

**HEAVEN SEASON FIVE: WAR**

**V. .02**

**NOTE**

This is not a final draft.

I'm not even sure it's an official rough draft.

This is the second 10K words of my new work of fiction, Heaven Season Five: War. This is for distribution to Inside Story subscribers only - <http://www.heavennovel.com> - who understand that this is considered a work in progress. I have tried to fix typos, but otherwise this is as-is. I have left in my notes on what I will fix on rewrite.

Thanks for supporting Heaven and me, and giving me a chance to show you a quick view inside my head.

Mur Lafferty

May 12, 2009

Durham, NC, USA

The wall of fire seemed to be doing a good job of holding back the storm, but it was clear they had to get out in it.

The eye seemed to be about half a mile wide, with the wind swirling around them. Even though it was still dark, they could see the wind, solid here, gaseous there, even liquid and blue as it devoured the air around them.

"How do we move through that?" Kate yelled.

"We're gods, right?" asked Daniel.

"No, dude, that won't work!" she replied, squinting through the flames as sputtered as a wave of water hit them. "Did you forget that our powers are at best unpredictable in this shit?"

Daniel grimaced. He had forgotten. What was the point of being gods of this world if he didn't have any power when he needed it? He remembered a story Kate had told him one night after they'd made love - they'd discussed their godly limitations and Kate had said that once Titans had stuffed the Greek god Ares into an urn during a battle, where he stayed until the other gods let him out. She'd always wondered how a god didn't have the power to get out.

Daniel thought it had made for good narrative, but really, what god had omnipotence? All of the gods he'd met had had powers, sure. He and Kate had created whole worlds. But neither of them could heal his eye, which had been taken by a god. If

other gods could mess with their powers (as someone clearly had with this wall of fire), then they were not omnipotent.

And what were these improbability storms but tools of chaos that pushed gods' powers to the edge of uselessness?

Something teased at Daniel's mind then, a whisper of Odin, a name. Something like "Gagap." He tried to chase the thought, find the information that the old god had left in his head, but it was gone as the scream of the storm drowned out all thought.

"Hang on!" came the yell behind them. Scott Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson came running down the hall, waving two black robes. They flapped behind him like wings.

Daniel took a step back from the hell outside the door and turned to meet the panting man.

"If you're determined to go out in that, you'll want these cloaks," he panted. "I don't know why you would want to, but if you do, you'll have these."

"What are they?" Kate asked softly, still staring into the roiling horror, which had started turning into billowy, black smoke that battered at the flames as if it were great fists.

"TK Cloaks," was Scott's answer. Daniel looked at him blankly. "They're designed to protect you from the improbability storms."

Daniel ran his hands over the thick black wool. A power cell about the size of a D battery hung at the hem, spreading circuits through the cloak. "How do they do that?"

"I took some chaos energy and tamed it with my Order Magnifier. It resonates through the cloak, forcing any chaos surrounding it to actually charge the battery. As long as chaos forces are at work, the cloak gets stronger and stronger." The scientist's eyes were wide with delight.

"That doesn't seem logical," Daniel said, trying to remember the conservation of energy laws he'd learned in high school.

"Or probable," Kate said,, breaking her gaze from the storm. "We'll take them."

"Oh good!" Scott said. "Please, if you survive, let me know how they work, will you?"

Daniel paused with the robe poised over his head, ready to fall. "Wait, you haven't tested them?"

Scott looked sheepish. "Well, no one will go into the storm to test it for me. And I certainly can't go."

Kate grimaced. "Of course you can't." She smoothed the black robe over her white acolyte robe and said, "how do we turn it on?"

Scott leaned over and switched both of their robes on, and they came to life, humming quietly around them. Daniel felt decidedly odd- a little heavier, a little less confident. Which

was odd, he figured, since the cloak was supposed to help keep him safe.

"Good luck!" said the scientist, beaming at them, his eyes wide through his glasses.

Daniel smiled at him and took Kate's hand. She frowned and opened her mouth, but then they stepped outside and any protest she had was lost in the screaming storm.

Whatever the flying creature had done to create the wall of fire had begun to weaken. The door slammed behind them, and Kate and Daniel stood and watched the storm batter at the fire in front of them.

"Now what?" Kate asked.

"Let's head north as far as we can. Stay on this side of the fire," Daniel said, squinting in the darkness.

The fire had begun to show holes, like a piece of paper licked at by flames. They linked hands and ran, passing paths that led into the hills, presumably to more caves and more scientists. Their footing went from gravel to dirt to grass and back to gravel. Kate was pretty sure they passed a clockwork bird that stood on the top of a metal perch. She was further convinced that the bird swiveled its head to follow them, and it flapped its metal wings in alarm. But they were moving too fast to know for sure.

It dawned on her slowly that although they were running as hard as they could, they weren't making very good time. They both stumbled more than once in the darkness, at times their dashing felt more like plodding.

The improbability storm. Of course. It dampened their divinity; they may as well be mortal. She shivered. Right now mortal and alive was terrifying - of course, since she had died

as a god, it was proof divinity meant little to nothing when something godlike wanted you dead.

Then the improbability storm broke through the wall of fire and drove all other thoughts from her mind.

Kate had never considered what colors would feel, smell, or sound like. Her sight left her as the storm enveloped them and she had a sense of being accosted by colors instead of wind. She closed her eyes and felt pink tickle at her cheeks, green wound around her ankles like insistent vines. She heard blue moan softly near her, and a small burning taste of yellow forced itself past her lips to linger on her tongue. She sensed thousands of other shades whirling around her, but they ceased suddenly when Daniel pulled her hood over her head.

He pulled her head in to touch his forehead and gripped her shoulders. "Your hood slipped off. Are you OK?"

Grateful for sight again, she nodded. "Are we close?"

He sighed. "I am not sure. This storm is pretty damn big."

"I can't sense anything," she said.

"I know. We just need to keep going. And keep that hood up."

They linked hands again, with magenta burrs sticking to their exposed skin, and ran on.

The colors were only felt, not seen, but lighting flashed through the clouds, sometimes right in front of them, leaving

behind a smell of sulfur and spots before their eyes. As bright spots blossomed in Kate's eyes, images assaulted her.

She stumbled to a halt. Images of Daniel with his numerous ex-girlfriends. The image of her father stony-faced at her funeral, refusing to cry. The image of her grandmother in the hated nursing home, abused by an orderly because no one gave a damn about her anymore.

A duckling she had allowed to starve to death after Easter one year, forgotten in the wake of chocolate bunnies and jelly beans. The suicide of a boy whose depression began when she had laughed at his invitation to a dance.

All reminders that she was far from perfections, that she was far from lovable. She felt Daniel pulling at her wrist, but the magenta burrs caused her to gasp and let go. He disappeared in a swirl of wind that tasted like regret.

Small gnomes, giggling and pudgy with tall red caps, fell out of a cloud and grabbed her hands and pulled. She resisted and watched her fingers stretch like putty. She blinked past the horror and realized this was the improbability storm attacking her from all sides. She didn't have to stand for this. She was a god, and even if she didn't have her power right now, she at least was still Kate, and that aspect of her being had gotten her out of more than one scrape.

She pulled her hands inside her cloak, and the extra tendrils of fingers broke off, causing her to gasp in pain. She didn't look down at her hands- she'd be OK eventually. She needed to be inside the protection of the cloak. She took a deep breath and stepped forward into the mist.

The storm had abandoned the concept of colors as tangible things and had moved on to emotions. She was mostly protected by her hood, but as she trudged forward, looking around for Daniel, she found herself lost in a haze of euphoria, despair, and guilt.

She stumbled over something dense and short and went sprawling. She lacerated her hand on a sharp stone and watched the blood well up.

Great. Nothing good ever happens when I get cut.

Her attention was distracted from the blood leaking from her hand to the stump she'd fallen over, which wasn't a stump at all but Daniel, crouched with his arms wrapped around his knees. He sobbed quietly, and Kate could feel a cloud of grief around him.

She reached forward and put her arms around him. He mumbled something incoherent about, "'s all going away."

Struggling with nothing more than her normal strength, she hauled him to his feet and murmured encouraging words to him as she forced him through the storm.

The storm had stopped accosting them directly, but Kate was still beset by strange visions. In one, a distraught man with only one arm and one leg yelled at an anthropomorphic penguin. In another, an air whale drifted through the storm, then plummeted messily to the earth. A third had high school crush of Kate's getting up the nerve to call and ask her out, but it was when she was on the phone with her best friend, and the busy signal discouraged him.

"He only got the nerve to ask me out once? That coward," muttered Kate.

Daniel continued to sob at her side, and she didn't know if her irritation was a false emotion caused by the storm or if it was real. Still.

"Hey, Daniel, chin up, dude, we have a job to do. Whatever the storm showed you, it was false. Not real. Fabricated. Let's move on, OK?" He wouldn't look at her. She gave him a little shake. "Daniel. Sweetie. I just saw a guy yelling at a penguin. This shit isn't real."

He finally looked up at her. She recoiled from the wide, red-rimmed eyes. "What I saw was real. I know it was. It was Heaven. And it wasn't good."

"What was going on?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but just yelled, "Look out!"

They ducked together, watching the blue-tinged net fly over their heads.

"That was real," Daniel said, sniffing.

"Agreed," Kate said. "Why is someone throwing nets at us?"

"I think it's safe to bet that while we figured out who Sam was, he probably figured out who we were."

Kate fingered the rich grass she realized they'd fallen on. "Oh. We're here." She rolled and got to her feet, but the darkness and wind didn't allow her to see anything around her.

"Listen, I'll go see if I can find Prosper. Can you handle Sam?" she asked.

"Jesus, why me?"

Kate sighed. "You're the trickster, dude. You can handle anyone. I'm not nearly as subversive as you are. You could trick him, reason with him, or just confuse him and lure him away. I don't know! All I know is he has one god imprisoned, so I'm betting he can catch another one, so we need to free Prosper and get out of here."

She kissed him briefly and ran in the direction she thought the caves might be. She had gotten pretty good at ignoring what the storm was throwing at her, be it gnomes or colors or grape vines wrapped around trellises at the perfect height to closeline her...

Oh. That was real.

#

She came to with her head aching and her neck raw and sore. She sat up. How long had she been out? And-wait. Where was she?

She sat within a shallow cave about six feet deep and ten feet wide, clearly chipped out and man-made. She sprawled on the rocky floor amidst several tendrils of grape vines, some wrapped around her ankles. The vines seemed to originate from inside the cave and stretch out to the trellises. A lump of vines lay clumped in the corner. The storm still held of the outside, but had lessened to the point of odd gusts of wind. The horizon glowed slightly with light.

"God, how long was I out?" She asked, rubbing her head.

"Three hours," came a hiss from the other side of the room.

Kate jumped and swore as the sudden movement made her head ache more. "Who's there?"

The lump in the opposite corner stirred, and the vines wrapped around Kate's legs tightened. She slid back until her back was against the wall, but the vines stayed firm around her ankles.

The lump in the corner continued to stir and almost unfolded, branching out and becoming man-shaped. The rough, round, bumpy base of one vine turned slowly, and two green eyes peered out. It smiled, then, showing roots and a mossy interior. Its tongue was a white root.

"Prosper, my lady," it said. "Your prisoner."

#

Kate stared at him. She wanted to look away, but she knew she had to face this grotesque mockery of divinity who had been utterly used and corrupted.

"Prosper. Shit. Listen. I didn't do this to you. Daniel didn't either. We had nothing to do with it."

A vine waved as if an airy hand, waving away her protests. "I know that. I have been owned and passed around between farmers for hundreds of years. But you, you were the first jailer."

Kate got to her knees and started to crawl forward, eyes darting around at the shifting vines. "Listen, I was not the first. In my view, I've only been alive again for a couple of days. We didn't imprison you, but we're trying to free you. What can I do to help?"

She looked around helplessly. The fines all originated from the god's body, and she didn't want to think what he had gone through to have those seeds implanted. She thought of the fine wine, the Cmar, that she had drunk, and her stomach turned over. No wonder it had been so good.

She slowly approached him, and he simply watched her. But when she reached out a hand to gingerly touch one of the thick vines growing from his chest, a smaller vine snaked out and wrapped around her wrist, keeping her away.

"Prosper, I'm just trying to help you. Can we cut the vines and get you out of here?"

More vines wrapped around her ankles and lifted her into the air. She struggled, annoyed at how her cloak and accolyte robe threatened to fall over her head. He held her in front of his warped and wooden face.

"These are my children. I give them life. Through me they are able to bear fruit. What kind of god of the harvest would I be if I allowed them to die?"

Kate gathered the cloak at her waist and held it tight. "Well, you'd be a free god, for one thing, not used for some lucky mortal's wine business."

He shook her and lifted her high, taking her outside the cave and high into the air. Kate could hear him yelling, but she was lifted too high to hear what he was saying.

She was too preoccupied with hanging upside down from the tentacle-like vines growing out of the god she was trying to rescue that it took her a moment to realize the improbabilty storm had passed, leaving a lovely morning on the green hilltop.

It also took her a moment to realize Daniel was nowhere to be found.

But the lack of storm also meant she had access to her powers again. She tried to will herself wings, trying to grow them as the enraged god took her higher and higher into the air.

Nothing happened.

"Shit." What had changed? The storm was gone, she was unharmed, she shouldn't be having problems.

But when Prosper dropped her, gravity felt very real.

#

Luckily the wind in her face snapped her into quick thinking. She let go of the loaned cloak and let it slide over her head and off her arms.

Immediately wings burst from her back and she stopped her fall, swooping low over the ground and back up in the air, panting. No wonder the cloak had made her feel so sluggish - as it had repelled the worse of the improbability storm, it had been dampening her own divine power. That had some serious repercussions.

But the serious issue now had to do with Prosper and his inhuman screams.

Kate flew down and landed lightly on the ground, paling at what she saw.

The dropped cloak had landed directly to cover the main vines growing from Prosper's cave to the vineyard's trellises. Blocked from the divine influence of the god, the vines were wilting and shriveling, and one by one they snapped, causing Prosper to howl louder with each one.

Finally having her awareness returned to her, Kate caught the sound of a door opening. She turned and saw Sam, looking a lot less friendly and a lot more menacing, step out. He had a large wooden harpoon gun that was armed with a net.

"From one to three in one night, not bad!" [GIVE SAM A MORE DISTINCTIVE SINGOSONGY VOICE TK] he said, and aimed.

The final vine snapped under the cloak and Prosper's screams turned to sobbing. Kate moved as fast as she could, zipping into the cave as the net crashed into the rocks behind her. She grabbed Prosper, who battered her arms weakly with his vines, and lifted him in a firemans's carry.

One step outside the cave to let her wings stretch out and she was in the air, leaving Sam cursing behind her.

"Oh would you shut the fuck up, for yor own sake?" she said. "I just saved you from slavery."

"My babies," he wept.

"That was an accident, and I'm sorry about it," she said as she climbed higher. "You dropped me and I had to either lose that cloak or break my neck. I didn't mean to drop it on you."

He didn't answer. Kate sighed and glanced back once at the vineyard, shriveling in the morning sun, and bit her lip.

"I'll be back Daniel. I promise. I just have to get this crybaby back to his temple."

Meridian shone in the early morning light, the buildings glinting and swaying in the light wind. It seemed to have survived the improbability storm much better than Daniel had. Daniel, who currently sat in a cage like an animal, trapped in his coyote form.

When Kate had left him, he went for Sam, heading in the direction from where the net had come. He had tried, briefly, to manipulate some matter around him, but he had been stifled by the cloak. Unlike Kate, he figured it out right away and dropped it, braving the storm's dangers.

He slipped into coyote form, and immediately found himself somewhere else. He sat in a room full of coyotes, each representing a different trickster god. Hermes was a tail-wagging dark red coyote, Loki was closer to black, and watched him with no humor in his eyes. Daniel didn't recognize all of the gods there, but he could taste their power as similar to his own. He sat on a dais in the middle of the room, and they surrounded him.

Am I on trial?

Daniel whipped his head around, looking for an exit to the room. Guys, I'd be glad to talk about this any other time than now, but it's not really a good time. I'm kinda trying to stop a guy who's hunting me. How's next week? Guys?

The barks and howls that greeted him indicated that they were not on board with the next week plan.

Coyote, the original, paced in front of him, grinning. She opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment Daniel felt burning ropes surround him. The courtroom dissolved around him and he struggled under a blue net that surrounded him. He tried to shapechange but couldn't, he tried to bite the ropes and was rewarded with a burnt tongue. Whatever blue substance the net was laced with that was able to incapacitate him was also draining his strength. He struggled and fell on his side, growling. He snarled at the man who approached him who grinned at him as the storm whirled around him.

It was only as he lost consciousness that he realized that the storm didn't seem to be bugging Sam at all.

#

Trapped like a bad stray dog. I was even caught with a big net like on the cartoons. Sheesh.

Daniel paced his cage as well as he could, which consisted of two steps in either direction. It looked like simple wood, about twice as high and long as he was. Something he should easily be able to break out of, but thin blue wire glowed from where it had been pressed into the wood, and he eyed it warily. As he was unable to use his shapechange ability here, it was pretty clear

that whatever current ran through that wire was the same as what made the net able to catch him.

Why is it so easy to catch a god in this place? Either we're still really ineffective in the whole god department, or there's some pretty fucking amazing power sources.

He'd thought only a god - Fabrique, goddess of clockwork, for instance- could create a device to trap a god. She had trapped him quite well when he had broken into her House of Mysteries. But apparently anyone good at tinkering could harness this stuff.

He sniffed at the wire and shook his head in disgust. It filled his canine nose with acrid, sharp, overwhelming smells. His mind filled with a sense of something very large distilled into something small and concentrated, a power with no rhyme or reason, a power like a storm, throwing tornadoes and lightning at one house and not another. But if you could harness and focus a storm's power, you'd be pretty damn difficult to stop.

Daniel wondered offhand if there were weather gods here.

The room beyond his cage was rather large. He guessed, with the vats and barrels that surrounded him he was in the winery. Beyond the smell of the wire, which now dominated his senses, he could sense slightly an alcoholic odor. On the far wall up high was a tiny window. That, plus the cool, heavy, dank air made him think he was in a basement.

Course, I could be in full sunlight on a roof and I couldn't get out of this cage. He amended the thought with the realization that his friends could find him if he were in full sunlight; down here no one could see him.

The urge to lie down and put his head on his paws and pout was a strong one. He couldn't break out, contact his friends, or hell, even form human words to talk himself out of this situation. Some trickster god.

Oh shut the fuck up. He thought angrily. You've done the feeling-sorry-for-yourself thing. Got you nowhere. You are a god, for Christ's sake. Screw Christ, actually. You're a god for YOUR sake!

He remembered with a start the trickster gods that had distracted him sufficiently enough for Sam to get the net around him. Why had they done that? Had it actually been a trial? And how had they done that, if they were all back in Heaven?

Coyote had led him through the Wasteland to learn about his power, making it possible for him to bring Kate back to life after her sacrifice to defend Heaven. The trickster god clearly wasn't trapped, or if she was, she wasn't without power.

Like me.

He thought of what he had at his disposal. He paced the perimeter of the cage, sniffing at the floor, the bars, the joinings between them, looking for a weakness. The bars were

narrowly spaced; he could only shove his snout through, not the rest of his head.

No weakness found, he flopped down and put his head on his paws. But despair wasn't on his mind. He closed his eye and breathed deeply, attempting to hit a trance, some sort of state of being to get inspiration, bring coyote back, even welcome back the trial.

The other tricksters remained absent and silent. But a plan began to form in his mind, a plan worthy of a trapped animal. The human part of Daniel winced and wondered at the logic of it, but the coyote part of him nodded in cold certainty.

He opened his eyes and regarded his left front paw. Daniel couldn't bring himself to do it, so he consciously retreated and allowed the animal part of him to settle down and begin to gnaw.

#

I really am not looking forward to being human again.

Daniel lay on his right side, panting. His left paw lay beside him, gnawed clean off by his strong jaws. The bone had been the worst part, but he had broken it clearly, desire to be free stronger than the maelstrom of pain that engulfed his leg.

The animal had almost completely taken over, ignoring the pain to heave himself to three legs. He held the left leg high, blood still dripping. He took his paw in his jaws and flung it through the bars. It soared through them without touching and

landed with a wet plot about six feet beyond the cage, slightly behind a wine vat. He lay down again, not minding the tacky blood on the floor of the cage that got in his thick coat. He could only hope now.

He was licking his wound when Sam finally came to visit him.

"One god is lost, one god is gained. I am not sure I made out good on that," the big man said conversationally, not looking at Daniel. He checked on the vat closest to the door and adjusted a knob. "And I got the weak cripple. Do you know what we did with cripples in TK CITY?"

Daniel didn't pay attention to him, just kept licking. The wound had stopped bleeding, and it was more of a comfort rather than cleaning.

"We tossed them out the airlock and watched them drown," Sam continued, checking a figure on a clipboard. "You need strength to live under the sea, and the weak could have caused problems. It's why my parents were exiled, see. I wanted three gods, and I'm stuck with the worst one. And you can't even talk - by Ishmael's lost foreskin, what happened here?"

He had finally looked in the cage and seen Daniel lying in a pool of his own blood, licking his stump. Daniel regarded him calmly, then went back to licking.

"You idiot!" Sam raged, bringing both hands down on the cage in a mighty thump. "I really did get the worst god. You don't

even know enough to realize that chewing off a leg doesn't get you anything in a cage like this! You're thinking a bear trap! Oh you fool! Now my god is even more of a cripple! What am I going to do with you now?"

Daniel's heart leapt. Weak? Worst? Stupid? Words that once would have hurt him now bolstered him. If Sam thought he was these things, he would underestimate Daniel. And that's what Daniel wanted.

He opened his mouth and panted, giving a doggy smile with blood coating his muzzle.

Sam groaned and turned his back, holding his head in his hands. "I've lost Prosper, my vines are dead, what am I going to do?"

He stopped groaning and turned, his eyes narrowing as he regarded the cage. "You may be an idiot, but you're still made of godstuff."

Daniel forced himself to keep casually licking, but he didn't like the new focus in Sam's voice. "And there is godstuff all over the floor of that cage."

Daniel looked down at the blood that still coated the wooden floor of the cage. He realized Sam was right. His paw, his blood, maybe even his piss were all divine, and would have power outside this divine-stultifying cage.

Sam ran from the room and returned with a wooden board. Blue wires ran around the board and connected to what looked like a battery case on one end, and the whole thing glowed. Daniel bared his teeth and backed into the corner of the cage.

"At least you know enough to stay away from this," Sam said, opening the door to the cage and inserting the board in first. Daniel would have to push against the board to get out, now, and he obediently held back.

With his left hand, he held Daniel at bay with the board, and with his right he carefully mopped up Daniel's blood with a rag. "Got a scientist, James Melzer, who will know what to do with this," he said. "Powerful stuff, I'm sure."

He pulled the rag and the board out of the cage, slamming the door quickly, and sat back on his heels. His eyes narrowed again.

"Wait a moment. If you gnawed your foot off, where did it end up? Did you swallow it?"

Crap, thought Daniel.

The big man dropped the board and stood, stashing the rag in his back pocket. He looked on the floor around the cage and then further into the room. Daniel held his breath as Sam went behind the barrel where he'd thrown the paw.

Sam got to his hands and knees and pulled out the rag. Daniel whined low in his throat. Sam did something with the rag and put it back in his pocket.

"Well, broken god, I will see what I can do with this. But I will find that paw before I'm done. At worst, it looks like I might be able to cut you up and sell the parts to a tinker. You've got to be as powerful as chaos energy."

With that he slammed the door, and Daniel heard a key turn in the lock.

Now what?

"What" turned out to be a movement that caught his eye. A shadow danced on the wall beyond the wine vats, the dark sibling to a sunbeam peeking through the trees. It took a humanoid form and skipped around the wall, playing with light, hiding, teasing, having a grand time leaping in and out of shadows. It twisted and contorted, actually making a series of shadow puppets that had Daniel amused even as he was annoyed.

Yeah. That's definitely part of me.

Daniel barked once, relieved, and wagged his tail. Let Sam think he was an idiot. His plan was working.

As the shadow cavorted, Daniel realized he had no control over it. It hadn't been his idea for a piece of him to turn into a playful shadow; he hadn't known what would happen.

Odin knew there was power in the loss of a body part, he reflected. This has got to work.

The shadow danced around the room until it got to the heavy wooden door. There it paused, then collapsed into a circle. It quivered for a moment as if gathering energy, then it burst from the wall and landed on the floor, a three-dimensional shadow, a dark imp that stood about six inches high.

Daniel limped to the door of his cage and stood expectantly. But the imp paid him no attention and instead pranced forward, still leaping and dancing, until it stood in front of the wine vat in the back corner of the room.

It paused briefly, then leapt up and slid underneath a seam as if it were a wide doorway. The vat shuddered on its stand and then rocked back and forth once. The faucet then flew off with incredible force and the green, bubbly wine spewed into the room.

The wine gushed toward Daniel's cage, but had turned into a slow trickle by the time it lapped at the edge.

What is it doing?

The shadow imp had ridden the torrent out gleefully like a kid at a water park. It hit the floor, stood a bit carefully, then skipped to the next vat, and then the next, forcing each to belch out its contents onto the floor. The hundreds of gallons of wine were creating a green, bubbly lake on the floor that

rose steadily, getting into Daniel's cage at last and coating his paws in the wine.

The blood that still stained the wood floor mixed in with the wine, causing little black rivulets to swirl around Daniel's paws. It spread out like a spiderweb, instead of dissipating in the wine, it seemed to get stronger. It stretched out to the bars of the cage where it wrapped around, sliding up and out of the wine. Like the shadow imp, it sank into the wood and Daniel heard the distinct BZZT of an electrical short.

The effect was instantaneous. Daniel could feel his divine power returning to him, the dampening power of the weird blue wires no longer holding him back. He walked through the bars as if they were made of smoke and shook himself. With a thought, he reclaimed his human form and staggered back as the pain of his bloody stump hit him. He stumbled back and fell into the wine.

The shadow that had been his severed paw was finishing draining the last of the Cmar wine. It staggered toward him, and through his red pain haze Daniel thought, the thing is drunk!

He stared at it dumbly as it leaned briefly against his knee. His ruined arm rested on his thigh. The imp waved feebly at him and then flowed into his arm.

The pain ended immediately, and Daniel stared in wonder as his hand reformed, fingers flexing. After a moment, he couldn't even see the scar where he'd gnawed.

"Goddamn," he murmured, as the waves of pain were replaced by waves of drunkenness. "How much did my hand drink?"

With a bit of effort, as he was still treating his new hand gingerly, he managed to get to his feet just as the door flew open, shoving a wave of green wine toward Daniel, which rebounded quickly and rushed out to soak Sam's boots.

The big man's face had time to register shock and fury at the draining of his last supply of wine, and then the escaped god, before Daniel narrowed his eye and flexed his divine, drunken will once again.

[SAM KEEPS HIS BLOODY HANDKERCHIEF, USES IT AGAINST THEM  
LATER]

WAR WINNERS- James Melzer, Arkle, TubaMaster, JRamboz

#

It was not a triumphant entrance, but it certainly stopped everyone in their tracks.

Kate, Barris, Fabrique, and Gamma were talking intently to the head priestess, discussing the details of landscape below to determine a good way to search for Daniel. Barris didn't see him, but with the system of caves and Sam's winery, that wasn't a surprise.

"Look, I say we just go straight into the house," Gamma said. She stood while the others were seated, bouncing from foot to foot. She made Kate tired.

"If he had something to trap Daniel, who's to say he can't trap us?" Kate said. "The scientists down there create robes to squash our power, we might as well be mortal."

Fabrique pulled at a copper curl. "But that wasn't their goal, correct? The scientist created the robe to protect from the improbability storm. Did it do that?"

Kate shrugged. "For the most part."

"This implies that the power that we have as gods, and the power of the improbability storms, are the same energy."

Kate stared at her. "That's... obvious. Why didn't we see it before? Why didn't you see it before? You are the one to work with the energy!"

The goddess stiffened. "When you're imprisoned for years and years, your mind turns to how to use energy to release yourself, not from where it comes."

"Well OK, if it's the same divine energy that we have, what god generates it?"

They were silent.

Kate slammed her hands on the table. "Well that's just great."

"Can we focus on the task at hand?" Gamma asked. "Trading one god for another wasn't the deal. And why didn't you take us?"

Kate sighed. "I told you. We were trying to figure out who in the hell that flying fire guy was. No one around here has seen

him before. Got caught in the improbability storm, then got the lead on Prosper." She ran a hand through her tangled hair. She really wanted a bath and a nap. "How is he, anyway?" she asked the priestess.

"His priests are looking after him. They were... nonplussed to receive him."

"You didn't answer my question."

The woman didn't look at Kate. "He is unwell. He is weeping, asking to be returned to captivity, and apparently in great pain. The high priest, Ramboz, is feeding him wine to placate him."

"Great," she muttered. "Now he'll be drunk AND whiny."

"I could stand a drink, but make it beer," came a voice from the doorway.

Daniel stood there, covered in blood and a sticky green substance. He leaned against the doorway of the temple, holding a large urn in his arms.

Kate threw herself at him immediately. He dropped the urn to receive her, and staggered backward. "Are you OK? We were just trying to figure out how to rescue you? What happened?" she said into his ear.

He hugged her back tightly and then gently pushed her back. The urn had fallen over and was making muffled complaining noises.

"I'll tell you everything in a bit. For now I need to sit down. It was kind of hard to get him here."

Kate looked closer at the jug, about half her height. Massive, white clay, with vineyards depicted twinning around it, it was sealed tightly. She smiled. "He's in there? Like Ares?"

Daniel gave a tired smile. "I learned from the best."

#

Kate took his hand in hers, studying the wrist closely. "Are you serious? You chewed it off? There's not even a scar!"

Daniel shrugged. "I know. I have no idea what happened. I didn't even expect to get it back."

She released his hand and looked at him. "But dude, why did you just wait on us? You had to know I was going to come back for you!"

They sat alone in the preistess' office, Kate demanding to get the story from him first. Daniel's eyes were hollow and he slumped in his chair, but he seemed fine physically. He stared at her.

"I- I don't know. I guess it was pretty extreme, huh?"

"Daniel. You chewed your own fucking hand off."

"I guess I didn't know where you were. I didn't know if he had you too. And I was stuck in coyote form. My thinking got a little wild there for a bit." He paused and stared at the wall, unfocused. "Or maybe I was given a test."

He told her about the disconnect during the storm, when he was on trial in front of the other trickster gods.

"You think they orchestrated this?" Kate asked.

He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't say exactly that. I just mean that they were watching. And what god sits around and waits for people to rescue him?"

"What god chews his own hand off to get out of a cage?" she replied.

"I do," he said.

She stared at him, then blinked once. "I guess you do."

"So what happened with Prosper? Did you find him?"

Kate smacked herself in the forehead. "Crap, I totally forgot. Yeah, I got him. He's not really in good shape. The whole orchard was growing out of him. He tried to kill me, and he might have done so if I hadn't taken off that coat. But I got him back here. He's in his temple now, and drunk, as far as I know."

"Yeah, we need to talk about those coats," Daniel said. The coats and the cage Sam had me in and the vat Fabrique put me in. What the hell is that?"

Kate sighed and twisted her robe in her hands. "We determined it's got to be another divine foce. That's the only way we could explain it."

"But who?" Daniel asked. "I thought we knew all the gods here."

"Clearly we don't," Kate said. "There's that flaming guy from last night, we have no idea about him. And then there's whatever this chaos energy stuff is. People learned to harness it and now they can trap gods."

Daniel stood up. "We need to bring the others in on this."

"I gave them some time off. Barris wanted to visit Lathe and Fabrique went with him. I think we've earned some rest. Why don't you get some rest?"

He smoothed the hair away from her face. "Just do me one favor?"

"Anything."

He bit his lip momentarily. "Stay with me?"

She kissed him. "Of course."

#

Improbability storms were once described in Meridian as cries of joy from lovemaking gods. In Lathe they were more crudely described as godfucking. Regardless, Kate and Daniel did not force an improbability storm as their innocent, exhausted cuddling led to stroking, fumbling, undressing, pinching, giggling, biting, sweaty, loud activities. They had wrestled, each wanting the on top position, and Daniel won, trapping her

roughly beneath him, losing himself in passion that bordered on animalistic.

Kate moaned beneath him, his rough handling driving her to match his passion. She stopped trying to force him off her to get the upper hand and accepted the frantic pleasure he offered her.

After their first time, they lay together, whispering things to each other, dozing, and wrapped around each other. Kate roused Daniel from light sleep, insisting to him with little nips that she wasn't quite done. The second time was slower, more tender, and took much more time.

When they were done, the ground did not shake, but the temple swayed in the sky as if pushed by a very hard wind.

Kate pillowed her head on his shoulder. "I see what you mean," she said, panting.

He stroked her hair. "What do you mean?"

"The animal. Coyote. That was different. And amazing."

"I haven't felt like that before. It was... primal. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Oh hell no," she said, wrapping her naked legs around his. "You can do that any time."

"Good," he said. Her eyes closed, but his remained open, staring at the ceiling and wondering.

#

"I don't know why you wanted to come with me," said Fabrique.  
"What does Lathe hold for you?"

"Oh, I don't get to see it very often," said Barris, looking around the main street of the city beneath Meridian. "It's in Meridian's shadow most of the day. I like to visit..." Something caught his eye and he trailed off.

Fabrique raised an eyebrow. "All right. I need to get some things from my house, do you want to come in?"

"I think I'll do some shopping," he said, starting forward without looking at her.

"There goes the source of all life," the clockwork goddess said softly. "Help us all."

She went back into her house, what was until recently, her prison. She had only supplies to help during an airship battle with her, gathered swiftly upon their last exit from the house. Now she looked around and tried to figure out what she would need for air or water travel.

Airtanks, mechanical wings, jetpacks, swimming fins, laser weaponry that worked underwater... there was just too much. Even her modified bag could only hold so much.

She smiled slowly to herself. How had she not thought of this before? She gathered her tools, a disused chaos battery, and a sketchpad. She left everything else in her house and then went back outside, sat in the street, and began to sketch.

#

Professor Burns' Idea Emporium was changed since Barris had last seen it, but that was not a new thing. Every time he went into the store to buy a little box that contained an idea, he paid the proprietor in blessings. So every time he came back, Burns was a little richer, a little healthier, a little younger, and his shop was a little nicer.

Now it occupied a swaying two story building made out of dark green glass. The pegs that tethered it to the ground - as the ground rejected anything built upon it - looked recently hammered in, so the building was new.

Professor Burns' weathered face lit up as Barris walked through the Idea Emporium's front door. "Ah! Your excellency! Welcome back! It's always an honor to see you!

Barris' lip trembled and a sheen of sweat glazed his forehead. He stared at Professor Burns with wide eyes and said, "I may be going on a trip soon. I need to stock up."

The Professor inclined his head, nearly bird-like. "Understood, sir. Should you be in need of a weapon or military idea? Or perhaps ..." he trailed off as if he knew what Barris needed.

Barris took another step forward, putting his shaking hands on the counter. Burns frowned.

"I- I don't care. Just give me some."

"Your excellency, I am but a mortal, and-"

"I'll take five. Give me three regular and two bad, or four bad and one regular. I don't care."

Burns choked and sputtered. "Five? Surely you don't mean-"

The sun god's eyes went wide. He shook his head; an irritating buzzing sound had begun to distract him. "F-five. Yes. I need five. IS that a problem? I can pay for it."

Burns' eyes flitted to the green windows, where the morning sunlight had dimmed even moreso than usual, being underneath the shadow of Meridian.

"No, of course not, excelency," he said smoothly, unlocking the display case in front of him. The light outside brightened a bit.

Barris shifted from foot to foot, wringing his hands, as Burns pointed with long fingers. "I might suggest a political idea, perhaps two war, and two bad?"

"Perfect, sure, whatever," Barris said, willing his hands not to shake.

As Burns' establishment and person had gotten fancier with the repeated blessings by the sun god, so had his ideas. Before they were contained within boxes, but now they consisted of carefully folded paper, cloth, or even metal. Most of the ideas were folded into the shape of something-dinosaurs were common-but he did keep the old favorite idea boxes around. Burns handed

the god a piece of blue silk folded into the shape of a judge's tunic, two tiny pterodactyls folded from hammered-thin sheets gold and silver, and two small wooden puzzle boxes.

Barris accepted them with shaking hands. He stashed the origami in pockets inside his robe, slipped one box into his breast pocket and turned away from Burns, hunching over the last one.

His fingers flew as they manipulated the puzzle box, the hidden catches and pressure panels no match for his eagerness and familiarity. Once open, he held it to his ear.

Developing trade relations with TK CITY would be a simple matter of visiting them and bearing gifts. They are eager to hear from the cities above the air.

As the idea wormed its way into Barris's head, he let out a great gust of air he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. As he pondered the implications around the idea, he straightened and smiled and Professor Burns, who watched him, frowning.

"Thank you so much, Professor Burns," Barris said. "It's always a pleasure."

He turned and leapt lightly out of the front door, dropping the 2 feet down to the ground, and walked back toward Fabrique's House of Mysteries, whistling.

#

Professor Burns pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the now-locked glass case. He walked quickly across the room and closed the door behind the sun god, locking it and putting up a TEMPORARILY CLOSED: USE YOUR IMAGINATION FOR 5 MINUTES sign.

Barris' blessings always came; Burns wasn't concerned that the god wouldn't pay. He had paid in odd ways - everything from the new building to the fact that he no longer woke up with his joints aching. But the most surprising result of the blessings was the upgrade to his Chaositron Idea Generator.

Burns previously would feed in small boxes, and the idea generator would place a vacuum-sealed trapped idea into the box, only to be released when the box was open. It was a brilliant piece of machinery, and Chaositron had given the professor a promotion and a hefty bonus. These are what he thought of as the glory days of Meridian.

Everything crashed when Chaositron had gone bankrupt soon after it started the idea business. Unfortunately, the idea generator created one very bad idea out of every ten good ones. They had no way of knowing which were good and which were bad, and after a particularly tragic airship crash connected directly to a bad idea that Chaositron sold the airship pilot, the company folded. Professor Burns' boss took "the quick trip to Lathe" (how people in Meridian referred to suicidal jumpers),

leaving Burns penniless with nothing but a corrupt idea generator.

Luckily people in lathe are more open to machines that only sometimes work, and he was able to build a somewhat thriving idea business there. He became familiar enough with the machine to be able to identify the bad ideas, and sold them as novelties.

One thing he noticed as his business grew was that his customers seemed to be in two camps. Some of them came to honestly need the ideas. They would purchase what they needed, use them, and only come back when they were stuck again in whatever they were working on.

Then there were the addicts.

Some people used ideas just for the thrill of the potential of it, the possibility was limitless and made them feel powerful. One addict likened it to being poised at the zipline in Meridian, about to let gravity sweep them down the line to Lathe. But they never actually took the step to fulfill the potential. They just went back for more ideas.

Burns had not seen anyone as addicted as the weak-willed sun god. Cutting him off had been a bad idea- the god's wild eyes had begun to burn with a fierce light. (BARRIS CANT AFFECT THE SUN IMMEDIATELY- EDIT THAT) If he could bless Burns so well, Burns was sure he could curse as easily.

Burns stood in front of his idea generator, upgraded by the divine blessing of the sun god to make more intricate ideas - even though it still produced bad ones. Burns rarely used the machine himself, he felt it was best to be the middle man. But this time he felt it was important.

The machine hummed to itself in the corner, small finger-like jointed rods whirred as they deftly folded another idea and dropped it into a basket.

Burns went and picked it up. Folded from a heavy linen cloth in the shape of a swan, the idea formed in his head as he shook it free of its shape.

Only the other gods can deal with one god's problems.

Professor Burns sighed and dropped the idea linen into the used pile to be recycled later. He hadn't been to Meridian since leaving it in disgrace years earlier. He guessed it was time to go home again.

#

The kids in Meridian assumed that James was the luckiest kid around. He had lived a life of excitement, true. He had been placed as a hand on his mother's airship when her crew had either died with his father in a pirate attack, or died when they had escaped the firey fall of Dauphin.

The escape from Dauphin had been very exciting, true. Terrifying, as well. What the other kids didn't know was that

when they had fled in his mother's signature airship, The Sheridan, two gods had stowed away aboard, taking control of the ship and ordering his mother, Alicia, to take them to Meridian, where his father had died.

James had had further adventure when he was appointed guide to the god Daniel when he visited Lathe for the first time and had to save him from the enraged goddess Fabrique. And then, as if that wasn't enough, he accompanied the gods into the Dark to fight air pirates.

And he was only ten.

James was lucky to call the god Daniel a friend. He was lucky to have the god's blessing on him as a reward for saving him. And he was lucky to be an able crewman to his mother's airship.

But the times when he missed his father, he didn't feel so lucky. And the times when he missed his home in Dauphin, and his friends. And the times when his stupid big sister, Connie, tried to pull rank on him.

Connie had done so this night. He had wanted to go into Meridian; he'd been so bored staying on The Sheridan, waiting for the gods to need transport somewhere. But Connie said that they needed an able crew member to be alert at all times, and tonight was his night. She got to go into the city with their mother to check on, oh he didn't know. Or care. Supplies. Find out what the gods were up to. What did it matter?

The Sheridan docked at a tower in Meridian close to the central temple, but still had to be on the outskirts of the floating city. If he looked over one side, he could look into the city. The city glittered in the twilight as people began turning their lights on. The gondolas and lifts ferried people home to their gleaming tower apartments, or took them to restaurants and theaters. They went about their lives, living in the sky, with no idea what was going on around them, without realizing the gods were among them.

James didn't like looking over the city. He preferred to turn his back to it and stare over the barren land below, into the hills and the Dark. He hoped if he looked far enough into the dark, he would see where the moon had run off to and he could find her and convince her to come back.

Being able to watch the skies had been his favorite part about flying. He had spent his allowance on books about the heavens, learning about the constellations of Fenrir, the Diving Mother, the Big Rock Candy Mountain, and Kate's Heart. He had been amazed to meet Barris, the sun god, and was disappointed to say the least.

He still hoped that they would meet Cotton, the moon goddess, and wondered why the moon had been gone these many days. The ground had rumbled when it had left, something he'd heard instead of felt, as he'd been in the air when it happened. The

hint of ocean he could see to the west did not gleam as it once did, as the tides had ceased. He wondered how the animals were faring.

The moon had been his favorite, and he missed her terribly. She had waxed and waned like him - crushing blows and huge excitements, being treated like a kid and being given airship crewman responsibilities, getting to meet the gods who created you and then learning they had as many flaws - maybe more - than you did.

James sighed, longing for the moon, and stared into the Dark as night fell. A large, soot-smudged bird landed on the railing a couple of feet from him. It looked like a crow, only it was white. He frowned at it.

"Hi," he said. "What are you doing here?"

The crow opened its wicked beak and cawed once, loudly. James winced at the sound.

"You wont find any food here. My sister would kill me if she found me feeding the chicken gun ammo to a crow. Go away." He waved his hand half-heartedly at the bird.

The bird didn't spook, but just hopped about six inches toward him on the railing and cawed again.

James squinted at it. The bird cocked its head and ruffled its feathers. It fixed its eye on him, and he was astonished to

see it wasn't beady and black, but white and luminous. Its eyes actually glowed in the shadows.

"What...?" asked James, still staring at the eye and relaxing against the airship railing.

The bird took another hop closer.

#

The boy was gorgeous. Morrigan had not had much experience with men - she knew the sun was male, and had longed to meet him, as she was the sole person who could see his true form at night, and reflect that beauty back onto the world. But she had never met him.

The lost souls in the underworld had flavors of male or female, but none had become a companion, a friend, or lover. The loneliness of captivity had been stifling to the goddess, but now that she had her freedom, the barriers raised by her disfigurement were maddening.

This boy, however, looked at her with curiosity. Interest. His eyes were a warm brown, bright and intelligent. His face was round, innocent, and complimented by a beautiful mouth. His skin was a dark brown that you commonly found in Dauphin, not Meridian, and she wondered where he had come from. Why he lived on an airship, and why he seemed to hold himself with more confidence than other boys she'd seen.

This boy would understand her. This boy would listen. He would curl up in her lap during the day, and be her servant and right hand man at night. When he became a man, he would be her lover.

But first, to join her in her new home, he would have to die.

Morrigan let him watch her, captivated, for a moment more, and then she took flight, spiraling up and up, ignoring his pleas for her to return.

#

As the sun dipped low, the rare rays touching the glass and metal buildings of Lathe, a voice groaned from behind inside a rubbish bin tethered to the rear of a grocer.

Sewer and trash issues were not discussed in Meridian and Lathe. Meridian residents paid a great amount of taxes that went toward the creation of machines to transport or transform their trash, and a year of tax revenue had gone toward the huge water cleansing building, where all waste water from the city ran through for purification. The waste collected was also transformed by some of the better tinkers. The upper class snobs of Meridian joked that the waste was transformed into bricks that Lathe residents used to build, but no one really knew.

Barris knew, but he wasn't going to tell anyone. Secrets were all he had.

Well, secrets and a massive idea hangover.

He was planning on using one idea to take the edge off, and save the rest in case Daniel and Kate wanted to drag him off on another ridiculous rescue.

Unfortunately the second bad idea was, "To fully experience something it is best to consume all you can at once." That one blew his mind to the extent that he stumbled for the nearest place to hide to consume the other three ideas, and was out for the day. Now, with the great fireball that was the focus of all his power ebbing, he stood shakily in the bin, rotten vegetables dropping off him. He clutched his head, too full of ideas to comprehend any of them, and wondered what day it was.

The sun slipped below the horizon at that moment, and Barris transformed.

[BARRIS -REDACTED-]

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