy disbursement from the shielding system nullifies any sound or ‘booms’ that would occur. To your most complicated question, that is something that I cannot begin to calculate. I would like to think that we do as someone created by humanity; however, we are still hiding. The reason for that, well, it is simple, really—as of right now, we are not confident in our abilities to come out triumphant in a full-out assault or war with the gods. Take that as you will.”

“I see,” Leon said, scrunching his forehead. “Two more questions. How far is this Salutis, and what is my role in all of this? I mean, why did Ragnarr and Dobrynya come for me—for what reason?”

“Salutis is roughly 76,435 miles away. At our current velocity, we will reach the territory in about one hour thirty minutes. As for why you were chosen, while I know the answer to that, I cannot disclose it to you as it contains highly classified information. With you not be-

ing an official citizen, along with everyone else here who might hear our conversation, I cannot disclose this information.”

This created more questions for Leon, but it gave him some idea as to what was going on. It wasn't on a pure whim that they saved him—there was at least a purpose behind his rescue and the unfortunate death of so many others.

“We have a problem, Ragnar,” Hope said abruptly, vanishing from Leon's side and appearing next to the general. “The two gods have attacked the other SFT in near unison with less than a second interval between the two attacks. As soon as I dodge an attack, the other god aims for where I'm dodging. It is too fast for it in terms of maneuverability.”

“What about the shields and weapons?”

“The shields won't last much longer, even as I've diverted as much power as I can to them since we've had the SFT move at a slower pace. The weapons are turning out to be ineffective against the shadow. I've tried to target the gorilla-bat, but the shadow just ends up covering for it. He has essentially masked the gorilla-bat's body within his own. He is being worn by the gorilla-bat like some synthetic armor. The speed they're displaying now is much greater than expected.”

“Damn it. How much time realistically can we stall without giving away this game of cat and mouse?”

“Two minutes more, maybe a little less, before they break the shield. It won't be much longer after that until they...” Hope paused for a few seconds.

“What is it, Hope?”

“I apologize, sir. The shields have been breached.”

7

As the gorilla-bat tumbled down the hill, all it could think of were the multiple ways it would torment the girl in the bloodied cloak. It screeched ferociously as it flew up in its pursuit of the SFT

with the shadow god. Beaming towards the SFT, it caught up with Hope and the shadow in less than a minute. Once they were both within a few meters, they attacked.

Hope could initially dodge, as well as send ion energy blasts back hitting the shadow. The shadow moaned in annoyance rather than pain, and it didn't seem to suffer any adverse effects. Hope targeted the gorilla-bat again and got a better reaction from it. The god brought its arms up to block the blast, but was unable to maintain control. It let out a screeching cry of anger as it started spiraling towards the ground. The shadow rushed down after it, encompassing it within its own body.

Together, the pair leaped back up beside the SFT, and that is when the synchronized attacks began. The shadow seemed to control the flight for both of them, while the gorilla-bat could move freely within the shadow's malleable body. The shadow barraged the aircraft with beams of its own strange energy. Hope could still dodge each attack with precision and no wasted movement, but then everything changed.

The gorilla-bat unwrapped the hooked chain from around its torso that it secured before its initial flight and slung the chain with ease into the side of the SFT's shields. This was after Hope had dodged the energy blasts from the shadow. The force of the god's attack shook the aircraft in its entirety and nearly threw it off balance, but the shield held.

Hope returned fire, but it was a trivial attempt. There was no effect on either of them now because of the mysterious properties of the shadow. Again, blasts blazed from it, and were narrowly avoided in time.

The gorilla-bat hit the SFT again, causing a tremendous strain on the shields. However, this time, the shadow transferred itself from the other god and onto the vessel via the massive chain. It held the chain in place and nullified the shield in its entirety. The gorilla-bat

flew high into the air and nose-dived towards the SFT. There was a loud **BANG** as it passed through the shadow and shredded the hull. It was now in the interior of the SFT.

The shadow slinked inside after its sibling and moaned once more. As sparks and dust settled through the interior, Hope saw a smile on the gorilla-bat's face. It was entirely ready to enact its revenge on the girl in the cloak. Now that she was only a short distance away within the aircraft, the two gods glared at her.

"I'll make you a deal," the gorilla-bat told its glutinous brother. "Let me defile this useless human how I see fit, and you can consume her soul."

"FOOOOOOOD?" the shadow moaned.

"Yes, you can eat her. But her death is for me to perform."

Hope stood up and looked at them directly; they were both within fifteen feet of her, midway through the cabin. The gorilla-bat's eyes shimmered in anticipation. Its thick meaty tongue slid across its yellow dagger-like teeth. The smile and look in its eyes gave the feeling of a mental patient about to snap.

"Well, well, you pathetic little human. I was going to leave you be and deal with Dobrynya, but no, you couldn't leave things as they were and escape on your own. You may have even been able to evade my brother alone, but you had to shoot me, didn't you? You pathetic creatures disgust me. I'll slice you little by little—making the pain last. I'll make you scream before we are done. You have disrespected me for the last time.

"Once you're completely broken, that is when my brother will consume you. While you are still living, you'll go through the horrible, excruciating pain of having your whole body twisted and turned inside of him. The process will suck your soul dry from your pathetic shell with nothing to dim the pain—you will feel it all. All because you shot me, you stupid fucking bitch!"

The gorilla-bat continued with the enamored look in its eyes. **THUMP, THUMP, THUMP**—each step forward created non-in-significant vibrations.

This display of brute hostility shocked Hope. She continued to play the weak, defenseless human, trying to stall and get as much information as possible out of them.

“I... I’m sorry,” Hope stuttered. “Please forgive me. I was trying to help the general. Can’t you see that I’m afraid! Why are you doing this to us? For what purpose? You keep attacking us and trying to kill us or force us into conditions that no one should live through. Why? For what purpose!”

The god stopped directly in front of her. “For what purpose!” It laughed while spewing saliva over her.

Hope was able to animate the image of her face covered in saliva in real-time to give no indication that she was a projection.

“Why do I, Ir’osen, need a purpose for doing with you humans as I wish? Me—a god—needing a reason? I think not. Your own pathetic gods are dead, and if there are any left, they have deserted you. So why do I need a reason for what I’m doing to creations with no creator? You’re insignificant. Your mere existence is practically a paradox at this point.”

“Maybe not you specifically Ir’osen, but what was the reason for invading in the first place?”

“A reason? Do you think my father needed a reason for what he does? Why would any god trust a god of another universe who is so different from their own? What sense would it make for a god to be trusting of other gods? We have removed the initial threat of your gods and thus secured our own safety. Well, that was until one of you went and killed Remmy. While none of us cared for him, likely, my father will probably rethink his plans for your universe.”

Was the reason for their invasion nothing more than a warped view of realism's security dilemma, mixed with the desire for hegemony among universes? Hope thought to herself almost contentiously.

It would make sense if that were their goal. It wasn't complete obliteration of humanity or our universe, but just aggressively taking away our nukes, so to speak, in the form of aggressive removal of our gods. Between that and keeping humanity weak by the immediate removal of conquest users theta and above, this seems to be a plausible theory. Indeed, what will happen now that a credible threat has appeared among humans under the watch of the dark gods? This was a question Hope didn't wish to find the answer to.

Ir'osen had lost his patience and was ready to enact what he perceived as divine justice on this human. With an evil smirk on his face, he reached towards the defenseless Hope and closed his hand upon her neck, only for it to go through.

"What in the hell is this? Is this some sort of power?" He paused for a moment, thinking to himself. "It seems I won't be able to fillet you like I was planning, but don't think you're safe. My brother can consume all matter."

Ir'osen looked back at their brother, who was in the back gently moaning, hungry, waiting for his brother to give the ok. "Feast upon her, and leave nothing behind."

The shadow leaped in an instant towards Hope like a starving predator. It encompassed her, but only confusion entered the featureless being.

"Foood?" he asked in despair.

"Yes, go on, enjoy her, you glutton," Ir'osen responded.

Overhead, Hope laughed at them. "Well, it's unfortunate I couldn't get any more information out of you before this game of cat and mouse came to a close. I thank you for what you supplied me with. It will prove beneficial knowing some abilities of your brother.

I also thank you for your name and the insights into why your universe declared war on ours.”

“Why aren’t you dead!” Ir’osen shrieked with rage.

“That’s my secret, and one I don’t intend to give up to you on this day, unlike those you have given to me,” Hope said, laughing. “I have my doubts that this will kill you, but we’ve been traveling at full speed since you’ve boarded, and at the very least, it will slow you down. That’s all I need to accomplish today. Goodbye, you gluttonous shadow, and to you, a gorilla-bat god named Ir’osen.”

The aircraft buzzed with a substantial ionic energy pulse.

“What are you—,” Ir’osen began to ask.

“FOOOOOOO—,” the shadow moaned once more, but the SFT exploded.

A giant shock wave travelled throughout the sky. There was nothing left of the SFT but ashes, which burned with a yellow fire as they fluttered down towards the ground. Hope had been broadcasting the conversation to the people on the SFT, Ragnarr, and those in *Salutis* awaiting updates.

“Is it done?” Ragnarr asked Hope after the sound and hologram vanished.

“It’s done,” Hope replied. “Unfortunately, we had to sacrifice the ship and its fragment, but if all goes well on his end, that should have been enough to allow for *Dobrynya* to escape.”

8

Somewhere in the realm of ten minutes had passed since the other gods had left *Dobrynya*. In that time, a significant amount had happened to *Dobrynya*. The most crucial part is what had still not happened. *Dobrynya*, the second strongest fighter in the human resistance, had yet to escape and was instead on the defensive against this oddly deformed god. He had so far chosen not to bring out *Zmey* and was instead trying to face him with his own merits of strength. Not because he was proud, but because he didn’t want to

risk his only chance of escape being injured. He knew he had one shot at getting away from here. Any mistake made could mean his end, and that would be a severe wound to the human resistance forces.

He knew this, yet he was tired—exhausted even. He had already spent days chasing after Leon and a significant amount of energy fighting Remmy.

He panted as the rain calmed. This helped his vision to be less obscured by the elements.

“You don’t look so good.” The god sneered. “You know, if you wanted, I could allow you to sit down and rest for a bit on the simple condition that you tell me the location of your hidden encampment.”

Dobrynya gave him a half pant and half-laugh.

“Well, it seems we don’t see eye to eye. Let me fix that,” the god said. They had only been a few yards back jolted at him with tremendous speed.

Dobrynya did all he could to avoid him by accelerating backward. His flames helped to propel him like a jet engine. In the process, he swung his sword forward from left to right at the agile god. A flash-fire shot ahead, expanding along the whole path that the great long-sword had cut, burning much of the flowers upon the hill-top. Even with the power of his flames giving him extra speed to retreat and with fire rushing towards the god, it didn’t matter.

Without hesitation, the flat-faced god continued to rush forward, jumping far above the tremendous fiery blast that was headed towards him. When he got to the apex of his jump, he tilted forward ever so slightly, kicking its legs back that created a devastating force. This sent the flat-faced god ahead with immeasurable speed; he was upon Dobrynya instantly. Dobrynya was slammed into the ground—the air knocked out of him. He slid nearly ten feet through the mud with the god on top of him. Dobrynya tried but struggled to catch his breath.

The flat-faced god had pinned him down by squeezing his throat. Its other hand reached with clammy fingers towards Dobrynya's left eye before shoving its thumb underneath—ripping the eye from his socket.

“FUUUUUUUUUUCK,” he cried out while hearing the nerves breakaway, and the blood vessels pop inside his skull. Blood shot out from the socket as the god pulled the eye out and stood up, admiring it.

“You see there? Now we see *eye to eye*, or at least *eye to eyes*,” the flat-faced god snorted as it laughed. While it continued to be enamored with its newly captured trophy, Dobrynya flipped from the ground and propelled himself backward, trying to gather his wits.

The god opened its face and started to toss Dobrynya's eye into its odd mouth, but must have changed its mind. The look of pleasure it made while staring into it was of genuine admiration. It closed its face back up.

“Don't worry,” it told him in an elated, nasally voice. “I'll keep this one right here.” He flicked a hook on its belly button, displaying the next spot for his prized trophy. He hooked it from left to right with care as to not damage the beautiful composition of the stark blue iris.

Dobrynya didn't play into his taunts and instead cleared his mind by taking a deep breath. A small blue flame-filled his eye socket in place of his missing eye. Right as Dobrynya was about to charge, they both witnessed a strange explosion in the distance.

Blue and purple energy erupted overhead, and a powerful boom followed it moments later. The explosion completely eradicated all the clouds.

It confused the god, but Dobrynya had an excellent idea of what had happened. The moisture from the clouds fell upon them both like a waterfall, blinding both of them. Dobrynya knew he had to act fast.

“Zmey NOW!” The Dragon obeyed its master’s call and came from within the necklace. It pulled him up on its back and pushed its mighty wings down, propelling them into the air.

The god had no idea what was happening because of the overpowering waters that were falling upon him.

“Quickly, head towards our old home. With the cloud cover gone, we have only one chance.”

Zmey obeyed and flew towards his master’s old kingdom at full speed. He made it seconds before the overwhelming downpour had come to a stop. The Dragon went back into the necklace the moment they arrived at the frozen kingdom.

The flat-faced god looked around, confused at what had happened, and noticed Dobrynya was nowhere in sight. In the distance, all Dobrynya could hear was the bellowing curses of the infuriated god.

“YOU THINK YOU HAVE ESCAPED! YOU THINK YOU ARE SAFE! NOT ONE OF YOU WEAK, PATHETIC CREATURES ARE! YOUR LIVES BELONG TO US! SOON ENOUGH, YOU WILL SEE THE *CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR OWN ACTIONS*, HUMAN! THIS, I PROMISE YOU!”

Looking back towards the hill, Dobrynya could see clear skies and a beautiful moonlight that shone throughout the lands. Ignoring the god in the distance, he carefully melted the ice and snow in front of him, and he entered the cave that had first brought Leon to his hellish imprisonment.



Chapter VIII



Hope's Ubiquity

Leon had taken his seat again shortly after Ragnarr and Hope discussed the situation aboard the other SFT. No one knew what Dobrynya's status was, and it was likely to be awhile until anyone was updated on it.

Exhausted and trying to take his mind off of things, Leon had been looking around the ship. After sitting back down, he was given a drink of water. Oddly enough, the water came from within the vessel and cycled up into a disposable container attached to the chair he was sitting in after he thought about needing a drink.

He watched outside the aircraft via a small hologram that was projected in front of him. Although there wasn't much he could see, he continued watching for quite some time. What intrigued him most were the peculiar colors in the atmosphere. Different shades of blue, purple, and even some pinks mixed in throughout the sky, satisfying him as they continued drifting throughout it.

Other than watching, he was able to listen outside of the SFT, as the wind had been filtered out. Much couldn't be heard from this height, but the occasional bird they passed by didn't bother him. He had begun to feel at ease until there was a loud bang.

Leon looked around until he and the others saw the flat-faced god and his siblings riding on the SFT through the hologram. In his left hand, the flat-faced god held the head of Dobrynya with both eyes burned out of his skull.

“Dobrynya held out for as long as he could. He tried to escape, but it was no use. He gave it all up, everything I needed. You humans are as good as done for. What a pity, a General of the resistance dying for some pathetic boy named Leon,” the flat-faced god howled. “If only you had left him to us, we could have avoided this. All of humanity will now suffer for this boy’s sins.”

The gods pounded on the shield, shaking the SFT. “We will arrive at Salutis soon, and all of humanity will die. You are all done for!” The gods laughed.

The SFT continued to shake.

“We will arrive at Salutis soon,” flat-face said again.

“We will be arriving at Salutis soon,” Hope said, and Leon lurched awake. As he did, the god’s face morphed into Vance’s.

Vance was over him and had been shaking him gently. “Hey kid, are you ok? You looked like you were having some bad dreams. We’ll be landing in Salutis in a moment.”

Leon rubbed his eyes and looked around. The hologram was still up in front of him. There was nothing outside but clear inky skies and the two moons that continued swirling in the distance. No banging sounds, no laughing gods, and no dead Dobrynya.

“I’ll be fine,” Leon said. A few hours earlier—without the interference of Remmy, he would have been the one who had killed him.

Vance sat down a few seats away, closer to Clayven and Dane.

“We are now arriving at Salutis,” Hope said as she appeared in front of everyone. “Please remain seated as we land.”

This didn’t seem to bother anyone, as everyone was worn out. Some were still sad about those lost in the conflict. Still, except for one older woman who continued her soft sobs, the group kept it together pretty well. As the hologram turned off, the translucent imaging had taken over the whole SFT; everyone could now see what was going on outside as if they were floating.

Some didn't seem to like this too much and gave an expression that clearly said they weren't a fan of heights. Those reacting negatively had the imaging around their chair turned back to normal, and a shade appeared in front of them. This allowed them to see the ship's interior and did well to calm most of them down.

As the ship descended, only the vast ocean below could be seen. There seemed to be a coastline, but it was at least ten miles away from where the ship positioned itself for its vertical descent.

"Why are we landing here?" Leon asked Hope.

"Wait for it. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

They were still a few thousand feet in the air, and the ocean below them began turning into a large city. There were lights, towering buildings, beautiful scenery, and a complete mixture of cultures all around them now. It wasn't like the US as a mixing pot; it was a distinct mixture of individual cultures and designs.

He could see different constructions from varying cultures in the same area: Japanese street lamps, wooden buildings, small brick streets. Leon even saw a flawless replica of the Empire State Building and the Eiffel tower far in the distance. There were even more recognizable buildings, but the majority were of unique designs that went on further than one's naked eye could see.

It seemed odd to Leon that there were no power lines to any of these buildings, yet they were brightly lit. The most exciting aspect was around the border of the city walls. There were giant towers made of different metals and glass. Each one gave a slow yet steady pulse that glowed with an ultraviolet purple at the top of the structure.

"This is incredible," Leon said while looking around in awe.

Even Krysta, who was unusually quiet about everything, commented with a single "Wow."

"So this is Salutis," Clayven said, clearly shaken by what he saw while a cold tear streamed down his face.

The lights and display of art and culture disappeared as a hatch opened up underground. With it, the SFT submerged even further.

After entering a solid structure below, the aircraft made a metallic attaching noise before bouncing and coming to its stopping point. The air docks had locked the legs of the SFT down.

“You may now stand,” Hope informed the group.

The SFT’s ramp opened, and armed resistance forces came aboard with weapons clutched.

“Welcome to Salutis.”

2

This is not happening again, is it? Leon thought to himself while looking at the people carrying weapons aboard the SFT. Hearing that familiar welcome he had heard from Vance in the Snow Leopard’s kingdom didn’t help.

“Everyone is to remain calm. There’s nothing to fear,” a muscular woman said, who looked to be in her late thirties. “We are here to escort a few of you to your debriefings before your trial. Now then, if you’ll come with us without making a scene, that would be appreciated. If by some chance you are unsure if this includes you, let me make things easy. Anyone who was in charge of or related to the exploitation, capture, transportation, holding, or killing of innocent humans against their will should step forward. Don’t go and lie now either. Hope will know, and it will make it worse for you in the long run. As for the rest of you, Hope will take you to where you need to go to get you processed and set up through different channels.”

Clayven stood and handed his son back to his nurse.

“Take care of him for me,” he told her.

She nodded. Vance and Dane followed Clayven along with a couple of guards from the kingdom. Krysta stood and approached Ragnarr.

“Remember what you promised,” she whispered.

He nodded and motioned with his head for her to move in line with the rest of them. She complied and followed the group out of the SFT. The bracelets everyone had been given encompassed those that followed the woman within a small energy field.

“From what I’ve heard, most, if not all of you, turned your back on humanity at one point and are responsible for a great many deaths,” the woman continued. “Whether this outweighs your other deeds will be determined when you have your day in court. Know that if it were up to me, I’d cast you out to the wolves. Those with powerful conquests, I would have taken by someone worthy and loyal to humanity. However, that is not for me to decide. We will all have to accept the outcome of the courts.

“This energy field you now find yourself in is a layer of protection for both yourself and those around you. It will protect you from energy blasts and most powers directed towards you. Think of it as your own personal force field. Though if you try to use your conquests in a way that is perceived to be aggressive, the energy field will squeeze you. This will make mobility impossible and respiration difficult. This is all determined by your activities which Hope will be constantly monitoring via the bracelet.

“If you continue to exceed safe levels for an extended period, this will be seen as an attempt to do harm to the resistance. This will lead to your immediate termination by a deadly charge being shot into your neural pathways. Your soul will then be extracted and contained until your trial is over. This means you will have no chance to defend yourself and will only be given a trial based upon the evidence and from witnesses as allowed. If later you are found innocent, your soul will be released, and you will reincarnate immediately. With that being said, if they find you guilty, then you will be exiled and left on your own to survive. If your crimes are severe enough and your conquest is valuable to humanity, your soul will be processed, and your conquest will be given to a chosen individual. This will be someone

in whom the resistance trusts and sees potential in. Is this understood by all?"

Leon listened and thought this seemed like some intense version of the Miranda warning; Ragnarr picked up on this and moved over to talk with him.

"It may seem extreme, but this is humanity's only sanctuary. While the methods can seem over the top, it's for the greater good. If our location was to be discovered, or something was to happen that might compromise Salutis, humanity could be doomed. At the very least, they would be set back a few hundred years again."

"There's no exile, is there?" Leon asked, disconcerted.

"You're a smart lad. The risk would be too great for us to do that. We discussed keeping the holograms off when flying here and not letting people know where our base is. In the end, we figured this would be pointless. There are multiple ways to figure out where we are when traveling here. Then there's the fact that we would have to keep even good people locked in here, staring at the same walls. It would feel more like a cage if we were to do that rather than a sanctuary."

"I've got it. It's for the survival of humanity. It's evident that we are in a constant state of war. One slight mistake could end up being the end of free will and the destruction of humankind as we know it. There are always going to be different rules during wartime. Less freedom and liberty are expected. I've already seen what would happen to most, hell, if not all of humanity, if Salutis falls. Most couldn't last against any of the gods for a minute. The ones who can? It seems unlikely that there are enough of them to equal the power of the gods. I also understand that it seems you're trying to at least mitigate the perception of that lost freedom. I can't say I like it all, but I can understand it."

"I hope you'll keep this to yourself," Ragnarr said with a stern face. "They'll be told what the consequences are at the trial before

the judge hands the decision down, but this keeps everyone calmer for now.”

Leon nodded and made sure he had everything. His recently gained dagger was still securely fastened on his waist. Besides that, what he had on his body when he arrived in Afterworld was all he had. He took one last drink of water from the ship and headed down the ramp behind the others.

3

By the time Leon had made it off the SFT, the other group had headed towards their debriefing and were gone. All that remained there was Leon, the nurse with Clayven’s son, and a few ex-prisoners and residents of the Snow Leopard’s kingdom. There was also, of course, Ragnarr and a handful of resistance fighters who had been lucky enough to be on the SFT to survive. Those who were still outside were wiped out. The bodies on the cart that still had their conquest and soul never made it up the hill past the gods.

“Listen,” Ragnarr said, addressing the group. “We’ve got to go make our reports, but you’re safe now. Please feel at ease. Hope will guide each of you from here to help you get situated. Again, welcome.” Ragnarr and the other fighters stepped away, leaving the small group behind with only Hope to take care of everything.

The group was confused. They were alone in an underground air dock that looked hardly any more sophisticated than a New York City parking garage. Around them were a few other SFT’s and different aircraft; some more prominent than the SFT, some smaller. Oddly enough, no one seemed to be too interested in them. They were all more focused on figuring out how an aircraft’s AI was going to take care of them. They looked at her, exhausted, both mentally and physically awaiting directions.

“Calm down, calm down. I assure you there is nothing to worry about!” Hope said. She knew how confused each of them was and acted immediately to ease their worries.

“Now, I’m sure you all have a lot of questions, but don’t worry, I’ll address each of them as they come. We’ll get through this process together rather painlessly. I know you’re worn out, so I’ll try to make this as simple as it can be.” She walked forward, descending from the aircraft, and passed by in front of the group. “Please follow me. I will explain things as we progress.”

The group followed.

“I’m getting a lot of odd looks, and I am not surprised, so let me explain a bit. First of all, the reason I can move about is both due to your bracelets and the city. Every bracelet is both a receiver and transmitter, which I can utilize for your well-being. Each bracelet has a Hexapentacontadicta core processor within it, or if you prefer, you can call it a 256 core processor. Each one runs off both solar energy and, when available, wireless, which can keep them running through almost all conditions.

“I will get into the latter at some other time. For now, just know that I can use each individual unit’s abilities when needed. I can use these fragments as they’re called, either separately or as a cluster unit. The SFTs have around a 2000 core processor in them right now. Though, we’re working on upgrading them to a 3000 series.”

Most were at a loss and explained that they didn’t know what a processor was, or even solar energy. Hope did her best to reassure them they would be fine and placed in an introductory class for necessary Earth information and technology. Leon had his own questions.

“What you’re saying is... well, erm, I’m honestly shocked if what you say is true. Technology has advanced to where Earth’s tech would seem almost ancient. You mentioned solar energy, yet I’ve only seen moonlight; how is this possible? I know it’s possible to produce small amounts of solar energy from moonlight, but we’re talking fractions. Is that enough to power a 256 core processor?”

Hope smiled at Leon. “An astute observation, Leon! Ten points for Gryffindor,” she said, chuckling. “The answer to your question is within your own observation, yet hidden. The moons here are unique and not ordinary by any means. They produce more than enough solar energy needed for plants to grow and for photosynthesis to take place. So while it may look like a typical night to you, it differs greatly from the type of night you are used to.

“Even if solar energy wasn’t enough, we still have wireless energy. This is thanks to the brilliance of Nikola Tesla and his Tesla Towers. With his diligence and the advancement of his original theories, we have perfected the wireless transmission of energy and long-distance communication. This allows us to transmit communications up to eighty thousand miles and send wireless electricity up to about fifteen thousand miles in any direction. If we build more towers around this world, we’ll increase that by a lot more. We are looking to do that, but the challenge is to deploy these undetected. Moving on, the bracelets also allow—”

Leon interrupted.

“Wait, wait, did you say Nikola Tesla, as in the Serbian American inventor? The man who could be considered the father of modern electricity with the AC motor? Are you saying *that* Nikola Tesla was able to complete his dream of wireless electricity and telecommunications array?”

An old man from the group who was quite malnourished commented ironically, “But ain’t he dead?”

Everyone else looked at Hope, waiting for a reply, until the door to the streets opened. What Leon saw—what everyone saw, was a vibrant city. It looked like a mix between Times Square in New York, mixed with Haugesund Norway’s shopping center of small family-owned shops and brick pedestrian-only walkways. There were no cars, no buses, no trains, but a few people were walking around enjoying themselves. It was unexpected, and even though he saw it from

up in the sky, it seemed much different up close. He wasn't a huge fan of NYC, but even he had to admit that there was something special about Times Square. He didn't think he'd ever see anything close to it again, and yet, here it was; for that, he was happy.

"I'll continue to explain things as we go. Please follow me," Hope said again, trying to keep everyone on track. One by one, each person started going their own way.

"Weren't they supposed to follow you?" Leon asked while looking around.

"They *are* following me, just as you are. As I was trying to tell you before, the bracelets also allow for neural integration. It wasn't activated until your bracelet made it within the wireless charging radius and charged a bit. This means I can show and tell you what others cannot see or hear, and show and tell others what you cannot see or hear. You can also speak to me by thinking about it, but we have yet to perfect telepathy from one person to the next. I can also forward messages assuming both people are within range of my mainframe in Salutis. I'm also able to send messages as long as the two parties are in the radius of a relay or their bracelets are within range to where my fractures can send information.

"Most people prefer to send voice communications, as it is more personal, as you saw with Dobrynya and Ragnarr. Though it can be quite slow. Depending on the situation, it may not be advisable to do so. So I will send messages to the other party, and my fracture will relay that message to them."

"*Fractures?*" Leon thought to himself.

"Yes, fractures. Each bracelet, SFT, almost anything with a powerful enough chip, has a version of me installed. Each fracture has most of the mainframe's knowledge and capabilities on a singular level. The fractures can act as individuals even when out of range of my mainframe in Salutis. Even under interference, such as from the dark beams earlier, they will work independently. Once back in

range, my fractures will synchronize with my main self, and everything will continue as normal with no delays.”

“You really can read my mind. Just how much RAM and storage are in this tiny bracelet to hold all of humanity’s experiences and knowledge?”

“Well, you don’t have access to the personal thoughts of others. Or anyone’s day-to-day experience, unless it was also included in your experience or is noninvasive to the other individual. Otherwise you would need a high-level security clearance and the council’s approval, or the person you want that information from to override that.

“What we store on your bracelet is all stem knowledge, general knowledge, and entertainment. We’ve stored most of what humanity has come up with within your wrist. There are, of course, my own added capabilities and systems that can play a role in helping someone in combat.

“As for your question about RAM, that’s obsolete, as our science team has created a sophisticated paging system to where RAM is no longer needed. They built it into the CPU along with a triginillion amount of storage space. That’s ninety-three zeroes vs. twelve zeros in a terabyte of storage that you are used to. While there is a lot of data to store, it’s something easily done since my fractures aren’t required to store other individuals’ data.”

“Couldn’t you essentially program that knowledge in my head? Say a fighting technique or even a new language?”

“While I can decipher and translate a conversation in real-time for you, I cannot program it into your mind because of the associated risk with it. In previous tests, it ended up killing those individuals. Once reincarnated, they were unable to remember what it was I was trying to teach them in the first place.

“One of my main useful functions is that I can analyze fighting patterns to some extent and can help you predict the incoming at-

tacks. I guess you could say that this is part of my OP functions or *Omniscient Protection*. Though there are limits to what I've been able to do for people in terms of that. Also, not everyone's mind can handle the strain for long. It depends on the person and can vary depending on their conquest. With you though, well nevermind.

"Regardless, I hope this helps you understand things a little more clearly. For reference, you can disable my features at any time using your own judgment. I will then stay disabled until it is your will to enable me again. This is what you may have noticed, watching Ragnarr fighting the beta guardian earlier. He's a bit of a complicated individual and likes to do things himself for the challenge by relying on his own strength. What we need to do is focus on getting you processed and find a mentor for you."

"A mentor?"

"Yes, you need a mentor that can help you with your conquest and help hone your abilities. Since you're someone with a somewhat unique conquest, we would like it if you would choose to fight with us."

"Fight with you?"

"Yes," Hope continued while directing Leon to turn the next corner after a wine shop. "Both Ragnarr and even Dobrynya, before he disappeared, thought that someone with your conquest ability could eventually be a powerful asset for humanity. With the proper training and discipline, we believe you could quickly learn to control your conquest sufficiently, becoming a lieutenant and even right beneath the generals' fighting capabilities."

"Not everyone here chooses to fight, and you don't have to, nor will we force you to. Though, there may be times where you will be forced to fight. Salutis is great, and while we hope it remains a safe haven for humanity, that will never be a guarantee. Based on everything you've experienced and on my readings from your memories and emotions, I think you would prefer this. It seems like you may

have already chosen this yourself when you went off on your own to rescue Clayven's son."

"I suppose you're right. I want to be out there to save and protect as many people as I can. Not for some divine purpose or reasoning, but because I want to help others who can't help themselves and need the support. I haven't really had any talents per se, and I'm unsure if I'll measure up to your expectations; however, if I don't try, how will we know? The one thing we do know is that if I don't at least try, I'll never be able to save anyone else."

"That is a pragmatic way of looking at it," Hope said, looking back at Leon. "It seems you have already come to understand a lot about how the universe works and why positivity is so important. Take, for example, your favorite author, Stephen King. Had he never had the inclination to finish any of his short stories because he thought no one would enjoy them, then he wouldn't be the famous author he is today. He may have remained a high school English teacher for his whole life. Then take me, for example; what if humans gave up on their dreams and believed everything that they had created, such as computers, AI, or technology, was nonsense? I wouldn't exist at all."

"You even know about Stephen King?" Leon asked.

"Of course I do. I have access to all human memories that live within Salutis. This includes your own gunslinger."

Leon smiled at The Dark Tower reference. After a moment, he felt uneasy thinking about what Hope had said. "You have access to **ALL** memories? Does that include all thoughts as well?"

"Yes, and I understand why you're asking this. Fortunately, I was not built by an authoritarian, and my code is locked so that no one can edit it at this point. This means, not even my creator can change how I think and feel. They cannot manipulate me for perverse means. I learn like everyone else and use what I have learned to do my job. That is, to help you all survive. The only means of termi-

nating me is if the council agrees. If something happens to the council, it will rely on the next five highest-ranking members in *Salutis*, or those of the highest conquest rank plus time in *Salutis*. This is to keep it balanced, and as a safeguard, in case any unforeseeable events occur. Don't worry, though; there is no social credit in place, and there is no function to disparage someone for thoughts only. The only time I will report someone is because of their actions, not thoughts or words."

He felt somewhat comforted by this, though; the thought of someone—even if that someone was an AI—to know his every idea and move was something that would take time to get used to.

"So Hope, earlier you brought up an interesting point. Who was the genius that created you?"

"I suppose you would like to know that. The great war ended around three hundred years ago. I was being worked on then, but that was in the early stages, right when the resistance had been formed. As technology improved, I was completed about two hundred years ago. For the past hundred years, I have been functioning independently. It wasn't one person who made me, but a team of computer scientists from different nations and ethnicities. Although..." she paused for a moment, "Unofficially, I would say the person who led the way on my development is the great Alan Turing."

"Who?"

"Alan Turing. It seems you have no memories of him at all. Would you like to learn about him as we walk? We're only a few minutes away from our destination now."

"*Sure, why not?*" Leon thought to himself, while both interested and wanting to appease Hope. She had seemed excited to speak about her own creator.

"I know what you're doing, but this also gives me another chance to show you another feature of your bracelet. I'll try not to feel too

much pity taken on me whilst I'm educating you; now, look to your side."

Not directly in front of Leon, but to the side in his peripheral vision, he saw something. There was a transparent 3D image of a man with text that told Leon about him.

"*The Great Alan Turing*," it read in large silver sparkling letters. Leon continued to read as he looked back and forth while walking. Though few seemed to be in the area he was walking. It made sense, as it was 01:14:33 according to the time displayed in the upper right of his vision. Leon thought this must have been how Google Glass wanted to be, of course, a much more advanced version.

"Born June 23rd, 1912, in London. He studied Mathematics, Computer Science, Logic, and Cryptanalysis. He helped the allies break the German codes in World War Two."

There was a lot more about him and his accomplishments in Salutis. It talked about how he barely survived and evaded a dark god with the help of someone named Rostam. The list went on.

"He seems like quite a guy," Leon conveyed to Hope with a yawn. After everything he had been through since arriving, he was rather sleepy, and his body was now calm enough to recognize it.

"It's still further than I'd like it to be in your current state of exhaustion, so let's take a shortcut." Hope said and directed Leon to something that looked like an open phone booth in the center of the walking crossroads. It was circular at both the bottom and top of the strange device.

"This is called a transfer station. It is why in Salutis we don't need any cars or other kinds of transportation that you may be used to. This device will take you anywhere within the city and some nearby bases that we have within a few seconds."

"How does it work?"

"You should experience it rather than asking how it works," Hope said, smiling.

Leon thought she was hiding something but felt it better to follow her instructions.

“Ok, so what do I do?”

“Put your left arm with the bracelet inside the hole in the dash in front of you.”

“And then?”

“Normally, you tell me where you want to go, but in this case, I’ll be taking you to your home. So I suppose, for tradition’s sake, tell me to take you home.”

Leon smiled and played along. He looked at the clock, and it was now 01:18:47.

“Ok, Hope, take me home.”

After he said that, there was a slight sizzling sound that was soon followed by complete nothingness.

4

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There were no thoughts to be had, no sense of being, or self-awareness, nothing. Eventually, Leon’s consciousness came back along with his fatigued and tired body.

He opened his eyes to find that he was standing in the same position at a transfer station, but everything around him was different. He heard a click on his left wrist, and the station released him. The time reappeared in his vision, and it was now 01:18:55. Only about eight seconds had passed since he told Hope to take him home.

Was that only eight seconds?

Hope appeared beside him.

“What you experienced was transportation known as MELT. This means *Micro Energy Limited Transfer*. In essence, I blocked your pain receptors completely, and you were atomized. The transfer station then transported your atoms and soul here using particle beam technology. Your atoms, along with your soul, were then restored to their original state within this other transfer station. At the

same time, it transported your bracelet via a pipeline using similar technology, and then, upon arrival, reattached itself to you.”

“So what you’re saying is...”

“Yes,” Hope said.

“You really just....”

“Yes.”

“So this transfer station... melted me.”

“Well, yes, but it was a short *temporary* melting,” Hope said while smiling. “This is why I told you it would be better to experience it rather than to ask how it works. After all, not everything works like in your movies. To transport atoms from one place to the next like that, we have to break them down. If you were alive while it happened, you wouldn’t survive the process. Since you’re already dead, however, we have figured out how to transfer both your body and soul.”

“You still melted me...,” he said, still a bit dismayed and honestly shocked.

“You’ll get used to it,” Hope said in a positive tone.

“As if *that* is supposed to make me feel better,” Leon whispered. “Well, whatever; why was it that you could transport my body, soul, and even what I had on, but you couldn’t atomize my bracelet? That seems a bit—well—odd.” Leon said as he rubbed his wrist and inspected the bracelet.

“It may seem strange to you, but humans still haven’t figured out everything in this realm. Humanity has gotten as far as it has after extensive studying and with previous help from the gods. The materials used in the bracelet for neural interfacing have issues being broken down to that fine of a level. Let’s say we wouldn’t want to cause an explosion.”

“Fair enough. Not trying to blow things or people up is usually a good reason.”

“Indeed! Now your apartment is right near this transfer station. This means you can get around the city without too much hassle.”

Hope pointed Leon in the right direction, and he approached a nearby door with a fresh coat of beige paint on it. The door had the number eight written on it in Arabic numerals. This was odd given the fact that every other entry was written with roman numerals. Leon reached for the doorknob but noticed that there was nothing there. Instead, there was something that looked like a flat push handle on the left. He thought for sure that it was a flat push door that he had been familiar with, like at a hotel building. He pushed it with his left hand, where his bracelet was located, while leaning with his body weight.

“Wait!” Hope exclaimed.

It was too late. Leon fell face first as the door didn’t open but instead became penetrable. He traversed through it, falling forward and barely recovering by doing a few clumsy hops before catching himself on a nearby archway. A few seconds after he passed through, the door behind him turned entirely solid again.

“Hey kid, are you ok?” a familiar voice asked a few feet away from him.

Leon looked up to discover the same salt and pepper-haired man he had seen when he first arrived, now staring back at him with a concerned expression. Vance was sitting on the couch, smiling at him in what appeared to be regular-looking leisure clothes. His muscular body seemed to fill them out even if they seemed to be a size too large for him.

“Vance?” Leon asked.

“Yeah, it’s me, kid,” Vance replied.

“*What is Vance doing here? I thought he was taken away by the resistance forces earlier?*” Leon asked Hope by thinking, giving no further sign to Vance that his presence surprised him.

“I was going to tell you, but you kind of stumbled in before I had the chance. Due to room constraints and the policy of not allowing potential criminals to be held together, among other things—well,” Hope paused. “It worked out that he’s your roommate.”

“I thought they would lock you up or something after they boarded the ship like that. What are you doing here?” Leon asked Vance instead of Hope. Trying to keep things between the two of them as amicable as possible.

It wasn’t that Leon particularly disliked Vance. It was that he had tried to *kill* him. Mercifully or not, that wasn’t something that most people could forget.

“Well,” Vance began, “it turns out that they had wanted to do an in-person evaluation. They realized we were all exhausted and decided to do it tomorrow while making it clear that we were under constant surveillance. One wrong move and, well, you heard the speech. So I’m stuck here with you until then, and at least until the trial takes place. I’ve got a meeting tomorrow, and I’m not allowed to leave the apartment without authorization.”

He paused for a moment as a sullen look appeared on his usually stoic face. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, kid,” Vance said now with tears in his eyes. “I need you to know that. It’s no excuse, but I was trying to protect the people there. I think that’s how it is for most of us. I’m not saying you have to forgive me, but I hope one day you will be able to.”

Leon looked at the heartsick man in front of him. He knew he was sincere. His expression said it all.

“It’s alright, Vance. I got the feeling you weren’t enjoying yourself and were doing what you thought was your only option in that hopeless situation. The choices you made were definitely ones made under duress, so I can’t blame you. If I were in the same situation and had been for as many years as you guys had been, I don’t know if I would have done much differently; I would have felt as hopeless

as you were. You don't need to apologize. Let's move forward from here."

Leon didn't want to feel like he was avoiding him, but he was not in the mood to talk any further. He looked around, finding a door in front of him towards the left.

"Hope, is that my room?"

"Yes, that is your room. It opens the same as the front door and will only open for you. Try not to fall over this time."

Leon shook his head slightly and moved towards the door.

"Sorry to cut this short after all that, but I need some sleep. I'm beyond exhausted," he said, looking back at Vance, who was still a bit shaken.

Vance nodded and waved him off for the night.

Leon put his palm against the push handle door in front of him, and it became something mixed between a liquid and gas. Swiftly, he traversed through it, and it closed up behind him, becoming solid once more.

"You don't need to travel through it that quickly," Hope said. "As long as your hand is on it, or it detects your body within it, it will stay in its softer state."

Leon shrugged while rolling his eyes.

In front of him was now a ridiculously shaped bedroom that was as narrow as it was long. The first thing he noticed was the queen-sized bed at the end of the room near a window. As he made his way there, he also saw a closet and an open doorway that led to a bathroom. He passed them both by and fell face-first into the bed. Leon didn't care if he was still muddy, salty from sweating, or even smelled like someone who had come from a raging fire pit; he was ready to sleep. It had only been a few days worth of time since he had last slept in his own bed, but to him, it seemed like this was the first time he was experiencing such a comforting sensation.

He kicked his boots off. Each one had mud deeper than the size of its grooves still stuck to the bottom, and then he pulled his legs up onto the bed. He laid there a minute and stared out the window to his left. Usually, the city lights would distract him, and he would try to cover them up with a blind to fall asleep, but not this time. This time, they provided a comforting glow. This hopeful radiance allowed him to fall asleep the moment his eyes rested in the comfort of his new home.



Chapter IX



The Unlikely Mentor

Throughout the night, Leon slept soundly, without interruption. There were no nightmares of gods holding heads of comrades or of them declaring they would kill every last human. There was only a tranquil, deep sleep that followed the closing of his eyes. Eventually, though, that sleep was interrupted by the posh English voice of his newly acquainted AI friend.

“Leon, it’s time to wake up. LEON!”

A small surge of energy rushed through his body. He opened his eyes to Hope’s voice and then covered them immediately. Sunshine was blinding him.

“What’s going on, Hope?”

“What’s going on is you’re going to be late for your first day with your mentor if you don’t hurry up!” she said frantically, almost in a panic.

“I meant, why is there sunlight?” Leon said. “Where’s it coming from?”

“That’s due to a big hologram and visual illusion created for the people here to feel more at ease. A shield surrounds the entire city. We use it to reflect images and light. In the daytime, we configure it to look as though the sun is shining. You don’t have time to worry about that, though. You need to be at your mentor’s place in thirty minutes, and you still need to get ready. Go, go, shower now. Get ready,” she said, almost desperately.

“Can you close that blind for me?”

Hope controlled the blind, and it closed swiftly, blocking out most of the sunlight.

Although slightly annoyed with Hope sounding like a parental figure, Leon followed her instructions and put his clothes into the closet. However, this wasn't an ordinary closet, and it turned out to be a sort of atomizer that allowed him to pick what clothes he wanted. It would reconfigure the atoms of the clothes to match whatever design he chose. It also seamlessly removed any foreign particles that didn't belong, such as dirt, skin, blood, or anything else that wasn't part of your standard threading. Even with all the designs, he kept the same hiking boots he came to this world with. After he put everything in, he pressed a button. The machine clunked and whispered a hum before repairing all of his clothes—reconfiguring them in a matter of seconds.

From there, he took a quick yet severely needed shower. While technology had changed, the showering process seemed to be almost identical. There weren't any knobs, only a single button, which he pushed before jumping in. The water temperature was perfect and needed no adjustments. Hope explained this was because she set the temperature to his most *pleasant* shower experience. He wondered how long it took her to go through all of his showering memories and decide which one was perfect; after all, he knew it had to be well over a thousand, but paid no mind to it.

“You know, we once had a different system in place that you would jump into. It would remove all the foreign particles and dead cells from the human body instantly, but it didn't seem to go over too well. We ended up scrapping the invention after about a month. Everyone enjoyed taking a shower more,” Hope said.

After about a 15 minute process of getting his clothes clean and taking his shower, Leon was dressed and ready to go. He walked out of his room and was welcomed with the smell of scrambled eggs,

toast, and jelly. While this was nothing special in the broad aspect, after having only eaten cannibal stew with a side of slightly moldy dry bread and water, it smelled like heaven.

He traced the aroma to the kitchen that turned out to be the room that Leon had caught himself on last night to prevent himself from falling.

“I hope you like your eggs scrambled, kid,” Vance said from the kitchen as Leon rounded the corner.

“Honestly, it smells great. Thanks a lot,” Leon said, sitting at the other end of the table.

Vance smiled back, looking a lot better than he did last night, and began eating.

“You only have seven minutes left. Please hurry,” Hope reminded him. The time was now 09:23:08.

“So, Hope, you seem more frantic and even a little erratic. Does this have something to do with who my mentor is? After all, you never mentioned exactly who they were.”

“Well, you may be right. Most people don’t have mentors of this caliber initially. Yours chose you specifically and should be able to help you a lot with understanding the principles around your conquest.”

“Oh, you mean the conquest I haven’t been able to use, but maybe once briefly by complete chance?” Leon said in a sarcastic tone aloud, and Vance looked at him strangely but said nothing as he understood who he was talking to.

“Oh, stop being so pessimistic. You’ll do fine with the proper training,” Hope retorted.

“So, who is it that couldn’t wait to be my mentor?”

“Well...,” she paused. “It’s actually someone who hasn’t ever taken on an apprentice before. It actually has me concerned as, although he’s brilliant, well, he can be a bit extreme at times.”

The time was now 09:26:39. Leon was more hungry than he realized and devoured his breakfast. He picked up his plate and rinsed it off before chugging his water and put his glass to the side for later.

He moved to the door and went through. This time, he didn't stumble at all. He walked over to the transfer station and got ready for the terrible method and sensation of transportation, or lack thereof, that was about to take place. He stuck his left arm into the slot again, and it gripped upon him. It was now 09:29:13.

"Alright, Hope, enough silence. Who is it? Who is my mentor?"

"Tesla," she said before initiating the transfer process.

All Leon could say before his mind went blank and his cells atomized was "TES—"

2

The insensibility flowed as he transferred from the station near his apartment in Salutis. The residence with the number eight and its fresh beige paint seemed so far away. A warmth, or perhaps wholeness that even the darkness couldn't swallow completely, was with him—a spark in what appeared to be a never-ending night.

The next thing he realized, he was whole again. Leon blinked a few times and looked around before ultimately coming back to his senses. He then heard that soft click upon his wrist, and the time display popped in his view and read 09:29:29; this transfer took longer than the last one. Before Leon could ask a question, Hope already knew the essence of what he would say before he had thought it out thoroughly.

"Well," she said, "you could. But without being in control of your conquest—even if I was to enhance your muscles and tendons of this reincarnated body to move at max speed, it would have taken you at least four hours to arrive here. That's assuming your lungs and body could sustain it. It's quite doubtful that you could maintain max velocity for four hours with no prior enhanced experience. It's questionable that your body could take the strain for that long. Even if I

were to block out your pain receptors, I don't think it would matter. Not to mention that it would be dangerous for such a frivolous expenditure and—”

“Alright, Hope. I understand,” Leon said. “Anyway, I thought we were supposed to be here at 9:30 a.m?”

“Well, yes, that is what you were scheduled for, and I have quadruple-checked the last ten minutes alone.”

The time was now 09:31:17. Leon had arrived at a nearby transfer station that looked as if it was hardly ever used. Next to it, there was a giant door that was connected to a metal castle. There was no sign of anyone.

Interesting architecture. Well, let's get on with it then. Leon thought. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

There was no answer, even as Leon moved to the front of the large metal door and knocked. Three reverberating echoes sounded before it opened.

At the giant door stood a tall, slender, solemn-looking middle-aged Tesla with a thick, dark, oily mustache. His hair was in such a mess that if not for the tuxedo looking day suit he wore Leon would have thought he had just crawled out of bed moments ago.

“It's about time you got here. I've been waiting for quite some time now. Come, let's get started,” Tesla said hurriedly while waving Leon inside.

Leon moved past him, and the giant metal door creaked to a close. The inside didn't resemble a castle. Instead, it seemed to be a massive laboratory. It reminded him of something like that of Dr. Frankenstein's lab; in fact, it could not only rival the brilliant doctor's lab but surpass it altogether. Small Tesla coils radiated different energy colors. Some had a few meters' range, electrifying the surrounding air.

Leon now understood why Tesla's hair was such a mess. After being here for a moment, his own hair moved to one side or the other, depending on how strong the static charge near him was.

Beyond that, the strangest aspect was that no one else was in this giant laboratory full of electrical currents and knowledge—not a soul. Only Tesla was here, and now Leon.

“So you've arrived, Leon,” Tesla said while guiding him through the maze of electric contraptions and doodads cluttering the giant room.

“I suppose so,” Leon replied, still dazzled by everything around him. “I'm not late, am I? Hope assured me I was on time as I was to arrive at 9:30 today. Isn't anyone else here? Where are your partners?” Leon asked, still looking around.

“Late? No, no, you're fine. It was merely a figure of speech. As for my partners, they don't exist. I have no partners nor assistants; in fact, I believe you are the first person besides myself and Hope to be inside for well over a hundred years.”

“What? A hundred years? So then you mean—all of this was made by you—alone?”

“Precisely, lad,” Tesla answered, smiling. “Hope, perform a merge between both of our processing fragments; it will make things run much more smoothly.”

“Understood, Doctor,” Hope answered. Making it to where she was both heard and seen by both of them in unison.

One hundred years..., Leon thought. “Why did you choose to mentor me, then? There had to be someone else with a similar background.”

“Well, there are many reasons previously I hadn't picked anyone. You're correct that your conquest may not be new. Though it is rare for someone to have that conquest when you think of all the ways for one to die. Consider the time disparity between here and Earth, and

then you only have a select few that make their way here in a given year.

“Why I chose you stemmed from a few different reasons. To satisfy you, I will say that a big part of it was based on your performance while in captivity. Then there is the fact of your actions regarding the fighting. It’s also my hope that I will help you evolve your conquest to make it superior to others. Lastly, you also passed my initial test. That is the only reason I opened the door for you in the first place.”

“The time disparity? What test? How do you know so much of what happened?” Leon asked now with more questions than what he previously had.

“Hope, are you telling me you haven’t at least gone over the basics of how time works here vs. the time on Earth?”

“Sorry, Doctor, I hadn’t had the chance with everything else going on. Though Ragnarr gave him a brief explanation of why the dark beings are after the living souls and our souls,” Hope said in response.

“Well, Hope, you sure have been slacking, haven’t you? Here’s the deal, lad, basically time here is one-hundredth of what you would expect to see on Earth. To simplify this, we must consider that roughly only 3.65 days on Earth have passed for each year here. Instead of getting anywhere from 50-55million souls a year, this means we only get around 500,000 to 550,000. This further translates to only around 1500 a day for us. Of course, we have to beat out all the subjugated colonies serving the dark gods and avoid the gods themselves when searching for these souls. When you consider the size of this Afterworld, this can be a daunting task.

“Since we now know that the gods target and consume conquest ranks of more outstanding quality as soon as they arrive, you must understand the likelihood of finding someone with something similar to yourself can be—well—challenging. While the military division sends out scouts to rescue those they can, they don’t always make it back. You can see the difficulty of that yourself by looking at

all the people lost on your way here. That should answer about half of your questions. As for why I have had no one at all as an apprentice before, that's simple; I don't trust people.

"I know we're working together, but the struggles I went through in my previous life only for my work to be discredited by that—Edison hack, have left me weary," Tesla said, pausing in disgust at the name. "I can't say I'm overly disappointed that he met almost divine karma after coming here. I've allowed Hope to be here to record my data and work in case I eventually suffer the same fate. If that happens, then perhaps someone else can take up the mantle of my work and further develop it to be beneficial to humanity.

"You asked how I know so much about you and what happened during your travels here; I simply requested that information from Ragnarr and his men. To your last question, 'the test' that I conducted is simplistic—if you would have had any adverse effects from knocking on the door, then I wouldn't have let you in. That doesn't seem to be the case, however, and you didn't even seem to notice the ten thousand volts that I had running through it."

Hope gave Leon a look that needed no words. Usually, she knew what he was thinking and not the other way around, but this time he knew exactly what she was thinking by that look.

"I told you he was a bit extreme," she would have said.

Leon was about to ask how Tesla had access to the mission from Ragnarr, but figured that would be a dumb question. He realized that the energy-based weapons the soldiers were using had to at least be partially integrated with the technology Tesla had developed. Not to mention that the city was primarily running on an energy system that he created. Putting all that together, there was a high chance that Tesla had close to max clearance and pull when it came to many elements in Salutis. He would have to have access to intel to help create countermeasures in protecting the city if needed. What Leon

couldn't get over was the ten thousand volt metal door that he apparently knocked on.

"So assuming you're telling me the truth, and I knocked on a ten thousand volt door—what would you have done had things worked out differently?" Leon asked, with one eyebrow slightly raised.

"That's simple lad," I wouldn't have opened the door and would have sent you away after you woke up or reincarnated if it had killed you. If you couldn't have handled at least that, then what I have planned for you may have killed you ten times over. I don't intend to take things easy on you, and we will work rigorously to improve your conquest abilities.

"The tides are going to be changing for the worse now that Remmy has died. We have to assume that today could be the last day to prepare. Why I chose you, lad, is because many people have seen promise in you. I think that if you learn to master your conquest—hell, even if we can get you to control it to a certain extent this next year—then you will do some marvelous things. I compete with Alan, but our rivalry comes from a good place; we try to see who can benefit humanity more. Suppose you use the technology we have crafted together with your conquest. In that case, I believe you will be a potent force for society.

"With my help, I hope you will become a fearsome force to be reckoned with. If, at the very least, you learn to create your own power source, you will surpass most other members of humanity. The reason for this is that while Hope is powerful, none can currently utilize her full potential for a sustained time in the field. Only when in the short radius of Salutis's wireless energy grid can they overcome this obstacle. This means that none of our fighters can use her defensive, scanning, and predicting methods for too long in the field. It also takes a toll on each person's body, trying to keep up with that level of input in their synapses.

“You are essentially the other half needed to overcome those obstacles. You should have the capabilities to power your fragment for a sustained, possibly infinite, time in combat. You may not even notice the extra input that your synapses will have to process. The final result that I’m hoping for—that we all are hoping for—will be you using the gift the gods have given you, combined with our technology. This is the only time I’ll ask, but if you wish to back out, say so now. As we move forward, there will be a strict methodology that you will have to adhere to.”

After he had heard everything, Leon felt both excited, yet fearful of the daunting task ahead. Not that he was afraid of the training itself; no, on the contrary. Leon was excited to push himself and see how far he could take it. If he could harness electricity on command, that would be more thrilling than any aspect of his whole previous existence. It would create new, exciting challenges ahead. He had always found Earth boring and bland. Most of the secrets that may still exist were hidden from general knowledge or locked away in the deepest depths of the ocean, where few could afford to adventure.

According to Tesla, many thought he was a strong candidate. Still, what if they all believed him to have the potential that he didn’t actually have? The fear that he faced was stemming from the surrounding pressure. He was dealing with the unknown, but he wouldn’t let the unknown keep him from trying.

“You don’t have to worry about me. I’m ready,” Leon told Tesla with confidence brimming from his eyes. “My grandpa always taught me to work hard for what you believe in, and even if others don’t appreciate it, you’ll be glad you gave it your best.”

Something had dawned on Leon that his troubled mind didn’t have time to fathom under previous circumstances. His grandfather had died back in 2015. That was over five years ago in Earth time, which had been nearly five hundred years ago here.

“Hope is my grandfather here?”

Hope looked at him with palpable anguish on her face as she answered his unfortunate question.

“Jim D. Michaels, Born May 23, 1928, in Enid, Oklahoma. Died February 9, 2015, from colon cancer. His soul was lucky to have appeared in the faltering territory of your gods and other humans. He survived through the tail end of the war and remained with the resistance for 200 years until he was killed during a mission to rescue a few new arrivals. Unfortunately, his group was ambushed by the most disloyal human faction, who now serve directly under the dark gods—the Blooming Apostate’s kingdom. They are formally recognized by their clenched blooming skull insignia.”

He got his answer, but was almost sad that he had asked. He had already lost his grandpa in his heart and mourned his loss without ever expecting to see him again. All this news did was reaffirm his drive. He frowned, clenched his fist, and looked more determined than before. He had already wished to help people before this news, and now, knowing what had happened, he knew his grandfather would want him to carry on and follow his heart.

They had made it to the heart of the castle and to Tesla’s most cherished room. The castle’s roof had a skylight, through which the fake yet realistic heated sun’s beams fell upon them.

Leon thought to himself, *the sun burns bright, makes a man just right*, remembering his grandpa’s favorite phrase.

“Alright, Tesla,” Leon said, looking at him with conviction. “You’ve got yourself a willing apprentice. Help me become someone who can protect those who cannot protect themselves.”

Tesla walked to Leon and put one hand on each of his shoulders. “Let us begin,” he said with an endearing smile.

3

On the other side of the city, things were picking up at a rapid pace. The meeting that Vance said he had to attend turned out not to be an interview but the first day of court for the accused from

the Snow Leopard's kingdom. Not everything in Salutis happened quickly, nor was everything as well organized as one would think an advanced civilization with a multi-functional AI would be. However, the one thing that was usually efficient because of the help of those variables was the court system.

In a city with almost no crime—the court system was used almost entirely for a single purpose—the trials of outsiders. This, of course, meant that anyone who wasn't busy at the time could watch the hearings. In this little city of salvation, there wasn't ever any live entertainment to be broadcast. There were more pressing matters than having trained actors or storytellers. Everyone played a role in the city, and there was no room for that role to be strictly for entertainment.

Hope would relay any relevant events to the public. She would have access to the mundane for anyone interested. This consisted of how hot or cold it was, or if there were any storms on their way that could be watched from the inner protective layer.

Sure, some wrote stories in their spare time. They even submitted them to the city's database if someone requested it. Still, outside of that, they never amounted to much.

For general purposes, there were two sources of entertainment. The first, any previously recorded entertainment cataloged from Earth anyone could access. Archives existed composed full of books containing anything you could think of (there were also movies of the same sort). The second exception was court trials. Was the reason that they were broadcast among the citizens to provide entertainment, education, or was it so the fear would keep them on track to prevent their demise? That was up for debate and depended on each individual's interpretation.

In the courthouse, a short, average-built almond-toned lady stood before the group in question, peering down at each of them.

“Before we begin this trial, let it be known that it is not to determine if you did, in fact, aid the Dark Universe, but to determine why. For it is already known that you did, aid them, and for many years. Before the chaotic fight that led to the death of the demigod Remmy, your kingdom was part of a subjugation treaty. This, again, is not up for dispute. Nor is the fact that your treaty required you to gather the souls of your brethren in exchange for your own safety.”

The judge went from left to right and named them one by one, starting with Vance and ending with Clayven.

“You have all acknowledged this to be true, so the question remains, why should you be allowed to remain here? Why should those of you before me who were each specifically responsible in one way or another for the exploitation, capture, transportation, holding, or killing of innocent humans against their will be allowed to stay in Salutis? Speak true and honest. You all have been properly told of the situation you are in and of your rights. If you lie, it will be known.”

The group peered up at the woman. Most calm but not hopeful. The one outlier in the group was Krysta, who did everything she could to hide her smile.

The judge continued to look over at them again until she came to Krysta, where she paused. She had now been notified about the deal between her and Ragnarr from Hope.

“It seems one of you made a deal to heal someone at the risk of your own life. Somehow, this one act has cleared you of all insurrections against humanity. I wholeheartedly disagree with the decision of this deal, especially given your part in all of this, but I cannot go against it. It was a wartime agreement made directly with a high-ranking council member. Therefore, I must allow that person to be free. You may go, Krysta,” the judge said, looking directly at her.

This differed from a traditional trial that anyone from the group was used to. There were no guards around to release her and only Hope to remove her shield restraint. Krysta began to leave, relieved

with a quivering smile, knowing that if they had made her testify, she would have had no defense. Krysta got great pleasure from luring in unsuspecting victims to crush their hopes shortly after. It was what she relished most about being in that broken-down *kingdom*. Right as she was about to leave the building, the judge stopped her, giving her a stern warning.

“You may have made the deal, but as you know, you are always being watched. Don’t let this newfound freedom go to your head. Be on your way now, and make smart decisions, for your grievances of the past have been forgiven. But next time, we will make you face your punishment with no sympathy.”

Krysta left without looking back.

4

It had been six hours since Krysta left the court building. Inside remained the five other defendants: Vance, Dane, Clayven, and the two surviving guards, Martha and Enzo. Coretta had been questioning them while a member representing the council of generals who simply went by Judahl and a member representing the citizens of Salutis named Vincent watched. Vincent seemed to be more skeptical of the defendants in front of him than either Judahl or even Coretta, who the group found out immediately was not to be taken lightly.

Things weren’t proceeding well for the group. The judge was allowed to use her conquest during the trials. While this usually kept the hearings reasonably short, it almost seemed unethical and cheating in terms of how it was used. Her conquest was built upon a rare case of Aphantasia. The disease prevents one from getting visual images. Hers was caused by a brain tumor that turned fatal shortly after she was diagnosed. Because of the strange circumstances of her death, she was granted the conquest ability to peek into others’ minds and see what they were thinking and feeling. This made most trials based almost solely upon her own viewpoints; that was, unless

there was an intervention from either of the other representatives present, which rarely happened. Nothing of the sort had occurred in the last six hours while they had questioned the group.

They had each told the judge their individual stories and reasons up to this point. Nothing had convinced her to grant leniency. While their accounts were various, from her view, they all felt similar. They were doing it for their family, for the survival of those in the kingdom. The one exception was Dane, who seemed to have had his own reasoning.

Dane lived for the king and would die for him. Clayven had saved him from a fate worse than death, worse than losing one's soul. He had traded some of his own personal preserves and had him smuggled out from the Blooming Apostate's domain. Dane cared not if it benefited the man or for whatever the reason was. He only cared that Clayven had saved him from being used as human kindling—a living hell that had lasted throughout the great war and slightly past it.

Being burned repeatedly again for the enjoyment of others—the pleasure of the Blooming Apostate's leaders. He had erased some of his own memories with his conquest to keep his sanity. The healers among them in their ranks would heal his insides so he would not die on their leaders' orders, but they were never allowed to treat his skin. Because they kept him in that state for so long, it had carved the damage into his soul. Even if he were to die now, he would reincarnate with the same wounds upon his skin and with no way to heal them. It resulted in him being referred to as The Scarred Man.

As it turns out Dane was saved to suppress the king's memories and conquest. This allowed Clayven to make a favorable deal for those still under his care—for those he had rescued along the way. It allowed him to elude the dark gods' gaze so that he could protect those around him and Raven, his son.

Dane stood before the judge and described the horrors that he had lived through, the few that he still remembered.

Coretta was given her position as a judge, as she had had little experience with the world outside of Salutis. This allowed her to be less emotional and forgiving with those from the outside world. She couldn't believe men could be so cruel for no reason. Looking into his mind, she could see and feel it instantly, up to the point he had erased. Coretta had initially thought about asking him to remove the blocks on his memories, but knew from everything she had seen already that they were real. A chill crossed her spine, and she called for a recess to contemplate the horrifying images and sensations that she had come to know through the man's suffering.

Coretta asked Hope if this was a creation of his own mind. Perhaps a manipulation using his conquest, but Hope affirmed that the images she had seen were authentic and that he spoke true. When the judge returned, she had decided that she would grant leniency to at least Dane for all he had seen and suffered.

He simply replied: "In the spirit of honesty, I tell you now if you release me, I will use whatever means necessary to save the king. Even at the cost of my own body or sanity."

This left her in a tough spot, and she was forced to keep him with the others, at least while she continued to hear more from the rest. She did just that, and before long, there was no more to be heard regarding why they had agreed to help the dark gods.

"Is there nothing more you can say for yourselves? Is there not one of you who thought to try and find another way? To do something different from handing over six hundred souls each year?"

None of them had a response to this.

Clayven glanced around at those he had been in charge of with a look of uncertainty before contacting Hope.

"Hope are you there?"

"I'm here, Clayven," she said, appearing before him, knowing what he was about to ask. "To your request of witnesses that has been denied. The judge has said, 'Why should witnesses be allowed to give only positive statements on behalf of the defendants. What of all the souls who were captured and tormented and removed from existence?'"

"There are a few prisoners that meet that requirement, and at least one that had a decent amount of interaction with us. Perhaps at least he could be called to give testimony?"

"Perhaps. It would take an overruling of the original set of rules for this trial. That will require the approval of at least two out of the three overseers present here. Would you like me to call a parlay on your behalf and ask?"

"Yes, please." He knew he didn't have any other option.

"Just a moment."

It was a long shot, and while he didn't expect it would do him any favors, maybe it could lead to the best probable outcome which his people walked free; well, *most* of them. Even with the witness, it meant that he would likely die, but at least he would have a loyal few willing to look after his son. Even Dane would listen to him if he pleaded for him to do so in the interest of his kid.

"Ok," Hope said after a minute. "In a rare case, all three have agreed to your request; however, it appears Leon's mentor has refused to allow this case to distract him for an unset amount of time, and well... I'll let Coretta explain it."

"It seems you have all been granted a short grace period. After being persuaded to allow you to have a single witness, that said witness is not available for an unforeseeable amount of time. This *anomaly* will cause this trial to be put on hold for the same amount of time. This is because of the clause regarding rule amending that states: 'a rule cannot be changed again during the same trial to ensure a fair process unless also requested by the defendants.' I don't suppose you

would like to request a change again, would you?" she asked, looking at Clayven.

Clayven said nothing, and neither did anyone else.

"I had thought as much. While I won't mention names, it seems someone on this panel knew before the rule change of said witness's current whereabouts and status. That said, it matters not. Until Leon's mentor allows him to be a part of this trial or an agreement is reached, this trial is hereby postponed."

She slammed the gavel and walked away.

The doors opened to the courthouse, and there were a few people around as the group walked out. Though no final decision had been made yet, a few had expressed sympathy for the group. Others, however, weren't so nice and had either called them apostates or simply sneered at them.

"How long do you think it will be until Leon can stand trial?" Clayven asked Hope as he headed down the road.

"If I were to guess, you won't be hearing much from him for at least a couple of months, though it could be much longer. It's a waiting game. You should focus on enjoying the time you have with your son," Hope said kindly.

The sun was fading now, and the moons were taking over the dark sky of Salutis. It was quiet and relaxing. Though the group had no purpose and none had a mentor of their own—for now, they were safe. All but Enzo headed towards the nurse's house to see the king's son while enjoying their temporary freedom. They were together and began to wait. Wait for when Leon would either convince the courts to save them or send them to their execution.

And wait, they did.



Part Two



The Need to Struggle and Lie





Chapter X



Trials

Months had passed since Leon first knocked on that electrified door and was tested by the father of modern electricity. In that time, he had learned a great deal about many things he hadn't been aware of—everything from the importance of positive and negative charges to the triboelectric effect and beyond.

Except for a few minor blunders and countless fried Hope fragments, things had gone smoothly. Leon was now much better equipped to handle the situations ahead of him. Tesla was still uncanny and eccentric when it came to most people and his privacy, but he had warmed up to Leon and Leon to him. Tesla had not only become a teacher that Leon could look up to, but also a friend. Perhaps even something like a grandfather.

The most exciting thing that Leon had learned about in his time there, besides his conquest, was the full capabilities of the Tesla towers. Tesla even had Leon inspect both the towers and the electrical systems that powered the wireless electricity over the months. With the help of Hope, he was instructed on how to charge certain capacitors with his own power at Tesla's direction. The biggest shock of it all was the discovery of the Teleforce defense system. These were giant electrical cannons Tesla had created that could shoot multiple targets up to 2500 miles away. He explained that they had such precision that the margin of error was only a few meters at the max range.

At least, that's what Tesla had told him. It's not like he had seen them in action. Either way, for this to be up and running was a complete surprise to Leon. It seemed like Tesla had created the ultimate defensive weapon. What would have once seemed like complete pseudoscience had now been an absolute pleasure to see come to fruition. Leon was grateful to be a part of this wondrous world Tesla had shown him. An advanced world that was full of technology and that was shrouded in complete mystery to others.

All that said, while Leon understood some of it, he was far from a tech-savvy engineer and wouldn't be able to reproduce it. No, his focus here was to learn everything he could about how electricity worked so that he could use his conquest more effectively. He had learned most of the basics. However, he would still need to know when to use the positive and negative charges together or separately, depending on his goals, to make the most of his conquest ability.

"So, do you think the Teleforce project could have worked on Earth if you had the backing that you required?" Leon asked, looking over at Tesla, who was working on something obscurely.

"In theory, yes. I had that finished before I left Earth. I was working with the US government in secret to develop it. Still, they canned the project and my ideas for free electricity. At the time, coal was more profitable to them than tapping into unlimited energy using the ionosphere. The Teleforce project would have needed a lot of electricity to run anyhow. I had later discovered that the ionosphere couldn't produce the power needed with my original tower design.

"I've since designed a sufficient new tower that uses a small fraction of Afterworld's vast energies and gravity. The new tower has little cylinder balls that run on a continuous track, going first down and then back up, wrapping all the way around the tower. As the balls go back up, I've been able to block the effects of gravity using anti-gravity technology. This allows the balls to maintain their speed and produce kinetic energy both while they fall and rise. This means, not

only have I been able to generate energy using something similar to my old ideas, but I have essentially created a secondary process that creates its own energy. Doing this allows for an energy redundant tower. If one fails or is blocked, the other should still provide a sufficient amount of power. When needed, it will still be able to defend *Salutis* in case of an attack. The power source here is similar to the ionosphere but packs an insurmountable amount of energy. In terms of potential power, it's far greater than Earth could have ever hoped for."

Tesla finished up what he was working on and then looked over towards Leon. After all this time, the different contraptions and doohickeys that laid among the castle still captivated him.

"Come here," Tesla said, holding something in his grasp.

In Tesla's hand, Leon could see a small black box, about the size of his palm.

"What is it?"

"This..., well, this is something that I've been working on for quite a while." Tesla loosened his tight grip from the box and handed it to Leon as he smiled.

"Go on, open it."

Leon opened the box. Inside laid a bracelet that differed from the others he had seen before. Instead of a light ivory shade, this one had a dark charcoal tone to the band. As soon as he put it on, he heard that familiar *click*, and the sun that was usually faded instead turned to an electric blue color that didn't diminish.

"You see, Alan was getting a little tired of my requests for a new Hope fragment and processor every other day when you fried them. So, with my help, we designed a unique bracelet. It runs in an open circuit. This means you shouldn't have a problem with overloading the capacitor anymore. Your electrical energy continues out of the bracelet and flows through you. There's still large storage for energy

in case of emergency. Still, with the open circuit, your body will no longer forcefully overcharge it.”

Leon didn't know what to say. The one thing he knew was that these men were absolutely brilliant, and humanity would be at a considerable loss without them. There were others as well, but these two had done so much to help him and were a big reason for some of humanity's greatest weapons against the gods. Had they not been around, nor the man who had taught people how to make the artificial islands, they would be in a hell of a lot worse shape.

Leon had learned a few different aspects of *Salutis* from Hope while studying under Tesla. The one he found most intriguing about the place was that only a couple hundred years ago, *Salutis* was a small island about the size of Japan. Building upon that island year after year, gradually expanding, they created an artificial continent roughly the size of the United States. This all took place while it was being camouflaged by the reflective light and soul cloaking technology.

The new bracelet had had enough time to calibrate to Leon's body, and Hope appeared in front of him.

“Hello again, Leon.”

“Hello, Hope,” Leon smiled. Her face and voice had become a part of his daily routine and something that he had grown fond of. “You're not going to disappear on me this time, are you?” he asked.

“I suppose that is up to you now, isn't it?”

“Well, I think I can manage to not overload this one—that is, unless you decide to piss me off,” he laughed.

He could tell Hope was about to say something stern and cut her off by letting her know he was only joking.

A sudden loud knock came from the front of the laboratory, causing Tesla to furrow his brows.

“Doctor, Ragnarr has approached the building and is requesting access. Should I let him know you'll meet him at the front?” Hope

asked, knowing that he wouldn't allow anyone else access to his laboratory other than herself and Leon.

"It's that time already, is it? Tell him we will be out in a few minutes and that I need a moment with Leon before sending him off."

"As you wish, doctor," Hope said as she sent the message to her fragment, which was with Ragnarr.

"Well, I wished we would have had more time. You've been here for nearly nine months, and while you've grown, there is still more I am sure I could have taught you."

"Out of time?"

"I stalled them for as long as I could, but it seems you've got two big appointments coming up, and I can no longer stall either. I'm sorry I couldn't teach you more in the time we had. It seems I have failed."

"What more could you have taught me?" Leon asked, astonished that Tesla had thought he'd failed him. "I've already learned how to utilize and sustain my energy. I've even been able to create an electrical field around me without my bracelet. And, on top of that," Leon said as he pulled out the dagger he stole off the wall in the Snow Leopard's kingdom. It shone while covered in electrical sparks. "I've mastered energy transference."

He threw the dagger at a nearby metal target he had used over the months, hitting it dead center, causing thermal heating to occur around where it struck.

"I know you're a lot more prepared than when you first arrived, but I didn't even get to teach you about the bell experiment that those damn Nazis stole."

Leon frowned, not understanding what he meant. "The bell... you're not talking about that made-up story *Die Glocke*, are you? Where the Germans created a giant bell used for time travel?"

"Time travel?" Tesla laughed. "Of course not. That would be preposterous. Though we are probably talking about the same thing."

The bell was never meant for time travel. No, it was meant for two things: levitation and teleportation. Who do you think created the transfer stations here? The reason I had been saving this for last is that you clearly weren't ready, and now I have no time left to explain."

"Excuse me, sir," Hope interjected. "It seems Ragnarr has become quite impatient and has given you eight more minutes, no more. If Leon doesn't make the trial, they will proceed without him, and in doing so, may well seal the fates of those few there."

"OK, DAMN IT, ok," Tesla said, more enraged and stressed than Leon had ever seen him before. "I don't have the time to explain it all, and you don't have time to waste if you are to make your court date."

"What court date?" Leon had heard nothing of the sort.

"There's no time for that. Ragnarr will tell you all you need to know about the circumstances of that debacle. What I need you to know is that you have the ability within yourself to charge each of your cells positively or negatively. By knowing this and understanding it, you *should* eventually be able to use the idea of electromagnetism with your own strength to do like the cylinders on my towers and ignore gravity. You've gone through a hell of a lot and have still struggled with the aspect of reading the properties of your surrounding environment, but with Hope's help, you should be able to grasp it. Eventually, you should learn to feel it on your own without her aid, and then you should be able to master your conquest even further."

Tesla led Leon to the front of the castle. They passed by the multiple lonely rooms full of doodads and gadgets. The halls were empty of pictures and only filled with books. Tesla's doctor Frankenstein's lab could be more aptly named Tesla's fortress of solitude. With his only assistant, an AI of another scientist's creation, it was indeed a lonely place.

At last, they had reached the door, and Tesla grabbed Leon by his shoulders and looked at him the same way he had when he first en-

tered his sacred space. An endearing look comparable to one a parent would give a child or grandchild.

“You look so much like him, you know that?” Tesla said with watery eyes.

“Like who?”

Tesla removed his hands from Leon’s shoulders and rummaged through his pockets until he pulled out a golden ring. The ring was both normal-looking and technologically sophisticated, with small circuits showing on the exterior. He handed it to Leon and told him to read the inside of the band.

The fine print inside read, “To JDM, the love of my life. - Love, Mary Alice.”

Leon knew those names well and now knew who Tesla was referring to. It had been his grandfather’s ring given to him by his grandmother.

“He had always told me should anything happen to him, and either of his grandsons were to come to this world while it was still in a chaotic state, to do my best to guide them. It turned out that you also had a conquest that I could help you develop. Your grandfather was the only genuine friend I ever had, and if not for him, I wouldn’t be here. He helped me make it through the height of the war by saving my life. I made a promise that if I could do so, I would guide and protect those of his kin. I hope I fulfilled at least half of that promise.”

“Sir, three minutes until Ragnarr breaks the door down. He’s rather serious about the time constraint,” Hope interjected again.

Tesla ignored her and continued talking. “Wear the ring. One day you may utilize it properly, teleporting on your own with only it and your conquest. I don’t have time to explain everything. I wish I did, and for that, I am truly sorry. Hopefully, if things go smoothly, you will figure it out, and if you can’t, well, then come and see me whenever you’d like, and we can work on it together. You know, your

grandfather was the inspiration behind the sun logo and the sun hologram you see each day in Salutis.”

“The sun burns bright, makes a man just right,” Leon said as he slipped his grandfather’s wedding ring on.

“And for that right, we must continue to fight,” Tesla responded. “Good luck, Leon. Don’t forget, I’m here if you need anything.”

The front door to the castle creaked open, and Ragnarr was standing there with an impatient look on his face.

“Odin’s sake. It’s about damn time,” Ragnarr huffed. “Hope, take him to the courthouse immediately.”

The nearby raggedy transfer station opened up, giving a slightly vibrant gleam, and Leon moved to it, sticking his hand into the wrist slot. He was trying to think of the words to say to Tesla before he left. All that came to him was “Thank you,” but before he could voice them, everything went numb, and the emptiness followed.

2

Click. The time displayed 16:15:33 before it faded from Leon’s view. It had been nine months since he had used a transfer station, and he didn’t miss it one bit. He had avoided using it by staying with Tesla in his fortified laboratory. It wasn’t like he had anything besides his clothes on him when he had arrived, and he was happy to avoid the transfer process day after day. There was also the awkwardness of sharing a room with Vance that he took into consideration. Not that he hated the guy; it was just that strange feeling of sharing a room with someone that had tried to kill him that would take some time

“Please exit the transfer station to avoid delays,” an automated, posh yet rather dull male voice said. Somehow, it reminded him of Marvin from the hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy. Leon didn’t know if the AI had a level of understanding like Hope did or not, but clearly, it wasn’t humanity’s chosen AI like she was. Knowing this, you could understand the depressed tone of voice.

“*Poor relationship?*” He thought jokingly.

“Something like that,” she replied. “He was my predecessor, and there were flaws to his build. Instead of scrapping the project, they left him as a function to help the city.”

Leon walked away and looked around at his surroundings. He hadn’t realized it at first, but there were a few people gathered that were eagerly awaiting his arrival. After all, the star witness in the most extended trial in the history of Salutis was him. One person was about to approach him when the transfer station buzzed loudly and glowed with a piercing bright light. Seeing the process from the other side slightly alarmed Leon as he staggered backward a couple of steps.

Ragnarr arrived and ruffled his hair a bit after coming to his senses.

“Get back—we ain’t got the time to be a sideshow to you lot,” he said, with a fierce glint in his eyes toward the onlookers.

He walked towards the courthouse, and Leon followed. Those around kept their distance in fear of the hotheaded general, who anyone could tell by looking was in a foul mood.

“Those damn gawkers. They know better than to interact with the court processes. Talking to you could sway your testimony. If we had time, I’d lay into them,” Ragnarr roared while making sure those around could hear his thoughts on the matter. “I assume you know of the situation, yes?” he asked Leon as they passed through the main entrance of the courthouse.

“What situation? I honestly have no idea why I’m here, just that it’s important.”

“That damned fool. Tesla is one of the smartest men in Salutis, and even though he sees the world for its truth, he remains in his own personal cave of allegory. He’s facing the outside world, yet choosing not to enter it and essentially ignoring it in the most critical of circumstances.”

Leon looked puzzled at Ragnarr, who was alluding to Plato's cave of allegory. It wasn't something he expected from the ruthless warrior.

"You know, I was going to take you up as an apprentice myself, but he blindsided everyone by requesting you almost the moment you arrived. Given the nature of things, I chose not to intervene."

He looked at Leon, noticing distinct changes in the man in front of him before giving a small smile.

"I must have faith that it was the right choice. I wish I could have given you a heads up about what you're going to face, but I cannot help you or them any further. We delayed as long as possible. Their fate is now in your hands, and the decision of the panel."

Ragnarr opened the door for Leon and motioned him to proceed into the epic chambers. The door that led inside was normal compared to most other doors he had seen. It closed behind him, with Ragnarr on the other side, leaving Leon in the courtroom to fend for himself.

The inside was filled with red velvet carpet and porcelain pillars, among different fancy décors. At the door stood two giant statues that resembled guards. They were about five times as big as Leon. Each was made with intricate detail, from their thick noses to their full lips. Both were blindfolded, with the alpha symbol in the middle. Leon didn't know what to make of this. They both held a spear with a shield and stood as straight as someone from the queen's guard in the UK.

Further in front of him, and kneeling, were Vance, Clayven, Dane, and the two guards—Martha and Enzo. They were each before Coretta, who was peering down from high above. Her growing impatience could be felt from where Leon was. Vincent, from the council of citizens, and Judahl, representing the generals, were still at her sides, sitting a few feet below her to her left and right, respectively.

“Ah, so the star witness has at last arrived!” Vincent said in a sarcastic tone. “It’s about time. Can we get on with this charade? Why these apostates have been allowed to remain here for this long is beyond me.”

“Careful Vincent,” Judahl said, sitting juxtaposed to him, cleaning his pocket watch with a cloth. “You’re letting your bias show.”

“Bias?” Vincent sneered. “As if what we’ve heard and seen is evidence of bias. No, it is only that of truth.”

Leon looked at the people in front and those above him, trying to get an idea of the situation. He had a vague understanding of what was going on but was still lost with no prior explanation.

“Excuse me,” he said, looking at the critical figures that were about twenty feet ahead of him and ten feet above. “Can someone please explain what is going on?”

“Well, it seems this star witness perhaps sees stars himself,” Vincent laughed.

“Enough,” Coretta spoke firmly. “Approach, Leon.”

Leon moved forward, gazing up at them. His hair was a mess. He tried to pat it down as he approached, but it was to no avail. He had been using an insulating gel whenever he would leave the castle, but in his rush, he forgot to grab some from Tesla. The dry air inside the old court building and the constant sustainment of the subtle energy field around him led to his hair being a static nightmare.

As he passed by the defendants, Vance gave him a queer look after sensing the difference in how Leon carried himself. He was still the same, but also quite different. To a veteran hunter and warrior, it was apparent.

Leon reached the end of the velvet carpet that had reminded him of the carpeting from Clayven’s castle, where the Beta guardian had tried to kill him. He stood about six feet away from the tall, lustrous bench that held the almond-toned judge and her compatriots.

“So you’re Leon,” she said, glancing over at him.

“Well, it’s unfortunate that we have to meet under such circumstances, but lady justice must have her say. This day is one she has already had to wait too long for. The reason you are here is simple—you are to be a court witness, and all we ask is that you speak true concerning any question that is directed at you. Explain it as best as your recollection will allow, and everything will be fine. This trial is not for you, but for those you see behind you. It is to determine whether they should be allowed to stay or be dealt with as apostates towards our universe. Do you understand what I am asking of you?” She glared at him with an intense deciphering look.

“I believe so,” he said calmly.

“Very well, then. Let us begin. What can you tell me about your first few days here on Afterworld?”

“My first days? In regards to what?”

“Go through what you remember, and I will stop you and ask more direct questions when it is needed.”

“Well, I first awoke in the sky and fell a few thousand feet down into the ocean below. From there, I swam ashore. I decided that since I saw nothing along the coast, I should head into the forest. Not long after I had found myself within its vast myriad, I noticed what looked like a crater in front of me. I stopped to observe the area, looked up, and saw the corpse of a man half-eaten by birds. I then noticed the two moons before I panicked and ran. Or was it the two moons and then the corpse? Either way, after that, I passed out. I awoke to Krysta and Vance.”

“I see. And what was your overall experience with Vance? Did he ever try to harm you?” she asked, looking at Leon and glancing over at Vance.

“Well, even though the initial meeting was perhaps scripted, in the sense that he was acting to lure me to the Snow Leopard’s Kingdom, he never changed personality-wise. He always seemed humble

and as kind as one could expect, given the circumstances of the situation.”

“I see. And did Vance ever try to harm you?”

“Well,” Leon began hesitantly. “He tried to kill me, but that was because of the situation and the orders of the king.”

“The situation?”

“Yes, with Remmy and everything that had escalated so quickly.”

“So, is it your position that you weren’t in any danger before the arrival of Remmy?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. I was clearly in danger due to the actions of the guardian and the Frozen King—as was everyone else who was caged there with me, but—” Leon was cut off.

“I understand now; tell me about your encounters with Enzo and Martha,” Coretta said curtly.

“Enzo?” He paused after inspecting the man who was trying to cover his face. “That’s Enzo?” he asked, shocked after realizing who it was in front of him.

He was amazed he didn’t recognize him on the SFT and barely recognized him here. Still, he guessed most people kept to themselves after that whole experience. Now his teeth were clean, and without a helmet, he looked completely different, but he did have that faint scar under the left of his lip that looked like a diamond. This was the only giveaway that helped him to realize who it was.

“Well, he was a cruel individual, and—” he was cut off again—this time by Enzo.

“Quit your lying. We never even met!”

“Never met? You threatened to cut off my fingers and *pieces* of me. What do you mean we never met?”

This apparently hit a nerve, and Enzo could no longer keep up his short-lived act.

“You shut your fucking mouth, you insolent freshie scum. You’re lucky I didn’t cut off your cock the moment I met you and then fed it—” He stopped talking and choked.

Enzo collapsed to his side, reaching in the air as his face turned from red to purple. He coughed, spitting up saliva as he could breathe again. As he exhaled, he let out a rough cough due to the continuous white beam that was now surgically lodged in his throat. He tried to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Vincent smiled at the display of agony as it coincided with his own unique sense of *justice*. Opposite of him, Judahl remained wholly calm and continued to stay unfazed by what was going on.

“It seems our dear friend Enzo broke the rules of the court, as he did not speak true. His punishment for this is he has forfeited his right to speak for the rest of this trial. Is there anything else you needed to say in regards to your encounter with this man?” Coretta asked Leon, who was shaken at the display he had witnessed.

“No, ma’am,” he said, wanting to describe how helpless Enzo was against the guardians but chose not to. “I had no other direct experience with him or anything that would apply to the case.”

“Understood. Now on to the woman named Martha. You seem to have recognized her as well, correct?”

“That’s right. We only met once, though,” Leon said, trying to straighten his hair again.

“Tell me about this one experience? What happened?”

“It was after Dobrynya had begun to battle with Remmy, and everything was thrown into chaos. I decided I would go save the king’s son, erm, Clayven’s son. So I made my way towards the castle. On my way, I was almost caught by one of Remmy’s guardians and would have been in a lot of trouble had she not intervened.”

“So you’re saying your only experience with her was her saving you? Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. If not for Martha, I’m not sure I would have been able to save Clayven’s son or the nurse that took care of him for that matter.”

“Would any of you like to add anything at this point?” Coretta asked the defendants, but she only got a few headshakes.

“Next, we have Dane,” she continued after a moment’s pause. “What were your experiences with him?”

“I don’t really have much good or bad to say about Dane. My experiences with him were all mostly neutral. He’s the one who helped me to regain my memories. Other than that, he only delivered Clayven’s orders to Vance, which led him to try and kill me.”

“Regain your memories?”

“Yes, I was having a spat of amnesia, and so he used his conquest to help me remember everything. So I guess honestly, he had more of a positive impact on me at his King’s behest. *Though for less positive intentions,*” he thought to himself.

Coretta looked at him and was about ready to say something, but decided not to. After a moment of contemplation, she knew what was next.

“Now for the final defendant. What is your overall experience with him?”

“With Clayven?” Leon asked.

“Indeed, unless you see anyone else around here that should be considered,” she answered, brows raised, with a peculiar tone in her voice.

“Well, none that I know of,” Leon replied. “To begin, my interaction with the *Frozen King* differed greatly from that of the man Clayven.”

“Explain,” Coretta said, confused, with her eyebrows scrunched.

“When I first arrived, I met the Frozen King; he was a king that would do anything to protect both his son and his people, regardless of the cost. He cared not for outsiders, except for if it would serve his

purpose of protecting those within his care. I was an outsider; therefore, I was expendable. Given the circumstances, it is certainly understandable. I believe this is why he had his memories wiped. Otherwise, his emotions would have made it difficult for him to act as a leader in the best interests of his people. It is why he and his people were able to survive.

“He tried to make a trade for me, not out of malice, but for the sake of those he was responsible for. He may have had a frozen heart in a sense, but it benefited those in his care.”

Vincent laughed.

“It’s funny that you should say that. That is almost essentially the same spiel that he gave to us during the first hearing that now seems so long ago. Are you sure they haven’t been in contact with each other?”

“Quiet Vincent. Let him finish.” Coretta reprimanded him while giving him an icy glare. “Now tell me about Clayven, who you associate apart from the *Frozen King*.”

“Well, I have little experience with the man. I know his memories were returned to him, and once they were, what limited interactions I had with him afterward were a lot more gentle. He was a whole new person. He was no longer a calculating man for the sake of his own. Instead, he became a man who cares about others around him and their well-being. He even encompassed his castle with precious memories and pictures under mountains full of snow and ice to try and protect everyone.”

“I see. That as it may be, unfortunately, I don’t think a feeling is enough to change his crimes. Thank you, Leon. That is all,” Coretta said, motioning him to the witnesses’ seat nearby.

“Can I say one thing before I give up my role as a witness?”

“You may,” Coretta said.

“I’m not sure what you’re going to sentence them to, but I’m assuming neither you, Vincent, or most of the people watching this

have been outside of Salutis in a while. Maybe you've forgotten what it's like out there? Perhaps you were one of the lucky few who never went through anything as the despots wish for out there. You're possibly even someone who tries as they may to forget the hell and horrors of life outside of Salutis can't. I was there for a mere few days, and I clearly understand the implications of living outside this sanctuary. I hope you all can remember, and when you issue your judgment, put yourself in their position—the position of all those still out there trying to survive. You call them apostates, but for the most part, they were scared and hopeless with no option that didn't include a massive death toll.

“During the rescue and liberation, many died with the help of two generals and other members of the resistance. That was against Remmy. What happens when other, stronger, more maniacal gods show up? What happened when those stronger gods came during our retreat? Even those among the generals face a challenge and possibly death. To my knowledge, we still don't know where Dobrynya is and what may have been his fate. So I ask you, when you judge them, to remember you are judging people much like yourselves. That is all I had to say.” Leon finished and moved to sit on the designated chair.

“*Well, that was some speech,*” Hope told him after he sat down. “*Though, you weren't supposed to bring up what happened to Dobrynya, as it was being kept hush-hush to prevent panic.*”

“*Well, why didn't you tell me sooner?*” he asked as he watched the Judge and the two representatives whispering among themselves.

“I am forbidden to assist any witness during their testimony. This is to give a *human* recount during testimony. So before you sat down here, I wasn't allowed to even speak to you,” Hope said as she materialized and sat beside him. “Now, all we can do is wait and see what they come up with.”

The talking between the group ceased, and Coretta looked at each of the defendants. “You have all received a fair trial and will now be judged as a group, as you have acted as one.”

“As a group?” Clayven stammered. “What do you mean, as a group? Not everyone here carries the same sins in this trial.”

“I’ve already seen enough to know that’s not the case. You are all in here for the same crime, and each will be given the same fate,” Coretta replied. “Now, if we can get this finished up—”

“Seen enough?” Clayven interjected. “You’re not looking hard enough if you think we all deserve the same fate. You only see what you want to see. LOOK HARDER DAMN IT!”

He knew there was little to no chance of them getting a fair verdict and anything but guilty if they were grouped together with Enzo. Sure, Enzo had followed him and done what he had asked before, but he was also depraved and took things too far more than a few times. Had they not needed the manpower so severely, he would have gotten rid of him a long time ago, even with his missing memories.

“Coretta, I suggest we do a person-by-person judgment. There is a lot at stake, and I don’t necessarily agree that all their crimes are the same,” Judahl spoke up so that all would hear him.

“I’m sorry, I disagree with that. While individually, their crimes may, or may not be different, what matters in this trial is the overarching crime of going against their fellow man,” she said with absolute certainty.

“Shall we bring it to a vote then?” Judahl asked.

“If that is the request of the council of generals, then I will allow it,” she said. “My vote is to judge as a group.”

“Mine is for individuals,” Judahl said.

“And you, Vincent? What is your vote?” she asked.

Something was off with Vincent, and his face was almost in a state of shock.

“Well..., I was going to say as a group, but it seems the general populace has decided that they would like for them to be judged individually.”

“It matters not what a few people think. There can’t be enough watching to form a majority to overrule their representative’s choice.” Coretta spoke, almost confused at the hesitance and of Vincent’s statement.

“Well, that’s just it,” Vincent said. “Everyone is watching.”

“What do you mean, everyone?” Coretta asked.

“I mean all of Salutis,” Vincent said. “They have also voted overwhelmingly to have the judgments split into an individual basis rather than as a group. Over ninety-three percent of the total population has voted this way.”

She paused, speechless.

“If you’re certain it’s accurate, then we must abide by the citizens’ wishes. We will take a short ten-minute recess before returning to render the verdicts. See you in ten,” she said as she slammed the gavel.

“What happened?” Leon asked Hope.

“Well,” Hope smiled. “While I’m unable to interfere and help a witness, I’m not prohibited from broadcasting their invigorating and passionate speech to the city. You know, to give the citizens a little nudge and remind them of how lucky they’ve been and how bad things still are outside, that they should be mindful of who it is that represents them and remain vigilant of what is going on. The person claiming to represent them may act completely differently when only a few are watching.”

“You’re telling me that you’d never see Vincent acting as he has here when in front of most people?” Leon asked, acting shocked.

“Not in the slightest,” Hope replied, tittering.

3

Ten minutes passed, and everyone had gathered back to their posts after using the restroom to await the judgment. There was a last

pause and whispering amongst the group above before Coretta broke the silence, issuing their decisions.

“We have all discussed it, and we will render verdicts based on different crimes. I will base my judgment on the overall good and evil acts of the person. Vincent’s vote will be if the individual is guilty of crimes against citizens, or other innocent persons, weighed by all from Salutis. He will issue his vote based on what the populace votes except for myself and Judahl. Vincent will get a single vote in that aspect, but it has no more weight than the next person. Judahl’s vote will be a vote focused on whether the person has acted of their own will against the gods and towards the destruction of Salutis’s principles.

“If there are three guilty votes, the punishment will be soul destruction. Your conquest will either be absorbed by someone else to increase its rank or be given to someone deemed worthy if it is a strong conquest. If there are two guilty votes, the person shall either be given the same punishment as three votes or saved by being put under the watchful eye of a volunteering general. They will be required to do as they are told until the general feels that they are no longer a threat and have paid off their debts to humanity. One guilty vote will mean basic freedoms throughout Salutis with court-ordered training and duties ordered by the council of generals. Zero guilty votes means that we will give you the housing of your choosing and assign you a mentor immediately to commence training. Does everyone understand?”

Each of them agreed, even Enzo, who gave an angry nod.

“And how do the councils find Vance?” Coretta asked.

“Innocent,” Judahl spoke first in an articulately profound manner.

After a brief pause, a vote request that lasted ten seconds popped up in Leon’s vision. The choices were either guilty or innocent for

Vance. After the time expired and the votes were tallied, Vincent spoke as well.

“The people find him with a sixty-six percent vote majority to be innocent.”

“I see,” Coretta spoke. “Unfortunately, I cannot be so forgiving in his case and find him guilty of his acts alone.

Although not wholly forgiven, Leon looked to Vance, whose face and body had relaxed considerably. Clayven himself smiled.

“Moving on. How does the council find Enzo?” she asked without a second thought to keep pace.

“Guilty,” Judahl said. “The man clearly has no regard for harming the innocent and, in fact, takes pleasure in it. One of the key aspects of Salutis’s principles is to help humanity. This man has had no concern for the suffering of others, let alone helping them.”

“Guilty on a ninety-eight percent majority vote,” Vincent said after a moment.

“I concur with that vote, and this man is not a man that should have ever been allowed to remain in Salutis for as long as he has. Enzo is guilty on all counts,” Coretta declared.

Enzo, unable to speak, stood up and ran. The small shield around him that kept him safe suddenly restrained him, causing him to tumble over, rolling along the carpet.

“We will deal with him after the votes are finished,” Coretta ordered. “Now onto Martha,” she said as Enzo remained in a ball, continuing to struggle, only able to totter back and forth before eventually giving up

“Innocent,” Judahl said. “Leon wasn’t part of the kingdom she was meant to protect, but she still intervened to protect him from the devilish guardians. She will make an excellent citizen.”

“Innocent on a ninety-nine percent margin,” Vincent said.

“It seems we’re all in agreement once more. I can find nothing to truly fault you for based on any testimony given. You have been

deemed innocent, Martha, and will be given your complete freedom after this is over,” Coretta said, somewhat smiling.

A relieved smile and eyes full of tears graced her face, and Clayven was seen sighing a breath of relief once more.

“Now, what is your verdict on Dane, gentlemen?”

“Innocent. I don’t believe Dane’s actions were that of a saint, nor do I believe they were insidious. So, therefore, I cannot find him guilty,” Judahl said.

There was a pause. “Innocent, on a fifty-two percent majority vote,” Vincent responded after a moment.

“I don’t believe he is quite innocent; however, his past suffering more than compensates for the sins he had committed while in the Snow Leopard’s kingdom. Therefore, I will absolve him of his crimes, and thus, he will be a free man,” Coretta commanded.

This was a rare decision for her, but she couldn’t think to continue any form of punishment on this poor soul after seeing his suffering in her mind’s eye. Dane rendered no emotions as he was not concerned with his own being but that of his kings.

The one remaining decision was shrouded in mystery as to which way they would rule. Would they focus on the shrewd, calculating king? A king who did heinous acts from feeding people dead bodies to survive, and who gave up any outsiders to the dark gods without batting an eye? Or would they instead focus upon the kind, caring man he returned to after Dane restored his memories—the same individual with a son and whose wife was lost in the past great war?

“We are about to bring this long and drawn-out trial to a close. How do the two councils find Clayven, the former king of the Snow Leopard’s kingdom?” Coretta asked the two men.

This time, it seemed neither of them was at the ready with their responses. Vincent even extended the voting time for the people to a minute instead of the ten seconds previously. It looked as if almost everyone was looking to further contemplate this.

At last, Judahl spoke.

“We of the council of generals, while finding it terrible the atrocities the Frozen King committed, cannot find a reason to blame the man Clayven, who is in his own right a completely different individual. While the two men shared some memories, they did not share all, nor did they share the same feelings. He fought against the dark gods in the previous great war. Thus, we find the man Clayven innocent of crimes against our gods and of any ill will towards the city of Salutis.”

“I see. And how do the people of Salutis feel, Vincent?” Coretta asked.

“It seems while some people understand the tough situation he faced, the majority believe it was his decisions that led most of those in his care to act in the way they did. Therefore, the vote has come to a fifty-four percent guilty majority vote.”

Leon didn’t know where he got that analysis, but he figured it was probably close to the truth. Leon had voted to spare the king. This was the one vote that had gone the opposite way from which he had voted. He saw no reason or threat from the man who was now in front of him.

“Understood,” Coretta said, while looking from Vincent to Clayven. “You know—I looked deeper, but I cannot ignore the atrocities you committed. Whether it was during a time when your mind and memories were corrupted or not. On your orders, these souls were ended—given to the dark gods and to their surrogates. I know times were rough and that you felt hopeless to take the initiatives that you did. Still, you removed those memories willingly. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not,” Clayven said. “I cannot ask you to overlook what I did, but given the circumstances, I’m afraid I would choose to do the same, even if it meant saving a few instead of losing all of them. I knew that what I did could eventually lead to my damnation, yet

there was no other option. Was I to just die and condemn those in my care to the same fate?”

“You don’t know that as a fact,” she rebutted.

“No,” he said. “I don’t know that for a fact, but given how things turned out with even Dobrynya and Ragnarr there, I think it’s more than evident, at least to *me*, of the justifications of my actions. Make judgment as you wish. Know if I saw another path—a better path that could have prevented less death and misery for my people, I would have taken it.”

Coretta was silent for a time before she eventually figured out the words to say and continued.

“You know, I don’t want to kill you, Clayven. I may seem like a hardass, but it’s not like I don’t understand what is out there. There is a dark cloud that is held over us every night; even if that shadow is hidden by the bright light of *Salutis*—it is still there. With that said, I must do what is right and hope that one of the generals is willing to do the same and take responsibility for you. I find you guilty of the damnation and torment of countless lives during your tenure as king of the Snow Leopard’s kingdom.”

The general’s communication line remained silent as Ragnarr watched the trial via his intuitive interface on the other side of the courthouse doors. With two guilty verdicts, Clayven’s only hope for salvation was for someone among the generals to step up and take responsibility for him.

“None of ya are willing to take him in?” Ragnarr asked the others—not one of them replied. “Odin’s sake, don’t blame me if this goes to hell.” He went to the door and grabbed the handle. But before he could open the door, another hand gripped his.

“You’ve handled things well while I’ve been away. Best I take it from here. Don’t you think?” A familiar voice told him.

Ragnarr looked up and found himself face to face with the man many thought had been dead. Dobrynya was now wearing an eye patch and looked like he'd been to the brink and back.

"Well, I'll be damned. How fuck'n long have you been back without telling me?" Ragnarr demanded.

"Only a few days. I'm not exactly in tiptop shape, and I'm only here to correct a wrong I unknowingly committed," Dobrynya said. "I don't have time now, but I'll catch you up on everything. Time is of the essence, my friend."

Ragnarr considered a snide remark but decided to let it go and removed his hand from the door.

"Ye better catch me up when you're done here," he said as Dobrynya opened the door to the court.

"Don't worry, I'll tell you everything. But time is running out, so we must act quickly." He stepped in and closed the door behind him.

4

"I will ask one last time: is there anyone from the general's council that will take responsibility for this man?" Coretta asked. It almost seemed as if she was trying to coerce someone into doing the right thing in order to spare herself the guilt this judgment would bring.

The door to the courthouse swung open, and a phantom of a man walked towards the bench. Along the way, he passed by a restrained Enzo before making his way to the other defendants.

"May I approach you, your honor?" Dobrynya asked.

"You may," Coretta said in a surprised voice that echoed the feeling of most there, including Leon. The only one not surprised, or at least unwilling to show it, was Judahl.

Dobrynya passed a few feet in front of the defendants who, while relieved about their own situation, were still feeling anxious about their former king.

“I would like to take responsibility for Clayven,” Dobrynya said. “As it had been before the war began and even during it, I feel it is my responsibility to do so. I need to make amends for failing him in his time of need. The choices he made were for survival and from my previous failures as a mentor and friend. I believe what he said, and that there were truly no better alternatives.”

“I see,” Coretta said, with a hint of relief. “If that is what a man of your caliber asks, I cannot deny it. Clayven, you will be spared and under the guidance of Dobrynya until he sees fit. If there isn’t anything else anyone feels the need to say, I hereby order this case closed. Court is adjourned.” She slammed her gravel, stood, and walked out. The other two followed shortly after.

“Is it over?” Leon asked Hope.

“Yes, it’s over. Though for you, it seems things are now truly beginning.”

Leon didn’t know what she meant by this but then remembered what Tesla had told him before he left, “you’ve got *two* big appointments coming up.” If this was the first one, what was the second?

“Hope,” he asked. “What is my second appointment?”

“I cannot answer that at this time. Forgive me. That said, what I can tell you is that all will be revealed soon.”

This gave him an uneasy feeling. While it could be nothing, it didn’t sound that way. His first appointment held the implications of life and death for Clayven and ex-members of the Snow Leopard’s kingdom. He wondered what the second was.

He’d find out soon enough, as both Ragnarr and Dobrynya approached him, along with Judahl, who had made his way into the lower region of the courthouse.

“What happened to your eye?” Leon asked without reserve, noticing the distinction of Dobrynya now in front of him.

“Lost it to that flat-faced bastard. Don’t you worry about that though. We need you to come with us to the generals’ building for an urgent meeting. There’s a lot we need to discuss with you in private.”

“Discuss with me? What’s going on?”

“We’ll get to that later, lad,” Ragnarr said. “We best be going now.”

“So this is the one they spoke of, is it?” Judahl asked while shoving between the other two in the process. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Leon. My name is Judahl,” he said casually, holding his hand out.

Leon grabbed it and gave it a firm shake, still pondering the upcoming meeting. He noticed the pocket watch chain sticking out of the man’s strangely elegant attire that looked like a suited house robe. Leon had to hold back a laugh as, for some reason, he was considerably reminded of the presidential candidate Vermin Supreme.

“What are we going to do with this lot?” Ragnarr asked Dobrynya, looking at the cleared defendants.

“We’ll have to figure out some way to get them settled, but we don’t have the time for this right now,” Dobrynya said. The look that creased his face showed he was visibly annoyed. Leon could tell he was using more willpower than should be necessary to remain standing and alert by how the general leaned against a nearby pillar.

“You two take care of them,” Judahl said to Ragnarr and Dobrynya. “I’ll go ahead with Leon and show him to the conference room where I can address what he needs to know. It shouldn’t be too much trouble with the generals’ HQ right next to us.”

The two looked at each other and reluctantly agreed with Judahl. It was annoying, but they needed to take care of the group, and it would be quicker if Ragnarr were to help Dobrynya rather than try to handle them all at once.

“Alright,” Dobrynya agreed. “You take him over there to the conference room first, and we’ll follow after a few minutes. We’ll do what

needs to be done by us, and then Hope can take over after we make some basic arrangements.”

“That sounds like the most practical choice we can hope for. We’ll be off then,” Judahl said, moving towards the door with Leon close behind. He held the door open for Leon, and the pair headed out together.

5

As Leon stepped out of the courthouse and into the extensive city, he felt a sense of relief. He had done his best to turn things around in there. Not because he thought that he particularly knew better, but because he knew at least a semblance of the same fear that they felt.

Leon still didn’t know why Tesla couldn’t have at least taken a moment at one of their dinners to mention the trial. He knew they had been swamped during training, but even a quick chat would have gone a long way to inform him of what he was walking into.

The air outside was as crisp as ever, and the temperature felt about the same as always. Still, this sense of mundane pleasure was welcome after the stressful situation he had emerged from. He was thankful that the city was both temperature and weather-controlled. This was made clear as the courthouse lingered on the edge of Salutis.

Leon could see over the vast waters outside. An intense storm was tossing waves and creating booms, but inside it felt like a pleasant autumn night. About the only thing they couldn’t get rid of, or perhaps chose not to, was that fresh sea smell of a port city. The scent of salty water filled the air with a dash of fish that got stronger the closer you got to the edge of Salutis. It reminded him of a college campus he once visited in Upstate New York—SUNY Oswego. The water wasn’t salty there, but the smell of the freshwater air and fish were quite similar. It was much different from anything found in Kansas, but he had become accustomed to it

Judahl motioned for Leon to follow him. Making their way down the stairway in front of the courthouse, they reached a gate that opened as they left. This differed from how he and Ragnarr had entered, but this also meant he wouldn't need to use a MELT device. This, at least, gave him a little comfort.

Through the gate laid the government center. It was full of different official buildings that required a certain level of clearance to enter.

"The HQ is on the next street over," Judahl said, as if reading his thoughts. "I know you must have a lot of questions, and I wish I could explain it now, but unfortunately, it is classified. I cannot say much on the matter until we are in a private arena."

Leon somewhat understood what he meant, even if it was reluctantly so.

"And this definitely has to do with me?"

"Oh yes," Judahl responded. "Almost entirely, I'm afraid."

For the rest of the time, the two said nothing to each other as they passed buildings of all different shapes and structures. After a minute, they arrived at a highly secure facility that was gated all around. In front of the gate was a giant Sphinx statue, and it had an alpha symbol carved into its head garment. Its hands were more humanoid than one would expect with opposable thumbs. As they walked closer, the sphinx's wings spread, and it stood on guard in the presence of Leon, who was now a few feet away from the gate. Leon grabbed for his dagger. His skin crawled, and his hair stood up, sensing the danger directly in front of him.

Judahl simply waved it down, and it sat back, resting as still as before.

"It's ok, you can follow me inside now. It won't hurt you," Judahl told Leon as he passed through the open gate.

"*What was that?*" Leon asked Hope, who had been silent on their way over.

“That was a Sphinx.” Hope mocked.

“I know that.”

Before she could respond further, Judahl took over. “You must have many questions. Let’s not have this be one of them. That was one of my golems. Its sole purpose is to protect the generals’ headquarters from any uninvited guests. You have nothing to fear from them,” he said, alluding to the many statues of defenders along the way to the main building.

“How did you gain this as your conquest? That seems like a rather intriguing story,” Leon asked, wondering how someone would gain the power to create a golem. It seemed like a power that almost created life from his own will.

“Well, it’s a long story. Maybe we’ll be able to get into all of that another time. The short version is that I was given this power based on my life, but now, instead of one or two golems, I can make armies. I can assign each a different task as needed. This is how my conquest has expanded here in the Afterworld. My life’s work learning to create the golems led me to where I am now. Like other magics that exist on Earth, there is also the power to create golems. Though now, it is all but lost magic, and I am probably the only one remaining anywhere who understands how. Unlike the witches’ clan, there weren’t many who could control the power of a golem or taught how, and we were wiped out a great many years ago.”

The more Leon had learned here about Earth, the more he realized he knew nothing about the world he was from. He thought it was a boring place with no mystery left, yet the more he heard, the more he felt it may not be the case.

There were always rumors of magic on Earth through science fiction and fantasy stories. The mythology of werewolves and vampires was rampant, and even the witches’ clan was rumored time and time again, but the story of a group possessing the power to create golems? This may have existed, but it wasn’t something he had heard of, or

that was that widespread. There definitely wasn't a mention of a clan of them. He wanted to ask more but knew it probably wasn't the right time, and they had arrived at a building within the encampment.

"None of those with the power to make golems are here besides yourself?"

"I'm afraid none survived the war as far as I'm aware," Judahl said. He had his palm held on the door, making it traversable, allowing Leon to pass through.

After Leon made it inside, Judahl followed behind, and the sizable thick door became solid once more.

Inside, it looked pretty standard at the front—almost like an office building, but the deeper they got, the more was revealed. Leon saw holographic images displaying sights throughout the city. He also saw a room heavily guarded by golems and what he thought might be other high-ranking conquest users. There had been plenty of them throughout the base as they made their way here, but they were explicitly guarding this one room. The room was covered in glass, and all he could see were glowing electronics in a room filled with a liquid substance.

"*What is that, Hope?*" Leon asked as they walked past it.

"*That,*" Hope replied. "Is me, or at least my mainframe, where all of my fragments, memories, and interactions are stored and linked. As I told you before, you only have access to what you are allowed to, and this 'version' of me only has a certain amount of data stored. The mainframe has all of my information that any of my fragments have ever experienced. As long as they sync up without being out of range or destroyed, their experiences will be transferred here. So with the proper authority, I can give anyone the information requested. This again depends on what is being asked."

Leon continued to admire it all until they passed through the hallway and turned the corner. They reached a double door with no

resistance soldiers but a couple of intense-looking golems with four arms and four blades each. Each had a face that looked almost like a bulldog. It appeared they also knew he was meant to be here. Neither bothered to move as the pair passed by.

Inside the room, there was a lot of information displayed. In the center, there was a vast 3D map of Afterworld. It seemed to chart the top half, but even that was only partially charted.

Different sectors, with their diverse geography and known allegiances in the area were shown. It also listed the kingdoms' basic populations and information of known resistance fighters via pings on the map. Each ping was tagged with their name and vital information as long as their bracelet could synchronize with Hope's server. Otherwise, the dot gave the last known location and statistics of the individual.

In another part furthest away from Leon, there were holographic images of the guardians' theta all the way to beta level. Each had different statistics, such as the force needed to break their armor, their common known weaknesses, strengths, and so on. While Leon wanted to get a more in-depth look into the world that he was now a part of, he became more curious and approached the wall.

"Why is it that as guardians progress, they become more humanoid?" Leon asked Judahl after noticing the distinct changes between each "phase."

Judahl was busy fiddling with something over by the table that circled the hologram of Afterworld. Before he could respond, someone else took the liberty.

"Das becuz da moe souls dat dey consume, da moe dat dey start ta look like us," a familiar voice told him, emerging from a connected nearby room. "Dey grow stronga by eatin' our essence and fo' some reason da mor dey do dat, da mor dey staht to become what dey eat."

Marie, the lady Leon first saw on the SFT speaking to Ragnarr via the transmission, now stood at the nearby open doorway. She ap-

proached Judahl, who smiled at the woman with a boa around her neck.

“Hello, love,” Judahl said to the woman as she walked in towards him. As she arrived, he met her with a kiss on her left cheek. The boa stayed relaxed with its head over her left shoulder, flicking its tongue.

“Hello dear,” she said. “Where’s Ragnarr an Dobrynya?”

“They’re on their way. They had to take care of a few things,”

“Don’ dey know wha’s goin’ on? We don’ have time to be workin’ on anything else. We half ta make sho dat Leon makes it ta da Dead-zone befo tomorrow’s day en.”

She approached the door where Leon and Judahl had entered and was only a few feet away before it opened. Through it came Dobrynya and Ragnarr; behind them followed Vance and Clayven.

“Well, is about time ya two made it,” Marie said, glaring at them both. “An wha’s with da stragglahs?”

“These two are going to be let in on what’s happening here,” Dobrynya said, passing by Marie. “We had Hope guide Martha and Dane so we could get here quicker, and we had Hang Tuah deal with Enzo.”

“Are you sure it’s wise for them to be here, Dobrynya?” Judahl asked, now sitting in one of the chairs at the table in the center.

“I know it’s unconventional, but given our situation and directives, I figured this was the best plan we had. I trust Clayven, and Clayven trusts Vance. Not to mention that you know as well as I that Vance is to be involved with what is happening. If anything arises, I’ll take responsibility for it and the resulting punishment the commander sees fit. We don’t have enough time to play, should or could we, and he’s busy deep in enemy territory. Let’s move on and be done with it,” Dobrynya said.

“I already tried to persuade him otherwise, but you know how he is after he gets something in his head,” Ragnarr interjected.

No one said anything else at this point and waited for Dobrynya to continue. Leon had learned he was the strongest out of the four generals, but it wasn't for this that they looked up to him. It was his dedication, honor, and all-around class that led each one of them to respect him in their own way. None more so than Ragnarr, who, while honorable, does not like to be beneath others and prefers combat to talk or receiving orders.

"Let's move on then," Dobrynya said. "We have a few topics to discuss and little time to do so. The first is the fight I had with flat-face. I've mentioned this a little, but I didn't have time to go through the details because of the trial. It was a complete disaster. We knew that he was one of the most powerful gods besides the dark creator, but I was almost helpless against him. I had never encountered him in combat until then and didn't know precisely how outclassed I was until now. Most of our shields were drained after our fight with Remmy and his guardians. Because of this, our men didn't stand a chance. I barely escaped with my life. We knew flat-face was strong, and while we grew over the years, it seems he has as well. I don't know how many souls he has consumed over the centuries, but it isn't without consequence for us.

"If perhaps my bracelet wasn't drained immediately, I may have tried to slay him with the help of Hope instead of escaping. Without her, fighting even with Zmey could have led to my demise. I say this to caution you. The dark gods have gotten stronger. We need to take mind of this—really take mind. Especially when fighting in other sectors. We had planned to move into the dark sectors soon, but this is inadvisable. Even with Hope, I don't know how well I would have fared. Either way, we need to expand our range of wireless energy immediately. This will help to ensure devastating situations of this caliber do not happen again."

Everyone knew what had happened between Dobrynya and flat-face. But the more he painted his helplessness, the more they under-

stood how any of them in the same position would have probably lost more than an eye to the fiendish god. Leon was annoyed at this point. The information he was hearing was interesting and warranted, but he didn't see how it had anything to do with him. He didn't understand why someone who, in a sense, had only graduated basic training was now sitting next to four of the most significant individuals in Salutis. The whole scenario made little logic to him, and he wanted answers.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt like this, and I never had time to thank you guys for saving me, but what does this have to do with me?"

"I suppose it can't be helped," Dobrynya said. "We owe you answers." He looked at everyone who was gathered and noticed there was an unequal distance between them. "Everyone come here and take a seat—we speak as equals here." He motioned each of them over to where Judahl and Marie were, including Clayven and Vance. As they took a seat at the round table, Leon couldn't help but be reminded of how similar it was to the round table in the King Arthur legends.

"Now, I'm sure I needn't say this as you all know what's said here is confidential, but what we are about to discuss is of the utmost secret. If it gets out, it could lead to trouble for us all. Is that understood?" Dobrynya asked while focusing most of his attention on Clayven and Vance, who both nodded.

"Now that that's settled, where to begin?" he asked.

"Why don't we begin with what I learned from the dark gods," Hope said, connecting their fragments to her mainframe. "I think it's time we discuss this. Most of you witnessed this, but my fragment on the decoy SFT talked to the shadow god and the one called Ir'osen. What they described to me sounded like something of a realist perspective on Earth, only in terms of universes. He told me that the reason the Dark Creator has done what he did was so that what

happened to our universe, meaning our gods, would not happen to them. I'm speculating here, but it sounded like they wanted to defeat our gods so they could create a hegemony of power. At least from their perspective."

"What are you talking about, Hope? Make things more clear," Ragnarr said.

"Basically, by killing our gods, they have little to worry about in terms of a power struggle. Another way to explain it is that they have removed our *nukes*, our best warriors, and only kept those they see as no threat. That is why they immediately remove those who appear in this world theta or above and give rewards for their capture. This way, they can have total dominance without the need for intervening on a scale of what they originally did. Now, that doesn't tell us why they did it, but there's no use trying to understand a realist perspective, and anything they see as a threat is dealt with as quickly as possible."

"Questions, puzzling questions. We get some answers and are left with more profound questions to fill the gap. Was it for no other reason than that that they did this, or was there a hidden reason we still don't know?" Judahl asked, stroking his long beard.

"So, who are the gods of our universe?" Leon asked. He had never gotten around to having that conversation with anyone. "I mean, there were so many on Earth; no one knows what to believe."

"Well, I'm surprised this hasn't been explained to you yet, but I suppose this is as good a time as ever," Dobrynya said. "The gods we knew about on Earth were false. Our gods created them to serve a certain purpose. To guide us in one way or the other while leaving us in mystery."

"But I heard Ragnarr say Odin a few times," Leon said.

"Force of habit, lad," Ragnarr replied. "It's how some say god damn. They aren't talking about god, but meaning a more forceful damn."

“So then, who are *our* gods?” Leon asked again.

“Why don’t we begin with our mission, and we’ll get into that?” Ragnarr suggested.

“I suppose that is the best place to start,” Dobrynya agreed. “What led us to my old lands in the first place was a mission we were given, to rescue you, Leon.”

“To rescue me? By who? Was it the elusive commander that you spoke of earlier?”

“Who, Rostam? I’m afraid not.” Judahl replied.

“Then, who?” Leon asked. “If not your commander, then who was it that asked for you to save me, and why?”

“Ya men all da same,” Marie said. “Be direct wida kid n stop beat-in’ round da bush. Go on den Dobrynya, tell em.”

Dobrynya stopped stalling.

“It’s a long story, but while most of our gods are gone and have been for a long time, not all of them are. We have been in contact over the years with one god—the goddess of fate. We worked with her over the years to gather artifacts and the legendary weapons that are scattered throughout our universe. This has been with the help of the witches’ clan that lives on Earth. They use the Earth portal to bring them over to us. These are weapons, and other items, that the gods have made over the centuries, or so we’ve been told. In the right hands, they have the power to help us turn the tides of battle.” Dobrynya gripped the necklace around his neck.

“Zmey’s Dragon rock is an example of one of the items over the years we’ve been blessed with. Fate gave us specific instructions that you would appear in that sector and that we were to rescue you. She wants to meet with you, and you are to leave by tomorrow morning.

You will also collect an item that she should have that has been procured by the witches’ clan. When you are done, you are to bring it back here. Fate has also asked for the one who tried to kill you but

was stopped by a demigod to accompany you,” Dobrynya said, looking at Vance.

“This is why we initially had you rooming together until Leon decided to stay with Tesla during his training,” Judahl explained. “We learned about Vance trying to kill you from Hope on arrival when he was brought in by Tanya. You may remember her as the strong muscle-toned woman that boarded your ship. After they arrived at one of the entry stations, they were made to meet with Hang Tuah. Everyone was exhausted by the time they arrived, so he sent them all home to rest before their trial on the next day. Hope told him it was Vance who we were seeking, and thus, he was given instructions to live in apartment eight with you.”

Now it all made sense to Leon. It wasn’t a coincidence, and they would have had to have known of something before Vance ended up as his roommate.

“So why do they want me to go with the kid?” Vance asked.

“We don’t know. Fate is often a vague goddess. She only told us that the person who tried to kill him but who was stopped by a demigod would have experience navigating on his own. Where you’ll be headed, communications will be of no use, and it will be the two of you alone,” Dobrynya told them.

“And me, of course.” Hope butted in. “Well, at least the me that is in your fragments.”

“Where exactly is it we’ll be headed?” Vance asked.

“The Deadzone,” Leon said, remembering what he had heard Marie say earlier.

“That’s correct,” Dobrynya said.

“You’re sending us off to meet Fate in the fucking Deadzone! Why in the hell aren’t one of you accompanying us?” Vance asked, standing up from the table. He spoke in an irate voice, one which Leon had not previously heard.

“Calm down, Vance,” Clayven told him.

He realized what he was doing and sat back down, trying to remain calm.

“Is the Deadzone that bad?” Leon asked.

“It ain’t called the Deadzone just because the communications are dead, kid,” Vance said.

“He’s right, lad,” Ragnarr said. “Honestly, I should go with you two. The area is rough, and the people and creatures there are worse.”

“You know you can’t, Ragnarr,” Dobrynya said. “There’s a reason Fate requested these two, and we must respect that. That’s why you entrusted Tesla with Leon to make sure he was ready. Is it not?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust that he’s increased his capabilities and understanding of his conquest, but what of his overall combat experience? Even if you give a baby the strongest weapon in the universe, that doesn’t mean the baby will suddenly become an expert fighter,” Ragnarr replied.

“You bring up a good point, but we’ll just have to trust he’ll be ok. What kind of combat training did you do, Leon?” Dobrynya asked.

“Combat training? You’re joking, right?” Ragnarr asked. “What kind of combat training would he have gotten with that reclusive scientist?”

“Well,” Leon interjected, “I didn’t have combat training of the typical nature, but I had artificial combat training with Hope. She taught me different ways to fight and how to use a dagger in combat based on all available public information from various fighting experts. I won’t pretend that I’m an expert, myself, but I did the shadow vision training every day for at least three hours, for seven of the nine months I was at Tesla’s home.”

“Shadow vision training?” Ragnarr asked.

“Allow me to explain,” Hope said, standing next to Leon. “Shadow vision training is a special program that Tesla had created by Alan Turing for training Leon in combat. It is only accessible by Leon due

to how his conquest works. With his natural capability to handle an increase in body current, he's able to use his mental and bodily functions differently than most. A big part of this is putting a lot more strain on his neural pathways than someone without his conquest could handle. Thus, Turing developed a program that I could use that would mimic enemies in his eyesight. This includes full-fledged illusions, and I could mimic resistance if he or his dagger 'hit an enemy or their weapon' and triggering his pain receptors if he were to get hit. Tesla wanted Leon to have practical combat training during his mental preparation. He figured this would be the best way to do so while maintaining his privacy."

"That man never ceases to amaze me," Dobrynya said. "What I don't understand is why Turing would create such a program for a single individual? This program Tesla requested must have taken considerable work, no?"

"Well, he owed Tesla a favor, and you know how those two are—they hate to be indebted to their rival," Hope said, smiling.

"Impressive," Judahl said. "How strong was Leon able to get? At least how strong is his conquest now?"

Leon pulled up his long gray shirt and revealed his new conquest rank. Those in the room were stunned.

"That is some considerable progress," Judahl said.

"Well, I'll be damned, kid," Vance said. "I knew you looked different when I first saw you in the courtroom, but hell."

Everyone else had similar things to say. In a few months, Leon had exponentially improved and was now a Zeta III. Leon wasn't sure what the big deal was, as it wasn't like he was alpha or even close. Even if his conquest rank was ahead of Vance, he still felt as though he were the weakest in the room. The big difference between them was their actual combat experience and their knowledge of Afterworld. Being a hunter and having been through at least part of the great war, Vance had plenty of both.

Vance himself had done some pretty impressive growth. He had initially been a Kappa IX but was now an Iota II. Given the time that had passed and ignoring Leon's crazy progress, this was still a pretty impressive feat, and he had bulked up considerably in his time of isolation.

"What do you think, Vance?" Clayven asked.

"Well, it won't be easy. Honestly, it'll still be plenty dangerous, but if we work together, it might be doable with the goddess's blessing. What other choice do we have?"

That much, they all agreed on. As much as Ragnarr wanted to accompany them, whether because of self-indulgence or to protect Leon, he knew he couldn't. He would have to trust fate and the pair of them to do what they needed.

"So tomorrow night's the deadline?" Leon asked.

"Das when Fade wan ya two sorry souls dere," Marie told him.

"Well, what details can any of you give me about it? I obviously have to go, so I'd like to be as prepared as possible."

Dobrynya looked at Marie, who motioned him to take over.

"The entrance of the Deadzone is a deserted region that if not for the towering mountains reaching into space itself, one could mistake for the Sahara. The entrance lies within a mountain's cave that is too narrow to navigate by aircraft. So after you make it to the entrance, you'll have to travel on foot. There's no entrance above either, and the mountains have different layers. Some are filled with water and other energies, so don't plan to fly over the mountains or try to find a shortcut, as it would do you no good. The Deadzone is located in an underground cave.

"Hope will keep you guys at the correct elevation, but stay away from the mountains that go into space—don't fly too high. This is to make sure you don't collide or get pulled into the anomaly known as the *edge*."

"The edge?" Leon asked.

“This is something that hasn’t been explained to you and isn’t in the public database. Afterworld lies upon the edge of our universe’s expansion. It is the spear that continues to cut through the nothingness and create more worlds and galaxies. That means that there is no leaving Afterworld using conventional methods. This is also why the god of fate defends the Earth portal, not only from enemies, but from other humans. That is why few know of the remaining existence of our gods and of the Earth portal. Only those who lived through the war know of its existence and the witches’ clan, but it is only a legend for most people.

“The fear is that if we make the Earth portal public knowledge, then many would try to flee Afterworld, leading to the demise of Earth. This could be through overpopulation or combat among different factions trying to take over a perceived more safe place. It could also even unknowingly lead the dark creator or his children there. People stay and work together in Salutis because it is the safest option. If there was the option to go to Earth away from the dark gods, would they remain here and be peaceful among each other? Fate has told us it is not our place to meddle in Earthly affairs, and we must keep to this tradition.”

“So if one were to go through the edge, what would happen?” Leon asked.

“Their body would be ripped apart, and their soul would be sent back here immediately to be restored. At least that’s the theory. It may be that the soul is destroyed as well, but there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Fate won’t tell you?”

“Fate is a complicated god. She only says what she wants and if it will benefit humanity or our universe. If it doesn’t, then there is little she will say or do.”

The conversation continued between Dobrynya and Leon, while the others listened. He learned little about the Deadzone other than

some creatures were abandoned there. The gods had tried to create these creatures to battle with the dark creator, but had mainly failed. Without the gods' guidance, they didn't have the independent experience like the humans had to fall back on. Leon thought they sounded a lot like the guardians the dark creator had, but the guardians still had their gods to control their movements and point them to a task. The creatures he spoke of were virtually abandoned after the gods had all but perished and disappeared into solitude.

"I think that's all we have time for tonight. You two should head home and get your rest. I know it's been a long day. We will have a ship ready for you in the morning, along with any supplies you may need. You can handle that, can't you, Ragnarr?" Dobrynya asked.

"Consider it taken care of. Go take care of yourself and head over to see a healer already. You look like piss. Go ahead and tell us about what happened on your way back here another time. You need as much rest, if not more than those two."

The group disbanded and headed off to their own tasks. Vance and Leon headed home together to get one good night's rest before the early morning and chaotic day that was ahead of them. After reluctantly using the Melt device, Leon walked into the house and sat on the couch. Vance grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and passed one to Leon.

"Hey kid, thanks for everything you did today. You did more than most would have, given what we put you through. I'll see you in the morning."

Leon smiled as Vance took his leave and headed through the door to his room. Leon sat there for a few minutes, sipping his beer before he followed suit. After passing down the long narrow room, he reached his bed, falling face-first into it. The covers began sticking to his skin from the electricity that was continuously generating within his body. Peeling the covers off his face and rolling over, he had many questions he wanted to ask Hope. But before he decided

which one to ask first, he fell fast asleep with nothing but the day ahead on his mind.



Chapter XI



The Journey of Fate

The night was long, and visions of the journey ahead haunted Leon in his dreams, but he wasn't the only one to feel overwhelmed. The thought of meeting a god—someone who had more answers than either of them was ready for, haunted both him and Vance throughout the night. While Vance had initially been deep in thought, he eventually fell asleep. On the other hand, Leon fell asleep fast but had a night that was both restless and full of wonder. He woke up time and time again, thinking of what to ask. He knew what he wanted to find out, but he was afraid that the answers he was seeking might do more harm than good, or even worse, may not be satisfactory in the goddess's eyes.

“Why did they abandon us? For what purpose were we created?” These questions and more he had struggled to keep buried throughout the night. The one question that was far more personal outweighed the others and was simple—yet even more perplexing: “Am I strong enough to make it through the Deadzone without holding Vance back.”

He wasn't afraid of asking questions or even getting answers that might seem unsatisfactory. No, what terrified him about what was coming was that he had no practical, real-world experience for something like this. For what he was about to do, no amount of shadow vision training could prepare him for. Sure, he had run off to save the king's son, but he ended up having to be the one rescued at the end.

Did that count as anything but failure on his part? Before he had much time to think about it, he had to get up and prepare for the day.

He began his preparations by tossing his clothes into the atomizer and showering. The shower was a unique feeling now. With so much electricity circulating throughout him and mixing with the water, he wondered if this was how an electric eel must feel swimming through the deep oceans.

While pondering this, he had intended to ask Hope questions that had been bugging him about the Deadzone. It turned out he had little choice in the matter, as Hope had brought up some questions he had been struggling with throughout the night. It seemed she had been waiting until he was entirely lucid before discussing them with him.

“So you’re wondering about the Deadzone and how deep you will need to go to find Fate?” Hope asked him. “Well, unfortunately, the Deadzone isn’t that easy to navigate. In fact, I can’t even navigate it. Though my data is limited—it is doubtful there will ever be a system developed to reliably traverse it.

“The Deadzone is a different space that is affected by celestial energies. We believe it has something to do with its connection to the edge, but we can’t be certain. The one advantage that you have is that while there are dangerous beings there, it is a complex system controlled by Fate herself. This makes it difficult for even the dark creator to enter.”

“So you’re saying that Fate has called us there, and the only way to find her is to rely on her, but it can’t be that easy, can it?” Leon asked as he finished washing his hair.

“No, it’s never been that easy. It’s dangerous there, and if you make a wrong move, you could easily die. While Fate can nudge you in the right direction, ultimately, it is up to you to take the reins for yourself and survive. Though worry not, Fate shouldn’t leave you alone in your journey and should have someone from the witches’ clan meet us outside. They have a unique ability to read the Dead-

zone and interpret it that far exceeds my capabilities. They have escorted many before you. Following their lead should allow you two to safely make it there with little trouble.

“I know you’re worried, but maybe this will ease your mind a bit; you’ll be happy to learn that you won’t need to fast travel. The generals have already brought a small transport to a nearby facility to make things easier on you. It’s about a mile away from here.”

This did make Leon happy, and he was even able to manage a slight smile. Hope knew how much he hated using the Melt device. Truth be told, few people enjoyed it—but there was no quicker way to travel.

The outfit he had chosen for the journey ahead was light and flexible. It was fitted with the same hiking boots he had arrived with—along with some stretchy cargo pants and a long-sleeved shirt. He finished it with a uniquely designed insulating hoodie that held a dark mask containing fibers that filtered out toxins. Leon could keep himself quite warm, so he wouldn’t have to worry too much about colder conditions because of the energy flowing through him.

Outside his room, he met with Vance, who was ready and waiting for him. He wore similar attire, with hiking boots of his own, but his clothing was much more substantial. He wore a thick leather jacket, scarf, heavy cargo jeans, and even some clear glasses to protect his eyes from flying sand and debris. Leon didn’t understand why Vance would need glasses with his energy field, but Hope had suggested it and clearly had more experience when it came to the Deadzone.

She had explained to Vance that he would need to bring heavier clothes as a precaution. Unlike Leon, even with Vance’s conquest allowing him to control his heart rate and blood flow, at a certain point, it may not be enough to counteract the unknown possibilities of the Deadzone.

As the two of them headed out, they each grabbed a power bar that Vance had stocked up on while Leon was away with Tesla. They went through the front door, and as they left, looked back once more at that number eight on the apartment. Although this was only Leon's second time leaving the apartment, there was a strange, almost nostalgic feeling. He didn't know when he'd see it again, and this made him feel forlorn.

Vance, on the other hand, continued forward without looking back. After a moment, Leon turned from the apartment and followed.

2

Men who were at best estranged roommates now walked side by side, continuing forward as equals. Neither said a word. It was apparent that they both had a lot on their minds. They were too deep in thought to recognize the other contemplating what was ahead of them. After a moment, an upbeat Hope ended that silence.

"We interrupt this brooding silence for a special announcement," she said with the tone of a newscaster while syncing their fragments so they could both see and hear her.

"We're about there," she said, walking in front of them, skipping and bouncing along gleefully as they headed towards the aircraft. If one were to close their eyes and listen, it would sound like someone was playing hopscotch by the way she was skipping along.

"What are you so excited about?" Vance asked her.

"That's a straightforward question, with a much more intricate answer," Hope responded. "We are going on an adventure; that is the simple part. The more complex answer is that while I love Salutis as it is where my mainframe is and where I was built—do you know the last time I've been able to fulfill my full potential here? That is to say, protect and defend humanity."

Neither had an idea, as they were both relatively new to Salutis. During their tenure, the one constant they noticed was that besides

a few storms outside of the shields, there had been nothing of consequence happening outside the isle.

“The answer is never. Now, don’t get me wrong, I am glad for the peace and that I haven’t had to use Tesla’s Teleforce death beams, among any of the other intricate defense systems we have in place. I also quite enjoy the stories and seeing the happy lives of each individual within the territory, but as you are alive, so am I.

“While I have no soul, my thoughts are my own. While other variations of me are out there fighting and exploring Afterworld at large with others, I cannot experience that in real-time. I only get to experience them through what essentially amounts to memories. While they’re indeed lovely to have, it isn’t ever the same as living through it, as I’m sure you two are aware as well.

“Take, for example, that Guns N’ Roses concert you experienced not so long ago while you were alive, Leon. Or that wedding party you attended, Vance. You can remember it, and it happened, but it’s not crystal clear or the same as it happening in real-time, is it? While my memory is sharper than either of yours, it still isn’t perfect. For me, it’s like being able to watch it on TV. While nice, it still isn’t the same as creating and directing what happens. Needless to say, I am ready for some excitement.

“Neither of my fragments associated with either of you have experienced anything new or exciting since we’ve been together these past few months. I’m ready for that to change. I haven’t even had much experience with Leon. While he was with Tesla, he destroyed so many other fragments. The fragment in his bracelet is just the latest that has been uploaded with the experiences of the others.”

This is something neither of them had considered. While Hope was a powerful AI, she was essentially alive. When not connected to the mainframe, each fragment was essentially a clone (albeit less powerful than the original mainframe). Still, they each required their own fulfillment. Here she was stuck with them on their daily rou-

tines of training and going to court. While that could be interesting for a novice or scholar, it certainly would not fulfill the interest of a super-intelligent and sophisticated AI like Hope for too long.

“Well, if you’re this excited about it, maybe we can work harder at not being so gloomy,” Vance told her.

Leon patted down his hair, nodding in agreement.

The task ahead would be a challenging one. Still, it would likely also be one of the most exciting conversations Leon would experience. He had a solid chance at genuine answers. Now was not the time to fear getting there. It was time to find the courage and reap the rewards that awaited him at the finish line. That, and he did feel guilty about frying more than a few other Hope fragments with this new understanding.

The transport was now in view, ahead on a docking platform that reminded Leon of a helipad. The only difference was it was much larger so that it could handle different-sized aircraft. He, Vance, and Hope approached Clayven, who was standing closest to them. He turned and handed a bundle to each of them.

“You didn’t have to do this...” Vance said, hesitating to take the pack.

“I did,” Clayven said firmly. “As I’ve told you and the others shortly after we arrived, I am no longer your king. You should not worry about offending me.”

“I know, but—” Vance tried to retort but was cut off.

“But nothing,” Clayven continued. “This was my task with which I was instructed. This minor chore is nothing compared to the damage I did to other individuals. While I still agree with those choices, I must do what they expect of me to gain favor and complete my atonement for my crimes. Now go on.”

Vance said nothing. He nodded before grabbing the pack and heading over towards the transport.

Leon took his pack and began to follow Vance but was halted by Clayven.

At first, the former king stared at Leon, but then he held out his hand. Leon hesitated before grabbing it firmly. Even through his thinly layered energy field, he still felt a slight chill from Clayven's icy hands.

"Thank you once again," he told Leon, as he reached out and grabbed the top of Leon's hand with his other. "If not for you, then more of my people may have suffered, and my son may have been a true orphan. So thank you."

"I only did what I thought was right," Leon replied.

"Spoken like a true farmer's grandson," Clayven said, smiling. "Truth be told, Dane may have seen a bit more of your memories than that of your death."

Leon gave a half-smile as he was still trying to put that ordeal behind him. The two of them finished shaking hands, and he headed for the entrance of the transport. Ahead, both Ragnarr and Dobrynya awaited them.

Ragnarr looked as wild as ever with his tangled hair and his leather clothes barely visible under his black cloak. Then there was Dobrynya, who looked as good as the day Leon had met him. The one significant difference was that he had some sort of eye replacement that was clearly different from his original and was a light violet color.

Dobrynya looked back at the two men who had now stopped before him as he prepared to give instructions. One man, a veteran hunter that had experience in the outer lands of Afterworld. The other, a fresh arrival who had more experience with captivity than any actual combat experience in either life combined. Still, now wasn't the time to doubt him, as a god had set their sights on meeting the young man. Ragnarr, along with everyone in Salutis who had known

about it, had done what they could in his absence to make sure Leon was prepared for the journey upon him.

“Alright, you two, listen up. We’ve had Clayven pack the essentials into your bundles: Dried meat, fruit, water, toiletries, and other necessities. The Deadzone is constantly changing. The journey can take anywhere from a few hours to over a month. We’ve also packed a few other items—specifically, some grenades. I’m sure you’re familiar, Vance, but Leon, I’m guessing you weren’t trained on these at all.

Leon looked surprised. Would they really need grenades?

“Grenades are pretty easy to use. Grip the lever, pull the pin, and throw. Make sure you do it in that order, or you might have problems.”

Vance let out a slight snicker.

Dobrynya gave him a smile and continued.

“If you have any problems, I’m sure Hope can assist you when needed. While the Deadzone itself can be perilous, getting to it can be just as dangerous. As we mentioned, you will come to a spot before the Deadzone that you can no longer fly and will be out of contact with us. You will have to traverse a bit of desert-like region on foot. Inside the mountain’s cave in the area known as End’s peak is the entrance to the Deadzone.

“The path there also borders the Blooming Apostate’s domain. This means you need to remain vigilant for any other humans around the area. I didn’t have time to mention it before, but there has been an expansion from them and other groups after Remmy fell. If you come across anyone other than one of the witches, they will probably not be friendly and could be more dangerous than you’re equipped to handle. The Blooming Apostates are the most influential faction of humans aligned with the dark gods. In terms of raw power, they even have those that rival us, generals.”

“This means stay on ya guard and watch out for one another. No playing hero like ya did at the castle, lad, got it?” Ragnarr added.

Leon nodded hesitantly.

“Now get on board, ya lot,” Ragnarr told them.

The two generals moved aside, and Vance and Leon, equipped with their gear, climbed into the transport. They were now ready to embark on what Hope had described earlier as an adventure. Though, it was yet to be determined what kind of *adventure* it would turn out to be.

“Take care of him, Vance,” Clayven said, now standing beside the generals watching the hatch close.

“Leave it to me,” Vance said, holding back the formalities he was used to directing towards his former king.

“Look after them both, Hope,” Dobrynya told her.

“Will do, sir,” Hope said gleefully, relaying the message to his fragment.

Ragnarr gave Leon a nod, letting him know he had confidence in his abilities.

The men continued to look at one another until the hatch closed completely, coming to a silent halt. They were now ready to begin their journey ahead.

3

The two men turned around, looking at the transport. The inside was much smaller than what they had expected, but in reality, it was still quite large for the two of them. Without knowing the exact size, Leon guessed it was about one-third the size of the SFT, while Vance thought it was only two-fifths smaller. Neither was quite correct in the matter, and Hope told them it was closer to three-sevenths the size.

There were only five seats compared to the vast rows of the SFT. The seats were set up in a sideways X formation with enough space between them to pass between each of them with ease.

“I take it you’ll be driving?” Leon asked Hope, who had already synced up with the onboard fragment.

“Well, of course. As much as I hate to say it, your track record of destroying things in the past few months is pretty bad. Are you that eager to destroy another of my fragments and components?” She laughed.

“Well, no.” He paused. “I’m pretty sure Tesla is going to charge me if I break this one or anything else.”

“Break?” Hope said in an audibly higher-pitched voice. “I think when we’re dealing with you, we should consider it completely destroyed beyond repair.”

Leon rolled his eyes and shrugged as he finished putting his pack away in the nearby storage compartment.

Vance, by this point, had already taken a seat next to Hope in the co-pilot’s chair. Leon took the position in the middle and noticed it had the same bit of tech as the SFT.

There was a hologram projector for the outside of the plane in the front center console. There was also the same type of water station that Leon had used before. He had learned they sent the disposable cups into a small atomizer to not waste the material and maintain sanitary conditions. This brought up an important point that he was curious about.

“Hope, has anyone ever been sick here?”

“Hold that thought for a minute.”

The engines kicked on, and they could all feel the transport lifting. Hope engaged the cloaking mechanism, and the carrier continued to rise until it reached the ceiling of *Salutis*. There the shield vanished above them, allowing them to pass through perfectly; the cloak from the aircraft maintained the full city cloak as it passed through. Rain pelted the transport as soon as it passed through the miniscule section of the lowered shield.

Once outside, the sun disappeared, and all that they were left with was the ambient night sky and two moons in the distance. The moons were at the same point Leon had seen them last. A moment

later, a vibration shook the transport as it blasted forward at top speed. In a couple of seconds, the rumbling died down, and the flight became as smooth as if they were still stationed on the docking platform.

“Sorry about that. I thought you’d want to enjoy the view before we left, and the conversation may have been a little inconsistent during the initial flight. Now has anyone been sick?” Hope continued.

“Well, that depends on what you quantify as being sick. In the traditional sense, no. Normal viruses or diseases of any sort do not impact humans who have died and had their souls transformed into their afterlife bodies. Unless someone who died of disease gained the ability to manipulate the soul and body negatively. This could cause someone to be ‘sick,’ and the only way to counter that is with a conquest user with a healing function—that, or by some unique artifact.

“Then there is Earthly magic, which is the teaching of the gods’ creation language to the witches. It can create and destroy, based on how powerful and talented the soul that uses it is. Again, this can be enhanced with particular blessed objects.”

“Why haven’t I seen anyone here use magic? It would seem that with your help, many could become an expert magician in no time, couldn’t they?”

“You’re thinking of something like ‘repeat after me,’ are you not? That would be simple, indeed. The problem with this is that the gods made limits to what one can and cannot do. This is why they taught the witches magic. As you were told by Ragnarr, living souls have valuable life energy. It is a potent essence and is why they are sought after by the dark gods and guardians. Only with that energy are you able to use the creation language of the gods. This is as simple as I can put it. The souls of the dead do not contain the necessary components to do so.”

Leon contemplated this and realized that his new body, while a vast improvement over his old, still had its limits. He also didn’t

know if his new one was actually better or if he merely had a better understanding of it. This gave him another idea.

“Couldn’t a witch use one of your fragments and then have that ability?”

Hope turned to him as the ship continued to fly straight. After all, this projection was a hologram of herself. She had a keen ability to multitask using different fragments, as Leon had seen before.

“This was thought of before. The problem is, while your bodies and souls have limits, so does that of the living. Simply put, their minds cannot handle the level of input that yours can. While it is complete nonsense that one only uses ‘ten percent of one’s mind’ at a time, it is not inaccurate to say one cannot possibly use all of it at once. The more strain one has on their synapses, the more problems may occur.

“This is why you can use my functions at a higher level than most others here, Leon. It’s because of your natural aptitude for handling electricity and current in your body. This is a significant benefit and allows for your synapses to work faster by firing stronger, rapid signals. Others, such as Vance, cannot use my functions to that extent. I can still do a lot for them. This is because your bodies are more durable than that of the living. If I were to assimilate my minimal functions with someone with a living body, the sheer shock would cause them to have an instant seizure, if not kill them. So, unfortunately, the witches must do it the old-fashioned way and work upon it within the extent of their own abilities.”

Leon didn’t know everything about the differences between souls and bodies of the living and dead, but what Hope had said made perfect sense in an abstract view.

Vance was listening and looked like he wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the right words.

Hope turned back and began messing with her hair while waiting for something to happen.

“Hope, how fast is this transport ship?” Leon asked.

“It is a smaller craft designed for speedy travel. The max speed of the ST is 75,412 miles per hour on a straight direct flight. It has limited shielding functions and even more limited weapon capabilities, as its primary strength is its speed. However, combat cannot be achieved at anything over 5,000 mph, as accuracy is a factor.

“One of the primary functions of the shields is to keep the ship together. Without it, we could not travel at this speed as it risks falling apart from the stress of force upon it. That’s not to say I guarantee it would take place immediately, but it is almost certain to occur given enough time.”

After a while, the group did their own thing. Hope focused on piloting the transport while Vance had decided to take a nap. Leon was still curious about the outside world and wanted to see more of it than what he could see outside the front or side windows. He thought about getting up to turn on the hologram, but Hope sent visual images into his head before he could act.

“This is what you wanted to see, right?”

“Sometimes I forget you can read my thoughts,” Leon said, sitting back and enjoying what was now in front of him.

The images were crystal clear. It was the equivalent of looking at something with a virtual reality headset on, except it was authentic in every sense. He heard the sounds outside. The wind, birds, and when focusing, he could listen to the animals running down below. Everywhere he looked, he could see something new and exciting.

They had made it off the ocean’s coast and inland. They were now above a large, green, lush field with flowers and trees. He could see vines draping from each tree and the interconnectivity of the ecosystem. He couldn’t focus on one spot for too long, as they were moving at phenomenal speeds. Even with the incredible imaging capabilities of the transport, he could only focus on something for a short amount of time before it would become distorted.

“How long until we’re in range of the Blooming Apostate’s kingdom?” Vance asked, turning on the hologram to his left before laying back in his chair.

“At this rate, it will be about ten minutes until we are in visual range,” Hope told him.

“I don’t think the kid is ready to see all of that brutality. Keep that in mind as we approach,” Vance said.

“You’re probably right. I’ll turn off the holo before we get there.

Leon had wondered precisely what Vance had meant, but was more interested in what was going on outside.

Looking down below, he had noticed they had entered a familiar snowy region along another coastline with a small hillside in the distance. Part of the hilltop was still somewhat full of colorful flowers, even as a few months had passed since they were here. However, the other half was still torn up from the battle that ensued between the flat-faced god and Dobrynya. Some of it remained entirely devoid of life and barren.

In the center of the hill, a skull branded with the Blooming Apostate’s insignia sat held up by the skeleton of a hand pierced by a pike.

“That’s odd,” Hope said, noticing what Leon was looking at.

Vance sat up after seeing what was on the hologram beside him.

“Why are they out here! Didn’t the other gods want to expand their territory to the weaker factions that they controlled? If so, then why is the most favored human faction of the Dark Creator out here now? What in the hell is going on?”

“Hope, slow down for a moment. We need to get an idea of what we are heading into. If they’ve expanded out this far, then the entrance to the Deadzone could be in jeopardy as well.”

Hope brought the ship to a halt, and it hovered high above the half desolated field of flowers where the battle had taken place. Leon continued to use the visual aid and looked around.

Vance watched what he was looking at through the hologram, and soon enough, they understood exactly what was going on.

Leon looked over towards the Snow Leopard's kingdom, and as soon as he had done so, he regretted it immediately.

"Here, Piggy Piggy. Come get this fresh meat," a woman with a red, silk, frilly bandanna said.

A naked man was on all fours, crying as he scurried through a literal pool of blood filled with intestines and feces. A woman nearby was screaming in agony.

The man in the pool went over to the woman who had called him piggy. In one hand, she held a saw that was smeared, dripping with fresh blood, and in the other, she held the foot of the crying woman. The man grabbed the meat with his mouth.

"That's a good boy," the woman in the bandanna said once more. "Go on, eat it, piggy."

The man cautiously ate away at the fresh-cut foot. The girl was still screaming as she watched the man tear the flesh away from her severed foot. She looked relatively young, though it was hard to know her true age given how reincarnated bodies work. That didn't matter; what mattered was that she was in pain and in agony from the helplessness of watching the man in front of her devour her foot whole.

"Now, are you going to disobey me again, you little slut? Are you going to get testy with me again? Or are you going to listen to your Master's orders?" the woman asked.

"I'll be good. I promise I'll be good, Serenity," the girl cried.

"What did you say? What did you call me?" Serenity asked the girl, putting the saw on her other foot and starting to saw away.

"Master! I'll be good, Master!"

"There there, that's all you needed to say," Serenity said, removing the saw from above her ankle.

She didn't get too far, but enough to cause a lot of bleeding with a quarter-inch deep cut in the girl's leg.

"Healer, come and take care of my little tramp."

A man approached, passing by a twisted wheel of fortune game. In it, a man was pinned up on a nearby wheel that was being spun by men and women alike. Most of them were dressed in fancy clothing and seemed almost jovial at what they were doing.

"Burn him alive, feed him his own cock, rape him, cut off his testicles and replace his eyes with them." The demented list written on the wheel went on. There was further abuse going on all around, and depraved acts of blood-soaked orgies, people taking part in necrophilia, and others raped and tortured in various disgusting ways. These were humanity's corrupt filth. It would be hard to call them human at all, as they diminished the humanity of others for their own enjoyment.

"This is what Remmy meant. These are the overstock, and this is what is being done to them," Leon said in disgust. He was doing all that he could to hold in the rage as his hair stood up and sparks emitted from his skin.

"Calm down, deep breaths. Control yourself," Hope said.

She stopped the projection of images, and he took a deep breath. He continued to watch the hologram in front of him like Vance had been.

Vance, meanwhile, was sitting there trembling. The girl continued to moan as the missing foot grew back. After the man healed her, the other wounds vanished as well.

"If you ever disobey me again, I'll have our piggy eat your tits right off of you. Is that understood?" Serenity asked the girl who was now released, still shivering with piss running down her body.

"And you piggy, don't forget to eat it down to the bone. That includes the toenails."

The girl nodded and followed the entitled Serenity into the castle. Men and women alike looked at her, licking their lips as they continued committing depraved acts. The man in the pool of shit, blood, and organs continued to cry and gag as he ate the foot piece by piece. The toenails crunched as they mixed with the tough flesh of the girl's foot.

Vance was still shaking. His eyes were watering as he continued to look on.

"You know him," Hope said, reading his thoughts.

"I do," Vance struggled to say aloud. "He was there when Remy attacked. He was the first one killed by one of the guardians. They bit his head off as he and Enzo attacked it."

"How is he still alive?" Leon asked, still shocked as he observed what was taking place below them.

"His head was devoured, it's true, but the creature did little more than that. What saved him was that Remy was upset that he was interfering with his audience," Vance said.

"It seems that his soul escaped consumption and after time, he was once again reanimated. The flat-faced god must have not worried about devouring those dead on the cart and, well."

Looking around, Vance noticed more of his brethren from the Snow Leopard's kingdom, and after a moment, he could no longer bear to watch.

"Let's go, Hope. There's nothing we can do for him, and I don't want to keep watching him in this state," Vance said. "Can you alert the generals of the situation and have them tell Clayven as well?"

"I understand. I have sent the message and have also let the generals know of the territorial situation. There may be something other than the Blooming Apostates at work here." Hope said, putting the engines into drive, which forced the transport to speed ahead.

“Why is this allowed to continue?” Leon asked with despair. “Isn’t that what the resistance and Salutis stand for; to prevent this from happening?”

“It’s not that simple, kid,” Vance said, still visibly upset. “The dark gods aren’t the only ones with the firepower to challenge us. They’re honestly the cherry on top of this shit world sundae. Even if they weren’t in the picture, we’ve all known for a long time that there are powerful factions out there. It’s partially why Clayven gave in so quickly. Salutis is the only wholly peaceful place remaining in this shit world. Sure, there may be smaller factions made of good people out there. Those that have gone into hiding—surviving—barely making it. They don’t compare to the number of horrors that remain. While the Blooming Apostates are by far the worst of them, the others are not anything majestic.

“This is what happens when you take the raw depravity of the human soul and combine it with no checks; no fear of retribution, divine or otherwise. You take away that which kept the worst of humanity at least somewhat in line, and what are you left with? Those who are favored by the dark gods are given free rein to do anything they want. Sure, Salutis has an advantage of technology and, in some regards, has powerful fighters, but there are many out there that can equal them. Like Dobrynya said before we left, the chosen few blessed by the dark gods in the Blooming Apostates’ ranks can match the generals blow for blow.

“Now that they’re expanding, it’s going to cause us to lose more numbers and make saving the innocent harder. Fuck! Fuck it all. I don’t see any hope in sight. No offense to you,” he said, looking at Hope, “I don’t see how we’re going to face these overwhelming odds.”

“I understand your frustration and concerns. As things are now, we are at a clear disadvantage, but we can only do our best and change what we can. I will do everything in my abilities to make sure

that the goals of *Salutis* continue to shine through.” Hope said forcefully.

Leon had known it was grim, but he didn’t realize how bad things were until now. The fear he felt, and despair he had suffered during his time at the Snow Leopard’s kingdom, now seemed inconsequential to that which he had witnessed. If he had the chance to switch places with the girl, would he willingly do so? He always thought of himself as virtuous and empathetic, but could he? Could he go through that humiliation and pain, day in and day out, where not even death would be a long-term escape? It wasn’t a question he wished to linger on for too long, as he didn’t know if he’d like the answer.

“A communication is coming through from *Salutis*. This will be our last contact with them until we return. Keep in mind we are getting close to the maximum distance of the transmission capabilities.” Hope alerted them.

The hologram changed from the view outside to the image of a slender gentleman that Leon had become accustomed to after living with him for nearly a year.

“Hey, son, we’ve received the data about the expansion of the Blooming Apostate’s territory into what was leftover from the Snow Leopard’s kingdom. We’re not sure what’s going on, but we will try to understand it using any means necessary. Neither of you needs to worry about it. We understand the situation and will come up with something. You two need to continue on with the task at hand and be sure to come back safe.” Tesla said with a bit of worry on his face.

“Don’t get sentimental on me now, Tesla,” Leon replied. “Besides, you trained me for this. I think I’ll be ok with your teachings and all I learned from training with Hope. I never got to thank you before I left. So I’ll say it now, thank you.”

“There’s no need for that. What’s done is done, and I was glad to at least pay back my debt a little,” Tesla said.

“We don’t have time for this,” Ragnarr said as he appeared in the hologram standing next to Tesla in the general’s conference room.

“Vance, Leon—with the expansion of the territory this far away from where they were months ago, you could easily be heading into a hostile environment. We can’t be sure that’s the case, but to assume that they’ve taken over the territory here because it was available would be a naïve thing to do. You two need to be on guard while you head towards Fate. It’s likely the expansion could have been near the Deadzone as well. With that in mind, watch each other’s—”

“We are now out of range of the capabilities of Tesla’s communication towers,” Hope said. “I would have stopped, but given the time constraints, we must keep moving forward. This is to ensure we arrive on time given obstacles we may face along the way.”

Neither Vance nor Leon had anything to say to this. They both wished they could have had a moment longer in case there was something important they could have learned.

With everything they had seen a few minutes ago, it was unclear what they would face after they left the safety of the stealth transport. Only time would tell if they would make it through this adventure unscathed.



Chapter XII



The Dead Zone

Nearly thirty minutes had passed since the small ST lost contact with the generals in Salutis. The two men were now left alone with Hope, who was guiding them the best she could. The fog and clouds cleared from the sky, and they had seen it—the enormous mountain range that reached from the ground to the edge. As Leon got a closer look, he saw the skies were peeling apart, and the clouds were being sucked up by the edge, and the two moons spun in opposite directions like a grinder. The mountain peaks that pierced the atmosphere disappeared into the darkness, and only the two vibrant moons continued to shine past the atmosphere.

Leon continued to stare into the mysterious sky, wondering why the moons were unphased by the edge which surrounded them. Hope interjected into his conscience and gave him the answer that he had been seeking.

“The ‘moons’ aren’t the typical moons one would expect. According to a conversation that was held long ago, the moons you see above are the energy of the gods. This energy is used in a way that allows for further expansion of our universe; the ‘spear’, as Dobrynya put it. This means that the moons are essentially the heart of our universe and have kept it going forward by pumping matter and life into it.”

Leon thought about what he had heard and decided that it didn’t matter what he expected, but what mattered was what the truth was. What is true, though sometimes may seem illogical, was

no more preposterous than where he was now. It didn't matter that he had never been prepared for any of this. This was now his new reality. This was his truth.

The same could be said for any new discoveries in science. At one point, something was undefined or unknown. That didn't make it any less factual and logical after it was studied and verified. As humans grasped a better understanding of things around them, they always brought more possibilities and information to light. Assuming the conversation that Hope was referring to was based on fact, then that is what the reality of the moons was.

The transport descended roughly fifty yards away from the mountain face entrance. As the transport lowered, the full scope of the giant rock face could be observed. Neither Leon nor Vance could see the details of it much further than a few miles up. Both of them continued peering up at the edge, inspecting the total void of nothingness, but eventually, they gave up. The enormous moons were now partially hidden behind the mountain face as the ST lowered onto the desert floor. The closer they got to the ground, the less of a distinction either of them could make between the night sky and the edge; it all blended together.

"There don't seem to be any irregularities on this side of the mountain entrance," Hope said as the ST came to a halt.

The back hatch opened, and both Vance and Leon grabbed their packs from the storage compartments. With everything that had happened, the two were in low spirits. Leon, recognizing this, barged in front of Vance.

"Try to keep up, old man," he said jokingly, giving a half-smile as he looked back at him.

Vance furrowed his brows and nodded. Though he still could not remove the disturbing images of his friends from the Snow Leopard's kingdom from his mind.

Together, the two of them stepped out into the sandy wasteland, with Hope following beside them. The shadow of the colossal mountain that had already encompassed them long ago became much more overwhelming once they were outside. It could be for that reason they had seen no signs of expansion into this area—it wasn't a deserted desert region; it was a barren wasteland devoid of all life. In the surrounding space, there was little more than sand, dust, and bones. The only sound that could be heard was the whistling of the wind as it rushed through the small, dark crevasse opening in the mountainside.

The back hatch of the ST closed behind them, and Vance swung his pack over his shoulders.

"Let's go," he said as he moved forward towards the task in front of them.

"Well, this is going to be fun," Leon said before mimicking Vance as he and Hope followed.

The group continued forward as the two men tried to ignore any of the lingering anxiety that they had in the back of their minds. The soft, sleekness of each grain of sand was felt beneath their boots as a gust of wind lifted various grains up that pelted Vance. He felt nearly every pellet as Hope was conserving every bit of energy that she could for when they ran into trouble.

Vance wasn't too worried about this. He was used to being outside in rough conditions before the idea of Hope had ever crossed his mind. The glasses that she had told him to wear also found their purpose as they helped stop the grains from blinding him.

For Leon, things were much more straightforward. Every grain of sand that came into contact with him would simply bounce off or dissolve on contact.

"Be ready for anything once we get inside," Vance told Leon as they neared the entrance. "Even if it looks deserted, stay on alert, and if you see anything, let me know. We may get lucky and not have to

deal with anything until we get inside of the Deadzone. Still, given everything we've seen, that's highly unlikely. Even if they haven't set up base here, knowing that they've expanded this way doesn't bold well for us."

"I wasn't planning on being caught," Leon said, thinking back to what he saw before. "I guess the only solace is that if they catch us because of our conquest ranks, the torture probably won't last too long, and one of the dark gods will devour our souls."

"That may be true for you, kid. For me, it may not be so simple."

After passing through the mountain pass, a beaten and battered sign at the cave opening read: "*Step inside to receive thy everlasting time of gloom and pain. Come, Ye. To see what wonders await.*"

"Gloom and pain, huh?" Vance said. "Seems about right to me. You ready, kid?"

2

Inside was pitch-black, with no signs of life. The one notable aspect was an overwhelming smell that made them gag upon entry. If not for the open nature of how the mountain tunnels were laid out, that disgusting smell could easily have knocked them both over.

"What's that god-awful smell?" Leon asked, covering his nose and mouth while looking forward into the darkness.

"No idea, but I'm guessing we'll find out soon enough," Vance said as he pulled out a torch and stepped further inside.

"**Click, click,**" his lighter sounded as the sparks created the flame he needed to get the torch started. Vance then held it out in front of him. From what he could see, it was apparent that this entrance hadn't been disturbed for quite some time. In all honesty, it probably hasn't been touched since the last time someone was called from *Salutis* to claim an item from *Fate*.

There were cobwebs everywhere, with no traces of much else besides the rock, mold, and that wretched stench that continued to sting their nostrils.

Leon took out the torch from his pack and set it ablaze with a spark from his fingers.

“Show off,” Vance said as he pushed forward. His torch cut through the webs quickly as he progressed.

Leon followed, and soon the dry sand they had been walking through had transitioned into a muddy, rocky slosh. The rock faces changed occasionally, and the jagged edges came in different shapes and sizes, as if they had grown that way long ago in order to slow them down. Still, other than the occasional water drip from the side-wall, everything was mostly the same. The most notable change was that godforsaken stench that went from a wretched sting to a now almost unbearable wave of death.

By this point, Vance had wrapped his scarf around his face, and Leon had covered his face with the mask that was a part of his hoodie.

“What is that smell, Hope?” Leon asked her as he continued looking around, not noticing anything out of the ordinary.

“Honestly, I’m not completely sure,” Hope said, busily inspecting a nearby rock that had a faint glimmer. Her scanners on Leon’s bracelet examined everything as they made their way in deeper. Apparently, it wasn’t too impressive, as she turned and continued forward to where Leon was.

“There is a bunch of iron in the air, along with methane. The source seems to be coming from all around us. It’s especially intense from the mud you are walking through. What I can discern for us is limited due to the different readings coming from all the different sources.”

There was now a slight sound of flowing water further ahead, together with a faint light.

“If I had to guess,” she tried to continue but was interrupted by Vance.

“Dowse your torch now!”

Vance plunged his torch into the thick mud.

Leon followed his lead but noticed the bare human footprints and dry blood spatter that riddled the nearby walls before he did. If that sign near the entrance wasn't enough of a heads up before, it was now clear that they weren't alone.

With the small light up ahead, Leon could barely make out what Vance was doing. He was holding his hand up as if to tell Leon to wait. As he stood there, the two listened to what sounded like faint whispering ahead. They couldn't make anything out at this distance with the running water and moved forward towards the light.

After they had made it about twenty paces ahead, Hope had instructed them to wait where they were.

"This is all wrong," she told them as the whispering continued. "The Deadzone entrance is supposed to be up ahead at the inner cave, but there aren't many of the normal signs that you would expect. The celestial energies are weaker than previously recorded. I'm even getting a small reading of dark energy."

"Well, whatever gave you the idea, something was wrong?" Vance whispered.

Hope ignored him and continued monitoring the surrounding situation the best she could.

"Can you amplify my hearing, Hope?" Leon asked. "It could give us an idea of what's going on."

Leon's vision and hearing were heightened instantly, and as soon as it did, the whispering became clear to him.

"Shut up, girl," the man said. Shortly after that, Leon heard someone being slapped.

"CAN I PLAY?" a morphed voice asked.

"Not with this one. I've come to collect this witch, as she has a vital role to play on her own. Though, since you caught her, I've brought you three fun new toys for you to play with at your pleasure."

Someone in the room ahead snapped their fingers, and Leon heard chains grinding together, approaching the man's voice.

"We've got to get a better look at the situation," Leon whispered to Vance, who was entirely out of the loop. They pressed forward, eventually reaching a corner of the entrance to the inner chamber.

Vance could now hear everything as well.

"We'll be on our way. Have fun with your prey, I mean playtime," the man laughed as they heard three different men begging to be spared.

"Valentine, don't forget the rules," they heard a different man saying while snickering.

"Oh right, forgive me," Valentine said with a sickening pleasure. "The rules are simple, you three. If you can escape the cave before you are caught, he will not follow you outside. So here we go. On your marks," keys turned, and chains dropped. "GO."

Leon saw him as he peeked around the corner. It was a tall, stocky man, about the same build as Vance, but slightly taller. He wore a frilly red suit and had dark blonde hair and blue eyes, which could be seen from the light of one of the upper caverns. He was touting a cane with its handle made from a human baby's skull and began walking away—leading the girl, who was still sobbing. Her mouth was gagged with a cloth.

Leon grabbed his knife, and it sparked. He was about to toss it when Vance caught his arm.

"What are you trying to do, dumb ass?!" Vance whispered.

"We can't let them take her like that."

"Don't you remember what Ragnar told you? *Don't be a hero.* You don't have a damn clue who that was. More to the point, look in front of you now," Vance said, motioning for Leon to look at the little island surrounded by a three hundred sixty-degree waterfall that came from the sixty-foot high ceiling.

The three men began running. One was headed straight for Leon and Vance. “**Splash, Splosh, Splash, Splosh,**” he ran through the tainted waters towards them.

From within, a figure came out screaming, “PLAYTIME!”

Its arms were long and dark, almost bone, with only a tight thin layer of skin on them. One of its hands had sleek and elongated fingers all the same length that made them look like a frog's hand, without the inner webbing. The other looked like an evil undead human's. Its wings were gray and tattered while its face was big and looked almost like an undead human's, but distorted. Its enormous flat teeth and pale-blue glowing eyes crept Leon out, and its body was covered in blood as it smiled with a wide dopey grin. It looked like an incestuous creature from hell.

It flew out in an instant, grabbing the man furthest away from Vance and Leon, crushing his head and tossing his body to the inside of the small isle. It quickly headed towards the second man. He had stepped inside of the pathway and made eye contact with Leon for only a second before the creature grabbed him. It flung him around and laughed up and down across the wall, dragging him under the nearby water on the other side of the cave wall. The creature lifted him up by his leg, noticing that the man was dead already. It frowned like a toddler and tossed him back into the center with the rest of his *toys* before heading down another tunnel after the last man.

“What the hell was that?” Leon asked in a panic.

“I'm not positive,” Hope replied, “but I think it was a faerie tainted by the dark gods. Something has definitely happened for a faerie to be outside of the Deadzone. The Deadzone may have shrunk in size.”

“It seems more like a guard dog at this point than anything,” Vance retorted.

“Well, what’s the plan? We gotta move quickly, whatever it is,” Leon said. “Valentine said that girl was a witch, right? Wasn’t it likely that she was here to escort us until she ran into that thing?”

“What the hell is going on?” Vance asked. “Why is Valentine here? We were already heading into this blind, but it’s more like we’re Hellen fucking Keller here.”

A strong breeze from the cavern beside Leon and Vance, followed by a loud thump, was heard in the middle of the isle.

“You play?” The faerie asked, peering around the corner as it dropped a severed leg that it had been chewing on. It fluttered while staring at them with a blood-smearing, simple-minded grin.

3

Leon froze at the sight of the creature who had caught them off guard. Its presence was as awful, if not worse, than the guardians because of the overpowering smell that engulfed it.

How could a faerie be turned into this? Leon thought while reflecting back on every reference of a faerie he had read in fantasy or lore.

While he was stuck pondering, the creature pounced at him like a cat with wings. This led Vance to push Leon out of the way and through the opening to the center room. Unable to dodge it himself, Vance caught its hand and slid quickly back through the muddy grime and into the wall. The impact hurt, but he was able to hold the creature off once he had solid backing behind him. This seemed to do nothing but amuse the faerie. While Vance’s hands were pretty big as far as humans were concerned, they were only about one-third the size of the faerie’s. Its eyes had widened, and a wicked grin rushed upon its face.

“You can play. You can play! You can play!” It roared with excitement as Vance pushed its hand aside and quickly regrouped with Leon.

“Wake the hell up, kid! Now isn’t the time to freeze,” Vance said, helping Leon up from the blood-stained waters.

“And what the hell are you so excited about?” he asked, looking at the creature that stood there smiling at him. Its hands were sliding down its face, and the hand with nails cut deeply into its skin.

“Well,” Hope interjected, “if I had to guess, it’s because you were able to react to its movements. If this thing is indeed looking for entertainment, then it was probably getting quite bored with *winning* so easily.”

“Ah, best to not disappoint it then. Are you ready yet, kid?” Vance asked Leon, as the monstrous faerie peeped at them through his fingers like a toddler.

Ready or not, that didn’t quite matter as here it came.

“It’s about to strike!” Hope warned, alerting the both of them.

Vance had seemed to intrigue the creature, and its right arm snapped at him like a snake. He was able to avoid it with the help of Hope, who had now done more than provide an energy shield to soften the earlier blow.

Hope had heightened his senses and his reflexes while also enhancing his muscles.

Though it took everything, Vance caught its arm as it flew past him. Using that inertia along with his own strength, he hurled it towards the center. The creature spun a few times and let out a burst of ridiculous wild laughter as it stopped midair.

A surge of light came from the center of the isle. One of the faerie’s *toys* had come back to life again and tried to escape once more.

“You no fun,” the faerie said, watching the person run out. “Go back to sleep. I’m playing with fun new toys.”

Before either of them could react, it reached up with its thick, slimy hand and slammed it down on her in a way that was reminiscent of swatting a pesky mosquito. It slapped her broken body back

inside of his *toy box* and licked its hand. Blood and saliva covered its disturbing smile.

Watching that happen dragged Leon back to his senses. Again, someone else had gotten hurt, and he stood by, unable to do anything about it.

“God damn it, what am I doing?”

Leon tossed his pack onto a nearby rock and drew his dagger. Afterward, he rushed to the right. The water splashed around him, and the faerie watched him with one fiendish pulsing eye; the other focused on Vance.

“Well, it’s not much of a plan, but I like the spirit. Alright then, let’s do this.” Vance said.

“Get ready,” Hope told the both of them while projected in the middle of the water. “Faeries are quite resilient creatures on their own. There’s no telling what this one is capable of after being so twisted. On three, charge together.”

“One,” she said.

Leon slid to a stop while Vance took out a pair of impervious metal knuckles from his pack that had suns on each knuckle representing *Salutis*.

“Two.”

Leon transferred energy into the dagger, leading it to spark. Vance threw his pack aside near the outer cavern where they had come.

“Three.”

4

They both rushed the faerie at the same time. Leon, who was further out, was still able to reach where it was much faster than Vance, who wasn’t nearly as agile.

“Not so fast!” Hope yelled, trying to warn Leon, who was only a few feet away at this point.

The faerie let out a shriek with both of its eyes now focused on Leon. It turned its head sideways like a crazed bird and flew directly at him, screeching the entire way. Its loud cry forced him to his knees as he covered his ears. Hope muffled the sound right after, but it was already too late. The faerie grabbed Leon's head with its muddy hand and squeezed. Even with the double layer of protection he had from his conquest and Hope's shielding technology, it still felt like he was going to be crushed as easily as aluminum in an industrial vice.

The electrical field he had surrounded himself in didn't seem to bother the faerie as it continued to squeeze. The slime upon its thick, disgusting hands seemed to have insulated it from any discharge. At the same time, it prevented Leon from getting any air.

"I can't breathe," he mumbled, trying to gasp for air.

"What you say?" The faerie asked, continuing to flutter there, squeezing and smiling at Leon gleefully. "Can't hear you!"

Vance had caught up to them and charged ahead, jumping up on the faeries' back as it focused on Leon. He climbed up—pulling and tearing the tattered wings with each grip as he ascended. This caused the deformed creature to swirl around in a panic, tossing Leon into a nearby rocky pillar.

The trio fell into the water. Even through all of this, Vance was still clinging to its back like a bull rider. After they were down, he grabbed the faerie's neck, squeezing as he tried to choke it out.

In most cases, this would have seemed practical, but instead gave it time to recover. With its long arms, it reached towards Vance.

Leon, still dazed and winded, staggered to his knees and began coughing. After pulling his mask to the side, he started throwing up what amounted to sewage water. Ahead, he could see what was about to happen, and with the utmost focus, threw his dagger at full strength. It soared through the air like an electric bullet hitting the faerie at the base of its wing; its body was pierced, and only the hilt remained visible.

The faerie let out a chilling scream. Now on its knees, Vance jumped off of its back and hammered the dagger into its body; he continued pounding using his fists like sledgehammers.

Punch after punch, he forced the faerie to crawl back into a near-by corner. He wrapped around to its front using such exquisite footwork that there was barely any splashing from the surrounding water. The dagger still in its back continued to burn. The faerie cried out in what first seemed like agony, but soon turned to resounding laughter.

Leon had recovered enough at this point and got to his feet. He felt an ill sensation as he ran towards the two of them. Something was off about the faerie that forced Vance to jump back a few feet, keeping his distance.

“Is that fear I sense from you?” The faerie spoke in a completely different, clear, articulate manner. “Ah, it is,” it said, looking at Vance, who was now sweating. A look of absolute despair filled his eyes.

“Options, now, Hope! Find where we can escape to and fast.” Vance demanded.

Leon noticed that even she seemed a bit unsettled and panicked.

“You two did well to cause what minor damage to this creature as you have,” the voice spoke. “But tell me, why do you humans continue to resist instead of giving in to the natural order? It’s interesting that some of you still prefer society and the social aspects of your nature over the beauty of your carnal desires. Perhaps the fear of not being in the upper echelon in this world scares most of you. It matters not. Soon enough, I’ll wipe this world of those who wish to fight against the progression of this universe. As your gods have fallen to the brink of extinction, so too will all resistance to my rule.”

The faerie became lax and rubbed its head, unaware of what had happened. It looked around with a blank stare, its eyes pinging back into focus.

“His presence is gone,” Hope told both Vance and Leon.

“Whose presence? What was that?” Leon wondered. His mind was racing, and his head still pounded.

“Be careful; what is coming differs enormously from what you have seen previously,” Hope warned them, sensing a change in the faerie.

The faerie’s eyes were now focused.

“You play well! No more play for fun, now I play for win!”

Hope tried to warn the two men, but the faerie charged at them too quickly.

It was fast, too fast. Leon dodged it thanks to his body now being in a heightened state of fight or flight. While Vance had been fighting this way the entire time due to his conquest, that alone wasn’t enough. It sent him flying across the entire length of the inner cavern and he slammed into the far wall. While his shield took the brunt of the impact, it wasn’t without consequence.

Vance slid down the wall as small rocks rained down on him. He stood back up and popped his shoulder back in by slamming it into the wall. He spewed a bit of blood from his mouth before wiping it away.



“You’ve taken a lot of damage Vance! My systems won’t last much longer at this rate with no stable energy supply; you will be without my assistance soon,” Hope warned.

“Fantastic,” Vance replied.

The faerie was about to charge Vance again, but this time Leon was already next to it. He jumped up, grabbing onto the hilt of his dagger still lodged in the faerie’s back.

“Hope, deafen me.”

Hope enforced the shielding near both Leon and Vance’s ears to block out any external sound waves.

“Let’s see how you like this, you hideous freak,” Leon said, letting all of his energy flow from his body and into the dagger, using it as a lightning rod. The overflowing energy caused discharge to spark off both the dagger and Leon’s hands.

The faerie let out a shrill shriek. Its body language told Leon and Vance enough without being able to hear it cry. Even with the pain and convulsing, the faerie powered through. Its arm twisted in a double-jointed manner and turned almost entirely around. It grabbed Leon by the legs and ripped him from its back, along with his dagger.

Vance saw this and charged to help him, but the faerie met him halfway, sweeping him up quickly with its other hand. The faerie zipped around the cave at insane speeds, with both of them in each hand. It held them by their ankles.

Leon stabbed it twice, but this only caused it to move faster.

Finally, it stopped. Its teeth were grinding back and forth, chattering as it fluttered there, looking at its two catches. Hope, by this point, had switched the shields back to focus on physical defense, enabling the two men to hear the creature’s words.

“Youzzz neww ffffavute toyzz,” it stuttered. “Fuuuuuun, verry funnn.”

Vance, still dazed from the intense movements, struggled to reach up to its hand. He got up, but it was no use, as he didn’t have the strength to pry it open.

A frown replaced the faerie’s smile.

“Me bored, want rest. You go sleep now.” It squeezed their legs harder as it took them towards the cave wall. There, it slammed them against it.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Each strike seemed more intense than the previous. Leon’s shields were holding up thanks to his conquest, but the impact alone was hard on him. It felt like he was wearing a football helmet and having his helmet hit by a heavy hitter like

Babe Ruth with a metal bat. At the same time, it felt as though Mike Tyson slammed his upper body repeatedly.

“Vance, my systems are going to shut down for you in a moment. I’ve absorbed what I could for you with my reserves and—” Hope paused.

“It seems my other fragment is offline, including all of Vance’s defensive systems,” she told Leon. He wasn’t able to understand much of what she said, as his head felt like it was going to implode.

The faerie paused a moment and looked at Vance, who wasn’t feeling any better than Leon.

Sniff, Sniff. “You different,” it said, smelling up and down on him. Eventually, it took its long, slender tongue and licked him. “You now feel like other toys—taste same too. Why he still feels new, and you feel like old toy?” It asked, looking from Vance to Leon and then back again.

“I... don’t know,” Vance said, barely able to speak coherently.

The faerie tossed him up and then caught him by the head, gently placing Vance’s face against the rock wall. With a slow and admirable amount of pressure, it scrapped his face against some nearby jagged rocks. It was more than enough to break the skin of his fortified body and caused Vance to moan in pain. The faerie looked at him oddly as blood dripped from his face onto the faerie’s slick fingers. This caused shock and appeasement all at once to appear on its face.

“THIS GOOD,” it said, smiling. “Now you sleep.”

With Vance still held tightly, it arched its arm back from its body as if it had no shoulder joint.

“Close your eyes!” Vance told Leon as he tossed something up in the faerie’s face.

A void-shattering flashbang blinded the secluded dark faerie, who knew mostly darkness. It dropped the pair and shrieked, flying high into the ceiling.

“You ok, kid?”

"I'll be fine. What about you? You're not looking so well."

"I'll be fine, but we need to figure out something to end this."

"YOU CHEAT!" The faerie roared while rubbing its eyes to recover from the blast. "YOU USE SOMETHING ELSE!"

As the faerie was about to charge in again, someone yelled from the other side of the cave.

"Enough!"

The faerie looked back, cocking its head like that of a battered crow to see who it was. A surprised look rushed across its face.

"IT YOU! I trade you for new toys... Why back?"

The witch gave him his answer by roaring a spell.

The faerie looked at her oddly. Something happened, and it didn't shriek this time, but instead screamed out in anguish. It hit its face multiple times and flew into the wall, bashing its head against the rock before it became engulfed in flames.

"WHY, WHY, WHY," it screamed, flying through the tainted water, trying to put itself out.

The water had no effect on the flames as they spread across its body, continuing to burn. The slime upon its arms acted like grease, and the fire moved everywhere. Its disgusting slimy hands turned into a flaky, crisp layer, and the rest of it welted and blistered.

Its scream became a whisper, and eventually, nothing else came from it as it fell into the water where, even dead, it continued to burn. Its wings were now nothing more than a cloud of powdery dust that floated in the air even after they had departed from the motionless faerie.

"Let's go. We have little time," the girl told them.

Leon, who was still dazed, got a closer look and saw that it was the witch who was taken away not too long ago by the man named Valentine. Both he and Vance struggled as they climbed to their feet.

"How did you escape?" Leon asked.

“There’s no time to explain. It won’t be long until they catch up. I have to get you to Fate. We’ll be safe once we get to the Deadzone.”

The two agreed to forgo an explanation for now as they moved to grab their packs.

“Hurry,” the witch said, motioning them to follow her to the edge of the faerie’s toy box.

“Don’t tell me it’s in there,” Leon said, looking disgusted at the litter of body parts and grime around the entrance.

“The reason they created the creature was to prevent anyone from entering the Deadzone. It only makes sense to have it defend the spot the entrance is at,” the witch said, looking at Leon before pushing through the waterfall alone.

“It threw us into a pool of blood, shit, and who knows what else. I’m pretty sure you even inhaled some of it, and you’re worried about what’s behind this?” Vance asked. He quickly dressed the wound on his face that stretched from his upper right lip to his eyebrow with some supplies.

“What was that strange voice that came from the faerie, Vance?”

“I’m not too sure. I just know it spooked me and was more than we would have been equipped to handle. Now let’s go.”

He tossed some bloodied rags to the side and pushed forward.

Together, they entered the waterfall.

5

The freshwater from above washed over them as they pushed through the waterfall. It was a refreshing change from the filth they had endured previously.

Once past the water, they took a deep breath in an attempt to clear their mind. The air was anything but refreshing. Gagging, they wiped away the water from their eyes as multiple dead bodies, many of the same person, filled their vision. Some were complete—others distorted and partial from the terrible flaying the faerie had given to them before eating upon them.

Beyond the multiple corpses on the isle, an enormous hangman's tree decorated with blood and organs rested at the center. To its right, there was a suspicious-looking stone pillared doorway that glowed with an odd hum as it stood a few feet away.

The middle-aged witch had already passed through and was at the center of the isle awaiting them. She stood next to the stone pillar doorway with a faint glow coming from within it—the Roman numeral VIII was on the top section. The entrance ahead looked eerily similar to what a section of Stonehenge might look like alone. Leon focused on that aspect as he passed the corpses and the stream of blood. He took each step with the utmost care as he passed through the rotten graveyard.

“Let's go fast,” the witch told them. “You don't want to be late for your appointment.”

“Is it safe?” Vance asked. He looked at the curious glow, moving his fingers around the rim of the entrance. He knew that if the enemy could have entered before, they would more than likely have done so rather than having this creature guard it.

“It's safe for me and those Fate are expecting, which is you. Go on. We don't have time for this.”

Vance moved forward and passed through.

“You're next, let's move,” the witch told Leon.

“What do you think, Hope?”

“Well, it's oddly suspicious that she escaped given who she was with, but you've also come all this way already. There's no point in second-guessing it when you're literally at the Deadzone. We also know nothing about this witch. She may have had some way to get away and been waiting for you to show up before doing so.”

“Seems like more than that. She could kill the faerie that we struggled so much against together. Are all witches this powerful?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not too certain about the strength of witches. In the past, they were powerful and fought alongside conquest users and the gods in the great war.”

Leon didn’t know what to think of this answer but moved forward—passing through the stone entrance. There was a slight ringing and what sounded like someone shouting behind him in the distance. He couldn’t tell if this was in his head or if someone was actually yelling at him. It didn’t matter. After he had walked through the stone doorway, the ringing had stopped. What he was staring at in front of him was what was known as the Deadzone.



Chapter XIII



Human Tenacity

Silence. No water running, no wind blowing, no birds chirping, only silence. No dangerous revenants or ungodly creatures looking to make any trouble. In front of them now was a small house in the middle of an empty field. Its soft glow from an otherwise voided realm felt oddly comforting to Leon.

It reminded him of the endless fields of plowed dirt after a mid-June wheat harvest. It was dark, but that was nothing new. There were some nights in the country away from the city that were all but pitch-black. Those were the cloudy nights where even the bright full moon could not pierce the darkness. The house and warm light from within reminded him of his grandparents' farmhouse on those dark nights.

"What is this?" Vance asked.

"It's what remains of the Deadzone," the witch told him.

"What remains? I thought there were revenants, remnants, whatever you want to call them that we needed to look out for. This is it?"

"The *remnants* that you speak of have been sent to Earth to join their own kind there. I'm not sure who explained it to you, but they were never truly hostile as long as you respected their territory and the surrounding nature. Some indeed felt as if they had lost their purpose and tried to leave here.

“That is what happened to that faerie that you saw outside. It went off on its own to protect the cave and ended up being twisted into what you saw. The cave and surrounding area used to be where these creatures lived long ago, but all that remains in the surrounding area is dust and bone due to the great war. Why has the Deadzone shrunk to what it is now? I do not know; that is a question for Fate herself.”

“*Did you know any of this?*” Leon asked Hope, wondering why he had heard little of this previously.

“A bit. I knew the battle was here, but I know little about the rest of the details. At least the version of me within this fragment has not been given access to that knowledge.”

He wondered for a brief moment why this part of history might be restricted. Then Leon thought back to the mass hysteria that might be caused should people know about Fate and the Deadzone.

“Interesting,” Vance said, gently rubbing next to his wound. He had been unaware of most of this, along with Leon. “So that house is...?”

“Yes. Let’s proceed as that’s where Fate is awaiting the two of you.”

“Well, you ready, kid? Looks like somehow we made it, and you’ll have that meeting after all.”

“So I shall,” is all Leon could think to say, brushing his left hand through his hair.

As they approached, each step felt more onerous than the last. The pressure of what was about to happen had caught up with them. The fears of the journey had subsided, and now the weight of what was expected was setting in with each step forward.

Left, right, left, right. A pause and a nervous breath before continuing again. He couldn’t tell if he was still wet from all the water or sweating that badly. Then he remembered the energy field that

washed over him would prevent most liquids from externally getting to him.

He slapped his face gently to try and shake it off. He was rewarded with a reassuring smile from Vance, who at the same time gave him a firm pat on the back as if to say, “*it’s going to be ok.*”

At last, they reached the entrance to the inviting house and were greeted by a warm humming from the inside.

“*Hmmmmmmmm du nuuuu, nu nu nu. hmmm hmmm,*” the gentle sound radiated around them.

“You don’t need to be shy,” a sweet voice said. “Please, come inside, Leon.”

2

Leon alone was forced into the house with only Hope by his side. The witch and Vance remained outside, but still within earshot. Leon looked back at Vance through the door and was only motioned forward by him with a silent whisper: “*Go on, kid.*”

Leon turned the corner to where an ordinary-looking woman sat in front of him in a rocking chair.

She had long black hair that went down slightly past her waist. It was straight at the top, but about two-thirds of the way down seemed to curl naturally. The most unusual feature of hers was her eyes. It wasn’t as if they belonged to a monster. Quite the opposite, they seemed all too kind. What made them strange was the fading iris. They were almost as white as the moons. She was on the cusp of being completely blind, but it didn’t seem that she let this bother her too much as she poured a beverage.

“Tea?”

“Sure....” Leon responded hesitantly. “Sorry, I think we’re a bit early. It seems a few things changed that we were unaware of that pushed us ahead of schedule.”

“Early? No, no dear. You are exactly where you need to be at the time you were meant to.”

Leon hesitated for a moment, looking into her eyes again. Even as they talked, the irises seemed to be dulling even more. “Your eyes; what’s wrong with them?”

“Ah, yes, that would be your first question. It’s quite curious for a god to be going blind, isn’t it?” She snapped her fingers, and a door appeared, slamming shut from where Leon had come a minute earlier.

The sudden events spooked him for a moment, but Fate’s reassuring smile calmed him almost immediately.

“This will be a private conversation, but I’m afraid we don’t have too much time to talk.”

“Not much time?” Leon asked.

“Yes, as you know, I am the goddess of Fate. That being said once I go blind and can no longer see, means one of two things. First, the universe will be destroyed. Fortunately for all, this is not what I see ahead, at least not yet. Which leaves us with the second alternative; my own demise. Before that happens, I’ve noticed that you have a plethora of questions that you wish to ask. Go ahead.”

“I...” this was the last thing Leon was expecting. Was he going to be the last one to have a meaningful conversation with Fate? Perhaps the first human to do so? He had heard that Fate and the gods didn’t say much or give much guidance at all. Why was she going to die? He guessed it wasn’t a question he needed to ask since she already answered it in a roundabout way. He would know the answer to that soon enough.

“Oh yes, before you begin, I have two things to thank you for coming here.” Fate grabbed a small sash nearby, unraveling it carefully.

“The first is the dagger, Carnwennan. This is the dagger that was bestowed to King Arthur. It will take a lot of practice to master, but I think you will find it helpful in your fight against the darkness. While Arthur still lives in this world, the dagger is meant for you.

Some of the weapons that a great being created many eons ago choose their own master. This is one of those weapons. One of the most powerful objects that humanity will be able to harness in their fight against the threat they now face, and those that are still to come. I think you will be able to pay this kindness forward in time by helping Arthur gather something else that has been quite difficult to come by.

“The second item I want you to have is this necklace, which holds the keystone. This allows you to travel through any of the portals from Afterworld or vice versa. This is what I used to open the portal to Earth and what allowed the witches’ clan to come here when they had a powerful artifact or weapon that would benefit humanity as a whole.”

She held them out to Leon, who took them graciously. He put the keystone around his neck, inspecting its beautiful lavender shimmer. He then unwrapped the dagger, and as soon as he touched its hilt, he felt a faint spark. It was as if he had shaken hands for the first time with someone that would become one of his best friends. He eventually slid it into his belt, opposite of the other already around his waist.

“You said *portals*, plural. This means that there are other hidden portals to Earth on Afterworld other than the one the witches used to get here?”

“No, that’s not quite what I meant. You see, while there are different portals, there is only one from here to Earth, and the other way around is also true. However, other portals lead from Earth to other planets in the universe. Those planets have a portal back to Earth and Afterworld. What you call *Stonehenge* is actually the gateway to these different worlds.”

She looked at Leon oddly and smiled.

“I’m surprised that was your first question. Though that’s not a bad thing. Please ask another without being prompted by me, as I

don't want to go into too much detail about the other planets. I will say, yes, they have life on them, and yes, they breathe the same air that you do. Just please avoid the two remaining center gateways. Those I wish for you to avoid at all costs. Especially the red door; for what is through that door, that gateway, will surely cause even greater harm to humanity in the long run than what we are now seeing. That is all I will say upon that matter. Feel free to ask anything else."

That's why the gateway to the Deadzone reminded me so much of Stonehenge, Leon thought. But I wonder what she means by avoiding the red door?

He noticed Hope rocking on her toes, smiling beside him.

"What are you so excited about?"

"What you ask? This is wonderful! This knowledge is what I've been craving. It opens up even more questions and possibilities than you could comprehend. Please ignore me and continue to get more information!"

Leon felt slighted by the way she phrased that, but she was right. He needed to continue and ask the questions he had contemplated. He knew the first question he had in mind could spark resentment, but he still intended to ask it.

"Why did you abandon and ignore humanity? Why did you create all the fake religions that only serve to create conflict among one another? I don't understand why you would do that to us."

Fate paused to get a sip of tea before putting it back down on the plate on the coffee table in front of her. She looked at Leon with a heavy sadness.

"Why did we abandon you? Well, if you must know, it wasn't something we took lightly, and it was heavily debated. It was to prepare you for what you've seen here. It seems we chose the right path after all, for we gods have all but died off, yet humanity struggles on. After the dark gods invaded, we began to prepare you by separating you physically; such as the separation of Pangaea. From there, a dif-

ference in culture and physical features began to appear. While this was the beginning, there needed to be more.

“We needed to cause conflict between those of you who looked similar, so we introduced religion. The similarities between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and all the other religions out there were to bring out the best traits within you. At the same time, the slight differences would create division and war. We did this to trigger your struggle for survival and make humans strong enough to stand against the dark tides. The strongest among you have since learned to do things alone and work together when possible. Most of you have learned to struggle.

“The weaker still believe that we play favorites. Perhaps there is a hint of luck and happenstance involved that constitutes what they perceive as a miracle, but that is never the case. We’ve never played favorites or interfered with things on the other side outside of the witches since we created those religions. Most religions were created for the sole purpose of making warriors. For example, the Nordic religion. How do you get into Valhalla? More conflict, killing, and dying as a warrior. Even monks, for as peaceful as most of them are, are taught to train their bodies in combat for spiritual wisdom. Though you can’t blame all religions or horrors on us, as some humans will look anywhere to find meaning.

“Take Scientology, for instance—we were as surprised as you were that such a following would come from a lowly science fiction writer. The point is, through a few simple yet intricate lies and humanity’s pain and suffering, you now have an edge that no one else can claim: human tenacity and ingenuity. Through your self-reliance, you have been taught to think for yourself and not rely heavily on us to solve everything for you.

“Look at yourself and where you have gotten with your newfound abilities. That was all luck, good or bad, depending on your view, but it was luck all the same. You were not chosen by us, yet

with your abilities and conquest and the help of others, you have the chance to do something great. Had we fed each of your needs and desires from our bosom, day in and out, and answered all of your questions, do you think this possibility, this yearning to struggle and survive while fighting for others would exist within you? Would the others who have given you access to their knowledge and fruits of their labor been as worthy as they are today? Would this rocking chair exist? Or those cups? Or would that tea be here if not for the struggles and innovation someone endured to conquer it? It's possible, but there is no guarantee.

"These were human creations, not creations of us gods. While not all of humanity is accepting of the world today, and it's surely dark at times, would even a majority of humanity be willing to struggle and fight? Would they work together now if they were given everything then? Or would it be as it is on Earth? One society, one species, depicted by one feral yearning: greed."

Leon was taken aback by her response. There was a lot to digest, all of it informative, but most of it seemed accurate. The world is rough, and people are greedy.

His throat felt dry, and he took a drink of the tea before proceeding.

"You said I wasn't chosen, so why am I here now?"

"It's simple. You're here now because of the potential that luck has brought upon you. I brought you here because of your humility and compassion. Not only yours, but that of your grandfather, which has given you exciting connections.

"Tesla is a prime example, which, along with your conquest, has allowed you to gather access to the training and technology that you needed to survive your encounter on the way. Though you're quite far away from reaching your full potential, and lightning isn't the only thing that led to your death."

“What do you mean? Even Dane used his memory recollection to figure out my conquest, and there was nothing else.”

“Hope, do you sense anything?”

“Sorry, I have noticed nothing of the sort that she could be referring to.”

“Remember this, Leon, just because you don’t have a memory of something that has happened does not mean it hasn’t. Once you figure that out, whatever else may happen, you will grasp an important understanding. Given time, you will eventually gain a better understanding of your true capabilities. Try not to take everything at face value. While seeing is believing, there are always forces at work behind the veil that factor into any given situation.” She looked at Leon and poured him more tea.

“Why did I fall from the sky when I first arrived?”

“Sorry about that,” Fate smiled. “I tried to get you into a position to be received by Dobrynya and Ragnarr, who were in the area at the time, but calculating things from within here can be a bit difficult. Where we are now is a small pocket dimension I crafted between what you call Afterworld and Earth. It has been used to protect myself while preparing for today.”

“Preparing for today?”

Looking at her eyes now, he noticed that there was little light left in them. He wondered what she meant by that and was about to ask her about the dark creator, but Fate took it upon herself to change the pace of the conversation.

“Hmmm.” She murmured. “I suppose that’s enough questions. I have one thing to tell you that you should find a use for in the future. The witches were of my own doing. They have, for the most part, followed me faithfully as long as humanity has been around. Though there are always those, who will stray further than others. The faithful are responsible for destroying souls that have, without fatal reasons, meaning destined to die from a disease or the like, taken their

own life. You can think of them as grim reapers in that way. Any soul that passes by a self-inflicted wound is examined. If found to have taken their own life without being marked for death, they are erased.

“I have chosen to do this to give them mercy. For if they are overwhelmed by life on Earth, then this world is no place for them. The souls of anyone pure of heart that has died and has yet to reach the age where their beastly nature takes hold are reset and reborn as another. I suppose that’s all I have time to explain, for our guest is growing impatient, and I can’t keep them much longer.”

“*Our guest?*” Leon thought.

“You may both enter,” Fate said, as the door that kept their conversation private opened and vanished once more. Vance, along with the witch, entered.

“About damn time,” Vance said before catching himself. “Sorry, I’m not sure if you could hear, but it’s just that as soon as that door slammed closed, and we were unable to hear inside, this crazy witch was knocking and cursing—banging on the door trying to get in.”

“I’m sorry,” Fate said, looking at Vance. “Your time is up; there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Vance looked perplexed, wondering what she was talking about. He tried to speak, only for blood to rush out of his mouth. He looked down and saw the witch’s hand through his chest.

“VANCE,” Leon screamed. He stood up, and with lightning coursing through his body, he charged forward. He got about three feet before noticing he could not move further. Fate was already in front of Leon before he had noticed.

“*Why can’t I move, Hope!*” Leon yelled internally.

“I... I don’t know, perhaps it’s Fate, but that’s unlikely.”

“VANCE,” he yelled again as Fate firmly gripped his shoulder.

Vance smiled at him, mouthing three words: “*Go on, Leon.*”

Soon after, his eyes popped, and his body radiated white light before he collapsed.

The witch smiled.

"*This* is the natural order," she exclaimed. "I suppose I don't need to wear this anymore."

The witch's body shook like someone on the electric chair before the skin tore and dissolved as a hideous being with violet, radiant eyes and a white complexion stood in front of him.

"Remmy?" Leon asked, astonished.

"Unfortunately, no, I'm not my son," the creature said. "It's regrettable, but she will be quite disappointed once she learns her son was killed by the same people she's been helping to protect all these years."

Leon, at last, recognized the voice from when the faerie acted strangely.

"I'll kill you." Leon snapped, looking at the motionless remains of Vance on the ground.

"Temper, temper. You've got yourself a lively one there, Fate."

"That's enough, you heinous creature. You've already brought such tragedy to our universe with your presence."

"Don't you **DARE** lecture me about tragedy, Fate. I gave you gods the opportunity to spare most humans and creatures of this universe for the fair price of a few souls for what was needed. But you refused. I ended up taking a few, and you start a war over it and look at you now. You sealed yourself away here, but it seems that the wound I inflicted on you long ago has run its course. Now, one of the last gods from this universe is on her deathbed.

"Don't blame me for your actions. I've been more than lenient on these annoying creatures, only taking what I need. How am I repaid? They've got the nerve to kill one of my sons. You want me to sit back and let that slide? I'm afraid I can't.

"I'll start by sending one of my sons to Earth and culling their passion and tenacity. At the same time, I'll take this world over completely, crushing any resistance that sprouts. It may take a year, ten,

or even a thousand, but eventually, they will fall. Now, hand over the keystone.”

As the god was telling her this, Leon could hear her voice singing in his head at the same time.

♪ My time is coming. Our work is done. We cast dark shadows, with lights afar. We did our best to see it through, but in the end, my time is due. The nights are daunting. Their hope is gone. The people call out with no rapport. Yet still their calling, now out to us. Our final showdown, and what it's cost. ♪

She looked at Leon and smiled, pushing him into the rocking chair she had been sitting in. The necklace he had put on glowed, and the chair swallowed him up.

“**You BITCH,**” the dark god bellowed, rushing forward.

♪ My last light, these shadows cast. Gods once aplenty, our hours passed. In the end, I atone to you. Perhaps with the keystone, your hope's renewed. ♪

Leon heard this in his head as he was being dragged away towards Earth. Fate crushed the portal, and as Afterworld was vanishing from his view, Leon saw the dark god pierce her body. Even so, a beautiful, resilient smile still gazed back at Leon as Fate's eyes turned completely white. The gateway and Afterworld disappeared from view, leaving him once again to fall towards an unknown future.



Epilogue



A man stood by a long oak table, tapping a coin against it while looking back at Leon. Confused, he took a long drag of his cigarette before knocking the ashes into a nearby plastic cup.

“So let me make sure I got all of this,” he said, looking at Leon with a hint of skepticism. “You died, got resurrected in another world, and fought against gods from another universe? Not to mention, these gods were basically demonic beings as far as anyone from Earth would be concerned, you know, with the whole soul-stealing mumbo jumbo. Then, you were sent from there, back to here, after the god known as Fate died? Am I getting that right?”

“Well, that’s basically right, but that’s only the start of the story,” Leon replied.

The man shrugged and took a seat in an old recliner, still twirling the coin through his fingers.

“So that’s what happened right before we met? You never got around to telling me the complete story,” a girl who sat near Leon said while leaning against him.

“That’s it,” Leon replied. His long hair that had once been dark brown was now stained with white and gray stripes throughout it.

“What’s this got to do with us, kid?” An older man in a cowboy hat asked, slamming down his glass of whiskey. The ice in his glass readjusted itself after melting with that all too familiar sound. He was sitting on a stool and wore an odd-looking coat and hat. Its colors looked like a mix of blood, outer space, and rusty iron. On his back, the symbol VI burned in orange and white flames.

AFTERWORLD

"I'd rather you not call me kid, but I'll be getting to that. Let's say things didn't work out as planned, and honestly, I don't even know how we would have planned for what happened."

A strange figure in a trench coat laughed wickedly.

"Do I get to slice things? Please tell me I get to slice things. I'll slice big, small, round, anything. Just let me slice!"

"Calm down," the cowboy told him.

The strange figure slumped down before laughing. Somehow, his odd laugh seemed saner than when the man spoke.

"You don't have to worry about that. You'll definitely get to slice things." Leon said.

This caused the figure to smile once more and slide its strange fingers across a whetstone.

Another lady with dark, long beautiful hair was on the couch that laid in a corner, snoring softly.

"Will she be ok? She's been sleeping for a long time," the man with the coin and leather jacket asked.

"She'll be fine. I'll fill her in later. Right now, she's doing something important," Leon said, smiling.

"That's *important*?" He flipped the coin he had been twirling, catching it between his middle and index fingers revealing heads. "Maybe so," he said, settling back down and taking a drag from his bent cigarette that was now smoked down to its filter.

"So, what's next is our story?" The girl beside him asked.

"Indeed, the story of the wizard and other worlds before our return to Afterworld," Leon said, rubbing his head and smiling.

She wrinkled her nose at him and smiled back.

Leon was happy. For the first time in a long time, he was at least slightly optimistic about the future. He looked at the many faces gathered around while thinking of those who weren't among them, and those who never would be again. After grabbing a glass from the nearby bar, he filled it up. He thought of Vance and the others he had

JAMES G. ROBERTSON

lost, those courageous men and women that those here would never know.

“Do you think they’ll be inclined to help after you and that woman tell them the entire story?” Hope asked him. She was the only one here who knew it.

“It’s not about if they’ll help, Hope. We’ll have to trust that they will. This isn’t something we can do alone, and even together, without the help of the others, we are all damned. This is where we must forge new bonds and look to the future rather than the past. If I continue to look back, I’ll never escape that darkness or be able to fight against the impending hell that approaches. I must continue forward. For the sake of all, I must strive towards that bright burning day.”

Leon took a drink and moved to sit back down beside the girl. From there, he continued his story.

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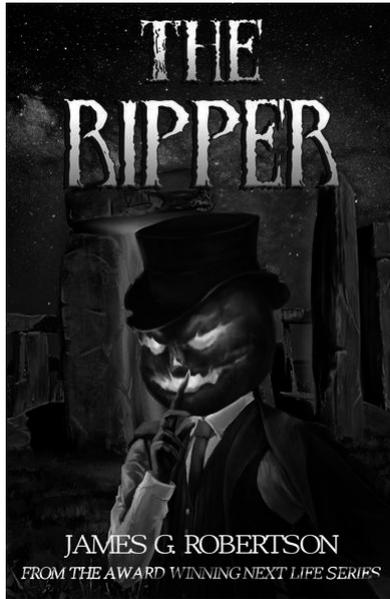
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About the Author

James G Robertson was born in a small town in Kansas. He's also lived in Texas, Missouri, and New York, where he graduated college from SUNY Oswego in 2019, obtaining a bachelor's in political science with a theatre minor. He also received an associate's degree in information network technology from Pratt Community College in 2012. His first book, *Afterworld*, was originally published in April, 2020.