



HELL

MUR LAFFERTY



THE
AFTERLIFE SERIES
II



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By Mur Lafferty

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The Afterlife Series II

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

This book is dedicated to the listeners, who encouraged me to take the step from one story to a series.

Thank you.

CONTENTS

[HELL](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[SNEAK PEEK AT EARTH](#)
[THE AFTERLIFE SERIES III](#)

CHAPTER ONE

I'd had no concept of time or self when I was a soul. I remember casting about, watching the Divine punish world leaders (which is what Daniel and Kazuko had told me He'd done). When I lost form but was touched by the Divine, I was stitched back together enough to comprehend my surroundings, if not my own identity.

We sat, the three of us, in the study of the Divine. I could no longer give It a name as I fully remembered Its touch. It was beyond Man, beyond Woman. The face It wore was a mask so most souls could comprehend what they wanted to see. But there was no comprehending the truth. Such power It had, such wisdom. It embodied the qualities of every god and goddess I had encountered and It got me wondering: was It a mixture of all gods, or was It the spring from which all the other gods were born?

Theological arguments aside, we had a mission. Why the font of such power required us to undertake this quest was beyond me, but trying to understand Its will was like trying to drink from a waterfall. I could only drink in a little at a time.

Daniel handed me a backpack. I took it wordlessly and strapped it on. Kazuko rose from her solemn kneeling position. She pointed behind us.

"That is the way out," she said.

A door stood where there hadn't been one before, in the middle of the wall. A Greek symbol was etched on the door, and it took me a moment to recognize Omega.

Daniel led the way, with Kazuko following and myself bringing up the rear. The door opened to a dark corridor. "Great," mumbled Daniel.

I closed the door behind us and left us in the pitch blackness.

"What did you do that for?" Daniel snapped. He'd been distant since his initial outburst. I think my inability to remember much upset him, as if he took it personally.

"I don't know," I said. "Habit, I guess. Don't leave doors open. Grandma Nancy would always say flies would get in. Dogs would get out. Air conditioning would get wasted." I rummaged around in my backpack until I felt something flashlight-shaped.

I turned it on and slipped past the two of them in the corridor. "Let's go."

We walked for some time. My head still buzzed with my experiences, and for a brief moment I regretted not taking the hawk's form. The hawk would unlikely be worrying about the cold silence behind me.

"So when are you going to tell me what happened to your eye?" I asked.

Daniel made a small noise.

"Never mind," I said.

“No. It’s okay.” His voice had lost the edge it had gained. “After you... had your... encounter with that angel demon thing... some stuff happened.”

“That’s not telling me much.” I didn’t look around but kept walking down the corridor, which had shifted from a hallway to a stone tunnel.

Kazuko’s soft, matter-of-fact voice floated up from the back. “After the altercation with the entity who attacked you, we were blown apart, God put Daniel back together: complete with his eye, but missing the wisdom of Odin. It turns out that God would need the All-Father’s wisdom to restore you. Daniel then found a way to regain what he needed. He got the wisdom back, gave an eye in exchange, and you know the rest.”

I stopped and shone the light in her face. She didn’t wince at the sudden glare. “I’m sorry. Can you go over that again?”

#

The cave emptied onto a barren plain. Distant screams sounded from afar. We stood at the mouth of the cave and stared at the gray waste and the gnarled, blackened trees before us.

“So which hell is this?” I asked.

“It isn’t hell,” Kazuko said. “This is purgatory.”

Daniel scowled at her. “And how the hell do you know that?”

“I am your guide.”

He turned to me, sighing. “See? She is still doing that.”

I didn’t return his exasperated grin. I pointed as figures came into view. In the gray afternoon (what time was it, anyway?) they lit up the dullness around them. Embers danced between the flaming figures, and they writhed as they walked.

“Good Lord,” Daniel said. “If this is purgatory, what is hell going to be like?” He swallowed. He apparently already knew the answer to his question; he had a god in him to tell him as much.

I was just me.

What was I doing there?

Kazuko spoke up. “Those are the lustful. The fire is burned from them as they prepare for entrance into Heaven. As soon as they are purified, they are permitted to wash in the river of Lethe and enter paradise.”

Daniel snorted. “Paradise. Right. It was a blast, huh, Kate?”

I remembered the touch of the Divine. “It is all they could ever hope for. They will receive their reward.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped slightly. “Please tell me you’re kidding. Don’t you remember getting to heaven, how it was all smoke and mirrors? We weren’t even together, but I found you and we left to explore?”

“Except we were sent to watch the end of the worlds,” I said absently.

He snapped his jaw shut. “You remember that?”

I nodded. “It’s coming back to me, in bits.”

“But that wasn’t my point. We agreed that heaven wasn’t all that, and we left. And now you’re buying into it?”

“You haven’t seen it,” I whispered.

“Seen what?”

“You haven’t felt the true touch of the Divine. Your view of it is colored by your anger.”

“What, are you a fundamentalist now? What the hell, Kate?”

I tilted my head, trying to understand. “You carry a part of the Divine within you, Daniel. When you realize that, you’ll understand.”

“Gah!” he shouted, throwing his hands up. He stomped out of the cave, heading toward the flaming walkers. Our guide, the stoic Kazuko, followed. I paused, and then walked in their footsteps.

The person in the lead, a tall woman in a flowing skirt, halted and bowed to us. Flames dripped from her hair, and her face twisted in agony, but she made no anguished sound. “Visitors to our hopeful land,” she said. “What news do you bring?”

“Uh, we’re actually on our way down. Can you point us the way out of purgatory?” Daniel asked.

“Way down? Do you come from the holy light of heaven?” the woman nearly wept in hope.

“Yeah,” Daniel replied. “God sent us on a mission.”

“Did He release us from our penance?”

“Uh, well, not so much,” he said, shifting from foot to foot, looking at Kazuko. “What are you in for? I’ll see if I can put in a good word.”

“I am Gloria Francis Smoot,” she said, bowing. “A prominent madam from New Orleans. My house of ill repute was notorious during the War of Northern Aggression.”

“Dude. You’ve been here since the Civil War?” Daniel stared at her.

“Well, yes; that much time is needed to remove the taint of sin, or until the Judgment Day comes. And our day will come.”

“What the fuck is going on!” Daniel yelled. He stomped around, flailing his arms. “Has the world gone insane? My best friend is a fundie, you’re sitting here, *on fire*, spouting some shit about how it’s okay that you’re *on fire* because you’ll be forgiven on Judgment Day, and you don’t even know.”

He stopped and grabbed her shoulders, gripping her burning flesh tightly. I winced in sympathy as his hands grew red.

“Listen to me,” he said. “It’s a ruse. Judgment Day was last Wednesday. It’s over. Heaven is busier than Macy’s on the day after Thanksgiving. He’s forgotten about you.”

She shook him off and took a step backward. Her compatriots shifted and glanced at each other through the flames. “Are you sent from Satan? Is this my final test?”

“You’re not paying attention,” Daniel said through gritted teeth. “We’re not from there, we’re going to there.”

“You lie,” she said. Her voice was barely audible above the crackle of the flames around her body.

“Really?” he asked. He pointed to the right, about one hundred yards away where an angel stood in front of an iron gate, staring at us. “Ask him. He probably can’t lie, can he?”

A woman put her hand on Gloria’s arm. “Do not despair, Gloria. You must keep the faith.” Her friends crowded around her, making the individual fires grow to one great bonfire, and we stepped back, squinting.

“This is ridiculous. Let’s get out of here,” Daniel said.

We left them crouched and weeping. Daniel stalked far ahead of us, his spine straight and his fists balled.

“That was a pretty shitty thing to do,” I told Kazuko. “He took away what remaining hope they had.”

“Daniel is dedicated to uncovering the truth,” she replied.

“How very X-Files,” I muttered. I ran to catch up to Daniel and put my hand on his shoulder.

“We need to camp, dude,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” he grumbled.

I pointed to the troubled sky. “It’s getting dark. We’re not in heaven anymore; apparently the other places have night.”

We tried to build a fire, but couldn’t find any wood. I thought about suggesting we convince a lustful soul to join us so we could see by their tormented light, but figured Daniel wouldn’t find it amusing.

Kazuko stretched out on a light blanket, her hand on her sword. Daniel hugged his knees to his chest and stared in the direction from which we’d come, facing the fires of the weeping souls.

Memories sat in my mind like stories I’d once read but not experienced myself. I hesitated a moment, then went to him and sat down, my back to his, and leaned back. He relaxed against me.

“I am sorry I lied to you, Kate, and I’m sorry I let you go ahead to that angel thing without me,” he said. His voice was tired, defeated.

“I never would have claimed my independence if it hadn’t been for you, Daniel,” I said.

“Still. I lost you for what felt like a long time. I really missed you.”

I was silent for some time.

“Do you want to tell me about what happened?” I finally said.

“Can we talk about that later? It’s still a little fresh,” he said, and he shifted as his arm touched the bandage across the wound on his face.

“Sure.”

“So why didn’t you ever tell me you were in love with me?” he asked.

I should have felt nervous and flushed, but I wasn’t. “Several reasons, I guess. I knew it would make things weird if you didn’t feel the same way. And if you did feel the same way, we might someday break up and I’d lose all of you. And then there was the fact that I *did* tell you about a year and a half ago and you didn’t return the feelings.”

He turned his head, trying to see me in peripheral vision. “What? When was this?”

“It was Christmas, we were hanging out at your house watching TV, the lights twinkling. It seemed like the perfect time. I gave you a love note with your present the next day, and you never said anything about it.”

“Oh... Right. Hell, I was in love with ten different people a week back then. I didn’t realize you were serious.”

I snorted. “How much clearer could I have been?”

He didn’t answer. I stared into the darkness, and I suppose he stared at the flickering, burning souls.

“What are we going to do about them?” I asked.

“Do?”

“Yeah. The tormented souls? Weeping and burning and all that?”

“Nothing. It’s not our jobs to release them, we’re just looking for the lost ones.”

“I guess with all that god stuff you got, you skipped out on compassion.”

He was noticeably still. I yawned, tired from returning to my corporeal body, and stretched out behind Daniel. I leaned against him, keeping contact, and fell asleep, with a nagging sense of something in my brain.

#

When I woke, Daniel was still seated, but his head was on his arms, and he dozed. Kazuko was seated cross-legged, making tea. I watched her pour water from a canteen into her teapot and the idea that had been nagging at me finally solidified.

I grinned and gently shook Daniel’s shoulder. He raised his head and then winced and put his hand to his neck. He glared at me. “You are never, ever going to let me sleep, are you?”

“Not when I keep having brilliant ideas. You need to stay awake to keep up.”

He groaned and looked at Kazuko. "Aren't you supposed to protect me?"

She didn't answer, but sipped her tea.

"Fine. Tell me, what glorious idea has sprung, fully grown, from your head?"

"Come on," I said, and pulled him to his feet.

All at once, it felt wonderful to have a body again, and I grabbed both our backpacks and ran toward the hill that the tortured souls surrounded. My feet pounded the ground and I outdistanced Daniel, who fell behind, complaining that his eye hurt.

I stopped short when I heard them, singing and wailing, calling out to God to remember them. I dropped the backpacks onto the ground and reached inside one until I found what I needed. I grasped the handle and lugged out a bucket of water.

Daniel caught up with me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"The Divine did not restore my soul, did It?"

He passed a hand over his face. "No, He made me do it."

"And how did you have the power do to something that amazing?"

"I got some Odin in a cut. What are you getting at?"

I thrust the bucket into his hands. Some of the water slopped over the side and got on his jeans. He swore.

"Free them. Forgive them. Release them."

He stared at me, his one eye wide. The souls staggered closer, recognizing Daniel. Their desperate faces turned angry and ugly. They pointed at Daniel and began running toward us.

The *sssshk* of steel coming out of a scabbard sounded behind me, but I held my arm out to block Kazuko. "Wait," I said.

She stepped around my arm and stood at my side, ready.

The flaming mob neared, and Daniel cast a look over his shoulder at me. "Are you serious?"

"Definitely."

He shrugged. "Worked for Dorothy." And with that he tossed the bucket of water at the mob.

With a hiss, the flames were gone. Seven wet souls stood in front of us, too shocked to go on with their planned evisceration of my friend.

The woman we'd spoken with the night before, Gloria, held her hand out and stared at it.

"There," Daniel said. I could tell he was much more nervous than he sounded. "Your torment has ended. You are free to move on to your paradise."

Gloria looked at the angel guarding the gate. He bowed his head and stepped aside, freeing the entrance to Heaven.

She flung herself, her very wet self, around Daniel's neck, weeping and thanking him. He

dropped the bucket and staggered, clumsily returning the hug. They left him, after each hugging or kissing him.

Trying not to smile, I handed him a towel. He wiped his face and jacket. “You want to explain to me what happened?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet. I’m working on it,” I said, putting the towel and bucket back in my backpack. “Till I figure it out, we have more lustful souls to free.”

He frowned for a moment. “We’re out of water. I’m sure there are more souls around here than that small group.”

I stared at him. “Dude.” I pointed to the bucket where he’d dropped it. It was upright and full of water again.

“How?” he asked, his eye wide.

“For God’s sake, Daniel. We’re in the afterlife. I created a house, garden, a fake you, and a relationship out of nothing but core desire. You think I can’t dream up a little water? Give it a try.”

“Wow, you think of everything,” he said, sighing. “But you look like you need something.”

I cocked my head. “What?”

“A shower.” He flung the bucket at me. It drenched me immediately and I gasped as the cold water soaked me. By the time I’d wiped the water and my stringy hair from my eyes, he was running off, laughing.

“You utter and complete ass!” I yelled, picking up the bucket and running after him.

The bucket got heavier as I ran, and I looked down to see it filling with water again. Some fiery souls burned ahead of us, where Daniel was running. As much as I wanted to get him back, I remembered what was important.

There were a lot of souls in purgatory to get to.

CHAPTER TWO

The wind in purgatory is ranker than the wind in heaven. Heaven had seemed bland and uninteresting at times, but it was a lot better than the stale scent of sweat and fear. Sometimes it's hard to notice the absence of bad things until the bad things are introduced. Or reintroduced.

Daniel had been an absolution machine once he'd discovered his power to free the burning lustful souls into Heaven. I think he had a spiteful glory in his realization that he not only had the god-like ability to grant the souls freedom, but also to throw more souls into the utter chaos that was heaven.

Kazuko and I had finally stopped following him, although it had taken some convincing to get her to slow down. Daniel ran around with his bucket, dousing anyone he saw. He outdistanced us, and I put my hand on Kazuko's arm. She gave me a look that sent chills through my spine, and I wondered briefly what would happen to me if she sliced me open here in purgatory.

"Just wait," I said. "Let him do what he needs to do. I don't think anyone is a threat to him right now, and we're not keeping up with him anyway."

She looked pointedly at the angel standing at the gate to Heaven, letting the doused souls by, but watching Daniel closely.

I snorted. "You're really thinking of taking on an angel?"

"I am bound to protect and guide you both," she said.

"Well, wait till we need you. Let's just sit and hang out for a bit. He clearly doesn't need us right now."

She acquiesced and we sat on the barren ground. I put my backpack behind my head and lay down, stretching out my tired muscles.

"He is upset." It wasn't a question.

"Clearly," I agreed. "You guys seem to have been through a lot of shit without me."

"He's lost his eye. Twice. The same eye."

I squirmed a bit. "Well yeah, that tends to piss people off. If it were possible on Earth. Which it really isn't."

"The second time he lost it for you."

I didn't answer her. I didn't know how. When someone voluntarily loses an organ for you through violent measures, "thanks" doesn't seem to be sufficient enough. I said as much to Kazuko.

"Then perhaps you should say, 'thanks a lot,'" she said.

I rolled over to look at her. She stared at me with an impassive look, but I suddenly

laughed. It seemed very loud in this land that had heard no laughter for eons. “You have a sense of humor!”

She rewarded me with a very small smile. “Do not tell Daniel. It does him good to trust me as a stoic guardian. It’s your emotions he worries about.”

“Me? Why should he worry about me?”

“You awoke in him great confusion and distress when your feelings were revealed. He has been concerned for you since. He still is.”

I leaned back on my pack again. “I’m fine. Really. You guys have been through a lot, but so have I, just not quite in the same way.”

“Do you feel the way you did before?”

“No.”

“Ah.”

I didn’t know what she meant by ‘ah.’ Perhaps it made things easier. Perhaps it made things more complicated. I didn’t get a chance to ask, because then Daniel came up to us, panting and grinning.

“I think we’re done here. You guys ready to move on?”

#

We did the same to the others. We told the wrathful, envious, prideful, slothful, gluttonous, and greedy that their time was done. Some argued and said they needed to go through the purgatories of the other sins for their full penance, but one smoldering look from Daniel’s eye and a glance at his katana convinced them their penance was over.

Kazuko and I just watched. We passed the time discussing exactly how Daniel had gotten the know-how to use the ancient sword.

“Of course, he couldn’t make his body follow his brain’s commands at first,” she continued. “But in time the muscles did what the mind told them.”

“‘Over time’?” I asked. “I thought you haven’t had a lot of time since I left.”

“The trip to regain Odin’s wisdom took longer for us than it did for you,” she said.

I watched Daniel remove a heavy rock from a prideful woman’s back and help her stand to look him in the eye.

“I don’t really see why he needs me at this point,” I whispered.

Kazuko was not a fidgety woman, but her sudden stillness caught my attention. “What do you mean?”

I got the feeling I was walking on a very tender subject and wasn’t sure how to get out of it. “I mean he has you as a guide and protection, and he seems like he can take pretty good care of himself anyway. He’s got the wisdom of a god; about the only thing he lacks is the common sense

to use it. But he really doesn't need me."

She didn't draw her sword, but she didn't need to. Her look terrified me. "I would respectfully ask that you never say that in his presence. You do not know what he went through to get you back. If you question your worth to him, you will show yourself to be blinder than he."

I blushed and backpedaled. "Look, I know he got me back and paid a huge price. He did it because we're best friends. We're like brother and sister. But I'm just saying I don't know why I'm on this mission to hell. You two have brains and brawn. I have nothing."

"You just answered your own question. You are the person closest to him. Whether you acknowledge it or not, he needs you."

I nodded slowly. "That's fair. Do you think he'll ever tell me what you two went through?"

She watched Daniel with her eyes narrowed as if trying to read him. "I do not know."

"Will you?"

"No."

"Yeah. That's what I figured." I lapsed into silence. Daniel had done his final scout to clear purgatory and once he reached us, we were off.

He hadn't been very chatty since taking on his new responsibility. He traveled from purgatory punishment to punishment, staring straight ahead and saying little. When we camped, sometimes he would talk about the souls he had freed, but otherwise he remained silent. I held back from him now, unsure of how to start a conversation. I tried to wrack my brains for the conversations we'd had, the times he'd been upset and I'd been able to make him smile, the times I reminded him what was important. But laughter felt cheap here, and how could I remind him of something more important than what he was doing?

The gates leading out of purgatory – or, as most souls saw them, into purgatory – were nothing special. To us they resembled a picket fence leading from the purgatory of the proud into a flower-filled field.

I had a momentary thought of Jet and missed her terribly. When all is dire, what could be better than a Labrador licking your face?

Daniel frowned. "Where the hell is this?"

"Um, not sure. Still not hell, obviously," I said. "Shouldn't you know?"

"Odin wasn't omniscient," he said. "I can tell you the genealogy of Loki, both parents and children, including those recently living in Norway, and strange factoids from Japanese and Russian mythology, but this Christian literary stuff is your bag."

The field was reminiscent of Elysium, with the marble buildings, glorious fields, and perfect weather. No one seemed to be tortured here, even a little bit. The men—all men, no women—lounged about in the fields, lying on blankets, eating, reading, or dozing.

The man nearest the gate sprawled on a blanket, playing a lyre. He lay on his back and frowned at the sky.

When we approached him, he brightened and sat up.

“Someone new! Someone new! Oh this is glorious!” He put down his lyre and clapped.

“Er, new?” I asked.

“Oh yes, we haven’t had anyone new in so long, and the company is getting quite dull. This must mean Rome has returned; tell me it approaches its glory once again!”

Daniel and I exchanged looks. “I am Daniel, and these are Kate and Kazuko.” He stuck out his hand.

The man stood up and struck a pose, ignoring Daniel’s hand. “In life I was known as Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, but you can call me Nero. Rome’s greatest Emperor.”

Another man came up to us, adorned in a toga and leather sandals. “Hold, there, Nero. Second greatest, at best.”

Nero’s lip curled. “Octavius,” he said, tipping his head toward the newcomer.

Octavius bowed. “It is a pleasure to meet such colorful people. Please, come and tell us about Rome.”

I realized I had to stop the assumptions. “Sorry, we’re not from Rome, we’re just traveling through on our way... somewhere.” The words “to hell” died in my throat.

Octavius paused. “You are not emperors who come from Rome?”

“No, we are just wandering through,” Daniel said. “Where are we, anyway?”

Octavius’s voice became hard and annoyed. “This is the flowering valley, the place where the kings and Emperors of the Rome come to rest.”

I snapped my fingers. “Oh yeah! You’re pagan so you can’t go to Heaven, but being divinely chosen,” I fought the urge to make air quotes, “you get to hang here for eternity.”

“Until we are purified,” Nero said. “But it has been an awfully long time.”

“Nero. Aren’t you the guy who danced and sang while your city and people burned?” Daniel asked.

“Ah, yes.” Nero sighed and got a distant look in his eye. “It was so beautiful.”

Octavius snorted. “Fool. You shame the empire. It’s a wonder you got here.”

Nero returned to us and focused on his forebear. “Oh? And I’m sure the gods look favorably on those who sleep their way into office.”

Octavius drew himself up. “I was divinely chosen – the gods smile on their children’s movements.”

“Especially when their children murder other peoples’ children to get what they want,” Nero said.

Octavius colored. “You impudent fool. I did what was best for Rome. And no children burned while you laughed at your city’s flames?”

I looked around at the beautiful field of flowers. This was certainly better than those in purgatory proper had it. I tugged at Daniel’s elbow.

“Please excuse us, emperors. I must speak with my friend,” I said.

They barely looked at us as they continued to bicker. I pulled Daniel and Kazuko away from them.

“You’re not seriously thinking of letting them into Heaven, are you?” I asked.

“It seems to be my purpose,” Daniel said, but he frowned at his feet.

“They’re horrific people! I’m sure even Caligula is here!”

“That guy from the Morrissey song?”

“Do you wonder why a gloomy ‘80s British pop star wrote a song about him? He was cruel, insane, and probably the worst emperor Rome ever saw! But because he was ‘divinely chosen,’ he gets to sit around here and do God knows what!”

“So what do I do?”

I grinned. “You and Odin are like chocolate and peanut butter. You seem to be working well together. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

#

It took some convincing, but we got all of the emperors assembled at the gate of Purgatory. I tried not to let the lineup intimidate me. Among the Roman emperors were Caligula, who chewed on a finger bone, and Caesar himself.

I stared at them all. “These people would never make it past the pride part of purgatory,” I whispered to Kazuko.

“If they even made it that far,” she said. I nodded.

Daniel’s voice took on the quality of a carnie. “Step right up, come one, come all, come and see the greatest thing man has ever offered his fellow man! The road to ultimate salvation is open to you, all you must do is pass one small test. One wee little test. God knows you were divinely chosen, however, you know how bureaucracy works. This is merely a formality.”

Everyone nodded. They had all been heads of state at some time or another.

Nero stood at the head of the line; claiming friendship with us gave him that right. Octavius stood close behind him.

“Now, if my lovely assistant will come join me at the front of the line, we’ll get to the festivities!” he said, motioning me to join him.

“Listen closely: there once was a god by the name of Odin,” Daniel began. “He had many children, but one, Baldur, was beloved of all. He was so beloved that his mother called to all

things in the world for a vow not to harm him. It helped that prophecies said his death would start a cascade of destruction that would end in Ragnarök, the end of the world. She neglected to get a promise from the weed mistletoe, however, and the god was slain by a spear made of the weed.

“This death did indeed cause many other deaths, starting with the poor fool who was tricked into throwing the spear, the blind god Hod. At Baldur’s funeral pyre, Thor kicked the dwarf Lit into the fire - no one knows why. Baldur’s wife followed the dwarf, throwing herself onto the burning ship. Lastly, Baldur’s horse was led onto the ship to die with him. The end times did eventually come, fulfilling the prophecy.”

Daniel took a deep breath. I bit my lip and waited. “At the funeral, Odin took on a disguise and whispered something into his dead son’s ear as the funeral ship was being prepared. No one knows what the All-Father said, and for the rest of eternity, he tricked people with the riddle of what he said.”

The emperors were fidgeting now and I poked Daniel to make him get on with it. “That’s somewhat unfair, I think. That’s a riddle as lame as, “what do I have in my pocket?” I’m going to make this easy on you. In order to leave this eternity for your just rewards, all you need to do is riddle me this: What three-letter word turns a boy into a man?”

I thought for a moment. “Bar Mitzvah” was made of too many letters, as were “first fake ID” and “selective service.” I was glad for a moment that I wasn’t being tested here. But how was he planning on judging them based on one word?

Nero swaggered forward and leaned in. “Nex,” he whispered.

I glanced at Daniel, who nodded slowly. Obviously he understood Latin now. “Clever to answer in Latin, Nero. Go stand over there, please.”

Octavius had his turn next. He walked forward, rubbing his chin. “Interesting question. Everyone has his own answer of what made him a man, but does that apply to all?”

Daniel shrugged, smiling. “That’s your call.”

Octavius thought for a moment. “The thing that applies to all men would be age.”

Daniel motioned him to form a new group away from Nero.

I caught on quickly to his plans and helped him sort the men. It wasn’t always easy; they gave us answers that weren’t three letters (in any language,) confusing answers (such as Claudius’s “sun” - or maybe he meant “son,”) creepy answers (“sex” and “boy” came up more than once,) and, of course, many answered simply “war” or, like Nero, “nex.”

Daniel had whispered to me that “nex” was Latin for death, specifically of the violent variety.

Caligula was an odd one. He spat out the bone he was chewing on and smiled and raised his

hands. “When I lay ill, my family prayed to the gods that I recover. They pledged their lives in place of mine, offering to give what was most precious in order that I might live to benefit Rome. I recovered, miraculously, and became divine in my own way. I kept their promise and had them slain, making sure they paid their debt to the gods. I had the right, because I was a god myself. The day I became a man, I became a god. So that is my answer. ‘God.’”

“Wow. Okay. You go hang with Nero, dude. We’ll make sure you get a good seat,” Daniel said.

Gaius Julius Caesar, the one we all studied in school, walked forward somberly and merely whispered, “God.” Daniel and I looked at each other and motioned him to stand with Octavius.

Few others answered “age” or “god,” most preferring to answer what was the most personal to them. When we were done, we had six groups. Octavius, Claudius, Caesar, and Vitellus stood in a small group of four men, while Nero and Caligula stood together.

Daniel had no facial expression as he walked to the picket fence to purgatory and opened it.

“Wow,” I said, unable to stop myself. When we had traveled through purgatory, it had looked like concentric circles ending in Heaven, but now it looked like seven fields lined up before us, with gates between them all, and the final glowing gate-the one to heaven-at the very end of the field for the lustful. The same angel with the flaming sword guarded it.

Each purgatory had its own sword-wielding angel that patrolled it, and as Daniel opened the gate, each angel flew forward.

Some of the emperors, previously looking pleased and cocky, began to exchange glances. An angel with a brightly flaming sword stepped in front of the group that had answered some form “sex” to the question. He swung his sword and it sliced through the group, not cutting them, but setting each aflame.

They screamed in pain and confusion and I turned my head. I couldn’t block out their screams, though, and realized I was meant to witness this, like I’d witnessed everything before.

I turned back and winced as the men continued to scream and run about. The other men had begun to weep or look outraged. Only Claudius’s and Nero’s groups looked calm.

“Now you will be purged of the lustful flame,” the angel said. He opened his arms and grew, causing me and Daniel to step backward. He embraced all of the flaming men and flew off to deposit them in the furthest-most field.

“Now listen, girl,” one emperor said. “We are divinely chosen. What we did, we did for Rome. You’ve no right to judge us thusly.”

I shrugged. “Then why are the angels listening to us?”

A gray-robed angel, this time a female, stepped up to his group, smiling serenely.

“No. I won’t go. I will stay here. It is my right!” he cried, stepping backward. But she

opened her robe and out flowed an acrid gray mist. As the men cried out in blind terror, it surrounded them, clouding them as their wrath had clouded their vision in life. She closed her robes around the mist, leaving nothing behind. Taking wing, she flew off to the hazy field of the wrathful.

An angel to represent pride buried his group in an avalanche, forcing each to carry huge stones to the nearest field, staring at the ground to learn humility.

The green-robed angel who represented avarice tossed out tight ropes to bind the fourth group, and dragged them, bumping and screaming, to their new home where they were to be tied face down.

The final group had begun to look uneasy, although still much less panicked than the others.

“So,” Daniel said, as if asking about their favorite sports team. “How have you four spent the last two thousand years or so?”

Caesar stepped forward. “Reflecting on our reign, mostly. Watching the world unfold, watching what we created grow. We saw the strides forward we took the human race, and rejoiced. We saw, too late, the mistakes we made, and we mourned.”

Octavius nodded. “I have committed the same as my fellows. Pride, wrath, lust, and more, besides. Why are we not with the others? Do we belong in one of the three remaining fields? I know I felt sloth and gluttony, although...” Here, he smiled, “I have to admit that the emperor of Rome had few people to be envious of.”

Daniel smiled. “Odin was fond of riddles, but I thought the original riddle he told regarding Baldur’s funeral was somewhat unfair. Mine was designed to test your morals, to test what you have learned. You’ve had thousands of years of relaxation while your betters have suffered in hopes of someday getting half the reward you enjoyed because of your assumed divinity. I have to admit I’m surprised that four of you were smart enough to pass the test.”

The angel guarding the final gate stepped forward, then.

“Now, I don’t know if I’m right here. This guy is the only one qualified to let you in. But I think you’re ready. Kate, what do you think?”

I looked them over. I’d quibbled over only one man: Emperor Vitellius, a pudgy man who had answered “age” in a bored way immediately upon addressing us.

I stepped back and gestured toward the angel. He stepped forward and took the arms of Caesar, Claudius, and Octavius and flew off, leaving Vitellius sputtering behind.

We waved at the departing angel. “You think they really deserve heaven?” Daniel asked.

I shrugged. “More than anyone else here. And that’s what we were judging, right?”

“What is the meaning-” Vitellius asked, his red jowls shaking.

One of the last angels stepped forward, a thin, androgynous one. Its bony hand wrapped tightly around Vitellius's wrist and carried him away.

"Huh. I guess I was wrong," Daniel said as they flew off, Vitellius howling in rage. "He's going to be spending some time pondering his gluttony, I guess."

I tugged on Daniel's shirt. "Two left, don't forget."

He groaned slightly. "I was hoping they'd run away while our backs were turned."

"Wow," I whispered. "I'd heard incompetent people can't comprehend that they're incompetent, but damn, these guys are completely unaware that they're douches. Look at them."

Nero and Caligula watched us, proudly waiting, no doubt, for their reward.

Daniel sighed. He unsheathed Izanami's katana, and Nero stepped back. "This was a gift given to me by a death goddess. I didn't want to accept it at first. But now I know what I have to do with it."

"Now, wait a moment," Nero began, but Daniel raised the katana and sliced the space in front of him.

The air itself separated and bled, and a powerful vacuum tore the slice wider. The men screamed and tried to run, but Kazuko was there with her blade at their throats. Caligula, incredibly, tried to fight her, and with blinding speed she lopped off his hands. With no means of fighting her, he tumbled head over heels past Nero into the rip. Nero soon followed, howling. When they were gone, Daniel passed his hand over the rip and it disappeared.

It wasn't until the violence was over did I realize I had my hands clapped over my mouth, pressing my lips into my teeth, stuffing the screams back into my mouth. A roaring filled my ears and I actually looked for a river there, in the middle of the afterlife. I looked away from the bloody ground before my best friend and his bodyguard, and tried to will away the blackness crowding out my sight.

"I will not faint," I said through gritted teeth, and breathed in deeply.

I jumped and nearly screamed at a light touch on my back. "Remember, judging those in purgatory was your idea," Kazuko whispered. "Do not blame him for this."

I swallowed bile. "I know. But actually seeing it happening is something else."

"The first time I drew blood with my blade I vomited," Kazuko said. "It is something you, regrettably, get used to."

I still couldn't look at her. I sat down and put my head between my legs to steady myself.

"All right, it's done," came Daniel's voice. I raised my head and he stood there, looking immensely tired. "They're all on their way to their final resting place. That'll teach them."

"That was pretty intense," I said. "I didn't know you could do that with your sword."

He smiled. "Neither did I. But at least it can get us where we're going faster."

My jaw dropped. “You’re not serious.”

“I think I can control it, and the sooner we get there and stop messing with this afterlife paperwork, the sooner we can get back home,” he said.

He helped me to my feet and brushed some hair out of my eyes. “You okay?”

I glanced once at Kazuko and nodded. “I’m just glad you didn’t have that sword when I was dating Kirk sophomore year.”

He laughed then, and the knot in my chest loosened a bit. “Me too. I really did hate that guy.”

He brought the sword up again and sliced the air open. This time, the wind blew out, hot and burning.

“We’re really going in there?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s going to suck, but at least we have swords,” Daniel said.

“I don’t.”

“We’ll work on that.”

CHAPTER THREE

I don't know what I expected, really. Cartoon hell, with flames and a grinning fat devil with horns and no sexual organs, perhaps with Bugs Bunny in the background, taking it all in stride? No, wait, Daffy Duck. Bugs would never go to Hell. He was too clever for that.

Yes, clever people don't go to Hell. Right. And yet here we were, voluntarily walking there.

Some people say that they love someone so much that they'd go to hell and back for them. As far as I know, Daniel and I are the only ones who actually went through with it. Daniel for his sister, and me, for Daniel. Of course. Hadn't it always been that way?

Well, that was unfair. He'd given his eye for me. The least I could do was follow him to hell.

Well, Kazuko was with us too. At first I watched her surreptitiously, when I didn't think she would notice, but she always met my eyes. After that, I didn't conceal my studying of her. I couldn't figure her out. She spoke more to me than she did to Daniel, but was always at his side, ready to skewer something or someone who threatened him. What drove her? Was it truly just honoring the death goddess who had given her the order to protect him?

Currently there was little to protect him from but boredom. Hell looked to be a lot like heaven, so far. The road was a little harder, the scenery more wilted, and the wind hotter, but honestly, it was a road like any other.

"So," I said, trying to break the monotony, "do you think we're going to hit another roundabout like Heaven?"

"Well, if this whole thing was built by Satan after being cast down, then maybe. It's possible that he didn't have much in the way of architectural creativity."

My breath caught in my throat. "Or maybe he did."

Dark walls came into view, looming in the distance, as high as the gates of heaven. As we got closer we saw that the walls were made of obsidian, with great jagged spires jutting out from the surface. The road led to a tiny doorway.

Each of the pointed spikes had a person skewered there, many still alive. They screamed, writhed, or simply hunched over and wept quietly. We approached one, a large, beefy man with a crew cut. A spike jutted from his middle and he breathed in quick, shallow breaths. A thin stream of blood ran from his mouth and he stared straight ahead.

"Greetings, Travelers," he whispered as we reached him.

It felt hypocritical to make small talk here. I swallowed and then finally spoke. "So, uh, what did you do?"

His eyes never left the point on the horizon, much like a military man. "My wife died in childbirth and I was forced to raise our newborn son myself. He cried all the time. I beat him to

make him stop crying. I killed him.”

My lip curled, but I had to remind myself I would likely meet much worse during my travels. “Can you tell me what this hell is?”

He lost his composure, coughed out a laugh, and then groaned. “This is not hell. This is the entrance to hell. This is where the cowards are, the people who can’t bear the thought of what goes on inside. We have the choice to impale ourselves here or face our proper punishment within the walls.”

“You did this to yourself?” Daniel asked.

The man nodded. His breaths came faster and he coughed again, spewing flecks of blood. “I am impaled here, then I die, then I return and see if I can face the terrors of hell.”

Daniel frowned. “Why would anyone choose Hell, if this looks like an easy way out?”

The soldier guy coughed once more and then slumped over, his eyes closed. His body slid slowly off the spike and fell to the ground to crumble into dust.

Another soul slid off her spike and crumbled beside him.

Daniel turned and watched the road behind us. “Why aren’t they coming back down the road?”

“Hell is a solitary place,” Kazuko answered. “You do not meet anyone on the road.”

“Huh. I thought hell was other people,” I said.

Daniel gripped his katana, flexing his fingers on the grip. “I’m sure it is, somewhere inside.”

He looked into the dark tunnel. “Let’s get it over with.”

#

Little things changed inside the tunnel. Instead of flashlights, we found greasy torches in our backpacks, torches that smoked and flared and made us cough. Our traveling robes were a dark gray, and the traveler necklaces were dark garnets instead of white diamonds.

When the tunnel ended at a T intersection, Daniel swore. “We’re in a maze. Heaven is a roundabout; hell is a maze. Any idea where we should go?”

I thought for a moment and pointed to the right bend. “How about that way?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Can you think of a reason to go left? Is Odin helping you out here at all?”

“Well. No. I don’t think his information will help out much unless we visit Hel.”

“Daniel, we are in hell.”

“No, Hel. H-E-L. The underworld of the Norse. Named for its ruler. Who, by the way, isn’t there anymore.”

“Where did Hel go?”

“We saw her briefly at Ragnarök. She was in a ship made of the nail clippings of the

damned.”

I snorted. “Nail clippings.”

“Hey, I didn’t make it up. I’m sure when she started making the ship, it was terribly scary.”

“Right. Because now it’s just gross.”

He sighed. We’d reached another intersection. He looked at me, and I shrugged and motioned to go straight. “She was arriving when we were leaving Ragnarök. Tyr was waiting for her boat. I’ve got a freaking god in my head and I still don’t understand waiting for your prophetic death. I don’t know why you wouldn’t do whatever you could to avoid it, try to stop it. Anything.”

Kazuko made a small sound. “Prophecies are smarter than most people. Stronger, too.”

“I guess so. Still seems silly to just stand there and wait for it.”

“If he had tried to avoid it, he still would have ended up there, waiting for her. It’s a difficult thing, avoiding your destiny.”

Daniel stayed silent. I kept leading our way through the labyrinth, not sure where we were going, just following my intuition. Finally, the corridor opened up into a huge room with miles of velvet ropes forming people into queues. Everyone there was Asian, waiting patiently in their lines.

Some had little more than the clothes they wore, others carried bags of food, and still others counted money. The brightly colored bills flashed in their hands and I caught sight of people such as John F. Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe on the face.

Daniel and I looked as one to Kazuko.

She rewarded us with a tight smile. “I am Japanese, not Chinese.”

Daniel waved her off. “But you carry a Chinese sword. And you know kung fu. You’re not fooling me.”

She sighed. “This is a Buddhist hell. Not exactly the same place of torment that the Christians and other religions think of, but more of a filing place. They call it hell because Christian missionaries told them that hell was where they went when they died, meaning if they died without becoming a Christian. So the Chinese just adopted the word.

“Huh. When are we going to reach the hellfire and damnation parts?” Daniel asked.

I punched his arm.

“Well I’m just saying it’s getting a little anticlimactic to keep seeing these places that are almost hell but not quite.”

I shook my head. “Do we see any souls here? Lost souls, I mean.”

The room stretched into the distance; we had no idea how large it was. It was filled with countless souls, all standing patiently in lines.

I scratched my head. "So what are they waiting on?"

"They wait for an audience with Yama."

"Yama?"

"The king of the dead. He was a hermit who was seconds away from enlightenment when some thieves interrupted his meditation and slew him. He became a wrathful spirit, taking on the head of the bull and first killing the thieves, then hunting nearly all of Tibet, but was stopped by a Bodhisattva. Yama relented, but is still quite wrathful. He now judges all Buddhists." Kazuko looked at me. "People are judged worthy of reincarnation or a suffering eternity in one of the Narakas now."

"Do I want to know what they are?"

"Eight levels of suffering in the cold and eight levels of suffering in the heat."

I shivered.

Daniel descended the steps in front of us and we followed. More and more people filed into the room, and I remembered the wars on Earth and how billions were dying. This room could be a hell in itself as the overload of people waited for Yama to assign them to their next life. But where would that life be if the world was a hulking ball of radiation?

Daniel accidentally tripped over a small couple fussing over a spilled box on the ground.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. Can I help you clean up?" He reached for one of the stray pieces of paper, but the woman slapped his hand. He withdrew it quickly, and Kazuko stiffened at my side.

The woman scrabbled around, snatching the lost pieces of paper. "Hands off! Hands off our notes!"

"He wasn't going to steal them," I said. "Is everything all right?"

They got all of the paper stuffed back into the box and glared up at us. "Our notes. Not yours."

"We don't want your notes!" Daniel said, his voice rising in frustration.

"What are notes?" I asked.

The woman got on all fours and gathered her legs under her and stood up, looking like a frog. She sighed when she finally got righted and looked at me with pity. "No notes. Poor girl. No notes, no goodies. No bribing the great and terrible Yama for a better life."

The old man shook his head. "Did your children not burn Hell notes for you?"

I blushed. "We, uh, don't have any kids."

He looked at us with pity. "It will be a long wait for you, then. Only the Hell notes will get you through the line."

They passed us then, heading to the end of the line where a robed man took a handful of bills from them, and opened one of the velvet ropes to let them through. The longer lines looked

to be made of poorer people while people in the shorter lines looked much wealthier. It was like an airport boarding line; first class to the right, everyone else to the left.

Daniel sighed. “Do either of you see any lost souls in here?”

I looked around. “We need some of those notes. I think we need to see Yama.”

Daniel stared at me. “You’re kidding. How are you going to whip up some children – Buddhist children, at that – to get us some Hell notes?”

I looked at Kazuko. “Do you have any?”

She shook her head.

“Well, it’s unlikely God would have sent us on a trip without some spending money.” I rummaged around in my backpack until my hand closed around a neatly bound stack of bills.

I pulled them out with a flourish. “Ah ha!”

Daniel sulked. “Why does your backpack give you everything and mine is always empty?”

I counted the brightly colored money. “No idea. Maybe because I say please?”

Daniel got the Marilyn Monroe Hell notes, 1,000 denominations, I got John F. Kennedy 500s, and Kazuko got stuck with the Lyndon B. Johnson 100s.

“You’re kidding me,” Daniel said, staring at his fake money. I shrugged; people around us were clutching similar bills with famous Americans and-we assumed-famous Chinese pictured on them. We approached the officious-looking man in the robe, who glared at us.

Daniel smiled at him and flashed his blue Marilyns. He smiled immediately and took two thousand Hell notes for all of us. I grinned at Kazuko and followed Daniel into the VIP queue.

Beyond Kazuko, I caught the eye of two little girls holding hands. Clearly orphaned and poor, they stood at the very end of the line, which looked as if it would be a couple of miles long, snaking through much of the room.

I dashed back and slipped them a handful of bills and patted each on their heads. They looked at me in disbelief and I grinned and ran back to my friends.

I was convinced I saw every Chinese person who’d been alive at the end of the world as we walked past the lines. The room was bigger than it appeared, almost adding another dimension, giving us the illusion that bodies were pressed in every cranny. I wondered what would happen if we had a stampede and then swallowed the panic back into my stomach. What could cause the dead to panic? Where would they run? Everyone docilely waited their turn.

Kazuko caught me staring. “They have nothing else to do. It is merely waiting. If Buddhists are willing to wait lifetimes for enlightenment, then waiting in a line in the afterlife is nothing.”

I nodded to her. I ran a couple of steps to catch up to Daniel. “Any idea what you’re going to say to the Yama guy?”

He didn’t look at me. “Ask him what he knows about my sister, I guess. Why don’t you talk

to him? You always seem to know what to do.”

“Oh, don’t be mad. You’re part god, after all. I just help out how I can.”

He deflated a bit. “I know. I’m just feeling so out of my element.”

I laughed. “Dude, we’ve been out of our element since we died. And we’ve managed to do okay. I mean, apart from the whole losing your eye stuff.”

He snickered. “Twice.”

“Oh yeah. Forgot about that.” I grinned at him, relieved he could finally joke about it. “Does it hurt?”

He reflexively touched his face above the missing eye. “Not really. Odin’s a god of healing, after all. I don’t stay hurt very long.”

“That’s good.”

He pointed ahead of us. “Look up there.”

Ahead of us rose a great temple built of black stones. The line continued its way up the great steps. Our straight line led us through the doors.

The interior walls glowed brightly, causing us to shade our eyes. Fountains sprung from the floor, giving a sense of serenity to the room that I hadn’t expected. My fatigue from walking so long dissipated and I straightened; first impressions always count, after all.

Our line finally began as we caught up with the fussbudget couple. They squabbled over how much they’d bribed the official and then squabbled about someone named Chen who the wife had said had made eyes at the husband.

She looked up when we filed in behind her. “What are you doing here? Did you steal from us? I told you they stole from us!” She smacked her husband on the top of his shiny head.

“No, I was just mistaken at the number of notes we had,” I said.

“Liars,” the woman sniffed, then turned away from us. “Yama will deal with you. He deals with liars. May you rot in the plain of Arbuda where the cold will raise blisters on your skin.”

Daniel opened his mouth to retort, but Kazuko, amazingly, put her hand on his arm. “She is right. Yama deals with all.”

Daniel nodded then, and we waited.

A young woman with bright eyes and shoulder-length glossy hair smiled at us as took the couple away. They went around the great fountain and then up a spiral staircase.

“Now what?”

“They will not take long to judge,” Kazuko said.

“How do you know?” I asked.

She didn’t get a chance to answer because, indeed, the woman descended the stairs again and smiled at us.

“Welcome to Di Yu, the place of renewal,” she said. “The Great Yama is looking forward to meeting you.”

We followed her up the stairs where we waited by a black metal door. She slipped inside and spoke briefly, then motioned us through.

When we were led in, the Great Yama sat on a velvet couch, looking much more like a playboy than a wrathful god who nearly obliterated Tibet.

Well, except for the bull’s head sitting on his shoulders. The soft brown eyes assessed us, and then he motioned for us to sit with him.

He opened his mouth and spoke, and the words that came through were pure poetry; I nearly swooned. His voice was light and joyous as he spoke, his words washing over us as we sat, stupefied. It was lyrical and glorious and sad, and Daniel groped for my hand. I squeezed it and closed my eyes, losing myself in the anguished words. Finally, he stopped, and I blinked the tears away.

And every word he had said slipped from my memory like sand. All that was left were my wet cheeks and my fingers still interlaced with Daniel’s.

I let go of his hand quickly, pretending I needed both hands to wipe my face.

“I received word you would be joining me,” Yama said when he was done, his low voice rumbling. I swear I felt earthquakes across Di Yu when he spoke.

“People of your stature are always welcome in my home,” he said.

I looked behind him. Eighteen black metal doors sat in the white walls, each with a different Chinese character on it. I wondered what lay beyond them. I wondered if I wanted to know.

Daniel cleared his throat and stepped forward. I started to recognize the aspect of Odin on his face as he spoke; his mouth became lopsided and knowing, and he spoke to the god as a peer, not as a lowly mortal “We are on a mission from YHWH to recover lost souls. Would you know anything about that?”

The god stretched on the couch, reminding me of a very bull-like cat. “I know the soul of every person in Di Yu. Right now I am processing them, judging them. I touch thousands an hour.”

Daniel looked at me.

“Then why are the lines so long?” I asked.

“The waiting is part of the process.”

“What about the hell note bribes?”

The bull’s lips pulled back, and I realized he was grinning. “That’s bureaucracy. My officials get no payment from me. They are the souls in perfect balance – not good enough for human

reincarnation, not bad enough for reincarnation in one of the eighteen Hells or the sixteen Narakas. I see how they do their jobs and then make a decision on them after a certain number of years.”

“So what about the lost souls?” Daniel asked.

“I know nothing of lost souls,” he said.

Daniel rounded on me. “Then why are we here? You said this was the way we were supposed to go.”

“I was only acting on instinct!” I said. I pursed my lips and thought. Then, to Yama, I said, “You mentioned we had high stature. Do many Travelers come through here?”

He laughed then, a deep, resonating sound that made me fight against putting my hands over my ears. “You still just see yourselves as Travelers? A human carrying a god within him, a human whose soul still remembers its purity, and a-“

Kazuko interrupted him, then, saying, “Nothing more than a guardian, Lord.”

Yama smiled at her. “As you will.”

“So what do we do now?” Daniel asked.

Yama sat up. “You give me my offering, and then go on with your travels.”

“Um, offering?” I asked.

“Certainly. You do not request an audience with a god without giving him something for his time. What do you have for me?”

We looked at each other. I pulled out my Hell notes. Yama shook his head.

“Well, I can’t give an eye, I only have one left,” Daniel said.

“And your guardian refuses to give me her secret,” the god said, looking at Kazuko. She looked back at him impassively.

He wanted secrets? Fine. I stepped forward. “Would you accept my secret?”

He sat forward eagerly. “A secret from a pure soul? That is indeed a special offering.”

I took a deep breath and stared ahead at Yama, not looking at Daniel. “Kazuko asked me if I still loved Daniel. I lied and said no.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Kazuko look at Daniel, but I didn’t see his response. I focused on the shiny brown eyes of the god.

“You lied. You love. Two secrets for the price of one. Very nice. I will help you further, then.” He pointed toward a door that I hadn’t seen before, a green door to his left. “The way you want to go is through there.”

Kazuko bowed to him and led the way, and I followed. Daniel brought up the rear. I wasn’t sure what we would say to each other when we got a chance, but I didn’t have to worry about it; Kazuko opened the door and the wind sucked us in, tumbling and twisting. The door slammed

behind us, leaving us to swirl within the vortex.

CHAPTER FOUR

I didn't have the sensation of falling until I hit the ground rather hard, knocking the wind out of me. I lay there, panting, assessing the damage. Possible sprained ankle. Wetness on my face indicated a cut. And as the pain in my chest wasn't ebbing: maybe a broken rib.

I sat up. Daniel and Kazuko weren't within my sight. Dead trees reached up into the dark gray sky and, near as I could tell, I lay on ashes. The hairs on my arms raised as I heard a wail, high and keening, rise through the forest. I realized it came from above my head and I craned my neck back.

Cats. They sat in the trees and clung to branches, each one beginning a low, angry wail. Some hissed, some cried, and each one watched me, amber eyes slit and angry.

Not wanting to be caught in a rain of fur and claws, I painfully got to my feet and limped toward a light that came from the edge of the forest.

Another sound, deeper, came from the clearing, and I paused. I'd only heard this sound in movies, as I've never been hunting with dogs. The baying of a hound washed over me, making me shiver, and the cats wailed louder. More deep baying howls followed the first, closer this time.

The cats above me scabbled higher in their dead trees, and the sound of cracking branches popped around me. The dogs came then, running through from the clearing into the forest. Branches began to break around me, and screaming cats fell from the trees like fat snowflakes, landing heavily and dashing to the next tree available, only to have it topple.

I was standing between the dogs and the forest full of fleeing cats, and I winced, not knowing what to expect, but the dogs just dashed past me, baying and barking and whining their glee. One dog got lucky and grabbed a cat's tail, and I averted my eyes when it started to shake its head. Some cats tried to fight back, but their claws found no purchase in the dogs' skin, and their brief stand of bravery proved to be their doom.

I looked up at the ruined trees and tried to think about something other than the horrific sounds around me, when something licked my hand. I forgot my pain and the horrors around me and crouched to my knees, tears filling my eyes.

“Jet?”

#

Understanding flooded through me as I petted her, the bond we'd had in dog heaven returning. It seemed dog heaven was connected through some metaphysical bridge to cat hell; it was just beyond the tree line. Which made a sort of sick, karmic sense.

“What kind of cats go to hell?” I wondered aloud. Animals acted on instinct, I'd always thought, and so assumed there was just an afterlife, no judgment. But then I remembered that

breeders often talk about temperament, and how some dogs just naturally are excitable and jumpy and others sleep all the time and still others are trainable. I guess cats are the same way. Except for the trainable part.

“Do you want to go hunting?” I asked.

Jet wagged her tail, her happiness infecting me. I grinned. “Okay. Since we’re so close to dog heaven, can I take a break there? I need a rest.”

She led me out of the woods, leaving the sounds of feline carnage behind us. Once out of the woods, the world changed abruptly to the sunny fields of dog heaven, where canines that didn’t take part in the hunt lounged around in the sun.

I sat down and let the heat relax me. “Man, I hope Daniel isn’t on the hill of bitches in heat. Not sure if we can deal with that again.”

Contentment radiated off Jet, and she lay down on my good side and put her head on my lap. I lay back in the sun.

“I’m really not sure what I’m doing, Jet. We’re searching for lost souls, and all we’ve done is muck about in purgatory, cut in line in Di Yu, and then lose each other in cat hell. Maybe Daniel and Kazuko are still in there. Who knows?”

Jet snapped her head up, alert. I remembered that look, that “let’s play” look. But I didn’t have anything to throw.

“What is it? Timmy stuck in a well?” I joked. She just stared at me, ears perky and alert. I thought for a moment. She had popped her head up when I had said, “lost souls.”

“Wait. Maybe Timmy is stuck in a well. Do you know something about the lost souls, Jet?”

She got to her feet and barked twice.

I sat up painfully. “Girl, I can’t run after you. Can you fetch?”

With that word, she was gone, tearing back into the dark woods behind me. I sighed, still in pain, but excited. Where were Daniel and Kazuko?

I rummaged through my pack for a mirror to assess the wound on my head. It wasn’t bad, more of a shallow rip than a deep cut. Still, I cleaned it and bandaged it as best I could with first aid supplies I found in my backpack while holding the mirror between my knees. I wrapped my ankle tightly and lay back again.

Jet returned, still running full tilt, and skidded to a stop next to me. She lowered her head and dropped a shining golden ball into my hand. It radiated heat and swirled within its confines, and I had a sudden flash of what it had been like to be made of nothing but pure soul stuff, no sins, no cares. A tear slipped down my face and I fought to compose myself. My body felt broken and pointless, a heavy cage that weighed down the glory of what I carried inside.

Jet nosed me in the neck and brought me out of my despair. I sniffled. “Good girl. Where

did you find this? Are there more?" She barked again. "Okay, then. Fetch." And she was off again.

I found a small wooden chest in my pack and carefully placed the soul within it. Jet returned with more souls, one at a time, carefully dropping them into my hands. As I handled these perfect little vessels, I began to be able to tell them apart. Little nuances were different; this one was more male, this one more female. This one was brand new, this one had been reincarnated a couple of times. The sheer potential of each life nearly overwhelmed me every time Jet dropped a new one into my hand, and I had to keep from crying every time I touched a new soul.

Jet finally returned to me with her final soul, followed closely by Daniel and Kazuko. Daniel waved to me, relief scrawled on his face.

"Man, I thought we had lost you!"

I laughed. "You did. How did you find me?"

They sat down next to me. "We pretty much fell on the stash of souls in the cat hell. We were trying to—" Kazuko put her hand on Daniel, stopping him.

"The dog arrived as we were liberating the souls, so we asked her to help us," she said.

I raised my eyebrow at Daniel, who was staring at my head.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, I got banged up when I fell," I said. "Ankle, rib and head. I am afraid I'm going to be a bit of a slow traveler for a while. Sorry."

Daniel reached out and took my hand. Heat rushed to my face but he got a faraway look in his eye and the pain started to fade. I remembered too late that he had a god's powers as my bones knit and body healed.

He focused on me again. "Better?"

I nodded, suddenly quite uncomfortable. He smiled. "Kate—" he said.

"I keep forgetting you are able to do stuff like that," I said, interrupting him.

He paused, then dropped my hand and sat back. "Yeah, it's pretty weird. But comes in handy."

"No kidding," I said, removing the now-unnecessary bandages.

He got up and extended a hand to me. "Are you good enough for a walk?"

I took his hand and tested my weight. My ankle had healed entirely. Kazuko stayed seated by Jet, staring at us.

"We'll be back soon. Guard the souls," Daniel said, and started walking. I followed, confused.

"That was subtle. And you wanted to ditch her why?" I asked once we were out of earshot.

"She didn't want to tell you what happened in the woods, and I think that's pretty dumb."

Daniel looked at the dogs rolling in the field of interesting smells. “We didn’t fall like you did; we just stepped out into the woods in front of a chest full of souls. I could open it, but neither of us could touch them.”

“You couldn’t touch them,” I repeated blankly.

“Not one. It was like there was a force field around them. Then when we had decided to search for you, Jet found us, grabbed a soul, and ran off. I wanted to chase her, but Kazuko wanted us to stay and guard the souls. Since it was Jet, I figured you might be involved, and sure enough, she came back. So after she got them all, we followed her to you.”

“Weird. I was able to touch them.”

“I know.”

I stopped, putting my hand on his arm. “Wait a second. How come you’re not freaking out like the last time we were here?”

“Huh... I don’t know. I could understand Jet’s emotions, like the last time, but there’s no incredible need to go over to that hill and do something that would make me want to kill myself later.” He looked around and spotted the place that had almost been his undoing last time.

I sighed. “If we’re supposed to be learning shit that will help us later, I feel pretty damn clueless. Any idea who put the souls in cat hell, of all places?”

He shook his head. “It’s pretty clear Yama helped us out, though.”

My heart rate quickened as I remembered what I had given in exchange for his help. “Yeah. That was good of him. Do you think we have to take Jet with us to get the other souls?”

He looked at me, and I fought to keep from squirming under his gaze. “I don’t think so. I’m guessing you would have been able to get the souls yourself, but you couldn’t walk that far. It was pretty far in.”

I looked away, back toward Kazuko and Jet. “I’ll ask her and see what she says.”

Daniel still stared at me. “Kate,” he began, but I interrupted him again.

“Look, I said it because I had to. It’s not a big deal; nothing has to change between us. Don’t feel obligated to me, and for the love of all the gods we’ve met, please don’t act any different around me.”

He didn’t reply, so I forced a smile. “Let’s head back. We can’t bask in this rest area forever.”

Kazuko stood up as we approached her. I said my goodbyes to Jet, who clearly was staying in the sun, and hefted my pack. The addition of numerous souls had increased the weight, but I felt lighter somehow. We didn’t talk as we passed the veil between heaven and hell and entered the forest where the terrified cats hunched in their trees, awaiting the inevitable hunt yet again.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daniel had decided that the best way to move about was to just cut a slice in reality and step through. That seemed like a stupid idea, much like closing our eyes and stepping off a cliff, but he asked me rather pointedly to find the road in the dark woods of cat hell, and I honestly couldn't do it. So I reluctantly followed them through the rip.

To my massive relief, we ended up on a road all the same, with a great black city rising before us. Daniel squinted at it. "It's like an evil Disneyland."

He was right. I almost expected a Goth Rapunzel to be weeping in the tower because she had just decided to shave her head. No, Goth was too sexy for Hell. My mind went quickly to Lori, a girl from my class who was not so much unpopular as just ignored. She had a hangdog appearance, drab blonde hair and a wide nose, as if only sixteen years on the Earth had already made her too tired for life; she'd had enough. Putting her in Rapunzel's black tower fit closer to my idea of Hell.

"So, do you know where this place is?" Daniel asked Kazuko.

She stared ahead at the jagged walls and spires. "Dis. The city of the Sixth Circle of Hell. Christian mythology. Dante."

Daniel and I stared at her. She looked back at us impassively. "I am better with hell than heaven."

"Why's that?" I asked. She didn't answer.

In life I'd always wanted to be mysterious and Mona Lisa-like. I never pulled it off. Kazuko was a Japanese Mona Lisa. Maybe it was a cultural thing.

"Why are we suddenly in the Sixth Circle?" Daniel asked. "Why didn't we start at the top, at the first circle?"

"I guess that sword of yours is a shortcut. Sorry I doubted you," I said, still not terribly confident that it was a good way to travel.

Daniel grinned at me, and I realized I hadn't been convincing. "Don't worry, I won't use it all the time. So," he said to Kazuko. "What are we doing here?"

"We will see when we get inside."

"Great," he muttered.

We approached the gates, our feet kicking up ashy dust on the road. The gates stood cracked open with a guy sitting out front on a stool, scratching patterns in the dust with his sword.

I saw almost at once that this was no "guy," but rather an angel with dirty gray wings. His dingy hair hung in his face. In fact, everything about him said dingy. He didn't come off as a

tortured fallen angel as much as a really bored angel gone to pot. I glanced at Daniel, who frowned as well.

He stepped forward. “We are Daniel, Kazuko, and Kate. We are Travelers to the city of Dis.”

The angel waved us in without looking at us, bored. Kazuko stared at him with open contempt, but kept her mouth closed.

“Not much security,” I said. “It’s a wonder we didn’t see the damned wandering around the outside gates...” I trailed off. The damned weren’t, in fact, wandering around outside the gates.

They were wandering around inside the gates, though.

They had all been branded, men and women - and my stomach turned at seeing the children, their eyes hollow and searching - with their crimes. “Pride,” “Lust,” “Suicide,” and more were burned across foreheads. The children mostly were identified as suicides, but there were plenty of men and women who had killed themselves as well. They were the most pathetic, looking to escape a terrible life only to receive an even worse afterlife.

In theory, of course. There didn’t look to be much torture going on here, unless you counted boredom, or that French guy who said, “Hell is other people.” People slumped against walls and milled around. Angels wandered with them, in and out of buildings, sometimes jabbing people half-heartedly with swords, but otherwise ignoring them.

“This is all wrong,” Kazuko said.

“You think?” Daniel answered her. He approached one shed-like structure that leaned to the left. Inside was a descending stone staircase. We went down, squinting at the sudden dark. We heard chains clinking and - goodness, was that laughter?

The stairs led to a dungeon, with the requisite chains bolted to dripping stone walls, stone tables with old bloodstains marring their surface, and whips stacked neatly in the corner alongside cases of unidentifiable tools. The only thing missing were the tortured souls.

Three girls had taken a spiked chain and were swinging it like a jump rope, the girl in the middle trying to avoid it. It was heavy and sometimes came crashing down on her, cutting her skin. She just laughed and took her place at the turning while another girl took the center, and the game continued until someone else got hurt. Although they clearly were having innocent, if masochistic, fun, the word “suicide” branded each girl’s forehead.

I smiled slightly at the cute and grisly scene, but Daniel lost it. “What the hell is going on here?”

The girls stopped their game and stared at him impassively.

“Where are the tortured souls? What is everyone doing just hanging around? This is like the outside of a 7-11 on a Saturday night!”

The girls glanced at each other. One, a little African girl, stepped forward. “No one has been

tortured here in weeks. We thought we were finally allowed to go to heaven, but we can't leave, either. So we play.”

“This is bullshit,” Daniel said, and stormed past me on his way up the stairs. Kazuko followed.

I went down to the girls. “So why are you girls here?”

They didn't glance at each other nervously or giggle or shrink back the way I had experienced with girls that age, but instead faced me head-on with hollow eyes. I realized with a small pang in my chest that they had been tortured for years; what did they have to fear from a single unarmed woman?

The one who had been wounded when we came in dabbed at the cut on her cheek. “My daddy touched me. No one believed me, so I took some of mommy's sleeping pills and killed myself.” She spoke plainly, with no sense of shame or regret.

The other two nodded. “Granny beat me and locked me in the basement,” one said. The other had an incestuous childhood like the first.

I gritted my teeth. The unbelievable injustice of these girls' existence in hell was overwhelming to me, and I knelt in front of them, looking at each of their faces, tears brimming.

“I'm so sorry,” I said. “I'd like to help you, but I don't know what I can do.”

One of them, the one with the cut cheek, patted my shoulder. “It's okay, really. The angels stopped torturing us a while ago, and it's been almost fun since.”

I searched around in my backpack for a tissue. I pulled two out and handed her one for her cut, which she accepted. As I dabbed at my eyes, I noticed my backpack shifting. Something stuck out of the top, and I grasped it.

I pulled out a sword with a white hilt. It was not like Daniels scary-ass katana, but rather a straight Chinese sword like Kazuko's. The blade glowed white and the heat that radiated off it stung my hand.

The girls gasped and drew closer, eyes wide. “Careful!” I said.

They didn't listen. They each reached forward and grabbed the blade. I winced, imagining their little hands burning, but couldn't pull back for fear of cutting them.

I didn't have to worry. The girls each began to glow and burn: bright, pure light with no sound or odor. They looked at me and smiled, the hollowness leaving their eyes. Then the white fire consumed them and they were gone. I choked back another sob and stared at the white blade. It ceased glowing and became just a regular sword. I stared at it a moment longer and then tried to put it back into the bizarre portal that was my backpack, but it wouldn't fit. I did find a scabbard, though, so I sheathed it and strapped it across my back the way I'd seen Kazuko do.

I left the empty dungeon and went back up the stairs.

Upstairs was pandemonium. Souls and the fallen angels alike screamed and ran in terror from the force that was Kazuko. She had forced a fallen angel to his knees and held her sword to his wings.

Daniel watched her, his arms crossed.

“What the fuck?” I asked Daniel, watching her hiss in the angel’s ear.

“I honestly don’t know,” he said. “She mentioned something about how underworlds were not run this way, it offended the principles of Izanami, and then she started punishing the angels.”

Kazuko kicked the angel between his wings and he went sprawling at our feet. She put his sword to his throat. “Tell him. Tell him why you aren’t doing your job.”

Daniel and I looked at each other, realizing she wanted the angel to answer to him.

The angel winced as Kazuko’s blade nicked him. Black ichor dribbled into the dust. “We no longer feel the Morningstar’s influence. We tried to keep up our jobs, but it was His will more than anything that ran this place. It slowly began to unravel. We don’t know why it’s happening and we can’t find help; we’re as trapped here as the souls are.”

“Why would Satan leave?” Daniel asked.

“I don’t know,” the angel said. “I have been here since the Fall and served him faithfully. His influence has always been strong.”

“It could be whatever is making God lose souls is making Satan lose influence over hell. Think that’s possible?” I asked in a low voice.

Daniel shrugged. “No idea. Sounds reasonable, though.”

He nudged the angel with his shoe. “Uh, do you think you can get back to work?”

The angel looked up at Kazuko, frowning. “I think we have new inspiration.”

I looked around at the terrified souls. The angels had begun to perk up and started herding the souls into the buildings. I looked back at Kazuko, standing glorious and terrible above the angel. The first anguished scream came out of an open window and I made up my mind.

“They’re back at it, Daniel. Tell her to let him go.”

Daniel paused and stepped back. Kazuko dropped her hold on the angel, who sprawled in the dust. “Back to your post,” she hissed, and he ran.

Daniel looked at me, frustrated. “I have no idea what’s going on. Are there any lost souls here? Can you sense them?”

I paused and shook my head. “I don’t think so, at least not in the sense that you mean. But I want you to do something for me. Get them to gather the children.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Just gather the children who killed themselves. There’s something I want to

test.”

He shrugged and nodded to Kazuko, who approached the angel at the front gate. The angel looked at her with undisguised loathing, but at her command, he left and began patrolling the castle, bringing children to us. They didn't look at Daniel at all, but all of them stared at me. When the angel was done, I pulled the sword from my scabbard and held it in front of them, blade down. It glowed again, the heat making me wince.

“Where did you get—” Daniel began, but stopped when the kids ran forward to grab the blade.

Like the girls in the dungeon, they each burst into a white hot flame, all the while smiling peacefully. Nearly every child came forward and immediately disappeared – the ones left over didn't make a move to the blade. Instead, they eyed it warily.

“Why are you here?” I asked one.

“I killed my best friend's mother and then him, and then myself,” he said. Other tales of violence, and the use of suicide as an escape hatch, followed his. In other words, these were kids who fully deserved their torment. I shook my head in disgust and the angel returned them to their respective chambers.

I sheathed my sword and caught Kazuko's eye. She nodded slowly to me as if I had confirmed her hunch. Daniel's face, however, showed complete confusion.

“What the hell was that about?” he asked.

“They didn't deserve to be here,” I said simply.

“And you just...”

“Well, you just sent the emperors to purgatory.”

“I guess I did.”

The tortured screams of the prideful and murderous filled our ears, and Daniel looked around him. “I think we're done here.”

We left, and the two angels at the gate slammed it shut behind us.

“So how did you release the souls?” Daniel asked me.

“How did you get the whole city running again?” I countered.

“And why is everyone so afraid of you?” I asked Kazuko.

She looked at me in her calm, inscrutable way. “So many questions. And no answers.”

Daniel sighed and raised his hands in the air. “Whatever. We need to find the lost souls. Figure out what's going on. And, I guess, add finding the devil to our list of things to do.”

“This wasn't in our job description,” I said.

CHAPTER SIX

That night we slept on the road, blankets over us to protect us from the bitter wind. I huddled under mine, unable to sleep. I wasn't afraid, not with Kazuko and Daniel near me.

Kazuko sat up, keeping watch. She kept her back to me, ramrod straight, but she knew I watched her.

Daniel slept hard, breathing deeply once he had covered himself. Troubling thoughts muscled out the tender ones when I looked at him. He was changing, looking at the world around him with more studious intensity. He looked at me differently, too. I didn't know what he had gone through for me. Maybe if I did know, I'd understand him better, but he seemed alien to me.

And yet I still worried about him. Stupid love.

But if I pointed fingers at Daniel for changing, I suppose I had better point them at myself or be called a hypocrite. I had looked into the face of the Divine and come out changed. It was something that I couldn't remember experiencing with my senses, but I remembered the incident as an emotion: complete and total serenity. Bliss. Love.

I still felt like myself, full of cynicism and fear, but I also felt centered and grounded. Every step I took was purposeful; even if I wasn't sure where I was going, I knew I needed to go there. Memories of our adventures trickled back in - my dog Jet, Hermes, Ragnarök, Susanoo and Izanami...

I wasn't sure when my thoughts turned to dreams, but it was a seamless transition, and I woke up rested.

Daniel was eating a hot dog. I grimaced at him. "Don't you know what's in that?"

"That's what makes it so good!" he said.

"Grandma Nancy said they were made of lips and assholes," I said.

"Your grandma was a woman of refined beauty."

"Yeah, well, your grandma..." my words died away when Daniel stiffened. I'd forgotten that the topic of his family was not a good thing to venture upon.

I hadn't thought much about his sister, even though that was one of our main goals. When you're wandering around hell, goals kind of go by the wayside as you struggle to comprehend and survive. But his sister was still at the center of this whole thing.

And his mother, the wretched woman. I've heard that you're not supposed to judge people with mental illnesses any more than you judge someone with cancer, but you don't see a lot of cancer patients killing little girls.

Daniel packed up his blanket and got to his feet. "Any idea where we're going today? Anyone? Anyone?"

I busied myself with my own blanket, and Kazuko rose smoothly to her feet. No one answered him.

When I finally stood, I said, “I guess keep going down the road.”

The wind became hotter as we walked, and we pulled our robe hoods over our heads to protect ourselves. Daniel and I huddled together as we went against the wind.

#

I know it sounds ridiculous, but I honestly was relieved to next see a hell I could understand, a hell I knew. This was the hell of Looney Tunes, the Far Side, all sorts of comical views, only without the fire.

A pit the size of a football field was rimmed by listless souls. The pit’s inside was black as if once holding a great fire. Near the center, a small pile of embers still glowed.

“I thought we just left the Christian hell?” I asked Kazuko.

She shook her head. “Some faiths have many hells.”

“But where’s the fire?”

Daniel grimaced. “I think I know what’s going on. Things are kinda wonky here, too, huh? Satan dropping the ball, or losing power, or something?”

“How could Satan care for two separate hells?” I asked.

“When you were alive, were there not heads of corporations or even states that managed many smaller, separate places?” Kazuko asked. “England ruled India for years.”

I shrugged. Like the city of Dis, souls wandered around listlessly here, clearly content that they weren’t being tortured, but without enough energy to do anything creative or productive with their free time.

A woman sat in a crude wooden chair close to the edge of the pit, cradling her knees, crooning softly. Daniel made a small noise in his throat.

“He planned this. The fucker planned this.”

“Who planned what?” I asked.

His voice was high and frightened, like a startled bird. “God. Satan. I don’t know. Someone is screwing with me.”

“Daniel, what—”

I didn’t finish. He drew his sword, walked up to the woman. She never looked up from her crooning as Daniel cried out in rage and cut off her head.

#

I won’t lie and say that I was getting used to the violence that surrounded me in hell. It was losing its shock value, though. I tried to develop a sense of detachment, like a theological sociologist, to figure out what happens exactly when someone “dies” in hell. Where do they go?

Previously, of course, we just sent people to different places. From purgatory to hell. Hell to heaven. And now I tried to watch what was going to happen to this woman now that her head was lying several feet from her body.

Discovering the secret behind this was better than dealing with the raving mess that was Daniel. Kazuko actually stopped him – with her sword – from going and slicing up the remaining souls around the edge of the huge pit.

Daniel had gotten rather good with the katana – Odin’s knowledge, I supposed – but he was still no match for his bodyguard. She blocked his strike toward his next victim with her thin blade and directed it downward. Daniel cried out in anger, and she kicked him once in the belly. He folded and dropped to the ground, gasping.

She picked up the katana and wiped it off, then snatched the sheath from Daniel’s side and put the sword away, but not before I saw that it had begun to shimmer in her hands. It didn’t do that when Daniel held it.

Daniel finally got in enough air to sob, and he curled into a fetal position and wept.

I walked to him and leaned over.

“Was that your mom?”

He nodded.

I knelt by his side and placed my hand on his head, lightly stroking his hair.

As he sobbed, I scanned the souls around me. Down into the pit, more figures moved: hulking figures that lumbered and trudged in a most un-humanlike way- a most *non-comforting* way. Sure, the angels could have kicked our asses, but at least they were human-looking. These demons were something else.

Thankfully, they didn’t seem to be showing any sign of aggressive tendencies. Much like the fallen angels of Dis.

I looked at Kazuko who stood above us impassively. “We need to figure out what’s up with this hell. I mean, it’s broken like the last one. Can you make it work again?”

“Not until Daniel can function. Not until he heals. I can’t do it without him.”

That was more information than I’d had before. I tore my eyes from Daniel to focus on the small woman. “What do you mean?”

She smiled at me. “You should figure it out soon.”

Another figure caught my eye in the pit. It was far away, so I couldn’t be sure, but it looked as though it rose from the embers of the dying pit fire itself and began walking across the ashes toward us. I kept my eye on it. The demons around it paid it no mind, and when I was close enough to be sure, I nudged Daniel.

“I think you need to see this, Daniel.”

His voice was still thick with tears as he saw where I pointed. “What? Where did she come from? Why isn’t she dead?”

“Daniel, we’re in hell. There’s nowhere else to go. I guess if you kill her, she comes back to be punished again.” I glanced at Kazuko for affirmation and she nodded.

Daniel got to his feet and picked up the sword again. “Then I’ll do it again.”

I wasn’t sure how to handle this grief-stricken and violent part of him, but I figured the truth would be better than sugar-coating. “And again? And again? Until what? Are you going to stay here forever, her hell being your revenge and your hell being the fact that she’ll keep coming back?”

Tough love didn’t work. He rounded on me, sword drawn, and I leapt back. Without thinking, I drew my own and held it out, the way I had seen Kazuko do, to defend myself.

With flowing grace she stepped between us, carefully. “Stop. Put your weapons away. The pit of flames is nearly dead but still it has an effect on you two. If you die here, you can never leave.”

Daniel’s eyes were still raging as he sheathed his sword. I fumbled mine back onto my back. Kazuko sighed and stepped away, but not before I saw that my blade had nicked her hand.

Daniel turned his back to me and asked Kazuko, “Why are we here, then?”

“I do not know. That information is not mine. But you seem to have found something to benefit you in each of the hells you have visited.”

I thought that it looked pretty obvious as to why we were here, but didn’t say so.

Kazuko waited with her hand on Daniel’s sword arm as the figure approached, crooning to itself again. Her hair was greasy and wild, the same dark brown as Daniel’s. I could also see where he got his almost-black eyes.

There the similarities stopped. Her face was bloated and droopy, her back slumped, her dingy sweatpants stretched over her fat body. She looked like a poster girl for depression that we would have studied in health class.

Her eyes widened when she saw Daniel.

“Danny. My baby. Have you come for me? Did you come to take Mommy home?”

Daniel’s voice was rough as he choked out a laugh. “And why would I do that?”

Her face showed genuine shock. “Because. Because I’ve been in this terrible place for so long. I’ve been so lost. I missed you.” Her chin trembled.

“Did you miss her?”

“Who? Who could I miss more than you?”

“Megan, Mom. Do you miss Megan? Your daughter...?”

She smiled then, an innocent and lucid smile. “I always wanted a little girl. You were my

joy, my son, but I wanted a daughter, too.”

Daniel took a deep, shaky sigh. “You had a daughter. A girl named Megan. She was four. You killed her, and when I tried to stop you, you cut me.”

I gasped as he held up his forearms. While Odin’s power had healed his scars, now they were fresh cuts again, weeping blood that sizzled when it hit the sooty ground.

“You were committed and died in the institution,” he continued. “That’s why you’re here in hell.”

“I had... a girl?”

“Yes, you had a girl; a little girl who did not understand why you hurt her.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know, Mom. She’s lost. I’m looking for her.”

“I’m coming, too.”

Daniel laughed, a hurt sound. “Mom, you can’t leave here. You’re in hell. You’re being punished for what you did.”

Her face lost the last of the confused, dreamy quality and I realized I finally saw who it was who had raised Daniel. Without whatever madness she had that had taken her daughter’s life, she looked like a normal person, someone who didn’t expect a cavalry to save her. Someone sane.

Then her eyes widened and she brought her hands to her mouth. “I remember.”

A small amount of tension left Daniel’s shoulders. “Dad always told me that you were sick. I tried to forgive you. I really did. But...”

She shook her head. “Unforgivable.” She groped around and found the wooden chair we had found her in, toppled when Daniel had attacked her.

Daniel stared at her, fatigue and misery bowing his shoulders.

I went to his side. His eyes were closed, tears streaming from underneath. I touched his arm, and he closed his hand around mine. “I just wanted her to acknowledge what she had done, who she had hurt. That’s all.”

He squeezed my hand again and the air got much hotter. The embers stirred below, and fire snaked around the pit, filling it. I stepped back from the sudden glare and heat, but Daniel held my hand tighter, so I stayed.

Daniel’s mother looked up from her despair and looked at the fire pit. The demons crawled out, newly invigorated, and began pursuing the errant souls, striking them with weapons and driving them into the pit. She looked at Daniel once, with sad eyes, and walked to the edge of the pit. Flames licked up to her feet and the rubber on her dingy sneakers caught fire.

It wasn’t a graceful swan dive, but it was clearly surrendering to her fate, to her responsibility. She waved once to Daniel and was gone.

He leaned on me, and I half-carried him away from the searing heat. He seemed very light.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We walked until the glow of the pit was no longer on the dismal horizon, and that was a very long time. When Daniel was finally satisfied we were far enough away, he collapsed in exhaustion. I spread out our blankets, urged him onto one, and lay down beside him. He curled into a ball. I tentatively reached out to him and he shuddered under my touch.

I scooted closer and wrapped my arms around him, holding him tightly until he stopped shuddering.

I was dimly aware of Kazuko's careful tending to her cut hand, and wondered why a shallow cut concerned her so much. I didn't have a lot of time to think about it, as I was pretty emotionally spent myself.

I dozed on and off through the night, watching him sleep, nodding off, then watching him sleep some more. When the baleful sun illuminated the never-lifting haze, he finally opened his eyes. When he saw me watching him, he smiled. I relaxed a little at the calm in his face.

"You been watching all night?" he asked.

I nodded. "Mostly."

"Why don't you get some sleep now?"

I answered by closing my eyes and dropping off immediately. I dreamed that he stroked my hair as I slept.

#

I don't think I slept long, but I woke up feeling refreshed. I lay alone on the blanket, the space beside me cold. Daniel sat and talked quietly with Kazuko away from where I'd slept. Disappointment was sharp on my tongue as I began packing up my blanket.

Daniel wrinkled his nose as we began walking. "Gah, what the hell is that smell?"

Kazuko's thin nostrils constricted as she inhaled. "That is the river Styx."

My stomach felt as if I had just eaten a bunch of ferrets whole. Ferrets on speed. Styx was the river to cross before you entered the Underworld, Hades's realm. Greek hell.

The line to get to the ferry began before we could see the river. But when a girl in a flower-printed dress, wearing a thin, gem-lined circlet around her brow spied us, she ran over and shook my hand first, then Daniel's, and lastly Kazuko's. She then took my hand again and, without a word, dragged us to the front of the line. I stumbled after her, the indignant hollow eyes of the dead boring into my back.

No one, alive or dead, liked line-jumpers.

We went to the front of the line where the brackish water of Styx lapped lazily at the bank. Charon, the ferry master, had upgraded his boat since the picture I'd seen of him in my Greek

mythology book – instead of a Venice-like gondola, his motorized ferry chugged idly as it waited for passengers, who came aboard slowly. A little ebony-haired boy onboard ran around and offered people water from a jug.

“The water of Lethe,” said Kazuko. “It makes them forget.”

“But I thought this was Styx,” Daniel said.

“All of the waters of Heaven and Hell run together eventually.”

The girl tapped her neck lightly, and we brought out our necklaces. They now resembled coins. She led us up the ramp to the boat and directly to Charon.

He squinted at our necklaces and grunted, turning back to his wheel. I thought he’d dismissed us, but the girl grinned broadly and scampered off the boat.

“What was that about?” I asked.

“We are welcome aboard,” Kazuko said.

“I’m surprised that hell honors Travelers too,” Daniel said.

“You are no regular Travelers,” Kazuko said.

“Yeah, so everyone keeps saying.”

I squinted across the water at the shore, barely in sight. “I had always assumed Styx was a narrow river and the ferry more symbolic than anything else.”

“It was, but as the number of souls passing through became more, the size of Underworld grew. Including the size of the river.”

Daniel stared across the way with me. He didn’t look at me when he spoke. “I’m sorry I attacked you at the fire pit.”

I shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s forgotten.”

He chuckled. “That’s unlikely. I just, well, I never intended to hurt you.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to say.

The ferry chugged along, and when we reached the halfway point on the river, Daniel spoke again. “I’ve been meaning to ask: what’s with the sword? Where did you get it?”

“The backpack. Where do I get anything?” I told him about the basement in Dis, explaining the child suicides and how I freed them.

He groaned. “Now, I don’t get it. Every time I go into my bag, I barely get anything at all to help me. I needed a weapon, I got a pocket knife. Ragnarök itself was happening around me, and I got scissors. You are playing jump rope and you just run across a white sword in your bag while looking for a tissue.”

I laughed. “Maybe I just have more faith in my bag than you do.”

His eye widened. “Maybe you’re right.”

Charon’s ferry chugged along and I looked at all the souls surrounding me. In Greek

folklore, most everyone went to the Underworld; only the heroic went to Elysium.

Elysium. Where I had met Hermes.

“You thinking about him?”

I looked down into the murky depths. “How can you tell?”

“He’s dead. We’re going to his underworld. Makes sense you’d think about him.”

“Where do the dead gods go, anyway?” I asked.

“Baldur went to Hel,” he said quietly, and this time I could tell the difference between the two words “Hel” and “hell.” “Izanami was also imprisoned in an underworld. I think they are subject to the same rules we are.”

I glanced at Kazuko, but she had nothing to add. She showed interest instead at the blade on my back.

“Will you show me your blade?” she asked.

I glanced around at the silent souls around us, none of whom paid us any attention. “Let’s wait till we’re off the boat. I don’t want to attract attention.”

She nodded. We approached the other side and the souls began shuffling forward. We stood aside as they left the boat.

Charon came up behind us. He spoke, his voice sounding as if it hadn’t been used in years. “They are not expecting you. This is to your benefit.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise, but Daniel took it in stride. “How did you know we were coming?”

“It is my job to know.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Can we, uh, do anything for you before we go? We didn’t really pay for our passage.”

He had already turned to shuffle back to his controls. “Come and see me again. When it’s all over.”

“I have no idea what that was all about,” I said as we disembarked.

Daniel shook his head. “I don’t get it either. What are we supposed to do? And who’s going to find out we’re here?”

“Hades is not a god who welcomes visitors,” Kazuko said. “We will have to be careful.”

The ferry deposited us at a pier on a riverbank made of black and red sand. We trudged through the hot sand and down a hill toward a rocky outcropping and the mouth of a large cave.

I stood still and closed my eyes, trying to reach out to sense the same pull that I consistently felt from the already-retrieved souls in my bag.

I inhaled sharply. They were here. Yes. There were a lot of them. Eyes still closed, I pointed.

“Great. That’s not foreboding at all,” Daniel said.

I opened my eyes and saw I pointed straight into the cave. The souls from the ferry were already making their dream-like trek that way as well. Nothing illuminated the cave, and as they entered, darkness swallowed them quickly.

“Daniel, this is hell. Stop being surprised when we get bad news.”

#

Before we went inside, I unsheathed my sword and held it out to Kazuko, but she held her hands up, refusing to touch it. She instead put her face close to the blade and moved her head parallel to it, inspecting every inch. She came to the white pommel and pointed.

“I didn’t think it existed. This is Metal Tiger; I heard legends about it when I studied t’ai chi. It presents itself to a powerful being in need.”

“Me? I’m not a powerful being,” I protested.

“Maybe you got it because everyone else already had a sword,” Daniel said. “How did you get it again?”

I glared at him briefly. “I told you. It was just there.”

“The Metal Tiger is strong - if it chooses to support you, it will serve you unfailingly. It can also decide you’re unworthy and just as easily slip from your grasp.” Kazuko glanced from the sword to me. “I would recommend not holding on too tightly.”

“I have no idea if you’re being metaphorical or not,” I muttered. I looked at the sword more closely. I could now see an etching of a leaping, shining tiger on the blade close to the hilt.

She shook her head. “Heroes always find the Metal Tiger, but they never own it. You cannot give it away; it chooses its own master.” She straightened. “That is what the legends say.”

I swallowed. “Wow.” Sometimes I could be so eloquent.

We went into the cave where I found that the White Tiger glowed, making our way fairly easy.

Souls had surrounded us, having ignored us since drinking the water of Lethe, but when Metal Tiger illuminated the dark cave, the souls appeared translucent, and as we went deeper, they faded away completely until we were alone.

“That was weird. Where did they go?” I asked.

“Let me guess, ‘blah blah, each soul has his own path to the underworld, blah blah,’ right, Kazuko?” Daniel said, grinning at her. My stomach twisted as I saw her smile back at him, and I told myself not to get so worked up. She’d saved our lives more than once. Jealousy was not proper thanks.

The walls glittered as we descended deeper into the ground. “Daniel, check it out. Gemstones,” I said. “Hades was considered the richest of the Greek gods because his domain was underground, where all the gems and precious metals were. He liked to flaunt his stuff.”

Daniel paused to examine a chunk of emerald sticking out of the wall. He whistled. "Nice. I suppose he'd be here in a moment if I even got my fingerprints on it."

"Remembering to use that god's wisdom in your head now, are you?"

He made a face at me. "Why don't you just find the souls and get us out of here?"

Tunnels appeared in the wall ahead, and we had a choice of three ways to go. Daniel and Kazuko looked at me.

"Fine, fine. I'm starting to feel like a metal detector." I inhaled slowly and closed my eyes again.

The lost souls were clearly down the first corridor; they pulled at me like a vacuum. But there was something... something in the second. Something that demanded our attention. It wasn't as important as the souls, but it needed us.

Or maybe just me.

The third corridor held something huge. Something *godlike*.

But behind us...

Something growled. Daniel swore. "There's a dog guarding the Underworld, isn't there?"

I heard Kazuko draw her sword as I opened my eyes. She had turned to face behind us.

Daniel and I turned after her. Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog of the Underworld, stood behind us, his great shoulders brushing against the gem stalactites. His coat was wiry, like a terrier, but his heads were thick like pit bulls. I don't know how we'd missed him, except that his black coat blended well with the shadows, and if he wasn't growling, I assume he'd be quite stealthy.

One head sniffed the air, another one sniffed toward us, and the third growled at us, baring its teeth.

I swallowed and fumbled with Metal Tiger, the sword that suddenly felt like an ineffective twig in my hands.

Daniel's voice shook. "Three heads. Three of us. We can take him."

"No, you can't. Go." Kazuko's eyes never left the dog.

"What? We're not leaving you!"

"Go."

I took a step backward down the first corridor.

Daniel pulled on Kazuko's arm. "Come on, run!"

Kazuko dropped her sword. I thought she was going to hit Daniel, but she elbowed him away and tore the bandage off the hand that I'd wounded.

"GO NOW," she said, and her voice echoed through my mind, demanding my obedience. Her compulsion tore through me and I turned and ran down the dark tunnel. I thought I heard

Daniel's footsteps close behind mine, but beyond that, nothing but a great buzzing sound and the yelps of a very large dog.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I could have sworn Daniel was behind me. I really thought he was. When you're running through a dark cave and the only light is coming from you, echoes and shadows can wreak havoc on your perception.

Kazuko had told us to run, and everything in my body had told me to obey her. I figured Daniel had obeyed her, too.

And so I ran down that first corridor, heading through twists and turns, too dark to figure out where I was headed. When I finally slowed to a stop, I was quite frightened to find I was alone-in hell. The dog's anguished sounds had ceased, but the buzzing noise continued.

"Daniel?"

My voice died in the cave. The air had become wet and dank; water leaked from the walls in little droplets. I took a tentative step and slipped, sliding for several feet. Once I'd gained my footing again, I realized that my sword was not the only thing glowing. Ahead, the rocks themselves glowed.

I peered into the gems and saw to my great shock that each hunk of emerald, sapphire, or diamond ensconced in the wall imprisoned a living, glowing soul. "What the hell?" I muttered.

I reached my hand out to touch a gem and heard Daniel call out to me.

"Kate, stop!"

Relief washed over me as he ran up, coming from the hall in front of me.

"Where did you come from?" I asked him, giving him a brief hug.

He stiffened in surprise, but carefully hugged me back. "I went down the middle corridor."

"And that loops back around this way?"

"Not exactly. There's really no time to explain, Kazuko is buying us all the time she can, but we need more help if we're going to do this."

I held up my hand. "Wait. I have no idea what's going on. Where is she, and what did she do back there?"

He clamped his hand on my shoulder. "Kazuko and I talked about this while you were asleep. The other souls we got in cat hell were just abandoned; it's likely some god would have run across them and taken them. The lost souls here aren't unclaimed; we're on Hades's turf. He doesn't like outsiders, and he certainly doesn't like outsiders taking his shit. We are about to steal from a god, Kate. A stern, easily angered god. And we've lost our bodyguard."

I sighed, forcing the tension and annoyance out of my shoulders. "What do you suggest we do?"

Daniel held out his right hand, which glowed with a bluish light. A single blue orb floated

gently above his palm.

“That’s... not a soul.”

“Not a human soul, no. He followed me in the other corridor, showed me the shortcut here. But he needs you, Kate. Don’t ask me why, I’m not sure.”

I held out my hand and the orb floated to me. I carried it closer to my face and knew immediately, even as it spoke to me in a weakened voice in my head.

Hello, lover.

“Hermes,” I said, forcing my voice steady.

You need help, but first you have to help me. Can you do that, Kate? Have you figured it out?

“Figured what out?” I asked. Daniel was shifting from foot to foot as if he were about to dash off. Time was, apparently, short.

Kiss me.

I hesitated. For one thing, where were his lips? For another thing, there was Daniel right there in front of me. And what would kissing this orb really accomplish?

Kate, once I gave you my life force. All I ask is now you give some back. Please. I can help you after you help me.

“You said you found this in the middle hall?” I asked Daniel, remembering the feeling I’d felt when I’d focused that way.

“Yeah. There were others there, but this is the only one that noticed me. I had a hunch what he was; I can apparently touch god souls while I still can’t touch human souls.”

“And Odin tells you what?”

“Kate, we don’t have time. That’s Hermes. Whatever he needs from you, do it.”

With one more glance at Daniel, I leaned forward and kissed the shining orb.

It dissolved immediately, tendrils of light and god stuff entering my nostrils, mouth and eyes. I threw my head back and gasped as Hermes slid into me, leaving behind fingerprints and picking over my soul as if it were a buffet.

Strong hands picked me off the ground where I hadn’t realized I’d fallen. I settled back, blind, against a firm, broad chest.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and his lips touched mine.

I lost myself in the kiss, in the taste of him, all other concerns minimal. I think I stopped breathing there for a moment, but he pulled away and whispered, “We have work to do.”

I opened my eyes. Daniel looked at me, his face inscrutable. Hermes took my hand and pulled-

And we *ran*.

God, how we ran. Hermes, the fleet-footed messenger of the gods, pulled me along with him and the caves became blurs to our eyes. I lagged only a moment as we exited the cave and I saw Kazuko rewrapping her hand, the unmistakable skeleton of a three-headed dog behind her, but Hermes tugged, and we left her.

The wind made me blink, which was a mistake, as I missed most of the trip. We came to a halt outside a great hallway, not even out of breath. I looked around, but Hermes was gone.

Kate, came the voice in my head. Hades knows all of my tricks. We have to distract Hades with something new so you can get what you need.

“Distracting *Hades*? You’re the trickster god, not me,” I said, fear flooding my mouth with bile.

Not necessarily, he said. I will guide you. I need something new, something Hades won’t see coming. Then there was that feeling again, that he was moving around in my head, gently touching my memories. A memory appeared in my mind like a movie, of me sitting in my second grade classroom as one of the last true Appalachian storytellers regaled us with tales of Jack. Jack and the King. Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack and the Bull.

The bull. Jack’s bull’s horns gave milk and bread and saved him when he was starving. After the bull died in a battle, Jack cut a strap from the bull’s hide. Whenever Jack was threatened, he would command the strap to whip and the horns to beat his attackers. “Tie strop tie! Beat horns beat!”

This we can use.

“Where’s Daniel? Is he okay?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder. I had no idea how far we had run.

Your guide will find him, now that she’s done with Cerberus. He’ll be safe with her.

I nodded and took a deep breath.

And so with Hermes whispering to me and making me feel utterly confused and confident at the same time, I walked into the grand hall of Hades and Persephone.

#

Bury your lies deep within the truth, Hermes said.

“My Lord Hades,” I said, bowing to him and pulling the Traveler necklace from around my neck.

The god and his prisoner wife Persephone sat on thrones at the end of a dismal throne room, flanked by the dead. Cold stone walls stretched high to form an arched ceiling, and gems winked at me, reflecting firelight. The dead souls milled about, making the throne room look more like a room full of bored teenagers than a grand court.

Hades and Persephone stared at me impassively. They were tall: as larger than life as the

gods at Olympus were, even Zeus. Being gods, I supposed they could be any size they liked. Hades had gold and silver rings adorning each finger and a long black beard. His hair was shaggy, giving him a wild mountain-man look. Persephone wore no jewelry whatsoever, a silent protest against her husband, I guessed. Hermes quietly affirmed my suspicion.

I approached them confidently, with Hermes calming my hammering heart.

Look in the bag. Show him the gifts you have for him.

“I bring gifts to the lord and his queen,” I said, pulling off my backpack. I pulled out a gaudy emerald necklace and a circlet encrusted with diamonds and handed both to a bored-looking attendant soul to give to Persephone and Hades. Persephone ignored my gift, choosing instead to stare at me, frowning. Hades smiled as he greedily inspected the circlet and his wife’s necklace.

“The god of Abraham, El, Adonai, Jehovah, sends you these gifts,” I said.

“Elohim? I thought He was on His way to joining us,” Hades said with a chuckle. “I certainly see that His followers have made things rather busy down here.” He waved his hand to indicate the crowded hall.

Joining them? I thought. Hermes caught my hesitation and urged me to focus. His presence sharpened my wit, letting the words come more quickly. “Why do you think He wants to bring you gifts, my Lord?”

I looking down and saw the corner of the corner of the ornate chest sticking out of my backpack. “I also know you have interest in gems, some more than others,” I said quickly. I opened the chest and saw a soul sphere there, a relatively new soul, with only one life to its credit. It quivered slightly as I touched it, and I picked it up and stretched out my hand to show Hades – close enough for him to see, far enough so he couldn’t snatch it.

He gasped. “Where did you get such riches?”

“I am on a mission from Elohim to find the lost souls. He wishes to give them to their proper afterlife. I think some of these belong to you.”

“That is excellent news,” he said, stretching out his hand.

I pulled back the soul. “I need to see your collection, first, sire.” I dropped my eyes deferentially. “Elohim wants me to see if you have souls that do not belong here. We are missing someone special.” I put the soul back in the chest and then back in my bag.

I chanced a glance up. Hades had narrowed his eyes in suspicion. *Uh oh.*

Persephone, whose eyes hadn’t left my face, placed her hand on her husband’s arm. “Follow them, beloved,” she said, her voice old and sad for all her youthful beauty. “It is only fair to do an exchange.”

Hades looked as if a one-for-one exchange was not fair at all, and with all of the wealth in

the world belonging to him, one could hardly expect him to be altruistic. He got off of his throne and beckoned me to follow him through a door behind Persephone. As I passed her, she rewarded me with a small, knowing smile.

“What was that about?” I whispered.

Hermes’s tone was light. *She recognized me. She’s helping us.* More memories of myths came back to me, including one in which Hermes and Persephone had been lovers.

My heart pounded and I bit my lip as Hades reached inside his red silken robe and brought out a key ring with hundreds of keys. He led me down a hall with many doors, stopping at one.

I was very aware of his closeness, and the divine power wafting from him. I had to play this just right.

“Your bag,” he said, and reached his hand out to me. I handed it over with no hesitation and he opened the door. I stepped inside, trying to keep my gasp to myself. Hades had captured thousands of souls and trapped them within gemstones; many more than I had seen in the previous cave. The gems glittered unnaturally, and I could feel them reaching out to me.

The ones outside were the overspill, Hermes explained. I shook my head.

I took another step into the room and was completely unsurprised when Hades, still holding my backpack, slammed and locked the door behind me.

#

Although the room still glittered brightly, I closed my eyes and put my hands on the wall. I felt a sharp gem that pulsed slightly. The soul inside was as clear to me as if it had spoken out loud. The soul identified as male, had existed in Australia and France and in some caves in an area that had no definitive boundaries. An old soul.

“Come on, then,” I whispered, and I drew it into my hand. It pulled easily from the wall, my palm flaring in a brief heat as I drew it into my hand. I had no idea where to store it, as my backpack was with Hades. As I wondered, it dissolved, sinking into my skin, leaving behind a glowing circle on my palm. I gasped as it sank in, heat sinking in and spreading up my arm and warming my entire body.

Excellent. Now you know what to do, Hermes whispered in my head.

Next I scooped up a soul that identified only as a writer, then a soul that thought of itself only as a mother, and I gasped when I caught her memories of all of the children she had birthed, loved, and lost. A woman from Russia. A man from Ireland. I pulled them all from the prison of Hades and kept them safe.

I turned on occasion, following the call of other souls, forcing myself to relax and stop trying to see and understand their lives. I kept my eyes closed. My mind drifted to Daniel and his lost eye, and I wondered what it had been like to choose to lose it a second time. I wondered when

he would tell me. I wondered if I'd be worthy of the sacrifice he made for me.

After gathering all the souls around me (I'd lost count after eighty) I explored them.

First, of course, I looked for Megan. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I'm sure memories of a loving brother and a crazy mom would stand out pretty baldly. I didn't see anything like that.

Scanning the souls was like reading a great epic with numerous plotlines that never seemed to tie together. This war story, this romance, this violent death, this boring, safe life. The stories lulled me, but Hermes's impatience stirred. Although it had felt like a long time, I hadn't been in there but ten minutes or so. I smiled to myself.

"Tie, strop, tie. Beat, horns, beat."

The bellow of the lord of the underworld shocked me out of my meditation, and I tried to protect my face as the door exploded inward. A sliver of wood cut my cheek, but I was otherwise unharmed. I ran out of the room and found Hades lying on the floor of the hallway, soundly restrained with a leather strap that still wound itself around him, snakelike. I picked up my backpack from where Hades had flung it when he had only found a leather strap and bull's horns inside. The horns lay beside the door from where they had burst it open, and I tossed them inside the pack.

"Keep the strap," I said, and Hermes and I were off.

#

Daniel and Kazuko stood by Cerberus's skeleton, arguing as we dashed by. We gathered the souls in the far corridor in an instant and joined them.

Daniel's eyes were wide as they stared into mine. "Is it you? Really?"

"Of course it's me, dumbass. Who does it look like?"

He pulled me to him and crushed me, then. I hugged him back awkwardly and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let go. "God, I was so scared," he said. "After I gave you Hermes's soul, you got all glassy-eyed and then you disappeared."

"He just helped me take care of some unfinished business with Hades," I said, smiling. "We got the lost souls, we're good to go."

"Hades will be free soon, we should leave," came the calm voice from behind me. Daniel finally let me go and I turned to see Kazuko. But it wasn't Kazuko. She looked the same, and yet her presence had increased. It was like she teased me at my peripheral vision. There was something else there.

Oh, God. She was *divine*.

She smiled at me, seeing my recognition. Daniel gaped at me, paying no attention to her.

"What the fuck is going on? Kazuko dissolves a three headed dog, and then you disappear

and say you got the souls back from Hades?”

“She will tell you everything in a moment,” Kazuko said, taking both our arms. “We need to leave.”

We ran down the hall. I purposefully had to slow myself to allow them to keep up.

Charon, inexplicably, was waiting for us.

He started the ferry the moment we stepped aboard. We chugged across Styx much faster this time. Once we were going, he handed the controls of the ferry to the little girl in the flowered dress and walked up to us.

He took my hand. “Do you have Hermes? Did you save them?”

I grinned at him, ignoring Daniel’s sharp look. “He’s with me. And I got the souls. But Hades won’t be tied up for long.”

Charon nodded and smiled. “Once we reach the other side, you’ll be safe.”

I heard Hades roar deep within the caves and got the distinct impression that we should never return.

#

On the far side, I asked Charon what stake he had in the orphaned souls.

“I catalogue them. It is part of what I do. And I knew there were some there that didn’t belong, some I didn’t ferry across; this upsets the balance.”

We shook his hand and got off the boat.

We passed the waiting souls, Kazuko and I definitely more relieved.

“So you have your own little friend in your head?” Daniel asked, not looking at me.

Hermes chuckled inside my head. I felt a small stab of guilt, but I lifted my chin. “We couldn’t have gotten through that without him. And you still have Odin.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“What’s wrong, Daniel?”

“I didn’t fuck the guy inside *my* head.”

“Ugh, you’re so crude,” I said. “Like I planned any of this? And what the hell do you care?”

Daniel ignored me and looked at Kazuko, “And what happened to you and that dog?”

I could feel her even though I didn’t look at her. She blazed like a fire; something had changed during her battle with Cerberus. I was surprised Daniel couldn’t feel it too.

“I stopped the dog and then came to find you. You will get answers in time.”

Daniel snorted. “Yeah. But will they be the ones I need?”

He stomped ahead of us and walked alone. I looked at the powerful woman at my side and she smiled. I shrugged. Daniel would get over it. He’d have to. It was pretty clear he needed us both.

CHAPTER NINE

The sky had darkened considerably, even though my body clock said it was midday. I squinted at the gloom and wished, briefly, for the fake beautiful days I used to have in Heaven. In particular, those days when I lived with Daniel: the Daniel who loved me. The fake Daniel.

Man, sometimes fantasy seemed much better than reality. Daniel hadn't spoken much to me since we'd gotten away from Hades. And I still felt slightly dizzy from Hermes's presence.

I wanted to reassure Daniel, but I didn't want to lie. For one thing, Hermes was still there – granted, he sat quietly in the back of my mind, but I could still sense him. Perhaps it was with his help that I could sense Kazuko so well now, too.

How did Daniel not see it? She walked ahead of us, back straight, step brisk. If pressed, I wouldn't have been able to pinpoint exactly what was different, but I knew she had changed somehow.

Daniel broke my concentration with a startled, “Who the hell...?”

Ahead of us on the road stood four Asian girls, each with long black hair. They looked as though each was two years older than next youngest; the youngest looking about ten years old and the eldest sixteen. At first glance they looked like sisters, but as they got closer, I got an uncomfortable feeling.

“I thought the road to hell was walked alone?” I asked Kazuko.

She frowned for the first time. “It is. We should not meet anyone here.”

As we approached, the girls became audible to us, and it was clear they were in a heated argument.

“I'm tired of searching,” the youngest said. “I want to sit down!”

The oldest shook her head. “We haven't explored all the underworlds. There are many to go; we've only explored seven.”

The next youngest sighed. “No, we've been *kicked out* of eight. How many more are there?”

The next youngest just stood there, sniffing, as if she had just finished up a good cry.

A chill ran through me as I studied the girls. Although they were obviously different ages, it was clear they were all identical. How was that possible?

The tired one, the youngest, pulled at the oldest girl's shirt. “Dae, look. People.” She pointed to us.

The weeping one looked hopeful. “Maybe they can help.”

Kazuko looked them all up and down. “You have no souls.” She was matter-of-fact in her bluntness, but the statement elicited a sob from the twelve-year-old.

“Wait, how can they be souls without souls?” Daniel asked.

“Excellent question, sir,” snapped the fourteen-year-old.

The oldest put her hand on his sister’s shoulder. “Hush, Min.” To us, she said, “I’m Dae. These are my, ah, sisters. Min,” the angry fourteen-year-old, “Sun,” the weeping twelve-year-old, “and Bo-Bae” the wide-eyed ten-year-old.

“Oh, just tell them, Dae,” Min said. “We’re clones. We can’t find an afterlife that will accept four girls cloned from one.”

“Wait, you’re what?” I asked.

“Clones. We are from South Korea. Some people wanted to see if they could clone the same scientist four times, once every two years, then raise us differently,” Dae said. “Something went wrong and we found out about each other and managed to run away. We died together, looking for the woman we consider our mother. Now we are just trying to find a place to rest.”

Daniel began his standard introduction of us, but I wasn’t listening. I stepped forward and held up my hand focusing on Dae, who seemed the most receptive of the bunch, and placed my hand below her neck. She looked surprised, but didn’t protest.

“What are you doing?” Min said, and raised her hand to knock mine away. Without looking at her, I reached out with my other hand and caught her wrist. She blurted her surprise but I didn’t lose my focus on Dae.

The soul was there, inside Dae. It was small and feeble, but still it flickered there. I let Min go and stepped back from Dae. “You do have a soul. It’s small and fractured, but it’s there.”

“Are you a god?” Sun asked with awe in her voice, and her eyes nearly hurt me with their need.

“No, sorry. It’s just that I, uh, sense souls. I guess. We’re trying to find some imprisoned souls down here, and I’m the bloodhound.”

The brief hope in her eyes died. “Oh.”

“Where are you going?” Bo-bae asked.

“The next hell, I guess,” Daniel said. “We go where the road takes us. You?”

Dae pointed at Min. “Min says Anubis will help us, so we’re trying to find him.”

Min nodded eagerly, her face losing some of its bad-tempered, pinched look. “According to stories, Anubis has a male and female aspect, two parts of the same whole. I thought he might at least listen to us, as four parts.”

“But we’re not parts!” Sun wailed.

Min glared at her. “That is true. We’re seven different girls. *Very* different girls.” She cast a withering eye at Sun, who had started to cry again.

Still thinking of the soul that flickered inside Dae, I shook my head. “No, you’re not parts. But you’re not wholes, either. I don’t understand it.”

I looked at Kazuko. She shrugged. “Of the gods, Anubis is as good as anyone now. I was hoping to avoid him, but we can go there, if you like. He could help the two of you get to your answers as well.”

“You mean you’ll help us?” Bo-bae said.

“Wait a sec,” Daniel said. “You’re not damned souls or anything, are you? Murderers, thieves, uh...” he paused, thinking, probably, of what horrible things pre-teen and teen girls could have done to deserve hell. He finally finished with, “...drivers who take up two parking spaces?”

Min pointed to Dae. “She’s lost her virginity already.”

Dae looked at her clone coolly and crossed her arms. “And you think that would damn me?”

Daniel snorted. “Last I checked, Min, being a tattletale doesn’t damn you to hell, so you’re safe so far.”

Min bristled as the other clones, save Sun, laughed. Since the girls were going our way, we walked on together, our little group suddenly grown to seven.

#

I wonder if we would have found the realm of Anubis if Kazuko hadn’t been purposefully leading us to it. Instead of a grand building, castle, or a mountain cave, we encountered merely a hole in the ground, covered by a dirty blanket.

“You serious?” Daniel said as Kazuko pulled aside the blanket to reveal roughly hewn steps.

I led the way in, Min and Bo-bae at my heels, eager to find out what Anubis had to say.

“So have you met a lot of gods?” I asked.

“I don’t know the ones we haven’t met,” said Bo-bae. “The ones in hell, anyway.”

We had been walking down a tunnel, dimly lit by torches in the walls. I was too busy realizing how much I had missed talking with people other than Daniel and Kazuko that I didn’t notice the change in the tone of the echoes.

Min may have been overbearing and rude, but at least she had excellent reflexes. She threw her arm in front of me and Bo-bae, who gave a short shriek as she realized the end of the tunnel was a gargantuan pit.

Daniel and the other clones stepped aside as Kazuko came forward.

“Anubis,” she whispered.

I squinted and stepped backward into Daniel. Down below, a sharp-featured black dog sat on its haunches in the pit, its head level with the top, staring right at us. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see that steep steps wound around the pit to the bottom, ending at the feet of the great dog.

Also at the feet of the dog was a man with a bird’s head.

“And Thoth,” Kazuko continued, pointing at the man with the bird head. “He weighs the

souls; Anubis passes judgment.”

Anubis opened his jaws and his obsidian teeth gleamed in the dim light. His voice was deep and gravelly as if he had further depths of the earth within him. “Five to be judged.”

I looked around. “Five? I thought there were four of you.”

Anubis blinked slowly. “The woman Kate has yet to be properly judged. The four half-girls named Dae Min and the man named Daniel Joseph Hudson.”

“Daniel?” I asked.

“What the hell?” asked Daniel.

“Half-girls?” demanded Min.

Anubis ignored them. “Who speaks for the half-girls?”

Daniel still stood in shock. Kazuko didn’t speak. Dae cleared her throat behind me.

“Please,” whispered Sun.

“Uh, me, I guess,” I said, stepping forward, careful of the edge of the pit.

“And who speaks for Daniel?”

I opened my mouth again, but Kazuko stepped forward and drew her sword. She placed it in front of her and faced the god. “The goddess Izanami speaks for Daniel Hudson.”

CHAPTER TEN

We didn't really have a lot of time for a "holy shit" moment just then. Right after Kazuko had made her pronouncement, Anubis ordered me and the clones down into the pit. I bit back all questions and left them, Daniel staring at Kazuko/Izanami in disbelief.

"I can't believe this," I whispered, focusing on my shock at Kazuko's revelation rather than freaking out about the handrail-free steps carved into the wall. "Did you know about this?" I whispered to Hermes, hoping he would respond.

Of course I did.

"And you didn't tell me why?"

She clearly had a good reason for her disguise.

"Why are you shocked?" Dae asked, assuming I was talking to myself. "I thought at least one of you was a god."

"We didn't know she was a god," I said. "Well, at least not at first. All I knew was Izanami appointed Kazuko as our guard and then left us. I didn't know she stayed in disguise, or whatever. I don't even know if there was ever a Kazuko, or if she was a host of the god, or what."

"So how are you going to represent us? You don't know anything about us," asked Min.

I glanced down at the feet of Anubis, where he and Thoth waited patiently. "I don't know," I said. "Anything I should know about you, or your, uh, mom?"

"She was a brilliant scientist who died five months ago, right after we found her," Dae said from in front of me. "She led the field in genetics and cloning research. We were her finest achievement."

I wracked my brain to figure out how to represent – defend? – these seven girls I didn't know. What if they did belong in Hell just by virtue of being humanly manufactured?

Although I wasn't relishing the thought of facing the huge dog, the end of the stairs came too soon as I still had no idea of what I was to do.

As we stepped onto the rock at the bottom of the pit, Thoth approached.

Bow to the judge of the dead, Hermes whispered. I did so, awkwardly, and the girls followed my head, much more gracefully.

The bird head lowered to acknowledge us and then indicated a large scale at Anubis's feet.

The dog spoke again. "I weigh your soul against a feather. Thoth determines the result. If you are too heavy of sin, Ammut devours you. Ammut is not here currently, alas, so I will do the devouring. If you are light enough, you ascend."

"Ascend?" Sun said hopefully.

The bird head nodded once. He gestured again.

“What do we do?” Bo-bae said, her voice shaky.

“Weigh the souls,” said Anubis.

The clones looked at me expectantly. I looked at Thoth, Anubis, the clones, and then up the stairs to where I knew Daniel and Kazuko – Izanami? – waited. I tried to remember that we were on a metaphysical plane, not physical.

I remembered the flicker of recognition in Dae’s chest when I touched her. I beckoned to her and she came willingly. “Are you ready?” I asked.

She smiled sadly. “I’ve been ready since the day we died.”

I put my hand on her chest and felt that discordant flicker again. I concentrated like I had in Hades’s realm, trying to coax the souls from solid gemstone.

Finally it came to me, the warm sphere nestling into my hand. The light left Dae’s eyes and she crumpled, her body evaporating like smoke.

“What did you do to her?” Min said.

The soul was smaller than others I’d taken, and striations interrupted the smooth flow of soul-stuff inside, so I concentrated on it, learning about Dae, her life and loves, her remarkable story. As I held it, the striations disappeared and it rounded out to look unmistakably like a soul.

I took Dae’s soul over to the scale and carefully lowered it to the waiting tray. The feather didn’t budge from its low position.

Sun smiled at me, tears rolling. “It’s true. You healed her.”

“Is that it?” I asked Anubis.

“It is merely part of a whole,” he grumbled. “Weigh them all together.”

The clones gasped. “Together we have to weigh less than one whole person?” asked Bo-bae.

Sun stepped forward confidently. “I’m next. And thank you.”

I smiled at her, embarrassed by her complete trust. Her soul nearly leaped into my hand, and her body dissipated like Dae’s.

The other clones came to me, one confidently, one reluctantly. I removed each soul, watched it reform and heal, and added it to the stack of shining spheres. Each was identical, which I hadn’t expected, as they had been such different girls. They were all incredibly light, although with the addition of Min, the feather rose just a little. With all four souls, the scales tipped one way, and then the other, and then balanced perfectly.

I blew out, only then realizing that I’d been holding my breath.

Anubis nodded his huge head slowly and said, “They are yours.”

I nodded and took the souls back, handling each one carefully as I stored them in my pack.

“Now for Daniel.”

I stepped back and watched Daniel. While Anubis had judged the girls, he and Kazuko – I

still couldn't think of her as Izanami – had descended the steps behind us. They walked forward calmly. I tried to catch Daniel's eye, but he didn't look at me.

“Why is he being judged?” I asked, but Kazuko waved me back.

She turned to Daniel and asked, “Are you ready?”

He nodded once, and then his good eye went to me, anguish and fear creasing his face.

“Kate, I'm sorry.”

“Wait, why?” I asked. Then I realized what was going to happen. “No, wait, don't you dare!”

He smiled then, and Kazuko placed her hand on his chest. Just like the clones, Daniel's face relaxed and he fell. I tried not to worry about his corporeal body as he dissipated, but I had to fight back tears as he became nothing more than a shining globe.

I couldn't stop myself from stepping forward, past Kazuko to stare at it. “What is that?”

Daniel's soul did not glow with the soft golden light that other souls did. It was laced with ribbons of red, green, silver and blue, with touches of black here and there.

Kazuko silenced me with a stern look and approached the scale. I could tell immediately that this was not going to end well. The soul dropped the scales down, pushing the feather high.

“No, wait! He's a good guy; he went to heaven when he died! He's already been judged!” I said, pleading to Anubis.

“Unlike the half-girls, this one holds *too* much soul within him.” He reached out a paw and Thoth placed the soul, so tiny compared to the god's paw, into it. Anubis held the soul close and sniffed it. “Ahhh... Odin,” he said, and the green ribbons left the soul to hover above like a streamer. “An aspect of Izanami, and her son Kagut-Suchi” he said, and the silver and red-colored ribbons left the soul. “And,” he sniffed again, sounding honestly surprised. “Goodness. Horus, what are you doing in there?” The blue color left Daniel's soul.

“What is he talking about?” I asked Izanami. “How is he carrying part of you? And who's Horus?”

She didn't answer me, but she stared hard at the giant dog in front of us. “Weigh him again.”

Anubis sniffed one last time. “No, I don't think so. This soul has a story to tell. I think we should let it speak.”

And with that, he opened his great gaping jaws and swallowed Daniel's soul.

#

Suddenly Daniel's afterlife played out like a hologram before us - Daniel arriving, being met in the afterlife by many, many women. Clothes were shed, bodies came together-

I turned my head, embarrassment and jealousy distracting me from the real reason we were here. “Tell me when this part is over,” I mumbled to Kazuko.

She glanced at me and said, “The true story is sometime after this, Lord Anubis.”

Anubis nodded once and I glanced up to see Daniel meeting with God, receiving the Traveler’s necklaces, and then walking to find me.

I gasped when I saw myself, sped up, from Daniel’s memory. I was shorter than reality, and mousier. I’d never been voluptuous, but in Daniel’s memory I had little more body than a boy’s.

Time sped up, we interfered in Elysium, I went away with Hermes, we went to dog heaven.

It became fascinating, how Daniel viewed me. After my encounter with Hermes, I had matured in Daniel’s eyes, growing a little taller, gaining a tiny bit of a figure.

I became enraged, then, stalking off, then demanding answers from him. I realized that’s when he started seeing me as *me*, as someone who wasn’t his sexless little sister. My confidence had grown with my anger.

I approached the angel, looking like a hero; much more confident and strong than I remembered feeling. Then she embraced me and I-

I turned my head, uncomfortable with the memory of the attack.

In God’s office, rage washed over Daniel as he realized how God couldn’t help him.

Then we got to the part of the story I wasn’t familiar with...

#

With his eye finally restored to him, and the cold hard fact that he had lost any chance of restoring Kate to a corporeal body, Daniel strode with powerful steps away from the glory that was the Christian heaven. Kazuko followed him as fast as her dignity allowed her.

“He tricked me. The son of a bitch tricked me.” His eyes were wide with rage.

“He has no mother,” Kazuko began, and Daniel rounded on her.

“I don’t need your logical bullshit now. Not now. I had one of the smartest beings in the universe in my head, I lost him and immediately become a goddamned fool. My best friend in the world is in a fucking *jar* and I don’t need your excuses!”

“Where are we going?” Kazuko asked.

“I don’t know. Away. Somewhere. Wherever I can get what I need to get her back.”

Kazuko placed her hand on Daniel’s arm. “Allies fall in battle all the time. Sometimes we can’t help them.”

“Bullshit.” He wrenched away from her and started again, but stopped immediately.

“What’s off the road?”

“Wasteland,” she said.

“People wander through wastelands to get answers, right? Isn’t that in all the holy books?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He stepped off the road onto the grass and walked

perpendicular from the road.

Kazuko spat something in Japanese and followed him. "This is dangerous, Daniel."

He didn't look at her. "Then it's good I have a bodyguard, isn't it?"

They didn't stop for rest. Eventually the road disappeared into the distance and the grass gave way to sand. The sun became a baleful eye that caused Daniel to squint and shield his eyes.

"Which way?"

Kazuko sniffed. "What are you looking for?"

Daniel crumpled briefly. "I don't know. Odin? Wisdom? Another god? Can I just cut out my eye and get him back? I'll do it."

Kazuko stopped his searching hand from scrabbling for the great black katana at his side. "Stop. Daniel. Stop."

Tears threatened. "I have to get her back. You don't understand. I can't do it without her."

"You survived Ragnarök without her," she began.

"She was there. I knew she'd be there when I got back. Now I may never have her back." The tears came now, evaporating in the desert wind and leaving stinging, salty trails in their wake.

Kazuko sighed. She lifted Daniel by the shoulders easily, as if he were a rag doll. "We'll save her," she said, and leaned in. He was so startled by the kiss that he didn't return it, just allowed her soft lips to press briefly against his.

Calm and patience infused his mind; the kind of patience that came from sitting in an underground prison for millennia. When she set him down, he cleared his throat and straightened, blushing. "Right. Okay. Let's go."

He looked around the desert, relishing briefly the view on his recovered left side. He saw something move behind a dune, a large shadow. Sand rose from the dune as if the shadow was struggling.

Daniel pointed, and Kazuko nodded.

"Horus and Set," she said.

"Who?"

"Egyptian gods. Horus epitomizes good. Set epitomizes evil. They are destined to fight till the end of time."

Daniel looked at his watch and started out over the sand. "Yeah, well, that was about a day or so ago. Time for them to stop."

Kazuko followed, sword drawn. Daniel also drew his, Izanami's terrible katana, but held it awkwardly.

The point drooped. Daniel stared at it. "I lost everything. I can't even remember how to

hold this. What the hell good am I going to be in a battle?"

Kazuko placed her small hand on his shoulder, stopping him. "Close your eyes." He obeyed. "Feel the sword. It will speak to you."

"How will—"

Kazuko cut him off, saying, "Shhhh." She allowed the silence to permeate the air. "You may not have Odin's wisdom anymore, but you are not alone. You have more inside you than you know. Feel the sword. It will tell you how to use it. It will help you become a godslayer."

Daniel's face relaxed and the katana's tip dipped into the sand. In his mind danced a great and terrible goddess, mother of all, and after a betrayal, destroyer of all. Izanami knew how to wield this sword.

"Have I been carrying her this whole time, like Odin?" he asked, his voice soft with awe.

Kazuko smiled. "She has been with you, yes."

Daniel's hand tightened on the katana as the knowledge reminded his muscles what to do. He opened his eyes. "Do we have a plan?"

"We rarely do," Kazuko replied.

Daniel snorted a bitter laugh and they struggled through the sand further to meet the battling gods.

Horus was a golden eagle, the size of a grown man. He rose into the air and dove, again and again, at his opponent. Daniel blinked when he saw that Horus had been blinded in one eye.

Set had chosen an ever-changing variety of outlets for his shape. He twisted constantly, becoming a giant hippopotamus, a snake, an armored beetle. He bled from several gashes delivered from Horus's talons. Currently, as a beetle dripping black goo, he burrowed into the sand.

Horus dove again, screaming his fury, and grasped Set's wiggling little legs. He carried his uncle into the air, shrieking triumph, but Set changed to a snake again and, tail still clasped in Horus's talons, slid up to tangle himself in Horus's wings. He squeezed, and the great bird faltered in the air.

Daniel and Kazuko watched as Horus attempted to wrestle control from his uncle and keep aloft at the same time. That became impossible as Set constricted, pulling Horus's wings back, and they plummeted.

Daniel swore and ran down the dune as best he could, sliding in the sand. When the gods hit the ground, sand sprayed in all directions, including into Daniel's face.

Blinded, he stumbled forward. He coughed and spat and rubbed at his stinging eyes. Had the fall broken Horus's delicate bird bones? Were divine bird bones stronger than normal bird bones?

Once the sand had settled, everything was quiet. Daniel rubbed again at his eyes, but the sand still blurred everything. “Kazuko! Where are you?”

She didn’t answer. Daniel swore again and stumbled forward again, startled when his hands fell on warm feathers. They did not move.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Daniel said, dropping the katana to feel for any sign of life on the god’s body. Izanami’s sword slid a bit on the sand, the impossibly sharp blade slicing through his boot and into his ankle.

Daniel grunted and pulled away from the blade, still trying to clear his vision. Horus twitched under his fingers, and the feathers melted away until Daniel touched only a muscular back. A human hand reached out and touched his ankle.

I gotta stop getting cut around gods, he had a moment to think, before the tidal wave of power flowed into his body. He cried out and fell backward. He retched onto the sand with the dizziness of it, and then slowly got to his feet.

He rubbed his hands over his still-watering eyes and spat the bile out of his mouth. He leaned over and picked up the katana, hands shaking, and realized he could see out of only one eye.

Frantically he rubbed the left eye, but his hand fell away when he heard the voice in his head.

Sorry about that. It’s a side effect, a voice inside his head said. He looked down at the body of the bronze, dying god that lay on the sand, a large black snake coiled around his neck, constricting.

“Horus,” Daniel said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.”

Oh, you can still help. I am not Odin; this is not my destiny.

Set had not noticed Horus’s immigration to the new body, and still tightened. A bone snapped in Horus’s neck.

“Yikes, that’s gotta sting,” Daniel said.

The serpent noticed him at that moment and stared at him, the slitted eyes appraising.

Stop staring and kill him! Horus said.

“Oh, right,” Daniel said, and raised the katana. Izanami had killed few snakes, although she had encountered many in the underworld after her death. She hated them. The snake danced to the side as Daniel struck, and he sliced Horus’s cheek instead.

He felt a disappointed groan inside him. “Sorry about that,” he said through gritted teeth. He backed up, goading the snake into following him.

Set changed then, flattening out into beetle form. A beetle the size of an Irish wolf hound.

“Shit,” Daniel said, skidding backward down the dune. His heel dug into the sand and he

lost his balance entirely, toppling over and rolling down the dune.

Not keen on rolling over the katana, he instinctively dropped it, trying to stop his roll before Set was on him.

It was too late. Dizzy from the fall, sand in his mouth, nose, ears, and eyes, he sat dazed when he felt the hard shell of the beetle on his back, the mandibles clamping around his left wrist.

He howled as the beetle cut into his wrist and the blood poured into Set's mouth.

The beetle paused to drink, and Daniel's stomach turned over, the disgust momentarily replacing the pain and fear.

"Fucking bug," he said, trying to roll away and kick at it.

"Kazuko!" he called again, hoping for help.

You could shape-change, suggested the voice in his head.

"Oh sure, that's totally easy," Daniel grumbled. "Why don't I just shape-change?" he kicked at Set with each syllable.

You can, now. Daniel had a feeling of dizziness and loss of control, and then Horus clearly took over, morphing his body into that of a great golden eagle. His wing tip easily slipped from Set's mandibles, and the beetle chittered his annoyance.

Holy shit! This is amazing! Why didn't you say that before? Daniel asked as Horus took flight.

I thought you knew. The voice was warm and amused.

They circled around and poised for a dive at the beetle, which blurred and started to assume another shape.

Hey. Wait. You've been doing this for centuries, right? Daniel asked.

Horus paused and circled Set again. *Yes. Why?*

Why don't we try a new way to fight him?

Daniel felt the mental shrug at his plan. Horus aimed another dive, this time away from Set, and they plummeted, talons outstretched, and they closed on the hilt of Izanami's katana in a great explosion as they landed.

With a great leap, they were off into the air again, the unbalanced sword hanging from their straining talons.

Now what? Horus asked. Set had become a hippo again, readying himself for a charge once they landed.

Let me drive, Daniel said.

They dove again, the hippo judging the angle of their attack and trying to get out of the way. Set changed to a beetle again and began burrowing into the sand.

Now, Daniel said, and Horus gave him his own body back.

Daniel gripped the katana and aimed it straight down as he fell. He landed on Set's back, the goddess's blade sinking deep, through the beetle's armor and into the soft interior, and then out the other side.

Set let out a great screech and began switching shapes, but the katana speared him the same no matter what animal he chose.

Daniel held on tight, the bucking god under him trying to throw him off. In the violence, he brushed up against the katana several times, the blade slicing effortlessly through his clothing and skin.

Set stilled, then, and Daniel pulled the blade out. Exhausted, he stepped on the beetle's back and went to the fairest approximation of its neck, then sank the katana into the bug again, hopefully killing off any remaining brain activity.

He stumbled off Set and knelt in the sand, trying to see all the places he was cut. There were several, some deep.

"Will that do it? Is it over?" Daniel asked out loud.

I have never before been able to kill him. He has beaten me, and I have beaten him, but there has been no death. I'm in your debt.

"Yeah, but what about your body?" Daniel asked, pointing at the god.

I still live. With your intervention, you have helped me win the battle I have fought since the beginning of time. I cannot ask you for more.

"Oh, go on. You know you want to," Daniel said, sensing Horus wasn't telling him something. "Do you really want to go back into that body?"

There was a long pause. *You do have the power to restore me,* he finally said. *What would you ask in return?*

Daniel smiled.

#

Horus, back in his own body, gazed up at Daniel with his one eye. The agony of his broken neck and other wounds was apparent on his face. Daniel didn't feel so hot himself. "Are you sure? Is she worth all that?"

"She's worth more than I have the ability to communicate."

"I have to take your eye to restore myself. Are you ready?" Daniel nodded. With a grimace, Horus's form shimmered and he became an eagle again, his broken neck looking even worse in bird form. He held up a talon and hesitated.

Daniel gritted his teeth. "Do it."

The last thing his left eye saw was the shining claw of Horus descending.

It was worse than the first time, maybe because the anticipation made it worse. Daniel's

body was already injured and singing the songs of pain and blood, and adding a bass drum to the symphony wasn't making it happier. He tried to bite back the screams as he bled onto the sand, but he couldn't. He was dimly aware that Kazuko was there, finally, drawing his shuddering body into her lap. She held a clean cloth to his face.

"He is restored." Kazuko said Daniel. "Your sacrifice has healed him."

Daniel barely heard her as he retched from the pain, retreating far into himself, wishing never to come out. Dimly aware of Horus taking wing, spraying hot sand on them. Dimly aware of Kazuko assuring him that Horus would return. Dimly aware of her stroking his hair.

Then he was unaware of anything.

He woke when Kazuko tied a bandage across his ruined eye. His felt much better, although the socket still throbbed.

"What?" was all he managed to say.

"He has been and gone. He did his part of the bargain, and gave you something in addition. I'm not sure if bargaining with Horus will benefit you, but what's done is done."

Daniel flexed his arms and legs; his cuts seemed to be healed, although he was still coated in tacky blood. Odin was back. His head ached, but it was nothing like it had been. He sagged with relief.

"Where were you?" he asked. "I thought you were my bodyguard."

She frowned. "I am not permitted to interfere in battles between gods. I couldn't help."

Daniel's jaw dropped. "Then why did you encourage me to go in alone?"

"I knew you could handle it," she said.

He shook his head. "Why did you say helping Horus is bad?" he asked.

"You now share a lost eye," she said. "Together you slayed Set. You may share other things. Horus is also known for beheading his mother, among other things."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Daniel replied. Then, louder, "We need to go back."

"You should rest."

"I can't wait anymore. *She* can't wait anymore." With her help, he struggled to his feet.

They walked in silence, Kazuko on his blind side to protect him. Her voice was very soft. "Are you going to tell her that you love her?"

He shook his head. "My mother went insane. My sister died. My father's emotions shut down permanently. Every woman since then has been a band-aid. I lose everyone I love. And I can't lose Kate. So I can't love her. I don't love her."

Kazuko watched him with sympathetic eyes. "Those are possibly the most words to ever proclaim that someone does not love."

"Shut up, Kazuko."

Above them, Horus circled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With Daniel's story of his adventure, and the story of how he had taken on Izanami and Horus, now over, Anubis lowered his head and spat the soul back out, now with traces of gray around it. Aspects of Anubis? The other hovering ribbons of godstuff settled down within the orb again, and Daniel's body coalesced around it.

Kazuko bowed to the gods and picked up Daniel's body. Thoth led us to a door in the pit that opened, unexpectedly, to a beach, where a boat waited.

I squinted my eyes against the sun. I wanted to stay where it was dark.

Neither of us spoke. Kazuko lay Daniel on a bier and covered him with a white sheet up to his chin. Whatever force drove the boat pushed it away from shore.

The boat cut silently through the water as I stared over the side, looking for any sign of land. Kazuko - Izanami, I mean - sat behind me, sitting vigil beside the prone body of Daniel. I couldn't look at him, so I watched our progress, wondering where we were going, and quite uncomfortable in the fact that we had no control over the boat.

I spent the next several hours in stunned silence. I didn't know the two beings behind me. I felt very alone.

After a while longer, she came up behind me. Now that she had revealed herself, I wondered how I didn't see it before. The edges of my consciousness tingled when she came near. She was as divine as any other god we'd encountered.

"I have spent the last several days wondering what happened when he lost his eye the second time. Now that I know, I think I'm even more confused," I said.

"I will answer what I can," she said.

"Okay, start with you. Who is Kazuko? Is there a Kazuko? Why did Izanami need to go with Daniel? And why were you disguised?"

"There is no Kazuko. This is the shape I had before I went to the underworld. My natural form now being insectoid, I am able to split myself. Part of me resides with my son, part of me is before you, and part of me rests within Daniel." She pulled back the bandage on her hand from where I had accidentally cut her, and a fly wriggled out.

"And Cerberus..."

"I devoured him," she said.

I swallowed, imagining the huge dog covered in flies. No wonder she had been obviously divine after all that. She'd eaten a dog that was eons old.

"I owed Daniel and decided to join you two. Joining you as myself would cause you two to lean too much on me and my knowledge. So I was disguised, helping where I could, but making

you choose your own way.”

“Okay, why can’t you and Daniel touch the souls?”

“I was once goddess of all creation,” she said, her voice far away and sad. “I am now a goddess of death, of the underworld. Those souls destined for heaven are not mine to touch.”

“But the souls are already dead. You should be able to touch them more than anyone. And what about Daniel?”

“You are asking the wrong questions.”

I slammed my hands down on the ship’s railing and gripped it hard. “Dammit, stop being so mysterious. I didn’t know what we were doing when we were supposed to be traveling Heaven - oh, and apparently ending the world - and now I don’t know what we’re doing here in hell, either. Are these souls real, or are they just trinkets leading us on a wild goose chase?”

Izanami remained so damnably calm. “You touched the souls of the clones. You saw better than I did that they were salvageable. Did they feel like trinkets to you?”

My rage subsided.

“You and Daniel have a destiny. Destinies are not awarded to those who sit around and do nothing.”

“We are dead! How can we have destinies? There is nothing left to us!”

“Kate. Did you ever wonder why all of this was happening? Why it was important for you to feel the touch of both the divine and Daniel before you were corporeal? Why was it important for you to come to hell with us? Why you found the Metal Tiger sword? Why were you *not* judged by Anubis?”

“I. Don’t. Know!” I wailed.

She didn’t let up, her voice getting harder and harder. “And why did the most powerful god of all creation start losing souls? Why is it you who has to clean up after Him? Why are both you and Daniel catalysts for the end of the world, and why do you both easily take on aspects of every god you meet?”

I cradled my head in my hands. “I thought I was supposed to be asking the questions.”

Hermes moved in my mind, gently, pushing memories to the surface. Hades’s mention of Elohim’s loss of power. The excited or honored way many of the gods and servants had greeted us in hell.

Daniel’s voice came from behind us both, rough, but strong. “I know.”

Izanami smiled. “I expected Kate to get it first, but then again, the story of what happened with Horus has shocked her.” She turned to face him. I kept my back to him, stiff and angry.

“Anubis told me. Is telling me. We brought it all to an end. Now we have to rebuild.”

Izanami nodded. “Go on.”

“Out of Ragnarök came the hope for a new world. Once Set was killed, Osiris will return and bring hope for a new world. After Armageddon’s battle will come one thousand years of peace. We broke it. Now we fix it.”

I turned, finally, too angry to keep my silence. “That answers nothing. How the hell are we supposed to do that, Daniel? We haven’t even finished our other job; remember those souls? Remember your sister? If we can’t even do that, how do you think we’re supposed to rebuild the world?”

“Look, we’re almost done with the souls. Megan is the only one left. If you would stop ranting and think for a moment, you’ll see I’m right.”

The look on his face was serene and serious, no longer the joking, cynical Daniel I knew. Was this Anubis talking? I looked away from his clear eye and stared over the water again, searching for the familiar pull.

Suddenly it blinked at me, fiercely, dead ahead. There was only one, and it was strong. One left. Megan. And we were heading straight for her. As I sensed her, I saw the shore ahead, finally visible.

I sighed angrily. I hated it when he was right. “Fine, so we’re almost done. But you didn’t answer the rest. How are you and I going to rebuild the world? It’s not like we’re gods.”

Daniel got up and approached me. I glared up at him, my anger the only defense against this stranger in front of me. He took my hand and placed it on his chest. Inside, his soul blazed; pure Daniel. *Divine* Daniel.

“Aren’t we?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Izanami left us at the shore. She embraced Daniel, holding on tight for a moment. I frankly stared at her as she wiped a tear from her eye as she looked at him in the eye for a moment. He whispered something to her, and she smiled.

She then came to me and hugged me like a sister, telling me I would grow into my role. I hugged her stiffly, silently begging her to stay. I didn't know how to talk to Daniel anymore; I needed her between us.

She didn't get my telepathic message, which made me cynical again about the whole god thing. Either that, or she ignored my request; which, knowing her, would be just as likely.

She removed the bandage from her hand and a swarm of flies buzzed out, turning the human form inside out until nothing was left. Izanami in her true form hovered over us for a moment, then sped back across the water.

"That's still weird," Daniel said, watching her go. I didn't answer.

He sighed. "Which way?"

I pointed down the one path that led away from the beach. "You could have figured that one out, I think."

"Why are you so mad?"

I laughed bitterly. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know my best friend anymore. I can't trust why we're doing anything. You're apparently brave enough to tell a god to blind you, but you're too cowardly to tell me why you did it. Now you tell me that we're turning into gods and have to remake the world, when all I feel like doing is running to my room and crying my eyes out. And I don't even have a room anymore! How's that for why I'm angry?" My voice cracked with the tears I fought back, and I turned away from him to get control again.

He laughed then, and I looked back at him. He suddenly looked so much like Daniel that I nearly broke. "Those are all good reasons. Listen, Kate—"

I didn't want to hear what he had to say. "Look," I interrupted. "I don't want to do this now. Let's just get done what we have to. Let me run ahead and see what I can find out. I've got this god in my head, so I might as well use him."

I ran off without looking at him. It felt good to run, and the speed at which I could maintain at a comfortable level made me feel as if I were leaving all my problems behind. The scrub beyond the beach blurred and I found myself in the middle of a dusty Midwestern US town. I stopped in confusion and looked around me. A general store stood in the center of the dead town, with two men on the porch playing chess. Well, the town was dead except for the sound of two kids playing inside the store.

“I can do that too, you know,” Daniel said behind me, making me jump. “Kagut-suchi can move like a wildfire.”

I forced myself to look in to the alien face. “Do you know where we are?”

He pursed his lips, and I felt a small triumph that I had finally irritated him. His eye flicked around and he shrugged. “No idea. Is she here?”

She was. It was clear. She was inside. But the two men on the porch of the store had spotted us and waved us over.

They were craggy men, somewhere between eighty and a billion. One was bald and clean-shaven, liver spots staining his head. The other had a shock of white hair on top of his head and sat next to a glass with a pair of dentures in it. He grinned at us with bright pink gums, and I was caught between disgust and nostalgia, remembering my grandfather.

He nudged the bald one. “They’re finally here. Looky there.”

The bald one motioned us up the stairs. “Let me look at you. Very nice, very good. Kate doesn’t accept the truth. Daniel has embraced it. Completely unexpected, but that’s why we like you. You are unexpected.”

It all became clear to me then: Satan was the bald man. The Adversary, playing checkers with God. Their casual attitude simply made me angrier. “Is Megan here?” I asked bluntly.

They glanced at each other. The bald one shrugged and the other one motioned us inside. “She’s playing in the nails again, silly girl. Always makes a mess of my inventory.”

“And you knew that all the time? You dangled her here for us to wander all over eternity to find?”

“The journey is as important as the destination,” God said mildly.

I grabbed the door and yanked it open, motioning for Daniel to precede me. He did so, finally showing some of the tension I felt. I felt tiny and mean. It felt good.

In fact, I was so busy being tiny and mean that I didn’t think to wonder Megan played with. Daniel walked down an aisle to the back of the store, following the sound of laughter. I bumped into him as he stopped abruptly, gasping.

A smiling, dark haired four-year-old girl stood beside a pole where drawers sat on disk. Each drawer held a different size of nail, and she spun the disk, laughing as the nails whizzed by her.

Behind her stood a boy, several years older, with bandages on both forearms and one over his left eye. He smiled and watched her protectively, a gentle, patient smile on his face.

He glanced up at us then, his dark brown eye widening. “Megan, they made it.”

The little girl shrieked, making me jump, and ran to Daniel. She grabbed him hard around the middle and he disengaged her arms so he could pick her up and hug her tightly.

The anger in my chest loosened as I watched him hold her, laughing.

The boy came to me, his face still holding onto youth but his deep brown eye (not to mention the tell-tale wounds) showing me unmistakably that this was Daniel.

He took my hand and smiled at me. "I'm sorry, Kate. I'm so sorry."

I was tired of being utterly flummoxed. "Why?"

The girl Megan raised her head from the adult Daniel's shoulder and pointed to the boy. "Because that Daniel died with me. You never got to meet him."

"You split yourself, like all these gods have been doing?"

Daniel, still holding his sister, looked down at his younger self with shock. "I had no idea. If I did it, it wasn't conscious, that's for sure."

"What are you, then?" I asked the boy.

"I'm surprised you don't know."

Daniel put his sister down. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head, ponytails bobbing. "I'm good! I am just here because I'm your last stop. You found me. You win!" She clapped her hands.

He nodded and stood up. He looked at his younger self, thoughtfully. "And you have to wait a little longer."

The boy nodded.

Daniel sighed. "Well, Kate, I guess it's time."

"For what?"

"Remember how Anubis said you had yet to be judged?"

"Uh, yeah."

"It's my job to do that."

Confusion and anger woke in me again. "Fuck, Daniel. Why? When will I know what is going on? And what if I say no? What if I just sit here and spin nails for the rest of eternity?"

Daniel looked down. "It's not my decision. If you refuse to be judged, then I guess you can stay here. We're not in hell anymore. This is a middle place, a wasteland place, like where I met Horus and Set. You will be safe here. But I promise you, after you are judged, I can tell you everything."

Tears of anger and confusion ran down my face. Daniel left me, then, holding Megan's hand and leaving the store.

The boy looked at me with concern, but did not move to comfort me.

"So who are you again?" I asked, trying to bite back the tears.

"You met me once," he said quietly, maturity aging his face. "In heaven. I'm the part of Daniel that has the capacity to show love. I died with Megan, but I was always connected to

Daniel, absorbing the feelings that he refused.”

The air left my chest, making it cold with shock. “You were the Daniel I was with in Heaven.”

The boy nodded.

“But I thought you were fake. You were too perfect.”

He smiled sadly. “I was built solely on the love that Daniel refused. Love for his parents, love for any woman, and mainly love for you. I don’t have much depth beyond that.”

I honestly thought the shock was going to shut me down. I’d had enough. I turned, my head in my hands, and followed Daniel.

He stood on the porch, watching Megan get a horsey ride on Satan’s knee. I stormed out, holding onto the anger as strength. “Fine. Judge me. If only so I can get some answers. I can’t take this anymore. You used to be the only thing I could count on, and now I don’t even have that.”

He put his hand out and took my shoulder. “You can always count on me, Kate. That’s not what this is about.”

“What is it about then?”

“It’s about the store, of course,” God said.

“The store?” I asked.

“Sure. We can’t run the store forever. We’re old. It was falling apart before the end of the world, but now it’s clear someone new has to take the reins. We just want to play chess,” Satan said.

“Checkers, sometimes,” God said, cackling.

“And this was all a game to you?” I asked.

God blinked. “All of it is a game. It always has been. Every war, every conflict, is a game.”

I looked from them to Daniel. “Answers?”

He nodded. “Everything.”

“Fine. What do we do?”

#

In the back supply closet, the bald one helped me out of my robe and took off my Traveler’s necklace. He turned his back as I removed my t-shirt and jeans and replaced them with a black linen shirt and pants. “You will move around better in those,” he said, beaming at me. He tied my hair back and told me to remove my socks.

Barefoot and clad in well-fitting clothing, I exited the storage room. The boy Daniel watched me silently, his eye wide with worry.

Daniel stood outside in the street, similarly dressed. He held his katana out. I reached back

and took the Metal Tiger sword out. For perhaps the first time, it felt totally comfortable in my hands.

“This doesn’t feel like a judgment,” I said. “It feels like an execution.”

“We have to battle, Kate. Only through this will you find your answers. If you are unworthy of the knowledge, I will win, and Hermes will escort you to your afterlife. If you win, you win everything you want to know.”

Hermes. Shit, he wasn’t only the messenger of the gods, but he led souls to their afterlives. Was that why he was with me? To escort me to – wherever?

The presence in my head was still there, but silent.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I said.

He laughed. “You’ve always been a bad liar, Kate. You were ready to hurt me several times today. You have found strength in only your anger as this situation has gotten away from you. Now is your chance. I lied to you about traveling through Heaven. I ended the world and caused your death a second time. I was angry and elusive, and I frightened you in hell more than once. I drew my sword on you. I resented your holding a god in your head while I carried several. You have a ton of reasons to want to hurt me.”

I thought of how he had withheld his feelings from me, and gritted my teeth. I drew my white sword and attacked.

Never attack when taunted, came an admonishment in my mind as Daniel easily parried my strike.

“Oh, don’t you fucking start,” I hissed. “I don’t need two people attacking me.”

Daniel grinned – he knew my argument made me weaker. He swung wide, going for my sword arm, and I stepped back and to the side, avoiding it.

My heart pounded with adrenaline and the outlying abandoned buildings and general store dropped from my awareness. All that I knew was the man in front of me, whom I had loved for years, and who had driven me to insane rage to attack him. His eye narrowed a bit as he saw the change in my focus.

He kept turning his head to the left to keep me in his sight, and Hermes urged me to use his weakness against him. I feinted left, causing him to over commit, and my sword sliced into his right shoulder. He hissed loudly and jumped back.

I looked at the blood on my sword, as surprised by my successful hit as I was by my lack of remorse. He assessed me, panting.

“Are we done?” I asked. He shook his head and came at me, sword held high. Time seemed to slow as my mind cleared and I saw it all. I finally knew how to end this. I dropped my own sword. I reached up and caught the katana between my palms. The blade dug at my hands, but

now I controlled it and didn't let it go. With a twist, I caused it to dig deeper into my left hand but the hilt popped out of Daniel's hands. I grabbed his right hand with my right and slapped my deeply cut left hand to his bleeding shoulder. Our blood mixed and-

He cried out, but I could barely hear him through the rushing in my ears. The world around us blurred and we collapsed on a wooden floor, back in the closet where I'd gotten dressed. Had I brought us here?

I held my eyes wide, but could only see through the right. Daniel lay on his back next to me, panting.

He closed his eye. "Do you know, now?"

Yes, finally, I knew it, all of it. The old gods, everyone from Hades to Elohim, were weakening. Not all of them wanted to accept the fact, of course, but new gods had to be found. Years before our births, Daniel and I were chosen. The store - the afterlife - had to be managed. Daniel was the darker, the angrier of us. He was to control hell, manage and punish the dark souls.

It became clear: our journeys, our actions, all had been to teach us of our powers, to make us learn about the metaphysical afterlife. We couldn't have just been handed the powers of a god; the journey mattered as much as the destination.

And me. I had thought I was nothing, but I was the one who had created anything I needed from the backpack. I was the one who found the Metal Tiger sword. I was the one who had, as a pure soul, been touched by two gods. Heaven was to be mine.

We were not alone. Osiris and the valkyries were to help rebuild the world into a place of peace.

And yet, with our paths separating in front of us, one to Heaven, the other to Hell, we were destined to be alone.

I nodded, although he knew I knew. I was inside him as clearly as he was inside me. I knew the aching depth of his feelings just as he knew mine.

"My God," I said.

"Yes. You're God," he said, laughing.

"I can't leave you. I won't. Not now." I sounded childish to my ears, my mind telling myself that I certainly could, and I certainly had to.

He rolled over. "No. Not now. But soon." He took my left hand and kissed the palm, healing it instantly. He took the right and did the same. He moved his lips slowly to my wrist then, kissing it softly. My breath became shallow as he moved up the tender skin of my forearm, causing electric shocks to shoot up my arm.

He moved closer to me and touched my face gently. I hadn't been this close to him, face to

face, since we'd come to Hell, and I could see the pink scars from Horus's attack above and below his bandaged eye. I traced them gently with my finger.

"I would lose the other for you if I had to," he said. "I'm sorry I could never show you."

"Show me now," I said. He leaned in and kissed me. It was everything and nothing like what I remembered from my first days in heaven. In heaven he kissed me exactly how I wanted to be kissed, which was nice, but there were no surprises. Daniel – the whole Daniel - surprised me several times there in the closet.

I moved my head forward as he carefully moved my hair aside and kissed my neck, gasping when he hit the spot that shot waves of pleasure straight down to my knees. He heard me and opened his mouth, biting down right where my neck met my shoulder. My hands scrabbled weakly at his clothes as he deftly removed mine. His hands traced slow designs on my back until I grabbed them and put them where I wanted them.

We weren't gentle. He hissed when I bit him on the inner thigh. I moaned when he bruised me, digging his fingers into my hips.

His slick salty skin tasted of inevitability. And I tasted, I'm sure, of celebration.

After we had explored feverishly with hands and tongues, I pushed his shoulders back to the floor and moved on top of him, merging our divine natures for the second time. The only coherent thought in my mind was the brief consideration of letting humanity die off or fend for itself, to stay here joined with Daniel forever. The world didn't need us. We needed us. Tears ran down my face and I cried out as I came, once, twice, then a third time as Daniel clutched me tightly and groaned. Worlds shuddered in our wake.

I collapsed next to him, tears still running. He wiped them gently with his finger. "Don't. Gods don't cry."

I chuckled despite my tears. "I think the divine community is going to learn some new tricks with the likes of us in charge. I've never been one to act like the cool kids just for the hell of it."

He smiled. "That's what I love about you. Among other things."

I kissed his searching finger. "Are we enemies now?"

He laughed out loud. "You've slain me. Does that count?"

I slapped his chest. "I'm serious!"

"The way I understand it, I'll a judge, a manager. No, more like security at a carnival. I am not evil, but I punish those who are. You get to give out the carnival prizes and I get to kick out the cheaters. Neither of those people is evil, are they?"

I thought back to the previous fall when, utterly bored and dateless, we had gone to the county fair. The October evening had been hot as we sat in the Ferris wheel, and for one shining

moment, when it stopped at the peak, I thought he was going to kiss me. I smiled at the memory.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Get dressed, I suppose. Go back out there and get the keys to the store. Go to work. We’ve got a world to rebuild. I don’t think it’s going to be easy.”

I nodded and reached out my hand. My backpack was there, holding clothing for both of us. We embraced and kissed once more before opening the door. I tried to make it last forever, but apparently my divine will didn’t reach that far.

“Whip those angels into shape,” I said. “Don’t be a stranger, either.”

He grinned. “Take good care of my sister. And Kate?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

The hurt in my chest managed to lessen a bit and intensify at the same time. “I love you, too.”

We exited the storage room, but we didn’t walk into the general store. Instead we stepped outside into a grand carnival. Carnies shouted at us and children ran past, giggling. Couples held each other as they went round the Ferris wheel, and delicious fried food scents hung in the air.

Daniel looked at me, his eye wide.

I shrugged. “I thought I’d try out that divine power thing.”

Ahead of us waited the two men, now dressed as circus ringmasters. They each held a deed, one printed with white ink on black paper, the other one black on white. Megan ran to Daniel and he picked her up and kissed her.

I knelt in the sawdust and peanut shells and opened my backpack. Souls poured out: the ones from cat Hell, and the Underworld, and lastly the clones, dancing their golden ways out of the pack to coalesce in corporeal form and look around in amazement.

The ringleaders handed us the deeds to the carnival and wandered off, arguing about whether next to play checkers or chess. I smiled at their backs, and turned to say something to Daniel, but he was gone.

My breath caught in my throat, but I refused to cry anymore. I would see him again.

We had work to do, after all.

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**Sneak Peek
at
Earth
The Afterlife Series II**

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

But back to potential. Kate pondered the issue of potential as she'd been trying to get her brain wrapped around the concept of all this power. She no longer felt the cold. She could teleport. And this afternoon she created life — which she immediately regretted, since the kitten reacted immediately to the cold, shivering in her hands. Details like this she would have to remember: if she's going to make life, she should do it where it might actually have a chance of survival.

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

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

Kate opened her eyes. “Do I look cold?”

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

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

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

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

Daniel looked around and whistled. “I stand corrected.”

“So, what have you been working on?”

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

“You’re whining.”

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

Kate sighed and looked at the floor. “Because it's easier than jumping into your arms and begging you not to leave me again. Now, what you need?”

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

“Snow?”

“In hell.”

“It froze over?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniel shook his head. “You?”

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

Daniel just looked at her.

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

The going was easy despite the weather and snowdrifts. Kate and Daniel half-walked, half-slid down the mountain. At the bottom, the snow still fell, but the wind had died considerably, making it easier to talk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, what's your point?”

“Well, isn't 'hobo' kind of rude?”

“That's what they were! Hobo was the name for a vagrant who traveled from job to job. He doesn't want to be tied down. He's not lazy; he's just fiercely independent. It's not a mean term

for homeless person. It had more weight during the day when you could get on a train, go to a new town, and get a job in a farm or a factory. Today — well, I mean, when we were alive — that was more difficult. I don't think there were many hobos in our time.”

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

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

As the man neared, each wooden slat, and a couple of feet of rail it was attached to, vanished after his feet touched it. He raised his hand as he neared Kate and Daniel, smiling through the stubble on his face and chewing on a cigar butt. His clothes were patched with brightly colored ragged pieces of cloth, and one of his shoes was missing part of the toe, revealing a filthy sock. His ragged brown fedora was pushed back on his head so Kate and Daniel could recognize a brand on his dark skin: the Greek letter Omega. The hobo removed his hat with a flourish and bowed. “Well H. bless my soul; I didn't think I'd see anyone on this trip. Not many people make the trek these days.”

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

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

“The final hobo?” Daniel asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daniel whispered.

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

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

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

“Like?”

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

“Here ’tis!”

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

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

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

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

“Of course!”

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

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

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

“Not a flake.”

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

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

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

Professor Omega stepped from the platform to the Technicolor-green grass and inhaled deeply. Kate wrinkled her nose; stale cigarette smoke and the scent of apple pie wafted through

the air. Professor Omega bent down and put his long, withered fingers, the lighter side tinged yellow with nicotine, into the grass. Reality seemed to shift slightly around them, disorienting Kate, and she got the feeling that a door was closing somewhere. Immediately, all of the hobos in the vicinity looked their way and broke into scattered muted applause with their fingerless gloves. Then they went back to their business.

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

Daniel looked around incredulously. “That was it?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The men recognized Professor Omega and bowed. “Professor Omega, it is an honor. Jane

here says she saw some unlikely folk in the first class car outside, that's all."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello 'bos! Did I miss it?"

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

Professor Omega frowned at the new arrival. "Bela. You arrived after The Last. I don't appreciate that."

Bela never lost his grin. "Professor! I died years ago! I arrived here before any of these hobos; jumping through dimension just means I can leave at any time! Ask H; he'll tell you. It's a technicality. I've been counted. You're still the last hobo; I just went wandering. I did get to see a

pretty amazing end of the world where I was, though!” He looked at Kate and Daniel, who, Kate assumed, stood out like middle-class Americans at the Ritz. “Hello! You aren’t hobos! Who’s this?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dr. Pepper?”

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

“H?” Kate asked.

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

“Yes?” H asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Pity,” the hobo god said.

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

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

“Yeah, but how?”

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

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

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

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

“It means that whether you’re riding the rails, or begging for a pie from a housewife, or getting temporary work as a farm hand, or sleeping under the stars, you are doing exactly what you should be doing at any one time. It means that only true hobos can be hobos, because they know not to waste, and you, sir, are no hobo, because you are wasting my time. It means that

even if you do not know how to do something, like make it stop snowing, you will figure out how to do it without bothering another hobo who has his own day to not waste!” He sighed and regained composure within a second, smiling at them again. “Now, I bid you good luck. I have my own day to not waste, and I suggest you do not waste yours.”

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

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

“What now?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They ran, then, their feet pounding the snow on the path that wound through the foothills.

The mountains soon faded into the distance. Sometimes it did pay to be God. Kate and Daniel never saw their monstrous pursuer, and when its roars ceased, they slowed down.

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

"What?"

"It stopped snowing."

Daniel looked around, surprised. The sandy Wasteland was pleasantly warm. "Huh. I guess I started angsting over something that was actually important."

"Looks like you just needed some direction."

"So the day wasn't wasted."

"Guess not. Are you okay to get back to work?"

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

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

"I don't think you should go back to the mountains ..."

"You may be right. Work, then. I'm probably ready."

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

"Yeah?"

"I still—"

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

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