

WASTELAND

By Mur Lafferty

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The Afterlife Series IV

Wasteland, The Afterlife Series IV

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

To Laura Burns, the last moon ranger, and Dr. John Cmaaarr.

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WASTELAND

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SNEAK PEEK AT WAR
THE AFTERLIFE SERIES V

CHAPTER ONE

“What do you want to do?”

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

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

“Sure, we can. And we do.”

“Do you have any money?”

“No.”

“Wanna go hiking?”

“Sure!”

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

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

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

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

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

Her skin was split and caked with blood and sand. Smoothing the hair away from the wound, Daniel could see the hole in her skull where the gods had exited. He began to cry again, his fingers tightening on her shoulders and bruising her skin. He didn’t know

why it had happened, but she was too big of a sacrifice to make.

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

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

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

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

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

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

If there was any left to remind.

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

Even when he had lost his eye, he somehow knew it was a symbolic thing, and the blood and humor that had gushed down his face were not actually real.

Now he was aware of his body: the large bag of organs and blood he had to carry with him. The thirst tore at his throat and his eye socket ached at best and screamed at

the invasion of sand particles at worst. His lips cracked and bled, making his body lose precious moisture even faster.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

him into the sand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A whisper of the knowledge he'd gained from Odin brought the memory of Baldur to him. The beloved god had been protected from everything but mistletoe, and Loki had tricked his brother Hod into throwing a mistletoe spear at him, killing him. Retribution for the slain god had been swift: Odin and a giantess had a son specifically to slay the poor patsy, who went down in history as the guy who killed Baldur.

Daniel looked around, wondering if anyone had been breeding with the express desire to kill him. Had he been responsible for Kate's death? He had no idea why the

gods needed to ride around in a head for a while before rebirth. Maybe he and Kate shouldn't have made love. Maybe he shouldn't have been such a dumbass when he was in charge of hell. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don't know who is,” he'd grumbled.

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

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

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

He had been giving, he could admit that. His father had put him in an after school youth group that had helped out at the homeless shelter, and he'd found actual pleasure

in helping others. Still, he kept himself at arm's length from people, letting only Kate close because she was so damn persistent.

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

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

What had she seen in him?

The rain continued and he shivered, realizing he'd left his t-shirt back with Kate. His bare chest prickled with the chill. He ran his hands through his sopping hair and remembered he had also left his bandage behind. There was no reason to feel self-conscious of his ruined face; there was no one around to see him.

Visibility was very low here; he squinted across the dune and saw what looked like a great tree growing out of the desolate land. He picked up his pace, sliding a bit on the wet sand, and approached it.

It was, indeed, a tree. It stood against the cloudy sky, leafless and daunting. A flicker caught his eye, two hummingbirds zoomed off a branch, circled his head, and then went to perch back on their branch. His eye followed them and he gasped.

A body hung from the branch, trussed up in ropes, swinging gently. Ruby-colored raindrops dripped from the toes of the hanging shoes. The hummingbirds kept vigil on the body.

"Kate," he whispered. He ran at the tree and began to climb, slipping on the bark and scraping his already raw hands. He missed his footing on a branch once and fell against the trunk, cutting a shallow gash in his side, but kept moving, scrabbling up the tree, eye fixed on the unmoving body of his friend.

When he finally reached the body, he gulped. They were up terribly high. The hummingbirds regarded him with their beady eyes, but made no attempt to help or hinder him. He hugged the branch and inched out across it, trying not to look down at the ground while, at the same time, focusing on the ropes to try to loosen them.

He'd left the katana with Kate's body (or so he thought, because it wasn't anywhere nearby that he could see). He had no other blade, and his tired, raw hands picked at the wet ropes ineffectually. With Kate's dead weight pulling the ropes taut, there was no way he could get her down. He couldn't give up, though.

“Come on,” he said, and drew in breath fast when he heard the branch crack. “Oh, no...” He picked at the ropes again, not even sure what he would do if he could untie her, except to let the body fall, but he had to get her down.

The branch cracked again and he lurched downward. The hummingbirds took flight and hovered near his head, watching him. He glared at them, rain dripping into his eye. “A little help here?”

The branch broke, and they fell.

He landed hard, knocking the wind from his lungs. Kate and the broken branch were gone; he was at the top of a hill with three crosses in front of him. Two were made from beams, one crudely made from two hefty tree branches. Kate hung, motionless, from the crude cross.

Daniel looked up at her, tears and rain blurring his vision. Weeping women surrounded him.

“What were their crimes?” he asked.

“Two were thieves. One saved us all from the demons of hell,” one woman said, motioning the mourners to begin removing the dead woman from the cross.

“That she did,” Daniel whispered. He moved to help them take Kate down, but a thundering sound caught his attention.

His eye widened as he saw the Roman soldiers on horseback, galloping toward them. The women screamed and hurried to get Kate’s body down. One of them – he recognized her with a start as Mary from his vision quest – looked at him and said, “You must protect us while we take her body.”

He barked a startled laugh. “You’re kidding me, right?” He stood unarmed and half-naked in the rain as three soldiers neared, bloodlust in their eyes and their weapons drawn.

Mary instructed the women to take Kate’s body away. “She gave her life for all mankind. What have you given?”

Daniel shut his mouth with a snap and allowed himself one look at Kate’s body, her wet face peaceful as she was borne away by the women who surrounded her. He turned, set his stance, and waited.

Time slowed; the haze in his eye caused by the rain seemed to lift; the scene

presented itself to him with startling clarity. One soldier closed in on him, with two more behind. The soldier in front was smaller, lithe, and aimed his horse at Daniel. If the sword didn't get him, he'd be trampled underfoot. The others behind him by several lengths were burly fellows; each raised a crude short sword.

His muscles twitched as if remembering something. The horses neared, necks stretched out in full gallop. He waited, his arms relaxed at his side. The soldier leaned over and-

Daniel danced to his left, close enough for his right hand's fingertips to graze the chest of the thin man's horse. Once he'd made contact with the horse, he knew everything about it; it was slightly lame in the off fore, which was why it carried the lighter soldier. As the horse thundered by, Daniel's hand trailed down its side until he made contact with the soldier's shin.

He closed his hand tightly on the man's ankle, and yanked.

For a moment, he thought he was going to lose his grip, or that his arm would be wrenched from its shoulder. His muscles screamed as he grasped the wet leather of the man's boot, and for an instant, the man on the ground and the man on the horse had perfect equilibrium. Time resumed, then, and the man toppled from the horse, hard. There was a crunch, and he did not get up.

Daniel didn't pause to see if he had killed the man; he grabbed the man's sword from his scabbard and faced the two men on horseback. The sword was a clumsy piece of metal, an ugly tool, and it certainly was no katana, but it would do.

He took a practice swing, and winced at the feeling of weakness in his damaged muscles. This wouldn't do. Fight with a weakened arm or fight with his left arm? He couldn't take the burly men in a fair fight, not unarmored with an injured sword arm. But he'd taken skinny in a rather unfair fight.

And what was fair about crucifixion? It was brutal.

He could be brutal.

His skin prickled as the other men approached. He had to do something else about this. The rain came harder now, lowering visibility. The soldiers approached at a gallop, then slowed.

"Good work sir!" the one on the right called, as he neared.

"Went down like a whore, did he?" asked the other, laughing.

Daniel looked at the man lying on the road. He was shirtless, wearing blue jeans. Daniel felt a momentary sense of vertigo, then realized he was wearing the soldier's garb.

"Should we go after them?" one asked, indicating the fleeing women.

"No," Daniel said. "She's dead. Let them cry over the body, it will do them no good."

He smiled. "Now, dismount for further orders."

He should have felt guiltier as he cleaned the blood off the sword. It was much easier to kill the Romans when they had assumed he was their superior than when they were bent on killing him. He looked at the departing women – they were barely visible through the rain, cresting a hill, carrying Kate's body, and then they were gone.

He finished cleaning the blade on a piece of one of the guard's jackets and then looked at it. Why did he care? He tossed the sword onto the pile of dead bodies at his feet, and as the blade went through the air, he caught an image of himself, actually himself: Daniel, reflected in the metal. When the sword clattered off the metal fastenings on the soldier's shirt and onto the road, Daniel blinked.

And he was somewhere else.

Daniel stumbled backward and fell on his ass in the pebbly sand. This was not the fine sand of the wasteland, it was the hard desert floor of the American west. Rocks, scrub and cacti surrounded him, seeming to loom with the long shadows of the setting sun.

Coyotes also surrounded him. Not the one coyote, the bitch, who had taunted him; these were real animals, thin, ribs protruding, lips curled back. There had to be twenty or so, all growling, all hunched down. Coiled springs, ready to let go.

He looked around desperately to see if she were among them, the one coyote he could talk to, but he couldn't tell them apart. He scrambled to his feet. "Is this it?" he asked them. "Is this how it ends? After all that?"

One coyote threw back his head and howled, and the others followed suit. Daniel trembled as a wave of gooseflesh passed over him. He set his jaw. "If this is how it is, then come on. I'm ready."

He didn't run, and he didn't go down easily. They leapt as one, and he fought them, kicking and punching. But twenty coyotes against one man had a decided advantage, and Daniel's right arm was still sore from the battle with the Romans. Teeth closed on his right arm, his left. A snout drove into his belly, knocking him down, and he was lost. As they tore into him, his fleeting thought was relief. It was okay that he had lost; at least this time he had fought.

Then teeth that matched a pair of yellow eyes he thought he recognized closed on his throat and he knew no more.

Utter bliss. Complete and total bliss. He rested his head on her lap as she dozed in her easy chair in front of the fire. She had fallen asleep with her hand on his head, and he gazed up at her with total devotion.

His eyes began to droop with the heat of the fire and the feeling her nearby. But he was sitting up, and as his body tried to sleep he stumbled, his movements jolting him awake and rousing her.

She yawned and smiled at him.

"You did it."

Awareness flooded his head, and he fell back, in human form again, and gaped at her.

"Kate?"

She curled in the easy chair, looking relaxed and luxurious, and smiled at him. He sat in his own chair and stared at her.

He opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

She laughed at him. "Too many questions?"

He nodded. "Are you real? What happened?"

"You brought me back. You brought back the reborn god."

"But how? I lost all that god stuff."

"Yeah, but you were still you. You got me down off Yggdrasil. You kept me safe from the Romans. And you didn't run from your own destiny."

"My own..." Daniel looked down at his hands that had previously been paws. Coyote had been with him frequently. She had guided him, taunted him, and then, at the end, devoured him. He had killed the Romans through dexterity and trickery. He had

shape-changed from coyote to man.

Kate laughed. “You’ll figure it out. You’re cleverer than you realize, as soon as you start to believe in yourself.”

“So- where are we?”

Kate looked around at the tiny cabin that held only a fireplace and two chairs. “We are in the Wasteland.”

As if disagreeing with her, thunder boomed in the distance.

“I didn't think it could storm in the Wasteland, but I don't think we could be anywhere else,” Daniel said. “When we got here, you were dead and I am pretty sure I was exiled. I had trouble leaving the Wasteland, anyway.”

It hit him, finally, what had happened, and he was on his feet, holding her tightly.

“This can't be, I can't be this lucky,” he said, stroking her hair.

She buried her face in his neck, her breath hot on him.

She smelled like wildness and musk as he kissed her. He blinked – Kate didn't smell like wildness and musk. She smiled at him, her eyes shifting to yellow.

He pushed her away from with a horrified cry, and the cabin – and the warmth – dissolved around him, leaving him in the storm, which had remained. He fell on the sand.

“Bitch. Trickster. I get it now. I get it. And I get that I spend entirely too much fucking time in the Wasteland on my hands and knees!”

He lurched to his feet, sobbing. This wasn't heaven, where his heart's desire was handed to him. This wasn't hell where he would be tortured forever – and there was some relief in that. This was the Wasteland, where a god would have to make things happen for himself.

His tears mixed with the rain as he walked with new determination. He knew the direction; he knew what he had to do. He knew who he was and what he was capable of doing.

Daniel, the newest trickster god, headed across the Wasteland to the body of his best friend.

His sense of direction was now flawless. Kate's body, her real body that lay at the place where they had landed painfully in the Wasteland, flared like a beacon in his

senses. The storm raged around him, but he ignored it.

He crested a soggy dune and blinked the rain out of his eye. The Wasteland was nearly pitch-black with the night storm, but in a flash of lightning, the world came into instant, strobe-light-like view. Beyond his dune lay a lush oasis, green-black in the storm; heavy grasses and flowers covered the ground while a huge tree in the center of the oasis shaded a small pond.

It hadn't been like that when he'd left, but this was the place. There was no question. In darkness again, he slid down the grassy hill and ran toward the tree.

The tree shielded him from the storm a bit. He placed his hand on the trunk and leaned his forehead against it.

"I've lost you three times. Once to reincarnation, once to bureaucracy, and now to death. No more. Not again. We're in the afterlife, Kate. When you die, the issue is not that you're gone, it's just where you've gone. I'll find you."

A thump sounded behind him and an instant later a hand fell on his shoulder. He turned and chanced a look at her. He raised his hand and stroked it carefully down the side of her head. Her hair was clean and perfect, her skull lacked the massive exit wound and she grinned up at him as his hands went to her face.

"You found me."

Daniel grabbed her shoulders tightly. "Are you real? This time are you real?"

She held her hands in front of her face and then touched her head where the gods had broken free. "I think so. What else would I be?"

"Something to trick me, something to hurt me. I don't know. I just—"

She grinned at him again, and the lightning flashed and lit her brown eyes. It was dark again when she kissed him, but he finally knew it was her.

The reborn god and the trickster god held each other in exile, in the rain.

CHAPTER TWO

With the rising of the sun, Kate marveled at the transformation of the Wasteland. She lay between Daniel's legs, leaning back on him as he reclined against the world tree.

"This is amazing," she said.

Daniel laughed. "I guess if you stab a god's corpse with death god's sword, it makes, uh, life?"

Kate shrugged. "Who knows? But like you said, no one dies here. Kinda hard to die in the afterlife. But what's going on here?"

The greening of the Wasteland hadn't stopped with the return of Kate. The grass and flowers had crept over the dunes and continued in all directions. The sun had risen in a blue, not gray, sky, and puffy clouds lazed by. The night's storm had left everything with a clean, sparkly look.

Of course it looked clean, she realized. It was brand new.

Daniel nestled his head into her shoulder. "Thank you."

She rubbed his cheek. "For what?"

"Being real. Existing. Making this easier. And, apparently, making the Wasteland a better place."

"I think you did that. I was just dead weight." She laughed, but he frowned.

"As usual, I don't know what's going on. But I'm glad you're here."

She leaned forward, turned, and kissed him long and slow. He was delicious. "We'll figure it out. We always do."

His arms tightened around her, but she pulled back. "Hey. Let's explore."

He groaned and tried to pull her back in, but she grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. "Come on, we need to figure out what's going on around here!"

"Yes, Goddess," he said.

They walked in silence, marveling at the landscape. At the top of a hill they discovered mountains to the west and a dense forest directly south. Kate squinted to the east and thought she detected a glimmer from an ocean.

Daniel followed her gaze. "Clearly, it started from where I buried you. But, really, what is 'it'? Why is the Wasteland growing?"

Kate shrugged. "Let's pick a direction and go. Mountains, woods or sea?"

"What about north?"

Kate didn't turn around, but she shuddered involuntarily. "No. Not north yet. Just... not yet."

Daniel watched her for a moment, then nodded. "You wanna tell me?"

"I would, but I don't know. Let's just save that for last. I'm a god, right? I'm supposed to listen to these feelings."

Daniel laughed. "Yeah, that's what it means. I think it has other benefits, though."

Well, her eyes were certainly better than a regular human's. She pointed. "Look." A thin line of smoke rose out of the woods a couple of miles to the south.

"A campfire?" Daniel asked.

"Or something. Let's check it out."

They headed down the hill and into the woods. The trees were unremarkable, they didn't loom, they didn't lurk, and they didn't hide tormented felines like cat hell had. It was the most normal forest Kate had seen since they had died. Every other place in the afterlife had had some sort of purpose, some sort of meaning. This felt, well, normal.

They covered the miles faster than they should have been able to, what with Kate just returning from the dead and Daniel having gone through a grueling night of facilitating that return. And while the walk did make Kate somewhat tired, she definitely didn't feel as though she had hiked miles through the woods.

Still, she was more relieved than startled to come across a small cabin in a clearing, the source of the smoke, which still drifted from its chimney.

An old woman sat in a rocking chair on the front porch, knitting something from blue yarn. She smiled at them and waved. They approached her.

"I always knew my Lords were comin' but I didn't realize they would come in person," she said, laughing.

"We're not here to, ah, collect or anything," Daniel said. "We're just exploring the land."

"This land is new. Brand new. Well, in the terms of land, anyway. I lived in this house since I was a girl. Had a coupla husbands, a whole mess of children. They're all gone now, or dead, and now I sit, knit, and wait."

"For?" asked Kate.

"For my Lords," she said patiently. "I knew they would come for me. I served them well."

Kate looked at Daniel. He looked as confused as she felt. "You have us at a disadvantage. This is all pretty new to us too. Where are we? And who are you?"

She laughed, a deep, rich laugh that reminded Kate of her own grandmother, and the bittersweet emotion surprised her. "You two were the Alpha and the Beta. I am The Gamma, the first woman. I was born from a drop of blood that came from the god-wound of the goddess Kate. My first husband was The Delta, he was formed from a discarded bandage that once covered the eye of the god Daniel."

She settle back in her chair, getting comfortable with the story. "And my second husband was The Epsilon, the man who was hatched from a hummingbird egg after Daniel cut Kate down from the world tree. And my third husband was The Zeta, the only man born of woman, as he was created from the tears of the weeping mother of the goddess."

Daniel's mouth hung open. "Wait, how old are you?"

"I am as old as the land, which to me is ninety-three years, and to you is about nine hours. I have birthed enough children to begin the population, from enough husbands to ensure the lot of them don't end up simpletons. I have done my duty to you, although it wasn't easy."

"Doing the work of the gods is never easy," muttered Kate. "But I still don't understand where we are."

"Honey, You're on Imari. The Earth Mark Three. You built it and created me to populate it."

"I don't remember any of this," said Daniel, rubbing his forehead above his eye.

"Here, honey," the old woman - the Gamma - said, and her needles flashed in the sunlight as she finished what she was knitting. She bit through the thread and tied a quick knot, then handed the narrow cloth to Daniel. He wrapped it around his eye.

"You don't remember because you had other things on your mind. My last task to serve you is to tell you what you've done and let you continue your work."

"This isn't the Earth, though," said Kate. "It's the Wasteland. We're exiled here."

"What's the Wasteland but unmolded clay? You molded it, made it yours. Now it is the Earth. Imari."

"We made another Earth?" Daniel asked, sitting heavily on the woman's front steps. "But we didn't take good care of the LAST one!"

But Kate nodded. "Yes. That's what happened. I remember now. We're not exiled, we're just where we should be. And we have work to do here, Daniel. A lot of work."

She grinned. "Mother Gamma, can I press upon you one last task?"

"You have no idea what heaven she's going to," Daniel said, looking around the little cabin.

"Doesn't matter. She'll do it. She'll take the message back." Kate held up a crocheted afghan and smiled. "I never could get the hang of this stuff. I only ever knitted lopsided scarves."

"But Kate, how do you know that?"

Kate put down the afghan and looked him in the eye. "Daniel. Come on. She spent her whole life bearing children to populate the world. What I've asked her to do is nowhere near as hard as that. And she's dead now, meaning she's comfortable, her joints don't hurt, she doesn't have incontinence, and her elbows aren't itchy. She'll go to heaven and deliver our message."

"Yeah, if she lives to get there."

Kate walked up to him and put her arms around him. "When did you get so damn cranky?"

He touched her face softly. "Since I completely messed up everything we did in heaven and hell. The second Earth was eaten by that creature. Now I have to be god of a third?"

"Things are different this time. You have proved yourself, you have faith in yourself, and you have me." She kissed him gently. "We were always stronger together than apart."

He clung to her, then and kissed her harder. She wondered if she would ever lose the thrill his touch gave her as his hands roamed her body, pushing clothing aside, desperate to touch skin to skin.

Although it started quickly, this time it did not have the air of desperation and fierce love that the first time did. They took their time and languished in each other, and the world shook with them.

They spent hours together, learning things about each other they'd only ever suspected, and when the sun rose again, they lay tangled in each other's limbs, too drunk on each other to move.

"You're sure that old woman is dead and gone to heaven?" Daniel asked as Kate lay her head on his chest. His voice was deep to her.

"Yeah, why?" She ran her hand over his belly and he laughed, batting hers away.

"Because it would be awkward for her to return and find out what we've done on her bed."

"And the kitchen table."

"Don't forget the chair."

"Ohhh. Yes, the chair. Sorry about that. Is your back okay?"

"It was worth it."

"Good." She kissed his chest and he groaned.

"You're going to kill me, you know that?" he said, responding to her yet again.

"Can't die in the afterlife. You wanna?"

"Sure," he said. But they both dozed off then, and slept the rest of the day.

Daniel woke up to a queerly empty feeling, realizing that he'd immediately gotten used to the feeling of her beside him, the feeling of her body curled up with him. When her body was gone, that was the wrong feeling, the unfamiliar.

The new cloth The Gamma had given him was gone, as were the rest of his clothes. Kate sat at the rickety table by the wood stove, running the blue cloth through her fingers. The homemade quilt lay casually draped around her shoulders and he looked with interest at the various bits of skin she revealed.

"Have you already studied the rest of my clothes, or have you just started?" he asked.

She smiled at him, not looking up. "I was just thinking. We're not in the afterlife anymore. We're somewhere else."

He sat up in bed, feeling stronger than he had since arriving in the wasteland. "The Earth Mark Three. The Imari, she called it."

"Yeah, what does that mean?"

"It sounds Japanese, but I'm not sure. It could mean something completely new."

But you haven't said why my new eye patch is so interesting."

"It's made from synthetic yarn." She finally looked up at him, her messy bedhead making her look slightly mad and very adorable.

"So? When did you become a yarn snob?"

She blinked at him, then said patiently, "Daniel, this is a new world. I seriously doubt there's a Wal-Mart or Michael's or AC Moore where you can find synthetic yarn. If she's knitting, she should be using wool or silk or something."

"Ohhh," he said. "Yeah, I don't imagine the hillsides are crawling with acrylic sheep."

She returned to her pondering. "It got me thinking. Not only how the hell she got it, but just about synthetics in general. We made the Earth Mark Two. It was created instinctively, totally organically, subconsciously. But Three, Three was made in a different way. Dead goddess, a sword, a quest. Not quite synthetically, but definitely not as organic as before."

"I'm not sure where you're going with this, Kate."

"I'm not sure either. But we made one world and it's not in good shape. It was all organic. Now we get another chance. And maybe we should focus on the synthetic. Synthetic isn't always bad. Organic holds within it the seeds of chaos, it is formed however it likes. Synthetic, however, has a hand behind it. Someone to guide it. Likely someone to love it.

"We can make this world, Daniel. Honestly form it to be what we need it to be."

"But what's that?"

"A tool to take back heaven, hell, and Earth Mark Two."

CHAPTER THREE

"This feels weird. Like having a second kid just to harvest stem cells to save the first," said Daniel, sitting outside on the porch.

Kate paced behind him. He couldn't see her, but he was aware of her with every cell. "Yeah, that's a strange ethical question. But we didn't make this world so we could save the other. It came to be by as much accident as the other one did. But if we can build the population of this one to focus on saving the other one, then we'll have two worlds full of people poised to help save the afterlife."

Daniel rocked in The Gamma's chair, determined to stay calm to counter Kate's agitation. "How-"

"Daniel, those gods came into power from civilizations believing in them. Just a nation full of people. We're offering worlds."

"But they were pantheons and we're just two."

"Are we? We're only as limited as we think we are." She came up to sit on the porch beside him.

"You sound like a motivational poster."

"All right Daniel. What do you think we should do? What are your bright ideas here? You're the trickster, you are finally learning how to use your power, you can do anything."

He looked down, abashed. "I'm not used to this. I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. I'm still tweaked about being exiled. I have godlike power-"

"You are a god," she interrupted.

"Okay, I AM a god, but I can't get out of here. What am I supposed to do with all of this power?"

"Make the Earth."

"Imari."

"Yes. Imari."

"How?"

She grinned at him, and he felt lightheaded and confident for the first time in a very long time. With Kate with him, he could maybe believe that he could do something.

"We'll figure it out," she said.

They hadn't attempted any great miracles since sending The Gamma to heaven, and frankly Daniel was pretty pissed that it was so easy for her to die and ascend, while he and Kate were stuck here.

Still, they simply walked to learn more about the world. To Daniel's eye, it looked just like the first Earth. And like Kate had told him the second Earth had looked. They walked through a heavily wooded area, a thick forest that looked as if it had been there for hundreds of years, not a day.

"How much time do you think has passed?" he asked.

"Well," Kate said. "Two nights ago the Earth Mark Three was created. About nine hours later, ninety years had passed, but the humans had already evolved to the point of building seventeenth-century cabins."

"So did we make dinosaurs on this planet? Cause I always wanted to see them and I'm going to be bummed if I missed them. I help make TWO planets and I don't get to see any dinosaurs?"

They came to a clearing and stepped into a carefully turned field. Daniel swore at the sight in front of him, and rubbed his eye just to make sure he wasn't imagining things.

Kate laughed. "So did you do that just now? Or is this a happy coincidence?"

Daniel just stared. Across the field two humans worked the land, hitching plows to beasts of burden that looked much less like oxen and much more like triceratops. A young boy rode on the lead lizard, patting its bony collar.

Beyond the field was the house, a small nondescript white farm house, but beyond that was a massive wooden tower that looked like a silo, but was open at the top with large perches extending from the opening. Pterodactyls sunned themselves on these perches, occasionally flying away to return with a hapless deer clutched in sharp talons, screeching loud enough to reach Kate and Daniel's ears half a mile away.

"Shit. They're domesticated," Daniel whispered.

Kate laughed again. "This is the coolest thing I've ever seen. Let's check it out."

They approached the farmer, a tall, muscular woman with brown skin and green eyes, waving at her. "Is she going to recognize us?" Daniel asked. Kate shrugged and continued to wave and smile till the woman saw them.

The woman was laughing at her son's glee on riding the lizard that had to be twice the size of an ox, but her smile faltered when she saw Kate and Daniel. She let go of the plow and fell to her knees in the dusty field.

Daniel glanced at Kate, unsure of what to do, but she walked forward and took the woman's hands and lifted her from the field. The woman kept her eyes down. "My Lords, I had prayed for Persi to bless the pterodactyls, I never meant to summon the two of you. Please forgive this humble servant."

To Daniel's ears she might have been describing how a nuclear reactor worked. Kate frowned. "Persi? I'm sorry, I don't know who you're talking about."

"The goddess of dinosaurs," the woman whispered. "Please forgive me."

Kate gasped and then grinned widely at Daniel. "Of course! New populations will give birth to new gods!"

Daniel realized with shock that she was right. They were idiots to think they'd be the only gods there. But at least the woman knew who they were, so they were still worshiped.

Daniel looked closely at the woman, whose lip trembled. She shook all over. He put his finger under her chin and forced her head up. Tears spilled from her eyes and she still wouldn't look at him.

"Hey. What's going on? Why are you so scared? We just wanted to see your farm and these awesome dinosaurs. Nothing's wrong."

"Yeah, calm down," said Kate, frowning. "Everything is fine. We're just wandering around, saw your farm. You didn't summon us. We're not angry."

The woman continued to weep silently. Kate sighed. Daniel removed his hand from her face and thought for a moment. What had she said? Something about the pterodactyls...

"Hey, what did you need Persi for, anyway? Something wrong with the pterodactyls?" he asked.

The woman sniffled and shook her head. "I can't bother you with my problems."

"Sure you can," Kate said. "We're here, Persi isn't; we don't have anything better to do."

"Come on," Daniel said, grinning at her.

She finally nodded. "Come with me. Daniel, get off the triceratops and go inside

and get some lemonade."

Daniel opened his mouth to tell her that no matter how much he'd wanted to, he hadn't gotten on the triceratops, but then he realized the boy's name was Daniel. He slithered off the beast and grinned at Kate and Daniel before running inside.

He was missing an eye.

Daniel froze. Kate's hand wrapped around his wrist tightly and she shook her head slightly. Don't make a scene. Don't make a scene? What was he supposed to say? The boy was named for him, presumably, which was nice and all, but the fact that he was missing an eye gave Daniel a cold feeling, making him uncomfortably sure that it hadn't been an accident to remove it. He balled his fists and walked next to Kate, who kept her arm closed around his.

It was only his boyish desire to see a nesting pterodactyl that kept him walking with her and not razing the farm to the ground with fire. He knew he could do it; he could feel the power bubbling within him, looking for an outlet.

The woman, who said her name was Lania, inexplicably called their roost the "henhouse" - with the lizards nesting on outcroppings along the wall all the way up to the perch scores of feet above them. The farm kept seven nesting females and two intact males. Immature castrated males were kept for meat, she explained, and Daniel forgot his rage at seeing the beasts up close. One of the hens looked placidly at him as he reached out a hand to touch the warm leathery skin.

"And what's the problem with them?" Kate asked.

"Two of our best hens stopped producing. I was hoping Persi would bless them to get them laying again," Lania said. "Not that I really expected her to come. She's much too important to appear to a humble farmer and dino rancher."

With a furtive glance at Daniel, who shrugged, Kate lay her hand on the lizard. She looked quickly at Lania and then murmured something under her breath. She did the same for the second hen, and the woman burst into tears again, thanking them loudly. She begged them to come into the house for lemonade, and Kate accepted, but Daniel shook his head. He couldn't stand it anymore.

"You go ahead. I want to check out the triceratops barn," he said, and Kate nodded and followed the weeping, gibbering woman back to the farmhouse.

Daniel didn't want to see the boy. He couldn't handle it. He knew the boy was

probably dying to see him, but Daniel couldn't face him. What kind of society rose out of someone blinding a boy to honor a god?

No. He did want to see him. He peered out of the henhouse and waited until Kate and Lania had gone into the house. He frowned. Trickster gods. Illusion, fooling, shape-change, those were the tools of the trade. Along with quick thinking.

Well. He could work on the quick thinking part. For now...

He blinked his eye as half the henhouse disappeared. His eye was on the side of his head, not the front, and his blind side was more pronounced than ever. He spread his wings and saw they were long and leathery. The hens looked at him with interest, but none tried to usher the pterodactyl chick back to a nest. He laughed, a high, clucking sound, and beat his small wings fiercely to climb the air up to the perch eighty feet above the ground.

The landscape spread around him and he could see the triceratops barn behind the house, the freshly turned fields, the neighboring farms, and several henhouses just like the one he was in. Further to the west was what looked like a larger city, and he made a point to tell Kate.

A warm wind came under his wings and he dropped off the perch and soared over the farmhouse. Delicious and intoxicating, flight made him forget for a moment his goal, and he circled the land lazily a moment before spotting the boy back out in the field, dejectedly leaning against the placid triceratops, which had wandered a bit and had dug a trench through the yard to get to a particularly tasty flowering bush.

Daniel came to perch atop the triceratops's neck ridge and watched the boy stare at the ground, the blue cloth around his head dusty and drab. He looked around when Daniel arrived.

"Hey there, chick," the boy said. "Glad someone wants to be around me. I'm supposed to be blessed by Daniel, and he didn't even want to meet me. I guess Daddy was right - I don't have the sight."

That's because they took your fucking eye, Daniel thought. He almost jumped down and turned back into human form, but he wanted to see what the boy would say when he didn't know his god was listening.

"I just wanted him to be proud of me. All the other seers are cool. They see things. I don't see anything. I wonder if I should pretend."

Daniel would have smacked his head if he'd not had wings. The kid was actually talking about prophesy. That made sense - they thought the kid was touched by god, and therefore they took his eye and made him special. Or maybe they took his eye to give him the sight.

We're out of touch for a couple of days and look what they've done. This may be harder than we thought, he thought.

He hopped down from the triceratops's neck and became himself again. The boy cried out and fell back against the lizard, who didn't even budge, her great bulk more than enough to take his weight.

Daniel put his hands out in a placating manner. "Hey, calm down. It's cool. I just want you to listen, okay?"

The boy tried to fall to his knees, but Daniel caught his shoulders. "You have one job here. Listen to me. Can you do that?"

The boy looked up at him with an eye the color of his mother's and nodded, clearly terrified.

"I don't know why the churches around here think it's cool to half-blind kids and say they have sight given by me, but this is the first I've heard about it. I didn't tell them to blind you and I'm so damn sorry they did."

He stopped and swallowed, the anger choking him again. "Does it still hurt?"

The boy nodded. "Mama says it's the sight coming on me."

Daniel gritted his teeth. "No, that's the pain from your eye being removed." He put his hand on the boy's face, and his scars disappeared. His remaining eye grew wide, and he tried to fall to his knees again.

"Thank you, Lord. The pain is gone. Oh, thank you."

Daniel pulled him up again. "I don't think I can give you the eye back, though. I can't fix my own, after all. Kate might be able to-" he stopped at the boy's vigorous head shaking.

"No, Lord, I don't want the eye back. I'd rather have the sight like the other boys do."

Daniel sighed. "Look, I told you, I didn't touch anyone and give them sight. You were wondering if you should start pretending you have it. I guarantee that they're doing that exact thing. They may convince themselves that they are seeing something, but I

promise I'm not sending them anything."

He paused and stared, unfocused, into sky. Then he smiled at the boy.

"Daniel. Do you really want to have the sight? Be my prophet? Spread my word? The real Word of Daniel?"

The boy's jaw dropped. He nodded slowly, his eye wide.

Daniel grinned. "Okay then. You know you'll be the only kid with the real sight. And since I have no idea what bullshit they're spouting in my name if they're blinding *kids* for Christ's sake, it's likely you won't be saying the same as the other seers. They'll call you the liar. Are you cool with that?"

He nodded again. "To spread Your word, I'd lose the other eye, Lord."

The utter devotion on his face made Daniel's soul ache, but he smiled anyway. He had no idea how to do it, but he figured putting his hand on the kid's head and throwing some divine will or something in there would work. He put his hand over the boy's head and closed his eye.

Her eyes, Coyote's yellow eyes, hovered in his vision, and he thought he heard her laughing. And then something passed from him to the boy; it felt like a searing heat went from his hand and out into the boy's head. The boy fell down, convulsing, and Daniel dropped to his knees, horrified.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry, I didn't know," he babbled, but stopped when the boy's eye flew open.

"He is the trickster who protects his own," the boy hissed, his green eye staring blindly at nothing. "Blind not your sons or else feel his wrath. The pterodactyl is his animal, the desert his home."

"Huh. That's about right," Daniel said, sitting back on his heels as the boy slowly got to his hands and knees.

"I will serve you, Lord. Until my end days," he said humbly, bowing his head.

"Thank you," was all Daniel managed to say.

He helped the boy to his feet and supported him as he staggered. "Do you think your Mama has any more of that lemonade left?" he asked.

The boy nodded. "Lord, may I ask a question?"

"Anything."

"Who is Christ?"

Daniel laughed. "He was a guy I knew once. He was pretty cool. I'll tell you about him later. Let's head inside, imbuing a kid with the touch of God takes it out of you."

CHAPTER FOUR

"I don't get it, Kate. How can they be so misguided as to blind their own kids?"

Kate walked with her head down, wondering why the road was so disorienting. It was wrong somehow.

"I don't know. Think about how many terrible things people did back home in the name of the God of Abraham. So many people interpreting the Word differently. As Douglas Adams once said, Christ's message was essentially "wouldn't it be great if everyone were nice to each other for a change?" and people STILL misinterpreted that."

"But I don't feel like I've given any messages, good or bad. I've been kinda busy with you. I haven't had time to say, "Be nice to each other" or "Blind your kids" or "Eat your veggies.""

"It would be nice if we could get some guidance. That's been the worst part of this whole thing," Kate said. "We could have asked Christ why he did miracles sometimes and not others. So many people have begged for proof of a god and nothing happens, but now we know they did - we do - exist." She frowned at the road. "I'd like to head into the city in disguise. Can we do that?"

"Sure. Hard for me to hide this, though," Daniel pointed to his blind side. "It seems to be a rather prominent feature around here."

Kate stopped walking and appraised him. "Shape-changing isn't a problem with you, is it?"

"Well, I did the pterodactyl thing pretty easily, yeah."

"Then you just turn into an animal. If you prefer, make it something shaggy, like a dog or horse. Something with hair that can cover your eye."

He grinned at her. "If you're going to ride me, I'd prefer it not to be my back."

She laughed. "Dog, then?"

He sighed. "The coyote part of me objects loudly, but you're probably right." He concentrated briefly, and then there was a shaggy white dog where Daniel used to be.

Kate knelt in the road and arranged the hair on the dog's head to cover the blind eye. The dog licked her hand. She grinned.

"That'll do."

She stood up and watched the dog romp through the woods. She realized she had no idea what the clothing looked like here, and then just guessed, creating with her divine will a pair of brown boots, green pants, and a white blouse. Nice, rugged, generic, she assumed. Her brown hair she willed blonde - then red, because she'd always wanted to be a redhead.

She peered at the road again and then laughed. She realized what was wrong. It was the wrong width. She'd been fascinated with the fact that Earth roads were the size they were because of the wagon wheel width from the times of ancient Rome. One of those situations where traditions held on for quite a long time. This road was wider - not a lot, but it was noticeable.

A clattering came from behind her, and she stepped out of the road to see exactly why the road was so wide. The wide wagon was pulled not by four horses, but four dinosaurs. Kate didn't know the names of them, but they each walked upright and had powerful, quick hind legs. She wondered if she were smart in not pushing Daniel to become a horse. She wondered if any familiar beasts of burden were used here.

The wagon clattered by, the man sitting in the driver's seat ignoring her. In the back he had raw bars of metal stacked, gleaming dully in the midday sun.

Daniel came up beside her and sat down. "Maybe I should have told you to become a dinosaur," she said.

He barked once and shook his head, his hair flying around.

"Okay, I get it," she said, arranging his hair to cover his eye again. "Dinos aren't shaggy. Let's head into town and see what's up."

Daniel barked once more and they started walking again.

The city was much more technologically advanced than Kate had expected. As they crested the hill that led to the city, she gasped as she saw towers rising over the smaller buildings, shiny and brass, with different insignias over the roofs like beacons.

She stared for a moment. "This is really going to wreak havoc on any evolution versus creationism debates, isn't it? Dammit. I was on the evolution side."

Daniel barked once, and Kate was pretty sure he was laughing at her.

"Did I ever tell you about the watch my mom gave me? This was before you moved to town, when we were kids." Daniel whined, and she continued. "Mom gave me a real watch, one that wound. I loved it. But I was a dumb, curious kid. I wanted to see how it worked. I took the thing apart and laid out all the gears and springs to look at them. Mom walked in on me and yelled at me. Scared me to death. I whacked the desk and the innards of my watch went flying, then they all clattered and bounced around my room and were gone."

She paused and stared at the city as another dino-pulled cart passed them. "I was finding bits of watch in my bed, clothes, and carpet for years after. I kept each piece in a bag, promising myself I'd put it back together some day. I never did."

Daniel barked, and she grinned. "I guess so."

"I am getting a little freaked, honestly," she said as they headed toward the city. "I mean, this world is evolving too fast. How can we hope to influence people if they go from amoeba to industrial age in forty-eight hours?"

Kate got the feeling of being completely out of her element as she neared the city. Buildings like this hadn't existed on Earth, none that she had ever seen, anyway. Most had some sort of wooden or stone foundation, but they seemed to effortlessly flow into brass or iron or steel towers and spires. One tower had a wooden lift attached with an intricate system of pulleys climbing the outside of a shining brass tower with a great cog rising from the roof. Another huge building had pipes and ducts running in and out of the exterior walls, and an intricate spider web of ducts ran both into the ground and high above the city, connecting the tower to other towers. Habitrails? Steam ducts? Kate had no idea.

And the people! Well, Kate realized quickly she was dressed as a country rube, as many of the people clearly looked at her as if she were an unwanted visitor. Nobility walked with a certain Victorian air, with waistcoats and corsets and skirts and hats, and more blue-collar types scurried around in coveralls and boots, grime and scars covering their hands. One woman stumbled in front of Kate, dumping her box of cogs and springs into the dirt. She swore, and Kate bent to help her.

Her forearms were covered in tattoos making her look like the interior of a clock. She muttered swear words to herself as she looked around the dirt for the dropped clock parts, and when Kate reached out her hand to help, the woman batted her away.

The moment her hand touched Kate's however, her eyes went wide and she stared at Kate.

Kate smiled and said, "I'm sorry. Can I help?"

The woman nodded mutely and sat down in the dirt, mindless of the annoyed people skirting around her.

Kate thought of all the clock pieces lost in her room, and that forgotten bag with some - but never all - of the parts inside. She ran her hand lightly over the dirty street and felt each spring, cog and gear jump into her hand. She dropped them into the box. "That should be everything."

The woman licked her lips and asked in an awed voice, "Are you..."

"My name's Kate. What's yours?" Kate ignored the low growl at her side.

"Gabrielle," she whispered. "I'm a tinkerer here."

Kate got to her feet and helped Gabrielle up. "Can you tell me where "here" is? I'm afraid I'm new. Quite literally."

Gabrielle nodded. "You're in Dauphine, Lady."

"Oh, I'm no lady, but thank you. Can you tell me if there are any, ah, places of worship in the city?"

Gabrielle pointed down the main road. "The heart of the city beats with two chambers, the organic chamber of Daniel the One-Eyed, and the synthetic chamber of Kate the Reborn."

"Organic and synthetic. Interesting. Kinda scary, too," Kate said, more to herself than Gabrielle.

"Would you like me to take you there?" Gabrielle asked.

"Oh, that's not necessary. You were clearly in a rush to get somewhere. I wouldn't want to make you late," Kate protested.

"It's no trouble, really," she said eagerly.

Kate put her hand on Gabrielle's arm once more. "Listen. You have an idea of who I am, and you may or may not be right, but I would appreciate it if you didn't let anyone else know your assumptions. Can I count on you?"

Gabrielle nodded once, her eyes wide at Kate's touch. "Yes, my Lady."

Kate looked around at the finely-dressed nobility or the practically-dressed workers. "I think you'd better stop calling me that, too, as no one would believe I'm

worthy of the title. Kate is fine."

"Ah, no one names their children after the goddess," Gabrielle said.

"They don't? But they name their sons Daniel," Kate said, frowning.

"With all due respect, Daniel is a god who speaks to our sons, we have a closer relationship with him. Kate is distant, removed, to be worshiped and revered." Her face burned and she looked at the ground, clearly reluctant to tell these things.

Kate sighed and Daniel whined at her feet. "This is more complicated than I thought it would be. Yes, please take me to these chamber things. And call me Jennifer or something. A normal name. Sheesh."

Gabrielle nodded.

Distant? She was distant? She had been busy being dead, thanks very much. Kate tried not to let her agitation show, as people began giving them a wide berth and dogs whined and barked as she walked past.

Daniel kept close to her leg, pressing against her. He butted his head against her and she was comforted by his presence.

Despite her annoyance, Kate continued to gape at the city's wonders. People moved from one high tower to another by gondolas and zip lines, and she started to realize that several main cables led from towers to the tallest tower in the center of the city. As they reached the center, Kate saw zeppelins through the towers on the far side of the city and wondered if there was an airship station on the other side.

Beyond the grand central tower lay an oddly placid little park. Within the park stood two tall buildings.

"Okay...," Kate said. "Seems influence isn't our problem..."

While every other building in the city had been a combination of organic and synthetic, wood and stone and brass and steel, these two buildings were starkly different. The one on Kate's left was made of a white metal that shone in the sun, rising nearly as high as the main towers of the city; rosy glass dotted the brass front doors and in front of this cold majesty sat a massive bronze statue of a dead tree.

The other building was more organic, made of wood and stone, only five or six stories compared to the vast tower on the left. Behind it, however, was what Kate recognized as a henhouse- a tall wooden silo that housed pterodactyls. In front of the church was a beautiful wooden carving of a wooden katana buried halfway into a block.

Vines twinned around the arch of the door and roses climbed the base of the sword statue.

Kate looked from one to the other, and Daniel snorted beside her.

"No kidding," she muttered.

Gabrielle stopped between the two and pointed to the wooden one. "That is the church of Daniel One-Eye. And that," she indicated the metal tower, "is the church of Kate the Reborn."

Daniel barked once and Kate looked at the direction he was facing.

Kate quickly saw what his superior canine ears had picked up - a mob of boys approached them. Kate gasped and knelt quickly, putting her hands on Daniel. "Do nothing, not yet. Please wait," she whispered as he started to shake with agitation. He whined low in his throat.

Each boy had a rag across his face - the proclaimed seers of the Church of Daniel One-Eye. They bore before them a limp figure with a bloody face.

They paid no attention to Kate or Gabrielle as they stormed past, screaming in outrage, to pound on the door of the wooden church.

A priest in a blue robe, also missing an eye, opened the door and smiled at them. "Boys, what brings you here? Worship isn't until the Day of the Weeping Heart."

Gabrielle gasped as they threw the unconscious boy to the feet of the priest. He frowned, but didn't look shocked. "What did Daniel do, boys?"

The tallest of the boys spat as he spoke. "He doesn't deserve the name Daniel. He came to us claiming to have been touched by the god, and said He didn't want us to have our eyes removed to receive His divine will! He said he knew Daniel's will and would tell us, and that we were all wrong!"

The priest's face was stony. "That is blasphemy, boys. But I think you took good care of it. I'll draw up the notice to have him and his family excommunicated. As for him," he said, looking at the boy, "continue disciplining him."

The boys grabbed Daniel's body and carried it to the statue and began hoisting him to be tied to the sword. Some sort of public humiliation, Kate thought, but her stomach turned bitter and cold when she saw his face.

They had taken his other eye.

Daniel broke into a flurry of barking and charged forward, and Kate followed. She

could feel her disguise melt away, could feel anger - gods, the power in that anger - coursing through her, making her nearly faint with its heat. Daniel jumped, his body morphing as he did so, landing atop the statue as a human.

The boys screamed and tried to scatter, but Daniel gestured, and they all fell as if something heavy had fallen on them. He took gently the boy's body from the terrified mob leader and then punched the leader in the face, watching him fall from the statue.

The priest came to the door of the church and fell to his knees in horror.

"You monsters," Daniel hissed, tears streaming from his eye. "You think this was a good idea, to blind these boys, thinking I'd bless them? I have touched one person on this world, and that's this kid here. He tried to carry my Word to you and this is how you treated him. Nothing you have done has been in my name. Consider yourself cursed. Consider yourself damned for all I care. May you burn in whatever hell you've created for yourself, in our names."

He stroked the boy's face and Kate saw the flesh knit back together, but the eye did not return. Daniel swore again, tossed the boy atop his back, and changed into a pterodactyl. He flew away, carrying the boy, back toward the farmhouse.

Kate did not weep. The boys still lay trapped on the ground, and the priest sobbed in the doorway.

"Gabrielle," she said. The woman was beside her in an instant. "Go inside My church and get My priestess."

Everyone stared at her. A crowd began to grow as people in the city had spotted the huge pterodactyl soaring, screaming above them, and had come to find out the fuss.

When the brass doors opened behind her and two people exited the church, she began to speak. "We had hoped to create in you a sense of love, of purpose. We need quite a lot from you people in the coming years. But we can't ask anything from you if you're going to be complete assholes from the get-go."

She laughed bitterly. "You know, when I was a girl, I used to hear stories of gods being vengeful, and I thought it was a terrible thing. Now I see the other side. You think you know Us, but you have no freaking clue. Daniel's not really happy about having only one eye, he doesn't want that to be how he's worshiped. Me, well, in my worldview, this world didn't exist until about two days ago. And before that, I haven't been untouchable; I was dead.

"Maybe it's Our fault. Maybe We should have considered how to build religions from the start. So We failed you there. But honestly. This," she indicated the mob of boys still lying in the dirt, "is what you thought was a good idea?"

She looked at her priestess, standing beside Gabrielle. She was dressed like Gabrielle, her tinker's coveralls clearly ornamental as they were made of soft silk and unblemished. Kate pointed to her. "You. Tell me. Do you do any of this in My name? Mutilate children? Encourage My followers to fall on each other like a pack of dogs?"

The woman shook her head, her freckled skin pale. Kate looked at Gabrielle. "Is she lying?"

"The followers of Daniel have been more emotional and primal," Gabrielle said. "The followers of Kate are peaceful."

"Yeah. That will likely change," Kate said, the anger a hot rush in her head. "Priestess. Gabrielle. And..." she looked at the boys. She pointed to the smallest boy and to the mob leader, nursing a bloody nose. "You two. Come here."

The four stood in front of her. Kate leaned forward and kissed Gabrielle and the Priestess on their foreheads. "Gather your families and get to safety. My mark will keep you and yours safe. Go. Quickly. You'll hear from me again."

The women's eyes opened in horror, and they dashed away—Gabrielle dragging the priestess who had tried to return to the church.

Kate looked at the boys. She wanted to be cruel, violent, bloody. She settled for cruel. Neither would look her in the face. She touched the mob leader's chin and forced him to look at her, fearful and still defiant. She gritted her teeth and said, "Remember what has happened here today. Remember what Daniel said. You want to be His representatives? His seers? You'll have it."

She passed her hand in front of the mob leader's face, taking his sight but not his eye. He cried out. The smaller boy cringed when she came near him, but she only kissed him on the forehead. "He will never see again. It is your job to lead him around as you preach the word of Daniel. It starts with "Don't be an ass." Get him out of here."

The smaller boy grabbed the larger and they ran, the older one wailing.

Kate looked at the churches, the beautiful city that had been built on complete misinterpretations of hers and Daniel's Word, and tears finally sprang to her eyes. She turned from the crowd and walked away.

Once, her tears had created a world. Now, they caught fire where they hit the ground, growing at an alarming rate with nothing to fuel them other than her great anger. The citizens screamed and ran past her as the fires engulfed the churches, and all organic touches, all that said *Daniel* in the city, caught fire. She didn't care who got free and who didn't as the fire spread as if sentient. She knew those who needed to carry Her message would get free.

She didn't pay attention to where she walked, she just plodded through the burning streets, still weeping, until she bumped into a rope ladder hanging in the middle of the street. No. It bumped into her. The airships and zeppelins were fleeing the inferno, tossed around by the rising heat. Not thinking, she grabbed hold of the ladder as it threatened to get out of her reach, and rose with the airship as it soared above the city. She looked down on the city as the metal towers began to topple, their organic foundations failing and the metal melting in the extreme temperatures. Cables snapped, whipping around and causing even more damage to the ruined city, flaming whips wrapping themselves around structures and pulling them down.

Kate could feel the souls as they let go of their bodies, the blaspheming priest, the mob of boys, but the others in the city were secure in their worship and their place in life. She mourned them, feeling not guilt but pity. And strong reservation that she would not let it happen again.

As the zeppelin left the destroyed city of Dauphine, Kate climbed the ladder to meet her pilot and to give instructions on where to take her.

CHAPTER FIVE

The zeppelin's captain was an older woman, short, stocky, with a steel gray bun contrasting with her dark skin - and she nearly had a heart attack when Kate scaled the ladder and arrived, in full goddess glory, in the cockpit of the zeppelin.

"Jesus, woman, don't get all worshiping and crash the airship!" Kate cried as the woman let go of the controls and bumped them with her arm as she knelt on the floor. The zeppelin began to do a lazy roll in the rising hot air, and Kate made a leap to steady them.

"Worship me when we're on the ground, for now, just please fly this thing," she said.

The woman nodded and took the controls from Kate and steadied the airship.

"Are you the only one aboard?" Kate asked.

She shook her head. "Managed to get my family out and on board. They're strapped in the bunks. Didn't have time to get the crew."

"Can I do anything?" Kate asked, half to herself and half to the woman. She honestly didn't know if she had the skill to do much of anything, but she figured she'd offer since she was a stowaway.

The woman shook her head. "Now that we're out of the city, flying should be pretty easy. It was dicey there for a bit, what with the inferno. Does my Lady know what happened?"

Kate grew very quiet and watched the zeppelin carry them north. "What is your name?"

"Alicia, my lady."

"And tell me, Alicia, do you have sons you think are seers of the god Daniel?"

She shook her head. "No, ma'am, I never wished to have my boys tested for the sight. I wanted them whole. You can't pilot an airship with one eye."

Kate put her hand on Alicia's shoulder. "We never wanted the boys mutilated, Alicia. I'm proud that you thought of your boys' welfare above a decree of the church.

"As for what happened to the city," she added softly, "it was a reminder to people not to misinterpret or think they know the will of the gods, especially when it pertains to

hurting their own children. The world is young and already worship and religion have gotten out of control. We have much work to do.”

Alicia made sure the ship was on a steady course and then knelt again. What was with all the kneeling? What was the point?

“My home is destroyed, this ship is all I have now. May I and my family use it to serve you?”

Kate blanched. She had destroyed this woman’s home, and god- er, well, someone - knew how many other airships, and she was offering herself to Kate’s service?

She nodded slowly. “That would be very helpful, thank you. Can you go a little more north? We’re looking to catch up with Daniel.”

The woman nodded, and readjusted her direction. Soon, Lania’s farmhouse came into view and Kate instructed her to anchor the zeppelin in the field. Alicia instructed Kate to hold the airship steady as she threw out lines from the center open hatch. She pulled a pair of goggles over her eyes, secured a hammer and four spikes to her belt, slipped on some heavy - looked like dinosaur leather - gloves. She grinned at Kate once, then grabbed one of the lines and, with surprising nimbleness, jumped out of the hatch. Kate couldn’t see her once she’d jumped, and merely waited until the lines grew taut and the airship was steadied.

The door at the rear of the cockpit slid open and a small boy peeked his head out. “Mama? Ursula was on my bunk again, and ...” he trailed off as he saw Kate.

“Hey, there,” she said. “Your mama just anchored the ship. She’ll be back up in a minute, I bet.”

He ducked back into his room and slammed the door. Kate grinned, her mood lightened for the first time in a while. She didn’t realize how much she enjoyed seeing a boy with his face completely whole.

Man. *Poor Daniel*, she thought. She walked to the open hatch and nearly bonked heads with Alicia, who had climbed the ladder.

“Your son peeked out. He was complaining something about Ursula,” Kate said, grinning.

Alicia sighed. “I know, those two are always going at it.”

“How many kids?”

“Five,” she said. “My husband died three years ago shortly after the birth of my

baby, and we've been on our own for a while.”

“Wow. And I thought I had it bad with a bunch of gods in my head,” Kate said. At Alicia's confused look, she added, “Never mind. Can you wait here for me? I shouldn't be long.”

Alicia nodded. “Of course, my lady.”

“Oh,” Kate said, poised at the ladder. “You can call me Kate. Promise.”

Kate had hoped she could rappel and be awesome like Alicia, but she didn't trust herself. She was a goddess, but that didn't mean she had to be stupid.

Alicia's airship had gathered attention, and Lania and her husband, Norbert had come out of the farmhouse to watch Kate's descent.

She waved at them.

Lania looked up at the great airship and then back at Kate. Tears still leaked from her wide eyes.

“Did Daniel make it back here with your son?” Kate asked.

Lania nodded.

“And is he...okay?”

“My Lord took his pain away,” she said, looking down at the ground.

Kate nodded.

“The people who did this to your son - the church itself - are gone. Daniel and I are going to speak with you and your son. We're going to depend on you to begin spreading our word. Are you willing?”

They both fell to their knees, Lania still weeping, and for the first time Kate understood why they knelt.

“A zeppelin.”

Daniel stood at the edge of the field beside Kate, staring in disbelief. “Where the hell did you find a zeppelin?”

Kate laughed. “Well, it kinda ran into me. I was busy burning the city down when the ladder whacked me in the head. Driven by a single mom and her kids. No crew.”

“And that's how we're getting around?”

Kate nodded.

“That is so awesome,” he said. “Don't get me wrong, flying around as a dinosaur is

pretty damn cool, but shit. A zeppelin.”

They approached the hanging ladder and began to climb, Kate first.

“Do you think I upset them?” Kate asked.

Daniel looked up and tried not to be distracted by the view. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“Well, he’s not the tragic martyr now. He has one eye back.”

“Kate, he doesn’t need to be blind for effect. That’s definitely not worth it. He survived the destruction of Dauphine by riding on the back of a god. He doesn’t need to be fully blind to get his message across.”

She was silent a bit as she climbed.

“You know,” he said. “Jesus did make blind men see too. And I don’t think he felt weird about it.”

“I don’t think I feel weird about healing the kid. I feel weird about not being able to heal you.”

This was news to Daniel. “Have you tried?”

“Several times. When I first came back. When we made love. When you were a dog. I can’t do it.”

“It’s okay, babe. I think this is how I’m supposed to be. I’m getting used to it. And hey, I’m glad you were able to help him. I wasn’t. Something about me and eyes and healing. Just doesn’t happen.”

Kate had reached the top of the ladder and pulled herself to sit at the edge of the hatch. “Well, if we were omnipotent, this wouldn’t be much of a story, would it? Just wave your hand and say, “Everything’s peachy!””

Daniel made a face at her. “Then we’d be back in the original heaven, wouldn’t we?” He climbed through the hatch and looked around. “And no one wants that. I do, however, want this.”

Kate hadn’t told him much about the zeppelin, and he’d only seen it from the bottom. The massive blimp, about fifty yards across, was made of tough golden fabric, and the words “THE SHERIDAN” were painted on the underside in brown. Strong brass railings surrounded the deck entirely, and the controls at the helm looked to be a cross between a sailboat and a train. The underside of the deck rumbled as Alicia readied the steam engines to drive the great propeller at the stern, and a teenage girl watched the

gauges that looked to correspond with the gas pressure in the balloon that held them aloft.

“She’s been busy,” Kate said, rubbing her fingerprints off the shiny brass. “It was pretty dirty when I was on earlier.”

“She’s the chariot of the gods now, she wants to make a good impression,” Daniel said.

The woman stopped priming the engines and knelt on the deck as she noticed they were there. The girl followed her mother’s example and dropped to her knees. Kate glanced at Daniel. “Can you help me do something about this?”

He shrugged. After the issue with his ‘church’ he didn’t see it so bad that people were reverential toward him and Kate. They might start to listen, now.

Kate stuck her tongue out at him and walked up to the woman. “You’ve gotta stop doing this, Alicia, else we might crash. We understand you respect us. And thank you for it. But let me know how the ship’s doing, okay?”

“She’s almost ready to go, my Lady,” Alicia said, getting to her feet.

“Great,” Kate said. “Can you introduce me to your crew?”

“This is my oldest, Sarah,” Kate said. “She was keeping the young ones safe when we left the city. She’s the only one qualified to be my crew. Sarah, go get your brothers and sisters.” The girl, whose long hair was braided in cornrows, bobbed her head and ran to the door that led to the bunks.

“We’ve got the twins Ursula and Sam, they’re eight. James is ten, and the baby, Kelly, is three,” Alicia said as the children filed out of the bunks. James was sullen and pudgy, built like his mother. The fraternal twins Ursula and Sam were rail thin, and looked down at the deck shyly. The girl Kelly held her big sister’s hand and stared unabashedly at the gods. Daniel grinned at her.

“Are you guys ready to be our crew?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, Lord,” the kids mumbled.

Daniel sighed. “This is going to be tougher than I thought, isn’t it?” he asked Kate. She smiled ruefully.

Kelly squirmed out of her sister’s grasp and ran on her stumpy legs toward Daniel. She wrapped her arms around his leg and giggled. “Danny!”

Kate snorted. “Well, you’ve won one of them over.”

Daniel bent down and picked up the girl, who chortled as he settled her on his hip. “Yes,” came her mother’s dry voice from behind him. “She’s the shy one. We’re worried about her.”

Daniel laughed. “I can see why. Is she afraid of heights?”

Alicia looked affronted. “Of course not. They all grew up on airships.”

Daniel walked to the railing and showed Kelly the henhouse with the pterodactyls sunning themselves. “Birdy!” she shouted.

“I guess so,” he agreed.

Kate was speaking with Alicia about their next stop, but Daniel was just happy to look at the view and think - hope - that they had made an impact on the people.

The people who had survived, anyway.

Alicia headed to the helm and the propeller increased speed. The kids headed back to their bunks, shepherded by their sister, and Kate joined Daniel at the railing.

“So we have the oldest and the youngest on our sides,” Kate said, watching the girl clutch at Daniel’s bandage. “The middle ones, well...”

“Kate, we destroyed their home, their city, their business. Can you blame them?”

“No. We didn’t. I did.” Kate looked down at the farm and waved to Daniel, Lania, and Norbert who had come out to wave good-bye at them as Sarah rappelled down to release the airship from her anchors. She rose with the ship, clinging to the ladder, and was soon back on the deck with them.

“You saved a boy. I tore down the city,” she said, biting her lip.

“You had to, Kate. If you hadn’t, they would have kept doing it. Or misinterpreted. We have a job to do here. And we need to do it right. We weren’t. We can now.”

Tears brimmed in her eyes. *Oh shit, she’s gonna make another world or burn something else down*, Daniel thought, but they were just regular tears she wiped away hastily.

“Here,” Daniel said, and passed her the grinning toddler. “We’re going to try again. I think they get us now. We’ve got Daniel and Lania and Norbert. They said they would rebuild the city. We’ve got the people you saved in the city. We’ve got Alicia. And soon we’ll have her kids.”

Kate took the girl and held her close, and the girl pulled at Kate’s hair and laughed again. Daniel, his arms now free, spread them out to encompass the ship. “And we’ve got

this awesome zeppelin!”

Kate smiled through her tears at him, and he put his arm around her. “And you’ve got me. We’ll be okay. I promise.”

She nodded, her tears falling on the baby’s forehead as the zeppelin rose above the woods. Alicia called from the helm, “Next stop, the northern city of Meridian. We should be there in about nine hours. First thing in the morning if we fly through the night.”

The airship turned and Kate and Daniel watched the ruins of the city burn behind them as they headed into the night.

CHAPTER SIX

Kate peered at Daniel through the holes in her hammock. After the events of the day, she really wanted to curl up beside him, but clearly the thin hammocks offered nothing but uncomfortable mashing of bodies if more than one person was involved.

Besides, Kelly was sacked out on Daniel's chest. When her sister had tried to take her out of his arms, she screeched and refused, and Daniel said she could sleep with him if she wanted. Alicia had no objection, so the girl was now drooling on Daniel's shirt and dreaming, no doubt, of the fantastic life she was destined to have considering she now slept on a god.

Or maybe she just dreamed of a new doll. Kate had no idea. Daniel snored quietly and shifted in his hammock. Alicia had given them the captain's quarters, as she had to fly the airship, and the children were bunked in the adjacent room. Across the room was Alicia's large captain's desk, with rolls of maps neatly stacked on a shelf behind. Behind that was the wide stern window, showing nothing but black.

Kate sighed, not tired in the least, and struggled out of her hammock. She climbed the narrow staircase and exited onto the quarterdeck. Lanterns hung from the cables and cast an eerie light on the brass pipes moving from the engine under the deck to the gauges near the helm. The fat bag of the blimp bulged above her and felt much closer than it had during the day.

She walked with a purposeful step, hoping not to scare Alicia, but the woman didn't look around as she stared ahead into the darkness. "Good evening, my Lady," she said, as Kate came up behind her.

"How is it going?"

"Honestly, I am a little nervous. I mean, me and mine will take you to hell itself if that is what you want, but Meridian is something else."

Kate had felt a particular feeling against the North since she had come back to life. It was as if she and North were repelling magnets. . It was stronger on the ground, though; from the air, it was easier to resist. Still, she had no idea why she felt this way. "What's north besides Meridian?"

"All sorts of nasties. Sky pirate attacks increase the further north you get. Some

people on foot have gone mad by going too far north. The priestesses tell us that is where the gods are born, and it's not meant for mortals."

"The Wasteland," Kate murmured.

"What is the wasteland?"

"It's the places between the afterlives. Sort of unclaimed god country. Gods fight to the death out there. You can get lost. And, apparently, you can create whole worlds from there. But it sounds as if it has even more qualities. I'm not sure if mortals can survive there. Tell me about the sky pirates."

"What do you want to know?" Alicia's voice was flat. "They have fast, nimble ships, they disable, board, execute the crew, and take whatever cargo you have. If you have no useful cargo, they take hostages. If there are no useful hostages, well, at least they have a new ship now."

Kate had the feeling she was treading on very tenuous ground here, and backed away slowly. "Well, I'm pretty sure Daniel and I can defend the ship if it comes down to that."

Alicia continued to stare straight ahead into the night, her jaw clenching.

"Alicia," Kate said, putting her hand on her arm. The woman finally looked at her, rage and terror in her wide eyes. "We will protect your family."

The woman must have finally remembered who she was talking to, because she relaxed instantly. She frowned and looked at the floor. "My husband was carrying some cargo to Meridian when they attacked. They took the ship and executed the crew." She wiped her eyes. "Or at least, that's what the remaining witness tells me. They usually leave one alive. They like to sow the fear, you see. I just wish I had his body to give it proper rites."

Kate embraced the woman, calming her sobs. When she had finally relaxed and gone back to the helm, she sighed and said, "It's good we're headed for Meridian, though. It's the closest port and the ship isn't equipped for a long travel. My kids barely made it out with a change of clothes. We're left with what you see, after the fall of Dauphine."

"I'm sorry for that," Kate said. "It had to be done, but I am sorry for your loss."

Alicia nodded once. "I don't pretend to understand or judge, my Lady. Only serve."

"I'll do what I can to help stock the ship," Kate said. "I think I can manage that."

She winked at Alicia, whose eyes widened in surprise, then the woman laughed.

Kate found it an odd sensation to speak and laugh with another woman, and kept her company as they sailed through the night, the steam-powered propeller whirring behind them. When the sun rose, it nearly blinded Kate with the glare off the towers straight ahead of them.

“Meridian,” Alicia said.

Kate squinted and gasped. “Uh, Alicia, is it my imagination or are the buildings not touching the ground there?”

Alicia grimaced. “It’s Meridian’s proximity to the north. Things aren’t always... right... here. Things are calmer toward the ocean,” she gestured east where Kate could see the glint of water on the horizon. “But settling there proved to be dangerous with local animals.”

A door opened behind them, and Sarah’s frightened voice cut through the hazy dawn. “Mama, what are you doing? It’s feeding time!”

Alicia swore - interestingly enough, an oath that involved Kate’s erect nipples, but she didn’t have time react to it - grabbed the controls and dipped the zeppelin sharply down toward the ground. At that point, from the clouds above them, a great moaning sound reverberated through the sky and a huge translucent shape dove down and gracefully soared through the air in front of them. It was five times as large as a house. Much larger than the airship. Kate grasped the railing and stared.

“Sarah, get the gun!” cried Alicia as she continued to direct the air ship in a sharp dive. Sarah ran back down the stairs below deck.

“What the fuck is that?” screamed Kate.

“It’s an air whale,” said Alicia, monitoring the gauges and flipping some switches. “They don’t eat humans, but a collision with them will knock you out of the sky. And when they’re feeding, they’re not paying attention.”

Kate stared at the diaphanous form moving lazily in the clouds, and couldn’t imagine it hurting anything. Then it zeroed in on a V of flying birds and devoured a good seventy-five percent of them. Now that she was aware of them, she could see them all awakening, moving in and out of the clouds, devouring birds when they could.

“They’re not dangerous when translucent, but-” Alicia said, and at that point one of the whales dove straight down and hit a lake below with a massive splash. Alicia

continued. “Right after they’ve surfaced they’re slower, but much more solid. And much more dangerous.”

The whale came back up from the lake, a deep blue color, and Alicia pulled the controls to the right—hard—and narrowly dodged the whale as it soared past them and higher up into the clouds.

“What the hell is going on?” came a voice from behind them. Daniel stormed onto the deck, his hair a haphazard mess and clutching a chortling Kelly to his chest. He had a wet spot on his shirt where she had drooled all night, and if Kate hadn’t been holding desperately to the railing, she would have laughed.

“Air whales,” she called. “Swim in air. Breathe water. Dangerous.”

“Air whales. Right. Makes perfect sense.”

“Mama, go inland!” called Sarah, hefting what looked like a rocket launcher on her shoulder. She tethered herself to a railing and used both hands to steady her gun. She aimed and fired, and with a FOOM the gun went off and she winced as she controlled the kickback.

“What is that?” Kate called as Alicia turned the zeppelin away from bodies of water.

“Chicken carcasses,” Alicia said grimly, still struggling with the controls. “They’ll converge on that area instead of here. My Lord, I trust you have Kelly? And my kids are safe in the bunk?”

“Yeah, as safe as they can be with this crazy navigation!” Daniel said. Kelly waved her hands around, gleeful in the chaos as Daniel held her tightly. “Kate, what the hell is wrong with you?” Daniel threw up his hand and the air around the zeppelin shimmered.

Kate shook her head, astonished at her own stupidity. “Alicia, steady the ship. We’ll be fine.”

“We will?”

“Daniel’s thrown a force field around the ship,” she said.

“Nope,” Daniel said, approaching them. “I just made the ship look like another whale. I assume they don’t collide in midair?”

Alicia shook her head mutely, and the ship leveled.

Daniel came up beside her. “What happened to you?”

“I—forgot, I guess.” Kate’s face was hot with her blush. She wouldn’t meet Daniel’s eye.

“Dude. You’re a god. You have created two worlds. You could have turned the whales to pigeons.”

“Come on, Daniel, it was AIR WHALES. How do you think on your feet when you’re in the air, surrounded by animals that should weigh thirty tons and be in the sea? Cut me some slack, I can’t think powerful goddess all the time.”

“Well you’re gonna have to,” he said. “Cause it’s just going to get dicier from here on out.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t know what came over me.”

He lost his obvious irritation and put his arm around her, grinning. “Well, when you forgot what power you had, you just got us a little in danger with the freaky air mammals. When I forgot, I brought down heaven and hell.”

Kate looked at him and saw the amusement in his face. “Yeah. We’ve got some weird shit ahead.”

He handed Kelly to her sister, who had untethered herself from the railing and had put down the huge chicken gun. He put his hand on Kate’s shoulder and said, “Tell me.”

They left Alicia and Sarah to finish the trek into the strange floating city and went below deck to talk.

CHAPTER SEVEN

According to Alicia, Meridian was a city that floated due to its proximity to the Wasteland, what she called the Dark. It consisted solely of several tall buildings with no solid roads linking them. The city officials had decided it was safer to tether the city to a rocky plain at the foot of a cliff instead of risk it wafting into the Wasteland, especially with the improbability storms that raged through in the wintertime. Hundreds of cables stretched from anchors in the city to the rocks below to keep the buildings stationary, but it still tossed about in storms.

It was a port of call for all sorts, everyone from adventurers to merchant ships. Although travel further north to the Wasteland was incredibly dangerous for mortals, it was a lucrative trip to make. Scientists had discovered that they could transmute sand from the Wasteland into a bizarre kind of chaos energy that was vital in propelling some airships and also fueled some of the more eccentric weaponry, and the suppliers in Meridian did a roaring trade in the bottled energy. Extremely dangerous to collect, and even more dangerous to transmute, the stuff was mind bogglingly expensive and no price was too high for eager air ship pilots or wealthy tinkers. Some desperate inventors would sell everything they owned except their tools in order to get enough money to buy chaos energy because they knew that the things they could build that used the energy would very likely make them wealthy in a matter of weeks.

Not all inventors made it big, though, and those who failed were abandoned in Meridian with no money to make it out of the city. Kate and Daniel hadn't seen the terrain because they had traveled at night, but Meridian was surrounded on three sides by steep mountains and cliffs; nearly impossible to reach by foot. And with air ships, no one bothered to try. Stuck with no money, the inventors would rappel down the cables to the ground below and live there, where the maddening energy was much stronger. Some would steal away into the Wasteland to farm what raw stuff they could, and then, if they survived, would build and sell their wares topside on the black market. Everyone knew that the items sold on the black market came from the mad inventors below the city and were as likely to blow up as they were to work. However, if the items did work, it was more likely that they would be more powerful than anything purchased in legit

markets. Black market movement on weapons and airship fuel was a lucrative trade.

Several of the underside inventors did make it rich eventually, but some were too mad to leave, or too comfortable in their little kingdoms.

And, Alicia added, almost as an aside, the city was a port for most of the sky pirates in the area, too.

Kate bent over and peered at the gauges. “So, does this ship run on the chaos energy stuff?”

“No, Lady. We had some ships in our fleet that did. The faster ones and the warship did. This one is our family’s personal airship, and the closest one we could escape to when the city fell. It’s a simple steam-and-helium driven zeppelin.”

“But you have used chaos energy before. What are these weapons you mentioned?”

“They’re terrible devices. Ray guns and energy staffs and whatever else the tinkers can think of. Some of them are useful - we were in the process of getting an energy shield fitted to our biggest cargo vessel. But overall, I think they’re more danger than they’re worth.”

Kate’s eyes lost focus and Daniel smiled at Alicia and thanked her for all the information. He dragged Kate to the poop deck, well away from the others, and said, “What’s going on, babe?”

“The world is finally going the way we need it to. I don’t know how the belief will get built back up after the last city we went to, but this one seems to be just the thing we need.”

“Sounds a little chaotic to me,” Daniel said. “What are you planning on?”

“Well, we need to find out if there’s a basis for belief in us there. I’m wondering where the pirates and the mad scientists fall in the belief scenario. If we’re on the border of the Wasteland, I’m really curious what’s beyond it.”

“Kate we can’t go back to heaven through there. We already determined that.”

“But still. If the mortals are going there for this energy stuff, it might be something we can use. They still need us in heaven. If they didn’t, there would be no need to keep us in exile here. That big beast would devour everything and then come after our new Earth. It’s not doing that yet. So there’s still hope.”

Daniel nodded slowly. “Why do you think Meridian is the answer to whatever the

question is?”

Kate shrugged. “Divine inspiration? But I think when we get there, we need to do some recon. I’ll find out about the belief structures in the city. And you,” she grinned broadly at him, “you’re the trickster. You get to go to the underbelly and talk to the mad scientists.”

“Lathe.”

They turned and found the second oldest child, James, looking at them and frowning. “The tinkers call the underside of the city Lathe. It’s supposed to be very exciting, but Mama won’t let me go.”

“Have you been to Meridian often, James?” Kate asked.

He shook his head. “Just two or three times. Daddy bought me a toy wooden horse that actually moved on chaos energy, but it didn’t last long. After Daddy died, Momma said none of us were ever coming back here.”

Daniel glanced at Kate then back at the boy. “Well, we’re here now. Do you want to go with me down to Lathe? Even though you’ve never been, you still know more about it than I do.”

The boy’s eyes grew wide. “You mean it?”

Kate touched Daniel’s arm. “Are you serious? You want to take a kid to the underbelly of a city with mad scientists?”

“I need someone who is more familiar with it than me. Call it divine inspiration. He’ll be fine. We’re gods, remember?”

“Yeah. Gods who can’t even leave this world. We don’t know our limitations, Daniel.”

He thought of what he had done to bring Kate back, and felt, for the first time a very long time, confident. “We’ll be fine. I promise.”

Kate held her hand out to him and opened her palm. A gray hummingbird with a bright red chest sat there, looking around with its beady eyes. “Here. Take Huginn with you. Send her to me if you need me.”

Daniel took the tiny, fragile bird and put it on his shoulder. It didn’t even register as weight to him. “Huginn? And Muninn is the other?”

Kate grinned. “They’ve been hanging around for a bit. One’s thought, the other’s memory.”

Daniel craned his neck around. "Which one do I have?"

"Thought. She'll take care of you."

"As much as a hummingbird can."

"Have you asked his mother yet?"

Daniel groaned. He knew he'd forgotten something.

Alicia was too concerned with docking the zeppelin to be concerned about her son going off with one of the gods who created the world she lived in. Kate watched her nod curtly at Daniel as she maneuvered the zeppelin closer to the floating city.

At this point Daniel could feel the proximity to the Wasteland, could feel the power coming up from below him. He hadn't noticed it gone since the subtle change from Wasteland to Imari. But now he could tell it was closer. The sheer power, the potential, of the area was almost palpable.

The city itself up close was a paradox. Buildings rose hundreds of stories into the air, tethered together by zip lines and flexible steel rods. As the buildings floated and swayed in the wind, the rods kept them from crashing into each other, the flexibility allowing the rods to do their jobs without snapping. Looking down caused Daniel to swoon a bit as the impossibility of the floating buildings with no street assaulted his senses. A fine mist surrounded the bottom of the buildings as if the city were floating on a cloud, and he couldn't see the ground beyond.

"They say the earth refuses to hold any structure, so it just throws it into the air," said James, who had come to stand beside Daniel.

"So are there buildings in Lathe?" he asked, squinting through the fog.

"Yes, but they're tethered lower to the ground. I think maybe three feet at most. Also, I think there are caves in the cliff. Some of the tinkers create in there."

"That doesn't make any sense. Wouldn't their experiments cause cave-ins?"

"Sarah says it's worse when the improbability storms come. You want to keep the chaos energy safe during those times."

"Improbability plus chaos is worse than a cave-in?" Daniel asked.

"You can build something to get yourself out of a cave-in," James said simply.

Daniel nodded, conceding the fact.

The zeppelin port was tall and thin, clearly just a place to park your balloon. Daniel

could see another port for more nimble airships about half a mile away, also on the edge of the city. Alicia had a berth rented on deck 45. She edged the zeppelin in, instructing Sarah to control the helium to drop altitude, and then she released a lever that shot out grappling hooks from the starboard side to anchor the ship.

“Clean anchor, crew,” Alicia said, and she paused for a moment, looking down, as if she just remembered her crew was gone and she traveled with only her family and two gods who really didn’t know what was going on.

Kate helped Sarah slide a rope bridge along one of the anchors, a series of planks captured inside a net, making it look like a long hammock with a stabilizing floor. “I don’t know what makes me more nauseated, looking up at all the ships and berths, or looking down.”

Sarah smiled shyly. “The zip lines are pretty safe, but if you’re really afraid, you can take the lift to a gondola level. From there you can get a ride to the Sidewalk and from there you can get anywhere.”

“I thought there weren’t any roads in Meridian?” Kate asked.

“Sidewalk is the central location. It’s at the center of the city and it connects to every building, at least by zip line. Not every building gets a gondola, but it’s not really an issue. The only weather this area gets is improbability storms, and you don’t want to be out in that in a gondola or a zip line when that happens.”

Kate narrowed her eyes as she looked into the spider web of the city. “Where are the places of worship?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daniel wondered if David Copperfield preferred stuff like making the Statue of Liberty disappear over doing things like making a child's eyes grow wide with surprise when he pulled a quarter from their ear. Daniel could shape-change and heal, but the look on James's face when he modified his appearance to look like a boy of twelve, thin and wiry, made all that power worth it.

Alicia watched with trepidation and Kate with genuine amusement as they ran across the bridge haphazardly and clattered down the stairs. They passed people in pseudo-Victorian garb - corsets and waistcoats and watch fobs and hats, boots and coveralls, but the material was different, and the leather had a tough, alligator-look to it. Dinosaur skin, Daniel realized, as he and James pushed past fancy people and grease-covered people alike on the stairs as they headed toward zip lines and gondolas. Most of the floors in the tower were dedicated to zeppelin berths, but a few floors were zip line exits, and several at the top serviced people who had the money for gondolas. Six elevators, ornately decorated in curlicues of brass and iron, stopped at every floor, but it seemed most people were content to take the stairs.

"Where are we going?" Daniel asked, surprised to hear his voice so high.

"There's a zip line to the ground on the bottom floor," James said, bowing a quick apology to a gentleman whose hat he had dislodged when he pushed past him. "No one monitors it for safety, they don't like talking about it, but they know they need it. You can also slide down the cables holding down the city, but it's a lot more dangerous. There's nothing to stop you when you get there."

The ground floor was dirty with cobwebs clogging the corners, trash piling up, and even broken vials that looked as if they had previously held some shiny blue liquid.

James led Daniel to a doorway that opened up to a patio. It was disconcerting to see the mist swirling around them. It felt like the end of the world. A cable extended from the wall above the doorway, a zip line handle attached to it. The people moving on the zip lines through the city were attached by safety harness to the handle. The zip line to the ground had no harness, but Daniel did notice it had a breaking mechanism that slowed the wheels that ran along the cable.

James went to grab the handle, but Daniel stopped him. “Let me go first, then I can be there if you get into trouble. We don’t know what’s down there, not really.” A small stool was under the zip line, presumably for the shorter travelers, and Daniel grabbed the handle and flipped the switch to release the brake.

A god could easily forget his divinity when riding a zip line through an impenetrable fog into an area he knows only as the home of mad, destitute tinkers. The mist swirled around him and the wind pulled at his shirt, and he gasped as he emerged from the mist to see clearly the city below.

He had pictured a shanty town, a group of shacks or tents, maybe a hobo village. He didn’t expect a group of two-and three-story buildings, in the strangest shapes possible, forming a shadow of Meridian almost as large as the city itself. Some buildings seemed to be formed from superheated metals and glass that had since cooled and hardened into flowing designs, sharp points, towers and terraces. And the colors! Meridian had been glorious in its shiny brass and silver buildings, but Lathe held buildings of green glass, red metals, and even a small, square shack that looked to be made of solid gold. Each building was also tethered to the ground, but much closer.

The zip line went from gray to bright red then, signaling Daniel to engage the brake. He squeezed the handles and swayed on the line as his downward momentum fought with him. He stepped lightly to the ground—a relatively flat stone outside the city — and let go, surprised to see the handle whizz back up the cable to return to the top. James slid down a moment later, and they stared around them.

“Is it like you thought?” Daniel asked.

James just shook his head.

“All right. Stay close, we need to explore,” Daniel said, and took off at a trot.

“What are we looking for, Lord?”

“First, call me Daniel. Secondly, I’m not really sure. Like we said, this world is pretty new to us, and we need to learn more. Kate thinks this city is important. So I guess we’re just looking to see what we can find. See what’s going on with the mad scientists down here.”

“Why?”

Daniel pursed his lips. “Kate and I are trying to accomplish something. And we need the help of people around here. We have your mom, and you, I hope...” The boy

nodded fervently. "But we are going to need a lot more people before the day is done. Or, you know, maybe we'll get a week. I don't even know how time passes here."

The buildings on the outskirts of town were small, single-story buildings that looked to either be houses or warehouses. Most were shabby and the kind of buildings Daniel assumed would have made up the entire city. Perhaps these were the homes of the true destitute, the ones who couldn't afford to live above and couldn't afford to leave. They hovered one to three feet off the ground, some with stairs that reached almost to the ground, some just looking to require a big step.

Daniel stumbled and looked down. The ground was covered in rocks from pebbles to boulders, making the terrain dangerous to travel across. How come no one had ever cleared a thoroughfare through here? He kicked a rock out of his way and jumped when it rolled back to where it had been.

"The land decides how it wants to be," James said.

"I guess so," Daniel said. They were getting further into the city - with more treacherous going - when they started to see people.

The first was a woman in a large billowy white cape, close-cropped red hair and goggles obscuring her eyes. She stared at them from behind a floating building that looked to be made of glass and metal plates, and then when they saw her, she scabbled onto the stoop and rushed inside.

James looked as if he wanted to follow her, but Daniel put his hand on his arm and pointed.

Dead ahead was a black building that looked as if it had been created by a child - there was no rhyme or reason to its construction - blown glass streaked with black formed towers and sideways rooms from a simple one-story building, and flashes of light came from within.

"There. That's where we're going," Daniel said.

Deeper into the city, foot traffic was more common. Distracted people, many of them looking distressed, climbed over the rocks as if born to it, heading from one building to the next. Signs over some of the doors showed the buildings to be businesses. "Professor TickTock's Timepieces." "Eric's Weaponry." And a handful of people worked on ladders to repair the foundation of "Splodey Al's Explosives," which had somehow developed a large black hole in the corner. A white building in the shape of a huge bottle

was apparently the local doctor's clinic - "Dr. Ophelia's Ministrations" - while a squat warehouse made of wood just proclaimed "GROCERIE."

Some people stood on a side street and called out their wares - clearly a more organic marketplace. Watches, potions, toys, clothing, fruits and vegetables (that looked oddly shaped and consisted of colors that didn't really want to be grabbed by Daniel's eye), and even small empty boxes containing, supposedly, 'ideas' were hawked. James wanted to look for something to buy Kelly, but Daniel dragged him forward to the black building.

The only problem was, they couldn't find a door. A man in a black coat with tails, a top hat, and dirty coveralls stopped them and said, in very precise English, "Go on, boys, you know you can't get into the House of Mysteries. Don't bother honest people now."

"The House of Mysteries?" Daniel said.

The man stopped. "You are new to Lathe?"

"Our parents had business here," James said, surprising Daniel.

The man nodded, satisfied. "You shouldn't be wandering the streets. This is not a safe city. But yes. When Lathe was established, the House of Mysteries already stood here, and no one has been able to get inside since. People believe the oldest tinker still works inside, but no one knows anything about him or her." He winked at them. "Tell your parents to visit my store, Professor Burns's Idea Emporium, for much higher quality ideas than they can buy on the street." He handed James a black card with white stamping on it and left them.

"So, what now?" James asked.

Daniel grinned. "Now is when you remember that you're traveling with a god."

Alicia sent Sarah off with the twins and Kelly and told them to stay out of trouble as she took Kate to the Temple. While the Sidewalk was the center of the city, the Temple was apparently the heart, the largest building in the city in terms of width, built like a pagoda with different metallic shades for each level. The bottom was a greenish brass, the one above that a shiny silver, then a reddish copper, then a white gold, a steel almost black, a soft gray tin, a bright orangey brass and at the top, the smallest floor had a roof of pure, shiny gold.

Kate modified her appearance a bit and then they were on the lift to get to the

gondola.

“The gondola will take us to yo- Kate’s temple as it’s the most popular. From there we can get to almost any other temple.”

“So all the temples are in one building. That’s convenient. Who else is worshiped there?”

Alicia screwed up her face. “Let’s see. The bottom temple worships Daniel, trickster god of the one-eyed, the forgotten, and hell. Then there’s the temple to Cotton, the Moon, then Persi, the goddess of dinosaurs, Kate’s level is the one with the white gold roof; then there’s Prosper, god of the Harvest; Ishmael, god of the sea; Gamma, the warrior messenger goddess; and Barris, god of the sun is on top. All of the temples are accessible except for the top two.”

Kate leapt nimbly onto to gondola as Alicia paid two coins to an attendant in a green robe. “Why can’t you visit the top two?”

Alicia shrugged and looked out over the city. “I don’t know. I just know entrance is forbidden.”

Kate nodded and relaxed into the seat, letting the swaying of the gondola soothe her tight nerves. She hadn’t seen any boys missing eyes yet, which was good. She wondered if news of Dauphine’s demise had reached Meridian yet, then wondered how much time had passed since leaving. It could be possible that much more time had passed. She watched citizens of Meridian soar along the zip lines or lazily traverse the city in their gondolas, and hoped she wouldn’t have to teach the same lesson to this beautiful city. Regardless of the time that had passed in the real world, she had taken down a whole city only yesterday, and didn’t feel up to doing another one just yet.

She closed her eyes and didn’t open them until they reached the temples. For the first time she paid attention to those on the gondola with her. Several young women wore coveralls, and she realized with a start these were young acolytes to the faith based on her. She wanted to follow them, but she knew where she had to go. A burly man with several scars on his face and hands was going to pray to Persi, and a dreamy woman Kate was pretty sure was stoned was headed to the moon goddess level. Only Kate and Alicia were headed upward to Ishmael’s level.

The stairwell stopped at the sixth level and the door at the top opened to a wide room with a pool inset into the floor. The walls were covered in blue, sparkly paint that

reminded Kate absurdly of her junior prom. A young priest stood naked in the pool and opened his arms, welcoming them.

“Let me guess. Ishmael is also the god of sex?” Kate whispered to Alicia, who nodded, her dark cheeks flushing slightly.

“Welcome, pilgrims,” the man said. He strode toward them. “Feel free to remove your clothing and join me. The next service begins in an hour, but I’m sure we can pass the time in a reverent and holy way.”

Kate grinned at him. “No thank you, Father. I’m just here on my way somewhere.”

“There is nowhere to go from here except for down, or into the holy pool of the god,” he said, and he stepped out of the water. He was thin, well-built and hairless, his erection incredibly large for his slight frame.

Kate fought the urge to laugh. “No, really, there are two floors above here, and that’s where we’re headed. If you could just point us toward the door.”

The priest frowned. “No one goes to the forbidden temples. The Messenger and the Sun have no priests, no pilgrims. Their worshipers are many but those who observe are few. The temples in Meridian are for show; that is all. But why worship those when you can revel in the glory that is Ishmael with me?”

Kate glanced at him, losing her amusement quickly. “Divine inspiration, call it. Now listen, if you don’t show us the door to the upstairs, we’ll make one.” She let her godhood seep out in her voice a bit with the last sentence, and the priest stepped back.

“There is no door, I- I was told by the Head Priest of Ishmael that the floors above are just for show. I don’t know anything!”

Kate snorted. “Useless.” She walked around the perimeter of the room, touching the wall as she went. Something resonated in the corner opposite the doorway.

“Alicia, we’re going,” she said. She concentrated briefly and then the wall dissolved, opening up a dark corridor. She smiled at the dumbstruck priest, whose impressive erection had wilted. “Excuse us, please.”

Alicia joined her and they walked into the dark stairwell.

“What are you looking for, Lady?” Alicia asked.

“I don’t know exactly. But I’ve got to go with my gut. And my gut says we need to go to the sun temple.”

The top of the stairwell had no door, but Kate simply made another hole in the

wall, dissolving the concrete and metal in front of them.

Kate barely had time to register the large empty room made completely of gold except for one small, open window, and the small thin man inside, before he ran at her, screaming, his fists balled and his eyes wild.

Kate raised her hand and he fell down face first, sobbing and screaming. Kate ran to him and put her hands on his shoulders. “Barris. Barris. What is wrong?”

The god of the sun curled up into a fetal position and she pulled his slight form so his head was in her lap and stroked his golden hair as he cried.

CHAPTER NINE

“It’s been so long. There was the world, and then there was this room, and then there was me,” he said, once he composed himself.

“You are a god, and yet you’ve been imprisoned here since the beginning of time?” Kate asked incredulously.

He nodded, sniffing. “I was aware of only a few things. Who I was. What my responsibility was. And who you were. I knew you were responsible for keeping me here.”

Kate gritted her teeth. “Why do people keep blaming us for shit? Barris, to me, the world has been alive for exactly two days and three nights. I’ve barely had time to find my footing before a sun god attacks me in a city that doesn’t even sit on the ground. I have no idea what’s going on or why it’s my fault.”

“You made this. You made us.”

Kate shook her head again. “It wasn’t conscious. We are not that cruel. I promise. But if you’re a sun god, why are you imprisoned? I figured you’d be super powerful.”

He glared at her, his golden eyes glinting through his tears. “I am. But all my power goes into keeping the sun burning. Why I have a physical form, I’ll never know.”

Kate felt her stomach turn over. “I can guess... but later. I can get you out of here, if you want.” It went against her better judgement, but she couldn’t keep this being imprisoned. “But first I need to know some things. Why are you imprisoned and no one else is?”

“The others are imprisoned as well. Just not here. Except for Gamma. Sometimes she knocks on my floor and I knock back. She’s as trapped as I am.”

“Do you know where the others are?”

“Persi is in the South, I think. Among the wild dinosaur herds. Ishmael is below the sea. Cotton is in Dauphine. Prosper is in Lathe. And Fabrique is in Lathe as well.”

“Fabrique?”

“Goddess of clockwork.”

“And they’re all imprisoned.”

“Yes.”

Kate sat back and ran her fingers through her hair. It made sense - this world without gods. But who had imprisoned them? Who had influence here? And she had a sick feeling in her stomach of the fate of Cotton the Moon Goddess.

“Come on. Let’s get free the Messenger and then -” she paused just as Huginn whizzed through the window. No sooner had the tiny bird given its report that she groaned. “Oh crap. Daniel.”

Alicia gasped. “James?”

Barris nodded. “Fabrique.”

They clattered down the stairs, Barris lighting up the dark stairwell. They stopped at the next level down to free the Messenger, but Kate balked and looked at Alicia.

“Was there a hole here when we came up?”

“No, Lady,”

“Someone must have followed us and freed her,” Kate said.

“Or captured her,” said Barris.

“Shit,” Kate said. She peeked inside the Messenger’s prison. It was much like Barris’s - consisting of a bright, empty room.

“We have to rescue her,” Barris said.

“Yeah, we have to rescue them all,” Kate said. “But I think we need to make sure Daniel and Fabrique don’t kill each other. What’s the fastest way to Lathe?”

Alicia thought. “I don’t think there are many zip cords down in the middle of the city, so we’d have to take the gondola or zip back to the zeppelin dock and then take the zip from there.”

Kate looked at the window, which was merely an ornate hole in the wall. She wondered what power existed to keep the Messenger inside, and if it was still there. She could sense nothing.

“The fastest way to go is down,” she said, and grabbed them both. Neither Barris nor Alicia had time to protest as Kate lifted them and took a running jump toward the window.

The explosion that Daniel set off when he forced open a hole in the House of Mysteries took him a bit by surprise, but he was pleased at his instinct to protect James,

who didn't have any sort of divine protection. They were blown backward off the building, and Daniel had a moment to think that he was pretty lucky to have done this in Lathe, where he was two feet above the ground, instead of Meridian, where he was a couple hundred feet up. Still, the ground was hard and he was putting most of his divine will into keeping James safe.

Daniel was bleeding from where his head had hit the ground, not to mention where the black glass had cut his face and hands, but James got to his feet unharmed. He stared at the hole with wide eyes, and Daniel thought fast on how to calm him down. He looked around - no one had paid them any attention. "I guess people here are used to explosions, huh? Think we took out a workshop?"

James grinned hesitantly and they approached the smoking hole in the black building. Daniel hopped onto the base of the building and peered into the gaping wound. He squinted through the smoke and thought he saw a glint of copper and heard the click of clockwork when something grabbed him and pulled him in. He didn't even manage to get out a cleverly phrased epithet before he was dunked into a vat of bluish liquid. A few whirring sounds and a lid was secured.

Daniel panicked. He thrashed around in the liquid before he realized that as a god, he didn't really need to breathe. He calmed down a little and peered out through the glass. A blue haze colored the room, but he could see a workshop crowded with gears and cogs and springs and tools and machines and a very small, very angry woman with very curly hair who stood right in front of the vat, apparently yelling at him.

He blinked at her. *Lady, you've locked me in a jar of I-don't-know-what and then yell at me? You think you might be going about this all wrong?*

Beyond her was the thing that had grabbed him - a massive mech-suit that looked like it comfortably seated a small woman. She was pointing at it now, and then back at Daniel. He tried to nod encouragingly. *Yes, you did catch me with the big scary suit. You are clearly the dominant god here. It's clear I'm not a threat and I'm sorry I blew a hole in your wall. Can you let me go now?*

She continued to yell at him, and he sighed - internally, anyway - and started to feel around for a way out. The top was bolted pretty tightly to the jar. He pushed his divine will against it, like he had done to open a hole in the wall, and nothing budged. He tried a shape-change, no dice.

Fuck.

He peered back out of the glass to get a better look at the furious woman, and his heart nearly stopped as she turned from him to focus on the young face of James, who had stuck his head through the hole.

Kate wondered as she and the god and the zeppelin pilot did a free-fall past the temples, how many people committed suicide in Meridian. Or just accidentally fell to their deaths. Barris screamed all the way down, which annoyed the hell out of Kate. He was a god. Immortal. Alicia, the mortal, clung to Kate tightly but did not scream.

They passed through the misty cloud that separated the two cities and began to slow. Kate couldn't sense Daniel at all but she followed Huginn's path to where she had last seen Daniel. The three of them touched down on the rocky street, and Kate told the others to wait for her. She left them, Alicia's face creased with worry and Barris looking around in wonder, and leapt lightly through the gaping hole in the black glass building.

Daniel, James, and a short woman sat at a workbench with tools and half-built inventions pushed aside to give them room for cookies and milk. Daniel was soaking wet, but otherwise unharmed. He waved at her.

"Hey, babe. Come meet Fabrique. She's a god too. Did you know this world's gods are all imprisoned?"

"What the hell happened? Huginn said you were in trouble!"

"I was," Daniel said, pointing to a tall blue tank in the corner of the workshop. "I would have drowned, but luckily I remembered I was a god." He took a bite of cookie.

Kate sighed. "And?"

"She thought we had locked her up. She was understandably pissed. But James came in and told her what was going on. I was lucky to have him around."

Fabrique stood. Her curly hair was held back by the brass goggles that were perched on her head. "I stored him in my collection of chaos energy. He was put in stasis and had no power. I was going to keep him trapped there for as long as I was trapped, but that child came in. He's a smart one."

Alicia crawled through the hole, saw her son, and ran to him and grabbed him, hugging him tight. James struggled against her, clearly embarrassed.

"Mama, I'm okay, please!"

“Your child is blessed,” Fabrique said. “The god Daniel saved me, but James saved him.”

“What are you doing in here?” Kate asked Alicia. “Where’s Barris?”

With James still crushed to her chest, she looked at Kate. “Barris is insufferable. I’d rather face unknown danger with you than sit safely with him.”

Kate swore. “What did he do?”

“He’s just whining. He whines more than the twins do.”

Kate looked out of the still-smoking hole as Fabrique got more glasses and plates to serve the newcomers. Barris was sitting in the middle of the road, tears streaming down his face. He glowed brighter than ever in the dim city.

“What’s going on?” Kate asked.

“I’m free. I can finally be free. And now I can see in person everything I only saw as the sun. Which, of course, was nearly everything, but I couldn’t experience it.”

“Oh, that’s why you knew where all the other gods were,” Kate said. “So tell me. Where is the Messenger god? Who took her?”

Barris stared at her blankly, then laughed. “I am very stupid.” Kate silently agreed with him. “In my excitement I forgot to look. She was taken by the priest of Ishmael, he’s sold her to the pirate ship *Fera*.”

Kate stared at him with wide eyes. “And you’re telling me this now.”

“Oh, an Idea Emporium, can we go there?”

CHAPTER TEN

Daniel flew Alicia back up to her zeppelin so she could pick up the rest of her family and take the ship down to pick up the others. Barris demanded to visit the Idea Emporium, and Fabrique agreed to come with them to rescue the Messenger, but wanted to pack a number of her inventions. “You don’t know what you’re going to need in rescuing the other gods. Especially from pirates.”

“Pirates are bad, I’m sure, but with four gods, how is this going to be an issue?” Kate asked. “I hate to be full of myself here, but we are kinda powerful.”

“Pirates aren’t gods, but they aren’t mortals, either. They live in the Dark,” Barris said, bouncing impatiently. “They are influenced by chaos energy and the Dark Beast. Can we go now?”

Something unpleasant ran down Kate’s spine. “The Dark Beast?”

“Yes. The Dark Beast. It’s bad. It gives them skills that they likely shouldn’t have. It makes them formidable. I haven’t seen everything they’ve done - the Dark tends to hide them from me - but they do things that even chaos energy shouldn’t allow them. Can we please go to the Idea Emporium now?”

Fabrique grinned at Kate, and she sighed. “May I leave James here to help you pack?” The clockwork goddess nodded and kept sticking devices into a carpetbag that really shouldn’t have held them all.

Kate took Barris by the arm and said, “Okay, sun god, let’s go.”

After the House of Mysteries had been blown open, the gods found no need to hide themselves. The citizens of Lathe stood in the center of the city, staring open-mouthed at the House of Mysteries. Kate looked around, grinned at them, and said, “Where’s the Idea Emporium your sun god is so eager to see?”

Professor Burns was delighted to see them, and seemed not at all intimidated that gods were in his store. Kate found the realization of a store where one purchased ideas perplexing, and said so.

“Ah, my Lady, in Lathe there is nothing more valuable than ideas.”

“And what coin do you deal in?” Kate said. She was pretty sure she could produce money, but Lathe might work differently.

“Oh, Lathe works on a barter system. Money works here, for those of us who do business topside, but anything from a vial of chaos energy to a kilo of titanium will work nicely.”

“So ideas are expensive.”

“Mine, yes. But they deliver.”

She bent and peered at the little boxes. Some were woven of reeds, some decorated with beautiful red and black lacquer, and others, wooden boxes from little coffins to intricate puzzle boxes. “How do you, uh, use them?”

“When you need an idea, you simply take the top off and hold it to your ear. It whispers itself to you. The ideas come in flavors of domestic to battle to business to creative invention. As you might expect,” he gestured to a large display case of empty-looking corked vials, “those are our biggest sellers.”

“Wow. How are these made, anyway?”

He puffed himself up. “Trade secret, I’m afraid.”

Kate groaned. Barris had filled his arms with tiny boxes and approached the counter, beaming.

“I’ll take a military idea, please. And whatever Barris wants. How much?”

Professor Burns looked at them each. He frowned for a moment. “Is... could there be any doubt of your divinity? Could you be cleverly disguised spies from Doctor Yamato?”

Kate narrowed her eyes. “Barris, make the sun go out.”

Barris looked up at her over his treasure. “What?”

“Make the sun go out.”

“You’ll want me to turn it back on again, right?”

“If people keep doubting our divinity, maybe not.”

“If you say so,” he said, and screwed up his face.

“No no,” Professor Burns said hurriedly. “That won’t be necessary. I apologize, my Lady. The cost for these ideas would be, ah, a blessing from each of you. Good fortune on my house from the Lady Kate, good fortune on my life from the Lord Barris.”

“Huh. Not on the shop?”

Professor Burns grinned. “The shop needs no blessing. I am quite successful. My wife is ill and my son blames me. Two blessings can’t hurt those situations.”

Kate nodded. She placed her hand on his head and felt the shattered pieces of his life knit slowly back together. Barris just grinned broadly and the room became lighter for an instant.

“Thank you, Professor. Oh, and for your lack of faith, I’ll be sending an apprentice to you in eleven or so years. Take her in and teach her everything you know. She’ll be your heir.”

“But... my son,” he said, and trailed off.

“Your relationship with your son will improve after this, but he’s not an idea man. He’ll find lucrative business in mining - he’ll discover a vein of an ore as-yet undiscovered and it will revolutionize tinkering. But he’s no idea crafter. No, look for a girl named Kelly to continue your legacy. And don’t forget.”

Professor Burns smiled slowly and bowed. “Thank you, My Lady. I’ll remember this day forever. And I will be ready for Kelly when she comes of age.”

Fabrique and James were waiting outside the shop. They stared with the crowd at the building. “It was my prison. And I am loathe to leave it,” she said, as Kate and Barris approached.

“If your prison is all you know, the outside can be scary,” Kate said. “Are you worried about leaving your workshop open?”

Fabrique stared at her. “These are my people. They know this house is a part of me. They know it is a holy place. They may visit, but I will know if they’ve stolen or harmed anything. They know my leaving is temporary.”

“Then let’s go.”

They headed out of town, people bowing whenever they saw them. Kate liked Fabrique at once, despite the fact she’d tried to imprison her man. The small, no-nonsense woman with the impossible brown hair and goggles was definitely someone she wanted on her side.

Daniel, Alicia, and the rest of the kids picked them up outside of town. Fabrique spent some time talking with Alicia about the airship while Kate and Barris and James set up bunks for the newcomers. Kate didn’t mind sharing the captain’s bunk with the two other gods; it wasn’t as if she and Daniel could have sex on the hammocks anyway.

Before they were on their way, they met in the captain’s quarters to discuss their plans.

“They’ve got her in the Dark now,” Barris said, peering at a pretty, closed wooden box stained blue. “But they haven’t landed yet.”

“Did you even check to see what kind of idea that was before you bought it?” Kate asked.

“No. But it’s so pretty.”

Daniel stared at him for a moment. “Well. At least you can find people. And it’s good the Messenger is still in the air, right? We can catch up?”

Alicia shrugged. “This is a family ship. Not a lot of power or speed.”

Fabrique rummaged around in her bag. “No, no, won’t need that for another couple of days; oh, THAT would come in handy, but not now—ahhhh.” She thumped a small device on the desk. Alicia put her face up close to it to see the tiny brass workmanship.

She gasped. “The detail is incredible. It’s like an accelerator, only one fifth the size of a weak one. How strong is it?”

Fabrique shrugged. “Not sure if you can measure it. I had a finite space in which to work for many years. I had to perfect the small machines. Hook that to your propeller engine and make sure everyone is strapped in. We’ll get there in no time.”

“Can you do this with a skeleton crew, Alicia?” Kate asked.

“Well, I don’t really have much of a skeleton crew anymore, do I?” she replied. “Sarah and Fabrique both know the ship. I have Barris, such as he is, as navigation, Daniel to give cloaking, and you, well, you’re the admiral.” She grinned at Kate, who felt her cheeks grow hot.

“We’re at your service, Alicia. You don’t know what it means to have you help us out,” Daniel said.

“Well, so far two of my five kids have their futures set,” Alicia said. “I think I’m making out just fine.”

After his meeting with Fabrique, James had shown considerable interest in tinkering, and the goddess said he could study in the House of Mysteries when he came of age. And Alicia nearly wept when Kate had told her about the deal with Professor Burns.

“Oh, we’ll take care of the other three, just give us time,” Kate said. “Is there anything else, or should we set about hooking that little device up?”

The terrain changed as they headed north, from rocky tundra to sandy tundra to just sand. But this wasn't the sand Kate remembered from the Wasteland; this sand was black and the world around them seemed less like a blank slate and more like a slate that had been rolled in grit and painted black. Not really the pristine canvas she was familiar with. A fetid mist began to obscure the ground from their sight, and Kate wrinkled her nose.

As promised, they reached the ship they were pursuing in very little time, with all of the kids but Sarah strapped into their bunks and everyone at their stations. Barris - and the five ideas he'd insisted on bringing with him - stood at the helm with Alicia. Kate stood behind them both, waiting to be needed. Daniel had positioned himself at the stern to get a clear look at the entire battle. Sarah was at the gauges looking for fluctuations, and Fabrique had gone below decks to acquaint herself with the engine.

Still, it was an unpleasant surprise when they were attacked unexpectedly from above.

The airship - thin, fast and lethal - came at them from an angle high above them, and Daniel screamed out a warning. Kate managed to throw up a shield before the ship's bow - a sharpened rod of metal— tore through the zeppelin's balloon. The ship - the *Fera*, from the name they could see as it passed too closely - bounced off and dove under them.

"Goddammit, Barris, I thought you were supposed to see them coming!" Kate yelled, picking herself off the deck.

"I told you I can't see everything, especially when it's affected by the Dark!" he cried petulantly. He pulled the cover off his blue idea box and held the open box to his ear. He smiled.

"What did it say?" Kate asked.

"It gave excellent investment advice if I want to open a business in Meridian," he said.

Kate actually felt like hitting him, but Daniel had approached her and pulled her back. "Kate, did you see the crew of that ship?"

"No, I was too busy shielding us," she replied tersely.

"They had some crazy tattoos. Like most of their skin. Black, heavy black ink."

“So, they’re pirates, they’re supposed to be scary.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure I saw these tattoos move.”

“Oh, that’s the Dark influence,” Barris said, “That’s what makes them stronger than anyone else.”

Kate felt her insides grow very cold. She looked at Daniel. He was pale.

“It’s that thing, isn’t it?” he whispered.

“It’s wrapped itself around the other Earth, and it’s trying to get at this one through the Wasteland.”

“So...”

“So what do you think is at the other end of this Wasteland? I think it’s a connection between the two. And the pirates-”

“Ware starboard!” Alicia cried, and Kate swore when she saw the ship barreling down on them.

The *Fera* had circled back around and came at them again, perpendicular to them, dead on target to impale their balloon.

Kate plunged her hand into her pocket and pulled out her idea, tightly closed in a gray box made of paper. She opened it and heard the soft voice of Professor Burns whispering to her. “Have faith in yourself, have faith in your crew, and use all tools at hand.”

She swore and threw the box overboard. “I paid a blessing for THAT? It’s a fortune cookie without the cookie!” She focused on Sarah. “Release pressure on the balloon! Fast!”

The girl didn’t question her, but twisted a knob hard to the left, and the escaping gas whooshed and the ship dropped faster than it should have, letting the *Fera* pass over them.

Sarah tightened the knob again, her eyes wide. “How did we do that?” she asked.

“I have a couple of tricks still left,” Kate said grimly. “How long till we can fill the bag again?”

“Two minutes.”

“You know, I don’t think the Gamma is on that ship,” Barris said thoughtfully.

Kate nodded. Alicia screamed then, and Kate whirled her head around to look behind them.

A second airship, the *Ferus*, moved with an inevitability that terrified her. Gargantuan, with two full balloons, it gave the impression of taking a damn long time to get up to speed, but when it did, all of the gods help whatever was in its way. But what if what was in the way was all the gods?

“Oh!” Barris said. “There she is!”

Alicia screamed for Fabrique to finish filling the balloon because she needed altitude.

“I think I can avoid this one, don’t worry,” called Daniel from the stern.

“It’s not the ship I’m worried about. Look beyond it,” Alicia said, sweat beading her brow.

Kate squinted at the swirling mass that pursued both airships. “What is that?”

“An improbability storm. Once you can see it, you’re in it, even if it looks far away. It’s unpredictable.”

The *Ferus* was gaining on them, and Daniel swore as the *Fera* angled for another attack. He dashed below deck and came back with the chicken gun. The pirates aboard jeered and screamed at them, and Daniel staggered back as the gun went off.

His aim was true, with the high velocity chicken parts ripping into the *Fera*’s balloon. The ship faltered and the pirates screamed at them as they lost altitude.

“That was the last of the chicken,” Sarah said, as Daniel looked at her for more ammo. He swore. Kate wanted to laugh - why hadn’t they stocked up on chicken parts?

The *Sheridan* turned faster than the *Ferus* and Kate shuddered as it passed over them.

Barris uncapped another box and listened. “Skim the ground, they’re weaker there!”

Alicia looked to Kate for confirmation and she shrugged. He was a sun god, if a feeble one. “Do it.”

They broke the cloud cover and dove straight into the improbability storm.

Unlike in Meridian, people could build directly on the sand here, and they had. Black bunkers rose from the ground like malevolent mushrooms, and they were decorated with spikes, weapons, and skeletons. Gun turrets swiveled to follow them, and Kate swore again and closed her eyes, willing the zeppelin to teleport higher. It didn’t

budge. She pounded on the deck.

“Fabrique, we need speed again!”

“It’s malfunctioning!” came the muffled reply.

“Improbability,” muttered Alicia.

“So we’re on our own. Just our normal boring selves,” said Daniel.

“If you’re so dim to think you haven’t changed in the past months, then get out of my way and let me do my job,” Kate snarled at him, and he actually took a step back. It killed her to say it, but she knew he’d either step up or crumble. She didn’t have time for him to dither.

He grinned, then, and said, “Man. I love you.”

She kissed him, quick and powerful, and said, “Go see what you can do. Anything you can summon is useful. Power is volatile here. I’m hoping that we haven’t lost everything.”

He nodded and ran to the back of the ship again. Kate rounded on Barris as the first shot - a blue laser beam that sheared off a corner of the deck railing - came from below as Alicia forced the zeppelin to climb. They had almost reached the cloud cover.

“What the hell was that idea? Was that in the “help the enemy” idea case?” Kate yelled.

“It was on sale in a basket on the floor!” Barris cried. “Two for one!”

Kate smacked herself on the forehead to avoid strangling him. She’d seen that basket. “You absolute fool! Didn’t you see that was the Bad Idea Basket? Why do you think they were on sale?”

“Why would he sell bad ideas?”

“I don’t know, maybe they’re jokes, or...” Kate stumbled as the *Sheridan* lurched in its upward climb right under the cloud cover.

“Lady, the big one is above us,” Alicia said, and Kate was impressed with her level voice. “It’s latched onto the balloon.”

“Has it cut it?”

“No, I believe they want to board.”

“Right.” Kate nodded. She grabbed another blue lacquer box from Barris. “Daniel. Can you shape-change at all? Anything that can fly. Anything.”

Daniel concentrated and became a pterodactyl chick. She handed the box to him

and told him what to do with it. He left with a flapping of wings.

“Now, Alicia, do you have weapons aboard?”

She shook her head. “Just the chicken gun for the whales. We had bigger, tougher ships for trips like this. This is a leisure ship.”

“When we’re done, we have got to rebuild your fleet,” Kate said absently.

She reached behind her back and willed her sword into being - the YIN sword, the volatile, untrustworthy sword. If there was a time for it not to come, now would be it, but her hand closed around a hilt, and she drew it. But gods, it was heavy. It was supposed to be a tai chi sword, light and perfect for a woman’s hand. It felt like a longsword. Or a claymore. When she brought it over her head, the blade clunked to the deck and Kate found it impossible to lift.

“Lady, they’ll be here soon,” Alicia said, still struggling with the controls.

“I can’t lift my sword, it, oh my god...” Kate dropped the hilt and backed up as the sword began to change even as Daniel returned, landing lightly on the deck.

“Package delivered. Who’s that?” he asked.

“It’s Gamma, can we go now?” asked Barris.

At that moment, *The Sheridan* shot forward, and Alicia cried, “We’re free!”

“Outrun them, get into the clouds and haul ass,” Kate said.

At that moment, they heard a groan, and Fabrique came up from the trapdoor on the deck. She carried a shoulder-mounted weapon and was scowling.

“I couldn’t make the ship move, but I could damn well build a weapon.” She focused on the pursuing ship, *The Ferus*. There was a sound much lower than Kate expected to hear, a low FOOM, and the *Ferus*’s left balloon disintegrated. The ship listed to the right and began to sink.

“Where to?” Alicia asked.

“Climb and keep going north,” Kate said.

Gamma, the Warrior Messenger to the Gods, looked very familiar to Daniel. Dark brown skin, high cheekbones, wiry build. She opened her eyes and smiled at them.

“My Lord, I knew I’d see you again. I have a message for you.”

“Oh! You’re THE Gamma! The first woman!” he said. “You got made a god? Uh, congratulations.”

She laughed. "I learned my skills heading through the battlefield to get to heaven," she said. "Once I got through and let them know you were here, I had enough skill to be a goddess. They gave me one message to give you and then sent me back, but the Dark locked us all away. After you freed Barris, you broke the lock on the entire building, and the Dark got its pirates to manipulate the priest of Ishmael to kidnap me."

"And how did you get in Kate's sword?" he asked.

"I'm connected to all weapons. Kate's is special, though, and here in the Wasteland, my connection was very strong. The pirates were distracted by the idea you dropped off, and I took my chance." She paused. "The captain was dumber than my fifth husband to fall for whatever that box told him."

"Impossible," Fabrique said, and grinned.

Daniel sat back on his heels, adrenaline making his limbs feel sour. They had made it.

"Daniel," Kate said.

He got up and joined her at the bow.

"Look. Can you see it?"

He squinted. The Wasteland had gotten darker as they'd gotten further in, and ahead they could see a writhing mass obscenely covering a globe. "The Earth. You were right. Fuck, Kate."

"Turn around," Kate told Alicia. "Take us back to Meridian."

"What about the storm?" she asked.

"I don't think it's there anymore. It nearly got us, if not for Barris's bad idea. I don't think it was a natural storm."

Alicia snorted. "Improbability never is."

Gamma joined them, stretching her limbs. "Don't you want to know what your message is?"

"Oh, shit, I forgot," Daniel said. "Yes, please."

"Just one word. 'Help.'"

Daniel and Kate exchanged glances. She sought his hand, and he squeezed it.

"We're going to need those other gods," said Daniel.

She nodded. "We're going to need more than that, Daniel. We're going to war."

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**Sneak Peek
Of
War
The Afterlife Series V**

CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I kept the sun in the sky! Imagine what would happen if I failed to do that for even one minute!" he said. He shifted his focus to her, the warrior messenger. She towered over him, strong and dark and imposing next to his pale, weak body. Revulsion for himself replaced his dislike of her and he sat up with difficulty, sighing. "What do you want, anyway?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was the sun, after all.

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He swooped down below Meridian and surveyed Lathe, allowing them to receive some of his power: a treat that that they never experienced during the day. He glided west then, over the ocean. He loved the waves, the water, so unlike himself. Dark and heavy, they were another world, but it also was a prison to another god. He'd told Kate and Daniel about the sea god, Ishmael, trapped beneath the waves; he assumed they would be trying to free him soon. As beautiful as the ocean was, he feared venturing below it. It was not his element.

He surveyed the world as far as he could. He skirted the Dark place, the Wasteland

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded absently and sipped her coffee.

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

actually there, imprisoned in the temples.

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

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

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

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

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

Fabrique nodded. "Maybe you set her free."

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

Barris nodded absently.

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

Fabrique pulled a map tube out of her tiny bag and pulled out two sheets — one was a clear plastic and one was paper. She unrolled the paper in the middle of the table. "This is Lathe," she said, bending over it so her copper curls brushed the map. She then

unrolled the plastic over the map of Lathe. A map was drawn in black ink and it took Kate only a moment to realize what it was. “And this is Meridian. So you can see where we are in relation to Lathe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh.”

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

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

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

“Which I assume we’ll have to do at some point,” Kate said. She shuddered. She didn’t like the Dark. It was still Wasteland, full of potential, but tainted, chaotic potential that seemed to ignore divinity. She knew it was the taint of the dark beast that enveloped heaven, and it — like many other things — needed to be cleansed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why not now?” asked Daniel.

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

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

Fabrique nodded. “I’ll be happy to get some supplies at the House of Mysteries.”

Gamma frowned. “I’ll be on the roof, then. If you need me, just draw your sword.”

Kate stood. Barris sat in the chair beside her, fiddling with the little idea box lid

again. "Barris, where will you be in the meantime?"

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

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

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

"Obviously," he said, frowning.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

