



HEAVEN SEASON FIVE: WAR

Version .01

NOTE

Hi there! Welcome to *War*.

This is not a final draft.

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

This is the first 10K words of my new novel, *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, an unnamed city left unnamed, and other little blips in the manuscript that I made a note about and then kept going.

Please understand I am not looking to workshop this novel. Right now I am in writing mode and want to finish it before I worry about edits. I will then send to first readers for comments. I understand (and honestly appreciate) if you find yourself wanting want to give comments, but honestly if I have scores of people sending me notes, I'll get overwhelmed. I am releasing it this way in order to give those eager to see the story (and see how I write): a sneak peek. I will be rewriting this before the free audio podcast launches on June 1.

Also, please note I'm **NOT** releasing this under a Creative Commons License. Sure, I can't stop you from distributing, but if you distribute this to non-paying people, it diminishes the worth of your own premium subscription. This is for you (and immediate family) and you alone.

OK, done with the "please don'ts" – now onto the cool, grateful stuff. Thanks for supporting **Heaven** and me, and giving me a chance to show you a quick view inside my head. This little experiment has already returned more than I ever could have hoped, and your patience during my premium feed kerfuffle has been wonderful. Thank you so much.

Mur Lafferty

March 30, 2009

Durham, NC, USA

Episode One

Barris lay atop his temple, 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 simple government of Lathe would be a simple job. What a fantastic idea. It 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, the goddess who'd been imprisoned for thousands of years in the room under his own. He had discovered in the past few days 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 to his own voice.

She walked across the roof and stood over him, her leather boots by his head. He didn't open his eyes to look up at her. "You didn't do anything during the battle but give Kate a bad idea box, 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 opened his eyes and saw her standing over him, the warrior messenger, 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. He was so tired. "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. 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. 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 how to become a scientist in the foothills outside Lathe, the haven for the forgotten and mad. He knew several key battle plans that would work against sky pirates. He had several ideas on how to farm in the chaos-riddled land outside Lathe. He even was 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 with a feeling of superiority, that no one else had such brilliant ideas, and how 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 shining sea west of Meridian, the floating city.

#

Three hours later, he opened his eyes to the night. His eyes were no longer watery blue; they glowed with a golden intensity. His muscles rippled as he sat up easily and stretched.

Barris' 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 revulsion he'd felt. A sun god should have more pride in himself. He vowed to lay off the ideas, to apply himself and

become a needed member of Kate and Daniel's team. He stood and relished the feeling of strength coursing through him. The same thought 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 know the other gods in person for three days, but he wasn't yet ready to reveal this part of himself to them. They may not understand.

His bare toes curled around the edge of the roof as wide silver wings unfolded from his back. He inhaled deeply and stepped off the roof.

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 he'd stop the idea addiction.

The wind whipped through his hair and he grinned against the force of it, relishing the flight. He flew past an apartment building, 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 swooped down below Meridian and surveyed Lathe, the city below the floating city, allowing them to receive some of his power 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, it was 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, skirting the Dark place, the Wasteland with its uncertainty storms and chaos energy seeping into the world, and flew over the mountains. He flew tirelessly for hours but in the early morning, as his energy began to wane, he positioned himself over the water again, eagerly awaiting the Moon.

In the two nights since his freedom the moon phase had been dark. But 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, had been. He would rescue her and tell her everything he had thought about her since he saw her glory outside his prison window.

But the Moon didn't rise. Again. He hovered in place above the ocean and made another vow, to tell Kate and Daniel about it. 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 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.

#

Kate had been busy modifying her floor of the temple to be a sort of home base of operations. The priestesses of the Reborn God had balked at first, then when they realized who 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. Her roof was made of white gold and her 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, goddess of clockwork, and the tall, strong Gamma, the warrior messenger, 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. "Ok, Barris, you said that Persi is in the South, Ishmael is under the sea, Prosper is in Lathe and Cotton was in Dauphin." Her insides squirmed at this last one. She had razed Dauphin 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. Dauphin 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, just 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. She thought perhaps that Cotton, the Moon goddess, who was imprisoned in the city Dauphin, might have a larger grudge. Kate had razed that city to the ground, with very few survivors escaping. Had she known there was a goddess trapped there, of course she would have tried to free her.

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 her best friend's eye that he 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 Dauphin had been over the top and needed to be cleansed, Gammorah-style. But she didn't know what had happened to the

goddess, or how to find her. She was afraid of what she would find if they did find her.

"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. "OK, 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 8 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 Dauphin." 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.

Episode Two

She stole the moon from the sky because she could.

Yes, it was spiteful, and yes it was mean. Yes, it would affect the world she loved. But she took it because she could, because it was hers, and because the world would miss it.

Where once she had cared for the world, watching it through her prison window which waxed and waned, now she didn't give a shit about it. It held no joy for her. She didn't want to see it, peeking as she could during the day or ruling over it during the night. She didn't want to flirt with the sun and wonder if he was as lonely as she was. She didn't want to have children wish on her or see patterns in her face.

Her face no longer held a gentle, soft glow. It had been burned when the city fell. When night fell and the horror had ceased and the flames and cries of the victims had all died, she rose from the rubble. Her fingers touched the ruined mass that was her face and she had cried. She cast about until she found a house where children had died, trapped inside. She used her will to melt their charred bones together to form one smooth mask to hide behind. She stumbled to a graveyard where the dead had been protected from the fire. There she knit a cloak from their hair to wrap around her charred nakedness.

Finally clothed and properly hidden, she shook herself all over and transformed into a white crow smudged with blood and

soot. She took to the sky and surveyed the world around her, the dead city of Dauphin and the countryside surrounding. In the air she could hear the whisperings of all of the lost souls with nowhere to go.

The moon hung in the sky like a scythe. To finalize her transformation, she would need a weapon. She reached up with her beak and plucked the moon from the sky. She landed lightly on the earth inside Dauphin. She transformed back to human form and fixed the sharp moon atop a leg bone where its ends glittered wickedly.

She turned her faceless mask to the charred remains of a temple that had been dedicated to the moon goddess, Cotton, someone she no longer was. She waved her club in a diagonal slashing motion, then walked through the threshold that used to hold a pearl door. She vanished from the earth, and behind her the lost and lonely souls streamed behind her, joyously following her to her new realm.

The name "Morrigan" floated into her mind, and she grasped it and felt it was a suitable name. She cradled it as her own, and sought to explore her underground home as the souls swirled around her.

Above Dauphin, where the moon used to be, only a void remained. A void that created a vacuum and began to attract interest from far away.

Morrigan didn't know; and if she had known, she wouldn't have cared. She had a new name, a new weapon, a new home, and most importantly she had her freedom. The crows belonged to her, as did all white animals, and she could learn more of what was going on above ground than she ever had as the moon.

Her ghosts fashioned her a throne of bones and she sat there, reveled in their adoration, and watched through the eyes of her animals above.

Her time would come. Morrigan would make those responsible answer for their crimes.

#

Kate looked out of the temple window at the sunset peeking through the floating buildings, then at the mist gathered around the base of the buildings.

"What does Meridian do with their dead?" she asked suddenly. "Do you have vermin? Pets? Garbage collection?" The concept of living away from the ground felt completely alien to her.

A young acolyte, assigned to her for the afternoon, appeared at her elbow. With eyes fixed politely on the floor, she said, "We cremate our dead, my Lady. Different vermin breed in the buildings, one will have mice, others insects and still others rats. They usually come from pets. The bank has an infestation of hamsters, and the air market has geckos. Usually after vermin breeds to the point of trouble, either exterminators are brought

in, or humane trappers who then sell the vermin as pets, and the whole thing starts all over again."

"You sound like you don't approve," Kate said, laughing.

The young woman grimaced. "I grew up in an apartment building with a guinea pig problem. Seeing one of those little beady eyes chomping on my cereal one morning made sure I never saw them as cute again."

"OK, so cute vermin. Or not so cute. What about garbage? Surely you don't drop it on Lathe?"

The acolyte's eyes grew wide and she forgot herself, looking Kate in the face. "Oh goodness no, that's prohibited. It doesn't mean some don't do it, but they're punished severely. We're not sky pirates who dump flotsam and jetsam over the side. We have a handful of buildings that transform the garbage using some power harnessed from the probability storms."

"And then what?" Kate asked.

Her face went slack and she dropped her eyes again. "Um, actually I don't know."

Kate grinned. "Once you throw it away, it isn't your problem anymore? Yeah, we had that where I'm from Don't be ashamed. I'll find out from someone. You'll have to excuse me; this is all so new to me, living off the ground."

"I have to excuse you?" the acolyte asked.

"Sure, I'm the new person here, I'm at risk of insulting your way of life."

"But Lady, you created us."

Kate shrugged, careful not to destroy the woman's faith. "That's true, Daniel and I made the world happen, but you all made it what it is. Which is why we have little idea what's going on." She took the woman's chin and forced it up, making her look her in the eyes. "Look, you won't offend me if you look at me, or talk to me like anyone else. In fact, I'd prefer it. Can you try to do that? Please?"

The acolyte's lip trembled and Kate realized she was scaring her. She let her go, and the woman said, "Yes, Lady."

"What's your name?"

"Meredith, Lady."

"Well, then, Meredith, how do you feel about showing me around the city tonight? You can take me and Daniel out, show us what folks do for fun around here. How does that sound?"

Meredith's eyes grew round and she stammered something about being needed at the temple.

"My temple, right? The temple built to honor me? Do you think that sweeping the floor here will honor me than helping me understand Meridian better?" Kate hated to pull rank, but it was honestly ridiculous how the priestesses seemed to balk at any changes she wished to make at the temple.

"No, Lady. I mean, yes, Lady. I mean, when would you like to go?"

"Thank goodness," Kate said. "We can go at sunset. Daniel's checking out his temple, he should be back up soon. Please get me an acolyte's robe so I can look like I'm from the temple too."

She sighed and looked back out of the window. "God, I could use a drink. You guys have wine here, right?"

Meredith grinned over her shoulder at Kate, relaxing at last. "I know just the place."

#

Kate held the glass of wine up to her face, frowning at the thin, slightly bubbly green liquid inside.

"'I don't know what it is, but it's green,'" Daniel quoted in a bad Scottish accent, and Kate snorted at him.

She glanced over her glass at Meredith, who encouraged her with a grin. "Things grow differently in Lathe. That's the finest wine that this area can grow. It's called Cmar. Trust me."

Kate put the glass to her lips, reminded herself that she was immortal, then took a sip.

It didn't taste green. Kate had always wondered why you didn't see sparkling red wine. Maybe because it sucked? But this tasted like a fruity red wine with the heavy tannins replaced

with ... she couldn't place it. Something light and airy, something besides the bubbles, which left a tingle in her mouth long after she had swallowed.

"That's amazing," she said.

Meredith nodded happily. They sat at a table in the back of a bar that was on the bottom floor of a squat building near the outer edge of Meridian. The bar was called "Bottomless," and its walls and floor were made of glass so you could look down and see the swirling clouds and, every once in a while, a glimmer from Lathe, hundreds of feet below.

Kate had heard of restaurants on top of skyscrapers with amazing views, but this was a new experience. She bet it would be amazing during the day, but they only opened at sunset.

"There's plenty to see at night," said the bar owner, a tall man built like a refrigerator by the name of Sam (who was amused greatly at this). He was remarkable in the way that he was much paler than most of the citizens of the world, nearly as pale as Kate and Daniel.

He didn't blink at Kate and Daniel, even though their skin was much like his, and Daniel had the missing eye which was hard to hide. He welcomed them with open arms and said all priestesses of Kate were welcome there. Meredith greeted him by name and he hugged her, almost engulfing her with his bulk.

"I always love the priestesses of Kate," he said. "I feel they bring a little of the goddesses' smile my way."

Kate grinned at him, wondering how much he really had ascertained. "I'm sure they do," she said.

He had seated them at a back table, where he said they could see the most of the wondrous things that went on during the evening below, and brought them a bottle of his best Cmar.

"So what are we looking for here? Or is it just the view?" Daniel asked, looking toward the mass of darkness that indicated the hills east of Lathe. Occasional bursts of light flickered from inside the caves.

"I'm not sure, exactly," Meredith admitted. "When I come I usually sit near the bar and chat with Sam. I rarely sit at the tables. I go to Lathe often enough on temple business, I don't need the view."

"There are always things to see in Lathe at night," Sam said, bringing another bottle of Cmar without being asked.

"Like?" Daniel asked.

As if that was the invitation he was waiting for, Sam pulled up a chair, the feet sliding smoothly and noiselessly over the glass floor, and settled his bulk into it.

"Well, the scientists work more at night. The one who've lost their minds tend to be more nocturnal. Not sure why, maybe they feel more like animals, maybe they don't like the sun anymore."

Daniel chuckled. "Maybe they've met Barris."

Kate glared at him. Openly admitting that they know and dislike the sun god was not a good way of keeping a low profile, but Sam didn't miss a beat.

"You might be onto something there. I had one man in here, he'd left Meridian in disgrace, but discovered something in Lathe that helped him make his riches back, so he returned to the city. But he was a changed man, very flashy. He told me at length how he hid from the sun and only came out in the dark, when the moon ruled the sky. He worshipped her, he said, and said he was working on a way to communicate with her."

Meredith looked over the horizon. "You might want to look him up, then. Shouldn't we have a waxing moon by now? It's been a new moon for days."

"The moon is gone?" Kate asked, her voice catching.

Sam scratched his chin. "Now that you mention it, it's been clear since that last improbability storm and I haven't seen a moon in the last few nights either."

The chewing, horrific pain enveloped her as her prison aboard a stationary airship caught fire and plummeted. She had tried to keep the airship in the sky, but it was during the day, her weak time, and she was little more than mortal. It crashed into a temple dedicated to her – there was too much pain and chaos to note the irony – and she struggled toward a hole in the ship's

hull. The burning balloon then sank and covered the ship, and fire was everywhere.

Kate blinked her eyes, trying to clear the vision. Was it something she had imagined, or something that had actually happened? She knocked back the last of the green stuff in her glass with one gulp, the bubbling liquid reminding her not so much of nice tingles, but burns.

"Careful, miss," Sam said, pouring her another glass. "This stuff is strong. Best to be sipped."

Kate blinked at him. It had been a long time since she had felt alcohol seep through her system. "And if you want to forget something?"

He laughed, a pleasing, friendly sound. "Then let me leave the cork out of the bottle for you."

Daniel put his hand on her arm and squeezed. She didn't meet his eyes. If the moon was actually gone from the sky, they were going to have even bigger problems. As if they didn't have enough.

Meredith glanced at Sam and shifted in her chair. "So, uh, what else did you want to know about Meridian?"

Kate appreciated the distraction and sipped at her wine, letting Daniel take this one.

"Anything, really. Where we come from, they didn't have cities in the air, and the whole thing is just really strange to

us." He glanced down through the floor. "Really strange," he repeated.

"I know what you mean," Sam said. "I am from TK CITY, the city under the waves. My people worshipped Ishmael, and the other gods were barely known, if at all. We worshipped the moon, as she moved the tides, and Persi, as she blessed the water creatures around us and kept the leviathan away. We didn't believe in the other gods we had heard about from the rare above-ground visitors. Coming to Meridian was a shock to me to learn about the sun, and Kate and Daniel, and the others."

They weren't known in TK CITY? This was news. "What brought you to Meridian, and what made you stay?" asked Kate.

"We were solitary for many years, but plague hit the city when I was a boy. My parents were a doctor and a scholar, so they were sent to Meridian to try to find a cure."

Kate finished off her glass and looked at Sam unsteadily. "And did they?"

Sam looked down at Lathe, frowning. "They did. But the council of elders said that we had been tainted by the city in the air, and would not let us return home. We were allowed into the city long enough to deliver the information about the cure and remove our belongings, and then we were exiled."

"Dude, that's cold," Daniel said.

Sam nodded and continued. "Minimal trade between the cities meant that my parents' riches meant little outside, so we arrived in Lathe poor and homeless. The good thing about Lathe is they'll take in anyone, so we found an abandoned house and my parents began their lives anew."

"TK CITY seems pretty intolerant of outsiders," Kate said, glancing at Daniel. He nodded in silent agreement; rescuing the god Ishmael may not be as easy as they'd hoped.

"After the plague was, I assume, cured, my people shut off all connection with the outside world. My parents and I became the only citizens, that we know of, outside the city."

"Why are they so intolerant?" Kate asked. "Surely they were grateful for the cure?"

Sam poured himself a glass of the green wine and knocked it back, much like Kate had. "People above ground were blasphemers," he said flatly. "They did not worship Ishmael as we did, they had new gods to worship. When my parents gave their full reports about Lathe and Meridian, they saw only cities of sin and horror. Anyone who has touched the outside must be irrevocably tainted, and must not be allowed into TK CITY."

Sam snapped his head up, his eyes instantly regaining the sparkle they'd had when they'd entered his bar. "But! You are here to ask about Meridian, not TK CITY, am I right?"

Kate poured more wine unsteadily into her glass. "We're from, uh, the South, so we don't know much about any city north of where we're from, including TK CITY. We want to know about everywhere, honestly. Thank you for your story, Sam, that can't have been easy for you."

He waved his hand in dismissal. "It happened so long ago it's hardly forgotten," he said, apparently forgetting the pain that had been scrawled on his face a minute before.

"Now, let me tell you of how I came from Lathe to Meridian. That is a much more interesting story."

#

"I have to admit, it was a tough change moving to Lathe. TK CITY is a strange place, but it's not as strange as Lathe. Lathe is very dry."

Daniel laughed. "That's the big difference? The weather?"

Sam cleared his throat. "It is relevant. The diseases in a dry area are much different from the diseases in a wet one. Meridian had better physicians, but as my parents were poor, we ended up in lathe, and my mother had to start from scratch. We looked different and talked different from everyone else.

"I went to the strange establishment that stands for school in Lathe, where we were taught not so much reading and writing and math, but how to live in the world where the buildings will not stay on the ground, the whales swim in the air instead of

the ocean, and is built entirely of penniless castoffs from the city above. I learned basic tinkering and farming."

He paused to wet his throat, and Kate said, "How can people farm in this soil?"

"The vegetables here are recalcitrant, odd things. They are fed not by water but by the improbability storms, so you may not get what you plant. But they do sustain people."

"So how did you get to Meridian?" Kate asked.

"Remember when I said I learned some tinkering?" Sam asked. They nodded. "Well, I invented a new way of getting grapes to do more or less what you want them to, and then fermented them to make sparkling wine."

"So the Cmar is yours?" Kate asked, pouring herself another glass.

"It is indeed. So I sold some crates of wine to Meridian, some to Dauphin, and other cities. I made enough to buy this bar and retool it to have a glass floor so I could keep an eye on my vineyard. It's on the hill over there." He pointed into the darkness, north of the cities. Kate squinted drunkenly and willed herself to see through the darkness. She spotted a vineyard and a little building nestled into the hill, the winery, she assumed.

"And the rest is history," Daniel concluded, draining his glass. "This is damn tasty stuff, Sam. I gotta tell you."

Sam bowed his head. "Thank you. I'm very proud of it."

"So what do people do in Lathe?" Kate asked. "I mean, you know, for fun?"

Daniel looked at her with a little smile, and she realized she was sounding pretty plastered. But to hell with it, it had been forever since she'd been drunk.

"There are bars such as mine, but with lesser vintages, of course," Sam said. "They have their own version of theater with clockwork actors and there are always the caves."

"The caves? Are there tours or something?" Daniel asked.

"No, it's more of a child-like dare that adults go through. The scientists who wish to be left alone go there, and often set traps."

"Traps," Daniel said, dumbstruck. "What, is this a D&D game?"

Sam looked at him blankly, and Daniel mumbled an apology. "The traps are often quite deadly, but you can often sell them to dealers in town if you can deactivate it safely. It's adventure, it's money, and there's a thriving trade. It makes the scientists cranky, though."

"I can imagine," Kate said. Her eyelids were growing heavy.

Daniel poked her in the ribs. "Come on, Kate. The night just started. Don't fall asleep on me."

She closed her eyes and willed some of the alcohol out of her system. "Whew. That was some good stuff, Sam. Thank you."

Sam stared at her, and she blushed, realizing that sobering up instantly was not something mortals did. He recovered quickly though, and thanked her for the compliment.

Sam returned to work and Meredith talked about the city, pointing out interesting buildings and describing the more entertaining parts of town. "Tomorrow, if you like, we can go to the market. There's always merchants there from Lathe and Meridian and all sorts of places."

"I'd love to, but we're heading to Lathe tomorrow. We have business there," Kate said, looking through the floor at the ground.

"Yeah, about that, Kate, we should talk about who's going. Is it just you, me and the other gods, or..." Daniel trailed off as he realized she wasn't paying attention to him. "Kate?"

Kate got out of her chair and knelt on the floor. "What the hell is that?"

A golden streak bisected the darkness, shining up through the faint cloud cover, heading toward the hills.

Kate looked up at Meredith. "What is that?"

The woman had gone white. "I - I don't know. I have never seen it before."

"Sam!" Kate called over her shoulder. He was at her side in an instant. "What is that?" She pointed to the golden streak,

which had been dodging in and out of the hills near Sam's vineyard.

"I have no idea," Sam said, staring. "Someone had mentioned something they saw the other night, something like a golden man, but I thought he was drunk."

"We're not drunk," Kate said. She absently felt in her pocket for money and handed it to Meredith. "Is that enough for the wine?"

The acolyte choked out an affirmative when she saw how much Kate had given her, but Kate was already at the door, Daniel close behind.

The wind pulled at them as they stood on the stoop, the fog curling around their feet.

"What are you planning on doing?" Daniel asked her.

"Following it," she said, and stepped out of the city.

Kate hadn't gotten used to flying like a superhero, she had found it more comfortable to grow wings to catch the air. They always ripped her shirt, but she could mend that with a thought. The black wings sprang from her back as she fell, catching the wind and steering her toward the hill. She realized belatedly that she had just tipped their hand to Sam, who was inevitably watching, but it was too late to worry about that now.

Daniel joined her, having shape-changed into a one-eyed pterodactyl. The wind picked up and they struggled against it.

Kate picked up speed, nearing the vineyards. The golden being still danced in and out of the hills, then shot toward them, skimming the ground, tearing up the ground in a fiery furrow behind it.

Kate and Daniel angled down to meet the being, but it didn't stop. Closer, it looked like an angel made of fire, flying incredibly fast, leaving a line of fire in its wake.

"What is it doing?" Kate yelled to Daniel as they dove. The wind tore away her voice but she knew he heard her. He folded his wings and dropped, inspecting the angel's work, leaving Kate alone to catch up.

As much as Kate worked her will to speed up to the angel, he stayed ahead of her. Just as she had decided to teleport in front of him to see if she could stop him – or at least get a good look at him – Daniel screeched at her. She understood immediately and brought herself up short.

They hadn't noticed the screaming wind around them, too intent on their prey. But there it was: an improbability storm tearing out of the Wasteland, Meridian and Lathe in its path.

"Shit," she mumbled, watching the glowing, roiling clouds near.

With a thought, she sent her hummingbird companions, Huginn and Muninn, out of her robe pocket and away from her, Huginn

after the angel, Muninn toward the temple to warn Meridian of the storm.

Daniel caught up with her and hovered beside her. He chirped once and flew toward the hills.

"Sure, great time to explore," she said. She cast one more eye at the swiftly departing angel and then followed Daniel.

The flames rose up high in front of the hills, burning straight from the dirt with no apparent fuel. They formed a barrier to anyone on foot, and Kate and Daniel stood before the 10 foot high flames.

"What was he doing?" Daniel asked, reaching his hand out. He pulled it back quickly. "This shit is magical or something. It shouldn't feel hot to me."

"Not magic," Kate said. "That was a god."

"But who? I thought we knew everyone who was out?"

"I don't know," she said. "One of ours, maybe? Kagutsuchi?" She thought about the Japanese fire god that she and Daniel had freed back during their adventures in Heaven, the one whose power had been so intense that his mother died of the burns she'd received in childbirth.

"But how? And why would he build a wall of flames here?" Daniel asked.

Kate brushed some wind-blown hair from her face. The storm was getting closer. "What's on the other side of this wall?"

"Hills. Caves."

"And tinkers," Kate said. The maddest of the mad were said to live in the caves outside Lathe, tunneling through the hills for more space to make their impossible machines.

"Wait a second, Kate," Daniel said, putting his hand out to the flames again. He winced but kept it there. "The fire's not moving."

Kate turned to face the storm, strange lights coming from inside the glowing clouds, edging closer to the city, which had started to sway in its wake. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but is the fire protecting the caves from the storm?"

"Looks like."

"And, uh, does it seem like a good idea to get behind the fire ourselves, as risking flying that close to the storm that likes to take gods' power away seems stupid?"

"I'm with you there."

They linked hands and flew high, over the flames, and landed at the opening of a cave. A dark brass door blocked the way. Kate and Daniel exchanged a look, then knocked as the storm closed outside the flame wall.

[RETCON - PEOPLE (SAM) FROM TK CITY ARE THE PALEST, CLOSEST TO K & D IN SKIN COLOR]

[THEY WILL LEARN OF BARRIS'S TRANSFORMATION WHEN THEY

REDACTED]

The door didn't budge. Kate frowned.

"Well, there's an improbability storm coming, a big scary thing just set fire to their front stoop, and now two gods want in. Can you blame them?" Daniel asked.

Kate snorted. "So, trickster god, get us inside."

He gave a devilish grin. "Oooh, I like it when you tell me what to do. Say please."

Kate giggled, feeling her face grow warm. "Stop it. This is serious."

"Yeah," he said, putting his hand on the door and closing his eyes. "But when it's serious is just the right time to be laughing. We need it. I get that now. Ah!" He drew back as the door gave a small click and swung silently open.

Kate walked past him, patting him on the butt. "Nicely done."

"So we're just going to waltz on in? And say what?" Daniel said, following her.

"We hear you have a harvest god kept captive, please free him," Kate suggested. She glowed faintly, illuminating the dark hallway.

"Sure. That'll work. I'm sure Prosper didn't think to just ask for his freedom."

"Do you have a better plan?" KAtE asked.

"Well as we don't even know if he is imprisoned here, I think it might be good to do some retcon. Learn a little about this place. Like we did with Hermes and Hades."

Kate nodded, remembering how Hermes had spoken softly in her ear about how to properly trick Hades into giving back the souls he had stolen. "What do you have in mind?"

#

Kate hadn't tried shapechanging before. That seemed to be Daniel's skill, and she didn't think it was something she needed to do. Still, it was relatively easy to disguise herself as a hummingbird and perch in the folds of Daniel's robe.

What if I can't communicate with you? she thought.

Silly girl, we are always linked, came his warm reply in her head. She relaxed, her tiny heartbeat slowing to a mere 250 beats per minute.

Daniel walked with confidence through the dark hallways. Kate's divine eyes could easily make out mosaics of different symbols, from birds to gears to whales to city landscapes covering the walls and floors. When Daniel reached a fork in the hallways, he chose the right, always the right.

He passed doors of wood, stone, metal, and one that looked as if it were made of cascading water. He paused outside this one, and decided to go on.

What are you looking for?

I don't know till I find it.

Want me to fly ahead and see?

Do you really want to be separated in the home of a mad
scientist?

Well, we are gods.

...Who are weakened when confronted with chaos energy.

Kate snapped her tiny beak in frustratoin. She was usually the voice of reason having to hold Daniel back. Now that she was stealthy and swift, sshe thought she would be ideal to scout ahead and report back.

Screw him, I don't need his permission, she thought, but before she could let go, Daniel stopped in front of a door.

"Here," he whispered out loud.

The door was made of one long sheet of paper. A crumpled up ball stuck out of the middle, and daniel grasped the ball and turned it.

The paper fluttered as it swung inward, and they entered a study.

Kate had to admit it looked a lot cozier than she would have expected a home inside a cave to look. A fire in a massive fireplace (where does the chimney go?) burned merrily in the far left corner of the room, with an easy chair vacant in front of it. It looked angled in the perfect "contemplate the fire"

position, and Kate darted over to hover above the red leather chair and then settle atop the back.

On the wall directly in front of the doorway sat a large, brass box. It pinged thoughtfully to itself as if thinking about something casually. Largely square in shape, it was about four feet high with two pipes sticking out of the bottom left hand side and snaking around to the front top side. A small window held a blinking cursor.

Kate cocked her head and blinked at Daniel.

"Yeah, it is surprising to have such nice stuff in a place where boy scouts should be exploring," he replied. "But what is this toy?"

He reached a finger out to stroke the bronze, but paused when a muffled voice from behind the machine said, "I wouldn't."

Daniel took a step back. "Hello?"

The owner of the voice popped up from behind the machine. He held a lit blowtorch and was wearing a welders helmet. He kept rising and Kate realized he must have been a good seven feet tall, and very thin.

He flipped up the mask with a hand encased in a heavy rubber glove. His face was boyish, and a black curl stuck to his sweaty forehead. He squinted at Daniel and flung his left hand around until his black glove went flying into the corner. He rooted around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses and

struggled to put them on, all the while the blowtorch burned in his right hand.

Daniel raised both hands in a nonthreatening gesture. "I'm sorry, I was outside of Lathe when the improbability came and this was closer to shelter there. Then this weird thing cut off any exit from the caves with a wall of fire-

The man turned off the blowtorch and put it on the ceramic tile floor. He stepped out from behind the bronze box with long, slow steps.

"Wait, did you say a weird being?"

"Uh, yes," said Daniel.

"Ahhh," said the man. He bent over and tapped a fingernail on the window with the blinking cursor. "The paerhapsotron told me with 85% certainty that I would be visited by a god tonight. I guess that was it. You say he's sealed us off?"

"A wall of fire ten feet high that seems to burn from the dirt," Daniel said.

"Fascinating! So my paerhapsotron was right after all. And I've been fiddling with it all night."

Daniel grinned. "Did it predict that you'd be doing that?"

The man blinked at him, not laughing. Daniel grimaced a little at his joke falling flat, and he coughed once. "I am Daniel."

The scientist glanced at Daniel's patch and grinned. His mouth was very wide, and Kate found it friendly and overly enthusiastic, like a dog's. "I figured that, with the missing eye. Were you a victim of the barbaric practices of Dauphin?"

"Yes, that's it," Daniel said smoothly. "I've lost my faith in the gods, you can probably guess why." He held out his right hand.

The scientist stuck out his left hand and shook Daniel's awkwardly, as his right was still in the heavy glove. "I am Scott Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson. You are welcome in my home. I certainly would have broken in to someone else's home if I were being chased by a fiery being." He squinted. "Wait, did you say it was one being?"

Daniel nodded. "That's all I saw."

Scott leaned forward and tapped the machine again. "Damn device. I don't know why I created it. It never works."

"Why? What did it say?" Daniel asked.

"It told me two gods were coming tonight."

Daniel swallowed and glanced over at Kate, still perched on the back of the leather chair. She hoped she was small enough to escape notice.

"No matter!" Scott said. "Failure is just another step on the way to success, right?" He straightened and took his helmet off,

dropping it beside the blowtorch. Keeping his right glove on, he strode from the room, beckoning Daniel to follow.

Kate took to wing and zoomed over to sit in the crook of Daniel's elbow.

Uh, where are we going?

I have no idea. He wants us to follow.

So you're an atheist now?

Well, I had hoped it would bring up the subject of gods.

Kate was about to mention the obvious fact that it didn't seem to work, but Scott surprised her.

"Curious," he said over his shoulder. "If you saw a fiery being raise a ten-foot wall of fire from the very dirt, how can you say you don't have faith in the gods? Wasn't that the work of a god?"

Daniel shrugged. "I don't know. I just know that any god who requires boys to lose eyes isn't one I'd want to follow. As for the other gods, I've never met one. I have no idea. Do you think it was a god? And if so, which one?"

Scott opened a plain wooden door which led to a kitchen with various devices, a long table, and a fire pit in the floor. A small chimney hole was in the ceiling. On the far wall was a large smudge of soot surrounding a small concave impression.

"Well, that's something we can discuss. Are you hungry?" Scott asked, poking a small device consisting mostly of small

steel pipes and one gauge. It shuddered and coughed, then started to him and the gauge rose slowly to hover around the middle range.

"Um, no, thank you. What is that thing?" Daniel asked.

"That's the power source for this room. As long as it's on and stable, everything else works."

Kate looked down and realized the steel tubes ran down the table and across the floor, lying in little trails in the floor so they wouldn't be tripped over. Each steel tube went to a different device - one looking like a refrigerator, one to an oven, and a third simply looked like a sink without any pipe indicating water going in or out.

"That's amazing," Daniel said.

"Thank you. It was difficult to build, as you can see.: Scott pointed to the hole in the wall. "But worth it in the long run. Now, about that being. Did it fly?"

"Yes," Daniel said, accepting a chair to the table. He accepted the glass of water Scott handed him. "Very fast."

"And was it on fire, or was it just making the fire?"

"Um, I couldn't really tell," Daniel said.

Scott nodded and pulled up a chair beside Daniel. "Well, for the past several nights I've seen a bright flying being coming from Meridian. It flies around then heads toward the sea. I

can't identify it. I know Dr. Larkin is planning on trapping it, but I doubt she can."

"Does she think she can trap a god?" Daniel asked.

"Well, as you said, we don't know it's a god. But if you think my inventions are something special, you haven't seen Drs. Larkin, Mayer or Lasica. They do some things that make me think what I'm doing is kids' stuff."

"Like what?"

For the first time Scott's friendly face narrowed and he looked Daniel up and down. "What is it you do, friend? You don't seem to be too likely to be a tinker, but I can't give my colleagues' secrets to a spy."

"Dr, Von Rothelsgesh- er, Scott, I promise, I'm not here to steal anything," Daniel began, but his host stopped him.

"It's Mr. And It's Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson," Scott said bleakly. "I got kicked out of Meridian University during an improbability storm. I never got my doctorate."

"They literally kicked you out? But improbabilty storms are deadly!" Daniel said.

Scott glared at Daniel. "Thanks. I found that out."

Daniel blushed. "I just mean how could they do that? What was worth a death sentence in a university?"

Scott glared at the table. "I was caught cheating. I was kicked out, forced to ride the zipline to Lathe, where I have

been exiled. I'll never get a doctorate, never be called Professor Von Rothelsgeschitemeirson. Happy now?"

"I'm sorry dude. Look, I ddidn't do much with my life either. But things have gotten better since then."

Find out something about Prosper, Kate suggested. Change the subject!

"So has Dr. Larkin ever captured a god before?" Daniel asked.

Scott shrugged. "She says she has. Said she stole a god from a farmer and kept him trapped for 20 years. Then she lost him in a card game."

Daniel perked up. "Which god was this? And who won him?"

Scott grinned again. "Suddenly a believer, are you? She claimed he was Prosper, god of the harvest, but never let anyone in to see him. And some winemaker won it. I don't know him, but he doesn't live in the caves with us. He grows his grapes--"

Daniel stared at the wall, unfocused. "-He grows them in a vineyard north of Lathe on a grassy hill."

Scott perked up. "Yes! How did you know? You're starting to sound lke my paerhapsotron."

Daniel rubbed his forehead above his missing eye. "I know because we were just talking to him. Aw hell. I need to go."

Daniel stood up. "Thanks for your hospitality and your information. In return I'll give you a truth. Your paerhapsotron doesn't need adjusting. It works just fine." Without another

word, he turned and ran out into the hall, Kate buzzing ahead of him.

"Wait! The improbability storm is still going on!" Scott yelled after them. "You could die out there!"

True, but it's not probable, Kate thought. She hovered near the door and let Daniel open it-

-Straight into the eye of the improbability storm.

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